



The Perfect Matchmaking

Author: *Milena McKay*

Category: Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: Life of a Goddess is hard.
There are so many rules.

Rule Number 1: Organize the Annual Cupids' Convention in Las Vegas.

Rule Number 2: Don't let Zeus interfere.

Rule Number 3: When Zeus inevitably interferes, avoid getting ambushed by cupids at all cost. Even if it means missing out on your Perfect Match.

When the Goddess of Love herself is made to run the gamut of tropes, from enemies to lover and second chance romance to friends to lovers and close proximity, will she keep her independence from the ever meddling Olympians, or will she chose to surrender to a well-placed cupid's arrow?

The Cupids are back! Sabine and Abby are bringing with them a steamy and highly trope'y second installment in the Perfect Match series, filled to the brim with mischievous deities, intrigue-weaving gods and attractive elbow patches (trust me, you'll want to read about those!)

Cover illustration by Anna Gladkovska. Typography by Holly Dunn.

Total Pages (Source): 29

PROLOGUE

“Cupids really have it all,” mused Abby Angellini-Goddard out loud, wiping her mouth on the ten-thousand-thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets and climbing up her wife’s blissed-out body. Long, lean, and gorgeous body. Arriving at her destination, she looked down at the beautiful face waiting for her there—so relaxed and carefree—and marveled yet again at the fact that this was her wife of three years. She could not contain her grin.

“Love is grand.” Abby nestled her head in the crook of the slim shoulder and closed her eyes, luxuriating in the smooth skin under her cheek. Smooth and silky, warm and seductive. She’d give her maybe fifteen more minutes to recover, because she could already feel herself wanting to go for round three. Or was it four?

“This is the life.” Hooking one arm across her wife’s midriff, Abby snuggled closer.

“I think after what just happened three times, those are supposed to be my lines.” Ah, round four it would be then.

And how could it not be, when there Sabine was in all her cupid glory, with—did she mention this already? It probably should be mentioned again, because... damn—a magnificentbody, obtained through hours of painstaking workouts, a face sculpted surely by whoever sculpted cupids’ faces these days, flawless ageless skin that Abby never wanted to stop touching. And then there was the voice. Low, sexy, currently lazy, and just a bit hoarse from recently attained rather loud satisfaction...

“All of those may be your lines, but how on earth did I get so lucky?”

Sabine Angellini-Goddard raised an eyebrow and Abby almost swooned. A freaking raised eyebrow! How lucky was she indeed?!

“I think in between all the proclamations about the extraordinary quality of your life, you missed saying a couple of sentences out loud, and so I am lost in the why of it all, darling.”

And the coup de grâce. Abby was such a goner. Darling. It was almost unfair what one word in that cultured, gravel-over-whiskey voice did to her. That was it. Round four it was.

“I’ve missed nothing. In fact, I know I’ve not missed an inch...” She trailed suggestive fingers down the amazing torso she’d worshiped just minutes ago, already excited that she got to do it all over again. Within the quiet of the room that was permeated with moans and gasps, a muted but insistent phone vibration yanked both of them out of their revelry.

“What were you saying about this being the life?” Sabine stretched, delighting Abby with quite a show of those chiseled muscles in action, before padding barefoot and bare everything else to where their clothes lay in a heap. “If this is work, I will fire my assistant.”

“Very Devil Wears Prada. Meryl Streep looks good on you, babe.”

“You looked better on me just a minute ago, darling.” Abby rolled her eyes and smiled. Sabine and puns...

Meanwhile, Sabine’s face changed, switching from the carefree, blissful expression to one that spoke volumes of extreme frustration. Abby’s own heart fell. Whatever was happening, their activities between the previously described luxurious sheets and the glorious round four plans were probably over. Shame, as she’d been about to open

the goodies drawer.

“Who will you be firing, Sabine?”

Her wife didn’t immediately answer but reached for the dark navy robe, and yes, Abby was definitely not going to be trying out the new strap she’d purchased just last week and had held back for a special occasion. Like an anniversary, or a birthday, or a Saturday.

With Sabine’s silk-clad form standing quietly by the window overlooking the calm, Upper East Side street, Abby thought back to four years ago. Two cupids, a newbie and The Queen of The Perfect Match, they had certainly made little sense on paper. Maybe that was why Sabine Goddard had resisted one brand-spanking-new cupid straight from the Academy. She was, after all, the only cupid to go a full decade holding the aforementioned title and ensuring that couples of mortals experienced once in a lifetime romances and were perfectly matched together.

Abby had been young and idealistic, and maybe a bit naïve. But she knew what she wanted. And she knew that she and Sabine could have it all if only the older cupid would overcome her fears, let go of her broken heart and take a chance on Abby.

When Sabine finally did let go—with some help from Aphrodite, who, in Abby’s mind, was like a fairy godmother—they’d come together, got married, and four years after their first Cupid Convention, they were still going strong.

Abby tiptoed out of bed, completely unashamed and comfortable in her own skin despite the chill of the early morning air coming from the slightly ajar balcony door. As she encircled her wife’s shoulders from behind and planted a gentle kiss on the nape of her neck, Abby sighed.

“Still happy?” Sabine’s voice was barely a whisper.

“Always with you. What has you upset?”

“Aphrodite.” The name was the only sound that fell off Sabine’s lips.

“Ah,” Abby sighed again. “And here I was thinking splendid, grateful thoughts about the goddess. What’s the word?”

Sabine relaxed slightly in her arms as they stood looking down from their penthouse over the rooftops and streets stretching in front of them, silhouettes of people and cars slowly appearing here and there. New York was waking up.

“No, not a word. More like an order. She’s not even asking. It’s a damn decree, the way I’m reading it.”

Abby squeezed the once again tensing shoulders and gave Sabine another peck on the neck.

“Whatever can she want from a cupid who retired two years ago?”

And that was another thing that still made Abby shiver excitedly. A year into their marriage, Sabine had suddenly retired. From her cupid duties, from her partnership in New York’s biggest and most profitable investment firm. She’d started a foundation, working with the vulnerable and disadvantaged, ensuring they had access to healthcare and representation. And making certain that she and Abby spent as much time together as possible, with Abby’s career taking off. Abby’s heart, already overflowing with love, couldn’t keep from adoringly fluttering because Sabine would give it all up, just to be there every opening night and every single other night too, by her side or in the audience, watching Abby become one of the most sought-after theater costume designers.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

Her wife's voice interrupted her train of thought.

“This is very much an order to un-retire.”

At Abby's blank stare, Sabine turned in her arms and simply handed her the phone. There in black on white—would Sabine ever step into the 21st century and use dark mode—was a text message.

“Be in Vegas during the usual week in February. You have two months to dust off your quiver and WIN The Queen Of Perfect Match title again. Zeus and the whole damn family will be there. DO NOT embarrass me, Sabine. Bring Abby. I'll need jokes and a drinking partner.”

“Well, at least I am good for something.” Abby handed back the phone and grinned.

Her attempt at levity did not succeed, as Sabine closed her eyes and laid her forehead against Abby's.

“You know she doesn't mean it like that. But damn her for thinking she can just yank my chain and drag me back into that whole business. The complete and utter lack of respect for my choices and my life is... Damn. What do I care if Zeus and the rest of those numpties will be there?”

Calling the Olympians “numpties” didn't bode very well for anyone involved and so there would be lots of drinking and jokes once they got to Vegas, Abby thought.

She lingered in the warm embrace for a moment longer, enjoying how their bodies fit

like two pieces of a puzzle. But Sabine was clearly upset and, more than her closeness, Abby knew she needed coffee and a plan of action. The ever-rational and organized soul that was her wife always functioned better with sustenance and a contingency strategy.

She took Sabine's hand and drew her through their wide open living room to the breakfast nook, where Orange and Brownie, their slothful and very chonky cats, lounged. As she seated Sabine on the satin-covered bench, their black lab, Sir Emerson Blackmore III, as always sensing his mistress's distress, carefully laid his enormous head with those silky ears into Sabine's lap. Abby pressed the sequence of buttons on the coffeemaker. If the cats noticed the tension in the air at all, they attached exactly zero importance to it as they continued to lounge on their cushions.

"Zeus and the family?" As a cupid who'd graduated from the Academy five years ago, Abby was somewhat familiar with the workings of the Olympus machinery, but only distantly. Apollo had been her professor once upon a time and she was good friends with some of the muses, especially Melpomene, what with their joint theater ventures.

But other than that, Abby mostly just did her cupid duty and stayed out of the fray. The internal politics and bitchery that surrounded the gods were a little confusing and generally too murky for her. Never one to go looking for trouble, unless it was to follow her wife, Abby would rather not get involved.

Looked like her days of staying out of the Olympic mess were over though.

"I don't think you've met Zeus, have you?" Sabine absently scratched under Orange's ear. "These days, he's an oil magnate obsessed with boats. I guess he's never shown up in Vegas before because he can't steer his latest mega-yacht there."

"What's he like?" At the sound of the coffeemaker, Abby poured two mugs,

splashing cream into hers and made a face at Sabine's bitter black.

"Eccentric, funny, total asshole. Sometimes loveable, more often—not at all. Pretty much what you read about him in the myths and legends of Ancient Greece. He has not changed, and I don't think he ever will. Chases every skirt, has progeny everywhere. Is confused about what morality is."

"Sounds like an upstanding dude."

"Not by a long shot, no. Still, with him, what you see is what you get, even if his motives and scheming are constant. But you know he's always up to something. There's no pretense, no fake innocence or pretentious manner. Zeus knows he's a jerk. He isn't hiding it. And he mostly just lives his life—well, his eternal life. He's making tons of money and sailing his latest boat monstrosity from one corner of whichever ocean to another."

"Why would he come to Vegas? I mean, why would he be there for the Cupids Convention? Isn't that no this domain?" Abby sipped her coffee and felt slightly more alert, a myriad of questions on her mind now.

"He usually doesn't. Once in a very rare while, some god or other type of celestial fool reminds him that he is the head of the family. A big, dysfunctional family. And he puffs up his chest to prove to everyone that he still rules the roost." The cat, awoken by Sabine's caresses, purred like a freight train.

"Does he? Rule the roost?"

"Maybe in his dreams? Since his divorce from Hera, he has really stepped back from meddling in the business of the various gods and goddesses. They have pretty much done as they pleased for centuries, with an occasional bout of chest-puffing and grandstanding from the old coot."

“So why is Aphrodite so demanding now? Why does it matter that he and the family, whomever that entails, will be in Vegas?”

“That is indeed the question. Perhaps he is checking up on her? Perhaps he is doing his once-in-a-century round of ‘gotta keep tabs on them kids’? Even if she isn’t his child. Or perhaps something else crawled up her excellent butt? Who knows at this point? But it’s mighty presumptuous of her to think that she can just trot me out there like a prize pony to show off to her nitwit relatives.”

Abby laughed, and Sabine just shook her head. “They really are a nitwit bunch, darling. You’ll see.”

“So we are going then? In two months? And you’ll resume your cupid duties in the meantime?” She felt a small tension wrinkle appear on her forehead and Sabine confirmed it by reaching out her fingers, the same ones that had just been making the cat purr in ecstasy, to smooth it out. Orange allbut growled in frustration at said fingers being taken away and gave Abby the stink eye before curling his tail in the air and swaggering off.

“Retired or not, I am still a cupid, and she is still the Goddess of Love. So I have to obey. But wouldn’t you agree the message is rather vague? The order, per se, imprecise?” The fingers moved from Abby’s forehead to cup her cheek, the thumb slowly tracing her lower lip, setting off sparks in its wake. And the low, suggestive, decidedly devious tone of voice was doing wonders for other places on Abby’s body.

“You mean...” She sucked in a breath, then sucked in Sabine’s thumb, whose other hand snuck under Abby’s robe and found her ready and very, very willing.

“I mean...” Sabine’s voice now sounded near her ear, as that wicked mouth was working its magic on her jaw. “That Aphrodite plays her games. But I am still The Queen Of The Perfect Match and I can play mine...”

“So, what are you going to do? Do you have a plan?” Abby could hear the plea in her own question since the fingers on her skin were too tender and now avoiding any place that would give her true respite.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

“What I will do is take you right here on the table, and then perhaps on the living room floor. We are yet to test the softness of the new carpet there, and then we will have brunch at Boulud. As for Aphrodite? Hmmm...” Abby could feel Sabine’s smile blossom against the sensitive skin of her collarbone as she nosed to move away the flimsy collar of the robe. “Aphrodite will have to wait because right now, I only have plans for you.”

1

WHERE FAMOUS LAST WORDS ARE SPOKEN (BECAUSE OF COURSE)

She hated her family.

No, she despised her family.

No, no, she wanted her family to go to hell for all she cared.

Well, the last one would be difficult because some of the members of said family actually lived in Hell, and those were the nice ones. Hades and Persephone never bothered her, never caused her any grief, and they shared a bond born out of being pawns in other gods’ foolish games.

So, no, she could not send them all to Hell. Hades was a good woman and she and her wonderful wife did not deserve to be punished thusly. She was at least honest about her devilry.

Plus, they weren’t even blood. She was one of the few among the twelve Olympians

not related to Zeus. Neither had she ever been married to him, nor had borne his children. Which was, quite frankly, a fucking rarity. The man was nothing if not prolific. Still, they were a unit. By their origin, by their mission, by their immortality. They were in this whole damn boat together, even if she, as she had already mentioned above, despised most of them.

Sitting in her beautiful office overlooking the Champs-Élysées, with the Arc de Triomphe looming in the distance, Aphrodite sipped her rosé and frowned. The wine did not taste the same. It did not bring her the sought-after pleasure. She carefully sidestepped the fact that not much brought her pleasure these days, and focused on the task at hand.

Though focusing on anything had been really hard lately. Aphrodite swallowed and shook her head, but the lack of clarity in her mind did not vanish. Rubbing her forehead, she moved her fingers into her hair, running them through her locks. She felt exposed, her thoughts racing to find the reason for the uncharacteristic malaise, yet finding none.

If she was completely honest with herself, her disquietude predated this nebulous “lately” she kept throwing around. Well, if lately meant years, then yes, lately. In her mind’s eye she could see herself four years ago, pontificating to Sabine Goddard about what love was and what it wasn’t. So sure, so damn sure.

Except she wasn’t; not now and not then. She had been faking it for decades, and while thoroughly successful, it was starting to put a significant strain on her. The Goddess of Love was no longer certain what love was. The Goddess of Love, to her utter horror, had realized she’d lost her way.

“What is the problem again?” As if reading her mind, Erato stretched her long leather-clad legs on the decidedly uncomfortable chair in front of Aphrodite’s desk and visibly braced herself for the outburst that she’d normally be subjected to for

being deliberately obtuse.

I've become predictable, even to this nitwit.

Aphrodite sighed, placed the flute on the sideboard, and sat back down. She was being unfair to one of her oldest disciples and she knew it. Erato, for all her faults, was her closest confidant and the farthest from a fool. She had her moments, when her head was, shall we say, otherwise occupied, usually between some cupid's or mortal's legs, but overall Erato was savvy, protective and best of all, loyal. Loyalty was seriously underrated these days.

"The old coot has ordered the whole family to assemble in Vegas at the Cupids' Convention." She could hear the whine in her own voice.

Erato blew a gum bubble, loudly snapped it, and looked at her with completely empty eyes. Okay, so maybe this particular disciple of hers was a bit of a nitwit even on some occasions that didn't involve anyone's legs.

"So... Zeus wants all the gods and assorted..." Erato visibly struggled with an appropriate word. "Rabble... to join the cupids' love fest this year?"

At Aphrodite's nod, Erato chewed some more, reached for her mistress's rosé glass, and drained it with few reservations for privacy or decorum.

"Yeah, okay." Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, the muse settled into her chair, wincing visibly at its stiffness. "Why though?"

Uncouth and always horny as Erato was, she also sliced right through the fog in Aphrodite's mind and zeroed in on what was important.

"That I do not know."

“Simple, call Apollo. Ask him. He’d know. He knows everything. Oracle bullshit and all that. Biggest gossip in the entire Olympus bunch. And if somehow, by some miracle, that self-licking ice cream cone doesn’t know, ask your ex. He’s a total momma’s boy kiss-ass. Hera is always in the mix when Zeus gets a bug up his godly ass. More likely than not, she’s the one who put that bug up there. Though why anyone would want to touch his millennia-old wrinkled tuchus, is beyond me...”

“Erato!” Aphrodite shuddered and waved her hands at her associate.

“Fine, fine. But seriously. If Hera is behind this, Ares will know. Mom and son buried whatever hatchet they had, and last I heard, they’re in the defense contracting business together. After the divorce, she really depended on him. What with her being Mother of the Millenium and having no other offspring to lean on.”

“She has Hephaestus.” Aphrodite spared a thought for her other ex, but no more than one.

“Yeah, I dunno. Even his mom doesn’t like him. Your taste in men was always suspect, if I do say so myself.”

Aphrodite let out a bark of laughter, prompting Erato to smile at her.

“At least some of the cool people will be there. The hottie twins...” At Aphrodite’s inquiring look, Erato elaborated. “Apollo and Artemis. And then the Queen of Brains herself, Athena. Brains are sexy.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never shared more than two words with her after the whole Trojan War ‘wipe a whole damn city off the face of the Earth over a dumb apple’ debacle.”

“Well sure, you wouldn’t know. You married a total oaf in Hephaestus and then dumped him for his equally under-intellectually-developed brother Ares. Nah, Goddess of Love you may be, but as I said, taste in men... really sus.”

“Fine, fine, let’s just move on from my appalling taste in spouses.”

“Well, maybe if you had mated more, you’d have developed better taste? You and I had our fun days in the sun, didn’t we?”

Aphrodite had to laugh at that. Trust Erato to remind her of one of her favorite memories. It had been wonderful. They had been wonderful. Especially coming after several traumatic relationships with gods and goddesses that had left her reeling, broken and bruised. Erato was gentle and joyful and had shown Aphrodite kindness and laughter and pleasure. That sex wasn’t a battlefield and that it could just be fun. Pure unadulterated fun. And best of all? They’d stayed close, and their friendship didn’t suffer. On the contrary, it was enhanced by their past intimacy.

Aphrodite shook her head. “Be that as it may, we need to ensure that the Convention runs as smoothly as possible. Since I really don’t want to speculate about why Zeus is insisting on a family meeting in the middle of the city of sin and debauchery, we can only do so much, and what matters most is to have everything under control.”

Erato chewed on her cuticle and wiped her fingers on the tight leather of her pants.

“Yeah, yeah, control what you can. So make sure the cupids are squared away, matching is tip-top. Maybe bring some adult entertainment, ‘cause one can only sit through so many of those true love blah blah workshops...”

Erato continued to blabber on, but Aphrodite tuned her out. Control what you can. Cupids squared away. The past three years had been rather unpredictable in terms of said squareness though. With different winners of the Queen of The Perfect Match crown each year, chaos reigned. She needed a ringer. Someone she trusted not to ruin the ceremony, the Convention, or the whole damn thing for her, while she was trying to figure out what to do about the descending hordes of Olympians.

“... I dunno, strippers could be the ticket, boss. But classy like...”

“Sabine Goddard!”

“You want to make Sabine strip in Vegas at the Convention? I mean, that would be a hot ticket to get, but are you sure?”

“What?” Aphrodite finally looked at Erato and was met with astonishment and not a little lust and anticipation.

“Oh, wipe that drool off your chin. She’s been happily married to her sweet Abby. No, no, we need her to come back from retirement and win the Perfect Match crown so I don’t have to put up with all the idiot cupids causing a ruckus at the ceremony as they did for the past three years. Do you remember Maddison St. James winning two years ago?”

“Oh, yeah, she got so excited her boobs nearly jumped out of her corset. Though I’m not sure that wasn’t by design. I enjoyed it anyway. The speech she gave still rings in my ears: ‘Shoot those arrows, shoot as many as you can, good hunting!’ I see how you’d want the classy and scorching hot Sabine to be there and steady that ship.”

Not really needing reassurance but still happy to have gotten it, Aphrodite reached for her phone, tapping away quickly.

“So you asked her? To come back from retirement? Isn’t she like doing something really boring these days? She might be mad at you. Might not come.”

“I’m the goddamn Goddess of Love, Erato. She’s a cupid, she’ll do as I say. And no, I did not ask her. I told her. So there.”

Erato actually grabbed a napkin and wiped her mouth and chin.

“Hot. Just now. With the telling and whatnot. But seriously, maybe ask her nicely? You know how these cupids are, they can be devious.”

“And what is it she can do to me, Erato?”

“Famous last words?” Aphrodite knew the glare she aimed at Erato could have melted steel.

The muse shook her head and raised her hands in surrender as Aphrodite watched the message she’d sent being received and read. No reply came in, but she knew Sabine would never defy her order. Say what you want about the longest reigning Queen of The Perfect Match, but she was reliable. Reliable to get the crown even if there were only two months left, and reliable to always answer Aphrodite’s call to arms. She’d pick up her quiver.

With darkness falling on the snow-covered streets of Paris, Aphrodite found herself with another glass of wine at one of the windowsills of her magnificent Montmartre penthouse overlooking the city sprawling before her. The city of love. Her city. She had chosen it herself, helped forge and shape it. She knew every street, every corner, every crevice, so why did nothing seem familiar anymore? Why the growing unease

and the recent inability to find peace, even here in her very own playground?

Turning the conversation with Erato over in her head, she remembered how the ever sexually active muse—who even now was probably bedding some unsuspecting woman—had casually thrown it out there that Aphrodite was undersexed. Maybe she was.

“And so what?” Aphrodite thought morosely, cursing Erato and her occasional spot-on observations. Maybe if she allowed herself the freedom her muses did, she’d be less undersexed. Maybe if she’d been brave enough to have long-lasting relationships beyond foolish men.

Because despite the lightness of her adventures with several goddesses and nymphs and Erato herself, women scared her. Their utter irresistibility, their understanding of her and their constant demand that she give her all... Gods were simpler, less dangerous. But then also less appealing. And always, always somehow thrust into her life by hook or by crook. The chief crook being Zeus himself.

Suddenly, a frisson of premonition shook her.

Gods thrust upon her.

Zeus. Hera. The whole goddamn family descending on Vegas. Were Zeus and his scheming ex-wife trying to marry her off again, to satisfy yet another game of thrones? After all, her first marriage had had no purpose other than to placate the angry Hephaestus. She had been nothing but an insignificant pawn in Zeus’ hands. Her divorce had upset the balance on Olympus, especially since she’d thrown over her husband for Hera’s other son. But Ares, in turn, had been such a disappointment as a true mate, arrogant, reckless, and ultimately weak. And so they too had failed.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

Hence, she'd chosen to do her damn job and not involve herself with anyone. Her one-and-done affairs with mortals never had any future to speak of, and so she remained alone. She had found the balance between her duty and her own peace. Until a few days ago...

Why would Zeus try to upset the already shaky balance now? What was he plotting?

Her phone dinged with an incoming message, and she unlocked it to be greeted with a succinct text from Sabine.

"See you in Vegas."

Yes, she'd been right to tell Erato that she could always count on Sabine to be her Queen of the Perfect Match. The cupid never missed. As for Erato's prediction that Sabine would want to extract some kind of revenge on Aphrodite, she just chuckled to herself. The only thing she had to fear from that particular cupid was a perfectly aimed silver arrow, and Aphrodite was fairly certain that, after centuries of going through the motions, she'd become immune to love.

She toasted her reflection in the window with her flute.

"There is nothing Sabine Goddard can inflict upon me."

2

WHERE A TRAP IS LAID (IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE)

Two thousand loud, unruly cupids? Check.

Nine apathetic muses? Check.

Twelve accursed family members, er, Olympian deities? Check.

Among those, one ex-husband, his brother—also a former lover—a manipulative ex-mother-in-law, and a crazy ruler of the world with despotic yet sexualized proclivities. Oh, and Erato. Perpetually horny.

As Aphrodite went through her mental list, she realized one person was still unaccounted for. Her Queen of the Perfect Match. She checked her watch as she left the bustling MGM Convention Center to head for her meeting. Still no sight of Sabine Goddard. Neither could she see her wife, the lovely, adorable and decidedly shrewd—despite certain claims to the title of Cinnamon Roll Extraordinaire—Abby Angellini. Or whatever cutesy, hyphenated names those two were going by these days.

It should be sweet.

Aphrodite, as the Goddess of Love, should see it that way and toast their saccharine marriage with whatever alcoholic beverage she happened to be holding at that time. Instead, she grimaced and got disgusted with herself for feeling disgusted at the cupids who were constantly sucking face nowadays.

She sighed as she reached the reserved table at the most trendy Vegas restaurant. She exhaled and reveled in being the first one there. At least, Mizumi, with its Michelin star, and the out-of-this-world Japanese cuisine, were worth partaking in a meal with a bunch of spoiled prima donnas. Still, as her heart rate spiked and her vision grayed in what was certainly an impending panic attack, she thought that perhaps she was more unsettled than she had allowed herself to acknowledge. No, tonight's upcoming

dinner with Zeus and his posse was getting to her, that was all.

Breathe. In and out. In and out.

“It’s not going to be that bad, Dite.”

She should’ve scented him before she even heard him since he approached her in his customary cloud of perfume, but her distraction and self-pity were starting to take their toll. Annoying as Apollo was, his powers of foresight were sadly unmatched, so him reading her was not a surprise.

“If prior experience is anything to go by, are you really calling getting interrogated for two hours instead of enjoying amazing food ‘not that bad’?”

“You’ve gotten too spoiled in Paris. All this ‘do as I please’ if you will, is not necessarily good for you. The optics?—”

She had no time for his pussyfooting around.

“Optics be damned! It’s my will. And it’s my domain, Apollo. Well, if by ‘spoiled’ you mean that I’ve gotten used to other gods minding their own business and staying out of mine, since they have no Earthly idea what the hell they’re doing when it comes to love, then, yes, I’ve gotten spoiled.”

“I meant the dinner company, Dite, but sure, whatever you say. I’m determined to enjoy the food, the entourage, not to mention placating Zeus helps keep the peace. And moreover, you really can’t expect to start doing your own thing, remain unaccountable to everyone for so long, and not invite some Olympian scrutiny.”

He performed a carefully choreographed toss of his flowing blonde mane. Half the people sitting at nearby tables swooned. She’d have laughed at the pretentiousness of

it all, but she had more pressing issues. She remembered Erato's advice to question him about what was really going on. Plus something in his tone, in the way he was wording his sentences, gave her the creeps. Hadn't he mentioned 'optics' a few minutes ago?

"Is this why he's here? Why you're all here? The Olympian scrutiny of my wayward, independent ways? And don't tell me you don't know. Even if nobody told you, you'd have figured it out."

"I mean, I don't need to employ my divine powers of deductive reasoning, Dite, to know that nothing happens among this crowd that isn't caused by the old horn-dog getting spun up about something. Plus the whole business with Athena... Here he comes, though, so we shall see. If I were you, I'd pretend to enjoy the hell out of myself and probably keep my mouth shut. Oh, and if possible, make yourself invisible?"

The whole business with Athena?

She decidedly did not remember what Apollo was talking about, until it hit her. Athena and her rebellion. Her veritable emancipation. The abandonment of her divine duties...

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

Aphrodite had scarcely had any time to take in his advice, as ten figures descended on their table in a cavalcade of chaos. The spectacle was the perfect example of why she'd moved to Paris and away from this Olympian mess. Because it was messy, and loud, and obnoxious, and so damn fake, she could barely stand these gods.

Hera still acted like the queen of everything, despite not being Zeus's wife for the last couple of centuries. Hephaestus still pretended to be the injured party every time he looked at her. And he still hung on Hera's every word, even though he wasn't her favorite son and was generally ignored by his mother in favor of Ares, who swaggered like his balls were so big they prevented him from walking normally. They weren't. She had firsthand knowledge. Which she regretted deeply. For many reasons.

Artemis and Hermes were whispering between themselves, probably sharing the latest gossip, and Aphrodite wished she was seated closer to them. At least she'd enjoy some conversation. Apollo, for all his clairvoyance, was still the same self-involved prick.

The rest of the crowd was a pretentious, extravagant blur. Including Zeus, who was busy flirting with the mortals.

Yeah, so what else was new?

Except as most of the gods were taking their seats with varied aplomb and demands for attention from the dining public surrounding them, the chair next to her was quietly pulled back by a slim, long-fingered hand, attached to a tall lanky body, smelling faintly of chalk and something Aphrodite couldn't immediately identify. But

it was so familiar and so cozy, it suddenly made her feel less exposed in her off-the-shoulder Armani gown, being drooled over by the entire restaurant and most of her table companions. That scent propped her up, gave her the illusion of being supported, and comforted. So did the tweed jacket with the corduroy elbow patches.

She found herself craning her neck to get a better look at the person slowly lowering themselves next to her, and did a double take when an oh-so-familiar face turned itself in her direction with a shy crooked smile playing on sensuous lips. Sensuous? Did she really just think that? But before the aforementioned sensuous mouth—yes, decidedly so with that sculpted upperlip bow—could formulate a greeting, they were predictably interrupted.

“Ah, Athena! Daughter! So nice of you to join us! What with you abandoning your official duties, I had no idea whether I should expect you to accept an invitation from your father anymore. Better late than never, I always say!”

Zeus’s booming voice managed to sound even more patronizing than usual. And of course, he was loud enough to immediately overwhelm every ear within a one-mile radius. God of Fucking Thunder indeed. At least, to everyone’s pleasure, Poseidon’s face soured. Upstaged yet again. Aphrodite wanted to sigh. Zeus hadn’t addressed anyone but Athena, and she was already sick of his pompous ass.

Apparently, she wasn’t the only one.

“I’m not late, Father. And your orders were more than a mere invitation. As for abandoning my duties, I haven’t. Sciences and discoveries have burgeoned since I managed to devote my full attention to them and not divide myself between war and wisdom. Ares can handle the former. The latter is clearly out of his league. Plus, I didn’t want to interrupt your socializing with the redhead who seemed taken with you.”

The cultured, thoroughly pacifying tones of the low voice beside her betrayed nothing, but Apollo covered his laughter with a cough, and Aphrodite had to bite her lip to suppress a smile.

Now she recalled the kerfuffle with Athena somewhat better. Brave, foolhardy Athena, who had one day said ‘screw you all, I’m done with war and I choose to dedicate myself to the sciences’. Very brave indeed. Aphrodite didn’t know exactly how things had come about, but the fallout had been massive. For a while, Athena was exiled and, if she wasn’t mistaken, pretty much cut off from the family. Maybe that was why—while all the other Olympians languished in a rather comfortable, if not to say opulent and idle lifestyle for most of their days—Athena actually worked for a living. Some professorial job in some god-awful New England place with lots of bears and snow and dreadful winter clothing.

But one thing Aphrodite did remember well: Athena had quite a mouth on her. A very smart and—as she had already stated—sensuous one, too. And you should never turn your back on her, because she could and would neutralize you with ease and poise. Just as she had a minute ago. Three hits in a sentence. It was obvious Zeus was properly placated by the remark on his pulling powers, Ares was left completely flabbergasted, no doubt knowing he’d been insulted somehow, but unable to recover enough to summon a clever retort, and Aphrodite knew Hera would be totally incensed by the reminder about Zeus’s philandering ways.

“Well, you’re clearly late, since you didn’t deign to dress for the occasion, Athena.” As zingers went, Hera’s attempt was decidedly subpar, and everyone around the table knew it. Athena just shrugged her tweed clad shoulders, before shucking off the blazer and revealing a black, sleeveless turtleneck and a set of arms...

Had it gotten warm in the room all of a sudden?

No university professor in the boonies of New England had any business having

those kinds of biceps, triceps, delts...

Aphrodite completely missed everyone standing up to toast something Zeus was pontificating about. She shook her head to clear the cobwebs of whatever it was that had suddenly discombobulated her, and no, the proximity of tanned, chiseled, uncovered arms was absolutely not the reason for her confusion. A deep breath and Zeus's speech made its way to her ears.

"... glad you lot are taking your family obligations seriously and showed up for this reunion. I think this is a tremendous occasion to take stock of who we are and what our responsibilities as both members of this family but also as Olympians are. Some of you have been relaxing, maybe slacking off a bit."

His eyes met Aphrodite's and she felt the same premonition she'd had in Paris.

Responsibility, duty, marriage...

Zeus winked at her and went on, "But don't worry, you can always rely on family to lend a shoulder, to help you make the correct decision, to pick up that mantle of responsibility and return to the good old days. To family!" He raised his champagne, and the rest of the gods followed suit. Last thing she saw before she hid her face behind the rim of her flute was Ares's smug, goading grin.

Her hands trembled, and she had to slowly set the glass down so as not to give herself and her anxiety away. But she felt faint and could sense the blood draining from her face. The room spun. Before she could decide what to do, the long-fingered hand she had admired just minutes ago covered her trembling one, and Athena spoke haltingly, distracting her from the viciousness of her ex's gaze.

"Aphrodite... Ah... You've gone pale..." Any port in a storm, or whatever it was mortals said? She could maintain a conversation with the devil if she had to, just to

escape the uncomfortable sensation that she was being set up as the sacrificial lamb yet again. Too bad Hades wasn't here. Athena would have to do.

Except Athena more than did. Perhaps not seeing the Goddess of Wisdom for a couple of centuries and generally avoiding her for millennia had been a mistake. Had she always been this oddly appealing, with those horn-rimmed glasses on the slim, high cheek-boned face? Had her eyes always been this shade of amber? And appealing? How strange to see the raw sensuality on the marble-like, sculpted, classic features devoid of all make-up and pretense. Aphrodite's now-steady hand picked up her glass and she took a long swig, but before she could answer, Zeus coughed loudly and every stare turned his way.

"It has been brought to my attention..." He inclined his salt-and-pepper-haired head in the direction of Hera and Ares before continuing. "...that mortals are abandoning some of the long-standing doctrines of our social order. And love is one of those doctrines."

Zeus narrowed his eyes and finally turned to her fully. "The steady decline in perfect matches delivered by your cupids, Aphrodite, the lack of clear direction for that segment of our subjects because of your non-existent romantic involvement, has certainly affected the general perception of love in the world. This needs to be rectified. To this end, we have gathered here, my dear."

Aphrodite felt the world tilt under her feet yet again, and only sheer will held her upright in her seat. Her premonition had been correct. The ancient asshole and his meddlesome posse were up to their old tricks. Since she saw no other reason for them to do this, she assumed that Zeus had some ulterior motive for his assholery. And not that he needed help in being awful, but alternatively it could've been that Hera was either bored, or someone had reminded her of the many times Aphrodite had bested her at an assortment of things since the goddamn Trojan War.

“I see Ares has turned into a busybody. Like he’d recognize anything about the mortals and their behavioral trends?” Athena murmured, following Aphrodite’s gaze. She seemed to have come to the same conclusion as Aphrodite had, and the steady pressure of Athena’s hand on hers did not waver, grounding her. It was time to stop taking hits though.

But panic was still clawing at her throat, and she struggled to draw breath. All her fears were gathered right in this room, staring back at her. And she wasn’t certain she had what it took to stand up for herself. At the end of the day, she so rarely did where Zeus was concerned. But Athena’s hand on hers was warm, and while it did not magically give her the courage the Goddess of Wisdom herself possessed, it stilled her somewhat, allowing her to take that deeper breath. After all, Athena would know, would understand like no other what Aphrodite was going through, as a woman and as a Goddess. Being made to be a pawn was something they had both endured many times over.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

“I welcome you all to my event to celebrate love. I don’t believe that love is dead. Neither do I believe my cupids are slacking.” She began tentatively. “My romantic involvements have never influenced them before?—“

Ares drained his glass and gave her an indulgent, patronizing smirk before interrupting. “If only you had any, maybe they’d encourage your disciples to be more diligent in their duties. Lead by example, I always say. Release a sex tape or something. I’m sure that would be inspirational.”

Artemis’s gagging sounds from across the table made Hermes and Apollo burst into laughter. The warm pressure on her skin became almost painful before Athena lessened her hold, perhaps realizing that her palpable anger was inadvertently hurting Aphrodite.

She bit her lip, but when she finally replied, her voice was steady. “I’ve led my cupids since time began, Ares. Your choice in partners is your own, however, so don’t blame my subjects for all the STDs you’ve had to seek medical attention for.”

“Zing! Dite 1, Macho War Dude 0!” Hermes high-fived Artemis.

“Children!” Zeus’ bellow made all of them flinch and settle down. “I mean, you’re not wrong regarding Ares’s medical history, my dear, but he’s not wrong either when he says your prolonged singlehood isn’t setting the best example for mortals and cupids. I completely understand that your marriage to Hephaestus left you traumatized?—“

“Hey!” Hephaestus’ indignant shout didn’t deter Zeus from continuing.

“—but it is time to get over all that, and to look around you and choose a mate.” He deliberately overextended the word ‘choose,’ and it resonated in her mind in all its fake glory. No, there wouldn’t be a choice for her. As she lowered her gaze, he continued, “Surely, with your cupids excelling—as you insist they are—one of them will find you a perfect match.”

She lifted her head so quickly at his words that the hitherto rather steady room, whirled again. She allowed herself to turn her palm in Athena’s hand and grip right back, taking solace where she could. Meanwhile, Zeus simply winked at her once more, his smile sly, his eyes shrewd, no sign of the daft old man that he often played to get out of whatever he needed to. No, this was the cunning god who had ruled the roost since the dawn of time. He knew his family, and he had played her into a corner.

With silence reigning over the table, Zeus signaled for the food to finally be served before turning to her one last time. “I think a week, surrounded by the best and the brightest two thousand of your subjects, my dear, will be sufficient for you to find your perfect match?”

It had been a trap. Aphrodite chose not to dwell on her relived trauma, panic attacks, and anxiety-ridden visions of herself being bartered to the highest bidder again, all in some sort of accursed power play. Instead, she decided to find someone to blame. Well, that would be easy. Because whatever trap was being laid, she had walked into it with her eyes and brain fogged by the foolishness that had possessed her to drool over horn-rimmed glasses and chiseled arms. For shame. Outplayed at her own game. Aphrodite threw back two fingers of Glenmorangie, placed the tumbler next to the three empty ones, and signaled for another.

“I heard the evenings before the Convention are particularly stressful, but I didn’t realize they were quite this bad.” Sabine Goddard gracefully sat down on the barstool close to Aphrodite and raised her hand for the bartender, who promptly filled a glass.

“Are you here to make jokes?” Aphrodite gulped down her next whiskey and turned to watch the audacious cupid take a gingerly sip of hers.

“Well, your summons were terse. One could say downright brusque. Considering how I was engaged at the time of receiving your message, I would even go as far as saying they were rude.”

“Oh please, I have no idea when a good time to summon you these days would be, since you’re always face down in your wife!”

Sabine’s expression could only be described as smug.

“I was about to do more than that and was cruelly interrupted?—”

“You’re just milking it now, Goddard.”

That earned her another self-satisfied look before Sabine sobered.

“I assume I’ve been summoned because you’ve been summoned?”

“So you know?” Aphrodite signaled for a new tumbler.

“Apollo let slip in strict confidence that it’s open season, with Zeus challenging the cupids to deliver a perfect match for you. So of course, it’s now known to any and all, as all Apollo’s strictest confidences are.”

“Fucking idiot.”

“Which one?”

“All of them. The whole damn family.” The whiskey was doing nothing to dissipate

the fogginess over her heart and brain. If anything, everything was getting more and more blurry.

“Well, Maddison St. James is just about losing her mind over whom she’ll pair you with.”

“If I catch her and her quiver anywhere near me, I’ll pluck her wings myself.”

“Just keeping you abreast of current events...”

There was so much compassion in the cupid’s voice that Aphrodite almost blanched. She didn’t need anybody’s damn commiseration! She was still the Goddess of Love. And nobody pitied her.

“Mind your business, Sabine. And do your job. I’ve noticed you have not cast a single arrow in the two months since I ordered you to come out of retirement. How are you going to win the goddamn crown with no arrows shot?”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

Sabine took a long swallow, polishing off her drink, and placed her glass on the bar, aligning it with the four empty ones Aphrodite had set in front of herself.

“That’s for me to worry about. You watch your six, boss. So many cupids, so many arrows, so few perfect matches.”

3

WHERE ROMANCE TROPES ARE ENUMERATED AND (PREMATURELY)
DISCARDED

So she had several problems.

But she’d been through worse.

She’d been forcibly married to a man she despised.

She’d been made to cheat on him in order to escape the loveless marriage, only to be discovered by the whole world and blamed for the wretched ordeal.

She’d been betrayed by her lover and left to shoulder the consequences of their affair alone.

She’d been used by pretty much every god in their own interests as a pawn.

She had survived.

She chose to completely ignore the rising of yet another anxiety-induced frisson at the memories of her trauma. Yes, for the upcoming week, she'd be surrounded by the very people who had abused her. Yes, they still made her skin crawl. Yes, to this day she could barely raise her eyes to Zeus lest the fear of the new torment he'd come up with return. And yes, she had to go fulfill her duty. Preferably within the next ten minutes.

Aphrodite looked at herself in the floor-to-ceiling mirror and nodded as much in approval as to reassure herself. From behind, Erato placed a wrap around her naked shoulders and gave her a decidedly lascivious once-over.

"For what it's worth, you look hot, Boss."

Aphrodite winced. Not that she didn't intend to appear hot. She always looked the part of Goddess of Love. The fairest of them all. Paris had not given her the damn apple for nothing, starting the entire Trojan War over her beauty. And tonight, at the Opening Ceremony, she'd need all the ammunition she could conjure to stay strong and withstand whatever harebrained plan Zeus had concocted. But it was costing her a lot.

"And I don't understand why you're worried. The cupids never really bothered you before. Do you actually think they'll take Zeus up if he issues his challenge?"

"I'd say we have several problems, Erato. You and I know that an arrow alone won't make me fall for anyone. And a couple of arrows do not make for a perfect match, regardless of whether the people in question have feelings for each other."

Erato's blank face did not inspire any confidence in Aphrodite that she was being understood.

"Okay, how's this? Problem number one: the cupids will make fools of themselves,

me, and whomever they choose to pair me with. Problem number two: if they fail, Zeus and the rest of them will be smug and awful and interfere with my affairs all the time, and probably take over the whole damn business, since they'll see it as proof that I cannot run the love affairs of mortals. Problem number three: I have to endure this motley crew of self-involved prima donnas for a whole week."

She was conveniently side-stepping the real problem. Interfering in her job of governing over love and cupids was one thing, but forcing her hand to choose a mate she had no desire whatsoever to... She shivered, pushing the images further from her mind.

"What about problem number four, which is actually a real issue? What if the cupids, just by their sheer numbers, stumble upon your perfect match? And masses of nincompoop cupids aside, Sabine Goddard is here, and she does not miss."

Erato gave her a look that was suddenly a touch too insightful, which was disconcerting for some reason. Aphrodite preferred when her assistant was less perceptive.

"Sabine is a little upset with me. You may have been on to something about how I summoned her. Let's just say, she is not amused."

Erato clucked her tongue in a gesture Aphrodite knew too well meant she was trying to keep herself from saying 'I told you so'.

"Okay, realistically, who could they pair you with? Is this Heph's play to get you back? Asecond chancekinda thing?"

They looked at each other in the mirror and both shuddered before shaking their heads.

“Artemis then?”

“Please, Erato, she’s one of my best friends. I can’t ever see that happening.”

“You couldn’t see the whole Zeus challenging cupids to a perfect match showdown happening either. And friends to lovers is a popular trope.”

Aphrodite raised an eyebrow. “Trope? Are we doing romance novel clichés now?”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

“Both you and I and all those thousands of cupids are romance novel clichés.”

Aphrodite again caught her assistant’s self-satisfied glance in the mirror and smiled back.

“Fair enough.”

Erato stroked her chin before continuing. “Okay, Ares? Didn’t you say he was being gross to you during dinner? Isn’t that just him flirting? Seriously, the taste in men you have, Dite.”

“Well, if his mother had her wish, this could be the power play. Hera has always wanted to have me under her thumb, and getting her favorite son to marry me...? I can’t even entertain the idea. But he is a horn dog like his dad. He won’t be opposed, although I thought he was enjoying his freedom. What’s this trope, enemies to lovers?”

“Hmm, you two were never quite that. How does one actually become enemies with a total fool?” The muse rolled her eyes before continuing. “On the other hand, you actually were sworn enemies with someone else. A certain academic currently hailing from cold and foggy New England. Tall, lanky, big horn-rimmed glasses, tweed jacket with corduroy elbows. Ring any bells? And speaking of elbows, I heard her arms are lick-worthy, all sinewy and muscled...”

Aphrodite almost choked on air at the mention of Athena. And not just any mention, but the detailed description of what the Goddess of Wisdom looked like, and especially the enumeration of all the points that had drawn her own attention last

night.

“Please,” she waved her hand at Erato, “she’s a relic. And I’m not at all interested in a Greek Lit professor from Yale. Spare me the boredom.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say all that. I heard she’s not quite as boring as people think...”

“What do you mean? What have you heard?” Belatedly, she realized she’d very obviously given herself away when Erato flashed a predatory grin, showing her canines.

“For someone ‘not at all interested’ in the supposedly dull academic, you are kinda hot under the collar right now, Boss.”

At Aphrodite’s glare, Erato just laughed.

“I don’t know much, but I heard she and Clio were an item. And that it was all very very steamy there for a brief minute. Well, more like for a couple of years, but what are a few trips around the sun for us? Nothing really. Still, Goddess of Wisdom, the Muse of History, you’d think they were a perfect match.”

Aphrodite actually had to force a very unpleasant set of images away. Clio was extraordinarily intelligent. And beautiful. And she could clearly see those long-fingered hands of Athena’s, still bearing chalk and ink stains, running through Clio’s beautiful, red tresses. And two years? Sure, nothing in the life of an immortal, but a considerable amount of time to savor certain aspects of a relationship. Argh, she so didn’t need those visions in her mind’s eye right now!

Damn Erato and her gossiping ways. But she had questions. Questions that pertained to herself as well, since she was beginning to see parallels emerge between her situation and Athena’s.

“And Zeus just allowed her to get involved with a muse? And to actually have a real relationship?”

“Oh, wow, I did not expect you of all people to be this discriminating!” Erato mock-clutched her chest. ‘Would you listen to this?A muse!How the mighty have fallen!’”

Aphrodite was getting tired of the amateur theatrics.

“You know what I meant. Quit the performance, Erato.”

“Fine, fine. I was messing with you, sheesh, you are wound tight. Maybe, you know, ask for a helping hand? Or if a hand is too much, just a couple of fingers?”

Aphrodite’s mouth twitched, and Erato’s grin blossomed fully.

“Athena was completely free of Zeus and his bullshit by the time she hooked up with Clio. You bet she’d never have been allowed to otherwise. He’d have used her differently somehow, everyone knows that. Her and Clio make a lot of sense together, but not to him. No power play, alliance-making, or any of the other stuff he cares about, you know?”

Aphrodite knew. After all, all her serious and long-term alliances had been pre-arranged, engineered, made to happen in some way. No, Zeus didn’t care for her dalliances with the nymphs or muses or even mortals. So yes, she knew. And envied Athena a little bit for the freedom she possessed. To choose. To be. To just breathe.

She shook her head. They weren’t the same. And she needed to stop thinking about those kind eyes, for surely they were pitying her, because Athena was free and Aphrodite never would be.

“It doesn’t matter.”

Erato tried and failed to raise an eyebrow. She had never learned the maneuver. Good, it served her meddlesome self right.

“It doesn’t.” She couldn’t believe she was about to justify herself to this particular muse, famous for her indiscriminate sexcapades. “I hadn’t seen her in centuries, so don’t be ridiculous. She took me by surprise. That’s all.”

“I’m just saying. There are only so many tropes in Romancelandia. And in my humble opinion, enemies to lovers is the best one. With opposites attract challenging it for the top spot, though.”

Aphrodite finally turned away from the mirror, hugging the wrap closely over her generous décolletage. Erato’s eyes predictably followed the folds of the fabric. Well, some things still worked just fine to distract her—at times—too perspicacious assistant.

“Nothing humble about you, Erato. Don’t sell yourself short. And eyes up. Let’s go deal with the descending hordes. And the thousands of cupids.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

“You’ll best them all. Love always wins. And you are Aphrodite. ”

Erato accompanied her little pep talk with a resounding wolf whistle, and Aphrodite straightened her shoulders further. Yes, she was the Goddess of Love and they had better remember that. She had better remember that herself. Since so much was riding on it.

The Opening Ceremony held at the MGM Convention Center’s massive amphitheater was going smooth as silk. Until it wasn’t. The gods were causing a ruckus, so what else was new? They needed to feed off the attention and the chaos their presence instilled in everyone. The cupids were a very fertile crowd for oohs and aahs. Apollo, of course, would know as much from teaching all of them at the Academy, and the rest of the Olympians followed his lead.

But it wasn’t the distraction of the audience or the constant interruptions by Zeus to either loudly congratulate, berate, or to force all the limelight on himself, that made Aphrodite feel anxious.

She cleared her throat. “Following the experience from the previous three years, we will extend the Perfect Match challenge. We will announce the winner at the Closing Ceremony. As you can see, the competition is very stiff this year.”

Feeling very exposed for some reason, Aphrodite gestured to the board that lit up behind her. Thousands of names moved across it. Far from all cupids had been invited to the Convention, and most of them were doing their jobs even as she spoke, assisting perfect matches to form. The enormity and the importance of her job, of their work, was overwhelming.

However, with all the big names present in the audience, the top ten on the board were firmly still. Maddison St. James was the frontrunner with 74% of perfect matches. However, the sheer number of arrows she'd shot was eye-wateringly high. Over ten thousand of them. Well, some were bound to hit their targets.

Conspicuously, one name was absent from the list. Aphrodite cast her eyes into the audience and quickly found Sabine sitting close to the front, with Abby's hand between hers, paying very little attention to the event itself. Under Aphrodite's watchful gaze, the younger cupid elbowed her wife sharply, and Sabine finally raised her face. And then she winked. The plastic of the microphone actually cracked in Aphrodite's hands from the blatant gall.

She was trying to gather her thoughts enough to wrap up the welcome address when Zeus clambered onto the stage, glass in hand, and, ignoring said microphone, simply availed himself of his thundering voice.

"I can indeed see how stiff the competition is, to quote the gorgeous Goddess of Love. It's giving me all sorts of uncomfortable feelings, if you all catch my drift."

Some cupids snickered, some gagged.

"I would like to thank Aphrodite for organizing this wonderful little assembly. It's just delightful to catch up with everyone here. Busy little bees that you are. But apparently not busy enough, since your fearless leader here, the Goddess of Love herself, is somehow single and not mingling at all. Slacking on the job, the lot of ya. So, in the spirit of the Week of Love, or whatever y'all are calling this shindig, let's all find our dear Aphrodite a perfect match by the end of this gathering. Here's to love! Ain't it grand?"

He toasted with a glass that looked like pure vodka and had to be helped off the stage by Hermes, who threw Aphrodite a pitying look. She wanted to scream. Either from

the horribly patronizing speech, the even more horrible task Zeus had given her cupids, or from the resounding cheer the aforementioned task received from them. Hermes and his pity were just the cherry on top.

Torn between panic and anger, Aphrodite mustered the grace and presence of mind not to blow a gasket right then and there on the stage, but it was a rather close call. In the end, she clamped down on both fear and rage, smiled and clapped, and announced the Love Convention to be opened before welcoming everyone to the banquet. She wanted to escape the stuffy room full of people she had no desire to ever mingle with, and tried to ignore the compulsion. She had a job to do.

A job that implied actually talking to these very people. With Erato probably seducing some unsuspecting cupid and nowhere to be seen, Aphrodite made her way through the amphitheater as unobtrusively as the most beautiful woman in the world ever could. Which really meant she failed pretty much in the first five seconds of her carefully planned route from one end of the banquet hall to the exit.

“I think Zeus’s idea is wonderful! Just so unexpectedly wonderful!” Maddison St. James, in all her catty, smug glory, could not hide her glee. “After all, with the assembled gods and illustrious personages here in Vegas, a cupid is sure to succeed.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Maddison, I just don’t think Aphrodite will be an easy mark.” It was a pleasure to see St. James’ face fall at the sound of Sabine’s voice.

“Goddard, what the hell are you doing here? Didn’t you retire?”

“Wow, hello to you too, St. James. And I was invited. To shore up incompetence, I assume, am I right?” Unlike Erato’s, Sabine’s eyebrow rose gracefully in a gesture that was both artful and natural. Maddison, however, wasn’t having any of that.

“I haven’t seen your name on the board. And in case you hadn’t noticed, I’m leading.”

“I noticed. The perfect match percentage was rather measly, though. Can’t help yourself, Maddison? You just have to shower the world with those arrows, consequences be damned. Don’t all those divorces weigh on your conscience?”

Maneuvering herself between the two squabbling cupids, Aphrodite raised her hands to effectively shut them up.

“My god, this is exactly why I do not miss these things.”

A growl and a male voice interrupted their almost cozy and certainly familiar back and forth.

“Which god is yours? And whom do you not miss?”

The difference in expressions on the warring cupids’ faces would have been amusing under different circumstances. Maddison’s, completely reverent and enraptured, and Sabine’s, almost disgusted at the decidedly unwelcome disruption. Ares, all 7 feet of him, towered over all of them.

“Interruptions, Ares. I do not miss interruptions.”

“Ah,” he said, fingers circling her wrist possessively as he raised her hand to his lips, still wet from the wine. Aphrodite heard Sabine gag behind her. “I’d forgotten how much you dislike that.”

“Forgotten or ignored?” The low voice from behind the massive God of War carried a decidedly warning undertone. Too bad Ares had never been particularly adept at picking up on such subtle things as subtext. Otherwise, he might have picked up on the glaring fact that Aphrodite had been forced to be with him by circumstance, never loved him, and would have swiftly ended their farcical relationship anyway.

Ares turned around, still holding Aphrodite's slobbered-on hand in his meat-hook-like massive mitt.

“Athena?”

The Goddess of Wisdom simply smirked. “I mean, sure you were together for a split second there, so I might give you the benefit of the doubt that you genuinely forgot about Aphrodite’s dislike for interruptions. Or drool, for that matter.”

His face underwent a comical series of changes as Athena spoke, from dumbfounded to enraged to lost for words. He really wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed, and perhaps he was reminded that Athena wasn’t a sparring partner he would take on willingly. Ares stalked off in a cloud of disgruntlement, veiled threats, and excessive macho bravado. As she watched the crowd swallow him, Aphrodite felt a gentle touch of fabric on her hand and turned around to find Athena extending a silk handkerchief to her, which she had just pulled out of her jacket’s front pocket.

And damn, with Ares and his bumbling interruptions, she’d almost missed Athena’s attire. Except she didn’t think it was really missable, since she was wearing a dark navy velvet suit. A tight-fitting, dark navy suit, with darker lapels and a barely-there see-through blouse underneath. The handkerchief matched the translucent material of the blouse, and as Aphrodite took it, she could sense the remainder of Athena’s body heat emanating from the square of silk in her hand. Something inside her clenched, not unpleasantly. As amber eyes met hers without the barrier of glasses, Aphrodite knew exactly what—and where—clenched. Want. Pure, unadulterated want almost shook her.

The kind, watchful eyes blinked once and with a graceful nod, Athena disappeared into the crowd.

“Wow! Ares is such a gentleman! And so tall! Wow!” From her left, Maddison’s ecstatic voice ended whatever moment Aphrodite had been having. For surely she wasn’t experiencing lust in front of two thousand cupids and assorted gods.

No way.

“Wow, indeed.” Sabine took a long sip from her flute and extended a hand to intercept another one from a passing server. She handed it to Aphrodite. “I think you might need this.”

“I would too, if that hunk of a god grabbed me like that.” With those parting words, Maddison almost danced in the direction Ares had disappeared.

“See, I would be swooning if a certain skin tight suit-wearing Goddess totally annihilated my oaf of an ex and his grabby hands.” At Aphrodite’s sideways glance, Sabine clinked their flutes. “I guess we can bury Erato’s idea of a second chance romance right here, right now.”

“I might bury Erato and her big mouth.”

“Aww, she cares. And gossip is a muse’s prerogative. A cupid’s too. Just passing the time while twiddling our thumbs at this, what did Zeus call it? ‘Little shindig?’ Asshole.” It was Aphrodite’s turn to extend her flute for a clink with Sabine’s.

“But, to Erato’s credit, she didn’t really believe in this second chance thing either. Now the enemies to lovers one, however...”

“Sabine, how many times do I have to tell everyone? We were never actual enemies. It was rough going for her as the Goddess of Wisdom and War. Obviously, the latter did not sit well with her. She was angry and went on ill-advised rampages. Like, who didn’t back then? Medusa still doesn’t speak to me. But please, let the sleeping

Cerberus lie. We were never enemies.”

“Well, if you put it like that. However, it’s not as if being enemies is a prerequisite for being lovers, Boss.”

And with that, Sabine sauntered off, leaving Aphrodite with a growing number of problems.

4

WHERE THE SECOND CHANCE ROMANCE IS UNREALISTIC (BECAUSE IT DOESN’T WORK WHEN ONE OF THEM IS STILL A WANKER)

Several things were becoming abundantly clear as the Convention progressed.

Ares was hellbent—sorry Hades—on somehow getting back with her and was using any and all pretense and chicanery to corner her.

Athena was equally hellbent on coming to her rescue.

The cupids were whipped into a frenzy of trying and discarding candidates for her perfect match, and Sabine Goddard was a constant lurker in the periphery of her sight, her quiver at the ready.

Zeus partied like there was no tomorrow.

After the fiasco of the Opening Night Banquet and the public showdown between herself and Ares, she had done her best to avoid him. It was becoming increasingly difficult since Maddison St. James and her cohorts of swooning cupids were bodily throwing themselves into making that connection happen, all in the name of the second chance romance trope.

“It’s the superior trope,” Maddison boasted during the workshop on romantic tropes and clichés. “It is one where the lovers are given the opportunity to evaluate and reflect upon their mistakes and see that they are still perfect for each other.”

Trapped by Ares in a secluded corridor, Aphrodite did not believe that either of them had anything to evaluate. She had no idea what his motives were, and couldn’t for the life of her understand why he was pursuing her to begin with.

“We can be so good together. We were once before.”

Okay, gag. Because no, they never were.

“You left me to bear the brunt of the fake ass moral outrage of the rest of the gods once we were discovered! You think we were ‘good together’?”

“You’re hot, I’m hot. What else do you need?”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

A sound of barely suppressed ‘gross’ from behind Ares made him let up and she managed to swiftly sidestep him. Athena, in a white starched shirt and thin black suspenders—of all things—and those glasses that made her face even more angular, setting her cheekbones in focus, leaned on the wall a couple of steps away from them.

“Don’t you have to cause discord someplace, Ares? You’re never satisfied when things are not in bloody upheaval around you.” Low voice dripping with derision, Athena rolled her sleeves and Aphrodite tried not to stare. The exposed forearms, tanned and muscular, had no business belonging to a stuffy Yale academic. One teaching boring Greek, at that.

“I’m kinda busy, Athena.”

Aphrodite, seeing an opening, latched on to the exact body part of Athena’s she’d been ogling intensely just seconds ago. Those forearms were hard as a rock, solid muscle and sinew. Aphrodite almost forgot where she was and what she was saying.

“Not anymore you’re not, Ares. We were done, oh, a couple of millennia ago. I’d say it was great, but it wasn’t. I’m not sure what assumptions you’re making here, but please stop.”

Ares, clearly unaccustomed to being given the brush off, stood menacingly in front of them.

“Back then, this kind of strategy got you all the unwilling women, Ares, didn’t it? Just good old-fashioned aggression. Now? Now it will get you a knee in the groin and a broken nose, if I have my way.” Athena straightened to her impressive six feet and

looked him in the eye, tilting her head just a little. He was a hulking piece of beefy man, and Athena was a lanky woman, but after a stare off that lasted about thirty seconds, Ares visibly shrank and staggered away. Somewhere from the side, clapping and gasping could be heard. Which could only mean one thing.

“I keep telling you, Maddison,” still clapping, Erato slowly stepped closer. “That this second chance romance bull you keep preaching is only possible when neither lover is a wanker. Kudos to the Brits for such a wonderful word. Wanker. Love it. I’ll borrow it, since it’s entirely appropriate for the occasion and for the man. Since the man in question, currently hightailing it out of here, is a massive wanker, I say you reconsider your strategy and stop wasting your arrows.”

Maddison turned to her, eyes blazing, ready to argue her position, when Athena slowly tugged on the hand that was still on her forearm.

“I suggest we make a quick exit, if you’re not willing to spend the next hour or so debating the romanticism of tropes.” At her nod they made themselves scarce. In their wake, they could still hear Maddison arguing with Erato about how good sex can bring back memories. Suddenly, there was an opening to her right and Aphrodite was shoved unceremoniously into what for a second looked like a closet before the door closed and she and Athena, who’d done said shoving, were plunged into darkness.

“What the—” A cool hand over her mouth stopped her tirade and, to resort to silly clichés, took her breath away. There was that scent again. Strange, familiar, comforting. And she still couldn’t place it, despite being enveloped by it.

“Shhh, Ares and Hera were at our three o’clock. I didn’t think you’d want to engage with those two again.” The whisper right next to her ear sent a shiver down her spine. What in the world was going on with her?

“Yes, I’d rather not get engaged to Ares, or Hera, or anyone, thank you very much.”

She took a deep breath and leaned away from the cool hands and seductive scents and the press of that solid, warm form. Her body was rudely screaming at her in unpublishable expletives. Had it really been that long since she'd had sex? Why was she suddenly reacting so strongly?

"You're funny. I don't think I remembered that about you." Athena purposefully and demonstratively took a step back and Aphrodite missed the warmth immediately. She needed her head examined.

It was time to stop acting like a damsel in distress. It was getting embarrassing.

"There's a lot I don't remember about you."

"Well, that's not a surprise at all. I don't think we exchanged more than two words during all our acquaintance. Unless it was to argue. Boy, those were the days, huh? Quarreling over apples, starting wars, me winning." A husky laugh ended that sentence, and Aphrodite smiled in the darkness of the small room.

It felt overwhelmingly comfortable to be here like this, without really seeing Athena, but smelling her and sensing her just inches away. She was probably reclining against the wall again, those ridiculously long legs crossed at the ankles and the arms hugging her chest. Such a seemingly relaxed, unobtrusive pose, and it revealed so much about her, Aphrodite thought. She was clearly at ease in her own body, enough to show it off in small glimpses here and there, either by the skinny jeans or the rolled-up sleeves. She looked good, she knew it, she didn't care who saw it. And yet, the folded arms implied that as comfortable as Athena was, she was still holding a part of herself back, in the shadows.

"I don't remember you winning, Athena."

The low laugh was back, enveloping her along with the mysterious fragrance. She felt

embraced and wanted to simply lean into it, like a cat into a warm caress.

“I may not have won that apple, but I won the war.” For a second both of them were silent, Aphrodite remembering the Battle of Troy and the price the mortals paid for the useless quarrels of bored gods.

Athena broke the silence first. “For what it’s worth, that one ended any and all aspirations I had to continue as Goddess of War. Ares can have it all to himself.”

“I wondered a little about that, honestly. You stepped back and away, so suddenly. And here you are. You speak your mind. You play no games, unless it’s to enrage Ares.”

They both laughed at that. A quiet sound of shared mirth that abruptly became too intimate to Aphrodite. But Athena was watching her with an unabashedly open gaze and so words just kept tumbling out of her.

“It made such a stir and yet here you are. Unbothered.”

Athena’s eyes crinkled now with more genuine joy and she exhaled loudly, as if she had been waiting for a completely different statement. When she spoke, her voice was stilted.

“I can’t say that it always felt that way. The fallout... I’m not sure how much you’ve seen. Being you, you’d have been busy. But I was banished for a bit. And I had to find myself along the way, in the loneliness and the quiet. You know, when all of this...” Athena waved her graceful hand around as if the janitor’s closet was something more than it was.

But Aphrodite understood. All this, all the trappings of being an Olympian. As Athena went on, her words became quieter, yet firmer.

“When all of this is gone, you are all alone and you hear your own thoughts. I found myself. In science. In nature. In experiments and knowledge and yes, wisdom. As ironic as it sounds. I found that I am indeed what I am supposed to be. And that banishment wasn’t scary. I think seeing me as indifferent and self-sufficient, Zeus simply couldn’t allow me the sheer pleasure of me staying that way. So I was allowed back and he, of course, claimed credit for all the progress science has made in the time I was away and ever since.”

“Does it bother you?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

“To be back? I thought it might, but I stopped biting my tongue and I stopped allowing Zeus and all of them to push me around.”

Aphrodite sighed. “Must be nice.” She knew she was revealing much more than might be safe. After all, the backstabbing and betrayals were legendary on Olympus, but this closet, these quiet confessions did not seem real somehow. Athena did not seem real. Maybe because Aphrodite had never really paid any attention to the severe and austere goddess before. Maybe she should have.

As if reading her thoughts, Athena’s voice was suddenly closer and so was her body heat. And so was a much needed change of subject. Who would’ve guessed that a virtual stranger could read her moods so well?

“You really thought about me?” If the intonation had been playful, Aphrodite might’ve flirted back, turned it on a dime into something else, something hot and sexual. If Athena reciprocated, they’d be burning up this closet in no time. But the voice was tentative and earnest and Aphrodite’s heart stuttered just a little. This nerd, this lovable nerd, such a duality she was. Even back then. Beautiful, yet aloof, brilliant, but rash. Wise and hotheaded, quick to rage and quick to kindness. And even after all these centuries, a touch insecure. That made her all the more appealing. Appealing in a way Aphrodite was not ready to allow herself to examine.

“Well, I wouldn’t go quite that far.” She heard an exhale next to her and, in the shadows, as her eyes adjusted, could see a smile forming. No hard feelings then. “As you said, I really try to keep busy and avoid the hustle and bustle, but even I felt the balance of the Olympus shift, and I wondered about that.”

“Yes, because you were always so concerned with that famous balance on Olympus.” Athena’s sarcasm was extra dry. After a second, they both chuckled, the sounds mingling seamlessly.

“I think I was just desperate to stay out of the way. I still am. And I wondered how you did it, is all.” Sighing, Aphrodite turned towards her companion. The darkness was doing funny things to her brain. Everything seemed so simple, so translucent, despite her not being able to see much. It was an amazing sensation. The clarity. She’d forgotten when she’d felt it for the last time, and yet here she was, in the janitor’s closet, with Athena smelling like comfort and safety, having the clearest sight in ages. So strange, so wonderful.

“I always thought you flighty. Shallow...” Athena sounded tentative, uncertain. And with words like these, she damn well should be. What did she even mean?

“Wow, thank you. And here I was going to tell you I was joking earlier and have actually entertained good thoughts about you.” For some reason, she felt a strong pang of regret at hearing that characterization of herself. She rarely cared what anyone thought of her, and yet, this one hurt.

“No, please.” There was that quiet concern and that earnestness again. Why was she finding it adorable, even in an insult? So she held her words back as Athena tentatively went on, “I haven’t seen you in so long, and honestly haven’t thought of you in longer than that probably... Damn, I’m making a mess of this, am I not?” Aphrodite had to smile at that and unbidden, her hand rose to touch that chiseled face. Quite like marble, smooth and all those wonderful angles.

“You kind of are.”

“I’m sorry, I just... What you went through? I never really considered any of it. It was Olympus business, as usual. Pillage, start wars, kill, maim. Commit atrocities and

in the same breath, accomplish heroic feats. And above all, use love to all ends. And the day before yesterday? I think I could finally see it all unfold. Sort of live, you could say. The manipulation, the cornering, the very subtle threats. And you sat there and acted stoically, aside from going pale. I felt it was so brave. And so I started thinking of you quite differently. Not shallow, not flighty. Valiant. A survivor. And yeah, ballsy. Although that is a very male-centric descriptor. Having ovaries of steel?" She huffed out a breath and the longer strands of her fringe tickled Aphrodite's skin.

"Is that an academic assessment of my outburst?"

"You're laughing at me." The aggravated note in Athena's voice made Aphrodite want to hug her, but she contained herself.

"Maybe just a little." She ran her fingers through those silky threads, tucking them behind Athena's ear. "I don't think sitting quietly and taking it was brave. I am just tired, you know? Well, of all the gods, I guess you'd know best." As she slowly withdrew her hand, Athena's elegant one caught it and held it, tenderly but firmly.

"I do. Part of the reason I stopped being the All-Mighty Goddess of War, was the criticism, very well aimed and very correct, of my behavior on various occasions where I was unfair, or reckless. And I got tired. I did most of it because I was supposed to. We are puppets, the lot of us. The Olympians." She said it with such disdain, Aphrodite tightened her grip. "We all dance to Zeus's tune, and ultimately he is one hedonistic bastard. He used you, and yet you survived and you went on, doing your job, being you. He used me and I quit..."

"No, you reinvented yourself. Don't tell me you did it just because you recognized the error of your arrogant ways." The suddenly-becoming-so-dear sound of Athena's laugh was like satin against her skin.

“No, I can’t tell you that. Vexing Zeus has been an incentive in itself.” The gentle fingers were tracing patterns on her palm, but instead of tickling, the gesture was causing a strange tightness in her throat. Why the sudden emotion?

Sometime during their conversation, they had ended up sitting on the floor. The hardness of the boards was uncomfortable, but she didn’t want to voice it, lest it spell the end of their tête-à-tête, and she wanted it to last. At least for a couple of minutes more.

“Was that why you jumped to my defense?” Aphrodite held her breath.

Athena’s chuckle was her answer. “Which time? Because my motivations have varied, I have to be honest.”

“Back then, at dinner?” Aphrodite didn’t much care which time, but chose to pinpoint this particular one, just to see where this line of questioning would lead them. The earlier explanation and the subtle boast that Athena put in it should not have been a turn on, but Aphrodite hoped her palms hadn’t gotten damp, for it would give her away. It was hot in here, though perhaps not because of the stuffiness in the air. This woman’s Jekyll and Hyde act, the shy, tentative scholar and the confident, almost brash warrior, were doing things to Aphrodite. She trembled, and stretched her legs. Not that it helped.

“At dinner you surprised me. Cornered, vulnerable, bold, stoic.” The slightly callused fingers danced slowly before encircling her wrist and the move, so simple yet so erotic, made her recross her legs. “Beautiful. But then you always were beautiful.”

“Ah... And the other times?” It was disconcerting, losing the upper hand to Athena in what certainly had moved into flirting territory, but she couldn’t find steady ground underneath her feet. Did she think she had clarity? Did she really think this scent, this darkness, this woman gave her clarity? She could barely see from the fog of lust

clouding her mind. And other places.

“Those other times my motivations were less pure?—”

The door to the closet opened so suddenly, she had to shield her eyes from the light spilling in. The fact that she did it with her left hand, leaving her right one still in Athena’s hold, was neither here nor there.

“Well, I had a feeling that you’d be in the most unpredictable of places, Dite.” Sabine leaned against the doorframe, and her smile was downright devious. “Or maybe I was wrong, and this is the most predictable place of them all? Not to mention the company.”

Aphrodite wanted to wipe that arrogant smirk right off the damn cupid’s face. Since she wasn’t in the position to do that, she allowed Athena to help her up and with her shoulders thrown back, stalked out of the closet and straight up to the elevator bank. She needed a break. And maybe a cold shower. Those romance novels did not lie about the close proximity cliché. As a literary instrument, it was very effective. As a life experience? Hot.

5

WHERE FRIENDS TO LOVERS IS ALSO DISCARDED (ALBEIT SOME BECOMING VERY FRIENDLY)

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

Amber eyes, messy bun with stray flyaway, long-fingered narrow hands... An artist's hands... Hands that clearly knew what they were doing...

"Clio said as much." Erato popped up beside her like some kind of clairvoyant demon.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." But if the heat in her cheeks was anything to go by, she was blushing furiously.

"Right, the wide-eyed, open-mouthed, practically salivating expression you were sporting while almost eating Athena alive with your eyes was apropos of nothing. Plus, I of all people know for a fact how much you are into hands."

Ha, sometimes Aphrodite forgot how astute Erato could be. After all, they had shared some very steamy and enchanting months all those centuries ago. As first forays into sapphic relationships went, Aphrodite couldn't have asked for a better partner. Sensitive, funny, sexy. Erato knew what she was doing back then, and she wasn't wrong now either. Not that she needed to know all that. Her head was already big enough.

"She is a very handsome woman. I have no idea why you think I'm not allowed to admire her." Affecting nonchalance, Aphrodite reached for a pastry.

"Pfff, like half the Convention is admiring her." At Aphrodite's glare, Erato quickly amended. "The half that isn't drooling over you, that is."

The doughy treat turned out to be flaky and sugary as she bit into it and she regretted

it immediately. She was making a mess of it. As metaphors went, this one was a doozy. She was making messes everywhere she found herself these days.

Handing her a napkin, in perfect sync, as they always were, Erato just looked out at the massive room crowded with mingling cupids.

“My point is, admiration is all well and good, but maybe let your interest be known to other people too? Maddison is on a crusade to make as many tropes as possible come true for you this week. She’s moved on from second chance romance into friends to lovers.”

Aphrodite turned to her assistant, eyebrows raised.

“Seriously, and who is the unlucky friend?”

Sounds of bystanders being pushed out of the way and curses being spewed as glassware and plates were dropped interrupted them. In the blink of an eye, Maddison St. James was standing in front of them with a rather poleaxed Artemis.

“There. All sorted now!” Maddison looked just about ready to jump out of her corseted dress. Aphrodite did not need to look at Erato to know she was enjoying the view of breasts pushing said corset to the limits of its endurance. That material was doing a lot of heavy lifting tonight.

“And what precisely is sorted?” Like smoke, Sabine appeared to Maddison’s left, making the already tightly wound cupid nearly jump out of her skin. Things jiggled. Erato bit her lip and barely suppressed a moan as the corset gave another quarter of an inch.

“Everything! Everything is! Aphrodite and Artemis will fall for each other, since they’ve already developed feelings as friends, and I’ll use my arrows to bring about

their perfect match! Done deal! There's no need for you here, Sabine. Oh, Abby, darling, I've not seen you in ages. You look wonderful. You're glowing!"

"Sabine just gave me the most amazing orgasm in the elevator." Abby's butter-wouldn't-melt expression and the provocative words just about floored poor Maddison. Erato gave Sabine a resounding backslap, and Artemis merely rolled her eyes before taking a step closer.

"Is this where I'm supposed to do something? How about a dance, Dite? As much of an escape route as anything else, I suppose."

As their hands touched, Aphrodite marveled at how different some sensations were. The warmth, the tingling vibes sending shivers down her spine, were absent. And so was the cocoon of clarity. As Artemis twirled her around the small dance floor, Aphrodite was left reeling from how much she wasn't feeling instead of how much she perhaps should be. Or would be, if she was being twirled by another goddess.

"This whole thing is getting tiresome, don't you think?" At least she could always count on her friend to read through the charade.

"I honestly can't believe Zeus got the whole damn family down here. And for what? To marry me off to Ares?"

She was trying to put on a brave face and a joking front, but the mere thought twisted her insides, making her breathing just a bit shallower. Fear clawed at her throat and she deliberately swallowed around it, chasing away the unwanted images.

"Meh, I don't think he cares one way or another. Hera has been third-wheeling a lot of his yacht parties recently, pestering him on behalf of her precious boy. You know how Zeus is, he has to see his own advantage in all this."

“Hera leaving him alone to bone mortal women isn’t advantage enough?”

They laughed in unison, half the room turning to stare at them. And then Artemis reached out her hand and with her thumb wiped Aphrodite’s lower lip.

“You have a little bit of pastry here. And it also has a very nice side benefit.” Artemis wiggled her eyebrows.

“Excuse me?” What in the world was everyone up to?

Within her peripheral vision, Aphrodite observed a tall figure back away from the dance floor and disappear into the crowd. The fog around her intensified.

“At least the whole cupid bullshit is making you see what you really should be seeing, Dite.”

Her friend’s bright, gentle eyes held no sign of her trademark sarcastic demeanor.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

“And what is that?”

“That this foolish Goddess of Wisdom might actually be your perfect match. Opposites attract and all that jazz.” And now the sardonic smirk was back.

“I can’t figure out if you’re insulting me or pulling my leg.”

“Really great leg, Dite. I mean, if I hadn’t taken that whole vow of chastity and we weren’t such good friends, I’m sure we would be pretty awesome. As it is, no, I was not insulting your intelligence by saying you and Athena are opposites that attract.”

“What were you saying?”

“That she’s obviously a big dumbass and you are, well... you. And also that despite you being total opposites, the fact that she has gone through something very similar to what you’re going through now, means she understands you better than most. So stop fishing for compliments. It’s not becoming of the Goddess of Love. You know you’re the fairest of them all. The sexiest, the hottest...” Artemis suddenly trailed off.

“Are you sure about that vow of chastity?” Aphrodite winked salaciously, and Artemis blushed.

“Yeah, no, yeah.”

“You’re too easy, Artemis.”

They had stopped dancing at this point, standing comfortably in the loose embrace of

each other's arms. Artemis gave her a little nudge before whispering, "Quit it! Go run after your dumbass potential mate, instead of standing here with me and causing half the room to swoon from our obvious compatibility. Go, before some foolish cupid actually shoots their arrow at us."

The crowds parted like the sea for her, and she ran from the ballroom, desperate to determine where Athena could have gone. Dumbass indeed. There was nothing between them. She had no right to get upset at Aphrodite dancing with anyone. Where the hell could she have disappeared to? Absolute fool. Soulful intelligent eyes notwithstanding. Aphrodite quickly turned left, then left again, trying to find her way in the labyrinth that was the MGM Grand and suddenly found herself stumbling. For once her four-inch heels had let her down and her ankle twisted, heel snapping and the floor getting perilously close. Stupid, stupid, stupid to chase after that fool and ruin her own face in the process.

But strong hands, familiar hands, broke her fall, and just like a complete cliché, she found herself in the arms of the dumbass she was chasing.

"Are you okay? Is it the shoes? I saw you stumbling." Amber, warmth, gentleness, clarity. Everything around Athena was so bright, so clear. Aphrodite's earlier anger edged out the comfort and satisfaction at being held safely and securely.

"You oaf! It's all your fault!"

The beautiful eyes widened comically, completely uncomprehending, going from concerned to apprehensive in a split second.

Ah, familiar with angry women? Good! I bet Clio showed you her fiery temper.

At the thought of Clio showing Athena anything, Aphrodite got mad all over again.

“Yes, it’s your fault. You had no business running anywhere in a huff! You have no business being in a huff! I was dancing with my friend.”

“Ah...” Athena seemed to be choosing her words carefully. “I went to the bathroom? I mean, sure, romance and all that, but you know, gods still go to the bathroom, even if it’s never mentioned in myths and legends.”

“Wait, what? What are you talking about?” The red haze of anger was slowly receding.

Athena stared at her, blinked once, twice and then shook her head.

“What are you talking about?”

Aphrodite felt like maybe she—with some nudging from Artemis—had made a bit of a strategic mistake. This being off-center, unbalanced, and totally unlike herself these past several months was driving her to do silly things. Like believing Athena was somehow jealous of her and Artemis, and that seeing her in her friend’s arms had led Athena to a dramatic exit.

“I... Ah...” How was she to come up with a plausible story to not thoroughly embarrass herself?

“Were you running after me for some reason?” Her voice tentative, Athena ducked her head enough to look into Aphrodite’s eyes.

“Me? No. Why would I? No. This is all just...” She waved her hand about herself as if that would explain her sudden brush with madness. It had to be madness. Running after some tweed-wearing, corduroy-elbow-patch-sporting, horn-rim-bespectacled recluse? Surely not!

“Just what?” Athena’s kind eyes were suddenly shrewd and a tad mischievous.

“Just nothing. Would you drop it? Or do you want to make me beg?” Belatedly, she realized what she’d said, as apparently did Athena, since her ears pinked endearingly. Then the corners of her lips turned up slyly.

“Ahem, despite our acquaintance dating back millennia, I don’t think we know each other well enough for that particular activity just yet?”

“Damn you! Ouch, damn my ankle! And my shoe!” The adrenaline of the chase and the encounter were apparently wearing off, finally allowing her to feel the damage from her fall. Athena had saved her face from certain bruises, but she hadn’t been able to rescue her ankle or her favorite Choos.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

“Let me see.” Athena brushed Aphrodite’s reaching hands away, knelt and then the gentle fingers she had been admiring all through the week were prodding and pushing along her foot, down to her toes, and up her calf. It was all very clinical—Athena obviously having very helpful and pure, even innocent intentions—but once the cool palms swept up to her knee, Aphrodite’s pain turned into a discomfort of another kind.

“This isn’t happening.”

“Nothing is happening, Dite. I don’t think it’s broken.”

Happy that Athena had misunderstood her predicament, but confused and now discomfited by her own reaction to the Goddess of Wisdom, Aphrodite couldn’t quite be graceful in her retort.

“When did you become a healer?”

Athena gave her a bland look before answering, her voice sounding defensive. “Would you prefer Apollo here? Or Hephaestus? Both of them have some of those healing abilities. Though Apollo will more likely than not tell you to drink tinctures and condition your hair, and well, Hephaestus will... I don’t actually know what he might do.”

“Nothing wrong with my hair and let’s leave my ex-husband out of it.”

Athena removed her hand from where it was supporting the injured ankle, and Aphrodite immediately missed the cool touch. But a second later, a caress and slight

tug on her disheveled locks almost made her purr. She leaned into the hand helplessly, surrendering to how amazing those fingers felt running through her hair.

“No, nothing wrong with your hair, Dite.”

“You’re shortening my name now?” The affectionate nickname her friends used was like honey when spoken in Athena’s low voice. She’d said it once before and it had not sounded friendly at all then. This time it was less tentative, as if after using it previously, Athena had gained a bit of courage and was more certain of how it rolled off her tongue. The thought of Athena’s tongue did things to Aphrodite’s insides. Strange, warm things.

“Everyone else seems to, and I heard you prefer it?”

“You heard?” This was very interesting. Athena was not generally a gossip. Who had she been talking to? And more importantly, why?

“I can’t seem to escape it. Hearing about you, that is.” Athena’s hand moved lower to the nape of Aphrodite’s neck and she had to put her entire force of will to refrain from shuddering.

“So you’re trying to avoid me?” Aphrodite narrowed her eyes. She didn’t like where this whole thing was going. She also didn’t like how much she enjoyed Athena’s ministrations.

“You’re unavoidable. Inescapable, really.” Athena’s fingertips traveled back up and into Aphrodite’s hair. They were carefully but surely tracing a pattern up to her ear, and when they brushed behind it and moved lower to where neck met jaw, Aphrodite shuddered. “Beautiful and haunted. Hunted even. This is all such a cliché.” Athena’s words did not seem to address anyone in particular, as if she was talking to herself, simply defining the predicament she found herself in. “Or maybe I am the cliché, for

responding to a gorgeous and vulnerable woman—”

“Oh for crying out loud! You’re making me into some god awful damsel in distress! I don’t need your saving! I don’t need anyone! The mere fact that you have some semblance of understanding of my situation does not give you any right to...” Hades, she was revealing so much more than she wanted to! And what had Artemis called Athena? A dumbass? Yes, she was a big dumbass who had no idea what she was talking about. Nobody knew what Aphrodite was going through. This was all so aggravating. So dreadfully insulting!

“You’re in an arguing mood?—”

Yes, definitely insulting... This was also humiliating and as soon as she’d shaken off the maddening touch she would... What had Athena just said?

“I’m not in an arguing mood! What do you even mean?—”

A finger on her lips shut her up.

“You are in an arguing mood. And you’re in pain. Otherwise...” The hand on her face was no longer cool, and the eyes looking into hers were no longer shy or apprehensive. Amber burned like liquid gold.

“Otherwise?” She watched as Athena’s tongue peeked out to lick her lips, and wondered if she knew how incredibly irresistible she was right now. All gentle hands and smoldering looks.

Of course the universe would choose that moment—just as Athena was about to lower her head to Aphrodite’s mouth—to send Sabine Bloody Goddard to interrupt them. At least she had Abby with her, so how bad could it be?

“Kissing already? We’re barely halfway through this book.” Why had she thought Abby was somehow a more preferable option? Traitor.

“We weren’t kissing. I twisted my ankle. Will anyone help me, for god’s sake!”

“Once a diva, always a diva. And which god are we cursing? Or praising? Because the dance floor is getting really heated, and you might just want to come watch this.” Sabine held out her hands, but Athena simply lifted Aphrodite up like she weighed nothing.

“We’ll be right back downstairs. She needs to have her ankle bandaged at least, to avoid more damage. And a different pair of shoes. Those... whatever ridiculous name she called them, are done for.”

“Oh no, not the Choos?” Abby picked the sad-looking shoe with its barely still attached heel.

“Who the hell—sorry Hades—names high heels after trains?” Athena blinked uncomprehendingly, suddenly appearing aggrieved once again.

“Oh Zeus, one is obsessed with shoes, and the other thinks they’re named after trains. You two really are made for each other.” Sabine shook her head, and Abby rolled her eyes at her wife.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

“Will you at least press the button for them before you get your quiver out and your trigger finger ready?”

The last thing Aphrodite saw as the elevator doors closed in front of her were the smug faces of Abby and Sabine as they leaned in to kiss each other.

“Fucking cupids.” She blew out a breath and looked up into the indulgent expression of Athena, who was still holding her tightly in those sculpted arms, and suddenly the aforementioned fucking cupids, the convention, and Zeus himself seemed a million miles away.

6

WHERE JEALOUSY REARS ITS NOT-SO-UGLY HEAD (PAR FOR THE COURSE)

Her problems were multiplying.

Her ankle was swelling quickly.

Her shoe was a dead loss.

And per every romance novel ever written, her lacy thong—because while she was a cliché, she was a very fashionable cliché—was uncomfortably wet.

She was uncomfortably wet herself.

Athena, her gentle hands, her bedroom eyes, and her strong, sinewy arms were making her tremble with desire.

Zeus, could she be more predictable? More purple prose-y?

Be that as it may, as Athena easily walked to the suite Aphrodite had instructed her to march towards, she couldn't help but revel in how deeply affected she was. By the proximity, by the sheer, effortless strength, by the maddening scent that was always present when she came close enough.

How long had it been since she'd felt this rush of heat, this giddy excitement? And could she trust herself to enjoy it? To allow it to happen? Her heart and some other parts of her body were screaming for her to let go, but her mind was paralyzed by old fear. Zeus, gods, the universe itself. Being used, being told what to do, never being allowed free will. Was this a setup? How were the Olympians involved? And how were the cupids?

As Athena put her down on the white leather couch in her luxurious penthouse, she sighed. No, the Goddess of Love very rarely made her own choices. Epochs passed and still nothing much changed.

"Thank you."

The considerate eyes looked at her without expectation as Athena knelt at her feet again. Maybe it was that utterly guileless expression that made Aphrodite extend her hand and mirror Athena's earlier gesture by cupping her chin. The abovementioned consideration left the features she had been admiring, replaced with blatant desire and obvious pleasure. Athena made a sound that was almost a purr and leaned into the touch, and Aphrodite smiled at the decidedly cat-like behavior.

"This is such a sexy look on you."

Athena's lips twitched slightly, and Aphrodite couldn't help but trace the lower one with her thumb. Silky soft and oh so hot. Scorching. A pink tongue reached out and gave the digit a quick lick, and she gasped at the unexpected images the gesture evoked in her. That very tongue licking her, her body tangled in dark satin sheets, Athena holding her hips down, pleasuring her. So sure of herself, of her power, of her skill. Driving her high, higher, to the very peak, then pushing her over and catching her before starting all over again.

She swallowed quickly, trying to shake the vision away. As she refocused her attention on the task at hand, Athena's eyes flew open, and the intelligent gaze seemed to penetrate her thoughts, reading them with ease.

"You like me on my knees in front of you?"

The lips moved under her thumb, sending tendrils of warmth up Aphrodite's arm.

"I can't deny that it is an attractive image."

"Are you playing games with me, Dite?"

And just like that, cold reason broke the intimate and decidedly sexual bubble they'd found themselves in. Well, she was dealing with Wisdom personified. Very carefully, she removed her hand, fingers tingling with the vestiges of heat as she lost contact with the gorgeous skin.

"No. I apologize. I didn't mean to give out mixed signals."

"You weren't. At least I don't think so. You can't help being who you are. And everyone wants Love."

Again, how very Athena-like to hit the bullseye on the very first attempt. Aphrodite's

smile tasted bitter on her own lips.

“Hence this cannot happen.”

“Because you think I’m falling for your godly persona? For Love herself?”

Falling? Hades in Hell.

Her chest was so tight she could barely breathe. But she needed to see this through before she could hyperventilate over potential feelings that Athena may or may not be developing for her.

“Well, I’d be foolish to try to escape the inescapable. Or as you said, unavoidable. I am Love and neither you nor I can help that.” They shared a look of such deep comprehension, a look that only two beings who had lived their whole lives by the same rules understood. She was Love and Athena was Wisdom, and they couldn’t shed these mantles. They had to make the best of what they were given.

“I think you are selling yourself very, very short, Love. Yes, you are that, but you are so much more. I don’t know you that well, but what I do see is beautiful and brave and vulnerable, and I want to know more. You make me want to know more. Which is rare for me.”

“Rare? You’re the epitome of curiosity and scientific method, darling!” Aphrodite tried to laugh it away, but Athena’s hands were holding hers with earnest sincerity.

“Science, experiments, knowledge. But knowing someone, really knowing, seeing and being seen? That is an openness I have granted few. And I believe you’ve granted it to even fewer. What are you afraid one will see if you open up? You gave me glimpses and I saw nothing but beauty, inside and out.”

Well, if Aphrodite had been apprehensive before, these types of declarations usually did her in and sent her running for the hills. Her ankle precluded her from taking

flight, but while she sensed she was gearing up for the fight response, it was freeze that took over. Athena wanted to know her, to see her. And Wisdom liked what she had seen so far. Aphrodite's heart thudded loudly in her ears and she tried desperately to find something to say, something that would divert Athena and herself from the possibilities that were surely impossible. Painfully so.

“Darling, Athena, you are overthinking this.”

Athena, undeterred, just smiled.

“You can't accuse me of being the brains in this room and not allow overthinking!”

“I see all those platitudes have gone to your already big head.” Aphrodite couldn't help but run her fingers through the silk-soft strands. Why couldn't she keep her hands to herself?

“I'll admit that my ego isn't small in certain aspects, but neither is yours, Dite. You are who you are, and you were always unapologetic about it. Why are you hesitant now? I'm by no means an expert...” Athena's eyes flitted away for a second, her palm tracing up and down Aphrodite's calf, in what she suspected was an entirely unconscious caress.

“For all the clumsiness in dealings of the heart that you profess, I would say you aren't a novice at all. In fact, somethings speak of quite the contrary...” Aphrodite trailed off, her eyes watching Athena's hand suddenly stop and retreat in a hurry.

“Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't realize?—“

“Involuntary inappropriate touching aside, I too keep hearing about your game, Athena.”

Flushed bright pink, Athena stood up so quickly, Aphrodite had to crane her neck to continue watching in fascination as the color spread from her cleavage to her cheekbones.

“Now who has been listening to gossip?”

“Oh no, don’t turn this whole thing around on me, player.” Athena ducked her head, and Aphrodite again marveled at how such a beautiful creature could be so completely oblivious to her own attractiveness or reputation.

“Clio...”

“Yes, Clio. Very much Clio. By way of Erato, but you know how muses talk.”

Wringing her hands, even more flushed than before, Athena stood in the center of the room, seemingly lost for words.

“Ah...”

“You are so utterly adorable. Honestly, can you blame me?”

“Blame you for what?” Athena turned to face her, that earnestness and guilelessness back on her features.

“For wanting to rip your clothes off? Or let you rip mine off, whichever you’d prefer. Though, I suspect you are very much the hold you down, fuck you blind kind of woman.”

“Dite...” The name came out as a low moan, and Aphrodite wanted to jump her. Right there and then. Forget her doubts, forget her concerns of being cornered, being used again, about her free will and her own choices. Athena was everything in this

very moment. Shy and awkward and gorgeous and strong and smart and beyond sexy. Aphrodite could drink her up, one greedy gulp at a time. Like ambrosia. Like Veuve Clicquot. She wanted to get drunk on the long slender lines of Athena's body, wanted to make her lose all trappings of that time-honed control and make her howl at the moon.

But she couldn't. Her fear was too great. Her concerns were too real. Her freedom was still worth everything and more. And taking a chance... She didn't think she had it in her. Not anymore. All her chances had been thrown in her face, resulting in her becoming a prisoner of her own circumstances or of her own desires.

"Go, Athena. We can't..."

And just like that, like erasing a whiteboard, the lost, earnest expression on Athena's countenance was gone, leaving only ruthless, cold reason.

"You mean, you can't. And you won't." Well, add inner strength to the list of all those attractive characteristics. But, of course, Athena had a spine of steel. And Aphrodite was always honest, even in moments like these.

“Yes.”

Aphrodite turned away from the all too knowing gaze. In front of her, the garish lights of the Strip cut at her eyes with their brightness, but she kept looking, relishing the pain. In the background, the door opened and quietly closed. She was alone. She always had been.

“You know this is very chic. You might even start a new trend.” Erato patted her forearm as they slowly made their way down to the ballroom.

“I’d rather you not mock me in my hour of need.” Leaning on sarcasm usually worked for her. However, of late, Erato seemed to be utterly immune.

“I thought Athena carrying you to your suite would’ve taken care of all your needs. Don’t tell me Clio exaggerated when she raved about the Goddess of Wisdom’s natural abilities.”

Damn her assistant and the mouthy, gossipy muses. She did not want to know anything about Athena’s natural or other abilities.

Erato gave her a gentle hip check. “Don’t worry, I saw her exit a scant minute after dumping you on the couch, so I kinda figured nothing happened.” The muse guided them smoothly through the labyrinthine corridors. “I’m also very proud of you for deciding not to hide out despite the ghastly bandage, and return to the ball.”

“It’s my ball, Erato. I can hardly skip it simply because I twisted my ankle. And call anything on me ‘ghastly’ one more time, and I’ll make sure the cupids pair you up

with Hera.”

Erato shuddered theatrically before finally delivering her to the table with the other Olympians. She pulled out her chair, and when Aphrodite took her seat, Erato delivered her parting shot.

“If I were you, I’d worry more about one Goddess of Wisdom burning up the dance floor with a certain muse, or about Sabine Goddard lurking around with her quiver. But then, you always had your priorities askew, boss.”

The speed with which Aphrodite’s eyes instinctively found Athena in the crowd—embraced, all but entangled in the arms of her ex—was rather astonishing. To her right, she could hear Hera gasping and mumbling something about propriety and getting a room, but that hardly registered. Hera was a known prude, and really, Aphrodite did not want to think about Athena getting a room with anyone but herself.

Except, no, she didn’t. She had just told Athena that nothing would come of whatever little flirtation they’d engaged in. Sure looked like the Goddess of Wisdom had taken her rejection to heart, and rather quickly, too. Clio was draped all over her in a very provocative manner. At least it looked awfully provocative to Aphrodite. Obviously to Hera too, as she was trying to get Ares to stop wolf-whistling.

“I was sad to see them break up, especially since they were a perfect match of mine.” Sabine stood on a little ceremony as she plopped herself by Aphrodite and crossed her legs, her own purple, sequined Jimmy Choos catching the lights of the ballroom.

All the twisting and turning in her seat to keep up with the events unfolding before her must have made Aphrodite dizzy and seeing green. That had to be it. Had to. Otherwise, her head spinning and the aforementioned green tinging her vision could be signs of only one thing. And she was absolutely not jealous.

“They were what?” Aphrodite blinked up at Sabine.

“One of my perfect matches. I think about five years before I retired? Something like that.” Sabine’s nonchalance was obviously faked, and it wasn’t at all making this entire ordeal easier on Aphrodite.

“I see what you’re doing.” She was being played. And not very masterfully at that. Which was a bit beneath the usual skill and depth of cunning and guile of one Sabine Goddard, All-Time Queen of Perfect Match. Aphrodite narrowed her gaze. Sabine was much more subtle than that.

And yet, despite knowing this game inside out, despite realizing full well she was being manipulated, Aphrodite could acknowledge that decidedly viridescent haze further descending upon her. The fact that Sabine saw Athena and Clio as ideal for each other—and them obviously still sharing much of their connection, if the display on the dance floor was anything to go by—was disconcerting.

Yes, just four years ago she had been the one telling Sabine that love is what you make of it, and a perfect match does not guarantee forever, but for some reason knowing that Athena had already had her perfect match still rankled.

For some reason? Damn it all to hell, Hades forgive her.

She was jealous. She had refused to give Athena a chance and yet here she was being engulfed in the corrosive emotion. How pathetic was she?

Sabine reclined against the back of the chair and settled in. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m really not doing anything. I’m just taking a short break while my wife is out there driving Maddison absolutely crazy.”

“You are going with the oldest trick in the book. Trying to make me have an

epiphany that Athena is the one I want and force me to make a move in an attempt to ensure nobody else gets to her first. How passé of you, Sabine. How very textbook.”

The cupid twirled a table knife in her hand. “While I admit that this is indeed one of the most basic moves in every love textbook, I am not going to pretend it’s not effective. That is exactly why it is in the book. Because it works. You are scared, and you are pushing her away. Showing you she can find happiness somewhere else is supposed to make you realize that it could be you, right now in her arms.”

“Your demagoguery aside, Sabine, it could not be me. Twisted ankle and all that.”

“Touché, Dite.”

They sat in silence while couples twirled on the dance floor, the room slowly closing in on Aphrodite. At one point, Clio stretched up to her tiptoes and whispered something in Athena’s ear. Not that Aphrodite was looking but she tasted bile nonetheless.

“Damn you, Goddard. It really is very effective.”

“You wrote that textbook, Dite. You should know. Now, I’m going to go rescue Maddison from lusting to death over my wife.”

As Sabine departed, Aphrodite could not help but think that, for someone so obviously well-skilled and educated in the science of love, she was awfully susceptible to it. Still. After all these years and all the harsh lessons.

WHERE WE ARE APPROACHING THE DREADED 80% MARK (AND WHAT THAT MEANS)

She decided to ignore her ballooning out-of-control issues and revert to her tried-and-true problem-solving method. Head-on confrontation. Not that it had ever garnered her much of a positive outcome in the long term, but the short-term results were oftentimes spectacular.

Certainly, these short-term results were beyond spectacular as Athena was currently pressing her into the closed door—the one that Aphrodite had knocked on just seconds ago—and kissing the very breath out of her lungs.

Say what you want about Athena, but she was the Goddess of Wisdom for a reason. Slow on the uptake, she was not. One look at Aphrodite's face after she'd opened the door in nothing but a pair of boxer shorts and a sports bra and Athena had seen exactly what was there. Undiluted, unrestricted desire.

“So all the tropes are proven totally useless, and the tried-and-true lust at first sight wins the day,” Aphrodite whispered and felt her lover's smile blossom against her lips.

“It's one of my favorites.” She could taste Athena's words on her tongue, the ‘favorites’ in particular carrying a strong undertone of champagne.

Her skin was burning everywhere the hands she'd been admiring the whole week

touched, and her clothes were binds that restricted her movements and did not allow her to breathe. She wanted them gone. As if reading her mind, Athena grabbed two fistfuls of the precious couture and a crimson Armani dress fell to the floor in tatters, the sound almost obscene how it reverberated in the quiet of the small room.

In a matter of seconds, she was standing in a red satin thong and her pair of Louboutins. She decided to ignore her ankle bandage. It did not fit the picture she was trying to paint for Athena.

Though Athena didn't seem to need any pictures painted. She stood back, the remnants of the ruined dress falling away from her fingertips, and her eyes were filled with awe. Perhaps even a little shock. Perfect. Aphrodite could work with shock and awe. It was her currency in this business, after all.

This wasn't business, however. This was all for her. That was the conclusion she had arrived at after watching Athena dance, mingle, and then retreat from the party in complete solitude, leaving Clio with a puzzled expression.

"She is just amazing. Frustrating, yet amazing." The muse had felt entirely comfortable settling into the empty chair next to Aphrodite, who'd signaled for their glasses to be filled. She didn't want to hear what Clio had to say, but perhaps she needed to?

"We had years of happiness and then..." The server interrupting them to bring another Veuve Clicquot made Aphrodite want to scream. Clio just looked at him with her serene smile, and Aphrodite was struck again by how perfect Athena and she seemed for each other. The knowledge of thousands of generations in their eyes. Both guardians of age-old secrets. She could certainly see what Sabine had seen when she'd fired her silver arrows at them. They were a perfect match.

As if reading her thoughts, Clio took a long sip of her drink and continued, "And then

all that perfect happiness somehow turned into perfect boredom. Maybe it's the years, the comfort level of being so similar, the knowledge and understanding of each other, but one day we were jumping each other's bones and the next I found myself looking around and searching for excitement. I loved her. I love her, still. I will love her always. She is my best friend and the one person on earth who knows me better than I know myself. But love is fire. Exhilaration. Desire. Not coming home to a pair of comfortable slippers and falling asleep. At least not for me. I wanted that fire back. And Athena deserves some desire back as well. Because as I said, she is amazing."

"Love is what you make of it, Clio." Aphrodite marveled at how the words she'd been uttering all week tasted horrid on her tongue this time.

"Then neither of us wanted what we made of it, Aphrodite. Hence the frustrating part of my earlier statement."

Clio's smile turned a bit predatory as she leaned closer.

"I confess, however, that watching the two of you together, doing whatever dance it is you have been doing these past several days, is very educational. And hot. You have something that Athena and I never had." Aphrodite threw back her drink and carefully set the flute on the table, her mind spinning from the revelations, as Clio continued. "Opposites attract is a superior trope. I have to tell Erato to stuff her age gap, Ice Queen nonsense, and accept that fire and ice meeting is an explosive combination."

Aphrodite filed away the tidbit about Erato fancying an age gap, because since when? And who was the Ice Queen she was favoring? Her assistant, the timeless player, was perhaps ensnared by someone older? Someone more experienced? Surely not. There were only so many choices on the menu, and Aphrodite refused to entertain the thought of Erato chasing after Hera. An actual shudder went through her.

But that was for a later ponder. At this moment, she was looking into the devious eyes of the Muse of History and seeing nothing but goodwill reflected back at her.

“You have your reasons to not pursue whatever is brewing and sparkling so radiantly between you, Aphrodite. But the whole Convention is set alight by your fire. And I am here to inquire if perhaps it doesn’t need to be a perfect match? Or even something halfway that deep? Athena has had her perfect match before. Maybe now she deserves to simply have some fun? If anyone knows history, it’s me and let me tell you, love can be very serious business. It kills, maims, starts wars and ends them. But love can also be a fling that just satisfies a hunger. It’s been known to happen, trust me.”

Clio had smiled at her kindly again and Aphrodite had stared, taken aback by the simplicity of it all. Athena deserved to have some fun. And maybe so did Aphrodite?

Well, this certainly was a lot of fun. Standing nude in front of a positively dumbstruck Athena was a very enjoyable experience. And merely enjoyable be damned. It was amazing. It was joyful. It was freeing. The hungry eyes trailed down from her face to her breasts and it felt like a physical caress. As if the fingers Aphrodite craved were tracing down her body, stopping at her nipples that furled tightly just from being looked at ravenously.

They both moaned at the sight and sensation and at that sound, Athena seemed to lose whatever tether had been holding her in place. Lightning-quick she had Aphrodite boosted up, hands under her ass, gripping her cheeks possessively. Aphrodite’s arms encircled strong shoulders, her own hands delving into Athena’s hair. She was delighted to find an undercut beneath the longer strands, and her palm caressed up and down, enjoying the pricking sensation.

Goddess, this woman was, in fact, all sensation, from the strength of her muscles, to the silk of her skin, to the bite of her teeth at Aphrodite’s bottom lip.

“You were getting distracted there.” Athena’s sly words held no apology for the sharp pain and Aphrodite didn’t have time to demand one since she was being carried—okay, this was extremely sexy and might account for her losing her trail of thought—to the bed in the center of the room and placed ever so gently down despite the rough grip on her ass or the teeth now marking her skin.

She felt weightless; she felt victorious; she felt desired as Athena’s mouth dragged down her throat to her breasts and when the heat of that mouth closed around her nipple, they both growled.

Aphrodite had always been wanted. Always been desired. It was sort of what she was all about. Her so-called cross to bear. That was nothing new. But she had oh so rarely wanted back like this. Strongly, to the point of oblivion, to the point of forsaking her own safety, her own security. Athena meant so many things. So many dangerous things. This could all be Zeus’s game. Some long-term alliance or power play he was executing. And that would mean she again would be deprived of her free will. Yet right this second, this very moment, it mattered not. She wanted. She craved. And she was being sated.

By Helios and all the heavenly deities, big and small, she was being sated. That wonderful wonderful tongue was doing amazing things to her breasts and as she reached out to touch Athena, a strong hand grabbed her wrists, raising them above her head, effectively rendering her helpless, spread out for the taking. And the greedy lethal mouth took again, claiming her lips, then her neck, her collarbone, that spot where shoulder met neck... She was marked and possessed and she reveled in it. When a hand reached out between them and dipped into her, it felt like a puzzle piece fitting in its rightful position. One finger, then two and she could almost hear the click of everything coming into place, the universe aligning.

Was this where she had belonged all along? Under the silky skin sliding against hers, entranced by the comforting scent that wrapped her in a warm embrace, held down

and possessed by strong hands and fingers that conveyed nothing but safety, even as they took her reason away with each thrust. How strange that centuries had passed, and she had never known what this very safety and security felt like. What total comfort felt like. Was this freedom? Of choice? Of simply being with whom you wanted to be with?

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

Her breath caught as Athena's fingers hooked on the one spot that was sure to unravel her in seconds and Athena seemed to sense the change in her breathing, obviously understanding it, she raised her head from where she was biting on her neck. Their eyes met.

And... it was suddenly too much. Too hot, too soft, too kind. Too perfect. Aphrodite tugged on her hands and Athena released her immediately, attuned as she was to her lover's every move. Aphrodite wanted to cry.

This, this right here.

Nobody else had ever felt her, sensed her, known her without knowing her. She wrapped her arms and legs around the lanky torso even as Athena slowed the thrust of her fingers, gentle now, clearly not entirely certain of what was going on, yet willing to do anything her lover needed. Aphrodite felt the tears spill, one then another... And at the sight of this overwhelming emotion, Athena's gaze shined with something akin to love.

The earth moved.

Funny how in books it's usually at the moment of an orgasm, but for Aphrodite, it was that very second before her release that the earth moved. The moment she saw love, as clear as her own reflection, gazing back at her in Athena's eyes. Time stood still, and they just looked at each other. Amber meeting blue, love meeting fear. Athena leaned in and kissed a tear away, only to cause more to trickle in its wake. And her gaze held so much love, Aphrodite could not bear it.

In a well-practiced move, she gained the upper hand, reversing their positions, and pinning Athena beneath her. She did not want to see. It was too much. And so she threw her head back, her hands reaching for her breasts, and felt Athena stretch down underneath her, propping her legs to give her stability. She just let it go, her hair slipping out of the loose bun all the way down her back. And then she rode, impaled on Athena's careful, tenacious fingers. She rode to abandon.

Aphrodite came like a shot. Despite it building for minutes, the strength of her orgasm still choked her and Athena did not give her respite. She just grabbed her hips, and dragged Aphrodite up her body. And then she feasted. There was no other way to call what was happening. That mouth, those lips, that tongue, perfect, perfect, perfect and they drove Aphrodite wild. The iron grip on her hip bones held her in place, and she could do nothing but hold on for dear life.

They say still waters run deep. But Aphrodite had always known she would drown in these particular ones if she let go. And for the moment, for one glorious moment, she allowed herself that freedom. When she felt the very tips of teeth on the underside of her clit, she came again, hearing herself scream in total wantonness. There was nothing left to lose, nothing left to hide, it all felt right. In the back of her mind, she sensed the body underneath her stiffen and heard a low moan, and Athena's orgasm triggered another release in her, a slow one, a wave that rolled and rolled and gripped her in a state of exultation she had rarely experienced.

She felt Athena gently tug her down until they were face to face, and then she was tasting herself on that wicked, wonderful mouth, and that felt right too. They kissed and kissed, moving in perfect sync, their hearts in rhythm. She threaded her fingers through the always just-a-bit-messy hair and smiled into the kiss. Silky strands, silky skin, silky kisses. She felt blissfully sated, safe, and warm. And she wanted. She wanted to stay. Wanted to fall asleep encircled in this embrace, breathing this woman, feeling her in every pore, in every inch of herself.

She wanted too much. And the little voice inside her reared its head, only to shake it at her. Too much was not good. Too much meant she'd lose herself again.

And if she did?

She felt that with this particular woman, with this particular lover, she may never find herself. Because, unlike any other, Athena was perfect. And she, unlike any other before, understood Aphrodite on a level that was scary, on a level that was dangerous, on a level that was too close to actually seeing her. The real her. Or perhaps Athena actually saw her and still stayed, still made love, still wanted more. And the fear of what that may, in turn, awaken in her, was paralyzing.

She must've stiffened, or maybe by the virtue of being perfect and perfect for her, Athena sensed her apprehension and her arms tightened around Aphrodite just for a second before letting go and falling down on the mangled sheets. She was giving Aphrodite the freedom to stay or to leave. Too bad they both knew Aphrodite would choose the latter.

And so she bent her head and placed her mouth gently on Athena's, thanking her, blessing her, tasting her one last time. And as kind eyes watched her, she pulled on a hotel robe and, dangling her heels off her fingertips, limped out of the room.

Aphrodite found herself standing in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows of her massive suite, staring blindly into the never-dying lights of the Las Vegas Strip. Her cheeks were wet, and as she raised her hand to wipe them, it felt silly to be crying now. She had made her own choices. For once, she had not been forced, nor coerced, or manipulated into leaving on her own terms. So why did it hurt so much?

"Maybe you should have stayed?"

She sensed more than saw Erato step to the windows beside her, and the warmth of

the familiar presence comforted her. Yet nothing felt like the comfort she had just left.

“You know that wasn’t an option.” Did her own voice sound this hollow? She reached out and Erato enveloped her in a hug, again so familiar yet somehow no longer satisfying.

Damn it all to hell. Hades come and claim all of them!

“Well, I don’t know anything of the sort. We are at the dreaded 80% inflection point. I think they call it that because in math it’s when the equation is about to change its concavity to either up or down. Nobody really knows how it goes.”

Aphrodite wanted to laugh. Trust her friend to be wrong and yet so very perfectly right for the moment.

“Math was never your strong suit, dear. And not only did you just make up the whole ‘inflection’ thing, but I also thought you said the 80% drama was so passé.”

“Hey, I used ‘inflection point’ correctly. It’s literally what happens at this point of every romance book. I may not be super smart, but then, not everyone can be Athena and win you over with her massive brain. As for my opinion on the 80% drama? It really is on the downward trend in the genre, but it’s also a classic for a reason. It works.” Erato held her tight, and they stared in silence at the vista before them.

“Why does it work?” Aphrodite’s chest tightened and her eyes stung again. Zeus, she had cried more in one day than in the last several centuries.

“Because it’s where you make a choice. Right or wrong, you make a choice and you either take on the world or you stand at your hotel window with a friend watching the lights of the Strip sparkle in the distance.”

“You think I made the wrong choice?” The tears flowed again.

“I think we should order something stronger than champagne and get really drunk.”

And that felt like the perfect end to her night.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

WHERE THERE IS A RESOLUTION AND A RESOUNDING SPEECH IS GIVEN
(AND TEARS ARE SHED)

Looking back at how her problems had multiplied during the week, it was a strange sensation to only be down to one. A massive one, but that was a minor detail. She breathed again. Her head was, while not clear, at least no longer fuzzy.

“That’s what getting laid does to you.” Like an echo from a few days ago, Erato stood behind her, as Aphrodite made last-minute adjustments before the floor-to-ceiling mirror in her suite.

“Does that mean you are neither breathing easily nor seeing clearly?” Her friend’s strange disappearances and even stranger behavior during the week had not remained unnoticed. No cupid reported having been seduced, no mortals had succumbed to Erato’s considerable charms. And she was decidedly subdued.

“This isn’t my book, Dite. This one is all about you.”

Aphrodite threw a long glance over her shoulder, observing her friend without the interference of a mirror. Centuries of trials and tribulations passed between them in one look.

“You’ll tell me?”

Erato gave her a smile that probably tried for easy and rakish, but it did not reach her eyes.

“One day. The same day you tell me what happens after the 80% drama in your book.”

Aphrodite sighed and applied perfume to her pulse points, “You may not have to wait all that long. The Closing Ceremony starts in half an hour. I am thankfully unattached. Zeus will blow a gasket or two.”

Erato’s derisive laughter sounded mean. “Zeus can go do anatomically impossible things to himself.”

“Be that as it may, I’m sure he will try something. The cupids failed, and now he will have all the excuses to meddle with the affairs of love. Maybe that was his plan all along.”

But as they walked into the immense conference auditorium, where thousands of cupids and the Olympians looked visibly bored with all the surrounding hoopla, the impressive Perfect Match board over the stage shone with particular brightness.

After three years, they had a True Perfect Match Queen once again. Aphrodite closed her eyes as the room was suddenly sapped of oxygen and she felt dizzy.

When everything came back into focus, Sabine Goddard’s name was still at the very top of the list with the perfect 100% score. One shot, one perfect match. Damn her.

“Do you want me to take her out back or something?” Erato’s whisper was decidedly shaky.

“No. I will deal with it. With Sabine and Zeus and everyone else. Nobody makes my choices for me, Erato. Not anymore. And a perfect match arrow will not sway me any more than Zeus’ orders.”

“I’m so proud of you. I know you’ve had problems all week...” Erato’s warm palm on the small of her back seemed to propel her towards the microphone. She looked at her friend, whose face held such faith in her it gave her a measure of succor. Yes, she’d mangled and mucked up so much during the last seven days. But Erato’s eyes were reverent, loyal, and told her the most important thing: she was the Goddess of Love and this was her show.

“And this is how I will finally deal with most of them. Erato... Thank you.”

The smile she got in return was dazzling. “No mushy stuff. Go be you.”

If it was possible to straighten more, she definitely accomplished it, and as she walked across the stage, thousands of eyes were glued to her figure. Her hips swayed gently, her heels clicked, sore ankle be damned, and her hair fell over her back in gentle waves.

The Goddess of Love had made her entrance. She could hear shouts of fascination and deafening applause. A cupid jumped from her seat, only to faint on the floor the next moment. Several more were standing with their hands extended towards Aphrodite, as if in prayer.

Oh yes, nothing reinforced her self-confidence like seeing all these people fawn and fall all over themselves at her feet. She deliberately did not look at the section of the crowd that held the Olympians. Athena was surely there, and Aphrodite was not yet ready to face her. She still had a couple of seconds to brace herself for that particular impact. She’d take them.

As she reached the microphone stand, the applause turned slightly hysterical. Her heart swelled at such displays of fannish loyalty and admiration, the cupids surely incensed by Zeus’s pretense and the standing ultimatum. But it was time to show Zeus and everyone else who exactly was in charge here.

Without a word, Aphrodite extended her hands, and complete silence fell over the thousands of cupids. In her peripheral vision, she caught sight of another one of them fainting and being dragged away by two muses.

“Welcome to the Closing Ceremony of the Cupids’ Convention.” More applause interrupted her, but one subtleshake of her head, and the audience was silent once again. Yes, she was rarely this showy in her power plays, but this time she had something to protect, and every single small and large victory was worthy of being shown off.

“Today is very important, perhaps more so than any other Closing Ceremony.” She had their attention before, but now thousands of eyes drank her up greedily and curiously. Hands were clenched and wrung, and Zeus sat up straighter in his chair. Aphrodite still did not look at the graceful figure lounging just two seats to his left. But she inhaled deeply, remembering that exquisite, comfortable, mysterious scent, and it grounded her, even if it was only in her memory.

As always, Athena’s presence, the sole idea of her, gave Aphrodite the much-needed clarity, lifting the anxiety, the fear. And with her courage up, she did finally look into those calm features. They held nothing but kindness. A kindness she perhaps did not deserve, but the wonderful eyes were so full of it, she smiled and Athena, in her wisdom, in her tenderness, in her ever-present support mouthed, ‘You got this,’ a second before Aphrodite once again addressed the crowd.

“First, it’s my absolute pleasure to welcome the return of an icon.” She placed a satisfying accent on ‘pleasure,’ and saw several cupids’ eyes roll back in their heads, simply at the sound of her voice. Oh yeah. “After three years, Sabine Goddard has proven she has not lost her perfect touch. I give you the returning Queen Of The Perfect Match!”

The cheers were loud and boisterous, drowning out Maddison St. James’s boos

entirely, as evidenced by her miserable face. Sabine, however, did not get up on the stage, and Erato had to deliver the crown to her seat in the first row.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

Zeus looked at the procession favorably, clapping and nodding, showing exactly what he thought of a cupid finally delivering the Perfect Match to the Goddess Of Love. Well, she had things to say about that, and she felt oddly grateful to Sabine for not taking the stage. Think what you want about the arrogant and audacious cupid, but she knew when to take a step back and leave the spotlight.

And so Aphrodite extended her hands again and the expected silence reigned.

“In the days of instant news, instant coffee, and instant feelings, it’s more important than ever to stand on the principles that have ruled our profession for all time. For we bring love, and that makes us paramount.”

She gazed across the masses of her cupids, all of them riveted by her every word, and took a deep breath. Time to kick the hornets’ nest. If Zeus thought he could simply step in and rule love, she had news for him...

“We are what’s important. We are what’s pure and necessary, what’s right and what’s righteous. Nobody can do what we do. Nobody can give what we give. In time everlasting, we are the ones who govern the ungovernable. For love is sacred. And we respect its laws. No matter how much others want to bend it to their will, we are the only ones who know the truth. Love bends for no one.”

She felt, more than heard a rumbling in the distance; the air filled with the distinctive scent of petrichor. Lightning, thunder and rain... Oh yes, Zeus knew she was about to hit him where it hurt.

“Cupids don’t bow to anyone. And neither do I.” She looked Zeus straight in the eye.

“It has been suggested that we need to adjust a little, for better direction and a more efficient process.” The cupids burst into a chorus of boos. “Well, love knows no process, no efficiency. There is no efficiency in losing sleep over a pair of long-fingered hands, losing your breath over a sweet, comforting scent, in daydreaming about a tweed jacket. Love dictates, demands, spurs you on. Love commands, but she does not allow herself to be commanded. You can try, but you shall fail. You can’t make it work, no matter how much you thunder, no matter how much you push. And you’ve pushed for ages. All this time.”

She glared at Zeus and received a glare back. The rolling thunder was getting closer. She didn’t care, not anymore.

“Time and love are the intangibles. Or should be. And if time is sacrosanct for all, love is something all are trying to manipulate. To twist to their wills. To use as their weapon or their bribe. Trust me, I’d know.” She swallowed against the unexpected lump in her throat. It was in the past. It was all in the past.

She stared directly at Zeus’s angry eyes and her words sounded like shattering glass. Sharp. Deadly.

“You played me. You played with me. With my heart, with my love. For power, for gain, for intrigue, for sport. No more. Because there is one thing I know. That all cupids know. Love is freedom. And freedom is love. And only those free will love truly.”

The cupids around her were on their feet, applauding, cheering her on. Aphrodite pressed on.

“When the Convention began, I was told I was unattached, and that it set a terrible example for everyone. That the Goddess of Love not being in love, not being married, was sending the wrong message to the world, to mortals, to cupids.” Gasps

and shocked exclamations replaced the cheers. Her knuckles on the microphone were white, and her fingers screamed in pain. But she did not relax her grip. If anything, she tightened it.

“I want to tell all of you that there is no love without freedom. And that even in love, my choice is free, and it is mine alone. I love. But I am free to make my own choices, unconstrained. Are you happy now, Zeus?”

He stood up, and she could see lightning crisscross the sky in the glass ceiling of the amphitheater. Ares and Hera jumped up with him. Chaos descended. Cupids were screaming bloody murder. Gods were demanding answers about what was happening. Hera was loudly screeching for Ares to do something.

“What can I do, mom? She doesn’t want me.” He seemed utterly perplexed by such happenstance.

“Can she have Hephaestus back, then?” Hera’s words were suddenly drowned out by laughter, and Aphrodite could see Apollo barely able to keep his seat from the guffaws. And in the sudden lull, Hephaestus mumbled, “Mom, you know how Aphrodite just spoke of choices and all that? Well, Apollo and I kinda already made some together...”

“What do you meantogether?” More mayhem ensued as all four almost ran to the exit, arguing loudly.

Artemis and Hermes were standing, whistling and applauding. The cupids were now chanting Aphrodite’s name; the muses were cheering. Alone by the back wall, Demeter looked on, her shrewd green eyes narrowed. Something tugged at Aphrodite’s conscience, the Goddess of Earth seemed too standoffish, too... something.

But as much as she was curious about what had gotten under Demeter's normally calm and collected bonnet—unless her daughter was involved—Aphrodite focused on one person and one person alone. In the midst of it all stood Athena, her face expressionless.

Ah, yes, hello choices, meet consequences.

Aphrodite had just confessed her feelings for Athena to the entire world, and she'd also made a very public choice to not pursue said feelings. Because nobody ruled her life anymore.

Except, it did not feel like a victory. There was no exultation within her. She had won a war. She had shed her shackles. And yet all she wanted was to lean in and be held by strong arms and tuck her face into the warmth of that neck and inhale the maddeningly elusive scent. And be comforted again. Be loved. Be wanted. Be devoured. She wanted so much.

And as her fate hung in balance between freedom and love right in front of her eyes, Athena turned around and left the amphitheater. Quietly and unobtrusively, as she did all things, she removed herself from the choices available to Aphrodite, and the equilibrium was gone. She was free. And she was Love. But she was alone.

She was wrong.

Aphrodite did not remember stepping off the stage. She did not remember all the congratulations and all the hugs and kisses and handshakes. She felt fragile and every touch was like a slap; she was sure she'd end up black and blue. Tears threatened, and she blinked them away, desperate to disappear.

Then suddenly a pair of hands held hers, almost dragging her out, soon joined by another pair. She knew these two. She knew she was safe with them, despite what

Sabine had pulled earlier with her perfect match arrow.

“Talk about unfair.”

She hadn't realized she'd said it out loud until both Sabine and Abby stopped and stared at her. Then Abby, the more practical of the duo when it came to things that mattered, bless her, pivoted into the now-familiar janitor's closet and shut the door behind them. It was a squeeze, but it felt oddly comfortable and she took solace in having been here with Athena.

Athena...

What had she done?

“First of all, oh my god, Dite! That was freaking amazing. I am so proud of you!” Abby clapped her hands, and her face lit up for a moment. Then right before Aphrodite’s eyes, suddenly sobered, the cupid clasped her wife’s shoulder and effectively shook the whole of Sabine. “And second, if Sabine shot her arrow, I’ll do something drastic! But! I know she couldn’t have! She wouldn’t! There must have been some mistake...”

Aphrodite thought it was one of the cutest scenes she’d ever witnessed. A cinnamon roll standing up, showing off all the pride she had in her woman. What a wonderful, genuine connection they had. Abby knew Sabine. Abby loved Sabine, hence Sabine could do no wrong. It was beautiful. Misguided maybe, since Sabine, still holding the damn crown, had clearly used her arrow. The board never lied...

“Well, darling?—”

Abby stopped babbling and turned on her wife with such adorable shock, Aphrodite had to laugh.

“It’s okay, Abby. The three of us know very well that a perfect match doesn’t mean happily ever after. Sabine did what any cupid would have done had they had the courage. But I made my choice. Neither Zeus, nor Sabine, nor the perfect match can make me do anything. I refuse to be with someone simply because I have to, because such are circumstances, or because whoever else deems that it must be so.”

Abby looked at her with admiration. Sabine watched her, head inclined to the side,

before leaning over and giving her an unexpected hug. Doubly unexpected because it came out of nowhere and because this was Sabine Goddard who touched nobody if she could help it.

Aphrodite opened her mouth to say so, but Sabine just shook her head.

“I did shoot my arrow. And there is a perfect match. The board does not make mistakes. And I do apologize.” Abby gasped, and Aphrodite closed her eyes as Sabine went on, “I am so very sorry that I allowed you even for a moment to believe that I would in any way force you into a relationship, after everything you’ve been through.”

“Huh?” Her and Abby’s simultaneous exhalations would’ve been comical under any other circumstances.

“But the perfect match?” Aphrodite looked from Sabine to Abby and back.

“Is not yours. Erato, however, has a bit of a mess on her hands. I couldn’t help myself. But that is another story. Erato’s story. Though I’m sure Abby and I will feature heavily in it.” Sabine smiled enigmatically.

“You did not use your arrow on Athena and me?” She could have sworn there was a dull roar in her ears.

“No, I didn’t. You and Athena do not need any arrow assistance. Your love is strong and pure. Your choice doesn’t affect the strength of that feeling. It does affect the fate of it, but not its purity, nor its intensity. You love. You both love. It’s true and real.”

“But...” she trailed off, remembering the expression on Athena’s face right before she turned away and left the convention.

“But you did make your choice, Dite. Sadly, very publicly so.” Abby finished her sentence, and the three of them stood in silence that seemed to stretch for eons. Extending her arm a second time, Sabine held the goddess in a tight embrace and Aphrodite cried.

9

WHERE THINGS THAT FELL APART ARE FIXED (OR COME TOGETHER, IF YOU'RE INTO PUNS)

She only had one problem.

And it wasn't really a problem. Just a minor issue. Not even that. She could handle it. She had contended with so much worse. Why, she'd just finished chewing and spitting out the God of Thunder. Surely a trip across the United States and a knock on the door of a small townhouse nestled on a quaint serene street in New Haven, Connecticut, was something she could easily accomplish.

At least that was her thought process as she took the red-eye from Las Vegas to Newark, then drove the ninety-or-so miles to the place where the world's most renowned expert in Greek language and literature lived and taught.

That continued to be her thought process as the GPS guided her through sleepy streets, across bridges and past harbors, down narrow roads, and along brick houses hugging each other close.

However, once she finally found her query and stood in front of the surprisingly cute, bright-yellow door, she lost her ability to think. Anxiety crawled up her back and all over her thoughts, and that damned fog cluttered her conscience again. She tried to grasp for some much-needed clarity and could find none.

Would Athena throw her out? Forgive her? Would she even open the door? Aphrodite raised her knuckles to knock, then let her hand drop limply to her side. Her breath puffed out in clouds, reminding her she actually wasn't dressed for winter in New England, snow lying everywhere, making it both picturesque and debilitatingly cold.

She shivered. She needed to do something. Standing here, she'd likely get frostbite or some such horrible thing her godly extremities had never encountered before. But knocking meant the last vestiges of doubt over what Athena might say and do would be removed and, with them, the final crumbs of hope that had given her the strength to fly to New Jersey and drive to New Haven. Despite being on the cusp of newfound knowledge, Aphrodite sighed and sat down on the small stoop and hugged herself tightly.

She didn't know how much time had passed, but she could no longer feel her legs when the door opened behind her and a loud gasp forced her to whirl around.

Athena stood in winter gear, looking like she was about to explore the Arctic tundra. She even had one of those fuzzy hats on. It made her look incredibly young and absolutely adorable. Silly and sweet. Beloved. Aphrodite's heart skipped the proverbial beat. Gods, had she really blown her chance with this woman? For what? To prove a point?

"Hades, take the wheel! Dite, what the fuck?"

Her teeth were chattering so loudly, she realized she couldn't actually form words and even if she could, how would she reply anyway? Athena's very eloquent question didn't require an answer. What the fuck, indeed.

Instead, she just extended her arms, in silent supplication, and in a second she was enveloped in that now-familiar embrace, Athena picking her up easily and carrying

her into the house, slamming the door behind them with her foot.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

And the fog gradually started to lift. Like an invisible hand was slowly clearing it from her eyes, from her mind, from her heart. The home smelled exactly as Athena did most days and as she was carried through the open plan first floor, Aphrodite could see a teapot with tea still steeping. Bergamot. Of course, Athena would smell like tea. Like the comfortable, cozy, relaxing brew one would curl up with before reaching for a good book. It was so fitting that she snuggled closer and tucked her nose into the hollow of Athena's neck, inhaling again and again.

To her surprise, Athena giggled—a sound so sweet and unexpected coming from the serious, quiet, and broody goddess, it made Aphrodite laugh in response. Soon they just stood there, Aphrodite safely ensconced in Athena's arms, in the middle of the living room, laughing and then kissing, Aphrodite feeling her lips thawing under the careful and gentle exploration of the mouth she'd missed so much. And she wanted badly to just say so. It was past time she started saying exactly how she felt.

“I missed your mouth.”

She could feel Athena's smile against her own, then the kiss deepened, Athena's tongue dipping into her, and she could smile no more. The sharp arrow of desire pierced her with such power, she lost her breath. She needed, she craved, she hungered. Athena seemed to sense exactly what was happening, because, without ceremony, she dropped Aphrodite to her feet before clever hands made quick work of her outer layer.

Then suddenly, to her utter horror, she was left bereft of those skilled hands as Athena became a woman possessed, building a fire in the hearth, piling up blankets from the couch, at once undressing and trying to coddle Aphrodite and make her

warm, kiss her, caress her.

“You are insane for this, you know? Coming to New England in the middle of winter in what? What even is this?” Athena was now tugging away the flimsy but fashionable clothes, attempting to cover as much of the unwrapped skin with her mouth and hands, the process more healing than sexual.

“It’s couture!” Aphrodite tried to inject all the affront she could into her voice, but her teeth were still chattering, and it didn’t sound too convincing even to her own ears. None of that mattered anyway.

The mouth she’d missed so damn much despite only having had it on her skin two days ago was back licking and biting and nipping and pleasuring and all she could manage was to hold on. And so she did. To the lovely, silky mess that was Athena’s hair, to those delightfully muscular shoulders, to that sensitive neck. Everywhere she could reach, she wanted to touch and consume and be consumed. But her earlier intention had been the right one: Things needed to be said. Out loud, before lust overtook them again.

“You are so good at this.” As she spoke, she tugged the beloved face back because she craved to taste these lips one more time, but also because she wanted to be looking into those amber eyes as she spoke. Athena could obfuscate as well as anyone, but the shimmer in her gaze always gave her away. At least, where Aphrodite was concerned.

She had known Athena loved her during their night together, she could sense her support during her resounding speech and she was keenly aware she had been heartbroken by the decision Aphrodite had announced so proudly. Others may not have noticed, but Aphrodite read it easily enough in the eyes that looked at her now with a mix of concern and curiosity.

“And because you are so good at this, I have to say some things before you make me lose my train of thought entirely.” She gave the kiss-swollen lips a quick peck. Because they were there, and so what? She wasn’t a saint. Merely a Goddess.

Athena opened her mouth, but Aphrodite put a swift finger to those lips, effectively silencing her. Not to be outdone, Athenanipped at it and smiled. For once, she seemed completely uninterested in talking.

So Aphrodite gave in, just for a few more seconds, and brought their mouths together again. How perfect could this be? How unwise had she been to ever consider giving it up so easily? The words bubbled inside her and she placed her forehead against Athena’s, holding her close, still shivering as much from desire as from the cold.

“Too good. At this and at so many other things. You. Too good. And too good to just pick up where we left off. I don’t deserve all this. Well, I do, but you know what I’m saying...” Athena laughed then and tightened her embrace.

“I have no idea what you’re actually saying and why you were attempting an icicle transformation on my doorstep. But here you are. And I find that wonderful.”

“Why do you... How?” Genuinely perplexed, Aphrodite merely stared in awe.

“Oh love,” Athena sighed and kissed her again, before Aphrodite could decide if she did or didn’t like the cute nickname. “I just do.”

“No, no, wait. First you give me clarity, and now you’re taking it all away.”

“I... what?”

“Please, don’t be all smug and gorgeous when I must have my wits about me. I came to apologize. To grovel. Ineedto apologize and grovel.”

“Ah... okay.” The ‘okay’ was uttered as if it had twenty syllables instead of two and it was clear that Athena was totally uncomprehending of what was happening. So Aphrodite set out to illuminate her.

“I was wrong. I left you. And I’m sorry. I made a very public choice that hurt you. And it was wrong and selfish and wrong. So I was...” She stumbled, her nerves getting the best of her.

“Wrong?” Athena’s eyes had little dancing sparks in them now, and her expression was akin to mischief itself.

“Yes... And...”

“Selfish? And wrong?” Definitely mischief.

“Yes, both. Wait, what is happening here? You’re not hurt? You’re not upset?” She raised her hands to cup the smiling face and still felt as if she was missing something exceedingly important.

“Of course I’m hurt. And upset and all those other things. But not with you, Dite.”

“Not with me?” Where was the famed clarity this woman always brought her?

“Oh Gods, you are so beautiful, even standing here looking like you’ll keel over dead from the cold, with your blue lips and chattering teeth. Your eyelashes are frozen. And I just love you so much. And it’s terrifying and amazing. But mostly terrifying. Yet you’re here and perhaps things aren’t as bleak as they were when I left Vegas?”

Aphrodite gaped at her after hearing the entire speech. She was, however, stuck on the words that had made her heart beat faster and turned her cold shivers into ones of a peculiar quality.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

“I love you.” She whispered, and Athena threw her arms up and jumped up and down, Rocky-style.

“Yes!”

“You dork, wait, wait! How about the whole ‘I wronged and hurt you’ part? Did you not hear that bit?”

Athena just jumped in place now, looking so happy and so adorable. Aphrodite’s treacherous heart kept skipping those beats even as she wanted to eat her up.

“I did. And did you not hear the part where I don’t think you are either selfish or wrong?”

“But I am,” Aphrodite sighed and gulped around the lump in her throat, “I made my choice without thinking about whom I might hurt.”

“Dite, you’ve been a virtual prisoner of your powers since time began. Zeus was gunning for them yet again. Whatever his real reason was, who the hell knows, but he was. You finally stood up for yourself. And you did it in style. Classy, strong, powerful. How can I begrudge you making your own choices? Love... It’s never selfish. Love is letting go.”

“And love is waiting for her to come back to you, if she is truly yours...” Aphrodite closed her eyes, trying to stem the tide of tears, as she whispered reverently.

“And to sit on your porch and freeze nearly to death rather than knock and ring the

bell. Because she loves you and is overwhelmingly, absolutely, truly yours after all.” Athena finished her thought quietly.

“So you were waiting for me to come back?” Aphrodite could not quite believe this woman, her strength, her compassion, and understanding.

“Well, I had little hope. But I also knew it was just my luck falling for the Goddess of Love, and that there would never be another like you. That nobody else would ever do. And so I resigned myself to the idea that you had some feelings for me and eventually we’d cross paths again, or that there would be other lovers, but none would ever compare.” The grin on Athena’s lips was decidedly evil.

“Other lovers?” Aphrodite frowned. “Absolutely not. Over my dead body.”

“You’re immortal, love.”

“My point precisely.” Aphrodite pouted for a moment, before kissing Athena again.

“So is this a happily ever after?” After a myriad kisses and smiles, Athena was suddenly serious, traces of uncertainty marring the beautiful countenance.

“Do you want it to be? Relationships between opposites that attract and those that began as lust-at-first-sight are notoriously rocky.” Aphrodite bit her lip to hide her smile and watched as emotions raced across Athena’s face.

“Are these the tropes that apply to us?”

“Oh, we fall under so many clichés, you don’t even want to know. We did the whole dreaded 80% drama, the running away after making love, the grand gesture, the saying ‘I love you’ among other things. We are batting way above average, dearest.”

“Well, I was always an overachiever, baby.”

“I can’t figure out if I like that you call me baby or not.” Aphrodite frowned and traced Athena’s sharp cheekbone before running her fingers through her even-more-disheveled-than-usual hair, tugging a little as she went, making her close her eyes and moan in satisfaction.

“You are so easy.”

“I’m easy? I’ll show you easy. Brace yourself, Dite!”

Aphrodite barely had the presence of mind to take off running up the stairs and into the first room that appeared in her path, only to realize that she’d ended up in the bedroom. Athena chased after her and was now slowly advancing, crowding her closer to the bed. Aphrodite didn’t mind one bit.

“That was a dirty trick,” she whispered. Breathing heavily, she watched in fascination as Athena’s kind eyes darkened, mesmerized by the rise and fall of Aphrodite’s chest.

“Such a breasts woman, aren’t you?”

“Oh, I am a very Aphrodite kind of woman. Goddess of Love, the most beautiful on Earth, and all mine. Knock me over with a feather. And then she loves me. Take my heart. And then she makes me come just by orgasming in my mouth after riding me like there’s no tomorrow. Blow my mind.”

After that, there were few words as Athena spread her out on dark navy sheets that smelled of her, pinned her hips and knelt in front of her. The vision Aphrodite had in Vegas coming true with remarkable precision. Oh, glorious, glorious precision, just like that mouth that surely had to be illegal in most Southern states. Thank the gods for boring, yet liberal Connecticut. Athena lifted her head for a moment and laughed,

perhaps because she'd said all those things out loud. Whatever, she'd better get used to over-communication. So Aphrodite tugged Athena's hair, and raised her hips up, more in demand than supplication. Athena smirked, but went back to work. Aphrodite did not even have the brain power to think anymore, let alone talk.

And then, oh, blessed Hades then, right before Aphrodite was about to reach the peak, Athena paused and looked at her with decidedly wicked eyes before planting a wet kiss to her inner thigh and, her chin on her abdomen, smiled.

"Dite, why were you freezing on my porch?"

Aphrodite, panting, wild and hungry, almost feral for a release, ready and about one second from begging for it, stared at her in absolute shock.

“What?”

Athena, smiling widely yet, planted another wet kiss, this time right above her belly button, and asked again.

“On my porch, just then. Why didn’t you knock?”

Aphrodite flopped back onto the bed and closed her eyes in exasperation. Perhaps this was the punishment for almost breaking Athena’s heart.

“Darling, can an explanation about my irrational—as they turned out—fears that you wouldn’t want me, and my legitimate—as it has been confirmed—hope that you would forgive me were warring inside me, wait till you just make me come already for crying out loud!”

“Oh, really?” How could one woman draw out two words into what surely was a whole paragraph that lasted way beyond Aphrodite’s ability to listen? So she reached out and closed her fingers around the gorgeously messy hair and pulled.

The surprised and no longer smirking mouth stopped an inch or so away from her own. It was Aphrodite’s turn to grin as she whispered, “That is so, but since you are inclined to play games, darling, allow me to show you one of mine and how well I can play it.”

And then she was running her fingers along the length of her own slit. Goddess, Athena had gotten her so ready, she could hear the almost obscene sounds of wet flesh parting under her touch. Athena could clearly hear it too, because her surprise

turned into shock and then hunger, hot, and burning, as her eyes darted between Aphrodite's face and her fingertips now dipping gently and circling her own opening. Somehow under that raw, fierce gaze, it was even better to touch herself, and so she moaned. It was the moan that undid Athena, who reverently glided her own palm along Aphrodite's and then there were two fingers inside her, in perfect sync, aligned and doing marvelous things to her.

When Athena's lips closed over hers, they lost themselves in each other. And it felt better. It felt as if they had made love for centuries, as if they had known each other forever and would love each other til the end of time. Lovers. Equals. Free to love and free to make their choices.

Granted, Aphrodite thought, those choices mostly consisted of mouth or fingers or toys for the next ten hours or so. Athena had fantastic taste in toys. Athena had fantastic taste in most things. And Athena tasted best of all. So they had a lot of options. But they were free, and they'd decide unencumbered by anyone's opinions or power plays, unless it was Athena's making Aphrodite come seven times in a row, simply to prove a point.

They were together and even if, by some cursed happenstance Fates might still throw their way, their happily-ever-after did not endure, it was certainly a happy-for-now. And a very very long 'now' at that. A centuries-long 'now' if Aphrodite had her say. A til-the-end-of-time one if they asked her. And ask her they better, since she was the Goddess of Love and it was finally her turn to get some of it too. All of it, actually.

EPILOGUE

WHERE THERE IS SOME SMALL MEASURE OF COMEUPPANCE (AND SABINE GODDARD WINS AGAIN. AT EVERYTHING)

On a massive yacht that resembled a spaceship rather than an actual boat, Sabine

sipped a convoluted version of a mojito and squinted at the sun reflecting off the waters of the Mediterranean. In the distance, off the aft, she could catch occasional glimpses of her wife splashing in the waves. In a two-piece swimsuit. A red two-piece swimsuit. A skimpy red two-piece swimsuit. Goddess, how lucky was she?

For all intents and purposes, this was indeed what winning at life was like. And it was good. In fact, it was so good the hulking, muscular shoulders and a long gray mane of hair that suddenly darkened her sight before settling in the recliner next to her, couldn't spoil it.

"Zeus..."

"Goddard..."

They toasted with their respective drinks, Sabine smirking at his ridiculously colorful and frilly one.

A woman who could have been anywhere between twenty and twenty and a day, but absolutely not older than that, sauntered past and jumped into the sea right in front of them with exaggerated showiness. Zeus sighed. Sabine laughed before throwing a sarcastic question his way.

"Yes, yes, how hard is your life?"

He joined in her laughter but sobered up relatively quickly.

"Have to say it was a bit harder, with Hera practically living on whichever boat I chose to party at, just to nag at me to get her boy back into Aphrodite's good graces."

Sabine gave him a sideways glance, but he had already reclined in his chair and closed his eyes to the early morning sun.

“So you caused all that kerfuffle in Vegas half a year ago to what end? To get Hera off your back?”

“Like I’ve not done much more to appease that woman.” He scoffed and took a long sip of his concoction.

“True, and it turned out so well for you, too. Aphrodite is blissfully shackled up, maybe not with Ares, but that doesn’t really matter to you since one way or another Hera backed off, and is now probably trying to convince Hephaestus and Apollo to give her grandbabies. A win-win for you, for sure.”

He sighed, reached for the drink once more, then reconsidered and sat up, looking like what had happened was the farthest thing from a win.

“Listen, I can’t really take any high roads here. Aphrodite has plenty of grudges to hold against me. And I can’t even say I wasn’t playing with her at stake again?—“

“Because you absolutely were.” Sabine sat up too, looking at him now, refusing to back away. “She’d have either accepted your will as she always did and got on with that foolish God of War, or been spurred into action, pushed by her zealous cupids, and found love somewhere else, making her unavailable to the above-mentioned fool, thus solving your problem. Am I right? And to call what you have been doing to Love for ages ‘grudges’ is to minimize the sheer amount of crap you’ve put her through... I can’t even...”

They stared at each other for a few heartbeats before Zeus slapped her shoulder hard enough to send a lesser cupid tumbling.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

“Damn you, Goddard. Fine, fine. Love wins. All is right in the world. I’m an asshole. Happy now?”

She wasn’t. He was being dismissive and, yes, an asshole. But she only had so much power here. Still, she had some questions and some assumptions she wanted confirmed. And so she gave him a sly smile, and he raised an eyebrow at her.

“What?”

“You really didn’t have to bring the whole damn clan to Vegas, though, did you? Ares was there. That should’ve been enough for Hera and the cupids. But you insisted on the entire shebang. The Olympian family descending upon the unsuspecting convention, disturbing peace and sowing discord and rumor. And it makes me wonder why...” She looked at him over the rim of her dark aviators.

“I hadn’t seen all those dunderheads in the same room for ages, just wanted to find out how all of them were doing.” He waved his enormous hand at her and turned away.

“Well, if that’s your story...” she trailed off, giving him another long look.

“It is and I’m sticking to it.” He nodded at her as if it settled the issue once and for all. Too bad, he had to have known her a little better. She’d handled his billions for years as his chief financial adviser. After all that time and all the money she made him, surely he recognized she could sense blood in the water.

“And here I was thinking it was something entirely different, old man.”

“You never did learn to let sleeping Cerberus lie, Goddard.”

“What, you’re gonna throw me overboard for figuring out that you brought the circus to town because you wanted to give Aphrodite a wider array of choices since it was clear that she could really only choose an immortal being?”

“Now you are simply assigning motives to my thoroughly innocuous behavior. But yes, fine, I did want to make sure Aphrodite had an actual choice this time.”

Gotcha, she thought. You Machiavellian bastard.

“Sure, sure. Good old thoughtful Zeus. Or maybe, just maybe, you wanted to not only ensure that Hera stopped ruining your fun but to spite her in the process, too? Because if given half the opportunity, Aphrodite would never have chosen Ares, and you knew it. You’d pushed her buttons enough, and she’d have done anything to pay you back for all the times you used her before. And her active regret of having ever been involved with Ares is known far and wide.” Now it was her turn to recline and stretch like a cat in the sun under his glare.

“You’re saying my motivation was impure.”

“I’m saying your motivations are always selfish and absolutely impure. And you did make sure the situation was a win-win for you. And maybe a little win for Aphrodite as well. However, you had no way of knowing that you’d drive her into the arms of someone who would actually give her love. You’d have cheerfully settled for forcing her into another loveless union. So no brownie points for you.”

They sat in silence after that, each lost in their own thoughts. She could hear his breath rumble in and out.

“Fine,” he said finally. “Not cheerfully, but those are semantics. You’re right. Happy

now? Can I sit here and live my life in peace since Hera has finally given me some of it and you've finagled my oh-so-dark and oh-so-nefarious secret?"

She wanted to sigh. She wanted to push him overboard for being a piece of work, and not even a little lovable right now. Again, as always, he was a selfish man who did everything that would allow him to have his way. And his way was mostly to be rich and comfortable and to screw around with as many mortal women as possible.

So what else was new? She did not sigh, but she did roll her eyes behind the glasses. Even though she no longer worked for him, his immense monthly contribution to her foundation was appreciated and spared her having to go hat in hand to the other gods. At least he was generous. And his wealth made a real difference in the lives of so many who benefitted from the work she did through her charity.

His companion got out of the water and walked together with Abby to the sprawling bar that sat to the side of the deck. Zeus and Sabine watched the women laugh and banter with the bartender. Sabine had to give it to Zeus, the girl was gorgeous. And from their earlier conversations, she was intelligent and kind to boot. The old coot had great taste.

"Listen, Sabine..." She turned to him, the tentativeness in his voice surprising her. "I was wondering, you did shoot your arrow at the convention, does that mean you are sort of back in the matchmaking business? Perhaps someday you could spare one for me?" His unshielded eyes looked over at the model sipping her cocktail, completely ignoring him in favor of the young bartender. Abby chose that very moment to turn around and give Sabine a dazzling smile and send her a kiss.

When Sabine turned back to Zeus, she saw both longing and calculation in his eyes, a combination so often found in those stormy depths. And this time she did sigh.

"Sorry, old man, I am officially retired."

He nodded, seemingly defeated, but Sabine knew that this was hardly the end of things where he was concerned. She'd just have to watch and wait and guard what was hers like a hawk.

As she took a cursory look at her phone it chimed with an incoming message. She sent Zeus an apologetic glance but he lumbered off in the direction of the bar. She opened the screen to a photo and instantly smiled. Yes, some things were worth un-retiring for. Like this one, even though she had not used her arrows to ensure their perfect match, she still had her hand in it, Sabine thought, as the happy faces of Aphrodite and Athena grinned at her widely from the screen.

"We just got these!" the message read and Athena was holding a set of really fancy keys in the hand that wasn't tangled in Aphrodite's golden hair. The Goddess of Love was positively radiant, her easy smile, for once, reaching eyes that encapsulated so much peace, it made Sabine tear up. Yes, they had their keys. Athena had moved to Paris, taking on a guest lecturer position at Sorbonne University and cutting some of her time in New England. Sabine guessed it was the wintertime she'd cut in particular, knowing Aphrodite's fierce aversion to cold.

They looked so happy, so blissfully untouched by the world around them, by the intrigue and politics which played with them and over them, Sabine closed her eyes and quietly put the phone away. She'd just have to make sure they stayed that way.

As if sensing her mood, a cool hand landed on her shoulder and a kiss on the other followed.

"What has you crying, baby?"

Yes, Sabine had so much to protect. And this above all. Being known and loved by this woman. Who indeed knew her and saw her and ran to her rescue when she was a touch melancholy.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

“The goddesses moved to a villa on the outskirts of Paris, now that Athena is traveling back and forth and settling into teaching at two universities.”

“I guess their domestic bliss is not what got you teary-eyed though?” Abby leaned closer and her beautiful, beloved’s fingers whipped away the remnants of tears that did spill.

“No, but they’re so happy. I’m...”

As lips followed the fingers, Sabine felt a smile blossom against her cheek.

“You are such a sap, Sabine. A big, nerdy, loveable sap. I love you so much. We will keep them safe, baby. I promise. They’ve had such a lousy go of it, they are due their happiness. It’s how the world works.”

“Darling, that is absolutely not how the world works?—”

“It should though, and we have some modicum of say about how it works in all things love and passion...” Abby’s eyebrows raised and Sabine bit her lip at the blatant invitation.

“Well, I already promised myself to keep an eye on them, but maybe I should be keeping my eye on someone much closer to me... Someone who thinks she has a say in how love and passion work...” It was Sabine’s turn to raise an eyebrow and tilt her head in the direction of the below-decks.

“Wow, so much innuendo and so many words when all I was trying to get you to

promise is that you will make love to me... Soon..." Abby danced just out of Sabine's reach and made her way down the oaken staircase and to their cabin.

Yes, Sabine thought as she quickly followed, not giving a damn about Zeus, or his girlfriend, or the entire crew of the luxury yacht. She had better things to do. And everyone else be damned. Except she'd send some flowers to Aphrodite and Athena for their six month anniversary. And maybe check in on Erato, see if she needed some help in that age-gap, Ice Queen romance of hers. Sabine did, after all, always feel responsible for the perfect matches her arrows enacted.