

A Tale Of Two Goddesses
Book 3 of 5
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Prologue

They set down on the ground with a small hop, and Aphrodite couldn't help but express her sheer joy at being "home" again. "We're baaaaaack," she called aloud, to no one in particular.

Teddy was a bit more shaken by the whole occurrence. While it was terribly interesting inside that strange wormhole -- as she thought of it -- she was relieved to finally see something normal again, feel normal again, and most importantly think normal again. Albeit a few thousand years before her time.

"Oh come on, Teddy!" She whined when she saw the yellow tinge to Teddy's suntanned skin. "You have to admit that was one bitchin' trip!"

Teddy shook her head. "It was nice an all, but I can't help wonderin' where they're gonna end up..."

Aphrodites spirits sank. "It'll be ok, Sugar," she said for Teddy's benefit as much as for her own. "Xena is one smart cookie, she'll find a way home."

"Isn't there anything we can do?" Teddy couldn't, wouldn't accept that line of reasoning. "I mean, this place is filled with GODS, surely one of them can help?"

Aphrodite chewed on her bottom lip, contemplating the thought of a God -- beside herself, of course -- doing anything that didn't bring with it some benefit for the deity in question.

"I dunno, Tedster." She beamed at the use of the nickname she'd remembered from a couple nights ago, when she'd met a few more of Teddy's Gal Pals, as she preferred to call them.

"Okay, enough of that," Teddy chastised. "While you think, I need something in my tummy, I haven't eaten since yesterday

afternoon! At least I think it was yesterday. How long were we in there anyway?"

That comment triggered Aphrodite's thoughts. "Teddy, why did you jump in there with us?"

Teddy shrugged, took her arm and started them walking. "I know we're like, the same and all, and you're entirely not into the 'girl thing', not that I wish you were, I just..." she faltered. Did she really know what she wanted? Deep down, were there any answers? "I didn't want to never see you again is all."

"Awwwwww." Aphrodite was all a blush. She kissed Teddy's reddened cheek and slapped an arm around her shoulders. "You and me, we're gonna have us some fun times, you'll see!"

"After we do everything possible to get someone to help Xena and Gabrielle."

"Oh, of course," Aphrodite agreed. That would be the first thing after she fed Teddy's growling tummy. Her own was starting to feel normal again, and that brought a momentary sense of relief. Within hours she should have her powers back at full strength.

Chapter 1

Teddy was beginning to feel a lot more like her old self. Aphrodite had fed her from the offerings of one of the more prosperous villages in the region where they had touched down. Not exactly the kind of 21st Century meal she was used to, but quite satisfying, nonetheless. The meal consisted of an assortment of fresh and dried fruits, bread, a type of dried fish, and some kind of lightly flavored, hard cheese.

Yes, indeed. She was feeling a great deal better about everything. A little too better.

Aphrodite was so happy to see the stress and worry over Xena and Gabrielle's dubious fate disappear from her friend's lovely face. Of course the three or so servings of the liquid that Teddy had been drinking to wash down the Goddess of Love's temple offering, probably hadn't hurt any either.

"Apppphhhhrrro... Aphroditeeeeeeeee, what is this stuff ya gave me to drink with the food?" Teddy's tongue felt suddenly thick.

"Mead, sweetie."

"Meeeeeeead. Mead... mead... mead... mead... funny sounding word, ain't it, Tide'?"

"Whoa, think you've reached your limit." Aphrodite laughed as she vaporized the tankard out of Teddy's hand just as she went to polish off her fourth helping.

"Aaaaawwwwwww, what'd ya do that fur, Tede'?" Teddy was wallowing on large satin pillows, trying to remember which way was up.

"Uhhh, Teddy, I forget, did you say back in the 21st Century if you ever drank spirits?" Aphrodites forehead scrunched up, trying to recall.

"Don't ya mead, 'scuse me, *mean* forward in the 21st Century, Deti'?"

"Oookay... Do you drink, Teddy?"

"Al-coo-hol?"

"Uh-huh."

"Hardly ever touch the stuff. Why d'ya ask, Tode'?"

Aphrodite simply blew a stray curl away from her forehead and tried to remember where she had placed her bottle of Wellness to take away the massive hangover Teddy was going to experience in the morning.

With maybe a small sprinkling of a Forgetful thrown in for good measure.

Chapter 2

"Teddy opened one eye, trying to focus in on the object in front of her. After several seconds, she finally succeeded. "Aphrodite, criminy sake. What?!"

"This is awful, Teddy. I don't know what we're going to do." The Olympian Goddess stood pacing back and forth in front of the pallet on the floor.

Now Teddy was worried. Nothing ever seemed to bother her friend; war, hunger, pestilence, time travel. The only incident she could recall when the Goddess had shown anything close to worry was when Dari had been shot, Sonny kidnapped, with the condition of Xena and Gabrielle unknown.

Oh, God.

Teddy spun on her back and sat up quickly, wishing she hadn't. "What is it, Aphrodite? Is it Xena... Gabrielle?" No matter how bad it was, she had to know.

"What? Oh, no. It's worse. Much worse... You don't honestly think I'm taking you to Mount Olympus wearing that?!"

Chapter 3

Aphrodite had fussed and nagged, whined and pleaded, until Teddy finally gave in and allowed her to "make-over" the cabbie. Then she fussed and nagged, whined and pleaded until she was allowed to "make-over" her friend, unencumbered; meaning that Teddy had to give Aphrodite cart-blanche with everything: hair, make-up, clothes... everything.

Teddy sat, stood, and even walked when Aphrodite asked her to. She would have put up more resistance, but there was still too much mead in her system to really care about anything but sleep. And she figured the less of a fight she gave the Pharaoh of Fashion; the sooner she could return to the pile of pillows that beckoned to her.

"Don't Goddesses sleep?" Teddy was curious about Aphrodites lifestyle now that she wasn't in an alternate time universe, and had full use of her powers.

"No." Was all the Goddess' replied, too wrapped up in her mission for in-depth answers.

It's gonna be a long night. "Ok, what else don't Goddesses do?" Since she had already broached the subject, she might as well stick with it.

"Well..." Aphrodite began, not really paying attention to Teddy the person, but Teddy the creation. "We don't eat, or drink, except for an occasional ambrosia or nectar. We don't have to comb our hair, or brush our teeth. We don't use the bathroom" -- she shook her curls furiously at the very notion -- "and we don't bathe... or become odoriferous." Noting Teddy's expression with an upturned nose. "There are too many don'ts to mention. Besides, we don't think about what we can't do. We concentrate on what we can."

"Can we get Xena and Gabrielle back?"

Aphrodites tone grew serious, suddenly, and she looked her friend in the eye, "To be honest, I don't know. But we're sure gonna try." Aphrodite stopped her primping, and clasped her stocky future self tightly against her bosom.

"Mmmph, Aphrodite?" Teddy mumbled.

"Yeah, Hon?"

"I can't breathe."

* * *

About an hour before sunrise, Aphrodite stood back to admire her handiwork. "Done."

"Finally. Am I presentable now?" Teddy stretched, uncomfortable with the feeling of the material against her skin.

"You'll do." But Teddy saw the pride on Aphrodites face.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." The cabbie walked over to the full-length mirror. She had noticed it immediately when they first arrived at the temple, causing her to wonder why it was there, until she remembered exactly whose temple it was. Bet there's one in all of 'em, had been her final conclusion.

Before Teddy could reach the view of the mirror, Aphrodite popped in her path and covered her eyes with a delicate hand. "No peeking, now, until I tell ya."

Aphrodite led Teddy over to the mirror, making certain everything was where it was supposed to be, then with a flourish, she whipped her hand away and instructed, "Ok, now!"

Teddy slowly opened her eyes and didn't know whether to laugh hysterically, or to cry, also hysterically.

There she stood, dressed in pink. And if the color wasn't bad enough... fuscina velvet. Sweet mother of mercy. I look like an Elvis painting, before the painting. Velvet fuscina go-go boots; velvet fuscina hip-hugger, flare-legged pants; a velvet fuscina bustier, with little, tiny

satin fuchsia rosebuds sewn everywhere; and a chiffon, see-through, fuchsia jacket, with fuchsia satin piping. And to top it off, a velvet fuchsia beret, with a huge satin fuchsia rose, square in the middle.

I look like Barney's whore. No, I take it back; even a big, purple dinosaur has better taste.

And there stood Aphrodite beaming at her, as if she had created the second Venus de Milo. How am I going to break this to her? Her head was beginning to pound. Damn mead. I can't think straight... Wait, I've got it.

"Ohhhhhhhh, Aphrodite you've out done yourself. I look marvelous." A person can't go to hell for lying, right? "I must say I had some reservations about this, but now that I see the end result, I couldn't be more pleased." Aphrodite looked like she could float, she was so pleased with herself. "I even look better than you." And with the final sentence, she sauntered off toward the temple doors.

Aphrodite scrunched her nose, pursed her pink lips, and popped in front of Teddy. "Wait a sec, hon. No one looks better than the Goddess of Love." Her hands were on her hips, as she stood in front of her reincarnated self.

Thank God, Teddy blessed silently. She was beginning to think that she was actually going to have to go outside in this monstrosity of an outfit. But she kept her bluff face on. She also blessed the fact, she had never taught the trio poker during the time they were in the 21st Century. "Well just look at me." Teddy twirled in her best imitation of the deity, who stood in her path to the door. "And after all, I am... you," she spoke with just enough narcissism in her voice to successfully get Aphrodites full attention.

Aphrodite bit the inside of her lower lip and thought. By the Gods, she's right. She is me, of course, so how could she not look just as good, in the right ensemble. She draped an arm around the cabbie and led her back to the inner sanctum of her temple. "I hate to break this to ya, Teddy, but I can't let you wear that out." To which, Teddy had to, literally bite her tongue in order to prevent a YAHOO!! from escaping.

"But Aphrodite," she started to say in her finest disappointed tone.

"Now, sugar, you know I have my reputation to maintain. We'll come up with something that's more you and less me."

"Very well, if you insist." The two Goddesses walked side by side; if they had traveled any other way, Aphrodite would have seen the rather large, winning smile on Teddy's face.

Chapter 4

Teddy, now dressed in a manner that was suitable to the Goddess of Love, as well as the 21st Century version of herself, headed to Mount Olympus. Teddy was wearing tan, suede pants -- but not the hip-hugger style -- a sleeveless, chocolate brown turtleneck, a tan, suede jacket, and tan, suede flat-heeled boots. A little dressy for Teddy's taste, but a good deal better, overall, than the hooker on a holiday threads she had been in.

Her headache had improved a great deal as well. The cabbie suspected that Aphrodite was the cause for her non-hangover, but couldn't get a confession out of her. And oddly, she noticed that as time wore on, it was growing harder and harder to even remember the specific events of the previous evening.

Teddy and Aphrodite appeared to find the home of the Gods virtually deserted. "Where is everybody?" the newly arrived visitor inquired.

"Who knows?" Aphrodite replied with a non-concerned shrug of her near-bare shoulders. "Knowing my relatives..."

Teddy cut off the Goddess of Love by uttering, "nough said. Ya think anybody's around?"

"Zeus and Hera are always close by, unless there's an emergency." Aphrodite stated while pulling Teddy down the grand hallway. "Let's see who we can find."

Teddy did not relish the idea of an immortal game of hide-and-seek, especially when the Gods had the home court advantage. So, with a great deal of reluctance, Teddy followed Aphrodite down the long passage. She moved slowly and with awe, as she inspected the golden walls that traveled up so high they disappeared from view. In

fact, there was nothing that in any way resembled a ceiling, anywhere. Guess Gods don't like that fenced in feeling, Teddy thought, and could relate. Maybe that's where I get it from.

Teddy's thoughts drifted, lost in the idea that she really carried the soul of this Goddess, who walked slightly ahead of her. So she tried not to think about it, the concept too profound and mind-boggling to truly comprehend.

Aphrodite turned to Teddy and announced that Hera's quarters were just around the corner. "Maybe we'll get some answers out of her." But she didn't sound very hopeful. Aphrodite was chattering away, walking backwards so she could keep eye contact with Teddy.

As they rounded the corner, Teddy stopped dead in her tracks. She paled, her mouth flew open as she attempted to speak, but no words would come out. A shaky hand raised a pointed finger high in the air.

Aphrodite turned quickly, not knowing what could have made her friend act in such a manner. Before her stood a monster -- a giant, towering at least 50 feet tall. And eyes... eyes everywhere. The Goddess could not even hazard a guess as to the total number of blood-shot eyeballs fixed on her and Teddy's form.

"Hi, Argus!" Aphrodite exclaimed with a wave of her hand, as she glided between the hideous things two legs. "Come on, Teddy. Hera's not the patient kind."

"But... but... what about... he's a... aren't you gonna do..." Teddy was at a loss.

Aphrodite looked at her friend in confusion, and then looked up at the giant. "Oh... I get it. Where are my manners?" She finally understood. "Teddy, this is Argus, faithful and loyal servant to the Goddess Hera." Aphrodite then moved into the view of the multi-eyed monster. "Argus, this is my friend, Teddy. She is a guest and is welcome on Olympus."

Argus made no coherent reply, at least not one that was understandable to Teddy, but he moved out of the door's path and allowed them access to his mistress -- Hera.

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"Lotta good that did." Teddy grumbled after they were out of earshot of Mount Olympus. "I've never met anyone so rude. And I'm a cab driver! I know she's your mother, Aphrodite, but..."

"I know. It's ok. Sorry about that." Aphrodite looked down at her sandals. "She hasn't been the same since Hercules was born... not that that's any kind of excuse for her behavior. You'd think she would have learned something, spending all that time in the abyss of Tartarus, but noooooo... she still won't let it go... sulk, plan revenge, plot, scheme, all over Herc. But does she ever have any time for her own kids?" Aphrodite, realizing she had gone a little off the intended subject, glanced over at Teddy and grinned. "I have a few mother issues."

Teddy chuckled, replying, "Don't we all?" And patted her friend on the back. "Where to next?"

"The temples are our best bet." Aphrodite hopped down from the boulder she had perched herself on. "Gods love to be worshipped."

Chapter 5

"I should have known Achelous wouldn't help," the Goddess of Love chastised herself. "He still has that little problem about the fact I helped Deianira fall for Herc, instead of him. Some Gods... go figure. Well that crosses him off our list." With a blink, a lavender scroll appeared written in mid-air, and with one finger swipe, Aphrodite marked through the river Gods' name.

The two Goddesses proceeded on to the next.

Aphrodite knew of a little sea reef where you could find a decent Sex on the Beach and could listen to a big blue wail out some hot jazz. It also happened to be Triton's second home.

The son of Poseidon was in his usual corner shell, sipping on a Hurricane, when he saw Aphrodite and Teddy approach. "Have a seat, Cuz, who's your friend?" Triton was always... friendly; particularly for a God who's lower extremities were that of a fish. After introductions had been made, Aphrodite explained their situation.

"I'd love to help you gals out, but that's just not in my realm of expertise." Triton gulped down the last of his drink. "Now, if you want me to change the direction of the tides or create a sea-monster, I'm your guy."

"Maybe some other time, Trit." Aphrodite took a good size swallow of the Screaming Orgasm she'd ordered. Teddy chose to stay alcohol free, considering her last experience. "Well, we hate to drink and run, but we have a lot of immortals to go through before we can call it a night." Aphrodite motioned for Teddy to follow her.

Teddy stood, preparing to leave the coral hide-a-way. "It was nice meeting you," she gurgled out, still not acclimated to being able to breathe while under water. "You, too," Triton smiled, as the Goddesses glimmered out of sight.

"Let's see, who's next. Achilles. Oh, boy! He's usually up for an adventure." Aphrodite clapped her hands enthusiastically after checking the list once they were back on shore. "Bet we can find him on the battlefield." Teddy held tightly to Aphrodite's hand, still not liking this shimmering in and out of existence.

* * *

Aphrodite and Teddy located Achilles on the outskirts of a nearby skirmish, but he was so into the war-like proceedings that he was of no help either. So on they traveled, popping here and there, tracking down this God and that Goddess, all day... with no luck. By mid-afternoon, Teddy's nerves were raw when she and Aphrodite found Adonis, sunning himself in his Athenian garden. Aphrodite tugged on the sleeve of Teddy's Suede jacket. "Hon, you better stay here. Adonis relates better when it's one-on-one."

So Teddy sat alone by the roadside, finding a boulder as a surprisingly comfortable seat. She was amazed at how sore her feet were, considering no more than she and Aphrodite had walked. But she was used to her cab. She missed the ole jalopy, and she missed Dari and Sondra, along with her other friends. But it was something about being with Aphrodite that made her feel different... whole, she guessed. She supposed it was the shared karma, but she never felt alone with Aphrodite, as she did when she was around other people, even her friends.

There had always been an empty space inside of Teddy, for as long as she could remember. It wasn't unbearable, but she was always conscious of it. It felt like a pulling, deep inside her, so she had spent her life searching. For what she didn't know. When she had arrived

in Lerrette, she thought perhaps her search was over. She had never experienced the kind peace and belonging as she had in that small Oceanside community. But then the nagging feeling had begun again, right before Aphrodite, Xena and Gabrielle appeared in her life. She spent time with the Warrior and the Bard and the Goddess Diva, and the lacking was somehow sated... at least temporarily.

But as Teddy sat there, the gnawing pangs chewed at her soul. And she wondered if there would ever be an end to this. Would she ever find what it was that called out so? Or was she destined to spend the remainder of her life in longing?

Teddy checked her watch and saw it had stopped working. Great... She thought about what she might be walking in on but decided to take her chances. She opened the gate and charged ahead, preparing herself for a Xena/Gabrielle-style fiasco. But when Adonis and Aphrodite came into her field of vision, they were both fully dressed and merely talking. Upon receiving a negative sign from the Goddess of Love, Teddy knew that Aphrodite had struck out.

After thinking she was never going to get Aphrodite away from Adonis, Teddy convinced her to visit one of the Goddess's favorite of her many temples for a break. The Tedster's poor deconstructed and reconstructed molecules were pooped from popping.

Once they shimmered in, Teddy's defenses dropped, and she could no longer contain her frustration. "That's it! I want to go home!" Teddy stomped out of Aphrodite's temple as quickly as she had entered it before the goddess could get a word in edgewise.

"Teddy, calm down, it'll work out." If only she hadn't been right about the whole selfish Gods of Mount Olympus situation.

"We've talked to, I don't know how many, Gods and Goddesses, and all most of them have done is laugh in our faces, if they even talked to us at all." Teddy was torn between anger and panic, knowing that she might never see her friends again if something couldn't be done. "If only we had the Cronos Stone. Your powers of kaplowy are at full strength, with the stone you could zap us..."

"Hold on, sweetie, you know it doesn't work that way. Even with the Stone, I don't know where Xena and Gabs went to, or more to the point, *when* they went to. All I could do is pop and drop -- pop us somewhere, sometime, and hope we dropped down in the right one." Aphrodite felt as badly as Teddy looked at the prospect. "Look, Hon, we've barely scratched the surface when it comes to godhood. We're not even a quarter of the way through the list yet."

"Don't remind me." The thought of having to go back to that truly godforsaken place known as Mount Olympus made Teddy want to toss her cookies. "And not all of them even have the power to see where and when Xena and Gabrielle were transported to, or get them back here." Teddy sat on the steps of the temple, elbows on knees, chin on fists, looking totally dejected.

"Bummer, I know. We'll get started again first thing in the morning. You need to sleep, and I need to... do what Goddesses of Love do while mortals sleep." Aphrodite smiled innocently down at Teddy's unconvinced form.

"What do Goddesses of Love do while mortals sleep?" Teddy asked, not buying the smile for a second. No way could this Goddess pull off innocent.

Aphrodite cast a diverted gaze on her manicure and replied, "Darlin' you're just too young for such a discussion. Give it another five hundred years, then we'll talk."

Teddy couldn't stop from smiling at her. She was just impossible to stay upset around. But the nagging feeling in the pit of her stomach would not go away. There had to be an answer out there, and if there was, she was going to find it.

"No, Aphrodite, the sun hasn't even gone down. I want to at least get through the A's today." Teddy gathered her energy and her resolve to find her friends and reached for the Goddess's hand. "Let's go."

"Ok, sugar. Off to find Artemis." And as quick as a dragon's tongue they vanished.

Chapter 6

Aphrodite and Teddy shimmered deep inside the forest. Teddy stood, checking to make certain all of her body parts were where they were supposed to be. She had done this every time Aphrodite had taken her on one of her trips. She had this fear that she would rematerialize - a term she had picked up from an episode of Star Trek - looking something like a Picasso. So far, so good... no nose where her nipple should be, no breast on her forehead... all was well with the world.

"Where are we now?" Teddy asked, looking at the huge trees and the over-growth of moss and ivy.

"We should have popped into an Amazon camp." Aphrodite pursed her lips, obviously not happy with the present surroundings.

"I take it we didn't?"

"Duh! Does this look like a tribe of Amazons to you?"

Teddy snorted a laugh. "Not unless they've truly mastered the art of camouflage."

"Oh, shush."

Teddy started laughing harder. "Maybe they had to move their campsite," Teddy suggested as she wiped the tears from her eyes. "Don't they do that from time to time to keep strangers out, and their enemies away?" Hey, maybe I know more about Greek Mythology than I thought.

"Oh, you're right. That still means they're around here. Amazon territory ends just over that ridge." Aphrodite shifted her head so she had a clear view of the embankment which lay beyond.

"That felt good, thanks." Teddy stated, regaining her composure. She also had a fixed gaze on the top of the hill.

Aphrodite turned to her friend and asked, "What for?"

"It's been a long time since I laughed like that, especially with everything going on right now." Teddy turned to look at the Goddess. "The timing was good, that's all." And she turned back to admire the hillside. Only the slope of the hill had changed.

"Ah, Aphrodite, something's not quite kosher." Teddy's glance flickered back and forth from the Goddess to the ever-changing view. "That hill is standing up!!"

"WHAT!" Aphrodite quickly jerked her head in the direction of Teddy's nod.

Yep, the hill was slowly growing taller, and thinner. Then it suddenly turned their way.

"CYCLOPS!" Teddy screamed.

"I'm aware of that, Sugar. Now, RUN!!"

The one-eyed, man-like creature began a rapid, if somewhat, clumsy decent down the now, much flatter, slope. He had heard the oddly dressed female talking to herself and realized he would have a bite of lunch after all.

Aphrodite ran to the left, while Teddy made a 90 degree turn to the right. Of course the Cyclops followed Teddy, not being able to see the Goddess of Love. And when Aphrodite realized that, along with the fact that her friend was about to become food, she popped into sight. She appeared in the creature's field of vision and did the only thing she could think of to goad him into coming after her.

"Come on, sweet cheeks, don't ya want a little dessert before the main course?" she yelled at him in the most seductive, enticing voice possible, considering she was scared dungless; that is, she would have been, if she was able to perform that mortal, bodily function.

After considering his options, the Cyclops changed course, heading straight for Aphrodite.

"Aphrodite, what in the name of the Holy Mother do you think you're doing?!" Teddy bellowed out from her location behind a Puka.

It's large green leaves served as little more than a nuisance, should one eye decide to come after her.

"I'm distracting him, so you can get away!" Aphrodite yelled back.

"I'm not leaving you here!"

Aphrodites lead had grown considerably - Cyclops' not being the fastest of creatures - when she ducked behind a large boulder to rethink her plan. She stood after a short time, her fear and concern for Teddy had momentarily blinded her to the fact that she was... is a Goddess.

The Goddess of Love boldly stepped out from behind the rock and stood directly in the path of the charging Cyclops.

"APHRODITE!" Teddy screamed, fear catching in her throat.

Aphrodite looked over at her friend and winked, then with a hip shot, the Goddess unleashed a barrage of well-aimed love at the beast. When the Cyclops felt the first of the blows, he was stopped in his rather sizable tracks. And by the time the onslaught ended, he was on the ground, quoting Ovid and Sappho.

"Well, that's that." Aphrodite struck her hands together as if cleaning off some amount of invisible dirt. She strutted toward the monster, and when his bulbous torso crossed her path, Aphrodite merely stepped on him, and continued till she reached Teddy.

"Come on, Sweet Pea," Aphrodite chirped, while taking hold of her stunned friend's arm. "We have some Amazons to find, and a Goddess to track down." And with a snap, they were gone.

They reappeared in the courtyard of the tribe of Southern Amazons. Aphrodite knew these women were special to the Goddess of the Hunt. She always suspected that it was her plan all along for Gabrielle to become their Queen. And she was aware that this would be the most likely of places to find her hermit of a sister.

The women were dressed in their usual attire... next to nothing. But it was not their clothing that had Aphrodites attention; it was Teddy's reaction.

The cabbie Goddess stood slack-jawed, openly staring at the abundance of beauties that paraded into her field of vision. "A whole colony of Xenas and Gabrielles." Aphrodite giggled at Teddy's comment, causing Teddy to blush profusely, not realizing she had made the statement out loud.

"It's ok, Hon. Ogle to your hearts content. They can't see us." Answering Teddy's confused look before she actually uttered a sound, Aphrodite explained. "Mortals can only see a God or a Goddess when we want them to, or if we're involved in something that pertains directly to them. And I'm not here to see them..." The Goddess lifted her free hand and swung her chiffon clad arm out. "...I'm here to track down Artemis."

"Artemis is the Goddess of the Amazons, right?" Teddy really didn't remember much about Greek mythology. But Amazon lore had always fascinated her.

"You got it. Maybe it would be better if we appeared. The Amazons are usually pretty friendly, to women, that is."

"What'd ya mean, usually?" Teddy asked half her question unseen by the Amazons, half in full view. Only she wasn't aware that she was in full view, at first. But soon she noticed the stares, and the open mouths that were aimed in her direction.

Varia had been sparring with a couple of the younger warriors when she witnessed the two materialize. Aphrodite was no stranger, although her visits were infrequent and unexpected, but the other woman was a newcomer to the new Queen's eyes. Her concentration distracted, Myst, the younger of her two trainees, executed an ankle sweep with her staff, knocking Varia on her queenly backside. After shooting the two her best warrior glare, they froze on the spot.

Varia couldn't keep up the pretense for long, however, and busted out with a hearty laugh and a morsel of encouragement. "Well done, you should always take advantage of an opponent's weaknesses." The girls, upon seeing and hearing that their Queen was not displeased, giggled with glee.

Varia excused herself from any further instruction and went to greet her guests. She wondered if Aphrodite's appearance, especially with this stranger, had anything to do with the sudden disappearance of Xena and Gabrielle. Varia had overheard some of the tales from the more rumor mongering of her tribe speak of what they had heard had happened to the Warrior Princess and her sister Amazon Queen.

Teddy had been watching the dark-haired woman with intense interest, an interest that hadn't gone unnoticed by the Goddess of Love. Upon seeing Aphrodite watching her watching the Amazon, she abruptly looked away. No time for any of that, she thought.

The Amazon Queen walked over and greeted Aphrodite with a fair amount of suspicion. "Well, to what do we owe this pleasure?" Varia spoke with a not-so-subtle hint of sarcasm.

"Haven't you heard? I spread pleasure for pleasure's sake," the Goddess retorted.

"Humph... and who's your friend?" Varia scanned the woman who stood by Aphrodite with a roving eye.

Teddy could almost feel the beginning of a blush touch her cheeks but shook it off by reminding herself why she and Aphrodite were there. "I'm Thea, Teddy to my friends. Aphrodite and I are lookin' for Artemis. Ya seen her around?"

"Sure, she takes her afternoon naps under that Cypress tree," Varia stated most assuredly and pointed in the direction of the path that led down to the bathing pond.

Teddy glanced in that general area and then back at Queeny, who was grinning like a mad woman. "I didn't know Amazons had a sense of humor." That wiped the smirk off that beautiful face.

"Mrrrrwww. Ok girls, detract the claws. Remember why we're here, Teddy?"

She pointed her chin down and looked guiltily at Aphrodite. "Of course I do," could be her only reply.

Varia's eyes never left Teddy's form during the exchange, first between Teddy and herself, then between Teddy and Aphrodite. And she felt guilty for her rudeness. "What I meant is that your guess is as good as mine when it comes to the will of the Gods. Artemis could

show up now, or a year from now." Her bare shoulders shrugged, catching Teddy's attention. "You're both welcome to spend the night here and see if she appears."

"Thanks, Hon, but huts aren't in my repertoire of lodgings." And with that, Teddy began to mentally prepare herself to be zapped into millions of pieces yet again. "But why don't you be an angel and put up my friend for the night? She's just fascinated with the Amazon way of life. Aren't ya, Sweetie?" Aphrodite turned a twinkling eye to her, and winked.

This time Teddy couldn't contain the spreading crimson that flowed from her neck up to the roots of her hair. "Aphrodite..."

"What did I say?"

Chapter 7

After Aphrodites sudden departure, the Amazon Queen took the 21st Century cabbie on a tour of the camp. Teddy immediately noted the pride in Varia's voice as she introduced her best warriors.

"Maybe you'd like some instruction on self defense while you're here," one of the more muscled women Offered.

"Mmmm, thanks for the offer, but I'm not big on the idea of being humiliated in public." Teddy hoped her refusal didn't insult the rather burly warrior standing in front of her. But she had seen the high amount of coordination required to successfully initiate Amazon fight moves, and she knew they were not for her well-packed and considerably non-limber frame.

The woman smiled broadly and suggested, "We could start off slow. I promise not to hurt you." Teddy couldn't help hearing the flirtatious overtones.

"That'll be enough, Lea." Varia interjected. Her voice was low, but her eyes screamed volumes, to which the Amazon Warrior quickly responded.

"Yes, my Queen," Lea stated simply with her head bowed and returned to her group of trainees. But as Teddy and her Queen walked away, Lea watched out of the corner of her eye with intense curiosity. "Hmmm..." she spoke. "Interesting..."

As the two passed the medical hut, en-route to the meal preparation area, Teddy realized that they had acquired a following. A group of around ten had taken up flanks behind herself and Varia. Occasionally, a stray Amazon child would walk beside her and she would smile down at the bright-eyed girl, ruffling her hair so the imp would giggle.

The Amazons had not had the opportunity to speak with Dari while she was at their camp, and most would not have approached the woman anyway, for fear of displeasing Queen Gabrielle or Xena. But now this other stranger was amongst them, and she somehow seemed more accessible. She smiled freely at all who crossed her path and offered a hand in greeting when she was given the chance.

Teddy and Varia left the kitchen and walked toward a row of huts that ran along the eastern border of the Amazon encampment. The group that had converged when Teddy's tour had begun slowly started to disband, as she was lead to one hut in particular.

"I hope this is all right?" Varia commented on the hut she had just shown the woman to. Teddy noticed that her voice had softened since she first spoke with her and Aphrodite, especially now that they were alone. "I know it's not what you're used to, in your time."

Teddy whirled her head around, coming face-to-chin with the Amazon Queen. Good thing I made Aphrodite take the heels of these boots off -- otherwise I'd loom over her. "How did you know?" She inquired, suddenly realizing how close they were to each other.

Varia looked up, she always did prefer women taller than herself. "Xena and Gabrielle brought Dari here after she arrived and was healed from her injuries. They needed clothing to make her look more... to make her blend in more." Varia didn't want to insult someone from the same time as a friend of the two warriors, just in case. Besides, she couldn't imagine this woman looking better in anything that the Amazons had to offer.

Teddy swallowed hard and simply stated, "Oh." She was striking. Her eyes were sable-brown in color, and grew transparent in the sunlight. She had witnessed that as soon as she had first approached. In fact, she found it damn difficult to look away from those eyes. But she knew, she had to.

Teddy turned quickly and nearly ran to the opposite side of the hut, pretending to appraise her surroundings, while keeping her back to the Amazon. "This will do quite well. Thank you for your hospitality."

"Excellent." Varia had also felt like running, but she didn't know why. It wasn't like she hadn't been attracted to other women. The Amazon Queen had her pick of virtually any woman in the tribe to take for a night, or to take as her mate, whichever she chose. "The evening meal will begin at sunset. I hope you'll be joining me- us." The correction was quick, a simple slip of the tongue, but it still made both women's hearts flutter. "I have to go." Varia announced and bolted through the door before Teddy could even turn around.

* * *

Aphrodite sat at her father's feet and looked up at him adoringly. "PLLEEAASSSSE, daddy."

"I told you not to meddle the first time. Look where that got you."

Aphrodite openly pouted. "I wasn't meddling. Have you forgotten? I am the Goddess of Love."

"Have YOU forgotten to whom you speak?" A bolt of lightning shot across the room followed by a rolling clap of thunder. Zeus dearly loved his daughter, but what she was asking was out of the question.

"Sorry, pops. I would never have brought it up, if I wasn't certain." She smiled her best and brightest – "this always gets me what I want" smile.

"I'll consider it. But know this, there will be consequences. And I make no promises."

"I understand, Daddy, thanks." She hopped up and kissed Zeus on the cheek, popping to the meeting room to see if Artemis was anywhere to be found. "Boy, for the King of the Gods, he can sure be a tight ass."

"I heard that" was bellowed loudly from every conceivable locale.

Aphrodite raised her fingers to the O that was now her lips, "Oops."

Chapter 8

The meal turned out to be not half bad; roasted venison with a variety of side dishes, the names of which Teddy really didn't want to know. She had been seated next to Varia, as an honored guest. Occasionally, throughout the dinner, they had accidentally brushed up against one another; two hands reaching for the same item, shoulders pressing while turning in conversation. Once even, they had turned their heads at the same, exact moment and came a hair's-breadth away from touching their lips together. The electricity that passed between them was undeniable. Teddy had to tell herself to start breathing again or she would surely faint.

Varia went to raise her tankard in a toast, as she liked to do when the occasion called for it. But this time when she lifted her drink, the container shook in her strong hand, and she knew the reason why. Being next to this stranger, this woman from another time, affected her. She had never reacted to anything this way, with this much intensity.

The rest of the Amazons quieted when they saw their Queen preparing to toast. Varia wished she could back out, but it was too late, so she raised her drink and spoke, "To old friends, and to new ones. To Thea." The Amazons hooted and joined in. "To Thea," they concurred. It was one of the shortest speeches she'd ever given, but one of the most heartfelt. She wanted to be Thea's friend. She needed to be her friend. But friends weren't supposed to be high on an Amazon's list of priorities. She felt utter confusion, down to her toes.

The last of the Amazons that had lingered after dinner to talk to Teddy bid their newest friend goodnight. Not a dense bunch, they

could see how their Queen wanted this woman all to herself. Varia walked Teddy back to her hut. "I hope you enjoyed yourself, Thea."

Teddy had tried to get Varia to call her by her nickname, but the Amazon would have none of it. "I prefer the sound of your full, given name." Varia said, and then stopped, having reached the hut door. "I like the way it feels on my tongue."

There it goes again, Teddy thought. I didn't even blush this much when I walked in on Xena and Gabrielle that time. "I wonder if Aphrodite's having any luck on Olympus." Teddy would have talked about underwater dog grooming in an attempt to regain part of her feeling of self-control.

"Knowing the Goddess, she'll pop in as soon as she has any information that she feels you should know."

"You don't like Aphrodite much, do ya?" Teddy had noticed Varia's change in tone when speaking to or about any of the Olympians.

"Aphrodite's all right, as far as the Gods go. I've just had one too many run-ins with the whole lot. It tends to color one's view." Thea was smiling down at her; a wistful look in those gorgeous, amber eyes. The Amazon Queen promptly returned the enamored stare.

Teddy stood, arms folded, head leaning against the doorframe, when suddenly she realized that she and Varia had been locked in a visual embrace for, God knew how long. She attempted to look away, but those sable pools had her entranced. She found herself hopelessly lost, and she didn't care. She sighed heavily, and then, off to the left, a high-pitched ring of giggles broke the mutual spell. It was the two teenage girls that the Queen had been sparring with when Teddy first arrived in the Amazon encampment.

Myst and Nya had been watching the stranger and their Queen for several minutes, as they stood frozen in the doorway of the hut. It was a rather fascinating occurrence for the tribe. Varia had never been interested in any type of joining activities before, so the tribe had sort of taken it for granted that she just wasn't interested period. Some Amazon Queens had chosen a life of celibacy. The girls had learned

in their Amazon History course that there had been countless bloodshed in the ancient past, as well as in more recent times, regarding the choosing of their supreme ruler's mate.

They had remembered, with a great deal of awe, the first time Queen Gabrielle and her Warrior, Xena, had arrived in camp. Although still young children, they had seen the way the two cared for one another. And once their studies had begun, they had both been curious as to why no Amazon Warrior had challenged the black-haired woman for the Queen's hand. But then, not soon after, the tribe had come close to war with the Centaurs, with the Centaur leader's son taken prisoner.

The newly cast Amazon Princess had challenged then Queen Melosa for the life of the young Centaur, calling on Xena as her champion. After witnessing Gabrielle's warrior in action, it left no doubt as to why no Amazon contested their union.

Nya remembered Myst coming to her some time later saying that the rumor was that Xena and Gabrielle were not joined, that they were merely friends and traveling companions. Both of the girls sat quietly in Nya's hut, on the edge of her bed, contemplating the possibility. The two turned to look at one another and burst out laughing. They laughed so hard that it was heard across the tribal courtyard, and when Nya's mother had heard the commotion, she had stuck her head through the door, only to find both girls in a heap on the floor, with tears of folly streaming down their young faces.

But the event that the two were witnessing tonight was even more unbelievable. Varia, their Warrior Amazon Queen, was... in love.

"No doubt about it," Myst whispered to her friend.

"Never would have believed it, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes." Nya concurred in true amazement.

Then the shocked pair had, once again, turned to look at each other, and had proceeded to crack up. In fact, Myst and Nya were so dissolved in laughter and tears that they had failed to notice their annoyed Queen quickly approaching. "A little late for you two to be up, spying, isn't it?"

The girls looked up and nearly swallowed their faces. Backing away slowly, the two spoke in unison, "I'm sorry, Queen Varia. It won't happen again."

Teddy was chuckling as Varia reprimanded the two adorable delinquents. And she could have sworn that, in the distance, as they ran back to their huts, she heard the twittering of schoolgirl giggles.

"Hope ya weren't too hard on 'em." Teddy didn't want those two getting in trouble on her account. Then she wondered, what made her believe that it was on account of her. She glanced down at Varia and knew, the look on both of their faces was a dead give-away. She silently pondered; do I have the same sappy grin on my face? She knew the answer had to be a resounding yes, from the butterflies swarming in her stomach, to the girls' reaction in observing her and Varia together. Oh boy, I'm in deep.

"Oh, those two live to stay in trouble." Varia nodded her head in the direction the in which the girls had been standing. "I've never known them not to be into some form of mischief. But they're good kids... and will make fine Amazon Warriors one day."

Teddy hadn't a concept of what it must be like to grow up an Amazon: the responsibility that was entailed, the sense of family, of history, knowing you forever had a place and a people to call home. She envied Varia that sense of belonging, not that she wasn't happy with her life, in the 21st Century. Dari and Sonny were family to her. But the emptiness would always come. She would watch her friends, along with Xena and Gabrielle, and had wished...

Varia noticed the far away look on Thea's sculptured face and burned to know what was going on behind her penetrating eyes. "Trade you?" Her velvet voice vanquishing the demons of doubt clouding Teddy's mind.

"What?" Teddy asked, not understanding.

"I'll trade you a feather, for your thoughts?" The Amazon plucked one of the ornamental pins out of her chestnut hair, handing it out for Teddy.

"It wouldn't look as good on me," Teddy stated, without really thinking, or perhaps thinking too much.

"I wouldn't be too sure about that." And Varia took a broad step towards Teddy, arms extended. She brushed the stray hair from the left side of her face and held it as her other hand pinned the hair back with the clip. "Beautiful," she whispered into Teddy's ear, her task complete, but her proximity not changing.

Teddy had closed her eyes as Varia stroked her hair, wanting to revel in the feeling through her sense of touch alone, shuddering when she felt her breath utter that lone word. When she did open her eyes to find the Amazon Queen had not moved back to her previous location, she found herself struggling not to gather the woman up in her arms and carrying her into the hut.

Varia lifted her chin, her sable eyes never leaving the amber. "It's all right, Thea. I promise you, it's all right."

Teddy was beginning to like the way she called her 'Thea.' No one had ever done that. The air in her lungs was coming out in short, ragged bursts. Every inch of her skin ached. She felt as if the world continued in slow motion. Varia moved ever closer to her, her gaze now hovering between Teddy's eyes and her mouth.

Teddy's conscience bellowed in one ear, while the emotions this woman stirred screamed in the other:

You can't allow this to happen.

Why not?

It's wrong.

Nothing's ever felt this right.

What about your friends? Remember them; Xena and Gabrielle?

Aphrodite told me to stay here; I couldn't go where she needed to look.

How convenient?

Teddy was torn, straight down the middle. She had never been so taken by another soul, except for Aphrodite. But the emotions she was experiencing around this woman was something entirely different

than what she felt for the Goddess. She didn't understand what happening to her, or why... and she was afraid.

Knowing that this wasn't her time didn't help. What if she got involved with Varia and then had to leave her? How could she survive without having those fathomless sable eyes to look into every day? No, she couldn't risk hurting Varia or herself like that.

Teddy placed her hands on the Amazons well defined shoulders and pushed her back, to a reasonably safe distance. "We can't. I can't." She wanted to explain, tried to explain, why she had pulled back, but the words wouldn't come. The look of rejection and confusion in Varia's eyes was too much, causing Teddy to turn away.

The Amazon Queen backed out of the doorway, trying to rein in her emotions so they wouldn't show, not knowing she had already failed. "Of course," she said, her voice too full to go on. She turned her back to the stranger and stomped heavily to her hut.

Teddy had stood and watched the Queen until her hut door closed. Even then she found she could not will herself inside. She knew what she had done had been for the best. Something deep inside her screamed that if she made love to Varia, she would never be able to leave her. And whatever... whomever that voice came from, she believed it.

Teddy finally dragged herself into the darkened hut, removed her clothing, and laid down on the soft furs. She had done the right thing, she kept telling herself over and over, not knowing that across the courtyard Varia chanted the same mantra. They both worked diligently to convince themselves that it was the sensible course of action, even as their tears began to fall.

Chapter 9

Aphrodite checked Mount Olympus's meeting room, and the mortal gallery, and the pleasure chamber, then she rechecked the pleasure chamber when she suddenly realized exactly where Artemis would be... the meditation garden. She had always loved the peace and tranquility that could be found in there, even as a child. Bit of a weirdo, way back then. Aphrodite shrugged. But what could she expect from the Goddess of chastity? "Ewwwww." The love Goddess cringed at the thought.

Aphrodite entered the celestial gates of the garden. It was pretty, that much she had to admit. Surrounding her was every flower, plant, shrub, bush, and tree ever known, plus a few in the experimental stage. All of the foliage grew out of the garden's floor, a floor made entirely of mist. There were no walkways, all a God need do was begin to move and a path was made.

In the center of the garden lay a courtyard. It was the only area devoid of vegetation, and it housed the Fountain of Renewal. When one of the Olympians felt drained, all they need do was come to the meditation garden and regenerate. It could sometimes take the equivalent of several lifetimes in the span of mortals, but all immortals found a sort of cleansing from the garden -- if they were willing.

Artemis sat on the fountain's edge as her sister approached. "I'm surprised to find you here, Aphrodite." The Goddess raised her head to look the other Goddess in the eye. "Same as always, I see." She said after viewing Aphrodite's attire, her head slowly shaking from side to side.

"Well, duh... I am eternal. And why would I change perfection personified?" Aphrodite rolled her eyes at such a ridiculous proposition.

Artemis smiled at Aphrodite. "Why, indeed," she answered and returned to her cleansing.

"Hold up, Sis, before ya zone out on me."

But Artemis already knew why the Goddess of Love was looking for her. All of Olympus was abuzz with her latest shenanigan. "Taking Xena and Gabrielle... really." The Goddess tsked, tsked disapprovingly.

Aphrodite was taken aback by her sister's unexpected commentary. "Oh, I think it was a fine idea." But just as she was about to explain why, Artemis interrupted.

"I know it got you what you wanted. Xena and Gabrielle are now physically, as well as metaphysically joined, but look at where they are... trapped in the year three thousand. Was it truly worth it?"

"Of course it was." Aphrodite's hands were on her hips as a show of protest. "They belong together, not just in the head... but in the bed." She was really steamed about this sudden questioning of her decision-making ability. "Not that you'd know the first thing about it. . little miss virg..." - hey, hold the chariot - "Where did you say Xena and Gabrielle are?"

Artemis wondered when Aphrodite would stop babbling and catch on to the information she had divulged. She stifled a laugh, and repeated, as point of record, "They are in the year three-thousand, commonly referred to in that time, as 3K."

Aphrodite never could stand the way her sister of the hunt stayed so calm, so serene, all the friggin' time. "Why couldn't you just tell me that?"

"What, and miss the show?" Artemis' smile grew, and Aphrodite had to giggle.

She always could play me. "Okay, so now we know when they are, but where, and how do we get them home?" Her forehead crinkled with the effort of her thought.

Artemis stood, taking her beloved sister by the arm and said, "Don't think so hard, Aphrodite, you'll hurt yourself... besides, it can cause wrinkles."

"What?!" Aphrodite exclaimed, and then thought, "But I can't get wrinkles." She turned an eschewed look in Artemis' direction, making them both laugh.

"Don't worry, everything happens in its own time, and in its own way."

Calm, and cryptic... make that two things she couldn't stand. Finally noticing that Artemis was leading her somewhere, Aphrodite asked, "Just where are you taking me?"

"Father wants a word with you."

Uh-Oh. "Ya know what this is about?" Aphrodite hoped he still wasn't sore over that tight ass thing.

"I haven't the slightest idea, but it sounded important, so you had better not keep him waiting."

Artemis and Aphrodite entered the King of the God's throne room, to find their father deep in thought. "Zeus?" Artemis approached, with Aphrodite trailing behind.

He took what appeared to be a deep breath, if Gods breathed. "Come closer." He beckoned them with a wave of his hand. "I have been thinking and have made a decision. Artemis, I must speak with your sister alone." And with that, the Goddess disappeared from view. "Daughter, I have considered what you told me."

"Yes, daddy?" She could barely contain herself.

"I will agree, under one condition."

A catch. Why is there always a catch?

"There must be an act performed, which proves the two are worthy of such an extraordinary request."

"What kind of act?"

"The ultimate act of love." Zeus smirked, already knowing how the events would unfold.

"But father!"

"The decision's been made and will not alter. Now go."

The Goddess of Love shuffled toward the doors of the throne room, too discouraged to pop, knowing arguing with Zeus was useless, when Zeus called, "And no interference from you, child. Or my offer becomes null and void."

"Great... why not tell Ares to lay off the leather while you're at it?" She mumbled out loud.

"What was that?" Zeus echoed behind her retreating form.

"Nothing... nothing." Aphrodite waved her hand, not turning around, and twinkled out of sight.

Chapter 10

Aphrodite popped into Teddy's hut right at sun-up. "Wakey-wakey," she whispered in her friend's ear. Teddy began to stir as the Goddess of Love looked down asking herself, How am I ever going to pull this off?

"Do ya get your jollies from disturbing me out of a sound sleep?" Teddy lied. The sleep she had experienced after Varia left had been anything but sound. "What'd ya find out?" Teddy asked, rubbing her bloodshot eyes and yawning.

"Well, I have part of our problem solved." The Goddess tried to look enthusiastic. "I know when Xena and Gabrielle are." She smiled unevenly at the still languid form of her friend.

Teddy eyed Aphrodite and knew from the look on her face that there was something she wasn't telling her but initially decided to let it slide. She was too tired, and her nerves were too raw from last night to interrogate a crafty Greek Goddess. Then the information that Aphrodite had just told her began to seep in. "You found out what?"

"Slow on the uptake this morning, aren't we?" Aphrodite's grin widened. "I found out when in time Xena and Gabs are," she repeated. "What's wrong with you, Teddy? You look awful." She took in her friend's disheveled appearance, knowing that usually to look like this, a body needed to have done more than merely sleep.

"Thank you, very much. I feel awful, but we can talk about that later." -- the later, the better. "Now, about Xena and Gabrielle?" Teddy changed the topic as quickly as possible. She didn't want Aphrodite using any of her potions or elixirs on her or Varia. The less she knew, the better they'd all be.

"They're in the year three thousand," she stated as if it were an everyday occurrence, and then looked back at her friend's still prone body. Aphrodite thought maybe she could skirt the impending explosion by offering Teddy some breakfast. "Ya hungry?" she inquired. And without waiting for an answer – POOF -- a spread fit for a king – err -- queen appeared on the table in the corner of the hut, near the end of the bed.

Teddy scratched her head. Had she heard right? Her friends were in the 31st Century, instead of the 21st. Suddenly, Teddy bolted up out of bed and rushed over to the table where Aphrodite was fidgeting with a platter of kiwi and strawberries. "Did I hear you correctly? The year 3000!"

"Yeah, Sugar. You heard right." Well, the cabbie had reacted far better than the Goddess had expected. "Now we just have to find out where they are, and find someone to get them home, and we're set." Aphrodite clapped her hands together, as if it were already a done deal.

Teddy was in shock. She remembered how lost the three of them had been in her world when she'd first seen them soon after their arrival. Now they were in another unknown world, and this time around there was no Aphrodite for them to rely on. At least they have each other, she thought, and somehow that stray mental statement returned her mind to Varia. She felt her knees grow weak, and instinctively she reached up for the feathered ornament, which still clung to her sandy hair. Goddess, please make her see and not hate me for what I did. I'd shrivel away to nothing if that happened.

Aphrodite watched as her friend paled and feared she would faint. This was going to be harder than she thought. "It will be all right, Teddy, you have to believe that." If only she were as sure as her words.

"I'm trying, Aphrodite. I'm really trying." She was not only replying to the Goddess' attempt at reassurance, but to the doubts that were plaguing her own mind as well. Just then a knock broke though the silence, and Teddy began to walk numbly toward the hut door.

"Teddy." Aphrodite called out to her, a laugh catching in her throat.

"What?" Teddy turned and cocked her head at the expression on the Goddess's face.

"Don't ya think you should put some clothes on before ya answer the door?"

* * *

Varia's sleep, if you could call it that, was anything but restful. She had felt foolish, remembering her bout of crying over the events with Thea after dinner. She had even felt silly as the tears flowed, but she had continued to weep. Then finally, sleep had come. Her slumber had been infested with odd dreams and confusing images. She dreamed of water, cool and comforting, but then the water changed and she was enveloped by a choking darkness. More than once during the night, Varia had awakened afraid, gasping for air.

And every time she awoke, her first thought was that of the stranger -- although she could really no longer be called that by Varia. From the first time she had stared deeply into the amber depths of her eyes, it was as if they had been together for a lifetime. She didn't understand what was happening to her. Varia felt as though she were in a trance. Something primal and urgent had been cast upon her.

What if the camp was attacked? Would she, the Amazon Queen, be so lost in Thea's eyes that it would cause her judgment to falter? No- she was looking for excuses. She couldn't blame faulty judgment on the woman who slept across the courtyard. She had too many of her own doubts about to her effectiveness as a Queen. She had watched Magda, with her skill, and then Cyan and her majestic presence over the tribe. She didn't have that. She was a Warrior, not a Queen. And although it was possible to be both, it wasn't a talent she possessed.

In the short time since she had taken the reins, small factions of Amazons had splintered away from the tribe. Varia knew that if Cyan were still Queen, or if Gabrielle had been in the encampment, the tribe

would still be whole. When it came to diplomacy, tact, and understanding, those women were true Queens of the Amazon Nation, or any nation for that matter.

She sat in the dark and remembered when it began to go wrong...

A scout rode into camp with the news that settlers had begun to construct a farmhouse within Amazon territory. In her usual kick-ass style, Varia had instructed a party of warriors to throw the intruders off their land. The head of the war party questioned the Queen's tactics and the fight was on.

"What do you mean questioning your Queen?" Varia had shouted at Lea, when the warrior showed signs of bucking her orders.

"Forgive me, my Queen, but I do not question you -- only the speed in which the decision was reached." Lea was well known in the tribe for her way with words. "Perhaps these people mean no harm. Would it not serve the tribe better to see if a compromise could not be reached first?"

"They have moved onto our land. How can we compromise?" Varia fought to regain her composure. "If we allow anyone who comes onto our land homestead privileges, then all of the battles that have been waged, and all of the blood spilled to protect it, will have been for nothing."

"I agree." Lea shook her head, emphasizing that what Varia had suggested was not her intention. "I merely meant that might it not be better to go to these people and find out why they are here, and explain that they cannot reside in our territory... for their own safety." The Amazon leaned in toward Varia. "Is it not wiser to make an ally of an enemy, rather than an enemy of an ally?"

"I'm not going to assume that they're allies, and then discover my mistake too late."

"My Queen, I can approach the house alone. Or so it will seem to them. The remainder of my warriors will lie in wait, should there be a need." Other warriors in the party had gathered around to assure

their Queen that all would be on alert, and that they agreed that a peaceful resolution might be achievable in this instance.

Suddenly Varia felt like an idiot -- worse, an inept idiot. She hadn't even considered that there could be other options than violence. And even though she felt shame and anger at herself for her lack of forethought, she was furious at Lea for being right. She made Varia feel small, and although the Amazon had only the best of intentions and goodwill for not just her Amazon tribe, but for the strangers on their land, Varia burned with resentment. And she felt ashamed again -- and alone.

Varia took it personally when her warriors disagreed with the way in which their new ruler was handling the encroachment on their sacred lands. She viewed their discussion as a private assault on her abilities. And even though she would never let it show, she was hurt.

Since that day, hurt had remained as a staple of her sovereignty. Long before the moon began its descent from the night sky, Varia knew she would sleep no more. And instead of fighting the inevitable, she got up, bathed, and dressed before the sun's first reddish-orange hues rose into view. Even without the luxury of sleep, she replayed the events of last night again. Running the scenes through her mind: how Thea had looked at her, not repulsed or uninterested, but terrified, she came to the realization that Thea had been trying to explain why she had pushed her away, but the words just wouldn't come. That gave the Amazon hope.

So when the sun began its ascent in the clear morning sky, Varia took a stroll over to Thea's hut to tell her there were no hard feelings, and that she understood the fear that must have been coursing through her. She felt the same emotion, but she wasn't going to let it stop her. Varia stood, took a deep breath, knocked on the bamboo door, and waited.

* * *

Teddy fumbled for a fur to drape around her naked body. She swore profanities at the Goddess of Love as she crumbled to the floor in a heap of un-Goddess like giggles. Teddy managed to find a suitable covering and flung the door open. Her jaw dropped when she saw Varia standing there. My God, she's even more beautiful in the morning.

"Hi-i." Teddy stammered. Real smooth.

"Hello." Varia could see the surprise on Thea's face and smiled in amusement. She liked her this way, naked and dazed.

Teddy stood in the doorway, totally captivated by Varia's appearance. The sun shone around the woman, creating an aura. An angel. My angel.

"Well, don't just stand there, invite her in." Aphrodite peeked behind Teddy's broad shoulders at Varia's now drooping face.

"Sure." Teddy, still in shock from Aphrodite's news and now Varia's visit, staggered back to allow the Queen to enter.

"I didn't know you were here," Varia spit out, not trying to hide her disappointment or her venom.

Aphrodite walked over to the Amazon and placed a laced arm around her shoulders. "Now, now, no need for that little green monster to raise its ugly head. Didn't you tell her about us, Teddy?" The Goddess admonished her future self.

"What does she mean 'about us,' Thea?" Varia tried to keep the worse case scenario from creeping into her thoughts.

"Thea?" Aphrodite turned an amused eye toward her friend.

"Don't say a word," Teddy warned. "Besides, I like it when she calls me that." Upon realizing what she had just said, the cabbie flushed crimson and glanced at Varia. The Amazon stood there, grinning from ear to ear, clearly pleased by Teddy's outburst, reinforcing her belief that it was fear that had made Thea pull away from her last night.

Aphrodite smirked openly at the two. "Ya see, Hon, Thea is me in a future time."

Varia lost her smile and crinkled her forehead; she didn't get it.

The Goddess tried again. "Ok, Teddy is my soul, reincarnated into another body from the 21st Century." She smiled, happily.

Varia remembered Gabrielle's tales of when she and Xena had been taken to the future, where Xena was some woman called the "Mother of Peace," and Gabrielle was an Indian prince. But she had thought it was just a story. "Thea was born with your soul?"

By Jove, I think she's got it. "Yes, that's right."

It was an overwhelming concept. The Amazons believed in the underworld, but one where a warrior's soul would live out eternity in keeping with Amazon traditions, not reborn into another -- and certainly not reborn inside any other being but an Amazon. What the Goddess was telling her clashed with everything she had ever been taught, but yet...

She broke away from Aphrodite and kneeled down beside the chair Thea had been silently sitting upon. "Is this true?"

"Every word." The sound of Varia's voice broke through Teddy's catatonic state. "I know it sounds too fantastical, but it is the truth." Teddy covered Varia's hand with her own, the sudden physical connection jarring them both. "Aphrodite showed me when she came to my time."

"I... I don't completely understand, but if you tell me it's true... then I believe you." Varia's glistening eyes reached inside Teddy's heart and squeezed. She felt like crying every time she looked at this woman, but she was uncertain if they were tears of pain or joy.

Aphrodite sighed, knowing that if she waited for the love fest to end, she'd be here all day. Normally, she wouldn't mind, in fact, she would encourage it, but she and Teddy had places to go and Gods to see. "Teddy, sorry, but it's time to take off. We have a lot of ground to cover today."

Teddy sighed heavily, not wanting to leave Varia, but knowing she had a mission to accomplish. "Give me five minutes. I'll throw my clothes on." Her amber eyes never left her Queen's.

"I'll prepare a sack," Varia announced, breaking the electrical sub current, and practically running for the door.

Oh boy. Aphrodite thought.

Teddy jerked, not knowing what she was talking about. "Wait a minute... a sack? What for?"

Varia yelled back, already out of the hut and sprinting across the courtyard. "Why? I'm going with you, of course. Why else?"

Chapter 11

The three popped inside the temple of Hestia, the Goddess of the hearth. "Are ya sure she's gonna show?" Teddy's voice was tinged with anger.

"Yes, I'm certain." Aphrodite quipped back. "Her weekly offering's due today." The Goddess zapped over to the altar. "See, she hasn't been in to pick it up. She'll be here soon."

Teddy mumbled a curt okay, and plopped down on a chair located at the far side of the temple. Varia thought she knew why Thea was acting so annoyed and walked over to where she had retreated, taking a seat beside her. "Don't be angry." Varia softened her voice to a whisper. "You know I couldn't be left behind."

Teddy did understand why Varia had insisted on joining them, and truth be known, if the situation had been reversed, she wouldn't have let Varia out of her sight. Another truth was that Teddy was confused by her emotions, not about the Amazon seated beside her, those were clear and strong. The cabbie's confusion lay in what Varia felt, or more precisely why she felt. Why was Varia doing this? Why was Teddy allowing her to do this? She was not the impetuous type, and the concept of love at first sight was one to which she had never laid any credence. But here she was, growing breathless at the sight of a woman she had met less than two days before. And amazingly, Varia seemed to feel the same way for her.

That was what she didn't understand. How could such a woman as Varia want her? Teddy never thought of herself as anything extraordinary. She prided herself on being a simple woman. She had her taxi and her house; she had her friends and a comfortable lifestyle. She really couldn't ask for a better existence.

Just then Varia reached over and took Teddy's larger hand in her own. Teddy felt the warmth inundating her skin, traveling through her fingers, up her arm, and around her shoulders. Varia slowly stroked tiny circles on Teddy's palm with the pad of her thumb. The taller woman's neck began to burn as an infusion of color crept upward. Teddy thought she heard flames licking at her earlobes and was certain that if the three were in one of Aphrodite's temples and had access to one of her full-length mirrors, she would see a rather large abundance of smoke billowing out of her ears.

Teddy closed her eyes and enjoyed the sensation of Varia's touch, along with the affect it had on her. The confusion and internal battle that was being waged inside the cabbie was momentarily quelled. The anger that her confusion created kept redirecting itself at the people closest to her, namely Aphrodite and Varia. "I'm sorry." Teddy whispered. "I don't mean to take things out on you." She instinctively grasped the smaller woman's hand, which held tightly to hers. "I'm not angry with you, I just don't know what to do... about Xena and Gabrielle." Teddy covered for what was really at the forefront of her mind, with what was running a close second, with guilt following at a not too distant third.

Varia squeezed Thea's hand tighter, wanting to remember the sensation forever -- just in case. The Amazon Queen had lost too many people in her young life, but she had no time for, nor was inclined toward, self-pity. She shoved the thought out of her head. No, she would not lose Thea. She would do whatever she had to in order to prevent that.

Aphrodite had been silently watching the two, waiting until their conversation reached a point where she could interrupt, with interrupting. But just as she was about to, someone else beat her to the pop.

"What exactly is going on here?" The Goddess Hestia demanded to know.

"Not much, and with yourself?" Aphrodite asked, knowing it would aggravate her pious sister.

"You know how I feel about your presence in one of my temples." Hestia would not even look at the Goddess of Love for fear that just the sight of such a creature might spoil her virgin eyes.

"Is that any way for you to talk to your own kin?" Aphrodite continued with the faux caring. "After all, we are sisters."

"Don't remind me."

Teddy reached Aphrodite just as she was about to hurl another remark in Hestia's stoic direction. It was her turn to provide a little guidance. "Remember why we're here, Aphrodite? Be nice."

"Spoil-sport." Aphrodite pouted. She did remember their mission, so she would be civil, even if it did go against every fiber in her immortal being. "Hestia..." -- Boy are Xena and Gabrielle gonna owe me big after they get back - "...dear..." -- Think I'm gonna hurl now - "...virtuous..." -- gag- - "...sister..." Aphrodite looked back at Teddy and crinkled her perky nose. "I need a favor."

"Why in the name of all things pure would I do you any favors?" Hestia's inane laughter at her request echoed in Aphrodite's ears, and the Goddess had to restrain herself from zapping the pristine princess straight to Egypt, to the throne of Min, himself.

"Because this favor has to do with Xena and Gabrielle. You know, the two who saved your high-priestess and kept all those vestal virgins from being ravaged and sold into slavery."

"Oh." Hestia hated being indebted to any mortal. But being beholden to a couple of friends of the Goddess of Love was even worse. "So ask your favor."

"Xena and Gabrielle are in the 31st Century and can't get back home." She took a pause, mustering her resolve. "Can you bring them back?" Aphrodite felt dirty just for asking, and not in a good way.

The other Goddess spoke as she walked indignantly toward her altar, "You haven't defiled my offerings, have you? Didn't touch them or anything?" After taking her time to inspect her sacrifices, she

continued her verbal assault toward Aphrodite by finally answering her question. "Don't be stupid, of course I can't bring them back."

"Can't, or won't?" Teddy piped up, her anger increasing with each of Hestia's responses. Who did she think she was anyway, to talk to Aphrodite like that? To hell with being nice.

Hestia turned her head, and regarded Teddy as one might regard a fly buzzing within close proximity to one's person.

"Well?" Aphrodite urged a response from the Goddess, knowing she would not recognize any mortal as being worthy of communicating with, unless she was one of her worshipers.

"You have my answer." And with that, she was gone.

"How can a Goddess, who is supposed to represent goodness and purity, act like that?!" Varia was beside herself. Maybe after that display, Thea understood why she felt as she did toward the whole lot of them. "Of all the self-righteous, hypocritical..."

"Calm down, Sugar," Aphrodite cooed. "All she needs is a good f..." Teddy and Varia, both snapped their heads in the direction of Aphrodite's voice. "*friend*, like Xena has in Gabrielle." She smiled down at the two mortals questioning expressions.

"Shuuure." Teddy gave the Goddess of Love one of her 'You're full of Shinola' looks, and wondered what colorful phrases Aphrodite had picked up during her stay in the 21st Century.

Varia looked at Thea, and then back at Aphrodite, and tried her best to contain the smile that had already begun to develop at the corners of her full mouth. Maybe this Goddess wasn't so bad after all. "Even so," Varia interjected, "that still doesn't give her the right to speak to anyone that way!"

Teddy turned her attention from Aphrodite to the Amazon. Well that's a first, she thought, not wanting to say anything that might set Varia into her defensive mode. Could it be that she was actually beginning to warm up to Aphrodite?

The Goddess, too, had taken notice of Varia's kind statement, and the fervor in which she had made it. "I appreciate the sentiment, Sweet Pea." Aphrodite threw the Amazon a coy wink. "But you're gonna pop your pelts if you stay wound up that tight."

Chapter 12

Another day in what seemed like an endless progression was over, and they were no closer to reaching their goal than when they had started. Aphrodite wanted to say something encouraging, but she drew a blank. Teddy looked sullen and hopeless; and with every God/Goddess that rejected them, Varia grew angrier and bitter toward the Olympians. This sucks. The Goddess knew what was to come next and detested the very notion. This one visit she had to handle herself. But how was she going to get away from her two traveling companions?

The road upon which the three were walking was rocky but passable. They were in search of a decent site in which to set up camp for the night. Teddy watched Aphrodite out of the corner of her eye. The gears were grinding inside that pretty blonde head. It had been a struggle over the past few days to keep one eye on her and the other on Varia. If one woman wasn't up to something, the other was. Trying to keep Aphrodite out of mischief had been bad enough, but since Varia had joined them.... Teddy just shook her head and smiled to herself. It was actually kind of nice.

Varia strolled beside Thea, keeping the woman within her peripheral vision. It had turned out to be quite the chore, watching over those two. Aphrodite was beyond hope as far as discipline was concerned. And Thea, well, she was stubborn, opinionated, and brooding; everything she wanted in a woman.

Aphrodite had allowed the others to get a good lead on her when she announced, "Why don't I just pop us to one of my temples? It would be much more comfortable than being out -- here." The Goddess shouted at the two forms as they forged ahead. She knew

they would say no by the way they had been ogling one another. They wanted to spend as much time as possible together; that was evident, even to a mortal. "I hate walking." Aphrodite added, purely for theatrics.

"Because Thea and I need the exercise. We have to use our muscles in order to keep them in shape." Varia kept on looking for a place to camp. The sun was descending, so the time available was limited. "Besides, I'm tired of your temples. I miss the forest." Varia made a 360 degree turn on her animal-skinned heels; surprising and delighting Thea by this impulsive action. "Smell the air, Aphrodite." Varia put her fist to her chest and breathed deeply, inhaling the scents around her. Thea's grin grew broader; God this woman is truly magnificent.

Oh brother. The Goddess rolled her eyes and continued on, unswayed. "Not my fault you have to do things the old fashioned way." Aphrodite stopped walking and placed a resolved hand on each hip. "So I shouldn't be the one punished for it." She smiled to their backs, and then pouted, quite convincingly, when they both turned around to glare at her.

"Aphrodite, would you please quit bitching and come on." Teddy could be just as hardheaded as her karmic counterpart. "Besides, since you don't sleep, why do you care where we stay?"

Without skipping a beat, the Goddess replied, "Oh, I don't. It's just the principle of the thing." Aphrodite decided she had humored her traveling companions long enough and zapped straight into their path. "If you two want blisters on your feet and bugs crawling all over the place, that's your business." Aphrodite's finger wagged in their surprised faces. "As for me, I'll see you in the morning." A stream of pink sparkles suddenly stood where the Goddess of Love used to.

Teddy and Varia looked at one another and smiled, both thinking the same thought; alone at last.

* * *

Aphrodite took a deep, cleansing breath. Even though it wasn't necessary for her to breathe in order to sustain her existence, she found the process of pulling and then pushing air out of her body rather invigorating -- something she wasn't about to admit to Varia. No need to put this off any longer. Aphrodite gathered up her pink chiffon, stiffened her resolve, and entered the gates to the Halls of War.

* * *

The walk had been silent, neither knowing quite what to say. Each understood that they possessed a yearning, even a need for the other, but neither knew why. Teddy turned and looked at the Amazon walking beside her and the breath caught in her throat. So this is what it's like to have an epiphany. She stood frozen to one solitary spot on the ground.

I love this woman.

It was that simple. But it was anything but simple. Love is never simple, is it? She felt utterly foolish. Teddy had been searching for some underhanded answer, some overtly drawn out logical solution to a completely illogical dilemma. She had been certain that the emotions Varia induced would lead her right back to where they had always led: the nagging, empty void. So she had waited, and waited, but it never came. Not since the day they had met, had the gnawing pain filled her soul. Her confusion had been born from that realization. Somewhere in her mind, the cabbie was sure it would return. The longer it took, the more confused she had grown. But as Teddy stood there, in a forest primeval, taking in every inch of the Heavenly creature casually walking in front of her, the truth hit her like a two by four upside the head -- it was gone -- every twinge, every pull, every doubt. Oh Heavenly Mother!

Varia strolled along, her mind drifting to what could be if she and Thea availed themselves the opportunity, when the Amazon suddenly stopped walking, realizing that she had left Thea standing some feet back. "What's wrong?" she asked. Her warrior senses

automatically kicked into maximum alert. In the tribe, an abrupt end to any activity usually meant that trouble lay ahead. Thea just stood there openly gaping at her. Is she hurt? Varia wondered as she carefully and cautiously approached. "Thea, what is it?"

Varia placed concerned hands on Thea's shoulders and shook her ever so gently. It was then that she saw a thin veil of tears misting the woman's eyes. She was beginning to get scared; it was an emotion she hated. Thea finally looked up into those soft sable browns and whispered, "I lov...uummff..... "

The following sensation was the feel of their bodies as they landed with a solid thud on the ground. A shadow of something ominous separated the warrior and the cabbie from the safety of the day's remaining sunlight.

"I'm afraid I'm to blame for your current position." A weak and fragile voice directed its way through the rocky terrain.

Both women looked up and over to where the sound had come from. Varia was the first to rise. She immediately held out a strong hand to Thea, which was taken readily. The Amazon Warrior pulled the larger of the two to her feet without much concerted effort.

Varia cursed herself for being so entranced by Thea that she had allowed her guard to slip enough for them to end up where they had. She pushed the thought of how they had landed out of her mind in order to concentrate on the possible danger at hand. But the feel of Thea's muscular frame beneath her own was something that would not be easily dismissed from her craving mind. Her skin vibrated from the all too brief contact. Varia pulled her neck to the side, causing it to crack loudly, relieving a small amount of the pressure pulsating through her body. "Who are you?" Her eyes narrowed in an attempt to see the fading figure.

"I am no one of consequence... except to them." The frail form pointed a bony finger up toward the setting sun.

Circling above the three, like unholy vultures, were a pair of frightening forms. Their wings were feathered, similar to a bird's. Their bodies appeared to be made of stone. The texture of their flesh gave off an almost marbled glow in the ever-increasing dusk. But

it was their faces that Teddy could not turn away from; these creatures possessed the faces of tortured women. These beings' features were wracked with agony. The pain was so exquisitely etched that it imprinted itself onto the watcher.

"Harpies." Varia's voice was a faint whisper to Teddy. She was already beginning to lose herself inside the blackness that was their heart. The Warrior had to act fast, and she had to do it now. She looked around for something, anything that could be used; then she remembered the old Amazon legend.

Varia reached behind her and gathered up her bow along with two arrows from her quiver. She knew about the odd item that Thea carried with her; some invention of the 21st Century. The warrior searched the woman's ever stiffening body for the object. Where in the name of Artemis is it? Ahhhh...at last.

She raised the metallic tip to the now cloth covered ends of the arrows. Varia had watched Thea perform the task over the course of the previous evenings. It was much more simple than rubbing sticks or crashing flint rocks together, or so it had appeared. Her hands trembled; she had, in the past, held the fate of human lives in her own. Those instances now seemed impersonal; a perfunctory task demanded by her title as Amazon Warrior. This life was different. She now held the fate of the woman she loved in her well-calloused hands. The possible consequences of her actions weighed heavily on the Queen's mind. But she would not allow her hesitation to cost Thea her life.

Varia held her hand in the same way she had witnessed Thea do it and brought the pad of her thumb down upon the plate. A small beam shot out and ignited the strips of cloth. Varia released the foreign object in her hand and placed the arrows in the middle of the bowstring. Holding her weapon horizontally, Varia took aim, inhaled, and allowed the slender stalks to take flight.

The Harpies had taken positions between the two women and the old man. Teddy had been watching the entire scene but was unable to do anything about the events as they unfolded. When she had stared into the creatures' desolate eyes, she had found herself

stricken, a numbing sensation infusing every cell in her body. She saw the panic rise inside Varia until an obvious plan took root. And when the Amazon readied her bow and arrows then began to dig through the cabbies' clothing, she knew what idea had formed. Teddy tried to tell her where she could locate her lighter, but the words wouldn't reach her mouth. So she stood there, amazingly calm, as the flaming arrows began their flight.

One arrow sunk into the feathered wing of the first Harpy. She was immediately engulfed in an inferno of orange flames, and with a final piercing scream she burst into a cloud of ashes. The other arrow also met its mark, but this kill was not a clean one. The second Harpy was struck in the heart; a fatal wound to a mortal, but not to this entity and its black organ. She fell to the ground, stunned, but rose quickly and charged at the huntress. Varia was knocked off her feet by the impact. She rolled onto her back and kick-flipped herself into a standing position. While pulling an arrow out of her quiver and simultaneously snatching her bow off of the ground, the Harpy lunged at the warrior, taking hold of the stringed section of the weapon.

Varia was being encased in a vise-like arm as she was lifted from the earth beneath her feet. She struggled against the monster as they ascended. She raised the arrow, still in her grip, and jabbed it against the beast. But without fire, the tip broke off as it impacted against the impenetrable skin. Finally, in a half horrified, half infuriated tone, Varia hollered out, "THEA!!"

Teddy had slowly begun to regain her mobility when the first Harpy was destroyed, but the weakness that followed was just as detrimental. She slumped to the ground when the second Harpy was hit. Unable to right herself, she lie in the dirt, a quivering mass of suede-covered flesh. But then Varia was attacked and somehow she found the strength to propel herself forward. She latched onto Varia's boot. "You're not taking her without me," Teddy announced in a weakened croak to the thing hovering above her.

A flash of metal caught Teddy's eye as she strained to keep hold of her love. The lighter! She stretched out her arm and could feel the metal against her fingertips. With a groan, Teddy fanned out her

fingers and clawed. She threw up her hand just as her weight was pulled from the ground. In one motion, Teddy lit the bow, which the monster still clasped in her free hand. The animal hide acted as a fuse and sent flames up the Harpy's arm. In her ensuing panic, the Harpy released her hold on Varia, plunging the Amazon and the cabbie to the ground. They landed with a resounding thud, and with the twinkle of the first of the evening stars, the two held tightly to one another as what might have appeared to the casual observer to be a shooting star, recoiled from their presence and flew away across the night sky.

Chapter 13

Aphrodite stepped lightly through the Halls of War. At least this was a way to kill two birds with one stone, so to speak. As she reached the main hall, the doors automatically swung open. "So much for the element of surprise," Aphrodite quipped, and continued her stride as she entered the dark and foreboding chamber. Once she had made it to the middle of the stone floor, a shower of silver sparkles cascaded through the air, landing some twenty feet away.

"Hey, Sis, bet I know why you're here," Ares smirked as he sat on his heavily jeweled-encrusted throne. One leather-clad thigh rested over a wooden arm of his chair.

"Oh, really?" She was afraid of that. For a group that stayed in conflict, immortals could sure spread news like a forest fire.

Ares' grin turned into a full-fledged smile. "Go ahead, ask me... ask me." He ended the request with a forward waving motion of his hands.

Aphrodite sighed. "All right, Ares." The Goddess stepped closer to her brother. "I'll play along." She reached the edge of the steps leading up to his throne and asked, "Will you help get Xena and Gabrielle back home?" Aphrodite rolled her eyes upward, waiting.

The God of War brought his hand to his forehead and rested it there. With his other hand, he drummed heavy fingers against his muscular thigh. "Ahhhhh... NO." Following his response came a stream of high-pitched cackles. "Oh," he said while wiping crocodile tears from his eyes and flicking them out into space. "that was priceless."

"Very funny!" Aphrodite crossed her arms over her heaving chest.

"Come on, Sis, what happened to your sense of humor?" Ares climbed down from his dais and draped a sculptured arm around Aphrodite's barely covered shoulders. "Hades knows, I'd help you if I could." He patted her back and then turned to pour himself a goblet of nectar.

"Hey." Aphrodite stomped over to Ares and grabbed the goblet from his hand before he had taken his first sip. "Quit trying to pull the Golden Fleece over my eyes." She set the silver chalice down on the table beside them.

"What are you blathering about?" The God picked up the cup and quickly drank before his sister could swipe it away from him, again.

"You know very well what," Aphrodite complained, and then added, "and Goddesses never blather."

"Whatever..." Ares loved pushing Aphrodite's buttons; but then again, Ares loved pushing anyone's buttons when given the opportunity.

"What's the matter, Big Brother? Getting senile in your old age?" The Goddess of Love could push a few buttons of her own when the situation called for it.

"Humph." Ares went to turn away but was held in place by the determined grip of his little sister's hand.

"Remember Ialrus?"

"Hercules' little buddy? What's he got to do with this?"

Aphrodite blew out a ribbon of air, her irritation growing. "You sent Curly to the past, to stop Callisto from altering the future. Is this ringing any bells?"

"Mmmm....Well ya just answered your own question, didn't ya?"

Aphrodite's grip loosened as she mulled over the God's last remark, which gave Ares a chance to turn away, successfully this time. "Huh?" She urged for a more precise explanation with a scrunched brow.

Ares seated himself at his throne and chuckled at Aphrodite's obvious confusion. "I sent him to the past." The God held out his hand and a ball of light appeared. "Sending and bringing back are two entirely different things." He began to bounce the neon sphere in his palm. "Sending the squirt was no problem since I had no intention of him coming back. But, of course, he had to find the Cronos Stone and manage to get back here on his own." Ares' lip curled as he remembered, and in a flash of anger he threw the fireball. It hit the wall on the far side of the throne room and shattered in a brilliant display of glitter. "So you see," Ares began after regaining his composure, "I can't help you."

Sufficiently convinced, Aphrodite asked, "Well, what about your protégée'?"

"Who?"

"You know, the Baroness of Black." Aphrodite smiled at her creativity, but all Ares did was raise an eyebrow, so she continued, "The Grand Dame of Grunge, the Lady of Leather, the Duchess of Dirt, the Marques of-"

"Enough already!" In a puff of bilious black smoke, Discord appeared. "What do you want? Ya Blonde bimbo."

"She wants to know..." – snort -- "...if you can..." – giggle -- "...help her get Xena and Gabrielle back." Full-fledged laughter ensued.

Oh goody, surround-sound cackling. Aphrodite pursed her lips and interrupted the merriment being made at her expense. "A simple yes or no would have sufficed."

Discord was doubled over, the laughter shaking her body with tiny tremors. She held tightly to her own chain-draped, leathered waist with one fishnet-covered arm. "Ya may not be good for anything else, Princess, but at least I can always count on you for a laugh."

"Guess, I'll take that as a no." Aphrodite was on the cusp of turning this disharmonizing waste of space into a gnome -- no, a cockatrice -- wait, even better, a catoblepas-- yes, that's the one...definitely.

"Discord, beat it. I know that look, and it's not a good thing." Ares had seen Aphrodite when her temper flared and knew that he didn't want to have to deal with another poultry incident. Discord was about to argue the point, so he did the zapping for her. With a snap, the Goddess of Retribution dissolved from sight.

"Awww, why did ya go and do that?" Aphrodite pouted. "It wasn't like I was going to do anything to her that she didn't deserve."

"That's the problem." The God shrugged his squared shoulders. "Do you know how much trouble it was to get her into that outfit when she was a chicken?"

"Ewwwwww." The mere notion was too disgusting.

"I think it's time for you to move on to whoever's next. You'll find no help here." Ares ' face grew cold for the first time since his sister's arrival.

"Very well." The Goddess lifted her delicate arms in preparation to leave, but had to ask the question that was gnawing at her. "With the way you feel about Xena, I thought you would have been eager to help?"

"Not this time, Sis." Ares scooted down in his throne and crossed his ankles. "I've discovered something over the last few eons." After what Aphrodite took as a dramatic pause, Ares concluded his insightful comment before shimmering away, "Sometimes it's better when you just watch."

Chapter 14

The sound of incessant coughing broke through the silence in the forest. It was not the kind of coughing that a person uses to make their presence known, but a deep, hacking cough, the type that in Teddy's time would have taken years of nicotine consumption to wreak havoc in a body. It was then that Teddy and Varia remembered that they were not alone.

The elderly man was lying on the embankment, his back to them. With every cough his body shuddered, sending a wave of spasms through his spinal column. The two released each other from the embrace that they had sustained since the second Harpy's departure. Once again, Varia was the first to her feet and offered a hand to her beloved. Teddy willingly, gratefully took the smaller appendage in her own. Their hands stayed clasped as they hurriedly sprinted over to where the man was located. Teddy knelt beside the now still form. Varia remained a safe distance back, just in case Teddy's caring nature proved unwise.

The old man rolled onto his back when he sensed the presence of the women. "I thank you," he gasped, before losing consciousness. Once certain of his state, Varia checked the stranger for injury. Finding none, she and Teddy carefully moved the man to the now roaring fire. Teddy had become quite efficient at gathering wood and stacking it so the flames could breathe and expand.

Varia felt her stomach growl and knew that Thea had to be feeling the same hunger. She was hesitant about leaving Thea alone while she hunted for food. "We don't know anything about him. If those creatures came after him once, what's to say more won't come?"

The Amazon whispered her concerns just in case the prone being was faking his present condition.

"He doesn't look as if he could be dangerous to a cockroach right now." Teddy was beginning to love all of this attention and concern, but she needed to convey to Varia that she really could take care of herself.

"Looks can be deceiving." Varia had come far too close to losing Thea once today. She would not risk a second time.

Teddy went on, un-persuaded, "And as for the Harpies, as long as that bonfire we currently have raging doesn't go out, we have the perfect weapon."

Varia could feel her resolve slipping away. She had known better than to look into those amber orbs for too long. They turned her into a pool of melted honey every time. "I suppose we could take turns keeping watch."

"That's my girl," Teddy cheered, only realizing what she had said after Varia's head snapped up. It was the first time she had called the warrior "her" anything. But from the warming glow that now radiated from Varia's face, Teddy didn't think that she had minded. "Now go slaughter some poor, defenseless, tasty animal. I'm starving." Teddy elbowed Varia in the ribs softly, trying to ease the tension that was clawing up her thighs.

Varia took the ribbing, lit a torch, and went in search of game. A broad smile played upon the Queen's mouth through the entire hunt. Her girl. She liked the idea. She wanted to be Thea's. Who was she kidding? She already was Thea's; she had been since the first time she saw the beauty. Varia stood, leaning against the stick she had fashioned into a spear.

She remembered the first time she and Thea had touched; it had been during the evening meal, the cabbie's first night in the Amazon encampment. They had both been reaching for a jug of water when their hands collided. Both turned in unison, fingers still lingering in contact. Their eyes met, and if any doubt remained for the Amazon Queen, they dissipated in that moment. She had even stroked her thumb across the back of Thea's hand -- testing the waters, she

supposed. And when the cabbie didn't move away, she felt a wave of searing heat ebb in an undercurrent between them. Varia forced the memories from her mind in order to return to reality and continue with the task at hand.

Teddy searched for vegetation as Varia hunted. The Amazon had asked her to perform this task while she was gone. It was mainly a diversionary tactic to keep her away from the man. Teddy explained to her that she couldn't recognize dirt from dandelions regarding most of the plants she came across, but Varia told her to find greens anyway, and place them in small piles near the fire. She would sort through them and pick out the edible ones upon her return. Teddy sat water on the fire to boil, hoping that she had done it correctly. She hated feeling useless. When Aphrodite was around, she found the strange environment easier to deal with. Between the Goddess's powers and her total ineptitude with the outdoors, Teddy actually felt needed. But Varia was a different story, she knew the forest like the back of her hand.

She gathered up what vegetation she could find, hoping at least a small amount could be used. What's wrong with me? I'm wringing my hands, anxious about whether I'll please Varia with this exercise at weed pulling. It must be love. Teddy chuckled to herself and nodded her head in agreement.

"You shouldn't fret so," came a voice from a few feet beside her. "She wouldn't care if all you did find were weeds."

Teddy stopped tending the fire and turned to look at her company. Had she spoken that out loud and not known? No, she was certain the statement had remained in her thoughts.

The old man was awake and trying to sit up, but failing miserably. The cabbie's heart went out to the old timer. "Here let me help you." She rushed over to his side and assisted him into a seated position. Once he was as comfortable as could be, she offered him a waterskin. It was then that Teddy realized that the elderly man she and Varia had rescued was blind. She took one of his withered hands and placed the skin inside it. He readily accepted it and nearly

strangled in his urgency to ease the dying thirst that burned in his throat.

"Thank you," he stated while his shaky hands offered the waterskin back to Teddy.

"Keep it," she said as she gently pushed his arms down before they dropped from lack of strength. "You need it more than I do." The combination of his blank stare and the emotion that poured from his weathered face made tears form in Teddy's eyes. She had to look away.

Once the spell woven by his gratitude faded, Teddy remembered why she had looked at him in the first place. "How did you know what I was thinking, or how Varia would react?" she asked with genuine curiosity.

The man turned in the direction of the fire. "My name is Phineus. I was -- am a seer." The words he spoke were tinged with sadness, or perhaps regret. He turned back toward Teddy and saw the questions that filled her, not with his eyes, but in his mind; so he continued his explanation. "I was born with the gift of prophecy, and the ability to see many things, the future, the past, the hidden. But I saw too well for the Gods tastes, and they blinded me for it." Phineus stopped and took another drink from the skin before continuing. "What the Olympians didn't understand was that I didn't need my sense of vision in order to truly see." He smiled mockingly. "Upon discovering their error, Zeus instructed the Harpies to torment me. They follow me and steal whatever food I find so that I will slowly starve."

Teddy gasped in reply to this stranger's tale. "How awful!"

"Today is the first in many years that I shall spend a night without the sound of swooping terror invading my sleep," Phineus reached out and patted Teddy arm, "thanks to you and your friend."

The mention of Varia, even if not by name, brought Teddy back to the second half of her previous question. But before her lips could form the first word, Phineus stated, "I know that the Amazon cares for you... deeply. That kind of caring negates all else."

"It's kinda eerie how you do that," she said, knowing now that it was useless to try and keep anything from the seer.

Phineus laughed, an act he had also not experienced in years.

The warrior strolled back into camp triumphant. In her hand she carried several rabbits. She was whistling a happy tune when she looked toward the fire and stopped dead in her tracks. Thea was talking to the stranger, and after a comment she made, he laughed. Varia crept closer to their location, not knowing that Phineus had already been alerted to her presence.

"Please, Varia, there's no need for concern. I would never -- could never harm you or Thea." The tone of his voice was very soothing, to the point where the warrior almost believed him without question -- almost.

"She's unsure." Phineus directed his head at Teddy. "Would you be so kind as to tell her my story? I fear I am too weak to regale such things for a second time."

Teddy nodded, momentarily forgetting their guest's disability. But it didn't matter, Phineus knew her answer and was already scooting himself down onto his back to enjoy a peaceful sleep.

Chapter 15

Teddy coaxed Varia to the far side of the fire and relayed the story of Phineus the Seer; at least everything that she had been told. Varia sat quietly and listened, occasionally stealing a glance in the direction of the reclined figure. But the fire raged too high for either woman to make out his form. Teddy saw the doubt in the Amazon's eyes. Ever my suspicious one. She reached out and took the warrior's hands in her own. "Phineus is no threat to us, Varia." She clasped her long fingers even tighter. "Trust me."

Varia looked into the fire, then at the hands that held her own, and finally up to the face to which the limbs belonged. "With my life," she replied, then grew bolder, "and my heart."

Teddy gazed deeply into Varia's eyes, watching the firelight dance across their glassy surface. She extracted one of her hands from the warrior's and brought it up to her exquisitely sculptured cheek. She cupped the heated skin in her palm and lightly caressed Varia's mouth with the pad of her thumb. Varia's lips opened, eager to accept the mound of flesh offered. Teddy felt the warm, moist surface envelope her and she moaned softly.

Varia's tongue made slow circles, enjoying the taste of Thea. This small sample made her burn for more. She wanted to know all of Thea. She began to suck, gently at first; but as her passion rose so did the pressure of the contact. She drug her teeth along the surface of the cabbie's thumb. Varia took the hand that had held hers and moved it to her bare thigh. She needed both of Thea's hands on her body. The warrior urged her hand to explore, which it did.

Teddy began to knead the muscled flesh of Varia's thigh, when a small sound brought them both back to reality. Phineus had rolled over creating a disturbance in the foliage under him. Varia released Thea's thumb, but would not let the woman's hand leave her face. "Perhaps we should take this someplace more private?" The Queen was not about to let this opportunity slip through her fingers.

Teddy was on the verge of protesting, fearful of leaving Phineus alone, when she looked into Varia's sable stare and was suddenly dumbstruck. Varia stood and led Thea to a wooded grove beyond the clearing where they had set up camp. If there happened to be any sign of danger, it was close enough where they could respond immediately, but was secluded to the point where neither could be seen or heard.

Teddy allowed herself to be taken by the hand. But the closer they got to the clandestine spot, the harder Teddy began to quake. This was what she had wanted since the first time she had seen the Amazon, but she knew once they crossed this intimate threshold, there would be no turning back.

Past fear, past doubt, only desire remained. Varia stopped in the middle of the glen and turned to face Thea. Small, strong hands reached up and caressed the cabbie's cheeks. Teddy closed her eyes at the touch of this woman, allowing Varia to take full advantage of the action. The Amazon stroked her fingertips down the contoured planes of Thea's features. She grazed her thumbs against Thea's full eyebrows, down the bridge of her nose, and finally ended on her luscious mouth.

She could stand the aching no longer. Varia laced her fingers behind Thea's neck and gently forced herself up on tiptoes, while pulling Thea down. Teddy's eyes were still closed, reveling in the previous contact of Varia's hands on her face, her neck, when the Amazon Queens' lips took her own.

Without the need for thought, Teddy felt what was about to happen. As Varia's mouth captured hers, Teddy's body reeled backward from the impact. An explosion-like force released itself in that instant, and both women were taken aback. Eyes flew open

amidst the excitement and confusion; each set of brown orbs stared blankly into the others.

"What the hell was that?" Teddy sputtered.

"I'm not sure." Varia gasped back.

"It was kinda... nice." Teddy could think of no other description; her mind was still in shock from the experience.

"Uh-huh." Varia's words stumbled out, as she moved her gaze from Thea's Amber stare down to her moist mouth.

Teddy, forgetting what all the hubbub was about, lowered her head back toward Varia. Thea's movement in her direction was calculated as far too slow by the warrior. She promptly entangled her hand in the massive waves of Thea's hair and pushed the woman's form closer to hers.

Varia's lips once again met the cabbie's, only this time it was in a crush of passion. Her mouth opened, enticing Teddy's to do the same. A soft, wet tongue played at the opening, tasting more of Thea. Teddy shuddered as the Queen explored her.

Teddy's hands had remained at her sides during the beginning of their kiss, but as awareness seeped into the cabbie so did her need to know this dazzling being in front of her. She raised her arms and placed one on Varia's bare back while sliding the other along her spine. Varia moaned inside Teddy's mouth when the woman's hands made contact with her exposed skin.

Once Teddy began her exploration of the warrior she found it impossible to stop. Her hands roamed over Varia's strong shoulders. The fingers of one hand stopped to play with the flesh at the back of Varia's neck, just below the hairline. Teddy felt the Amazon tremble at her touches, and found that her own knees became weak with that knowledge. She clung to Varia so she wouldn't lose her balance and send them both tumbling to the ground.

Teddy pressed her Queen tightly against her larger frame. She felt the Amazon's heart beating hard in perfect rhythm with her own pounding organ. Once she was certain of her equilibrium, Teddy moved her hands down Varia's body, ending at her firm, round bottom. She squeezed the flesh beneath the animal hide and was

caught unprepared when Varia jumped up, wrapping her muscular legs around the cabbie's waist.

Teddy chuckled, breaking the kiss for the first time, and steadied herself before falling to her knees, lowering Varia onto her back. The Amazon smiled up, but would not release her captive. She tugged Thea's shirt free and began to untie the strips of cloth that held the sides together. Once the shirt was off, Varia inspected the odd garment that lie beneath. She stroked the material between her thumb and forefinger – soft, like down. It was similar to her own top, but was not laced up.

A soft laugh escaped from Teddy as she saw the questioning look knit Varia's brow. "Here," she whispered, and unhooked the front of her bra. Varia's fingertips brushed away the soft cotton, exposing the skin beneath. Her fingers continued to explore the curving flesh.

Teddy's nipples hardened when her breasts were freed from their constraints. But as Varia stroked the areolas with her thumbs she cried out from the ache. Varia wouldn't touch the tiny nubs that longed for her; but she did everything else. Varia teased Thea. She wanted the woman's fire to burn as brightly as her own -- wanted her to scream -- wanted her to beg for her body to be released from the torture imprisoned inside it. But more than anything, Varia wanted to please Thea.

Teddy arched back, hovering a rose-colored bud above Varia's mouth. "Please, Varia," Teddy mouthed. She had begun to undulate her hips against the Amazon, slowly grinding in a steady motion. Varia's basest need overtook her momentary wishes, and she extended her tongue out. She flicked the wet tip across Thea's hot skin. Teddy arched further back. "More," she breathed out. Varia arched her own back in order to meet Teddy's urgent demand. She clasped Thea's tender morsel between her teeth and pulled as gently as her desire allowed. Teddy gasped at the tension and followed Varia down.

When the Amazon's head once again lie on the ground, she engulfed the swollen orb in her mouth, sucking intently. Teddy yelped from surprise and pleasure, taking Varia's head in her hands.

As the warrior enjoyed the feel of the flesh with her tongue, her hands undid the front of Thea's pants and slid them, along with her undergarment, down as far as the length of her arms would allow.

Teddy took up where Varia left off by kicking her feet free of her boots and scooting her pants the rest of the way off. Once Thea was naked, Varia shifted her weight and flipped them both over. As soon as Teddy was comfortable on the ground, Varia released her hold and sat up squarely on Thea's stomach. She didn't want Thea to go through the same frustration she had just experienced, so Varia began to unlace the top of her Amazon garb. Teddy found herself too entranced to move, seeing this woman on top of her removing the last raiment's separating their hungering bodies.

Varia quickly discarded the bottom of her outfit and slid her torso back down Thea's flesh until their hips nestled together. The Queen's lips once again sought out the mouth of the woman beneath her. Once the sweet treasure had been located, Varia began to rock softly, swaying her body against Thea. Varia pulled her mouth away from Thea with a groan. She needed more. The Amazon worked her way slowly down Thea's body: nibbling her neck, kissing the flat plains of her stomach as she stroked her nipples between greedy fingers.

Teddy writhed with every action to which Varia entreated her body. The moss beneath her only added to the sensuality. Teddy felt as if she were being made love to on a mountaintop of crushed velvet. She breathed noisily with delight, "Ahhhh..." followed by a few other incoherent guttural vocalisms.

Varia dipped the tip of her tongue into Thea's navel, causing the cabbie's hips to buck up involuntarily at the sensation. Teddy clawed at the ground, a torrent of passion coursed through her. Varia slid a knee between Thea's legs and coaxed her thighs apart enough for her to lie close to her core. "I've wanted you for so long," Varia hoarsely whispered, her mouth sucking the inside of Thea's quivering thigh.

"...An eternity," Teddy moaned in agreement.

"Open yourself for me," Varia requested, and Thea readily complied. The Amazon reached up and plucked an ornament out of her chestnut hair. She ran the feathered end of the clip up the length of Thea's exposed mound. Teddy cried out when it touched her, she was so close. Varia continued her teasing torture by twirling the mass of feathers over Thea's hardened bud. The excruciatingly light flutter was bringing Teddy to the point of madness. She convulsed against the air, pleading with Varia to stop, while silently praying she never would.

Teddy was covered in a sheen of perspiration, her eyes half closed, her breath exiting her lungs in short, spastic bursts. I guess she's suffered enough. Varia smiled and allowed a throaty chuckle to escape before she enveloped Thea's tiny, swollen, sweet spot with her mouth and began her real assault.

Teddy thrashed under Varia. The warrior held her down to prevent her from bringing herself to a climax; Varia wanted that pleasure to be all hers. Teddy could feel a tide of orgasm beginning to vibrate inside of her. Varia continued the steady pressure, but when she felt Thea's body nearing the inevitable, she inserted her fingers inside Thea.

The swift stroking motion of Varia's hand along with the constant attention from the Amazon's mouth was more than enough to send Teddy over the edge. A tsunami of ecstasy crashed over Teddy. She lost herself inside the thunderous waves, not caring if the entire world drowned, so long as she and Varia could remain like this forever.

Chapter 16

Aphrodite smiled warmly and wrapped her arms tightly around her waist, hugging herself. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the sensations that enveloped her. How can any creature say they feel complete without love? She pondered the possibility and shook her head. A mass of golden, banana curls sprung to life in dozens of mimicking shrugs, answering their Goddess' question the only way in which they could.

* * *

Teddy awoke to the smell of breakfast cooking on the fire and walked out into the clearing fully dressed, hungry enough to eat a bear. Varia was standing near the open flames, occasionally bending over to attend to something. Teddy glided over as quietly as possible to Varia's location, intent on surprising her.

Just as Teddy got close enough, she lifted her arms way above her head, ready to unleash a ferocious roar, when Varia whirled around and executed an ankle sweep with a patented Amazon move just like the one that had laid her out when Teddy first arrived in her camp. Teddy landed on the ground with a resounding thud, but before she hit, she grabbed hold of Varia, taking the Queen down with her.

"Oomph," Teddy exclaimed when the Amazon Warrior landed on top of her. She wasn't complaining though, she had grown accustomed to being in that position after last night. Varia, with all of her aggressiveness, preferred being on top...being in control.

Once the shock had worn off, Varia realized that she had just flattened the love of her life. She scanned Thea's limbs for any sign of injury, working her way back up to the beautifully surprised face. She was treated to a sight broad grin spreading across Thea's features. Varia released a pent up breath upon realizing that Thea was neither hurt nor angered by her action. Teddy, still lying flat on her back, folded her arms across her chest and asked, "Is this your subtle way of telling me that you don't like surprises?"

"Surprises are fine," Varia retorted. "It's just never a good idea to sneak up on an Amazon."

"Ah-ha. Gotcha, I'll try and remember that from now on."

Varia smirked and sat up, using Thea's lap as a seat cushion. She leaned toward the fire and turned what appeared to be fried bread over in the skillet.

Varia announced, "Breakfast is ready," And then bounced playfully up and down on Thea's thighs before crossing her ankles and bolting upright into a standing position. Varia cut the bread into three equal slices and placed one piece on each of the three large, almond-shaped leaves that lay beside the campfire. The leftovers from last night's supper of rabbit stew had already been warmed and placed on the makeshift plates.

Varia picked up the first serving and handed it to Thea. Then she picked up the second and walked over to where Phineus sat, beneath the same tree under which he had slept peacefully the night before. She laid the leaf beside him, directing his withered hand to its location. Knowing Varia was uncomfortable around displays of gratitude, the Seer accepted what she offered with a smile and a simple nod of his head. Varia took his actions as thanks enough and returned to Thea's location. She picked up the remaining plate, made a place for herself beside Thea, and began to eat her breakfast. As she made herself more comfortable, their knees bumped, and even though Teddy's was clad in suede, she shivered uncontrollably. Varia looked up to find Teddy staring at her, a look of understanding in her amber eyes. They both smiled and turned back to their food; no discussion was necessary.

Suddenly, a question formed in Teddy's mind. "Any ideas as to what to do with our friend?" she whispered.

Varia shrugged her squared shoulders as she shoved the last of her breakfast into her mouth and threw the leaf on the fire. "There's a village not far from here, in the same direction we're headed. A soldier lives there who owes me a favor." Varia turned toward Thea and was met with a not-so-subtle look of apprehension. "It's a small village." The Amazon reassured. "They'll look out for him." Then her thoughts deepened. "Or they'll have the Amazon Nation to answer to."

Teddy glowed with appreciation at the woman by her side. God she's magnificent.

"Sounds like a plan," Teddy said, comforted by Varia's assurances. She polished off the rest of her food and went to throw the leaf on the fire. She studied it for a second, thinking, the ancient Greek precursor to paper plates -- she snorted out a self-amused chuckle -- and completely bio-degradeable, too. She tossed the leaf on the fire and stood, dusting off her pants.

Varia knew Thea's simple gesture meant that her cabbie was ready to move out. "No time like the present," the Queen jibed after Thea passed her and began to load up their belongings.

* * *

The three reached the town of Drocsid before mid-morning. It was a quaint little village filled with small wooden dwellings, a short row of shops, one stable, and a tiny inn. Varia sauntered over to the local blacksmith. "You seen Teirynd?" she asked in her best "Don't mess with me, I'm the Queen of the Amazons" tone.

"Who wants to know?" the hulk of a woman asked, leaning against her sledge hammer once the pounding rhythm required to perform her work had been disturbed.

Teddy tried not to gawk, but she had never seen anyone shaped like the blacksmith -- not in person -- on television, in bodybuilding competitions sure, but never up-close and personal. The woman was a living, breathing ad for anabolic steroids, only the drug didn't exist in this time. Every curve of her body, every bulging muscle, every inch of taut skin, was the result of years of hard labor. Atalanta had nothing on this piece of Grecian granite, that was sure.

"I'm an old...friend." Varia answered. "We fought together, on occasion."

"Oh." The smithy was obviously unimpressed. "You should be able to find her at the inn." Without further pomp or circumstance, she returned to her work, ignoring the strangers.

They entered the inn. With Teddy and Phineus taking seats near the door, Varia went in search of Teiryn. Within minutes, a crash echoed through the room. A sunny-yellow blonde, somewhere between Varia's and Teddy's size, tumbled to the inn floor. A very red-faced Amazon closely followed.

Teddy advised Phineus to stay put as she headed toward the wrestling women. The Seer grabbed Teddy by the arm. "Be careful," he advised.

Teddy could see the concern etched into the old man's features. "What is it?" Worry began to line her own face.

"I'm not sure -- too many minds. Just watch yourself." And with that he released her.

She waded through the circling crowd, bumping into a very dour looking man, who seemed quite interested in the goings-on. Teddy turned to excuse herself for causing the collision, but the man was nowhere to be found. She turned back just in time to see the Blacksmith reach into the blur of animal skins and flying fists and grab the two by the back of their heads. "Enough!" she bellowed, releasing her grip and allowing the warriors to fall on their backsides. She turned to Varia and asked, "I thought you said the two of you fought together?"

"I did." The Amazon declared as she straightened herself back up. "But I never said that we fought on the same side." Varia looked at Teddy and smiled like a Cheshire cat. All Teddy could do was grin back and roll her eyes.

The blonde was not as amused. "Should have known it was you, Varia." She grit her teeth and glared.

"Well if you'd bothered to look up, you would have known who it was." Varia shot back a grimace of her own.

"If the banshee who gave birth to you had taught you any manners, you would have asked to speak with me instead of demanding."

Oh, this is going to be fun. Teddy silently shook her head.

* * *

Finally, after considerable coaxing, the Smithy calmed Teiryn down enough to sit at the same table as Varia and the others. It soon became obvious that the two were lovers and that the Blacksmith held a great deal of clout with the soldier. Teddy learned that the Blacksmith's nickname was Ash. She presumed it was a salute to her chosen profession.

Teddy took on the role of bard to explain the situation. Phineus sat quietly, mentally surveying his new surroundings with an air of caution, already knowing the impending outcome of this debacle. With each round of drinks the warriors began to relax. And by the fourth round of grog, Varia and Teiryn were clutching one another's shoulders regaling tales of long ago battles as if they had always served on the same side.

It turned out that Teiryn had been in the army of a Warlord whose land neighbored the Amazon tribes. The greedy land baron had decided that he wanted what the Amazons had, and the fight was on. Varia and her warriors battled Teiryn and her army on several occasions, the last time taking her and a small troupe prisoner. The soldiers learned the ways of their captors and grew to believe that it was wrong to usurp the Amazons' right to the land. In the end, Teiryn

and the other soldiers fought with the warriors to overthrow the Warlord.

Ash slowly sipped her one tankard of ale and smiled at her woman. She had conversed with the Seer in order to get his perspective and found that he was indeed in need of protection. The Blacksmith had an affinity for anything in trouble. So when Teddy asked if Phineus could stay in the village, Ash agreed, not waiting for her thick-tongued better half to approve.

Ash arranged for the Seer to take up residence in the abandoned shed behind hers and Teiryn's dwelling. She explained that it was already well furnished for those times when Ash or Teiryn found themselves in the proverbial doghouse.

The night was nearly morning when the five parted company. Ash, Teiryn, and Phineus headed off toward their home. Teddy and Varia decided to take a room for the remainder of the night and then begin a search for Aphrodite at dawn.

"We're never going to find Xena and Gabrielle at this rate." Teddy wondered where the Goddess of Love had gotten to, as she spoke to Varia in the moonlight, watching three shadows disappear into a house down the road.

"We'll find them, Thea. And we'll get them back here." Varia laid her head against Teddy, the amount of alcohol in her system was beginning to catch up to her. Varia saw the same look on Thea's face that she had whenever she talked about the 21st Century. "You miss your friends, don't you?" She asked the question not really realizing what she was saying. When Thea didn't answer, she repeated it. "You miss Dari and Sonny, don't you Thea?"

Teddy thought for a minute. True, in the beginning, she had missed them terribly. But since Varia had come into her life, she couldn't honestly say that she missed anyone. She was guilty about the admission, but it didn't change the way she felt. "Not really." There was no reason to lie. "Not since I met you." She looked down at her Queen and realized that she was almost asleep. Teddy laughed, scooped Varia up into her arms, and headed inside the inn.

* * *

A sour grimace crossed the face of the man as he crept around the corner. He had been watching the events as they unfolded, but was unable to have free reign. Damn Seer! Things have become very interesting. Very interesting indeed. Maybe it was possible to get back into his good graces after all. But carefully this time. No, I must keep these cards close to the vest.

A puff of charcoal smoke faded quickly in the night air. A wicked smile played at the corner of a pair of black painted lips. "This time... Retribution is mine."

Chapter 17

The cock's crow awakened Teddy shortly after dawn. She stretched, expecting to find the same kinks in her body that she had during the majority of her tenure in this far-off land. Sleeping on the ground, night after night, was wreaking havoc on her spine. As she slowly extended her arms outward, she remembered that it wasn't earth beneath her now, but a soft bed of feathers and down. She sighed happily, her eyes sealed tightly shut, a smile of satisfaction curling her lips upward. Teddy wriggled beneath the covers. Never again would she take even something so basic as a mattress and box springs for granted. She tried to drift off back to sleep, but she found the task impossible.

Springing up like a medieval Jack-in-the-box, Teddy launched out of bed, ready to face the day ahead and the ever-present task at hand. Today, Teddy thought. Today I'm going to get some answers about Xena and Gabrielle. A soft snore drew her attention back.

Varia was sprawled out, sculptured arms crossed above her head, nude except for the thin gauze of a sheet covering her muscular form. Teddy's own unclothed frame moved to the foot of the bed and studied the sleeping Amazon Queen. The fabric molded itself perfectly to Varia's curves. And what curves, Teddy pursed her lips in a silent, appreciative whistle.

Her eyes roamed freely, drinking in the sight. Varia's dark, wavy hair was a disheveled spray across the pillow. Her face was peaceful, giving her features the softened complexion of a much younger girl. Teddy's gaze traveled south to the breathing motion of Varia's chest, and to the soft, beautiful orbs that rhythmically rose and fell in unison. Varia sighed lightly in her sleep, arching her back as

the air escaped her full mouth. Her breasts heaved slightly, pressing them tightly against the sheet. Dark circles imprinted through the off-white material, becoming more pronounced as her nipples hardened. Her back settled down against the bed, but the tender peaks remained firm.

One of Varia's legs was uncovered, beginning at the top of her hip. She had some small bruises where Teddy had sunk her fingers into the warrior's flesh. Memories of their night together in the forest flooded Teddy's mind; Varia had given all and took nothing in return. The cabbie smiled widely as she thought, maybe there is a way to sneak up on an Amazon after all.

Teddy placed her hands on the edge of the feather bed, positioning herself between Varia's open thighs. She carefully pulled the sheet over her head, so as not to awaken "Sleeping Beauty," and began her surprise attack. Teddy blazed a trail of whisper soft kisses up the inside of Varia's thigh. The Amazon's breathing grew heavier at the contact. Teddy pulled her body upward, searching for the hardened points of her lover's breasts. Just as she reached them, Teddy stopped. Her lover, she thought again. She had never referred to anyone in that way before, not even in her thoughts. She gently laid her head on Varia's chest and listened to her heartbeat. With every thud, Teddy's heart beat a little faster. Teddy kissed the skin beneath where her head had laid.

The taste of Varia's flesh ignited the passion that stirred inside her. She nuzzled the warrior's firm breast with her open mouth before locating the still swollen tip. Teddy's lips grazed her nipple before devouring it. Varia's back arched against Teddy, and she moaned deeply. Teddy continued the sucking pressure on Varia's flesh, but her fingers sought out other sweet rewards. She scraped her shortened nails across Varia's tight stomach causing the muscles to ripple involuntarily.

She traveled downward in short strokes until she felt the coarse hair of Varia's mound. Teddy stroked her lightly at first, but increased the pressure when she felt Varia's wetness seep in between her fingertips. The Amazon's sleep had become restless under Teddy's

constant attention, and when the cabbie finally entered her, Varia's eyes fluttered open. "Thea," she whispered, uncertain as to if she were still dreaming.

No answer came, but this was definitely not a dream. She could feel Thea's fingers deep inside her, building up the tension between her thighs. The need for friction was becoming unbearable. Varia's hand found the head that so expertly was torturing her upper body with pleasure. She ran her fingers through the silky hair, drawing it into a fist. Her other hand pulled the sheet off of her sizably increased form in one swift movement.

The sudden exposure didn't slow Teddy down for a second. In fact, she wanted Varia to see her, to see how much she wanted to please her, how much she wanted her. Teddy inserted another finger into Varia, making her scream out. Her hips began to thrust wildly against Teddy. It had never been like this, for either of them--so much passion, so much need. Teddy could feel Varia tightening against her fingers; she was close to orgasm. Teddy slid her thumb to Varia's throbbing mound of flesh and began to stroke. Varia's hips rose up off the bed, taking Teddy with her. Her breath caught in her throat as a climax splintered her insides. The explosion inside her body seemed endless. Tiny aftershocks followed the initial seismic event. Her mind imploded and the void where her brain was filled with desire, and heat, and love.

With a final series of thrusts, Varia groaned hoarsely and collapsed back onto the bed. Teddy slid her body to Varia's side and waited for the Queen to regain some semblance of her composure before she kissed her deeply on the mouth. Her arms embraced the smaller woman, as her lips explored deeper. The only clear thought left in Teddy's mind was an incessant urgency to not know where she ended and Varia began.

Varia sensed the need and want that coursed through Thea's body because her own matched it. This was more than she'd ever dreamed of. It was so much more. She loved this woman in her arms. She had from the first moment their eyes met. The feeling had only grown the more time they'd spent together. This was their destiny.

And now that she had this woman in her arms, she was never going to let go. Varia drew her head back, emotion and passion filled both pairs of eyes.

"Thea..." was the throaty groan that escaped from the Amazon's mouth. "I love you, Thea." Varia could have never believed that it was possible to experience this much happiness... or love. She had loved no one since her sister's death. It was the same illness that had claimed Cyan's life, the tragedy that had made her Queen of the Amazons.

"And I, you." Teddy took Varia's face in her hands and kissed away the stray tears.

"Thinking of Selene?" Teddy had grown to know the woman's thoughts in such a relatively short time. Varia nodded her head yes, losing sight of any pain in Thea's kisses. "Again," she stated, wanting Thea, but not meaning the word to come out in such a demanding tone, Varia quickly added, "Please."

Her tone was of no concern to Teddy. Varia could demand, ask, plead and she would be there. "Your wish is my command," Teddy made a sweeping arm movement and bowed accordingly, or at least as well as possible while lying naked on a feather bed.

Varia laughed and pulled Teddy down on top of her, wrapping her legs around her woman's waist. But as Teddy bent to kiss her, the Amazon pulled back just enough to teasingly suggest, before capturing Thea's mouth with her own, "Command this, Cabbie."

Chapter 18

The Goddess of Love nervously twirled a golden lock in between two perfectly manicured fingers. I hate waiting! she thought, remembering not to speak out loud this time. You never knew who or what could be lurking around, unseen. She had been summoned to Mount Olympus by her father, the King of the Gods. That was the one thing Aphrodite hated even more than being kept waiting. She had been perfectly content watching the latest developments unfold between Teddy and Varia, plus occasionally tuning into her other special case mortals. A Goddess's work is never done.

* * *

Zeus knew how she felt about being ordered to the home of the Gods. Under the circumstances it was important to test her resolve. Aphrodite was considered to be one of the more fickle of the Olympians. In the beginning, Zeus believed that she would lose interest in the mortals if given enough time. He had to be assured that his beloved, but flighty, daughter would not grow bored and move on to her next pet project. And so far, so good. She had kept up her end of the bargain admirably, and as for the mortals... well, they never did cease to amaze him.

* * *

The King of the Olympians bolted down in front of the ever-impatient Aphrodite. Her eyes rounded at his dramatic entrance.

"Show off," the Goddess snorted. She knew her father's sense of humor would interpret the off-handed statement as a compliment.

Zeus smirked at his daughter, as he wrapped a silken covered arm around her chiffon shoulders. The two began walking toward the King's highly decorated, gold throne. "I've been keeping an eye on you and your traveling companions," he stated matter-of-factly.

"Tell me something I don't know," Aphrodite quipped. She wanted to ask the question that burned in her throat, but knew better than to push. Zeus wasn't just one for dramatic entrances; he also enjoyed the occasional dramatic pause. So she exercised what little patience she had left and allowed the drama to unfold as Zeus wished.

The King watched Aphrodite out of the corner of his eye and nearly laughed at her skewed features. It was killing her not knowing what decision he had reached. He chuckled lightly when they approached the stairs leading up to his throne. Zeus turned, facing the pensive Goddess. He took hold of both of her hands and announced, "It's time."

* * *

Teddy and Varia had just finished dressing and were about to head downstairs when a flurry of sparkles turned the women's attention back inside the room. Aphrodite shimmered into view, perched atop the disheveled sheets of the feather bed. She smiled knowingly at the Amazon and the cabbie and asked, "Did I miss anything?"

Both women blushed at the Goddess's implication. But it was Varia who attempted to steer the conversation in another direction. "Where have you been? We were worried."

"We?" Teddy and Aphrodite questioned in unison, openly gaping at her.

"What?" Varia asked upon seeing the shocked expressions on both of their faces. She had actually begun to grow fond of the sometimes infuriating Goddess during their travels together. It was Aphrodite's relationship with Teddy that had widened the cracks in

her resolve to detest all Olympians. The fact that Aphrodite deeply cared for Thea had become obvious. The Goddess played no tricks at Thea's expense. There was no amount of hurtful deceit. Varia had watched the two of them carefully and saw their defenses drop when the other was near. And slowly Aphrodite had allowed Varia to see her softer side as well. "I'm allowed to be concerned about..." Varia took a breath. Oh well, in for a Dinar, in for a Dram. "my friends."

Aphrodite smiled warmly, almost shyly at the Amazon. If Goddesses could blush she would have. A simple thank you was all that she said in return. No frills, no cute catch-phrase, just two heartfelt words conveying Aphrodite's gratitude and understanding at the enormous gift Varia had just given her. Friendship.

Teddy stood back and watched this miracle happen. She never would have believed it possible for Varia to have called any immortal, even Aphrodite, a friend. The Goddess of Love looked as if she might burst with happiness. And even Varia seemed lighter, as if a great weight had been lifted from her strong shoulders.

The Amazon Queen was quiet, unsure as to what to do next. The silence was beginning to make her nervous. She was the center of attention, and except on the battlefield, it wasn't a place she enjoyed being. She looked up at Thea, her eyes pleading for her to end this emotional hush. But it was Aphrodite who picked up on the not-so-subtle hint and broke the tension the best way she knew how. "Is that love I smell in the air?"

Varia laughed, grateful for the sound of another voice. Teddy laughed as well, until the knowing grin appeared back on Aphrodite's face. The Goddess knew that Varia and she were now lovers. Teddy remembered Aphrodite's penchant for meddling and was suddenly not so amused. "You didn't have anything to do with Varia and I..." She wasn't certain how to finish that statement without turning crimson yet again.

Aphrodite cocked a confused head in Teddy's direction. Thinking back to what she had done to get her other mortal friends together, it hit the Goddess what Teddy was talking about. "Oh no, Sweetums." She raised her hand to her chest. "I swear on my favorite

garter-belt that I in no way zapped either of you." Aphrodite understood Teddy's asking, but she was a little insulted nonetheless. "Think about it this way, if I hadn't involved myself in Xena and Gabrielle's love life, or lack there of, you would have never met Varia, the vixen Amazon."

"True." Teddy glared at the sheets, remembering the events of that morning, and had to concede that she owed a great deal to her past self.

"Hmmp!" Varia snorted, not knowing what a vixen was and not certain whether she liked the sound of it.

Aphrodite, seeing that Teddy's thoughts had drifted, snapped her fingers in her friend's field of vision, breaking the spell. "Over here, Tedster."

"Mmmm? Oh, sorry, Aphrodite." The smile on her face hadn't left since the first time she and Varia kissed by the campfire.

"Oh, brother..." She's got it bad, and in the worst way... without Godly intervention. "Concentrate, Teddy." She'd lost her again. "Varia see if you can snap her out of La-La land, since you're the reason she's in it. The three of us have a little trip to take."

Chapter 19

Three figures emerged upon the shore of the darkened waters. Aphrodite grasped her biceps, wrapping her arms tightly around herself. A chill passed through her immortal form. It wasn't possible for her to feel the effects of weather, but what she was experiencing wasn't caused by any cold front. The Goddess regained her composure, remembering why she and the others were there. As she stood behind her two friends, she gauged their reaction to the new surroundings. They were definitely not pleased. Aphrodite didn't want them to grow hesitant so she intervened before their thoughts drifted too far. "Come." She walked between Teddy and Varia, taking the lead.

As Aphrodite glided between her two friends, Varia and Teddy turned to look at one another. Both sets of eyes were clouded with confusion. A sense of foreboding filled the already stagnant air as they walked along the rocky shore. Teddy took in her surroundings. They appeared to be in a cavern; a body of eerily still water split the rocky floor in two. The water's edge was made up of black pebbles. The layered stones resembled lumps of coal, and the farther inland one came, the larger and more perilous the ebony formations grew. Teddy's gaze strayed from Varia to Aphrodite, and back again. The cabbie shuddered violently.

Varia saw Teddy's body twitch involuntarily and moved closer. The Amazon wrapped a protective arm around her lover's waist. "Are you all right?" she asked.

Teddy could only shake her head yes, knowing that the tone of her voice would give away her true feelings. Varia smiled

reassuringly. She pretended that she, too, believed everything was all right, if for no other reason than in support of the woman she loved.

In the distance, Varia could make out what appeared to be a small dock at the black water's edge. They seemed to be headed in that direction. The warrior said a small prayer that it was not Aphrodite's intention for them to set sail upon this river. Water did not normally frighten Varia, but this wasn't water. At least the liquid did not have the qualities of any water she had ever seen. It seemed thicker, deeper-like ink-colored quicksand.

The women reached the dock just as a fog rolled across the river's surface. A boat broke through the mist, its only passenger being a cloaked, old man. He urged the ship onward with a single wooden oar. The boat docked, as its awaiting passengers came aboard. But the figures that boarded were not the three that first stepped on to the platform. Varia and Teddy stared as individual after individual climbed down into the ship's hold.

"Where did they come from?" Teddy asked out loud, not really expecting an answer.

"Everywhere," was The Goddess of Love's reply. She stood silently as each passenger handed the oarsman a single coin.

Once the cargo was loaded, Charon pushed his fairy back away from the dock. But before he and the boat were out of site, the immortal conveyor of souls to the underworld looked back and nodded a knowing head in Aphrodite's direction. The fog then parted, allowing the full length of the boat to enter before closing in around the shadowed forms, extinguishing them from sight.

Varia swallowed hard, the gist of what had just occurred slowly sunk in. "What's going on, Aphrodite? Why did you bring us here?"

The Goddess exhaled loudly. For the first time in her long life she was at a loss for words.

Sensing that a difficult story was about to be told, Teddy tried to ease Aphrodite along. "The beginning is always a good place to start." The cabbie gently laid a strong hand lightly upon the Goddess's forearm. Aphrodite appreciated the tenderness of Teddy's gesture and thanked her by patting her friend's hand.

"From the beginning...." Aphrodite stepped away from the other two and walked to the end of the platform. Her satin covered toes curled off of the dock's edge. "After all this time..." she stated, lost inside the memories "I can still feel the pull."

"Aphrodite." Teddy whispered, not wanting to startle her enraptured friend. But when there was no response, Teddy tried more firmly. "Aphrodite!"

The Olympian turned and smiled.

"Teddy..." She began. "when we went through the vortex, on the way back from the 21st Century, I was flooded with images."

"So was I, but..." Teddy was trying to understand.

Varia interrupted. "Thea, just let her talk."

Aphrodite smiled at the Amazon Queen. "The visions I had were from long ago, nothing more than bits and pieces, really. But it was enough." Aphrodite took a step closer to Varia and Teddy. "So I went to the Temple of the Fates and studied their loom." Aphrodite had their full attention now. And even under these circumstances, she loved being the center of attention. "I sought out one strand in particular. After viewing it, there was no doubt." Aphrodite turned back toward the river and fell silent.

Teddy was trying to be patient with her friend. It was obvious, even to a rough around the edges cabbie, that what she was telling them was of the utmost importance. But her patience was wearing thin. Maybe just a little prodding wouldn't hurt. "What did you see?" She asked softly, avoiding the scolding look that she knew Varia was sending her way.

"Shortly after my birth..." Aphrodite continued her tale, "when I was still in a weakened state, I wandered from Olympus and found myself along the shores of this river--the River Styx..." She paused again, willing herself to remember. "I had no idea what it was. I only felt the water beckon to me, so I waded in. The poor souls trapped within its darkened abyss felt my life-force as I entered and latched themselves onto my being." Aphrodite shuddered as she remembered the feeling of her immortality being drained away.

Aphrodite turned quickly, back toward the women. "I died in the black waters of the Styx that day."

Varia shook her chestnut mane. "You're immortal. You can't die."

Aphrodite tilted her head and slowly swept it back and forth. "Aw, Sweetie, all immortality means is that we can't die as mortals do: of illness, old age, by weapons forged from man. It does not mean that we are incapable of experiencing death."

"I understand," Teddy assured. "Otherwise, I wouldn't exist."

Aphrodite's smile widened. "Exactly. And neither would Varia."

A peal of hysterical laughter pierced the stillness. Varia quickly covered her mouth with two trembling hands. Teddy encircled Varia in her arms upon seeing how the Amazon was affected by Aphrodite's tale. "Go on, Aphrodite." Teddy urged.

"The Fates allowed me to see my death. I also saw all of the lost souls that had denied themselves the peace of crossing over into the underworld, where they could be with their loved ones and eventually given rebirth. Their essences clung to me, feeling the life that stirred within me. They surrounded me, enveloped me. I could feel myself being released from the physical realm. But as my soul's final journey began, I was forced back into this body." Aphrodite swept her hands down the length of her torso. "Celesta, Death herself, had come for me, but upon realizing who she had come for, she summoned Athena. With the help of Hades, I was freed from the Styx, and Athena healed me before my soul was completely released.

"I awoke to find myself back on Mount Olympus. Being born a Goddess had saved me, and thanks to the healing powers of Athena and the regenerative properties of the Meditative Gardens fountain, I was fortified. However, even Athena and the fountain's waters couldn't heal me completely. A part of my karma was lost forever. Or so I thought." Aphrodite beamed at Varia.

"I don't understand, Aphrodite." Varia was trembling. The shock was too great. It couldn't be true she told herself over and over.

Teddy's head raced. So many questions filled her mind. She had no idea where to begin. But as she had said, the beginning is a good place. "Let me understand what you're telling us. You're saying that Varia's soul is the part of your karma that was lost in the river Styx?" This was too much!

"Yes." The Goddess continued with a sweet smile. Her anxiety from the memories was beginning to dissipate.

"That's not possible." Varia suddenly regained her voice, if not her composure.

"Why not?" Aphrodite's smile expanded once again.

For that Varia had no viable reply. "It just can't!" She bolted out of Teddy's embrace and leapt off of the dock onto the craggy surface below. She had no idea where she was going or how to get out of this place, but she was not going to stay any longer.

"Hold up, Sugar." Aphrodite yelled after Varia, then snapped her fingers and popped the Queen back onto the pier. Aphrodite walked toward the visibly shaken woman and took her face into her small, delicate hands. The Goddess lifted Varia's head up to meet her sure and unwavering gaze. "I know you're frightened. I know I'm asking you to disregard all of the beliefs you were taught, but what I'm telling you is the truth, Varia. If you look inside your heart, you'll see that."

The Amazon Queen fought back the tears. She loved the woman who stood beside her and cared for the Goddess who tenderly cupped her quivering face. She raised her eyes and was caught in Aphrodite's intensity. It was then that Aphrodite lifted her arms in a sudden flourish, and with the speed of a hummingbird, the Goddess placed her flattened palms against the temples of the warrior.

The Olympian was speaking to her, not with words, but in a series of images. Varia could see the memories as if they were her own: emerging from the sea in a lather of foam, wandering through Olympus, the call of the murky water, drowning in a sea of need, a freedom from pain, then being restrained to this plane of existence.

The barrage of images flashed forward through time. The faces of women, men, children began to blur, swirling through her mind--all of them her. Lifetime after lifetime until one solid likeness took form... Varia.

The warrior stumbled back, breaking the connection Aphrodite had made. She understood now. It was beyond words. Her skin tingled with the realization of who and what she was. It all made sense. Of course she and Thea had immediately bonded with the other. The two were soul mates, literally. They shared the one karma that had made up the being who now stood before them--Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love. One of them could never, would never, be complete without the other. Tears once again flowed from Varia, but these were not born of confusion and fear. These sobs spawned from relief and understanding and happiness.

Teddy, ever at Varia's side, watched her love with trepidation. Somehow she knew that it was not the time to voice an opinion or even concern. But when Varia started to cry... interference be damned. Teddy stepped between Varia and Aphrodite hoping to shield her Queen from any further pain. Teddy held the woman tightly to her chest as she stroked her silken hair. "It's all right," Teddy cooed. "Everything will be all right."

Varia pulled back far enough from Thea so she could look into her gleaming amber eyes. "Yes, my Love, it is all right. For the first time in my life, all is as it was meant to be." Varia buried her face deep into Teddy's suede jacket and wept for all of the lifetimes spent incomplete.

"What did you do to her?" Teddy demanded from Aphrodite.

"Calm down, Sweetie. I knew that words wouldn't be enough to convince this one..." Aphrodite swung an arm in Varia's general direction. "so I put the touch on her to show her who she was." Aphrodite stepped around Teddy and stroked Varia's bare shoulder blade. "I know sharing memories can be rough, especially such traumatic ones; I'm sorry for that."

Varia's head flew up. "No, don't be sorry." Her stare drifted to Teddy. "Don't be angry, Thea. I understand now."

"You do? You're ok?" Teddy scanned Varia's face. She was not totally convinced.

"I do, and I am." Varia straightened herself up in an effort to reassure Thea that she was not going to fall completely apart.

"But I have so many questions." The Amazon turned toward Aphrodite.

Teddy nodded her information packed head. "Join the club."

Chapter 20

Once an air of calm had surrounded the three, Aphrodite shimmered them all back to the Amazon encampment. The Goddess believed that familiar territory would do Varia a world of good toward handling the shocking news she had just received. But much to Aphrodite's surprise, once they arrived inside the tribal courtyard, Teddy also seemed to relax.

The Amazons welcomed their traveling Queen and her Consort. Even Aphrodite was given a rather enthusiastic greeting. If truth be known, Aphrodite was grateful for the time away from the onslaught of questions that awaited her when she, Teddy, and Varia were once again alone.

As the crowd prepared for a proper celebration, Lea approached Varia. The auburn haired warrior who had previously noticed her Queen's interest in the stranger from the future, sidled up beside her ruler and whispered, "You've chosen well."

Varia turned and gave Lea a questioning look.

"Oh, don't even try and give me the innocent act. You know very well what I mean." The fighting instructor nudged Varia in the ribs and pointed an upturned chin in Teddy's direction, grinning as if she had aimed Cupid's bow herself.

Varia turned and glanced at Thea. Upon feeling the warrior's emblazoned eyes on her, Teddy spun around and smiled down at the woman she loved; the half that made her whole. After a few heated seconds, Teddy's attention was forced back to the tribal member she had been having a conversation with before Varia distracted her. When the Queen went to turn her attention back toward Lea, she scanned the crowd that surrounded them. That's when she noticed the

same slightly amused, completely delighted cherubic grin on all of their faces.

"Lea, you're a dead woman." Varia mouthed.

"Don't blame me." The aqua eyed warrior defended. "You brought this on yourself. Stop looking so shocked, Varia. You've always been so... fight, fight, fight... war, war, war... everyone bent over backwards trying to convince you that there was so much more to life, but you never listened. We've been worried about you. I know that you will forever associate Queendom with the death of your sister..." Lea didn't continue; she didn't know how without bringing up a past that was better off where it was--in the past. Everything that was in her heart had been said. She then turned to the wonderful traveler who had entered their lives. "I'm glad the gods saw fit to send you here, where you were needed." Lea clasped a very surprised Teddy's hand tightly in an attempt to further convey her gratefulness at helping her Queen find the love that had been locked away inside her heart.

* * *

After an appropriate measure of the day was spent rejoicing, eating, drinking, and dancing, the three women excused themselves from the party and walked to the bathing pond, just outside of camp. No matter how much Aphrodite dreaded it, there were still questions to be answered. "Let's just dive right in, shall we -- figuratively speaking, of course?" The Goddess saw no reason to mince words any longer.

"The floor is yours." Teddy egged the Goddess on. Varia looked down and only saw the pond and grass covering the ground, no "floor". She shrugged her shoulders and turned a captive ear toward Aphrodite.

"Before either of you ask, I've known about this... situation for a while."

"A while?" Teddy repeated. "Define a while."

"Mmmm... a couple of days... in Greek Goddess time." The last part of the sentence came out more as a mumbled, jumbled clump. But before she could be questioned about it, Aphrodite forged on. "I had a good reason for keeping it to myself," she defended. "Actually, my logic involves Xena and Gabs."

Oh, this is gonna be good. "Well, go ahead. We're all ears."

Varia just rolled her eyes and shook her head. The Amazon wondered how long it was going to take before she would be able to understand her 21st Century love's way of speaking.

"I paid a visit to Zeus soon after my trip to the Fates. I explained everything, especially about the two of you, but I also told him how we needed Xena and Gabrielle back. What with being King of the Gods, he was already well aware of our search for an Olympian able and willing to help. Of course, he knew about the incident that had occurred at the River Styx, but was unaware of his favorite daughter's connection to the Amazon Queen." Aphrodite had impatiently begun to pace between the pond's edge and a nearby tree. "Although somewhat unreceptive, at first, Daddy decided that he would consider intervening if you mortals proved yourselves, without any help from me."

Varia and Teddy looked at one another, with Varia asking what they were both thinking. "How?"

"By making the ultimate sacrifice for love." Aphrodite stopped pacing and clasped her hands securely together.

"Well?" Teddy was growing impatient. She was in no mood to be trifled with. Her nerves were raw from the questions left unanswered, and her body ached with an intense hunger for the woman by her side. She knew that she would burst into white hot, searing flames if she had to go on like this for much longer. An unexpected squeeze from Varia's hand on top of her own calmed the cabbie down. How does she do that? Teddy pondered.

"Well..." Aphrodite repeated Teddy in an exaggerated tone. "As for you and Varia, both of you had to be willing to die to save the other." Aphrodite chirped brightly.

"Did we pass the test?" Varia asked.

"Of course!" Aphrodite blew a stray curl when the two just sat there, seemingly unfazed by what she thought was monumental information. "Well, so much for the dramatic climax." Aphrodite shrugged and lowered her hands.

"Maybe we're missing something." Teddy stated upon viewing her friend's pout.

"Obviously." Aphrodite pursed her lips even tighter. "Don't you get it? You and Varia saved one another during the Harpies attack. That proved to Zeus that the two of you should not be separated, under any circumstances. Isn't that great!"

"It's wonderful, but I got news for the gods. Nothing's going to separate us." Varia decided to put her two dinars worth into the conversation. Teddy smiled proudly at the Amazon and nodded enthusiastically in agreement.

"Shhhh..." Aphrodite chastised the couple with her hands firmly planted on her slanted hips. "Do me a favor and just play along until you get back to the 21st Century. The last thing we need around here is more trouble." The Goddess of Love suddenly realized the words that had just come out of her mouth. "Did I just say that? Oh, man."

All three of them laughed heartily until it hit Teddy what Aphrodite had said about returning home. "Wait a minute. What did you mean 'until you get back to the 21st Century?'"

Aphrodite grinned with self-satisfaction. "Zeus has declared that both of you may go back--err--forward to Lerrette."

"Why can't we both just stay here?" Varia inquired.

Mortals... they're never satisfied. "Because the future won't be altered if you go to the 21st Century with Teddy. You've accomplished everything that you were meant to, Varia, but if Teddy stays here, the distant future will be changed."

"What about my tribe? I can't just leave them." Varia was torn, again. She couldn't live without Thea now that they were finally together, but how could she abandon her people?

"You won't be abandoning them, Varia." An ethereal voice filled the air, and a hazy mist arose from the ground beside Aphrodite, bringing with it the Goddess Artemis.

"I was beginning to think you weren't going to show." Aphrodite whispered to her sister.

The Amazon Nations' Goddess ignored Aphrodite's lack of confidence in her relatives and continued to assure Varia. "You've done your best to be the kind of Queen of which the Amazon Nation can be proud, and you've succeeded. But the Amazons cannot flourish when their Queen is unhappy. You have been very unhappy, haven't you, Varia?"

Varia held her head down as she answered, the weight of her memories too heavy to bear. "Yes, I've been miserable." As she continued, the Amazon held her head high. "I could never be content without Thea. I know that now."

"As do I." Artemis smiled softly. "That is why I am freeing you from your title as Amazon Queen. Go and be happy, Child." And along with the mist, Artemis was gone.

"Let's do it!" Aphrodite chimed in, causing Varia and Teddy to jump in their already startled state. The Olympian was so excited that she could hardly contain herself.

"Hold up. You still haven't explained about Xena and Gabrielle. I can't leave without getting them back to where they belong." Teddy silently chastised herself for being so wrapped up in her own problems that she almost disregarded her friends.

"Sweet Pea, Sugar Dumplin', Angel Cake..."

"Enough, Aphrodite, I'm getting diabetes just from listening to ya." Teddy frowned extra hard to make her point.

"Anyway, before I was so rudely interrupted." Aphrodite draped an arm around each of her friends' shoulders. "Those two are being taken care of as we speak."

"Cut the mystery, Aphrodite." Teddy was not going anywhere without a better explanation than that. "You said that Xena and Gabrielle were part of the reason why you didn't tell us about our shared karma."

"Right." Aphrodite agreed. "Because Xena and Gabby had a project of their own to tend to. It took a while to persuade them of the importance of the venture." She attempted an innocent smile, and then remembered that she couldn't pull it off.

As she had been talking, Aphrodite had led the couple to a secluded spot in the forest. Once they arrived where she wanted, Aphrodite announced. "It's time."

"But..." Both women spoke in unison.

"No buts." Aphrodite took their hands in hers. "Do you trust me?" she asked, as her eyes traveled from one pair of brown orbs to the other. "Do you trust me?" The Goddess repeated in a stronger tone.

"Yes," came another simultaneous reply.

"Good. Then trust me about Xena and Gabrielle." Aphrodite stepped back from the two. "And next time, don't hesitate so long before you answer. Now hold on tight to each other."

Varia and Teddy wrapped their arms snugly around one another's bodies. Varia trembled ever so slightly. And even though Teddy had been through the experience once before, she knew that it in no way prepared her for a second trip.

After taking a mental picture of her two friends, Aphrodite looked up toward the sky and announced, "They're ready."

"Aphrodite, will we see you again?" Teddy asked as the atmosphere around them began to swirl with color.

Aphrodite brought her hands up to touch her pink lips. She smothered the palms with kisses and flew them out at Varia and Teddy. "When you least expect it."

The image of the Goddess of Love was the last thing the pair saw before the world of the Olympians disappeared from sight.

Epilogue

The swirls were coming faster now... A rush of color and sound, emotion and perception filled the travelers' senses. Varia clung tightly to her love and closed her eyes. The sensations were quickly reaching the point of overwhelming. The warrior mouthed a small Amazon prayer for Teddy's safety as well as her own.

Varia squeezed her eyelids even closer together and pressed her forehead to Teddy's chest. A stray thought fought its way through the synaptic corridors of Varia's overloaded mind. Artemis had relieved her of the burden of being the Amazon Queen, but did that also mean that she was no longer considered an Amazon at all? There had not been time enough to ponder the idea before, or to ask if there were others of her kind in the year 3000. Varia pushed away the notion, for, in the end, it didn't really matter. She would live out the remainder of her life with the woman she loved, who loved her; and after all, what more could anyone want?

Nothing, Thea's heart beat in reply.

Nothing, Varia agreed... except maybe for the experience they were living through at this very moment to be over--soon.

Teddy smiled and pulled Varia closer into her embrace. She was floating. Only it was more than a feeling of weightlessness; it was as if Teddy could actually feel space itself gathering between the very molecules that made up her physical being. She found herself exhilarated and nauseated at the same time. The cabbie had been right; the journey wasn't any easier the second time around. But this time she had Varia with her, and she would endure if for no other reason than that. This time love fueled their trip, Teddy thought, not

fear, like the last sojourn. There wasn't a modicum of that dreaded emotion coursing through either of them.

The two continued to cling to one another, in an attempt to will this journey to its end. Teddy and Varia were both so enraptured by what was happening to them, through them, around them, that when two more consciousness's mingled with their own, it went virtually unnoticed.

Then suddenly Teddy jerked, an awareness filling her being. Varia felt Teddy stiffen, and out of concern a question formed in her mind, What is it? But she didn't have to wait for an answer. It was at that precise moment that her own essence was touched. Dark and light, chaos and calm, strength and softness invaded the women.

Xena and Gabrielle...

There was no doubt. The Warrior Princess and the Battling Bard's molecules mingled with the cabbie's and Amazon's. The contact was brief, but it left an indelible impression.

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Aphrodite entered the Meditation Gardens to see how her rose tree was coming along. She had come up with the idea of cross-pollinating rose bushes with a Weeping Willow. All they needed was a little agricultural love fertilizer. The Goddess reached the spot where her newest creation was taking form. She chewed on her bottom lip and sighed. The willow was coming along nicely, but the roses appeared to have inherited the weeping trait. Every rose that had bloomed faced the ground, and if plucked, the flower bent lifelessly in one's hand. The roses were now thornless, and in their place lay single teardrops upon the stems. "So much for that idea," Aphrodite grumbled. "Much too depressing. Maybe I'll try it with an Oak."

"What? And have thorns falling to the ground the size of acorns?"

Aphrodite whipped around to find a cloud of mist forming into the Goddess Artemis. "Very funny, Sis."

"What are you working on now, Aphrodite?" Artemis asked, not sure she really wanted to know.

"Oh, just an experiment." The Goddess of Love quickly tossed the weeping rose behind her, out of sight. "Nothing I can't fix."

"Hmmm." Artemis replied with a furrowed brow. The mist surrounding her slowly began to dissipate as she walked toward her sister-goddess. Artemis took Aphrodite's arm and released a drawn out sigh.

"What's wrong?" Aphrodite inquired, noticing the melancholy look on her sister's face.

"I was just thinking about the recent turn of events."

Aphrodite swiveled around to look Artemis in the eye. "Aren't you happy about what happened?"

All Artemis could muster was a half-hearted shrug. "Everything is as it should be."

"Well, personally, I'm thrilled." Aphrodite was aglow with the outcome.

"Of course you would be." Artemis once again took her sister's arm and began to stroll through the garden. "After all, Xena and Gabrielle are finally together, after years of scheming on your part."

The Goddess of Love began to protest Artemis's implication, but decided she was right and stopped herself.

Artemis, upon seeing that Aphrodite was not going to argue the point, continued. "And now the part of yourself that was lost has been found. Teddy and Varia truly belong together."

"Then why are you so down in the mouth?"

"Because, my dear little sister, I just realized that I have a lot of work ahead of me." Artemis just shook her tresses.

Aphrodite stopped walking, forcing Artemis to cease her introspection. "I don't get it," Aphrodite announced. "What are you talking about?"

Artemis released Aphrodite's arm and explained. "Well there are resumes to collect, interviews to conduct." She lowered her eyes remembering how difficult it had been the last time. "I guess, first off, I'd better have Hermes start posting these." And with that, Artemis held out her hand and a scroll appeared. The Goddess held both top corners of the parchment and whipped it forward so Aphrodite could read the script.

Aphrodite read the paper, then reread it, and read for a third time, not believing her eyes. Her face screwed up, and even though she attempted to contain it, laughter bubbled up from within her. In Artemis's hands, a help wanted sign dangled.

"Artie, you're too much." Aphrodite sputtered out, in between the giggles.