

Chapter 12: Battlelines

A crisp and clear night afforded Xena and Gabrielle an unobstructed view of a meteor shower from the upper deck of *The Hippolyta*. The ship was quiet, with precocious ten-year olds having long since been tucked into bed, and an efficient crew invisibly going about their nighttime duties. Xena had built a fire in the small fire pit near the barbeque and saltwater swimming pool. It didn't take much of an imagination for either woman to imagine themselves many years in the past, traveling from one place to another, stopping for the night. Somewhat guiltily, Gabrielle was grateful Aphrodite either wasn't back yet, or elsewhere on the ship. For this moment at any rate, the bard felt on the same page as her companion and she did not want to risk any intrusion that might upset the harmony of their détente. Relieved to not be arguing, for the moment they enjoyed an ease in their rapport they hadn't experienced since the warrior's resurrection.

"This is a thirty-one-year-old whiskey from the United Kingdom," Gabrielle explained, handing Xena a glass. "It's called Craigellachie."

The warrior smiled approvingly after tasting the amber colored liquid. "And 'United Kingdom' is England, what used to be Britannia?" she asked.

"Yes, with Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. You've picked up so much so fast Xena." Gabrielle took the glass back and quickly rinsed it out with some water, letting the run off spill on the deck. She poured a pale-yellow liquid from the collection of bottles that covered the table next to her. "This one is a whiskey from Finland. It's only ten years old and is called Teerepelii."

"It's the same color as the white wine from lunch. The chardonnay." Xena observed as she sniffed the glass before trying its contents. "Definitely not the same stuff. I like it. It reminds me of fruit...and straw, I think. The older one would be better for spitting fire though." Xena grinned, her mood clearly enhanced by all of the spirits she'd sampled thus far.

"What are those clear bottles over there?"

Gabrielle allowed herself a giggle before gently pushing the warrior's hands away from the bottles. "Not so fast Xena," she said. "There is a methodology here. We're going in order. The vodka and gin will come after the rum. But first a tequila." Gabrielle knew she was just pretending, putting loss, danger, and complications out of her mind and enjoying the simple pleasure of introducing her friend to the world of craft distilled spirits, but she also knew that these moments of escape were fleeting. She poured two shots from an ornate hand painted bottle, then handed the bottle to the warrior.

"Dos Artes Extra, Anejo Reserva Tequila," Xena said, reading the bottle. "It's beautiful," she added after tasting the dark amber liquid. "Both inside and out. It looks expensive?"

Gabrielle shrugged. "It's about one hundred twenty dollars a bottle. Hard to adjust that into dinars from the old days. Let's say it would have been well out of our price range. You'd have been able to get a new sword and armor for the same price."

Xena looked at the bottle with newfound respect as the bard switched to the next spirit.

"I have a question for you," Xena asked, sipping the Bundaberg dark rum from Australia she'd been offered. "what's a billionaire? I mean it sounds like a made-up number. I've never heard of a billion dinars."

“It means I have a ridiculous amount of money. It *is* absolutely made up.” Gabrielle replied, offering her a spiced rum from the United Kingdom next. “Think about all of the royalty we ever encountered in all of our travels together. King Lias, King Gregor, King Kaltor, Helen – all of them. If you were to add all their wealth together, with their lands, their treasures, everything, I’m sitting on top of many, many times more than that. Here, try this coconut rum. It’s one of my favorites.” She passed the glass over and noticed the puzzled look on her companion’s face. “Over a thousand years ago, I realized that money and a very patient, long view of life would be key to my survival,” she explained. “I’ve seen governments and armies come and go. The Pharaohs ended, the Knights Templar ended, Hell, even the Whig Party here, in this country disappeared. Some endings are great – the Nazis getting put down in Germany was a very good day. But seeing the native peoples here in this country all but wiped out was tragic. With that in mind, I’ve learned to put wealth aside, let it accrue in value to fund the things we’ve always believed in – the greater good, if you will. I suspect that I’m one of the wealthier individuals on the planet. I don’t know if I’m still the richest, but I’m probably still in the top five. Xena, I know you think I’ve done a terrible job of it, but I have tried to combat the forces of Ares the whole time I’ve been looking for Aphrodite. Even if I didn’t realize how much Ares was taking an active hand in everything.”

They had moved on to vodka and Xena accepted the glass of Russian Zyr without speaking. She downed its contents enjoying the warmth that radiated from the clear liquid as it traveled down her throat. She heard what the bard was saying but had to admit, she was only half listening. The orange of the firelight danced in Gabrielle’s green eyes the way it always did. If this had been Ancient Greece, the bard might have been wearing her green top, brown skirt and leather boots; her toned muscles thrown into greater relief by the firelight. If this had been Ancient Greece, she might have leaned across the small distance between them and kissed her, knowing her kiss would be warmly received and returned with earnest. There were so many times they’d undressed each other in the firelight, oblivious to how cold it might have been, then enjoyed each other completely, falling into a satisfied sleep, content that a horse named Argo would keep watch.

But this wasn’t Ancient Greece. Xena studied the woman sitting next to her, now in jeans, a sweatshirt, and barefoot. Gabrielle’s eyes met hers and the bard looked away, embarrassed. Xena knew the ardor was visible on her face and feeling the warmth of the alcohol, she was not inclined to hide it. After several different vodkas she tried the gin and frowned. “Okay, I’m not a fan of that one,” she said.

“It’s better if you have it served as a gin and tonic,” Gabrielle said, making eye contact hesitantly. There was no mistaking the stirring that Gabrielle felt, almost like a once forgotten song that comes back to you, the sound soft and warm.

Xena smirked. It felt good to know that she could still read her companion. To some extent, at any rate. In addition to the ‘I said something important and you’re not listening to me’ look, she saw attraction in those green eyes. It was doubtful she even realized how dependent she’d grown on the bard’s love for her, until she felt apart from it. She put the desire to lean over and kiss her companion to the side and addressed the more practical concern. “Have you considered that while what you’ve built is a fantastic way to fight for the greater good, but you might need to shift your forces somewhat to combat Ares directly? Do you know what kind of forces he’s supporting?” How long he’s been active here?”

Gabrielle nodded in agreement. “I suspected Ares was here on earth all along, and not on Olympus I didn’t really know for sure that he was in America right now or who he was posing as until just before we got you back. That is a big piece of the puzzle. I’ve got some people working on uncovering everything there is to know about Gideon Power. When we know who this guy is, what he’s involved with we will have a better handle on how to confront it. I’ve been doing my homework, Xena. It’s what we’re going to discuss in the meeting tomorrow. We’re going to come up with a plan of attack.”

Xena nodded and had her attention diverted by Argo who came bounding up the steps to greet them. As the pit bull approached Gabrielle felt a presence at the back of her mind. Almost as if permission was being asked to join them. “I think Aphrodite just returned to the ship,” Gabrielle said, scratching her dog behind the ears. “Argo lets me know whenever someone comes aboard if she’s not already with me.” Her connection to Xena in the moment felt too good to risk damaging it by giving voice to the goddess communicating directly with her in her mind.

“You should have her join us,” the warrior suggested. “She’s more of an expert on Ares than she lets on. And what did you say about Argo being able to detect someone lying?” Xena asked, accepting an affectionate greeting from the pit bull.

“It was something Aphrodite did to her.” Gabrielle explained as she texted the goddess. “She said it’s an ability dogs have to begin with, she just encouraged Argo to be more vocal about it.” “That could be useful if you get her in the same room with the right people,” Xena observed.

Gabrielle considered her comment as Aphrodite made her way across the deck, followed by Michelle and Vox. There was no doubt that the ship’s captain was off duty because her curly brown hair was down, falling in tight ringlets around her shoulders.

“Nicolai mentioned you’d just about emptied the liquor cabinet and I’ve got to admit, I was curious. Aphrodite thought it’d be okay if we joined you guys.” Michelle said as the trio approached.

“I had a feeling this wasn’t strictly a private party,” Aphrodite said, with a wink to the bard.

“Please, pull up a seat,” Gabrielle said as the newcomers joined them. She watched Vox take the seat next to Xena and the two greeted each other with a fist bump. She was grateful Aphrodite let her know she had clued into Gabrielle’s emotional state when she came back on board and wanted the bard to know that she’d done this.

Xena shifted uncomfortably before speaking to Michelle, “I...ah...forgot a lot about the spirits of the day and...”

“It’s okay, Xena – I know,” the captain said grinning broadly at the warrior. “The whole crew. We know you’re from Gabrielle’s time but that you’ve been in some sort of stasis, we know that’s what the ‘amnesia’ is.” Gabrielle looked over to Aphrodite who shook her head.

“I didn’t tell them anything,” she said.

“We figured it out on our own,” Michelle explained. “I’ll admit, it took some effort to wrap our heads around your situation,” the statuesque captain continued with a nod to the bard, “but once you get past you being over two thousand years old, and Aphrodite being *the* Aphrodite – well, anything after that isn’t as heavy a lift.”

Gabrielle’s eyes briefly met Vox’s and the engineer shrugged. “So, is this a booze free for all?” she asked hopefully.

“Have at it,” the bard replied gesturing at the bottles with relief. The engineer’s tone assured her that she’d kept her word about Xena having died. ‘Stasis’ was as plausible an explanation as any.

“Great, I’ve got to introduce you to this great drink that Wolfgang and I came up with while I was still in sick bay.”

“You’re not supposed to drink in there,” Gabrielle replied, frowning.

“Whatever. It was pain management. Anyway…” she said dismissively, stepping behind the kitchen counter by the barbecue. She rummaged through a cabinet, finally extracting five martini glasses. Working with practiced efficiency, she rimmed the glasses with honey and pink sugar. Without overdoing the flare, she handled the bottles and ice like a skilled professional.

“I had a summer job as an underage bartender,” she explained as she filled a shaker with ice, pineapple-mango vodka, and coconut rum. A Monster Pipeline Punch energy drink from the fridge below was added to the glasses after she’d poured the shaken spirits.

The quartet of women took the offered glasses and took an experimental sip. Their smiles almost matched the bashful grin they received in return.

“This is fantastic!” Gabrielle said beaming.

“Really nice,” Michelle echoed. “What do you and Wolfgang call it?”

With cheeks now flushing pink the engineer mumbled. “Wolfie really wants to call it an ‘Aphrodite’ and I can’t think of anything better so…”

“I must say I’m honored,” the goddess said with a wink. “Even if I’m not the biggest fan of the color pink.”

Xena looked at her in surprise, “well that’s a switch,” she said.

“Given enough time, we all evolve Xena,” the goddess replied. “But a very nicely balanced drink I must say. L’chaim!”

Clearly uncomfortable being the center of attention, Vox cleared her throat and addressed Gabrielle. “Were you guys up here plotting how we take down Ares?”

“Not exactly,” Xena admitted as she finished her drink and passed the glass back to the engineer, gesturing for her to prepare another.

She could feel her relaxed inebriation fading as she began to think more seriously, Gabrielle admitted a trifle guiltily, “Mostly we were drinking.”

“Shen had a rough day?” Aphrodite asked sympathetically. The duo nodded in agreement.

“He was due for a melt-down and he had it.” Gabrielle explained. “Poor guy has been through so much.”

“Fortunately, children are pretty resilient,” the goddess replied. “Do you think he’s still in danger?”

Taking another sip of her drink, Gabrielle shrugged. “Ares used Susan as leverage against me,” she said. “I could see him using Shen as leverage as well, if he knows about him. He was hell bent on us not…reviving Xena, so now that we have, I don’t know what his issues would be. But there is a viciousness to Ares that is new and different from the Ares we knew once upon a time, so I wouldn’t want to assume anything.”

While the beverage left a pleasant sweetness on Gabrielle’s palate and warmth radiating from her belly, a chill still coursed through her. “Anyone I’m close to is in danger of being used as leverage, and that includes everyone on this ship or in my

company,” she said seriously to Michelle. “I hope the crew has had an honest discussion about that very real possibility.”

With a sad smile, the captain nodded. “We have Gabrielle, especially in the wake of what happened to Susan. It isn’t lost on any of us that all of the release forms we sign when taking this job are very real and there for a reason.” She glanced at Vox before continuing. “You know the crew meets regularly. We’ve had blunt conversations that this particular danger isn’t like any of the potential dangers we expected when joining your company and moving up in the ranks. But every one of us is behind you. Not only in the work you do, the causes you support, the change you try to effect but also who you are as a person. We see how you treat people, what you offer the world around you and what you expect in return. If that isn’t something worth working and fighting for, I’m not sure I know what is.”

Gabrielle was too moved by the captain’s words to notice that Aphrodite was closely watching Xena as the warrior was listening to what was being said about the Bard of Potidaea. “That means a lot to me Michelle, thank you,” she finally said. “I really thought that some of you would make the decision to transfer out, and I absolutely wouldn’t blame anyone if they did.”

“Someone might transfer, but not for the reasons you think,” Michelle affirmed with a nod. “Rebekah Luna put two and two together and is convinced you’ve been a lawyer in addition to a surgeon, acupuncturist, musician. We’re still figuring out any number of professions you must have had. She doesn’t think she’s needed onboard as the legal liaison and is seriously considering a transfer to the home office.”

“Home office in Los Angeles or Ireland?” Gabrielle asked with a frown.

“Ireland, I think,” Michelle said with a shrug, indicating she wasn’t sure.

“I’ll talk to her,” Gabrielle replied. “Just because I’ve done a thing doesn’t mean I want to keep doing it or have even done it recently or am even good at it.”

“She also thinks that if she leaves, there will be room for an onboard tutor for Shen. We can’t take the place of real teachers forever,” Michelle added in a tone that made it clear that she didn’t disagree with the decision.

“We can talk about remodeling the crew’s living section and making more room at a later date,” Gabrielle said, not thrilled with the idea of losing a member of her crew. “I think we’re getting a little ahead of ourselves here.”

Gabrielle looked over at Xena accepting a second drink from the engineer. As the blue of the warrior’s eyes flickered in the firelight, she called the image of the well-proportioned woman in reveling armor was up from memory. Wearing jeans, a sweatshirt and sneakers, she simply looked beautiful, not beautiful and deadly. “Xena,” she asked, “do you have any idea why Ares would be so afraid of you...being awake? In this time period specifically?”

The warrior shrugged and studied the flames of the fire before responding. “I have no idea,” she said. “Certainly, you and I got the better of him more than once in the past. It might be as simple as that. He has a lot at stake and doesn’t want to risk it all tumbling down. I mean, I know how he thinks, and while I used to know his strategies, that was a long time ago. I don’t think I have any weapons or anything that can hurt him now.”

“Let’s face it Xena,” Aphrodite added. “My brother is in love with you. He’s in love with the idea of you leading his armies, yes, but also in love with you as a person.” As Xena’s face clouded over in confusion, Aphrodite rolled her eyes and explained.

“Du – uh, his ‘little brain’ overriding his ‘big brain’ has resulted in defeats in the past. He probably wants to avoid getting himself into situations like that now. The world is a more complicated place than telling a smelly army ‘go raid that village’. His schemes are more complex, with more moving pieces and possibly more vulnerable in that sense. You are not something he’s factored in and that probably rattles him. And you know strategy.”

“Gabrielle has built an army. I don’t doubt that you have other people who can strategize, so I’m not sure why Ares is so worried about me,” the warrior replied.

The captain turned to the goddess sitting on her right. “You’re his sister and his equal I’d assume, so why isn’t he worried about you getting in the way of his plans the way he’s worried about Xena?”

Aphrodite had finished her namesake drink and moved on to tequila, pouring herself a very healthy portion into the sugar rimmed martini glass. It was clear that she would have preferred helping herself straight from the bottle but didn’t want to bogart it from the others, should anyone want some. “Ares and I can’t directly hurt each other or any of the remaining Olympians. It’s a thing. I punched my uncle recently and it hurt me more than it hurt him, I’m sure. He also knows my ability isn’t a destructive one. I mean, people can be plenty destructive in the name of love, both to themselves and to others but that isn’t my *intention*. I won’t directly kill someone or even physically hurt them if I can help it. I guess that makes me no threat. There have been countless wars that I couldn’t stop, only comfort the anguished and try to get people to see a different path.”

“But wars do stop,” Vox observed. “On occasion peace breaks out and people prosper and get a breather from his destruction. There has to be something that Xena’s presence triggered...” The young butch’s ice blue eyes widened and shot from Xena back to Aphrodite and Gabrielle. “It wasn’t Xena’s arrival that set Ares off, it was the awareness that you were planning...to wake her up. It was only after Ares got confirmation that you and Gabrielle were together in Catalina that he kidnapped Susan.”

Inwardly Gabrielle winced. She saw Xena’s posture stiffen slightly though she knew that wasn’t necessarily how Vox meant the statement. “There had to be something,” the engineer continued, “that, by the two of you joining forces worries him. Unless, of course Xena is the only being on Earth who can out think him. I mean, he is a god, right?” She studied the flames for a few seconds more, puzzling through the problem like an engineering puzzle. “What did you use to...wake Xena up?”

This time it was Aphrodite’s turn to shrug. “A seashell of mine, which got destroyed...”

“And a hammer which we still have,” Gabrielle added. “I picked up the hammer with my sai and Xena’s chakram.” Green eyes met piercing blue. “The hammer was forged by Hephaestus,” Gabrielle said, her voice barely a whisper.

“As was my chakram,” Xena replied. “Although Ares won’t admit it. It must have been.”

“It will be easy enough to tell if we look at it,” Aphrodite commented after a thoughtful sip of tequila. Everyone around the small fire stared at the goddess. “What?” Aphrodite said, as though her statement were obvious. “My ex-husband monogrammed everything. There will be a small ‘H’ somewhere on it. Do you want me to check?”

Instantly the hairs on the back of Gabrielle’s neck stood on end. “No,” she said quickly and with conviction. “No. It’s off the ship, safe. I want to leave it where it is.”

She looked around at the dark of night around them. There was no one onboard but her crew and she absolutely trusted every one of them, and they were only reachable from the marina by a small boat, or someone with training. Still, she felt uneasy this close to land and wished they were out at sea for this conversation. There could be drones out of sight. "I don't want to touch it until we're ready to use it," she added quietly. "It's safe," she repeated.

"What we need is to figure out is how to get to him," Michelle observed. "Gideon Power, the guy pictured on the internet isn't Ares, but he may be a clue to get to Ares. Maybe SP can get to him first?"

Gabrielle leaned forward, towards the warm firelight. Xena was impressed that Michelle, Vox and even Aphrodite did the same, waiting for the bard's instruction. She leaned forward as well, already picking up that Gabrielle did not feel completely safe on deck. "Michelle, you are going to join us for the directors meeting tomorrow," The bard said quietly. "I think the captain will have a permanent place on the board. There are things that the active crew knows that the rest of transportation might not and you guys should be represented there. You will debrief the rest of the crew at your discretion and see if their skill sets, and knowledge of...the situation at hand can complement the actions taken by other divisions in the company.

"Xena and Aphrodite will also be at the meeting," She looked around at the nods of agreement and added "Sorry, Vox."

The engineer shook her head. "No worries. I'm happy to assist Michelle on the crew side."

"You put some pieces together tonight," Gabrielle countered. "I want you to keep working that. I'm going to ask for different people's perspective in who else in the company I need to read in on this, I'd like your take on that as well," she added. If Xena noticed the young engineer beaming at the compliment, she was polite enough not to show it.



It was quite late when Gabrielle and Xena arrived back at the library outside her quarters. The warrior had been a bit unsteady on her feet on the way down the stairs, reaching out to Gabrielle more than once to steady her. Gabrielle was unconcerned and assured the warrior that her tolerance for alcohol would improve. In any case, if she were in danger or even sufficiently startled, her mind would clear instantly. Her advice was to enjoy the sensation while it lasted.

"I haven't over indulged this much since...since..." Xena's voice trailed off as she tried to remember the last time she'd been drunk.

"Wasn't it the Artemis festival with the Amazons when Joxer had followed us to their village?" Gabrielle asked after searching her own memory.

The warrior chuckled, "and Ephiny was so annoyed with us she made him sleep outside the hut we were using and we had to be quiet."

Gabrielle's laughter joined Xena's. "We could both barely walk the next morning and he kept asking us why."

"I was so tempted to tell him if only to get him to shut up about it," Xena replied, her laughter subsiding. "Did he ever find someone?"

“Yes,” Gabrielle assured her. As she had the previous night she took the ottoman to the first bookcase and on top of the books, at the far end was a separate volume, larger than the others but not as thick. Xena now noticed that nearly every one of the shelves had one of these larger books lying flat on top of the neat row of vertical volumes. The bard opened the book and over her shoulder Xena saw page after page of meticulously rendered sketches. As the pages were turned she saw familiar faces fly by: her mother, Lyceus, Torus, Autolycus, Ephiny, Solari, as well as drawings of her and Argo. There was the occasional drawing of people they’d battled: Callisto, Alti, Caesar, even Ares. A number of drawings were of Gabrielle as well as her family, her mother, father, and Lila graced the pages. “These are amazing, Gabrielle. Who drew them?”

“I did,” Gabrielle said shyly. “I took up drawing and painting awhile back. This is something that helps me remember, and even helps me visualize in my writing. Or I should say, the writing helps me visualize the drawing. I don’t know, goes both ways I guess.”

“Awhile back?” Xena asked wryly.

Gabrielle blushed a little “Okay, maybe seven hundred years ago or so. I mean you can’t really live through the Renaissance and not get into art...oh, here we go,” she announced as she found the page she was looking for. She showed it to Xena and it showed a beaming middle aged Joxer, balding but fit, holding a tiny baby with a comely long-haired woman at his side.

“Joxer eventually fell for Selene, she inherited an Inn from her parents and Joxer got his dream of spending his days fishing to put dinner on the table. They had a son they were kind enough to name Gabriel. As I recall they had two more daughters then another son they named Xenan. Here...” She flipped through a few more pages and found another drawing of Joxer and his family. This time the children were young adults, smiling and happy, with parents who clearly loved them, each other and the life they’d built together. The expressions on the faces spoke as plainly to Xena as if they’d been talking. The likenesses captured not only their appearance but personalities as well.

Xena touched the paper gently, careful not to smudge the graphite drawing. “And you got to be a part of all of that.” She shifted a little unsteadily on her feet and Gabrielle put the book down and grasped each of the warrior’s arms to steady her.

Green eyes found blue and held them. “Xena, if I could go back, change time and space so we could live out our lives as we should have, I’d do it in an instant. Being that I can’t, I am both sad and relieved that you did not have to live out that time in Greece. There was joy, I won’t deny that. Joxer was a wonderful father, and all of his children were full of happiness and so much less annoying than he was. Solari was an amazing Queen to the Amazons. Minya even became famous in her region for helping people. But Xena, there was a lot of pain too. Your mother passed away first. I was there with her, and she was happy about that and there was no pain- she went peacefully.”

Xena could feel her eyes fill with tears and she wanted to look away, to tell Gabrielle to stop, but she felt that she owed it to the bard to at least hear what she didn’t have to endure. “Solari was killed in battle. I don’t know what became of Hercules, but Iolas died while his wife was expecting their first. He had a serious illness and,” she shrugged, “I didn’t know medicine the way I know it now. Joxer outlived his wife, they were both quite old when they passed away, in the same year, I think. Their children were grown, he had dementia, passed away peacefully in his sleep just as Selene had. Torus

married and welcomed twin girls named for you and your mother, also a son named Lyceus. He lived to be an old man, stubborn till the end and died from complications from horse riding accident.” Now Gabrielle’s eyes were welling up as well at the memory. “Off the top of my head I can think of probably a dozen or more children named Xena or Xenan from the people whose lives we intersected with. A few named Gabrielle or Gabriel too, of course. We had a positive impact on a lot of lives and you left a legacy that endured and was remembered.”

The pleasantly muddled feeling of the drink was passing quickly as Xena thought about what she might have left behind in the world and marveling at the very idea that the scales might have actually have been tilted toward the positive. Gabrielle gently touched her cheek, drawing her from her thoughts. “Did you want to stay up and read?” she asked softly. “I’m going to turn in.”

Xena nodded but she knew she didn’t have it in her to read, not tonight. When the bard took her leave she studied the bookcases, following their logical progression to the most recent shelf. As she suspected the books here looked less worn. She checked the dates on the spine of the last volume and deduced that Gabrielle must have the current volume in her bedroom with her. Xena didn’t mind. What she was looking for was the most recent sketchbook. She didn’t want to read, she didn’t want to see faces from her past, but she did want to see more of the bard’s drawings. There was something about the line quality, the precision to the shading that made the portraits come alive and speak to her. She opened up the most recent book of sketches and immediately frowned.

She’d started the book from the back, moving past the blank pages to the most recent drawing Gabrielle had finished. The drawing was of a scantily clad Aphrodite, sitting on a beach, mid laugh. The contrast in value had the sunlight highlighting the goddess’ face and short hair, her fit form in gentle relief. Xena felt like she was being mocked. She rolled her eyes, acknowledging the jealousy. Skipping back several pages, she did indeed see familiar faces, but they weren’t from the past. There were drawings of the bard’s crew going about their usual routines, clearly unaware they were being sketched, unless Gabrielle was just drawing from memory. She didn’t recognize all the faces, but she did notice Shen, Vox, Wolfgang, Michelle, and the man with the unusual hair – Bo. There was an older Chinese woman she assumed was Susan and a family picture of Susan with a man looking over the shoulder of younger couple holding a baby.

Even here though, as she flipped through the pages, among so many faces, she didn’t realize she’d see her own face. Seemingly at random, there would be a drawing of her in her armor, sharpening her sword, or wearing the contemporary clothing of the day. Some were just studies of her face or hands, others were fully rendered scenes.

People were not the only subjects of the drawings. There were sketches of her dog Argo, buildings, landscapes, other animals. many of which looked fanciful to Xena. One was a funny sort of striped horse, another was a large animal with legs like tree trunks and a long horn on its face. Xena took the phone out of her pocket to google and realized there was no help in typing ‘what am I looking at,’ into the search engine. She turned several more pages and made a mental note to ask Gabrielle or Vox about the animals in the morning. She put the sketchbook back where she’d found it and selected an earlier volume of drawings from a higher shelf.

She opened the book to a random set of pages and a piece of paper fluttered to the floor. Xena was going to pick it up but was distracted by the faces looking back at her. It

was like looking at her own reflection, but it wasn't. Two women that very much looked like her and Gabrielle smiled back at her, a dog at their side. They were dressed even more strangely than the clothes she was presently wearing. She picked the piece of paper off the floor and opened it. The heading said "obituary" and what followed was a story about an elderly couple that had been killed in a car accident. There were pictures in the article showing the two women as they'd been in the drawing and again later in life when they were older. She read the article, pausing to research words like "archaeology" and the lecture series where one of the women had been speaking. While she could only guess at the paper's significance she could tell that this was important so she gently folded it and put it back, turning the page to see other drawings.

Once again, most of the faces were unrecognizable. The occasional crewmember she knew, a few sketches of herself, some of her dog as a puppy. From time to time, there was a drawing of Callisto, or Solon, or even Hope as an adult. Clearly Gabrielle was interested in remembering all of her past, not just the happy memories. As she put the book back, Xena considered her place in Gabrielle's life and felt reassured that regardless of who else might be important, her place in the bard's mind and heart was secure. After restoring the book to its shelf, she sighed; she was tired. She considered sleeping on the couch again. While comfortable, she decided against it, instead turning off the library light. With a nervousness she had not felt in many years, she opened the door to Gabrielle's bedroom and stepped inside. They had spent many nights as friends sleeping side by side, and she knew she was kidding herself to think this was no different, but persisted regardless.

The room was dimly illuminated by soft light from the bathroom. Xena made her way there and closed the door, enjoying the decadence of being able to clean her hands, face and teeth whenever she liked. She made her way back to the bedroom and as Vox had shown her, using her phone screen to light her way. She smiled, noting the leather-bound volume on the nightstand near Gabrielle, Argo contentedly curled up on a soft cushion on the floor. Making her way to the other side of the bed, she stripped down to her t-shirt after noting Gabrielle still wearing hers and assuming it was the custom.

Carefully sliding between the sheets (and once again amazed at their softness), she paused to take in her surroundings. There was something about the room and its ambience; the contented breathing of the dog, the soft breathing of the dog's mistress, the scent of lavender and wood, the gentle rocking of the yacht on the water – all of it made Xena feel an ease she had not felt in a very long time. She had spent enough time onboard to know that people were awake, and even now, as she prepared to sleep, the crew was routinely making sweeps of the ship as well as any number of other security measures, employed to keep them safe. Even at the height of her warlord days, Xena was not certain she'd have put together as efficient and competent team of elite individuals. Truth be told, she was curious to sit in on the meeting with the other division leaders for a closer view of how Gabrielle's Army was organized.

She was drawn from her thoughts by her unconscious companion shifting in her sleep and rolling over onto her side. Like magnets drawn to each other, a hand reached towards hers and held it, squeezing gently at random intervals. Steadfastly Xena resisted the temptation to wonder if the bard were dreaming about someone else, someone who had recently shared this bed. She reminded herself that she was the person who was here now, the person for whom Gabrielle willingly ended her previous relationship. While the

bard still felt distant and just out of her reach while awake, she was inches away here and now, and had reached out to hold her hand. It made for the first night in a long, long time that Xena, Warrior Princess, fell asleep with a smile on her face.

Chapter 13: The War Councils

Gabrielle woke wondering if she'd missed the wake-up call from the bridge. It was rare (but not unheard of) that she woke up unassisted. Before she rolled over to check her watch, something dark moved in her peripheral vision. It took only a slight turn of her head for Xena's peacefully sleeping face to come into focus. Quickly searching her memory, the events of the previous night came into sharp focus, including her retiring for the night alone. She tried in vain to remember the last time she'd seen the warrior sleeping so peacefully. She smiled, drinking in the relaxed face and peaceful expression of her unconscious companion, pleased that Xena felt comfortable enough to join her. Silently she slid out of bed and after using the bathroom, made her way across the cabin to the door, only snapping her fingers to wake the dog when she was well into the library. Argo's keen hearing picked up the sound, and the dog followed her up the stairs to the deck to do her business.

"You're up early," she heard from behind moments later. Gabrielle turned to see Aphrodite and Michelle approach. The two were walking close together but not touching. Michelle was dressed for her on-duty shift with her curly hair in its professional bun. She wasn't wearing the usual crew attire of jeans and t-shirts or other assorted vacation wear, rather she was dressed for the meeting with the department heads in a dark gray business suit with a crisp white blouse. She looked stunning. Aphrodite opted for a rich navy pinstriped suit and pencil skirt combination with a pale blue blouse the adjective 'diabolical' was the description that came to the bard's mind. If anyone maintained focus during the meeting, she suspected they might deserve a bonus or promotion.

"Hey guys," the bard replied, a bit annoyed with herself that she couldn't keep the suspicion out of her voice seeing the pair together at this early hour.

"Look who's adorable when she's jealous," Aphrodite replied with a chuckle.

"We were up talking, that's it," Michelle quickly explained with a genuinely worried expression on her face.

Now it was the Goddess of Love's turn to look annoyed. "You don't need to explain that to her, sweetie," she said. "Not only does she not have standing to be jealous, she's more evolved than that," she assured her companion.

Gabrielle, who knew well what endearments could mean when uttered by the Goddess of Love, decided not to pursue the issue. Not only was Aphrodite correct on both counts, she was more concerned about Michelle's vulnerability in the situation than her own feelings, reminding herself that not only did the captain know who she was dealing with, she was a grown-ass woman capable of taking care of herself.

"Everything set for this morning?" Gabrielle, smoothly changed subject.

"Yes, with one minor change," the captain replied, relief evident in her voice.

"You'd requested that Jorge, Sabin and Fiona arrive early for their 'booze meeting' and Heather Martin has also asked to arrive early. She wants to discuss something with you before the general meeting, but I don't know what."

Gabrielle leaned her back against the railing of the ship, thinking. "That's fine. I was going to read her in, might as well include her and do it now."

“The more the merrier?” Aphrodite suggested with a grin.

“Let’s hope I can do this without having to impale myself,” the bard replied, frowning in Aphrodite’s direction. “I also want to have a quick word with the whole crew. Please have them assemble in the conference room before the department directors. When everyone is onboard, I want the ship away from its moorings for the meeting. I’ve got this feeling... I want everyone to stay extra sharp about bugs and drones and shit that can spy on us.”

“Will do,” Michelle replied with a nod. “Shall I take Argo for her breakfast while you get ready?”

Gabrielle nodded, then watched the departing form of her dog happily trailing behind the captain for a moment before turning her attention back to the goddess, who was intently studying her. “What?” she asked.

“You’re a bit of a mess and I’m worried about you,” Aphrodite said seriously.

“You’re kind of a mess yourself,” Gabrielle retorted. With a small smile, she added, “What did I say about throwing moves at the captain of my ship?”

Aphrodite shrugged. “I like the captain of your ship. What can I say? You reminded me how much fun it is to spend time with women. Besides, if I seem less available, you might get your shit together faster.”

“Like you having a girlfriend is going to make you any less available,” Gabrielle was unable to hide the amusement in her voice.

“Asshole,” Aphrodite frowned but offered no further argument.

Gabrielle playfully punched Aphrodite in the arm as they turned to walk back to the stairs that would take her back to her quarters. “I’m not going to ask you to not hurt my crew, because I know you wouldn’t.” She stopped at the stairs, rewarded with the million-watt smile that could make the bleakest day seem sunny.

“And you are correct,” she said. “I will tell you though, that you’re going to need a new captain, since I think she may want to join me when I go traveling after this shit with my brother is handled. I know you’ve got plenty of qualified people who can step up.”

“As captain maybe,” Gabrielle replied departing. “Getting someone who cooks like she can will be another challenge entirely.”

“That’s your problem, now stop changing the subject.” The goddess replied crossing her arms. “Why are you a mess?”

“I’m not sure what’s going on with Xena. I mean not *with* Xena, I know where Xena’s head is. With my head and Xena – that’s the problem.”

“It’s not your head darling, it’s your heart,” the goddess said sympathetically.

“You know what I mean,” Gabrielle replied, clearly frustrated with herself and not the woman standing next to her. “I love Xena. I know I love Xena. Xena is the other half of my soul, for fuck’s sake. I woke up in bed less than an hour ago with Xena sleeping next to me and I had a moment of panic wondering if we’d done anything. We hadn’t, but why wouldn’t we? We’re in love. I can only imagine how this is making Xena feel, which is the worst part of it. I love her, but I’m not ready to be what we were and I feel completely ridiculous staying that out loud. Of all the potential things that could have happened with her return, this was not something I anticipated.”

Aphrodite nodded understandingly. “Gabrielle, you have spent the last twenty centuries rationing how much of yourself you share with someone. I have no doubt that

there have been magnificent relationships where you felt like you were nearly as in love as you were with Xena, *nearly* being the operative word here. Maybe you were even eighty percent open with them, in other instances maybe it was sixty or forty or who knows – fifteen percent if you were just looking for a distraction and wanted to get laid on a regular basis.” Gabrielle nodded, considering the goddess’ words seriously. “You are old enough and mature enough to know that there isn’t just one kind of happy ending. You can passionately and deeply love more than one person, even more than one person at the same time,” she continued with a self-satisfied smirk. “But your heart, as an emotional muscle, has atrophied. It hasn’t had to be fully present, fully authentic with anyone until I showed up.” Gabrielle gave Aphrodite a ‘aren’t you full of yourself’ look and the goddess waved her hand dismissively. “This is not an ego thing Gabrielle, although, hello, with being The Goddess of Love, an ego thing would be totally warranted here. What I mean is, you didn’t have to hide who you are with me. Your background, your real history, what you’ve been up to for the last two thousand years – you haven’t had to lie to me once.”

“You don’t have to lie to Xena either. Not about your fears, your frustrations, or anything else tumbling through that gorgeous blond head of yours – you can tell her like you always would. That was the strength between the two of you. She was cranky and beat people up, and you reminded her that even so, she had a soul and was worthy of being loved. She reminded you that you’re nobody’s fool and in charge of your own destiny.” Gabrielle smiled and hugged her warmly.

“You really are a goddess,” Gabrielle murmured into Aphrodite’s shoulder.

“Oh, and that you’re sexy as fuck,” the goddess added playfully in her ear.

“You’re not happy until the line is in the distance behind you, are you?” Gabrielle asked with mock seriousness as they parted.

Aphrodite winked. “Admit it, I had ninety percent, didn’t I?”

Gabrielle shook her head as she turned to go down the stairs. “Don’t sell yourself short,” she said playfully. “Ninety-six percent, easy.”



Gabrielle returned to her cabin to find Xena freshly showered, a bath towel wrapped around her muscular body. She was standing, back straight, staring at something hanging in the walk-in closet. “I saw that same expression on your face the last time we saw Caesar,” Gabrielle observed.

“At least against Caesar I felt like I knew what I was doing,” Xena replied a bit morosely.

“It’s not that bad,” Gabrielle assured her. “I’ll take a quick shower and we can get ready together.”

Xena turned toward the bathroom and sat on the edge of the bed while she waited for Gabrielle. Intentional or not, the door to the bathroom had been left open and from her vantage point Xena had a clear view of Gabrielle’s reflection in the mirror as she undressed and stepped into the large marble shower. The sight of the dragon tattoo brought her thoughts back to Japan and she shuddered involuntarily.

“How did you sleep?” Gabrielle called from the shower, breaking into the warrior’s unhappy thoughts.

“I slept well,” she answered, loud enough to be heard over the running water, looking at the mirror once again. The bard was making quick work of shampooing her hair and washing herself. Xena stared transfixed. She knew every square inch of the bard’s skin intimately. She saw several small scars on her legs and when Gabrielle turned around to rinse her hair, she saw the small round scar left by the arrow that had pierced her, just above her breast. The warrior was surprised to find that she had so few scars that were new to her and how clearly she noticed them.

As her mind wandered she remembered being a small child, walking past one of the rough-hewn homes of Amphipolis where she could smell the most amazing scent of a feast being prepared knowing that she would not be invited to dinner. That was how she felt this moment gazing at the woman in the shower.

Gabrielle turned the water off and reached for her towel, glancing into the mirror. As she did so, she made eye contact with Xena. The warrior looked away, embarrassed at having been caught staring.

“This morning I’m going to meet with the crew, then several of my department directors before the actual departmental meeting,” Gabrielle said conversationally. She’d wrapped a towel around herself and was towel-drying her hair as she walked back into the cabin. “Let me dry your hair before we get dressed,” she said leading the warrior back to the dressing table. She started to use the blow dryer on the warrior’s hair, briefly showing Xena how it worked before getting started.

“Breakfast will come right before the departmental meeting. These meetings have been known to get quite heated, but I’m hoping to keep everyone on the same page today.”

“I’ve had lieutenants like that,” Xena said as she watched their reflections in the mirror. There was something decadent and enjoyable in having Gabrielle’s fingers working their way through her hair and she was in no hurry to have it stop. “I looked through some of your sketchbooks last night.”

“Really?” Gabrielle said, sounding delighted. “I hope it didn’t make you homesick.”

“I looked at some of the more recent books. There were some amazing animal drawings, Gabrielle. You’re certainly the one with many skills now.” Xena smiled as she said it and the bard quickly checked their reflection in the mirror to make sure that there wasn’t anything else behind the comment. “I recognized the elephant, but the horse with the stripes and the large beast with the tree trunk legs and the huge spike on its face – are they real or imagined?”

Gabrielle turned off the blow dryer and studied Xena in the mirror. “Xena, there is a larger, more amazing world out there than you can imagine – and I promise to show you every corner of it.” She put the blow dryer and the hairbrush down and put her palms on the warrior’s shoulders, squeezing for emphasis. “I think you were looking at some sketches from Africa. The horse with stripes is a zebra and the thing with tree-trunk legs and the horn is a rhinoceros. There are giraffes, lions, and ibex – we will go on a safari soon and see them all. It will have to be soon though, they are all racing towards extinction. People are making a mess of the world.”

“I saw Africa in Shen’s book, on the map, it’s enormous. Why did you settle here, in North America?”

Gabrielle finished the warrior's hair. She turned Xena to face her and began applying makeup. While the warrior wasn't sure of the need for the disguise, she had no intention of stopping her. It felt really nice to be the center of the bard's focus and to have the light touch of familiar hands on her face.

"I wouldn't say I've exactly settled here. I've been here, in North America at least, for a little over one hundred years this last time. But I do move around pretty frequently, hence the boat. The United States is a very young country, and there is a lot of growth and opportunity. It's pretty easy for me to blend in here, so it has also been fairly easy to change identities and move money around as needed. In many places in Africa, it wouldn't take much before I'm considered a dangerous spirit. Other places, like much of Asia, it's almost impossible to blend in. Europe is great and I feel right at home there, but I've spent hundreds and hundreds of years traveling all over. Here it was new, everyone is descended from some kind of immigrant, and there was adventure and excitement. Unfortunately, the genocide against the original inhabitants of this land was very nearly complete, so it has a downside too. Every inch of this country was taken from someone else, and they don't like to reminisce about that part of their history."

She had finished with the warrior's makeup and encouraged Xena to look at her reflection. Xena blinked in surprise. The change wasn't drastic, but it was dramatic. She looked...different. She had to admit, she looked really good.

"I promise, there will be time, plenty of time for you to see all of it. The fact that you can already speak all of the languages will have you feeling right at home in no time," she added with a smile.

Xena nodded absently, thinking about America and how she would view it as a warlord. "This sounds like the kind of place Ares would be interested in as well," Xena observed as she watched Gabrielle apply her own makeup. "The ability to blend in, move his resources – many of the things that appeal to you will also appeal to him. Only he's interested in causing unrest, not combating it. He's not able to change form?"

Gabrielle paused in the application of her mascara to shake her head. "Aphrodite says that she can't change form, disappear, or affect world events from afar. She says she needs to travel the conventional way humans do. I would assume it would be the same for Ares. His hair grows, so he'd have to have it cut, and he can change his beard or shave it off, but I'm pretty sure that's about it. When I saw him, he looked the same as he always did but in different clothes and without the facial hair."

When she'd finished with her makeup Gabrielle turned to her companion. "Xena," she said softly, changing the subject. "I'm glad you came to bed last night. I..." she stopped herself, starting to get choked up. After a calming breath she continued. "I know this is not easy for you. Not only the shock of the world that you find yourself in, but me not being...not being..."

"In love with me," Xena finished for her. The bard's eyes narrowed. Not necessarily in anger but in intensity.

"Me not being *what you remembered*," Gabrielle corrected her.

"It's okay, Gabrielle," Xena said reassuringly and the bard didn't know whose statement she was referring to. "We said we'd focus on Ares, I need to get used to the world, you need to get used to me. We've covered this. It's okay."

Gabrielle nodded and led them both to the bedroom. The bard dressed slowly and methodically enough that Xena could follow without feeling self-conscious. "Is there a

significance to you wearing a skirt and me wearing trousers?" Xena asked. "Is there a symbolism in the color scheme? You'd described this as a war council of sorts ..."

With a shake of her head Gabrielle gestured back to the closet. "Aphrodite bought you several business outfits, I picked this because I think it will look great on you. I picked this light gray one with the vest for me because I just felt like it." She held up the light blue blouse to her chest. "What do you think, this one or a white one?"

"The blue, it draws out your eyes," Xena commented as she fastened the belt around her waist. "Blue and green," she added absently. "Like the ocean."

They finished dressing and looked at themselves in the full-length mirror. "These shoes are insane," Xena grouched. She was wearing narrow black slacks, black Christian Louboutin pumps, a white blouse and the drop-wasted jacket was almost a cross between a smoking jacket and a tuxedo. The gray and black pattern was modern with rich black lapels.

"Xena you look like a million bucks," she said appreciatively. "I know heels are the worst, and if it were anything other than these meetings, you'd be in different footwear. Trust me, when we go to D.C. we'll be wearing something with more sanity."

The warrior took a couple of experimental steps. Gabrielle was impressed she didn't stumble, but knowing Xena's core strength and remarkable balance, she wasn't surprised that after striding across the room once, she looked like she'd been wearing heels for years.

Nearly all of the crew was assembled in the conference room when the pair arrived, only Elaine and Vox were noticeably absent. "Elaine is watching the monitors on the bridge," Michelle explained as they approached. "Vox is hanging out with Shen below deck as a safety precaution. I was going to fill them both in after the director's meeting."

Gabrielle nodded and looked around the conference room at the assembled faces as Steve and Hatsuo finished the security sweep of the room and sealed it, the soft blue light indicating complete privacy.

"I will make this quick since I know you've got work to do to get us underway," she began. "If anyone hasn't had the chance to meet Xena, I wanted to give you that opportunity," she nodded her head in the warrior's direction. Xena's cheeks grew hot as all eyes shift to her. She keenly felt the absence of Vox, whom she was most familiar with of the crew. She found herself glancing over at Aphrodite, who rewarded her with a reassuring wink. Five of the crew either nodded an acknowledgement to the warrior or raised a hand in greeting.

Gabrielle began the introductions around the table. "Xena, this is Rebekah Luna, our legal liaison. Samantha Ramirez, our steward this tour with Blake. Hatsuo Eko, head of security, followed by our bosun, Steve Hagstrom. Lastly, Ingrid Kamaka is our mechanic extraordinaire. Guys, this is Xena." The warrior smiled in acknowledgment and was relieved when the attention shifted back to the bard. Gabrielle took a deep breath before continuing, taking a moment to make eye contact with each of the employees seated around the large, rough-hewn table.

"As you all know, the effort to find Xena has taken a very high toll from all of us. Shen's presence on this ship is testament to that, and I want to thank all of you, from the bottom of my heart for stepping up the way you have to make him feel safe, and more importantly, loved." There were nods of agreement and acknowledgment.

“While you are all aware that I’m slightly older than I look...” she paused for the well-meaning snickers around the table, “you might not be aware that I’ve known Susan’s family for a very long time. I met her grandfather in 1912 when he was a young man and he was a very dear friend of mine until he passed away in ’70. Susan’s mother Betty started in ’52 and worked for me until she retired. All of you knew Susan and we all mourn her loss. I mourn it profoundly. I was the first person outside her family to hold her as a baby. As I am Shen’s godmother, I was also Susan’s god-mother and before that, Betty’s.”

As the bard spoke Xena could see a the awareness of the practical implications of Gabrielle’s predicament dawning on their faces. “I tell you this because I want to make it clear that I value life, specifically all of yours, in a way that you might not consider. I don’t want any of you thinking for a second that because I don’t have skin in the game physically, that I’m not profoundly aware of the risks that all of you are undertaking by being in proximity to me. Xena and I are reunited, something Ares wanted to prevent, but that does not mean that Ares is not a still threat, or that he’s going to drop the issue. In fact, I believe that he will take active measures to gain some kind of leverage over the three of us.” As she spoke, she nodded to the goddess and warrior standing to either side. “Susan was collateral damage, and I tell you honestly and sincerely that it is unlikely she will be the only casualty. All of you have to understand that. You are all in very real danger.”

The mechanic brushed her long auburn hair out of her face and tentatively raised her hand. “Ingrid, this isn’t class, you can just talk,” Gabrielle reassured her.

“Um, yeah, hi,” the mechanic said awkwardly. “Is Xena...ah...you guys knew each other from Greece so you’re...age wise I mean...like Aphrodite...but still...” The mechanic’s words kind of trailed off and she shrugged helplessly.

“I think she’s asking if I’m immortal like you,” Xena added helpfully.

“Or if you’re as indestructible as Gabrielle is,” Bohemian added. “Don’t feel bad, none of us are fluent in Ingrid.”

Xena glanced at Gabrielle and Aphrodite and the goddess spoke up. “Yes, she’s immortal, in the way that Gabrielle is, but since she’s been in stasis she doesn’t have two-thousand years of experience to impress you with at Trivial Pursuit. As for the indestructibility, does anyone have a pocket knife?”

Immediately several pairs of eyes shot to the gouge in the table where Gabrielle had been impaled only weeks earlier. “No, absolutely not,” Gabrielle said fiercely. Xena was taken aback, and stood there looking between the two, confused.

“Just to cut the tip of her finger, silly,” Aphrodite explained with a reassuring look around the table.

“What are you talking about?” The warrior asked, exasperated.

“They were having a hard time believing Gabrielle before, so I stabbed her,” she explained as Xena’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “And I only did it because they were being stubborn and it all worked out okay so calm down,” she added hurriedly.

“You should know if you’re indestructible, right?” Bohemian asked as he fished a small Swiss army knife out of his pocket and slid it across the table. In a smooth movement Aphrodite picked the knife up and folded out a small blade before handing it to the warrior, handle first.

“Cut the tip of your finger,” she said. “See if it heals up.”

Xena shrugged and did as she was asked, drawing the blade across her index finger and holding it up as several crimson drops splashed on the table. Hatsuo took a handkerchief from his pocket and passed it to Aphrodite. Almost instantly the bleeding stopped and the skin knit together. Surprised, the warrior touched her finger to her thumb then shrugged again. “Well, that answers that,” she said.

“I’m still a little confused as to how you battle a god?” Rebekah asked. “We’ve gotten a small taste of what Aphrodite can do, I can’t help but think that Ares has similar powers?”

“That is the problem we’re presently wrestling with,” Gabrielle replied. “Michelle will update you when we’ve had the director’s meeting and keep you in the loop moving forward. I wanted to personally thank all of you, but also stress the very real danger each one of you are in. I want to give you an out, should any of you decide this isn’t for you.”

“What is your next move?” Bohemian asked curiously. “None of us are going anywhere. Is there anything we can do to help with whatever it is you’re planning? If you don’t know what to do about Ares, are we any closer to getting Susan’s body back for burial?” Several of the assembled crew nodded their head in agreement. Susan was one of them.

“I will be meeting with Fiona shortly. HR will have her file, her will, final requests, et cetera, that each of you have filled out,” Gabrielle willed herself to keep the ache out of her voice. She wanted to be clear that she could be having this conversation about any one of them “Aphrodite, Xena, and I will be going to DC to meet with some Feds and hopefully get Susan’s body released.” As an afterthought she added, “I should probably take a bodyguard. I’ll be traveling as Susan Vincent. Nicolai?”

The large Russian man shook his head. “No,” he said. Gabrielle blinked. That was not the answer she was expecting. Several surprised glances were shared around the table. “I will stay here and guard Shen,” he explained. “You three are indestructible, the boy is not. You don’t need bodyguard, you need someone who *looks* like bodyguard; who can play bodyguard. Take Ed.” Spontaneously the rest of the crew either clapped or pounded the table in approval. There was a chorus of ‘bravo’, ‘well said’, and ‘right on’ from around the conference room. Gabrielle shrugged taking his point.

“Very well,” she agreed. “I couldn’t agree more.” For a moment she silently considered each of her crew, their individual strengths and weaknesses gleaned by years of having them in her employ. While they were all perfectly capable of making their own decisions, there was a maternal drive in her that wished some of them would choose differently. Inwardly she stopped herself. This was not time for Gabrielle the nurturer; it was time for her to lead.

“I’ve said my piece about letting each of you off the hook. If you’re going to stay let’s move forward on full alert. I want everyone wearing comm units. If you’re moving about the ship, do it in pairs. Wearing weapons might not be a bad idea. They won’t hurt Ares, but I have my army – we’d be foolish to think he doesn’t have his, and if they are the kind of right-wing yokels Gideon Power appeals to, they will be overjoyed at the chance to use their guns. Wolfgang, I want you and Vox to coordinate with us when we’re away from the ship, and with Transportation and SP. We will take Ed to DC and you will loop each other in. The same attention to detail that we’ve used more than once to get medical supplies past pirates and terrorists – that’s what is going to be needed now. I don’t know how or when Ares might come at us directly, but I’m certain he will.”

“Before we go,” Hatsuo interjected his face grim, “all of us have access to the same cyanide device that Susan was wearing. I would suggest we all consider wearing one.”

Gabrielle studied the security chief’s face for several moments before replying. She saw the microscopic pull of his facial muscles betray the fear he was experiencing but determined not to show.

“I am not going to ask any of you to die for me, and if any of you are captured I will do everything in my power to get you back. I will say this, Ares has been around a long time. His fingerprints are all over events as big as the Spanish Inquisition and the Holocaust. His hand is in conflicts large and small the world over. If he captures you, you very well may wish you were dead long before you have the chance to be rescued. There are no secrets I’m asking you to keep. If you are captured, please feel free to talk. Nothing any of you could possibly say is worth dying over. If Ares didn’t know about Shen when he grabbed Susan, he probably knows now and I do want him protected. But he would naturally assume he would be on this ship. We will be expecting an attack.” No one spoke but it was clear that her message had hit home. “You’re all dismissed,” she added quietly, releasing them to go do the work they were trained to do. Without comment, chairs were pushed away from the table as the crew filtered out. “Sarah, Samantha, if I may have a word,” Gabrielle said to the chef and steward as they prepared to file out of the conference room. “I’m about to have a booze meeting with Sabin, Fiona, Heather and Jorge. You know what they drink?” The chef nodded.

“We’ll take care of everything,” Samantha assured her with a nod as Michelle approached while looking at her phone.

“The early directors are at the dock, may they board?” the captain asked.

Gabrielle nodded then added to the chef and steward, “Please have a pitcher of Bloody Mary’s sent down, today is going to be a long one.”



“You guys go ahead,” Gabrielle said to Aphrodite and Michelle. “I’ll meet you at my study. I just want to get some air on deck and let Argo do her business before the next meeting. Michelle, you can handle the introductions.” The captain nodded and turned to go, waiting for Aphrodite, who hesitated a moment before joining her.

“Mind if I stay with you?” Xena asked, uncertain of how the bard might answer.

“Not at all,” Gabrielle replied, leading the way to the upper deck. Argo trailed behind the two, quickly finding a ball on deck and proudly bringing back to her mistress. The bard threw it a couple of times, wistfully looking out to the open ocean. “I wish I knew what Ares was up to. Why he would even care if you’d been resurrected? People are going to get hurt...” she trailed off, seeing her own concern reflected in Xena’s face.

“You’ve become quite a leader,” Xena observed. “I think Ares is afraid of me, not even realizing that you might be more of a threat to him at this point.”

“I think Aphrodite is right, he’s afraid of his feelings for you and how that distracts him,” Gabrielle demurred, distracted by her dog. “And besides, you’re the warrior in the family.”

“Uh huh.” Xena replied, throwing a solid punch at the bard’s face.

Gabrielle parried the blow, grabbing Xena’s wrist and taking a step towards the warrior. As she moved past Xena, she pulled the warrior’s arm behind her back holding

the wrist at a painful angle. The move took but a second and as quickly as the bard performed it, she let go, instantly apologetic.

“Xena, I’m so sorry. It’s was reflex.”

Blue eyes twinkled with humor, and she arched her eyebrow knowingly as she nodded. “I can see that.”

“How did you know?” Gabrielle asked, adjusting the collar of the taller woman’s shirt and jacket.

“It’s how you carry yourself, Gabrielle. You move like someone who has had a lot of training, like a fighter.”

“Like you?”

Xena shrugged. “As gifted with words as you are, I wouldn’t think you could survive for two thousand years without having to fight as well. Beyond the fighting that we did, or that you continued in Egypt. Bigger conflicts need larger forces, armies. And you don’t lead an army without knowing how to do what they do. You’ve clearly endured some big conflicts.” Gabrielle nodded. “So, remember that. When you talk to your directors, when you talk to your people. You’ve been fighting Ares this whole time even if you didn’t know it was him and he didn’t know it was you.” Xena looked down into shining green eyes for a moment. She stopped herself from telling the bard that she was proud of her. Proud that she’d managed to replicate the positive things that she became without having to endure the negative part of the journey first. Something made her keep silent. Instead she smiled and hoped that it would convey the same message.

Gabrielle thought about Xena’s advice as she led the warrior and Argo back below deck. “Did you train in Jappa? Or Chin?” Xena asked as they descended the stairs. With a shake of her head, Gabrielle stopped them, just outside her office. “Xena, after you died I couldn’t go back to Japan for a very long time. It was at least a thousand years. I’ve picked up training in the martial arts from all over, like everything else, I guess. And yes, eventually I did do some studying in Japan and China as well, but believe me, to this day every time I set foot on Japanese soil, I’m taken back to the awful, awful day you died.”

“Not anymore,” Xena replied with a grin, following Gabrielle through the formal office to the study behind.

The scene inside of Gabrielle’s office was a cozy one. Sabin, Fiona, and Jorge were seated on the leather couch by the wood paneled wall; the coffee table in front of them laden with a variety of pitchers, bottles and a cast iron tea pot. Heather was seated in left of the two chairs across from the bard’s desk, while Aphrodite occupied the chair behind the desk. Michelle stood in the corner against the bookcase, trying to look unobtrusive. Gabrielle motioned for Xena to take the empty seat next to her Director of Finance. Argo padded over to the dog bed next to the couch and made herself comfortable.

“There you are,” the goddess said in greeting. “I was about to start your meeting without you.”

“Nice.” Gabrielle replied with a mock frown as she flipped the switch that indicated that the room was sealed. “I’m glad all of you have met Aphrodite, I’d like all of you to meet Xena,” she said with a nod to her companion as she leaned against the edge of her desk. “Xena, this is Sabin Jha, head of Special Projects, Fiona O’Brien, head of Human Resources, Jorge Hernandez, head of Transportation, and Heather Martin, who

is head of Finance.” At each of their names, a hand was extended and Xena rose from her seat to grasp each one politely. “Heather, you asked to speak to me before the director’s meeting, what’s up?” Gabrielle saw the brunette hesitate and glance uncertainly at the newcomers, so quickly added, “Oh and before I forget – Aphrodite and Xena have class one clearance, and I’m making the position of ship’s captain a member of the Director’s board. You’re free to discuss anything you’d like here.”

If any of the directors were surprised by the announcement, they kept it to themselves, but the realization that she’d inadvertently crashed a private meeting dawned on the finance director. Her cheeks flushed crimson and she quickly scanned the assembled faces before speaking.

“I. ah...just wanted to make it clear that you have my full support for whatever resources you need to get the people responsible for Susan. I know you don’t always feel like I’m behind you when it comes to spending your money – but this is different. Susan was a friend to all of us,” she nodded over to the couch to include the three seated there. “Whatever it is you need; the Finance Department can make that happen. Also, I suspect Shen will be living onboard, so a remodel is probably in order. You have my support there as well.”

Gabrielle grinned as she turned to reach for a folder under the chaos of papers on her desk. “I mentioned after the last meeting that you and I would meet with Susan and go over some financial stuff,” she said briefly opening the folder to make sure it was the right one before handing it to the brunette. “This should put your mind at ease, financially speaking at least.”

Heather quickly scanned through the small stack of paperwork, a perplexed expression on her face. “I don’t get it, are these holdings with which you have relationships?”

“In that I own them, yes,” the bard replied.

The finance director adjusted her glasses and scanned the paperwork again. “This is impossible,” she said dubiously. “With Bardic & Company and what’s in here,” her green eyes darted back to the pages as she flipped them over to do the math, “you’d be worth over seventy billion dollars. That would make you one of the richest people on the planet. And the richest woman by far.”

Gabrielle shrugged. “Some of those assets are easier to get to than others. And I’ve got various caches of gold or diamonds stashed around the world. Again, not easy to get to, but I know where they are. I’ve been careful to keep holdings under different identities, and the last thing I need is for Forbes to request an interview every other month, but yes, the money is mine.”

“Do you mind?” Fiona asked the finance director who wordlessly handed over the folder. She scanned its contents as Gabrielle walked the couple of steps to the coffee table and poured a Bloody Mary cocktail into a tall glass rimmed with seasoned salts, and a celery stalk and crisp piece of bacon standing at attention. She passed the glass to Heather before pouring one for herself.

“It’s not a little early to be drinking?” the brunette asked accepting the glass.

“You won’t think so in about five minutes,” Gabrielle assured her as Aphrodite chuckled from her place behind the desk.

“These companies go back decades, over a hundred years?” Fiona said, passing the folder back to the finance director. “You inherited them?”

“No.” Gabrielle replied. “Before I drop this bombshell on the four of you, I’d like to point out the refreshments on the coffee table. Sabin, I know you don’t drink alcohol – the kettle has your favorite green tea in it. There is tequila for Fiona and whiskey for Jorge; your favorites of course.” Her directors stared at her with obvious confusion so she turned her laptop computer so they could see the screen. The final slide from her power point presentation with the various images of herself over the years was displayed. “I wish I had the luxury of telling you the full story, but time is of the essence. To make a very long story short, I’m over two thousand years old. Those companies are my companies – I started them. I change identities every few decades, change the names of my companies, bury my assets, horde stuff in warehouses, maintain holdings all over the world and speak dozens of languages, many of them dead ones.” She nodded to Aphrodite and Xena before continuing “Aphrodite is *the* Aphrodite of the Greek Pantheon of Gods fame, and Xena has been the focus of much of my companies’ energy for the last two thousand years. She was missing, in a state of stasis, and I needed to find Aphrodite and enlist her help in reviving her. The *Olympus Project*,” she added with a nod to Sabin, “is all about Xena.”

“Ares, also known, incidentally, as Ares, God of War, kidnapped Susan in an effort to force me to abandon my quest to revive her. I’ve read-in all of the crew serving on *The Hippolyta*, and they accept my story as true. Our next step will be to take the fight directly to said God of War. I want to make sure he isn’t a threat to Shen and the rest of my people.” She took a deep breath. “So, questions?”

For long moments no one spoke. Argo absently scratched an ear with one of her hind legs. Heather sipped her Bloody Mary steadily as she watched as Jorge help himself to a drink. Fiona poured a cup of tea, handing it to Sabin before pouring a shot of tequila for herself. “Would anyone else like a refreshment?” the HR director asked as if she were serving at a tea party.

“Tequila sounds great,” Aphrodite replied enthusiastically.

“The thing she’s drinking looks interesting,” Xena said with a nod to the woman sitting next to her. “Why is there meat in your drink?” she asked Heather directly.

The finance director turned and looked at the woman sitting next to her. She studied Xena’s piercing blue eyes looking for any hint that an unfunny, poorly timed, and inappropriate joke were being played on the Bardic & Company directors. Not finding any duplicity in the warrior’s face, she extracted the piece of bacon from her Bloody Mary and handed it over. “Try it,” she said.

Xena shrugged and took a bite of the bacon that had been submerged in the drink. She nodded approvingly. “This is really good!”

Fiona stood and passed over a second Bloody Mary to the warrior, and Xena added the half eaten bacon to her own drink. Heather looked down at her glass with sadness, realizing she wasn’t getting her garnish back. “You look pretty good for being over two thousand,” she finally said to her boss. It seemed the only rational thing to say.

Gabrielle looked at the four of them sympathetically. “I know it sounds insane. Believe me, over the years I’ve been locked up and institutionalized more than once for telling someone this.”

“Why exactly are you telling us this? And why now?” Fiona asked, pouring herself a second shot.

“I decided Susan needed to be read in when Aphrodite had been found, and it looked like we were making very real progress into getting Xena back. She is the one who encouraged, demanded really, that I at least tell the people who do ship duty. And she was right, of course. From there, it didn’t seem right to have Jorge’s people know something he didn’t. Of all my directors, I initially felt it would be essential for the three of you to know but reading Heather in made sense as well. I will seek your counsel before deciding to tell the rest of the directors, if we feel they all need to know.”

“How did Susan take it?” Jorge asked carefully, sipping his whiskey. Gabrielle could see the caution etched on his features. He ran his hand through his short salt and pepper hair, something he always did when he was uncertain.

“She was more surprised at my sexual orientation than she was at my age,” Gabrielle replied. “But I’ve known Susan’s family for three generations so she had a head start on the rest of you.”

“Wait – you’re gay?” Heather asked dumbfounded.

“I knew it,” Fiona added, with an air of validation.

“As much as I want to know how *that* came up in conversation,” Jorge added, caution giving way to amusement, “I realize it isn’t the point,” he looked askance at Fiona and Heather who sheepishly inspected their drinks. “Sabin, you were the last to see Susan at work, how did she seem? You knew her the best of all of us, except Gabrielle of course.”

The Nepalese man smiled, remembering something. He sat the teacup and saucer down on the table. “I recall a mission we were on years ago in Tibet,” he said. “We’d finished our business and she insisted that since we were in the neighborhood, we stop for several days in Nepal so I could visit some extended family. She was so insistent, she stayed and did some sight-seeing, meaning the company plane wasn’t going anywhere so I had no choice. On the flight back, we had a long talk about the importance of family, and how generations of her family had worked for generations of your family,” he nodded at Gabrielle as he spoke. “There was something about how she spoke that made it seem like she was retelling a family legend, something you know isn’t true but you buy into the lore of anyway. I know about her mother and grandfather so I did find it strange that she seemed to think the story more fiction than fact.”

“We had our talk about a month ago.” Gabrielle looked over to Aphrodite for clarification about the date. The goddess nodded, aware of the unintended frown on the warrior’s face across the desk. “Did she seem any different after that?”

Sabin pushed a long strand of black hair that had not been included in his loose ponytail away from his face. Dark eyes sparkled with humor as he recalled the conversation. “For the last several years she’s been talking about retirement and turning over parts of her portfolio for me to manage. I’d hoped to come to last month’s directors meeting but couldn’t because of my broken leg. I still had the cast on and was having trouble getting around. I’ve been managing Brian Glass pretty closely and the last conversation I had with Susan had started out as a conversation about Brian. He’d requested some vacation time, which he had on the books but we found it odd so soon after getting a new assignment. That led us to talking about strange things at work and she commented that if I were ever in a meeting with you and a bottle of Scotch was present, just go with it and suspend my disbelief.” Pointedly, he glanced at the coffee table where the Scotch still stood from Gabrielle’s talk with Susan.

“I find it a little hard to believe that all of the crew take this at face value,” Jorge said looking at Michele. “What say you?”

In any instance but on *The Hippolyta*, Jorge would be the person Michelle reported to. Transportation selected and trained their candidates for a variety of positions and missions within the company, including crewing the ship.

Michelle stepped away from the bookcase before responding. “We didn’t take it at face value. Not by a long shot. We were convinced – quite dramatically in fact. From there, Xena’s situation and the existence of Ares, Poseidon, and the rest make much more sense.”

Gabrielle reached behind her and opened the top drawer of her desk. She extracted a towel and a knife. “I hate this part,” she muttered before slicing her arm from elbow to wrist, carefully catching the drips in the towel so she didn’t bleed on her desk. There were gasps from the people in the room surprised by this. Then a “holy fuck,” from the finance director as the laceration stopped bleeding and knit back together. “This is what makes me immortal, for lack of a better term for it. I heal really well.”

“And what makes Aphrodite, *the* Aphrodite?” Jorge asked his disbelief clearly wavering.

“Aphrodite, can you do something that isn’t super invasive, given that HR is right here in the room with us?” She said as she cleaned off the blood on her arm with the towel. Her mind wandered as she worked, wondering what the Goddess of Love would do that would convince them that she was more than just an incredibly pretty face.

Quite unexpectedly, the memory surfaced of she and Xena at the hot springs of Loutra Pozar outside of Thessaly. She blushed remembering the sight of the warrior waist deep in the bright turquoise water that was reflecting off the azure blue of her eyes. She had lunged at Xena that day, leaping into her arms, wrapping her legs around the warrior’s waist, kissing her so hard that she nearly knocked the two of them over. But Xena had held her with ease and carried her to a spot by the waterfall where the two of them could be more comfortable. They hadn’t seen another soul for days and felt quite alone in their private paradise. They weren’t alone however, and when a family approached with young children who commented about the two women “wrestling” in the waterfall, bard and warrior made the unspoken decision to ignore them. Vaguely a comment registered in the bard’s consciousness when the man gruffly said that the family would set up camp nearby and come back later but that wouldn’t have made any difference. In that moment, the passion between the two had been so intense that a legion of Roman soldiers would not have stalled their efforts.

The taste of Xena’s mouth, the feel of strong muscles yielding to her touch, the warrior’s expression, and the sounds she made all seared itself into her memory. She was fierce when she claimed the warrior’s lips, their front teeth clashing together almost painfully. A hunger had been released that demanded its tribute. At first, there was no gentleness in the way that they grappled together, desperate to consume every bit of each other. There wasn’t anything Xena wouldn’t let her do, and nothing she wouldn’t let the warrior do to her in return. The zeal of the late morning yielded to afternoon and some of the most languid, sensual hours the bard had ever spent. The warm healing waters were a fitting backdrop as they isolated themselves from everything else in the world. Back and forth they pleased each other and themselves to a soundtrack of their moans, sighs, laughter and heady conversation. While it was not the first time the two had been

together, as Gabrielle recalled, that afternoon had been one of the best. Only when night fell and they heard the family loudly tromping down the trail, did they chuckle and, beyond satisfied and content, reach for their clothes and sneak away into the dark to find Argo and leave the family in peace. To this day, that particular shade of blue from the spring by the waterfall was still Gabrielle's favorite color.

There was something about the memory of that shade of blue that brought another recollection to the bard's mind. The place where the waterfall met the thermal pool was a decidedly lighter hue almost an icy blue; the same color as Aphrodite's eyes. Gabrielle had seen those eyes look at her, completely unguarded as she'd pinned the goddess down on their second night together. In a heated rush those memories came to the forefront. Her fingers interlaced with those of the goddess as she'd leaned down slowly to kiss her, watching the anticipation build on the perfectly sculpted face beneath her. She remembered the things she'd done to the goddess with her hands and her mouth, the demands she'd made and how readily they were granted. She'd felt a sense of power that night, a power that had certainly been willingly granted of course, but one that she'd used well. She'd made the goddess beg, and rewarded Aphrodite's pleading so well that Gabrielle, woken from a near coma the next morning had found herself covered in bruises. Almost as soon as the second memory came to mind, it abruptly halted, leaving her to feel as if she'd looked into a room not meant for her.

"No one in this study is a virgin and I'm very gratified that while all of your experiences may vary in terms of awesomeness, no one here has had to deal with anything non-consensual. Because of that, each of you just each remembered one of your fondest sexual experiences. You're welcome." Aphrodite hadn't moved from behind the desk, her expression inscrutable she passed her shot glass to Fiona to refill. She continued, "if anyone needs any more convincing about me being who I am, I'm happy to tell you exactly what it was you were remembering, where it happened, who it was with, blah, blah, blah."

Gabrielle looked at Xena, who grinned at her weakly. The expression was as open as any book the bard might pull off her library shelf. While her assumption had been that Xena might have been thinking about her, it was clear that the warrior did not think she was the subject of Gabrielle's memory. After two thousand years, she supposed it made sense Xena might feel that way. It then dawned on her that the reason was sitting behind her desk. Of course, Xena would assume that her best sexual encounter would be with the Goddess of Love. Who wouldn't think that. And she had thought of Aphrodite, but as soon as that thought entered her mind, she realized it was not the case. She looked at Aphrodite. The goddess would not meet her eyes, and was instead intently studying her now empty shot glass. Her thoughts had been of Xena, Aphrodite's had been of her, and the goddess knew that she knew it.

"It would be really fantastic if you guys would just believe me so we can move on from this," Gabrielle said, her heart aching for both warrior and goddess.

"I'm sold," Heather said in a rush only to have the other three directors nod in unison.

"Before I forget," Fiona said, the crimson of her cheeks fading from Aphrodite's demonstration, "Susan updated her HR file. It must have been just after you two had spoken. She gave me this letter and had said she would rewrite it when she had more time, but wanted it updated immediately. I also have her other paperwork, her trust, will,

and such, which you can go over when you're ready." She opened a leather folio she'd been carrying and extracted a sealed envelope. "I thought it better to deliver this to you outside the regular meeting. While I am sorry for all of our loss, I am especially sorry for yours Gabrielle, especially now that I know just how long you'd known our friend."

Gabrielle accepted the envelope and opened it to find a handwritten note on company letterhead. Silently she read it to herself using a clean part of the towel she was holding to dab at her eyes.

Dear Gabrielle,

If you are reading this, I have died unexpectedly and too soon after learning your truth. While I'd hoped for many occasions to discuss history with you at length over a bottle or two of wine, I am so very grateful to have had the opportunity to learn your given name and real identity. Please, do not grieve for me Gabrielle. You, more than most, understand how fleeting life is. Every trip around the sun is precious and I do not feel that I've wasted any of them.

Be there for Shen. It is my wish that you adopt him. He is the sole beneficiary of my estate, details of which are in my file. I think that around his 18th or 21st year might be an appropriate time for him to know your secret (the longevity one dear, not the gay one – I trust you to be up front about that already), though he may figure it out on his own sooner, given his passion for super heroes. Go with your gut and when he's ready, read him in. Your life, your passions, your friends, Aphrodite – share all of that with him; do not compartmentalize anything from him. He will grow to be a better man the more he knows of you, as knowing you – even a limited capacity, has made me a better woman.

I hope that you are successful in your quest to find Xena and I pray that together you continue to devote your time and energy to the positive force that this company has proven to be. In the span of three generations, my family has watched you create a nimble and efficient enterprise that can be a force for good in the world. Just remember –in the quest for The Greater Good, you have to look as much at your present surroundings as in the world you hope to create.

It is with love and devotion that I sign this,

Ever your friend,

Susan

Gabrielle folded the note and put it back in its envelope. Briefly she closed her eyes and took a calming breath. No one spoke in the room but she could hear their individual breathing patterns. An alert vibration on her watch drew her attention and she looked at her phone. She passed the device to Michelle. "Would you please let Elaine know that the rest of the directors may board, then we can leave the Marina. Have them start breakfast while we finish up here. We'll join them in the conference room when we're ready." Michelle accepted the phone and began to type.

"There are a couple of things I will only say here, to the six of you," the bard continued. "Ultimately, we need to find a way to get to Ares. It is possible that I have a weapon that can hurt him. My hope is that if I hurt him, he will leave me and mine alone and hopefully take some time out of his busy schedule of fucking up the world."

"That is a very concise plan," Fiona observed. "Do you think you can actually kill the god of war?"

“I don’t think you could eliminate war from this world any more than you could eliminate love,” Aphrodite replied thoughtfully. “I for one certainly hope not, and not just for my sake obviously. But it is possible to diminish his influence, and I think that is your best-case scenario. Also,” and she said this more to Gabrielle than anyone else, “if I’d been able to keep ahold of that piece of my shell all these years, it’s likely he’s kept something as well. Something that reminds him of his power. If we could find it, it may be key in getting him to go where you want him to go, if you’re planning some sort of ambush.”

“We need to find him first,” Xena replied. “And hope that he keeps it with him.”

“We can talk strategy in the next meeting,” Jorge interjected. “But to be clear we will address Ares by the alias he’s using at the moment – Easton. We should table this to get everyone’s input.” He put down his glass, clearly contemplating another drink.

“Speaking of alias” Fiona started, “Zuma Ocean contacted us for a new identity. He wants the name Ariel Waters.”

Aphrodite chuckled. “My uncle is a jerk. But, he’s got a sense of humor, I’ll grant him that.” Jorge poured himself the drink he’d been contemplating.

“And for Xena, you wanted paperwork created for the Xena Amphipoli identity? I still need to get a photo. Was that Greek or American passports?” Fiona asked with her pen at the ready to jot down notes.

“Actually,” Xena interjected. “Shen gave me the name Natasha Romanoff. I’d like to use that.”

Fiona briefly glanced at Gabrielle before making the notation. “One passport and identity background for Black Widow coming right up,” she said, amusement evident in her thick Irish brogue. “Do you speak Russian?” she asked.

“Da,” Xena responded, somewhat surprised with herself.

“Russian and American passports,” Fiona amended.

Pushing herself away from her desk Gabrielle nodded. “You heard the Avenger. I think we’re good here. Fiona, you may want to make a notation of some sort to help me keep track of who is read in on this stuff moving forward. Xena, like Aphrodite, will be tangentially assigned to SP for HR purposes. We are heading to D.C. tomorrow, so can you get her a package by then?”

After a brief glance and a nod from Sabin, the HR director replied, “I will have it waiting on the plane. Also,” she added with a glance at the goddess, “I will have the identification that Aphrodite requested earlier in the week, the FBI stuff. What about the crew there? Have you read in Ed and the twins?”

“I will, but not for this trip. I don’t want to fly with someone who’s just been freaked out by this information,” Gabrielle replied.

“Probably a wise decision,” Sabin agreed.

“Alright, let’s have some breakfast and see where we’re at with our opposition research.” Gabrielle said turning off the switch that unsealed the room and opening the door for her guests.

As everyone filed out, Aphrodite hung back and touched Xena’s arm to indicate that she should do the same. Gabrielle gave them a questioning glance but was assured that they would be along shortly.

“What’s this about?” Xena asked as the goddess knelt down to pet Argo who’d meandered over for affection.

“Xena, I’m generally all about keeping people’s confidences...”

“When it suits you,” the warrior remarked watching the blond woman scratch the muscular dog behind the ears.

“That said,” the goddess continued as if she hadn’t been interrupted, “there are occasions when I need to say something to keep people from doing stupid things.” Xena refused to take the bait and waited for Aphrodite to continue. The goddess stood up so she would be eye level with the warrior. She was taken aback by the vulnerability she saw in the pale blue eyes looking at her. “Gabrielle had the same memory you did back there,” she said simply. Xena was about to protest, to accuse her of making something up, but then Aphrodite pointedly looked down at Argo, who was contentedly panting, her attention equally divided between warrior and goddess. She hadn’t barked, whined or growled.

Xena wasn’t sure how to respond. “She doesn’t love me,” she said and immediately Argo barked once and butted her head against the warrior’s legs. Xena leaned down to pet the dog and amended, “she isn’t *in love* with me.” Argo whined quietly and nudged her again.

“Your Gabrielle, the lover, is waking up from a very deep sleep. I tell you this because she is going to be in conflict with ‘Gabrielle Shen’s Mom’ and ‘Gabrielle The General’, and I don’t want you to get all sulky. Gabrielle will have enough difficulty juggling these three and she will need your support, not a wounded-warrior attitude.” Aphrodite pointed her finger at the open door and Argo trotted out of the study to join the rest at breakfast.

“And what of your Gabrielle?” Xena asked as she followed the goddess up the stairs.

With a smile void of enthusiasm Aphrodite answered, “I may meet up with her again at some point, but for the time being, she’s where she needs to be, which is out of the picture.” Xena stopped and turned to face the goddess, feeling more sympathy than she ever expected, given the circumstances. She was searching for something to say that would be both honest and not sound trite but found herself at a loss. Aphrodite shook her head. “It’s okay Xena. I know and thank you.”

The buffet line was nearly empty by the time that the late-comers arrived. Xena helped herself to some food, mimicking the selections made by the goddess in front of her, then took the open seat next to Gabrielle. Michelle and Vox had been joined by Aphrodite at the table, the warrior’s presence filling the fifth seat.

“Everything okay?” the bard asked quietly.

Xena nodded, watching how everyone else was eating before digging into her own food. “Yes, Aphrodite just wanted to clarify something for me.” She nodded towards the dog who was shaking down one person after another for a handout. “You need to make sure she’s in all your meetings,” the warrior suggested. “Being able to tell when someone isn’t being truthful is really helpful.”

“You need to get Argo in a room with Brian Glass and figure out what is up with that guy,” Michelle concurred. “Sabin mentioned he’s already on vacation and you don’t just do that a week after switching departments.”

Vox shrugged as she made quick work of her waffles. “Maybe the guy had a wedding or something planned?”

“Then Susan and Sabin would have known when he transferred, right?” Michelle asked.

The engineer shrugged uncertainly as she scratched at her abdomen.

“Please try not to poke at those,” Gabrielle warned. “I know the stitches are ready to come out. I’ll try to get to them after lunch.” Vox nodded and left her abdomen alone.

“Speaking of which,” Aphrodite offered amiably. “I know you’ve got an ‘all hands on deck’ thing going on right now but I thought that tonight I’d take Xena, Vox and Michelle out to dinner so you could spend some time with Shen before we head to D.C.

“Where is Shen?” Xena asked looking around

“With Nicolai,” Michelle and Vox answered in unison. Their table was a fair distance from the nearest table with non-crewmembers but the two leaned in anyhow. “We’re not advertising that he’s onboard,” Michelle added quietly. “Just in case.”

Gabrielle looked at the other four, equal parts grateful and jealous not to be joining them later. “If everything looks okay with Vox when the stitches come out she can join you. But be on your toes, okay? Ares would be stupid to go after the two of you but you never know. And don’t stay out too late, we have an early flight in the morning.”

“Aww thanks mom,” Aphrodite said chuckling, knowing full well only she or Xena could get away with such a comment.

“Xena, can I ask you a question?” Vox asked as she finished off her waffles. The warrior shrugged, waiting for the engineer to continue. “I’ve noticed that when we do our meals, you always walk away with a plate of food identical to whomever is standing in front of you in line.”

The warrior shrugged, impressed that the younger woman had picked up on that detail. “I’m unfamiliar with all of the food, and I don’t want to waste time obsessing about choices that ultimately aren’t that important. I figure if I try out what other people are eating I’ll eventually decide what I like and don’t like.” She gestured to Bohemian Van Lyle sitting a couple of tables away from them, “you’ll notice I don’t follow Bo in line anymore. Once was enough.”

“That dude is into some weird food combinations,” Vox agreed. Their attention was diverted by several department directors shouting and pointing at something off the starboard side of the ship. “Sounds like a whale sighting,” Vox commented judging from the excited cheers. “Probably humpback.”

The warrior shook her head. “No, they are blue whales, and there is some mating going on.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth she looked at Aphrodite. “How did I know that?” she asked.

The goddess grinned, “I never said the gift from Poseidon would be very useful,” she replied. “As time goes by the...side effects... will likely present themselves. Tell me, where are the closest dolphins?”

Xena concentrated for a moment. “There are four of them darting back and forth under the hull of the ship. A larger pod is just behind, doing their morning hunt for fish. These four have eaten their fill and are playing.”

Aphrodite shrugged. “I’m not sure how we’ll use such a talent, but I guess it’s good to know that you can do it.”

“You guys just get weirder, and weirder,” Vox said with complete seriousness.



The afternoon meeting went fairly quickly, much to the bard's relief. After introducing Xena and Aphrodite to the directors and explaining that they would be permanent fixtures within her company, she was able to move on with the departmental overview. The biggest revelation was a suggestion to fund an organization that provided moving expenses for people from Puerto Rico to red districts in Florida. The needlessly cruel handling of hurricane Maria's aftermath on the island left everyone in agreement. Heather Martin made no objections to supporting the group, as well as other relief efforts, something that raised more than one eyebrow around the table. With the briefest of summations by most departments, they were able to quickly focus on the matter at hand. Gabrielle was grateful that with Fiona, Sabin, Jorge and Heather already on board and clued into what was at stake, they were able to quickly focus the meeting into a strategy planning session.

Sabin brought up several images on the wall-mounted monitor at the end of the conference room. Several were of Ares and an equal number were of an overweight, bloated, and generally unhealthy-looking man in his sixties.

"The man on the right is Gideon Power, or rather aspirational actor Henry Scruggs who is playing the character of Gideon Power as a full-time occupation." Sabin began as he stood and addressed the assembled directors. "Special Projects has uncovered a money trail going back nine years which is when the Gideon Power *Power Hour* show started. Typical right-wing conspiracy theories; nutty enough to be confined to radio, most of the stations owned by Patriot Media which when you get through their shell corporations trace back to Fire Industries."

"And the guy on the left, who doesn't look like a walking triple bypass?" Leticia Sanchez asked.

"That guy is a bit more of a puzzle. We think his name is Heinrich Easton, these photos show him going in and out of the White House. We believe him to be an off-the-books adviser to the President and his administration. He is also tangentially connected to Fire Industries, which, incidentally, has connections to Russian Oligarchs and a lot of trails that dead end in the Cayman Islands and Swiss Bank accounts. Has he shown up on the radar of the Politics department Ms. Chen?" Sabin asked, looking over at Victoria Chen.

The dark-haired woman shook her head, a puzzled expression on her face. "We thought we'd uncovered all of the players in this Administration, but this is a new one. Mr. Jha, is the working theory that Easton is supplying the funds for Scruggs radio show? Or that Easton is the one doing the radio show and just having Scruggs go around in public as the Gideon Power persona?"

"The latter," Sabin clarified. "We have tracked down production studios in the DC area, Montana, Wyoming, and Alabama where these shows are recorded. There is a lot of secrecy about the show. They like to tout how much the deep state is after them and then hawk a variety of useless products. We're fairly sure we've found the compound out in the middle-of-nowhere Montana where Ssrcuggs lives, but Easton is proving to be more elusive."

"We think that everything about Gideon Power show is created and directed by Easton but that public appearances are done by the actor as the face of the radio show," Jorge Hernandez elaborated. "There isn't a companion webcast to the show, which is unusual in today's market. It's just the voice, and then this guy making appearances."

“To what end?” Mike Tiller asked. “Why would the guy want a walking advertisement for Alcoholics Anonymous walking around, just pretending to be him? How does that troll get him more listeners?”

“Because he’s more relatable,” Xena interjected. “The listeners are going to identify, believe that Gideon Power is one of them, maybe even feel superior to him. The question is, what is Easton getting from the radio show?” She noticed the approving glance between Jorge and Sabin at her question.

“This guy is taking the brainwashing mission of Fox News one step farther,” Fiona O’Brien replied. “Convincing millions of people of inaccurate, misleading, or just outright false information, taking their money, judging their gullibility, collecting data on their voting, buying, and social media habits – all of which can then be exploited. Exactly how, I’m not sure...”

“I think I can shed some light there,” Sabin continued. “We were able to analyze a fair amount of server traffic from ones used ostensibly by the radio station and show. We found other traffic going in and out of those same servers. It’s not just radio show stuff. There seems to be a backchannel between the home station, a firm in DC that the President owns, and a media company in Macedonia that is really a bunch of hackers working out of a warehouse there. They’re pushing traffic through social media and monitoring responses, shifts in polling data; essentially weaponizing the false narratives that swing elections. They are also working to organize a variety of volatile alt-right and neo-Nazi groups, other anti-government types. When violence flares up, Turner’s people have an excuse to crack down on nearly everything – except the people instigating the violence, of course.” Sabin touched his tablet and the screen changed to a chart illustrating the connections between companies and groups associated with either the radio show, the administration, or Fire Industries. “It isn’t just the United States that’s being targeted. Germany, France, the UK, Italy, Japan, Sweden, India – this is an orchestrated effort to destabilize governments.”

“When a building falls down the first one on the scene gets dibs on rebuilding it,” Xena observed.

DeShaun Johnson, his bald head shining under the lights of the conference room, cleared his throat before speaking. “It may be out of the depth of the Philanthropy department,” he said, “but how do you plan to combat something like that? It looks like a fairly well-organized machine.”

“Just to play devil’s advocate for a moment,” Aphrodite interjected. “Do you want to combat this machine here? In America?” The directors around the table looked at the blond woman, varying degrees of surprise on their faces. “Has the argument been made to save your resources to work in another part of the world to prevent this sort of takeover and leave this country to its own devices? Is this where your company wants to make a stand and fight this battle?”

For the next forty-five minutes, a heated argument ensued between the directors discussing the pros and cons of doing something about the threat to democracy posed by the players illuminated on the chart as opposed to leaving it to someone else and simply moving the business elsewhere. The division clearly seemed to be a pragmatic approach of what would make the most financial sense versus an altruistic strategy that would benefit democracy and freedom. Through it all, Gabrielle listened attentively, occasionally jotting down notes. From time to time, she caught herself looking over at

Xena, who was also paying rapt attention to the discussion. When she'd heard enough, the bard stood and the rest of the room fell silent, waiting for her to speak.

"Firstly, I want to thank everyone for their input and insights on this. This is not the last conversation we're going to have about this matter, and I will be in touch with all of you to some degree as we move forward to address it." She looked around the table, studying faces to gauge the impact of her words.

"We're going to confront this here. If we don't, if we lose the United States to authoritarianism, we will have that much taller a mountain to climb the next time, in the next place. Fire Industries has hackers in Macedonia; I have over two dozen of the best hackers on the planet, operating from here and elsewhere out of Special Projects. For the first round, we are going to turn them loose on Easton and any business he is involved with."

Nods of agreement went around the table and Fiona O'Brien spoke up, "If you'd like to fight fire with fire, you might consider leaking what we know about Gideon Power. You can't come right out and expose him – that's too obvious and easy to write off, but make him, Scruggs, out himself. Get people clamoring for interviews and highlight the differences there with what's said on the show. If he could be exposed as a fraud..."

"From the political side of things," Ms. Chen added, "we can try to expose these lobbying connections. Try to shine more light on what's happening, as well as turn up the heat about the lack of transparency from the Administration, and demand to know about the players involved. The right information placed in the proper hands could generate a lot of questions from the press. Questions Easton and his organization aren't going to appreciate."

DeShaun leaned in. "It also wouldn't be a bad idea to start channeling more funds into progressive radio programming. Right-wing radio vastly outnumbers alternative voices because the money is so lucrative. If you're not worried about making money, let's start buying stations and change the conversation. From there, you can support groups that turn out the vote, above and beyond what you're doing in Puerto Rico. Organizations like *Run For Something*, groups that combat Interstate Crosscheck and Jim Crow 2.0, there are a lot of places to invest in democracy." There were nods of agreement around the table.

"The element of surprise is going to be key," Xena said solemnly. "It would be smart to coordinate your efforts, get everything ready to go, hoard your information. Then, in one well-planned attack, try to overwhelm his organization. In addition to taking the fight to Easton, given what happened to your colleague, all of you should increase whatever defensive measures you presently employ. If it's security, add more of it. If your people are fighters, add more drills. If you generally operate out of one location, start moving around. As soon as you start to disrupt this well-organized machine, it will take Easton no time at all to figure out where the threat is coming from and retaliate. Be prepared for that." Xena turned to speak directly to Michelle. "The same should go for the ship's crew. If they don't regularly do combat drills, they absolutely should." Heads around the table nodded in agreement with the warrior's suggestions.

"Would it help to have time face to face with this Scruggs guy?" Mr. Johnson asked, looking at his tablet. "Because there is going to be a black-tie fundraising affair for media elites in DC this weekend. You said you were heading there tomorrow, yes?"

“Where you find Scruggs, you may find Easton lurking in the shadows and pulling the strings,” Fiona O’Brian added.

Gabrielle nodded. “Get me an invite to the gala. If Easton is there, he may have something nearby that we can get as leverage. Some of this will be left to chance but it’s probably our best shot. Everyone – have the appropriate teams talk to each other, share information. There is too much going on to reinvent the wheel here. I want strategy groups brainstorming with tactical team on every conceivable way to mess with Easton’s whole universe, from the money pipelines to his organization. Start some soft attacks, let’s see if we can figure out the extent of his forces and where we might find them.”

As the meeting broke up, the directors broke into small groups to travel back to the Marina by helicopter. Fiona, Jorge, Sabin, and Heather remained behind to be in the last group.

“Will you need your apartment in DC cleared out?” Fiona asked, opening up her folio once again to jot down notes. “It’s presently being used, but we could have those agents move to a hotel. Alternatively, we could book you at the Omni Shoreham where the fundraiser is being held.”

Gabrielle nodded. “Book a presidential suite at the Omni, and a reinforced car.”

The Irish woman opened an app on her phone and quickly scrolled through several screens. “You’ve got the Jaguar in DC that has been customized.”

“That’s great.” The bard agreed. “I think that one should do nicely, should things get messy.”

“Suitable for James Bond or Jason Borne,” Fiona agreed offhandedly as she made some notes.

“Will we be working with them as well?” Xena asked.

The Irishwoman chuckled and extended her hand to Xena one more time. “It was a pleasure to meet you Ms. Romanoff. When I’ve had a chance to truly process all I’ve seen today, I look forward to having those chats about history that Susan had been hoping to enjoy.”

Xena grasped her hand warmly, “You remind me of my friend, Bodecia, and I look forward to those conversations.”

Heather, Jorge and Sabin also bid their goodbyes, then made their way to the helicopter. Xena watched in amazement as the vehicle rose skyward.

“Another example of ‘science’?” she asked Aphrodite over the backwash noise.

“You are catching on much faster than I expected.”

Chapter 14: The Fear of Flying

Xena stood apprehensively in the door to walk-in closet, surveying the vast array of clothing. She’d watched with envy as Gabrielle had strode in, selected a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, then headed to the bathroom to remove her makeup. The warrior chose a pair of jeans and boots that reminded her of her old armor. That was as far as she’d gotten when the bard joined her.

“You know, you’re not expected to instantly just know all of this,” Gabrielle said encouragingly.

Xena nodded. “Aphrodite said it was dinner at some kind of club, maybe dancing. She said dress casual. Does that mean an actual dress?” she asked pointing to the business wear section of the closet.

“No, she means be comfortable, and I think you’re off to a great start. It was a lot simpler before, huh?” she grinned as she looked through Xena’s section of the closet. She had flashbacks to Dwayne choosing Aphrodite’s outfit for Santa Barbara, and was amused to find herself in that role.

“The armor fit the mission, so yeah, simpler.”

“In a way, things haven’t changed as much as you think,” Gabrielle countered gently. “The outfits we had on today for the meetings, were to project professionalism and power. Tonight, I’m going to have dinner and enjoy a movie with a ten year old so I’m dressing not only more comfortably for me...”

“But more approachable for him,” Xena supplied, understanding.

Gabrielle nodded. “So, tonight – I guarantee you Aphrodite is going to look amazing, because she wants to impress Michelle, and I’ll wager Michelle will do the same, for the same reason. Vox, who knows? I think she’ll try to look dressed up and dressed down at the same time because she wants to look amazing, but doesn’t want anyone to know she’s given it the slightest thought.”

“But she’s interested in you, not me,” Xena protested.

“She is getting over being interested in me,” Gabrielle clarified. “She may want to look enticing, should she meet someone, even if just to have a flirtatious evening. It’s not just about what you wear of course, but that is some of the psychology that goes into it. What message do you want to send tonight?” she asked.

The warrior rolled her eyes, “That I’m not recently resurrected and actually belong here,” she muttered, moving hanging items out of the way to better see the inventory.

“What about these?” Xena asked, selecting a soft, light blue t-shirt and a crisp leather blazer. “I also like this jacket,” she pointed to the biker jacket she’d worn a couple of times since rejoining humanity. “But I think that would be too hot to dance in.”

“You are absolutely right, and I think you’ve made a fantastic choice. You’re going to look amazing. Change your clothes, and I’ll redo your makeup.”

The warrior complied, putting the outfit she’d been wearing in the bin that Gabrielle indicated would let the staff know to have them laundered and pressed. After she’d dressed, Gabrielle withdrew a small, neatly folded stack of money held in place by a money clip, from the drawer by the bed and handed it to her. “In case you need dinars for dinner or drinks. I’m guessing Aphrodite will pick up the tab, but just in case.” Xena put the money in her pocket then sat down to have her makeup adjusted for evening.

When Gabrielle finished, Xena studied her reflection in the mirror while the bard selected a necklace from a jewelry box on the dressing table. The difference between the professional makeup of the morning and the evening look was striking, and Xena had disguised herself on enough occasions to know Gabrielle’s intent. Her eyes were darker and bolder, portraying a confidence and fearlessness the warrior didn’t quite feel. The dramatic makeup played counterpoint to the otherwise casual choice of clothing, giving the outfit a more polished finish.

Turning her attention away from the mirror, Xena observed, “You’re really good at this.”

Gabrielle shrugged and smiled self-consciously at the complement. “What can I say? I’ve had practice. One last thing, though.” She placed a simple necklace of

translucent, irregularly shaped aqua and green beads around the warrior's neck and fastened it in back. While understated, it finished the outfit nicely.

"This is beautiful Gabrielle," Xena said, inspecting the beads. "What is it?"

"That, my friend, is sea glass." She explained, reaching out and fingering the necklace absently. "There is a lot of garbage in the ocean, and this is the only material that actually comes out better than it goes in. Broken glass gets weathered and worn down by the water and sand, then washes up on beaches as this."

Xena looked at her, profound sadness etched on her features. Gabrielle nodded. "Yeah, I know how crazy that sounds. You'd better get going, I'm sure Aphrodite wants to avoid traffic if she can."

Xena realized Gabrielle had been absolutely right when she joined the others on deck. Aphrodite was wearing a low cut backless black dress and heels. The color brought out her hair and eyes in striking contrast. Michelle, on the other hand, was wearing black leather pants and a sultry white silk blouse, open to mid-torso, a simple gold necklace catching glints of light. Vox was dressed in similar to her with jeans, boots, and sports jacket, but sported a button-down vest in place of a shirt, and a collection of necklaces with various pendants dangling from them.

"Did you forget your shirt?" The warrior asked as they boarded the water taxi.

"Absolutely," the engineer answered, smirking conspiratorially.

"Where are we headed?" Vox asked from the back seat as Aphrodite drove the Mustang from the parking lot. The engineer and captain had climbed into the back seats, leaving Xena to sit up front with Aphrodite.

"You ever been to The Edison?" the goddess asked, glancing into her rearview mirror. "It's in downtown LA."

"I've been meaning to try it," Michelle chimed in, happily. "But I never think to make a reservation,"

"Fortunately reservations aren't something I need to worry about," the goddess replied with a chuckle.

The traffic was typical, which afforded the warrior an unobstructed view of the slow-moving vehicles and the Southern Californian denizens driving them. She stared out the window in awe.

"What is it that's the most unsettling?" Aphrodite asked gently. "The actual vehicles? Or the quantity?"

Xena was unaware her bewilderment had been so obvious. "I think it's the sheer number of people more than anything," she replied. "I've seen hundreds of people at once on a battlefield, but this is..." she gestured around them and shrugged.

"For what it's worth," Michelle offered sympathetically, "I doubt I'd handle this kind of a shock with half the grace you're managing."

Vox reached over from her position behind the warrior and squeezed her shoulder encouragingly. "It's because she's a badass," she said.

Aphrodite chuckled. "You have no idea."

"What do you think would surprise us the most if we woke up in your world of two thousand years ago?" Vox asked curiously.

Xena turned in her seat to glance at the pair in the back sets, their curiosity piqued. "I'm not sure. Perhaps the giants, or maybe the centaurs."

"Really?" Aphrodite chimed in. "You don't think it'd be the harpies?"

“You guys are joking, right?” Vox asked uncertainly.

Xena made eye contact with the engineer before asking, “Does it look like I’m joking?”

The preponderance of traffic near the beach did little to prepare Xena for the visual dominance of the Los Angeles skyline. “By the gods...” the warrior breathed as the vista of sky scrapers came into view.

“While it isn’t for everyone,” Aphrodite acknowledged, “I’m a fan. There is amazing food to be had in downtown Los Angeles.”

“The Angels?” Xena asked curiously.

Vox snorted, “Hardly,” she said. “It’s the second largest city in the United States. Almost four million people live here in the city limits, with another nine million people in the greater metropolitan area. It’s weird because, unlike New York City, which is really compact and dense, the population and living quarters for people in Los Angeles sprawls out a huge distance. From the beach to the San Fernando Valley, and from Chatsworth to Alhambra covers over five hundred square miles.”

Michelle rolled her eyes. “I’m sure Xena understood zero of that. I’m from Santa Cruz, and I barely got it.”

“It’s big, I get it.” Xena assured her companions. “But those buildings are so tall. Who would want to live up at the top? Climbing up there must take hours.”

Vox and Michelle exchanged glances. “Xena, don’t take this the wrong way,” Michelle replied, “but you’re really making me appreciate a lot of things I take for granted. This thing called an elevator transports people from the bottom to the top, stopping at the requested floors.”

Xena looked over to her companion. “Science?” she asked, to which the goddess replied with an affirming nod.

Aphrodite stopped the Mustang at the valet kiosk in front of The Edison. The building itself was a fairly non-descript, white building, with and several floors that gave no outward indication of the entertainments above. Inside however, was like walking onto the set of a cool steampunk movie, where the warm glow of the polished copper and exposed brick interior made everything look inviting. There were luxurious curtains of crushed deep burgundy velvet restrained with thick gold ropes, and eerie illumination from old fashioned Edison bulbs. The embossed tin ceiling tiles reflected the sound, making the ambient noise significant. As they cleared the entryway, they could see down into the lounge where glowing bars and dark booths provided spaces that were more the illusion of privacy and intimacy than actually existed. The décor was accented by antique fixtures and engine parts, with some old film projectors, boilers, and requisite small steam engines added in for effect. Xena’s eyes were still adjusting to the dark as the goddess walked up to the host’s stand and gave her name. In moments they were ushered to a table.

“Whose table did we steal?” Vox asked as they were seated.

“I honestly have no idea.” Aphrodite replied easily. She was beginning to look over her menu when her attention was distracted. Placid blue eyes narrowed as she studied a couple at a nearby table. Picking up her purse, she excused herself, walked over to the table, and dropped something. As she stooped to pick up her phone, she briefly touched the woman, who knelt over to help. The goddess communicated her thanks, nodded curtly to the woman’s male companion, and then made her way back to the table.

“What was that about?” Xena asked as the goddess resumed her seat. She glanced up to Michelle, who had hopped out of her seat to help Aphrodite into her chair. Xena didn’t acknowledge the gesture only through force of will but Vox, who was not as understated, made a small smirk at home on her lips. Aphrodite smiled in appreciation at the captain, who blushed in response. She nodded at the table she’d just visited.

“You see that couple over there?” she asked her companions. “That guy is a rapist. I sensed him the second we walked in. This is a first date, so I’m making sure she doesn’t take him home, or see him again for that matter.” Her face scrunched up a bit as she seemed to listen to something no one else could hear. “There are two more of those assholes here tonight, I’ll have to make the rounds to make sure that they don’t hurt anyone either.”

“How can you even tell?” Vox asked, clearly awed.

Aphrodite shrugged. “I just can.”

“Can’t you give them permanent erectile dysfunction or something?” Michelle asked, concern threading her voice as she looked at the woman Aphrodite had just saved.

The Goddess of Love shook her head sadly and returned her attention to her menu. “I could, but you’d have more mass murderers that way. Your addiction to guns has really gotten in the way of my problem solving. Best I can do is encourage them to be sloppy so law enforcement has a better shot at catching them. Try to steer them away from children, that sort of thing. From time to time, I’ve been able to foster a suicide, but I have to be really careful how I do it to make sure no one else gets hurt.”

“Jesus, that’s heavy,” Vox replied. “And the women, you have to touch them to get them to safety.”

Aphrodite nodded, “Unfortunately, yes. It wasn’t always this way, but yeah. To save specific people, I have to be in contact with them, and I can’t be everywhere at once so...” Everyone was quiet a moment, as the magnitude of the reality and responsibility that Aphrodite carried with her sunk in. “I can say though, that being in my general proximity will have unexpected positive benefits to everyone downtown tonight. People will be in better moods, quarrel less, feel better about themselves...”

“Get laid...” Vox cut in with a chuckle.

“That too,” the goddess grinned.

“Just maybe not this table,” the engineer grouched.

“Hey! Speak for yourself.” Michelle replied, nodding conspiratorially at Xena.

Xena smiled unconvincingly and picked up her menu. “Any sign of Ares?” she asked, looking over the selections. While she could make out all the words, much of the meaning was lost on the warrior. Aphrodite noticed and when the waiter came over, she took the liberty of ordering drinks and food for the table.

“I think small plates are in order,” she suggested. “Let’s try a little of everything. And no, no trace of my brother.”

“Can you just tell when another god is around?” Vox asked curiously.

Aphrodite shrugged. “I’d say it’s like a ‘disturbance in the Force’ if that gives you any clarity.”

“Actually, it does,” Vox agreed. “And these drinks look amazing. I have no idea what a ‘Dead Man’s Hand’ tastes like, but I have to try it.”

Xena smiled, relieved. “Nice to know I’m not the only one flying blind with our culinary options.”

It didn't take long for the drinks and food to arrive, Aphrodite seeming to foster exceptional service everywhere. Drinks with exotic sounding names like The Edison, The Mistress, Pimm's Cup, Black Magic, Southside Fizz and Algonquin #2 were presented and consumed in turn. There was no denying that the goddess had a knack for knowing what victuals would appeal to each of her companions and ordered accordingly. In time, Michelle asked for the story of how Xena and Gabrielle met, to which Xena obliged, occasionally making eye contact with Aphrodite to make sure she was not revealing anything that might be problematic. Vox listened to the tale, her expression unreadable. When Xena finished the engineer downed the rest of her drink, signaling the waiter for another round.

"It almost doesn't sound like Gabrielle," the engineer said, looking at Michelle for confirmation.

"I'd have to agree," Michelle said, looking from Xena to Aphrodite. "The Gabrielle we've always known has been the smartest most self-assured..."

"And nurturing," Vox interrupted, the alcohol clearly taking its toll. "Don't forget nurturing."

"And nurturing," Michelle amended, "person we've ever met. There isn't anything she doesn't know, but she doesn't come across like a know-it-all."

"Unless it's trivia night," Vox corrected. "She's an insufferable know-it-all on trivia night," the engineer muttered into a Southside Fizz as it was placed in front of her. Michelle chuckled, nodding in agreement.

"Do you know what quality specifically it was that made you fall in love with her?" Michelle asked, hurriedly adding, "if it's not too personal. I'm such a sucker for romance."

"Noted." Aphrodite said quietly, smiling to herself.

"Why was my first relationship such a train wreck?" Vox blurted out, seemingly unaware of the current conversation.

Without saying a word, the captain moved the engineer's drink out of her reach and pushed a plate of Tesla fries closer to her, in the hopes that the starch in the sweet potatoes would absorb some of the alcohol in her system.

Aphrodite sighed with the resignation of someone familiar with being blamed for someone's break up. "Because honey, you were stupid and dated one of your college professors."

"Did it have to hurt so much?" Vox asked, her voice pleading.

The Goddess of Love looked at her sympathetically, her words gentle but firm. "Would you have learned as much if it didn't?"

The engineer processed the information through her alcohol-soaked logic processors for a moment. Deciding she was satisfied with the answer, she reached for a deviled egg.

"Getting back to you, Xena," Michelle turned back to the original conversation, rolling her eyes at her shipmate as she did so.

"It's hard to say it was just one thing," Xena refocused on the question, grateful for the interruption and extra time to consider her response. "Gabrielle has an unlimited capacity to love, to bring out the best in everyone she comes in contact with. I guess it's the nurturing," she said to Vox's affirming, if drunken nod. "It's hard not to fall for the person that brings out the best version of yourself. She's a magnificent person who

doesn't seem to realize the positive effect she exerts on the world around her." Xena glanced over to Aphrodite, who was gazing thoughtfully into her drink. It didn't take an oracle to see that not only did the goddess agree with her, she felt the same way.

Vox looked over to Aphrodite, almost as if she were seeing the goddess for the first time. "Can I ask you something?" her voice was free from any condescension or attitude, her expression surprisingly vulnerable.

"Shoot, Tiger," the goddess replied affectionately.

"What's it like to have people worship you, pray to you? Can you actually hear the prayers?"

Aphrodite made eye contact with the waiter, and signaled for another round. She then delicately bit into a deviled egg, dabbing the corners of her mouth with a napkin before answering.

"Firstly, I will tell you that prayers and worship are about the people doing the praying and worshiping and not the other way around. That is a common misconception. When you pray to whomever, it's because you've got stuff you need to work out or remind yourself you're grateful for or whatever. That's all well and good, but the...entity you're praying to doesn't have a horse in that race." The drinks arrived and she sipped hers thoughtfully before continuing. "It's been awhile since I've had temples where people brought gifts and did all the worshipful stuff, and I've gotta say, that part of the gig isn't half bad. Who doesn't want to be worshiped? But there's no such thing as a free lunch, even for a god, and no one ever dropped off a bad ass statue without wanting something in return. They always want something in return."

"Can gods hear prayers?" Michelle asked, sipping on her own drink.

"When you listen to music, you can hear the vocals, guitar, keyboard, bass, drum – the different drums even, kick drum, snare, hi-hat all at once right?" The captain nodded. "I hear people like that. Millions of instruments, simultaneously, often in discord, playing very different kinds of music, but sometimes in harmony. The harmony – that's what I work towards."

"Wolfgang thinks we invented gods," Vox said blinking and clearly losing the battle with inebriation.

"Well people certainly invented the word 'god' and the concept. I never called myself a goddess until you humans started doing it. Think of it this way – humans and dogs. Both mammals living on the same planet, yet with two very different life spans and very different abilities. To the dog, you guys are the gods. To other humans, you're just you." The expression darkened on the goddess face and she seemed to be considering a life she no longer lived. "While I might not have the same...abilities I once had, that only changes external stuff. I've still got the same responsibilities, good days and bad days that I had before. While I might not be perfect, I'm still more perfect than you lot." She said the last with a joviality that Xena could tell she clearly didn't feel.

For Aphrodite's sake, Xena leaned in to change the subject. Looking from Vox to Michelle, she said, "I have a question for the two of you. I want to know how you met Gabrielle?" While still on her first drink, Xena sipped it slowly not wanting to repeat of the previous night's inebriation in an unfamiliar setting. That Vox was already demonstrating the effects of the cocktails gave her pause as well. Music had started to play and a few people were beginning to dance.

“I’ve been with the company for twelve years,” Michelle explained. “I was in the Air Force and was recruited from there. I started in the Technology department and actually met Gabrielle in my first year when she came by the warehouse where we were working on a project. She’d was getting an update from our director. I had no idea who she was.” The captain smiled, her brown eyes twinkling at the memory. “She asked me a few questions about the project and...” she shrugged.

“You were in loooooovvvve,” Vox said giggling to herself. “Why does she have to be so damn perfect?” the engineer moaned, dropping her head into her arms on the table.

“Wandre, get a grip,” Michelle warned, not amused.

“Leave her be,” Aphrodite gently encouraged. “I invited you guys out, and you’re off the clock. Don’t hold anything against her. It’s safe, let her be.” She cocked her head, listening to the music. “Let’s go dance,” she suggested, standing and offering Michelle her hand. With a nod, the captain accepted the offer and the two headed for the dance floor.

“What about you?” Xena asked the engineer. “How did you meet Gabrielle?”

Vox reached across the table for Michelle’s drink, ‘The Mistress’ and polished it off before moving her head closer to Xena conspiratorially.

“I was getting ready to go to spy school. I’d just graduated from the Naval Academy, and since I aced my cryptology and language classes, a couple of government agencies were trying to recruit me. At the same time, I’m approached by this Chinese lady. People usually don’t start in Special Projects, but I’m an exception.” Her pride in this achievement was evident in the smile she gave the warrior before scanning the plates on the table for something else to eat. Finding an unclaimed piece of flatbread, she continued. “I was in SP for four years and then Susan recommended I transfer to Transportation. That’s where I met Wolfie, Bo and Ed. I didn’t meet Gabrielle until then, two years ago.”

Her expression grew dark and she wiped a tear from her eye, working hard to make it seem otherwise. “Susan had a knack ya know? She just knew where people fit. What would be good for them and the company. Anyway, I immediately tried out for ship duty and tested well, so I did the training. This is my first tour. Gabrielle spends the most time with the folks in Transportation. I mean, anyone working on the ship is basically going to live with her. She can see people, ya know? She has this ability to make you feel understood and it’s kind of intoxicating. Kind of like Aphrodite.”

The engineer nodded towards the dance floor, where Aphrodite and Michelle were laughing and dancing. Of all the couples on the dance floor, the two of them seemed the most at ease and in their own world, even though they were the only women dancing together, not counting the four women wearing matching bridal party sashes who were keeping each other from falling over, rather than dancing.

From over the engineer’s shoulder, two women standing at the bar caught Xena’s attention. She looked back to Vox, who had returned to brooding moodily into her drink. Xena hesitated briefly before making eye contact with one of the women at the bar and nodding at Vox, figuring if either woman was dangerous, Aphrodite would have already said something. As if to reinforce her assumption, the goddess reached out and touched a woman dancing with a man, ostensibly to keep from bumping into them. After a beat, the woman left her companion and headed off in the direction of the rest room.

“You guys thirsty?” One of women from the bar said as they approached the table.

“Absolutely,” Vox replied happily, accepting the offered drink. Xena politely nodded towards the two empty seats, inviting the women to sit. “Which one is this?” the engineer asked, taking an experimental sip.

“Tennessee Twist.” This was the shorter of the two, who appeared to be in her late twenties. She sported short red hair, styled in a pixie cut, and was dressed in a black, well-tailored pinstriped suit, with suspenders that contrasted nicely with her shirt and matched her wingtip shoes.

The redhead smiled. “I’m Jenna, and this is Veronica.” Her companion had light brown hair, done up in a relaxed Gibson Girl, and was also wearing a suit, a deep crimson with a more relaxed fit than her chum.

“Nice to meet you, Jenna and Veronica,” Vox replied. “I’m Vox and this is Xena.”

“Cool names,” Veronica, said, winking at Xena. “Your drink is a Damasco Brasa. Hope you like it.”

Xena tried the cocktail and smiled approvingly. “Very nice.”

“Would you ladies like to dance?” Jenna asked hopefully, looking over to the dance floor. “I see your friends already are.”

“We’d love to,” Vox announced before Xena could think about it. “Come on Warrior Princess, time to cut a rug.”

Xena stood up, resisting the urge to protest. She wasn’t pleased at the engineer for overdoing it with drink or thrilled to be put on the spot with dancing in a manner and environment entirely foreign to her. But her friend had been hurting and there really wasn’t anything to lose, so she allowed herself to be escorted to the dance floor after she and Vox had taken off their jackets. Vox’s companion seemed especially pleased at the bare tattooed arms that encircled her.

The song was mid-tempo and didn’t take much effort to match steps with people around her.

“Warrior Princess – interesting nick-name,” Veronica said, leaning to Xena’s ear to speak.

Xena nodded in agreement. “It’s unusual, but it’s mine.” She glanced over at the engineer and saw her confident smirk as she danced close to Jenna. Xena smiled to herself, remembering what it was like to be young and cocky.

“You don’t strike me as someone overly concerned by what other people think.” Jenna was looking up at Xena, having mistaken the smile as being directed towards her.

There was something about the woman and the situation that struck a chord with the warrior. She felt impossibly young, but was probably no more than five or six years younger than Xena, and there was an innocence to her that neutralized any physical attraction the warrior felt.

“It depends on the person I guess,” Xena said kindly which was greeted by a knowing sad smile.

“There’s someone else?” Veronica asked, not trying to disguise her disappointment.

“I’m afraid so.” Xena smiled warmly, making it clear she did not regret her situation. Veronica was beautiful and were her circumstances different, Xena would be

dancing and making small talk with this woman all evening. But, she did not want to give this woman the wrong impression.

“Where is she?”

“She’s at home spending some time with her son,” Xena replied, easily following Veronica’s dance movements. “We’re about to go on trip.”

The brunette smiled approvingly. “Good for you,” she said sincerely. “You’re a solid wingman for your friend,” she added with a nod towards Vox and Jenna, the pair already oblivious to anyone else.

The song crossfaded into a slow one. Aphrodite tapped the brunette on the shoulder. “Mind if I cut in?” The goddess asked.

“It was nice meeting you,” Veronica said, stepping away.

The warrior arched a questioning eyebrow as she took Aphrodite’s hand, settling the other one on the goddess’ waist and brushing against the bare skin of her back. Her mind’s eye flashed on Gabrielle being recently acquainted with that warm, smooth skin, then stopped herself, acknowledging the jealousy but refusing to let it control her.

“I can slow dance with you without you falling absolutely in love with me,” Aphrodite explained. Xena nodded, well aware that she was leading because the goddess wanted her to. The steps were simple and she was grateful that some types dancing seemed to have stayed similar to what she remembered.

“What’s it like for you?” she asked Aphrodite. “Knowing what everyone is feeling, being able to see into their most hidden recesses?”

After a proficient twirl, the goddess smiled warmly. “Sweetie, I’ve never known any different. Now, you, you weren’t always the bad-ass warrior babe that you are now. You were once a little girl, then learned how to be a fighter, then a more skilled fighter, and so on. You acquired your abilities through a lot of work and determination.” She shrugged. “I started out with my innate abilities as they are. Yes, I’ve evolved over time, changed, grown, and adapted to my circumstances and the world as it changed, and while I can’t externally influence the world or transport myself like I used to, the core of who and what I am hasn’t changed. Just like it hasn’t changed for Ares, or Hades, or even my stupid Uncle Ariel.”

“I sent Michelle off to collect Junior.” They turned a bit to see Michelle helping Vox don her jacket. “She’s feeling radiant thanks to the flirting and dancing. Very good instincts on your part,” she said approvingly. “Incidentally, there is a guy over there,” she gestured with her head, “who is planning to jump us as we leave the club, before we get to the valet stand. He was planning to go after your new friends – the redhead and brunette – but I changed his mind because I figured you could handle it better than they could.”

Xena nodded in agreement as she glanced over the goddess’ shoulder, taking note of the man who was eyeing them with animus. She casually asked, “If you can see the future, should I ask how Gabrielle and I work out?”

“Xena, I see a lot of futures. I see you and Gabrielle together, in the near future, or maybe something happens and you guys don’t get together until the more distant future, or something really goes sideways and it’s not the two of you until the far distant future. You will be together, it just depends on when Gabrielle gets over herself and if you can keep from fucking it up,” she smiled warmly to make sure Xena knew she was

teasing. “As for that asshat, all he’s been thinking about since he saw you dancing is stabbing someone with the knife he’s stolen.”

“Why would someone take issue with us? Is it one of Ares’ guys?”

“He’s homophobic,” Aphrodite explained with a rueful shake of her head. “Just a jerk; nothing to do with my brother. Although homophobes do seem to adore dear Ares. I don’t know what gets into these people. He’s got feelings he can’t grapple with because of his chosen mythology and is too scared to take on men so he goes after women.”

Xena nodded, understanding. “Did you find the third woman who was in danger?” the warrior asked as the song ended and they parted.

“Yeah. One of the bartenders, over there,” she nodded in the direction of the bar. “She’s decided to walk to the metro with one of her friends, so the jerk at the end of the bar is going to think better of following her.”

Making their way back to the table for desserts and to settle up the bill, Xena wondered at Vox and Michelle chuckling knowingly to each other as the goddess tossed her black American Express card onto the plate. But she was in her element and completely unsurprised by the greasy smelling man that jumped her as they made their way out of the club. The knife fell from his hand as he impotently staggered backward to the brick wall, both hands going to his throat where Xena had jabbed two fingers. Aphrodite stood with her arms crossed disapprovingly, and it was Vox and Michelle’s turn to wonder at the scene unfolding before them.

“I’ve just cut off the flow of blood to your brain,” Xena explained quietly looking around to see if anyone was going to misguidedly come to the man’s aid. She needn’t have worried; people made their way past them on their way to the valet stand, seemingly oblivious. The warrior assumed it was Aphrodite’s doing.

“The problem with attacking unsuspecting people,” Aphrodite lectured him unsympathetically, “is that sometimes they fight back. Keep this in mind, asshole: *all* queer people know how to do this – the men, women, people transitioning, all of them. The next person you attack may very well kill you, so why not just question your orientation in private, and leave the rest of us out of it? Kay?”

She nodded to the warrior. Xena jabbed him again and he keeled over, inhaling gulps of air and rubbing his throat.

“You got something to say?” Michelle demanded, looming threateningly over him. He scrambled backwards, using the wall to regain his footing, fear etched on his face.

“Beat it!” Vox growled at him as he got to his feet and he ran, limping down the street.

Michelle looked at Aphrodite, concern clouding her face. “If he thinks all gay people know hand to hand combat, won’t he just get a gun?”

“He’s missing two toes from a stupid fourth of July mishap years ago. He’s afraid of guns or he’d have used one now. But yes, he is now absolutely convinced that every queer person can kick his ass.”

“Man, I wish I was a god,” Vox muttered as they waited for the Mustang to arrive.

“You wouldn’t use your powers for good,” Michelle countered. “You’d totally use them for your own selfish desires.”

Xena laughed heartily. “Like that disqualifies you from being a god.”

Aphrodite frowned, not appreciating being the butt of a joke, but couldn't argue. She was still frowning as Xena slid into the passenger's seat and good-naturedly winked at her. After some significant pleading from the engineer in the back seat, an all-night ice cream shop was located and pints purchased before the red Mustang wound its way back to the parking lot in Marina del Rey.



Xena followed Aphrodite into the den in Gabrielle's private residence. A warm, nurturing space, it was situated between the library with its imposing book cases, musical instruments and the hallway that lead to the guest stateroom. It took only a cursory inventory of the room to tell that a fair amount of nurturing had recently taken place. The television was off, its large screen dark so the room's only illumination came from the warm glow cast by the built-in light sconces. Two pieces of half-eaten pizza was all that remained on a large plate, and two bowls contained the dregs of ice cream sundaes. There was a box of tissue on the coffee table with a number of them used and discarded across the table and floor. Argo was curled up asleep at one end of the large, comfortable couch. Shen was in the middle, wrapped in a blanket and sound asleep, his head on Gabrielle's lap, her arm draped protectively around him. Gabrielle was asleep as well, leaning back with her head at an angle, her breathing slow and steady.

"They're both sound asleep," Aphrodite whispered to the warrior. "Shen was grieving," she explained. "Gabrielle too. You can feel the sadness in the air- despite the pizza and ice cream."

"Should we wake them?" Xena asked uncertainly.

Aphrodite looked critically at the unconscious pair on the couch considering the warrior's question. Xena noticed her eyes intensified slightly, then returned to their usual placid blue. "Shen would be fine if we left him, but Gabrielle is pretty wrung out." The goddess took the couple of steps to the end of the couch and gently pet the sleeping dog, who groggily raised her head.

"Not the world's greatest guard dog," Xena observed critically.

"Only because she knows us," Aphrodite chuckled. "Had we been strangers, we wouldn't have made it into the room." She looked at the dog and pointed in the direction of the stairs up to the deck. Obediently, Argo jumped off the couch and trotted out. "She will take every opportunity to be lazy but is dedicated where it counts. While she's taking care of business, why don't you tuck Gabrielle in? I can take care of Shen." A momentary flash of uncertainty crossed the warrior's features, but she didn't object. "She's really wiped out," Aphrodite assured Xena. "I don't think she'll wake up."

Inwardly, the warrior bristled at being read so easily by the goddess, but she moved toward the couch. Aphrodite leaned over and in a graceful movement that surprised Xena, picked up the boy and held him as if he were nearly weightless. "I had a nice time tonight," she told Xena, leaning forward and giving the warrior's cheek a chaste kiss. "Thank you. I have our outfits for tomorrow in my quarters, so tell Gabrielle to wait for me to get dressed in the morning."

Xena nodded, thanked the goddess, then leaned down to pick up Gabrielle. Argo returned from the deck above and trotted past the warrior to the bedroom, making herself at home on the dog bed. As she stood, Gabrielle shifted in her arms, resting her head on a strong shoulder and sighing contentedly. Xena leaned in and caught the faint scent of the

fragrance she identified with Gabrielle, even with the traces of garlic and onion that currently accompanied it. Smiling sadly, she walked into the bedroom.

Xena gently laid the bard down on the bed and considered her next course of action. She turned back the bedcovers and situated her unconscious companion. So far, so good. Retrieving a t-shirt from the closet, she undressed Gabrielle, carefully and chastely relieving her of her shoes, jeans, sweatshirt and bra, finally navigating the shirt over her head and pulling her arms through the sleeves. Aphrodite's prediction proved correct; Gabrielle slept soundly through the whole process, her face relaxed and free from the tensions of grief, parenting, and running a large enterprise, but Xena suspected Aphrodite may have had something to do with the uninterrupted slumber of her companion. She knew Gabrielle to be a sound sleeper; she also knew there were many a night when she'd woken the bard with the lightest touch, often upon hearing the steady snoring of Joxer or after sounds of activity in the Amazon village quieted.

Upon closer inspection, she realized why Aphrodite might have tampered with Gabrielle's consciousness. Tear-stained cheeks, and red nose left no doubt that while a few hours of closeness with Shen without having to share the time with others, their evening had been one of painful mourning. Xena looked down at the t-shirt she had chosen for Gabrielle, curious as to who Adele was, and why an image of the woman's eyes adorned the front of the garment in the first place. She stripped out of her own clothes and donned her t-shirt. Memories came to mind of times when she'd cared for Gabrielle, when the bard had been shot with a poisoned arrow, or when she'd been quite ill. Or of times Gabrielle had taken care of her, like when she'd taken a poisoned dart to the neck, complements of Callisto, or when she'd been caught in the log trap before she'd died the first time.

She slid in between the sheets and reached over Gabrielle to pull the covers around her shoulders. As she moved, Gabrielle turned towards her, moving closer. Absently, Xena brushed the hair from her forehead and within moments her breathing fell into rhythm with the bard's. In a scene that had played out so many times in the past, Gabrielle's arm snaked around the warrior's waist and the blond let out a contented sigh as she relaxed into a comfortable position against Xena's breast. Smiling to herself, Xena enjoyed the familiar sensation, well aware that the morning would bring distance and a whole host of things that were unfamiliar and unsettling. For now, in that moment, the universe felt as it should be and she was not going to waste it. She held onto Gabrielle as she slept, staving off unconsciousness for as long as she could until she was finally overcome. When she did slip into sleep though, it was the most peaceful and contented since her resurrection.



Gabrielle woke slowly. She was comfortably warm and felt more content than she could remember. Upon opening her eyes, dark hair obscured her vision and it took but a moment for her hands to report that they were wrapped around Xena and that she was holding the warrior close. A momentary feeling of awkwardness made itself known and dissipated as Xena held her, strong arms tightening to keep her from a panicked bolt.

"Hey," she said softly, moving so she could look at the warrior's face. "Good morning."

“Hey yourself,” Xena replied with a smile; her arms releasing their hold so Gabrielle could lean up on her elbow to make eye contact. “You sleep okay?”

“I did,” she replied returning the smile, albeit bashfully. “Shen and I had a bit of a rough night. There was sadness, but it was good too. I think he let go some of the hurt he’s feeling. He’s processing it.” Not wanting to relive the previous evening, she changed the subject. “What time did you guys get in?”

“I think it was sometime after two. Vox overindulged a bit and we found this all-night ice cream place. Ice cream is pretty amazing.” The warrior’s thoughts wandered and it was evident on her face.

“What is it?” Gabrielle asked.

Xena leaned up on her elbow as well so she could see Gabrielle’s eyes, and look into the face of the person who knew her more intimately than any other; often better than she knew herself. There was no point in anything but honesty.

“I feel like I’ve misjudged Aphrodite,” She admitted. “A part of me really wants to be jealous but at the same time I’ve realized that she’s not the same as she was the last time I saw her. She’s changed. I never realized what a crushing responsibility she has as a god, and what a genuine, loving heart she has and…” she shrugged. “I can see how you guys would be good together. She can understand you in ways that I can’t.”

Xena would have been disappointed if Gabrielle disagreed with her, or deflected or denied her assertions. Instead, the bard reached over to brush a strand of hair away from the warrior’s face and gently touched her cheek.

“Xena, I have no idea what it’s like to wake up and be surrounded by the inconceivable and have to take so much of this new reality on faith. I think we’re even when it comes to our difficulties understanding each other. Besides,” she added, “I’ve learned that while time is a finite resource, love is not. Yes, I absolutely love Aphrodite. I absolutely love you too, and I am choosing to spend my time with you. Time that isn’t Shen’s or needed for my work is yours. Not out of any sense of duty or obligation, but because you’re my heart Xena, even if my heart is somewhat defective right now and trying to wake itself the fuck up.”

Gabrielle studied Xena’s face. Satisfied the smile she received was genuine and that she’d been heard, she impulsively leaned forward and gently kissed the warrior’s lips. She marveled at their softness and was delighted to feel the return of the old, familiar electricity she remembered. She leaned in to kiss her more passionately as Michelle’s voice came over the ship’s intercom.

“Gabrielle, it’s six. Would you like breakfast onboard before going to LAX?” Xena smirked at the bard’s obvious frustration at having their moment interrupted.

“Breakfast for Argo,” Gabrielle replied after hitting the comm button. “Maybe something light for us, I think we might eat on the plane.”

“I can whip up some crepes,” Michelle countered. “No trouble at all, and will be better than whatever Ed can reheat.”

“Sold. We should be on deck by seven.”

“Aphrodite said to let her know when we were up,” Xena explained as she got out of bed. “Something about her having our outfits for today.”

“I’ll let her know we’re awake and showering,” Gabrielle replied reaching for her phone. “I’m sure she’ll be happy to have breakfast onboard. Did she and Michelle have a good time last night?”

As she spoke Gabrielle watched Xena stride confidently to the bathroom and strip out of her shirt before getting into the shower. She stared at the warrior's reflection in the mirror, remembering the sight she'd seen so many times long ago. There were countless streams, lakes, and the occasional hot tub they'd shared naked together even before they were lovers; those memories bubbled to the surface as if being unpacked from a thick wrapping of opaque tissue.

"I think they both had a good time," Xena replied after making eye contact with Gabrielle in the mirror. "Vox got to flirt with someone, which seemed to cheer her up. Aphrodite and Michelle danced a bit. We went to this place called The Edison, do you know it?"

"Downtown LA, right?" Gabrielle asked. "The steampunk looking place."

Xena had her eyes closed, lathering her hair with the shampoo. After rinsing she replied, "I have no idea what that means."

The bard mentally chided herself. "I do think I've been there. Steampunk means something loosely inspired by nineteenth-century technology, like steam engines and such. It's kind of a subset of the Science Fiction genre, although I admit that explanation doesn't really help." As she spoke, she noticed a stack of neatly folded clothes on the chair from Xena undressing her the night before. She smiled, having forgotten about the warrior's fastidiousness.

Xena stepped out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around her body, and another wrapped around her hair. Gabrielle took that as a signal to take her shower. There was no denying that the bard was torn. There was no good reason not to shower together, certainly this particular shower had accommodated herself and two other women easily in the past. There was even one time where she'd shared it with three other women, crowded as it was, she'd hadn't minded at the time.

But regardless of Aphrodite's opinions on the number of relationships she'd racked up (and, dammit, she'd had sex with a perfectly decent number of people over the last two millennia), she couldn't stop feeling like the insecure bard from Potidaea when around Xena. It almost seemed to Gabrielle like she was starting her relationship with the warrior all over again, even though she knew memories of their lovemaking were quite fresh in Xena's memory.

"I understand the science part of it" Xena replied, combing out her long hair. On a whim, she tried out an expression she'd heard many of the crew use. "It's all good, no worries."

"Well look at you, sounding like a native." Aphrodite remarked from the open door.

"Don't you knock?" Xena grumbled, turning around.

"Not usually, no," the goddess answered with a smirk.

Aphrodite sported a stylish yet utilitarian business suit in navy blue, looking every inch a FBI agent straight out of central casting. She was holding two matching garment bags, which she deposited on the bed.

"A Scully suit suits you," the bard remarked, joining Xena in a matching towel.

"Well, we are going to be impersonating federal agents. I know I didn't buy anything like that for Xena when I did her shopping, and I wasn't sure about your wardrobe," the goddess explained.

“Very generous of you,” Gabrielle quipped, knowing full well she’d paid for the clothes. She and Xena unzipped their bags and withdrew suits of similar cut and color. They didn’t identically match, but the three of them would certainly pass as a team of federal agents.

“We will need to do more than look the part if we’re going to make it past security,” Gabrielle continued, critically eyeing the serviceable shoes supplied by the goddess.

Xena casually discarded her towel and walked naked over to the closet for undergarments. Aphrodite grinned as Gabrielle valiantly tried to avoid eye contact with her. That battle lost, she endured Aphrodite’s knowing wink and proceeded to get dressed.

“Will Shen join us for breakfast?” Xena asked. Her matter-of-fact demeanor as she dressed suggested the same aloof professionalism she’d exhibited when she’d competed in the Miss Known World competition. To the warrior, this was just another costume for just another mission.

Aphrodite closed her eyes and concentrated for a moment. “Shen is awake and will probably be on deck when we arrive. As for your concerns,” she said, turning to Gabrielle, who was adjusting her bra, “I had Special Projects make us some badges which should fool anyone who isn’t looking too closely. When it comes to the security personnel, leave them to me.”

“We should plan on several days at least?” Gabrielle opened a small suitcase and began adding clothing for herself and Xena. Turning back to the goddess, she started to speak when Aphrodite raised her hand.

“Way ahead of you, boss.” she said, nodding at the small suitcase just inside the bedroom door.

On deck, the trio sat at the large crew dining table near the galley. Looking out the long bank of windows, Gabrielle could see the thick marine layer obscuring visibility. It made her feel vulnerable and she didn’t like it. Shen joined them moments later, accompanying Argo from the kitchen. The dog was still licking her chops from breakfast.

“Good morning Gabrielle, Aphrodite, Xena,” he said politely, greeting Xena with a fist bump, hugs for the other two.

“You’re up early, Moose,” Gabrielle said warmly. “You sleep okay?”

The boy nodded. “I think I slept better than I have for a long time,” he said.

Xena and Gabrielle both glanced at the goddess, who smiled sheepishly. If blushing had been Aphrodite’s thing, she would have been.

“You guys look great,” Michelle commented, depositing a plate of warm crepes in front of them.

“Why thank you,” the goddess replied with a wink.

Gabrielle smiled at Michelle as she accepted her plate, then said, “As soon as we leave, I’d like you to take the ship out. This lack of visibility makes me nervous.”

“It’s harder to sneak up on us in open water,” Shen explained to Aphrodite. Digging into his crepes, he looked back to Gabrielle. “Does this mean that I’m still in danger?”

“We’re trying to stay cautious, Moose.” Gabrielle assured him, looking to Michelle.

“We’re going to practice some drills,” Michelle explained to the boy. “You’re going to be included. Practicing on getting to the safe room, stuff like that. We want to see if we can beat your current record.”

“Is Argo going to stay here?” he asked hopefully.

Gabrielle looked like she was considering leaving her dog with her son when Aphrodite shook her head. “She needs to come with us kiddo,” the goddess said gently.

Shen’s expression brightened “You guys are going on a spy mission?”

“Yeah, something like that,” Xena agreed with a grin.

The boy looked thoughtful for a moment. “If that’s the case,” he said reasonably, “I’ll wait for you to call me – I won’t try to call you.” He nodded, satisfied with his decision. “Wouldn’t be helpful to have your phone go off if you’re doing spy stuff. Even if it’s in silent mode.”

“That’s very good thinking,” Gabrielle agreed, tousling his hair. “I’ll call you when we land, how’s that?”

“Say Xena,” the captain asked after passing the warrior another fresh crepe, “that...ah...thing you did last night after we left the club, you think you’d have some time to show us before you leave? We’d like to practice that.” As she spoke she held two fingers together and jabbed the air. “Gabrielle has taught us some similar hand to hand techniques, but it’s always good to get a fresh perspective.”

“What happened last night?” Gabrielle asked, concerned. “You mentioned all night ice cream, not getting attacked.”

Michelle winced at Xena’s expression, painfully aware that she shouldn’t have mentioned the homophobe in front of her boss.

“It was a jerk at the club,” Aphrodite demurred. “Nothing to do with you know who.”

“Now it sounds like you guys are going after Voldemort,” Shen observed dryly.

Xena glanced at Gabrielle considering her response. “Do you think we can spare an hour?” she asked, taking a sip of juice.

Gabrielle nodded mutely. Anything her crew could learn from Xena could provide additional safety, and would give them something to work on and practice until they could get back.



After breakfast, and the impromptu training session, Gabrielle, Xena, Aphrodite, and Argo made the ride in a chauffeured town car to LAX in near silence, each lost in their own thoughts.

“Xena,” Gabrielle said cautiously. The warrior turned from watching the stream of slow moving cars to give the bard her undivided attention. “Remember when I said you were getting thrown in at the deep end before your first ride in a car?”

“Yes,” the warrior replied, her voice tinged with wariness.

“I think today is going to be stranger.” Xena took a deep breath and waited for Gabrielle to continue.

Before the bard could continue, Aphrodite said “There,” pointing out the window at something streaking across the sky.

“That’s an airplane and we are going to ride in one.” Gabrielle explained. “I can tell you how they work if that helps.”

Xena looked at her dubiously. “I don’t think that will help.”

“Let me guess,” Aphrodite said, amusement threading her voice. “You have your pilot’s license for jets as well as helicopters?”

Gabrielle shrugged. “It was something to do after pastry school. Actually,” she continued, returning her attention to Xena, “I thought with your love of kites that you might enjoy this.”

Xena looked out the window again as another airplane came into her field of view. “Perhaps,” she said. “Is this one of these things where I need to act like I know what’s going on?” There was a wariness to her voice that Gabrielle instantly picked up on.

“It’s probably really draining, isn’t it?” She asked sympathetically. Xena forced a smile, inwardly kicking herself for letting the exhaustion show. “The Omni has an amazing tub in the presidential suite.” Gabrielle continued. “You should take some time to relax when we get to DC.”

As they drove onto the tarmac of the Los Angeles International Airport, Aphrodite explained to Xena that the airport was a hub of global activity. It was then the goddess’ years spent as a flight attendant and the knowledge gained in such a pursuit became apparent. She ran through some statistics of the different planes, how many passengers each could accommodate and how long it would take to fly between various places with which the warrior was familiar. Xena’s interest overcame her weariness watching the large passenger aircraft race down the runway and become airborne.

As before, they parked near Gabrielle’s plane and were met at the bottom of the steps by Ed Schecter, dressed in his dark suit, sunglasses and earpiece, looking every inch the bodyguard. Gabrielle could see the twins Isra and Kismet just inside as she led her group towards the plane.

“Ed, you remember Aphrodite,” Gabrielle said as the muscular man shook the goddess’ hand. “Anna Winter is the alias she’s using.”

“How has Vox recovered from our adventure in Greece?” he asked.

“Good as new,” the goddess assured him warmly.

“And this is Xena,” Gabrielle continued. “Or Natasha Romanoff, if anyone asks.”

“Vox has mentioned you,” Ed said warmly, shaking the warrior’s hand. “She says you’re alright, and from her that’s pretty high praise.”

“She’s not so bad herself,” the warrior replied, grinning.

Gabrielle led the way up the stairs and introduced the twins, who greeted everyone graciously. Everyone chatted for a couple of minutes while Ed stowed their luggage.

“The plane looks good.” Gabrielle remarked with approval, glancing at the area of the floor where she’d performed emergency surgery on Vox.

“Transportation sent a team. They replaced the carpet when cleaning didn’t meet Jorge’s approval,” Isra explained, then smoothly transitioned the subject. “If you are ready to go we just need to let the tower know and get in the queue.”

Gabrielle nodded and waved her hand toward the couch. “Xena’s never flown on a private jet,” she explained. “Let’s try to keep the turbulence to a minimum. Xena, why don’t you take the couch? I’ll sit next to you.”

Xena took her seat as Argo jumped up next to her. Gabrielle settled herself on the other side. Aphrodite and Ed settled into recliners.

Argo shifted, resting her gray and white head on Xena's thigh. Aphrodite smiled at the gesture then looked at Gabrielle curiously. "You never told me how you got Argo?" she asked.

Xena looked at Gabrielle, waiting for the story, absently petting the dog and momentarily distracted from the movement of the jet as it made its way to the runway for takeoff.

"It was three years ago. I wasn't planning to adopt a dog so soon after Thor's death," she explained. "But I was in Louisiana checking out this farm that our animal charity had purchased for a sanctuary. A group of dogs were being brought in that had been rescued from a dog fighting ring that found their financials and a host of other evidence dropped on the doorstep of a federal agency by our friends at Special Projects." The plane shook a little as it made the first of several turns to the main runway and Xena glanced warily out the window.

"Part of your Philanthropy division?" the goddess asked, knowing the answer was yes, but trying to shift focus from the tension that was radiating from the warrior.

Gabrielle nodded "We've got animal charities all over the globe. Dogs, cats, circus animals, farm animals, exotic animals, endangered animals – you name it. Obviously human charities too – human trafficking, refugees, women's shelters, medical services. Anyway, this particular sanctuary was for rescued and mistreated dogs and farm animals, and a fair number of cats." She looked affectionately at the dog resting happily in Xena's lap. "This one was a puppy and started following me everywhere. She just decided she was going to stay with me and would not take no for an answer. When it was time to leave, I started to drive away in the car. Well, one look in the rearview mirror with this little one tripping over her feet racing after me..." she shrugged. "That was that. We've been co-workers ever since." She looked affectionately at her dog; muscular gray and white head with amber eyes and floppy ears. "I think she was destined to be a bait dog," the bard explained. "At that time, she was small for her age and they hadn't bothered to clip her ears for fighting. Once she moved in with me and got fed regularly and got some decent exercise she filled out to the sweetheart she is today."

Xena had stopped petting the dog as the plane hit its last turn and after a momentary pause, began to speed down the runway for takeoff. Without making eye contact, Gabrielle reached out reassuringly to hold Xena's hand nearest to her. After seconds that stretched out in silence, the jet lifted and began to soar upward. The warrior from Ancient Greece tightened her grip on the bard's hand and stared transfixed out the window as the houses and cars below shrank and looked like toys. Moments later, it became difficult to make out individual homes and vehicles. "By the gods," she breathed quietly.

Ed grinned broadly at Xena's amazement. "Small jets always give me the feeling that I'm actually soaring too," he agreed. "The difference between this and a commercial plane are like night and day."

Xena glanced at Gabrielle before smiling briefly at the muscular man. "You are absolutely right," she said.

With a chuckle at the exchange, Aphrodite pulled her iPad from her purse and began to scroll through various email and articles. "Do we have any kind of plan after we meet with the pathologist?" she asked.

“That reminds me,” Ed said with a grin, hopping out of his recliner and getting a large envelope from the cupboard. “Sabin dropped this off early this morning as we did our pre-flight.” He handed the sealed envelope to Gabrielle.

As she expected, three matching sets of FBI credentials were inside along with identification documents for their alter egos. The fake badges had names Gabrielle didn’t recognize but the DC driver’s licenses were for Susan Vincent, Anna Winter and Natasha Romanoff, respectively. There was also an invitation to the fundraising gala, her name in gold leaf embossed on textured linen paper. Gabrielle put the contents back into the envelope then put the envelope into her purse. She withdrew a small laptop computer and opened a file folder. “Did Jorge read you in?” she asked Ed as she found the document she was looking for.

“About the troll who plays Gideon Power and his handler Heinrich Easton?” Ed asked as he accepted the laptop that his boss handed him. “That’s the guy who killed Susan,” he said, looking at the documents. “You called him ‘Ares’ at the time.”

Gabrielle nodded “think of Ares as a code name. He’s going by Heinrich Easton and probably a dozen or so other alias as well. Scruggs is the actor playing Gideon Power. We think they might both be at the Gala tomorrow night.”

Ed looked at the back of the plane where he’d stowed the small suitcases and then looked at Gabrielle critically. “You ladies got ball gowns in those tiny suitcases?” he asked dubiously.

The bard’s eyes grew wide with the realization of her mistake and lack of forethought or planning. “Fuck,” she muttered in frustration.

Aphrodite chuckled and immediately started scrolling through her phone. “Relax dears,” she said reassuringly. “I know a guy. I’ll text him.”

“A guy who can alter formalwear in a day?” Ed asked dubiously.

“Maybe not in your size pumpkin,” she replied affectionately, “but for us, sure. We can go pick out something after our meeting with the pathologist and have it delivered to the hotel tomorrow. This may surprise you, but I have a way with people.”

Ed beamed at the goddess, “Oh, I’m not surprised at all. And not to worry,” he added to Gabrielle as he opened a thin closet behind rich wood paneling, “I remembered to bring my tux.”

“Someone is getting an extra bonus this year, that’s for sure.” Aphrodite replied approvingly.

Xena listened with detachment as Gabrielle, Aphrodite and Ed discussed their plans for the afternoon and evening. She was riveted by the world moving by slowly below and marveling at the view of clouds from a parallel position in the sky. The landscape changed from the rocky, brown desert of the southwest to shades of green and circular shapes which she learned were the farms of the Midwest. She could not believe how vast the world looked from this perspective.

She half listened as words registered in her consciousness. Bodyguards would not accompany federal agents, so Ed would stay with Argo and the car when the three of them met with the pathologist, Dr. Kate Sprucehill. After the meeting, they would find formalwear. They would do reconnaissance on the hotel building, then make a plan for the following day. During the gala, the mission was to find Gideon Powers and see if that led them to Ares. Ideally, they might discover where Ares was staying and if that might provide an opportunity to steal something of his that he might value enough to be lured

into an open confrontation, far enough away from innocent bystanders to be practical. It wasn't the best plan she'd ever heard of, but she and Gabrielle had accomplished much on their adventures together with even less planning than this.

After several hours of flight, Ed excused himself to prepare some food. He was a kind and charming man but moved with the practiced precision of a dedicated warrior and Xena liked him instantly. "Sarah sent over some food early this morning." He explained as he rummaged through the small galley. "We've got some vegan lasagna and a savory pie, I think it might be chicken. I could also make a salad, or there is some butternut squash soup in here that I had the other day, it's really good too. That with some crispy garlic bread? I see some panna cotta here, and there is some really tasty banana bread made with Michelle's apple sauce. Oh, and some decadent rice krispy treats made with – damn – with homemade marshmallow!"

Gabrielle shrugged, considering her options. "Lasagna and salad sounds good to me." Aphrodite and Xena both nodded. Argo was treated to a bowl with some pieces of raw vegetables, which she munched on contentedly. As they finished their lunch, Ed withdrew a deck of cards from a drawer and flashed a winning smile. "You ladies fancy a game of cards?"



Gabrielle casually glanced at her cards then impassively raised her eyes to Xena. The warrior looked back at her unperturbed. It was all the bard could do to keep from grinning from ear to ear. Xena's calm demeanor brought back memories, remembrances of fighting incalculable odds and besting countless foes.

In the moments between Ed suggesting cards and cleaning up the remnants of their lunch both Gabrielle and Aphrodite had casually texted Xena information on the basics of poker so she would not seem out of her element when it came time to play. They told her the suits, the hierarchy of hands, and the fundamentals of the game. The bodyguard was none the wiser and sat down with the trio in earnest. Xena's natural nonchalance gave her an opportunity in the first several hands to simply fold and watch how play progressed as Gabrielle and Ed battled it out. Aphrodite offered to be the dealer, knowing the unfair advantage she'd have even if the bodyguard didn't. When Xena began to play, raising and calling her opponents strategically, it didn't take long for the warrior and bard to take all of the bodybuilder's chips.

"That's me, done," he said, showing a weak two pair. After a nod in the direction of the recliner he asked, "do you mind if I take a catnap?"

"Absolutely not," Gabrielle replied, shaking her head. "I know it was an early morning for you and the twins. Unlike Isra and Kismet – you don't get to stay with the plane in DC and I don't know what the next few days will bring, so by all means, rest up now."

He smiled gratefully and settled himself in the recliner, pulling a pair of headphones from a drawer. "You need anything boss, don't hesitate to wake me," he said as he donned the headphones and selected something on his phone before settling back and closing his eyes.

Gabrielle leaned forward and whispered to Aphrodite, "Can he hear us?"

The goddess shook her head. “He’s listening to the Hamilton soundtrack,” she replied as she dealt the next hand to Xena and Gabrielle. She looked at him again and the blue of her eyes briefly intensified.

“And now he’s sleeping, so speak freely.”

Gabrielle looked over at Ed. Sure enough he was snoring softly, his breathing measured and steady. With a casual glance of her cards, the bard continued.

“Do you have any idea what it is of Ares’ that we might be looking for – what could possibly be important enough to get him to go where we want?”

“The source of his godhood was his sword. Do you think he’d still have that?” Xena wondered, raising Gabrielle by tossing several chips into the center of the table.

Aphrodite shrugged. “I honestly have no idea. I’ve seen him a time or two over the years. The last time was during world war two and he certainly wasn’t wearing that giant sword then. He might just have a fragment of it but there is no way to know.

“I kept my shell at one of my temples,” she explained, dealing three cards face up to the center of the table. Without looking at her cards, Gabrielle casually measured out chips and pushed them to the center. Xena saw her bet. The goddess put down the turn card, glancing sideways at Gabrielle.

“When the tether to Olympus was cut, I went into hiding for a long time. Things were just too weird and I couldn’t deal. When I returned to my temples they’d been looted and were in bad shape. My shell had been broken and most of it was missing, but there were a few fragments left which I picked up and kept with me. I don’t know if there is something similar for my dear brother or not.” She put down the river card and the last round of betting began. Gabrielle won the hand and collected her chips.

“If you and Ares are evenly matched,” Xena wondered, “and Gabrielle and I are...well, not like most people at this point – do we think he may have some similarly gifted people on his side? Indestructible lieutenants perhaps? Do we need to plan for more than Ares?”

Aphrodite shuffled the cards as she considered the question. “For the record, Ares and I are not evenly matched. I’m stronger than he is, and probably will be for the next several centuries.”

“How do you figure that?” Xena asked as she casually stacked and restacked her chips.

“I had ambrosia right before we resurrected you,” she explained. “Uncle Ariel – I’ve gotta say, the name is kind of growing on me – measured out what it would take to give you and Gabrielle comparable life spans, then he gave the rest to me. Unless Ares has a stash of the stuff, I’ve fed on it more recently, so am for sure stronger, although his wheelhouse is still his and mine is still mine.” She smiled as she cut the cards and shuffled again. “When you think ‘food’ of the gods,” she clarified, “think nutrient rich energy bar, not a doughnut.” She looked thoughtful for a moment. “I can’t say I’ve given it much thought, but maybe that’s what separated gods and mortals initially. We had access to a superfood.”

“How would you get it?” Gabrielle asked.

“It was always on Mount Olympus. I’d pop in every now and then have a bite. Can’t say I’m a fan of the family drama but that’s where the ambrosia was.” She shrugged. “I’d usually stash a little in my temples so I wouldn’t have to go home as often,

but the risk was then mortals might have access to it.” She smiled sweetly at her companions, “No offense, of course.”

“None taken,” Xena replied dryly. “Can you please pass me another of those rice krispy thingies?”

Aphrodite passed her the dessert plate, picking up a single piece of puffed rice as she did so. She looked at it thoughtfully.

“I found a piece about this big in the late nineteen sixties. I was working as a stewardess for Pan Am, based out of San Francisco. I’d worked a flight to Greece, so I visited the ruins of one of my temples during my layover.” She popped the crumb into her mouth. “The Summer of Love was no accident,” she grinned.

“So, if you’re in your lane and Ares is in his,” Gabrielle asked for clarification, “how does that make you more powerful?”

Aphrodite shrugged. “I’m not sure that it does in any meaningful way. I could kick his ass at arm wrestling right now, out-lift him at the gym, even probably sway a few of his neo-Nazi douchebags to grow a conscience. I’m just, I don’t know, rejuvenated?” She fell quiet a moment, thinking. “You know the Bible verse ‘love is patient, love is kind’? It’s one of the few things they got right. Love *is* patient, and eventually I will win out. I can see a million ways this all plays out, and love wins. What the world will look like, now *that* is an entirely different matter. There is no guarantee that ‘justice’ will win, but ‘love’ certainly does.”

The goddess’ expression became inscrutable and she looked at Xena as if for the first time. It was a look of realization, and conveyed recognition and respect, things that the warrior had never experienced from Aphrodite.

“I think the fact that Xena embodies traits of three of us is going to be key,” she explained. “She could already think like Ares, she’s picked up new abilities from me and possibly my uncle in the process of being resurrected. As for lieutenants for Ares; he’d need ambrosia and unlike my uncle, he would never give it to a mortal. He’d find that really offensive.”

“How is it that Poseidon is the only one who seems able to get it?” Gabrielle mused aloud.

With that, Xena’s eyes suddenly grew wide and her cheeks flushed with excitement. Glancing reflexively at the sleeping steward, she breathlessly whispered to Gabrielle and Aphrodite, “I know where it is! I know where *all* of it is, where it grows – what exactly *it* is! It’s like I suddenly remembered, but I’ve always known it.”

“What are you saying?” Gabrielle asked. “You know what ambrosia is? Besides being ambrosia?”

Xena nodded excitedly and went on. “It’s a very slow-growing kind of seaweed. Don’t ask me how I know, I just do. It is transparent while it’s underwater and impossible for humans to see when it’s immature, but when it matures it becomes less translucent. Once it’s picked and brought to the surface, it becomes opaque. Poseidon would have it harvested by dolphins or other sea creatures and brought to him. It’s further down than mortals can swim and the other gods never went in the ocean, that’s why he is the one who supplied it to Olympus.”

Aphrodite was dubious. “How would he get it up there? He couldn’t exactly deliver it himself.”

Xena went on. “Seafaring birds – pelicans or albatross or whoever he could convince to do it. Poseidon was tied to the water, but he had this other duty to his family as well. He didn’t appreciate being relegated to one zone and expected to provide for the others. Probably an additional reason he wanted to break free – he wanted the freedom to go to and from Mount Olympus on his own. He just didn’t foresee that breaking his tether to the oceans would result in cutting off Olympus from the world as well. You never saw him on Olympus, did you?”

The Goddess of Love cocked her head, searching her memory. “No, I only saw him when I’d go to the sea, but I like the ocean so I saw him fairly regularly. He was decent enough when Hephaestus and I split up.” She shook her head in disbelief. “Holy shit,” she breathed. “This is a game changer.”

“What do you mean?” Gabrielle asked, glancing at her hand of cards.

Now Aphrodite began to get excited. “It doesn’t matter if we find something Ares is passionate about. I mean if we do, great, now we have something – ambrosia. We can use ambrosia as bait and I *guarantee* you he will show up for that.”

“But we don’t actually have any.” Gabrielle thought this part was self-evident.

“That’s easy enough to remedy,” Xena countered. “Do you have a map?”

Gabrielle reached for her laptop and the warrior shook her head. “No, an actual map. Shen doesn’t trust those things to not spy on you and I’m inclined to agree with him.”

Gabrielle nodded, seeing no reason not to be cautious. She walked over to the small closet and retrieved a rolled map of the world from behind the hanging tuxedo, then unrolled it on the table with Aphrodite’s help.

Xena studied the map. “Show me where you guys brought me back.”

Aphrodite pointed to the tip of the Baja California peninsula.

“We could get some here, or here. Xena indicated the various places on the map around the peninsula, to the amazement of both goddess and bard.

Xena continued, pointing to areas in other parts of the world. “There is also some here, and here, but I don’t think those plants are mature yet.”

“Are you seriously telling me there is ambrosia in the Hudson Bay?” Gabrielle asked dubiously. “And the Bay of Bengal? Those two places are nothing alike. How could the same plant grow in two totally different ecosystems?”

“It grows all over, it just grows really, really slowly, and when I say ‘it’ I mean one plant. The size of a head of lettuce. There may be one tiny plant in all of the...” she looked at the map, “Norwegian Sea and it takes centuries for a single leaf to grow. The ambrosia that you tossed into the river of lava was easily tens of thousands of years old.” The warrior went on excitedly. “That’s why mortals haven’t found it. One lettuce sized transparent plant on the sea floor? The ocean is just too vast if you don’t know exactly where or what it is you’re after.”

“What ambrosia got thrown into a river of lava?” Aphrodite asked, furrowing her brow.

“So, you know where it is,” Gabrielle rushed on quickly, ignoring the goddess. “You said it’s deeper than people can swim. Do we need a submarine? Because I have one. I just need to get it relocated to the West coast.”

“Why not just ask a dolphin to do it?” Xena said sensibly.

Aphrodite and Gabrielle looked at each other, then back to Xena. “Are you saying that you can talk to sea creatures? “Like Poseidon does?” the bard ventured.

“I think so, I mean not every living thing in the sea,” Xena explained. “A lot of it isn’t the least bit interested in anything I have to say. Honestly, is that any weirder than me being able to speak elvish?”

Gabrielle opened her mouth to speak, and then closed it. The warrior had a point.

Xena rushed to continue. “But this is important. Ares has to be the one to figure out that we have it and demand it from us. It has to come from him. If we try to offer it, he is absolutely going to see it as bait.”

“If Ares and I are in the same room that will not be a problem.” Aphrodite assured them. “He will immediately know I’ve had it and it will rattle him. He will be desperate to figure out how I came across it.”

Something suddenly occurred to the bard. “Aphrodite. Poseidon, Ariel – whomever – put just a few drops of his blood into Xena’s urn, and now she can talk to sea life, understands the secrets of ambrosia, can determine where various sea life is just by sensing or concentrating.” Turning to the warrior, she asked, “Am I missing anything?”

“I think I can surf and hold my breath longer than I used to be able to.”

The bard looked back at the goddess. “And you added more than twice that amount of your blood, and she can read and write every language. Is that all she can do?”

“No,” the Goddess of Love replied.

“Then...?” Both bard and warrior looked expectantly at Aphrodite for the answer.

Aphrodite arched a knowing eyebrow at Gabrielle.

“*Ooohhh...*” The bard blushed furiously in realization.

“Besides *that*.” The goddess rolled her eyes and continued. “Let’s agree that Xena is much nicer this time around. She’s got more patience and empathy, as evidenced by her befriending your love-sick engineer, instead of disemboweling her. Clearly, she’s getting that from my side of the family.”

“I’m trying to be serious,” Gabrielle protested.

“Gabrielle,” Xena said quietly, realization dawning on her. “I think she is being serious. I feel like I have this strange...insight.”

“The bard’s eyes darted over to Aphrodite, who shook her head. “No hon, not *that* insight.”

Xena wanted to ask what the goddess meant, then realized it was something between them that didn’t threaten what she and Gabrielle had. She let it go.

“It may grow over time. You will learn to control it and know when to tune in, when to tune out. It will take practice but you will get the hang of it. Looks like ‘sensitive chats’ are eventually going to be your thing too, dear.” She chuckled as she looked back to Gabrielle. “And you were worried she’d come back straight.”

“Poseidon said she’d have two dads and a mom,” the bard protested.

Aphrodite rolled her eyes. “Honey *none* of the gods or goddesses are straight. Not a single one. We’re all queer.”

Both warrior and bard looked confused.

“Ares...?” Xena ventured. The goddess waved dismissively as she helped herself to another piece of pumpkin bread.

“Bitch please. I know for a fact he’s blown off steam bottoming at a leather sex club in the Tenderloin in New York City on more than one occasion. Not that there is anything wrong with being a sub in a leather bar. Look,” she went on, in answer to their questions, “this is just shit that I know, I can’t tell you how I know. The thing is, when there are only a couple of dozen of you and you live for tens of thousands of years, you’re going to get really bored if your only option for companionship is half that limited number of partners. That’s why the dalliances with mortals, the incestuous relationships with each other, even though they never work out. I’m not saying we’re not a fucked up people, because we are all *so* fucked up. Just not as fucked up as the rest of you.” She dabbed at the corners of her mouth with a napkin. “My point being, is that Xena isn’t straight. Yes, she inherited the traits of three deities within that fit physique of hers, and yes, she’s less obnoxious than she was.

“We have a real shot at Ares here,” she continued. “Whether we find something that matters to him or not, ambrosia *will* matter. Unless he had a killer stash stored away somewhere, he will be ravenous for it. With one more element, this plan might actually work.” She said the last with reservation and turned her head. Both Xena and Gabrielle looked at her. “Ares isn’t going to go to any meeting where he doesn’t feel like he has the upper hand,” she explained. “He needs to have something of yours that you will do anything to get back. That’s why he kidnapped Susan.

Gabrielle followed the line of Aphrodite’s vision to see what the goddess was looking at and her sleeping dog on the couch came into view.

“Absolutely not,” she said flatly. “There has to be another way.”

Xena looked at Gabrielle then turned to Aphrodite then back to Gabrielle. “In a lot of ways, she would be safer,” the warrior said gently. “He isn’t going to torture her, she can’t tell him anything.”

“I know how you feel,” Aphrodite added, “I know my shell wasn’t a living thing, but I was really attached to it. I won’t say there isn’t risk, because there is. But I think she will be okay. Let’s just say I’ve bestowed a couple of enhancements on her besides being able to spot deception. All I want you to do is consider it, you don’t have to make a decision now.”

Gabrielle studied the soundly sleeping dog. Her large square head tucked back towards her body, ears flopping over in relaxed bliss. The bard smiled at the thought of the love and devotion those amber eyes held when Argo looked at her.

“Argo can’t consent,” the bard protested. “I can’t offer her up as a hostage when she doesn’t know what’s going on. That’s beyond wrong. Why don’t we let him take me as a hostage?”

“We can’t have him take you because it will take all of us if we’re going to try and hurt him enough to leave you alone,” Aphrodite explained. “Using the hammer and the chakram is a two-person job. I can goad my brother into anything, but I can’t directly lift a hand to hurt him, nor him me. It’s just how it works. It’s going to take the two of you. It’s probably why he didn’t want Xena to come back, among countless other reasons. And Argo *can* consent and she has. She would do absolutely anything to make your life better. It’s just how dogs are. You’re welcome.”

The bard frowned. “You’re responsible for dog’s behavior and can talk to them?” Even after two thousand years of living, Gabrielle found some things just too unbelievable.

“Do you doubt Argo’s love for you?” the goddess asked archly.

“Well, no but...” Gabrielle protested.

“Love is my thing, the whole rainbow. From the time that first woman shared a meal with a wolf. Of *course* I can talk to them.”

“Cats, not so much?” Xena asked dryly.

Aphrodite rolled her eyes. “Cat’s haven’t forgotten they were worshiped as gods by the Egyptians. Blame them.”

Gabrielle nodded mutely. After all she had asked of Aphrodite, the goddess had sacrificed her last bit of home and she felt like she couldn’t say no, but couldn’t say yes yet either. The card game forgotten, she moved to another drawer and extracted a shoulder holster and gun. The weapon was part of her disguise as a federal agent, but also a reminder that even though she and Xena were not in mortal danger, Argo, and the people nearest her were.



Aphrodite led the way to the security desk next to a pair of walk through metal detectors and scanning machines in the federal building. They showed their badges and Gabrielle noticed the blue of Aphrodite’s eyes intensify.

“We’re here to see Dr. Sprucehill,” the goddess announced. “We have an appointment.” The first of the three security guards checked a sheet and then picked up a phone. Gabrielle opened her suit jacket to show the gun in its holster which was noted by the second security officer. After a moment, they were waved past the machines as a woman in a lab coat came walking towards them.

Dr. Kate Sprucehill shook hands with each woman while checking their counterfeit badges before leading the way down the sterile corridor to a large antiseptic room.

They passed six gleaming and empty autopsy tables. Refrigeration units lined the wall behind the well-lit examination tables on their way to a small office through a doorway off of the lab. The office was warmer, and showed evidence it was occupied by a living human being. On the desk, a photo of two young boys in superhero costumes sat next to a picture of the doctor and a man Gabrielle assumed was her significant other. There was also a small metal action figure of Captain Phasma from Star Wars holding onto an iPhone cord, which the bard found adorable.

“Will you be taking over the investigation from Agents Andrews and Rodriguez?” the pathologist asked conversationally.

“Yes,” Gabrielle replied smoothly, drawing her eyes away from the doctor’s desk to look at her. “We were just assigned and are getting up to speed.” Dr. Sprucehill appeared to be in her late thirties. She was as tall, blond, and blue-eyed as Aphrodite, with her long hair pulled back into a professional ponytail; in short, she was beautiful. Gabrielle felt a pang of guilt that what they were doing would likely result in the woman losing her job. She made a mental note to contact her HR people to find use for the services of a pathologist in her organization.

“Ah, very good then,” the doctor replied, drawing the bard from her reverie and gesturing to the seats across from her desk as she took her own. She briefly rummaged through a stack of folders before selecting one and handing it to Aphrodite saying, “These are the findings.” The goddess glanced at the paperwork inside before passing it

over to Gabrielle to make sense of the medical jargon. "Cause of death is straightforward," the pathologist continued. "Cyanide poisoning. She was wearing a tooth favored by old-fashioned spies that contained a small chamber with the poison. She bit down on the capsule, and that was that."

"Do we know where she was killed?" Gabrielle asked, intently looking at the documents in the folder. There were toxicology reports, photographs of Susan's body, notes from the autopsy; the exam had been through and complete. "She lived in Southern California."

"I believe that is where she was abducted." Dr. Sprucehill replied "While her body was found in Montana, I don't believe she was killed there. I found pollen in her nostrils and plant material under her fingernails from the DC area. My theory is that she was held hostage for a day or so in DC before she died, then taken to Montana to thwart an investigation. There was bruising from restraints, probably handcuffs." She smiled sympathetically in the direction of the refrigerated units. "It seems like she was doing her best to collect information to point to her abductor. There was a symbol scratched into her shin and another strange set of marks. The angle, depth and position point to self-inflicted." The doctor pointed to two photos in the file that Gabrielle was holding. Gabrielle studied the images, then showed them to Xena.

"Looks like the sign of the zodiac for Aries." Aphrodite commented.

"I agree. Do you mind if we take a look at the body?" Gabrielle asked.

The doctor looked confused for a moment, then answered "No, not at all."

"Before I forget," Gabrielle added before the doctor could stand. "We've been sent the paperwork to release the body. A van will be by in a couple of hours to pick it up." She withdrew a file folder from her leather briefcase. The doctor looked at the blank piece of paper in the folder and with a professional nod, signed it at the bottom.

"This way please," the pathologist led them to the refrigerated units. She stopped and pulled door 6 open, smoothly sliding out the tray that contained the body of Gabrielle's former vice-president. With a fluid motion, she pulled the sheet back to expose Susan's head and shoulders, neatly folding it across the Chinese woman's chest.

Gabrielle grimaced as she looked at the deceased face of her most trusted employee. While she might not have been like a regular friend, this was her god-daughter, someone she'd known since birth. The reality of her circumstance may have kept them from being close, but Gabrielle loved her all the same. The pathologist noticed the bard's obvious reaction.

"Are you alright?" She gently asked.

"I'm fine," Gabrielle assured her, fighting to keep her voice from breaking. In her peripheral vision, she saw concern on Xena's face. Xena dropped the file folder she'd been holding, stooped to pick it up, banging her head soundly on the drawer as she stood. The crash echoed in the sterile room, as did the warrior's howl of pain. Reaching up to her forehead, she drew her hand back and looked at the blood from the cut on her forehead.

"This way," Dr. Sprucehill said, leading the warrior back to her office, "lets sort you out."

Gabrielle watched the pair depart then back to Aphrodite with a questioning expression on her face.

“She wanted to give you a few minutes with Susan,” the goddess replied, beaming proudly.

The bard turned her head in the direction of the pathologist’s office where Xena was sitting, the doctor treating her cut. She knew how hard Xena must have smacked her head to get a wound that didn’t heal instantly. She turned back to Susan; the face lacked the peaceful expression of sleep, but untroubled by worries of the corporeal world all the same. After grasping a cold, unyielding hand Gabrielle leaned forward and kissed her friend’s forehead, a tear landing on the waxy skin.

“Goodbye my dear friend,” she said softly. Without saying a word, Aphrodite had passed her a tissue and she blotted the moisture away then dabbed at her own eyes.

Gabrielle had composed herself by the time they were rejoined by pathologist and warrior, now sporting a Band-Aid on her forehead. She greeted Xena with a smile of gratitude then turned her attention to the pathologist.

“Where did you say the scratches were?”

With great care and respect, the doctor went through her findings and the details of her examination, answering all of Gabrielle’s questions. If she found it odd that her two companions remained largely silent she didn’t say anything. When they finished she assured Gabrielle that all would be ready for the transfer of the body and offered to answer any additional questions should the need arise. All three women shook hands and thanked her for her time before making their way back to the parking lot.

Chapter 15: Second Time Stories

“Vox, how do we sound?” Gabrielle asked quietly as she took her seat at the bar next to Xena and Aphrodite. Ed stood nearby, keeping a watchful eye and looking every inch the bodyguard that none of them needed.

“Loud and clear boss,” the engineer replied from the control room on *The Hippolyta*. “The picture is clear too; the necklace is working like a charm. You got checked in okay? Wolfgang called ahead to make your arrangements, I think his crush on Aphrodite is showing.”

“Tell him I appreciate the mountain of bath bombs, oils and salts in that palatial bathroom,” she replied into her own comms unit with a light laugh as she accepted a drink from the bartender. “The champagne and chocolate covered strawberries were a nice touch too.”

“That tub is impressive,” Xena admitted, marveling at how the in-ear communication unit and pendant camera worked with the small transmitter in her purse. “Nearly as impressive as that face-time thing you did this afternoon with Shen.”

Aphrodite wasn’t convinced. “No, impressive is letting a ten-year old pick out your ball gown. That gown looked wonderfully Mackiesque.”

Xena shrugged, accepting her drink from the bartender. “I figured he’d do as good a job at it as I would.”

“Will the alterations be done in time?” Vox asked as she adjusted some of the controls onboard to get better sound. “I don’t think we have any magic mice that can bail you out in time for the big dance.”

“They’ll be done in time,” Aphrodite assured the engineer as well as her companions. “With what you paid for those dresses,” she added to Gabrielle, “I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s enlisting his entire team to get it finished.”

“Hey guys, what’d I miss?” A male voice asked through the monitor as he took his seat next to the engineer.

“Dude!” Vox protested. “You’re off duty now. This is my shift. You can keep tabs on them when I go off shift, like we discussed.”

“I was bored!” Wolfgang protested. “Come on, tell me what’s happening? Did they provide the accommodations for Argo? I was pretty clear about that when I called in.”

“Ladies, ladies you’re both pretty,” Aphrodite complained quietly from her seat at the end of the bar. To the casual observer it simply looked like three friends talking together. “Argo is all set. Look, the mummies need to work now, so please, get it together.”

“Fuck, I didn’t know we were live,” Wolfgang sputtered, embarrassed. “My apologies, boss, Aphrodite, Xena, Ed.” The bodyguard made a soft grunt but didn’t say anything.

“Is there anything in the system about Scruggs staying here? Or Easton?” Gabrielle asked, sipping her old fashioned, green eyes scanning the crowd.

The soft clicking of a keyboard could be heard. “Scruggs is listed,” the engineer confirmed, “but no Ares or Easton so he’s probably using another name or isn’t staying at the Omni. Based on what you found out from the pathologist, he probably lives in DC.”

“True, but he still may carry an object with him if it brings him power. Could I get another look at the picture?” Xena asked, leaning close to Gabrielle, keeping her voice low and quiet. “Of Scruggs.”

A long-forgotten shiver went up the bard’s spine at the sensation of the warrior’s breath so close to her ear. “Here,” she said, taking a moment to engage her brain and remember how to unlock her phone, “I’ll text you the photo. This is the guy we’re looking for.”

The warrior nodded, sitting up once again, casually looking around the bar. They’d chosen the nicest watering hole in the opulent hotel and the number of people making their way to the club was slowly picking up. The trio watched as the Washington elites met, exchanged pleasantries and in some cases, went off to discuss business. With the aid of the camera Gabrielle was wearing, the duo in California worked feverishly with the assistance of facial recognition software to identify the political operatives, lobbyists, wealthy donors and other players as fast as they could.

Ed cleared his throat purposefully and Gabrielle looked around to see what he’d alerted her to. Her eyes went wide at the sight of Brian Glass chatting amiably with someone. In moments, that someone was identified as a low-level advisor to the president’s administration. Gabrielle turned her face before being spotted and began planning how to handle the situation.

“What is it?” Xena asked, her voice calm but concerned.

Gabrielle nodded to the bartender for another round so he’d move to the other end of the bar to prepare their drinks. “The guy over there, Brian Glass, works in my company. He just transferred to Special Projects. Susan and I have suspicions about him; there’s just something off about his story.”

“He went on vacation right after transferring to a new department which is kind of strange,” Wolfgang added over the monitor. “He isn’t listed as staying at the Omni under his own name.”

“How do you want to handle this, boss?” Ed asked as he casually brought his cuff up towards his mouth to speak into the mic.

The warrior’s eyes brightened and she nodded to the goddess. “You need to question that guy in your suite with Argo. Argo will let you know when he’s lying. You go ahead and wait for him, I’m sure Aphrodite can convince him to follow her there. Ed and I can keep watch down here in case Scruggs shows up.”

“Warrior has a point,” Aphrodite agreed.

Gabrielle couldn’t think of a better plan to get to the bottom of her employee’s activities. She appreciated that Ed stayed silent, not commenting on things that would have made no sense to him. She’d have to read him in next.

Gabrielle made her way back to the spacious suite, receiving an enthusiastic greeting from her dog. She couldn’t help but grin at the ‘amenities’ that had been set up by the balcony for Argo’s use, complements of Wolfgang. Besides several dog beds throughout the suite, there was also a feeding area and a place for her to do her business.

“We’ve got some good people, don’t we girl?” she asked, scratching the dog behind the ears and getting an affectionate lick on the face for her trouble.

Several moments later, the door to the suite opened and Brian Glass entered with Aphrodite, clearly startled to find his boss there.

“Hey Brian,” the bard said casually watching his reaction carefully.

His momentary expression of surprise quickly vanished as he looked from one woman to the next. “Miss Vincent, I had no idea you were in town.” Both women looked at the dog who looked back and forth between them, clearly with an expectation of treats. “I was just...ah...she invited me up...” he said, referencing the goddess.

“I gather,” Gabrielle replied. She nodded towards the couch across from her indicating that he should sit and fixed him a drink. Aphrodite sat down next to him and accepted a copper mug from the bard.

“What are you doing in DC?” Gabrielle asked pleasantly, taking the comfortable chesterfield chair across from the matching leather couch.

“I was visiting friends in town for vacation,” he replied easily. “We’re going to meet up here a bit later. They’re in town for the ball tomorrow.”

Argo barked once and ambled over to the chesterfield, flopping down at her mistresses’ feet. “See, the thing is, I don’t think that’s true.” Gabrielle said, taking a sip of her Moscow mule.

Glass shrugged, his broad shoulders and muscular arms barely contained by his sports coat. He looked slightly smaller in build than Ed, but less sculpted and refined. He was all soldier, built for utility, not vanity. “Honestly Ms. Vincent, with all due respect, where I go on my vacation time isn’t really any of your business.”

“In this case it is,” Gabrielle disagreed amiably. “I suspect you don’t really work for me. I mean sure, I’m signing your pay checks, but someone else has your loyalty.”

“That’s crazy,” he said and started to stand, ready to leave in a huff. Aphrodite put a gentle hand on his arm and he sat back down, clearly surprised with himself.

“Do you work for Ares?” Gabrielle asked pointedly, setting her drink on the black lacquered coffee table that sat between them.

“Who’s Ares?”

Argo remained silent and rolled over to give Gabrielle better access to her belly. “How about Heinrich Easton?” she asked.

“I don’t know who that is either.” A soft bark had Brian looking with concern at Gabrielle. “Is something wrong with your dog?” he asked.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Aphrodite muttered under her breath.

“Thing is,” Gabrielle continued leaning forward and studying his face intently. “You know who Heinrich Easton is. Do you work for him? Yes or no.”

“No, I don’t work for him,” Brian replied hotly. Argo was silent so Gabrielle continued.

“Are you with the feds?” she asked.

“I work for you,” he insisted, looking at the dog suspiciously when she whined.

“FBI?” Gabrielle asked calmly.

He didn’t speak, only shook his head, looking at the dog and nervously beginning to catch on. Argo was studying him as well. She cocked her head but remained silent.

“CIA?” the bard continued with the patience of one who could play this guessing game all night.

He shook his head and Argo chuffed at him, then ambled over so he could pet her head.

“Well that answers that,” Aphrodite said with a satisfied sip of her drink.

He reached down to pet the dog’s head and looked at Gabrielle, his expression equal parts confused and astonished. “I haven’t told you anything.”

“Not yet.” she pleasantly corrected him. “Why is the CIA so interested in Bardic & Company, that they’d embed someone undercover for so long? Why is the CIA interested in Heinrich Easton? And is Lynyrd Skynyrd really your favorite band?”

He chuckled at that last question and grinned bashfully at the bard. “Yeah, I knew I’d stepped in it there during the interview,” he admitted. “Tell me how you trained your dog to do that?” he asked hopefully.

“Nope,” she said shaking her head. “We’re going to have a chat and you’re going to wish you were hooked up to a polygraph.” With that Aphrodite got up to get them fresh drinks and Gabrielle leaned back in her chair to begin the interview.



Xena listened with interest as Gabrielle questioned Brian Glass, smiling inwardly at how remarkably effective Argo was at interrogation. It took no time at all to determine that the loudness of a bark correlated to how far an answer was from the truth, whereas a subtle chuff or whine indicated a more nuanced deviation. Even when the Brian refused to speak, the fact that questions were being asked led to canine assisted revelations of truth. Not wanting the conversation taking place upstairs to distract her from the mission at hand, she turned down the volume on the speaker in her ear and continued to scan the throng of conservative elite milling around in front of her.

She sipped her third drink, then stretched out her neck by moving her head from side to side. Her muscles were stiff and while the alcohol helped some, there was no doubt she was developing the tolerance Gabrielle had mentioned. She was certain if she concentrated, the buzz would vanish and the stiffness in her neck would intensify. It had been a long day and while she felt her stamina increase daily, she was tired. She thought about Ares and the battle that was to come; thoughts of her most recent battle returning unbidden. If she was once again going to fight the God of War, she would need to rest and gather her strength. The pain of death, not the physical pain, but the pain of

separation from Gabrielle and the things in her life left undone were too great to risk again. She did not want to go into her next battle in any condition other than her best.

“Is this seat taken?” a soft voice to her left inquired.

Xena looked up, startled. She was so lost in her thoughts, she hadn’t noticed the woman approach.

“Please.” She nodded at the seat most recently occupied by Aphrodite. The woman smiled her thanks. She reminded the warrior of the woman she’d seen in the photograph with Shen from the ten-year old’s bedroom. She had red hair that came to her jawline and gently framed her face, with hazel eyes that looked gray in the warm light of the bar. She was wearing a short black dress that left her shoulders bare, and a dark choker with cut stones that glittered in the ambient light.

“What are you drinking?” the warrior asked, getting the bar tender’s attention.

“Stolichnaya Elit,” she replied favoring Xena with warm smile. “If you have it Steve?” she said to the bartender, who she clearly knew. “The New Zealand version.”

“Make that two, my tab,” the warrior said, mimicking Gabrielle’s earlier interaction with the bartender. He nodded and produced two chilled shot glasses, which he promptly filled with the redhead’s request.

“I’m Jennifer,” she said toasting the warrior with her shot glass.

“Natasha,” Xena said returning the toast.

“You in town for the gala?” Jennifer asked taking a sip of vodka.

Xena nodded. “Sort of, you?”

She nodded in the affirmative. “At the confluence of public relations and entertainment, events like these are working weekends. What do you do Natasha?”

“Private military contractor.” She was suddenly grateful for the conversational practice she’d had with Vox, which made it easy to put her past experience into contemporary terminology.

A fat man in an expensive suit and unkempt gray stubble walked up to them, leering openly at Xena’s new companion, unconcerned at intruding.

“Crystal, I was hoping I’d run into you here – let’s connect tonight. Both you and your friend, I’ll even pay double.”

The warrior’s eyes narrowed as she quickly got the gist of the conversation.

“Sorry friend,” she said, her voice tinged with danger. “She’s already got plans for the evening.”

Confused, he looked around for a man. Xena sat patiently, cocking her head to the side while waiting for him to catch on. He finally did and his eyes went wide, first in surprise, then thinking a joke was being made at his expense.

“That’s a good one. Like you can afford her.”

“You do have a point,” Xena allowed, now annoyed by his boorishness. She leaned forward which drew him in. “I’m only paying for dinner. The incredible sex is absolutely free, and if you don’t want to pay for a new nose, I suggest you take your repugnant visage elsewhere.”

Shock and anger vied for dominance on his face “Do you have any idea who I am?” he sputtered. He grabbed her arm as he spoke, the spittle collecting at the corners of his mouth.

“Besides a loser who has to pay for sex?” Xena asked sweetly. “I haven’t the faintest idea.” She took her thumb and middle finger and slowly reached over to his wrist.

In an instant, his eyes went wide with pain and he let go, backing away and shaking out his hand.

“Cunt,” he muttered as he stormed off.

Jennifer chuckled into her drink and signaled Steve for a second round. “My tab this time, Steve. And that was fucking priceless.” Glancing at Xena, she added, “You really don’t recognize him, do you?” When Xena shook her head, she said, “That was Senator Beaufort Hastings, chair of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. He’s kind of a big deal.”

“Friend of yours?” Xena asked dryly, accepting the drink.

Jennifer smiled seductively as she sipped her vodka. “He is a client on occasion, he wasn’t making that up.” Xena’s expression didn’t change. Jennifer smiled a genuine, grateful smile. “I take it that doesn’t bother you in the least?”

“Of course not. I’m not about to judge you for how you make a living.”

“And I take it spending the night with me isn’t anathema to you either?” she asked coyly.

“I’d need to run that by my girlfriend first,” Xena replied with a shrug and a grin, prompting another round of laughter from the escort. As they chatted amicably, Xena silently thanked her friend back onboard *The Hippolyta*. The time she’d spent chatting with Vox during the engineer’s convalescence was paying dividends.

“So, what’s your girlfriend doing that she’s leaving you alone in a bar filled with repugnant creatures like Hastings? Sure, you can take care of yourself, but still...”

“We’re going through a bit of a thing at the moment,” Xena replied honestly. “I’m helping her with some work stuff while we’re figuring things out.”

She didn’t want to think too hard on what, if any abilities she might have inherited from the goddess. But she had to admit she was having a gut feeling, or insight that she’d never experienced before. Deciding to trust her gut, she pulled out her phone and showed the escort the surveillance photo of Scruggs standing next to Ares. Jennifer looked over at the screen and studied the photo.

“I’m looking for these two men,” Xena elaborated. “Henry Scruggs and Heinrich Easton. I don’t suppose you know either of them?”

“I don’t,” Jennifer replied drawing her fingertip across the top of the warrior’s hand holding the phone. Xena smiled at her warmly, enjoying the attention. Different from the young woman she was dancing with the night before, Jennifer seemed like a woman whose experience may have mirrored her own in some ways. “But give me your phone. I’ll text myself the photo and see what I can find out for you. I’ve got friends,” she added with a wink.

The warrior’s smile broadened. “I’d appreciate that.”

“You know,” she continued, moving a bit closer, “If things go south with the girlfriend, I think we could have some fun.”

Aphrodite and Gabrielle returned to the bar. Their conversation with Brian Glass had been informative and t was looking forward to filling Xena in. She wasn’t expecting to see Xena sitting close to a gorgeous red head who was intimately touching the warrior’s hand and forearm while leaning close and whispering in her ear. Even more alarming was the warrior’s obvious enjoyment of the attention. The smile on her face and the vivid blue eyes darted to the interloper’s cleavage when she leaned in for the

warrior's ear. At their approach both women pulled back a little. The red head looked bemused, but Xena's expression was tinged with embarrassment.

"Look who's making friends," Aphrodite commented as she and Gabrielle came up to the bar. The goddess arched a disapproving eyebrow at the warrior, who looked away. The bard found herself at an uncharacteristic loss for words.

"Anna, Susan this is Jennifer. Jennifer this is Anna and Susan," Xena said politely, pointedly avoiding eye contact with Aphrodite.

Jennifer smiled warmly, shaking their hands in turn. "Let me guess, your girlfriend?" she nodded at Gabrielle. "And your sister," at Aphrodite who did not look amused.

Xena coughed, clearing her throat. "Yeah, something like that. Older sister."

The escort laughed again and ordered a round for the group. "It was lovely meeting you all, and very nice making your acquaintance Natasha. You have my number, feel free to give me a call. I will leave you ladies to your evening." With that, she pushed away from the bar and kissed Xena briefly before departing into the growing throng of hotel arrivals.

"Who's your new bestie?" Aphrodite asked, not even trying to hide her ire.

"She said she works in public relations and entertainment," the warrior explained.

"We leave you here for half an hour – and you manage to pick up an escort?" Gabrielle asked, incredulous.

"She found me. Then this annoying senator – someone called Hastings – came by. How did it go with Glass?" Xena asked, changing the subject.

Gabrielle quickly took stock of her feelings. While uncomfortable, she realized the white-hot jealousy coursing through her was a good sign. She also realized she had little to no justification for criticizing Xena for flirting with anyone. Since the warrior's return, it had been she who hadn't felt their connection. It suddenly dawned on her that if she did not reconnect with the warrior, Xena would inevitably seek a connection with someone else.

"The thing with Glass went surprisingly well." Gabrielle explained, taking care not to sound hurt or angry when she spoke. "Right now, he and Ed are reviewing files."

"You got him to share his intel?" Xena asked, impressed.

"No," Gabrielle replied, shaking her head. "We're sharing ours. He works for the Central Intelligence Agency, or CIA, which is spy agency that is only supposed to do work outside of the United States borders, so having someone undercover here in the States is supposedly a no-no. They've had their eye on a lot of Easton's activities with Russia and other countries for some time. Ed is sharp, if Glass slips up and shares anything we can use, he will catch it."

"Where are they?" Xena asked, rubbing the back of her neck with her fingertips. "I think I'd like to retire for the evening, but I don't want to get in the way if they're using the suite."

"They're working in Ed's room, conferencing in with Vox and Wolfgang back on the ship." Gabrielle replied, looking concerned. "Are you okay?"

"Just tired," Xena reassured her. "Scruggs hasn't shown up. I don't think he will and there's been no sign of Ares. I might make use of that huge bath tub and that mountain of bath stuff Wolfgang got for Aphrodite."

“Of course. It’s been a really long day.” Gabrielle smiled at the warrior in a way she hoped conveyed comfort. Inwardly she chided herself. Xena looked exhausted; she was chagrined she hadn’t seen it before. There was a tightness to her expression and a drained look to her eyes that was uncharacteristic for the warrior. She’d seen the look before; times when they’d been pushed miles past their limit of endurance, but that had been a very long time ago. Seeing the expression now brought those memories flooding back.

The warrior smiled and brought her hand to Gabrielle’s shoulder. The touch was warm, and grateful. “I’ll catch up with the two of you later,” she said after a brief glance to Aphrodite.

Gabrielle watched her depart, continuing to stare long after Xena made the turn to the elevators to their suite. Finally, Aphrodite had had enough and nudged the bard in the shoulder.

“Have you ever known Xena to take care of herself like that?” Gabrielle finally asked, turning to the goddess.

Aphrodite shrugged. “I’m telling you, this Xena is a lot better than the last one.”

Gabrielle’s frown made it clear that she didn’t appreciate the ribbing at Xena’s expense, even if the goddess had a point.

“I need to get my shit together when it comes to her, or cut her loose so she can move on,” Gabrielle said, more to herself than to her companion.

“I guarantee that Xena wasn’t interested in the escort,” Aphrodite reassured her. “Sure, she enjoyed being flirted with by someone who knows how, but she wouldn’t have done anything. Xena is as devoted to you as she ever has been. Besides, I think everyone in DC felt that flare of jealousy you shot at her. Yeah, you tried to play it cool, but honey, that was intense.” This last bit was said with a smirk intended to take the edge off of her words. Before Gabrielle could respond, the hotel concierge approached them and nodded respectfully.

“Ms. Winter, this note was just left for you at the front desk with instructions to deliver it immediately.” He handed the goddess a folded piece of paper. She read it then passed the paper to Gabrielle without a word. Gabrielle read the handwritten note and then passed it back.

“Looks like we were successful after all,” Aphrodite remarked as she put the note into her purse. She signaled Steve for another round. “This vodka is quite good,” she said after passing the other shot glass to Gabrielle.

“Are you going to go meet him?” the bard asked, looking thoughtfully into her shot glass.

“We wanted to know what Ares was up to. If he’s inviting me to a sit down, he may give something up.”

“Or think that you’re going to slip,” Gabrielle countered. “I don’t want you going if it’s not safe.”

Aphrodite smiled warmly and winked affectionately at her. “You are a treasure. I will be perfectly safe. He can’t try to hurt me directly; we just don’t do that sort of thing. I have nothing to fear from his legion of mortal minions and if for some bizarre reason he tried something, I’m the one who’s had ambrosia, so I’d kick his ass.”

Gabrielle looked out at the throng of people now crowding the bar. Someone here had been watching them, at least enough to identify Aphrodite and alert Ares to her

presence. She needed to be smart, stay sharp and outthink a god. With a nod at the crowd, she observed, “He’s probably doing a lot of the same things we are. He’s got his people watching for us, we’re looking for him. I’m concerned that innocent people could get hurt in the crossfire.”

“It’s a valid concern,” Aphrodite agreed. “But keep in mind that if anyone is stupid enough to follow him, put themselves in harm’s way for him – they’re responsible for those choices, not you, dear one.” Placid blue eyes found warm green and the goddess was both surprised and saddened by the steadfast acceptance she found there. Gabrielle knew that in the battle against Ares, people were going to die, quite likely by her hand and she had fully accepted that.

“I know,” the bard said quietly, her voice threaded with steely resolve.

“One thing I can offer you,” Aphrodite continued brightly changing the subject, “is an evening off. Ares isn’t going to have his people make any moves while I’m meeting with him. He’s going to take one look at me and want to play twenty questions about ambrosia. You should relax, join Xena in the tub and see where the night takes you; unwind and rejuvenate yourself.”

Gabrielle nodded. Spending some time with Xena was indeed what she wanted. She easily recalled a half-dozen moments – hot-springs, hot-tubs, waterfalls, summer days, snowy nights; the sensations came back in a rush and Gabrielle experienced a hunger that she had worried she might never feel again.

She eyed Aphrodite suspiciously. “No love,” the goddess reassured her with a small smile, “that’s all you.”



The Goddess of Love allowed herself to wallow in her heartache for the first half of her cab-ride to the restaurant. Knowing this was best for Gabrielle helped some, as did knowing that the future could bring the most amazing of surprises. Months ago, she had no idea that Gabrielle, Xena, her uncle, or even her brother existed in the here and now. She had a new sense of hope at the possibility other members of her family, her children were out there waiting for her to rediscover and reconnect with them. She missed the romantic connection she shared with the bard but felt confident that it was a connection put on hold, rather than severed. She would patiently wait and see where things progressed for the warrior and bard; she had all the time in the world and could afford to be patient. Gabrielle’s yacht captain came to mind; patient didn’t mean she couldn’t find enjoyable ways to distract herself in the meantime.

A familiar landmark out the window of the cab broke into her reverie. She was nearly halfway to the restaurant and needed to center herself for the confrontation to come. Her feelings of pain and loss acknowledged and explored, she put them aside and meditated for a moment. She felt her power, her ability – all of the things that made her special and different – come to the surface and fill her. She spent much of her day-to-day life tamping down what made her exceptional to be more relatable to mortals so as to pass as one of them. But this was no time for modesty or humility. She was like no one else on earth and now was the time to embrace that. Ares would be looking for information, to seduce her into his way of thinking and make her an ally. He would be duplicitous, might threaten her or try to bribe her; she needed to be ready for anything.

The car came to a stop at the cab stand; Aphrodite paid the driver and walked into the restaurant, acknowledging the host with a nod and smile as she passed him. A sense of aggression and danger hung thick in the air. When her eyes adjusted to the dark, she found herself surrounded by a lush, throwback interior that would have been at home in any number of mob movies.

“Over here, Sis!” a playful voice called to her, and Aphrodite saw Ares sitting at a cozy booth in the back. She walked past numerous tables, occupied by either oblivious diners or his none-too-subtle bodyguards and henchmen. It took a fair amount of restraint not to roll her eyes at the scene.

She was easily the most powerful person in the restaurant; she could feel it, taste is almost. The God of War sensed it too because his self-satisfied smirk vanished when she approached. “You are positively radiant,” he admitted, taking a sip from his wine glass. “Found some ambrosia, did you?”

“It certainly appears that way,” she smoothly replied, gracefully sliding into the booth. She studied him as she took a sip of wine from the glass he poured for her. It tasted heavy and bombastic as she swirled it around in her mouth. She thought of Gabrielle and how a mortal with a few extra years of living could become a much better judge of good wine than an immortal. “You called this meeting,” she finally said as she put down the wine glass. “So, meet. What is it you want to say that you couldn’t put in an email?”

“Come on, Sis,” he replied trying to regain some of his previous bravado. “Can’t a brother and sister get together? Haven’t seen you since the forties.” Aphrodite grimaced, eliciting a chuckle from Ares. “Yes, I knew that was you. I’ve been keeping tabs on you, and on every Olympian I can find. I’ve been trying to figure out what happened, as well as shape and enjoy this new world order.”

“Fascinating.” Aphrodite replied flatly. “Who else have you come across?”

He shook his head, “Not so fast sis. Why don’t you tell me where you got the ambrosia? I know it wasn’t one of your temples, I raided them years ago.”

This time the Goddess of Love allowed herself an eye roll. “You’re that certain you knew where every one of my temples were? And how rude is that by the way?” Waiting for his response, she studied her brother. He was, as always, handsome, rugged looking, exuding a base lust for power that could be intoxicating if one was in the mood for that sort of thing. Aphrodite crossed her arms and said nothing.

“What are you doing in DC?” He asked changing the subject.

Aphrodite could feel him studying her, looking for deception. He expected her to lie to her, the lie possibly being more informative than the truth. “We’re here to arrange for the transportation of Susan Yin’s body back home.” She took another sip of wine and grimaced. “Playing stupid isn’t your thing Ares. You know that Gabrielle runs in circles that would have her staying at the Omni with all the power players in town.” She could feel her brother moving into her mind, looking for signs of deception. She reached for the wine bottle to pour herself a second glass to avoid eye contact. She maintained an oblivious, calm façade, secure that her own secrets were safe. She let him feel her power, her sense of assurance, like looking into someone’s house when they leave the front door open. Carelessly, his own secrets were laid bare before her, allowing her to glimpse the field journal where he kept meticulous notes on the locations and identities of the other Olympians he’d found.

Were it not for the recent ingestion of ambrosia, Aphrodite doubted she'd be able to sense without probing something he wanted to keep private, much harder still to keep her own sense of discovery hidden. But secrets and privacy were every bit as much in the prevue of love as they were part of the games of war. With a relaxed posture that comes from well-warranted confidence, she endured his invasion with good humor, not letting on. After a brief moment, her power and confidence unsettled the God of War enough for him to withdraw from her mind, falsely believing that she was none the wiser.

"Fine," Ares said with a shrug. "Because we're family I'm giving you one warning. Stay out of this thing with me and that irritating blond. Cut her loose. You don't want to get in the middle of this."

Aphrodite laughed in spite of herself. "You admit to sacking my temples, stealing my ambrosia, and now you want to tell me who I can't hang out with because of some kind of familial loyalty? You're a riot."

"How did she survive anyway? She seems too together for someone who's had ambrosia. Is there some relic of Athena's stashed somewhere we've overlooked? Some kind of deal with the fates? Hades? Do know how she did it?"

"Perhaps," Aphrodite admitted with a chuckle knowing an outright lie would be easily spotted.

"Did you do it?" He demanded.

She shook her head knowing that he could tell she was telling the truth. "Do you know what happened? How we all lost touch?" she asked wondering if he'd figured anything out yet.

He shrugged as if it wasn't something that he'd given much thought. "I have no idea," he admitted. "Although if Gabrielle is still alive this is probably somehow her fault. I'd prefer a hundred Callistos to one of her," he fumed. "If there is trouble, she's going to be in the thick of it."

The Goddess of Love shuddered at the thought of a hundred Callistos. "Fortunately, that doesn't seem to be up to you."

Ares wasn't prepared to give up on the ambrosia just yet. "Come on, Sis, where'd you get the ambrosia? Are you in touch with family? Do they have it? I'll give you my list if you give me yours."

"You sound like an addict," Aphrodite said without emotion or judgement.

Ares frowned, unable to remember the last time the goddess wasn't intimidated by him. "All's fair in love and war..."

"Why do they say that?" she interjected. "Because we're really not at all alike. I'm awesome and you're a jerk."

Ares downed his wine, poured himself another glass, and tried a more conversational tone. "I know you've found ambrosia before. The late sixties – that was all you."

She was tiring of this game. "That was with the smallest crumb that you somehow overlooked in my temple in Athens. Imagine what I'm going to do with a decent meal? Besides, I know you've had a bite recently as well. You've gotten a lot of mileage out of getting some guys to fly planes into buildings."

He grinned broadly. "Yeah, I found some stashed in one of Hades' remote temples. It's not like he's gonna need it. The tiniest bit but still, I must say that has worked out even better than I expected. You know what I like about this country? It's all

about survival of the fittest, the ruthless, the strong. America is no place for peacenicks who want to coddle everyone else.” Now the warning was clear in his voice and he looked at Aphrodite, his eyes cold and hard. “America is the land of endless war. War on its own people, war on everyone else, war on the ideals they hold most dear, war on knowledge, wall to wall war. They build the weapons that they sell to people to use on its own citizens. It’s amazing. It was made for me, and that, dear sister, is something you can’t do shit about.”

The Goddess of Love leaned back in the booth, gracefully crossing one leg over the other. With a casual glance, she let her eyes rest on one of Ares’ men. A skinhead with a tattoo of a swastika on his neck. He had been keeping a watchful, yet unobtrusive eye on his boss since she sat down. A look of confusion crossed his features and he rose from the booth, then staggered out of the restaurant. The God of War had nothing but cold fury in his eyes when Aphrodite turned back to him. “That guy just came to his senses,” she explained. “He’s going to stumble out of this restaurant and into a tattoo parlor where a husband and wife team do cover-up work for free on reformed white supremacists and other hate groups. He’s going to be so grateful he’s going to work for the family and in his free time he’s going to get an education and then pay it forward by volunteering to tutor African American women in prison. You can play cat and mouse all night bro, and by morning I’ll have this restaurant emptied of assholes.” She winked at him, not the slightest bit intimidated. “Except you of course.”

“Fine,” he growled as he put his phone on the table, displaying a photo of the three of them at the bar earlier that night. “I want Gabrielle out of my way, ambrosia or no ambrosia. I know Xena is back, and while I’d ideally like to have Xena on my team, I’ll take Xena and Gabrielle out of each other’s way. Worst case, I’ll settle for the blond moving to some remote island and Xena following after her. Look,” he continued trying another angle, “I was going to be nice. Offer some compassion with my conservatism. But I don’t have to. I’m shaping this place into the authoritarian wasteland of my dreams.”

Placid blue eyes narrowed. “For someone who kidnapped Gabrielle’s closest friend and then killed her, you’re deluded to think that they’ll just drop this because you want them to. You made it personal, dumbass!” Aphrodite replied. “And upsetting Gabrielle is the quickest way to make Xena really, really angry. Duh. You know that.”

“That bitch killed herself. I needed information, not a body,” he shot back defensively.

“That was a really nice woman,” the Goddess of Love hissed in return. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Now it was Ares’ turn to roll his eyes. “There is nothing wrong with me ‘Dite,” he said. The Goddess of Love’s features furrowed into a frown at a nickname she detested. “Gabrielle’s lackey was a mortal. Hardly more than a pawn in a universe where we’re the kings and queens. You’re the one with the problem when you start treating mortals like us. A tryst here and there, fine. We all have itches that need to be scratched – but I saw you two in Catalina. Sis, that was disgusting,” he said looking genuinely repulsed. “The look of adoration on your face, the way you’re following Gabrielle around like a love-sick puppy...”

Aphrodite laughed harshly, unable to stop herself. The venom filled chortle made Ares’ eyes narrow with anger which only made her laugh more. “That’s rich,” she gasped

around laughs. “Do you even hear yourself? Honestly I don’t know what’s more asinine – that you think you know anything about love or the hypocrisy of Xena’s little bitch lecturing me.”

“Fuck you,” Ares spat, his anger getting the better of him. “Xena isn’t entirely mortal. She’s not like Gabrielle.”

“You’re no better than a racist,” Aphrodite replied dismissively. “And that limited world view is going to be your undoing. But, whatever. Apparently, you think Xena and Gabrielle can stop you. Why is that? Oh yeah, they always stop you.”

He frowned then his eyes brightened as a new strategy occurred to him. “Fine. You’re into pussy now. Obviously, I can relate. When you tire of Gabrielle, I can get you all the tail you want, or I can start having all the queers rounded up and sent off to camps, up to you. I’ve got connections and I know how much you like visiting people in camps.”

“What is it with you guys?” Aphrodite replied making no attempt to hide her disgust and anger. “On Friday night’s it ‘I hate the gays’ and on Saturday nights it’s a trip to the leather bar to pull a train. Your kink is your business, I don’t give a shit. But it’s the hypocrisy that kills me. Sometimes you like to bottom. Who gives a fuck? Oh, and you’re gonna help *me* score?” To prove her point she stared at the God of War while she casually dropped her napkin on the floor. A bartender immediately walked over and picked it up, returning it to her.

“Miss?” the brunette bartender said politely. “You dropped this.”

“Awww, thank you,” Aphrodite replied warmly as she accepted the napkin her fingertips brushed against her hand. It was clear that the bartender was smitten. The woman adjusted her glasses and walked away, turning around once to smile at the goddess before returning to her station at the bar.

“As you can see,” Aphrodite continued, “I didn’t have to glamour her, so enough with you getting me dates.”

“Great,” Ares replied sarcastically. “My sister the succubus. Okay, how about this? Back the fuck off or it’s world war three. You know I have the juice to do it.”

“What is the fucking point?” Aphrodite asked imploringly. “Sure, we can survive. I can thrive even with Xena getting me ambrosia. But to what end?”

“Ah ha!” he said victoriously. “Xena is the key to ambrosia, I knew that was how the brat survived.” Aphrodite grimaced at her mistake. “Look,” he said trying to sound reasonable. “I know you like people, bringing them joy and happiness or whatever – as long as you don’t mess up my plans I’m good to have you do this, but no war protests this time. You stay in your lane. You fuck with me and I will pull the pin on this grenade; I’ve got all the players right where they need to be.” He shrugged as an idea came to him and leaned closer. Aphrodite was annoyed that he smelled nice. “You share your stash of ambrosia with me and maybe I wait for the next autocrat? Xena keeps me in supply of the stuff and maybe you get your supreme court back for another generation? I can be patient if properly motivated. These people don’t deserve your concern – they’d sell their mothers for an extra tax cut. But those little people, I’ll let them live a little longer maybe?”

Aphrodite nodded slowly, considering his offer. “I’ll think about it,” she said. “Give me three days.”

“You have twenty-four hours,” Ares replied firmly.

Aphrodite smiled. “Fine, I’ll take two days.” He shrugged in agreement, thereby dismissing his sister. The goddess didn’t mind, in fact she was grateful that he couldn’t see her face and the self-satisfied smirk she wore as she left the restaurant.



Xena eased herself into the fragrant foamy water luxuriating in the warmth and quiet. It was hard to imagine a bathing space more opulent than the one on *The Hippolyta* but the marbled bathing area in the presidential suite was indeed that. She considered that if amenities such as this were as readily available in her warrior days, she might have spent less time on the battlefield. She let the water rise up past her shoulders, extending her legs and resting them, crossed at the ankles on the far edge of the tub. The space was so large she could easily float if she wanted to. The heat permeated her stiff muscles, encouraging them to relax. Her mind followed suit. She let thoughts come and go, clearing her consciousness of the clutter so she could look at what was important, eventually letting even those thoughts recede until her mind was blank.

Like stripping away a painting to get to the under-painting, then the sketch, the gesso, then finally the canvas surface, she thought about Gabrielle and her place, not just in the bard’s life but in the cosmos in general. There was much she didn’t like, even more she didn’t understand about this new world, but the basic struggles and triumphs were the same. Her feelings about Gabrielle had not wavered. In fact, a newfound respect and admiration had emerged, intertwined with her disappointment that her feelings did not seem to be reciprocated. Her bard had lived an astonishing number of ‘lives’ after making a decision she would admit was immature. She had kept the core of who she was, even as she forged a skill set that rivaled or surpassed her own. Who was she to Gabrielle now?

After dunking her head back to feel the hot water on her scalp, she sat upright once again and closed her eyes letting the relaxation seep in, filling her senses with the sizzle of a candle and sounds of the water with bubbles popping. Unbidden, her mind flashed upon moments not that long ago with Jennifer. It was nice to be desired, even if superficially. She considered her interaction with Gabrielle when they’d woken up this morning. Gabrielle had kissed her, a kiss that felt familiar, even now making her pulse race with the memory. She would wait. While it might not have been true of the Gabrielle she had once known, she had no doubt that the Gabrielle of today would make her desires known when and if she was ready.

Xena had no idea how long she’d rested in that place between consciousness and sleep, that blissful space where you could dream while lucid enough to direct the pageant that played out. Eventually the warrior became aware of a presence in the room with her. Without opening her eyes, she knew it was Gabrielle; the fragrance of her perfume giving her away. Feeling too relaxed to even acknowledge the bard’s presence, Xena simply waited, assuming Gabrielle was there to retrieve something. Her ears perked up at the soft rustle of fabric, then she felt the displacement of water as Gabrielle joined her in the tub.

Opening her eyes, the warrior saw the bard’s breasts slip beneath the suds and Gabrielle smirked slightly, watching her.

“All that’s missing is Minya bringing the hot water,” the bard observed.

“Much better to get it out of the faucet,” Xena replied with a smile. “Things alright at the bar?” she asked adjusting her legs to give the bard more room.

“Ares sent a note to Aphrodite, so she went to meet with him.” Xena arched an eyebrow and she continued, “I’m not worried. She’s feeling the ambrosia and is certain that she’s more than his equal for the time being. I don’t know if she’ll get anything from him, but I’ve little doubt she’ll be able to get information from the people around him, and he does seem the sort to have an entourage. If nothing else, she said to take the night off as he wouldn’t try anything before seeing what information he could glean from her.”

“Assuming that he’s told his flunkies anything,” the warrior grouched. “But a night off is well deserved.” She tilted her neck which omitted a loud ‘crack’ and several vertebra popped back into alignment.

“Still stiff?” Gabrielle asked. Xena nodded and without further comment Gabrielle picked up one of the warrior’s feet under the water and began to massage it, expertly hitting the requisite pressure points that had the warrior sighing with pleasure.

Xena looked at Gabrielle through blissful eyes but there was something else to her expression and Gabrielle could see it. “What is it?” she asked.

Blue eyes studied green before Xena took a deep breath and said what was on her mind. “Before I met you, I searched out people to learn from them for one reason only – skills to make me a better, more skilled, more formidable and lethal warrior. Even with people like Lao Ma or Cyan, what I sought was power and brutal skills. I cared about hurting and killing people, and never cared about learning how to heal them. But you, I can tell that you’ve put as much energy into learning healing arts as you have into the martial ones. It’s an amazing thing to see.”

Gabrielle smiled. The sense of the surreal was receding. This was Xena; she was alive, she was here to stay, and simply chatting in a steaming hot bubble bath was the most perfect moment imaginable. It felt just like it did in the old times. She loved the sound of Xena’s voice, the warm, low rumble. For the time being, saving the world was pushed to the side; this evening she was selfishly keeping for herself.

“I’ve tried to balance what I’ve studied. I’ve been drawn to science, which is why I love the medicine of different cultures.” Xena groaned happily, as the bard coaxed a particularly tough knot on the ball of the warrior’s foot to release. “But you taught me the basics of reflexology and acupressure before I even knew there were words for those things. I just continued to learn down the paths that you showed me.”

“Tell me a story,” Xena urged splashing a little water in the bard’s direction, deflecting from feeling self-conscious at the compliment. “Do you still remember how to do that?”

“What kind of story?” Gabrielle asked, enjoying the warmth of her connection with Xena as much as the warmth of the water.

“Tell me about when you first came here,” the warrior suggested settling herself back into the water. Gabrielle continued the massage and Xena let the touch and familiar timbre of her storytelling voice envelope her. She leaned her head back and couldn’t think of a time she’d felt more content.

“Well,” the bard began, “the first time I came to this country was from Italy in the mid-eighteen hundreds. I made my way to Oregon City, on the other side of this continent, in what is now the state of Oregon. My company was called The Chakram Shipping and Holding Company and was being run by agents of mine in Europe. I went by Adele Sparrow then. The trip out west was to look for some business possibilities, in addition to my ongoing search for Aphrodite or any clues as to what became of the other

Olympians. It was the ‘wild west’ and there weren’t many opportunities for women so I actually posed as a man for the fifteen years I lived out here back then. Samuel Stafford was the name I used as a man.”

Xena opened an eye and looked at Gabrielle. “How’d you pull that off?” she asked.

Gabrielle pushed some bubbles around before answering. “I dressed the part, had a man’s haircut. I could fight, I could shoot. People thought Sam was a young man,” she shrugged. “My reputation in town was as a young man that while small in stature and scrappy in a bar fight, especially if there was a broom nearby.” She smiled and Xena grinned back at her, remembering the hours of work the bard had put into honing her skills with the staff. “I was also really good with guns,” Gabrielle added, drawing Xena from her memories. “I spent so many hours mastering how to shoot. Rifles, six-shooters, didn’t matter. I could hit anything. I had this six shooter, Odessa...”

“Your gun had a name?” Xena asked opening her eyes. “I never named my chakram.”

“I didn’t name it,” the bard replied. “The previous owner did. I won it in a poker game from a grifter passing through town. Anyway, I’ve severed a hanging rope with a single shot more than once.”

Xena nodded, impressed. “So, dressing the part and fighting was enough to convince people?”

Gabrielle’s cheeks flushed a little, making her glad Xena had her eyes closed. “There were some ladies that worked upstairs at the saloon in town. I was a gunslinger, and hired myself out – I did a fair amount of work as hired muscle for the Pinkerton Detective Agency. Anyway, I’d visit the girls as often as the other boys did. That seemed to do the trick.”

“You visited a brothel to convince people you were a man?” Xena asked, her voice threaded with amusement. “Did the women have any idea?”

Gabrielle shrugged. “If they knew, they kept my secret,” she said. “When I’d visit I’d never fully undress and I’d insist on it being dark. I’d made a dildo and...” she shrugged. “No complaints from the ladies, in fact my personal hygiene and respect for them made me really popular. That, and I paid well.”

“Dildo?” Xena asked.

Gabrielle looked pointedly at the water.

“Oh, a phallus?” Xena suggested with a chuckle.

“Exactly, they’re called dildos now.”

“That’s a silly name.” This time Gabrielle arched an eyebrow and the warrior chuckled, “Yeah, I guess that fits. I’m sorry, please continue.”

“When I got married I didn’t need to keep visiting the prostitutes and she knew I was a woman so that made it easier,” Gabrielle paused, “you know, that’s the only time I’ve been legally married to a woman.”

“This is a story I’ve got to hear,” Xena urged with a twitch of her foot in the bubbly water. “What was her name?”

“Her name was Bess, Elizabeth actually, and Xena she seemed so young. She was in her early twenties, with long brown hair and these light brown eyes that were really striking. She and her husband Caleb lived in town and he was a farrier. I rented a room in the hotel on the far side of town but I knew her enough to tip my hat and say hello. We’d

exchange pleasantries on the Sundays when I'd see her at church. Her husband had a nasty reputation as a cruel and violent man, and there were rumors that he beat her. Most folks in town gave them wide berth. Naturally, I'd been on the lookout for a reason to get involved but until this happened all I'd heard were rumors, nothing I felt I could act on.

"On this particular day, I happened to be in the mercantile when Bess came in. I was buying some fabric to make myself a new shirt and the proprietor, Joseph was determined to sell me something I didn't want for twice the cost of what I wanted. Bess was waiting to get Joseph's attention. I suggested Joseph help her first, but she demurred." Gabrielle paused in her story to collect her thoughts. She looked around the opulent bathroom with its polished marble and shining fixtures and considered all the different lives she'd led.

"Caleb comes in angry," she continued. "He had no patience with her and blows up because she's buying brown eggs instead of white ones. Bess tried to explain that the brown ones were cheaper, and would allow her to buy the liniment he wanted, as he hadn't given her enough money. So, then he starts berating her for embarrassing him in public." Xena could hear the tension in Gabrielle's voice tighten, still angry about the incident over a hundred years later.

"I'd had enough," the bard went on, "and said that while he was doing a great job embarrassing himself all by his lonesome, I'd bet him ten dollars he couldn't tell a brown egg from a white egg once cooked. He took a swing at me, which I blocked, he tripped and then fell headlong into a display of flour in sacks and came out of the altercation looking like a ghost. That's when he challenged me to a gunfight to take place at noon the next day."

Xena found herself engrossed in the story. As Gabrielle wove the tale, images filled the warrior's mind from Shen's history book; the wooden sidewalks, horses tethered outside of the saloon and the dusty streets. She envisioned the cowboys in their hats and chaps and how Gabrielle would look dressed like that. Without a trace of jealousy, she was simply mesmerized by the tale and wondered in silent astonishment at how many other amazing stories the bard would be able to tell.

"Did Elizabeth want her husband dead?"

"Actually, no," Gabrielle explained. "When Bess came to my room that night at the hotel, she was a mess. Caleb had beaten her most savagely. Several bones in her face had been broken, including one of the bones near her eye. One of her shoulders was dislocated, which I was able to fix. It was only then I started to consider going through with the gunfight. I asked her if she had any children and she told me she was barren, one of the reasons Caleb was always angry with her. She explained that as much as she hated him, if I killed him she didn't know what would become of her. She didn't have much of an education, so teaching was out. She was beautiful but that would have led her to saloon work. She also told me quite pointedly that she couldn't pass as a man."

"So, she knew?"

"Yes," Gabrielle answered, pausing to switch to Xena's other foot. "She said that she knew the very first time she saw me but saw no reason to divulge my secret. Quite impulsively, I suggested that if Caleb insisted on a gun fight and I won, which I was pretty confident about, that I would wait a respectable amount of time, court her in the usual fashion, and then marry her. That way she'd have the time and space to decide what

to do with her life. I honestly assumed in a year or two she'd figure things out and move away."

"And you won?" Xena asked.

"Caleb was dead before his gun even cleared its holster," the bard replied without pride or enthusiasm. "I waited several months then, true to my word, courted her like any young suitor would. That solved my situation with the women at the saloon, although two of them were very disappointed. A year and a half after killing her husband, Bess and I were married by the local reverend.

"Did you love her?" Xena asked quietly.

Gabrielle was quiet a moment. The only sounds in the bathroom were from the flickering candles and the slight movement of the water in the tub. "I'd say I grew to love her. I cared about her, certainly. I obviously felt responsible for her safety. I was gone a fair amount of the time working for Pinkerton, so we got a small bit of land just outside town. The house was modest, since we obviously didn't have children. It wasn't much to take care of. I had two horses, Whiskey and Tequila, a dogs, Bourbon and a coyote, Sarsaparilla. There were some chickens, a couple cows, goats, and a cat. The whole homestead was small enough for her to manage by herself while I was gone and with my reputation, people left her alone. I taught her to read and write and she devoured every book I could find for her. She was quiet and reserved at first but in time grew in comfort and confidence and became more than my equal when it came to chatting." Gabrielle smiled tenderly at the memory. "I told her that if she met someone we could work something out but that didn't happen.

"At first, we took turns one of us sleeping in the bedroom, one of us sleeping on the couch in the parlor. We spent our time together when I wasn't working, we got close." Gabrielle chuckled, remembering something fondly. "I thought about you so much in those years Xena," she said. "I saw so much of the girl from Potidaea in Bess. I saw feelings awaken in her that I'm sure you saw in me and like you, I gave her the time to figure things out." Xena arched a knowing eyebrow and the bard continued. "She found her own way to let me know. At first, she was concerned that I needed to greet her like the other men did with their wives, with a kiss, for appearances sake of course. Then she decided that the sensible thing was to just share the bed because it was big enough for the both of us." Gabrielle shrugged.

"One thing led to another?" Xena suggested helpfully and the bard blushed again. "How long were you together?"

"Counting our courtship, we were together for eleven years and we spent the last eight of those years as lovers. She got a really bad case of Scarlett fever and died. The medicine I knew at the time was enough to keep her comfortable but I couldn't save her. I left Oregon City soon thereafter and adventured up north in what is now the Yukon region of Canada until Whiskey and Tequila passed away. I ended up making more money from the gold mines up there before the rush than I did from my business in California and Oregon. In any event, I moved back to England with the dog and coyote resumed control of the company. Later, I married a man and didn't come back to the United States until 1912."

"The first time, how did that happen?" Xena asked curiously, enjoying the story and the images that Gabrielle wove for her.

Gabrielle smiled; remembering not only her first time with Bess but also how that had contrasted so dramatically with the first time she'd shared that intimacy with Xena.

It had been such an eerie, surrealistic day that she and Xena had spent traveling from Delphi to Thebes. A thick blanket of fog rolled in, making them stop early to camp for the night. The full moon refracting off the mist had painted everything with a cool glow. Between the eerie white haze and the moisture that clung to everything, Gabrielle felt more of a chill than was probably in the air. All the same, she had been more than happy to join Xena on her bedroll that night, their bodies keeping each other warm. Sleep was the farthest thing from her mind at that early evening hour. There were no stars to count, no fire to tend, the moisture making a cheery blaze impossible. She lay there in Xena's arms, absently touching the skin of the warrior's hands with the pad of a gentle finger. From there she stroked the inside of a wrist and heard the sharp intake of breath in response.

"I'm sorry, did I hurt you?" She had whispered.

"No," Xena whispered back, "that feels nice."

"So you don't mind if I—"

"—no." the warrior cut her off. "I don't mind at all."

Given permission to explore and touch, Gabrielle made the most of it. She drew her hands across strong forearms, feeling the heat rising from the body behind her, her own pulse quickening. She felt an anxiety that scared her with its promise. She turned in Xena's arms to face her, to touch her cheeks, lips, and throat with a light finger. The desire in the warrior's eyes was obvious, even in the dim light of the mist. All the while Xena had remained still, neither helping nor hindering the bard's efforts.

They were close enough, having known each other as long as they had, that nonverbal signals were very plain to Gabrielle. Xena would be a willing participant for whatever she wanted. It was up to her. She leaned forward, and with a confidence she didn't feel, gently placed her lips against Xena's. She was delighted at their softness and the way they felt against hers. She felt warm arms circle around her. Her fingers brushed against the warrior's throat revealing a heart hammering every bit as hard as hers.

She deepened the kiss, oblivious to the fog, the chill, or the night sounds. Her whole world was only the pair of them; Xena letting her explore at her own pace, responding with enthusiasm, rewarding her curiosity at every turn. While she had been with Perdicus and the clumsy, rushed fumbling that was their marriage night, it in no way prepared her for what she was presently feeling. The engagement of all her senses and her heart — that made it different. There was a safety and security in Xena's arms to be found in equal measure to the excitement and passion that they promised. They spent an extra day at the campsite, leaving Gabrielle with little doubt as to the depths of her feelings for Xena, and that they were completely reciprocated.

All of this flashed through Gabrielle's mind as she considered Xena's question. There was no trace of jealousy in the warrior's tone; rather, she seemed intrigued to hear the tale. "I had come home from a month-long stint with Pinkerton," the bard explained. "I was tired. She heated some water for a bath while I fixed the barn door. Tequila was too smart for her own good. After my bath, Bess asked me to try on a shirt she'd started for me while I was gone. She was a skilled seamstress and an amazing cook.

"As she's fitting the shirt on me and adjusting the pins, she tells me about this conversation she'd had the week prior with Ruby one of the girls from the saloon. Bess

was quite the conversationalist.” Gabrielle elaborated when Xena smirked in her general direction. “She and I would talk about everything from the books she’d read to local news, philosophy, you name it. Anyway, Bess asked me if I missed seeing Ruby and the others. I said that I didn’t really. I mean perhaps on occasion, but not really. Then she asked me why I hadn’t tried to do anything like that with her, given that I was technically her husband and could demand it.” Gabrielle smiled sadly to herself. “Xena, it breaks my heart but in that place, at that time, Bess didn’t have the faintest clue about her own agency or the concept of consent. She told me that Ruby had gone into quite vivid detail as to what transpired between us and Bess said she was curious, and perhaps a bit jealous as well.”

Xena allowed herself a small chuckle at the bard’s expense imagining Gabrielle with someone as talkative as she was. “So, it wasn’t like our time in the mist?” she asked.

“No love,” Gabrielle said with a warm smile. “This was sweet, and it was nice, but it was in no way like that amazing night and day in the mist.” Xena smiled and nodded for the bard to continue. “Bess was curious and asked me about everything. There was no guile, no sense of embarrassment. She wanted to know how someone decided to kiss how they kissed. Or why they chose to touch a certain way. She didn’t want to lead, but she did want to discuss and process... to a certain point that is.” Gabrielle added with a wry grin. “We started in the parlor where she was fitting my shirt then finished in the bedroom, as you do. It was lovely,” she added “but she wasn’t you, Xena. None of them have ever been you.”

Xena looked at Gabrielle, taking in the way her hair framed her face, the sparkle of her green eyes, the contours of her nose and lips with an inscrutable expression on her face that the bard had never seen before. “How did it feel?” she asked quietly.

Gabrielle didn’t need to ask for clarification. She locked eyes with Xena as she spoke. “How did it feel to watch a young woman fall in love with me? To see her become aware of her own sexual desires? To watch her wrestle with the confusion, but look at me lovingly when she thought I wouldn’t notice? Or how she’d find reasons to touch my arm, or my hair? I think you know exactly how it felt Xena. It felt powerful. I felt desired. But I also felt a great sense of responsibility not to hurt her, or do anything that she might later see as a mistake or a lapse in judgement. There was fear mixed with that power.”

She put Xena’s foot down and moved her hand up the warrior’s calf under the water. “Is that how you felt?” she asked. She leaned forward moving her hand up the thigh. She could feel her own pulse quicken in a way it hadn’t for over two thousand years, and it felt delicious.

“Yes,” Xena whispered, bubbles giving way to Gabrielle’s movement as the bard settled herself, straddling Xena. She brought her lips to the warrior’s, then kissed her fiercely. Strong arms encircled her, holding her close as she threaded one hand through the wet black hair at Xena’s neck and with her other hand, left her fingertips resting lightly on Xena’s throat, feeling the quickening heartbeat there.

It was almost like she could feel a dam breaking; the walls she’d built around her memories of Xena to keep them safe were cracking. For years after the warrior’s death Gabrielle had thought about her, imagined her, relived in her memories of their adventures, including the intimate ones. Over time it became too much, too painful, and Gabrielle knew that she had to put those memories away, put them down on scrolls and in journals and keep them from her conscious thought, or the sadness and loneliness would

be too much. A tide of emotion was surging through her, and the bard from Potidaea was not the least bit interested in containing it.

The warrior from Amphipolis was a willing recipient of the lust fueled onslaught. While Gabrielle had never been shy or unskilled in the past, there was no denying that two thousand years of life experience had left their mark. Warm lips parted as Gabrielle's tongue demanded entry, walking that tightrope between loving and fierce. When they parted Xena saw the shimmer of unshed tears in the bard's eyes, instantly becoming concerned. "What is it?" she asked.

Gabrielle rested a palm on each of Xena's shoulders, steadying her. "I think I know what's been off with me," she began quietly, looking into the depths of azure blue eyes. "It's been equal parts disbelief that you're really here and fear that you may be gone again. I don't want to endure that. I can't."

"Gabrielle, I'm not going anywhere," Xena assured her. "I am here, apparently for a very long time." The warrior was about to say more but hesitated. If she were to be sure of anything in life, she was certain that she knew Gabrielle. Since her resurrection, however that certainty had been tested. The person straddling her hips was simultaneously the Gabrielle she knew and a woman with experiential wisdom that she didn't. For the first time in a very long while Xena felt like she was a nervous, inexperienced youth; the feeling was as thrilling as it was frightening. Briefly she considered telling Gabrielle this, that she felt out of her element. She smiled, instead saying, "Kiss me again," startled somewhat by the pleading of her voice.

Gabrielle complied enthusiastically, bringing her hands to the sides of the warrior's face. Her movements were unhurried. She kissed Xena, delighting in the softness of the warrior's lips and the warm wetness of her mouth. As their tongues moved against each other's, she kissed like a woman rediscovering the love of her life.

She kept her movements careful, aware, delighted, and aroused by the feel of the hot water around them. Not wanting to lose the hot foamy water to the marble tile floor, she moved with graceful intention kissing Xena's mouth then down her neck, across her collar bones and down to a breast, playing with the nipple of the other with her hand. The warrior released her arms from around the bard's waist and braced strong arms on either side of the large tub. This gave Gabrielle more freedom of movement and, much to Xena's delight, she utilized it. In the salted water of the roomy bath tub, it took no effort for Gabrielle to lift Xena at the hips, raising her legs to float on the surface of the water.

The whole scene gave Xena the sensation of submersion into decadence. The scent of bergamot, mint, and the faintest touch of eucalyptus filled her senses. The hot water that supported the back side of her body contrasted with the chill of her skin no longer submerged. She wasn't about to complain though. She watched the crown of blond hair lower to the juncture between her legs and felt Gabrielle's touch, first with her lips and tongue then joined by her fingers, giving her gooseflesh for an entirely different reason. There was a languid, unhurried confidence in the way the bard moved against her. Like a woman who had been away from this for far too long, she intended to take her time getting reacquainted with Xena's body. Clearly the bard was as focused on her own pleasure as she was on the pleasure she was providing her partner and that awareness was an absolute turn-on for the warrior.

"Gabrielle, please," Xena pleaded after a suggestive thrust with her hips was ignored. Much to her dismay, the bard pulled back to look at Xena, keeping her fingers

where they were, three in one of Xena's openings, one in the other. She continued to thrust her hands rhythmically, slowly and blue eyes shone brightly with desire.

"Do you have any idea how long two thousand years is, Xena?" Gabrielle asked seriously. "How excruciatingly long I've waited? How I thought I'd never get to touch you like this again?" Gently, smoothly she extracted the single digit from Xena's backside so she could shift forward to kiss her warrior again. "To rush me would be unkind," she whispered in Xena's ear before kissing her yet again. "I want to etch every second of this indelibly into my memory."

"What if I promise that you get to do it again?" The warrior asked with a smile. Gabrielle gave her a wink and then went back to what she was doing. "Gabrielle, that feels impossibly good," The bard murmured agreement, sending vibrations through all the sensitive parts of Xena's anatomy. The warrior took a deep breath, steeling herself for the amazing ride ahead, not wanting it to end too quickly. Not that she had any say in the matter, apparently.

There is a fine line where the denial of one's passion shifts from heightened arousal to annoyed frustration and Gabrielle understood that. As much as she enjoyed the sounds, smell and taste of her warrior, she was keenly aware of the pulse throbbing against her fingertips. She slowed down as many times as she dared, letting Xena catch her breath, letting the heartbeat slow and then, before the warrior could become frustrated, she quickened her pace, using her tongue and the wetness of both the warrior and water to her advantage. The soapy water was not ideal, but she focused on the taste of her lover. There was splashing, water and suds treating the tile of the bathroom like the canvas in a Jackson Pollock painting, but the bard didn't care. That Xena was driven past the point of her usual cool reserve was supremely gratifying. It hadn't been two thousand years for the warrior since they'd been lovers; she did a quick calculation in her head and would wager it hadn't even been a month. Still the warrior cried out in her release loudly, involuntarily slapping the water with a strong arm and splashing the bard full on in the face. Gabrielle closed one eyelid tightly and the stinging stopped almost instantly. She stilled her mouth and hands until the surging and thrusting of the warrior's orgasm passed. When Xena was through, Gabrielle gently lowered her body until she was once again enveloped in warm water.

Quickly Gabrielle dunked her head below the surface, her hair already mostly wet from Xena's thrashing. At least this way she could push it out of her face and have it stay. She smiled at Xena, who looked back at her with equal parts adoration and amazement. Finally finding her voice. "I believe Vox has told me that the appropriate comment at this moment is 'oh my fucking god,'" Xena said with a wide grin.

"Welcome home," the bard replied.

Xena's grin shifted into a smirk, her eyes narrowing slightly into a look that was both seductive and ravenous. "Come here," she demanded and kissed Gabrielle again tasting herself on the bard's lips. She shifted her lover's position so that the bard's back rested against her front. As strong arms encircled Gabrielle, she had her hands free to explore the bard's body, slick from suds, bath oils and water. She moved one hand to a grateful breast alternating massaging the pliant flesh and lightly pinching the nipple. The other hand found her where she was slick and wet from more than the bath water.

With a chuckle Xena considered that this position almost made her feel like she was touching herself however instead of receiving the feedback through her skin she was hearing it through the gasps and aroused moans of her lover.

“Xena, this is hardly fair,” Gabrielle protested between breathless pants. She had reached one of her arms behind her, tangling her fingers in Xena’s hair as she turned her head to the side, pulling the warrior’s lips to her. With her other hand the bard played with the nipple that Xena hadn’t laid claim to.

“Weren’t you just saying something about savoring the moment?” Xena murmured before biting down hard on the bard’s neck.

Gabrielle gasped, feeling pleasure and pain in equal measure. As the warrior had hoped, the red marks from her teeth vanished a second later.

“Let me guess,” Xena purred seductively, her voice low and rich. “You’ve spent a few nights like this, haven’t you? Doing exactly this and imagining it was me,” as she spoke, her right hand moved steadily between Gabrielle’s legs with the bard’s hips bucking in syncopated rhythm.

“Xena, I thought about you,” the bard panted, speaking with difficulty as her body slid back and forth against the warrior’s. “When my grief had subsided enough to let me think about moments like this.” Xena smiled enjoying the sensation along her body, the splashing of the warm water, the froth of suds flying everywhere. Sure, she wanted to turn Gabrielle around to face her, to taste her but she decided that there would be time for that later, this was just too damn fun. “Xena,” Gabrielle continued, “I’ve thought about your hands on me, in me. The taste of your mouth, the way your breath feels against my skin, the way your eyes shine with desire when I’d pin you down...”

Beaming with pleasure, Xena let the images that Gabrielle’s words conjured fill her mind; the lust-filled tableaux and loving, sensuous exchanges. The imagery fueled her movements, thrusting with new urgency.

“Harder,” Gabrielle demanded. “Yes, right there,” she gasped when Xena complied. Powerful spasms shook her body, strong muscles clamping down on the fingers pressed against her. To Xena, it felt like she could feel the bard’s heartbeat everywhere. Gabrielle was still, catching her breath. After several moments, Xena gently withdrew her hand, releasing her and the bard slid back into the warm water and turned around.

They sat across from each other grinning when Gabrielle finally spoke. “I don’t know about you,” she said, her eyes still shining with desire, “but I’m ready to get out of the tub.”

“You read my mind,” Xena replied with a wink.

Chapter 16: The Party

Gabrielle dressed with apprehension. The weather had turned stormy and the bard had not noticed until well into morning. She couldn’t help but wonder if the present status of her relationship with Xena and The Goddess of Love’s possible feelings about that could have had anything to do with the lightning, thunder, and cold rain coming down in sheets. Still, she resisted the urge to tap into the goddess’ feelings because such an action would be an invasion of privacy.

After giving Xena a final kiss, the bard from Potidaea once again resumed the mantle of one who helmed a large company, and prepared to confront Ares. She texted

Aphrodite and Ed, then ordered a selection of breakfast offerings to be delivered to the room along with vast quantities of coffee and espresso.

Aphrodite arrived first, almost immediately after the text was sent. “You kids have a good night?” she asked, her tone not quite reaching the levity and humor that she was striving for.

Xena looked from Gabrielle to Aphrodite then announced that she was going to take Argo and stretch her legs. The bard muttered “coward” under her breath as Xena passed her and she heard the warrior’s light chuckle. Both women stared at the door where warrior and dog had departed before turning to face each other; Aphrodite not able to return the bard’s concerned gaze.

“Don’t.” Aphrodite said when they were alone.

“Don’t what?” Gabrielle demanded gently. “Check in to see if you’re okay because I care about you?”

“Yes,” said the goddess. “Because worrying about me isn’t your job.”

“Bullshit,” Gabrielle disagreed. “Of course it is; I love you. You know my feelings for Xena don’t lessen my feelings for you; you of all people understand that.”

“I know,” Aphrodite replied, clearly frustrated with herself. She sat down in a huff on the sofa in the central part of the suite. “I get jealous.”

“I’ve noticed,” the bard replied taking a seat next to the goddess with a glance to the rain coming down in buckets outside.

“That? I’m not Zeus; I don’t do weather,” she demurred.

“Even when you’ve had ambrosia?” Gabrielle pressed, gently nudging her shoulder.

With a shrug, the goddess glanced out the window. “Okay, maybe a little weather,” she allowed. “Seriously, do I need to ask how perfectly things went last night?”

With a smile that she couldn’t have kept from her face if she tried, Gabrielle nodded. “It was nice. A part of my life I thought was gone for over two thousand years and you brought it back to me.” Gabrielle put her arms around the goddess, hugging her tightly. “I can never thank you enough.”

Aphrodite put her arms around Gabrielle, allowing herself to enjoy the closeness and scent of the bard’s freshly washed hair, if even just for a moment. “Yeah, well... whatever,” she murmured before gently disengaging and stepping away.

Xena returned with Argo excitedly holding out her phone to show the other two. “I got a text message,” she said.

“Yay you?” Aphrodite said with an eye roll but Gabrielle looked at the warrior’s phone with interest.

“This is from the woman last night?” she asked reading the text.

“What?” Aphrodite asked, intrigued. “The escort? She wants a date? She was cute, what’s her number?”

“No,” Xena clarified. “I showed her the photo of Scruggs and Ares, asked if she’d seen them, she said she’d ask around. This says that Easton moves around between several different residences, but that one of them is the penthouse of this hotel, leased under the name of Atmos.”

Gabrielle picked up the laptop sitting on the dining table in the suite and opened one of the files on the desktop, quickly scanning its contents. “Here it is; Atmos is a company that is a subsidiary of Fire Industries. Ares is using that company to pay for his

penthouse. I suspect that is why the gala is being held here,” the bard surmised. “Easton pulling strings.”

“Which means I wasted my time last night,” Aphrodite said with a rueful head shake. Both Xena and Gabrielle looked at her with a questioning glance. “After our chat at the restaurant, my dear brother had me followed. They thought they were being discreet. I led them on a wild goose chase all over the city all night long. I figured as long as they were waiting for me to lead them to you, you guys would be safe- have a night off. At about eight o’clock this morning they gave up and I followed them hoping they’d lead me to where Ares was staying but they came back here, I thought I’d been made.”

“What did Ares have to say?” Xena asked.

Aphrodite shrugged. “He knows you’re back and saw all three of us when we were at the bar. I guess in hindsight, we should have kept you under wraps, but then we wouldn’t have this detail: He is intrigued about the ambrosia, determined to get his hands on some and not to have you and Gabrielle back in business. He thinks I slipped up by admitting that you were the source of the ambrosia and he has the pieces in place to start World War Three. His hooks run deep in the administration, that was confirmed. He thinks Fire Industries is under wraps, and has no idea you know about Scruggs or his Easton identity.” Her blue eyes moved from warrior to bard and back. “It was a productive meeting. He’s rattled. I don’t know what it is about the pair of you, but he’s freaked out by it.”

“Is he here now? In the building?” Gabrielle asked, equal parts excited and worried. The goddess closed her eyes for a moment, as if she was listening for something then shook her head.

There was a knock at the door and Ed entered followed by Brian Glass. Gabrielle did a double take. “What are you still doing here?” she asked, then shrugged apologetically.

“I don’t blame you,” He replied with a smile.

“Brian is redeeming himself,” Ed added with a nod to the CIA agent. “We did a deep dive last night on all the intel we had gathered and he suggested some new ways of looking at it as well as...strategies... for containing Easton or at the very least, fucking with him. We were up all night with Vox and Wolfgang. We’ve even got a drone in the air.”

The agent nodded in agreement, “I’ve got some leeway in how I do my job,” he explained, referring to his real job with the clandestine federal agency. “I respected Susan and mourn her loss with you. The more you rattle Easton, the better chance he has of screwing up in areas that we can address.” Gabrielle nodded appreciatively urging him to continue. “About Susan’s case, I actually did some research into that last night. I see her body has already been delivered to a mortuary in California, and she was cremated. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

“Only that we need to have a funeral and there isn’t anything further the feds are going to learn from her body. I saw the report,” Gabrielle replied. “I hope this...mix up... doesn’t reflect badly on the pathologist who released her.”

“She’s probably going to be fired, but I suspect that you know that and probably have a job waiting for her,” Brian said, knowingly.

There was a knock at the door. Ed answered, received the room service cart and signed for several large boxes, which he deposited on the coffee table in the central room.

“See, I told you the ball gowns would be altered in time,” Aphrodite said happily, examining the contents of the various boxes.

“Why don’t we sit down,” Xena suggested, eyeing the food. “We can have something to eat and figure out how we’re going to handle tonight. It will probably be helpful to have an extra pair of hands to help out,” she added, nodding to Brian.



“I don’t understand why this is more sparkly now than it seemed in the shop,” Xena complained as she finished dressing. She was looking at her reflection in the mirror. The elegant black and silver gown looked like a cross between a dress and a tuxedo. Gabrielle was clothed in shimmering, form-fitting gold and Aphrodite wore an impossibly sexy ice blue gown.

“Because Aphrodite’s designer was clearly influenced by Bob Mackie,” Gabrielle explained, as she applied the warrior’s makeup.

“And these are going to help us blend in?” Xena was still dubious.

“I promise.” Gabrielle reassured her.

Aphrodite was strangely quiet since finishing her own hair and makeup. She sat on the couch petting Argo. The pit bull exuded an aura of sheer bliss at the attention. Gabrielle joined the duo on the couch and Argo stood on the unsteady cushion and lazily flopped over on her other side so she could put her head in the bard’s lap.

“She’d better not be saying ‘goodbye’,” Gabrielle said, looking seriously at the goddess.

“Goodbye for now,” Aphrodite clarified. “Gabrielle, we need someone on the inside. She knows what she needs to do, she knows how to do it. She and I are close, I will be able to zero in on where she’s at. I don’t see how else to track his movements and I think she’ll be oaky.”

Gabrielle looked down at her dog thinking for a moment of all the dogs she’d loved and lost over so many years. Like people, every time was excruciatingly painful, even when you knew that in time you’d recover and go on with your life. She looked down into amber eyes that looked back at her with utter love and devotion. “You know you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do, right girl?” she said quietly to her dog, who took that opportunity to lean up and lick the bard’s face. She sighed. Fighting for the ‘greater good’ had its downside.

“We’re all good with the plan?” Xena asked, looking empathetically at Gabrielle. She knew what Gabrielle was feeling; the sensation of putting someone you felt responsible for in harm’s way. She’d felt it enough where the bard had been concerned in the early days.

Gabrielle nodded touching the earpiece she was wearing. “Command do you read?” she asked.

“Loud and clear, boss,” Wolfgang answered from across the country.

“Lookout?” she asked.

“Lookout online,” Brian Glass answered from Ed’s room adjoining their suite.

“Backup?” she asked.

“I’ve got eyes on valet and the door,” Ed confirmed after adjusting his bowtie and nodding politely to a passing DC socialite.

She looked at Aphrodite and Xena, then gave the dog one last kiss on the top of her head before adjusting the dog's rhinestone studded collar and standing.

They rode the elevator down to the gala in silence. Several couples in formalwear joined them, giving them space after one glance at the pit bull. One inebriated woman was the exception, kneeling down to pet Argo after commenting how pit bulls made wonderful service animals.

They stopped at the security queue outside the ballroom. Gabrielle extracted the invitation from her purse, and in moments they were scanned and ushered inside. She adjusted the glasses she was wearing which provided a video feed to *The Hippolyta*. Vox and Wolfgang were using the feed to provide necessary intel on the people and players around them.

"Showtime," the bard whispered, entering the elegantly dressed throng.

If Xena had any doubt that their sparkly gowns would help them blend in, the scene unfolding in front of her made it clear that their attire provided the three beautiful women perfect camouflage. Everywhere she turned there were glints of sequins, rhinestones, diamonds, sapphires, and gold. The men, nearly all dressed in black tuxedos, provided a counterpoint to the women, who mostly dressed in black or white while splashes of color from other gowns created a pointillistic scene in front of her. Smartly dressed wait staff carried trays of champagne and hors d'oeuvres and mingled through the throng of the wealthy and powerful. Most of the denizens of the gala were older and Caucasian, and Aphrodite couldn't remember the last time she saw such a large gathering of people with so little to offer. A man crossed the goddess' path, stopped mid-step and nearly knocked her over as he took off again.

"What's so funny?" Vox asked, responding to Xena's audible chuckle minutes into the party.

"That's the guy from last night," the warrior commented as the fat senator made eye contact with her and hurried off back the way he'd come.

"The guy at ten o'clock," Wolfgang announced in their collective ear, "that's Chester Adams. Chief clerk to the guy who's in the stolen Supreme Court seat. He's one of Easton's goons."

"One of Turner's actually," Glass clarified. "If what you surmise is true, Easton probably put him there, but the president thinks that guy is his man. Turner was paid handsomely for that appointment, one hundred and seventy-five million, currently sitting in the Cayman Islands."

"Who sells out democracy for money you're not going to live long enough to spend?" Aphrodite wondered aloud after adjusting her earring.

"You know something about the President we don't?" Brian asked suspiciously.

"Many things," the goddess answered. "But specifically, one only need to glance at that pasty, obese excuse of a golfer know that his arteries are going to have to give way at some point. There is a finite number of McNuggets that one can consume in one's lifetime. They always get you in the end."

"Susan," someone to the right of Gabrielle called. "Susan Vincent, is that you?" The bard turned and was warmly greeted by a tall redhead speaking with a Greek accent. "I must say, I'm surprised to see you here, dear," the newcomer said warmly after kissing each of Gabrielle's cheeks.

“Arianna, good to see you,” the bard replied. “I could say the same thing about you, could I not?”

“These used to be my people,” Arianna Huffington explained with a warm smile. “You don’t convert people by only speaking to the choir.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Gabrielle agreed as she stopped a passing waiter and relieved her of four glasses of champagne. “We are on a similar mission.”

Someone behind them tried to get the author’s attention and Gabrielle hugged her briefly. “Go, you and I will catch up sometime when you’re back in LA.”

Arianna smiled and nodded to each of Gabrielle’s companions before disappearing back into the throng of wealthy, sparkly dressed people. As the trio continued to move through the elegantly dressed crowd, Gabrielle made small talk with several people that came up to her, either because they knew her, or wanted to after hearing from others who she was. On occasion, she introduced her companions, Anna and Natasha, but often the exchanges were so quick that she didn’t get the chance.

Xena was impressed by the size of the room; chandeliers had been hung and tables set up throughout the space that encouraged people to mingle. There was a stage at the far end with a large dance floor in front of it. The lighting was not overly bright, but also not the theatrical seediness of The Edison. In this setting the warrior gleaned even more information about the dual life her lover lived. Gabrielle chatted comfortably with a variety of people in several different languages. In her role as Susan Vincent, representative of Gabrielle Evans, she could claim this world as her own but clearly didn’t. More than one person made a cutting remark about her ‘seeing the light’ and she had responded that she was here to meet a donor about a climate change initiative. The look of annoyance she received in return was indeed priceless.

The warrior was drawn from her thoughts when finally, they came to the center of the ball room; a grand piano stood just off to the side of a stage where a band would be playing later. The elevators were just across the dance floor on the other side. If a crowd gathered here it would make navigating the space all the more difficult.

Gabrielle stopped by a standing table to chat with someone and gave a brief nod to Xena who departed with Aphrodite. The goddess looked at Argo and motioned with her head and the dog obediently followed behind. Gabrielle fought to keep the anguish off her features as she briefly watched them go, then turned back to her superficial conversation.

Xena, Aphrodite, and Argo approached the elevators on the far side of the dance floor. One elevator had two, not so subtle guards standing watch so it was easy to tell which elevator went to the penthouse. Aphrodite extracted her phone from her purse and pretended to read the screen.

“Excuse me,” she said with the over announcement of a truly inebriated person to the guard closest to them, “is this the elevator to Mr. Easton’s flat?”

“We have an appointment,” Xena added with a drunk sounding chuckle.

“Mr. Easton isn’t in,” the guard said dismissively.

“I know silly,” Aphrodite replied. “He told us to get started without him.”

She turned to Xena who was not the least bit surprised that the goddess kissed her. The guards stood transfixed, staring as the two women went at it. When Aphrodite dropped her phone, the closest guard bent down instinctively to pick it up, which gave the

goddess the opportunity to touch his hand without the other guard seeing it. Blue eyes briefly intensified and the first guard turned to the second.

“I’ll take them upstairs and watch them until Mr. Easton shows up.” The second guard nodded, too distracted to come up with an alternate plan of action. Instead, he feebly adjusted his pants.

They entered the elevator and the guard used a keycard to swipe an access pad, entered a code then pushed the button to the penthouse. They rode in silence until Aphrodite shrugged and looked at Xena. “So. You and Gabrielle,” she said.

Xena looked at her, with eyes filled with kindness and empathy, “Because of you,” she said.

The goddess chuckled. “Dude, you really did come back nicer this time.”

“I think I get it from my mother’s side,” she chided and winked. The goddess got her drift and frowned.

Just inside the penthouse, Xena let the guard enter first, then deftly hit him in the back of the head, knocking him unconscious and taking his keycard. “We’re in,” she said quietly, knowing the mic in her ball gown would pick up the sound.

“Excellent,” Gabrielle replied with a light laugh, seemingly in conversation with someone at the gala.

“How are things from the lookout?” Aphrodite asked, knowing that Gabrielle couldn’t work that into a conversation at the moment.

“No alarms or other alert signals,” Brian confirmed studying his computer screen. “Looks like the code he punched was seven-four-five-two. Ed, how is it outside?”

“Same here,” Ed added. “People continuing to arrive, no sign of anyone who sucks worse than the rest of these rich assholes,” he muttered under his breath.

The warrior looked around the penthouse, its décor leaving no doubt in her mind this was Ares’ personal space. It was opulent, decadent, hedonistic, overdone, and ruthless, much like the man himself. Black, red, and gray seemed to be the favored colors with chrome and brushed metal providing counterpoint. The furniture was industrial chic and the art was severe. Candles, weapons, and lush fabrics were everywhere.

“Man, they could have filmed fifty shades of bad fan fiction in this place,” Aphrodite commented, frowning. “You know behind one of these doors is a sling, a rack, and a collection of butt plugs.”

“Any clues where to look?” Xena asked the goddess. “Hopefully not in the butt-plug room.”

Aphrodite closed her eyes. “This way,” she said, opening her eyes and leading the way to the bedroom. Like the rest of the suite, it was palatial and overly elegant. Surveying the room, she muttered, “This furniture looks like it came from the set of a gothic Tim Burton porno movie.” The ceiling was tiled in hammered tin, polished to a mirror-like surface. Not quite as nineteen seventies as an actual mirror on the ceiling, it clearly served the same purpose.

“We’ve got movement down here,” Ed announced shortly after the two had begun to search the bedroom. “Scruggs just arrived in a limo with Easton.”

“Someone just said something on an unsecured channel about elevators,” Brian added hurriedly. “You were right about this being a potential trap.”

“That’s a beautiful piano,” Gabrielle said to the couple with which she had been chatting.

“I’ve heard that you can play,” a wealthy gentleman said, smiling over his whiskey. “Play us something, Miss. Vincent.”

“Well if you insist,” Gabrielle couldn’t get to the piano fast enough. She started with a Scott Joplin composition called Weeping Willow, and as she’d hoped, people began to congregate, drawn by the sound of live music. In moments, the way to the elevators was congested with wealthy party goers.

As Gabrielle played she muttered into her mic. “Update?”

“We’re looking,” Aphrodite said, her voice tense. “I know it’s in here, but I just can’t tell what, everything is reading the same to me. I just know there is something here.”

Brian’s voice came in calmly over the comms units. “You have incoming – four guards, ETA 30 seconds.”

Xena stopped what she was doing, and stood still. She closed her eyes trying to feel for anything different about the room. She sensed it. Almost like a warm breeze, the same energy the goddess had felt a moment ago. She took the earpiece out of her ear, cutting her off from the distractions from the chatter of the rest of the team.

Together, Xena and Aphrodite focused on the symbol of Ares’ power; both relaxing and focusing their mind and energy on the God’s most guarded secrets. While power and brute strength were also characteristics of love and romance, more often than not, it was a desire to hide and keep secrets. Like a beacon, the secrets called out. Aphrodite turned in the direction of a book case against one wall of the bedroom. One shelf only held a façade of books which disguised a safe behind it. The lock was digitally coded to a thumb print. Gently touching the reference pad, sparks emitted from her fingers shorting out the system and rendering the lock useless. The safe opened.

“Any sign of the knife?” Xena asked, glancing in her direction.

“No,” Aphrodite replied. “Keep looking.” The warrior walked past her towards the far end of the room while she rummaged through the contents of the safe.

Pushing aside the fake passports and bound stacks of money, gold coins and an assortment of gemstones, she came across a thin, well-worn field notebook. It was compact, durable, and waterproof, with tear resistant pages. As soon as she touched it, she knew this was what she’d been seeking. Sparing only the briefest of glances at the interior pages, she felt the rising panic of the team on the comms and heard their warnings to her and the warrior.

She let her voice drop to a calming tone, relaxed but poised. “Xena – don’t think about it too much, what is calling to you is in this room. You’re connected – feel that.”

The warrior looked around the room with fresh eyes. Her gaze came to rest on a back wall, which was covered with swords and daggers from all over the world, many of them ornate and ancient looking. They were all vibrating on different frequencies, but one in particular caught her eye. It was a simple knife in a sheath with a bone handle. She grabbed it and could feel its warmth in her hand.

Aphrodite nodded in agreement. “That’s it,” she confirmed.

Four guards charged in, weapons drawn. Argo charged at them barking and growling savagely. One guard took aim with his weapon and was stopped by another. “Mr. Easton says to take the dog alive. He’ll take care of the other two.”

“Argo, here girl,” Xena called hoping to get the dog out of the room unscathed. Argo obeyed, but was hit by a taser and dropped to the ground, twitching helplessly halfway across the bedroom floor.

The warrior grabbed another knife from the wall and was about to throw it when Aphrodite stopped her.

“Don’t give them a reason,” She whispered, urging her out of the bedroom.

“Stop right there,” two guards ordered them. The other two held weapons on them from a distance.

Xena’s hands moved in a blur as she disarmed the first guard, then used the butt of the weapon to knock the second unconscious. Before the other two could fire, warrior and goddess were out the door, shutting and locking it behind them. Xena shoved the tip of the second knife into the seam where the electronic lock mechanism was housed. At Vox’s suggestion, she pulled at the wires, snapping them, locking the door.

“Plane. Now.” Gabrielle said quietly as she finished her song and moved into a dramatic classical piece, causing more people to crowd in to see who was playing.

“Ed, you get that?” Aphrodite said as she and Xena made their way down the stairwell as quickly as they could. “We need that car up from valet and the twins ready to get that plane in the air.”

“I’ve got a five hundred-dollar tip to the person who gets me my jag in under three minutes,” Ed could be heard saying to the valet crew.

“Vox,” Xena asked urgently, “what’s it look like outside?”

“You’ve got some cars mobilized from the other addresses your escort gave us,” the engineer said. “It’s going to be a big party. Get out of there now!”

“The weather?” The warrior asked.

“It’s still raining. There have been a few accidents, police have their hands full at the moment,” Vox confirmed.

“Can you please do something about that?” Xena asked Aphrodite as they hurried down the stairs as fast as the designer gowns would let them. In frustration, Xena kicked off her shoes, managing much better in her bare feet.

“Oh, right.” Aphrodite said as they reached the landing of the next floor down.

The door opened and two armed men stormed in, taking aim at Aphrodite who arrived first on the landing. Xena launched herself from the stairs above, landing on the pair. In seconds, she’d immobilized them both.

“You know they can’t hurt me, right?” the goddess asked.

“Sorry, habit.” Xena shrugged.

“Go out the door,” Glass urged through the earpiece. “There aren’t any more guys on that floor. They are converging on the stairs. You can get the elevator the rest of the way down.”

Taking the advice, they hurried to the elevator, incapacitating the one guard inside and riding it down to the gala level. They made their way around the periphery of the mob around Gabrielle and the piano. She was now taking requests from rich donors who placed bets with each other trying to come up with a song should would not know how to play.

“Gabrielle, now!” Xena urged as they came up parallel to her.

“Sorry, guys – gotta go,” The bard said, halfway through Vanessa Carlton’s A Thousand Miles. Xena could hear the groans of disappointment.

A familiar voice could be heard over the crowd, shouting for people to get out of his way. Xena looked around, but couldn't see Ares. Still, she knew he was there, too close for comfort.

"Gabrielle, as fast as you can. Ares is nearby."

"Sorry dude, but you have this coming," Aphrodite said to Senator Hastings as she passed him with Xena. She touched his hand and he immediately grabbed for her but missed, his open palm landing instead on the groin of a federal court judge. Immediately the judge took a swing at the senator, knocking him to the floor. The shouting and commotion that ensued gave Gabrielle the time she needed to clear the ballroom.

"I'm driving," the bard shouted as they approached the valet stand. "Aphrodite – you and Ed in the back. I think we're going to have company."

True to his word, the well-muscled flight attendant had the car ready and running when bard, warrior, and goddess all fled the gala at once, a cacophony of chaos and confusion in their wake. Faster than one might think his large form would allow, Ed climbed into the backseat right behind the goddess. A second later, Xena shut the passenger door and they were on their way. Almost immediately, three cars were in pursuit, each with gunmen firing at them.

"Fuck," Gabrielle said expertly releasing the clutch and gearshift, racing through the wealthy Kalorama district of DC.

"We've got eyes on you. All three chase cars are behind you but it looks like they're about to split up." Vox reported over the comms unit.

"Roger that," Gabrielle said, downshifting to take a corner at high speed. "Xena, get my gun out of the glovebox."

"Is this Odessa?" the warrior asked, handing the gun over?

"This?" Gabrielle replied with a chuckle, glancing at her side mirrors to see the car behind her gaining, even on the slick wet streets. "No, this is a Glock Twenty-Three. It holds thirteen shots, not six."

With the .40 caliber handgun in her lap, she shifted again, taking a corner against a red light and nearly causing an accident in the intersection. The car behind her swerved to avoid getting hit but maintained pursuit. She didn't want a shootout, even if three quarters of her car's occupants couldn't be killed. But when a bullet hit the side mirror on Xena's side and another dinged the reinforced side panel, Gabrielle took a deep breath, reminding herself Ares' people had made the choice to serve him. She fired several shots, intentionally missing, hoping that they'd back off. It didn't work. If anything, they shot back with more enthusiasm.

"Ed, get down," she urged as two shots came in quick succession, shattering the back window. "Aphrodite..."

"I've got him," The goddess leaned over to cover Ed, who was confused and upset as to why he wasn't the one doing the protecting.

Gabrielle was trying to split her focus between watching the steadily gaining car in the rearview mirror and the puddle and pothole riddled road ahead. The downpour may have stopped, but the asphalt was still slick from the rain.

"Hold on," she instructed before taking a corner hard. The turn resulted in a near collision; the bard's expert driving skills were the only thing that enabled her to avoid it. The maneuver caused the car behind to slow down, letting her gain some distance.

A sound came through the expensive sound system indicating that someone was trying to call Gabrielle's iPhone. A glance at the in-dash screen let her know it was coming from *The Hippolyta*. She smiled, taking another corner as fast as she dared, she hit the button on her steering wheel to connect the call. "Hello?" she said, suspecting she knew who was on the other end.

"Hi Gabrielle," Shen said, cheerfully. "Are you busy?"

Gabrielle downshifted, narrowly avoiding a moving truck as she headed out of the residential area.

"I'm kind of working right now but I have a minute. What's up?"

"It's history," he complained. "Prisha wasn't too happy with my essay on the fall of the Roman Empire."

She dodged a pothole, happy to see the car behind her hit it square on, sparks exploding out as the undercarriage contacted the asphalt.

"What was the problem?" she asked, glancing again at her side mirror.

"She said my reasoning was too simplistic. I said the empire fell because of military overspending, like we're doing now." He sounded adamant, defiant even, and Gabrielle thought for a moment on how to put her own experience into something a ten-year-old could understand.

"Moose, you know there is rarely one single reason for anything. Sure, there was military overspending, and other economic issues. Remember they'd been in a constant state of war, also like now." She turned the wheel hard, narrowly missing the curb, the back end fishtailing a bit on the wet asphalt. Xena gripped the side of the door to steady herself.

"Right, the overspending on the military was because of the constant state of war," he agreed.

"Don't forget government corruption," Aphrodite added from the back seat. "Also like now."

"Oh, hey Aphrodite," Shen said brightly; the tapping sounds of the keyboard indicating that he was taking notes. "Are you guys in the car? Going somewhere?"

"We're actually on our way back to the airport, to come home," Gabrielle said pushing the car faster.

"Don't forget the weakening of the Roman Legions," Xena added, trying to keep her voice casual and not being entirely successful as the bard sped through a red light.

"Spending money on the military doesn't help you if you don't have the properly trained forces to fight."

"Oh, hi Xena." Shen continued typing.

"And the invasion of the Goths," Ed's voice was slightly muffled from underneath Aphrodite. Another shot came dangerously close to the car, its sonic whine clearly audible as it flew past.

"The people who wear all black and makeup?" the boy asked, confused.

"No, the Visigoths. You should research them too. Look Moose, I've got to go, but we will be home soon and I'll be sure to come by and say 'hi' if it's not too late, okay?"

"Okay," he replied, satisfied with the answers to his question. "This was really helpful, drive safe, Squirrel. G'bye." Shen disconnected the call.

Gabrielle gave the rearview mirror another glance before turning her attention to the warrior at her side.

“Xena, I’m going to take my hand off the shift so I can shoot for real. When I say ‘now’ you need to shift. If I need to go fast you shift down,” she said pointing at the diagram, “If I need to slow down you go the other way. Think about riding a horse on wet cobblestones.” Xena nodded, picturing the image in her mind, understanding.

Gabrielle used her side mirror to aim as the Jaguar raced through the streets of the US capital. She held her right hand with the gun out the window pointed backwards, keeping her other hand steady on the wheel.

“Now!” She barked, engaging the clutch. There was a little grinding initially, but the warrior got the hang of the gear shift. Gabrielle fired off two more shots, hitting the chase car twice. It immediately backed off.

“Cops have been alerted to the commotion,” Vox urged. “Get to the airport as soon as you can. Car coming at you from the west, next intersection.”

Grateful for the warning, Gabrielle was able to slow down, swerving to avoid the chase car and shooting out one of their tires as they drove past. In moments, they pulled over to the side of the street and stopped. Vox relaying the information Wolfgang got from the CIA agent’s drone had proved to be a useful technique; Gabrielle was able to dispatch the second chase car in short order. The third car proved to be more persistent, firing two more shots into her Jaguar, one painfully grazing her shoulder. The road was still wet and slick, reflecting the street lights above. All which proved an advantage to the woman who had been driving since the invention of the car. While the car behind them occasionally fish tailed, Gabrielle’s expert maneuvering had them drifting, turning, speeding, and at one point doing a controlled 180° turn in an intersection.

“Now,” Gabrielle repeated urgently. Xena downshifted, giving the bard more power as they headed onto a straight patch of road. Aphrodite kept Ed down, much to his vocal complaining. They were heading into a wooded park. Gabrielle took steady aim backwards with the aid of the side mirror. Staying calm and focused she pointed the gun and squeezed off a round. The bullet struck the front tire, causing the car to swerve and crash into a nearby median.

Gabrielle put her gun down and resumed control of the car, driving as quickly as she dared to the airport. “Tell the twins to fire up the plane,” she said.

The Jaguar had barely come to a stop, when its inhabitants exited and raced up the steps of the jet. Kismet met them at the top of the stairs, her expression sad when she realized Argo was not accompanying the quartet.

“The police are asking questions,” the co-pilot mentioned as Ed closed and locked the cabin door.

“Get Rebekah Luna on it, and get us in the air as fast as possible.” Gabrielle instructed, kicking off her high heels, adrenalin still surging through her body. The co-pilot nodded and returned to the cockpit, closing the door behind her.

Ed waited until the door was fully closed before turning to Gabrielle angrily. “What the actual fuck?” he said hotly as the plane began to move.

“What?” Gabrielle said, completely confused. Xena was immediately at her side, nearly eye-level with the large bodybuilder.

“What the fuck is she?” He demanded pointing at Aphrodite.

“Oy,” Vox said with startled surprise in their earpiece. “I just cut the feed to Brian. I think this conversation needs to stay in the family. It’s bad enough that he heard everyone calling Gabrielle by her actual name.”

Gabrielle and Xena both frowned, not knowing the genesis of the outburst and certainly not appreciating the aggressive tone. For her part, Aphrodite made herself at home, kicking off her heels and moving to the galley section of the plane. Quite calmly she began to open various cabinets and cupboards, looking for something.

Ed held out his other hand, which held a flattened slug. “A number of shots came through that back window,” he said, “and hit her. I picked this up from the floor of the backseat. I didn’t say anything,” he continued with a glance to the cockpit, “in front of Kismet or Isra because they are flying this plane and we could die if they freak out. Or could we? Is it just her? Is it the two of you as well? Am I the only one here who runs the risk of dying?”

“If you don’t watch your tone you might run that risk sooner than you anticipated,” Xena said quietly, the threat in her voice apparent.

“Ed,” Gabrielle said calmly in a tone that was both commanding and empathetic, “sit down, get a grip and I can explain.”

“Yeah Ed, calm down,” Vox urged from the yacht. “Aphrodite is oaky. Honestly, I’m not her biggest fan and I’ll still totally vouch for her. She’s okay.”

“Awwww, thank you sweetie,” the goddess said with a genuine grin as she handed Ed and Gabrielle each a drink. “I knew I’d grow on you.”

The muscled flight attendant glanced at the bottle of Scotch on the counter and then glanced at his drink with suspicion. “Oh, for fucks sake,” Gabrielle said in exasperation and downed the contents of her glass.

“Dude,” Vox urged again, “you know me, I am telling you she’s okay.”

The large man threw the contents of his glass down his throat and swallowed, the tentatively sat down in the recliner before passing the glass back to the goddess for a refill.

“Is she a robot?” he asked suspiciously. “Some prototype from Special Projects that Transportation hasn’t been read in on?”

There was laughter from the goddess which deepened his frown. “I’ve been called a lot of things,” she commented as she handed back the refilled glass, “but that’s a first for robot.”

“I assure you she isn’t a robot,” Gabrielle said adamantly. Xena looked at her questioningly. “I’ll explain what a robot is later,” she added to the warrior.

“Her name is *Aphrodite*,” Vox said in the earpiece.

“So, what?” he shot back. “She’s named after an Ancient Greek go...” his eyes went wide, catching on.

“Always with the ancient with these people,” Aphrodite complained passing a drink to Xena as well. The jet hit the main runway and took off, although the inhabitants of the plane, save for Xena, scarcely noticed.

“No fucking way,” he protested in disbelief. “No. Absolutely not.”

Gabrielle rolled her eyes and got up from the couch as soon as the steep part of the climb subsided. She rummaged through some drawers at the back of the plane and found some sweats. It was a slim hope, but she fantasized that getting out of the ball

gown would somehow improve things with her employee. She passed a set of clothes to Xena and Aphrodite as well.

“Are you’re like her?” Ed demanded, although some fear and uncertainty crept into his voice. “Her too?” he nodded at Xena. “And why doesn’t she know what a robot is?”

Gabrielle sighed. “Xena, could you please unzip me?” she asked and the warrior complied. She slipped out of her dress and turned to her employee. “Look Ed, I don’t mean this in a harassment kind of way, but you asked.” She slid the dress down, exposing her bra and pulled part of it aside revealing the scar where she’d been pierced by an arrow. “This was from getting shot,” she said, deciding to not elaborate. She stepped out of the dress and put on the sweat pants. “I’m not a goddess.”

When her back was turned, Ed exclaimed, “Jesus Christ, that’s a huge tattoo.”

After tying the string on her sweatpants, she pulled the sweatshirt over her head. Vox was heard chuckling over the comms, “Fuck! I could have won the newbie bet with him.”

When the bard turned back around, she was gratified to see Ed looked chagrined by his outburst. “You just don’t look the type, big tattoos and all...”

“I am fairly confident that is not the most surprising thing about me,” she observed before launching into the abbreviated explanation of her longevity, her massive wealth, her quest for Xena, and their opposition to Ares, who Ed knew as Easton. Vox and Wolfgang supported the bard’s claims through the ear pieces, but it wasn’t until the demonstration of her healing abilities and a brief demonstration by the Goddess of Love that the flight attendant sat shaken, but convinced.

Aphrodite had settled herself in the other recliner, Xena and Gabrielle to the couch. Xena listened to her lover’s tale but was distracted by how empty the couch felt without the gray pit bull joining them. Gabrielle sat close to Xena, who had draped an arm over her shoulders. She leaned against the warrior’s body and felt the unspoken reassurance and support as she wove her tale, answering Ed’s questions to the degree she felt appropriate.

“That is a tremendous thing to do for the love of your life,” he finally said. Gabrielle nodded in agreement, then smiled at Xena with an expression that said she’d do it all again in a heartbeat. He was about to voice his confusion though, suspecting that bard and goddess had been together but after a glance at Aphrodite and the almost imperceptible shake of her head, he dropped it. Instead he said, “You read mythology – about gods wreaking havoc in the lives of men and don’t think of it as something that happens in the present. You don’t think of ‘god’ as a term people invented to describe other people we didn’t understand.”

Aphrodite chuckled. “Let’s be honest, kiddo. Man invented the concept of ‘god’ to exert control over other people, and as a way to govern them. They still use it that way.” After noticing Xena’s arched eyebrow she continued, “I will admit my family let it go to our heads, and were willing participants, but I mean, come on – some of those temples and sculptures were pretty bad ass. And thank you for calling me ‘people’ honey, I will take that as a compliment.”

“Are we good, Ed?” Gabrielle asked, shifting the conversation back to her employee. He smiled at the goddess and nodded apologetically as Kismet opened the cockpit door and hurried into the cabin.

“Gabrielle, we’ve got a video message coming in,” the co-pilot said with urgency. “Same guy as before, Easton, same channel.”

Ed was immediately on his feet, getting the laptop out of a drawer and setting it on the table. “Give me a minute,” Gabrielle said with a glance to her companions. The co-pilot nodded and returned to the cockpit, leaving the door open. “He knows you’re back” she said, turning to Xena. “Might as well have you front and center. How did you leave things with him?” she asked the goddess.

“He wants me to stay out of his way. I told him I’d take a couple of days to think about it,” The Goddess of Love replied.

Gabrielle nodded, trying to strategize on the fly. “Xena, sit next to me,” she positioned the warrior in front of the laptop. Aphrodite, you stand by Ed. I can sign to you out of view of the camera and you can relay it back to Xena.” She said quickly tested the plan by signing, which the goddess relayed. Xena nodded, understanding what was being said. Xena took Ares’ dagger out of her purse and put the sheathed blade on the table to the side of the laptop.

“Might be better to make him think I’m not with you guys,” Aphrodite added as Gabrielle opened the laptop and prepared to make the connection. “Tell him I had a jealous fit or something. He’ll buy it.”

Gabrielle nodded, then tapped an icon on the screen, connecting the transmission. Once again Ares sat smirking back. This time, however, he was in a plush office, not a sterile interrogation room.

“Xena!” he exclaimed cheerfully, “You’re looking well. I see you found the irritating blond.”

“Never felt better,” the warrior replied with a thin smile. She and Gabrielle were sitting comfortably on the couch. Xena had one arm draped casually around Gabrielle’s shoulders, one leg casually crossed over the other. Gabrielle sat tucked at the warrior’s side, her hands out of range of the camera, her arms relaxed.

“You’re not going to believe who got left in DC?” he said, tugging on a leash. Argo came into view, moving unsteadily on her feet. After an additional tug, she jumped onto the couch and sat next to the God of War, briefly licking his ear which seemed to surprise him as much as it annoyed him. Xena could feel Gabrielle’s body stiffen and she reassuringly squeezed the bard’s shoulder.

The gesture did not go unnoticed by the god. “You know,” he continued conversationally, “I’ve never tried dog. I know it’s commonly served in China. I bet my chef could whip up something tasty with this, what do you think? Should I have your dog for dinner?” Argo barked once at him, but it did little to reassure Gabrielle.

“If you hurt my dog, so help me...” Gabrielle began as Xena reached for Ares’ dagger and took it out of its sheath, casually examining the blade.

“Look what didn’t get left in DC?” She smirked when she saw his eyes narrow. “I suspect you might want this back in one piece, as opposed to pieces,” Xena said calmly. “You might want to think about that before you threaten anyone.”

“Funny you should mention anyone...” Ares replied with another low chuckle as he tugged at another leash. With a lurch, Jennifer, the escort from the bar at The Omni Hotel, came into view. Her hands were bound with zip ties, the leash attached to a collar around her neck. She looked fearful and shaken. “Seems I picked up a pet belonging to each of you.” Keeping her face passive Gabrielle began to sign to Aphrodite, telling her

what was on screen. “Does expensive hooker go with dog? Does that call for a white wine or red?” Argo barked again and wagged her tail.

“What kind of deal are you looking for Ares?” Xena asked, keeping his focus on the escort and not Gabrielle. “That woman doesn’t have anything to do with this. Your issue is with Gabrielle and me, no one else.”

“What about my sister?” Ares asked. “Is she there? You guys working on a threesome or something?”

Gabrielle rolled her eyes, annoyed at the god’s lasciviousness. Xena chuckled and shook her head. “None of your fucking business,” she said flatly. “What do you want for the dog and the girl?”

“Ambrosia,” he smirked. “Dite had some, said she got it from you. I want twice what she had. And you and blondie stay out of my way. I’m working on something big, and I don’t want the two of you anywhere near it. The stunt in DC was not appreciated. And I want my dagger back.”

“Let’s say I know where to find ambrosia,” Xena offered amicably. “The dagger for the girl and the dog. Gabrielle and I aren’t in much of a position to get in your way. I’m just getting my bearings here.”

“Not good enough, Xena,” the god shook his head. “I’ve spent too long putting everything in place. I’m not going to have you and your brat fuck it up at the last minute. Do I need to pick up some more of Gabrielle’s people to force you to make a deal? Who do you think you are anyway, bard?” he taunted Gabrielle. “You think your private militia can do squat against the United States Government? I know how many people you’ve got on that overpriced party boat,” he snarled. “My guy in the coast guard filled me in. You’re no match for an actual strike team.”

Argo remained silent and Gabrielle began to move her hands, signing to Aphrodite who repeated the hand movements so Xena would know what she was saying. After a nod to Ed, they both slipped inside the cockpit, closing the door behind them.

Isra and Kismet looked up at their entry, the conversation playing out on a small screen to the side of the control console. “What can we do?” Kismet asked as her sister focused on piloting the jet.

“Gabrielle said to get the recoding – the parts that pertain to the military and Easton’s plans – to Brian Glass. He’s still in DC. Have Vox and Wolfgang edit out the other parts. She also said to signal the yacht. Contact Michelle Fender, Gabrielle wants *The Hippolyta* to get underway for Mexico. She thinks an attack by Easton’s people is imminent, so they need to be on high alert. When we land at LAX she said we’ll take the helicopter and catch up with them.”

“Is this guy insane?” Isra said, after checking in with air traffic control. “Some of the stuff he’s ranting about doesn’t make any sense. Ambrosia?”

Aphrodite and Ed briefly made eye contact before the goddess answered. “Let’s just say he’s speaking in metaphor. He’s a drug dealer among other things. It’s not going to make any sense to you, but Gabrielle knows what he’s talking about.”

The answer seemed to satisfy the twins, who nodded in unison. Aphrodite and Ed returned to the main cabin, staying within view of bard and warrior, but close to the cockpit door in case they needed to step inside again.

“Three days, tip of Baja – Cabo. The beach by the arch. You meet us there and we do the exchange,” Gabrielle said, her voice cool and controlled.

“I don’t think you’re in any position to call the shots,” Ares shot back. “Bring the ambrosia to DC. I like the city.”

“What you like is manipulating the power players in the capitol.” Gabrielle replied. “You want the ambrosia, meet us in Cabo.”

“Fuck you bard. I’m not doing what you want, you don’t have anything over me,” he growled, annoyed.

“I disagree,” Xena said her voice cold and calculating. “I’ve got Hephaestus’ hammer. Dying to try it out on something, like this dagger maybe.”

The smirk vanished from the God of War’s face, replaced by genuine anger and worry. “If you want this pair of bitches back in anything other than pieces, you’ll leave my dagger the fuck alone,” he warned. Argo barked once. He tugged on both of the leashes for emphasis. Getting her attention, the pit bull began to climb into his lap and lick his chin. With a frown, he pushed her off of his lap back on to the floor. “Stupid dog,” he muttered.

“Ares, I’m giving you a shot at fresh ambrosia. More powerful than the dried-out stuff you’ve been picking up off the floors of forgotten temples. It’s in Cabo, I know where. Take it or leave it. Three days,” Xena repeated. “We do the exchange, you get your ambrosia, the dog and the girl remain unharmed.” He was about to respond when she closed the laptop cutting the connection.

No one spoke for a moment. Gabrielle looked over to Aphrodite. “She’s fine,” the goddess reassured the bard. “I think Jennifer is fine too, she’s more frightened than Argo but for the time being I think they’re both safe.”

Gabrielle nodded, trying to calm by sheer force of will the tension she felt in her core. She was not only worried about her dog and the escort, but also her crew and godson. “You noticed that Argo didn’t bark when he talked about coming after the ship. We need to get back there as quickly as we can.”

“We need to have some kind of plan when we arrive as well,” Xena added with a sad smile.

“I agree,” Aphrodite said as she feverishly tapped away some messages on her phone before finally turning her attention to the bard and warrior.

To Gabrielle, it seemed a world away from her time with Xena in the bathtub. In reality, it had been barely over twenty-four hours. Ed and Aphrodite had resumed their seats in the recliners. She leaned back in the couch, Xena’s arm draped affectionately around her shoulders. Planning and strategizing with Xena at her side, she at least felt like they were working towards something positive and achievable.

Chapter 17: Boss Battle

“Are you ready, Moose?” Gabrielle asked as she straightened the ten-year old’s tie. He was dressed in a black suit which matched the black dress and heels his godmother was wearing. With a warm smile, Gabrielle smoothed his shoulders and drew him in for a hug, planting a kiss on the top of his head.

He had asked to get ready in her bedroom, having more room to lay out his suit and get assistance from the bard with his tie. Gabrielle knew it was for the large bath tub but she didn’t mind. She ironed the suit while he bathed, chatting with him as he was momentarily distracted from his sadness by the suds enhanced by the jets in the tub.

Once again Gabrielle was amazed at Aphrodite's efficacy and ability to motivate people to do the near impossible. When the jet had landed at LAX and they rushed to the helicopter, they were met by a courier from the Transportation division of Bardic & Company with Susan Yin's ashes in one container, a tremendous assortment of flowers in another, and the boy's suit and dress shoes in a garment bag. She'd looked in amazement at Aphrodite and the goddess shrugged "You gave me class one clearance," she had said as they climbed into the helicopter. "You also mentioned a funeral for Susan so I put two and two together and made some requests. I know people."

Ed and Xena had helped stow everything on the helicopter as they took off. Here, Xena's utter amazement wouldn't have been out of place even if Ed hadn't been read in on the warrior's history. "By the gods!" she exclaimed, looking out the window and marveling at the bard's ability to fly the craft.

Gabrielle smiled at the memory, drawn from her thoughts by the small hand that reached for hers and held on tightly. She and Shen left her quarters and made their way to bow of the yacht where the rest of the crew was assembled. There were a lot of reasons for the bard to be proud of her people and she was not shy about letting them know. But looking at the assembled faces she could not recall a better reason to be reassured in the choices she'd made in assembling her team. Gone was the vacation wear favored by her crew, all of them instead choosing suits; all the men and even several of the women opting for ties as well. Everyone looked their best out of respect for their fallen colleague as well as the young boy grappling with that loss. Even Bohemian was scarcely recognizable in his three-piece suit, tie, and his dreadlocks pulled back into a ponytail. Shen let go of the bard's hand and he took his place between his godmother and Aphrodite who was dressed in a subdued floral print. He hugged her briefly and nodded to Gabrielle to begin the service.

"I've known Susan a long time," Gabrielle began. "She was someone I looked up to, someone who's counsel and friendship I valued. She was loyal, to her family – her parents, to Tom and Trixie, to Shen and to me and this company. She believed in things beyond herself, the greater good, and felt those things were worth sacrifice. Susan valued every one of you. No one stands on this deck without meeting the highest standards in the Special Projects and Transportation divisions. Susan was proud and honored to consider all of you family, as am I. It is my intention to see her vision realized, to work towards a world where the good in people triumphs over evil. Knowing people like all of you and like Susan gives me hope that it is indeed a possibility." She looked down at the boy who had begun to cry, silent tears streaming down his face. "Did you want to add anything?" she asked him gently.

He sniffled, wiping his eyes with the handkerchief that Aphrodite had handed him. "There is something they say in the Spiderman movies and comics. That with great power comes great responsibility." He shrugged. "I think this applies. I am sad that my grandma is gone, but I am not sad that she died doing work that she believed in. I think she would have preferred that to just dying for some random reason. I am glad that I have all of you in my life. I don't think I could handle this without you guys." He nodded to indicate that he was finished. He returned to his place next to Gabrielle who put her arm around him and squeezed affectionately.

Hatsuo went next to describe what he admired most about Susan. Bohemian talked about what he would miss, Michelle talked about her fondness for cooking. Every

member of the crew took a couple of minutes to share a reminiscence about the woman, the impact she had on their lives, what they would miss, what they treasured.

Aphrodite spoke last. "I only met Susan recently," she began, looking out at the clear crisp day. They had stopped the ship for the ceremony, and the breeze was minimal, stopping completely as soon as Aphrodite started to speak. "She was warm and welcoming, kind, and funny. She had a lot of love in her heart and she treasured that love fiercely. The love and respect you all felt for her, she knew that, the united belief that you all share in the vision of a better world, she was with you there too. She worked the hours she did and as hard as she did because she enjoyed your company and was dedicated to your purpose. And she saw no better legacy she could leave Shen, then a world in better shape than she found it. That reality might be hard to fathom right now, but that's why it drove her. People never really leave us when they live in our memory, and when you think of the dead, the dead can hear your thoughts."

When she finished Xena began to sing and Gabrielle choked back tears at the sound. The notes struck a nearly forgotten chord with the bard, having heard the mournful and soothing tones while standing before so many funeral pyres. She could hear occasional snuffles from her crew and Shen wiped his eyes again before handing flowers to everyone. Then he and Gabrielle opened the container of ashes and the bard held him steady as he leaned over a section of railing and spilled the ashes into the ocean. With no breeze, they traveled neatly down. When he finished he took the bouquet of flowers that Aphrodite had been holding for him and tossed them overboard. Xena continued to sing while each mourner followed suit, then finishing the song and tossing over several sunflowers herself.

The ocean's current had moved the flowers as they were tossed and instead of a mass of flowers, they wound their way in a line from the the ship off into the distance. Shen watched them silently. Gabrielle knew that he was thinking about his mother, his father and his grandfather and etching the moment for his grandmother indelibly into his memory. It had been too much loss for a young boy and she was determined to protect him with everything she had. Susan Yin would have expected nothing less.

"What do you think, Moose?" Gabrielle asked, while the rest of the crew looked on.

The boy nodded then turned away from the flowers. "I think grandma would be happy with this. I think she'd want us to have the cookies and ice cream now." Gabrielle nodded approvingly and the group began to make their way to the tables set up with plates of cookies and bowls for the ice cream.

"Hey Shen," Vox said as she approached with Ed following behind her. "You did really good today kiddo." He nodded mutely and gave her a hug which had her wiping her eyes and shaking her head, determined not to cry. "I want you to meet a friend of mine, this is Ed."

Shen looked past the engineer to the large black man standing behind her, his eyes growing wide with amazement. "You're almost as big as The Hulk," he said, clearly in awe.

"Thank you?" Ed replied with a bashful grin as he extended his hand which did indeed look massive compared to the ten-year old's.

“Oh, it’s a compliment,” the boy clarified. “Anyone who is like an Avenger is cool in my book. Have you met Xena and Aphrodite? They’re kind of like super heroes too.”

“I have met them, I came in on the helicopter with them yesterday,” Ed supplied helpfully. “Gabrielle did an amazing job landing it on the yacht going as fast as it was.”

Shen nodded. “She’s like a superhero too. Are you going to join the ship’s crew? I can put in a good word with Gabrielle, she’s my godmother.”

Nervously Ed glanced from the boy to Gabrielle then bashfully caught the eye of both Xena then Aphrodite. “I’d like that Shen, thank you.”

Gabrielle smiled at the pair, then nodded to the ship’s captain who quickly came over. “We need to have a meeting as soon as people get their cookies and ice cream. I just need to get something out of storage, then we can start. Let’s get back underway, you can join us over the monitor. I want someone in the control room at all times.” Michelle nodded then glanced down at the boy. “Shen is going to join us for the first part of the meeting,” Gabrielle continued, “then maybe he can give Ed a tour of the ship since he’s going to be joining us.”

Nicolai had been standing nearby and approached upon hearing the conversation. “I have some clothes he can wear. Tuxedo is nice for funeral but unless he’s James Bond...”

“Thank you, Nicolai,” Gabrielle replied. “I do think you’re the only one onboard who has anything remotely in Ed’s size. I’m not sure where we’re going to have you sleep.”

The bodybuilder shook his head. “I got a couple hours sleep on the couch in the control room last night and it was fine. I’m more than happy there. Elaine got me a blanket and a pillow. Everyone has been great. I’m fine boss. Shen, why don’t you show me to the conference room while Gabrielle goes to storage?” Satisfied, Gabrielle nodded and left the group. She returned to the conference room a short time later with a metal briefcase and took the seat Shen had saved for her. He had chosen to sit between herself and Xena. It was a small gesture to be sure, but it seemed to the bard like the youngster was going out of his way to let both Xena and Aphrodite know that they were important to him.

When everyone was settled, Wolfgang shut the conference room door then activated the switch to indicate that the room was sealed. The screen of Gabrielle’s phone showed Michelle in the control room, watching the array of readouts, guiding the large yacht towards their destination.

“Okay, this first part of the meeting I wanted to include Shen, because we all need to be on the same page here,” she began, scanning the faces of her assembled crew. “Shen, in all honesty, *The Hippolyta* isn’t the safest place for you right now. The problem is, we are the safest people for you to be around so while I’m not happy about having to take you into battle, I wouldn’t want you surrounded by anyone else besides everyone in this very room. We are on our way to Mexico and whether it’s before we get there, or after we get there, we are going to be attacked. I wanted you to be in this part of the meeting because you have to know that everyone here would put their life on the line to protect you, because it’s what Susan would have wanted and because it *is* what I want. But you have to understand, that if you don’t do exactly what we ask you to do, even if you don’t want to – *especially* if you don’t want to – from now, until I give the ‘all-clear’,

not only would you be putting your own welfare at risk, you'd also be endangering anyone trying to help you. Even a delay of a minute or two could keep someone from being at the next place they needed to be, and that might be protecting someone else." Shen nodded solemnly and Gabrielle knew that her words were resonating. She suspected that the meeting coming on the heels of a funeral might have had something to do with it.

Gabrielle turned her attention to the rest of the crew. "From here on out, I want all of our security protocols followed, we are taking absolutely no chances. I want everyone armed and always stay in pairs. Wear your defensive gear and stay on the comms. Your downtime will be minimal, use it wisely. Easton's people will be a well-trained private militia force of black-ops, ruthless professionals. They won't hesitate to attack us at sea and they will try to slip on board and take people out using stealth. They may come by helicopter and it is not by mistake that we are leaving US waters. We will fare much better answering to the Mexican government if we are required to shoot at people, helicopters, boats, you name it." She knew her words were unnecessary; most of the team had been recruited from the military special operations and intelligence communities. This sort of situation is exactly what they were trained to deal with. Well, almost exactly, she corrected herself. She was pretty sure there weren't any training scenarios for going up against a god.

She turned her attention back to her godson. "Moose, I want you to take Ed on a tour of the ship, while we finish our meeting. Nicolai is going to go with you as well. I want you to inventory the food and water in the safe room. Make sure there is a laptop in there, some books, a pair of headphones. Make sure the bathroom in there, and everything else works. When the fight gets going – and I don't mean 'if' I mean 'when' – you are going to have to seal yourself in so we won't have to worry about you during the fighting. You will be able to communicate with us, but it's possible you may be in there for even a day or two or more. Honey, you are going to be a big target and we want to do everything we can to keep you out of the chaos, okay? If you were to leave the safe room, for any reason, even if you thought you were helping..."

Shen nodded, understanding the gravity of the situation. "If I were to leave, people would be taken away from the fight to protect me and that means they can't protect you, or help you. I *was* listening." Gabrielle nodded, beaming at the boy. "It's going to be okay," he added. "You'll see. And on our tour of the ship, we can stop at Nicolai's cabin so Ed can get some new clothes."

"Ed," Gabrielle said, turning her attention to the flight attendant. "Nicolai will brief you on the ship, and get you some gear. Wear your comm units so you both can hear the rest of the meeting." She hugged Shen briefly, and then sent him on his way. He took each of their hands, and the bard couldn't help smiling at the sweetness of it. He looked tiny, walking between the two hulking men.

Once they'd left and Wolfgang had resealed the room, she turned her attention to the rest of the crew. "I wasn't exaggerating for Shen's benefit. When we were in DC, we learned some things about Ares and his agenda. The guy has no qualms about starting World War Three. He's adamant about having no one – especially us – getting in the way of the insane Turner Administration. In addition to Argo, he has a woman named Jennifer as hostage. She doesn't have anything to do with this, and doesn't need to be involved."

“We will arrive in Mexico the day after tomorrow, at first light. Do we know when Ares will get there?” Michelle asked, after consulting her tablet for an updated ETA.

“Ares is going to arrive at the beach by land, and he’s going to want to have the fight after dark.” Xena replied casually. “We need to have this fight in during the day.”

“How can you know that?” Hatsuo asked, frowning slightly.

The warrior shrugged. “It makes the most sense. He can have more people around him, and he will make less of a scene when he gets there by arriving overland. As for nighttime, he doesn’t want to do any of the things he’s doing in the open. He has always been more comfortable pulling the strings from behind the scenes. Or under the cover of darkness, in this case.”

“An armada of ships going after a pleasure yacht is going to get people’s attention,” Aphrodite added. “Whereas a caravan of SUVs isn’t as out of place.”

“So, we meet him on the beach.” Bohemian said, then asked, “What then?”

“Not so fast,” Gabrielle interjected. “Xena, Aphrodite, and I will go ashore, and we will take three people with us. I want the rest of you on *The Hippolyta*, protecting Shen and this ship.” She looked at the faces of her crew and decided upon her next course of action. “Vox and Wolfgang – the two of you will stay onboard on the comms with Brian Glass in DC. He has agreed to serve as an informal liaison between his agency and us. We can probably get some satellite imagery from him. Nicolai, you are staying onboard, close to Shen. The rest of you are free to volunteer to go ashore, no judgement if you feel that your talents are better spent onboard.”

It was no surprise that every hand went up around the table. Gabrielle picked up her phone to text Xena and Aphrodite and confer with them about who should accompany them, but put the phone down, deciding this decision was hers alone. She knew the crew better than they did; if things went wrong, she did not want them to share the responsibility.

Gabrielle took a breath and made her decision. “Sarah, Elaine, and Ed – the three of you will join us. Get suited up. Ingrid, I want you to review every extreme protocol about this ship. Every trap, every strength, every weakness. I want every one of Ares’ people to regret ever setting foot onboard.”

“Yes, boss.” She replied.

“Bo, I’d like you and your sniper rifle on the top deck watching over us, but that will leave you exposed.”

The tall man nodded and gave Gabrielle a boyish smirk. “I guarantee I’m a better shot than they are. I got your back.”

Steve Hagstrom, the bosun raised his finger. “What’s the plan? Besides trying to get Ares to show himself in daylight.” Gabrielle opened her mouth to speak, then hesitated, so he added, “I’m prepared for it to sound completely insane.”

The chuckles that followed put everyone at ease. The bard glanced at her companions to her right and left before opening the briefcase and continuing. “At some point, we need Ares on the beach, hopefully one void of civilians. We need to rescue the hostage, get Argo back and catch him in a shockwave that we expect to be generated by Hephaestus’ hammer hitting Xena’s chakram.” As she mentioned the two items, she withdrew them from the padded metal briefcase, along with Ares’ sheathed dagger.

“I thought those weren’t on the ship?” Michelle asked in surprise.

“We were outside when the subject came up and I was worried about drones listening in, not about you, Captain.” Gabrielle said reassuringly.

“Here is the stamp of Hephaestus, we talked about up on the deck.” She indicated a small initial on one side of the chakram.

“And the dagger?” Ingrid Kamaka asked, warily eyeing the dagger. “It has his power, yeah? Shouldn’t we try to destroy it?” The suggestion by the ship’s mechanic was met by several nods of agreement around the table.

Xena shook her head. “No way will he release the hostage without it. He doesn’t care about Jennifer one way or the other, but I think he will release her when he gets the knife, as a sign of good faith for something he wants more. He’ll probably try to keep Argo for...leverage.” She was about to say ‘ambrosia’ but decided against it.

“So, the crew going ashore...?” Prisha Washburn ventured.

“Elaine will be with Aphrodite, Ed with Xena, and Sarah with me. The three of us,” she indicated herself, Xena and the goddess, “will need to be separated. We need to get Jennifer out and to safety. Aphrodite, that’s your mission. Between me and Xena, one of us will throw the chakram, the other will throw the hammer.”

“Argo might be able to provide a helpful distraction at that moment,” the goddess offered.

“When the hammer hits the chakram the blast should hurt Ares and anyone else close to him, which is why we want to keep him isolated. We have to do this from a distance – and we only get one shot at it.” Gabrielle explained.

“Nope, this doesn’t sound impossible at all.” Bohemian added, wincing as Vox kicked him under the table.

“I admit it isn’t perfect,” the bard confessed, trying to sound more confident than she felt. “But believe me when I say Xena and I have pulled off plans that seemed even more impossible than this. I want everyone to suit up. Get in those last-minute drills, check weapons, traps, surveillance everything.”

As Gabrielle stood, Aphrodite put a gentle hand on her forearm, “We need to have a chat,” she said. When the bard glanced at Xena, she added, “Privately, if that’s okay.”

“Do you want to go to my study? It’s secure.”

“How about a nice stroll on deck?” the goddess countered. “I enjoy the sunshine.”

“Sure,” Gabrielle agreed, still unsure of the topic. “Xena?”

The warrior grinned and nodded towards the group making their way out of the conference room. “It’s okay,” she assured the bard. “I want to see what’s in the armory and get a tour of the ship from a military point of view. You will...” she searched for the right phrase, “text me when you guys are done?”

Gabrielle nodded and kissed the warrior quickly before following the goddess from the conference room.

They strolled in silence for several minutes before Gabrielle nudged Aphrodite’s shoulder. “Out with it,” she said finally.

“I’m trying to put my thoughts in order.”

Gabrielle chuckled. “Honey, it’s me. You don’t have to be elegant. And you are kind of freaking me out with your seriousness.”

Aphrodite stopped walking, leaned against the deck railing, and looked out at the expanse of blue. Turning back to her companion, she smiled and looked into a face furrowed in concern.

“Gabrielle...” The goddess was ever the fan of endearments, so the bard was surprised to hear her call her by name. Aphrodite was as serious as she had ever seen her.

“Admitting vulnerability is not really my cup of tea. But this is important and we need to address it.” Gabrielle stayed silent, letting the goddess take her time. “I can’t directly attack Ares and he can’t attack me, you know that part. He can’t be hurt by anything on this ship, except the chakram, the hammer, his dagger, you, and Argo.” She noted Gabrielle look of surprise, so explained, “Back on the beach in Mexico, when you tasted my blood? It allows you pierce a barrier of sorts. Not just into my feelings, but physically as well. For example, if we were still fucking and you scratched my back, you’d actually leave a scratch now, or a hickey or whatever.” She shrugged, having made her point. “If Argo were angry and bit me, I’d suffer a dog bite. I’d heal, mind you, but not quickly, unless I’d had ambrosia.”

“Argo?” Gabrielle asked wondering how the ability transferred to her dog.

“I wasn’t planning on that.” Aphrodite admitted. “After...you know...you were in a thrall of sorts and fell over. Argo rushed over to see if you were okay, and you know how dogs are about licking wounds. I could communicate with her before, of course, but it’s much easier now. I also think she might live a bit longer than average for a dog her size.”

Gabrielle stood there frozen, mulling over the multitude of thoughts that cascaded through her mind. She had seen Aphrodite this exposed and vulnerable once before, during a night filled with sex that had left her nearly comatose; gazing down as she’d straddled the goddess, but this was for an entirely different reason.

“Why?” she finally asked. “Did you know this would happen? With me, I mean. I get that Argo was an accident.”

The Goddess of Love looked uncomfortable; clearly this level of candor was distressing. She took a deep breath before answering.

I was so caught up in the power and memories, in that moment I didn’t explain what was going to happen, which would’ve given you the opportunity for informed consent.” She sighed and shrugged in defeat, “I also didn’t want to deal with the rejection if you said no. In hindsight, it was not fair of me to do that. I owe you an apology.”

And there it was. Aphrodite loved her, truly loved her. Gabrielle suddenly felt as if a psychic fog lifted from over herself and the goddess. As quickly as the clarity came, it ushered in the realization that this was a responsibility the bard had not anticipated, and the immensity of this settled as a tangible weight on her shoulders.

She didn’t say anything, merely offered her arm to the goddess and they continued to stroll towards the ship’s bow. They were nearly there before the bard spoke.

“Aphrodite. I’m not sorry you did it. I am not sorry at all.” She left it there. Trying to put to words her love for the goddess, how much she meant to Gabrielle felt too much like leading her on.

“Something tells me that if we weren’t about to battle Ares, you wouldn’t be mentioning this at all,” she observed.

“Correct,” Aphrodite confirmed. “Some things can simply be felt without discussion. And this isn’t my favorite kind of chat.”

“But you want us to have every advantage where Ares is concerned? Is this why you weren’t worried about Argo? Because she can protect herself?”

The goddess nodded. “Ares can hurt her. She hasn’t had ambrosia. But, she can hurt him and he doesn’t know that. He knows his dagger can hurt him, and he is vulnerable to the chakram, which I’m sure he suspects you have. Xena has told him about the hammer. We don’t have a lot of surprises on our side. We will have to use them wisely. I have no idea if he realizes what will happen when the chakram and hammer collide.”

They were standing at the bow, just past the helipad where the Bardic & Company helicopter was secured. Gabrielle looked up at the goddess as a strange thought came to her.

“Xena and I aren’t the same, are we? This is about that as well, isn’t it?”

Aphrodite favored her with one of her radiant smiles. “Dear one, you and Xena are many things, but ‘the same’ isn’t one of them.”

“You know what I mean,” Gabrielle persisted.

“I do, and you’re right. Xena is starting her life over in many respects. She has the essence, if you will, of three Olympians. Sure, you’ve both had ambrosia, but you consumed it while still a mortal human. What puts you on a more even footing with her is that you also now have the essence of one Olympian in your system.”

Aphrodite looked out at the ocean. A joke about ‘fluid bonding’ came to her; she opted for more honesty instead. “You don’t have the same abilities as Xena, but you both have abilities beyond that of other mortals. Let’s face it, to some degree you are beyond Xena. You’ve put in more training and studying into honing your skills than she ever did because you could. In some respects, you are now, essentially, Ares’ equal, and because of this, he is underestimating you. This is a definite advantage for our current situation. But besides that, the bigger take away is that you don’t need the essence of gods to be beyond other people, or closer to gods – the life you’ve lived has done that. Keep eating ambrosia in small quantities, and you and Xena could end up like me.”

Gabrielle was fairly certain that her heart didn’t stop beating, it just felt that way. The Goddess of Love just offered her a pathway to godhood. She searched for the words to form a response. Finding none, she instead took a step closer to the goddess and hugged her, trying to pour all the love and affection she felt for her into that simple gesture.

“Let’s kick that can down the road for a few hundred years and revisit it later, okay?” she finally said into Aphrodite’s shoulder. She felt the soft chuckle thrum through the goddess’ body in response and smiled. To have not one, but two great loves in her life at the same time was incredibly humbling.

Pleased, but not surprised that the crew had waited for the two of them to return before serving breakfast, Gabrielle made a point to sit at the table with the ship’s attorney, Rebekah Luna. Shen nudged her playfully and asked if he could eat with Vox, Bo, Ed, Nicolai and Wolfgang. She watched him go as Aphrodite and Xena joined her at the table with the attorney and Ingrid, the mechanic.

“We need to talk,” Gabrielle said shifting her gaze from her godson to the lawyer. “I hear you’re feeling redundant.”

Rebekah smiled. “In Michelle and Elaine’s cabin, there’s a chart tracking the pool to identify all of your professions. I put ‘lawyer’ up there myself.” There was no sarcasm or judgement in her voice; rather, she conveyed a sense of profound respect for her boss’ capabilities.

“That I’ve passed a state bar gives me a greater appreciation for someone who has a passion for, and is practicing the law. Look, seven of us have a captain’s licenses, but there is only ever one captain at a time on this ship. I own *The Hippolyta*, but if Michelle tells me to do something, I do it.” Aphrodite chuckled and Gabrielle shot her a warning glance. “Besides,” Gabrielle continued, “I need you to get in touch with someone from the Mexican President’s office in Mexico City. Explain what is going on – minus the more fantastical parts, just stick to the facts in evidence – that will be enough to secure her administration’s cooperation. Maria Huerta is no fan of Turner, and she’ll be held responsible if that beach isn’t cleared of tourists.”

The attorney nodded, agreeing with the bard’s reasoning. She thought for a moment. “We might be able to get a video meeting with the president and Susan Vincent, if she’s speaking for Gabrielle Evans.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. If you can get that set up, I’ll put on something appropriate and we can do the chat from my office.”

“See if there is a way that the President can choke off Ares from the bulk of his force,” Xena chimed in. “Ares will probably be in the first third of his army. He’s too cautious to be in front, but too arrogant to bring up the rear. Have Ares and a small force go through, then close off the access roads and create a long detour for the rest.”

Glancing towards the bow, azure blue eyes focused on the helicopter parked up there. “When we get closer, you might want to do a reconnaissance flight. Get a better sense of his potential routes.”

“Has anyone contacted Poseidon?” Ingrid asked, having finished her pancakes. “I mean you’re going up against a god with a god, but you’d think you’d want as many gods as you can get your hands on, right?” The way she said it made it sound like she was suggesting wearing a flowered shirt to a luau, but the glances exchanged between Gabrielle, Xena and Aphrodite made it clear the statement was profound.

“Do you think he’d help?” Xena asked.

“Uncle Ariel? He couldn’t have skittered off that beach fast enough when he heard Ares was in the mix,” Aphrodite said with disgust.

“We should at least reach out,” Gabrielle countered. “Give him the opportunity to help. He recently contacted us for a new identity, we have an easier way to contact him than his usual spy-craft protocols.”

“I can reach out,” Rebekah suggested. “I can let him know where we’re at and what’s going to happen. But will he believe it’s really from us? He seems paranoid.”

“Tell him I mentioned Nerites.” Aphrodite said. “And if he’s being stubborn tell him to do it for Rhodos and Herophilos.” Ingrid looked confused, so she continued. “Nerites was my first love. I turned him into a shellfish because he broke my heart. It’s not something I tell a lot of people.” She shot a small grin at Gabrielle before continuing, “I handle rejection much better now. Anyway, Rhodos and Herophilos are the two daughters I had with Poseidon.” Ingrid dropped her fork, which clattered on her plate and fell to the deck. Several people at other tables looked over, and Aphrodite frowned at the mechanic.

“I know what you’re thinking, and I don’t blame you for being horrified. For sure, incest is bad, and wrong, horrific, and all the other awful adjectives. That’s a big ‘duh’. And while I don’t owe you an explanation or apology, put yourself in my place. You are part of a handful of immortals. There aren’t a lot of options out there for you, or many

people who understand you, or can deal with you on your level. My culture pre-existed yours by several thousand years, and we didn't have the same taboos you do now, so judging me by your standards today is rather unfair. Don't get me wrong, you have your taboos for very good reason and should keep them in place. I wish all mortals were as horrified as you. "Anyway, I'd had an affair with Ares. Yes, that Ares. Poseidon helped me out and..." she shrugged, then reached across the table, and since it clearly wasn't getting eaten at this point, speared the mechanic's last pancake with her fork, transferring it to her plate and digging in.

"Come on, we were all consenting adults here..."

"I think it's that she's still getting over mythology being more history than myth," Rebekah observed.

"Whatever," Aphrodite replied. "Tell Ariel he owes me and he really should help us. The world that Ares wants isn't going to be any fun for him."

"It's going to get a lot worse," Gabrielle added. "I've no doubt Poseidon feels the devastation of climate change and what's happening in the oceans more profoundly than any of us. For that reason alone, he should be in favor of people that want a different world than the one Ares wants."

The lawyer nodded in agreement and stood. "I think I've got enough to draft a persuasive missive to Mr. Waters. Do you want to see it before I send it?"

Gabrielle smiled in appreciation. "Don't wait for me. You know what you're doing. I'm going to meet with everyone on board, review every facet of our current plans. If you need anything, you know how to reach me. When I'm done, I'll meet with you in my office to talk to President Huerta."



Xena peered through her night vision goggles down at the ground below as Gabrielle smoothly brought the helicopter around. There was no sign of Ares but they still opted to not to use the search light and risk giving away their presence. While the helicopter could be heard, it would be difficult for anyone on the ground to locate them without the right equipment.

"Right there," the warrior said over the headset comms, "just a little to the right, see it? That road is the quickest route to the beach."

"Does it look like there room for several jeeps to get to the beach abreast of each other? Or will they have to go single file?" Gabrielle asked

The warrior frowned, considering. "Jeeps are the width of the cars we passed on our way over here?"

"More or less."

"They could get three abreast on the road in places and on the beach. But there's some big rocks that they will have to break formation to navigate. Can you take us over to the cliff where Aphrodite tossed my urn?"

It sounded so strange to Xena; *her* urn, *her* ashes. That she'd been dead was still a hard one to swallow. Then she realized it wasn't any stranger than what she'd experienced of late: Traveling from one side of a country to another in a matter of hours, moving around in the air like a dragonfly in a helicopter, traveling the ocean in a floating palace, and seeing Gabrielle, her Gabrielle, in charge of an elite army. Absently, she wondered if Aphrodite was right; she had come back different somehow. She didn't feel

different, but she had made a choice to learn from past experience, and that included taking the risk to be more open with Gabrielle. Was that due to Aphrodite's influence or just maturity?

Further introspection would have to wait as something in the water caught her eye. She refocused the binoculars at the base of the narrow outcrop and watched as a number of stingrays fed on squid close to the surface of the water. She felt unsarcastically protective of them.

Gabrielle's voice broke into her reverie. "One of us needs to get Ares up on that ledge and shove him off, while the other will throw their weapon from below. Do you want to throw the hammer or the chakram?" She maneuvered down towards the cliff for a closer look.

"Do you have a preference?" Xena asked, noting how narrow the formation over the water was and how sharp the rocks below looked.

"I spent more than a decade in Egypt throwing your chakram around. I'm more comfortable with that."

Xena nodded "I'll take the hammer. You know, we're going to be pretty exposed on the beach. There really isn't any kind of cover. They've got the rocks, and your ship is going to be moored too far out to help much. Will they have the same weapons they used in DC? The guns?"

Gabrielle nodded, "You can count on that. But they'll be using automatic weapons, which means more bullets a lot faster. We're going to need as much chaos as we can muster when the fighting starts. Have you seen enough?" she asked, checking the fuel gauge. The warrior nodded. "I'm going to fly low over a couple of other areas on our way back, if anyone is watching us, I want there to be several places they think we're interested in, not just this part of the beach."

Xena nodded in agreement, putting the binoculars down and watching the bard's movements with wonder. "Do you want to take the stick?" Gabrielle asked, guiding the craft higher. She read the look of apprehensive excitement on the warrior's face as an affirmative. She guided Xena's hand to the control stick, covering it with her own and showing her how the control resulted in movement of the craft. Words were not needed. Like its own language, Gabrielle could feel her thoughts transmitted to her lover via touch. While she knew it technically wasn't so, there was no denying the unique electricity that passed between them that she'd never encountered with anyone else. After a few moments, she removed her hand, deciding the look of joy and wonder on Xena's face as she guided the craft was one of the most radiant sights she'd ever seen.

They spent the next hour surveying several other prominent places along the Cabo San Lucas coastline. She had Xena mark the map with places to moor *The Hippolyta* to facilitate moving between the yacht and beach. After a smooth touchdown on the helicopter pad, the ship continued on towards the tip of the Baja peninsula. They were met by Ed and Steve, who secured the vehicle. Michelle was also waiting for them at the landing pad.

"Any sign of company?" Gabrielle asked, removing her headset and dropping it back into the cockpit.

The captain shook her head. "Nothing yet. Aphrodite said she's going to keep watch tonight. She's in the command center at the moment and has been making frequent rounds on deck because she can tell if anyone approaches – by boat, under water, or air.

She's our very best defense at the moment." Gabrielle noticed any attraction the captain felt for the goddess was absent from this conversation. She was discussing a valued member of the crew who had a unique skillset.

Gabrielle nodded, understanding. "Did she say anything else?"

Only now did Michelle Fender blush. "She said to get some rest...eventually. Tomorrow is going to be a big day. Don't overdo it." The captain shrugged apologetically.

"It's fine." Gabrielle assured her. "Let me know when we get there and I'll be on deck shortly thereafter, unless something happens. If anything seems amiss, do not hesitate to wake me. What about Shen?"

"Nicolai and Ed are taking turns staying with him. He can get to the safe hold from his quarters in less than thirty seconds. Twenty-two seconds is his average to get in and seal the hold. His best time is seventeen seconds." With a nod and a thankful smile, Gabrielle dismissed the captain.

"There is nothing more you can do tonight," Xena gently suggested. "You should get some rest...eventually." the last part was in a seductive whisper as she walked past the bard, who couldn't follow her to their cabin fast enough.



The sky was bleak; the air heavy with moisture and the sea spray cold. The idyllic day of Xena's resurrection seemed like a lifetime ago as the away team sped towards the beach in the Zodiac. Gabrielle adjusted the brim of her baseball hat and sunglasses, then reached around to feel for the chakram, safely secured in a reinforced pocket at her back. Her ship was moored as close to the rock outcrop as its size would allow, and all of Gabrielle's crew members were dressed for battle and in position. Bohemian Van Lyle, his marksmanship on par with Gabrielle's, watched over them through his sniper rifle scope from his perch on *The Hippolyta*. Michelle Fender monitored everything from the command center; Wolfgang Fowler, navigator and engineer Vox Wandre were manning communications with Gabrielle's away team, as well as other divisions in the company. Steve Hagstrom, the bosun, was in the engine room with Ingrid Kamaka ready to spring any number of traps when the ship was eventually boarded. Hatsuo Eko, the chief of security, was watching the monitors in the control room, coordinating with the crew and Transportation Forces in Mexico. Nicolai Burns was armed to the teeth and standing guard near the safe hold. The rest of the crew, stewards Blake Taylor and Samantha Ramirez, navigator Prisha Washburn, and lawyer Rebekah Luna, were making frequent sweeps of the ship, watching for the invaders they knew were coming.

She surveyed her away team; the XO, Elaine Jackson, chef Sarah Gibson, and flight attendant Ed Schecter, looked every inch the elite fighting force she knew them to be. Their uniforms, the color of sand, rendered them dangerous visions in beige. However, while the military grade tactical armor might help protect her and her crew from Ares' men, she knew better than to believe their Kevlar or weapons would do anything against the god. She reached back again to touch the chakram, reassured by its presence.

She signaled to Xena and Aphrodite using American sign language, although the mic and earpiece she wore could have transmitted her voice just as well. "*Should we get our hands on some actual ambrosia?*"

Aphrodite signed back. *“It’s a gamble either way. If he gets his hands on it, he will eat it immediately. But it is the one solid bargaining chip you have. And it’s not like I’d let it go to waste - if we can keep it from him.”* She smiled.

“I think I have a solution for that.” Xena signed, moving her hands as efficiently as if she’d been speaking ASL for years. *“I’ll meet up with you guys on shore, but you’ll need to stall Ares until I get there. Do not speak about ambrosia. It’s a sure bet Poseidon doesn’t want anyone to know what ambrosia is or where it comes from.”*

Aphrodite looked genuinely stung by the words so Gabrielle added quickly, *“Clearly you aren’t just anyone.”*

“Thank you, dear,” She replied aloud.

“Be careful, please.” Gabrielle said. Xena winked, then tipped herself backwards out of the boat. Ed, guiding the tiller of the motor, looked over to the bard in surprise.

“She’s okay,” Gabrielle reassured him, Sarah and Elaine, both of whom had looked back at the splash. “She will meet up with us on the beach.” He shrugged and continues steering the inflatable through the choppy water.

“There, on shore,” Elaine called out pointing as she peered through binoculars. “Four jeeps.”

Gabrielle looked in the direction her XO was pointing at the vehicles making their way across the sand to intersect with their trajectory. “Can you count the passengers?” adding, “Wolfie, what have you got for me?”

“Vox has the drone in the air and Glass on the line. He knocked the satellite offline, said the wrong people were using the data. You’ve got four jeeps which came off the road like Xena predicted. Ares sent two guys up the cliff in back, snipers no doubt. Vox counts eighteen people on the beach, plus Ares, Argo, and the other hostage.” He was quiet a moment, then said something in Spanish into another mic. “We’re getting word from the Mexican government that they’ve choked off the rest of the convoy,” he explained to her. “Transportation arrived and are assisting local authorities in keeping an additional ten jeeps from joining the first four. Bottom line, you’ve got nineteen hostiles, not sixty.”

“Ares is in the third vehicle,” Aphrodite added. “That will be the one with the hostages. I can feel that he’s got men in the water too, no doubt to board your ship as soon as we engage on shore. There are a lot of men in the water, I’d say about thirty.”

Gabrielle nodded. Not the best news, but not unexpected. “You copy Wolfie?”

“Roger that, boss.”

“Any sign of Ariel?” she asked the goddess, grateful that even if Ares’ people were listening, they wouldn’t know who she was talking about. Aphrodite sadly shook her head.

The Zodiac rode a final wave into shore and Elaine and Sarah jumped out to pull the boat onto the sand. As they’d expected, they were completely exposed on the beach, but she’d determined their best option was to not look like a threat. Before leaving the Zodiac, Gabrielle glanced one last time down at the host of weapons stowed on the bottom of the inflatable, then made an obvious show of taking the gun from her shoulder holster, from her leg holster, and her ankle holster and leaving them in the boat. She still had two smaller sidearms well-concealed against her back. Aphrodite was dressed in the same sand colored tactical clothing, minus the gear and weapons. Ed, Elaine, and Sarah stayed with the boat, armed, their hands visible.

Bard and goddess walked the short distance onto the sand. They stopped midway between Ares' jeeps and the Zodiac and waited. There was a pop in her earpiece and some static. Then Wolfgang's voice cut through briefly, "They're trying to jam our signal boss. Red Dragon secure..."

"Launch now," Gabrielle replied. "Copy?"

"Rog—" and the signal went dead. Confident that the company-wide assault against the God of War was underway, she could only hope that their efforts to jam signals between Ares and his forces were proving as successful as his assault against hers. A heartbeat of worry descended and she thought about her people in harm's way but she purposefully put that to the side. Adequately warned and advised, the only thing to do now was respect the decision made by her people. She glanced behind her, wishing Xena were there.

"Not one, but two irritating blonds," Ares greeted them, confidently crossing the distance from his jeep. Like his men, he was dressed in black tactical military garb; he wore an assortment of weapons, and his short-cropped hair and Oakley sunglasses completed the picture of an alt-right mercenary

"And don't you two look butch? I'm pretty sure only one of you is supposed to be the man." He smirked. In one hand, he held Argo's leash; a gun pointed at the dog's head in the other. In the jeep, three mercenaries held guns on the escort who looked terrified. "Where is Xena?" he demanded as he came up to them, towering over Gabrielle. "Or did you chase her off to keep this piece of ass all to yourself?" he asked his sister with a suggestive leer.

Aphrodite rolled her eyes, "And people wonder where lesbians come from," she replied dismissively. Reaching into the pocket on her thigh, a number of Ares' men raised their guns. She shot her brother an annoyed glare and he waved his hand to forestall his men. She extracted Ares sheathed dagger.

"We are prepared to do some deal making, if you think you can stop being a dick for five minutes, which I realize is a stretch."

"It's not too late to switch sides, ya know," he replied, ignoring the barb. "Your interests align better with mine than theirs. Long lived perhaps, but they're still mortal. And give me back my fucking knife."

"Not until you release Jennifer," Gabrielle said.

A single shot into the surf punctuated the bard's demand, the retort echoing off the cliffs and capturing their attention. The God of War raised his fist to stop any additional shooting. The bard turned her head to see Xena striding confidently out of the surf towards them. She was soaked, but didn't seem to mind at all.

"That's far enough Xena," Ares called before the warrior reached the other two. "Where is my ambrosia?"

"Let the woman go and we'll talk," she replied smoothing her hair back from her face.

He seemed to do a quick calculation in his head, then signaled to his men.

"Let the bitch go," he shouted. "That one anyway," he added, smirking and casually gesturing behind him without ever taking his eyes off Xena.

Aphrodite stepped forward to meet Jennifer as she was roughly shoved out of the vehicle. She followed behind the frightened woman as they made their way towards the

Zodiac, blocking her from attack from the beach. When they neared the Zodiac, she signaled Elaine, who moved forward to intercept her.

“That’s far enough,” Ares shouted with a glare at Xena. “No one moves any farther until I get my knife, the ambrosia, and the hammer.” For emphasis, he jerked on the dog’s leash.

Xena noted Jennifer’s distance from the Zodiac, shielded as she was by Aphrodite, Elaine between them and the boat. Sarah Gibson was focused on Xena, Ed was focused on Gabrielle. They weren’t in much of a position to argue. Xena nodded to Aphrodite, who tossed the sheathed dagger to The God of War. He caught it easily, then stowed it in a cargo pocket on his pants.

“The ambrosia is up on the cliff.” Xena nodded towards the tall arch down the beach. “Climb the cliff; it’s under a rock at the edge of the arch. I’ll go with you. When you have the ambrosia, you signal your men to let the dog go, then I’ll give you the hammer.” She patted the ancient weapon resting against her thigh, clipped to a belt loop by the leather strap.

He smiled, revealing a row of perfect teeth. “Not so fast Xena. Change of plans. Your brat stays here on the beach. I’m bringing the dog, my sister and you up the cliff, and you three.” He nodded at the three men who had ridden in the jeep with him. “Any funny business from you, and all your new friends get riddled with bullets.”

“Take me instead of Aphrodite,” Gabrielle suggested.

Ares chuckled, his expression indicating he found her suggestion truly funny. “Um. Fuck no. You’re annoying.” Stepping aside with a formal bow and grand sweep of his hand, he added, “After you, ladies.”

Gabrielle briefly met Xena’s eyes as she headed towards the cliff. The bard’s eyes pled for caution; the warrior’s eyes returned reassurance. Having already repeatedly restated their love for each other in a variety of positions the night before, this moment was about the mission. Through years of adventures it had developed into the signature strength between the warrior and bard. Not the necessity to keep their love affair separate from their frequently life-threatening mission of fighting for the greater good, but rather their love affair sustaining and strengthening their ability to do so. Xena and Gabrielle were not the battling force of nature in spite of being lovers, but because of it. Still, the frustration she saw there was genuine. This was not going according to their plan, but some improvisation was always to be expected.

Absently, the bard wondered if Ares knew that she could hurt him. Certainly he knew that Aphrodite couldn’t, but then he couldn’t hurt her either, so that was something. Knowing that there wasn’t anything she could do about Ares for the time being, she focused on the imminent battle before her. She noted the positions of the remaining men in the jeeps and the two snipers concealed on the cliff. Calculating the angles in a heartbeat, she made her best guess as to where they’d be positioned. The briefest glance told her that Ares’ men had varying degrees of readiness and experience. Some had their hands on their weapons, some did not. There was no doubt that Ed, Sarah and Elaine were making the same assessments themselves. With her hands at her sides she casually tapped at a switch in her pocket. In her earpiece, it sounded like breaks in the static but all of her people knew Morse Code. For now, she would watch and wait, choosing the moment to make her move.

Xena led the way to the cliff, followed by Aphrodite then Ares holding Argo's leash, with Ares' men bringing up the rear. She moved as quickly as she dared, wanting to keep the god close behind and knowing it was only a matter of time until the men on the beach started shooting.

"Nice of your bard to disarm before joining me on the beach," he said conversationally, picking his way up the cliff. "Not that I give a shit, mortals are expendable – that's why they're mortals."

"One of the many reasons why you suck and Gabrielle rocks," Aphrodite muttered as she climbed.

"I don't get it, sis," Ares chuckled, "you and Xena with the brat? If I'd known you were into threesomes..."

"Watch your step," Xena cautioned, changing the subject after kicking some rocks loose. She reached the top of the narrow ledge and turned, keeping a careful eye on Argo as she went, Ares following her. Aphrodite joined her next and Ares motioned the two of them to stand back before cresting the thin rock outcrop himself.

"Here's how this goes," the warrior continued casually. "You signal your expendable thugs to let Gabrielle take Jennifer the rest of the way to safety. I tell you where the ambrosia is and you release the dog. You've already got your knife as a sign of good will. When it's all done, you get the hammer. Simple."

Ares looked down the cliff towards his men on the beach then regarded the woman confronting him and did a quick mental calculation. He nodded once and whistled sharply twice; the man who'd previously released the escort nodded at Gabrielle.

"Quickly," the bard urged the frightened woman towards the Zodiac as she followed.

"Where is it?" Ares demanded, wasting no time.

"At the end of the outcrop," the warrior replied. "Under a rock."

He motioned for his three men to stand in between himself and the women as he searched the rocks at the end of the narrow rocky cliff, the water fifty feet below them. The powerful crashing of the surf against the rock beat out a steady rhythm, interrupted by his victorious roar as he found something under a rock. He held it up victoriously, making sure the Goddess of Love could see. Uncertainly, Aphrodite looked at Xena, who didn't seem concerned. He popped the morsel in his mouth and grinned broadly. "That's what I'm talking about," he crowed around the mouthful of ambrosia.

Ares scarcely had time to savor his moment before everything went sideways. Two things happened simultaneously: A commotion down the beach at the most distant jeep was punctuated by several shots ringing out, drawing Xena and both god's attention to the scene below. Gabrielle and Elaine raced to shield Jennifer as she made the last few steps to the Zodiac, hiding behind a shield Ed had pulled from the inflatable. The bard drew one of the guns from her back and returned fire, as did Ed, Elaine, and Sarah. As the bard turned to grab a rifle from the inflatable boat, sunlight flashed off the metal at her back; the chakram had cut its way out of the reinforced pocket on her tactical jacket.

"What the..." Recognizing the metallic glint, Ares roared in anger from the top of the outcrop and screamed down to his men, "KILL HER – KILL THAT FUCKING BRAT!"

Aphrodite whistled. Argo, calmly standing next to the God of War on her leash, turned and bit him at the knee. Ares bellowed in pain and Xena used the brief distraction

to disarm the guard closest to her. The second guard shot Aphrodite, who didn't even flinch as the bullet simply hit her and fell to the ground. The two guards looked down at the flattened lead slug, confused and unsure of their next move. There was another roar of pain and anger as Argo bit down Ares' hand as he was reaching down to pry her vice-like jaws from his leg. This was the dog's undoing; the powerful god flung his arm with enough force to send her flying over the cliff, falling 20 feet to the rocks below. She yelped once and lay still.

From Gabrielle's vantage point, she could see that something was happening on the outcrop but couldn't tell exactly what. She saw something falling partway down the cliff and put her fear aside as to who or what it was. She also saw two bodies tumble down the cliff across from her, above the jeeps. The snipers. She let the chakram slip into her hand from the pocket at her back and waited.

Aphrodite's eyes blazed with fury as she saw the dog thrown down the cliff and charged her brother. Xena was about to rush at Ares to shove him over the cliff and send the hammer after him when the Goddess of Love ran past her, screaming and hurling both herself and the God of War to the water below. The warrior glanced down to the beach, looking for the bard, and the chakram she knew would be headed towards the falling siblings. She was not disappointed. Muscle memory unconsciously calculated the precise geometry necessary for the hammer to meet the chakram. She let the heavy hammer fly with all her might, knowing that in the next heartbeat she would be hit by bullets from the two guards she hadn't disarmed. There was a bright flash and loud a bang as the hammer hit its mark, smashing the chakram to fragments.

Xena braced for impact from the guard's weapons, wincing as two shots rang out in rapid succession. Both armed guards dropped lifeless to the ground, one close enough to the edge of the cliff that his lifeless body rolled over the edge. Looking down at the beach below, Xena could see Gabrielle lowering her rifle and switching to her handgun as she'd changed her focus to the men in the jeeps. The bard had not been joking about being a deadly shot.

Gabrielle returned fire on the men shooting at them, wincing painfully as the armor plate covering her chest was hit. From her peripheral vision she saw Xena's silhouette go over the cliff in an elegant dive. She was puzzled as to why Xena was diving into the water but was in no position to get answers at the moment, so instead focused her energy to the battle at hand.

The static in her earpiece popped irregularly, then Vox came in over the comms unit. "Boss, do you read? Over."

"Copy," Gabrielle said automatically, dropping another guard who'd been firing on them from behind the armored door of a jeep.

"Their jammers have been knocked out, Glass came through. We've been boarded and engaging the enemy on decks two and three. SP attacks in progress. Do you want reinforcements?" The engineer's voice was calm but the urgency was clear.

"Negative, only when ship is secure..." her words were cut off by a scream to her left. In an effort to get Jennifer to safety, Elaine had been hit. Gabrielle took several steps back to get near the wounded woman, returning fire as she went.

"I got your six, boss!" Sarah yelled, returning fire at the jeeps, ducking behind what cover the deflating boat could provide and pulling another riot shield from the boat. Gabrielle briefly assessed the situation, and immediately realized its gravity. Elaine was

mortally wounded, bleeding profusely from her leg, lower abdomen, and upper chest. There wasn't anything Gabrielle would be able to do to save her. A moment later, Sarah was hit in her shooting arm; cursing as she involuntarily dropped her weapon, she grabbed the gun with her left hand and continued firing.

"Vox, send over those reinforcements, Elaine and Sarah've been hit," she yelled into her comm unit.

"Roger," the engineer replied. The emotion in Vox' voice told Gabrielle something else had gone very wrong.

"What is it?" the bard asked, dropping another of the armed men.

"I've heard Bo was hurt, they think he might be dead," the engineer said, desperately trying not to choke up. "Something's happening in the water off the boat, there's lots of screaming, and some fighting on deck. Michelle won't let us leave comms to go help."

"Hold your post," Gabrielle ordered, knowing she it was unnecessary; her crew would absolutely follow the captain's orders. "Keep me updated." With deadly aim, Gabrielle vented her hurt and anger on the men trying to kill her.



Xena dove off the cliff, following the bodies of Ares and Aphrodite into the surf below. Once in the water, she again felt the unusual sensation of being in her element, a feeling she previously only felt while on horseback or in the midst of battle. She swam through the choppy water with ease, avoiding the jagged rocks at the base of the outcrop while searching for signs of either Olympian.

There were dolphins in the area, she had called on them to assist in retrieving the immature ambrosia that had been deposited on the cliff top by a willing seagull. She'd warned any sea life in the area willing to listen away from the battle. The creatures that fled were starting to return; those that didn't were stunned or perished in the blast making them easy prey for the more sentient of the ocean denizens.

She spotted Ares first, clearly wounded and struggling to swim. She swam past him, easily avoiding his grasp. Some distance beyond she spotted Aphrodite, who wasn't moving much at all. Wrapping her arm around the goddess' chest, she swam back to shore, requesting the dolphins keep Ares in the water as long as possible. She also requested they retrieve mature ambrosia. She could only hope some would be found in time. When the surf was shallow enough, Xena shifted the nearly unconscious goddess into her arms and carried her over to where Gabrielle and her crew were positioned.

The gunfire had ceased, and the battle on the beach appeared over. Three men were on their knees, their hands interlaced on their heads, facing away from the bard. The rest of Ares' men were dead.

With measured, but urgent movements, Gabrielle worked over the prone body of Elaine. She knew that in spite of her best efforts, the young woman was going to bleed out before she could be returned to the ship. The bard could hear the sound of the jet skis approaching, but she knew it was too late.

"Boss, are the hostages okay?" the injured woman struggled to ask.

"Yeah, Elaine," Gabrielle said soothingly. "You saved Jennifer. She's with Ed. She's okay, Sarah is okay too – took one in the arm but she's good. Take it easy, we won." Applying direct pressure to any of her wounds made the XO scream in pain, so she

held the woman's hand. She glanced over to Aphrodite who, badly wounded as she was, was trying to move closer. Sarah was quickly at the goddess' side, helping her get closer to Elaine, whose blood was pooling in the sand beneath her. Sarah was bleeding too – the chef had been shot twice in the vest and once in the arm – but seemed unconcerned about her injuries.

Leaning up, Aphrodite looked at the dying woman, smiled her radiant grin and gently picked up Elaine's other hand. Rich mocha skin contrasted against pale, placid blue eyes met with dark brown. "I've got you, love," she said softly to the dying woman. "There is nothing to be afraid of."

"I don't want to be cremated," Elaine pronounced, her voice a hoarse whisper. "I just want to be left to the sea like the old days."

"Ever the seafarer," Aphrodite said gently. "You can have whatever you want honey." The goddess maintained eye contact and squeezed the woman's hand.

Elaine's eyes went wide with wonder, "It doesn't hurt," she said, her voice clear, but soft. Aphrodite continued to smile, bringing the hand to her lips and kissing it gently. "It stopped hurting. I feel good, Gabrielle, really good. I'm okay, it's all okay. Thank you...thank you for the adventure of a lifetime..."

Tears from the bard's eyes splashed down on Elaine's face but the XO didn't feel it. Her expression was calm and relaxed; she was already dead.

Xena looked on helplessly at the scene in front of her. Aphrodite caught her eye and mouthed the word Argo. Xena looked fearfully at the rock outcrop.

"Leave me with Gabrielle," she said. "You go, Gabrielle has this. If you hurry she'll be okay."

The bard looked up at the sound of her name having just tied a strip of cloth around the chef's arm to staunch the bleeding. "Argo?" she said, concern threading her voice.

"She's going to be okay," Aphrodite assured her, wincing in pain as the warrior ran down the beach towards the cliff.

Blake and Prisha arrived on jet skis just as an additional jeep pulled up on the sand near the others. "It's ours," Ed announced indicating the jeep, still pointing a gun at the three men who had surrendered.

"Go deal with that, please." Gabrielle asked Ed, gesturing at the kneeling men.

"There is another one alive on the cliff, over the arch," Aphrodite added. The big man nodded in understanding before striding towards the jeep to confer with their people from Transportation.

"What can I do?" Gabrielle asked, looking intently at the goddess. Without asking permission, she concentrated on the goddess. She was instantly connected and felt just how frightened Aphrodite was. The pain nearly unbearable, and Gabrielle could feel a diluted sense of it. In her very long life, the Goddess of Love had never been hurt this badly.

"Go help Ed," Aphrodite instructed Sarah, who was about to protest.

One look from the bard made it clear Sarah was to belay that request. "Please take Blake and Prisha with you, thank you." Gabrielle added politely, but very much an order.

When it was just the two of them, Aphrodite moved her hand from her abdomen where she'd been holding it. A fragment of Xena's chakram about four inches long had easily sliced through her clothing and impaled her like so much shrapnel. There was a

second piece, smaller than the first, in her thigh and a third one in her chest. There was also a slice across her upper bicep, her shirt cleanly sliced and exposed wound underneath. Given that her clothing was wet and her blood wasn't red, it would have been easy to overlook how badly she'd been hurt if one didn't know what to look for.

Instinctively, Gabrielle turned towards the deflated Zodiac for the first aid kit. Only the sound of the goddess' voice kept her from rushing over to retrieve it.

"Listen to me very carefully Gabrielle," the goddess gritted her teeth around the pain. When green eyes once again were held by blue, Aphrodite continued. "I am not going to die, so put that fear away. I'm hurt is all. Yes, badly hurt – but I'm not going to die. I know you're *listening* to me, so feel that. You need to get me in the water before you take out the shrapnel. My clothing, anything with my blood on it needs to be burned. I don't want my blood coming into contact with anyone else. Is that clear?"

Gabrielle wasn't sure if it was their connection or the ferocity with which the goddess spoke, but the meaning was clear. Aphrodite had chosen to let the bard past her defenses, to move one small step closer to godhood. That was not a gift that she was willing to risk falling into anyone else's hands. That also meant she was not to use sterile gloves which went against everything she'd learned through centuries of medical training.

"When we get back to the ship, you are going to take care of Argo." Aphrodite continued, struggling to stand up. Gabrielle was at her side. "Get me into the water and you can pull out the chakram pieces, but beyond that, you do nothing until everyone else is tended to. Are we clear?" Mutely, the bard nodded. There was no playfulness in her voice, none of the lyrical quality she usually associated with the Goddess of Love. In fact, in this moment, the fierce determination sounded much more like Athena than the goddess she considered her closest friend.

With Gabrielle assisting Aphrodite, they walked into the surf, just past where the waves were breaking. Aphrodite immediately relaxed, her feet just touching the sand on the bottom. Gabrielle was treading water, unsure what she should do next.

"What should I do now?" Gabrielle felt the uncertainty, as Aphrodite had never been in this position before. They were both equally unsure of what to do. "Give me some of the pain," the bard said, this time not a question. "I've got this."

"Start with the big one," Aphrodite urged through gritted teeth as she brought her hands to the bard's shoulders, intending to keep Gabrielle's head above water while the bard extracted the chakram piece. "Throw it onto the sand when it's out," the goddess urged, "you may need it later." Gabrielle nodded, looking below the surface of the water at her abdomen. The bard could feel an emotional weight settling on her like the worst, most intense migraine ever. It conjured up memories of lobotomies and electroshock treatments. Focusing past the pain, she found the curved piece of chakram. With a thumb and forefinger pinched on the inside curve, pulled with firm and consistent tension. Aphrodite cried out, a chilling sound that rocked Gabrielle to her core, but she did not relent. The pain in her own head worsened; she remained conscious by force of will alone. The goddess released a second cry, then a gasp as the chunk of metal came free. Aphrodite panted in release; the pain behind Gabrielle's eyes lessened ever so slightly. To the bard's surprise, the fragment was much larger than she expected, three inches easily had impaled the goddess' body. She brought it to the surface to throw it overhand to the sand and noted that there was no blood on its surface.

“My blood dissolves in seawater,” the goddess explained.

“I guess this is karmic retribution for impaling me to my conference table,” Gabrielle replied, happy that Aphrodite smiled in return.

“Asshole,” Aphrodite replied, the tone making her gratitude evident.

“You ready to go again, tiger?” Gabrielle asked, smiling past her own pain to convey a reassurance she didn’t completely feel. She reached next for the metal embedded in the goddess’ chest. The bard could almost feel a high-pitched whine in her inner ear as she reached for the fragment. On instinct, she moved forward and kissed Aphrodite, distracting her for the instant it took to wrench the shrapnel from her skin.

“Sneaky,” the goddess panted, grateful for the distraction.

Gabrielle inspected the second fragment. It was not as large as the first and didn’t show any signs of honey colored blood, so it quickly joined its mate on the sand.

“Last one,” Gabrielle assured her before taking a deep breath and diving under the surface of the water to inspect the goddess’ thigh. She broke the surface of the water and smoothing her hair away from her face, regarded Aphrodite seriously.

“I think you need to float on your back,” she suggested. “This won’t be as bad as the first, but it won’t be as easy as the one I just did.”

Aphrodite, nodded, letting Gabrielle support her as she easily floated on the surface of the water. All of the feelings were there at the forefront of the bard’s mind; the fear, the pain, the uncertainty. Gabrielle knew there was nothing she could do to negate those feelings and distracting the goddess a second time was not going to work. Instead, she thought about the closeness she felt for Aphrodite. How she valued her friendship, how she loved her, and how she had returned the other half of her soul. Every positive thing she could articulate in her own mind about her connection to the goddess she imagined in the kind of three-dimensional detail that made her a bard among bards. All of that love and positivity she sent to the goddess in a single blast as she pulled the last bit of chakram free.

Aphrodite cried out in pain, but it wasn’t the agonized wail from before. She wrapped her arms and legs around Gabrielle and sobbed in relief. The bard held her, stroking her back, murmuring in to her hair that it everything was okay now. She could feel the pain lessen, the fear dissipated. Gabrielle moved toward shallow water, picking up Aphrodite in her arms. She waited until the goddess had stopped sobbing, regaining some measure of composure before walking to the shore and laying her gently next to what remained of the Zodiac.



Xena raced to the rock outcrop, climbing it as quickly as she could, searching for the pit bull. She found the dog two thirds of the way up, whimpering and conscious, with one of her hind legs at an odd angle, clearly broken. She was bleeding from some deep cuts and scratches, but the broken bone appeared to be the worst of her injuries. Gently, she picked up the animal, fully expecting to be bit out of pain or fear but Argo simply yelped and whined. Before beginning her descent, she glanced over to the two men left on the rocky ledge. One was dead, the other still unconscious. The unconscious fighter could wait, Gabrielle’s dog was more important.

Cradling Argo, keeping the broken leg as immobile as she could, she made her way down the cliff. She’d begun her walk back up the beach when someone approached

from the water, the hammer of Hephaestus dangling from his wrist by the leather strap. While she'd never seen him in this form, she knew instantly who it was, and that he was very, very angry.

"Creatures of the sea are not yours to command," he said without greeting.

"Who's commanding?" Xena drawled, striding past him. She had neither time nor interest to argue with the God of the Sea. "I asked nicely. Besides," she added with a hint of surprise, "I thought I'd killed you."

Poseidon shrugged, not at all embarrassed. "And Hercules thought he killed Zeus, and on and on. When someone is trying to kill you, it's not a bad idea to let them think you dead. You'd be surprised at how many of us resurfaced in that window between your death and..." he trailed off, uncomfortable.

"Gabrielle and the Anvil of Hephaestus. Yes, I know," Xena supplied. "We can discuss a list of who's-who later," she added, nodding at the wounded dog.

"My nephew is out there, hurt," he shot back, pointing to the area below the arch. "There are several dolphins keeping him from coming ashore."

"Aphrodite is over there, also hurt and unlike your nephew, she is going to get our help." Xena's icy reply making her position clear.

Grey eyes bore into the back of her skull as Xena maintained her pace, walking as quickly as she dared to keep the dog as comfortable as possible.

As they neared the group by the jet skis, Poseidon put his hand on Xena's shoulder to stop her out of earshot. The warrior was surprised at the gentle touch, clearly being communicated as a request, rather than a command. She stopped to look at the God of the Sea, responsible for her renewed life.

"Gabrielle's people are not the ones to deal with Ares. You've more than made your point with him. He's hurt but he isn't dead. You can't kill us. You think you can, but you can't, you never could. Your bard is going to want to try and contain him; that is not her job, and if it takes fifty years or a hundred and fifty years, that kind of folly will backfire and have a corrosive effect on anyone in that kind of proximity to him, the two of you included. Either you let his men take him wherever he can convince them to go, or I have to take him. Child, he is a god. You might not like him, but you still have to respect him."

"I'll think about it," Xena replied with a curt nod before continuing towards the others. She knew Poseidon was right. There was no way they'd be able to keep a muzzle on Ares indefinitely. He was injured, and for the time being at any rate, he'd think twice about getting involved in their affairs. When she reached the others, they were in a tight cluster around Elaine's body. Aphrodite was leaning heavily on Gabrielle, but looked a little better than when she'd brought her out of the water. The three prisoners were being watched by the newcomers from Gabrielle's company and she could see three men heading to the rock arch to retrieve the two bodies and the unconscious soldier with Blake and Prisha assisting.

Xena knelt in the sand, cradling Argo as Gabrielle fell to her knees at her side, kissing the face of the whimpering dog.

"Awww sweet pea, what happened to you?" she said, her voice soothing and warm. "Your leg is broken, girl." She looked the dog over as much as she could in Xena's arms. After a quick triage of the people on the beach, she came to a decision. "Ed, you're taking Sarah back on the jet ski. Sarah, report to sick bay and anyone onboard the

ship who is injured, I don't care if it's just a scratch, anyone who is injured have them meet there too. Ed, come back with the stretcher. Xena, you will take Aphrodite to the ship on the other jet ski; Aphrodite will tell you how to operate it." She held the goddess' eyes a moment longer to see if there would be an argument but there was only exhaustion. "Ed, when you come back, bring the other Zodiac to transport Elaine and Argo." He nodded once in the affirmative, then helped Sarah to the jet ski, getting her situated first before climbing on in front of her and taking off. Only now did she acknowledge Poseidon's presence. "What are you doing here?" she asked acidly. "You know, we could have used your help?"

"Child, you had my help," he shot back. "Were it not for me and the forces I command, your ship would have been overwhelmed. Ares knows a floating fortress when he sees it. He suspects you've got something valuable onboard, I'm sure. Without me and the sharks you would have had twice as many of Ares men onboard."

Gabrielle looked like she'd been stung. She averted her eyes. "I didn't know. I'm sorry. Thank you for your help. I didn't know you'd gotten my message."

He shrugged. "You have a persuasive lawyer. How are you?" he asked, turning to his niece.

"Don't worry about me," the goddess deflected. "Argo is in pain, Xena hand her to me, let me hold her until Ed gets back." Xena glanced at Gabrielle, who nodded. Carefully she transferred the large dog to the goddess' arms. The dog cried out in pain a couple of times then seemed to settle down comfortably. "Besides," the goddess continued, "I'm in better shape than he is. And I don't understand that, he just had ambrosia." She looked down the beach at the silhouette of Ares crawling on his hands and knees out of the surf.

"Immature ambrosia," Xena corrected her. "The stuff on the cliff wasn't mature. It was mostly translucent; didn't have any kick. I'm tracking down some of the real thing for you," she added. "You need to hold tight until it gets here."

Poseidon turned to look at Xena with an expression that was equal parts rage, respect, and confusion. "You are not the keeper of ambrosia, Xena. I am."

The warrior shrugged indifferently, "I think it could be argued that *you* made me your partner in that."

"We can fight this out later," Gabrielle cut in. "I need my people to go get Ares." She was about to signal the troops guarding the prisoners when Xena stopped her.

"We can't take Ares," she said.

"What do you mean we can't?" Gabrielle asked. "Look at him, he can't even stand up." Clear of the water, the form on the beach had collapsed on the sand and was still.

"What I mean is we have to let his men go collect him and take him off somewhere where he can lick his wounds and get better," Xena knew that what she was saying was the right course of action, but she didn't feel much better about it than Gabrielle did.

"It's going to take him a long time to recover," Aphrodite added. "Sweetheart, you know Xena is right. You can't keep any of us captive. It just wouldn't work."

"Then what was the point?" Gabrielle demanded, exasperated and frustrated. Elaine's body was still warm, she feared for the worst back on *The Hippolyta*. She'd lost Susan, Shen might still be in danger.

Poseidon looked down at the bard with an expression one might consider fatherly. His grey eyes were empathetic, his expression sad but firm. "You know you can't eliminate war from the world Gabrielle," he said gently. "Anymore than you can eliminate love. The best you can do is tip the scales in one direction or the other. It cost you, I don't deny it cost you, but you did tip the scales in the direction of love. Ares will recover, but it will take him time, which gives Aphrodite and the rest of you a head start. And I think he's learned to leave you and yours alone. Work against him how you see fit, make a better case for people to follow, keep fighting for the greater good. But this piece has to stay on the game board. You can't take it off."

"Hey," Aphrodite said softly, gesturing for Gabrielle to come closer. It was clear that the effort to talk was taking its toll. "Love, you know he's right," she said quietly after swallowing with effort. "But that doesn't mean you can't scare the crap outta him."

The bard stroked Argo's head, considering her options. Coming to a decision, she nodded and stood, noting the hammer that Poseidon was still carrying.

"I'm going to need that back," she said. While polite, it was clear this was not a request that would tolerate refusal. He glanced at Xena, who took a step to Gabrielle's side and stood, her back straight, at her full height. She regarded the god eye to eye.

"Very well," he said finally, passing the hammer to the bard.

Xena and Gabrielle walked down the beach to where Ares lay. He had crawled onto the sand and pushed himself over so he was lying on his back. A large fragment of chakram extending from just below his collar bone. There was another piece sticking out of his abdomen. His blood was the color of burgundy wine, one might almost think it looked nearly human. The realization nearly sickened Gabrielle.

"Nicely played, ladies." The defeat in his voice was evident.

Gabrielle stood over him, moving to block the sun so he could see her face clearly. She held the hammer by its leather strap directly over the metal protruding from his shoulder. There was no masking the fear on Ares' face.

"If she lets go," Xena said smoothly, "I bet there is still enough juice in that piece of chakram to end the three of us."

"You'd be killed too," Ares sputtered.

"It's been over two thousand years," Gabrielle replied easily. "I've seen everything I want to see. Saw Hamilton from the front row and everything."

"And me," Xena added, "dead is no big deal. I was just there."

"Don't," the God of War begged. "You guys are off limits, I swear."

"Not just us," Xena clarified. "You leave me, Gabrielle, her extended family, which is anyone who works for her including the..." the warrior searched for the word.

"Subsidiaries," Gabrielle added helpfully.

"Right, subsidiaries," Xena added. "You also leave Aphrodite alone and Poseidon," she added for good measure. "Basically, anyone who has ever had occasion to say hello to us, you leave them alone."

"Fine, fine," he agreed waving his hand in surrender. "Xena, there is a part of me in you," he said, wincing with pain. "You can't deny it. You can only go for so long and not crave a good fight."

The warrior nodded in agreement. "Oh, I'm going to do plenty of fighting. Don't worry about that. Fighting you, Ares. We are going to use every tool we have at our

disposal. We are going to make war on your whole infernal machine. You've always wanted the war to end all wars. You're going to get it."

"Yeah," Gabrielle added, "it's just that the war is against your fucked-up world view and all that represents, you repugnant asshole."

"Do we have a deal?" Xena asked.

He didn't immediately answer so Gabrielle loosened her grip letting the hammer fall several inches before tightening her grip on the strap to stop it. "Yes," he shouted, then winced in pain.

"I think he will keep his word," Xena said turning to Gabrielle.

"If he doesn't, we still have the hammer and the chakram fragments." While spoken to Xena, the warning was clearly for Ares benefit. Gabrielle leaned down, about to pull the chakram fragment from his shoulder then stopped herself. She looked up to Xena taking a step back from the god. "I think you should do that," she said.

At first Xena didn't understand. "Is it because I'm related to the three of them?"

"What are you talking about?" Ares asked, his voice pained and tight.

"Surely you knew I was dead?" Xena asked with a wink.

Ares looked uncertain, dark eyes darting from warrior to bard. "She got better. Again," Gabrielle supplied helpfully.

"But this time I came back with the help of Aphrodite and Poseidon," the warrior explained. "I think the essence of three gods is better than one. Especially if one is you."

Gabrielle nodded. "You should wash the blood off in the water before we get back to the boat. And, um, I believe if any of his blood gets in your mouth, you will have insight into where he is, how he's feeling, basically his thoughts. And you will have the ability to hurt him directly. It's a weird trip though."

There was no mistaking the look of supreme rage on Ares face, but he was in no position to refute what Gabrielle had just said. The comment drew the warrior's attention from the God of War, causing things to fall into place about Gabrielle's connection with Aphrodite. Far from making her jealous, it reassured Xena that there was a deeper reason for their mutual attachment.

Using the same force she would use to snap the bolt off an imbedded arrow, Xena roughly yanked the chakram fragment from Ares shoulder, eliciting a pained howl. She repeated the motion with the segment on his thigh and he grunted again.

"We're going to let your men go," she added. "They'll come get you and I'm sure you can take it from there."

Ares nodded. "Ya know, Xena, I will keep my word. Leave you and the brat and her collection of misfits alone. But give me time, I'll bounce back. There are billions of people in the world Xena, millions of warriors. You used to be special, one of a kind-ahhhhh..."

His words transitioned to a pained howl as Gabrielle kicked him in the groin as hard as she could. A new look of wariness and fear crossed his agony-stricken face.

"Fucking right, I can hurt you," the bard said icily. "I could make your face hamburger with my bare hands right now. That was for Susan, Elaine, and Bohemian. I swear, you fucking creep, if you as much as think of hurting any of my people, I will unite the rest of the Olympians, and we will rip you worthless limb from worthless limb."

"Yeah, yeah," the warrior replied to Ares with a proud smirk. "You've found a zillion other Xenas to work with and I just need one. This one." she nodded her head

indicating the bard. With azure blue eyes boring down into those of Ares, Xena brought her hand holding the bloody fragments of chakram to her face. With seductive and erotic slowness, she inserted her thumb, dripping with his blood, into her mouth, rolling her eyes back in pleasure as it came out clean.

“Fucking bitch,” Ares growled, helpless to stop her.

Xena staggered back a step, and Gabrielle was instantly at her side, keeping her upright and steady. A rage unlike anything she’d ever known coursed through her veins, the world for a moment turning red and vulnerable. She could feel the fear, passion, anger and hate of everything around her, and visualized how the orchestration of those emotions led to absolute power. Not since her most ruthless days as a warlord had she been this far removed from empathy and compassion. Just as she felt the need to scream, to release the merest fraction of anger, the wave receded and she felt her own sense of self return once more.

“Now the two of us can kick your ass,” she said, her threat void of any embellishment or bravado.

They turned to go, walking back to the bard’s people. Gabrielle put her arm around Xena’s waist, supporting her for the first unsteady steps. The God of War no longer of urgent concern, she kissed Xena’s shoulder and remarked, “I don’t know. I still think you’re special and one of a kind.”

Chapter 18: Happily Ever After

Gabrielle studied Argo’s x-rays with a critical eye. The decision to care for the living before tending to the dead was an easy call to make, but the crew had unanimously insisted on treating Argo first.

Gabrielle was grateful the breaks to the canine’s right tibia and fibula were relatively clean, and did not require surgically inserting orthopedic pins or plates to hold the bones together. She efficiently set the Argo’s hind leg, then began applying the cast she would need to wear for the next several weeks. Argo had been remarkably calm since her return to the ship; there was little doubt in the bard’s mind Aphrodite was responsible.

There was a soft knock at the sick bay door and Xena entered, the concern for the dog evident on her features. “How is she doing?”

“She’s doing really well,” Gabrielle replied. “When her cast is finished, I’ll suture up her deeper wounds and then I’ll be on to my next patient. How is Shen? How is everyone?”

Upon returning to the boat, Gabrielle had only briefly seen her godson. She wanted to personally deliver the news about the death of Elaine and Bo and reassure him that his injured friends, including Argo, would be okay. Nicolai, who was posted closest to the secured hold, had fought off several attackers and, despite bleeding from several stab wounds, refused to leave the boy’s side.

“I’ve put Aphrodite in your cabin,” Xena began. “She requested that.”

“*Our* cabin,” Gabrielle gently corrected her.

The warrior smiled and continued. “*Our* cabin. She’s in a lot of pain and she’s exhausted but has asked to speak to everyone on the boat privately. Your cabin has more room for someone to sit and chat with her. I told her to rest, but you can imagine how well she listens to me. Maybe if you suggested it?”

Gabrielle looked up from her ministrations on the dog to gauge if there was any other meaning behind the statement. Reassured there was not, she went back to her work.

“I don’t think she’d listen to me either,” she replied. “She’s grown attached to the crew, and missed having a family. She’s been adopted into the company family, and no doubt wants to comfort us with our grief. Any idea when some ambrosia might come our way? I think that’s the only thing that’s going to fix her. She will heal, but I’d like her completely healthy long before Ares is.”

Xena nodded. “It’s on its way. I think I may have to have some sort of discussion with Poseidon about that. At the moment, he is with the uninjured crew watching over the bodies of Elaine and Bo, and he genuinely seems moved. He also seems pleased with the name Ariel, so that’s what everyone is calling him.”

She took a breath, then continued with her updates. “Blake and Samantha have begun cleaning up the blood and damage on board. Ed is coordinating with your people in Mexico to transfer the bodies of Ares’ men from the ship and in the water back to the beach. Poss- Ariel wasn’t kidding about the sharks. Nine men died in the water before ever boarding your ship. Your people fought off twenty trained assassins. We think there was an additional man in the water, but I don’t think there was anything left of him to recover.”

Gabrielle nodded, stripping off her gloves and donning a new pair before preparing Argo’s wounds for cleaning and suturing. “Who is up next?”

“I think Ingrid’s burns are the most pressing because of the pain, but if she’s spoken to Aphrodite, she’ll probably be as relaxed as Argo is. Sarah has a bullet in her arm that needs to come out. Nicolai has three stab wounds that need cleaning and stitches. Prisha got hit in the head with the butt end of a gun and Michelle thinks she’s got a concussion. Jennifer is unhurt, just scared. Shen is sitting with her, talking about the paper he’s working on about ancient Roman history. I think he’s got your gift of conversation.”

Stepping back from her work, Gabrielle gave Argo a final examination to check for any additional injuries and received a warm lick on her face for her effort. She kissed the dog’s nose after administering a pain killer for additional comfort over the next twelve hours. For now, her work was finished.

“How are *you*?” She asked looking up into the brilliant blue eyes that felt like home where ever she was.

Xena smiled down at her. Two months ago, she would have given a short, pat answer to the question, and only in reference to her physical wellbeing. Today, she finally realized what the bard had been really asking all this time, and that she had a fuller answer.

“I’m good, Gabrielle. I feel for the loss of your friends and I’m worried about Aphrodite and her injuries, but I’m okay. We gave War a nosebleed today. Not fatal, but anything that has Ares feeling insecure and unsure of himself can’t be a bad thing for us.”

“That’s how he’s feeling?” Gabrielle asked. “Insecure and unsure?”

Xena nodded after a moment’s thought. “He’s scared. That thing with the blood rattled him. Not what he was expecting. The obvious question is, ‘how did you know?’”

Gabrielle knew she was blushing, but Xena deserved to know. “Aphrodite,” she said.

“I’d worked that much out for myself,” Xena chuckled, taking two steps towards the bard so she could wrap her arms around her. “I was hoping for a little more detail,” she added with an affectionate squeeze.

Gabrielle wrapped her arms around Xena’s waist and rested her head against the warrior’s breast to listen to the familiar heartbeat. Again, she marveled at the long distant memories that resurfaced at the touch. If she closed her eyes, she could almost hear the soft creak and smell the scent of the supple leather of Xena’s armor and tack.

“Before we got you back, I was on the beach with Aphrodite and Poseidon – I mean Ariel. He needed a few drops of Aphrodite’s blood added to your ashes, so she cut her hand with the last remaining shard of her seashell. She had the same kind of attachment to it that Ares has to his dagger. After Aphrodite cut herself, I was wrapping a bandage on her cut and...she, um...offered me some of the blood on her hand.”

“Did you know what would happen?” Xena murmured into the top of her head.

“I didn’t,” she answered. “I didn’t even know the full extent of what all was involved until Aphrodite told me, shortly before the battle.”

“What was it like?”

“It was amazing,” Gabrielle replied. “But also, kind of scary. There was an intense feeling of love for everything, for everyone, but also this sense of responsibility. In the span of a second, I could see backwards and forwards in time, millions of years in each direction. For a brief moment I knew all there was to know about love and relating to people. Then everything faded. What about you?”

Xena shook her head slightly trying to keep the recent memory at arm’s length. “It was rage, anger and hatred. Past conflict, future conflict, the power gained by manipulating people’s most base instincts and fears. Everything was rooted in the belief that conflict brings out the best in people; that the best way is always the way of strength and ruthlessness. I think where you were was a much better place to be.”

“So, it was your life before we met?” Gabrielle asked gently.

The warrior nodded against the soft crown of blond hair. “In essence, yeah.” She released the bard and took a step back, gently stroking Gabrielle’s cheek with the back of her knuckles. “You have more patients to see to,” she said softly before leaning in for a kiss.

When they parted, Gabrielle nodded and smiled. “It’s almost like old times in that respect. Could you please take Argo to Aphrodite? The two of them can rest together. And send in Ingrid? When I finish with everyone here, I will check on our goddess then call Bo’s parents.”

Xena nodded. “Anything else? Michelle was asking for orders.”

Gabrielle considered her options before speaking. “Have Michelle contact the department heads. Have them fly to Mexico tomorrow, Ed can ferry them here in the helicopter or we can hire a boat, whichever is easier. Bo and Elaine had some close friends in other departments, so have Michelle reach out to them too. I guess that means we may need additional provisions from Cabo San Lucas. Sarah and Nicolai can decide how much extra food we will need and buy out a local flower shop I suppose. We want things nice onboard for the funeral.

“I need to know Bo’s last wishes with respect to burial from Fiona as soon as possible. Elaine will be buried at sea here, in Mexico, but I’d like to know what Bo wanted before I speak to his mothers. We need to have an update from everyone

tomorrow before I decide what to do next. Oh yea, and we need to contact Shen's school. He can go back next week. I think Ares isn't in any condition to come after him, wouldn't you agree?" The bard had scarcely paused for air between sentences, but finally paused long enough to look to Xena for a response.

"I think Shen will be a grown man before Ares is remotely in any shape to come after him personally. I think he'll still do what he's doing, playing groups of people against each other to create conflict. But I don't think he'll be personally involved for awhile." Xena moved to pick up the large dog. She cradled the canine in her arms, Argo's square head contentedly resting against her shoulder, fast asleep. "I'll come check on you after I get Argo situated, unless Aphrodite decides I need to chat with her."

"I'll prepare the bodies for burial once I've seen to all the living." Xena nodded in agreement and understanding. The warrior was nearly out the door when Gabrielle's voice stopped her. "Xena?" she said. The warrior turned around. "Thank you,"

With a smile that reached her eyes Xena replied, "I love you too, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle blinked, determined not to burst out crying in sick bay. Of course, she and Xena had expressed their love for each other over the years, frequently and in countless ways. But Xena saying it first was a rarity. She had to admit, Aphrodite's contention of a 'new Xena' seemed to have merit.



The injuries of her crew tended to, Aphrodite was the next patient on her rounds. Gabrielle knocked softly on the door to her quarters. Xena met her at the door and smiled warmly. "I'll leave you two alone," she said gently and departed.

A chair had been pulled up next to the bed where the warrior had been sitting, keeping the goddess company. Argo was curled at Aphrodite's side sleeping soundly; large head on her uninjured thigh. There was a slim journal resting in the goddess' lap. "Hey beautiful," Aphrodite said weakly.

"Flirt," the bard replied with a chuckle. "What's that?" she asked with a nod to the book.

"I nicked it from dear brother. I'm fairly certain it's his notes about the other Olympians he's found," Aphrodite replied, her voice sounding exhausted. She passed the book to Gabrielle who looked at it curiously, flipping through the pages.

"What language is this?" The bard asked.

Aphrodite shrugged, wincing at the effort. "I have no idea."

"But you know every language," Gabrielle began in protest.

"I know every language used to express love. This is my war-obsessed brother's own code. One that I hope your warrior can help me crack, but it will take some time." Aphrodite smiled weakly in response to the bard's confused expression. "Xena has insight now, more so than even before. She can see enough into Ares' thoughts to crack this code, but not until I'm stronger and can support her in doing something like that. But we'll figure it out, hopefully before Ares realizes I have it." She leaned back, tired. It was obvious that the injuries she'd sustained and the exertion she'd expended after the battle had cost her.

Gabrielle put the book on the nightstand and reached out to push an errant strand of hair off of the goddess' forehead. "What can I do?" she asked gently.

Aphrodite gave a small smile. "I'm not sure if all the blood got washed away or not, so I need you to get me out of these wet clothes and tuck me in."

"Uh-huh," Gabrielle grinned. "I know you just want me to take your clothes off."

Aphrodite chuckled, then winced, the levity proving painful. "Maybe," she allowed softly. Gabrielle gently moved her dog to the side before starting on the goddess' clothing. Before unbuttoning on the shirt, she bent down to tenderly kiss her forehead. She could feel the woman beneath her smile and relax. It occurred to Gabrielle that for someone who spent most of her time tending to the emotional needs of others, it was indeed a special thing to be cared for in return. With tenderness, Gabrielle undid the buttons on the shirt, easing Aphrodite's svelte body from the damp fabric. She removed her bra and trousers, then stood up to assess the wounds.

The bard was surprised to find that, while the wounds were open, they were not actively bleeding. The area around each of the injuries was an angry red, with the surrounding skin taking on an unhealthy grayish hue. The goddess' honey-colored blood filled the painful-looking wounds, adding an ethereal element to the inflamed and tender looking lacerations. An examination of the ripped clothing revealed no sign of the unusual 'blood' which relieved the goddess.

Gabrielle covered the goddess with a quilt. "I'll burn the pants and shirt to be on the safe side. Do you think this is an allergic reaction?" Gabrielle indicated the skin discoloration.

"I don't think so. I'm not running a fever; I can't. I don't have an immune system like humans. It just hurts like a fucking bitch and I'm worn out. This whole fucking day has me wrecked. I'm keeping my shit together for your family, dear one. If I were on my own, I'd be a blubbing mess right now, and that kind of sadness isn't going to help your crew grapple with their grief."

"You are an amazing creature," Gabrielle said honestly, looking into Aphrodite's placid blue eyes, noting that they were as pale and grey as she'd ever seen them. The goddess' usual infectious sparkle was missing and that emptiness was palpable. Gabrielle felt it like a weight. She smiled encouragingly, then went to the closet for a sweatshirt and pair of Xena's sweatpants.

"I want one of your t-shirts," Aphrodite called. Gabrielle put the sweatshirt back. "One of your really soft ones. And I don't intend to give it back."

"You're really high maintenance when you don't feel well," the bard deadpanned, selecting a night shirt she'd recently worn; it was incredibly soft and still smelled of her, which she knew was what the goddess was really requesting.

"I'm worth it," Aphrodite replied, assisting where she could to get into the dry clothing. Once dressed and situated under the covers, Gabrielle went to the bathroom and returned with a hot washcloth, towel and hairbrush. Gently she cleaned the goddess' face, hands and arms, wiping away the sand and salt, then brushed her hair.

"Hey! You almost look hot again," Gabrielle said playfully, admiring her work when she finished.

"Asshole," the goddess muttered, sinking back into the pillows propped against her back. "Has everyone been tended to?"

"I have to call Bo's moms next. He and Elaine are on ice for now. Elaine wants to be buried at sea. I need to get her ready. I can get Bo cleaned up and dressed, but I need to know his wishes before going beyond that." Seeing an unasked question on the

goddess' face she continued. "They aren't alone. Their friends are watching over them. I know that what's left is just an empty shell. But it's important for the crew to be there for them. I love them, but I'm tending to the living first."

"Your crew are guarding their memories of them," Aphrodite responded, patting a space in the bed next to her. Gabrielle climbed into bed next to the goddess who immediately snuggled in, resting her head against the bard's breast, holding her close. Gabrielle put her arms around Aphrodite, remembering that it wasn't so long ago that the goddess had held her in a similar fashion when the weight of everything had just been too much. "Can you spare a couple of hours?" she asked softly, an unusual vulnerability in her voice.

It was obvious where the fear came from; it wasn't just Aphrodite's injury, it was that Gabrielle wasn't an Olympian with the most epic of boundary issues. Gabrielle had, for the vast majority of her very long life, conducted herself in a very ethical, conventional way. She was honest, loyal, loved fiercely, and was, for the most part, monogamous. No, she and Aphrodite weren't lovers now, and she didn't see that changing anytime soon. Xena was her heart, the other half of her soul. Aphrodite, of all people, understood this (that kiss in the ocean notwithstanding). She also realized that Xena understood she and the goddess weren't ever going to be 'just friends' either. There was a murky, messy middle space with Aphrodite that felt surprisingly comfortable. She squeezed a little tighter, deciding that for another couple of hours, Bo's mothers could believe that their son was alive. She was treating the living first. Aphrodite needed this.

"For you dear heart, anything."



Xena made her way to the gym where the bodies of the two fallen crew members were temporarily resting on cots. What little room remained was occupied by people standing together in small groups, comforting each other and watching over the deceased. Several were sharing fond remembrances; a couple of people were crying. At the warrior's entry, the attention turned to her with people asking for an update on Argo. Everyone had already visited with Aphrodite.

"Argo is resting comfortably with Aphrodite," she explained. "Gabrielle says she was able to set her leg without complication and she's got some stitches in a couple of places but will be fine. Down the road she may be able to tell when it's going to rain." She surveyed the room looking for a familiar face. "Where is Shen?" she asked.

"Shen and Wolfie are in the supply hold with Rebekah." Michelle replied. "The kid has been through so much. Wolfie told Shen that he needed a break from the sadness and wanted to teach him drums. Rebekah is singing."

"Shen and Bo were really tight," Steve added. "I mean Wolfie was really close to Bo too. He, Bo, and Vox were like the Three Musketeers. They did everything together."

Xena had no idea what musketeers were, but got the gist. "Everyone who is injured was ordered to get some sleep in their quarters, except for Prisha with the concussion. Steve is staying with her," Michelle continued.

"And Vox?"

Hatsuo shook his head sadly, "We're not sure. She's taking this really hard. Wants to be alone I think." Xena nodded, worried about the young woman. In a very short time she'd bonded with the people her bard drew near. This was Gabrielle's crew,

but now it was also her crew. She felt protective of them, proud of them, and a million other things.

Her musings were cut short when she noticed Poseidon/Ariel standing behind Hatsuo and eyeing her intently. She nodded at the God of the Sea and he followed her out of the gym onto the expansive deck.

“Are we going to have a problem?” he asked, joining her at the railing. The expanse of the Pacific sparkled before them as far as the eye could see.

“As long as you stay out of my way, I see no problem,” the warrior replied amiably.

“You were playing with fire. What if that ambrosia hadn’t been immature? What if the dolphin who got it for you had made a mistake? Can you even imagine what you’d have on your hands if Ares ate a large quantity of mature ambrosia?” He sounded more fearful than angry, desperate to convey his concerns to the warrior.

“Imagine if Gabrielle had a Poseidon who stuck around to tell me this stuff instead of running off at the first mention of Ares,” she replied neutrally. “I don’t deny I have a lot to learn, but if you are going to abdicate your responsibility to teach me, then I’m not going to feel entirely responsible if on occasion I…” she searched for the right expression, “fuck it up.”

He opened his mouth to speak then closed it, conceding the point. “I can’t argue with that,” he said. “So, you’re willing to learn?”

Xena shrugged, “It appears I don’t really have much choice in that. One more thing,” she added. “Ares gets no ambrosia, immature or otherwise. I now you worry about your nephew, I know you feel that you need to see him – to make sure he’s okay. Don’t. You know he will just manipulate you into getting ambrosia for him. We need him to heal as slowly as possible. You agree to that and I promise that there will only be one of us exerting dominion over the sea. I will learn from you and will consult with you before acting in your domain.”

The threat was subtle, but there. Poseidon could maintain his place of superiority over the oceans with Xena as an ally, but it came with a price. His eyebrows raised thoughtfully. He was impressed. “Aphrodite might have been right about you returning a better version of yourself. You’ve made a strong case here.”

“What can I say?” the warrior deadpanned. “It seems I take after mother’s side of the family.” She was rewarded with a thoughtful chuckle and respectful nod as the god turned and headed back into the gym. Xena was about to follow him when something caught her eye by the railing on the main deck below. Short platinum blond locks stood out in contrast to the deep blue of the ocean behind her.

Xena cleared her throat as she descended the stairs, not wanting to intrude on the young woman unawares. Her body language indicated she was crying and Xena knew her new friend well enough to know she’d want a moment for self-composure. The warrior approached the railing, resting her arms on the varnished wood and looked out at the expanse of blue. “I look out at this,” she said, “and it’s easy to pretend I’m back in my old life. The sea has changed, least of everything. Then I turn the other way and I hardly know which end is up.”

Vox nodded, trying to casually wipe her eyes before speaking. “I bet you had to bury a lot of your friends back then.”

“Well, we didn’t bury them, but yes.”

The engineer looked genuinely surprised. “What did you do?”

Xena shrugged, watching a formation of pelicans flew past and listening to the rhythmic slap of the water against the ship’s hull. “When I was a warlord, I didn’t do much of anything. People died in battle. I didn’t really have friends. There were a few people I valued more than others, but in a battle, you stay where you fall. When I moved on to the other part of my life, after I’d met Gabrielle, funerals would involve a pyre. You’d bathe your departed loved one, dress them, spend some time with them and then the body would be placed on a pyre that would be lit, and you’d wait with them as they became ash.”

“Elaine and Bo are going in the sea,” Vox said quietly, her voice cracking.

“There was a period of time when I lived at sea, I had crew die on occasion. Usually they just got tossed overboard, but once in a while, I would honor whomever died if they were valued. They’d be wrapped in a shroud, weighted down, returned to nature.”

“Xena,” Vox observed. “Whenever you talk about yourself as a warlord, you make yourself sound like a total dick.”

The warrior nodded, a sad smile on her face. “I *was* a total dick,” she replied. “You and Bo were, close?”

“His was the shoulder I cried on, literally cried on, when I realized that yeah, Gabrielle was gay but I still didn’t have a chance,” she looked at Xena sheepishly, embarrassed at her admission.

“Aphrodite isn’t someone you can really compete with,” the warrior replied sympathetically.

“Dude!” Vox corrected her emphatically. “I’m talking about you. Yeah, Aphrodite is gorgeous, kind, funny, she seems pretty smart... okay maybe I do hate her a little. But Gabrielle built this billion-dollar enterprise to keep your memory close and to find you. Like, who wouldn’t sleep with the Goddess of Love, right? But you are the love she chased down across thousands of years. If someone told me that kind of love existed, I’d have told them to fuck off.” Her eyes began to well with tears as she looked at Xena. “You know what Bo said to me? He said that if that kind of love exists for Gabrielle, it probably exists for other people too and while I’m waiting for...how did she put it...the other half of my soul, I should hop into bed with as many goddesses as I can find.” The memory overwhelmed her, and she broke down crying. Xena instinctively reached out and wrapped her arms around the sobbing woman; the engineer holding onto her tightly. After several minutes, Vox regained her composure and released the warrior. They stood close, Xena kept her arm wrapped around the young woman’s shoulders as the engineer rolled up the sleeve of her shirt.

“See this tattoo?” she said indicating one of several tattoos on that arm. It was an ornate old-fashioned anchor and quill on the inside of her forearm. “Wolfie, Bo and I all got these matching tattoos when I got clearance for ship duty. “Those guys are my *mates*, ya know? I want to do something for him, but I can’t help bathe him or dress his dead body. I talked to Wolfie about it, we just can’t...handle him like that.”

Xena squeezed the engineer’s shoulder. “Vox, you don’t have to. That is how Gabrielle wants to care for them, and everyone is different. There are a lot of ways to honor someone. I mean you still have some skin left, I don’t know about Wolfgang, but a

new tattoo seems in order. As for the funeral, Shen told me that you sing. You heard the song I sing a song to honor the dead. I could teach it to you.”

Vox looked genuinely surprised. “You’d do that?”

Playfully, Xena gently pushed the younger woman away. “Of *course* I’d do that. We’re mates, right?”



As night descended, Gabrielle looked thoughtfully at her computer screen before hitting the button to connect the call. Taking a deep breath and clicking on the cursor, her screen filled with the faces of Bohemian Van Lyle’s mothers, Olivia and Tzu-Ching, the Canadian and Taiwanese women who adopted the boy as a baby. While she had met them on several occasions, most of Gabrielle’s sense of them had come from their son, who loved to regale everyone with stories about his childhood while the crew relaxed around the ship’s fire pit. Gabrielle ached for the women. The worry was evident on their faces and Gabrielle did not prolong the inevitable.

“Miss Vincent,” Oliva said, “Michelle said this was urgent. What’s happened to Bo?”

“Olivia, Tzu-Ching. I am so very sorry to deliver this news.” The words had scarcely left her mouth when tears began streaming down Olivia’s face. Tzu-Ching was ever stoic and held Oliva in her arms without breaking eye contact with Gabrielle.

“Bo was killed today in Mexico. There was...a substantial fight. He was shot and killed.” She did not elaborate further, waiting to gauge the response of the man’s parents. Olivia sobbed openly into her wife’s shoulder; tears streamed from Tzu-Ching’s eyes but she did not cry. Bo had shared enough about his parent’s history to know that the woman from Taiwan had witnessed a lot of violence as a child, including escaping from Viet Nam as a refugee after her parents had traveled there for work.

“I know much of what Bo did was secret, but you can’t say more?” Tzu-Ching asked.

Out of the corner of her eye, Gabrielle could see her own reflection, the small screen image in the corner of what Bo’s parents saw. She looked exhausted and spent. In the background behind the two grieving women, she saw the living room where they kept the computer that their only son had given them. Olivia was a masseuse and Tzu-Ching an acupuncturist, and their home was warm, cheery, and eclectic. She knew it smelled of Moxa and incense; Bo’s clothes always retained the fragrance after he visited home. They knew the job could be dangerous, but they also were proud of the extensive humanitarian and charitable causes his work supported.

“We were fighting a private military force of white nationalists from America. Bo was on the ship, providing cover fire for myself and several others on land,” the bard began. “There were two snipers on a cliff above us and he shot one of them. The second sniper returned fire and he was hit. Even though he was gravely wounded, he managed to line up his next shot and take out the other sniper before succumbing to his injury. Everything happened in less than a minute. He saved me and several others including Sarah.”

Tzu-Ching nodded, clearly proud of her son, and grateful his sacrifice meant something. “Was anyone else hurt?” Olivia asked, blotting at her eyes with a tissue.

“Elaine was also killed. She was with me on the shore. Several others were injured on the ship, but Bo and Elaine were the only fatalities. I have been in touch with Fiona. Bo did not specify any instructions in the event of...” Gabrielle blinked back tears, reaching for a tissue herself.

“Bo didn’t think about death,” Tzu-Ching said, her voice finally cracking. “It did not concern him. But I think he would like to join Elaine in whatever ritual...” the stoic woman finally broke down with a sob. Olivia straightened up, and regarded Gabrielle while holding Tzu-Ching.

“What are the funeral plans for Elaine?” she asked.

“I was with Elaine when she died,” the bard replied. “She asked for her body to be interred at sea. It isn’t remotely legal but I’m not concerned about that, we will honor her request.”

Against the larger woman’s breast, Gabrielle saw a crown of black hair nod. “That is fine with us,” Olivia agreed. “I’m sorry we won’t be able to make it...”

Gabrielle shook her head, rushing to reassure her, “Robyn Versoul will pick you up in the morning,” Gabrielle explained. “I’ve instructed the flight crew to bring you to Mexico, and then we’ll fly you out to the ship. We’ll set sail out to sea for the funeral after you’re aboard. Afterwards, you can either spend some time in Mexico, or we’ll return you home that evening.” Gabrielle smiled sadly, her heart breaking for the two women. “I would think that you might want to be at home.”

Olivia and Tzu-Ching looked at each other, clearly surprised and overwhelmed by the offer. Olivia was first to speak. “That is very kind of you Miss Vincent.”

“It’s just Susan, please,” she said gently. They nodded and Gabrielle felt like she’d intruded enough on their grief. They needed to process this privately.

“Again, please, let me say how very sorry I am for Bo’s loss. He was a wonderful man, a valued member of Gabrielle’s team, and a dear friend of mine. Fiona will be in touch with you in the days to come to talk about his life-insurance and pension. You can let her know whenever you are ready to discuss it.” They nodded, having no idea that they were going to inherit a small fortune, something that would make most lottery winners blush. Gabrielle knew it was no consolation for losing him, but money being one of the few things she had in excess, she felt it the least she could do. “I will see you tomorrow then?” They acknowledged her statement, then bid farewell and ended the call.

With a heavy sigh, she pushed herself back from her desk and looked up to see Xena standing in the doorway. She had no idea how long the warrior had been watching her, but didn’t mind.

“I never had to make that type of call as a warlord,” she observed. “I’m sorry that you had to.”

“I don’t put my people in harm’s way lightly for this very reason,” she replied. “I’ve had to make a number of these calls over the years. I vividly remember each and every one. They are all excruciating.”

“We can end the day on a positive at least,” Xena offered. She entered the office, revealing Poseidon, who was standing just behind the warrior. “We have ambrosia,” she announced.

“That’s fantastic!” the bard replied excitedly, standing up “let’s go give it to her.”

Poseidon shook his head and held up his hands. “Not so fast, Gabrielle,” he admonished gently. “We need to have a chat.”

Confused, she nodded towards the couch, and walked over to the bottle of scotch, still standing watch from her chat with Susan Yin. Sitting there on the low table, Gabrielle realized leaving it there was a way to keep the memory of her god daughter close, reminding her of when they'd had the conversation that had changed so much for her.

Xena and Poseidon took seats on the couch and Gabrielle settled herself in the wingback chair next to them. The leather creaked slightly, reminding her of her lover's armor from long ago. She put aside memory and nostalgia with effort.

"What's up?"

"Pos- Ariel," Xena corrected herself as the God of the Sea shot her a glance, "needs to cover some things before we heal our ailing goddess."

From the pocket of his shirt Poseidon extracted a rather large, plump leaf and put it on the table between them. It was bright red in color with deep orange flecks. It was beautiful. To Gabrielle's estimation it was probably twice the size of what she'd consumed on the beach in Mexico. "There are going to be...ramifications from healing my niece and we need to address it and be prepared before we give this to her."

"What kind of ramifications?" Gabrielle asked. "She's in a great deal of pain, it seems to be getting worse and she's having some kind of reaction from the chakram."

"I know," Poseidon agreed. "Fortunately, she was stronger than Ares when she was injured or she'd be in worse shape now, and would be completely unable to support you and your crew in their grief."

"Is Ares similarly wounded?" Xena asked thoughtfully.

"Yes and no," Poseidon replied. "Your chakram is a weapon of war. He isn't allergic to it. He is hurt, he isn't going to heal very fast, but if we didn't aid Aphrodite, he would heal faster than she would. Physical pain and battle injuries are more in his wheelhouse. Emotional pain and heartache are in Aphrodite's."

"Okay," Gabrielle replied apprehensively, "what is it we need to address? I think the sooner we get her to full strength, the better for everyone."

"The thing is Gabrielle," Poseidon said patiently, "she is going to be *more* than at full strength. She needs something this potent to combat the debris in her system. It is going to release a wave of her...primal energy I'd expect. I mean some of this is conjecture. To my knowledge, none of us have been injured this badly before." He paused, looking down at her for the first time as something close to an equal.

"After my error in not thinking through the ramifications of destroying Hephaestus' Anvil, I am trying to consider things a bit more judiciously. Unless you want to offload everyone on board and sail your ship miles out to sea for a couple of days before giving her the ambrosia, you are going to have an orgy here on your ship if you give it to her now. I can shield Shen from her energy, but I can't shield everyone on board." He looked at her sympathetically. "Xena's resurrection?"

He needn't say more. Gabrielle's cheeks flushed crimson as she was transported to that brief moment after being imbued with the goddess' power.

"What can we do?" Xena jumped in to provide Gabrielle a moment to compose herself.

Poseidon looked thoughtful, distractedly scratching his grey goatee. "My niece could select a few of your crew, two or three should suffice, maybe four. And if the two of you help, then you should be able to bleed off enough of her initial...energy to let her

get a grip on herself. Aphrodite is strong, she knows herself – two or three hours would suffice I would expect. Again, this is guesswork.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Gabrielle protested, holding up her hand. “I’m not going to send in *any* crew that don’t have that type of relationship with Aphrodite to...”

“Are you volunteering?” he asked hopefully. “Because that would solve your problem. She can’t hurt you.” He glanced at Xena. “Either of you.”

Gabrielle blushed again and there was no mistaking the unhappiness in Xena’s expression. “No, I’m not volunteering,” she replied hurriedly. “I just can’t ask someone to...do that. I mean Michelle has a relationship with Aphrodite and I’m sure she’d...”

Poseidon rolled his eyes, clearly not enjoying the conversation any more than Xena or Gabrielle were. “Are you asking me to do it?” he asked with a frown.

“No!” both bard and warrior replied in unison.

“Good, because I can’t shield Shen and...”

“We get it,” Gabrielle said uncomfortably, frowning and shaking her head into her hand at the image.

Xena steeled herself, inwardly shifting gears and trying to frame the proposition before them like a military campaign. “How can we help...dissipate whatever it is that needs dissipating?”

Poseidon looked from warrior to bard with the expression not unlike that of a single father faced with having to explain the facts of life to his pre-teen daughters. He took a deep breath and spoke as patiently and dispassionately as he could.

“My niece is the Goddess of Love. She’s going to be overcome with that kind of energy. You,” he looked at Xena, “have the essence of three gods coursing through your veins. It is muted, not as clear, precise, or strong a connection as your bard has, but I think should be enough for Aphrodite to channel some of her...ardor...through the two of you so it doesn’t blast whomever she is with at full force. You two are the only two people besides myself onboard that she can’t hurt.”

Xena chuckled. Gabrielle looked at her questioningly, failing to see the humor in their predicament. “He’s asking us to fuck to absorb Aphrodite’s energy while she’s fucking Michelle, so she won’t hurt your captain.” Xena explained.

Both Poseidon and Gabrielle stared at Xena. Gabrielle opened her mouth to speak, then closed it.

“And here I thought you were the one with the gift for descriptive language,” he commented to the bard.

“Yes, well...um...that does seem to be what you’re suggesting,” she replied.

“Indeed,” he agreed. “You have a connection to Aphrodite, and you have a connection to your warrior. Send your crew below decks- separately to their quarters or whatever. Have your Russian keep guard over his fallen comrades. I will watch a movie in the den with Shen. That’s close enough that I can shield Shen and Nicolai, everyone else might think they’re having a weird fantasy or two. Nothing they would act on.” He chuckled to himself. “What is your expression? You’re taking one for the team?”



Gabrielle knocked on her stateroom door. Michelle opened the door and smiled at her boss as she invited her in. The bard stood, casually holding the ambrosia behind her back. It was an unspoken agreement between those on the ship who knew of ambrosia’s

powers not to mention it to anyone who didn't already know. It was an obvious no-brainer.

"I need a word with the goddess," Gabrielle said, returning Michelle's smile.

"Is everything okay?" the captain asked, worried. "Ariel was just here, and he took Argo. Said they were going to watch a movie with Shen."

"Everything is okay," Gabrielle assured her. "We've got a handle on healing Aphrodite, and it may have some fallout – sexual fallout – and we don't want anyone affected by that inappropriately."

Michelle nodded uncertainly before joining Xena in the hallway. "Let's go into the library," Xena suggested. "You can probably go back in a minute or two."

"Hey gorgeous," Gabrielle said, closing the door and making her way to the bed. She kept the ambrosia out of sight for the moment, concealed in her hand.

"Flirt," Aphrodite said weakly. "You smell nice."

"About that. I have ambrosia, but you need to hear me out before you can have it," Gabrielle did her best to strike a tone between firm and caring as she opened her hand. Aphrodite's eyes lit up in hunger, but was too weak to take it from her.

"You have my attention," she said, transfixed on the exotic seaweed.

"Once you eat this, I am going to share your consciousness, then Xena and I are going to...er...help you bleed off some of your energy, if need be." The goddesses' eyes brightened and her eyebrows raised in interest. Gabrielle shook her head.

"No, hon. Not a threesome." The pout she got in return was so adorable she added, "Give us a few decades to get reacquainted, and then we'll talk, okay?"

"Fair enough," she agreed sullenly. "How does this work?"

"I don't know," Gabrielle admitted. "I think you just have the ambrosia, we get Michelle back in here and...er...ah..."

"Got it sweet pea," Aphrodite said extending her hand. Gabrielle handed it to her and the goddess consumed the plant with a zeal that was most undignified. There was almost an animalistic urgency that surprised the bard.

The effects were immediate. A warm ivory glow radiated from the goddess' skin and a blast of energy Gabrielle was unprepared for hit her. Similar to the goddess' reaction to her shell but with more energy and intensity, Gabrielle was overcome by an ardor the strength of which stunned her. In a second, she was on Aphrodite, kissing her with a passionate abandon. The goddess returned the onslaught for a number of long glorious minutes, reveling in returning to the apex of her power, rejuvenated and renewed. Tongues moving against each other, their fingers threaded through each other's hair, it was as if time and space stopped to relive a moment from the not so distant past. As she gained control of the rush, she regained her sense of self-restraint and gently, reluctantly pushed Gabrielle away from her after one last lingering kiss.

Confused and panting, it took a moment for the bard to regain her composure. She looked sheepishly at Aphrodite, clearly embarrassed.

"My bad," the goddess said reassuringly. She took a breath. A deep, sexy, alluring breath and Gabrielle leaned forward again. "I think you need to..."

"Yes," Gabrielle said firmly. "Xena and I need to..."

Aphrodite winked playfully, "I love you sweet pea, and thank you." She lifted the t-shirt she was wearing, revealing thin white scars where her gaping wounds had been moments earlier.

Gabrielle nodded approvingly, but her head was starting to swim with lust once again; the aphrodisiac energy in the room palpable.

“I love you too, Aphrodite. I’ll send Michelle in. “If you need... anything...”

“Right side, bottom drawer,” she replied with a sensual smile. “I remember, love. And I’ll have everything cleaned up before you come back. Good thing we aren’t the jealous type.”

Gabrielle winked before taking her leave to the library. What she found on her arrival was almost comical: Xena stood on one side of the room, Michelle on the other. Both women were making a deliberate effort to not look at the other, and both looked beyond relieved when Gabrielle entered.

“The goddess will see you now. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” Michelle nodded mutely to Xena and Gabrielle, and then hurried into the cabin, shutting the door behind her.

The door closed, and Michelle immediately realized she was in over her head. The room was warm and softly lit, the air nearly crackling with electric tension. In a graceful, fluid motion Aphrodite rose from the bed and stripped the soft t-shirt over her head. Ivory skin shimmered and perfectly proportioned breasts swayed, nipples erect as she moved. In short order she was face to face with Michelle, softly glowing blue eyes holding brown in their gaze. Aphrodite covered her lips and she was lost. Strong, confident hands threaded through her hair and she surrendered completely to the lips moving against her, as a soft tongue demanding entry into her mouth. The kiss was electric, sending a charge through her nervous system. Shoved with some force against the closed door, she brought her hand to the back of the goddess’ head, the other caressed her cheek, startled at how otherworldly the goddess felt. The blond tresses of Aphrodite’s short hair felt more like warm water to Michelle’s fingertips and her skin was impossibly warm and soft. She could feel the energy of arousal wafting over her, penetrating her cells and molecules. She realized this experience would be unlike any other.

“I feel like I should ask for a safe-word,” she panted when Aphrodite finally broke the kiss. Michelle smiled radiantly, conveying her happiness at standing next to this door, in this cabin with this goddess.

“Darling,” Aphrodite purred softly, her lips brushing against Michelle’s. “I am the only being on earth with whom you will never need a safe word.”



Gabrielle had barely taken a step past Xena in the library when she felt the connection between her and the goddess open. Like sinking into a warm tub, she felt the lust completely envelope her senses. The pithy concerns of mortal morays like privacy or inhibitions vanished. The mundane details had been tended to and she didn’t need to concern herself with anything but satiating her own need.

While she couldn’t see exactly what was happening on the other side of the door, Gabrielle could feel it. She could feel Aphrodite’s confidence, mastery, and exaltation in her domain. This is where she exuded a facility like no other, and for the moment, the bard from Potidaea shared in the experience with her, the byproduct of siphoning off the energy’s intensity for the safety of the mortal woman pinned against the other side of the door.

Ravenous with need, she turned to Xena, who looked positively delicious. She pushed Xena against the door and kissed her ferociously, her hands making quick work of the buttons on the warrior's shirt. Her tongue moved against Xena's as she reveled in the warm wetness of her mouth.

For her part, Xena felt the impact on the other side of the door at the same moment that Gabrielle pushed her, acutely aware that Michelle was essentially pressed against her back, separated only by a couple of inches of polished wood. She reveled in Gabrielle's onslaught, returning the kiss with enthusiasm. She heard the gasp of pleasure from inside the cabin. The juxtaposition of anonymity and shared experience was a heady combination.

Tossing her shirt on the floor, Gabrielle had her bra undone in an instant and lunged back at the warrior with a series of kisses down Xena's throat and across her collarbones. Releasing a low groan in appreciation, Xena stretched out her arms, bracing herself against the door frame as her lover found a breast, skilled hands undoing the button and zipper of her pants.



Michelle heard Xena's groan on the other side of the door and smiled. Moments earlier both captain and warrior were mutually surprised to find themselves engaging in a passionate kiss, seemingly for no reason. Both tall, strong, muscular women, they'd battled for dominance, lost in the lust fueled moment before sheepishly coming to their senses. Embarrassed, they'd broken their embrace and had moved to opposite sides of the library when Gabrielle walked in. It was now clear to Michelle that all of this had something to do with the goddess' recovery. While she had no idea how Gabrielle had healed the impossibly beautiful woman, or even what the nature of her injuries were in the first place, the captain of *The Hippolyta* was certain she was about to be ruined for any other lover, and she was absolutely fine with that. There was something additionally erotic about being pressed against the door, nearly feeling the heat of the woman on the other side penetrating through. There was little doubt in the captain's mind that Aphrodite could read that added excitement and planned to use it to her full advantage.

"Don't tell me I'm going to have to compete for your attention?" she murmured, her tongue trailing down Michelle's throat as she leisurely undid the buttons of her shirt.

"Oh gods, no!" Michelle protested, her hands drifting over the planes of the goddess' back. "You are amazing and..." Hesitating for the briefest of moments caused Aphrodite to stop what she was doing. The goddess rested her hands against the plane of the door, on either side of Michelle's face.

"Yes?" she asked sweetly, her face inches from the captain's. Relaxed and perfect, blue eyes shimmering with desire; in this moment Aphrodite was every bit the Goddess of Love. Michelle leaned forward to kiss her, and was rewarded with an enthusiastic response, but the goddess didn't move her hands. Michelle tried touching her, exploring her back, moving her hands to the front, cupping a perfectly proportioned breast, feeling the nipple go taught in her fingers. Aphrodite smiled, clearly enjoying the attention but again didn't move. "The rules of this game are simple hon. You try and hide anything from me that is better said out loud..." she needn't continue. It was clear to the captain that her privacy would be respected but not where the only point in silence was

fear or insecurity of saying something she wanted to say. She could trust that the woman churning up her insides in the best possible way would know the difference.

“I was going to say that you smell fantastic, but I can’t describe it. It’s beautiful but indescribable...” She was rewarded by the goddess easing her out of her shirt, bra following a second later. Aphrodite pressed forward, her breasts resting against the captain’s, both women naked from the waist up. She whispered into the brunette’s ear.

“Gabrielle says I smell like tropical moonlight, but she’s a bard and words are her thing.” She felt the other woman stiffen ever so slightly and she nipped at a grateful neck, sliding one hand behind Michelle’s head and sliding the other one down the front of her pants. “No love,” she murmured. “I’m not thinking about her, I’m thinking about you.” Now it was the captain’s turn to moan out loud as Aphrodite’s fingers found where she was hot and wet. “I would assume if you can hear Xena,” she said with a sultry chuckle, “Xena can hear you too.” Michelle groaned and again, panting in frustrated and disappointment as the goddess withdrew her hand, tasting her fingers then smiling.

While Aphrodite had not been entirely honest with the captain, she felt that in her position some discretion was warranted. She could feel Gabrielle in tandem with her, taking some of the energy surge she was riding and funneling it towards Xena. So clearly, the bard was in her thoughts. Not that Aphrodite couldn’t focus on a dozen lovers all at once. She knew everything she was doing to the captain, the bard was doing to her warrior; their shared connection proved an added dimension of exciting.

Aphrodite was grateful for these three women, and felt very connected to them. Unlike the other members of Gabrielle’s crew, they had all participated in various forms of group sex. There was a maturity in their confidence of their own sexual identity and being able to express their needs. Aphrodite saw value in all levels of experience; even the most awkward of encounters were incredibly endearing and sweet. But that wasn’t what she needed in this moment. She needed to gather in experienced energy and send it back out to psyches that would not be paralyzed with fear and insecurity by its intensity.

Taking a step back from the captain, Aphrodite pushed the sweatpants past her hips and stepped out of them gracefully. She grinned as the brunette unconsciously licked her lips, pupils dilating noticeably in ever more heightened arousal.

“I think you’re overdressed.”

Michelle grasped the sides of her pants, only to be stopped by a patient shake of the goddess’ head.

“No love,” she said. “I want to do that.” With a hand at the front of the captain’s pants and one at the back she smoothly pulled them down.

“You seem like you’ve done this before,” Michelle commented as she stepped from the garment.

Aphrodite chuckled, genuinely amused. “Once or twice, over the years,” she replied with a lyrical laugh, now leaning her naked body against that of the captain, pressing her back against the door once more.

“Hold on,” she murmured before moving in for a kiss. To Michelle’s estimation it must have been what dancing with Grace Kelly would be like, or acting in a scene with Meryl Streep, or discussing the nature of the universe with Stephen Hawking; to engage with someone who so completely knows what they’re doing that it leaves you spellbound and breathless. There was an intensity and clarity to her feelings that she’d never felt before. The rush was there, the butterflies in her stomach, the quickening of her pulse, the

sighs of bliss. She could not recall a time when she'd felt so in tune with her own lust. Aphrodite kissed her with unhurried intensity, fully aware that it was driving the woman against her mad with desire. She shifted a little, trailing light kisses down the brunette's throat, moving the captain's hands to either side of the door jam. She continued downward lightly touching one of the captain's breasts teasing the nipple erect with her hand, using her lips and teeth on the other.

"Yes," Michelle gasped as she felt a thud against the door, clearly made from the warrior throwing her head backwards. "Yes, keep going," she panted again as the goddess continued her progress downward.

"Gabrielle, please!" she heard the muffled groan from behind, and was very much aware that what was happening to her was also happening mere inches away from her. She briefly worried the sounds of lovemaking might distract her, but then Aphrodite reached her center. The whole world vanished. The room dissolved around her and she found herself enveloped by sensual light and mist. She shifted her legs, giving the goddess better access, and gazed down the length of tan her torso into the blue eyes of the woman kneeling in front of her. Eyes that were watching her intently with desire and mischief. Without breaking eye contact the Goddess of Love covered her cleft with her mouth and licked in an unhurried fashion, winking and smiling sensuously into her sex when her pleased gasps became audible groans. She threw her head back again, unconcerned by the audible 'thud' it caused.

Temperature rising, pulse quickening, Michelle felt as though her entire being were melting and turning to liquid fire, willingly dissolving to essence to be consumed by the goddess kneeling in front of her. She watched transfixed as Aphrodite moved against her, feasting as she steadied the captain with warm hands against the her thighs. When Michelle began to rock her hips back and forth, finding a counterpoint to the goddess' rhythm, Aphrodite moved one hand, easily sliding two fingers into her; then reached out with the other hand to press her palm against the door, mirroring Gabrielle's hand on the other side.



Gabrielle moved against Xena with practiced ease. While their time in the bathtub might have been about rediscovery, the memories came flooding back. She well remembered what her warrior liked, and was happy to give it to her. With strong arms, Xena braced herself against the door jam, her back pressing against the unyielding wooden surface of the door in order to push her hips forward to allow the bard's mouth access at the perfect angle. Gabrielle could feel the desire and passion flowing from her cabin, which only served to compound the love she already felt for Xena. While she wanted nothing more than to give her warrior release, she knew that she needed to hold off as long as she dared; the act of lovemaking itself being key to bleeding off the goddess' energy – not the climax. With practiced ease, she moved three slick fingers in and out of her lover in concert with the movements of her mouth at the top of the cleft. Reaching forward with her right hand, she expected to brace it against the door. Instead, she encountered Aphrodite's soft, strong hand, her skin warm with power, her pulse hammering out a steady rhythm. They interlaced fingers, and she felt Aphrodite's chi flowing into her, carrying with it a knowledge and understanding far beyond the bard's two thousand years. She did not see the goddess, only felt her as she kept her attention

focused on Xena, green eyes gazing up into blue watching as Xena's eyes became heavy lidded with pleasure, her moans and pants musical in their beauty.

In tandem Michelle and Xena reached a hand forward from the door to the head of their respected lovers, in both an encouraging and pleading gesture. The two women on their knees gently withdrew their fingers from their lover, using that free hand to grasp the back of a thigh and hold them close as they drove their partners to climax. Modesty had no place as the audible gasps became pants, and the panting gave way to moaning, then pleading.

"Gabrielle... please... don't stop," Xena begged as her hips bucked of their own accord.

"Oh my god, oh my god..." Michelle gasped repeatedly as she ground herself against the goddess' willing mouth and tongue.

The two brunettes climaxed together; their cries of release ringing out simultaneously in the private quarters. Aphrodite stilled her movement, allowing the pleasurable contractions to rocket through the captain's body and released the bard's hand. With graceful movements she stood and kissed Michelle hard, her arousal slicked skin sliding against that of the other woman.

"Fucking amazing," Michelle husked when she was given a moment to breathe.

"Lover, we're just getting started," Aphrodite murmured before taking her hand and leading her to the bed.



Gabrielle released Xena, absently wiping slickness from her chin. Standing up, she afforded the warrior the opportunity to see her face more clearly. One glance at the blazing green eyes, Xena knew this was not entirely *her* Gabrielle. Her mind had been far too preoccupied; she had been distracted, consumed by her own sense of pleasure, aroused by what her lover had been doing to her body and the sounds of sex from behind the door to fully appreciate the change in her bard's expression and demeanor. There was a new hunger and worldliness there, and if she hadn't understood its source, she might've been concerned.

"You are amazing," the warrior husked, drawing the diminutive woman in for a kiss, her passion ignited anew at tasting herself on the bard's lips. Gabrielle returned the kiss with vigor, stepping away from Xena only for a moment to pull the t-shirt over her head, tossing it to the floor, her bra following an instant later. She kissed Xena, and could feel another onslaught of passion building from the cabin.

"Xena, I think we have about two minutes to get to the guest cabin before I lose it again," she said letting her hands roam over the statuesque body in front of her. "Unless you want to keep listening..."

The warrior chuckled, allowing Gabrielle to lead her down the short hallway to the guest quarters. "I won't lie, that was great. But I'm all for some privacy."

Inside the guest room with the unmade bed and clothes strewn everywhere, Gabrielle pushed Xena towards the bed.

"Not until I get your pants off," the warrior playfully protested. Gabrielle brought her hands to her hips but was stopped by her lover. "Not so fast. Come here," Xena demanded and Gabrielle paused. Her smile was sultry as she stepped forward to stand

between the warrior's legs as Xena sat on the edge of the bed. She touched the soft brown tresses and lightly stroked the warrior's face.

"Do you feel her too?" she asked, lightly tracing Xena's mouth with the gentle tip of her finger.

"A bit," the warrior replied with a small smile. "But I'd expect not to the degree that you do."

"Describe it," she asked as strong hands slid around her waist, undoing her pants and easing them over her hips she could step out of them.

"It's like everything is making me think of sex. Anything potentially erotic is magnified; the scent of the sea air, the sway of the ship, the way I taste on your lips, hearing Michelle pant and groan through the door. Arousal is everywhere, everything is an aphrodisiac. Is Aphrodite there, in your head?"

"Not exactly," Gabrielle replied throwing her head back blissfully as she moved one of Xena's hands between her legs. "I can feel this...power. I know what you want, I sure as fuck know what I want, I know exactly what to do, how to do it and it's like even though Aphrodite and I are having this nearly identical experience together, it isn't with each other. *Obviously*." She groaned as Xena pushed two fingers inside.

"But you're watching her?" Xena pressed her for information as she slowly stroked with her hand. She enjoyed Gabrielle writhe and move against her, delighting in keeping her rhythm just out of synch.

Gabrielle didn't mind. In fact, the last thing she wanted was for the ride to be over too soon. No, the slow build, keeping the fire warm but not explosive was exactly what she was hoping for in this moment.

"Xena, right now, at the forefront of my memory is every orgasm we've ever shared. Every position, every setting, from my clumsy first attempts to the torrid trysts in hot springs and waterfalls. The angry make-up sex, the comical getting off while not jostling sprained limbs or broken ribs. Keeping quiet among the Amazons, not waking Joxer, all of those barns and inns; every fantastic, perfect moment of our ability to express our love for each other. Aphrodite is here, at the periphery of my consciousness, but she's far too occupied with what she's doing with Michelle, and I'm far too occupied with you. It's like we're sharing the occasional high-five behind our backs, she's not exactly part of this."

"Mm hum," Xena replied with an arched eyebrow as the bard pushed her backwards, urging her to scoot up the bed. "And this isn't exactly what she and Michelle are doing right now?" she asked wryly.

"How can you tell?" Gabrielle asked curiously, as Xena positioned herself in the middle of the bed.

"Because your eyes are glowing," Xena replied with a chuckle. "It makes sense to be...in synch with her, but the eyes are a solid giveaway."

"Fortunately, we both have similar likes." Undulating her hips back and forth at the warrior's waist, Gabrielle smiled, enjoying as Xena was turned on by what she was doing.

Xena reached forward with her hands and rested one at the bard's hip to steady her as she moved. She reached forward with the other, rubbing her thumb through Gabrielle's trimmed pubic hair. The bard looked down at Xena's similarly trimmed hair and absently smiled to herself. Xena had taken her advice to fit in to include what must

seem to her as an idiosyncratic custom. Unable to stay distracted, she slowly and deliberately eased her way up Xena's body.

"You looking for another orgasm to add to that collection?" Xena asked dryly.

With a deceptively sweet smile, Gabrielle leaned close; her face right next to Xena's, her lips brushing against those of her lover. "Xena, I want you to drive me crazy with that perfect mouth of yours. I want you to make me feel so good that I lose my fucking mind. When you are sure I can't take another second of it, I want you to make me come so hard you nearly drown."

Blue eyes flared with passion in response, a wicked grin spreading across her to soon to be covered face.



"Hey!" Michelle protested as Aphrodite leaned away from her, rising from her face and reaching over to the bedside table.

"Just a minute, honey. I promise we will get back to what you were doing, it was delightful." The goddess reassured her as she opened the bottom drawer. Rummaging around inside, she sat back up, bring up a few items which she placed on the bed.

Curious, Michelle rolled over, surprised to see a bottle of lube, several dildos and a vibrator on the bed. Blushing furiously, she rolled back, forcing her eyes shut and grimacing. "You know, until now I'd forgotten that this was my bosses' bedroom. Those... those are my bosses'...things."

Aphrodite frowned slightly, not foreseeing this complication. "Your boss, that's the sticking point for you, not that..."

"You've...er...enjoyed each other? No. I'm not the jealous type. But she's my..." her words were stopped by a gentle finger on her lips.

"If you want me to I can...fix that for you, make it not bother you. But, as a rule, I really try not to tweak the minds of people I genuinely want to get to know." Aphrodite voice was kind and patient, in stark contrast to her eyes which conveyed hunger and her body which was thrumming with readiness. She straddled the captain's hips and lightly traced her fingers over warm, receptive skin, thinking as she playfully teased the woman's breasts beneath her.

"I can deal, you don't need to mess with my head," the captain assured her. "By all means, keep messing with my body – but I'll handle the head stuff."

Aphrodite smiled. "I can promise you this," she said, "you aren't just an employee any longer. From today, you're going to be more family to Gabrielle than the rest of the crew, and you know very well she considers the crew family, albeit with some strong boundaries firmly in place." She took a deep breath and a shimmer rippled over her, from her head moving down her body. "No matter what, we're spending the next several hours together. I need it too badly not to. But after that, if you want to keep your old life you can have it, no hard feelings. If you decide you're up for an adventure, you need to think of Gabrielle, Xena and me differently. You will need to believe yourself as one of us. And..." Aphrodite stopped herself, not wanting to ruin the surprise.

"Group sex?" Michelle asked dryly.

The goddess winked. "I always gravitate to the smart ones. Not for a while yet, love. Those two need to get reacquainted thing first. You take your time and think about

it, no hurry in letting me know. But there is something pressing you will need to hurry back to,” she purred as she repositioned herself, straddling the captain.

“I don’t know why you bothered with lube?” Michelle asked as she eased her hand’s over Aphrodite’s thighs, “you certainly don’t need it.”

A delighted laugh filled the cabin. “Like that’s for me.”

Settling herself once more atop the captain’s face, she brushed several brown curls from Michelle’s forehead and returned the brunette’s smile. The captain opened her mouth and reaching forward, resuming the cadence and patterns from before the interruption. She lapped skillfully with her tongue, delighting in the taste of the woman moving against her. As before she felt the room melt away, riding the wave of Aphrodite’s building passion. She was warm, electric, every inch of her humming with pleasure, as she watched the tableau above her, the bliss on the goddess’ face infectious. Casually leaning back, Aphrodite reached behind touching her lover in time with her own movements. Impressed at the captain’s concentration, she rewarded her by reaching forward, picking up a dildo and putting it to good use. If the captain had been able to see, she’d have been fascinated at the goddess’ flexibility and dexterity. As it was however, she could not see past the lithe body undulating above her, her own pleasure demanding equal attention. Slippery friction created heat that cascaded and intensified between the pair as they each concentrated on fulfilling the desires of the other.

Out of habit Michelle signaled the goddess with a squeeze to her thigh that she was at the exact right place, realizing a heartbeat later that obviously Aphrodite already knew that. Since their first kiss the goddess had done nothing but what the brunette craved at any given moment. Aphrodite was all too happy to provide verbal encouragement however. “That is exactly right, love. Right there,” she said as she moved back and forth, the muscles of her legs, waist and torso contracting and releasing with practiced ease, pressing herself more firmly still onto her lover’s mouth. When she brought her free hand to her own breast, pinching the nipple playfully, Michelle was pushed over the edge, another powerful climax cascading through her body.



Gabrielle panted, almost regretting the specificity of the instructions she had given Xena. Working wonders with her mouth alone, the bard felt her warrior everywhere. For long moments she was deep inside of her, making her legs tremble and turn to liquid, moments later sucking lightly, teasing the bundle of nerves at the top of her cleft. When she came too close to the edge she would back off stroking the outside edges before beginning the dance again with variations. They continued the game for long minutes until Xena could feel the tremors begin in the bard’s thighs that indicated muscles were at the point of fatigue and that a cramp was imminent. She moved her strong hands across the top of the bard’s thigh and brought them up the bard’s body to her breasts, cupping them firmly with intent.

Gabrielle could feel Aphrodite with her as she moved closer to climax. With a feeling that was more collaborative than voyeuristic, she felt the presence in her mind of give and take. The Goddess of Love giving her a sense of mastery and control over her own body and taking the energy generated by the passion and arousal she shared with Xena. As Xena touched her, Gabrielle could feel Aphrodite touch herself and that image sent a powerful orgasm careening through her, making her cry out her release.

~~~~~

Aphrodite joined her, riding the wave of both Michelle's and Gabrielle's orgasm. With every surge, every pant, moan, and groan, Aphrodite felt her control increase and her strength return. While the carnal lust she was reveling in was only one facet of the enigma that made up love, it was emblematic of her overall renewed strength and vigor. Aphrodite was stronger than she had been in thousands of years, and the world would in time be better for it. In the here and now however, the effects would be felt by the people closest proximity to her.

Still smiling, she climbed off of the captain, releasing the woman, gently removing the dildo and tossing it aside. "You know, back in the day I'd just grow a dick or two to party like that," she observed.

Michelle was in the process of drawing a couple of deep breaths to regain control. Her eyes went wide with surprise. "You're kidding?!"

"My name isn't part of the word 'hermaphrodite' by accident. I mean I could grow a dick anywhere – on my hands for example – I should say your perception would have been that I grew one on my hand for a scene like this. I used to have all kinds of cool powers." She frowned, realizing her mood was starting to darken with negativity.

Instead, Aphrodite stretched out on the bed next to Michelle and began to play with her hair, enjoying the feel of the tight curls in her fingertips.

"What happened?" Michelle asked.

"That, my love, is a story for another time," the goddess said, kissing her and derailing any further questions. "Catch your breath and hydrate, I'm not done with you yet."

~~~~~

Hours later, Gabrielle rejoined her crew. She knew the goddess and ship's captain were still hard at it, but she had a very clear sense that it was purely for enjoyment at this point; the need for containing the surge of power caused by the ambrosia had passed. After a long, glorious, hot shower, she relieved Nicolai from his post; Xena checked in with Poseidon before joining her. It was impossible not to see the renewed sense of hope among the crew, even as they performed the sad duty of preparing bodies for burial. There was no doubt in Gabrielle's mind that the energy from a renewed and fully healthy Aphrodite had resonated powerfully with everyone on board.

The stewards, Blake and Samantha, were tasked with retrieving clothes for burial from Elaine and Bohemian's cabins, respectively. Xena and Gabrielle had just finished bathing the bodies when the large form of Nicolai returned, blocking the sunlight from the open doorway, Sarah just in front of him. Both warrior and bard looked up from their work, noting the serious expressions on both their faces.

"Everything okay Nicolai?" Gabrielle asked as she repositioned the soft blanket over Bohemian's body. She was wringing excess water from his freshly washed dreadlocks while Xena was combing out Elaine's hair.

"Very well Miss Evans," he began formally, his heavy accent always reminding Gabrielle of music.

"Please, the both of you, speak freely," she protested gently. Clearly, this was official business, so she gave them her undivided attention.

He continued solemnly “Yes, okay. Gabrielle. Very soon you will need new captain and executive officer. Michelle is going to run off with your old girlfriend. The decision is yours of course, but I would like to be captain, with Sarah as my executive officer. Red and I work well in the kitchen, no?” Gabrielle glanced over to Xena, who was trying to hide her smirk by focusing on her work. “No offense to new girlfriend, of course.” He added with a curt nod to Xena, which did nothing to abate the warrior’s grin.

Gabrielle took a deep breath, unhappy that once again, her personal life seemed to be the focus of the crew’s deliberations.

“There is a fair amount there to unpack. Michelle hasn’t said anything to me as of yet, but if and when she does, I’m happy to have the two of you in charge. You’ve taken a vote?”

While the final decision was obviously hers alone, Gabrielle knew that things proceeded much more smoothly when the rest of her current team was onboard with such changes. It provided the opportunity for any apprehensions about shifting duties to be aired and discussed. Sometimes only a conversation was needed, other times people found that a transfer was a better solution, depending on the conflict. “The crew has been unanimous,” Sarah added. “And we have some suggestions for staff additions.

Gabrielle nodded. She had just removed the bullet that killed Bo, and was threading a needle to sew shut the wound in his neck. When dressed in his suit, it would not be visible to his parents. She was grateful for the small mercies.

“Go on,” she urged. “I’m listening.”

“Ship will need time in dock for refitting and repairs,” Nicolai began. “Shen will need a proper room on crew level, maybe room for tutor? You discuss raising child with new girlfriend.” While stifled, there was no denying the chuckle that came from Xena. “Ed would be good addition to the team, he is already in the know, yes? Robyn Versoul is on list to transfer back to ship duty, you will need to tell her or whomever. I think Vox should go to school for captain’s license as well as Wolfgang- they can be study buddies while they continue work.”

Gabrielle’s first instinct was to attempt an explanation that referring to Aphrodite as the ‘old girlfriend’ and Xena as the ‘new girlfriend’ was not only inaccurate but also unfair to them both. Seeing the twinkle in the Russian’s eyes however she realized he was teasing her to be playful. The large man did have a knack for making people feel a bit lighter when things were difficult. Not unlike his fondness for wearing rainbow unicorn t-shirts around Shen.

Sutures done, she looked up and regarded the pair. “You guys seem to have thought of everything.”

“Not exactly,” Sarah protested. “Jennifer has seen enough...or um...felt enough to know that something unusual has happened and I don’t know how you want to handle that.

“So, we may have a new employee for Transportation or Special Projects?” Gabrielle asked dubiously, doubtful as she said it that either department would be a good fit for the soon to be former escort.

“I’ll bet Aphrodite could use a personal assistant,” Xena remarked. “If her intention is to travel, with or without Michelle, I’m sure she’d appreciate someone to make her arrangements.”

Blake and Samantha arrived with the clothing that their colleagues would be buried in and were surprised by the low rumble of laughter coming from the huge Russian. "It is nice when girlfriends get along so well," he said, winking at his boss. With a formal bow, he and Sarah took their leave, leaving the four to finish their ministrations.

"I'm really growing to like that guy," Xena remarked, smiling as she accepted Samantha's help dressing Elaine.



Gabrielle awoke early, roused by Argo's whining. Getting dressed in near darkness so as not to disturb the peacefully slumbering warrior, she carried the dog up to the deck to do her business. On a flat surface, the dog could walk surprisingly well with the cast on her hind leg, but stairs proved to be the more difficult obstacle. Feeding her, she was happy to see the dog's appetite had returned to normal. The bard then took a walk to the command center. She was not surprised to see Nicolai and Sarah, but definitely surprised to see Michelle with them. The captain looked exhausted but happy, and was no doubt operating on zero sleep. The slight sheepishness in her glance was the only indicator of their recently shared intimacy. She felt an involuntary tugging at her emotions but stubbornly refused to give the small pangs of jealousy legitimacy.

She was distracted by Shen sleeping on the couch, his head in Ed's lap, wrapped in the blanket that Elaine had given the flight-attendant from her cabin.

"Good morning," she whispered softly, helping herself to a cup of espresso from the carafe.

"Good morning," Michelle quietly replied. She handed her a sealed envelope. "My letter of resignation."

"Okay," Gabrielle replied. Having decided the previous night how she would handle this if it came up, she tossed it in the trash can under the console. "Not accepted. How is everyone?"

"But –" Gabrielle held up her hand and the captain fell silent, looking a little wounded.

"You aren't resigning, Michelle, you're transferring. I won't say you're working *for* Aphrodite, because that would be an HR nightmare. She isn't really employed by the company, or assigned to SP. She's more of an independent consultant, and you will be Bardic & Company's full-time liaison for her..."

"Humanitarian work?" Nicolai supplied helpfully.

"Exactly," Gabrielle agreed. "You still get your regular salary, benefits, and pension, but you kinda have to do what she says." The large man chuckled and Sarah nudged him in the arm. "Also, you may have an executive assistant, Jennifer. I need to see if she wants the job."

"I tell you, lesbians. Better than soap opera," Nicolai chuckled to himself. "They should make reality television show."

"When will the directors be arriving?" Gabrielle ignored the Russian's comments.

"In about an hour." Michelle replied, relieved and pleased. "We thought we'd have a breakfast for the crew, then feed the directors when they get here. We will have additional people from Transportation and Special Projects. Friends of Elaine and Bo. Olivia and Tzu-Ching should be arriving right after the directors. Oh, and I spoke to

Rebekah Luna this morning. She's going to stay on as legal. She agrees that acclimating a couple of new people at a time is the smartest way to go."

"Excellent," Gabrielle agreed. "When everyone is onboard, take us out to sea. Far enough to..." Michelle nodded, needing no further elaboration. "When the funeral is over and our guests are gone, I'll meet with the directors and we can head home. Once we're back at the marina, we can make arrangements for the transition of crew and getting Shen back to school."

"Huh?" the boy said groggily waking up when he heard his name. "Did you say I'm going back to school?"

Gabrielle nodded, "Yes, if you want to. We need to make some changes to the ship so we'll be living on land for a while. You know that place I have in Malibu?"

Shen asked, "And Xena is going to live with us? What about Aphrodite?"

"Aphrodite has her own house in Venice, and I'm sure we can visit as often as you'd like." Gabrielle smiled giving up any pretense at having privacy where her crew was concerned. "And, Xena is going to live with us. I mean if we're both going to adopt you, we really should live together, don't you think?"

"Well, what you're going to need to do is get married. But we can work on your proposal for Xena later. I'll need to give it some thought," the boy replied happily enjoying the burst of laughter from Nicolai that was infectious.



The last notes of Xena's song finished, accompanied in stunning harmony by Vox. Nicolai, Michelle, Ed, and Sarah tipped the two sets of boards, releasing the shrouded bodies of Bohemian Van Lyle and Elaine Jackson into the water. Olivia and Tzu-Ching Van Lyle sobbed together, the older woman clutching the dreadlock she'd clipped from her son's head before the service. Elaine did not have family outside of the tribe she'd created for herself, and the people she loved and cared about most were already onboard.

Gabrielle held Xena's hand when her song concluded and led her to the sobbing pair to extend her sympathies. "Olivia, Tzu-Ching ..." she got no further before being warmly embraced by Olivia. "I am so very sorry about Bo," she said, her voice a bit muffled by the taller woman.

"We knew the job he did with you all was dangerous," Tzu-Ching replied when Olivia released the bard. "While we're broken hearted at our loss, you can't fault your child for following their own heart wherever that leads them."

"Some people can grow to be very old and not live half as much as Bo lived," Shen interjected from Gabrielle's side.

The women looked down at him and smiled, impressed and curious about the ten-year-old. They looked just past him for signs of a parent among the crew.

"This is my son, Shen," Gabrielle explained deciding that a streamlined story was best for everyone involved. "And this is my partner, Natasha."

Olivia and Tzu-Ching exchanged knowing glances, clearly answering a question they had asked themselves previously. Gabrielle was resigned to this being a normal occurrence for a while and simply went with it. Xena extended a hand and shook each of theirs warmly, expressing her condolences as well. Aphrodite approached, looking

radiant even as she mourned, and added her sympathies, introducing herself in the process. Again, the two women exchanged knowing glances.

“You’re the young woman Bo mentioned having such a crush on,” Olivia said, beaming. “It is nice to meet you. He said such wonderful things about you when we spoke last week.”

The goddess was clearly touched, and smiled. “I think you have it backwards. I’m the one who had the outrageous crush on him.” She continued chatting with them for several more minutes, her presence providing solace.

Soft orange lights lit the ship and as Shen explained to Xena it was a signal among the crew to refer to Gabrielle as Susan. The orange lights meant civilians were onboard, and that the identity of Gabrielle Evans needed to be protected.

Everyone from serving crew to other company members greeted the Van Lyle’s with a hug and a fond memory of their son. They clearly knew some of the crew well, and these members stayed close, offering what support and comfort they could. Other groups of people consoled each other and told stories of adventures they’d had with Elaine.

After a time, Poseidon came up and tapped the warrior on the shoulder. After leading Xena out of earshot from the group she had been standing with, he regarded her with a somber expression.

“Our duty to these two isn’t finished. We don’t want their bodies surfacing, getting picked up by a fishing vessel and creating problems. We need to ensure that they are surrendered properly to the deep. Consider this your first lesson.” Xena nodded, grateful that she would not need to shoulder her new responsibility without guidance.

“I’ll see you in the meeting,” she whispered to Gabrielle before following the God of the Sea down to the water level.



Having bid her guests adieu, Gabrielle sat down with her company directors around the rough-hewn conference table. Nicolai occupied the newly reserved seat for the ship’s captain. Gabrielle was flanked on either side by Aphrodite and Xena. Jennifer Charvel was more than happy to accept Aphrodite’s offer of a permanent job; the two deciding that they did indeed quite like each other. While the newcomer wasn’t in the meeting it was Gabrielle’s first order of business to let Fiona know of the staffing additions as well as the position changes.

“We’ve also assigned Dr. Kate Sprucehill to Special Projects. I know people don’t start there, but her skillset is unique,” Fiona explained, reviewing her notes for the meeting.

Gabrielle nodded turning to her director of Finance. “Ms. Martin, you’re gonna love this, but we need another plane.”

The brunette opened her mouth to protest but across the table Aphrodite leaned forward resting her chin on the palm of her hand. “It’s for me,” she said, adding a wink for good measure.

Heather Martin closed her mouth and made a notation on her note pad. “We can budget for this alongside remodeling your yacht,” she said grudgingly. Mr. Tiller and I will come up with a plan. “Are we going to need an additional mega-yacht too?” she asked sweetly.

“No,” Gabrielle said at the same time the goddess replied in the affirmative. Gabrielle slowly turned her head to glare at her. Aphrodite shrugged, accepting defeat. “Let’s see where we are with everything else, shall we?” the bard asked rhetorically. “Ms. Chen, where are we on the political front?”

Victoria Chen opened a folder, identical copies of which had been passed to all participants. “The coordinated assault against Mr. Easton and Fire Industries went well. On the political front, Gideon Power was exposed as the actor Henry Scruggs, with a number of papers running various articles about the web of connection between Easton, Scruggs, Russian oligarchs, and the money laundering Fire Industries engaged on for them. Scruggs is claiming he is simply an actor playing a role, but we expect investigations by the SEC and AGs in various states for his false product claims and testimony he gave under oath in a deposition as Gideon Power in a sexual harassment case. That’s open and shut perjury. Easton seems to be off the radar with the White House claiming that they don’t know the guy although Mexico is helpfully supplying evidence to the contrary and the photographic evidence we collected has been forwarded to several news outlets.”

“So, it seems that Easton will have a number of messes he can focus on cleaning up distracting him from fomenting division and political discord,” the bard observed.

“With the people lining up to get a piece of him legally, I think he will need to disappear and come up with a new identity,” Sabin Jha added. “Special Projects will be keeping an eye out. The resources of the *Olympus* project will be transitioning to this new focus and we will continue to informally liaison with Brian Glass at the CIA. We also caused a fair amount of havoc with Easton’s hacking operations in Macedonia. They will just relocate of course, but that will take time and money. Our people are on it and will continue to harass and disrupt them whenever we can.”

Gabrielle nodded, pleased with the outcome of their efforts. She gestured to the head of philanthropy, DeShawn Johnson, for his report.

“Philanthropy is working on a joint project with Technology to provide some next generation support for various voter initiatives. We’ve identified some new grassroots organizations that can use our help. With our expertise, we can help these groups simply overwhelm Easton and his ilk at the polls. We are already seeing positive results in several key states and districts. I will admit, it’s a new avenue for us, but looks like a promising one.” There was a passion and enthusiasm in the way he spoke that energized everyone around the table.

“I think we have some talent in the organization,” he continued. “I realize that you can’t run for office. Your dual role as in this company would preclude that.” Inwardly Gabrielle chuckled. A fake identity was the least of the reasons why she shouldn’t run for office. She considered that perhaps she didn’t need to tell every one of her directors her age. “But you have people working for you that absolutely should. Or at least take a more active role in cultivating candidates and supporting them. That would plant the seeds to build a bulwark against Easton years down the road. That and the education initiatives of course.”

“I think that is a plan worth pursuing. Planning with a ten to fifteen year projection is wise,” Xena commented with an approving nod. “Make sure Argo is in the room any time you interview a candidate,” she added under her breath.

“Please prepare a proposal for the first phase of your initiative for our next meeting,” Gabrielle added, nodding. She took a deep breath and gazed across the table. “Ms. Martin, why don’t we go over budget numbers for the rest of the year. Let’s see how many islands we have to liquidate.”



The night was clear and crisp as *The Hippolyta* spend north towards home. After a precocious ten-year-old was tucked into bed by his parents, Xena and Gabrielle quietly made their way from the crew quarters to the upper decks. The sounds of life and family surrounded them. Nicolai and Sarah were reviewing upcoming maintenance and duty assignments in the command center while an off-duty Ed snored quite contentedly on the couch. An obviously smitten Wolfgang and equally smitten Vox were giving Jennifer a tour of the ship. While they couldn’t see who, strains of a heated argument could be overheard about the merits of the latest Star Wars movie.

“Who are they talking about?” Xena asked as she picked up Argo before ascending the main stern staircase. “I didn’t think America had a monarchy.”

Gabrielle smiled. “Firstly, Princess Leia is fictional, and secondly, she is from Alderaan. Well, it’s her adoptive home anyway. There is a magnificent world of cinema to which I am going to enjoy introducing you.”

Xena chuckled. “I hope I like it as much as vodka.”

Gabrielle grinned. “Oh, I think you will.”

They were hardly surprised to find Aphrodite and Michelle putting the large hot tub on the main sun deck to good use. The pair were naked, sipping champagne, enjoying the massage jets and salt water, engaged in nothing more salacious than star gazing and conversation. Aphrodite brightened at the sight of the pair and beckoned them over, pouring two additional flutes. Michelle looked positively mortified. Up until that moment, it had apparently not occurred to her that her boss (and ship’s owner) might happen upon them at any moment.

“You should join us,” Aphrodite suggested happily.

“Holy fuck,” Michelle muttered in her embarrassment. “I, ah, thought you guys had already turned in...”

While she and Xena had exchanged pleasantries at the funeral, this was their first time face to face in a more private setting since their intimate encounter. Xena smiled sympathetically, trying to reassure the brunette.

“Don’t be such a prude,” the goddess playfully admonished. “You’re going to have to get used to seeing them naked if we’re going to successfully vacation together.”

The warrior shrugged approvingly as she nonchalantly stripped out of her clothes. “The water looks great.”

“Where is it you think we’re going on vacation?” Gabrielle asked apprehensively as Xena climbed into the spacious Jacuzzi. “Michelle, if you’re uncomfortable I don’t want this to be a thing.”

“By the gods this is amazing,” the warrior purred happily accepting the offered glass, either oblivious to, or purposefully ignoring the captains’ appreciative yet embarrassed glance.

“I can’t think of a moment you’ve been anything less than professional,” Michelle assured her boss. “I think we can agree to a separation of on the clock and off the clock.”

Besides, I do need to adjust to my new role as liaison.” She sat up more confidently, clinking glasses with Aphrodite.

“I can’t argue with that,” Gabrielle agreed, stripping out of her clothes. She couldn’t help but notice the trio of appreciative gazes from the women in the water.

“It’s going to be kinda cold walking to bed,” Gabrielle observed, handing Argo a bone from the outdoor kitchen before climbing in to join the others.

“Oh, I’ll text Blake and have him bring you guys robes. He brought ours up earlier,” Aphrodite said amiably.

“No!” Gabrielle replied a bit exasperated. “No offense, but I can only handle one crewmember seeing me naked on any given day. Okay? That’s the last thing Blake needs to deal with tonight.”

“Too bad Vox is giving Jennifer a tour with Wolfgang, I’m sure she’d help you out,” Xena teased.

“Wouldn’t count,” Gabrielle replied without thinking. “She’s already seen me naked.” In that moment, she wasn’t sure what was more embarrassing, the arched eyebrow from Xena or Michelle. “It’s a long story,” the bard protested. “Suffice it to say it was a memory created by Aphrodite after she’d been shot. And I realize that isn’t helping this story at all.”

“You’ll have to tell me the long version sometime,” the warrior suggested good-naturedly which Gabrielle hoped could come sometime after she’d recited all of the stories in all of the books in the library.

The quartet conversed amiably together for several hours. Xena, Gabrielle and Aphrodite told stories of their adventures in Ancient Greece, Michelle regaled them with tales of her childhood, which the warrior found just as exotic. Gabrielle decided that whatever the goddess and captain had discussed had indeed had a profound effect on the captain. She was confident and relaxed, her intention to spend a great deal of time with Aphrodite (and by extension, with them) quite clear.

It was apparent that a bond was forming between Xena and Michelle as they chatted, and when the thought entered Gabrielle’s mind she saw Aphrodite look over at her and wink. She could do nothing but smile indulgently in return. In time, Michelle excused herself returning a short time later with robes for warrior and bard.

“If you ladies will excuse me,” she said “I’d like to...ah, get some sleep... before...” she trailed off, smiling wickedly.

“We get it. Before Aphrodite turns in,” Xena supplied as mildly as she could.

Out of politeness, Gabrielle glanced away as the captain kissed the goddess. She then took her leave, retiring to the guest quarters.

“It’s good that you’re having the ship remodeled,” Aphrodite observed when her lover had departed. “No one is going to stay in Bo’s quarters and Michelle doesn’t want to stay in the quarters she shared with Elaine.”

“I knew there was a reason she’d been willing to bunk with you,” Xena said playfully.

“You might want to see about added soundproofing for the main sleeping quarters,” the goddess added, smirking defiantly at the warrior.

“Where are you headed to next?” Gabrielle asked, desperate to move the subject away from sex as quickly as she could. It was only a matter of time she knew, but at some point, she knew both Xena and Aphrodite would become comfortable enough with

each other that teasing her about having slept with the both of them would be fair game. She just wasn't ready for today to be that day.

"When we get back to the Marina, we're going to stay at my place until my plane arrives. You guys will come over for dinner and you will have to introduce Xena to Dwayne and explain to him why you dumped me." She winked at Gabrielle, then continued "When the plane is ready I need to go to Europe, travel a bit. I think Africa after that. I'll be back for solstice though. I don't want to miss Shen's first solstice with you guys, listen to you tell him stories about Senticles, make some nutbread, it'll be great."

"I think he was raised Christian," Gabrielle said cautiously, unsure of the goddess' reaction. "I was there at his christening."

"Not him again," Aphrodite complained rolling her eyes, "Christ."

"I'll check in with him," Gabrielle added diplomatically. "We'll see what he wants to celebrate, explain to him what we grew up celebrating. I'm sure he will be overjoyed to see you, whatever the occasion."

"Are you fully recovered?" Xena asked, genuine concern in her voice.

After giving the warrior one of her thousand-watt smiles the goddess replied, "Nearly good as new." After lifting her arm out of the water she added, "I have scars now though." She might not have intended the vulnerability to come through her voice but Gabrielle felt it.

"You're still stunningly beautiful," Xena said reassuringly nodding to Gabrielle for conformation.

"For sure," the bard agreed without thinking, "I'd hit that."

Xena tried to look stern but laughed in spite of herself, enjoying the crimson flush to the bard's cheeks.

"I've gotta say, warrior," Aphrodite observed. "You really came back a ten this time."

Playfully she looked wounded, "I thought I was always kind of a ten?" she protested.

Aphrodite shook her head. "Your personality was a three – five on a good day." Xena rolled her eyes and the Goddess of Love splashed her playfully. "Alright loves, I'll leave you to your evening," As she stood, Aphrodite chuckled as the bard bashfully looked away and the warrior pointedly did not. "You kids have a good night and I will see the two of you in the morning. We still have two days before we get home, and Shen said I can cook breakfast with him. By the way, both our rooms have been cleaned and ordered with fresh linens. I cleaned your toys and put back the ones I'm not keeping. And before you ask, yes, I did it myself. Well, Michelle and I did anyhow. We are keeping it in the family, as it were. Also, I'm back in the guest room. Don't want you kids ending up where you shouldn't."

Gabrielle and Xena nodded appreciatively. "Thank you, Aphrodite," the bard said.

"Anyway, I'm off to..." the goddess tried to continue with a mischievous grin.

"Yeah," Gabrielle cut her off. "We get it. Have a good night."

Aphrodite donned a robe and blew them a kiss before departing. Gabrielle watched her go, then reached for the champagne bottle to refill their glasses.

Reconsidering, she just passed the bottle to Xena, not bothering with the crystal flutes.

“So, this is your life,” Xena observed taking a swig then passing the bottle to her lover. “You travel the world on a floating fortress, never far from a variety of hot tubs, besting Ares and leading a vast army of elite fighters who are as dedicated to the greater good as you are.” She was thoughtful for a moment and looked up at the stars. “And along the way, you got a dog that can detect deceit, got the Goddess of Love to fall for you, and resurrected me from the dead. That about cover it?”

Gabrielle smiled, leaning into Xena’s side and touching the warrior’s muscular leg under the water. “Well when you say it like that, it sounds really amazing.”

“But not as amazing as the time I killed the Bacchae,” the warrior replied.

“Wait a minute,” Gabrielle protested, “I helped you kill the Bacchae.”

“Helped?” Xena replied in mock confusion, “you *were* one of the Bacchae! I had to defeat them AND save you. That’s at least as interesting as having a floating palace.”

Gabrielle laughed; it felt so impossibly good to once again have her universe righted. “At least my Argo can help question adversaries,” she challenged.

“But my Argo you could ride. And, well, this one is almost big enough to ride,” the warrior allowed after glancing over at the dog, who was watching them contentedly.

Green eyes gazed up into blue, the shimmer of the Jacuzzi light reflecting in their eyes. They kissed, the first of many, then together they stood, deciding that a place with a bit more privacy might be a better location to continue their conversation. Picking up Argo and heading down the stairs, her warrior followed, grabbing an extra bottle of champagne as she went.

There was so much possibility in front of her, and for the first time in forever she wondered if thousands of years would be enough. No longer did time feel like cordwood stacked as a bulwark against loneliness. Time was going to be an amazing vehicle with which to show Xena the world. All that she learned, and all she had grown to love. Watching Shen grow up would give them both a second chance at so much that had escaped them the first time around. She had to catch her breath, make herself slow down and focus on each of the moments in front of her and not waste any of them. In this moment, she wanted to show Xena how very much she was loved and mattered in Gabrielle’s life.

“You know,” she said conversationally closing the door to her stateroom, eyes dancing with desire and anticipation, “Aphrodite may be onto something with her suggestion of enhanced soundproofing.”

The End

Author's note

The Xenaverse has spoiled me beyond measure in gifting me with some of the most amazing friends I've ever had. There are people in my life to this day who make up a tribe I love fiercely, close friends that came from a shared love of a quirky TV show, or in one unusual case, from being on a quirky TV show. From my amazing wife who I see every day, to people in different cities, time zones or even far flung countries like Finland – I honestly can't think of anyone more blessed than me with the people I've gathered close. I seriously don't deserve it, but no you can't have them back, they're mine!

There is another one though who deserves a shout out, a shout out that I've never properly done until now. And with a final work of fan fiction, I figured it was probably overdue. I wrote my first story in 1996 and put it on a mailing list. I was contacted by a woman who I didn't realize at the time was quite possibly certifiably insane. She offered to edit for me so people would think English is my first language (I mean, it is but I realize by my writing how you might be confused.)

In the early days she'd hand me back printed pages dripping with red ink, at least I think it was ink – she said it was the blood of the innocent who didn't pay attention to grammar lessons but I chose not to believe her. Anyway, Pyrate Ska Mayhem has edited every story I've written since the very beginning. Patiently, or not so patiently, crafting my demented musings into something that kinda sorta makes sense. When people say they like my work I'm all too happy to take the credit because I have an outrageous ego, but deep down I know what they're saying is they like Pyrate Ska's crafting of my work. She's the rock star in my bat cave, the writer behind the writer who makes me- well- me. It may have taken me over twenty years to get around to this, but this one is dedicated to Pyrate Ska, with love and appreciation – and maybe a drink the next time I see ya – that nasty rum you like. Thanks buddy!

Bat – 1/14/18 11:37pm

Soundtrack

Like any temperamental artist I have a process to how I work. It's evolved over time but has gelled into something I find helpful so I'm sharing it here. I have a tendency to collect a group of songs I listen to over and over while I'm working on a story. Music has always been tied to my writing, either to get inside a character's head, or to get the feel of a scene, or to just think about something else while I let my subconscious work on a problem. What follows is the playlist that I put together as I worked on this story. I live in Los Angeles which provides for ample time spent in one's car, often in traffic, listening to music. Yes, you can tell from my musical tastes that I'm ridiculously old, but I'm not Gabrielle/Aphrodite old so that's something.

In no particular order – and if the song is linked to a character or scene I've indicated that as well. If nothing is specified, the song just ended up on the playlist that helped get my head where I needed it to be.

1. Wish You Were Here, Fleetwood Mac, Mirage (Gabrielle)
2. Water Under The Bridge, Adele, 25
3. When We Were Young, Adele, 25 (Gabrielle/Aphrodite)
4. Blue Bayou, Linda Ronstadt, Best Of (Susan Yin)
5. Alone, Heart, The Road Home (Vox Wandre)
6. One Sip, Sammy Hagar, Lite Roast, (Bohemian Van Lyle)
7. Fuck You, Cee Lo Green (Shen's favorite song – kid is 10, it's the swearing)
8. I Am Woman, Helen Reddy, Best Of (Vox wanting out of sick bay)
9. For All We Know, Carpenters, Gold (Xena's introduction to modern music)
10. Yesterday Once More, Aimee Mann, Vinyl Soundtrack (Vox sick bay)
11. Half Breed, Cher, Greatest Hits (Vox wanting out of sick bay)
12. Better Be Home Soon, Crowded House, Woodface
13. Weeping Willow, Scott Joplin (Ballroom scene)
14. Eyes Wide Open, B-52s, Funplex
15. I Will Take Care Of You, The Bangles, Doll Revolution (Aphrodite & Gabrielle)
16. Crystal, Stevie Nicks, Practical Magic Soundtrack (Xena & Gabrielle)
17. I Still Miss Someone, Stevie Nicks, Behind The Mirror (Gabrielle)
18. Steal Your Heart Away, Fleetwood Mac, Say You Will
19. I Won't Last A Day Without You, Carpenters, Gold (Vox Sickbay/Gabrielle)
20. True Romantic, Indigo Girls, Poseidon & The Bitter Bug (Xena)
21. University Blvd, Los Straight Jackets, Rock Don't Run Vol. 1 (Bohemian)
22. For What It's Worth, Berlin, 4 Play (political climate)
23. My City Was Gone, The Pretenders, Learning To Crawl (political climate)
24. Silver Springs, Fleetwood Mac, The Dance (early Xena & Gabrielle)
25. Can't Stop Lovin' You, Van Halen, Balance (Gabrielle)
26. Lost At Sea, The Bangles, Doll Revolution
27. Superstar, Madonna, MDNA
28. Sunset Strip, Courtney Love, America's Sweetheart
29. Love Is All There Is, Sheryl Crow, Detours
30. Venus, Shocking Blue, Greatest Hits, (Aphrodite)

31. Special, Garbage, Version 2.0
32. Planets Of The Universe, Stevie Nicks, Trouble in Shangri-La
33. Fragments, Blondie, Pollinator
34. The Story, Sara Ramirez, EP (Xena & Gabrielle)
35. Eve of Destruction, The Turtles, It Ain't Me Babe, (political climate)
36. If I Lost You, Garbage, Strange Little Birds
37. Der Kommissar, After the Fire, Atomic Blonde Soundtrack
38. Cities In Dust, Siouxi & The Banshees, Atomic Blonde Soundtrack
39. 99 Luftballons, Kaleida, Atomic Blonde Soundtrack
40. My Favorite Mistake, Sheryl Crow