

The Challenge of Ate

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This is in response to a challenge issued by Daasbuffy on AJCS. The challenge is at the end of the story (I don't want to give too much away in advance.) Thanks DB, good one.

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Chapter 1: Twenty-Five Years Before

An animalistic howl emanated from the underbrush.

Artemis tracked her prey, not knowing what type of beast had the intelligence to evade her for over an hour.

Silent as a cat, Artemis crept up to the beast while considering her surroundings.

With a blast of godly strength she threw a large stone to drive her prey into the open where she could get a clear shot with her bow and arrow.

The figure dashed out of the bushes as expected and Artemis let the arrow fly. A fraction of a second later she realized that this wasn't an animal, but a person... a woman.

Artemis ran forward to find the woman collapsed on the ground with an arrow piercing her heart.

There was nothing to be done, the shot had been on target and the woman would die.

Artemis retrieved her arrow and looked curiously at the woman laying dead at her feet.

She looked familiar.

Then to Artemis' shock, the wound began healing itself.

//Apollo! I need your help!// Artemis called to her brother with her mind.

* * * * *

Apollo stood in the forest over the strange woman, trying to understand what he was seeing.

"She's a goddess... but I've never seen her before." Apollo said in bewilderment.

"Is she from another pantheon? Maybe they cast her out and she's been hiding here?" Artemis asked curiously.

"No, her power signature is Olympian... in fact..." Apollo trailed off in thought.

"What?" Artemis asked as she stared at the woman.

"It's almost the same as Strife's. We need to get her to Olympus. She'll be waking up soon and I'd like to get some hephestian metal on her so she doesn't get away before we can get some answers." Apollo said with resolve.

"Ready when you are." Artemis said firmly.

In a burst of power, the twins flashed their unconscious find to Olympus.

* * * * *

Strife appeared in Apollo's temple with a cautious expression.

The bright and shiny side of the family never called on him, and the few times they had dealings, Strife tended to end up worse off for the experience.

"Can you explain this?" Apollo asked shortly.

"What?" Strife asked, looking at the dirty, disheveled woman laying on the examining table.

"Who is she?" Artemis asked impatiently.

"How in Hades name should I know? Nevah seen her before." Strife said defensively.

"Come on Strife, her power signature is almost identical to yours. You have to be related." Apollo said in an accusing voice.

"Don't know what ta tell ya 'Pol. I ain't nevah seen her. Ya need ta look somewhere's else." Strife said firmly.

"Could she be your child?" Artemis asked, sounding less accusatory.

"She's a full goddess, right?" Strife asked, waiting for Apollo to answer.

"Yes." Apollo said as he looked at the facial features of the woman.

"Well that proves it. Ain't no goddess nevah spread her legs fer me. I just got me three kids, boys. An their muthah don't even know Ah'm a god." Strife said with absolute certainty.

"Just look at her Strife, look at her face. She's related to you." Apollo said quietly.

"Can't help ya 'Pol. I gotta get back ta Unc." Strife said quickly.

Apollo stood dumbfounded, then his attention was drawn to the woman waking up.

* * * * *

"Who are you?" Apollo asked carefully.

The woman looked at Apollo with unseeing eyes.

"What's your name?" Apollo asked a little more loudly.

The woman looked at him in confusion and finally said, "Little buggies, little tiny buggies, crawl and swim, flit and fly. Breathe them in, eat them up, they make you sick and sleep and die..."

Apollo looked at his sister with wide eyes.

"She's insane." Artemis said hesitantly.

Apollo focused his god power to look in her mind and fell to the floor.

He started choking and turned himself half over before vomiting.

"What... what did you see?" Artemis asked in confusion.

Apollo took in a deep, cleansing breath, then with a thought, cleaned himself and the floor.

"It's not like anything I've ever seen before. She's quite mad. Whatever answers we find about her, we won't find that way." Apollo said as he made his way to his feet unsteadily.

"I'll go to the halls of time and see what I can find there. Let me know if you find out anything else." Artemis said with resolve.

"I will, thanks for your help... would you check in on Asclepius before you go? I haven't seen him all day and want to be sure he's alright.

"Sure. I know right where I'll find him. In the archive of the muses. That boy isn't going to be happy till he knows all that is knowable." Artemis said fondly, thinking of her nephew.

"Did I tell you that he asked me to teach him about medicine?" Apollo asked with a smile.

"Really? Another god of healing? You might actually get to take a day off." Artemis said with a smile.

Apollo thought about that, then shook his head. "Never happen. If I take a day off... there won't be a day. Remember that I do the whole sunrise thing."

"You could get Helios to do it. He's been working for you for... forever. It's about time he had some responsibility." Artemis said, knowing she was right.

"Won't work. He's afraid of horses." Apollo said simply.

Artemis laughed as she walked out of the temple.

* * * * *

Eris walked into Apollo's main temple in an impatient stride.

"WHAT?" She demanded, glaring daggers.

"Do you know this woman?" Apollo asked, not letting Eris' attitude phase him.

"No. Is that all?" Eris demanded.

"Eris, this woman has a power signature almost identical to Strife's. He says he doesn't know her so the only other explanation I can come up with is that she's Strife's sister." Apollo said in a clinical voice.

"Strife's probably lying, he does it all the time. Only thing the little pest is good at." She said and stomped out of the room.

* * * * *

[Damn it. Apollo's too close. I need to throw him off the trail.] Eris thought as she walked back to the halls of war.

A thought occurred to her and she diverted to the halls of time.

[I need to block access to her past... and maybe while I'm there I can find something useful to draw Apollo's attention.] Eris thought as she walked through the ornate garden to the grand temple.

* * * * *

"What are you doing here?" Zeus said in a booming voice.

Eris turned and faced her worst nightmare and her eyes darted around, looking for an escape.

"Answer me!" Zeus boomed.

"Covering up for you... as usual." Eris said in as confident a voice as she could manage.

Zeus got a surprised look on his face, so Eris continued.

"Ate's back." Eris said simply.

"I thought you killed it just after it was born." Zeus said with anger burning in his eyes.

"I dropped them in the forest. I figured they'd starve or get eaten by wolves or something. But Ares found Strife just where I'd left him and knew he was mine by the power signature. I don't know what happened to Ate." Eris said while inching her way toward the door.

"Then kill it now. If Hera finds out, she'll make both our lives a living Tartarus." Zeus said with a scowl.

"Apollo's got her. He thinks she's Strife's daughter because they have the same power signature." Eris said, inching further.

"Well they're twins. Of course they'd have the same power signature." Zeus said as he started to pace.

"I can't get her away from Apollo, he's like a dog with a bone." Eris said seriously.

"Then we need to give the dog something more interesting to chew on..." Zeus said with a crafty smile.

"Let me fog the memory mirrors so no one can trace Ate back to us, then we can mess with shiny boy." Eris said with purpose.

A figure stood behind the pillar, just two feet away listening intently.

* * * * *

"What is the meaning of this? As King of the Gods I am the only one who can call a council of the gods!" Zeus said in a booming voice.

Artemis looked around the room to confirm that all the major gods were present... and Strife.

"I called the meeting." Artemis said in a full voice.

Zeus looked at her with stunned disbelief before breaking out in malicious laughter.

"Tell us what you know about Ate." Artemis said coldly.

"Who?" Zeus asked, looking as innocent as a new born babe.

Artemis continued undeterred, "Ate, your daughter... and granddaughter."

Then Artemis turned to face the room and said, "The daughter of Eris and Zeus, Strife's twin."

A gasp went through the room and Strife bolted upright.

"Yer my dad?" Strife asked in disbelief.

Zeus looked on in equal parts humiliation and anger.

Hera looked at her husband in rage as Eris did her best to fade into the background.

"How did this happen?" Ares asked, directing his question at Eris.

She couldn't answer. She had no voice.

"He raped her." Hera said in a guttural growl of disgust.

"What?" Apollo asked in surprise.

"Whenever he gets mad at me he finds some way to take it out on our children. What do you say Zeus? Couldn't you track down Ares so you could beat him unconscious that day?" Hera asked her husband with might.

"I..." Zeus began to say.

"What do you have to say?" Strife asked his mother.

Eris looked into Strife's questioning eyes and slipped into her defensive posture.

"Yeah, so what? You lived. What more do you want?" Eris said with her arms crossed over her chest.

"No thanks to you." Artemis said forcefully.

"What do you mean?" Ares asked in confusion.

"You knew Eris was pregnant. When she gave birth, you followed her at a distance to be sure she was okay. You found Strife, abandoned in the tall grass in the mortal realm outside Tanegra. You never told anyone, you just said that Eris chose to let you raise Strife. What you didn't know is that she had twins. If you had looked closer you would have found Strife's sister not three feet farther on." Artemis said seriously.

"How do you know that?" Eris snapped.

"I got to the halls of time before you could cloud the images. I was there when you told Zeus that you'd abandoned your babies and left them to die." Artemis said darkly.

"How did Ate survive?" Aphrodite asked in an uncharacteristic small voice.

"She was raised by wolves. She finally came into contact with mortals when she was about nine years old. They did their best to teach her, but... she was wild. They determined that she was beyond help and did their best to provide for her. She lived at their farmhouse until they finally died of old age. Since then she's been surviving by hunting in the woods by the farmhouse... that's where I found her." Artemis said sadly.

"What're we gonna do for her now?" Strife asked and looked around the room.

"She won't be able to stay at my temple indefinitely. She'll need almost constant supervision." Apollo said plainly.

Everyone looked around but were careful to be silent so they wouldn't be mistaken for volunteers.

Strife looked at his uncle with hopeful, pleading eyes.

Ares thought for a moment, then asked, "What's her godhood?"

Everyone looked to Zeus, since he was the only one to confer godhoods.

"Ate: The Goddess of Drunken and Destructive Insanity." Zeus said quietly.

"I've seen a few wars started that way." Ares said in thought, then continued, "I Ares, Head of the House of War accept Ate into my house and offer her my guidance and protection."

Strife walked to Ares side and said under his breath, "Thanks Unc."

Ares made no outward indication of having heard, but Strife knew that he did.

"What about Zeus?" Hera demanded of the council of gods.

Apollo stood and declared, "If no one objects, we will stand in recess on that matter to give Ate time to adjust to her new surroundings. In two moons we will reconvene and settle the matter of Zeus."

No one objected, and the gods began to go their separate ways.

* * * * *

Two months had passed and Ate was settling in surprisingly well in the House of War. She was stark raving mad, but once one accepted that fact, she was pleasant company.

"Ate, we're bout ready fer dinnah, come on an eat." Strife said as he walked into the lounge where she was staring out the window.

"Grubby, wormy, crusty shell. New eyes, new wings, natures spell." Ate said with excitement.

Strife walked to her side and said, "Yeah, tha butterflies are nice. We can go out an try an catch some aftah dinnah if ya want."

"Broken wings, broken eyes, broken heart, falls and dies." Ate said with damp eyes.

"Kay, we can jus watch'm." Strife said softly.

Ate smiled and said, "Drippy, lumpy, sloppy, bumpy?"

"Yeah, you can have some mashed potatahs an gravy with yer dinnah. But ya gotta eat yer greens too." Strife said as he led her from the room.

"Sour, stringy, icky, clingy?" Ate asked hesitantly.

"No, yah don't have'ta eat any spinach, Ah promise." Strife said as he put an arm around his sister's shoulder.

* * * * *

Though Ares wasn't usually one for family gossip, when it directly related to him or his household, he passed on the information that they might need.

"You know Hera cut him off about two months ago." Ares said absently.

"Yeah, Ah don't blame her." Strife said as he ate his dinner.

"Well I just found out that Zeus found another mortal's bed to warm... and he left her pregnant." Ares said sadly.

"Ya think tha old coot is really that horney? Mebbe 'Pol could cook sumthin up so he don't have so many wild oats ta sew." Strife said in thought as he glanced to see how Ate was doing.

"No. I think he does it to hurt Hera. He knows that by being unfaithful he's not only insulting and disrespecting her, but he's also tearing directly into her godhood. I doubt he even remembers the mortal's name." Ares said as he looked off into a distant place only he could see.

"But ya know we'll all be hearin 'bout it fer tha next thousand years." Strife said with a shake of his head.

"Yes. The name Alcemene will be very well known on Olympus when Hera finds out." Ares said with regret.

* * * * *

After some time in the garden watching the butterflies, Strife heard the call of Apollo to attend the hearing of Zeus.

Strife put an arm around his sister and said, "We need ta go to tha Great Hall. 'Pol's callin fer us."

"Teeny tiny little bird. Careful moves, careful step, careful hands or break it's neck." Ate said with worry.

"Naw, Ah'll be right there wit ya. No one's gonna hurt'cha. Me an Unc will keep ya safe." Strife said with affection.

Ate cuddled close to her brother and waited for him to transport them.

* * * * *

Strife looked around and found that not only the inner council was present as before, but also Hades, Poseidon, Hestia and Gaia.

"We have discussed this matter and come to the conclusion that Zeus must make reparation to those he has injured. Each of you will be asked for one thing that will compensate you for your suffering at his hands, so consider your answer carefully." Apollo said to the group.

A murmur went through the gods and Apollo waited for silence so he might continue.

"Eris, what is one thing that Zeus can do to ease the suffering he has caused?" Apollo asked with a note of compassion in his voice.

Eris was disgusted by the pity Apollo was showing but fought to keep her expression neutral. Finally she answered, "I want him to swear on the Styx that he will never touch me again for any reason."

"I promise." Zeus said in a sullen voice that appeared on the surface to be true remorse.

"Say it, I want to hear the words." Eris said with venom.

"I swear my sacred oath on the river Styx that I will never again, under any circumstances touch you again Eris." Zeus said in an emotionless voice.

Eris nodded and looked away.

The gods knew that Zeus couldn't be trusted to keep his word, but an oath on the river Styx would guarantee his compliance, otherwise he would lose his godhood... permanently.

"Strife, what can be done to ease the suffering that Zeus caused you?" Apollo asked in a quieter voice.

Strife held his sister closely and said, "He was nevah a fathah ta me, he nevah claimed me or my sistah. No one outside this room knows that Zeus is mah dad. All I want is ta keep it that way."

"Does anyone object to that?" Apollo asked the group of gods.

No one answered so Apollo took that as acceptance.

"Then it is done. Strife has no father." Apollo said seriously.

An aire of agreement spread through the room.

"Strife, you're the only one who seems to be able to communicate with Ate, can you ask her what she wants?" Apollo asked in a voice filled with tenderness.

"What'cha want we should do 'bout Zeus? What's gonna make yas happy?" Strife asked quietly.

"Teeny tiny, itty bitty, never hurt, never pity." Ate said, looking into Strife's eyes with compassion.

"Who you mean?" Strife asked as he narrowed his eyes.

"Promise kept, still betrayed. Left alone, feels afraid. Lives in virtue, lost desire. Strength, love, peace, fire." Ate said with pleading eyes.

"Alright. If that's what ya really want... Yer a bettah person than me." Strife said as he pulled his sister close for a hug.

"What does she want?" Apollo asked in confusion.

"Tha things that Zeus refused ta do fer us, she wants him ta do fer his unborn child." Strife said as he watched Hera for her reaction.

"What?" Hera said suddenly then turned to glare at Zeus.

"What exactly does she want him to do for the child?" Apollo asked carefully.

"She wants tha kid ta be acknowledged b'fore all tha gods an mortals as his. She wants fer Zeus ta protect tha kid and do his best ta give tha kid a happy life." Strife said with a wistful little smile.

Zeus looked with irritation at Strife and Ate.

"Then we will proceed. Zeus, if there is to be an end to this matter, you must do as Ate has asked." Apollo said forcefully.

Zeus reluctantly stood and said loudly enough for all to hear, "I Zeus do hereby declare before all Olympus that the unborn child of Alcemene, is my son. At his birth he will be named Hercules. I grant my child the blessing of godly strength that he will be protected from those that would harm him. At his birth, it will be announced by every priest at every temple that Hercules, my beloved child has been born. My protection will also include the mother, so that no action shall be taken against her."

Hera couldn't hold her indignation at the proceedings and said, "He raped his daughter and denied his children and *this* is his punishment?"

"We've left it to those he injured to decide. It is not in our power to undo what has been done. Without true remorse on Zeus' part, any punishment we could devise would serve no purpose but vengeance." Apollo said calmly.

Hera seethed, but stayed silent.

"Is Ate satisfied with this declaration?" Apollo asked hesitantly as he turned his attention to Strife and Ate.

Strife looked at his sister and saw the happy, contented smile that she wore.

"Yeah, it's jus what she wanted." Strife said in peace.

Chapter 2: Twenty-Five Years Later

Ate had been living in the Halls of War, unseen for the most part by all but the members of that house.

Ares had worked to include her in his plans whenever possible. It became common for armies who'd lost Ares' favor to have a drunken brawl the night before an important battle.

Strife divided his attention between his duties in the House of War and his sister.

Twenty-five years of seeing after her well-being had turned out to be a pleasure rather than a burden.

Then the fateful day came when he faced Callisto and was stabbed with the hind's blood dagger.

Strife died and his shade was confined to the underworld.

Ate couldn't cope with the loss, and in a last-ditch effort to appease her, Ares took her to Hades' realm to ask his Uncle Hades if she could stay with Strife.

"Please Uncle, no one else can understand her and she's been inconsolable since he died." Ares asked quietly.

"The living aren't meant to dwell in the realm of the dead. If she were to eat or drink anything while she was here, she'd be bound to the underworld permanently." Hades said in thought.

"I don't see that being a problem since Strife is here. She'd welcome the change." Ares said with regret.

"But many things can happen to a fallen god. They can be reborn or resurrected. If that were to happen, Ate would be trapped here for eternity and Strife would have to make the same choice... I can't allow it." Hades said seriously.

"Resurrected? Why haven't I heard about this sooner?" Ares asked quickly.

"Because it isn't something that you can do for him. It's really complicated, but it has to do with soul-mates, opposing forces and some factors that even I don't understand." Hades said with irritation.

"So what you're saying is that it's a possibility that Strife could be resurrected, but you don't know how or when." Ares said in thought.

"Yes, it's been known to happen a few times before. Unfortunately, those instances don't seem to have enough in common for us to figure out how to cause it to happen on purpose." Hades said with regret.

"Dagger and dart, smile and heart. Two are one, can't break apart." Ate said seriously.

Ares shushed her and tried to think of what to do.

"All I can suggest is that you bring her to visit as often as you can. Maybe that will be enough to keep her happy." Hades said weakly.

"I guess it's a short term solution. Thanks for trying. Please let me know if you can think of anything else that we can do." Ares said in thought.

"I promise. You're one of my favorite nephews, I'll do whatever I can to help... but right now I have to go deal with a situation. I think Hercules' hunter friend just died again. I need to get him put back to right before anyone finds out or Hercules will be on another crusade to retrieve his soul." Hades said in a tired voice.

"Why don't you just make him immortal? It would end up being just about the same wouldn't it?" Ares asked as he gently put an arm around Ate.

"Why don't *you* try getting a golden apple from Hera? She guards those things like Athena guards her virginity." Hades said in frustration.

"Yeah, except the apples are worth something." Ares said with a smile.

"And someone wants them." Hades said with a smirk.

Ares gave a gentle laugh and led Ate out of Hades' office to visit with Strife's shade.

* * * * *

//Cupid? Do you have some free time?// Ares called to his son.

Cupid appeared in a pink flash of power, carrying Bliss.

"What's up dad?" Cupid asked casually.

"I was wondering if you could stay with Ate for a while. She usually keeps herself entertained, but I may be gone for a few days and she doesn't always remember to eat... or create edible food." Ares said hesitantly.

"I don't know what to do. I've never really spent any time with her." Cupid said nervously.

"If you have any problem, you can call me and I'll tell you what to do. I'd really appreciate it if you could do this for me. Just about everyone in the House of War is going to be tied up with this war." Ares said hopefully.

"Sure dad." Cupid said reluctantly.

"Oh yeah, could you take her to visit Strife? It's the high point of her day." Ares said quickly.

"Um. Sure, I guess." Cupid said hesitantly.

"What's wrong?" Ares asked with concern.

"Strife and I, we don't get along." Cupid said as he looked away.

"Why not?" Ares asked, trying to think back.

"I don't know. We just never did, I guess we're too different, we don't have any common interests." Cupid said in thought.

"Well it will just be a few days, and if you're taking care of Ate, he'll probably treat you nice." Ares said, then got a distant look in his eyes.

"I've got to go. It's starting." Ares said quickly and vanished.

* * * * *

Cupid put Bliss down and stooped a little so he could hold Bliss' hand to steady him.

Bliss hadn't completely perfected walking yet and still had unsteady moments.

"Papapapa?" Bliss said to his father in an inquisitive tone.

"He had to go to work. Let's go find your cousin Ate." Cupid said patiently.

Bliss screwed up his face in question.

"I don't think you've seen her before. You'll like her... I think." Cupid said cautiously.

They walked into the lounge and found Ate staring out into the garden.

"Hello Ate, Dad asked me to stay with you for a while... how are you?" Cupid asked hesitantly.

"Days, pushing. Nights, lying. Lost, living. Lost, dieing." Ate said in a depressed voice.

"Jupa grommish." Bliss said loudly.

Ate turned to look at Bliss and her sadness transformed into a gentle smile.

"Menambis." Bliss said seriously.

"Running, falling. Hurting, giving. Holding, having. Loving, living." Ate said in return.

Bliss broke from his father's hand-hold and hugged Ate's legs.

Ate picked up Bliss and sat him on her lap. She gently stroked his golden curls with one hand and put her other gently around him to keep him from falling.

"Dagon ustavis Stwi." Bliss said as he enjoyed Ate's attention.

Ate's eyes lit up and she looked at Cupid in question.

Cupid tried to follow the mangled, incomprehensible conversation and finally took a chance and said, "Yes, we're going to take you to visit Strife."

"Short shadow, bumpty bump. Whistle wave, joggy jump?" Ate asked hopefully.

Cupid was surprised that he actually understood that and said, "Sure, we can go now if you want to. Then we'll have dinner when we get back."

* * * * *

Cupid appeared with Ate and Bliss in the main hall of Hades' castle.

"Um, I don't know where we're going. Can you lead us there Ate?" Cupid asked hopefully.

Ate looked at Cupid with confusion for a second, then looked around the hall and started walking.

Cupid took Bliss' hand and followed saying, "I hope she knows where we're going."

Ate took them up a flight of stairs and to a door.

"Little bitty, dark and sad. Hurt and lonely, mean and mad." Ate said in warning.

"I won't take it personally. I don't know much about Strife, but I'm sure he has a good reason to be angry." Cupid said as he picked up Bliss.

Ate knocked on the door and waited.

Strife opened the door and a look of delight came over his face when he saw Ate.

He hugged her close, then noticed Cupid and Bliss standing behind her.

"What'cha doin here?" Strife asked in an accusatory voice.

"Dad asked me to watch after Ate because he's going to be dealing with a big war for a couple days." Cupid said cautiously.

"Little, big. Happy, heart. Nice, friendly..." Ate said then got a questioning look on her face that Strife recognized.

"Um..." Strife thought about what the next two words would be.

"Arrow, dart." Cupid said with a smile.

Ate looked at Cupid with delight and Bliss clapped his hands.

"Ya can understand her?" Strife asked with wide eyes.

"Well, not everything. But yeah, all you've got to do is listen. She's easier to understand than Bliss." Cupid said and looked to his son.

"That's Bliss? I ain't seen 'im since he was nothin but eyes an wings." Strife said in wonder.

"Yeah, he's growing up fast... a lot faster than I did." Cupid said with a hint of a blush.

"Ah remembah that. You was a cherub for nearly three hundred years, wasn't'cha?" Strife asked as he withdrew into his room and gestured for his guests to enter.

"Yeah. Mom was going nuts trying to figure out what she was doing wrong." Cupid said as he took a seat on a couch in the parlor area of the room.

Ate sat beside Strife on a love seat and held him close.

"So what's been goin on upstairs?" Strife asked as he held his sister tenderly.

"Not much. Herc's still on his self-imposed quest to piss off every god on Olympus. I think Pan and Lamia are the only ones left." Cupid said with a smirk.

Strife laughed, he never knew Cupid had a sense of humor, much less sarcasm.

"So what'd tha big oaf do ta piss you off?" Strife asked, not realizing that he was becoming more relaxed in Cupid's presence.

"Besides calling my son a monster and a brat, he had a little fling and destroyed about two years of work. I had an epic romance arranged and now the guy's all jealous of Hercules and the woman's pining after him... saving herself for him." Cupid finished with a roll of his eyes.

Strife laughed, not in malice but sympathy.

"Happy horsey, little ring. Jumpy dolly, smile and sing?" Ate asked Strife hopefully.

Strife was about to answer, then looked at Cupid in question.

"I don't mind if you don't. As long as they don't get too rough." Cupid said in response.

"Go head you two. Ya know where Ah keep tha toys." Strife said with a grand smile.

"Dada tanka." Bliss said, then ran to join Ate at the toy box.

"You're welcome Bliss. You two have fun." Cupid said warmly.

"Most people teach their kids ta talk before teachin 'em manners." Strife observed.

"Well, Bliss is really special. I didn't exactly teach him manners, he just kind of picked them up." Cupid said as he glanced fondly at Bliss.

"That means he saw you bein polite and's tryin to be like you. I think that really says sumthin 'bout'cha." Strife said in thought.

"Do you have any kids?" Cupid asked as he shifted to be more comfortable.

"Yeah, triplets. But they don't know Ah'm their dad. Unc's been lookin out for 'em since I been dead. Jett and Jayce are makin names fer themselves and comin into their own... Joxer's, well, he got it in his head that he wants ta be a hero..." Strife trailed off in worry.

"Just what Greece needs, another demi-god hero." Cupid said with full sarcasm, then looked apologetically at Strife.

"He don't know he's a demi-god, none of 'em do. Jett got my godly stealth and fighting ability, Jayce got my sense of independence and individuality,

but Ah think Jox got a piece of mah godhood or sumthin." Strife said carefully.

"How's that?" Cupid asked with interest.

"Mischief an mayhem follow him around like a bad smell. He don't exactly cause it, or he don't mean to, but when he walks by... things tip ovah, knots come undone, things just go wrong." Strife said, then met Cupid's eyes.

"You must worry for him." Cupid said quietly, holding Strife's gaze.

"Yeah. Since he was wantin ta be a hero, I nudged him ta meet up with Xena. I thought mebbe she would protect him..." Strife trailed off.

"Let me guess. She treats him like crap or ignores him." Cupid said darkly, thinking of the few times he had peeked in on his half sister.

"Yeah. But it ain't obvious. Xena just rolls her eyes or turns her back on 'im. It's that little bitch that tags along with Xena that's hurtin him." Strife said with pain.

"Um, Gabrielle?" Cupid struggled to remember.

"Yeah, tongue like an adder, manners like a harpy and a heart cold as Zeus'." Strife said in anguish.

"Why does he stay with them then?" Cupid asked with concern for Strife's attitude.

"He thinks he loves her." Strife said in defeat.

"Well, maybe I can do something about that." Cupid said in thought.

"Anythin would be bettah than what he's livin through now." Strife said quietly.

"I'll keep you posted. Don't worry, Joxer will be fine." Cupid said with assurance.

Strife smiled, then thought to ask, "Tell me bout yer wife. Ah nevah got ta meet her."

* * * * *

Ate and Bliss were playing in the floor.

Ate held a Pegasus and was flying it around with a raspberry noise.

Bliss had a boy doll and a girl doll and they were wrestling on the floor.

After a minute, Ate stopped to watch what Bliss was having the two dolls do.

Bliss looked up and noticed Ate's curious expression.

"Moman Herm. Bounce, bounce, bounce, aaaaahhhh." Bliss said sadly so that only Ate could hear.

Ate looked at Bliss with surprise.

"Mind and Heart, feeling start. Feeling die, fall apart?" Ate asked hesitantly.

Bliss looked at Ate with sad eyes and nodded.

Ate put down her Pegasus and hugged Bliss close.

* * * * *

"Come on Ate, give Strife a hug so we can go have dinner." Cupid said gently.

Ate got up and pulled Strife into a deep hug and held on tightly.

Cupid walked over to the toy box to help Bliss put the toys away.

"What's wrong?" Strife asked quietly.

"Heart and Mind, trust and lie. Daddy Mommy, sad and cry." Ate said in despair.

"Who?" Strife asked quietly, feeling that she didn't want Cupid to hear.

"Mind and Thief, lay and lie. Kiss and hug, Heart will die." Ate said with imploring eyes.

"Did Bliss tell ya that?" Strife asked in a whisper.

Ate nodded with worry in her expression.

"Yah need ta not say nothin bout it ta Cupe. Bliss could be wrong an we don't want ta cause no trouble fer him. Will you promise?" Strife asked seriously.

Ate nodded, then fell into another hug with her brother.

Cupid walked over to them, carrying Bliss.

"We'll be back to see you tomorrow Strife." Cupid said quietly, not wanting to disturb them too much.

"Thanks fer takin care of Ate fer Unc. Ah can't think of no one bettah ta do it." Strife said in an equal quiet voice.

Ate hesitantly released Strife and walked to Cupid's side, waiting for him to transport them.

* * * * *

Cupid produced food for all three of them and noticed the subdued mood that had fallen over both Bliss and Ate.

"What's wrong Ate? You've been quiet and worried since we got back." Cupid asked with concern.

"Ugly truths, little lie. Sad and sour, sad and die." Ate said with downcast eyes.

"Oh, a secret. Okay, I won't ask. But if you can't tell me, can we do something that will cheer you up?" Cupid asked hopefully.

"Nia happy, Nia sing, Nia dance, Nia fling!" Ate asked hopefully.

"Okay, but only for a little while. If we visit too long, Mania will get wound up and it'll take Morpheus himself to get her to sleep tonight." Cupid said firmly.

Ate nodded enthusiastically with joy.

"Come on Bliss, we're going to visit Phonos and Mania for a little bit." Cupid said and held open his arms in invitation.

Bliss got to his feet quickly and tottered to his father.

* * * * *

Cupid was emotionally exhausted after a visit with the ever cheerful Mania.

Ate and Bliss had a wonderful time, but it was like a dinner of nothing but sweets to Cupid.

Ate walked into the lounge where Cupid was sitting and said, "Night time dew, risen moon. Swirley swimmy, never knew."

"Oh good, thank you for putting him to bed. I usually have to read him two or three stories to get him to sleep." Cupid said with a smile.

"Beauty flower, muzzy Mind. Daisy worry, seek and find?" Ate asked with concern as she sat in her usual spot by the window.

"Psyche's working tonight so I'm going to stay here. I already told her. Mom can look after things at the House of Love for a few days." Cupid said as he relaxed.

"Muzzy Mind, summer heat, Heart conjoin, couple meet?" Ate asked conversationally.

Cupid smiled and tilted his head back and gazed off in the distance as he said, "Yes, we did meet in the summer, but there was a lot more to it than that."

Ate sat straighter and waited expectantly.

Cupid glanced over and realized that his nightly routine of story telling hadn't been broken, only his audience had changed.

"Let's see, I first met Psyche..."

* * * * *

Bliss and Ate were playing in the floor when Phobos and Deimos appeared.

"What you two doin?" Phobos asked as he flopped himself into a chair.

"Paydolziz" Bliss said happily.

"We don't want to play with dolls or nuthin, but maybe if we could find sumthin we could all play..." Phobos said with a smile, knowing Ate's response before she made it.

"Looky over, in behind. Under in, fail or find!" Ate said with a bounce.

"Yeah, we'll play. Who wants to be 'it'?" Phobos asked with a smile. He knew she'd want to be it, that he'd hide and when she got close, he'd jump out and scare her... it worked every time.

Ate continued to bounce with excitement.

"What are you up to?" Cupid asked as he walked into the room.

"We're gonna play hide and seek." Phobos said with a sneaky smile.

"Sounds like fun. But you've got to give me plenty of time to hide, I'm big so it takes me longer." Cupid said seriously.

"Really? You wanna play?" Phobos asked in disbelief.

"Sure. Bliss and I play all the time. It's one of our favorite games." Cupid said with cheer.

"Okay, Ate's it." Phobos said and looked at Ate.

Ate turned to the nearest wall and closed her eyes as she slowly said, "Slinky... Spider... Inky... Cat..."

* * * * *

Psyche appeared in the room and immediately asked, "Where's Cupid?"

Ate looked at Psyche with wide eyed surprise, then her eyes narrowed.

"Oh, you're that crazy bitch aren't you? I thought they would have locked you up by now. I'll find him myself." Psyche said dismissively and walked to the doorway to look out in the hall.

"Muzzy mind, rotten core. Stupid slut, rancid whore." Ate said with disgust.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Psyche said as she spun around to face Ate.

"Hermes." Ate said in a low voice.

Psyche went pale at the single word response and her eyes darted around the room.

She took in a deep breath of relief and said, "Yeah, so what? I got it on with Speedy a few times, Apollo too. Who are you going to tell? Who'd believe a retarded bitch like you anyway?"

"Happy Heart, Scary Skies. Dagger, Sword, and Hurting Eyes." Ate said confidently.

"That's right Ate. We'd trust you even if we hadn't heard it ourselves." Phobos said as he walked out from behind a curtain.

"What?" Psyche said as she turned in time to see Deimos walk from behind the other curtain.

"Ate don't lie." Deimos said darkly.

"Yeah, she may be crazy, but she's honest." Phobos said from beside his brother.

Bliss crawled from behind an armchair and tottered over to stand between Phobos and Deimos, holding on to both their hands to remain upright.

"You don't need to tell anyone about this..." Psyche began to say.

"That's right. They don't need to." Cupid said as he stood from behind the couch.

"It's not..." Psyche tried to say.

"Save it Psyche. I'm going to be watching the kids for a few days. That should give you plenty of time to clear your stuff out of the temple before I get back." Cupid said in a tired voice.

"Where am I going to go?" Psyche said with a trembling lip and voice as tears began to fall.

"I don't care. How about with Speedy or Apollo?" Cupid said coldly.

Psyche dropped the hurt act and snapped, "Fine! At least they know how to satisfy a woman!"

"Lucky them." Cupid said dryly.

Psyche stomped her foot once, then disappeared in a flash of yellow.

Cupid walked to the couch and sat heavily.

Bliss ran to his daddy and climbed up on his lap.

"Daddyhug?" Bliss asked quietly.

"Yeah baby, a hug will help a lot." Cupid said as he pulled Bliss close to his chest.

* * * * *

"Ya did that on purpose didn't'cha Ate?" Phobos asked when they were safely out of the room.

Ate looked at Phobos with guilty eyes and nodded slowly.

"Didn't want his pain." Deimos said in a mumble.

Phobos pulled his brother into a loose hug and said, "I didn't want his fear either."

"Dagger and dart, smile and heart. Two are one, can't break apart." Ate said in a quiet, child voice.

"Really? You think it could work?" Phobos asked uncertainly.

Ate nodded firmly.

Phobos looked at Deimos for a long moment then said, "We'll help ya."

* * * * *

Phobos, Deimos and Ate walked into the lounge to find Cupid rocking Bliss in his lap and crying silently.

"Ate wants ta visit with Strife... We can take her if ya wanna stay here." Phobos said hesitantly.

Cupid quickly wiped his eyes and tried to put a less-than-devastated expression on his face before saying, "Thanks Pho, but I can take her. You two can come if you want."

"Yeah, we ain't visited with Strife in a while." Phobos said impatiently.

Cupid picked up Bliss as he stood, then took Ate's hand gently into his.

Phobos and Deimos looked at each other and flashed out together. A moment later Cupid followed.

* * * * *

"What's tha mattah Cupe?" Strife asked with immediate concern.

Cupid looked at the children all watching them and said, "I'll tell you later."

"Come on Ate, why don't you show us your toys?" Phobos said assertively.

Bliss began to wiggle in his father's arms and Cupid put him down.

Strife and Cupid sat down and watched as Ate and the children proceeded to pull every toy out of the toy box.

* * * * *

"Can ya tell me now?" Strife asked quietly.

"Psyche... she's been cheating on me with Hermes... and Apollo." Cupid said in despair.

"That's tough. It's hard ta lose sumthin like that." Strife said uncomfortably.

"Yeah... I didn't see it coming. I guess I just didn't want to see it." Cupid said as he looked off into a distant place only he could see.

"Would it help ya ta talk bout it?" Strife asked carefully.

Cupid looked into Strife's eyes and found only concern.

"Yeah, I guess." Cupid said uncertainly.

"What was wrong?" Strife asked, hoping it was the right question.

"Besides the absence of love, trust, respect and affection, it was the perfect marriage." Cupid said with a pained smile.

Strife couldn't help but giggle. Cupid had a sense of humor he could appreciate.

"Why'd ya stay with her if she treated ya like that?" Strife asked with concern.

"I didn't want to be alone." Cupid said in a distant, hollow voice.

"Did it work?" Strife asked, knowing the answer.

"No. I've never felt so lonely as when I was laying next to her." Cupid said with pain.

"Thought so." Strife said in sympathy.

"Did the same thing happen to you?" Cupid asked with concern showing in his eyes.

"Naw. The triplet's mom. Her husband was a no good sack'a shit. Ah found her when she was lonely and hurtin and Ah was feelin bout tha same. Me an Jocasta shared our pain an fer that one night, we wasn't lonely. She nevah saw me again aftah that night, but Ah been keepin an eye on my kids." Strife said distantly.

"Then you've never been in love?" Cupid asked hesitantly.

"Naw, nevah." Strife said sadly.

"It hurts... Gods it hurts. You're lucky your dead, I wouldn't wish this feeling on you." Cupid said as his tears began to fall.

"Don't say that Cupe." Strife said weakly.

"It's true Strife. Love is the worst feeling there is... it cuts so deep... I wish..." Cupid stammered through hitching breaths.

"Don't say it Cupe. Yer hurtin, but remembah that yer a God. Yer words have powah an can cause things ta happen." Strife said as his panic began to rise.

"I wish I were dead too." Cupid whispered.

"He don't mean it." Strife screamed into the air.

"What's wrong?" Phobos asked as he ran to Strife's side.

"Get Ate an tha kids outta here quick Pho." Strife said as he heard rumbling in the distance.

"Ate, get Bliss and let's go home." Phobos said as he ran back to Deimos unsteadily. The floor was shaking and throwing him off balance.

There was a great flash which left Cupid and Strife alone.

* * * * *

"No Thanatos, don't do it, he didn't mean it." Strife said in panic.

Cupid was only vaguely aware of what was happening around him.

//When a God wishes for death in this realm, it is my responsibility to grant that wish.// Thanatos spoke to Strife's mind.

"Please Than, he didn't mean it. He has a kid ta watch out fer, ya gotta let 'im take it back." Strife pleaded.

"What?" Cupid asked as he came back to himself.

"Tell Thanatos that'cha didn't mean it, that'cha don't want ta die." Strife begged.

"Why do you care?" Cupid asked in confusion.

"Cause you got all tha things Ah always wanted. Ya got all tha things worth livin fer. Ya got yer dad an yer son. Don't give that bitch tha satisfaction of destroyin you. Ya have'ta want ta live." Strife pleaded.

Cupid looked Strife in the eyes and nodded, then looked at Thanatos.

"Is it possible to give my life to Strife?" Cupid asked in an emotionless voice.

"Wha? No Cupe. Ya can't do that. Bliss don't need me, he needs you." Strife said as he was assaulted by a fresh wave of panic.

//Lord Hades is the only one who can do such a thing, do you wish me to summon him?// Thanatos asked with sad eyes.

Cupid nodded slowly.

* * * * *

A black blur of power faded to reveal Hades standing before them.

"Ya can't let him, it ain't right." Strife began to beg.

"Cupid, do you, of your own free will, offer to sacrifice yourself so that Strife might live?" Hades asked formally.

"No Cupe, say no." Strife said quickly.

"I do." Cupid said coldly.

"Then I have no choice but to grant your wish for death and accept your sacrifice. The living flesh you now inhabit will be remade for Strife." Hades said darkly.

"Ah won't take it. As soon as Ah'm alive Ah'll come back an ask Thanatos ta kill me." Strife said defiantly.

"You don't want to be alive?" Hades asked curiously.

"Yeah, Ah do, but not like this. Tha price is too high... I ain't worth it." Strife said and looked away so he wouldn't meet Hades' eyes.

"You are." Cupid said and turned Strife to face him.

"What?" Strife asked, unable to break Cupid's gaze.

"You're worth it. I may have dad and Bliss, but they can take care of each other without me. Ate needs you, there's no one else who can take your place." Cupid said quietly.

Strife looked into Cupid's eyes and finally nodded.

"Kay, fer Ate Ah'll do it. An Ah promise that Ah'll see aftah Bliss an he'll come ta visit'cha every day." Strife said with certainty.

"What was that?" Cupid asked as a strange feeling washed over him.

"That was your wish coming true." Hades said with a curious look.

"I'm dead? I don't feel dead." Cupid said as he patted himself, somehow expecting to become insubstantial.

"Ah can feel it... Ah'm warm again. Ah felt cold the whole time Ah was dead." Strife said as he enjoyed the feeling of blood moving through his veins.

"I don't feel cold... I don't feel any different." Cupid said in confusion.

Strife walked over to him and put an ear to Cupid's chest.

"Uncle Hades, I think ya missed or sumthin. Cupe ain't dead." Strife said curiously.

Hades walked over and looked carefully at Cupid, then Strife.

"I guess the wish I granted was the one in your heart, not the one in your mouth." Hades said with a cryptic smile.

"Strife! You're alive! Come on, let's show the kids!" Cupid said with excitement.

Cupid and Strife flashed out of the room simultaneously leaving Hades and Thanatos looking at the empty room.

"Kids..." Hades said with a shake of his head as he walked to the door.

//Do you think they learned anything?// Thanatos asked as he followed.

"Only time will tell, but my gut tells me yes." Hades said as he led the way out of the room.

* * * * *

Ate and the kids looked on with apprehension that turned to joy when Cupid and Strife appeared in the Halls of War.

Of course Strife immediately went to Ate and hugged her tightly. Cupid held Bliss and watched fondly as Strife, Ate, Phobos and Deimos danced around in a circle.

"Come on Cupe, you an Bliss are part'a this." Strife said quickly.

Cupid shifted Bliss to his shoulders and said, "Hold on tight, we're going to dance."

Bliss happily held on and enjoyed the dance as much as anyone.

Chapter 3: And All the Rest

"Cupe, will yer arrows work on a God?" Strife asked carefully.

"Um, yeah, for about a week. Why?" Cupid asked curiously.

"Ah'm Mischief, what'cha think?" Strife said with a grand smile.

"No. It hurts too much... I could never hurt someone like that." Cupid said with a shake of his head.

"Not even Hermes and Apollo?" Strife asked slyly.

Cupid thought about that and was interested enough to ask, "Who do you want to match them up with? A goat, a tree?"

"Naw, but save that fer latah. Ah was thinkin... each othah." Strife said with an expression that meant there was more he was dieing to tell. {Well he'd already done the dieing part, but he was fit ta bust anyway.}

Cupid looked on in confusion and waited for Strife to spill it.

"Where's yer 'dearly beloved' gonna go now that ya threw her skanky ass out?" Strife asked in a leading tone.

Cupid got a look of excitement as he said, "And if they're in love with each other... oh God's that'll piss her right off."

"An tha best part is that you won't be messin with innocents ta get back at her. It'll serve Herm an Pol right for messin with yer wife." Strife said in his devious and cunning voice.

Cupid's eyes went blank for a second, then he said, "She's at the temple of love... I don't know what... or who... she's doing."

"Ah'm gonna go ta tha temple of debauchery and see if I can find a few of tha excellent bottles of wine. Then Ate can give tha wine her special touch." Strife said with a grin.

"Let's do it before Psyche tells them and screws this up." Cupid said seriously.

"Go ahead an call 'em... Ah'll make a grand entrance." Strife said then vanished with an indigo flash and a maniacal giggle.

//Apollo, Hermes, Do you guys have a few minutes to come to the House of War?// Cupid asked carefully, trying to keep calm in his mind/voice.

Apollo flashed in first, then Hermes.

"Hey guys, come on in and have a seat. I have something of an announcement to make and I wanted you to be the first to hear it." Cupid said as he motioned to the sofa.

Apollo and Hermes cautiously sat on the sofa. Both were perched on the edge, as though they were ready to jump and run at a moment's notice.

"What's your big announcement?" Apollo asked, a little impatiently.

Strife walked into the room carrying two opened bottles of wine.

"That would be me. Ah'm back." Strife said happily and sat one of the bottles on the low table between Apollo and Hermes.

"How... you were dead... I mean, hind's blood." Apollo said with wide eyed confusion.

"Come on guys, drink a toast with me to Strife's new life." Cupid said as he produced four goblets.

Strife purposely poured Cupid's wine slowly to encourage Apollo or Hermes to pour the wine from the other bottle.

Hermes was the one to do it and filled his and Apollo's glasses.

Cupid held out his glass and said, "To Strife, may his second time around bring him twice the happiness of his first."

"Thanks Cupe." Strife said shyly as he touched glasses with everyone, then took a drink.

"Oh, this is good." Hermes said in surprise.

"Yeah. I figgahed that comin back from tha dead calls fer tha good stuff." Strife said with a grin.

"You have a point." Apollo said and began to relax back into the couch.

"Come on guys. Once a bottle's open, the wine has to be drunk... you can't let good wine go to waste." Cupid said as he refilled his and Strife's goblet.

Apollo nodded and refilled his and Hermes' goblets.

"So why'd you call us to celebrate? We're not close or anything." Hermes said, not noticing that he was slurring his speech.

"Who else would I call?" Cupid asked, then shot a glance at Strife.

Apollo gazed off into space for a second, then shook his head and shrugged.

"Cupe, what color is Hermes' eyes?" Strife asked curiously.

Cupid looked at Hermes for a second, then said, "Brown, I think."

"Ah think they're dark green." Strife said, looking carefully at Hermes.

"No, I'm sure they're brown." Cupid said, understanding the game.

"Pol, yer, like, the God of Judgment ain't'cha?" Strife asked casually.

"And you're sitting right next to him." Cupid said with a gentle laugh.

"Yeah, would'ja settle it fer us?" Strife asked hopefully.

Apollo looked into Hermes eyes, studying the color.

In that same moment, Cupid produced his crossbow and a love dart.

Wham! Bam! Boom!

"They're brown *and* green." Apollo began to say, then tilted his head and said, "And they twinkle with passion. They have the look of chin silk, the most decadent and forbidden pleasures."

Hermes was enthralled as he gazed deeply into Apollo's eyes and said, "Summer skies, waterfalls, winter rain..."

"Guys, do you mind if I send you to Hermes' place now? The kids are playing in the next room and I've got to get them ready for bed." Cupid asked, trying to keep a neutral voice.

Apollo blinked and shook himself, then said, "Yeah, fine. Thanks for inviting us."

"Sure, thanks for coming and making the night special." Cupid said, then transported them to Hermes' temple.

"That was easy." Strife said as he sat back and took a drink of wine.

"Yes... It's funny, seeing them together like that... I kind of hope it works out. They look good together." Cupid said as he relaxed and took a sip of wine.

"Yeah, me too. Ah think they're jus what each othah needs." Strife said from his slumped position.

"I'm a little jealous." Cupid said as he looked into his wine.

"Me too." Strife said as he looked at the ceiling.

"What are we doing wrong?" Cupid asked and devoted his full attention to Strife.

"How you mean?" Strife asked and met Cupid's eyes.

"We're both attractive gods. We're both fun to be with, and yet you haven't found anyone and I found a back-stabbing ex-mortal slut. We must be doing something wrong." Cupid said, then leaned forward to get the wine and automatically filled both glasses.

Strife took a long drink of his wine before saying, "Ah nevah really looked fer anyone. Ah don't know how ta get someone ta notice me like that."

"Yeah, that's the hard part, it'd be easier if you could just whip it out and say, 'See this? It's because of you.' Then you could get a 'yes' or 'no' answer on the spot and not have to waste a lot of time on things like 'Is she interested?' or 'Does he like me?'" Cupid said with a slight drunken smile.

Strife giggled at the thought.

Cupid got a peaceful smile as he looked at Strife.

"What?" Strife said as soon as he noticed Cupid's thoughtful gaze.

Cupid looked at Strife with a half-lidded expression of lust and let one hand drag across the growing mound in his pants.

"See this? It's because of you." Cupid said seductively.

Strife looked at Cupid with surprise, then the surprise gave way to interest, then desire.

"Yes."

* * * * *

Cupid and Strife enjoyed a night of passion and a morning of playing with the children before Strife got a vacant expression and worry filled his face.

"What's wrong Strife?" Cupid asked with immediate concern.

"Joxer... he just caught Xena and tha Gabbs doin it. Gods Cupe, he's hurtin." Strife said with pain.

"Then lets help him." Cupid said simply.

"How?" Strife asked as he looked at Cupid with shiny eyes of unformed tears.

"Bring him here, comfort him, make him feel special and loved." Cupid said with compassion.

"But he don't know he's mah kid." Strife said slowly.

"That's your choice to make. I think you should tell him, but it's not my business. If you want, I can go get him and tell him it's part of my 'godly duty' since his heart is broken." Cupid said speculatively.

"Would'ja? I can't stand ta see him like this." Strife asked hopefully.

Cupid nodded and flashed out of the room.

* * * * *

Joxer was sitting on a fallen tree, crying and wondering what was left for him. He had asked for so little in life, yet he was denied everything he desired. Friends, love, purpose, they were all taken away.

Joxer wasn't blind, he knew that he wasn't a hero, no matter how hard he tried to be. He knew that his 'friends' didn't want him around and only put up with him out of pity. And his love? Yeah right. Gabrielle had been so obvious in her lack of interest, yet he kept trying in the hope that he would gain her affection.

Cupid appeared before Joxer and slowly walked to sit beside him on the fallen tree.

"You feel like talking about it?" Cupid asked quietly.

"Nothing to talk about. She's in love with Xena." Joxer said in a hollow, defeated voice.

"Yeah, she is." Cupid acknowledged.

"Did you do this to me?" Joxer asked as he turned tear filled eyes toward Cupid.

"No, you did." Cupid said honestly.

Joxer looked away, then nodded.

"Would you like to come with me? I think I've got something that will make you feel better." Cupid said in a soothing voice.

"Nothing can make me feel better." Joxer mumbled.

"Okay, then would you like to come with me so you can feel miserable around some people who'll care?" Cupid asked hesitantly.

"No one cares." Joxer said as new fresh tears began to fall.

"Sure they do. Come on, give me a chance. All you have to do is say the word and I'll bring you right back. What have you got to lose?" Cupid asked reasonably.

Joxer looked up at that and had such a hopeless expression that Cupid felt it in his heart.

"You're right... I've got nothing, so I've got nothing to lose." Joxer said in despair.

"Come on." Cupid said as he stood and offered a hand to Joxer.

Joxer took Cupid's hand and as soon as he was standing, Cupid transported them to Olympus.

* * * * *

"Here's a room for you Joxer. Why don't you change out of your armor, you won't be needing it here." Cupid said quietly.

"I... um... don't have anything else to wear." Joxer said timidly.

Cupid looked at Joxer closely, then produced a toga of fine linen.

"There you go. I know you probably aren't used to togas but they're really comfortable and fairly common on Olympus. No one will notice." Cupid said gently.

"I... um... I need to clean up first. Is there a lake or stream nearby?" Joxer asked, keeping his eyes downcast.

"There's a bathing room out this door and to your right at the end of the hall. Go ahead and take your time. Whenever you're ready, we'll be in the lounge at the other end of the hall." Cupid said and walked toward the door.

"Thanks Cupid." Joxer mumbled.

"No problem Joxer. Get cleaned up and try to feel better." Cupid said and left the room.

* * * * *

Joxer found the bathing room easily and enjoyed a long and relaxing bath. Afterward he put on the toga and was surprised to find that he actually felt better.

He walked hesitantly into the lounge to find Cupid and Bliss plus a few people he didn't know.

"Hey Joxer, Ah'm glad you made it out of the bath." Strife said with a smile.

"Thanks." Joxer mumbled uncertainly.

"We're just about to have lunch. Do you know everyone?" Cupid asked in a friendly, yet casual, tone.

"No, just you and Bliss." Joxer said as his eyes darted around the room.

"Well this is Strife, and Ate is over there by the window playing with Bliss." Cupid said with a serene smile.

"Strife? Aren't you dead?" Joxer asked unsurely.

"Ah was, now Ah'm not." Strife finished with a shrug.

"Oh, I guess if Iolaus can be resurrected, why not a god." Joxer said, thinking out loud.

Strife giggled and couldn't fight the impulse to pull Joxer into a hug.

Joxer got a wide eyed, shocked expression as Strife hugged him.

"Don't worry Joxer, Strife is just friendly that way." Cupid said with a gentle smile.

"Only with the people Ah like, and there ain't too many of them." Strife said seriously as he released Joxer from the hug.

"Most of them are in this room." Cupid observed.

"Come on, we're gonna have lunch now. Ate's gonna make the mashed potatoes." Strife said with a look at his sister.

Ate bounced up from the window and hurried to the dining room.

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Joxer had enjoyed lunch and found that Ate was enjoyable, and slightly bizarre, company.

"Come on Jox, why don't ya tell us what ya'd like to do?" Strife asked as the group walked back into the lounge.

"What do you mean?" Joxer asked hesitantly.

"Ah mean ya got yer whole life ahead of ya, what would make you happy?" Strife asked as he sat forward in his seat, awaiting Joxer's answer.

"Are you saying that if I ask for something, you'll grant my wish?" Joxer asked in confusion.

"Naw, it don't work like that. Besides, ya gotta watch out fer wishes." Strife said as he glanced at Cupid.

"Unless it's Hades' granting them." Cupid said with a smile.

"Yeah." Strife agreed, then turned his attention back to Joxer.

"I don't know... I mean, I thought I knew what I wanted... but I don't know anymore." Joxer said in a lost voice.

"Fair enough. Why don't you stay with us a couple days and figure it out? Bliss and Ate like you and we'd enjoy having you here." Cupid asked with a smile.

"Okay, I guess I could do that." Joxer said cautiously.

"Ate, would you like to show Joxer the garden?" Cupid asked gently.

Ate perked up and hurried to join the men at the couches.

"Ate can show you around and then if you need time to think, you can go out there and have some privacy... it beats sitting in your room." Cupid said with concern showing in his eyes.

"Yeah, that sounds good... and thanks Cupid... and Strife. I, I don't know what I'd be doing right now if you hadn't come. But I'm pretty sure I'd be a lot more miserable than I am." Joxer said brokenly.

"We care bout'cha Jox. Remembah that." Strife said seriously.

Joxer nodded, then gave in to Ate's tugging on his arm.

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"Dagger, Arrow, Chalice, Dart. Smirk and Smile..." Ate challenged from beside Joxer in the grass.

"Wine and Heart." Joxer finished and giggled.

Ate bounced with happiness.

"Chakram and Leather, Curley and Scroll. Princess and Hero..." Joxer trailed off and waited expectantly.

"Friend and Hole?" Ate asked with raised eyebrows.

Joxer laughed and said, "Yeah, that works."

"Joxer?" a voice said from behind.

Joxer turned to see Ares standing over him.

"Ares... I mean, Lord Ares..." Joxer stammered in fear.

"Just call me Ares, what are you doing here Joxer?" Ares asked in a curious, but friendly voice.

"Cupid brought me here and said I could stay a few days." Joxer said hurriedly.

Ate stood and hugged Ares.

"It's good to see you too Ate. I've missed you the past few days." Ares said warmly, then turned his attention back to Joxer.

"I guess I can leave if I'm in the way..." Joxer began to babble.

"Nonsense. You're a guest. Stay as long as you like. I was just surprised to see you here. That's all." Ares said as he pulled Ate to sit with him in the grass beside Joxer.

"Um. Okay." Joxer said hesitantly.

"Relax Joxer. You're welcomed here." Ares said with a gentle smile.

"Are you the same Ares that Xena talks about? Or are you the one Hercules met when he fell through that swirley door thing?" Joxer asked curiously.

"Ares, God of Love?" Ares asked with a delighted chuckle.

Joxer sat silent, waiting for an answer.

"I'm neither of those. The Ares that Xena talks about is a monster who only exists in her own mind. I've done a few things to perpetuate that image, but here, in my home, I'm just me. My family and a few choice friends get to see past the 'God of War' and meet the real me." Ares said with a smile.

"Oh... okay. I guess I'm kind of like that too." Joxer said in thought.

"You mean 'the Mighty'?" Ares asked without any derisive tone in his voice.

Joxer nodded.

"Do you do that on purpose?" Ares asked, really interested.

"Not exactly. It just kind of happens when I'm around people who treat me like a fool... I kind of live up to their expectations... or down." Joxer finished with a shrug.

"That's exactly the way it is with me. My public persona is formed by the opinions and expectations of those around me. When I'm on a battlefield or in a warlord's tent, I'm expected to behave a certain way. If I were to behave any other way, there would be anarchy... which would spoil my ability to conduct the war." Ares said as he gazed off into the blue sky.

"Yeah, if I stop being the fool, they do something to put me back in my place... I don't think they even know they're doing it... at least I hope not." Joxer finished with a dark look.

"No, I don't think they do. The mortals have such closed minds that they can't accept anything that falls outside their preconceived notion of the world." Ares said absently.

"Um... Ares? I'm mortal." Joxer said hesitantly.

"Well, present company excepted, of course." Ares said with a friendly smile.

"Of course." Joxer said, and began to smile too.

Ares got up off the grass and said, "I need to check in with Cupid and let him know I'm back. I'm going to have a meal, would you two like to join me?"

Ate immediately took hold of Ares' elbow and leaned her head on his shoulder.

Joxer smiled at the scene and automatically followed.

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"Strife?" Ares asked in wonder as he walked into the lounge.

"Unc. S'good ta see ya." Strife said happily.

Ares walked immediately to Strife and pulled him into a hug.

"How did this happen?" Ares asked, refusing to release Strife from the hug.

"Well, Psycho's been screwin' Hermes and 'Pol. Cupe found out and got all depressed and shit. He was in mah room when he said he wanted ta die..." Strife trailed off.

Ares shifted so he had one arm around Strife and the other around Ate.

"And any god who wishes for death in the underworld will have his wish granted." Ares said as he looked at Cupid with worry.

"The next part is where it gets confusing. I guess in all the mess of trying to talk Thanatos and Hades into not killing Cupid, he offered his life for mine." Strife said in thought.

"But he didn't want to take it, but I finally talked him into it for Ate's sake." Cupid added.

"Yeah. So when Hades tried to kill Cupid and give me his life, somehow, he did something that made us both alive." Strife said happily.

"I'm glad to have you back. This place has been far too serious without you." Ares said with a tender smile.

"It's good to be back... and there's one other thing..." Strife trailed off and looked at Cupid in question.

Cupid smiled and nodded.

"Me and Cupid's a couple now." Strife said quietly.

"Really?" Joxer asked in surprise.

"Yeah. Since last night." Cupid said happily.

"Son, are you sure this isn't a rebound thing from Psyche?" Ares asked hesitantly.

"No dad. If I was rebounding, it would be with another woman. Strife and I... I don't know, it feels like we've known each other forever. I'm more comfortable around Strife than I ever was with Psyche... and he's better in bed." Cupid finished with a blush.

"I think I need to have a little talk with Hermes and Apollo." Ares said in thought.

"You'll probably find 'em in bed together." Strife said with a smirk.

"What?" Ares said in surprise.

"We invited them over to celebrate Strife's resurrection last night..." Cupid began.

"Ate threw a little drunken insanity mojo into their bottle of wine..." Strife continued.

"And then I asked Apollo what color Hermes' eyes were." Cupid said with a smile.

"That's when Cupid shot 'em with a love arrow." Strife said with delight.

Ares laughed at the thought, then said, "Gives brotherly love a whole new meaning."

"Yeah, well they were both screwing my wife, so it serves them right." Cupid said seriously before breaking into a smile.

"Let's go ta tha halls of time and see if we can find tha moment when Psycho found out... Ah wanna get a picture of tha look on her face." Strife said through giggles.

"You're not hanging the picture where I have to see it are you?" Cupid asked playfully.

"Naw. Ah'll put it in one a mah old dirty shrines... ta keep tha rats out." Strife said happily.

Joxer was laughing so hard that tears were running down his cheeks.

"You okay Jox?" Strife asked with concern.

"Yeah... It's just... Gods, it's funny..." Joxer trailed off and fell into fresh gales of laughter.

Ares smiled and walked to Joxer to ease him onto the couch, before he fell over into the floor.

Somewhere between standing and sitting, the laughter turned into crying.

Before Ares knew what happened, Joxer was holding him close and was shaking with gut wrenching sobs.

Cupid and Strife motioned to Ate to follow them out of the room.

Ate looked back into the room and with a flex of her unstable and unpredictable godly power a bottle of wine and two goblets appeared on the table before Ares and Joxer.

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Ares held Joxer close, then noticed the wine on the table. He filled a goblet and handed it to Joxer.

After a questioning moment, Joxer took the goblet and drained it in one drink.

"Be careful Joxer, Olympian wine is a little stronger than what you're used to." Ares said in warning.

Joxer nodded and cast his eyes to the floor.

"Will you tell me?" Ares asked quietly.

"Gabby doesn't love me." Joxer said to the floor.

"Is that really such a bad thing?" Ares asked in a tentative whisper.

Joxer looked up curiously and met Ares' eyes.

"She treated you badly Joxer. Is that really the type of relationship you want?" Ares asked with concern.

"She always said she didn't care what people looked like... or if they were different or weird somehow. She always talked about how everyone was the same inside... I thought I had a chance..." Joxer trailed off.

"Joxer, I'm only telling you this because I don't want you to hurt..." Ares said in prelude.

Joxer nodded and waited.

"She's a two-faced, lying, mean, spiteful, ugly little woman." Ares said with a tiny sneer.

"But how do you really feel?" Joxer asked with a watery smile.

"You're too good for her Joxer. You're honest to the depths of your soul. You have courage and inner strength and beauty that she can't possibly match. I think that's why she always put you down. She was trying to destroy what she could never have." Ares said seriously.

"Too good for her?" Joxer said incredulously.

"Absolutely." Ares said, then poured them each a drink.

"But... I just want someone to care for..." Joxer trailed off.

"You also need someone who cares for you. It only works if it goes both ways." Ares said, then took a drink.

Joxer also took a drink, then asked, "Why are you doing this? I mean talking to me like an equal."

"Because in all the ways that matter, you are my equal. Joxer, the god powers don't mean a thing if the person behind them doesn't have a heart and soul. You have a heart and soul as great as that of any god I've ever met." Ares said seriously.

"Ares... is it wrong... would there be any way... have you ever..." Joxer stammered helplessly.

"Just say it Joxer, whatever it is, just ask." Ares said quietly.

"Could you love me?" Joxer asked, cringing back, expecting to be fried.

"I could. But would you let me?" Ares said as he looked deeply into Joxer's eyes.

"I would." Joxer said with a hesitant smile.

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Ate and Strife pulled back from the crack in the door simultaneously.

Strife pulled Ate into a hug and closed his eyes in peace and joy.

The End

The Challenge

From: "DB" <daasbuffy@y...>

Date: Mon Oct 25, 2004 12:50 am

Subject: Challenge Time!

I read a myth that stated that Ate: The Goddess of Drunken and Destructive Insanity was the result of Zeus raping Eris.

Now here's a thought; what if Ate was a twin or Zeus raped Eris more than once?

Now here's the challenge:

What is the relationship between Ate and Strife?

Do they know who their father is?

Does Eris raised them or does Ares?

And a must is the Ate brings Cupid together with Strife by making Physche reveal her crimes against her marriage in the same way that Ate made Zeus reveal Hercules coming birth to Hera.

Then Strife working with Ate help Ares find happiness and true love and all that mushiness with Joxer.

I look forward to reading the stories.

That's if anyone is brave enough to take it up!