

Chaos

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Controlling Chaos

Chapter One

The eternal springtime of Olympus was interrupted by dark clouds and dropping temperatures. The atmosphere became dank and a feeling of foreboding hung in the air. Gods stepped out of their temples into the diminishing light huddling into themselves and each other. As the initial shock wore off, fear and curiosity drove them to the Great Hall of Olympus to question their king, Zeus.

Zeus was in the dark (literally) as to what was causing this aberration of weather. When the last of the major Gods entered the great hall, a rainbow hued light strobed three times and resolved into the form of a God who was unknown to all.

Zeus walked up to the intruder with murderous intent and demanded, "Who are you? What are you doing here?" The stranger looked at Zeus with annoyance and answered, "My name is unimportant, and I am here to sort out the mess you have made of your pantheon."

Hearing this response as a threat, Zeus formed a thunderbolt and hurled it at the visitor. The thunderbolt was absorbed with a wave of the visitor's hand and Zeus was frozen to the spot where he stood, powerless. The visitor looked around the great hall and spoke with a gentle voice loud enough for all to hear. "I have come to undo the damage that Zeus has done to your pantheon. I have seen by your actions that you align yourselves with power, as mortals do. By doing this, you have allowed yourselves to be controlled by power and passion rather than reason. I am here to inject some reason into your pantheon."

Gaia narrowed her eyes at the visitor and a flash of recognition fell across her face.

"Zeus, you have abused your position as King of the Gods. You have allowed your pantheon to fall into such disarray that you have insured its destruction. The twilight of the Gods is at hand due to your negligence. I have come to sort this mess out personally, rather than have all the gods of the Greek pantheon die."

"Who are you to judge me! You have no right..." Zeus began. With the wave of a hand the visitor simply removed Zeus' mouth. Panic and terror filled Zeus' eyes, but he was blessedly silent.

"Since you have chosen your leaders by the level of their power, I claim the right to judge and command on that basis." The visitor said simply. "Now down to business. Zeus, since you have failed in your duty as king of the gods, I remove that title from you. You have performed your duties as god of the sky adequately so *that* you shall retain."

Whispers flew across the great hall, but at a glance from the visitor, the room fell into silence.

"As you all know, your jobs are to control and channel the passions or powers related to your godhoods. Without control of any kind there is chaos which leads to destruction and with absolute control you remove the element of randomness or choice from life which leads to stagnation and destruction." The visitor stopped at this point to see if the gods had any comprehension of their basic function. To his delight, more than half of them actually seemed to be following along with what he said.

"Over the course of the past decade three godhoods have been lost and not replaced. Chaos has been allowed to reign in their place and now it is boiling to a point where it will destroy you all. To correct this problem I ask Lord Hades of the Underworld to produce the shades of Dionysus and Strife." Hades gave the visitor a considering look, then nodded once and disappeared in a dark flash. The visitor waved his hand and Nemesis appeared by his side. Hades appeared a moment later with the transparent shades of Strife and Dionysus. The visitor motioned Nemesis to stand beside Strife then asked, "Strife, former god of mischief, your godhood has not been claimed by another since your death and is bound to your shade. Do you wish to return to life or transfer your godhood to a new god of mischief?"

Strife stood silent. He gave the visitor an unmistakable 'Who in Hades name do you think you are?' look. Then he looked around the assembled gods and his gaze stopped on Cupid and Psyche standing side by side. While looking into Cupid's eyes he said with a strong clear voice. "I'll stay dead. I got nothin here." Ares seemed annoyed by this answer, Eris seemed uninterested, and Cupid held Strife's gaze with a look of sorrow.

"Very well. Your godhood will be transferred into this symbol." And the visitor produced a necklace with a smirking face pendant. The visitor stepped forward and allowed Strife to place his insubstantial hand on the necklace. There was a sudden burst of deep blue light and then the visitor stepped back and said. "It is done, good rest and peace to you Strife."

With this Hades waved his hand and Strife's shade faded into nothingness. The visitor turned his gaze on Dionysus and asked the same question. Dionysus responded much as Strife had, except that Dionysus focused a venomous gaze toward Zeus when he answered. Dionysus transferred his godhood into a golden cup with a flash of purple light and faded as Strife had.

Then the visitor turned to Nemesis who said, "My godhood was removed years ago, I don't understand what I am doing here." The visitor shook his head and told her. "Access to your godhood was blocked, you still retain it. You have the choice to regain control of your godhood or to give up your godhood forever."

Nemesis answered without a second thought. "I made the choice to give up my godhood many years ago and I have never regretted it. I choose to give up my godhood now." With that, The visitor transferred her godhood into a golden bow. Then he sent her back from whence she came.

The visitor looked at the assembled host of Olympus and said, "Three new gods will now be created to fill the vacant positions." With another wave of his hand, three identical men appeared. Ares looked like he was going to faint for a moment, Aphrodite bounced a little in excitement but remained silent. A murmur went through the crowd and the visitor spoke up to regain everyone's attention. "Jett, king of assassins, step forward." Jett did so and The visitor looked him in the eye as he spoke. "Jett, I am offering you the godhood of retribution, will you be willing to serve?" As the words and surroundings began to make sense to Jett, a huge smile came across his face and he simply answered, "Yes."

The visitor picked up the golden bow and it changed into a silver dagger. He handed Jett the dagger and a green light momentarily surrounded his body. The assembled host of Olympus felt the birth of a new god as the symbol of power transferred the essence of retribution and made the host of that power into a full god. "May I introduce to the host of Olympus, Jett, God of Retribution and Retaliation."

The visitor turned his attention to the remaining brothers. "Jayce, Lord of Dance, step forward." Jayce did so and the visitor looked him in the eye as he spoke. "Jayce, I am offering you the godhood of Debauchery, will you be willing to serve?" A smile of delight crossed Jayce's face and he answered, "Yes."

The visitor handed Jayce the golden chalice and Jayce took a deep drink from it. A purple glow surrounded him and the host of Olympus felt another god awaken. "May I introduce to the host of Olympus, Jayce, God of Wine and Debauchery."

The visitor looked at Joxer and he stepped forward. With a smile of approval the visitor asked, "Joxer the Mighty, I am offering you the godhood of Mischief, will you be willing to serve?" Joxer looked at Ares who smiled and nodded, then Joxer happily answered, "Yes."

The visitor handed Joxer the golden necklace and Joxer carefully and reverently put it on. A deep blue light surrounded Joxer and the host of Olympus felt his godhood awaken. "May I introduce to the host of Olympus, Joxer, God of Mischief and Divorce."

"Now that the powers are all being channeled, lets reorganize the power structure a little. Zeus, can you behave yourself? Or shall I leave you as you are?" Zeus responded with a murderous glare at the visitor and the visitor just shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh well, to reiterate, Zeus will no longer be king of the gods, it was his mismanagement that allowed the chaos to gain a foothold in Greece and nearly destroy you all. He will not be left in a position to allow that to happen again. Henceforth, Zeus is God of the Sky."

"Lady Hera, as goddess of marriage and childbirth you have made decisions and taken actions contrary to your godhood. As goddess of marriage it was your responsibility to lead by example. Your husband's infidelity should have given you the opportunity to demonstrate how a wife should handle such problems with grace and dignity. And his bastard children have no fault in their own creation and shouldn't be a target for your hatred. As goddess of childbirth, your relationship with your own children should be a shining example to all others of how a mother should nurture and love her children. Instead you manipulate your children into hating each other in hopes that they will not unite against you."

Lady Hera stood in shock as the charges against her were raised. "Since you are unfit for your godhood, it shall be removed and a more suitable godhood shall be bestowed." With a wave of the visitor's hand Hera began to glow a bright blue, then the blue began to brighten through the colors of the rainbow to become yellow. The golden yellow glow started to streak with darkness and the golden yellow became a cloudy pus colored yellow then a festering brown-yellow. There the color stabilized and The visitor announced, "May I introduce to the host of Olympus, Lady Hera, Goddess of Vengeance and Betrayal."

The gasps and murmurs again filled the great hall. The visitor waited for a moment and when silence again settled on the room he started his next revelation.

"Hephaestus, Aphrodite, Cupid, Psyche, and Bliss, please come forward." A few moments later, they all made their way to the front of the Great Hall. All of them, even 5-year old Bliss, looked as though they were walking to their execution.

"Hephaestus, God of the Forge, in recognition of your wisdom, patience, and great paternal skill I bestow on you the title King of the Gods." At this revelation, all attention turned not to Hephaestus but to Ares, rightful heir to Olympus. The visitor noticed this and spoke to Ares. "Ares, God of War, as you have been rightful heir to Olympus, so shall you be. To preserve Greece, you are needed where you are. In the event that Hephaestus is deposed as ruler of Olympus, you are next in line of succession. This would not be necessary if Zeus hadn't made such a mess of the power structure of Greece in the last decade. We will speak of this later, privately." The visitor then turned his attention back to Hephaestus and his family. "Host of Olympus, I present to you Hephaestus, God of the Forge and King of the Gods."

"Aphrodite, Goddess of Romantic Love and Head of the house of Love. By virtue of your successful marriage with Hephaestus, and the loving relationship with all your children, I confer on you the title of Queen of the Gods, and bestow the godhood of Goddess of Marriage and Childbirth." A pink aura pulsed around her and then shifted through the colors of the rainbow until it was bright blue.

The visitor then turned to Cupid and said, "Cupid, God of Infatuation and Obsession, I bestow on you the godhood of Romantic love and leadership of the House of Love." And Cupid's aura flared red and shifted ever so slightly to pink and dissolved. Not missing a beat, The visitor turned to Psyche and said, "Psyche, Goddess of Manipulation of the Mind, I bestow on you the godhood of Obsession to be used in conjunction with your current godhood. And Bliss, God of Happiness, I bestow on you the godhood of Infatuation to be used in conjunction with your current godhood." Psyche's aura flared from pale yellow to red. And Bliss' aura flared from a light shade of pink to a darker shade.

The visitor looked around, as if he were counting things down on his checklist and his gaze settled back on Hera. "Lady Hera, do you wish to remain married to Zeus, God of the Sky?" Hera shot a disgusted look at Zeus and answered, "I never wanted to be married to him."

The visitor then looked at Joxer and said, "Joxer, as God of Mischief and Divorce, it is in your power to dissolve the marriage bonds between Zeus and Hera." Joxer stepped forward and instinct took over. He placed his hand on Hera's forehead and asked quietly, "Do you desire the ending of this union?" She looked into Joxer's eyes and said a wholehearted, "Yes"

Through the power of his godhood, Joxer could see the truth of her desire to end her union. Joxer then spoke loudly enough that everyone in the room could hear, "Let it be known to all of Olympus that the marriage of Zeus and Hera has been dissolved." Joxer removed his hand and Hera smiled. Her brown-yellow power enveloped her and her appearance changed to that of a twenty-five year old woman. Most shocking to all, a HAPPY twenty-five year old woman.

The visitor then looked into the young Lady Hera's eyes and asked, "Lady Hera, would you do me the personal favor of training our new god of Retribution and Retaliation?" Hera looked at Jett, gave a shy smile and nodded happily. "Would the Goddess Lust come forward." The sinewy form of Lust made her way through the assembly of gods and rubbed herself against the visitor. He subtly took a step away from her and pointed at Jayce, "Not me, him. Would you instruct him in his duties in the House of Debauchery?" Lust took a long look at Jayce then said, "It would be my pleasure."

The visitor then looked at Ares. Ares just said, "I will." And it was understood by all.

The visitor then looked at Zeus. Thinking out loud he said, "I know I'm going to regret this..." and then waved his hand giving Zeus his mouth back. Zeus immediately began to sputter and gear up for an all out tirade when the visitor walked up and said, "You now have the power level of a minor God, you're on an equal footing with Bliss and Ganymede. Piss me off, I dare you, because I have no problem with changing you into a dung beetle and giving your godhood to the next

random mortal I encounter! Now, did you have something to say?" Zeus stood silent, his face somewhere between red and purple with rage.

"That reminds me... Ganymede, would you come here?" And the beautiful form of Ganymede, cupbearer of Zeus came to the front of the Great Hall. He looked terrified enough to pass out. "How long have you been the cup bearer to Zeus?"

Ganymede answered in a barely audible whisper, "1523 years."

"Hephaestus, you don't need a cup bearer... Do you?"

Hephaestus smiled and shook his head.

The visitor then bent slightly to look Ganymede in the eyes and spoke quietly so that only Ganymede could hear, "I know that you've been used by Zeus for sex for the past fifteen hundred years. In light of that, I feel that you would be most adept at helping people who exploit or are exploited for their body. Would you be interested in being their God?"

Ganymede looked at the visitor with wide eyes and nodded. The visitor straightened up and announced for all to hear. "I assign Ganymede to the House of Debauchery and name him the God of Harlots." A scarlet glow enveloped Ganymede then faded.

"I think that was a good day's work, If anyone has questions about the new arrangement, meet me here tomorrow. I thank you for your attention." Then The visitor walked to Ares and began to talk quietly, after a moment they, along with Joxer, flashed out.

Realizing that they were dismissed, the other gods began milling around discussing the day's events with each other.

Chapter Two

The visitor, Ares and Joxer appeared in the War Room of the Halls of War. Ares was livid, and began to speak. "How dare you give Hephaestus my rightful place as King of the Gods!"

With his declaration made, Ares struck out with a fireball hitting the visitor full in the chest. After staggering for a moment, The visitor responded with a lightening bolt aimed at Ares head. Ares snapped his hand up and deflected the lightening bolt back at the visitor. At the moment when the visitor was impacted by his own lightening, Ares let loose a volley of a dozen throwing knives. The visitor impacted the wall from the force of the lightening bolt and was immediately pinned to the wall. Knives were pinning the visitor through his wrists, legs and several knives stabbed through his torso. The final knife was between his eyes, pinning his head to the wall. In a move as fast as the lightening bolt, Ares was in front of The visitor clamping a slave collar of Hephestian metal around The visitor's neck.

The visitor looked Ares in the eyes. The visitor was showing no outward signs of pain and made no struggle against the knives, "Ares, what do you know of the coming Twilight of the Gods?"

"It's supposed to be a time when mortals rise up and overthrow the gods." Ares said, somewhat puzzled.

"And you know what happens when you lose your sword of power..."

"Yes, there is no control over the impulse of war among mortals. War runs rampant throughout the country in an ever increasing intensity until all the people are destroyed." Ares answered bewildered as to the connection.

The visitor shifted his eyes and looked past Ares to Joxer, "Do you know why the god of Mischief is necessary in this and other pantheons?"

Joxer thought about it for a second before answering, "I suppose it's like the sword of war. Without a god of mischief, every impulse of mischief would become an act of mischief."

The visitor looked surprised by Joxer's answer. Joxer noticed and said, "Ares...uh... explained some things to me."

"He did a good job of it. Without your mischief god, not only do you have mischievous actions running rampant, but they don't have any underlying purpose. The culmination of the mischief is nothing but chaos. Most pantheons understand the necessity of having a mischief god but yours is one of the few that actually uses

the forces of mischief in concert with the forces of war to achieve a benefit. Loki is allowed to run wild in his pantheon and has nearly caused it's destruction many times. Coyote is a respected member of his pantheon, but works alone and is sometimes at crossed purposes with his own people."

Ares spoke up, "Now that Joxer is god of mischief, he can learn to channel the impulses and turn the mischievous actions to some purpose."

The visitor shifted his focus to Ares, "Yes, in time. Unfortunately, it is time that we don't really have. Take the condition of the mischief godhood and extend the same reasoning to the godhoods of debauchery and retribution.

"The impulses of those godhoods have been unchecked among mortals, building, leading toward ultimate destruction." Ares said with realization dawning.

"Now put together the impulses from all the abandoned godhoods, throw in a couple self-righteous demigod heroes and a harpy with an agenda..."

"...And you get a Twilight of the Gods." Ares finished.

"And it's already in the making. All the ingredients are there. It will take an experienced War God paying his full attention to prevent the Twilight from coming to be."

Joxer interrupted the ensuing silence. "You are talking about preventing the Twilight of the Gods, but is it something that can be prevented? I mean, since it has been prophesied, doesn't that mean that it will happen?"

The visitor looked approvingly at Joxer and answered, "Yes and no, Joxer. The Twilight of the Gods will come to be. There is no preventing the eventual destruction of the gods. But it doesn't have to be this week, or this year, or this millennia."

Ares nodded, "I see why you need me where I am. If I took on the job of king of the gods now, my attention would be divided between the king duties and war duties."

The visitor became transparent and stepped away from the wall, leaving the knives behind. The visitor took the slave collar from his neck and handed it to Ares as he walked past him to sit on a nearby chair. "Right, and since Hephaestus can't father any children, he can't create an heir by right of inheritance. That insures your place as the designated heir of Olympus."

Noticing the bewildered look on Ares face, The visitor said, "Oh that, no power in this universe can hurt me... You looked like you needed to work off a little steam before you could talk reasonably."

The visitor was apparently counting down his mental checklist again, "Oh, and I wanted to offer up a warning. Now that Zeus is out of power, don't go straight for Hercules. If any of those four are killed, they will be elevated to the status of martyr and the twilight will be assured."

A look of profound disappointment crossed Ares face. Joxer walked over and placed his hand on Ares shoulder and said, "Well... Uh... If you hurry, you can have the... Uh... pleasure... of telling Hercules the news."

The visitor saw Ares face light up at that and laughed. "Go ahead, we've had enough seriousness today. Ruin Hercules day and enjoy yourself."

Ares smiled and nodded before flashing out with Joxer in his arms.

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Ares and Joxer flashed into a wooded area near Hercules and Iolaus' campsite. They walked toward the firelight and waited to be recognized. Hercules' head turned at the movement and he immediately got to his feet. A moment later Iolaus was at his side.

"Ares, what are you doing here?" Hercules spoke Ares name as if it were a curse.

"I just came to give you the latest family gossip, little brother." Ares said with a smile.

"I don't want to hear anything you have to say." Hercules spat.

"Fine, Iolaus would you be interested in knowing that Zeus is no longer King of the Gods?" Ares said with glee.

"What!? Ares what kind of game are you playing at?" Hercules screamed, ready to pounce.

"Hercules, you didn't want to hear it. I'm talking with Iolaus if you don't mind." Ares then purposefully turned to Iolaus and said, "It's been quite a day. Zeus was removed as King of Olympus, and Hera was removed as Queen. And that means that Zeus protection order is no longer in effect for any of his children..."

"Father!" Hercules screamed into the air.

"I don't know if he'll be able to come to you Herc, he's probably busy clearing out his desk." Ares said with ever increasing satisfaction.

Iolaus noticed Joxer standing behind Ares watching the events unfold. "Joxer? What are you doing here?"

Joxer looked up, not expecting to be noticed. "I... Uh... Just came along with Ares to deliver the news."

"What are you doing with Ares?" Iolaus questioned curiously.

"I... Uh... kinda work for him now." Joxer said shyly.

"Joxer, Ares will just use you. You don't owe him anything." Hercules stated in a commanding tone. Then turned his voice toward the sky, "Father!"

Zeus appeared in a muted white flash looking smaller and more tired than any of those assembled had ever seen him before. "You called, my son?"

"Father, Ares said that you aren't king of the gods anymore. Is this true?"

Zeus flashed a withering look at Ares and said, "Yes, it's true."

"But how? I thought you couldn't be removed from your position except by your death." Hercules asked, somewhat weaker as the situation was becoming more real.

"I honestly don't know. An unknown god came along and took my power away as if it were nothing to him. He left me weakened to the point that I can barely transport myself. And he dissolved my marriage to Hera." Zeus ended in a voice so small and defeated that it could barely be heard.

"So is this unknown god the new king of the gods? Where is he from, who is he?" Hercules asked, paranoia streaking his voice.

Ares stepped in to answer, "No, he named Hephaestus as the new King of the Gods. I get the impression that he is just here to set things right and then he will leave."

"Set things right? For whom?" Iolaus chimed in.

"For all of us." Joxer said with uncharacteristic confidence.

Ares turned to look Hercules in the eyes, "Herc, I don't like you. You don't like me. But this is a new day so I'm willing to let our old battles lie in the past. I'll leave you alone as long as you stay out of my way."

With that declaration Ares turned to leave, Joxer turned to leave with him when Hercules said, "Joxer, you don't have to go with him. You can stay here with us."

Ares looked at Joxer seriously and said, "He's right, you can stay here if you want."

Joxer gave Ares Aphrodite's 'Duh' look (pat pending) and walked ahead of Ares into the woods. Ares just smiled and followed him.

Without a word, Zeus walked in the opposite direction and disappeared in a muted flash of white light.

Hercules and Iolaus stood silently, and Hercules realized that a perfectly good day had been ruined.

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Ares and Joxer appeared in the Halls of War. It wasn't the war room, but the décor was similar enough that there was no doubt of where they were. Joxer sat on a nearby sofa and waited for Ares to seat himself. A moment later Joxer asked, "Is this going to change things between us?"

Ares considered the question for a moment, then answered, "Yes, it probably will, but I think it will be a good change."

Joxer looked puzzled.

"We've been friends for a couple of years. When one of us needs someone to talk to we seek each other out and discuss our problems. But there have been times when I felt like I couldn't tell you certain things because mortals and gods are so different." Ares reasoned.

After a nod from Joxer, he continued, "Now that we are both gods, our relationship is bound to change because we both have a similar frame of reference."

Joxer began to look lost so Ares decided to use an example. "How old are you Joxer?"

"27" Joxer answered without knowing where this question was leading.

"At 27 a mortal is 1/3 to 1/2 of his way through a mortal life-span..." Joxer gave a nod of acknowledgment.

"I am nearly 3000 years old and I'm not particularly old by the standards of gods, my life has no predetermined length."

Joxer became excited as realization dawned, "That means that when I talked about wanting to settle down and raise a family while I still have time, I was looking at a mortal life-span and you couldn't really relate to it because you have..."

"...Forever, basically." Ares interrupted with a smile.

"And now that I have forever too, we can understand each other." Joxer nodded knowingly.

"Time is just one thing we perceive differently, we'll discover other things and adjust to them as we find them." Ares stood and extended his hand to Joxer to lift him from the couch.

"I think, before it gets too late, I should begin to train you to use your new godly abilities." Ares said with a serious look.

"Uh... Okay... Um... What are you going to teach me first?" Joxer stammered.

//How about, this being your first day, we start with something easy?// Ares voice sounded in Joxer's mind.

"Okay Ares, that was really freaky. I heard you inside my head and my knees felt kind of funny."

Ares laughed. "That's mind-speak. Gods can call other gods that way or talk privately. It'll just take a few times of hearing it and you'll get used to it. Although I can't explain the thing with your knees."

"Can I do it?" Joxer asked.

"Sure, all you have to do is picture my face in your mind and think the words that you want to say to my face."

Joxer scrunched up his face and thought something at Ares but it didn't work.

"I didn't get it Joxer, try again and I'll see what you're doing..."

Ares looked into Joxer's mind and saw the problem. "Joxer, I think you're trying to protect me. You're actually making the picture of me, sending the words to it and pulling them back before they reach me. Just relax and let the words flow. You don't have to protect me. If they are too loud, I can shield myself.

//ARES - CAN - U - HEAR - ME ?//

//Yes, I can hear you. Now that you can do it, just do the same thing but in normal speech. You don't have to hammer the words in. How are your knees?//

Joxer scrunched his face and responded. //Ma Neez R still feelin funnee. Iss thiss enny bettr?//

//Some. But I think your trying to be quiet and it makes your mind-voice sound funny. Just think to me like you're talking to me.// Ares was really REALLY trying to keep a straight face.

//Just normal talk? Like this? Uh... What should I say?//

//Perfect Joxer!! Just like that. It's time for bed now. We'll practice again tomorrow.//

//It's really fun. But my knees still feel funny.//

Ares led Joxer through a door into the private chambers of the halls of war.

"Joxer, if you don't mind, I'm going to have you stay in my room tonight." Ares said just a little sheepishly.

"Uh... Okay. Why?" Joxer asked.

"Well, honestly, I don't have any guests that spend the night in another room. See this room, it's Eris'. Those are Phoebos and Deimos. That one belongs to Enyo. And this one belongs to Strife. I'm going to visit with Strife and see if he minds that I give you his room. There are plenty of rooms but none of them are ready for guests. They'll need to be emptied and made ready to live in."

Joxer nodded his head and agreed. "I don't mind sharing a room if you don't."

Ares smiled at him, "Not a problem, what are friends for?"

At the end of the hall they came to a double door. When Ares opened it, Joxer stopped, transfixed by the sight of the enormous bedroom.

Ares stopped at the stunned look on Joxer's face and realized that Joxer probably hadn't ever seen a room done in full regal pageantry before. "As head of the House of War, and the Houses of Aggression as well as being the heir to Olympus I guess I am allowed one or two indulgences. I like having a nice bedroom.

"Nice? This is the most beautiful place I've ever been! And it's bigger than my village back home."

Ares laughed. "That's nice of you to say but I assure you that its not bigger than your home village."

"Still, its amazing..."

Ares led Joxer over to a tall cabinet. "Here is a wardrobe, the clothes should probably fit you. If not, we'll work it out when we need to. Through that doorway is a bath and through the other doorway is the sleeping chamber. I'm going to take a bath now, you're welcomed to join me if you like. Just make yourself comfortable."

Joxer stood silent for a moment as Ares walked to the bathing room. Then he followed saying, "Uh... I... Um... bath, yeah."

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Back in the meeting hall, Gaia waited for the last of the gods to leave the visitor alone. She was appalled from being witness to hours of adolescent awkwardness and undisguised sucking-up. Apparently the other gods had no concept of dignity or self-respect.

"Gaia, I've been waiting to talk to you" the visitor spoke quietly.

Gaia looked at the visitor with shining eyes and said, "Grandfather?"

Chapter Three

"Yes child, I have returned."

"But you can't exist here, you'll destroy the world." Gaia said with a note of sadness.

"I know little one, I'm merely dipping my toe in the pool. I'll be leaving soon."

Gaia spoke up, more insistently, "The world is already being effected by your presence. Civilizations will begin to fall if you don't leave immediately."

"My little godling, you always were an impatient one. I can stay one more day with no lasting effect. The pieces are now in place. I just have to set them in motion." the visitor said.

"But won't your being here draw grandmother." Gaia said with some worry.

"Chaos will do as the mood strikes her. The twilight had to be postponed, if I had stayed away, all would be lost. Talk with the fates, they will confirm that this was necessary." he looked away grimly.

"I understand Grandfather. It's just hard for me to be objective when my godhood is screaming at the wrongness of your being here." Gaia said with a timid look.

"I know child, and I promise that once the new structure is set into motion, I'll be on my way." He said sadly. "Sit and talk with me for a time before I have to finish my work here and leave."

Gaia gave a nod and sat with her ultimate Grandfather, enjoying his companionship for the first time in millennia.

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Ganymede materialized unseen to mortal eyes in a brothel. He looked around the main room with an appraising eye. He observed the last of the unattended harlots helping the Madame clear tables. The women worked to the music of moans and slapping flesh from the occupied rooms of the brothel.

The women chatted idly of the business of the day as the work was quickly completed. As the last of the harlots left to get a night of sleep. Ganymede decided that he would talk to the Madame.

In a flourish of scarlet light and golden sparkles Ganymede appeared. Meg stopped in her tracks and stared at the beauty of the young barely teenaged boy... god... standing before her.

"Lord?... May I help you?" Meg asked with uncharacteristic hesitance.

"Please, call me Ganymede. And yes you can help me. Let's sit, this might take a while."

"Yeah, sure. Can I get you a drink or anything?"

Ganymede laughed a somewhat bitter laugh and said, "M'lady, I would be honored to provide drinks. I've had years of training."

Meg was taken aback by his response but nodded and sat across the table from Ganymede as he produced two goblets of wine. "M'lady, I have recently been given the duty of protecting you and establishments such as yours. I have come to you so I might get to know your needs."

As soon as the words left his mouth, a leer crossed Meg's face. Ganymede felt a spark of fear, deep within himself. It was the same spark he always felt when someone approached him with THAT look.

"No." he said quietly. The near whisper was more effective than a scream. Meg felt appropriately ashamed when she realized what her automatic response had been.

"I will tell you this because I need to do the right thing to help those who are my responsibility. Zeus found me when I was a child and he became enamored of me. As he was king of the gods, he was able to take me and make me into a minor god so that I could be his toy for all time. My body was made to be unchanging. The way you see me now, I have been for the past 1500 years. I was his own personal whore. Today I was given the responsibility to watch over those who are used for sex. My official title is 'Ganymede, God of Harlots'."

With a look of shock and a voice filled with awe Meg said, "Then, you're my God?"

Ganymede smiled and his eyes softened as he felt, for the first time in his life as a god, worship. "Yes M'lady, I am the god of you and all those in your employ. Now all I need to know is what can your god do to help you?"

* * * * *

Cupid finally relaxed as another wave of nausea left him. He called out across Olympus, //Asclepius!// and then bent his head into a basin retching again.

Asclepius appeared behind Cupid and quietly began to assess his condition.

"Cupid, there is an enchantment on you." Asclepius said.

"What? What is it?" Cupid asked between deep breaths.

"It appears to be a spell from one of your arrows... no... my mistake... two of your arrows. Obsession and Infatuation." Asclepius said timidly. "They are working in direct opposition to your new godhood."

"But... how? Can you fix me?" Cupid asked as Asclepius materialized a cold wet cloth.

"No, but you can. As I said, the spell is contrary to your new godhood. The godhood is cleansing your system. By morning all the effects of the enchantments should be gone."

"Is there anything I can do to speed it up? I feel rotten."

"I think a bowl of ambrosia should settle your stomach and then a good nights sleep." Asclepius stood again and turned to go.

Cupid immediately materialized a bowl of ambrosia and began to eat.

"Thanks Ace. I owe you one." Cupid said between bites walking Asclepius to the door.

Asclepius stopped in his tracks. He turned to Cupid and looked deep into his eyes. "Yes, you do. And as head of the house of love, you can actually repay me."

Cupid was stunned by the bluntness of Asclepius' statement, "What can I do for you Ace?"

"Cupid, I'm lonely... I would really like to have someone to share my life with. If you can do this for me, I'll consider all past and future debts paid in full."

Cupid slipped from stunned to shocked. "Ace, it was a figure of speech. There has never been any debt between us in my mind. I promise that I will do all that's in my power to find you someone that you can share your life with."

Ace nodded and walked out of Cupid's temple. Cupid felt the ripple through his godhood. He had intellectually understood the nature of his new godhood, but for the first time he felt the power and responsibility of the God of Romantic Love.

* * * * *

Cupid awoke with a start. He sat up in bed and stared around his bedchamber as if he'd never seen it before. The light seemed brighter somehow. He looked at the sleeping figure next to him, expecting to see his beautiful wife. Instead he saw an average looking woman drooling on her pillow. He gazed steadily at this stranger sleeping next to him as he tried to put the pieces together.

Then he realized. In a distant memory, like a half-forgotten dream, he remembered scratching himself with one of his arrows as he looked at the mortal Psyche through her bedroom window. That was where it all began. The years of his life, walking through an obsessive haze seeking her attention and approval. But a scratch of one of his arrows should only last for a week at the most on a god.

He stretched his memory further and recalled Psyche pricking him with his arrows as part of their sex play. [The Bitch!] It all made sense now. He had been held captive of his own arrows enchantments for YEARS! Since they were arrows of obsession and infatuation, they would be amplified by his former godhood, keeping him under the enchantment for as long as she wanted him to be.

He bolted out of the bed and flashed to his mother's new temple. He needed answers and knew that she would be able to provide them.

* * * * *

Joxer woke up in the bed next to Ares. He thought back on the night and smiled. He and Ares had shared a bath. He was embarrassed but Ares didn't seem to notice. He thought that he would pass out before he had removed the last of his clothes and stepped into the water.

Between the heat of the water and Ares own casual attitude, he finally found himself able to relax. They had lounged in the bath for almost an hour talking about anything and nothing.

Now Joxer was thinking back on some of his deepest desires and compared them to the reality of the night before. There was no comparison. Given the choice between the sexual relationship that Joxer had once dreamed of and the easy companionship and camaraderie of the previous night, Joxer would happily keep their relationship as it is. There was such a feeling of contentment, but there was more than that. Ares had treated him with respect, as an equal, and as a friend.

Joxer looked across the bed at his friend and smiled. Ares had always taken him seriously. One day, when he was feeling particularly depressed he went into Ares' temple and began to pray to Ares. But this time he ignored the formal structure of prayer and just sat and talked to Ares like another person. When Joxer had talked himself out and was just kneeling at the alter, Ares appeared before him with a curious look on his face. Joxer nearly passed out from fear until Ares sat upon his

throne and began to talk. Ares talked to him in the same no nonsense manner that Joxer had used.

At the end of Ares tale of woe there was an uncomfortable silence. Then Joxer said "You win." Ares simply gave a tiny barely-there smile and nodded once before disappearing.

And that's how it began. For years they had been having their bitch-n-gripe sessions when either of them felt the need. There wasn't much said between them beyond the sharing of their troubles. Although it was never said, Joxer knew that he had been given an incredible gift, and an incredible responsibility. He had never told another living soul of his meetings with his god.

Now here he was, sharing a bed with Ares, even though it was in the most platonic of circumstances. Whether it be by the hand of their mysterious visitor or the hands of the fates, he couldn't dare to ask for anything more. At this moment he was the happiest that he had ever been.

Chapter Four

The visitor entered the main audience chamber of the grand temple that used to be Zeus'. Hephaestus was sitting at a desk next to Aphrodite. They were looking intently at some papers and didn't notice his entrance.

"Lord Hephaestus, Lady Aphrodite, may I speak with you a moment?"

Hephaestus and Aphrodite looked up as one with looks of concern then Aphrodite spoke, "Come in and join us, would you like some breakfast?"

The visitor smiled at the kind and genuine invitation and shook his head. "I just have a few things I need to tell you and I'm going to be on my way."

Hephaestus had a surprised look but said nothing, waiting for the visitor to continue.

"I'm just tying up a few loose ends before I go. You know that there are those on Olympus that are loyal to Zeus and are going to try to make your lives difficult?"

"Yes, we discussed that last night. We have a pretty good idea who to watch out for." Hephaestus said glancing at Aphrodite.

The visitor shifted forward in his seat and said, "I don't think Athena will be as much of a problem as you might think. A small camp of Mongol soldiers arrived from Chin this morning and are camped right outside Athens..."

Aphrodite twigged to it first and asked, "And how did a Mongol horde happen to arrive today?"

The visitor smiled and answered, "I put them there, of course. But given her fascination with strategy and tactics, I thought I might take the opportunity to introduce her to another culture. Oh, and I think Apollo might be a little busy too..."

Hephaestus just raised an eyebrow as Aphrodite giggled.

"You see, a new style of music was introduced in southern Greece this morning. It has a most interesting beat. And it's nearly impossible to dance to. I think it might take some time to understand the structure of this music."

Aphrodite jumped in with, "What'cha got for Artie?"

The visitor shook his head. "Artemis is a goalonger." At the vacant stare he received from both in front of him he continued. "She'll go along with Athena and Apollo but

she won't start anything unless she's backed into a corner. Basically, it's not her fight, so she's not that interested."

Aphrodite nodded her head in acceptance of this while Hephaestus considered it.

"The only other problem I perceive is not really as much a problem as an annoyance, that would be Hercules. I know he is needed for many things but it would really be better if he were out of the way for a month until things get settled."

"Can you send him to Chin? That would keep him away for a while." Hephaestus asked with a little spark of mischief that Aphrodite hadn't seen in a while.

"No, I don't think he'd survive the trip, they play by different rules there. I put him and his friend Iolaus somewhere very safe while they slept. Right now they're inside a mobius torroid... it's a 4 dimensional... never mind, if they walk in a straight line, as they see it, in any direction, they will end up where they started two to three weeks later. It just looks like a normal forest path. The only difference will be that he won't find any towns or other people for the entire time. But it has plenty of food and water. Hercules'll probably never even know he was inside the thing. It will dissolve by itself in about a month." the visitor said with a smirk.

"What about Xena and her bard? What'd you do to them?" Aphrodite asked with a little bounce.

"Nothing, you have a god of mischief in training that should be able to make good use of them, unless I miss my guess. I will take my leave of you now. I have faith that you will help this pantheon reach it's full potential."

And after a respectful bow, the visitor flared into a ball of rainbow hued light and left Olympus.

* * * * *

After waking up and a simple breakfast, Ares announced that they were going to visit Strife. Joxer was a little nervous since he had received Strife's godhood, but he was happy to have the chance to see Strife again.

They were standing before a grand building that seemed to be a cross between a temple and a castle. As they walked through the doors, Joxer was thinking he liked this idea less and less. The huge rooms were intimidating, the gray on gray color scheme was depressing, and it smelled funny. Ares led him to a large set of double doors. Joxer was about 98% sure that he didn't want to know what was behind those doors, but Ares just walked up and opened them.

There was a group of people (sort-of) sitting around a dining table. The only one that Joxer recognized was Strife. At their entrance everyone looked up but Strife jumped up and ran over to his uncle. "Unc. S'Good to see ya! What'cha bring Jox for?"

Ares reached over to Joxer's neck and pulled the smirking pendant out of Joxer's shirt by the chain.

"No way! Jox got my job?" Strife nearly bounced with enthusiasm.

Joxer shrunk into himself when Strife reacted, and Strife noticed.

"Don' worry Jox! Yar perfect for the job! I was worried about who would git it. I couldn'ta picked anyone bettah."

Joxer's entire face lit up with his smile. Strife threw an arm around his shoulders and led him away from the dining room.

* * * * *

A few hours later Joxer was in a daze. He had just been told more about creating mischief than he ever imagined. Finally he had had enough. He broke in on Strife's impromptu lecture on the importance of rodents and their various uses.

"I have a question." Joxer interrupted.

"Go 'head Jox." Strife shot back.

"What would I have to feed a horse to give it a really nasty foul case of gas?" Joxer asked glancing down at the floor afterward.

"I'll tell you bout red beans n green apples latah but first... would this be for a horse I know?" Strife asked with his old full force smile in place.

"Well, it's nothing against Argo, she actually treated me the best of the three of them..." Joxer once again found the floor interesting.

"Whoa, I thought Xena and the Gabbs were like yer best buds or sumthin, what's the story?"

Joxer looked up from the floor with shiny eyes. "I didn't know they were treating me bad until someone treated me good and I could tell the difference."

Strife nodded his head once, paused, then gave one more nod, "Okay... I think we'll start wit green apples and boilt eggs..."

Ganymede appeared in Meg's, unseen by mortals. He had spent a few hours talking with Meg and together they came up with a few things. The first thing was the alter before him. His first alter.

They discussed it and decided that it need only be a scarlet alter cloth and a single candle. Any tribute could be left around the candle.

While he was looking at the simple alter set up in his honor, he heard a scream come from one of the rooms.

Without a thought, Ganymede ran into the room and saw a monster of a man trying to force a girl. Meg rushed into the room and tried to pull the behemoth off the crying girl. When he saw that Meg was making no progress, Ganymede made himself visible.

"Stand aside!" he said to Meg in his most authoritative voice (which wasn't much).

Meg, recognizing his voice, stood aside and saw him create a melon-sized fireball and throw it at the man.

The man turned his head and seeing Ganymede began to laugh.

Unruffled by the man's insolence, Ganymede declared, "Get out of this room and out of this building. These women are under my protection!"

The man laughed harder and went back to his rape.

Ganymede walked over to him and grabbed onto his shoulder with a hand that crackled with scarlet lightning.

The big man's body went rigid and he began to cry out in pain.

Still holding the same shoulder, Ganymede dragged the man out of bed and out of the room while the man just screamed "How?... How?... "

Ganymede looked down at the now whimpering man and said, "I'm a god, you idiot!"

Ganymede let go of the man and walked around to face him. "I believe in second chances, this is yours. Remember this: No means no! If you EVER harm anyone under my protection again, I'll show you what I learned in 1500 years at the hands of the sickest bastard in the known world. LEAVE. NOW."

As the big oaf scrambled to get out of the building, Ganymede felt that warm, sweet feeling again. He turned to see Meg and the unfortunate woman and once again identified the feeling... worship.

Chapter Five

Cupid stood before the new main temple of his grandmother. He had visited his mother earlier and after telling her all that happened she referred him to his grandmother with a little piece of advice. "I'm the goddess of marriage, I don't see yours surviving this. From the way you sound, you don't need counsel, you need vengeance. I think Hera will fix you right up."

Cupid walked into the antechamber and saw his grandmother talking in hushed whispers with Jett while gazing into a scrying pool. Hera was dressed in tight black leather pants and a red top that was something between a corset and a vest. Her auburn hair was swept back from her face but flowing down over her shoulders to the middle of her back. When she looked up at Cupid, her blue eyes seemed remarkably large and beautiful.

Cupid gaped for a moment then said, "Grandma, you look HOT! I mean Great! I mean Wow..."

"Thank you Cupid, but please stop. Anymore would just be disturbing."

"Point taken."

When Cupid started to explain all that had happened, Jett made as if to leave. Hera just put a hand gently on his arm and shook her head, then turned her attention back to Cupid's rather dramatic telling of Psyche's misdeeds. When he finally finished his story he looked up to see a distant look in his grandmothers eyes. There was such a look of ferocity in those eyes that it sent a chill up Cupid's spine.

Finally she spoke. "Cupid, as tempting as it is to seek immediate gratification, I think this situation requires some careful thought and planning."

At Cupid's puzzled look she continued, "This was not a case of faulty judgment or giving into a temptation. This was calculated exploitation over a period of years. As such, it requires a bit more finesse than just turning her inside out."

Cupid nodded his head and asked, "So, where do we start?"

Hera nodded her head and called mentally, //Joxer?//

* * * * *

Joxer was actually enjoying himself. He had thought that he might feel bad doing things to his supposed friends but it actually felt pretty good.

Strife had been right about the mixture to feed Argo, she loved it. It was kind of complicated, but absolutely guaranteed by Strife to produce the desired results. Xena wouldn't be sneaking up on anyone for at least a day and a half.

Unseen to mortal eyes, Joxer glanced over at the river where Gabrielle was washing off after an unfortunate fall into a mud puddle [smirk]. He examined her lithe form as she slowly washed herself. The sunlight made her reddish blonde hair sparkle. Joxer noticed her hand begin to drift lower. He shook his head and thought to himself, [what was I thinking? I wanted that?]

He went back to work on her clothes which were drying on a rock. He applied a liberal amount of the potion that would attract every insect in the area.

//Joxer?//

Joxer heard the call but had no idea who made it. He really had no idea what to do about it so he made his own call.

//Ares?//

//Are you done already?//

//No, someone just called me and I don't know who it was.//

//I'll be right there.//

A moment later Ares appeared in front of him. Ares looked deeply into Joxer's eyes and said, "It was mother. If you're ready to go, I'll take you to her."

"Just a second" Joxer said as he walked over to the campfire. He picked up a handful of dirt and sifted it onto the fish that were laying beside the fire, waiting to be cooked. "Okay, I'm ready."

Ares laughed and opened his arms. Joxer moved into his embrace and they flashed out.

* * * * *

Joxer and Ares appeared in Hera's temple to see an obviously upset Cupid. Halfway through the story, Ares was ready to go and rip Psyche a new orifice or two but one look in his mother's eyes convinced him that the best course of action would be to stand back and watch the master at work.

Hera then turned her attention to Joxer. "So, if you'll just perform the divorce, we'll create our plan and get to work."

"No." Joxer said flatly.

A chorus of, "What!?" came from all the occupants of the room.

"Cupid, how is this going to effect Bliss?" Joxer asked quietly.

Cupid was still dumbstruck by Joxer saying 'No' so just shrugged one shoulder.

"Have you talked to Psyche about this?" Joxer asked even more quietly.

"No, why would I, after what she did, she doesn't deserve... anything." Cupid sputtered.

"I agree," Joxer said calmly, with a bit more self assurance. "But this isn't about her, not really. Cupid, you've been thinking about this less than a day. In fact, I don't know if you've been thinking at all, you've been feeling."

"But Joxer, after what she did..." Cupid sputtered out in an unbelieving shout.

"Cupid, take the time to do the right thing. Sit down and discuss this with someone." Joxer said reasonably.

Cupid looked at his grandmother and his father with a bit of a puzzled expression on his face.

"Cupid. Discuss. As in two-way communication. Talk it out with someone, then make your decisions. Nothing has to be done today. Take the time to do this right. Do what's best for Bliss AND best for you."

Cupid finally seemed to understand what Joxer was saying to him. He got up and walked to leave. "Thanks Jox, I guess I've got some thinking to do."

Joxer nodded and Cupid left the room.

Jett pulled Joxer to the side and asked him, "You don't think they should divorce?"

Joxer looked surprised, "Get serious, of course they'll divorce. But Cupid is going to need to know that he did the right thing, for the right reasons. If he were to divorce her right now, it would give her a hook she could use later to possibly guilt him back to her."

"Jox, how'd you get so smart?" Jett asked with an evil little smirk on his face.

"Hey, I'm a god!" Joxer answered with a chuckle.

Joxer and Jett walked back to the center of the room where Ares and Hera were talking.

"So, do you need any help making plans?" Joxer asked Hera.

Hera gave Joxer a look, not Aphrodite's 'Duh' look. Hera's look was more like, 'you stupid, stupid man, I feel really ashamed for you for asking such a question'.

Ares, having been on the receiving end of that look on more than one occasion, put his arm around Joxer's shoulder, and after a goodbye to his mother and Jett, flashed them out of Hera's temple.

* * * * *

Ganymede was putting the finishing touches on his new room in the house of Debauchery when he felt that warm sweet worship feeling again. He couldn't resist the impulse and transported himself, unseen, to Meg's. There on his alter were eight candles, and spread across the alter cloth were various pieces of jewelry and a small vial of fragrance.

There was a small gathering of working girls and one guy, listening to the unfortunate woman from the night before giving a dramatic retelling of the events. As the story progressed the warm sweet feeling continued to grow.

In the past, there were times when Ganymede had bemoaned his existence. He had wished that he weren't a god, he craved the release of death. The realization was beginning to blossom within him. What he lacked before was a purpose. Feeling this worship, he understood that it wasn't the warm fuzzy feeling that was making him feel so good in the depths of his soul. It was the feeling of being needed and appreciated; knowing that what he did changed peoples lives for the better.

* * * * *

On a forest path in the middle of nowhere (literally) Hercules and Iolaus were making their way to what seemed to be the north.

Hercules was beginning to become concerned and said, "I don't believe it but I think we're lost. We should have been to Pyrhia by now."

Iolaus looked up at his big friend and said, "We aren't expected, there's no hurry to get there."

"Yeah, but I don't like not knowing where I am."

"Herc, would you do something for me?"

"Sure, what."

"Stop and listen."

"Okay, what am I listening for?"

"Shhh... listen."

Hercules heard the wind rustling the leaves on the trees. In the distance he could hear the gentle tinkle of water in a stream. He could just barely hear the sounds of birds calling, far, far away.

"Now take a deep breath, what is the smell?" Iolaus asked with an almost hypnotic quality to his voice.

Hercules smelled the peaty smell of fertile earth, then he noticed a hint of moisture from the stream. It was the smell of life.

"That's all I wanted, we can go now if you want." Iolaus said as he adjusted his pack.

"What was that all about?"

"I just thought we needed to stop and enjoy what we have right here, right now. Just for a little bit I want to enjoy what we have in front of us instead of worrying about what's ahead of us."

Hercules considered that, then said, "People depend on us. I have to keep going."

"Yeah, we help people, because of the things we do, some people are alive that wouldn't be otherwise. Some others are living happier lives because of us. But I want to be happy sometimes too. And what would make me happy right now is to set up camp, take the rest of the day off and enjoy the moment."

Hercules knew that there was some reason that he should object. People somewhere needed him. Then he looked into Iolaus' blue eyes and simply unslung his pack.

Hercules walked off the path into a clearing and began to set up camp while saying, "You're right, we deserve a day off."

Iolaus beamed. Maybe this would be his chance to get his big friend to loosen up a little.

* * * * *

Cupid had wandered around Olympus for hours, in a more or less stupor until Joxer's words came back to him, 'discuss this with someone'. There was only one person Cupid wanted to be with at the moment. And that is how he came to be here. In front of a door in Hades' great hall.

Cautiously, Cupid knocked on the door. Strife opened the door and started with surprise at Cupid before him.

"Hey Cupe, what'cha doin here?"

And once again the story fell out of him. As he finished telling Strife about what Joxer said, he started to cry.

Strife pulled Cupid into a hug and rocked him until the crying stopped. They sat there for minutes, saying nothing, just holding on to each other. Then Cupid shifted himself into position and began to kiss Strife.

Strife reluctantly pulled away and looked him in the eyes.

"Cupe, yer still married to Psycho."

"I know but before..."

"Cupe, I don' wan it ta be like it was before."

"What do you mean? We were happy."

"Cupe, ah been dead fer a year now. Bein dead gives ya time to think. What da ya think we were like before Psycho?"

"We had fun, the sex was great."

"Ah got no complaints bout the sex, nevah did, but that's all we had."

"No, I love you Strife."

"N I love ya too Cupe, but don'cha see? We nevah told anyone we was togethah, I was a dirty secret. Whatevah we did, it was cause YOU wanted ta. I don want that, I want a partnah, not a mastah."

"But I never thought of you that way..."

"Sure ya did. Ya nevah said it outloud but'cha said it every time ya'd sneek into my room... n every time ya'd leave me in the middle of the night so Unc wouldn' find'ja."

"I didn't realize..."

"I know, neithah did I, but now ah do and it ain't gonna happen no more. Ya called all the shots, n I ain't hangin it all on you. Ah let'cha. I ain't sayin I don't want'cha Cupe. Ahm jus sayin, it can't be like it was. Let's take it slow n mebbie it'll happen. Till then, ahm always here fer ya."

Cupid let a small resigned smile cross his tear streaked face and nodded. "I guess I got some thinking to do."

"Yeah, if ya need me ya know where ta find me." Strife said with his own sad smile as Cupid left the room.

Chapter Six

After the meeting with Hera, Ares was needed elsewhere to deal with a war and Joxer had decided to stay on Olympus. Joxer was walking the grounds enjoying the scenery and thinking. While sitting by a fountain, pondering the past few days, Cupid walked by him.

Cupid was a mess. He had obviously been crying and looked as if he were at the end of his emotional rope.

Joxer called, "Hey! Cupid!"

Cupid stopped in his tracks and turned with a dazed expression. Then it was like he came back to himself for a moment. "Hey Jox."

"Cupid, I need your help with something." Joxer said, considering how he was going to make this work.

"Sure Jox, what'd you need?"

"I haven't learned to transport myself yet, and I don't want to bother Ares while he's busy warring..."

Cupid had to interrupt, "Where'd you need to go?"

"To a clearing southeast of Corinth. I need to get some things."

"No prob, just think about where you need to go... yeah, hold on, here we go."

And there they were. Joxer looked around and found the bags that he wanted from a nearby cave. He handed one of the bags to Cupid and walked over to some bushes and started to pick some red berries.

Cupid watched him, stunned for a moment then went to the bush beside Joxer and started picking berries too. He was about to put one of the berries in his mouth when Joxer put a hand on his wrist to stop him.

"You probably don't want to eat those. I'm not sure what they'll do to a god but they'll make a mortal sick with vomiting and chills for a couple of days."

Cupid stood with the berry a few inches from his mouth and asked, "Then why are you picking them?"

Joxer put on his most innocent face, "I thought I'd make something special for some friends. Everyone likes pie, right?"

"You're evil Jox, who knew?"

Joxer just gave a smile and went back to his berry picking. After a few minutes he looked over at Cupid and asked. "So how are you doing?"

Cupid looked back at Joxer and recognized the honest concern in his eyes. If anyone else had asked him the same question, he would have said 'fine'. But Joxer knew better and expected an honest answer.

"Not so good Jox, there's all this stuff with Psyche, and I have to think about what's best to do for Bliss and... other things."

Joxer caught the hesitation and jumped in, "Other things, like your relationship with Strife?"

Completely stunned, Cupid asked, "Wha? How'd you know about that?"

Joxer thought about it for a second then said, "Cupid, I'm about to tell you something that I've never told anyone."

"Okay Jox, what is it?"

"Well, I've been friends with your father for a few years now. We never told anyone because if they knew he had a mortal friend... let's just say I wouldn't have survived the week. Ares and I talk about whatever bothers us, he was worried about you, how you distanced yourself from everyone after you married Psyche. That's when he told me about your history with Strife."

Cupid was stunned, "He knew?"

"Yeah, from almost the beginning. He knew it every time you would sneak in or out of the halls of war to visit Strife." Joxer said with a little smile.

"But... why didn't he say anything?" Cupid asked, truly puzzled.

Joxer chuckled, "He said that you were having so much fun sneaking around and getting away with it, that he couldn't bring himself to stop it."

"So he wasn't mad? I mean that I was with Strife?"

"Nope, we didn't talk too much about that side of it but he didn't seem to have any problem at all." Joxer said.

Joxer sat his bag on the ground. He motioned for Cupid to follow him. Cupid did and they retreated to some conveniently placed rocks that made for a decent sitting place.

"Cupid, from what I've been told by Ares and by what my godhood tells me, I think I have a pretty good view of what's going on with you. Please talk to me, let me help you figure things out."

Cupid looked at the sincerity on Joxer's face and began to talk...

...and talk...

...and talk...

* * * * *

Their talk had started in the early afternoon and lasted into the early evening. Joxer was still stunned by some of the things Cupid had told him. He knew that Psyche had manipulated Cupid but she was one twisted bitch. Her idea of sex had nothing to do with pleasure for anyone but her. She didn't just enjoy causing physical pain, she enjoyed degradation and humiliation too.

There was something gnawing at Joxer's soul. He knew that Hera and Jett would come up with something spectacular to do to Psyche but he needed something of his own. Ares was his friend so that made Cupid his step-friend... er... friend-in-law... oh well, something like that anyway. She had hurt Cupid and Joxer needed to get his own back on her.

//Ares?//

//Yes Joxer? What do you need?//

//I need to learn to transport myself, I hate being a burden.//

//I don't mind, where do you need to go?//

//To Hades', to visit with Strife.//

Ares appeared. When he locked eyes with Joxer, the hard look left his eyes and a small smile started to cross his lips. He just opened his arms and Joxer automatically stepped into the embrace.

::Pooft::

And then they were in the hallway outside Strife's room. Ares stepped away and thought, //Just call me when you're ready to go back. I still have a few things I need to do, stupid warlords think they know what they're doing...//

Joxer just thought a quick, //Bye.// as he knocked on Strife's door.

Strife opened the door, he seemed only slightly surprised this time, "Joxer? What'cha need?"

When Strife extended his arm in invitation, Joxer walked into the room. Joxer sat and spoke, "I talked to Cupid today..."

Strife began to wiggle and fidget a little in his chair. Joxer decided to let him off the hook, even though it would be fun dancing him around the subject for a while. "...one of the things we talked about was your relationship before Psyche."

Strife was speechless.

Joxer continued, "I'm not here to talk to you about that, I just wanted you to know that I know and I'm okay with it."

Strife had recovered a little by now and said a quiet, "Thanks, Jox."

Joxer nodded his head and went on, "Psyche is an evil bitch and she must pay for hurting Cupid."

Strife was speechless again.

Joxer stood and began to pace, when he spoke again it was with determination in his voice, "I've got a plan, but I don't know if it's do-able, I need your expertise to tell me how to pull it off"

And they talked long into the night only pausing occasionally for a fit of giggles.

* * * * *

Hera and Jett entered the main hall of the house of Debauchery.

"Lord Jayce, Lady Lust, the house of Retribution seeks the aid of the house of Debauchery." Hera said to the stunned pair.

"Of course Lady Hera, what can we do for you?" Lust answered on behalf of her pupil.

"Now that we've formally asked for your assistance, we could dispense with the titles, if you don't mind." Hera answered.

"I don't mind at all Hera, what can we do for you?" Lust asked again.

Hera proceeded to tell the highlights of Cupid's story and her plan for vengeance.

The four of them gathered closely around the scrying pool at the side of the main hall. While checking on the current whereabouts of Psyche and Zeus, Jett slipped his hand to the small of Hera's back and began to rub slowly.

This continued for a few moments until Hera noticed and stood straight. Jett flinched back at her glare and watched as she walked to the other side of the main hall. The others noticed and watched for a moment, then Lust said, "I'll go check on her, you two stay here."

Lust approached Hera and hesitantly asked, "Hera, is something the matter?"

"I don't know Lust, I just spent millennia of torture with one man, the last thing I need in my life right now is another. I mean, we're supposed to learn from our mistakes, aren't we?"

Lust took Hera's hand in her own and said, "I understand, and I think I know just what you need."

Hera's heart skipped a beat as she realized what was happening. She looked up from their joined hands and into the chocolaty brown eyes of Lust. Hera thought to herself, [Maybe she does know what I need.]

* * * * *

//Ares?// Joxer sent the mental call.

//Ready?// Ares responded.

//Yeah, we're done, so whenever you have time...//

Ares appeared in a flash and nodded a greeting to Strife, then said, "I've done all that I can do for today, let's go home."

"Sounds good to me." Joxer responded with a tired smile.

Ares slipped an arm around Joxer's waist and after a 'goodbye' to Strife, they appeared in the hall outside Ares' bedroom. Without a thought Joxer opened the

double doors and walked in, shedding clothes along a direct path to the bathing chamber.

A few moments after Joxer eased into the water, Ares followed. Ares noticed the exhausted look on Joxer's face and asked, "Hard day?"

Joxer turned his tired gaze to Ares and answered his question with a question, "How do you do it?"

Puzzled, Ares asked yet another question, "Do what?"

"Everything that needs to be done. I've done about a hundred different things today, and there are about a thousand other things that I haven't gotten around to." Joxer said as he laid his head back against the edge of the sunken tub.

Ares considered for a moment and said, "If you think this is busy, wait until you've finished your training and take up your full duties as god of mischief and your duties for the house of war."

Joxer tilted his head slightly in Ares' direction then said, "I imagined that the gods sat up on Olympus all day, eating ambrosia, listening to music and laughing at the silly mortals."

Ares gave a tired laugh and said, "Apollo maybe, but the rest of us actually do have things that must be done. What do you have planned for tomorrow?"

"I need to visit Hecate for a while, then probably Pan. It depends on what Hecate says. Then in the afternoon, I need to meet with Cupid and see if he's come to any decisions. What about you?" Joxer asked tiredly but with interest.

"The war that I've been working on all day, it'll be ready to start in the morning. The good part will probably be done by the afternoon."

After some small talk about the days events the tired pair made their way to the bedchamber.

A few minutes after settling in bed Joxer realized that Strife had said that Joxer could have his room.

"Are you asleep yet?" Joxer asked quietly.

"Not yet, what do you need?" Ares answered sleepily.

"I just remembered that I'm supposed to be in Strife's room..."

" 'Sokay Joxer, I like you being here." Ares interrupted.

Now Joxer was fully awake as he realized that he liked being here too.

He looked over at the sleeping form of Ares next to him and his old desires were reborn. Hesitantly, he put his hand on Ares bare shoulder and said, "I like being here too."

Ares opened his sleepy eyes and saw the look of intent in Joxer's eyes. His brow furrowed for a second then relaxed. Ares brought his hand around Joxer's waist and pulled him close.

Joxer felt himself being pulled into Ares embrace and went along willingly. He ended up with his face nuzzled into Ares shoulder. Ares' strong arms held him firmly and he felt the ghost of a kiss on the top of his head.

Not another word was said, they lay silently, holding each other close until they drifted into sleep.

* * * * *

Ganymede decided to travel to some other locations around the mortal realm. He visited several cities, unseen, assessing the situations of those who were his responsibility. There were already two more alters dedicated to his name, apparently some of the workers at Meg's had spread the word about their new god. It was nearly morning, as he was thinking of going back to Olympus he felt a twinge. It didn't feel physical, but it was like a physical cramp. A twist in the essence of his godhood.

Summoning his concentration, he followed the tendril of power to the source of his pain. He found himself back at Meg's. He could feel the pull of the pain coming from one of the rooms. Making himself insubstantial as well as invisible, he passed through the door to see one of the working girls, Charise, emptying the money pouch of a sleeping customer who stank of alcohol.

Ganymede made himself visible to mortal eyes and said, "Charise, how are you this evening?"

Charise discretely dropped the money pouch by the trousers of the sleeping man. "Me, oh I'm doing fine... Lord Ganymede."

Ganymede took a step closer and asked, "And what was your business with this client?"

"Just the usual, nothing special." Charise answered shakily.

"It must have been a little special to warrant the 25 gold pieces in the hand behind your back." Ganymede said taking one last step into Charise's personal space.

"I... Uh... I mean... " Charise stammered.

"Enough, return the money to the pouch and meet me in the main room." He said before vanishing from the room.

Charise quickly returned the money and dressed, then walked into the main room where Ganymede was seated.

As she approached and made as if to sit by him he held up a hand to stop her, "You have chosen a life of service of your own free will. You provide the service and receive payment. By doing this thing, you sully the name of all those of your profession."

Charise began to look appropriately ashamed. Ganymede continued, "You are no longer under my protection, I will no longer hear your prayers. I will not involve Meg in this matter but I assure you that you will receive no favors that are granted to the others. You need to find another god and another line of work. May I suggest Hermes, as you have seen fit to steal and lie."

And with that Ganymede was gone, leaving Charise standing alone.

Chapter Seven

Joxer came awake slowly reveling in the sensation of being held close. The memories of the night before returned and brought a smile to his face before he opened his eyes. He looked up into the loving gaze of Ares.

Joxer nuzzled his face back into Ares shoulder and shyly said, "Good Morning."

Ares reached down to Joxer's chin and pulled his face up enough so that he could place a tender kiss on Joxer's forehead. Then he said, "Good Morning."

Joxer adjusted his position and scooted back a little so that he could look into Ares' eyes comfortably. Then he cleared his throat and spoke, "Remember when I asked you if my being a god was going to change our relationship?"

Ares laughed and pulled Joxer in for their first kiss. Their lips just barely touched. The tiniest sensation could be felt, but it burned like fire. After just a moment of the feather light kiss, Ares let his tongue slip out and trace it's way across the crease of Joxer's full mouth.

Joxer opened his mouth to the intruder and Ares gently worked his way in. In response, Joxer's own tongue went to work.

And so it went, the kiss deepened and became more and more passionate. Hands were seeking and caressing as torsos began to writhe in pleasure. As if by a spoken cue, they separated and looked into each other's eyes again.

"Wow," Joxer said as he gasped for breath.

"Yeah," Ares responded, also gasping.

They moved in for round two when Joxer stopped and listened to a silent summons from Hephaestus. They pulled back from each other and Ares said, "Hep has a great sense of timing. Lets get ready, you can't keep the King waiting."

Joxer disentangled himself from Ares and the bed covers and began to get ready for another day.

* * * * *

Lust was watching Hera sleep when Hera came awake with a start. Hera looked into Lust's eyes and began to remember what had happened the night before. Lust was intrigued by the myriad of emotions running in quick succession across Hera's face. Wondering. Wistful. Shy Happiness. Sorrow. And finally anger.

Lust pulled away, wondering if Hera was regretting the night before. Hera noticed the movement and realized it's cause.

"No Lust, I'm not upset with you." Hera said a bit of anger in her tone.

"Then what is it, what is wrong?" Lust asked full of concern.

"I lived, married to that man, for thousands of years and NEVER felt anything like last night." Hera said gruffly.

"I had always heard that Zeus was a good lover." Lust said shyly.

"He knows what to rub and what to pinch to make everything happen that's supposed to. But last night was tender, and beautiful. Zeus is a good sex machine, but he doesn't know the first thing about loving." Hera finished a little less gruffly.

Lust turned her face away from Hera. Noticing this, Hera moved herself around to face Lust and saw the tears in her eyes.

"Did I say something wrong?" Hera asked with every bit of hostility gone from her voice.

Lust's shining tearful eyes looked deeply into Hera's. In a whisper of a voice Lust said, "You've given me more of a compliment than you'll ever know. People see me as accomplished at sex, but no one has ever called me a lover, not in the way that you mean."

As Lust was moving in to give Hera a very good morning kiss, the silent summons came from Hephaestus.

Before they separated, Lust held Hera's hand to her heart and said, "Regardless of what happens from now on, I will hold the memory of last night as a treasure in my heart. My first love."

Speechless, Hera pulled Lust into an embrace before they had to leave to meet with Hephaestus.

* * * * *

Hephaestus waited in the Great Hall for all the summoned to arrive. They flashed into the hall in ones and twos until the last was in attendance.

Hephaestus cleared his throat and began. "The title of King of the Gods comes with certain responsibilities. One of my duties is to watch out for the well being of every member of this pantheon."

None of those in attendance had any idea where this was leading so Hephaestus decided to take it up a notch. "Stop your plotting against Psyche."

Looking around Hephaestus thought to himself, [Who could have guessed that this group could look this innocent.]

Deciding that he needed to spell it out, he continued, "Remember that, as King, my word is law. So here is the law."

And Hephaestus turned to each in the group as he spoke to them.

"Hera, Psyche will not become obsessed with Zeus."

"Jett, you will not put out a bounty on Psyche's head."

"Lust, you will not alter Psyche's hormones in ANY way."

"Jayce, you will not spread any rumors, true or otherwise about Psyche in the mortal world."

"Aphrodite, you will not infect Psyche with any disease. No pustules, no running sores, not even that discrete itch thing. None."

"And finally Joxer, you will not by your own action or the action of any other, alter Psyche's appearance in any way, no rat face, no donkey tail, and you most certainly will not create an aroma of urine to follow her around."

Turning his attention to the group as a whole he asked, "Am I understood?"

The entire group nodded in ascent and Joxer timidly raised his hand.

Hephaestus took notice and asked, "You have a question, Joxer?"

Joxer nodded and said, "Why?"

Hephaestus looked around, obviously addressing the entire group, "Short answer: Because I'm the King and I said so."

He waited a moment for this to sink in, then continued, "The long answer has to do with created gods. Joxer, let me ask you a question, since you've become a god, how much mischief have you created."

Joxer looked at the floor then timidly answered, "Some."

"In the full day that you've been a god you've tripped Gabrielle into the mud, put dirt in her food, given Xena's horse a case of flatulence that would send Cerberus yelping in terror, had Xena and Gabrielle afflicted with an attack of insects... need I continue?"

Joxer shook his head, eyes held firmly to the floor in shame.

Hephaestus continued, "What is happening is that all the impulses of mischief are coursing through your godhood and effecting your behavior. It's something that happens to all gods to some degree, but more so to created gods. Each of the created gods here today has a mentor. One of the duties of that mentor will be to train you to recognize when your godhood is pulling you toward a specific action. This isn't a matter of controlling your godhood, it's a matter of recognizing its influence and making your choices accordingly."

Hephaestus looked around to see if everyone was following his explanation. Seeing the light of understanding in everyone's eyes he continued, "Now, back to your question Joxer, 'Why'. The answer is that Psyche was made a god and given no supervision. Does anyone here know of anyone who helped Psyche in any way?" No one answered but everyone knew.

"So she was a mortal, made into a god with the godhood of manipulation, then isolated from everyone except her new husband who gave her the tools to manipulate him." Hephaestus noticed the somber mood and decided to let them off the hook, a little.

"What's been done is past. If Cupid still desires the divorce, I see no reason to refuse it. But there will be no retaliation against Psyche for any past deed that Psyche has performed. And since Cupid is the reason for Psyche becoming a god at all, it will be his responsibility to see that she is properly trained to use her godhood, which is as it should have been five years ago."

Aphrodite spoke up on her son's behalf, "After what she did to him, you're going to make him train her in her godhood? That sucks!"

Hephaestus gave a tolerant grin to his wife and said, "No, he doesn't have to train her, he has to see that she is trained. He can find someone else to do the actual training."

Jett cleared his throat and asked, "How did you know what we were planning?"

Hephaestus motioned for Aphrodite to come close and whispered in her ear. Aphrodite then pulled back, looked carefully at his face and said, "Nope honey, it doesn't say 'stupid' anywhere on it."

Hephaestus then looked back to Jett and said, "It's a King of the God's thing you really don't need to know about."

Chapter Eight

Hephaestus called Cupid to his private office. Cupid appeared shortly thereafter and plopped into a chair across from his step-father.

"What do ya need, daddy Hep?" Cupid asked casually.

"I need to talk to you about Psyche." Hephaestus answered in his most calming tone.

Cupid bristled immediately. "She..."

"Stop!" Hephaestus said, preempting Cupid's hissy fit.

Hephaestus looked Cupid straight in the eyes and said, "I know that Joxer talked to you about your feelings about what has happened, what we are going to talk about now isn't you, it's Psyche."

Cupid calmed down a little and asked, "What do you want to say about her?"

"What was her life like before you married her?" Hephaestus asked, once again in his calming tone.

"Her father was going to sell her to the highest bidder..." Cupid said without emotion.

"And how do you think that made her feel?" Hephaestus asked, trying to lead Cupid into thinking about someone else.

"Bad, I guess." Cupid answered.

"I would think a little more than bad. Imagine how you would feel if you were being sold... by your father... to a stranger with the right amount of money..."

Cupid thought about it and said, "I guess I'd feel pretty worthless, and alone."

"Exactly, now, do you remember the first time that you spoke to Psyche, what you said to her?" Hephaestus prompted.

Cupid's temper sparked again, "I was under the influence of a love arrow, I..."

"Cupid, this isn't about you. What was the first thing you said to her?" Hephaestus prompted again.

"I told her that she was beautiful and I loved her and wanted to marry her." Cupid mumbled.

Hephaestus sat forward in his chair and asked, "And how do you think that made her feel?"

"Okay, being a mortal, I guess that having a god tell her that he wanted her would make her feel special and wanted and loved." Cupid said quietly.

Hephaestus nodded and continued, "Given those circumstances I can see why she would choose to marry you. It's hard to imagine anyone in those circumstances behaving any differently."

Cupid glanced up at Hephaestus' and said, "Yeah, I guess I can see that."

Hephaestus decided it was time for the next stage, "So after you were married, what was her life like?"

Cupid looked puzzled and asked, "What do you mean?"

"Who were her friends? What did she do for fun?" Hephaestus asked with raised eyebrows.

Cupid thought for a few moments then answered, "I don't know, I don't think she had any friends... or fun."

This looked like the perfect time to jump right into it. "What would have happened if you had left her? Back in the beginning I mean."

Cupid answered without thinking, "She would have been alone, she might have been made mortal again."

"And if she were made mortal, she would have been sent to the mortal realm to be alone, or with her father." Hephaestus added.

"But that doesn't excuse what she did to me!" Cupid's rage started to boil up again.

Hephaestus calmly answered, "Cupid, this isn't about you. Can you begin to understand why she didn't want to lose you?"

"Yeah, I can see that but..." Cupid began but was interrupted.

"You talked to Joxer yesterday?" Hephaestus asked, hoping to deflect Cupid's anger.

Cupid was stunned for a second by the seeming non sequitor. "Yeah, a couple times."

"And how was he?" Hephaestus asked, leading Cupid to discover this himself.

"He was fine, he helped me a lot." Cupid answered, still somewhat stunned.

Hephaestus decided to drive in the final nail, "Would he have been as much help last week?"

Cupid stopped to think about Joxer as he was before his godhood. He couldn't really put into words what was different about him, but something fundamental had changed. Finally Cupid answered, "I don't know, I don't think so."

"So what changed?" Hephaestus led.

"He became a god, I guess something in his godhood helps him to be more understanding or something."

"Do you think he was calling on his godhood while he was talking to you? And do you think he knows what it's doing?" Hephaestus asked, knowing they were almost there.

"No, he isn't calling it, and I don't think he knows. It's just doing it by itself." Cupid answered cautiously, sensing where this was leading.

"You're right, it's the same with all made gods, the nature of the godhood guides the actions of the made god until they are shown how to recognize it." Hephaestus said with a hopeful look in his eyes.

"So the godhood of manipulation would lead Psyche to control others, and she was already afraid of being alone or sent back to her father." Cupid was speaking as he put the pieces together.

"You've got it! Now you understand!" Hephaestus said with excitement.

"But the things she did to me..."

Hephaestus waited for Cupid to figure it out.

"...were all types of control and manipulation." Cupid said with wonder.

"Yes, and now that you know that, we can take steps to set things right." Hephaestus said happily.

Cupid looked up with shock, "Grandmother! I've got to stop her, she's going to do something really awful to Psyche."

"Wait, no she won't." Hephaestus interrupted, "I talked to her and the others that were going to take revenge on your behalf. They understand now and they'll leave her alone."

Cupid dropped his head into his hands and asked, "Daddy Hep, this is such a mess, how am I going to fix this?"

"The first step is to teach Psyche how to recognize the influence of her godhood. She has been led by it for the past five years, so it's going to take some work. And I'm leaving it up to you to see that it gets done."

Cupid looked up, disbelieving, "Me? Daddy Hep, I don't want to be in the same room with her, much less train her in her godhood."

Hephaestus put on his stern fatherly voice and said, "Cupid, this isn't about you. It's about Psyche and what's best for her. You don't have to train her, you can find someone else to do it. But it is your ultimate responsibility to see that it's done."

"But why?" Cupid asked in a small voice.

"Because you're the reason she was ever made a god, so she is your responsibility for as long as she needs you." Hephaestus said with an air of finality.

"How long is that?" Cupid asked with a streak of fear in his voice.

"Until she is a self sufficient god, with control of her godhood, with relationships, and with the respect of others." Heph said in the fatherly voice again.

Cupid looked at Hephaestus and felt like he was a cherub again, "This could take millennia."

Hephaestus nodded, "And then you'll be done."

* * * * *

Leaving the great hall, Joxer was shaken to his foundation. He thought about his actions the past few days and realized that it was all true. He was becoming a bad person... god... whatever. He absently walked over to a fountain and stared at the flowing water as he thought about the horrible, spiteful things he had planned for Psyche and knew that even though he hadn't done them, he would have if it had not been for Hephaestus' intervention.

He looked deep within himself and decided that the only way that he was going to make peace within himself would be to talk with Psyche, and see that she was not harmed. After that, he needed to spend some time with Xena and Gabrielle. He needed to know how much of his feelings toward them were real and how much was his new godhood wanting to play.

//Ares, I'm out of the meeting// Joxer thought.

//Do you remember where Hestia's temple is?// Ares asked.

//Yes, did you need me to get something from her?// Joxer responded curiously.

//No, she is going to train you to transport yourself.//

//But... I thought you were going to do my training.// Joxer replied with an air of disappointment.

//I will do most of it. But Hestia has trained nearly every god of this generation in transporting. It is best that she handle this aspect of your training.// Ares said and Joxer could almost feel a smile through the mind-speak.

//I guess I'd better go then. See you later?// Joxer asked hopefully.

//Yes, I should be done here well before sundown.// Ares replied with the smile again.

//See you then.// Joxer sent before heading off for Hestia's temple.

* * * * *

Joxer walked into Hestia's temple where he could smell something cooking... a stew maybe. He heard voices coming from one of the rooms so he went in and saw Hestia sitting, holding Bliss on her lap and talking with his brothers.

Hestia looked up at Joxer and said, "Good, now we're all here, we can begin." And she set Bliss on his feet by her side.

She told them to look around the room they were in carefully, then after a few moments she led them to the next room.

"Bliss, honey, transport yourself into the next room dear." Hestia said in her grandmotherly tone.

Bliss did as he was asked and a moment later walked back in through the doorway. Hestia explained visualization and power utilization. She finished by telling them how to bring it all together and transport.

Hestia looked at Joxer and said, "Jett, you can be the first to try."

Joxer looked at her with surprise, "I'm Joxer ma'am." he said timidly.

"Yes, of course, now go ahead and try to transport into the next room..."

* * * * *

Cupid walked into his new office. The office of the head of the House of Love. As he looked over the scrolls on his desk he muttered to himself. "The work's only been let go for two days, how can I be two weeks behind?"

As he was plowing through the pile of scrolls he came to a decision, "Anteros!" he called.

Anteros appeared, his silver/white wings shimmering in the light from the window. Cupid kept his gaze on the scroll before him and said, "Ter, I could really use your help getting through all this work."

Anteros was stunned for just a moment, then came back to himself and asked, "Since when has the mighty Cupid needed anyone's help? Especially mine?"

That made Cupid look up into the defensive face of his younger brother. "Since now, I don't know how mom kept up with all this work. When I was dealing with infatuation, I didn't need anyone's help to get my job done, but just look at all of this. You're better at this kind of stuff than I am. There is a lot of work to do and I need help... especially yours."

Cupid could see the turmoil going on in his brother's face then saw him reach a decision. Anteros pulled up one of the backless chairs that the winged members of the family favored and proceeded to work.

* * * * *

The sun was setting as Joxer walked out of Hestia's temple with a limp, holding a wet towel to the side of his face. After this day, he could look fondly back on his days as a mortal, walking to get where he needed to go. He had transported himself inside a wall, into the fireplace and into the fish well... twice.

Bliss had laughed so hard that he nearly choked.

The only consolation that he could give himself was that his brothers hadn't done much better. Jett had transported himself into the same wall Joxer had and into a fountain. Jayce had transported himself up a tree and couldn't make himself concentrate to transport himself down. He was up there for half an hour.

And in the entire time that they were there, Hestia didn't get their names right even once. Joxer had felt the spark of mischief coming from her. She knew their names, she was just playing with them, so Joxer figured, 'why not?' and let her play. What's the harm?

* * * * *

Cupid materialized in his home temple. Psyche noticed and began a verbal assault, "Where have you been? I haven't seen you but a few minutes in the past two days... "

Cupid had so many emotions boiling inside him, he didn't even know what he was feeling. So without any emotion in his voice, he said some of the most feared words in the realm of relationships, "We need to talk."

Chapter Nine

Cupid walked across the room and sat on the edge of the bed.

Psyche walked past the bed and sat on the chair. She looked at Cupid's silent form and, through her godhood, she realized that the spells on Cupid were broken.

Cupid noticed as Psyche paled. "Yeah, the spells are broken, it seems that Obsession and Infatuation couldn't stand up to the godhood of romantic love." He looked up to see the fear in her face. "Don't worry, I'm not going to do anything to you, I just want to talk."

Tears started running down Psyche's face as she started to tremble.

There was a part of Cupid that wanted to hug her to comfort her, but there was a bigger part of Cupid that couldn't stand the thought of touching her again so he just sat until she calmed herself.

"Psyche, there is something you need to know." Her tear stained face looked up, afraid.

"Your godhood has been influencing your judgment. That's part of why I'm not screaming at you right now." Cupid said in his most reasonable tone.

"What do you mean influencing?" Psyche asked quietly.

And Cupid explained how made gods are effected by their godhoods.

Psyche had stopped crying and seemed to understand his explanation. Then he continued, "So now it's time to do something about it."

"What can we do?" Psyche asked timidly.

"Not we... you. I'll discuss what needs to be done with you, but in the end it will be up to you to do it."

When Psyche looked blankly at him, he continued. "I wouldn't be much help, I don't understand it well enough, but some of the senior gods will probably be able to help you."

Psyche looked at him confused, "Who should I ask?"

Cupid shrugged and fell back on the bed, flattening out his wings. "Maybe Dad, he has a strong godhood, but he isn't driven by it. Maybe Apollo, as the head of the

house of intellect he probably understands it best. Daddy Hep would help, he seems to understand it pretty well."

Psyche seemed to shrink into herself as she said, "They all hate me, I can't ask them to... not after... "

"None of them hate you, Psyche. None of them know you... " Cupid paused, waiting for her to look up.

"...I promise that if we explain what's going on and ask them to help, they will." Cupid said with certainty.

Psyche got up from the chair and made to lay next to Cupid.

Cupid sat up suddenly and moved off the bed. "That's the other thing I need to talk to you about."

Psyche looked at Cupid with wide eyes.

"In all the time we've been married, I've been under a spell that effected my feelings. I don't know what's real. I don't know how I feel about you. I don't know you." Cupid said with a diminishing voice.

Psyche began crying again. Cupid continued, "I'll help you do the things you need to do... and while we're working on that... we could try to get to know each other... if you wanted to?"

Psyche looked up with teary eyes and asked, "How do you mean?"

"I mean, get to know each other, the way people do. Talk, do things together, maybe even become friends, if you want to."

"Why? Why are you doing this?" Psyche asked as she wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Because it needs to be done." Cupid said simply.

After a glance at Psyche, he continued.

"I didn't deserve what happened to me. I'm angry about that, but I have to work it out." He noticed a little fear on her face and went on, "And you don't deserve the things that happened to you. However you feel about that, you'll have to work out. There are some things I'll be able to help you with, if you want me to. And other things I can't help you with, we'll find you someone who can."

Psyche began to move toward Cupid and asked, "Can I have a hug."

Cupid stepped back and said, "No, I can't do that yet. Psyche, you're not the only one who's working things out. I just... can't."

Psyche stopped and nodded her head.

* * * * *

Ganymede heard a summons from another god. He followed the call and appeared before Ares in the halls of war.

"Ganymede, would you care to explain what you did to Salpus?" Ares began immediately when Ganymede appeared.

"Salpus?" Ganymede asked, completely confused.

"Salpus! The man that you threw through a wall. One of MY warriors?" Ares continued loudly.

"Him? He hurt one of MY harlots. I had to protect her... " Ganymede started.

"Not by disabling one of my warriors! If he needs disciplined, then I'll see that it's done but you WILL NOT attack one of my worshipers." As Ares spoke he stood to his full height for the full intimidation effect.

Ganymede stood silently for a moment looking up into Ares eyes, then spoke, "You're right. I could have stopped him from hurting her without breaking his legs."

Ares lowered himself onto his throne and sat back, pleased.

"But..."

Ares snapped back to attention.

"I will do what is necessary to protect my harlots. If I bring a matter like this to you, will the warrior be disciplined?" Ganymede asked in a steady tone.

"What did he do that you found objectionable?" Ares asked, somewhat irritated.

"Salpus seems to think blood, bruises and screams constitute foreplay, Sarima, the harlot involved, did not agree, nor did I." Ganymede said, his ire coming to the fore.

"What do you want, for my warriors to bring your whores flowers and candies when they visit?" Ares said with venomous sarcasm.

"NO! I just want YOUR warriors to leave MY whores in basically the same condition that they found them!" Ganymede said in an increasing scream. He froze for an instant with a distant look in his eyes. Then he broke into laughter and said, "But... but... I want to be th... there if you tell your warriors... to bring fl... flowers an... and candies to the harlots." and he broke into full laughter.

Ares watched Ganymede having his laughing fit and began to smile.

"I... I wanna see... the looks on their faces... when you tell 'em." And off he went into another gail of laughter.

Ares let out a little laugh and said, "Deal. I'll let my warriors know to leave the harlots in the condition they found them..."

"...and I'll let my harlots know that they shouldn't expect flowers and candies." Ganymede said as he turned to leave.

"Ganymede, one more thing."

Ganymede stopped and turned around.

"I don't know if anyone's told you but, you're doing a good job." Ares said with an uncharacteristic timidity.

Ganymede smiled and said, "You're the first. Thank you."

And Ganymede continued out of the halls of war.

* * * * *

The night before, they had sat by the campfire and talked about general things and just enjoyed the feeling of not having to hurry anywhere or worry about anything. Now Hercules and Iolaus were sitting by the stream silently. They had been sitting there for an hour.

"Herc?" Iolaus broke the silence.

"Yeah?"

"Do you think Ares meant it when he said he would leave us alone?" Iolaus asked contemplatively.

Hercules sat quietly for a few minutes, then answered. "I don't know. I hope so."

"With Zeus being out of power, he doesn't have anything to gain by lying to you about it. He could have attacked us, but he didn't." Iolaus said quietly.

"I suppose." Hercules said warily.

"But, what if it's over? I mean Hera isn't married to Zeus anymore, she doesn't have any reason to be after you anymore. Ares said that he wouldn't bother you. What are you going to do?"

"What do you mean?" Hercules asked as he turned to look at Iolaus.

"I mean, just imagine if the gods are going to leave us alone. You could have a family again. You could have a life that doesn't revolve around fighting everyday." Iolaus said dreamily.

Hercules remained silent, thinking of the possibilities.

Iolaus broke the silence again by asking, "What would you like your life to be like, if this is really for real?"

"I suppose I'd like to find a place to settle down. Someplace where I could hunt and fish." Hercules answered absently.

"Someplace like Poteidaia?" Iolaus asked with a mischievous smile.

"Merciful Gods! No! I'm ready to wring Gabrielle's neck after one day of travel with her, I wouldn't settle anywhere NEAR her home town." Hercules said then noticed that Iolaus was laughing.

"Very funny. How did you know?" Hercules asked Iolaus honestly.

"I saw you wince a couple times when her voice went into the screechy range. And I noticed how quickly we HAD to be somewhere else every time we met up with them." Iolaus said with a laugh.

"Well... Um... " Hercules stammered.

"So where would you like to live?" Iolaus interrupted.

"Someplace close to Corinth, so I could visit Iph."

"I know just the place!" Iolaus said enthusiastically.

"Where's that?" Hercules asked warily.

"Alcemene's house. I mean, since she died, no one has lived there. It's close to Corinth. And you already own it." Iolaus stated reasonably.

"Hmm, I guess. What would you do? I mean if there really were no more fighting?"

"I guess I'd find someplace around you, I'm kinda used to being around you now. It'd just feel wrong if you weren't there." Iolaus said, then realized what he'd said.

Hercules thought about it for a minute then said, "You could stay with me. The house is big enough for two. I'm used to you being around too."

* * * * *

Joxer walked into the halls of war and headed straight for the bathing chamber. He walked past Ares without saying a word, Joxer didn't even seem to notice where he was. After Joxer had passed, Ares caught the scent of fish.

He got up and followed Joxer to the bathing chamber, knowing what had happened. He'd never tell Joxer, but he had landed in the fish well more than once when he had been learning to transport.

By the time Ares reached the bathing chamber, Joxer was already submerged in the water up to his neck. Ares quickly stripped and slid into the water beside him.

"So, how did your lessons go?" Ares asked quietly.

Joxer groaned once as his only response.

Ares decided that he knew what Joxer needed.

He put an arm around Joxer's waist and pulled him in for a hug.

Joxer just melted into the embrace and started silently crying.

This was the last thing that Ares expected to happen when he gave Joxer a naked hug.

So he just had to ask. "Joxer, what's wrong?"

"Nothing.... Everything... I don't know..." and he broke into full sobs.

"Well, that about covers it, I guess. Tell me why your upset." Ares soothed.

"I... can't..." Joxer whimpered.

"You can, just go ahead and tell me."

"I'm not as good a mischief god as Strife and a five year old can transport better than me and I try to help people and it doesn't work and when I try to use my powers it goes all wrong and when anyone talks to my mind my knees go funny and... and I'm bad because I hurt people." and Joxer was crying again.

Ares sat for a moment, petting Joxer's wet hair and trying to soothe him while at the same time trying to make sense of all the things Joxer was saying. Finally Joxer settled.

"I'll let you in on a little secret Joxer." and Ares moved his lips close to Joxer so they barely touched his ear as he whispered. "You're not Strife."

Ares moved back and continued at normal volume. "You'll do things your own way and be your own type of mischief god. As far as Bliss being able to transport better than you, that's true. But Bliss has been transporting himself for almost a year now. So if you need to compare your performance to Bliss, compare it after a year."

"As far as using your powers, it just takes time and practice. I think maybe you missed your true calling. You could've been the god of impatience. You've only been a god for a few days, you can't expect to know how to do everything. It just doesn't work that way. We can talk to Asclepius about the thing with your knees if it bothers you."

Then Ares turned Joxer so they were eye to eye. "Why do you think you are bad? Who did you hurt?" Ares asked with complete concern.

"Xena and Gabrielle, and Argo I guess. I did all those things to them and I enjoyed doing them and... "

Ares interrupted him and said, "Your godhood just pushed you to do some mischief and you got carried away, but did you actually hurt them at all?"

Joxer shook his head and Ares pulled Joxer's face to his shoulder and rubbed his back soothingly.

"Would you feel better if you could spend some time with them?" Ares asked quietly.

Joxer nodded into Ares' shoulder.

"Okay then, let's get to bed. In the morning we'll transport down so you can meet up with them."

"Okay, thank you Ares. I've never fallen apart like that before." Joxer said embarrassed.

"I think the god thing alone is enough reason for you to have a breakdown, put the rest of the week on top of that and no one would blame you."

* * * * *

Just as the sun was beginning to light the sky, the sleeping women sat up with a start. Argo began to act agitated and the birds were startled and flew away. Xena and Gabrielle looked at each other as they could sense the approach of something. Then they heard it.

"He's Joxer the Mighty, He's very tidy..."

Chapter Ten

"Xena! Gabby!" Joxer exclaimed as he approached their campsite.

Gabrielle groaned quietly, more or less, and began to make herself busy breaking camp.

As she was diligently working Joxer asked, "Why don't we catch some fish and have breakfast before we break camp?"

"We're in a hurry to get to Thebes, we don't have time to wait for fishing, don't be stupid." Gabrielle said while continuing to pack up.

[That's one.] Joxer thought to himself, but stayed silent as he watched her work.

* * * * *

Camp was broken and the three, four if you count Argo, were on a path through the forest. The breakdown of camp had passed without incident, but then again, Joxer hadn't spoken to Gabrielle since the 'stupid' remark. He began thinking back through his travels with Xena and Gabrielle and noticed a pattern. He decided to test out a theory, just to see if he was right.

"It sure is a beautiful day, isn't it Gabby?" Joxer asked with as much of a smile as he could muster.

"It's too hot, there are too many bugs and don't call me Gabby." Gabrielle sneered.

[That's two.] He thought. [If my theory is right, the next one should be an insult AND a slap or nose twist.] "So what are we going to Thebes for?"

"WE'RE going to stop a war, I don't know why YOU'RE going." Gabrielle said snippily.

[I guess I was wrong.] Joxer thought to himself. *Whap!* [*Good One Gabby!*] Joxer thought as he saw stars.

//Ares?// Joxer thought to his almost-lover.

//Done already? It hasn't been an hour yet.// Ares responded.

//I don't need to see anymore. I'm just going to say my piece and then go. I thought you'd want to hear.// Joxer thought with an underlying smile.

//Wouldn't miss it.// Ares thought back with a smile of his own.

Joxer stopped in his tracks and said forcefully, "Gabrielle."

Gabrielle turned, rolling her eyes and huffed a sigh of exasperation. She was standing in a pose with her fists balled up on her hips waiting impatiently for Joxer to continue.

"Gabrielle, I'm leaving. I'm not going to let you insult me or hit me anymore." Joxer said in an emotionless tone.

"C'mon Joxer, we have to keep moving." Gabrielle chirped out, turning to catch up with Xena, who was ahead, watching the conversation.

"I always thought you were beautiful and smart. Now I understand why. You think you're beautiful because you make other people feel ugly. You think you're smart because you call other people stupid."

This declaration made Gabrielle stop, dumbfounded. "I'm..." she tried to say but Joxer interrupted.

"You're mean, Gabrielle. That's it, that's all you are. And I'm not going to waste my time being around someone who doesn't like or respect me. The next time we meet, it won't be as friends. Bye Gabby, Bye Xena." And with that, Joxer turned and walked off in the opposite direction.

//That was good, but you didn't tell them you're a god.// Ares thought to Joxer with amusement.

//I'd rather show them, when the time is right.// Joxer thought back with a smirk.

//Ready to come home?// Ares thought.

[Home, it really is my home now, isn't it?] //Yeah, I am. Where are you? I'm going to try to do it myself.// Joxer asked.

//In the throne room.// Ares said with concern.

//Here I go... // Joxer thought back, then with a look over his shoulder to make sure he was out of sight, he vanished.

Back on the path, Gabrielle was walking with Xena saying, "I'm glad he left, he sure was grumpy this morning."

Xena was just sitting on Argo astonished, [Like water off a duck's back. Gabrielle didn't hear a word of it.]

* * * * *

Cupid entered the bedroom that he used to share with Psyche. She was still asleep, alone in the bed. "Psyche... " Cupid said, trying to wake her up somewhat peacefully.

"Wha? Cupid, what is it?" Psyche asked blearily.

"I was awake all night thinking, and I've come to some decisions." Cupid said sadly with a little apprehension.

Psyche was now fully awake. "What decisions?" she asked with her own apprehension.

"Psyche, this marriage isn't going to work out. Our entire marriage was a lie... " Cupid continued to be interrupted.

"But we could still work things out." Psyche interjected with a pleading note.

"I don't want to work it out. Psyche, I'll be here for you, to help you with things. But I just won't be your husband anymore." Cupid said, feeling like he was the lowest type of creature for not staying with her.

"B... but what am I going t... to do?" she asked through sobs.

"You're going to decide what you want to do, then you're going to do it. And do you know what?" Cupid asked with false enthusiasm.

"What?" she returned with a suspicious look.

"I'll be right there helping you, any way I can." Cupid said with an almost smile.

* * * * *

Joxer materialized in the throne room of the halls of war, in the fireplace to be exact. But with a quick step out of the firebox and across the hearth, he was in Ares' arms.

Ares and Joxer kissed like they hadn't seen each other in months. "Can we go to bed, I mean RIGHT NOW?" Joxer asked.

Ares got a disappointed look and said, "I have a war to start near Thebes this morning... "

"Can't someone else take care of it? Just this once?" Joxer asked with authentic pleading in his voice.

Ares pulled out of Joxer's arms and cleared his throat, "Eris... Enyo... " Ares called out loudly. Within a heartbeat both his sister and daughter appeared. "Eris, we have a war starting outside Thebes today. I need you to take Kraeges' side, Enyo you get Larigis. There were a lot of political maneuverings and such going on but I decided we just need an old fashioned bloodbath. The whole point of this one is to cull the excess male population of the area. So have fun, assassinations within the ranks, surprise attacks, what have you." Ares said with a bloodthirsty look in his eye.

"And where will you be?" Eris ventured to ask.

"I won't be able to attend. Something else ::blush:: came up. This is all for you two, live it up!" Ares said, walking away. Eris and Enyo were obviously dismissed.

* * * * *

They entered the bedchamber at a run. At the edge of the bed, Ares stopped and gathered Joxer into his arms for a long deep kiss. Somewhere during the kiss, their clothes dissolved. [Subtlety later, score now!] Ares thought as he turned Joxer's back toward the bed and prepared to push him down.

Joxer either didn't notice or didn't care as he began to stroke up and down the length of Ares torso from shoulders to hips and back again with feather light touches. On the next down stroke, Ares had had enough of that and grabbed Joxer's hands and firmly placed them on his ass.

Joxer pulled his face back a little in surprise, but when he saw the carnal hunger in Ares' eyes, he took his double handful of Ares' ass, pulled firmly, and ground his turgid shaft against Ares' belly.

Ares approved of Joxer's action and responded in kind. There are times when gentility and romance are the way to go. But other times, like this time to be exact, fast and dirty was the name of the game.

Ares finished pushing Joxer onto the bed. Ares was hungrily devouring Joxer's mouth when Joxer surprised him by flipping him to his back.

Joxer slid down Ares body, and without a second thought he took Ares shaft into his mouth. Using a combination of instinct, his limited experience, and every engraving

he had ever seen on the subject, Joxer began to work Ares' hot shaft with enthusiasm and passion.

Ares head snapped back from the surprise attack. The myriad of sensations overwhelmed him and within moments he achieved climax. Joxer stayed firmly with his ministrations until he had consumed every drop of Ares seed.

After a moment of gasping, Ares reached down and pulled Joxer fully onto the bed beside him. He started by giving Joxer a deep kiss, tasting himself in Joxer's mouth. Then he began to work his way down Joxer's long neck with licks and kisses, and the occasional bite.

Ares worked his way down to a nipple and began alternating sucks and nips. As Joxer seemed to get used to this, Ares moved to the other nipple and began a new assault. Once both nipples were firmly at attention, Ares moved down the hairless chest to the flat stomach. When he finally reached Joxer's engorged cock, he began to nuzzle in the pubic thatch at the base of Joxer's shaft.

Joxer let out a giggle and started to writhe, "It tickles! Stop, it tickles!" Joxer gasped out between giggling breaths. Then Ares took Joxer's cock into his mouth. He was moving more slowly and deliberately than Joxer had but then again, he already got his, so he had nothing but time.

Tortuously slowly Ares moved his mouth up and down the shaft while he tenderly kneaded Joxer's ball sack with one hand. As much as Joxer was enjoying the attention, he wanted 'More', 'Faster', and 'Now'. Joxer made some barely articulated noises that might have meant that.

Joxer began to thrust himself into Ares mouth with increasing speed. He could feel the climax approaching hot and fast. Joxer's body went rigid and just as his first spasm of release spilled forth, he heard the silent summons from Hephaestus in his mind. It's difficult to say if that made the experience more intense or not, but all too soon Joxer had spent his load down Ares greedy throat.

As Joxer collapsed he began to laugh. Ares was surprised by this reaction having missed Joxer's mid-coitus message, then he received his own message from Hephaestus and understood. When they both finished laughing, Joxer asked, "Do you think we'll ever complete a sexual act without a message from Hephaestus?"

"Maybe, Like I said before, 'Some sense of timing.'" Ares replied with a smile.

"What we just did, that was just to take the edge off. It's only a taste of what's waiting for us tonight." Ares said, then pulled Joxer in for another deep kiss.

With a wave of Ares hand both he and Joxer were cleaned and clothed. Ready to meet with the king.

* * * * *

Ares and Joxer appeared in the main hall before a large group of family.

Hephaestus blushed and smiled at Joxer then stood to gain the attention of the seated group.

"We are here today to bear witness to the divorce of Cupid and Psyche. Joxer please come forward and proceed as you will." Hephaestus said regally.

Joxer came forward and gestured for Cupid and Psyche to join him. He noticed with relief that Bliss was not present. Joxer turned to face Cupid, he looked Cupid directly in the eyes and Cupid got a look of surprise on his face. Cupid glanced at his father and back at Joxer then smiled with approval. Joxer returned the smile and looked deeply into Cupid's eyes again.

After a silent moment, Joxer broke the gaze and turned to face Psyche. He look deeply into her eyes and an involuntary shudder ran through his body. Joxer broke the gaze with Psyche and turned to face the assembly.

"Be witness, those assembled that the marriage bonds that once bound Cupid and Psyche are now severed. They go into their separate lives from this point. May they each find happiness in their own way." Joxer said sadly.

"In the matter of Bliss, the product of this marriage, it is my ruling that Cupid shall be sole guardian and provider for their child. Psyche may arrange to spend time with Bliss at Cupid's convenience." Then Joxer turned to look directly at a shocked Psyche. "In matters of divorce, I am the final judge. If you wish to understand my motives, you are free to ask my reasoning."

Psyche was still too shocked to speak. So Joxer continued, "If there are any questions about dividing property, come see me privately. If there is nothing else, this matter is concluded."

Joxer, Psyche and Cupid made to leave the front of the hall as the others stood to go. "Wait!" Ares called to the group.

All eyes turned to Ares. "I have an announcement to make." he said to the group as he made his way to the front.

Joxer was walking to be seated when Ares grabbed him by the arm and lead him back to the front.

"All those assembled, bear witness to this." Ares said as he took Joxer's hands and got down on one knee before a stunned Joxer.

"Joxer, you have been my friend for the past four years. When there was no one else for me to talk to, you were there to listen and to care." Ares said looking up into Joxer's eyes.

"As in the cycles of nature, life gives way to death, death makes way for new life, in light of the divorce that we are here to witness, it seem somehow right that today be the day I ask, Joxer, will you marry me?" Ares asked with all his love showing in his eyes.

Joxer stood silent for a second then tugged Ares up to stand. Then Joxer finally said, "Ares, you have been my friend for the past four years. When no one else trusted me, you treated me with trust and respect. I would be honored to marry you."

Chapter Eleven

All the guests in attendance came up to Ares and Joxer to offer their congratulations. As moments passed, more and more gods appeared in the hall. Psyche looked back at the pair with a sour look on her face and flashed out, back to the temple of love.

Aphrodite pushed her way through the well wishers to speak with Ares and Joxer. "So guys, when are you going to have the wedding?" She asked with her characteristic bounce.

Ares pulled Joxer close in his arms and looked into his eyes. With love in his voice he said, "I know that I surprised you with this, but there is nothing more that I want than to marry you. Joxer, take whatever time you need, and when you are ready, we will be married."

Joxer continued to hold Ares gaze and responded, "First you were my friend, then you were my fantasy, then you became my teacher. I don't need to prepare, I would like to marry you as soon as we can." Joxer then leaned close to Ares ear and whispered. "This morning's sex was great but I would like for our first time making love to be as a married couple."

Ares pulled back and gave Joxer a warm smile of agreement, then turned to Aphrodite. "We're ready when you are Dite." Ares said with a smile.

"That's so cool, Ar." Aphrodite squeaked with a bounce. "Give me an hour to get everything set up. You two need to decide who you want to stand with you, and get anyone here that you want to attend."

Ares nodded and started thinking, strategy and thinking under pressure were, after all, his stock in trade.

Joxer mentally called to his brothers to begin his own planning.

* * * * *

After some discussion with his brothers, Joxer decided that he would like to have Xena at his wedding. Although she hadn't treated him as a dear friend, she didn't go out of her way to cause him grief. She was one of the few people that he and Ares had in common all along. Besides all that, she was Ares daughter, and as such, should at least be invited to the wedding.

Joxer made his way through the growing crowd and said timidly, "Ares, I think we should invite Xena to the wedding."

Ares didn't question his reasoning, he just nodded his head and his eyes defocused for a moment, seeing at a distance. Ares let out a little chuckle at the scene before his mind's eye. "Remind me not to let Eris and Enyo play together anymore. But the good news is that there isn't any reason that Xena can't come if she wants to." Ares said with a smile.

"What did they do?" Joxer asked with amused curiosity.

"The two armies never made it anywhere near each other. They just started fighting amongst themselves and things escalated. I guess that's what you'd expect letting the gods of discord and destruction loose on a battlefield with free reign." Ares said as he started to laugh again.

Joxer was looking at Ares somewhat puzzled, "But why is that so funny?" Joxer asked seriously.

"That's not it, I was looking at Xena wandering around with this, 'Wha happened?' expression on her face. She was there to try and stop the war, and they never went near each other." Ares finished, still laughing.

Joxer smiled and figured that you just had to be there, then he asked again, "So can we invite Xena to the wedding? It just feels right that she should be here."

"Of course we can invite her, but you don't want her to bring her pet harpy do you?" Ares asked with a furrowed brow.

"No, just Xena. Gabrielle can stay on the battlefield and bitch at the dead for lying around and bleeding on her boots." Joxer answered sincerely.

Ares gave a short nod and mentally called to one of his sons. After a heartbeat, Anteros appeared before Ares and Joxer. "Ter, would you go down to the mortal realm and invite Xena to the wedding?"

Anteros looked at his father with a stunned expression, so Ares continued, "Just let her know that I'm getting married and that as her father, I am inviting her to celebrate my wedding with me. Be diplomatic, either she'll come or she won't. And her ::clears throat:: companion, is NOT welcomed. I'm sure you can find a pleasant way to let them know that too. So, will you do it?"

"You're the boss." Anteros said with a shrug.

"I'm not asking as your boss, I'm asking as your father if you want to do this to help me." Ares replied, noticing Anteros' hard feelings.

"Why? Was Cupid too busy to do it?" Anteros spat with disgust.

Ares saw the sibling rivalry for what it was and answered, "I didn't ask Cupid because he's a little high-strung for dealing with Xena. You're more level-headed, although you couldn't prove it right now. So can you do this for me Ter?"

Anteros nodded his head and said somewhat ashamed, "Sure dad, I'm sorry, I've just been feeling wound up lately. I'll go ask her now." And Anteros flashed out of the meeting hall.

* * * * *

Anteros appeared on the battlefield a few paces away from Xena. With a swish of her sword, Xena took up a stance, ready for attack and asked, "Who are you, and what do you want here?"

Anteros looked closely at his half-sister and replied in a soothing voice, "I am Anteros, and I'm here to invite you to Ares wedding."

Gabrielle made her way to Xena's side with her staff in her hands and her 'I just smelled something bad' look on her face.

"Anteros?" was all that Xena could think to say.

Anteros let out a sigh of exasperation. [She'd sure know Cupid if he was standing here.] "Anteros... God of Love Avenged... " he continued, still seeing no spark of recognition.

Finally he said with a growl, " ...Cupid's brother."

The light seemed to dawn in Xena and Gabrielle's eyes.

"Dad asked me to come here and invite you to his wedding. If you'd like to go, I am to take you to Olympus, if not, I'll be on my way." Anteros said flatly, not impressed with this sister of his.

Xena looked around at the carnage and said, "Yes, I have a few things I would like to discuss with Ares."

Anteros extended his hand for Xena to take when Gabrielle spoke up, "I'm not going anywhere near that murdering bastard."

[You weren't invited.] Anteros thought to himself but just said, "As you like, we need to be going, the ceremony will be starting soon."

Xena took Anteros' hand cautiously and they disappeared, leaving Gabrielle in a disgusted fit of rage.

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Ares started searching through the meeting hall for his father. Finally he spotted him against a wall by the door.

Ares walked up to Zeus and began to speak, "Father, would you do me the honor of standing with me at my wedding?"

Zeus just stood disbelieving, waiting for the slap-down that seemed to follow any act of kindness the last few days.

Sensing Zeus' caution, Ares went on to say, "I know we haven't been close the past hundred... thousand... er... well ever. But you ARE my father and I would like it if you would stand with me to support me at my wedding."

Ares waited somewhat patiently as Zeus processed what was being asked of him. One of his children was asking that he take part on a special day. As Zeus looked back, he realized that if Ares had asked him this last week, he would have assumed that Ares wanted some favor or power by involving him. Zeus was humbled and responded to Ares with a voice filled with emotion, "Yes, my son. It would be an honor and privilege to stand with you at your wedding."

As Ares turned to walk away and prepare other things, he thought he noticed a tear in the corner of Zeus' eye.

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When Xena and Anteros appeared, she immediately scanned the room for Ares. Upon seeing her father walking away from Zeus, she forced herself through the crowd of gods to talk to him.

"Ares, how could you? All those men, your warriors, how could you do that to them?" Xena asked with anger and hurt in her voice.

Ares thought for a moment about playing dumb and leading her through the usual verbal maze that they were both so familiar with, but then decided that, just this once, he would actually answer her question... at least a little.

"Thebes has been experiencing drought for the past three growing seasons, there is no longer enough food to support the people of the city. The poorest people in the city are beginning to starve and yet the population is still increasing. How would you fix the problem?" Ares looked away then said quickly, "I'm getting married in a few minutes, excuse me."

Ares walked away leaving a dumbfounded Xena, pondering possibilities that she had never before considered.

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Aphrodite made her way to the front of the main hall and called to everyone. "Take your places, the ceremony is about to begin."

After a few moments of shuffling, Aphrodite waved her hand and all the torches in the hall lowered their flames. A hush fell across the crowd as Ares began to walk up the center aisle of the main hall.

Chapter Twelve

Ares arrived at the front of the main hall. He took his place standing next to his father. The low torchlight and candles around the room were giving off a soft, romantic glow.

Joxer began his march up the aisle and there was absolute silence except for a surprised squeak that came somewhere from the general vicinity of Xena. After a few moments, Joxer took his place between Ares and Jett standing directly before Aphrodite.

Aphrodite smiled at the men gathered before her then turned to Zeus and spoke. "This marriage will be a union between two special people. All those assembled will be witness, but you Zeus, I charge with a special responsibility. As you stand with Ares to support him on this special day, I charge you to continue to support him and his relationship with Joxer. Give guidance when it is needed, protect their union from outside influences that might seek to harm them, and be absent from them when it is right to do so." Aphrodite looked seriously at Zeus then continued, "Are you willing to accept the responsibility to support Ares from this day forward?"

"I am." Zeus answered, barely loud enough to hear.

Aphrodite then looked at Jett and said, "Jett, I charge you with the responsibility of supporting Joxer and his relationship with Ares. Give guidance when it is needed, protect their union from outside influences that might seek to harm them, and be absent from them when it is right to do so. Are you willing to accept the responsibility to support Joxer from this day forward?" Jett also said, "I am."

Then Aphrodite turned to look at Joxer and Ares. She held out her hands in invitation for them to do the same. As she laid their hands together, her voice rose to fill the hall, "Ares, son of Zeus, God of War, Head of the Houses of Aggression, do you take Joxer to be your chosen consort, from this day forward?"

"No." Ares said loudly.

A mumble started through the gathered gods and Aphrodite stood gaping, at a loss for what to do next.

Ares waited for a moment then continued, "I do not want Joxer to be my catamite, my concubine, or my consort. I want Joxer to be my husband, my equal, for now and until the end of time."

Aphrodite was still wavering about what to do, so she drew on her instinctive knowledge from her godhood and proceeded. The ceremony began to fill her mind

and she asked Ares, "Ares, Son of Zeus and Hera, God of War, Head of the Houses of Aggression, Head of the house of war, defender of Greece and heir to Olympus, why do you wish to make this man your husband for eternity?"

Ares looked at Aphrodite with a determined look and replied, "Because I have given him my heart, and I have received his in return."

Aphrodite then turned to Joxer and said, "Joxer the Mighty, Son of the late Janus and Jocasta, God of Mischief and Divorce, why do you wish to make this man your husband for eternity?"

Joxer fixed his gaze deep into Aphrodite's eyes and responded, "Because all the love of my heart goes to him, and all the love of his heart comes to me."

Aphrodite then lifted her gaze to the assembled guests and said for all to hear. "May the fates witness the truth of these words to verify that Joxer and Ares are of one heart." Then she produced a red ribbon and bound their joined hands.

Behind Aphrodite, facing the assembled host of Olympus, the fates responded in unison, "So witnessed."

Aphrodite hadn't actually been expecting them to show and to be honest it kinda creeped her out. She went back to the ceremony by asking the question. "Ares and Joxer, in taking this vow, you are swearing to each other, those assembled, and the fates that you will be faithful to your partner from now until the end of time. You are avowing your future decisions before they have been made in favor of your husband. Your loyalty, fidelity, and trust will be to your husband before all else. If you are willing to take this vow, say 'I so swear.'"

Ares and Joxer spoke simultaneously, "I so swear."

Aphrodite wasn't even trying to follow along now, she just let her godhood continue to lead her through the ceremony. The voice that came from her mouth was her own, but she was not the author of the words.

"By swearing this vow, Joxer and Ares are of one mind." And she produced a gold ribbon and bound their hands again. Once again the three fates spoke from behind Aphrodite. "So witnessed."

All the gods present had been to enough weddings to know that something unusual was going on, something old, something powerful.

Aphrodite looked into Joxer's eyes and asked, "Joxer, tell me what song is singing in your soul."

Joxer answered without knowing where the answer came from, knowing only that it was true, "My soul sings with eternal love for Ares."

Aphrodite then turned to Ares and asked, "Ares, tell me what song is singing in your soul."

Ares was also mystified by the answer coming from his own mouth, "My soul sings with eternal love for Joxer."

"By speaking this truth, Joxer and Ares are of one soul." And she produced a blue ribbon and bound their hands again. Once again the three fates spoke from behind Aphrodite. "So witnessed."

Aphrodite then said, "You may kiss."

Ares and Joxer turned their bound hands so they wouldn't get in the way and gave each other a very enthusiastic kiss. While they were kissing Aphrodite began to speak again. "By performing this act, Joxer and Ares are of one Body." When the men finished their kiss, Aphrodite produced a green ribbon and bound their hands yet again. The three fates spoke in unison, "So witnessed." and vanished from the main hall.

Aphrodite took hold of Ares shoulder and guided the joined men until they were facing the assembled guests. She turned herself to face the guests and said, "Any blessings or well wishes may be given at this stage of the ceremony." With that declaration, Aphrodite withdrew to get her husband and try to figure out what just happened.

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As each of the guests was walking up to the bound couple, a shaken Aphrodite was sitting by her husband trying to understand the ceremony. While discussing the possibilities, Hera approached saying, "You've enacted the eternal binding. When the ceremony is complete, they will be bound together forever."

Aphrodite gave Hera a 'duh' look, but it was only on half power so not very impressive. Hera continued, "It means that if one of them somehow dies, the other will be drawn to join him. If one falls into the void, so will the other. For eternity. In the future, whatever incarnations it may take, they will be bound together. This ceremony isn't used because it is truly eternal. There is no divorce from this marriage, death is no escape, don't you see how serious this is? The last time I know of this ceremony being used was for Chronos and Rhea!"

Aphrodite saw all too well that Hera's one and only personal experience with marriage was a nightmare worse than anything that Hades had ever concocted in

Tartarus. Aphrodite had the feeling that this ceremony was meant to be, the fates actually signed on as witnesses. Hera stood back as Aphrodite stood. "Hephie and I are going to give our blessings now and end this. I think they're going to be a great couple, and I just have to believe that it will all work out."

Hephaestus and Aphrodite walked to the bound couple and proceeded to give their own blessings and well wishes.

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Ares and Joxer had been standing, bound for nearly half an hour while guest after guest wished them well and created gifts for them. Ganymede had created a golden statue of a reclining woman with her head thrown back in ecstasy. Then he looked at Joxer, looked at Ares, then looked back at the statue and it changed into a reclining man with his head thrown back. Ares and Joxer had both laughed at that.

Eris and Enyo had seemed too friendly, somehow seeing them getting along was like seeing a boulder perched on the top of a cliff. You know the disaster is going to happen, and when it does, it's going to be big. But what can you do about it? Be aware, and be somewhere else when it happens.

Most of the members of the family had made their way through the line, Athena seemed distant and Apollo seemed distracted, occasionally humming to himself. Xena had actually given her heartfelt congratulations to the couple, surprising them both.

Finally the stream of family seemed to be ending when Hephaestus and Aphrodite walked up. Hephaestus put his hand on Ares and Joxer's bound hands and said, "As King of Olympus, I have the ability to grant many things. Is there one thing that I can do for you both, to improve your lives together?"

Joxer and Ares exchanged a look, then looked at Hephaestus and spoke in unison, "Strife."

Hephaestus was taken aback by the request of Ares and Joxer. He had thought that they would ask for a new temple, or some other luxury to begin their new lives together. Hephaestus had to consider all the possible obstacles to resurrecting Strife. The first one being Strife himself. Strife was dead, and as such he had rights which must be observed. So if Strife didn't agree to it, that was the end of it. The next obstacle was Hades. He wouldn't be too receptive to having someone removed from his realm. He would most likely ask a high price for such a favor. The rest of the pantheon could also be a problem. They were never very accepting of Strife during his life, they would probably be less so this time around. Many of them thought him beneath the rest because of his dubious parentage. Eris had never

given a satisfactory explanation of her pregnancy. And her story seemed to change as often as her listener.

"Ares, Joxer, this is not an easy thing to do. I'm not saying no, I'm just saying that it isn't something I can guarantee can be done. We will need to talk with Hades and Strife before we can proceed with this matter. If either of them refuses, then there will be nothing I can do. Hades is king of his own realm, and I will not begin my term as King of Olympus by assuming authority I don't have in Asphodel." Hephaestus said with a grim look on his face.

"Ares and Joxer, whenever you're ready, go to Strife and talk to him. See if he is interested in being resurrected. I'll talk to Hades and see what kind of deal I can make."

After their brief talk with Hephaestus, Aphrodite came forward to give her blessing to the couple. She placed her hand on their bound hands and said, "I Aphrodite, Goddess of Marriage give my blessing to this marriage, let it be known throughout Olympus, Ares and Joxer are now married." The four bonds began to writhe and twist around their hands, then pulse with energy. With a final crackle of power the bonds vanished and became a thin band of colors etched into the skin on Ares' and Joxer's wrists.

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There was a party going on, Olympus style. Jayce had broken out some vintage wines stored at the house of debauchery. Apollo summoned a group of musicians to provide entertainment, however, the music was impossible to dance to. Eris and Enyo were laughing at their adventure earlier in the day. Cupid was putting up a brave front and tried to look like he was having fun.

Soon after the party started, Joxer and Ares went looking for Hephaestus. They found him with Aphrodite talking in a hushed whisper.

"Hep, we're going to go visit with Strife for a while." Ares said with determination.

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather wait till after your honeymoon?" Hephaestus asked reasonably.

"We won't be able to enjoy our honeymoon until we've done all that we can for Strife." Joxer said quietly but firmly.

Hephaestus nodded and said, "Then while you're visiting Strife, I'll try to get Uncle Hades alone for a chat."

Ares sent a brief message to Anteros, asking him to see that Xena gets home all right. And then moved himself and Joxer to Asphodel to visit Strife.

Chapter Thirteen

Xena was wandering around the party, watching all that was going on but not really paying attention. She thought back on what Ares had said to her about the drought and saw her own blind ignorance for what it was. She had assumed that Ares caused these wars for his own gratification, but if the other wars had underlying purposes like this one...

Then she thought back on some of her past encounters with Ares; his frustration at his plans being thwarted. If he were just causing the wars for his pleasure, he would have been angry, but the frustration seemed to suggest that she had interrupted something of greater importance. Paling slightly, she wondered how many people she had caused to suffer by her own actions since she'd started seeking her redemption.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Jayce talking with Hera and a goddess who she didn't know. Seeing Jayce reminded her of Joxer, and her shock at the revelations of the day. Joxer wasn't who she thought he was. The moment she saw him walking up the aisle and realized what was about to happen, Xena became angry. She had let out an audible squeak when she forced herself to remain in her place. She couldn't accept it. [Maybe I'm asleep,] she had thought. But as the ceremony began, she knew that she was witnessing reality. As the ceremony continued, she began to think that if she could talk to Joxer, maybe she could convince him to stay away from Ares for his own sake. Then Aphrodite spoke his title, 'God of Mischief'. Joxer was the new god of Mischief. She suddenly knew that Joxer had been responsible for some of the more colorful events of the past few days.

Then she remembered the events of that very morning. Joxer had joined up with them at daybreak and he had tried to be friendly. Gabrielle had been rude and nasty, she had even gone so far as to hit him. None of that was anything new, what was unusual was that Joxer had stood up for himself and told her off.

Xena had to admit to herself that Joxer was right. She hadn't really noticed it before but Gabrielle really was mean. As Xena thought back, she realized that Gabrielle was just this side of nasty to every man they knew, unless she wanted something from them. Gabrielle tended to treat Hercules and Iolaus like dirt too, just not as openly as she treated Joxer. No one could doubt her dislike for Autolycus. A few minutes ago she had made her way through the line to offer her congratulations, she had surprised herself because she found that she was honestly happy for them, maybe even a little envious when she saw the feelings that they shared.

A voice spoke her name behind her, interrupting her thoughts.

Xena turned to see Anteros give her a questioning look.

"I'm sorry, did you say something?" Xena said to him quietly.

"I just said that Dad asked me to see that you get home, so whenever you've finished here, I'll take you." Anteros replied calmly.

"I'd like to go now, if you don't mind. I have some thinking to do." Xena said with a contemplative look in her eyes.

"Where would you like to go? Back to the battlefield? To your friend?"

"To my... to Gabrielle, if you don't mind." Xena replied somewhat distracted.

Anteros gently took Xena's hand in his own and they flashed out.

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Ares held closely to Joxer as he knocked on Strife's door.

"Unc, Jox, what'r ya doin here? Ain'cha gettin married?" Strife asked with surprise.

"We just did, but we needed to talk with you before we do anything else." Ares said seriously.

Strife picked up on his uncle's serious tone and ushered them into his room to sit.

"Hep asked us what we wanted for a wedding gift, and we told him that we wanted you returned to life." Ares said without bravado.

Strife was speechless for a moment. Then he asked, "Did Cupe ask ya ta do this?"

Joxer shook his head and replied, "No, Cupid has been dealing with his divorce. We asked for you to be resurrected because we care about you."

Strife looked at Joxer shyly and said, "Thanks Jox, ya know, tha dead can hear it when tha livin think 'bout 'em. Yer one a'tha few mortals what cared when I died. An I always knew that Unc cared. But I don't know what I'd do if I came back."

"What would you like to do?" Joxer asked quietly.

"I dunno, I jus don wan it ta be like it was b'fore. Ah know ya tried Unc, but I had a pretty crappy life, an I don wanna go back ta that." Strife said sadly.

Ares looked a little hurt but couldn't disagree. Strife had truly had a crappy life. "We can make it better this time..." Ares drifted off with regret filling his voice.

"You had a crappy life before, but you can't do anything to change it while you're still here. If you want something better, you need to be alive to get it. As long as you're dead, you'll never be anything more than what you are right now. The dead don't grow, don't develop, don't find anything new in the future. The dead only find ways to deal with the past because they don't have a present or future." Joxer said firmly.

Ares looked at Joxer with pride then turned to Strife with a nod of agreement.

Strife considered Joxer's words. The dead deal with the past. He had done that, it had taken time but he understood the events that had lead him to this place and who he was. He understood himself better than he ever had in life. And what Joxer said about the future was true, he didn't have any hope for the future because he didn't have any future. He had made peace with his past, but should that be the end? Contentment was a good feeling but was it enough for the rest of his eternity?

"Strife, you've always been like one of my own kids and I miss you. Every time we get together as a family, I notice that you're not there... and it hurts." Ares said sadly.

"Awww, I know Unc, ah feel it each time that happens. If ah do this, what'm I gonna be? Ah mean, Jox's tha godda mischief now." Strife asked with serious contemplation.

"Hep'll decide that. Does it really matter? Besides, Hep likes you, he won't give you anything terrible." Ares said confidently.

"So, will you do it?" Joxer asked excitedly

"Yeah, ah'll do it." Strife said in defeat.

Joxer actually did an Aphrodite styled bounce (no jiggles, of course) as Ares gave a full smile.

Ares eyes defocused as he mentally called to Hephaestus to give him the good news. Then Ares jumped out of his chair and grabbed Strife into a hug.

"Hep said that Hades agreed!"

Joxer grabbed onto Strife and Ares to make it a three-way hug. Ares stopped his hugging as he received another message.

Ares pulled away from the hug and said, "Strife, we're going back to the main hall on Olympus. Hades will summon you in a minute. Hephaestus said that we can do this right now. Since everyone's gathered at the wedding reception, we're going to get them all to donate power to your resurrection."

"Get goin, Ah'll be right b'hind'ja" Strife said with a big grin.

Ares and Joxer flashed out leaving an excited Strife behind to wait.

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Hephaestus and Hades walk to the front of the main hall. Hephaestus raised his hands and all the torches began to sputter and flare for a moment to gain everyone's attention. When the room quieted, Hephaestus said loud enough for all in the room to hear, "As a gift to Joxer and Ares on their wedding day, Hades has agreed to resurrect Strife. All those assembled who would be willing to donate their own power to this task, gather in a circle in the center of the hall."

The crowd cleared a circle in the center of the hall, and gods began milling around, some to join the circle, others to avoid it. Ares and Joxer appeared in the hall as the circle was beginning to form. Ares noticed that all his godly children were standing in a row to donate their energy to Strife. As he looked around the other members of the circle, he was happy to see that most of the members of the house of war were among them, however; Eris was not there.

Some of the other members of the circle surprised him. To Hades' right stood Persephone, Thanatos, Celeste, and Charon. Either Strife had made some friends in Asphodel or he had annoyed them to the point that they would give of their own energy to be rid of him.

Ares wasn't really surprised to see Hestia in the circle, she had always had a soft spot for her mischief maker. And Ganymede was there too. He seemed the type to try and help anyone.

Ares was glad to see that Jett and Jayce were willing to help. Ares hadn't gotten to know them personally, but from what Joxer had told him, Jett appeared to be a cold hearted bastard, but Joxer had assured him that it was just for show. And Jayce gave the appearance of being flighty and shallow but that was also a facade. A movement from Hades caught Ares attention.

As the gods stopped moving around the hall, Hades stepped forward and produced a stone table in the middle of the circle. Hades then waved his hand over the table and the insubstantial shade of Strife was laying on the table, as if asleep.

Hades looked around the circle briefly then focused his attention back on Strife. Hades produced a knife and cut the palm of his right hand. He held the bleeding hand over Strife and allowed the blood to drip into the shade. The blood didn't seem to pass through, but was absorbed, causing a swirling in Strife's form. In a voice like a trance, Hades said, "Just as a parent gives of their life's essence to create a child, I give of my blood to give substance again to Strife. I give my own life's essence in his re-creation, therefore I claim him as my blood and heir." Persephone stared in shock for a moment then walked beside her husband and took the knife from his hand. She cut her own palm and likewise let her blood flow into Strife while saying, "I give my own life's blood to Strife's re-creation and claim Strife to be my own blood and heir." Then Hades and Persephone stepped back into their place in the circle.

Hades again spoke, "Join me now, donate power so that Strife may live again."

Every god in the circle, even Bliss, raised their hands and began to focus their power on the cloudy shade of Strife. Colorful streams of power flowed together to form a solid white power surrounding Strife. The white light began pulsing like a heartbeat. When the pulsing became a steady rhythm Hades lowered his hands. Then, one by one, the other gods followed his lead. The light continued it's steady pulse, but began shifting colors until it became a pulse of darkness. Finally with one last pulse, the darkness was absorbed and Strife began to gasp for breath.

Hephaestus walked up to the stone table and helped Strife into a sitting position. After giving Strife a hug he looked around the circle of gods and announced, "Let all of Olympus hear me, May I introduce to the host of Olympus, Strife, God of Unnatural Creatures, Son of Hades and Persephone, and Heir to the throne of Asphodel."

Chapter Fourteen

Hades walked over to Hephaestus and Strife. He asked Hephaestus, "Do you mind if I have a moment alone with Strife to explain things?"

"Of course not, you can use my study if you like." Hephaestus responded with a smile.

Hades helped Strife off the table and led him out of the main hall, figuring that Strife probably wasn't up to a transport yet.

In the background they heard Hephaestus saying, "Give Strife a few minutes to get his bearings, then you can all give your congratulations."

They entered the study and sat on some comfortable chairs. Strife looked at Hades and asked, "So what's the deal? Why did Heph say I was yer son?"

Hades took a moment to formulate his answer. "The flesh that Eris bore died a year ago. The flesh you now inhabit was made from the blood of Persephone and myself. In that way, you are our son because you are made of parts of both of us. You are also our child by choice, we both freely decided that we wanted you as our son. You have been in my house for the past year, and it has been a pleasure getting to know you. I don't know if or when you'll be able to accept us as your parents but we hope that you will. We will not force you; you are not a prisoner. You are free to go where you want and be who you want. Just please consider being our son, we both want you to be."

"Ah dunno, Ah mean it's what Ah wanted all my life, my old life, but it seems kinda strange to have parents that want me." Strife said sadly.

"I know Str... son. All I'm asking is that you give it a try." Hades asked sincerely.

"Ah'll try... Dad."

Hades pulled his new son into a hug and held him for a peaceful moment until Strife started to laugh.

"What's funny?" Hades asked, puzzled.

"This means Ah get ta call Demeter Grandma, don't it?" Strife asked through chuckles.

Hades smiled at the thought and said, "I suppose it does."

"That's just gonna shit her right up the wall." Strife said, breaking into a full laugh.

"Strife!... Language... " Hades said in a stern, fatherly tone.

Strife stopped laughing and put a properly chastised look on his face.

Then Hades started to laugh and said, "Yep, right up the wall."

And they were both off on a laughing fit.

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Hades returned to the main hall with his arm around his new son's shoulders. The procession of well-wishers came to them and Strife was surprised to find that he was enjoying the attention. In his previous life he would have been wanting to escape from it. It entertained him to see the god's reactions. Some of his relatives obviously couldn't care less that he was alive, they just made their way through the line because it was expected of them.

Then there were the others. Phobos and Deimos actually danced him around in a circle when they had their turn in line. Harmonia had been crying tears of happiness and gave him what was probably the most tender hug that he had received in either life.

Cupid made his way to the front of the line and gave Strife a big, deep kiss and a bear hug. Strife looked into Cupid's tear-filled eyes and whispered, "Cupe, ya got d'vorced taday n ah came back to life n got me some new parents. Can ya gimme a coupla days ta deal b'fore we try anythin?" Cupid just nodded and hugged him again before moving on to let someone else have a turn.

Soon Ares made his way through the line and gave his own hug of congratulations. Ares told Strife seriously, "Your old room is just as you left it, Joxer won't be needing it after all, obviously. So whenever you want to come to stay for a while, there is always a place for you."

Strife nodded seriously then his serious look gave way to his old mischievous smile and he whispered conspiratorially, "So are ya ready ta give Jox the weddin night workout, Unc? Wait... I guess it's Cuz now ain't it?"

Ares gave Strife a suspicious, 'What in Hades' name are you talking about' look.

Strife continued with a giggle, "Zeus is yer dad, Hades is my dad, Zeus and Hades are brothahs, that makes us cousins!"

Ares shook his head with exasperation. "If you insist, but to tell you the truth, I've grown accustomed to 'Unc'." He said with a guilty smile.

"Me too, Unc. So, whatcha got planned fer the Jox on yer honeymoon?" Strife asked enthusiastically.

"What are you asking? Do you want a blow by blow accounting of my plans?" Ares asked with an indignant growl.

"Naw, I may be a perv, but tha thought of you n the Jox 'doin it' jus don't do a thing fer me. I was jus wonderin if you was gonna go some place special."

"Yes, but it's a secret. We'll tell you about it when we get back." Ares said with a smile.

Joxer then joined them and said, "I just got a prayer from Xena, she has some questions for me and I think I should answer them."

"On our honeymoon?" Ares asked with disbelief.

"It won't be that long, I just have the feeling that she's beginning to understand some things that she didn't before. If I do this now, she might not be as big a pain in your ass later. It's like my wedding present to you." Joxer said with a sly smile.

"Okay, go do what you need to do, but hurry. I don't want to have to start the honeymoon without you..." Ares said with his own version of the sly smile.

"Don't you dare! I'll be back before the party's over..." Joxer said as he flashed out.

Ares looked longingly at the spot where Joxer had been then walked away, leaving Strife to the next person in line.

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Joxer appeared with an indigo flash of power, into a moonlit clearing where Xena was sitting on a fallen log. She had a pensive look on her face.

Xena watched as Joxer walked over and sat beside her. "So what did you need to ask me?" Joxer inquired as he made himself comfortable.

"How long?" Xena asked, without emotion.

"How long is what?" Joxer responded with a mischievous glance.

Xena either didn't catch it, or chose not to. "How long have you been a god?" She asked with a hint of anger creeping into her voice.

"Just a few days, the only time I've been around you since it happened was this morning." Joxer answered seriously.

"Are you trying to say that the foul stench coming from Argo wasn't your doing?" Xena asked pointedly.

"No, that was me. My mischief godhood was wanting to play, and I didn't know that it wasn't my idea... Is Argo okay?" Joxer asked penitently.

"Argo's fine." Xena replied, somewhat calmer. "Does that mean you have it under control now?"

"It's not control exactly, but now that I know that the godhood can push me toward certain behavior, I can recognize it and decide if it's what I really want to do." Joxer answered seriously.

"How long have you and my father been together?" She asked absently.

"We've been friends for years, but we just had our first kiss this week. Tonight will be our first time..." Joxer said realizing what he was saying. Then he continued, "Xena, I got the impression that you had some bigger questions to ask.

"Yes, Ares said that the war outside Thebes was to help the people by reducing the number of men, leaving more food for everyone else. So I was wondering if all wars are like that? Helping people, I mean." Xena asked a little apprehensively.

"Some. Wars need to happen for a lot of reasons. Some to control population, some to foster innovation, some to band communities together against a common threat, and some are just to release a build up of aggression. Some of the wars serve a purpose that we don't see until years later. Ares could explain it a lot better, but that's the basis of it." Joxer answered.

"So does that mean that I'm hurting people by trying to stop the wars?" Xena asked in a timid voice.

"No." Joxer said emphatically. "You perform a necessary function by opposing war. The same way that Ares uses war to control the mortal population, you are a force that helps keep war from escalating out of control."

Xena seemed surprised by his answer, so he continued. "Ares doesn't control every aspect of a war, he doesn't know before it happens who will live and who will die.

He just guides the wars that are forming to produce the best results, for the greater good."

Xena sat quietly for a moment pondering this, then asked, "Then why does it seem like Ares is fighting me, if I'm needed?"

"Because he is, you're working against his godhood. His godhood tries to resolve aggression by exhausting it through conflict. You try to overcome aggression through understanding and cooperation. Opposing philosophies, plain and simple." Joxer said with a smile.

"But don't I mess up his plans by trying to stop his wars?" She asked thoughtfully.

"Sure, but if he knows you're going to be there, he usually factors your presence into the scenario and makes sure that the things that need to be accomplished happen despite you. And sometimes, he even depends on you to stop the fighting once his goals have been reached." Joxer answered just as thoughtfully.

"So, what should I do now? I mean knowing that war has a purpose, how can I fight against it?"

"That's easy, Fight against the war, because it's the right thing to do. Continue to help people resolve conflicts peacefully. The only difference is that now you can do it without hating your father. He will guide the people who are willing to fight into a situation where it can do the most good." Joxer said, then before Xena could interrupt, he continued, "But without someone to oppose war, people don't know of any other way to resolve their conflicts. These people choose to go to war, and you give them an alternative. Just don't be discouraged when something happens like it did today at Thebes, sometimes it is just necessary and we have to accept it."

Xena sat quietly for a moment, absorbing what Joxer had said before saying, "I need to think about this. It's a lot to deal with."

"I know, I'm going to go now. I have a honeymoon to get to." Joxer said with a happy smile.

Xena smiled as he vanished.

She sat for a while, contemplating what he had said, then made her way through the forest, back to the sleeping form of Gabrielle at their campsite.

* * * * *

Psyche sat alone in her room at the temple of love. She had been angry when she arrived earlier, but now she was livid. If this divorce thing was going to happen

anyway, she at least expected to get a good dose of sympathy from the other gods. But No! Ares and Joxer had to get engaged, stealing every bit of her thunder. She had been preparing all day to play the part of the injured party after the divorce was declared, and she had been left standing there, watching Ares spout romantic slop at his boy toy. That was when she had left the hall, before they put on a display that made her physically ill.

Then after arriving back at the temple of love, she heard the announcement that Ares and Joxer were married. She had always disliked Ares because he was trying to take the attention of her Cupid away from her. He deserved to suffer, and now he was married, so he would. What was marriage after all but two people chained together, a battle of wills until one was victorious and the other was left a desiccated shell? Ares and Joxer would soon be locked into their own battle and well out of her way, so she need not worry about them for a while, they wouldn't interfere with any of her plans.

Then, just a few moments ago, the announcement was made that Strife had been brought back to life. She had thought that Callisto had solved her problem when she killed the little freak. Now she was sure that Cupid would go sniffing around Strife, trying to start things up again. She couldn't allow that. Divorce or no, Cupid was hers and no one could have him until she was finished with him. Of course, when she finished with him, no one would want what was left...

Chapter Fifteen

With a flash, Ares and Joxer appeared in complete darkness. A slight tremble of fear went through Joxer but Ares just held him tighter.

Joxer asked, "Where are we?" And noticed a strange reverberation of the sound of his voice.

Suddenly torches ignited and Joxer was breathless at the sight. They were in a crystal cave. There were sparkling jewels embedded in the walls ceiling and floor. They all seemed to be natural in their formation. After a few minutes had passed, Ares said, "No one has ever seen this cavern but me and now you, it can only be entered by godly means."

Joxer took a few steps away from Ares, as he stared in wonder at the beauty of this place. He turned to tell Ares but at the sight of him, Joxer was speechless. The sheer beauty of his husband in the firelight staggered him. He immediately moved back into Ares arms and began a passionate kiss.

Ares pulled back reluctantly and said, "Deeper in the cave, I made a bedchamber for us. Forevermore, this will be our special place. No god or mortal will disturb us here, nothing in the world can disturb us here... not even Hep's sense of timing."

Ares led Joxer deeper into the cave. True to his word, there was a bedchamber made amongst the jewel encrusted walls of the cave. The flickering firelight caused the light cast through the jewels to dance on the walls which gave the entire room the appearance of a living thing.

Ares led his husband to the bed. This time rather than ravishing him, he began to slowly and reverently kiss him. With tender kisses full of love, Ares began at his beloved's mouth, then worked his way to his throat. While his mouth was busy kissing, his hands were slowly unlacing Joxer's shirt. Once the top of the shirt was adequately loosened, Ares pulled the shirt over Joxer's head in a smooth, fluid motion.

Joxer initiated the next kiss. He took his beloved husband's mouth gently, and as he did, he eased the vest off his shoulders. Joxer's hands drifted down Ares narrow waist and onward to his hips. He caressed them before moving to take a firm grasp of Ares leather covered cheeks and pull him tight against his body.

Ares pulled away from his husband's firm grip, then at Joxer's puzzled look, he dropped to his knees. He began to unlace Joxer's pants and looked up into his eyes seductively... inches from his crotch. He slowly unlaced the pants, deliberately

removing one lace at a time, making sure that Joxer could feel the exquisite sensation of the cord being pulled loose just above his rising cock.

Ares smiled as he felt Joxer shudder with desire. After agonizing minutes, the laces were undone. Ares then took hold of one of Joxer's feet, indicating that he was going to remove his boot. With little effort he removed first one, then the other. Then, still on his knees, Ares placed his hands on Joxer's waist and began to slowly, painfully slowly peel the trousers down Joxer's hips.

Joxer's cock sprang free from it's confinement and Ares moved his face forward to nuzzle against the side of it as he continued to lower the pants down the long legs. When the pants were pooled on the floor, Joxer stepped out of them. He took hold of Ares by his shoulders and urged him to his feet.

Joxer performed the same actions on Ares, including the nuzzling caress against the side of his cock. Now they both stood naked in the shifting firelight.

Ares took Joxer by the hand and led him to the bed. Ares eased him down, then crawled into bed next to him and snuggled close.

"Are you nervous?" Ares asked quietly.

"You are my friend and I love you more than anyone I've ever known. I trust you to never hurt me or make me feel afraid. So no, I'm not nervous, I'm ready." Joxer said with a tender smile.

"Good." Ares said with his own smile before moving in for a slow deep kiss.

* * * * *

Cupid remembered a promise that he had made to Asclepius. He quickly realized that anyone who would be a suitable match for Asclepius would end up dominating him and would leave him, no one can respect a doormat. While he had been at Apollo's temple, telling Apollo about Psyche's situation, he had been told the latest gossip of Olympus by the muses. They had been going on about the changes in Ganymede and how he had seemed to grow up overnight. He searched Olympus with his mind and found Ganymede in his room at the house of Debauchery. //Ganymede, can I talk with you for a moment?// Cupid thought to him.

//Sure.// Ganymede answered with a little anxiety underlying the word.

Cupid appeared in a pink flash of power. Ganymede looked at him with wariness in his eyes. As Cupid was about to speak, Ganymede interrupted.

"Do you remember the times that Zeus had you shoot me with infatuation arrows?" Ganymede asked coldly.

Surprised, Cupid nodded.

"I know that as king of the gods he could command you to do something like that and you had to obey. But I want you to understand what that did to me. Zeus had violated my body for centuries before that. But with your arrows, he was able to violate my mind. I can't forgive that, not yet. So please, ask what you want of me and leave me alone. I know it's not your fault, and it's wrong of me to feel this way. But it's how I feel. I don't want anything to do with you. I don't like you." Ganymede said with regret in his voice.

Cupid stood gaping at the statement. He had never been told such a thing before. Everybody liked him. They always had. After a moment of stunned silence Cupid came back to himself and said, "I just wanted for you to spend some time with Asclepius. I remember how timid you used to be, and now you are stronger and more self-assured. I think it would be good for him to see someone who used to be as quiet as him as an example of how to be more assertive. I'm not asking you to try to change him, just be yourself and spend some time with him. I think you'd be a good influence on him."

"Okay, I'll talk to him." Ganymede said shortly, obviously not wanting to be in Cupid's presence anymore than necessary.

Cupid nodded and walked away, before walking out the doorway he turned and quietly said, "I'm sorry."

"I know, me too." Ganymede said and watched Cupid leave.

* * * * *

Sitting in their camp of the past two days, Iolaus was trying to work up the nerve to talk with Hercules. Finally, after hours of internal debate he began.

"Herc, you mind if I ask you a personal question?" Iolaus asked hesitantly.

"You know you can ask me anything."

"You haven't been with anyone, I mean like sex, since Serena, right?" Iolaus asked, trying to hide a tremor in his voice.

"Right." Hercules answered with a blush.

"Don't you get, like urges? I mean, I get urges all the time and I just wondered if you do too."

"Sometimes, I just try not to think about it." Hercules answered seriously.

"So if you had the opportunity to 'do it' right now, would you?" Iolaus asked, trying to lead Hercules to think about him 'that way'.

"There's no point in thinking about it since I'm not seeing anyone right now." Hercules answered obliviously.

"Right." Iolaus responded, feeling the ache within himself.

* * * * *

Cupid appeared in Hephaestus' study having received a summons from his step-father. He noticed Apollo sitting with Hephaestus and asked, "What do ya need, Daddy Hep?"

Apollo answered, "I've been thinking about Psyche and I figured out what to do. Heph gave me this," and he held up a bracelet. "To restrict Psyche's powers, I might need you to help me get it on her. Once we do, I'll take care of her. You won't be able to bring Bliss to visit her for a while, I'm going to need to keep her isolated. So whenever you're ready..."

"I'm ready, just tell me what you need me to do."

"Call Psyche, I'd like to do this while we're with Hephaestus so nothing can be said later of how we did it." Apollo answered with uncharacteristic seriousness.

//Psyche, could you come here for a minute, I need to talk with you.// Cupid called with false enthusiasm.

Psyche appeared in a flash of orange/red power. Immediately Apollo walked up to her and said, "I just wanted to formally invite you to take your place in the house of intellect." He took her hand with a slight bow as if to kiss it, then in a quick move he brought up his other hand and clapped the bracelet onto her wrist.

Realizing that she had been tricked, Psyche began to rant and rave. Apollo nodded to Cupid and they each took one of Psyche's arms and transported her to the house of intellect. They dragged her kicking and screaming down a hallway to a plain wooden door. Apollo opened the door and they dragged Psyche inside. The room was barren. There was a bed with a blanket and a pillow. Nothing else. Once she was fully inside, Apollo and Cupid stepped back out into the hallway, blocking her escape with their bodies and closed the door. After listening to Psyche scream for a

moment, Apollo waved his hand and a golden glow appeared over the door and there was silence.

"Now I can begin weaning her off the influence of her godhood. I don't know how long it will take, but it is imperative that she remain secluded until I am finished." Apollo said as he led Cupid down the hall, back toward the audience chamber.

"Just let me know if there is anything I can do to help." Cupid said, glancing back at the door.

"Give me time to do my job. That's the best help you can give me now." Apollo answered seriously as he sat on his throne.

* * * * *

After the incident with Ganymede and helping to capture his ex-wife Cupid decided that he needed to talk with someone. He knocked on Strife's door, surprised when he hadn't been able to appear inside his room. Strife opened the door a crack and poked his head out. "Hey Cupe, what's goin on?"

"Strife, can I come in? I need to talk with you." Cupid said with emotion in his voice.

"Sorry Cupe, Dad said ya can't come in ma room no more. We can go ta tha study if ya wanna."

"I... I don't understand..." Cupid stammered.

"We both made mistakes afore, Cupe. I talk'd ta Dad 'bout it an he said we need ta do this right if we're gonna have a shot of makin it work. Soes ya need ta talk ta Dad, an if he says it's okay, we can go on a date. But it ain't right fer us ta be togethah where we could fool around. Least not fer a while yet." Strife said calmly.

"Since when did you let someone else decide who you can date?" Cupid asked, confused.

"Cupe, Dad cares 'bout me an don't wanna see me hurt. He didn't tell me we was doin' it like this, he told me what he thought an asked me. Ah care 'boutcha Cupe, an ah wanna do it this way an see if we can get it right. Cause if we jump in like last time, it'll proly end up like last time. An I don' think I could go through that 'gain." Strife said seriously.

Cupid got a resigned look on his face and said, "I'll go talk to Hades now. If he says it's okay, would you like to go to Arcadia with me? They're having a festival."

"Yeah Cupe, Ah'd like that." Strife said with a smile.

* * * * *

An hour after her capture, Psyche heard the door open. Apollo walked into the barren room where Psyche was sitting on the plain bed crying.

Psyche cried with hitching breaths, "Why are you doing this to me?" giving him a pitiful look up through her lashes.

Apollo considered her coldly and said, "We're done for now." He closed the door and walked away leaving a stunned Psyche trying to understand what just happened.

Chapter Sixteen

"Uncle Hades, do you have time to talk with me for a minute?" Cupid asked nervously from the doorway of Hades private study.

"Of course Cupid, I've been wanting to talk to you. Please come in... and close the door." Hades said with some fire in his voice.

There were a few tense moments of silence before Cupid began, "I was wondering if... see, I wanted to take Strife out on a date tonight, if that's okay?"

Hades sat forward in his chair and pinned Cupid with a look. "If it were up to me, you wouldn't go anywhere near him ever again. But Strife still has feelings for you so I'm willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. You may take Strife on a date, with certain conditions."

Cupid sat, frozen rigid under Hades gaze.

"You will treat him with the respect that he is due as the Prince of Asphodel. You will dress in a manner that he will find pleasing and take him places that he will enjoy. You will refrain from any physical contact with him unless it is initiated by him, and the contact may include the holding of hands or a brief hug only. I have spoken to Strife about this and I trust him to behave accordingly, however; I do not trust you. Thanatos will be accompanying you as chaperone, unseen to mortal eyes of course, and will inform me of your behavior." Hades said in a commanding voice.

"Why don't you trust me?" Cupid asked shakily.

"Because you hurt my son to the depths of his soul. Because you left him with scars so deep that he wished for death and that wish was finally granted. Because you treated him like a whore and a disgrace. Because you seem to think with your dick and ignore how your actions effect other people... Do you need more?" Hades asked seriously.

"No, I got it." Cupid said, ashamed.

"Be that as it may, Strife loves you, and I believe that you love Strife. Now I just need to know that you can respect him." Hades said with less intensity.

"I... I'll try." Cupid said, feeling very small.

"You do that. Now go get ready for your date, you don't want to keep my son waiting." Hades said with a small smile.

Cupid nodded and flashed out.

* * * * *

After a long difficult day of lust and debauchery, Lust and Jayce sat exhausted in the sitting area of the house of debauchery, exhausted.

With obvious nervousness Lust said, "Jayce, I wanted to ask you something, but I don't want to offend you."

"Yes?" Jayce replied without moving.

"I've sensed through my godhood... your attraction... to me." She said warily.

"Yes." Jayce replied, not moving but with a definite change in attitude.

"You know that I've been seeing Hera?" Lust said, relaxing a little.

"Yes." Jayce said with no expression at all.

"So I talked to Hera about it and she said it would be okay if you wanted to join us. I mean, the only way it would work for her is if you agreed to certain conditions..." Lust said quickly.

Jayce responded by turning his head and giving her an inquisitive look.

"She is going to watch, and that may be all she decides to do. She may at some point decide to direct our actions, and if she chooses, she may join in the sexplay, but she will only do what she feels comfortable with. She's been through a lot, I mean with Zeus, and this will be a really big step for her to be with a man again in any way, but we won't do anything if you don't want to. I mean I think this will help her heal some old wounds without feeling too threatened..." She rambled to a stop at the look on his face.

With a large serene smile on his face he said, "Yes."

* * * * *

Ganymede had been sitting in his room, trying to come up with a reasonable excuse to spend time with Asclepius when a prayer came to him. The prayer was from his high priestess, Meg. She was concerned about one of her girls, and was requesting his counsel.

Ganymede appeared in Meg's with a flourish of scarlet and gold. "Lord Ganymede, thank you for coming. Charise has been crying for nearly two whole days and I can't get her to tell me what's wrong."

At the mention of Charise, the smile left Ganymede's face.

Without noticing the change in his attitude, Meg led him out of her room, across the bustling main room and to the closed door of the room that housed the crying woman.

Ganymede hardened his heart toward the sound of her crying and braced himself for the sight of her as Meg opened the door.

"Charise, Lord Ganymede is here, will you tell him what's wrong?" Meg said hopefully.

Ganymede had been prepared to see Charise crying or even angry. But when he saw the look of fear on her face, fear of him, his resolve crumbled.

In one moment of insight he realized what had been going on with him. Ever since he had hardened his heart toward Charise, a part of his emotions had been encased in stone.

Quietly he said with a glance at Meg, "M'Lady, please leave us alone for a moment."

Meg left and closed the door behind her. Ganymede looked at the disheveled form of Charise and said in a broken rambling meter, "You stole from a customer and lied to me... that hurt me so much that I wanted to not care about you anymore... so it would stop hurting..."

He looked away, "...It didn't work..."

He walked over and sat on the edge of her bed, speaking toward the wall, "...Since I told you that I wasn't your god anymore, I've felt wrong..."

"...like a stone was laying on my shoulders." He turned to face her.

"Please forgive me..." he said with pleading in his voice.

"I was wrong." Ganymede said with downcast eyes that were filling with tears.

Charise was openly weeping, she didn't know if it was sadness, relief or joy. But the emotion was spilling out of her. In a barely hopeful voice, she said, "I was wrong and I'll never do it again. Will you please be my god again?"

"Yes, I would be honored to be your god. And there is something I want you to know and it's very important that you believe me. No matter what happens in the future, whether you make me angry or are my most devoted follower, I swear my sacred oath on the river Styx that I will never abandon you again. There is no act that you can ever commit that will cause me to forsake you." Ganymede said solemnly.

Charise pulled Ganymede close to her, weeping with joy. As she did, Ganymede felt a weight lift from his soul.

* * * * *

Joxer sat on the bed, thinking about their wedding night. Ares had treated him like the most fragile and precious of things. After an hour of kissing and fondling Ares had taken nearly half an hour to prepare him for their lovemaking. He had been so thoroughly oiled and stretched that there was no pain at all when Ares finally gave in to his begging and penetrated him.

Joxer had loved the sensation as Ares carefully positioned himself to brush Joxer's prostate with every thrust. As he looked back on the night, Joxer noticed that there were blank spots in his memory where he had simply overloaded on sensation. For those moments, he WAS feeling.

Then he thought about how Ares had surprised him by asking that he return the favor. Although they had never discussed it, Joxer had assumed that he would be on the receiving end of this aspect of their lovemaking. Ares had other plans, it seems that when Ares said he wanted his husband as an equal he meant in the bedroom as well as out.

Joxer had been nervous, since he had never penetrated another man before. Ares talked him through the preparation and gave him quiet reassurance, finally admitting that he had saved this particular act of lovemaking for his wedding night and Joxer would be the first. What a gift, in that act of love, they each gave something unique to the other that went beyond words and actions. It was like another cord had been added to their wedding bond.

Joxer smiled at his sleeping husband, finally exhausted after passionate hours of lovemaking. With a thought, he extinguished the torches and curled up against his husband and slept.

* * * * *

In the back room of a bar in Corinth two men awoke, naked and tangled together. Both had the familiar aftereffects of too much alcohol and both realized that they couldn't fully remember the night before.

Next, they noticed simultaneously the variety of instruments of sex and torture that littered the floor and that one wall appeared to be a curtain. They were both struggling to untangle themselves when they realized that they were bound wrist to ankle to each other.

A fat, older gentleman walked happily into the room and said, "You fellas put on a great show last night, the crowd loved you. I'll leave your cut of the money on this stool for you. Come back anytime."

Once the fat man had left them alone, there was a flash of power and the bonds were gone. The two men turned, looked at each other, and gasped.

"Zeus?" "Jett?"

Chapter Seventeen

Strife was laying alone in his room, half awake, half asleep, replaying moments from the night before; his date with Cupid.

Strife had been waiting impatiently for Cupid to arrive. His father had told him that Thanatos would be coming along on their date. For just a moment, Strife had felt like telling his father that he was old enough to take care of himself, but one look into Hades' eyes convinced Strife that even though he could take care of himself, his father wanted to. Strife couldn't deny Hades the pleasure of helping him, and it would do Cupid some good to have boundaries. It was nice to know that he didn't have to face everything himself. Hades would help to protect him, would give him advice, but in the end would allow him to make his own decisions.

Then Cupid had arrived. Strife nearly fell off his feet when he saw Cupid dressed in black leather pants. Cupid had his hair done in a different style, it was unruly and wild and Strife loved it. He was also wearing some kind of vest made of chain mail. Strife hadn't been in a position to see how the thing fitted around his wings. But that's all he was wearing as a shirt. Cupid's tanned skin could be seen easily through the chain and the vest was left hanging open to his waist. Thanatos walked to a position between Cupid and Strife, not blocking their view of each other but very much in their field of vision. The only thing on Strife's mind had been how it would feel to peel the leather off of Cupid's sweaty body.

Finally, Cupid had asked if they were ready to leave. Strife had been to a point where he could only nod his head. In a flash, they were in Tanagra. Strife had given Cupid an incredulous look, but Cupid had explained that the party in Arcadia wasn't going to be that much fun, so he decided that Strife might enjoy dinner and some theater.

Strife remembered that he had thought, [Oh no, Cupes is gonna try ta make me sit through some snotty, high-brow play]. Cupid had immediately assured him that it was a comedy, and that's why he chose it. He thought Strife would enjoy it. Strife had wondered to himself if Cupid had been talking to Apollo or the muses to pick out the show, cause Cupid didn't know comedy from cantaloupe. Cupid was wonderful in a lotta ways but he didn't get jokes. He might get the punch line three days later after six people tried to explain it to him, but he still wouldn't think it was funny.

Strife ran through various moments from later in the night. Talking quietly over dinner. Going to the play. When they said something funny on stage, he would look over at Cupid and see that confused look on his face which made him laugh that much harder. But the funniest moment of the night was when Cupid had flashed them back to Hades palace. It was obvious that Cupid wanted to throw him down

on the steps of the palace and ravish him right there but Thanatos stood silently as they gave each other a very chaste and proper hug before ending the night. Cupid had looked like he was going to shoot his load just from the hug. Truth be told, Strife hadn't been that far from the brink himself. He wasn't sure exactly why that was funny, but for some reason, that amount of unresolved sexual tension just was.

Strife decided that he would breakfast with his father this morning and discuss some things. //Dad?//

//Yes son?// Hades replied immediately.

//Have you had breakfast yet?// Strife asked casually.

//No, we were just about to start the day, would you like to join us in our private dining room?// Hades asked hopefully.

//Sure, be ready in a minute.// Strife thought happily. And thought himself clean and dressed. In the year that he had lived in Hades' palace, he had never seen the private dining room. He and the other preferred guests were welcomed to use the formal dining room or the kitchen. For some reason, this gesture made him feel more like Hades' family than any of the words that they had spoken. He checked his appearance in the mirror before flashing out to have breakfast with his parents.

* * * * *

Jayce was first to awaken. He looked at Lust and Hera curled up together and felt a twinge of something; envy perhaps. They had such closeness, such passion. The night before had been an eye-opening experience for him. These women loved each other. It was evident in their every action.

In the beginning of their night, Hera had watched while he and Lust had been petting and kissing. It only took a few minutes for Jayce to realize that while Lust was touching him, she was actually making love to Hera. Every time she touched his body, it was done to inflame Hera's passion. Before very long, Hera began directing their actions. She would tell Jayce what to do, as if he were an extension of her, making love to Lust.

The sex had been passionate, but it hadn't been for him. He had heard the term sex-toy used to refer to someone before but had never grasped its meaning. He had been a living, breathing phallus to be used for Hera and Lust's pleasure. No thought had been given to his desires or his needs. He was there to perform a function in their lovemaking. And when they had tired of him, he had been shifted aside while they had tenderly made passionate love to each other.

Quietly Jayce made his way out of the bedchamber. He had had numerous lovers in the past, both male and female, and had never felt so dirty after a lovemaking... no, sex. Love had nothing to do with what he had experienced the previous night. And he felt cheap and dirty and used. He had agreed to do this, and had thought it nothing but harmless fun, but there was harm. Deep within him something had withered. He had always felt good about himself before, but now? Now he wanted nothing more than to be away from everyone and everything. Hera and Lust had done something to him that likely would be with him for a long time to come. The women didn't hate him, at least that would have been something. They felt nothing for him... and it hurt.

* * * * *

Ares laid beside Joxer with his eyes closed, reflecting on the night before. He had had many lovers through the centuries but never had he felt so loved and cherished as he had the previous night. Joxer had been so responsive to his every touch, as if each was the first time he had ever felt loved.

Joxer was an incredible and generous lover. From the first kiss of the night, Joxer's every movement was devoted solely to bringing him pleasure. After the love that they had shared, he was ready to marry Joxer all over again.

Slowly Ares opened his eyes. The sight that greeted him took his breath away. Joxer had been gazing off into the distance when he saw Ares awaken. The pure joy in Joxer's eyes when their eyes met burned itself into Ares heart for all time. His past lovers had been happy to see him, his children had been happy to see him, but never before in his long life had anyone shone with absolute joy when they looked in his eyes. Ares was humbled by the love that Joxer held for him. He felt unworthy because he had never loved anyone so intensely before and didn't know that he was capable of such an all consuming love.

"I love you." Ares said, not able to find any other words to say.

"I love you too, Ares." Joxer said with a huge smile. Not the goofy 'mighty' smile but an honest joyful, radiant smile.

"Do you have any idea how beautiful you are to me?" Ares said sincerely.

Joxer became instantly cold, "I'm not beautiful." he said and turned his gaze away.

Ares sat up and took Joxer into his arms. He pressed a gentle kiss to Joxer's cheek and quietly said, "You are beautiful to me, you are beautiful for me. When you look at me, your face lights up with beauty like I've never seen before."

Joxer turned back to look at Ares with a shy glance. Ares smiled and Joxer's face went from solemn to joyful in an instant.

"If that's true, it's all because of you. If beauty comes out in my look, it's because I'm looking at your beauty and reflecting it back to you, I love you so much." Joxer said, trying to hold back tears.

"There is a mineral pool deeper into the cave, let's wash up and come back here. I want to spend the day with you in my arms." Ares said with intensity.

Joxer could only nod in agreement as Ares took his hand and helped him up from the bed.

* * * * *

After some tense moments Jett finally got up the nerve to talk. "Uh... do you remember anything about last night?" he asked timidly.

Zeus gave Jett an appraising glance before answering, "No, last thing I remember was being at a party in Arcadia, one of those formal stuffy things, then I woke up here."

"I was in the house of debauchery, talking with my brother. Then I was here. Doesn't that seem strange?" Jett asked pensively.

"I have an idea about that, but first I must ask. Have you done anything to upset Hera ?" Zeus asked knowingly.

"Yeah, she got really upset when I tried to feel her up yesterday. I mean, I thought she was putting out the signals that she was interested, but when I made a move, she shut me down. I think she was pretty pissed." Jett said, concerned.

"I think Hera somehow got hold of some potions from the house of debauchery. This reminds me too much of some previous happenings to be a coincidence."

"Would that be something that Lust would be familiar with?" Jett asked carefully.

"Yes, they are lust potions, she is the one who makes and uses them, why?" Zeus asked, not sure if he wanted to know the answer.

"From what Jayce was telling me, they're together, Hera and Lust, I mean. So if Hera wanted a lust potion, I think Lust would be happy to get it for her." Jett said darkly.

"So SHE did this to us. Just like her. I have to admit that Goddess of Vengeance suits her to a tee. We can't let her get away with this..." Zeus trailed off in thought.

"We can't fight her. Anything we do to her, she'll turn back on us a hundred fold." Jett said with a little fear. Hera was a scary woman on a good day.

"I think I've got an idea of how to get at her in a way that she can't retaliate." Zeus said smugly.

"I don't know if I like the sound of this." Jett said, feeling the urge to flee.

"Just listen, she was trying to get vengeance on us by putting us together in a compromising position. Right?" Zeus said evenly.

"Right..."

"So what if we were to act as if she did us the biggest favor in the three realms by putting us together?" Zeus said with a gleam in his eye.

"How would that bother her?" he asked, confused.

"If she believed that she caused me to have a moment of happiness, it would just tear her up." Zeus said with more enthusiasm.

Jett nodded in understanding.

"And there wouldn't be a thing she could do about it. We could make a point of not obviously taunting her, but since you work with her..." Zeus said evilly.

"...I could let things slip in front of her, and we could be seen together. And she would be ready to explode because you aren't miserable!" Jett said, beginning to feel the enthusiasm himself.

"And if it doesn't work, neither of us is any the worse off, right?" Zeus finished with a smile.

"Right. So what do we do now?" Jett asked with an answering smile.

"We have breakfast. I think it would be a lovely day to have it by the big fountain in the courtyard of the main temple." Zeus said with a conspiratorial smile.

Jett responded with his own smile and they flashed out.

* * * * *

Apollo opened Psyche's door. She was laying on the bed, obviously awake. "Why are you doing this?" she asked without emotion.

Apollo created a chair for himself and sat down. This surprised Psyche, because every other time she said or did anything, he would just leave and lock the door. Only to return an hour later.

"Your godhood is influencing your actions, it has been for over five years. This is the only way that I can break the influence of your godhood so you can take control of your life again." Apollo explained calmly.

"But why have you been coming into my room and then leaving when I said anything?" she asked, confused.

"Because, emotional blackmail is one of the tools of your godhood. If I allow you to influence me in any way, I will reinforce the message that you can control people with your behavior."

She considered that statement for a moment, then asked, "So what do we do now?"

"We spend some time each day like this, talking like civilized beings. We are going to take small steps with this so you will end up as a person who can interact with people without trying to manipulate them." Apollo explained simply.

"When can I see Bliss?" she asked, near tears.

"Not for a while yet, I think. If you like, I can take whatever messages you want to him." Apollo said, standing to leave.

"Why are you leaving?" she asked in a panic as the tears started to fall.

"We've done enough for this time. I'll be back soon, and perhaps we can talk longer. Small steps." Apollo said as he vanished the chair and walked out the door.

Psyche laid on the bed and cried as she heard the door lock.

* * * * *

Jayce wandered around Olympus, thinking. So many things had changed. He had been happy, he had liked himself. He had friends who liked him, then he became a god. Now he had lessons to learn and duties to perform and he would have to be around Lust, reminding him of what had happened.

He thought back to his life and tried to remember when he had felt safe and loved. Then he was hit with a flash of inspiration. He formed the destination in his mind and concentrated as Hestia had shown him.

Jayce appeared in the street of a town outside Corinth. He walked up to a familiar door and knocked, a little worried that he might be making a mistake. When the door opened, he looked into a familiar face.

"Jayce? Oh muffin, what's happened to make you so sad? Come in, come in and tell me all about it."

"Thank you." he said and was led inside.

"Come my little muffin, tell Twanky all about it."

Chapter Eighteen

"Hey Dad. Hey Mom." Strife said as he entered the dining room.

"Good morning, son." Persephone said with a smile.

"Good morning, son. How did your date go with Cupid?" Hades asked with a small smile.

"Like ya don't know already. Than was watching every move we made all night." Strife said with his own smile as he materialized breakfast for himself.

"Thanatos isn't much for exposition. He said that you both behaved adequately." Hades said, materializing breakfast for Persephone and himself.

"Well, we went ta dinnah an a show. It was real funny, Ah laughed my a... self silly. An Cupe was a perfect gentleman." Strife said with his old mischief grin.

"I'm glad to hear that. Have you made plans for another date?" Hades asked with interest.

"Naw, we was too caught up in tha moment ta think bout tha next one. That's what I was wantin ta ask ya, do ya think it would be alright if I asked Cupe out on a date?" Strife asked, a little nervously.

"I think that would be an excellent idea. I'll give you the same advice that I gave to Cupid. Treat him with respect. Dress in a manner that he will find pleasing. Choose someplace to go that he will enjoy. And keep the touching to a minimum. I believe that on a second date, a goodnight kiss should be appropriate. Not too much, just a taste." Hades said with a smile.

"Yeah, I didn't know if this was such a good idea, but aftah last night... I think me an Cupe really need to do it like this ta show that we want each othah outside tha bedroom."

"Strife, I think you are exactly right." Persephone said with obvious delight at the perceptiveness of her son.

"Thanks Mom, Dad's been givin me some real good advice. I nevah had no examples of good relationships afore, soes I didn't have a clue on how to get it right with Cupe. With you twos help, we're gonna do this thing right soes we can be like you an Dad someday." Strife said, taking a large bite of his food.

Hades and Persephone looked at each other with eyes full of love for each other and their son.

"Son, I love you." Persephone said, having moved so she could lean against her husband.

"I know Mom, an I love you both. I nevah thought I was gonna see the day when I had a family but it was worth dieing ta get me ta here." Strife said with a loving gaze before he turned his attention back to his food.

Hades and Persephone had both stopped eating and just sat holding each other as they watched their son eat his meal. Their marriage had had many moments of happiness, but none of them compared to this.

* * * * *

When they went inside, Twanky sat Jayce at a table and brought him some tea. With very little prompting, Jayce began to tell his story. It started when he was summoned to Olympus and ended that morning with how he was feeling. Twanky listened to his story, considering what he was saying and what he wasn't. Finally she thought she understood where the problem lie.

"My little muffin, unless they're using magic on you, they can't make you feel anything. They didn't make you feel like this, you did. I know how much you enjoy playing with the boys and girls, do you know why this is different?" Twanky asked quietly.

Jayce just shook his head no.

"Think about some of the boys and girls you've been with before. What did they have in common?" She asked solemnly.

Jayce thought for a moment then replied, "Brown eyes?"

The Widow Twanky nearly laughed aloud. She got herself under control and said, "No, I hadn't thought of that, I was thinking of how you felt about them."

"They were my friends?" Jayce answered as though it were a question.

"Exactly. When you were describing these women, I noticed that you never once said that you loved them or even liked them. Am I mistaken?" Twanky genuinely inquired.

"No, I only met them this week and we aren't really friends or anything." Jayce answered while wiping away tears.

"But since you are used to being lovers with your friends, you expected them to behave as if they were. My little muffin, you did nothing wrong. You just had different expectations from your play than they did." She said, handing him a hanky from her pocket.

"But... but what do I do now?" Jayce asked through his tears.

The Widow Twanky looked out the window and noticed the time of day. Inspiration hit her. She knew just the thing to make her old pupil feel better. "You come with me. I know just what you need." she said, taking his hand to lead him from the table.

They walked out of the widow's house and to a roughly made stage in the Towns Square. There were several beautiful women milling around and a few musicians tuning their instruments.

"I've known you for many years, and if I've learned anything about you, it's that you can express yourself best through dance. So here is your chance. Every hurt, every worry, everything you don't have words to say, just let it all out. I'll dance with you to get you started, then I'll move off. Remember that this is for you. Just let it all out." she said, then went to the musicians to tell them what to play.

She shooed the girls back from the stage where they became an audience. With a look from Twanky, the musicians began to play a slow, sullen tune.

Twanky walked up to Jayce and he took her into his arms and they began to move.

Within a few minutes, Jayce closed his eyes and began to let the emotions flow out of himself, through his motion. Twanky noticed him becoming lost in the mood and moved herself out of his grip.

For nearly half an hour everyone present watched enthralled as the dance continued. Not one person present had a dry eye as they watched the pain and power displayed in the dance. The musicians had become part of the dance, all of them continuing to play while enthralled at the display. As one the musicians let the last notes die away as Jayce came to rest in the center of the stage.

Every person poured out their adoration through their applause. Several townspeople had noticed the performance and become an audience that nearly filled the Town Square. Jayce wasn't paying attention to the applause, he was just feeling the peace that came from the release. Twanky had been right. He felt better.

Unseen to all, Terpsichore stood hidden in the curtains of the stage, crying. She was crying at the beauty and pain and pure emotion that had been expressed through

Jayce's dance. In the back of her mind she thought, [How incredibly special is the person that can inspire a muse?]

* * * * *

Ganymede appeared in the Temple of Healing, he looked around for a moment when Asclepius entered the room.

"Can I help you?" Asclepius asked quietly.

Ganymede had been thinking of an excuse to come to visit since Cupid had asked him. He had intended to ask for advice about dealing with followers, being that he was new to the whole worship thing. With one look into Asclepius' light blue eyes, his excuses went away.

"Cupid asked me to spend some time with you. He noticed that you weren't very assertive and thought I could help because... I am, I guess." Ganymede said unsurely.

"Why didn't Cupid just talk to me himself?" Asclepius asked, a bit insulted.

"You'd have to ask him. I think he meant for me to behave like I was here for something else and talk to you about it as a friend... But I couldn't." Ganymede said shyly.

Asclepius was a little stunned. "Why not?" he asked automatically.

"Because it would be a lie. I almost did it, but then I realized that I could hurt you by pretending..." Ganymede trailed off.

"...to be my friend. Yes, when it came out, that would hurt." Asclepius said sadly.

"Anyway, if you want to talk about anything, all you have to do is ask. I don't know how much help I could be, but I promise that I'll always be honest with you." Ganymede said, back to being unsure.

"Thanks, I've noticed that honesty can be hard to find around here. It's funny, I went to Cupid asking him to find me someone to love. Does this mean he doesn't think that I'm good enough as I am?" Asclepius asked with a little tremor in his voice.

"Probably. But look at Cupid's history. He may be the god of love, but I don't think his opinion is the end all and be all of relationships. I tell you what. When you have time, why don't we go for a walk or something and just talk about it? I bet that

between us, we can find someone for you. Leave Cupid to figure out his own love life, we can take care of yours just fine without him." Ganymede said with a smile.

Asclepius thought about it for a minute. Ganymede was right about one thing. Cupid did seem to have a talent for making a mess of his own love life. Being in the house of intellect, he couldn't avoid the gossip of Olympus. He knew about Cupid's messed up marriage with Psyche and his 'secret' affair with Strife. And it would be good to have someone to talk to about these things. Ganymede seemed to be sincere and honest.

"If you're not busy now, I have time for a walk." Asclepius said tentatively.

"Sure, I don't get much business in the morning." Ganymede said cheerily.

Asclepius got a vacant look for a second then said, "Dad's going to watch the temple, so I'm ready when you are."

"Let's go."

* * * * *

Near the end of his breakfast with his parents, Strife received a call from Hephaestus. Strife had finished his meal and excused himself before flashing out to meet with the King of the Gods.

"Hey Hep, whatcha need?" Strife inquired as he appeared.

"Have a seat Strife, I needed to talk with you about the responsibilities of your new godhood." Hephaestus said in his business tone.

Strife plopped down into a chair and looked at Hephaestus inquisitively.

"First of all, I wanted to let you know that the Bacchae are going to become your responsibility. Since Dionysus' death, no one has been seeing to their needs. Jayce would seem to be the natural choice since he took Dionysus' job but he thinks they're... how did he put it? Oh... icky and gross." Hephaestus said without inflection.

Strife gave a giggle, hearing Hephaestus say 'icky and gross' just seemed wrong on so many levels. At a glance from Hephaestus, Strife immediately quieted.

"Since they are unnatural creatures, they will be your responsibility. You must see that their numbers do not become too great or small, that they are performing their function, and that they remain aloof from mortals." Hephaestus said as if reading from a manual.

"Um... Hep? I dunno what they're sposed to do, an why can't they be round tha mortals?" Strife asked, needing to know.

"Like most other unnatural creatures, they are used to thin out the mortal population. It turns out to be a most effective way of culling the mortals since it's usually the most stupid of the mortals that end up being killed. There are times when brave mortals will come up against a Bacchae, in that case, if the mortal is defeated, he should be given the honor of becoming a Bacchae. But the stupid ones... are meat for the beasts." Hephaestus finished menacingly.

Strife had never heard Hephaestus talk like this... he liked it. Who knew that Heph had a dark growley side?

"As to your other question. Unnatural creatures are in place as a population control for mortals, and sometimes to set boundaries for them. If the mortals and unnatural creatures befriend each other, they lose the ability to perform their primary function." Hephaestus said in a lecturing style.

"Kay, I get it. What bout the othahs? Whatcha want I should do bout them?" Strife asked, seriously.

"I will leave that to you. I might make the occasional suggestion about your creatures but, by enlarge, they are yours to deal with as you see fit. You must assess their needs and adjust their numbers as you feel is right. And one other thing, most unnatural creatures have animal intelligence, the Bacchae have higher reasoning. For this reason, you might want to make a set of laws for them to follow." Hephaestus said, equally as serious.

Strife just nodded his head. Then he had a thought. "Why'dja pick me fer this godhood?" he asked timidly.

Hephaestus thought for a second then said, "They are called monsters and demons. They perform a necessary function but they are hated by all for no reason other than their existence. They have no fault in their own creation but they are hated by mortals and most gods. I think they need a god to represent their best interests and I believe that you will."

"Cause I used ta be like them. I was called a monstah and a demon when Ah was little. An mosta tha mortals an the gods hated me..." he drifted off, understanding Hep's reasoning.

"So how was your date with Cupid?" Hephaestus asked with a smile.

Strife was taken aback by the apparent non sequitor then shook his head in exasperation. Everyone on Olympus probably knew about their date by now.

Xena and Gabrielle were on the road, traveling toward Corinth.

The previous night had been full of revelations for Xena. Absently she tuned into what Gabrielle was saying.

"...the Gods play with mortals for their own amusement. They cause plagues and famine to keep us from becoming too powerful. They know that if we were allowed to grow strong that we could defeat them. I think they're scared of what we could do..." she kept nattering on until Xena finally tuned her back out.

So not only was Gabrielle mean to her supposed friends, but she believed she was on an equal footing with the gods, and only still mortal by the gods treachery. Xena had quite a few eye-opening experiences the past few days. Most of them were things outside her control. But this, she could deal with.

Xena brought Argo to a stop and said seriously, "Gabrielle, we need to talk."

Chapter Nineteen

Gabrielle stopped and gave Xena a questioning look.

"There are some things we need to discuss." Xena said with menace in her voice.

"Like what?" Gabrielle asked, oblivious to Xena's mood.

"I think you're wrong about the motives of the gods." Xena said carefully.

"How can you say that? You've seen the way they mess with people's lives." Gabrielle said, disbelieving.

"Isn't it possible that people mess with their own lives and the gods step in to help them when they're needed?" Xena asked.

"What did they do to you on Olympus? Did Ares tell you these lies?" Gabrielle asked in a huff.

"No, I asked him one question and he gave me one answer. He didn't try to convince me of anything. He was busy getting married." Xena said flatly.

"And why won't you tell me who he married? You've refused to tell me what happened while you were on Olympus." Gabrielle said accusingly.

"He married Joxer." Xena said without inflection.

Gabrielle began to snicker; the snicker became a chortle and finally moved into a full-fledged laugh. She was able to force herself to stop laughing long enough to say, "God's Xena, that was a funny one." then she laughed until she was doubled over.

Xena watched tolerantly while Gabrielle laughed herself silly.

"Why do you think it's funny?" Xena asked seriously.

"Joxer? I mean, ignoring the fact that he's a guy, the man's a complete idiot. No one would be stupid enough to date him much less marry him. And Ares is a psychopathic bastard who couldn't love anyone." Gabrielle said, then began to chuckle again.

"Joxer is a sweet man who cares deeply for the people around him. He has more heart than anyone I've met, and anyone would be lucky to have a mate that loved that deeply. And that psychopathic bastard is my father. He saw to it that I was

taught to take care of myself and when I turned against him, he fought against me but never attacked me on a personal level. He may not say it, but I know that he does love me." Xena said menacingly.

"So he's using the fact that he's your father to try to get you back into his service?" Gabrielle said, knowing that she understood his motives.

"No, the only time that he's ever mentioned it was when he said that if I was his daughter, he would be proud. He didn't try to convince me of anything." Xena said, becoming angry.

"He must have convinced you of something yesterday or you wouldn't be talking such foolishness today." Gabrielle said confidently.

"Watch that. Joxer may have put up with your attitude and insults but... I. Will. Not." Xena said with a glare in her eyes and a hand on her chakrum.

Gabrielle realized that she might have gone too far. She said a little silent prayer and stood quietly while Xena calmed down.

After a few heartbeats Xena was calm enough to continue, "Ares invited me, not commanded me, but invited me to witness his wedding. Everyone, all the gods present, treated me as Ares guest. No one tried to change my mind about anything. It was a family wedding, just like any other, except maybe with better wine." She said, ending with a small smile.

"So what was this 'one answer' that Ares gave you to convince you that he wasn't all bad?" Gabrielle said, becoming snotty again.

"He told me that the war in Thebes was necessary to reduce the male population so that the women and children would be able to survive. They've had a drought..."

"He's lying. He's just telling you what you want to hear." Gabrielle interrupted.

"I don't think so. First of all, it makes sense. I know there has been a drought and Thebes has a lot of people. Second, I didn't want to hear it. I was happy believing what you told me." Xena said with coldness.

"He's a murdering bastard who will say anything to get you back into his service." Gabrielle said with venom and certainty.

"Okay, let's clear this up right now." Xena's voice raised in irritation. "He's not a bastard, he's a legitimate child of Zeus and Hera, and he's my father, so stop calling him that. As to him murdering? I, as a mortal, am unfit to judge the gods. I don't

know enough of 'why' they do things to say if they are right or wrong. I can only judge right and wrong for myself."

"How can you say that? When you stop a war, aren't you dictating right and wrong to people?" Gabrielle said with her own irritation.

"No, I'm trying to give them another way to fix their problems, a way without fighting. If they are determined to fight, they will. I don't have an army to enforce my will anymore. I just live my life as I see fit and try to help people along the way. You used to understand that, what happened to you?" Xena questioned, realizing that this wasn't the same innocent girl that had originally joined her.

"Me? You're talking about me changing? You're the one who's ready to go back to Ares all of a sudden." Gabrielle spat.

"I didn't say anything about going back to Ares. I'm just beginning to understand some of his motives, that doesn't mean that I'm going to go back into his service." Xena said with a challenging look.

"You're listening to his words, believing his lies, even though you've seen the suffering that he causes with your own eyes." Gabrielle said with hatred.

"I've seen suffering, I've caused some of it, but I'm not sure how much of it was caused by Ares and how much was prevented by him." She said emotionlessly.

"Listen to yourself, you've been on enough battlefields to see how many innocent men have died for the glory of Ares." Gabrielle said, switching her voice to pleading.

"Innocent? Those men were on the battlefield because they chose to be. And their deaths might have meant safety for the truly innocent, the women and children that they were defending." Xena said, becoming disgusted.

"They wouldn't need to defend their people if Ares didn't start the wars." She said, as if to a slow child.

Xena, picking up on the tone, said, "People start the wars, Ares guides them so they produce the best result for the most people. If people didn't want to fight, they wouldn't."

"You're wrong! Ares causes all the wars. He is evil and needs to be destroyed. Mortals will never be free to live their lives in peace until he is gone." Gabrielle said with venomous fury.

Xena looked at the snarling visage of Gabrielle and fully realized the hatred and ugliness that she contained. It was as if she was seeing Gabrielle for the first time

and couldn't believe that she hadn't noticed the attitude of the mean hateful little woman before.

"Gabrielle, leave." Xena said in a voice like stone.

Gabrielle was stunned for a moment then started nattering, "What? You can't mean that. You just need a day or two to get over your trip to Olympus..."

"Gabrielle. Shut. Up. And. Leave. I don't want to see you, talk to you, or gods forbid, hear you again. Joxer was right, you are mean. You are arrogant and hateful. If our paths should cross again, I don't know you. If you approach me, it will be the last mistake you make. Is. That. Clear?" Xena said with Warrior Princess authority.

Gabrielle closed her eyes and prayed silently again before saying, "Can't we just talk about this, I mean maybe I was a little..."

"Is. That. Clear. Bitch?" Xena asked again.

Gabrielle finally nodded as Xena began to undo the packs on Argo's back. Within minutes, all Gabrielle's possessions were laying in a pile beside her as Xena rode away.

Gabrielle stood stunned and thought, [Psyche, why have you forsaken me?]

* * * * *

Asclepius and Ganymede walked in silence for a few minutes through the gardens of Olympus, just looking at the beauty before Ganymede asked, "So you're looking for someone to love, what are you looking for in a mate?"

They stopped on the path as Asclepius thought. "I'm not sure, I don't have a clear image of who I'm looking for, just someone that I can spend time with. Someone that I can come home to after a long day at the temple and tell my troubles to. Someone who actually cares about what I'm thinking and feeling..." he trailed off.

"If you find someone like that, see if they know someone for me, because that sounds pretty nice." Ganymede said with a smile.

Asclepius got a serious considering look on his face. "I guess I never thought about you looking for someone. I mean, you look so young, like you shouldn't be thinking about dating for at least ten years." Asclepius said in a friendly tone.

"I look this way because Zeus did something to me. The old pervert wanted me to look like this, so I do." Ganymede said with anger.

Asclepius raised his hand in a familiar gesture. "Do you mind?" he asked, wanting permission to scan Ganymede with his godly abilities.

Ganymede just nodded, giving permission.

Asclepius closed his eyes and moved his hand slowly up and down, a few inches away from Ganymede's body. After a minute he opened his eyes.

"I think I can undo what he did. It appears that he stopped your growth with a potion that I'm familiar with, and I seem to remember it having an antidote." Asclepius said in his professional persona.

Ganymede was speechless. Centuries ago, he had dreamed of being able to grow up like everyone else. Now it might be possible.

Thinking that he had insulted Ganymede, Asclepius said, "If you want to, that is. There isn't anything wrong with you as you are, I just thought that you'd like to look as old as you are so you could find someone..."

"Thank you Asclepius, really. But I've never considered finding someone to be my mate. I was basically a slave all my life until last week. So I haven't even thought that far ahead. I'm pretty sure that I'd like to go through with it, if you do have an antidote." Ganymede said in a daze.

"Call me Ace. And I just don't want you to think that I'm trying to change you or that there's anything wrong with you the way you are..." Ace chattered nervously.

"I think I understand, Ace. This is about Cupid sending me, isn't it?" Ganymede asked, thoughtfully.

"Yeah. I guess it bothered me more than I realized. He seems to think I'm not good enough to be loved or he wouldn't be trying to change me." Ace said shyly.

"I guess so. But if you are happy with who you are, it doesn't matter what he thinks. Are you?" Ganymede asked, hoping that Asclepius wouldn't think he was being too personal.

"Yes. I am." Asclepius said with a smile.

"Problem solved. Cupid can go find someone else to change then. We're going to keep you just as you are." Ganymede said with a smile of his own.

"Thanks Ganymede. You know, all this stuff gets muddled in my head, it really helps to talk about it. It seems to make it clearer." Ace said happily.

"I'm glad. You're good to talk to. I mean, you're good company." Ganymede said shyly.

"Thanks, so are you. Would you like to go do something tonight? Dad and the muses are going to a festival in Arcadia, one of those things that sound like fun until you get there. So if you don't have any other plans..." Ace rambled to a halt.

"Yeah, if you don't mind us stopping at a few brothels before we go out. I just won't be able to relax until I know that everything is as it should be." Ganymede said happily.

"I wouldn't mind at all. I think a tour of the brothels of Greece would be an interesting way to begin the evening. It's not like I've ever done that before." Ace said with a smile.

"Since you put it that way, we'll make it a real tour. I'd really like to introduce you to my followers. I know they'd like you." Ganymede laughed at the surprised look that came over Asclepius' face.

"Until then I'm going to do a little research and see if I can't find that antidote for you." Asclepius said, returning to professional mode.

"And I'm going to get some sleep. As you might imagine, most of my work is at night." Ganymede said, trying to affect his own professional mode.

"See you tonight then." Asclepius said before walking back toward the temple of healing.

"Until tonight." Ganymede said as he headed toward the house of debauchery.

* * * * *

Strife appeared outside Cupid's office in the house of love. He knocked gently on the door and waited for Cupid to bid him to enter.

"Heya Cupe. Ya gotta minute?" Strife asked nervously.

"Sure, come in. Anteros and I were just doing some paperwork." Cupid said with happy surprise.

"I'll just be going..." Anteros began.

"No Ter, it'd be bettah if ya stayed. Ah'm only gonna be here a minute." Strife said quickly.

Anteros looked surprised but stayed where he was.

"Cupe, Ah'm here ta ask if ya wanna gwan a date wit me tonight." Strife said nervously.

"Will Thanatos be joining us?" Cupid asked cautiously.

"Yeah, proolly, but we can still have us some fun anyways. So do ya wanna?" Strife said with a big grin.

"Of course, I just wanted to know what to expect. What time should I be ready?" Cupid asked with a loving smile.

Strife began to melt at the sight of the smile and knew that he had to get out of there if he was going to behave himself. "Jus aftah sundown. Ah'll meet'cha at yer temple. Kay?"

"I'll be waiting. Where are we going?" Cupid asked, while thinking about throwing Strife down on the desk and...

"It's a surprise. See ya then." Strife said and flashed out of the room.

"So what's that about Thanatos?" Anteros asked, unable to imagine why he would go on their date.

"He's our chaperone." Cupid said with a little frown.

"I'll be back in just a moment." Anteros said and flashed out.

A moment later, gales of laughter could be heard coming from one of the private rooms in the temple of love.

* * * * *

Hera and Lust watched carefully as Jett entered the room. They were expecting him to show some sign of his humiliation or not show up at all.

"Good morning ladies!" Jett said with enthusiasm.

Lust looked at Hera with wide eyes as Hera shrugged in response.

"So what do we have on the agenda today. I can't wait to get started." Jett continued, obviously not caring about their reactions.

"Uh. There's a councilman in Sparta that needs our services, then..." And Hera named off a few jobs that they would be doing that day.

"Sounds good. But I'm going to stop work a little early. I have a date." He said with a big smile.

[It couldn't be.] Both Hera and Lust thought as Jett left for work.

* * * * *

Jayce walked past a doorway noticing that Hera and Lust were talking in hushed whispers inside the room. He continued on to his office and went to his desk. Sitting on his desk was a figurine of a dancer, fully extended in a graceful move. There was a note attached to the base.

I saw your dance, I felt your pain, be comforted and know that someone cares.

T

Jayce looked again at the figurine and smiled. [Someone cares.]

Chapter Twenty

Joxer sat dreamily, wrapped in Ares arms, cradled against his chest. They had spent the entire day in bed, making slow passionate love, talking, or just sitting silently like now.

"Ares?" Joxer said in a whisper.

"Hmmm?" Ares replied, just as softly.

"I feel like going dancing." Joxer said, snuggling down against Ares chest.

"Hmmm." Ares hummed contentedly.

"Was that a 'Hmmm. Yes, I'd love to go dancing'? Or a 'Hmmm. No, I'd rather not'? Or a 'Hmmm. Go ahead. Tell me about it when you get back'?" Joxer asked with a note of teasing.

"Um... the first one." Ares said, nuzzling into Joxer's hair.

"Where do you like to go to dance?" Joxer asked, in a near catatonic daze.

"I don't normally go dancing, but there is a week long festival in Arcadia. It's a little formal as I remember, but they usually have good music for dancing." he replied automatically.

"Hmmm. Then let's do that. After..." Joxer said as he reached behind him to take hold of Ares renewed erection.

"Yes, after that." Ares said happily.

* * * * *

The sun was about to set as Jett walked into the Corinthian bar. Zeus was seated at a table and already had a drink in front of him.

Jett walked up to the table and asked, "Been waiting long?"

"No, just a few minutes. Do you think they'll be watching?" Zeus asked with a barely concealed smile.

"I'm sure of it. I just said that I had a date this evening and stayed happy all day. I don't think either one of them got any work done, wondering what I was up to." Jett said with a laugh.

"Then let the show begin." Zeus said with a smile as he dipped his finger into his drink.

He slowly brought the finger to Jett's mouth. Jett kept his mouth closed for a second as Zeus traced his lips with the wine-covered finger before Jett finally parted his lips slightly.

Zeus forced his finger into Jett's mouth and began moving it in and out in a lewd, violent fashion as Jett slurped. Other patrons of the bar noticed and tried to turn away at the rather disgusting sight.

Jett let his hand drift from his own lap to the lap of Zeus, and felt for his erection through his pants. When he found it, he gave it a squeeze.

Zeus took his finger out of Jett's mouth with a pop and dunked two fingers into the wine before bringing them back to Jett's mouth.

The bartender was watching the display with revulsion. He had no problem with couples showing affection in his bar, no problems with male couples, even though it was rare. But these two were just nauseating.

"You two need to get a room or get out. We don't need this in the bar." the bartender said with disgust.

Zeus looked up at the man and waved his free hand. The bartender found himself in Sparta... nude except for a yellow hat... riding a donkey.

At the display of god powers, the other patrons of the bar understood not to interfere with the two men.

Zeus pulled his two fingers free. He placed one of his hands behind Jett's neck and pulled him in for a deep, animal, violent kiss. There were grunts and slurps coming from both men as Zeus worked his other hand into Jett's pants.

Two of the bar's patrons hurriedly left the bar. One of whom looked as though he were ready to hurl.

Zeus was working Jett's erection furiously inside his pants with his hand as he began to lick down the side of Jett's face, then began to tongue his ear.

Jett was losing the ability to reason. For some reason this nasty, raunchy, aggressive style was really getting him hot. He shifted his weight to turn Zeus and lost his balance, throwing them both out of their chairs. They nearly fell on three more patrons who were running for the exit.

Within minutes they were humping each other vigorously on the floor. Grinding their pelvises with grunts and moans and even a snort from somewhere. Jett finally came back to himself enough to say, "Do you think they saw that?"

Zeus simply said, "Fuck 'em, let 'em get their own." Then he took a handful of Jett's hair and pulled his head back painfully before starting to suck on his neck.

* * * * *

Cupid was waiting in his temple for Strife to arrive. He had no idea how to dress for their date so he decided to wear his simple white pants and leather harness, even though the harness served no purpose without his quiver of arrows and crossbow.

In a flash that was a smudge of darkness, Strife appeared. A moment later, in another dark display, Thanatos also appeared, off to the side. Strife was wearing all white. Tight, white leather pants, much like Cupid's own but so tight that NOTHING was left to the imagination. He had on a white billowing Chin silk shirt with puffy sleeves. The shirt was open to mid-chest exposing Strife's skin. Normally Strife appeared to be pale, but against the white silk, he looked almost tanned. And his hair... his hair was neatly combed and gelled down with something. He looked gloriously beautiful, from the top of his neatly combed hair to the soles of his white mid-calf boots.

"You... you look great!" Cupid said amazed.

Strife just smiled and extended his hand in invitation.

Cupid took his hand and in a smudge of darkness, they were behind some tents, in Arcadia at the festival.

Strife pulled Cupid along, out into the public thoroughfare and they walked along until they reached a courtyard where many couples were dancing.

"Would you do me the honor of this dance?" Strife said very carefully.

Cupid was so stunned at Strife's proper use of language that he just nodded.

The crowd had hushed as they approached. Gods were known to attend this festival, and everyone knew Cupid (the big white wings were a giveaway), but the murmurs that started through the crowd were about Cupid's companion.

Very few knew what Strife looked like, and those who did were looking back at him five and six times to be sure. So only the music could be heard as Cupid and Strife took the dance floor.

Strife took Cupid into his arms and began to dance. The style of dance was formal and proper, just the way Cupid liked it (since he didn't have a speck of grace or flare). All the other dancers stood aside to watch the couple.

It occurred to Cupid that Strife didn't like this kind of thing. He was about to say something when he looked into Strife's eyes and saw the love and beauty there. Cupid understood. Strife didn't enjoy formal dances, formal clothes, or formal speech. But he enjoyed their closeness, their dancing, their being together... and that made all the rest incidental.

The first song ran into the second and the dancing continued. Eventually the crowd of people got over the surprise of Strife a) being alive, b) dressed in white, c) dancing with Cupid, and they began to dance as before the couple's arrival.

* * * * *

Jayce was watching the dance wistfully, unseen to mortal eyes. He had a few little debauchery jobs to do here tonight and wanted to take the time to watch the people enjoying themselves. When Cupid and Strife had taken the dance floor, he was as surprised as anyone. They moved perfectly to the music and were a striking couple. Jayce would never have credited Strife with being able to pull off that look. But he did it beautifully.

Jayce moved over to the punchbowl and poured a little of his special blend in. Now the punch had a lot more punch than it started with. Earlier he had visited a wine merchant on the thoroughfare and gave his wine a little extra kick. These stuffy formal things sometimes needed a little debauchery to remind the high and mighty how to have fun.

As he moved back to the spot where he had been standing, he found a single rose with a note. He looked around, but no one was near. He picked up the rose and read the note.

Someone cares,

T

Jayce looked around again but didn't see anyone out of place. This had to be the work of an Olympian to have had access to his office. But the only Olympians that Jayce could see were Cupid, Strife and Thanatos...

Thanatos with a 'T'.

* * * * *

Iolaus and Hercules were on the road again. The light had given out and it was time to make camp. Neither of them had said much this day because, there was just nothing to say. After all the years traveling together, it had all been said, and there hadn't been any occurrences worth talking about for a week on this trip.

Iolaus decided to try again as they started to set up the camp.

"Herc, what do you think about two guys, I mean like together?" Iolaus asked carefully.

"Never gave it much thought, to each his own I guess." Hercules said as he sat out his bedroll.

"Well haven't you ever wondered what it was like to be with another man?" Iolaus prompted, hoping that Hercules wouldn't get angry.

"Nope. I'm going to go catch something for dinner. Would you gather some firewood?" Hercules continued.

"Sure..." Iolaus mumbled and thought, [That's the ONLY warmth I'll be getting tonight.]

* * * * *

Ares and Joxer appeared just outside the courtyard where the dancers were. As they approached the dance floor, they noticed Cupid and Strife dancing. Ares and Joxer both stood in shock with their mouths open for a second when they saw Strife dressed in white, dancing with the dignity and bearing of a prince.

Ares came back to himself first and said, "I guess him being Prince of Asphodel has really made a difference."

"Guess so." Joxer said, still amazed.

With a little prompting from his husband, Joxer was led out to the dance floor. Rather than use the more formal style of dance like Cupid and Strife, Ares chose to hold Joxer close to him and move with the music. If anyone objected... well he was the God of War so they'd just better not.

* * * * *

Hera and Lust had been standing, looking into the scrying pool with wide eyed horror for over an hour.

They turned as one and silently walked away. Hera was thinking, [No way I'm having sex tonight, after seeing that I might not ever have sex again.]

At the same time Lust was thinking, [If only there were some way to make my memory vomit...]

Chapter Twenty-One

Apollo and the muses became visible to mortal eyes. The music died and everyone on the dance floor stopped and stared at the golden beauty of Apollo. Everyone except Ares, Joxer, Cupid and Strife. They'd seen it.

Ares and Joxer made their way across the dance floor to Cupid and Strife. After a considering look Ares thought to Joxer, //Follow my lead.//

Bowing deeply Ares said with genuine respect in a voice that the surrounding people could hear, "Greetings Prince Strife, I hope that you are enjoying your evening."

Strife was taken aback for a moment then he responded with a bow and replied slowly and respectfully, "I am, Prince Ares, are you and your husband having a good time?"

Joxer nearly fell over from hearing Strife speaking so properly. Ares however, didn't miss a beat in answering. "Yes, it has been nice, the musicians are playing very well tonight." Then he turned his attention to Cupid and said, "How are you this evening son?"

"I'm... uh... good dad." Cupid stammered, feeling like an uneducated fool for not being able to properly address his own father in a formal way.

Ares gave his son a tolerant smile as Joxer spoke. "Prince Strife, how are your father and mother?" he asked in a reverent voice.

"Very well Joxer, I must say that I am surprised to see you back from your honeymoon so soon." Strife said with regal serenity.

"Ares told me that the band at this festival was very good, so we decided to come and enjoy what Arcadia had to offer." Joxer said diplomatically since every person in their vicinity was carefully listening to their every word.

Ares noticed the crowd forming and decided to use their interest to set the record straight.

"Prince Strife, have you heard if Hephaestus is planning to make formal announcements of your new status or the new godhoods?" Ares said, knowing that Strife would see what he was doing.

"Please, just call me Strife. I know that Prince is my proper title since I am the son of King Hades and Queen Persephone, but after formal introductions are made, I prefer not using my title. And to answer your question, no, I haven't heard of any

announcement from King Hephaestus." Strife said slowly, trying to maintain his formal speech. The outward effect of his slow speech was the appearance of having a calm, regal demeanor.

"As you like Strife, and likewise please address me as Ares." Ares said, happy that Strife had taken the hint.

"Of course, Ares. When do you plan to take up your duties again?" Strife asked conversationally as Cupid gaped at the apparent ease with which Strife was engaging in formal conversation.

"Tomorrow, there are things I must attend to." Ares said formally.

"I am glad to see you and Joxer so happy. It gives me hope for my own future." Strife said with a smile at Cupid.

Cupid could only blush from the attention of everyone in the crowd turned on him. Ares noticed Cupid's shyness and decided to shift the focus.

"It seems Apollo is about to start the music again, so I'll bid you good evening." Ares said with another respectful bow.

"Good Evening to you both." Strife said and bowed with equal respect.

As Ares and Joxer walked away the music began to play. They were about to take hold of each other to begin to dance when they noticed the music. The strange beat of the music was impossible to follow.

So with silent acceptance, they moved off the dance floor.

* * * * *

Cupid stood amazed at Strife. He truly was a Prince. It was more than a title that had been given him. Strife's dignity and presence was apparent regardless of his style of dress or manner of speech. Cupid felt the epiphany wash over him. [This is what Hades wanted me to see. And dad too. Strife is so much more than I let myself see.]

Cupid wondered why he had been so blind to the real Strife. The Strife he had been seeing was the Strife that was battered and alone. He was a hurting child that needed someone to help him. His Strife was lonely and would do anything to be loved and accepted.

Tears welled up in Cupid's eyes as he realized that he had done the equivalent to Strife that Psyche had done to him. She had used his arrows to manipulate. He had

used Strife's fear of being abandoned to manipulate. In their past, Cupid was always in control and Strife followed along without complaint or opinion. Though it was never said, there was the silent understanding between them. 'I am going to have fun, you can come along with me... or not'. Never had there been a thought about Strife's fun, until now. Hades had forced him to think of what Strife would enjoy. He had never given thought before to Strife's likes when deciding what to do, he always assumed that if he liked something, Strife would too.

Cupid noticed that Strife was watching him so he moved close to Strife and said, "I need a little time to think about some things. I'm going to go home."

Strife was surprised and a bit worried that he had done something to offend Cupid. But when he looked into Cupid's eyes, he recognized what he saw. Self-Realization. Strife had had that look on his face for the greater part of the past year. He knew that whatever Cupid was understanding, it wasn't something he had done so he wouldn't take it personally.

"I understand." Strife said quietly and took Cupid into his arms, "A little time to think can do wonders. I had a good time tonight, I hope you enjoyed it too."

"It was like a dream. Thank you for doing this for me." Cupid said with uncharacteristic humility.

Strife then pulled Cupid in for a kiss. It was a slow meeting of lips followed by slight pressure. Strife pulled Cupid more tightly against himself to convey his heartfelt affection.

As he began to pull back from the kiss, Strife gave into an impulse and bit on Cupid's lower lip and tugged slightly. When Cupid opened his eyes in surprise, Strife stepped back from Cupid's grasp and smiled tenderly.

Cupid gave a shy smile in return then flashed out in a flourish of pink sparkles.

Strife looked over at Thanatos with shining eyes and thought to him, //Ahm gonna go back ta tha house. Why don'tcha have some wine or sumthin, have a good time.//

Thanatos gave Strife a 'Yeah, right' sarcastic look before Strife disappeared in a smudge of darkness.

The crowd that had been surrounding Cupid and Strife began to murmur as rumors and speculations began to fly.

* * * * *

Asclepius made a mental call to Ganymede after sundown. Within moments Ganymede appeared with a slightly anxious look on his face.

"I found the antidote. If you are sure that you want to do this, I can give it to you tomorrow, there might be some pain involved, since you have been under the effects of the potion for so long." Asclepius said with concern.

"It would be worth it." Ganymede said with determination.

Wanting to change the conversation to something more cheerful, Asclepius asked, "Are we still going on the tour?"

Ganymede looked at Asclepius with a smile in his eyes and said, "Yes, I know you're going to enjoy this."

Ganymede extended his hand to Asclepius so he could transport them both, and they were gone in a flash.

* * * * *

In a scarlet and gold display, Ganymede and Asclepius appeared in Meg's. Asclepius was surprised to see the look of delight on everyone's faces when they appeared. He was used to being feared by mortals and found the difference to be pleasant but a bit unsettling.

"Lord Ganymede, welcome." Meg said with genuine fondness.

"M'Lady, I brought someone for you to meet." Ganymede said happily.

Asclepius was surprised when he saw Meg, "Xena?" He said, before thinking.

"Who?" said Ganymede as Meg said, "Yeah, I get that a lot."

"This is Asclepius, the God of Healing." Ganymede said in introduction, "Asclepius, this is Meg, the owner of this fine establishment."

Asclepius took Meg's hand and kissed the back. As he lifted up, his eyes met Meg's.

"You have the most beautiful eyes..." She said in astonishment.

Before Asclepius could answer, Meg snagged one of her employees and said, "Look at his eyes, aren't they like the sky on a summer's day?"

Asclepius blushed, not used to receiving attention. Ganymede was watching with approval as Meg made Asclepius feel special.

When the number of women fawning over Asclepius reached four, Ganymede stepped in. "I told you that you'd like them." He said to Asclepius, then turned to the women, "I'm going to give him a tour of the place, with your permission M'Lady?"

Meg blushed at her God's willingness to defer to her on such a matter and said, "Of course Lord Ganymede, anytime."

Asclepius was led to the bar where Ganymede got them drinks. They watched the room of bar patrons enjoying an evening of drinking and camaraderie. No one was sitting alone and a good time was being had by all.

Next Ganymede led Asclepius to the far end of the room to the alter and said with pride, "This is the first alter that was dedicated to me."

Asclepius carefully noted the collection of jewelry and fragrances that adorned the alter along with various other trinkets. Ganymede looked through the collection and found a simple necklace with a rough blue stone pendant. He picked up the necklace and said, "I'd like you to have this as a remembrance of this evening."

Asclepius responded by ducking down and lowering his head so Ganymede could put the necklace on him.

Ganymede carefully placed the necklace over Asclepius' head. His fingers brushed the sensitive flesh of Asclepius neck. Asclepius shuddered at the touch. When he stood back to his full height, he averted his eyes from Ganymede. But Ganymede caught a glimpse of what Asclepius was feeling... shame.

* * * * *

Thanatos decided to take Strife's advice and walked unseen to mortals, to the refreshments and poured himself a cup of punch.

Jayce saw Thanatos standing alone, watching the people milling about and decided to join him.

"It's a lovely evening, are you enjoying yourself?" Jayce asked Thanatos quietly.

Thanatos looked around himself to see whom Jayce was addressing, when he realized that Jayce was talking to him he responded, //I have just been watching over Cupid and Strife. I don't really do well at parties.//

"Why do you talk mentally? Mortals can't hear us." Jayce asked curiously.

//The sound of my voice will cause a mortal to die instantly and will drive a god insane.// Thanatos responded with a touch of sadness.

Jayce thought about that response then said mentally, //Well this is more private anyway. I think Ares talked Apollo into playing dance music again, would you care to join me?//

Thanatos was surprised, no one had asked him to dance for millennia. Sadly he thought, //My touch is the touch of death. No god or mortal can withstand it.//

Jayce thought about that and realized that Thanatos was denied any physical contact with anyone. [How very lonely and tragic.] //Then would you like to go for a walk?//

Thanatos was overwhelmed by the kindness of this new god. No one had paid any kind of attention to him as a person for a very long time. His instincts were telling him to say no. Run. Don't believe that someone could care for death. But looking into the deep brown pools of Jayce's eyes, he couldn't help but to accept the offer, wherever it might lead. //Yes, I would like that.//

Chapter Twenty-Two

Terpsichore had noticed Jayce and Thanatos talking. She tried to be discreet in her observation and was pleasantly surprised at the tenderness that Jayce displayed. It seemed a little strange that he would be open to someone so soon after the emotional display that she had observed. She had done her best to try and comfort him by sending him gifts and notes... Signed 'T'... as in Thanatos.

A wave of panic swept through her. She didn't want Jayce to be hurt so soon after the heartbreak that she had observed.

She called mentally to Thanatos, //Thanatos, Jayce believes that you left him gifts and notes to comfort him, it's my fault. I don't know what to tell him that won't hurt him. I just wanted him to feel better, he had been hurting so bad.//

//Terpsichore? What did you tell him in the notes, if you don't mind my asking.//

//I told him that I saw his dance, I saw his pain, I told him to be comforted because someone cares, and I signed the note with a T.//

There was a moment of mental silence as Thanatos absorbed the information and the possible connotations.

//So he believes that I saw him dance and offered him comfort... That explains a lot.// Thanatos thought sadly.

//Yes. But let me ask you, if you had been the one to see him hurting, would you have wanted to offer comfort?//

//Of course, but I wouldn't because...//

//So you care?//

//Yes.//

//Then the notes aren't a lie. He believes that the someone who cares is you. If you do, then there is no reason to tell him the rest.// Terpsichore reasoned.

//Do you have any romantic interest in him?//

//No, I just wanted him to know that someone cared that he was in pain.//

//If you are agreeable, I will never tell him of this. Although there can never be a relationship between us, I believe that he would be distraught if he found that he approached me under such a misconception.//

//I agree, he is vulnerable right now and needs someone to watch out for him. If you are willing to be that someone, I will give any assistance you need.//

//Thank you Terpsichore, you are a very good friend. Even if Jayce doesn't know it.//

* * * * *

Ganymede said quietly so that only Asclepius could hear, "Why don't we take a break from the tour?"

Asclepius, still keeping his eyes averted, nodded slowly as Ganymede led him back to Meg.

"M'Lady, Asclepius and I need to discuss some things privately. Do you have a room we could borrow for a short time?" Ganymede asked with a sincere smile.

Meg thought for a second before responding. "Of course Lord Ganymede, right this way." she said before leading them to a room beside the bar.

They entered and Ganymede led Asclepius to sit. "You remember when I told you that I would always be honest with you?" Ganymede asked quietly.

Asclepius nodded, staring at the far wall.

"Would you please be honest with me as well. Tell me what's wrong." Ganymede said, starting to worry at Asclepius' drastic change in mood.

"When you touched me... I felt something... but I can't, you look like a child..." Asclepius rambled, almost too quiet to hear.

Ganymede had suspected that it might be something like that. "Have you ever had this feeling toward a child before?" he asked gently.

"No, never... it's just... wrong..." Asclepius said, nearly in tears.

"I think I may understand." Ganymede said, then asked, "You know that I'm not a child, right?"

"Yes, but..." Asclepius began to say.

"When you are attracted to someone, do you just feel for the physical body, or do you feel for the person inside?" Ganymede led.

"The person inside, that's why I wouldn't visit a place like this. I couldn't enjoy sex with someone I don't know and like." Asclepius said, sounding a little better.

"I hope I'm not assuming too much but, maybe you're getting to know the person that I am inside and that feeling was stronger than your feeling about the appearance of my body." Ganymede said, trying to be non-threatening.

Asclepius thought about that for a second before asking, "If that was true, how would you feel about it?"

"I would feel honored and pleased that you could feel so strongly for me that you would respond to me even though my physical appearance isn't attractive to you." Ganymede said sincerely.

"Do you feel anything like that for me?" Asclepius asked with a bit of tension in his voice.

"I think so, I'm not used to having those kinds of feelings. I've never loved anyone, I don't know how it feels." Ganymede said with uncharacteristic uncertainty.

"If you're right about my feelings, the problem may be solved tomorrow when I give you the antidote." Asclepius said with a hesitant smile.

"Possibly, but what if it doesn't work? I mean, I think it's important to me to know what you'll do if I have to stay in this form... or choose to." Ganymede said with tears in his eyes.

Asclepius sat silently and thought about it for a few minutes. Finally he turned and took Ganymede's hand in his and looked deeply into his eyes.

"It wouldn't matter, I like the person who you are inside and if the antidote doesn't work or if you decide not to take it, I won't feel one bit different toward you." he said with a loving voice. Then Asclepius leaned over to place a gentle kiss on Ganymede's lips.

Ganymede was surprised. For an instant he felt the little spark of fear that always accompanied physical intimacy but then it faded and he just allowed himself to experience the kiss.

Slowly they parted and both sat startled for a moment.

"That was, wow." Ganymede finally said.

"Yeah." Asclepius responded.

"Tomorrow, I'm going to take the antidote. I don't know what I'll look like when it's done. It's important to me to know that it won't make a difference between us... I'm afraid." Ganymede ended with a tremor in his voice.

Asclepius took Ganymede into his arms and began to rub his back and murmur soothingly, "Don't worry, no matter what happens, I'll be with you. You don't have to go through it alone. And however you look when it's done, I'll still be there."

Ganymede snuggled deeper into Asclepius chest. It had been so long since anyone had comforted him. He found that he enjoyed it. And whatever tomorrow held for them, he could always hold tonight close to him as proof that Asclepius cared.

"I thought I was supposed to be making you feel better." Ganymede mumbled into Asclepius' chest.

"We take care of each other. Whatever happens, we take care of each other." Asclepius said, reveling in the feeling of giving comfort and support. He had always been the one needing support, his father was so strong and the muses were so close-knit that he never had to support someone in this way.

Professionally he offered support, but there was a certain detachment to that. When the patient was recovered, there was no more attachment between them. This was personal, and he found that he liked being depended upon, he liked being able to soothe, he liked being a partner.

"Ganymede?" Asclepius asked quietly.

"Yes?"

"I think I would like... I mean... If you wouldn't mind..." Asclepius sputtered.

"Just say it Ace." Ganymede said with a smile.

"If you would be interested, I think I'd like to date you... I mean steadily... exclusively." Asclepius said carefully.

Ganymede thought about it for a moment, then said, "Yes, I think I'd like that, but we need to take it slow, I have some things that I need to work out before I can let things go any further."

"I know, I mean I know some of what you have to deal with, and I'm here for you if you need to talk about it." Asclepius said gently.

"Thanks Ace. I have the feeling that right now all I need is time to work things out." Ganymede said calmly.

"Then time you shall have, but we still get to do this, right?" Asclepius emphasized his words with a squeeze.

"Definitely, and this." Ganymede said and turned for another gentle kiss.

"Good, I wouldn't want to do without that." Asclepius said with a smile.

"Are you ready to go back to the tour?" Ganymede asked quietly.

"Sure, I hope each of the stops doesn't have a revelation like this one did." Asclepius said in a teasing tone.

"No, Meg's is special. The rest are just plain old whorehouses." Ganymede said with a smile.

* * * * *

Cupid sat alone in his room and reflected on his past relationships and perceptions of people. As he thought of his treatment of Strife, tears started running down his face. Strife had always been loyal and loving toward him while he was oblivious to what Strife wanted and needed. Hades had been exactly right in saying that he couldn't be trusted. He hadn't seen beyond himself. All his actions proved that he thought about his own pleasures before he thought of anyone else. Cupid thought sadly, [I used Strife.]

He noticed some scrolls sitting on his dresser and thought of Anteros. His brother obviously had problems with him. Until now, when Cupid had bothered to think of his brother at all, he just assumed that Anteros was jealous of him. But now he looked beyond his own self importance and saw his relationship with his brother in ruins, not because Anteros was jealous but because Cupid was a self-involved fool who wouldn't put forth the effort to become interested and involved in his brother's life. Anteros had made many attempts to draw Cupid into his interests so they could have something to share, but he had been in his own world, and since Anteros' interests weren't his, he declined invitations one after another until he was no longer invited. And being so self involved, he never even thought to include his brother in his own interests, so he never invited Anteros into his life. Cupid thought despondently, [I pushed Anteros away.]

Cupid thought of his father and another wave of sadness washed over him. They had been so close at one time, but now they hardly spoke. Cupid could think of a dozen occasions when he had acted selfishly in regard to his father and remembered that each time his father had given him that tolerant loving look. His

father didn't expect any better of him... he had written him off as a lost cause. Cupid thought with increasing depression, [I disappointed my Father.]

Thoughts of his father led him to think of Joxer. Cupid should have been the one to offer assistance and advice to Joxer since he was a new god. But true to his selfish nature, all he did was wallow in his own problems and expect Joxer to help him like everyone else. This new god, given no training had helped him when he wouldn't help himself. Joxer had told him to talk through his problems with someone, but what had he done? He had wandered around, wallowing in his own self pity until Joxer had taken it upon himself to take Cupid aside and discuss his problems. Cupid thought with pain, [I've failed as a god.]

Shame overcame Cupid along with a fresh wave of tears. What kind of a parent was he being to Bliss, giving him an example of how to act like he was the center of everything. His little Bliss spent most of his time with Hestia these days so he could work... but after work was finished, he left Bliss with Hestia until he was ready to go collect him. Had she given up on him too? He was such a pitiful excuse for a father. Lately the time he had spent with Bliss had been moving him from one place to another. He hadn't just sat and held Bliss in quite a while... and it had been months since they sat in the floor and played. Cupid thought with agony, [I've failed as a father.]

His mother and stepfather had been as willing as Hestia to watch Bliss, and never said a word against his self-involved actions. From Hephaestus' talk with him the other day, he knew what Cupid's problem was... 'it's not about you, Cupid.' That's what he had to keep reminding Cupid. But he hadn't said it before, not until he had to intervene on Psyche's behalf. So Hephaestus knew... and so did his mother, she had always given him assignments and left him to do his job. She rarely involved herself in his business, and when she did he had made it clear that he didn't want her there. He had behaved selfishly and arrogantly and not had the sense to be humiliated by his own bad behavior. They had given up on him too. Cupid thought from an abyss of misery, [I've failed as a son.]

The feelings were overwhelming. [Too much.] The shame, the guilt, the lost time, the missed opportunities, the ruined relationships, the knowing what a disappointment he had become. [Too much.] A bad father, bad husband, bad son, bad god, bad person. [Too much.] Who was left that he could turn to? [Too much. Need help. Too much...]

And Cupid became silent but for some humming. Sitting and rocking with his arms hugged around his knees and tears streaming down his face.

* * * * *

The sound of laughter could be heard throughout the Halls of War as Ares and Joxer appeared. Joxer took Ares by the hand and led him to the bathing chamber.

"I can't believe how much we danced. I'm so tired, I feel like I could sleep for a week." Joxer said happily.

"It does sound like a good idea but we have things to do... I have to try and stop some wars that the silly mortals started up on our day off." Ares said with disgust.

"You said 'we', what do you have planned for me?" Joxer asked with a sensuous gleam in his eyes as he lowered himself into the tub.

"Many things, but in the morning, I thought I could introduce you to your duties for the house of war." Ares said in relief as he settled in next to Joxer in the tub.

Joxer's eyes lit up with excitement. "Really? You mean I'd be doing a real job just like the other gods?"

"Yes, really. You've learned mind-speak, transporting, invisibility to mortals, and rudimentary materialization so I think you're ready to work." Ares said with a proud smile.

"Uh... ruda what?" Joxer asked curiously as he traced trails of water across Ares chest with his fingers.

"You're a very fast learner. You've developed the ability to create things. Can you make an apple?" Ares asked to prove his point.

"Red or green?" Joxer asked seriously.

"Doesn't matter, just make one." Ares said with a smile.

Joxer thought for a moment and a little green apple appeared in his hand.

"That's what I mean, you can create things that you can picture in your mind. Now all we have to do is practice so the pictures can become more complex, the next step after that is to teach you to create things that don't have a physical manifestation, and finally extra-dimensional materialization." Ares said, accidentally slipping into lecture mode.

Joxer just looked at him puzzled.

"It doesn't matter, we'll be focusing on creating more complex things for the next few decades." Ares said with a loving smile, then without warning he moved in for a kiss.

Joxer responded with enthusiasm. The kissing became deeper and more serious as Joxer thought happily, [The honeymoon's not over yet.]

Chapter Twenty-Three

The twilight was fleeing Olympus. As always, the air was crisp and clean. True to his nature, Anteros got up and went quickly to watch the sunrise. It was his time of peaceful contemplation before beginning the day.

In a state of serenity, thinking of nothing in particular, Anteros watched the rising sun and enjoyed the spectacular show of colors on the horizon. Finally when the show was complete, he rose and went back into his room to dress and prepare for the day.

He went to Cupid's office, where he had been helping his brother in the mornings to stay on top of the paperwork. Truth be told, he enjoyed this time with his brother. Though they only spoke of business during their mornings, Anteros found that even this small amount of closeness gave him a part of the connection to his brother that he had always wanted... it was enough.

Upon arriving, Anteros was surprised to find the office empty. Cupid was usually punctual. He wasn't in the habit of being late to attend to the paperwork, and if he were going to be, he would always leave a message.

Anteros thought to Cupid, //Cupid, time for work, did you sleep in?//

There was no response. This worried Anteros more than Cupid being late. Cupid was a very light sleeper and if he had slept in, he would immediately be awake and answer a call.

Anteros searched mentally and found Cupid in his room. With a thought, he was there and what he found shocked him speechless for a moment.

Cupid was sitting, arms hugging his knees, staring silently into the distance. There were tears running down his face, leaving salty tracks on his cheeks, and giving evidence that he had been like this for hours.

"Cupid? What's wrong?" Anteros asked in a panic.

Silence.

Cupid didn't move a muscle. Anteros tried to look at Cupid's mind but found only a toneless rhythmic hum going on in his head. //Asclepius! Something's wrong with Cupid! Come quick!// Anteros called out mentally, in fear.

Jayce awoke and thought about the previous evening. He hadn't expected to talk to anyone, he had only planned to do his work and return to his room, alone. But then he talked to Thanatos and his plans had changed.

Thanatos had been quiet and timid at the beginning of their walk, like he was distracted by something. But as the walk continued, he began to open up. Thanatos had asked him why he didn't shrink away from his hideous appearance.

Jayce had laughed at that. He had explained that he was a dancer and an actor when he was mortal. He was used to people who wore costumes and affected personas that weren't their own. By having that experience, he had learned to get to know people by their actions rather than their appearance. As an example, he had spoken of Psyche, who he had met briefly. She appeared to be beautiful to the eye, but underneath she was a cold-hearted shrew.

Then he explained that attractive didn't mean internally ugly any more than unattractive meant internally beautiful. As an example he spoke of the bacchae. They were amoral, hedonistic to the extreme, and embraced every vice of mankind. Such creatures were 'icky and gross' from their appearance to the depths of their being.

Thanatos had seemed interested to hear his opinions on such things so he happily shared them. Later he told of his childhood, growing up with his brothers outside Corinth and the good and bad times that they went through.

Soon the story turned to the Widow Twanky who had taken him in and taught him to express himself with dance... and the joy of acting by being someone else for a while.

As expected, Thanatos hadn't said much, but he did tell a little of his life in Asphodel, his friends Celeste, Charon and Strife. And he told of how he enjoyed sculpture, something that only Strife knew of, since he had visited Thanatos unexpectedly one day.

So tonight, after all the duties of the day were done, he was going to Asphodel to see Thanatos' sculptures. Jayce had a great appreciation of art in all it's forms, so he knew that he would enjoy viewing this form of expression with the god who was fast becoming his friend.

* * * * *

Asclepius and Ganymede awoke in each other's arms. They were both fully clothed, and in an ugly little room with only the most meager furnishings. Asclepius thought back on the night before. They had continued their tour of the brothels of Greece. As it had been in Meg's, the mortals were delighted to see them in every place that

they visited. Not in the manner that he had witnessed in temples where mortals worshipped, but happy to see them in the manner of a friend who stopped by for a visit unexpectedly. Every place they went was full of laughter and easy-going companionship. All the alters held various trinkets of gratitude and worship. They had finally asked for a room here in Sparta where they could rest after so many stops and fallen asleep while talking.

Ganymede opened his eyes and looked at Asclepius with a smile. This man, this god, was a true friend. They had talked for hours and enjoyed each others company. Originally he had been wary of Asclepius declaration the night before about being friends even if the antidote didn't work. Now he felt that whatever happened, they would always be at least friends. This man was so attentive and kind, he had a genuine joy of life that spread among all those around him. All you had to do was give him your attention and he would nearly glow with happiness, which was contagious.

//Asclepius! Something's wrong with Cupid! Come quick!// He jumped when he heard the powerful call. "Something's wrong with Cupid, I have to go." Asclepius said sadly to Ganymede before placing a kiss on his forehead.

"You mind if I go with you? I need to apologize to him for something." Ganymede said while getting out of the bed.

"I don't mind at all, come on." Asclepius said, extending a hand, indicating that he would transport them.

Ganymede took his hand with a gentle smile and they were gone.

* * * * *

Joxer and Ares were on the soon to be battlefield. The warlords were rallying their men to fight as Ares explained, "I turn my back for one day and they think they need to go to war with each other. Neither town can afford to lose their army, if they do, their neighbors will swoop in and take both towns."

"What should I do to stop them?" Joxer asked with concern.

"You need to make them decide not to fight without making yourself known. If we tell them what to do directly, they will depend even more on the gods to make their every decision. We want to guide them to do things for themselves, not command them." Ares said while carefully watching the armies.

"I understand. What do I do now?" Joxer asked seriously.

"You take a side and do what you can to discourage them from fighting without revealing that there is a god present. It's for the best if they don't suspect that we're here. Then you go to the other side and do the same thing. Normally I would take one side and you the other, but I have to go to a small community near Pylos and see to another skirmish like this one. It's going to be a long day. Remember, this isn't a test, you can ask for help or call me with any question you have at any time." Ares said, then gave Joxer a long, deep kiss.

"I love you. I'll miss you." Joxer said sadly as Ares separated himself from their embrace.

"I love you too. We'll be back together soon." Ares said with a sad smile.

"Not soon enough." Joxer said sadly as Ares vanished from sight.

* * * * *

Gabrielle made her way into Cupid's temple in Thebes. The normally bright and beautiful temple was dark and forbidding. She walked up to a priest and asked, "What's going on?"

"We don't know, we fear for our Lord Cupid. Last night the temple slowly became like this. The candles won't light, all the flowers withered, the offerings of fruit rotted on the alter, and the walls changed color to an ashen gray. We don't know what to make of it... Lord Cupid won't answer our call." The priest said near tears.

"Maybe he's dead?" Gabrielle said offhandedly.

"Get out, we will not entertain such a notion here." The priest said angrily as he led her out of the temple.

[You will now.] Gabrielle thought, pleased with herself.

[It sounds like Lady Psyche's plan is working. That's probably why she didn't answer my prayers when I was with Xena. She was busy destroying Cupid.] Gabrielle thought with delight and walked away from the temple, nearly skipping with happiness.

* * * * *

In a flash of yellow light, Asclepius and Ganymede appeared in the room with Anteros and Cupid. A moment later there were two more flashes, one of midnight blue and silver sparks and one of bright red and silver sparks. Anteros turned to see Phobos and Deimos looking around curiously.

"We felt chir fear, Ter. Soes we came'ta help." Phobos said with vigor.

At a sustained glare from Anteros he amended, "Kay... we came'ta watch."

Anteros turned his attention back to Asclepius as he scanned Cupid.

"There's nothing physically wrong with him that I can see. We need to get Dad to take a look at him, he deals with maladies of the mind." Asclepius said calmly.

"Has yas told Strife boutit yet?" Phobos asked in his manic way.

"No, I just found Cupid like this a few minutes ago." Anteros answered his brother.

"We'll gota gettim." Phobos said bouncing with energy as Deimos nodded with a dark look.

"Tell him to meet us at Dad's temple, I'm taking Cupid there." Asclepius said with authority.

There were twin flashes as Phobos and Deimos disappeared, then a moment later the rest of the gods disappeared, leaving the room empty.

* * * * *

Xena approached the war camp warily. As she was about to make her way into the commander's tent Ares appeared to her. "Xena, I'm glad to see you."

Xena gave Ares a wide-eyed expression of surprise.

"You know that I was on my honeymoon. These fools decided that they needed to start a war while I wasn't looking." Ares said with a sneer.

"So this isn't one of those wars for the greater good?" She asked incredulously.

"No, this war will weaken the defense of this area and cause the population to decrease to an unsustainable level. If that happens we will have to divert significant amounts of people to immigrate to the area to keep these communities alive. And we need these communities to provide agricultural support to the surrounding towns." Ares said with a little frustration in his voice.

Xena was about to speak when Ares continued.

"Xena, if it wouldn't be too much trouble. Could you try to talk some sense to this lot while I go over and try to discourage Airolous from going to war. Try reminding them that this war is not sanctioned by their god. But don't tell them that I'm

here... I don't want them thinking that they're that important. Fools are bad enough, the last thing I need are arrogant fools." He said with full frustration.

"Of course, I'd be happy to help." Xena said with a smile.

Ares had been expecting accusation and argument from Xena. Her immediate capitulation threw him off guard for a moment when he remembered Joxer's words. So his explanation on their wedding night might have been worth the time after all...

Ares gave a short nod and disappeared. A moment later Xena continued on to the commander's tent.

* * * * *

With multiple flashes Ganymede, Asclepius, Anteros, and Cupid appeared in Apollo's temple. Moments later Phobos, Deimos, Strife, Hades and Persephone appeared.

"What's wrong with him?" Hades asked in his authoritative voice.

"I don't know yet, Uncle Hades. I need Dad to look at him, but he's just finished the sunrise thing and won't be available for a few minutes.

"Cupe, what'cha doin?" Strife asked quietly.

Cupid remained silent and still.

Asclepius waved his hand and Cupid was lying on a bed. A moment later Cupid curled back into his fetal position, the tears continued to fall.

//Dad, I need your help at your temple on Olympus. Something's wrong with Cupid's mind. It's like he's... broke.// Asclepius called, recognizing the seriousness of the condition.

//Hang on a minute. Try to make him comfortable, what's wrong with him?// Apollo asked, obviously distracted by other tasks.

//He's catatonic, he's curled into himself physically and I suspect mentally, and he's silently crying.// Asclepius thought to his father with worry.

In a golden flash Apollo appeared in the Temple of the Sun. "Ace, dude, would you, like, go to the stable and tend to the horses. I've got this." Apollo asked as he made his way to Cupid.

"Sure dad." Asclepius said, then looked at Ganymede who extended his hand to go with.

Asclepius took Ganymede's hand and they flashed out in a flare of yellow light.

* * * * *

Joxer observed as the warlord was trying to plan the attack. Having been raised in a warlord's home, he understood such things and it was obvious that this man was an imbecile.

"Take twenty men and circle around here, they won't expect a group to attack from behind." Durgis said, convinced of his own cunning.

Joxer thought about the things that Strife had told him about such situations and tried to influence the thoughts of one of the warlord's men.

It only took a moment and Joxer knew that he had been able to seed the idea in the man's mind. Now it was time to see what fruit the seed would bear.

"They're looking right at us. They'll expect the attack because they can see our every move." The slight man said in epiphany.

The rest of the men turned as one in surprise at the declaration of the quiet little man, then turned back to their leader with question at the valid observation.

Durgis was livid, his men should know better than to question his plans. He took a step toward the smallish man, intent on thrashing him soundly when his pants suddenly dropped around his ankles.

Joxer took the opportunity to drop a little surprise in the pants. He stood back to see his plan come to fruition.

No laughter was heard. None of the men dared to. But as the silence continued, Durgis got to his feet and pulled up his pants. There was more than one red face shaking to contain the laughter and a few tearful eyes being discreetly wiped dry.

As Durgis sternly walked back to the table to continue his planning, he noticed a smell. One by one those around him noticed the smell in an expanding circle until even those at the back of the tent had noticed.

Those next to Durgis tried to casually move away without drawing attention to themselves. Hands were discreetly brought up to noses to try and withstand the putrid smell. Durgis stormed out of the tent in humiliation.

Once Durgis was well away from the tent, the other men raced out of the tent to get fresh air and question whether Durgis was a capable leader. If he couldn't plan, dress himself properly, or hold his bowels he shouldn't be responsible for their lives.

Joxer nodded, ready to call this a success before flashing out to deal with the opposing camp.

* * * * *

Apollo finished his examination and looked around the room at the expectant faces.

"I've seen this before. But I've never seen it this bad. It usually affects teenagers. Cupid's the first god of his age I've seen with it." Apollo said with concern.

"What is it 'Pol, spit it out." Strife said with worry.

"I don't, like, have a name for it. If you need to name it, call it 'Growing Sickness'. It usually fixes itself in a couple hours or a day. But Cupid is going to need help to get through this." Apollo said professionally.

"Ah'll do whatevah Ah can, 'Pol. Just tell me what ta do." Strife spoke up immediately.

Apollo gave Strife an apologetic look and said, "Dude, There's like, nothing you can do. You can help later, I'm betting that all of you can. But for now the only one who can help Cupid is Jett."

Chapter Twenty-Four

There was a combined disbelieving chorus of "Jett?"

Apollo looked at the anxious group.

Anteros looked as if he were going to burst into tears at any moment.

Strife looked like a loud noise would have him clinging to the ceiling, he was just that tense.

And if the loud noise happened Phobos would be right beside him on the ceiling.

Deimos... you could never really tell what Deimos' mood was, you could only do your best to be aware of him and not turn your back.

Hades and Persephone were holding each other tightly, as if this was their own son.

Apollo looked back to his patient and consider the next step in his treatment.

Ganymede and Asclepius reappeared in a scarlet flash with gold sparkles.

"Do all of you, like, really want to help Cupid?" Apollo asked seriously.

Everyone in attendance, except Cupid obviously, nodded their heads in ascent.

"Then do his job. I'll call Jett and we'll, like, figure out what's wrong and how to fix it. When we finish, I'll call Ares and Aphrodite and fill 'em in. Ter, dude, you, like, know what needs to be done, don't you?" Apollo asked seriously.

"Yeah, I help him in the mornings." Anteros answered unsurely.

"Then, dude, take them with you and give them the jobs that need done. Cupid could, like, use the power boost and it'll keep his work from swamping him when he's better." Apollo said to the group.

"Can't Ah stay with Cupe till he's awake?" Strife asked with worry.

"Dude, if he wakes up, I'll call you. Now you need to stir up some energy for his godhood." Apollo said sternly.

Anteros, Strife, Hades, Persephone, Phobos and Deimos flashed out to the temple of love.

Asclepius asked his father, "Dad, does Cupid need me to help too? I'd really like to take Ganymede back to my temple. I have a treatment to try on him."

"Go ahead Ace, I was just giving them something to do. There were too many people to have underfoot." Apollo said conspiratorially.

Asclepius laughed and took Ganymede's hand and disappeared in a yellow flash.

* * * * *

//Jett.// Apollo called seriously.

Jett appeared in a green flash. Apollo immediately noticed that he had a swollen eye and a split lip.

"Like, what happened to you dude? Do you need me to heal you?" Apollo asked with concern.

"Naw, this is just the afterglow from some romance last night." Jett said with a smile that looked wrong with the split lip.

"If that's what you're into..." Apollo said as he walked to Cupid.

"So what did you need?" Jett asked curiously.

"I need you to, like, use your godhood to look in Cupid's mind. I think I know what's going on with him but I need you to confirm it." Apollo said with distraction.

Jett moved to Cupid's side and put his hands over Cupid's head. A green glow began to form around his hands and Jett suddenly became pale and started to lose his balance.

Apollo caught him and asked carefully, "So, like, what did you see?"

"Retribution, he's calling retribution onto himself. I don't understand it." Jett said

"I need you to look again, I need names and reasons." Apollo said professionally.

"Okay. It'll take me a minute and I may have to go back a few times to get it all." Jett said in warning.

"Do what you need to do. That's what we're here for." Apollo said, producing a chair for himself.

* * * * *

The group of gods appeared in the temple of love. Anteros went to the desk and picked up a scroll. After reading for a few moments he plucked a feather, dipped it in the ink pot on his desk and began to write. As each piece of paper was completed, he handed it to a different god.

Each god read their paper in turn and flashed out to do their task.

* * * * *

Strife appeared in Sparta in a dingey little inn. The innkeeper's daughter was just beginning to prepare a large meal while the innkeeper was working in his office.

Strife read his assignment and looked at the innkeeper's daughter again. Mara. He had to make Mara fall in love with the fishwife's son.

[That's easy. We jus need ta cook fish fer dinnah tonight.] Strife thought.

He planted the thought in the girl's mind and she immediately told her father that she was going to get some fish to prepare for dinner. Her father just nodded.

She went down the street one block and started to examine the fish. Strife watched carefully and noticed that she had no interest, whatsoever, in the fishwife's son, Lynl, and likewise; Lynl had no interest in Mara.

[If Ah don't do sumthin, they're nevah gonna git togethah.] Strife thought, then realized the answer.

As god of unnatural creatures, he knew where they were at all times. He found a suitably cranky minotaur and summoned him to the market.

//Ah want those two, the dumpy girl an the skinny boy ta be trapped togethah, do it.// Strife commanded his minotaur.

The minotaur stomped and began to scatter carts and goods around the market until he reached the fish stall. He worked purposefully to drive the two teenagers into the same place.

//Now terrorize 'em. I want 'em holdin on ta each othah.// Strife thought to the minotaur.

The minotaur had them cornered, and began to make quick, jabbing motions like he was going to rush the kids. Finally Lynl took Mara into his arms and the minotaur quieted, awaiting further instructions.

//Stay an watch 'em fer a minit. When they start talkin, Ahm gonna send ya back ta yer home.// Strife thought to him with thanks.

The minotaur squatted and watched the teenagers carefully. After about two minutes Mara began to whisper to Lynl. The boy nodded and whispered back.

//That's enough. Ya go on down that there alley an Ah'll send ya home. The mortals won't know what happened to ya.// Strife thought with a smile.

And so it went. The minotaur left and the new young couple emerged from their harrowing experience.

Strife thought, [This love stuff ain't so hard.]

* * * * *

Gabrielle was enjoying her morning in Thebes. She found the alley she was looking for and ducked down it to find the altar hidden at the end. A shrine to the Goddess Psyche.

The shrine was empty and dirty. Gabrielle began to work vigorously cleaning the altar. When her work was completed she sat her offering on the altar reverently. A variety of yellow flowers. Psyche loved yellow flowers, so that's what Gabrielle would bring in hopes that Psyche would make her presence known.

After a few moments, when Psyche didn't appear, Gabrielle began to pray. In deep reverence, Gabrielle offered up her prayers to Psyche. Nearly half an hour passed as she prayed. Finally she gathered her things and prepared to leave Thebes. Her work here was done. Since her primary mission could not be completed, she would fall back on her secondary mission. As a high priestess to Psyche, she was responsible for the upkeep of her shrines and temples. So she would travel from town to town until Psyche gave her a new mission.

* * * * *

Phobos appeared in Tanegra with his slip of paper. He was supposed to make the Widow Turgess fall in love with her neighbor, a retired warrior name Arach.

Phobos thought about how to get them together. He produced a large box and sat it on the Widow's doorstep. Phobos knocked on the door, then went to the warrior's door and knocked on it too.

Phobos then became invisible to mortals and watched to see if his plan worked. The Widow saw the large box and tried to lift it. The ex-warrior saw her struggling and

offered to help her. He lifted the box with some effort into her house, much to Phobos delight.

A moment later a shrill scream could be heard and Phobos felt a rush of power through his godhood. The Widow Turgess backed out her front door, and a moment later Arach was carrying out the large box of rats. Once the box was sat far away from the house, The Widow fell into the arms of the retired warrior and cried. After a moment, he began to try to comfort and soothe her.

[The God of Fear and Terror and Love,] Thought Phobos with a smile as he flashed out.

* * * * *

Asclepius and Ganymede appeared in the treatment room of Asclepius' temple.

"Gan, would you get up on that table and sit up?" Asclepius asked professionally.

"Gan?" Ganymede asked surprised, as he got up on the table.

Asclepius produced a clay pot and said, "What? Oh, I hope you don't mind, Ganymede can get to be a mouthful."

"I don't mind at all. I like it." Ganymede said with a smile.

"I need for you to drink this all down. It tastes awful, but you only have to take it once." Asclepius said with a little worry.

Ganymede took the clay pot and was about to drink when Asclepius asked, "You know you don't have to do this for me, right?"

"I know, I'm doing it for me. It's something that I've wanted for centuries. Thank you for helping me do it." Ganymede said seriously.

Asclepius nodded and Ganymede drank the foul brew.

"Now lay back and try to relax. This is probably going to get a little uncomfortable." Asclepius said with concern.

Asclepius then waved his hand and Ganymede became naked but for a sheet covering him.

Ganymede began to feel the potion working through his body. It felt like something was creeping under his skin into every part of him.

A tremble ran through Ganymede's body and he began to take short shallow breaths. Sweat started pouring off his body and his arms and legs began to tremble.

After a moment of silence, Ganymede arched his back and tilted his head back in a scream that came from the depths of his soul.

Silence.

Ganymede was unconscious.

Asclepius produced wet cloths and began to mop the sweat from his body. Ganymede's hair was matted to his forehead and tears were streaming down his face.

A scarlet glow began to surround Ganymede's body. Asclepius stepped back out of the way. He knew that the transformation was about to occur.

Ganymede's body began to lengthen and fill out. His facial features contorted into something unrecognizable. His hair began to grow, as did his fingernails. Ganymede's form was changing in uneven bursts.

Asclepius was glad that Ganymede was unconscious. The pain that he would be going through would be unimaginable.

Finally after half an hour, Ganymede's body became still and stable. Asclepius looked in wonder at the new form of his friend. Ganymede was a broad-chested, well-muscled man.

His black hair was to the middle of his back, and his facial features were beautiful to behold. Asclepius waved his hand and dress Ganymede in a larger version of his scarlet and gold robes.

"Ace?" Ganymede said weakly.

"Gan, how are you feeling?" Asclepius asked with deep concern.

"If that was a little uncomfortable, I'd hate to feel what you consider painful." Ganymede said with a trembling voice.

"You'll feel better soon. It worked." Asclepius said happily.

Ganymede forced himself to sit up on the table. Asclepius was immediately at his side, supporting him.

"Can you make a mirror for me, I'm still too weak." Ganymede asked in a whisper.

Asclepius made a mirror, standing right before them.

When Ganymede stood, with Asclepius' help, they were both surprised that he stood a full foot taller than Asclepius.

"Wow." Ganymede said as he looked at his image in the mirror. Then was puzzled at the sound of the deep adult voice coming from his mouth.

"Tall." Asclepius said in wonder.

"Thanks Ace." Ganymede said happily and pulled Asclepius close to him, burying Asclepius' face in his chest. They stood like that for long minutes, giving and receiving comfort. Ganymede couldn't take his eyes off his image in the mirror.

Ganymede separated himself from Asclepius and began to walk haltingly around the room. "It's going to take some time for me to get used to this new body. And I'll probably be hitting my head on everything now." Ganymede said with a smile.

"When you're up to it, I'd like to go back to check on Cupid." Asclepius said quietly.

"Give me a minute, there is something that I want to try."

"What's that?" Asclepius asked.

"This." Ganymede said and changed back to his old familiar juvenile appearance.

"What? Why?" Asclepius asked in puzzlement.

"The potion blocked my ability to use glamours or shape-change. Now that I can, I'll choose when I want to look like this, and when I want to look grown-up." Ganymede said with a smile.

"At least this way your worshipers will recognize you." Asclepius said cautiously.

Ganymede changed back to his adult form and walked to Asclepius' side.

"I'm ready to go when you are Ace." Ganymede said happily.

"Then hang on Gan." Asclepius said as they disappeared in a flash of yellow light.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Xena entered the tent and found a typical warlord commanding his weak-willed flunkies. Then she noticed who it was.

"Lessy?" Xena said in a playful tone.

"That's Lesarnum! What are you doing here Warrior Princess?" The oafish man glowered.

"Lessy, that's no way to talk to an old friend. I came here to see why you are going to war with your neighbors." Xena said reasonably.

"None of your damned business." Lessy said in a huff.

"No, I suppose it isn't... yet. When you've decimated your army and Airolous' army in this battle, then what's left might be my business." Xena said with slyness in her voice.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Lessy asked with a hint of fear.

[I got him.] Xena thought with satisfaction. "I mean, once you've killed his men and Airolous has killed yours in this battle, the whole valley will be up for grabs. And since Ares didn't sanction this war, he won't care if I take the spoils." Xena said with confidence.

"Why would you think that I'm going to lose? I will be victorious!" Lesarnum bellowed, but his eyes showed his doubt.

"It doesn't matter who wins, once you go to war, all I have to do is come in and take care of what's left. You've actually done me a big favor Lessy. I wouldn't have come to this valley with the threat of your army plus Airolous, but now... it's like you're handing it to me. And all the farms and homes are ready to move into. You're too sweet." Xena said and batted her eyelashes.

"Get out of here! There will be no war here today! And if you or your warriors come anywhere near this valley, you will be destroyed!" Lesarnum bellowed from the depths of his grubby little soul.

"You sure Lessy? I've always wanted my own valley." Xena asked mock demurely.

"Go away or I'll have my men drag you out!" Lessy screamed.

Xena turned and said, "I'll be watching. Wait for me?" And ducked out of the tent.

Deimos appeared in the castle in Corinth. He looked at his paper and walked unseen to mortals through the gardens of the palace. There was a fair maiden sitting on a bench, working on her embroidery. With a thought from Deimos, the needle slipped and the woman stuck her finger. A shiver of power ran up Deimos spine and he sat beside her to enjoy the tingle. [Must take it when it's right there.] Deimos thought to himself.

Now he had to find a way to get this maiden, Vanera, to become attracted to Iphicles captain of the guard, Grakkon. [Crime, painful, bloody crime. That'll get him.] Deimos thought. He pulled out one of his many daggers and was ready to start carving when he thought. [Might send him looking for who did it.]

Reluctantly he put the dagger away. He watched her carefully embroidering and was inspired. He ran to the nearest guard and came up behind him. With a thought he produced a needle and jabbed the guard in the butt.

As expected, the guard yelped and felt around for whatever had stung him. When he found the needle, he threw it away and forgot about the incident. Deimos repeated the performance with guard after guard until they had all been stuck with needles at least twice, all except for Grakkon.

The guards began reporting the incidents of being stuck with needles to Grakkon. None of them had seen who had done it. Deimos placed the idea in Grakkon's mind to check in the garden. As he walked through the garden, he saw a woman using a needle to do embroidery.

He made his way to her and began to talk. He was formal and questioned her of her whereabouts. Deimos became disgusted and thought, [They're never going to get to it like this!]

Deimos materialized a needle and a vial of poison. He dipped the needle into the poison then jabbed Vanera in the butt.

Vanera screamed and felt for the needle. When she pulled it out, Grakkon took it from her and examined it. He recognized the scent of the poison and lifted Vanera easily. He ran through the garden and into the castle. He took her immediately to a priest of Asclepius. She began having violent cramps in her stomach. Sweat was flowing off of her as she began to have painful, twitching spasms throughout her body.

Grakkon stayed by Vanera, he held her hand and talked soothingly to her as the priest concocted the antidote to the poison.

Within minutes the antidote was ready. Vanera was jerking violently and gritting her teeth with the effort to remain sitting upright. Grakkon held her close and helped steady her hand and lift the antidote to her lips. When some of the antidote spilled, he gently wiped the spill away with a towel provided by the priest.

He held her close as the antidote began to work. As her condition improved, he refused to let go of her. She felt so safe in Grakkon's arms that she didn't mind at all. They stayed close together and talked into the night.

As the God of Pain looked around, he decided his work here was done. He thought, [When Cupid is all better, maybe I could help him sometimes.]

* * * * *

Asclepius and the 'new and improved' Ganymede appeared in the Temple of the Sun. Apollo looked at the new arrivals. When he saw the man who was over six and a half feet tall and had bronze skin and flowing black hair, he nearly swooned.

"Ace, aren't you, like, going to introduce me to your friend?" Apollo said with a leer.

"Back off Dad, he's mine. This is Ganymede, he was here with me earlier. I had to help him change his appearance."

"Dude... you do good work." Apollo said as he stared.

Ganymede leaned down to Asclepius' ear and whispered, "And Cupid said you needed to be more assertive?"

"You bring out the best in me." Asclepius whispered back with a smile.

Noticing that his father was leering at his boyfriend Asclepius asked, "Don't you need to go check on Psyche?"

"Uh... yeah... it's past time. Will you stay here with Jett and take notes as he calls them out?" Apollo said distractedly as he stared at Ganymede.

Asclepius took the scroll and quill from his father and pushed him toward the hall where Psyche was housed.

Jett was resting quietly, finally he said, "Ganymede, looking good."

"Thanks." Ganymede said shyly.

"You're going to have to get used to it. You're going to get a lot of attention looking so good." Asclepius said resigned to the fact.

"I thought this was what I wanted but if people are going to treat me like that, I'd be better off the way I was." Ganymede said shakily.

"Gan, don't worry. You and I are together in this. No one's going to bother you, I'll see to it." Asclepius said firmly.

"I don't need a protector. I can do it myself." Ganymede said, offended.

"I know you can, but as your boyfriend, it's my job... You still want me, don't you?" Asclepius asked honestly.

"Of course, I just hadn't thought it would be like this, I just thought I'd be like everyone else." Ganymede said in frustration.

Asclepius hugged Ganymede close to him.

"You are." Jett said from the other side of Cupid's table.

"What?" Ganymede asked as he pulled out of the hug.

"You are like everyone else. Apollo hits on everyone when he first meets them. He hit on me, I know he hit on Jayce, I don't think he would dare to hit on Joxer but if Ares weren't in the picture I bet he would." Jett said plainly.

Asclepius nodded and said, "He's right Gan, I love my dad but he's a real slut."

Ganymede started laughing as he realized that Asclepius and Jett were right... he was just like everyone else.

Asclepius' eyes drifted down to the list and he noticed Ganymede's name. "What's this Jett?"

"That's the list of people that Cupid thinks deserve to call retribution on him." Jett said without inflection.

"Gan, you're name is on here." Asclepius said to Ganymede.

A dark look came into Ganymede's eyes. "I guess it would be." He said cryptically.

"What are you going to do with this list?" Asclepius asked Jett.

"He doesn't think that he's worthy to be forgiven for the things he's done. He wants to make up for them. So we need to get each person on that list to call retribution on him." Jett said clearly.

"But how is that gonna help? He doesn't even know where he is." Asclepius said, puzzled.

"That's where I come in. For the first few, I use my godhood to carry out the retribution on Cupid and he will be aware of it since retribution is what he's calling out for. After that, he'll be more and more aware of his surroundings, at least that's what Apollo thinks." Jett said with a smirk.

"I know what I want." Ganymede said quietly.

"Wait, this has to be real retribution. You can't just forgive him, he has to be punished or it won't work." Jett said with certainty.

"I know what I want." Ganymede said again.

"Okay, why don't you tell me and maybe it's something we can do now." Jett said with enthusiasm.

"Do I have to do the whole formal declaration thing or can I just tell you?" Ganymede asked seriously.

"Just tell me, you're not doing this out of anger or in front of the council so we don't have to be formal." Jett said casually.

"I want him permanently marked with my initial. A gamma permanently etched into the inside of his forearm where he'll see it every day and remember why it's there. And when anyone asks him about it, he'll remember it again." Ganymede said with determination.

"Isn't that a little harsh?" Asclepius asked and pulled on Ganymede's arm to pull him away and talk privately.

"It's what I want." Ganymede said without inflection.

"Will you tell me why? I mean, you don't have to but I'd like to know." Asclepius said solemnly.

"Cupid did something to me. What he did is something that I have carried for centuries and will carry the rest of my existence. I want him to carry something of mine, it doesn't undo what he did, but it makes us even in my mind. He must feel the same or my name wouldn't be on the list. I think I need to do this as much as he does." Ganymede said seriously to Asclepius.

Asclepius considered Ganymede's words and gave him a short nod before walking back to Jett and Cupid.

"You still sure?" Jett asked carefully.

"It's what I want. Jett, is that acceptable retribution?" Ganymede asked seriously.

"Will you forgive him when it's done?" Jett asked in response.

"Yes." Ganymede said calmly.

Jett picked up Cupid's arm, then paused. "Right or left?" Jett asked simply.

"Right." Ganymede said without emotion.

Jett took Cupid's right arm and turned his wrist to be facing upward. He placed a hand over the forearm, closed his eyes and concentrated the power of retribution to permanently mark a god. After long minutes of effort the glow faded. He pulled his hand away and a perfect gamma could be seen about the size of a thumbnail.

"That alright?" Jett asked tiredly.

"Yes." Ganymede said emotionlessly.

"Is he forgiven?" Jett asked to be sure.

"He is." Ganymede said with certainty in his voice.

Jett placed a hand on Cupid's head and a green glow flared briefly.

Asclepius, Ganymede and Jett watched as Cupid opened his eyes.

* * * * *

He opened his tearful eyes.

[hurt.]

The room was dimly lit.

[gloom.]

The air was bitter.

[foul.]

The people in the room were looking at him in disgust.

[filth.]

He could hear whispering voices, talking about him.

[failure.]

Ice flowed through him and he huddled close into himself.

[alone.]

He could feel clawing in his gut.

[sorry.]

A fresh wave of despair washed over him.

[Too much.]

[No hope.]

[No help.]

[No one cares.]

[Can't go on.]

[Don't want to.]

There was something.

He turned his arm over and saw the letter 'gamma'.

[hope]

Chapter Twenty-Six

Apollo returned to the main hall of the temple where he had left his son and the others. He was surprised to hear excited talking. When he entered the room he immediately noticed Cupid was awake. He didn't seem to be coherent, but he had some limited awareness of his surroundings.

Apollo watched as each of the men tried to engage Cupid in conversation. Cupid was looking from person to person with tearful eyes but not showing any recognition of who they were or what they were saying.

"Save your breath guys. The light is on but no one's home." Apollo said as he made his way to Cupid.

"But he opened his eyes and started looking around." Asclepius said, wanting to understand.

"Don't get me wrong, it's progress. And I expect you to tell me how he got this far, but he is far from well. The three of you hovering around him is not going to help. If that would help, I would have let the last bunch stay." Apollo said wryly.

"Got it Dad, and he got better because Ganymede called for retribution against him." Asclepius said simply.

"Good. I was worried that no one would want to be first. Now that someone has done it and proved that it worked I can call Cupid's parents." Apollo said and became defocused as he called. //Ares, Aphrodite, Hephaestus. Something is wrong with Cupid and I need you to come to my temple, now.//

Ares, Aphrodite and Hephaestus appeared immediately. Apollo preempted their speech by saying, "Cupid is deep in a depressive state. He feels that he's hurt people and doesn't deserve forgiveness. The only way we're going to get him better is for those he hurt to seek retribution."

Ares, Aphrodite and Hephaestus were all speechless from hearing the news and seeing the crying, incoherent Cupid. "Ganymede called for retribution and brought Cupid out of his catatonic state to be as he is now." Apollo said a little less forcefully.

"What can we do to help?" Asked Ares, always ready to jump directly to a solution when possible.

"We give him what he needs. You three have to call for retribution on Cupid or he won't feel that he made up for hurting you." Apollo said as he walked beside Cupid and picked up the list. [3... 2... 1...]

"Why would I ask for retribution against Cupid?" Aphrodite asked, puzzled.

"According to what Jett and I could make out through Jett's godhood... Jett? Would you?" Apollo asked.

Jett rose from his chair and took the list from Apollo. After reading it for a moment he said, "Aphrodite and Hephaestus, he feels he has been selfish and oblivious to others, especially you two. He feels that he was such a failure as a son that you both had no choice but to give up on him."

Aphrodite's mouth fell open in shock at the very idea, at the same time Hephaestus just nodded in acceptance.

"Ares, Cupid feels that he was a disappointment to you as a son. He never was what you wanted him to be, and he never put forth the effort to even try." Jett said in a flat tone.

"Are you sayin we have ta hurt Cupie? Cause if you are 'Pol, I'm gonna tear you up." Aphrodite said ending in a snarl.

"No, no. You don't actually have to hurt him. Ganymede, would you mind explaining your retribution to Cupid's parents?" Apollo asked, trying to shift the focus off of himself.

"Yes, I would mind very much." Ganymede said in a deep voice and moved closer to Asclepius.

"Ganymede? Whoa sweetie! Talk about a growth spurt." Aphrodite said in surprise before becoming focused back on Cupid's situation.

Apollo gave a dark look toward Ganymede then said to the parents, "Fine, I just need you to think about why Cupid would feel this way. Specific instances when he acted selfishly, especially with you two. And times when he passed up opportunities to do things with you Ares. Then you have to think of a way to make things right between you. What can be done to balance the scales between you?"

"I just can't do it 'Pol." Aphrodite said, and threw her hands up dramatically.

"I suppose we could do this the mortal way. It might be a little slower but it's a proven treatment." Apollo said absently.

"What's that?" Hephaestus asked, subdued.

"Public flogging. With the state he's in, I'm guessing he'll have all the guilt beat out of him in about two to three months." He said in a speculative voice before he was lifted with one strong hand and pinned to a wall.

"Find. Another. Way." Hephaestus said in a voice full of menace.

"I... I was just saying, that's why I need you three to come up with retribution ideas that won't damage him. Just think about it. You three and Strife are the last that I'm going to ask to do this. The others should be easier, since there is less guilt to be dissipated." Apollo said, massaging his throat when Hephaestus put him down.

"Is there anything we can do for him now?" Ares asked calmly.

"No, I just called you so that you could start thinking about it." Apollo replied.

"Call if there's anything I can do in the mean time." Ares said in a commanding voice before flashing out.

"I'm gonna stay with Cupie..." Aphrodite began.

"It would be best for him if you didn't. I can guarantee it would make things worse. He doesn't need or want to be coddled right now. Go and think about the retribution you can call on him and I promise that if there is anything you can do to help, I'll call you immediately." Apollo said seriously to Hephaestus and Aphrodite.

Hephaestus took his wife's arm and guided her away from Cupid before they flashed out of the room.

"Ganymede, I still need to know about your retribution." Apollo said sternly.

"It's between Cupid and myself. It's settled." Ganymede said and folded his arms across his chest.

"Go ahead Gan, tell Dad what you told me. I mean, if it will help Cupid..." Asclepius said in a begging tone.

"Fine. He did something that hurt me, I think it will always hurt me. So I gave him a reminder of what he did to carry from now on. End of story." Ganymede said gruffly.

"You were easier to get on with when you were little." Apollo said, frustrated.

"No he wasn't." Asclepius answered in a teasing tone.

Ganymede smiled at Asclepius' teasing and pulled him in for a kiss.

After a brief kiss, Asclepius pulled back and whispered, "Not in front of Dad."

"You ashamed of me?" Ganymede asked seriously.

"No. He'll want one too." Asclepius said with a smile.

* * * * *

Joxer appeared in the second war camp to find that they were already past the planning stage and were arming for battle. He couldn't think of how to stop the warriors at this stage so he called to Ares.

//Ares? One of my camps is already arming for battle. Any suggestions of how to stop them?// Joxer asked with worry.

//Let your mischief godhood loose. Rain hardship on them and thoughts of battle will be a distant memory.// Ares replied with humor.

//Love you.// Joxer said before turning his mind back to the army before him.

//Love you too.// Ares replied with a smile under his thought.

Joxer closed his eyes and looked deep within himself, into the essence of mischief. He drew the power up and out, and let it flow without focus.

Suddenly a horse reared up and knocked over a cart.

The cart in turn landed on a soldier's foot.

The soldier screamed and drew his foot up, throwing himself off balance and falling into two other soldiers.

One of those he fell into was sharpening his sword and cut off a finger, the other twisted at the impact and broke his ankle.

Ants started swarming up the legs of a dozen men, causing them to jump around furiously swatting at themselves.

Two men just fell over for reasons that no one could explain, causing worry among all those around them.

The camp fires sputtered and jumped their pits to burn indiscriminately.

The oil lamp in the warlord's tent fell over and the tent began to burn swiftly.

Four of the horses laid down and fell asleep and could not be awakened.

Armor straps and boot lacings broke.

The smoke from the tent fire and the campfires seemed to collect over the camp, stinging eyes and making breathing difficult.

Joxer looked at the havoc that had been wrought by releasing a burst of his power and chuckled. He decided that all that was left to do was some detail work.

Joxer went to a campfire and threw in some wet wool, chunks of sulfur, and a bottle of rancid oil, just to add some spice.

Then he went to the warlord's tent and saw the warlord standing by, yelling orders at his men who were trying to contain the fire.

Joxer focused his power and his concentration to create a reasonably large puddle just behind the warlord. Then with another push of his power, he caused a flash of fire to leap out from the tent, toward the warlord, knocking him off balance and into the mud puddle.

Chaos was all that could be seen in all directions. Joxer decided to go back and check on the first camp. These guys weren't going anywhere for a while.

* * * * *

As soon as Cupid's parents had left, Apollo started studying the list again, trying to decide who would be best to help Cupid in his current state. Anteros... had been pushed away, Joxer... didn't get help when he should, Bliss... didn't spend enough time with. Considering the choices, he decided that Anteros was the best to call at the moment. Joxer was too new a god to help Cupid in his current state, and Bliss was too young. He didn't need to see his father like this.

//Anteros, I've got a way that you can help Cupid.// Apollo called.

Before he was completely finished sending the message, Anteros appeared.

"We figured out what is wrong with him. He feels like a failure and a bad person and needs to be forgiven by the people who he's hurt." Apollo said calmly.

"So what can I do?" Anteros asked cautiously.

"You're one of the people he feels guilty about hurting. He thinks he pushed you away and kept you out of his life." Apollo said directly.

Anteros thought about the blunt words and couldn't help but agree with them. "Okay. I got that, but what am I supposed to do?"

"I need you to seek retribution against Cupid for what he's done to you." Apollo said carefully, knowing that he was going to get a reaction.

"WHAT?" Anteros yelled, "I'm not doing anything to hurt Cupid!"

"I'm not asking you to hurt Cupid. I'm asking you to call for 'just' retribution against him to balance the relationship between you. Once you have, he'll know you have forgiven him for what he did and will get a little better." Apollo said, trying to keep it simple.

Anteros thought on that and finally said, "I guess I can see that. So I need to come up with some way to make things right between us. Something that Cupid couldn't or wouldn't do before..."

Apollo waited. Noticing the distant gaze in Anteros' eyes, he could see that Anteros was working this out.

"I have an idea, but I don't know if it's enough." Anteros said hesitantly.

Apollo turned to Jett and asked, "Are you ready for another one?"

"Ready when you are." Jett said with a smile.

"I Anteros, God of Love Avenged, call for retribution on Cupid, God of Romantic Love...." Anteros said formally.

Jett rolled his eyes and interrupted, "We don't have to be all formal here. what do you want done to Cupid?"

"I want his privacy taken away. I want the wall between his rooms and mine removed and I want all his doors removed. He has hurt me by retreating within walls, figurative and literal. I want the walls taken away." Anteros said sternly.

Jett laid a glowing hand on Cupid's head and after a moment he looked up and said, "Cupid's privacy is very precious to him, if you are willing to accept it as payment for his past behavior, he will be willing to give it up."

"I am willing." Anteros said seriously.

In a pink flash Cupid was gone. Everyone in the room started mentally searching Olympus for him. They found him in his room at the Temple of Love. As one, the group flashed to the temple and found Cupid making walls and doors disappear from his home.

"I hope he doesn't get rid of any walls that he needs to hold the roof up." Jett said, looking up.

Cupid stopped his movement sharply and stood, staring at his brother.

Jett got a serious look on his face and asked Anteros, "Is he forgiven?"

Anteros looked around the room and considered. "Yes, everything is forgiven." Anteros said with a smile.

Anteros held his arms open to Cupid and Cupid ran into the opened arms, crying in relief.

"It's alright Cupid, it's not too late. I'm glad to be getting the brother that I always wanted." Anteros said soothingly as he held Cupid tight.

Cupid finally pulled away and said, "Thanks Ter. Oh gods, Ter, I don't know how I'm going to do it. I've got to make things up to so many people. How am I going to fix this mess?"

Anteros was about to offer Cupid comfort when Apollo walked over and said, "You're going to fix this mess by making things right with one person at a time till you're right with everyone."

Cupid looked confused at Apollo, then nodded. "What do I need to do now 'Pol?" Cupid asked tiredly.

Apollo said with certainty, "You need to make things right with your son."

* * * * *

Hades and Persephone walked, unseen to mortals across an open meadow to a small farm house. Within the house there was an old man sitting, looking sourly at the village woman who came to deliver food to him.

//He's about to die anyway. Why bother?// Asked Hades of Persephone.

//Because love can make even a short amount of life worth living. As it is now, he only waits to die.// Persephone answered.

"Woman! Didja bring tha cakes I asked fer?" the sour old man yelled.

"Aye, made 'em myself, I did." She said, somewhat offended by his tone.

//How are we supposed to make this work?// Hades asked his wife.

//I haven't got a clue.// Persephone replied.

They watched silently as the old man glowered and the woman worked to stock his cupboards.

Hades had enough of waiting and made himself visible. Pointing at the old man, he said, "You, come with me."

"Who... who are you?" The old man asked in fear.

"I am Lord Hades, King of the Underworld. You will come with me NOW!" He commanded.

The old man shakily got off his chair and walked toward Hades. The woman stood afraid, cowering against the counter.

In a flash of darkness Hades and the man disappeared. A moment later Persephone made herself visible to the woman.

"Who?" Was all the woman could say.

"What is your name dear?" Persephone asked quietly.

"Leene." The woman asked in a shaking, fearful voice.

"Leene, I'm Persephone. Do not worry, no harm will come to you." Persephone said, wondering what her husband was up to.

"What 'as 'e done wit Venris?" The woman asked, a little more calmly.

"I don't know." Persephone answered honestly.

"I 'ope 'e don 'urt 'im. 'es a mean ole man, but 'e don know no better." Leene said sympathetically.

"I think he just needs someone to hold him close and show him that life isn't as bad as he thinks." Persephone said speculatively.

"I s'pose it could be tat way. But te ole foolwon let nobody close nuf ta touch 'im. Nobody be fool nuf ta hold 'im." Leene said with certainty.

"If he were to try, just once, do you think you could be that someone?" Persephone asked, hoping Leene would consider it.

"Yea, buts more likely ta snow in da summertime dan fer 'im ta talk ta me like I'm a person like 'im." Leene said sadly.

A dark flash gave way to the figures of Hades and a very pale and shaking Venris.

Immediately Venris ran to Leene and threw his arms around her, begging her forgiveness and asking her to stay with him and hold him close.

//What did you do to him?// Persephone asked, amazed at the transformation.

//I showed him a rock.// Hades answered simply.

//A rock did all that? Which rock?// Persephone asked, confused.

//The rock in the third level of Tartarus that he would be chained to for all eternity if he didn't treat that woman with love and respect for the rest of his days.// Hades thought smugly.

Persephone considered it for a moment while watching Leene and Venris holding tightly to each other and talking softly. She took Hades hand and made a motion with her head, signaling for them to go.

In a dark flash, the King and Queen of Asphodel disappeared from the mortal realm, thinking how much fun it was to help people fall in love.

* * * * *

Anteros appeared in the Temple of Love with Bliss in his arms. Bliss looked around the room with surprise. "What happened Uncle Ter? Somebody steal all the walls?" Bliss asked worried.

"No Bliss, your daddy took out the walls because I asked him to. You see waaaaay over there, that's my room. We're all going to be living together now." Anteros said happily.

Bliss started clapping and bouncing with happiness.

"Bliss, I need to ask you some very important questions." Anteros said to Bliss seriously.

Bliss calmed down and gave his Uncle Ter his full attention.

"Do you know how you feel when you've been bad? How you feel inside?" Anteros asked carefully.

"Uh huh, I feels like a lizardy thing is crawling in my tummy." Bliss said seriously.

"What does your daddy do when you've been real bad? I mean the baddest you've ever been." Anteros asked, trying not to worry Bliss.

"When I took daddy's arrows and shooted mortals daddy spanked my butt and made me say I was sorry." Bliss said and wiggled in remembrance.

"How did you feel the next day? I mean inside. Was the lizardy thing still there?" Anteros asked quietly, hoping for the right answer.

Bliss shook his head no.

"I'm going to call someone, his name is Jett, he looks like Grandpa Joxer, it's his brother." Anteros said, hoping this would go well.

In a green flash, Jett appeared. Anteros asked Bliss quietly, "If your daddy was real bad, like the baddest he's ever been. What do you think should happen to make his lizardy feeling go away."

Bliss thought carefully and said, "His daddy should spank him and daddy should say he's sorry."

"Then everything would be okay?" Anteros asked to be sure.

Bliss nodded his head emphatically.

Anteros looked up at Jett and Jett nodded.

"Thanks Bliss. I'm going to take you back to Aunt Hestia for a few minutes, but if everything goes right I'll be back with your daddy in a little bit." Anteros said with a sad smile.

"Gonna see daddy!" Bliss said, full of happiness again.

"In just a little while, let's go see Hestia." Anteros said and flashed out leaving Jett alone.

Jett thought to himself in a sing-song tone, [Cupid's gonna get a spanking...]

Chapter Twenty-Seven

//Cupid!// Hephaestus called with anger from his throne room.

"Yeah Daddy Hep?" Cupid said sadly as he appeared in the room.

"Would you explain to us why you deserve retribution from Bliss... Better yet, explain it to Bliss." Hephaestus said sternly.

Cupid looked around the room at Bliss, Jett, Apollo, Anteros and Hephaestus. He walked to Bliss and knelt down to his level. "Bliss, I've been wrong by not spending time with you and not playing with you like I should." Cupid said sadly.

"You feelin lizardy in your tummy?" Bliss asked seriously.

"Yeah, and I'm not sure how to make it go away." Cupid said with tears coming into his eyes.

"You gonna get a spankin and say your sorry." Bliss said in a no-nonsense tone.

"I am?" Cupid asked with wide eyes.

"You are." Hephaestus said with finality in his voice.

Cupid stood and walked before the throne of his father.

"I never thought I would have to do this to you again, but I think it's long past time. Drop 'em." Hephaestus said sternly.

"You want me to..." Cupid asked with a tremble in his voice.

"Jett is the only one in this room who hasn't seen it before, and I think he'll restrain himself. Drop 'em." Hephaestus said louder.

Cupid took down his pants and Hephaestus pulled him across his lap.

"I'm going to tell you what each swat is for, and you're going to say you're sorry to Bliss. And if I don't believe that you're really sorry, I'll give you another and another until I do believe it. Do you understand?" Hephaestus asked gruffly.

"Yes." Cupid said quietly, feeling the burn of humiliation on his face.

"This first one is for not bringing Bliss home every night. Do you have any idea how it makes a child feel when their parent doesn't come to collect them?" Hephaestus said with compassion for Bliss.

::SMACK::

The sound echoed through the room and everyone but Hephaestus was surprised at the power behind the swat. A perfect bright red handprint raised immediately on Cupid's bare white butt.

"I'm sorry I didn't come home to get you at night Bliss." Cupid said in a wavering voice.

"This one is for not taking time to play with your son. Do you have any idea how much he misses those private times when his father takes an interest in what he likes to do?" Hephaestus said with a little growl.

::SMACK::

And another perfect handprint was raised. Jett was ashamed to feel himself getting turned on by this and adjusted himself surreptitiously.

"I'm sorry I didn't take the time to play with you Bliss." Cupid said with tears in his voice.

"This one is for not reading stories to your son. No one can take your place in making him feel safe and loved that way." Hephaestus said gruffly.

::SMACK::

"I'm sorry I didn't read to you at night." Cupid said sadly.

"I didn't believe that one. You collected Bliss from Hestia or from me and your mother and took him home. Instead of spending the time to read him a story, you just put him to bed and went to do your own things. Think how it made Bliss feel to be picked up and dropped off like a parcel of groceries." Hephaestus said in a near scream.

::SMACK:: This one sounded louder than the others and left it's own distinct handprint, raised slightly from the others on the tender skin. Jett was watching in fascination, breathing shallowly and feeling a tingle spread through his body.

"I'm sorry Bliss, I love you and didn't think that you would miss the stories." Cupid said while crying.

"This one is for not eating meals with your son. How is he to have a sense of family when his own father won't take the time to sit down with him at a meal and find out how his day was?" Hephaestus said, red faced and angry.

::SMACK:: Both the formerly white cheeks of Cupid were now an angry splotchy red color. Jett was biting the inside of his mouth trying to distract himself from his arousal.

"I'm sorry Bliss. I knew ::sob:: knew other people would feed you and didn't think ::sob:: you'd miss the time with me." Cupid tried to say through his tears.

"This one is for not taking Bliss out and teaching him about the world. How is he to understand what's around him if he isn't introduced to it. It's your responsibility to see that he is trained in the ways of the world." Hephaestus snarled.

::SMACK:: Cupid's whole body flinched at the impact. A tremor ran through Jett's body as if the echo of the sound impacted him too.

"I'm... I'm s... so... sorry Bliss. I should have t... taken you ::sob:: out and showed you ::sob:: things." Cupid said with tears streaming down his face.

"This one is for not helping Bliss to learn his power. No one is more competent to train him in his godhood. And it is your duty to do so." Hephaestus said in another snarl.

::SMACK:: Jett adjusted himself again and felt a tear running down his own face. His was a tear of frustration.

Cupid broke down into a fit of crying. After a moment he said, "I'm sorry for n... not training you to use ::sob:: your power."

"And this last one is for ignoring your son to the point that you didn't notice what you were doing to him." Hephaestus yelled.

::::S M A C K::::

Cupid broke into a full gale of tears. Finally he said, "Bliss ::sob:: I'm sorry I didn't notice that I was ignoring you." And he broke into another round of tears. When they calmed, he continued, "And if... if you'll f... forgive me, ::sob:: I promise I'll never do it again."

Bliss had tears running down his own face, he ran to his daddy and hugged him around the neck, which he could easily reach since Cupid was still across Hephaestus' lap.

"Is your lizardy feeling gone now?" Bliss asked with worry.

"Yes, it's all better now. You know I meant what I said, I'm sorry I haven't been spending time with you, and It's not going to happen anymore." Cupid said through his tears to Bliss.

"I know daddy. It's all better now. You been spanked and you said you're sorry. So you'll feel all better now." Bliss said seriously and wiped his eyes.

"I've still got to say sorry to some other people, but I won't be gone long and I'm going to spend every spare minute with you." Cupid said with a glimmer of happiness showing through his tears.

Bliss just held him tight again as Hephaestus watched the whole scene with a tender smile.

Jett let his power flare for a moment to see that all was as it should be. //Zeus, drop 'em// He thought as he flashed out.

Finally Cupid cried himself out and got off his step-father's lap. He pulled up his pants, picked up his son, and looked around to see Anteros engaged in conversation with Apollo. He turned back to Hephaestus and said seriously, "Thanks daddy Hep. I'm sorry you had to do that."

"I do what needs to be done, it's my job as a father and as a king." Hephaestus said without malice.

"Have you decided what you want for retribution?" Cupid asked cautiously.

"No, your mother and I are still working on it. If we don't come up with anything else, you may be getting another spanking." Hephaestus said seriously.

"Whatever it takes, whatever I have to do to make things right Daddy Hep, I'll do it." Cupid said with certainty then sniffed back a tear.

"Ready for the next one?" Apollo asked calmly.

"Who's next?" Cupid asked nervously.

"Joxer."

* * * * *

Joxer looked around the war camp and felt that something was missing. [They might still be able to pull together and go to war.] He thought with frustration.

//Ares? I need to divide the ranks. Maybe Discord could help me?// Joxer thought to his husband.

//It would be better if you didn't call her. By the time she finished there wouldn't be enough soldiers left to be of any use.// Ares thought back with frustration.

//Do you have any suggestions then?// Joxer asked, sensing something else in his husband.

//I've found a misplaced money pouch can work wonders at turning comrades into enemies.// Ares suggested with underlying worry showing through.

//What's wrong?// Joxer asked with his own worry.

//It's Cupid, I'll tell you about it when we get home. Are you about finished?// Ares thought, still sending worry.

//Yeah, just let me do this and I'll be done. Love you.// Joxer replied.

//Love you too. See you soon.// Ares thought then retreated from Joxer's mind.

Joxer quickly selected a favorable candidate who seemed appropriately quick to anger and with a small flash of power, his money pouch was elsewhere. Joxer planted a little seed of an idea in his mind and stood back to watch.

As the fight was commencing, Joxer received a call.

//Joxer, can you come to Apollo's temple? We need you to help Cupid.// Apollo asked professionally.

//I'll be right there.// Joxer replied. [Maybe I'll be able to stop Ares worrying.] He thought to himself.

* * * * *

"You want me to do what?" Joxer asked in a disbelieving tone.

"Cupid feels that he was wrong to depend on your help when he should have been helping you instead." Apollo said clearly.

"But that's just stupid. Cupid was going through some really tough things and I was happy to help." Joxer said, confused.

"But from Cupid's point of view it was a failure on his part to be a proper god. If you call for retribution on him, you will help to heal him." Apollo said, tired of explaining it.

Joxer thought for just a moment and said, "Fine, Cupid want's to train me in my godhood? I've got just the job for him. Ares and I have been talking. He says I should have a temple in the mortal realm. I only know how to make small things..."

"So you want Cupid to help you make your temple? I don't think he'll feel that it's enough payment." Apollo interrupted.

"No, I want him to train me to do it the way I want it to be. He doesn't create anything. He feels he failed me by not teaching me when I needed to learn, then here's his chance." Joxer said shortly.

"I don't know. Jett has been using his power to see if the retributions are sufficient but he isn't answering any calls right now. I'll leave it between you and Cupid to decide what's enough." Apollo conceded.

"Good, come on Cupid. I know just the place where I want to build. And remember, it's my temple, I'm going to do it my way." Joxer said determined.

* * * * *

"Joxer, you can't do it like that. It's not even close to level."

"Level is boring, it's my temple and I don't want it level, besides if I make the other one slant the other way, then it kind of evens out."

"But then water won't drain off the roof, there'll be a trough in the middle."

"Not if I tip the entire temple just a little that way."

"Jox, you do that and the floor of the entire temple will be slanted."

"Okay, what if I make this beam and that one a little shorter."

"I guess..."

"Then we're ready for a roof."

"Make the picture in your mind and feed the power into it. This isn't like making something small like a bowl, you don't have to 'pop' it all at once."

"Okay."

"Looking good, just keep going."

"I got it."

"Uh... Jox? Did you mean for it to be that color?"

"Yeah, I think it's kind of pretty."

"I haven't seen that color since Bliss was a newborn... and I didn't want to see it then."

"Let's go inside. Watch your step."

"Ewww. Where did THAT come from?"

"It isn't real, it's made of stone. Think of it as sculpture."

"That's just nasty, Joxer."

"It's my temple."

"Right."

"I think the throne is going over there."

"That sounds good. Go ahead and picture it... Whoa Jox, it's like waaaaay uneven."

"I know, go sit in it. Try it out."

"Uh... I'm not real good at sitting at the moment."

"Just give it a try, I want to see how it looks."

"Arrrgh. The thing nearly tipped over... the bottom is round."

"Yeah, Pretty cool huh?"

"I think it's safe to say that it's the only one of its kind... and the first 'rocking' throne I've ever seen."

"How about an altar over there?"

"Are you thinking granite or marble?"

"Pumice."

"Joxer, that won't even... I know... it's your temple.... Let me see what it looks like."

"There, I think that's pretty good."

"It looks pretty stable, I guess without legs you won't have to worry about the stress on the tabletop... but it isn't level."

"What is it with you and level? I already made the floor level because of you. And level is no fun. THIS is fun."

"Joxer? What is that?"

"I don't really have a name for it... but it's fun."

"It's frightening... Oh Gods! It moved."

"Yeah."

"You made a living thing?"

"No, it just moves."

"How?"

"You're the one who's supposed to be teaching me. So. I'm. Not. Telling."

"Okay, I got that. So what do you want next?"

"I need some plants to liven up the place."

"Okay, plants are living things so they're a little different... it moved again."

"Don't worry about it. Now what about plants?"

"It's best to find the ones you want somewhere else and bring them here. Creating living things is really hard to do and if it's something that already exists, it's just easier this way."

"I can do that... found 'em. And I think... over... there."

"Those are weeds Jox. But the flowers are nice."

"If you touch them you'll itch for a week... The altar needs something..."

"It moved again... Jox? It's getting closer."

"Leave it alone... How's this?"

"It's floating."

"Yeah."

"Joxer, your altar is floating in water."

"Yeah."

"Why is your altar floating?"

"Because it's pumice, and that's one of the things that pumice does."

"I can't argue with logic like that."

"Good. How do I do something complicated like a tapestry?"

"Honestly, I just tell my priests what I want and they get someone to make it."

"I don't have time for that. I can make the tapestry but I can't get the fine detail."

"That's something you'll only be able to do with practice. If you want, I can look in your mind and help you focus on it."

"Yeah, let's do that."

"Joxer?"

"Yeah?"

"The pattern."

"Yeah?"

"Why are the cows doing that?"

"I guess they were bored."

"No matter how bored cows get, they don't do that."

"You're so literal. Just focus."

"Are those holes?"

"Sort of."

"I need to know so I can visualize them."

"They're pictures of holes."

"Oh."

"..."

"Oh Gods Joxer, what are those? No don't tell me."

"They're just dried figs."

"Why are they that color."

"Because they'd clash with the snake otherwise."

"What snake?"

"Pull back and look at the whole picture at once."

"Oh, that snake... Joxer, you're sick."

"Yeah, now help me focus."

"I hate to ask, but what are the things that look like little pickles?"

"They're little pickles... Now focus... you're supposed to be teaching me, remember?"

"Sorry Jox."

"There... it's done. Thanks Cupid... that's exactly what I wanted."

"You wanted that? And it's not lev... never mind. It's still a little bare. You need some more stuff on the walls."

"Like that, maybe?"

"Uh... Jox? It's customary to stuff and mount the animal's HEAD."

"I gotta be me."

"How about some shields and weapons on that wall?"

"Hmmm. How about a mural?"

"It's just easier if you get a mortal to paint it for you."

"I suppose... I can do that... I know just the man... I'll have to get him out of the asylum first... yes, thank you Cupid."

"Uh... No prob... Aaaaaah! It touched me. That... that... whatever it is... touched me!"

"Cupid?"

"..."

"Cupid?"

"Yeah?"

"You're a god, it couldn't hurt you if it wanted to. But since it bothers you, I'll put it in the other room until we're finished."

"Thanks Jox"

"I was thinking about some stairs over there."

"Uh... Jox?"

"Hmmm?"

"You don't have a second floor."

"I know, just look..."

"Where does the door go?"

"Outside."

"Twenty feet off the ground?"

"Yeah, you got wings, wanna try it out?"

"Maybe later."

"This is going a lot faster than I expected. So what do you think of the room?"

"Needs more plants."

"Any suggestions?"

"Ragweed, stinging nettles, razor grass, and creeping nightshade."

"Way to go Cupid! It's about time you got into the spirit of things!"

"I've never understood the whole mischief thing, and I don't think I understand it all now, but maybe I'm beginning to get it."

"Okay Cupid, let's do some gardening..."

"Hmmm... it needs a little color."

"Which color?"

"I got it... What do you think of those?"

"Pretty, orange..."

"Smell them..."

"Why?"

"Trust me..."

"Oh God's, they smell like rotting meat..."

"Yeah, that's payback for the 'whatever it is' touching me."

"Ooooh, so the angst kid is giving out paybacks now?"

"Sorry Joxer."

"No, this is good. We're done. If you feel like you can get a payback on me, we must be okay. What do you think?"

"I think you're right. Thanks Jox, helping you make things that were uneven and illogical helped. Spending an afternoon in your sick, twisted, bizarrely-freakish company was enough to make me feel punished." Cupid said in a teasing voice with a smile.

"I enjoy your high-and-mighty, formal, stick-up-the-butt, company too Cupid." Joxer said with equal teasing and an answering smile.

"Now I get to go back to 'Pol and take my next treatment." Cupid said, making ready to leave.

"No you don't. You promised to help me finish my temple, we have one more room to do." Joxer said seriously.

Cupid put on a pouting expression. Joxer glared at him for a moment until a smile broke out across Cupid's face.

A few moments later a voice could be heard from the other room. "Aaaaah! Get that 'whatever it is' away from me!"

Visualization submitted by a reader:



Chapter Twenty-Eight

Cupid and Joxer were walking around the newly formed temple, admiring the collection of bizarre things and putting in some finishing touches.

The pit of toads seemed to have no purpose to Cupid, but Joxer insisted that it was a necessity.

//Cupid, come to my audience chamber. We need to talk.// Ares called to Cupid. The serious undertones of the message made a chill crawl up Cupid's spine.

"Gotta go Jox, Dad's calling for me." Cupid said and vanished in a pink flourish.

Immediately Cupid appeared in Ares main hall to be confronted by the icy serious gaze of his father.

"Cupid. I have decided what retribution I require from you." Ares said in a voice of deep solemnity. "You feel that you were a bad son to me because you didn't share in my life, well my retribution is to require you to accompany me through the most painful thing in my life and share it with me."

Cupid felt his heart sink at the look in his father's eyes and the words that were spoken. "Where are we going?" Cupid asked in a quavering voice.

"Follow me, you'll understand soon." Ares said as he walked away.

Cupid gathered himself and followed silently.

They came to a door at the back of Ares' temple. Cupid knew this door. The only place in all of Ares' temple that he had never been permitted entrance. Strife and Cupid had tried for months to open this door but it was locked by mortal and godly means. They had wondered about the contents of this room and had decided that it must be a torture chamber.

With a wave of Ares' hand, the locks and wards fell away from the door of the room.

With hesitation, Cupid entered the dimly lit room. He looked around and was confused by the hodgepodge of items sitting around. There were a few pictures, some weapons, a few scrolls and a harp.

Ares stood by the door as Cupid began to make his way amongst the piles of things. The items looked somehow familiar to him... and yet he couldn't place why.

"What is all this stuff Dad?" Cupid asked his father.

Ares only responded with a hard, pained look.

Cupid decided to look closer at some of the items. He picked up one of the scrolls and recognized the handwriting. [Olerion!] Cupid thought to himself. Then with an icy shiver crawling up his spine, he looked around the room again with understanding. This room contained memories, pain, loss, and grief.

With tears running down his face Cupid realized that the retribution his father had decided upon was to share in this pain... this pain that he should have shared in the first place.

"I'm sorry Dad, I should have been there to share in your mourning." Cupid said weakly, not knowing exactly what to say.

"They deserve better than this... they've been forgotten." Ares said with his own tears.

"Then lets do something for them, make a memorial to the fallen. We can make sure that they aren't forgotten." Cupid said, knowing that this is what he must do to balance things with his father.

"How will we honor them?" Ares asked carefully.

"Together. We will decide the best way to honor each of their memories. Dad, I know how painful it would have been to do this alone, but we can do it together. When we're done we can get Ter, En, Pho, Demi, Harm, and Bliss to come here and get to know the fallen."

Ares got a weak smile on his face and nodded. This was exactly what he had been hoping for. His eldest surviving son wanted to share in his pain and grief and to honor the memory of his fallen children both god and demi-god, Cupid's fallen siblings.

* * * * *

Zeus was nervous. He knew Hera too well to expect her to remain on the sidelines as he had a good time. He had a feeling that she would be striking at any time and he needed to be prepared.

//Jett, I need to talk to you for a moment.// Zeus called out in uncharacteristic timidity.

//Sure, let me ditch the dragon lady and I'll be there in a minute.// Jett replied.

About two minutes later Jett appeared beside Zeus.

"What did you want to talk about?" Jett inquired calmly.

"I was with Hera long enough to know her mode of operations. She'll be striking at me with another attempt at vengeance soon." Zeus said with worry.

"Makes sense." Jett said, knowing that there was more to it.

"Since we've been playing together, she might target you to get to me." Zeus said with irritation beginning to creep into his voice.

"So what do you want to do about it? I mean, do we wait for her to act? Do we do something to prevent her from acting? Or do we strike first?" Jett asked with a gleam in his eye.

Zeus considered it for a moment and said, "Do you already have something in mind for a first strike?"

"I do." Jett said with an evil smirk.

* * * * *

Asclepius walked into Ganymede's room and saw him sitting in deep, serious contemplation.

"Gan, are you alright?" Asclepius asked quietly.

"Yeah Ace, I've just been thinking about things." Ganymede said distantly.

"You feel like sharing your thoughts?" Asclepius asked timidly.

"Yes and no. I mean, I know that I can tell you this stuff and you'll be here to help me. But, at the same time, I feel like I need to do this myself." Ganymede said with a bit of misery in his voice.

"Then how about I just hold you and tell you that everything will be alright?" Asclepius asked seriously.

Ganymede considered the words and his face broke into a smile.

"Yeah, I think that's just what I need right now." Ganymede said and stood to take Asclepius into his arms.

"Everything will be alright." Asclepius said quietly as he laid his head against Ganymede's chest and held him tightly.

* * * * *

Cupid and Ares had worked for two hours, sharing ideas for suitable shrines to the fallen when Cupid received a mental call.

//Cupid.// Hephaestus called in a neutral tone.

"Daddy Hep's calling me. Why don't we call it a night so you can get home to Joxer. I'll think about this and we can work on it again tomorrow." Cupid said quietly.

When Ares heard Joxer's name, any argument that he might have made left him completely.

"That sounds like a good idea. Good luck with Heph." Ares said as he left the room.

* * * * *

"Yes, Daddy Hep?" Cupid responded as he materialized in his step-father's study.

"Your mother and I have decided on the retribution we require." Hephaestus said without a hint of emotion.

"What is it Daddy Hep? Just tell me and I'll do it." Cupid said with desperation in his voice.

"We've given it a lot of thought. There have been a few things that have irritated one or the other of us over the centuries but there is only one thing that you have ever done that has actually been a disappointment to us." Hephaestus said and took hold of Aphrodite's hand for support.

Cupid stood, not daring to breathe, waiting for his punishment in the ensuing silence.

Aphrodite broke the silence by saying, "Cupie, you never want anyone's advice or help until you've dug yourself into a hole, then you come to us to dig you out. Our retribution is that you are going to have to do this on your own. We aren't going to tell you how to fix this. You made this mess and you are going to fix it without our help."

"We love you son, you know that. But this once, you're going to have to do this off your own back. You'll have to decide how to make amends and how much is enough. The only hint that I'll give you is that this has nothing to do with your work... this is about our family and your place in it." Hephaestus said solemnly.

Cupid nodded sadly and said, "Thanks mom, thanks Daddy Hep. I'll figure out how to make things right... I love you."

Then Cupid flashed out in a muted pink blur.

* * * * *

Jayce appeared in the main hall of Hades' temple. Thanatos had said they could meet here, since Tartarus was difficult and unpredictable to navigate.

//You came?// Thanatos thought in surprise.

[He expected me to change my mind when I'd had time to think about it.] Jayce thought sadly.

//Yes, I'm looking forward to seeing your sculpture. How was your day?// Jayce asked genuinely interested.

//Not very busy, with Ares being on his honeymoon, business is slow.// Thanatos thought in response with an expression that might have been a smile.

//Mine is slow too. It looks like I'll be getting busier in the next few weeks. Apparently harvest season is a peak time in the debauchery business.// Jayce said conversationally.

//I suppose it would be. Are you ready to go?// Thanatos asked, with a bit of worry showing under the words.

//Sure, lead the way.// Jayce responded with a smile, trying to put Thanatos at ease.

* * * * *

Thanatos had led him to the river Styx and to Charon's boat. After introductions were made, the boat ride was made in silence.

Eventually they made their way into Tartarus. A shiver of fear ran through Jayce's body but Thanatos reassured him by saying, //You can always transport yourself out, nothing will harm you while you are with me.//

Jayce became somewhat comfortable with his surroundings. Thanatos' assurance had worked and he just enjoyed the unfamiliar landscape as they made their way to Thanatos' home.

Finally Jayce asked, //I'm just curious, why didn't we transport there?//

//Truthfully, I wanted to see your reaction to Tartarus.// Thanatos responded, sounding a bit ashamed.

Jayce thought about that and asked, //How did I do?//

//Better than most. I've seen the shades of some of the most fearsome warlords break down into tears before this point.// Thanatos thought with a smile.

//This place has its own dark beauty. I mean, once I got past the whole 'this is the place you go for eternity when you're damned.' part, I could see the beauty in the craggy stones and the pools of lava, and the stalagmites are fascinating.// Jayce thought as he continued to follow Thanatos until they stopped in front of a cave.

//This is my home.// Thanatos said, seeming to be embarrassed.

//You don't have a door?// Jayce asked with curiosity.

//I never needed one... everyone around here is afraid of me.// Thanatos said simply.

Jayce could see how Thanatos might frighten someone who didn't take the time to get to know him.

Thanatos led the way in and Jayce was amazed by the interior of the cave. The living area that they entered was warm and friendly, possibly the most comfortable room he had ever been in.

//Your home is beautiful!// Jayce thought in wonder as he looked around the room at the comfortable furniture, ornate vases, finely woven tapestries, and beautiful arrangements of dried flowers.

//Thank you, I hoped you would like it.// Thanatos beamed with pride.

//I really do. Where are your sculptures? I've been waiting all day to see them.// Jayce asked excitedly.

//Right through here.// Thanatos said with worry in his mind/voice.

Jayce followed as Thanatos led the way through his home.

They entered a large cavern. Thanatos made a gesture and torches lit the room. Jayce's breath was nearly taken away by the beauty of the sculptures before him. There were sculpted animals, people, and various other things.

Thanatos watched with worry as Jayce walked from statue to statue without saying or thinking a word.

//So?// Thanatos sent in a timorous mind/voice.

Jayce turned to face Thanatos and had tears in his eyes. //I've never seen such beauty captured in stone. You have a wondrous talent.// Jayce sent with awe in his mind/voice.

//Do you have a favorite?// Thanatos asked as he watched Jayce walking from sculpture to sculpture.

Jayce considered for a moment, then walked to one of the smaller, more delicate sculptures; a raven rendered in onyx and said, //This one, it looks so lifelike that I keep expecting it to take off into flight at any moment... and I don't know how you managed to get so much expression into the eyes but they tell a story of hurt and loss... too many things seen... too many people lost...//

Thanatos was surprised by Jayce's very accurate interpretation of the expression he had given the raven. He knew how the raven made him feel, but didn't know anyone else would be able to see so deeply.

//When you leave, I'd like for you to have it.// Thanatos said hesitantly, not wanting to be too forward.

//Thank you Thanatos... may I call you Than?// Jayce asked tenderly.

A smile flitted across Thanatos' corpse-like face and he nodded.

//Than, I know I just came to see your sculpture but... could you come with me to the mortal realm for a while? You have shared something so personal with me, that I want to do the same in return.// Jayce asked timidly, fearing rejection.

//Of course.// Thanatos responded with a smile.

//Then follow me.// Jayce said and disappeared in a purple flash.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

"What do you have in mind?" Zeus asked curiously.

"What drives Hera? Now that she's not married to you anymore, what defines her?" Jett asked in a leading tone.

"Her vengeance toward me. That's all she's got left." Zeus said in thought.

"Right. So let's take it away from her." Jett said with a dark smile.

"How?" Zeus asked curiously.

"You know how these things work better than I do... if we were to get married, I mean with the blessing of Aphrodite and the sanction of Hephaestus, then we would be protected from any act of vengeance by Olympian law." Jett said unsurely.

"Yes... and that would really chap her ass, to see me getting married." Zeus said in thought.

"But we'll need to get past Aphrodite's godhood... otherwise she'll know we aren't in love and will refuse to marry us." Jett said in his scheming tone.

"One of Cupid's arrows should take care of that. The effect will only last a week." Zeus said absently.

"Hera couldn't touch us or she'd bring down the wrath of all the houses of Olympus on her." Jett said with increasing excitement.

"And we could keep this marriage thing going until one of us finds someone else that we want to marry." Zeus said in thought.

"Okay, but how are we going to get anyone to believe that we're in love? They're all gonna think we're up to something." Jett said seriously.

"What would we do if we were really in love?" Zeus asked and looked into Jett's eyes.

"I guess we'd spend time together... have lots of sex... do pretty much what we've been doing!" Jett finished with surprise.

"Right. So first thing we need to do is get Cupid's help." Zeus said in speculation.

"I've been working with him all day. I can go talk to him and ask right now if you want." Jett said frankly.

"Yes, we musn't hesitate. The old harridan is likely to attack at any moment. The sooner we get this done, the better." Zeus said seriously.

Jett nodded and flashed out in a green flourish of sparkles.

* * * * *

//We're here.// Jayce thought apprehensively.

//What are you going to show me in the mortal realm?// Thanatos asked curiously.

//Not what, who. I want to introduce you to the closest thing I have to a parent.// Jayce said timidly.

Shock could be seen in Thanatos' eyes as Jayce knocked on the door.

After a silent moment, the door opened to reveal the Widow Twanky in a flowing green dress.

"Muffin, oh my dear. I've been so worried about you. Come in, come in and tell Twanky how you're doing now." She said hurriedly as she ushered him into her house.

"I've brought someone to meet you." Jayce said quietly, looking at Thanatos who remained invisible to mortal eyes.

"Who would that be my little muffin?" Twanky asked, looking around.

//Please?// Jayce thought with an imploring look to Thanatos.

After a brief moment of thought, Thanatos revealed himself to the Widow Twanky's sight.

"Goodness!" Twanky exclaimed as his corpse-like form resolved into being.

"Widow Twanky, this is Thanatos... Death Incarnate. Than, this is the Widow Twanky." Jayce said as formally as he could manage under the circumstances.

After a moment to collect herself, Twanky said, "Come in, come in and sit. And Thanatos, you are welcomed here."

Jayce beamed with pride for the Widow Twanky as he followed her into the house.

"I feel like a whore." Ganymede said out of nowhere.

Asclepius remained silent as he held Ganymede close.

"It's like I've been dirty for so long, I don't think I can ever feel clean again. I don't remember being clean." Ganymede said, his voice losing all emotion.

Asclepius stretched himself up to give Ganymede a kiss on the cheek.

"Ace, I may never be able to do... certain things. You deserve someone who can bring you pleasure and I don't know if I can ever..." Ganymede trailed off with a voice of weak desperation.

"Shhh. I'll never ask more of you than you're willing to give." Asclepius said in a whisper.

"I can't ask you to deny yourself. It's not fair to you." Ganymede said as tears crept into his voice.

"Gan, before you work yourself into a fit, let's just clarify what we're talking about. Tell me exactly which acts bother you... it might be something that we can work around." Asclepius said calmly.

"I can't stand the thought of having anything put inside me." Ganymede said quietly with shame.

"Does that mean oral and anal?" Asclepius asked clinically.

"No, I'm okay with the oral stuff. It's just... the other." Ganymede trailed off.

"Gan. How would you feel about making love to me? I mean later on, when the time is right. Would you have any problem with that?" Asclepius asked curiously.

"I'd be a little scared. I know how much it can hurt." Ganymede said honestly.

"We'll be careful so there won't be any pain, I promise. Gan, this isn't going to be a problem for me. So far I count one thing that you don't like to do, and honestly, I don't think I'd like doing that." Asclepius said gently.

"Really?" Ganymede asked with hope.

"Well, I've never done it. but it's not featured in any of my fantasies." Asclepius said carefully.

"Thanks Ace. I was really worried that I wouldn't be able to give you what you wanted." Ganymede said with a relieved smile.

"Just remember, this isn't just about what I want." Asclepius said firmly.

* * * * *

Joxer walked into the sitting room of the private rooms in the house of war to find Phobos and Deimos talking.

"Then they opened tha box 'o rats an tha woman screamed an tha old guy threw it out an they hugged an it was cool." Phobos said with excitement.

Deimos almost smiled at his brother's enthusiasm.

"How are you boys doing today?" Joxer asked carefully, never having spent any time with the twins.

"Where's dad?" Phobos asked quickly.

"I think he's with Cupid. Did you need something?" Joxer asked with concern.

"Naw. Jus don see you without im. That's all." Phobos said quickly.

"Okay. How are you doing?" Joxer asked, not knowing why he felt that they needed something.

Phobos looked at Deimos with a questioning look, then looked into Joxer's concerned gaze. Finally he said, "We did good things today. We never done nothin like that before... It felt weird." Phobos said with frustration, obviously wanting to say more, but having difficulty knowing how.

Joxer thought for a moment, then asked, "Do you two ever use your godhoods to do good things?"

"I'm tha God of Fear an he's tha God of Pain. There ain't no good in our godhoods." Phobos said simply.

"I bet I could find some. Give me a minute, I'll ask your dad if I can take you somewhere." Joxer said, then went silent as he talked to Ares.

//Hey love, how are you?// Joxer asked quietly.

//After Cupid and I finished, I came to check on my armies. I have a few things to do here then I'll be home. I won't be long.// Ares replied.

//Love, do you mind if I take the twins to the mortal world to do a little shopping?//
Joxer asked gently.

//You can create anything you need, why do you need to shop?// Ares asked curiously.

//I don't really. It's just an excuse for me to take the twins to the mortal world and see if we can use their god powers for good.// Joxer thought honestly.

//I'd never thought of that... good luck.// Ares thought weakly.

//Is there any particular city that you think Mischief, Pain and Fear should visit today?// Joxer asked with a smile under his question.

//Yes, actually there is. There is a blacksmith in Arcadia, Codgis, who would benefit from a visit. I don't know if the man's an idiot or just greedy but his substandard weapons are getting good men killed. If you checked him out you could decide what needs to be done about him... but you'd better talk to Heph before you mess with a smith.// Ares sent as an afterthought.

//Good idea. We shouldn't be gone too long. I miss you. I love you.// Joxer finished quietly.

//I miss you and love you too.// Ares sent in reply with desperate need flowing as an undercurrent.

"It's okay with your dad. Do you want to go to the mortal realm with me? We can have dinner, do some shopping and see if we can find a way to use your godhoods for good." Joxer said with excitement.

"Why?" Deimos asked suspiciously.

"Why what?" Joxer asked in return, not actually remembering hearing Deimos speak before.

"Why're you bein nice ta us?" Phobos asked, mirroring his brother's suspicion.

"It might not make much sense to you. From what Cupid said, gods don't look at family the same as mortals. But in mortal terms you're my step-sons. That makes us family, and you try to help family." Joxer said carefully.

"You tryin ta change us ta be good?" Phobos asked, still suspicious.

"No, I just want to try and find different ways you can use your godhood. After you've tried it out, you decide if you want to do it again or not." Joxer said seriously.

Phobos and Deimos shared a look then nodded in unison.

Joxer concentrated and the three of them were off to Hephaestus' temple.

* * * * *

"King Hephaestus, may I have an audience with you?" Joxer asked timidly.

"Joxie, come in. And you brought the boys! Pho, Demi, come and give your momma a hug." Aphrodite said as she bounced from beside Hephaestus at the desk.

"What did you need Joxer?" Hephaestus asked seriously.

"There is a blacksmith in Arcadia, Codgis, Ares wants me to see why he is providing substandard weapons for his warriors. But before I take any action against him, I would like your permission... since he is a blacksmith." Joxer said respectfully.

"Thank you for coming to me. Codgis has been lax in his prayers of late and his offerings have been sparse. But since he is one of my followers, he is entitled to some protection... he is not to be killed or permanently disabled. Beyond that, use your own judgment. If the situation is too bad, come to me and I will deal with him." Hephaestus said in a considering voice.

"Are you okay? You look really tired." Joxer asked with concern.

"I'll be fine. I need to get a good nights sleep. There's more to this job than you can imagine." Hephaestus said darkly.

"If there is anything I can do to ease your burden, let me know." Joxer said quietly.

"Thank you Joxer. If there is something you can do, I will call on you." Hephaestus said with a weak, tired smile.

"I guess I'd better get going then." Joxer said to Hephaestus, then turned to the boys who were being hugged by their mother.

"Are you guys ready to go to Arcadia?" Joxer asked with a smile..

Both boys nodded enthusiastically.

"I think we need to change our clothes a little... dress a little more mortal." Joxer said in thought.

Aphrodite took the cue and changed the three of them in an instant.

Phobos began to laugh in his manic, slightly psychotic way. Deimos looked at Phobos and himself without betraying a hint of emotion.

"Thanks Dite, this is perfect." Joxer said warmly.

"Thanks for taking an interest in the boys Joxie. You guys have fun today." Aphrodite said with a grand smile.

"We will, you have a good day too, you too Hephaestus." Joxer said before carefully picturing Arcadia in his mind.

* * * * *

Jett appeared in Cupid's temple to find Cupid playing in the floor with Anteros and Bliss. They had a collection of little dolls made up to look like various people on Olympus.

"Hey Cupid, I was wondering if you could do me a favor." Jett asked quietly as he smiled at the sight.

"Is this a personal favor or a business one?" Cupid asked without moving from Bliss.

"Business I guess. I was wondering if you could shoot me and Zeus with an arrow to make us more in love." Jett asked hesitantly.

"Why?" Cupid asked, devoting his full attention to Jett.

"Because we want to get married. If you shoot us, we'll know what love really feels like and know if we really want to go through with it or if we're making a mistake." Jett said carefully.

"Sorry Jett, I'm off duty right now. If you're serious about this, you two can come to me in the morning and I'll take care of you. My evenings are reserved for family and I won't interrupt that unless it's an emergency." Cupid said with a note of apology.

Jett looked at Bliss' expression of joy as his father played with him and smiled.

"It's okay Cupid. Tomorrow will be fine. Family is more important right now." Jett said warmly.

"Thanks Jett. I've just recently been reminded that I've had my priorities screwed up so I'm trying to get them set straight." Cupid said quietly.

"This is a good start." Jett said before disappearing.

"You know he was lying don't you?" Anteros asked carefully.

"Of course." Cupid said without emotion.

"What are you going to do?" Anteros asked as he moved a doll to chase after the doll Bliss was playing with.

"I'm going to do what he asked, I'll just need a little help to make it turn out for the best." Cupid said with a gentle smile.

"You've got a plan?" Anteros asked carefully.

Cupid looked at the mark on his forearm and said, "No, this plan isn't for me to make."

* * * * *

"So tell me why you've brought Death to visit... I hope it's not in a professional capacity." Widow Twanky said with a slight note of worry.

"No, nothing like that. I just wanted for Than to meet you. He's been a really good friend to me and I wanted him to know you." Jayce said with a smile.

//I feel as if I know her already. I've met all fourteen of your husbands. They all speak highly of you.// Thanatos sent, still looking uneasy in the company of a mortal.

"Oh, how are they?" Widow Twanky asked with concern.

//All of them live in a large house in a corner of Allysium and spend their days remembering their happiness with you and their nights drinking fine wine and enjoying each others company. They are all enjoying an eternity of peace, joy and companionship.// Thanatos said with a peaceful look, which somehow looked wrong on his corpse-like face.

"Oh, it's good to know that they're happy. I loved each and every one of them." The Widow Twanky said as she relived some of the finer points of her marriages.

"Thanatos is a sculptor. He's given me a piece of his work and I was wondering if I could keep it here with you. As much as I would love to keep it on Olympus with

me, hardly anyone would get to see it. If I leave it here with you I know people could see and appreciate it." Jayce asked hopefully.

"Yes, yes of course my little muffin. Please show me, I love a good sculpture." The Widow said with a smile.

Jayce carefully relocated the statue from Tartarus to the middle of the Widow Twanky's living room.

"Goodness!" Twanky said as she walked to the sculpture and looked carefully at it.

"Where would you like me to put it?" Jayce asked, as she inspected the statue carefully.

"Just leave it right here. It is beautiful and here it will be the focal point of the room." Twanky said as she looked into the eyes of the bird.

Jayce smiled at Thanatos who had a look of apprehension on his face.

//She loves it. Art is meant to be seen, not hidden.// Jayce sent privately.

"You have an incredible talent Thanatos. So much emotion, so much feeling... it's like Jayce's dancing caught in stone." Twanky said in thought.

Jayce smiled warmly at the statement as Thanatos looked on in surprise.

"So tell me what's going on with you Jayce. You were in such a state the last time I saw you, what's happened to turn you around so completely?" Widow Twanky asked as she took a seat.

"Thanatos happened. I was feeling lost and alone. Now I have a friend. Thanatos made all the difference." Jayce said with a smile.

"Are you two thinking of becoming a couple?" Twanky asked with interest.

"I'm afraid it can't happen. Thanatos is forever denied the touch of another. His is the touch of death." Jayce said sadly.

"If that weren't the case, do you think you'd be lovers?" Twanky asked nosily.

"We might." Jayce said with an amused glance at Thanatos who was sitting in shock.

"If that's all that's holding you back, be lovers of a different kind. You can share your love without touching." Twanky said sagely.

"How?" Jayce asked with interest.

"Through your words, your dance, your sculpture. The physical aspect of love is just one small part of a relationship. You can be lovers in your hearts and souls without involving your bodies." Twanky said with a dreamy look.

"I don't understand." Jayce said with difficulty.

//Nor do I.// Thanatos said, slightly recovering from his shock.

"The act of sex can be performed without love, you know this muffin." Twanky said and looked to Jayce to find comprehension.

"What was missing from that physical act was love. Likewise, you can have that love without physical contact. They can exist without each other. And that non-physical love is the love that poets and storytellers have been speaking of throughout the ages. Romantic, passionate love that transcends the body." Twanky said with a romantic twinkle in her eyes.

//But I'm a monster.// Thanatos said quickly.

"You're a person. A person with depth, feeling, caring and warmth." Jayce said immediately.

//I don't know how...// Thanatos trailed off.

"We'll figure it out together. We may end up as friends, like we are now. And if that were to happen, I would be content. But if there is the chance for something more, something permanent, I want to try for it. Do you?" Jayce asked carefully.

Thanatos thought and looked at the hopeful expressions on Jayce and Twanky's faces.

//Yes.// Thanatos said quietly.

* * * * *

Ganymede pulled Asclepius into a deep passionate kiss.

Asclepius pulled out of the kiss and said, "Wait."

Ganymede got a look of fear and question in his eyes.

"You're emotional. You've been through a lot today; physical changes and emotional revelations. Let's not move on to another level of our relationship until you're more comfortable." Asclepius said with difficulty.

Ganymede thought about the statement and finally said, "Thanks Ace. I think I want to move to the next level, but I can wait till I'm sure. Thanks for thinking of what's best."

"Another kiss like that last one and I may not be able to think at all." Asclepius said honestly.

"I'll hold you to that." Ganymede said with a tender smile.

Asclepius and Ganymede just enjoyed the warmth and comfort of their embrace as Ganymede got a call from Cupid.

//Ganymede, I have a situation to discuss regarding Zeus. If you're interested, come over and we'll discuss it.// Cupid sent quietly, with respect.

"Cupid's calling... it sounds like something good." Ganymede said to Ace.

"Let's go." Asclepius said and straightened his robes.

Ganymede nodded and transported them to the Temple of Love.

* * * * *

Joxer, Phobos and Deimos appeared about fifteen minutes walk outside Arcadia.

"Why didn't you just take us to the town?" Phobos asked quickly.

"Because we need to get used to acting like mortals for a few minutes. Have you guys ever been around mortals before?" Joxer asked curiously.

Both boys shook their heads.

"Then just watch and listen at first. We're going to get something to eat, then we'll go to the blacksmith's shop and see what's going on with Codgis." Joxer said to the pair.

"Why didn't we eat before we left?" Phobos asked curiously.

"Because it's not about the eating, it's about the people around us. We're going to watch people, we'll just eat while we're doing it. Maybe we'll find a way to use your powers while we're there." Joxer finished in speculation.

Both boys shrugged and continued walking in silence as they approached the town.

* * * * *

Ganymede and Asclepius appeared in the Temple of Love and saw Cupid, Anteros and Bliss playing in the floor.

"What have you got for me Cupid?" Ganymede asked curiously.

"Jett wants me to shoot him and Zeus with a love arrow tomorrow. I thought that might interest you given your history with Zeus." Cupid said, keeping the majority of his attention on Bliss.

"Hmmm." Ganymede said in thought.

"Why?" Asclepius asked curiously.

"I don't know. He gave me some reason about wanting to marry Zeus and testing it out first... but he was obviously lying. I don't think it matters." Cupid said seriously.

"Do you have anything that will work like, permanently, on a god?" Ganymede asked speculatively.

"No. Not really. To affect a god permanently would take a lot more power than I have, I'd need about... six or seven major gods to make it work. And even then the affect would be limited to the confines of the enchantment on the arrow. It could be broken." Cupid said as he continued to play.

"What if we put an enchantment other than the usual one on the arrow?" Asclepius asked carefully.

"What did you have in mind?" Cupid asked, looking up curiously.

"You're talking about shooting them with romantic love... and that's fine, but there need to be other things to sustain the romantic love. Things like infatuation, respect, dignity, common interests... things that serve as a foundation." Asclepius said in thought.

"So how do we get those things?" Anteros asked curiously.

"With help from some of the others. If we tell Hera that we're going to shoot Zeus with a love arrow to make him marry Jett, I know she'll go for it. She'll think she's causing him harm. Lust will go along, and we can use Lust's godhood to pour passion into the spell. Jayce will want to help his brother to be happy so he'll throw a little debauchery into the mix... who else can we get?" Asclepius asked in thought.

"All of us, Bliss's arrow's of infatuation can be the basis of the spell. I can donate a romantic love potion into the arrow." Cupid said seriously.

"And I can add the passion of love avenged." Anteros said seriously.

"I know if we asked Dad and Jox they'd contribute." Cupid added.

"Mom and Heph would too, and mom's got some powerful marriage mojo that she can add." Anteros said with excitement.

"I count five major gods, we'd do good to have a few more on board for this." Asclepius said seriously.

"Your dad would probably help if you asked him." Ganymede said suddenly.

"Psyche." Cupid said without emotion.

"What?" Asclepius asked in question.

"If your dad thinks she's ready for it, Psyche could add her special touch to the spell and her power to the mix." Cupid said, turning his attention fully to Asclepius.

"I'll ask him. If she's up to it, her godhood could make the difference. It would be like the catalyst to bring all the other influences together." Asclepius said with increasing excitement.

"Jett and Zeus will be back in the morning to be shot with an arrow. We have till then to get this done. Who's going to do it?" Cupid asked everyone in attendance.

"I think we should do it." Ganymede said in thought.

"Everyone knows that you have reason to wish harm to Zeus... and that'll make them want to kick in. Good thinking." Cupid said with a nod of his head.

"Then all I need is an arrow." Ganymede said seriously.

"Bliss, can you make an arrow of infatuation for Ganymede?" Cupid asked his son quietly.

Bliss held out his hands and scrunched up his face. A moment later an arrow appeared and he handed it to Ganymede.

"Now you realize that if this works, Zeus won't even know that he's being manipulated. He'll just think he's in love." Cupid asked seriously.

"Yeah, but I'll know. That's enough. And thanks for calling me Cupid. I'm sorry I said all that before, I guess I was dealing with a lot of changes and blew off steam at you." Ganymede said with a note of shame.

"It's fine Ganymede. It helped me. I'm sorry about all that stuff in the past, but I really feel like it's behind us now, how about you?" Cupid asked hopefully.

"Yeah, all in the past. We're cool now." Ganymede said with a gentle smile.

"Good. Now you'd better start making the rounds. By the end of the night, that little arrow is going to be one of the most powerful forces on Olympus." Cupid said with a smile.

"Yeah, let's get going." Ganymede said and held out his hand to Asclepius.

They disappeared in a flash as Cupid, Bliss and Anteros watched.

"Are they as much in love as it looked?" Anteros asked.

"Oh yeah. They just had to get to know each other and it happened naturally, no spell required." Cupid said and turned his attention to Bliss again.

"So you set them up?" Anteros asked as he began to play with Bliss again.

"My godhood did, I didn't actually know about it till after the fact. I'm still getting used to the romantic love thing. It may be a few decades before I'm fully aware of when my godhood's pushing me toward an action." Cupid said absently as he marched his little Ares doll across the floor.

"As long as it works out. I think Zeus and Jett are both going to benefit from the supercharged arrow." Anteros said as his Hades doll followed the Ares doll.

"Yeah. What are you doing?" Cupid asked as he watched Anteros' doll following him all around.

"Collecting the dead in your wake." Anteros said seriously.

Cupid smiled and continued to play.

Chapter Thirty

"Dad, I need your help. Zeus wants to be shot with an arrow and we need Psyche's special touch to make it stick. Is she up to it?" Asclepius asked hopefully.

"I think so. Let's go see if she'll be willing to do it. She began to progress rapidly once she was able to recognize the influence of her godhood." Apollo said conversationally as they walked down the hall.

Apollo gently knocked on the door and asked quietly, "Lady Psyche? May Asclepius and I come in to ask you a favor?"

"Yes, come in." Psyche said solidly.

"Good evening Lady Psyche, how are you?" Apollo asked with a gentle smile.

"Good, I'm feeling better than I have in years." Psyche said honestly.

"I'm glad to hear it. Asclepius has a favor to ask you, and I have an offer to make." Apollo said slowly.

"What can I do for you Asclepius?" Psyche asked pleasantly.

Asclepius was speechless at the dignified and well spoken woman standing before him. He couldn't reconcile the sight with the raving shrew that he had seen just a few days earlier. At Psyche's expectant gaze he snapped out of his mental wandering and said, "Jett has asked Cupid to shoot him and Zeus with a love arrow. We were thinking that with your help we could make it stable and cause the effect to be permanent."

Psyche considered the statement for a moment before asking, "They have asked you to do this?"

"Yes, well they asked for the love arrow, the permanence was Cupid and Ganymede's idea." Asclepius said honestly, glancing over his shoulder at Ganymede.

Psyche nodded then said, "If King Hephaestus sanctions the use of my powers on the arrow, I will be happy to agree."

"We'll be talking to him soon. We just wanted to be sure who would be willing to help before we went to him." Asclepius said seriously.

"A wise course of action, Hephaestus' time is no doubt valuable since he has taken up his new duties." Psyche said in thought.

Asclepius was again taken aback by the dramatic change in Psyche. He could only manage a nod at her accurate interpretation of his motives.

"Lady Psyche, your progress is such that I am willing to release you from your confinement if you feel that you are ready to resume your godly duties." Apollo said seriously.

"I'm afraid that I'll stray and become lost in the influence of my godhood again." Psyche said seriously.

"I have another bracelet for you. It is made of the same Hephestian metal as the one you now wear. The only difference is that you will be able to remove this one whenever you wish. You will have full access to your god powers whenever you want, but you will be able to interrupt the influence of your godhood by putting the bracelet back on." Apollo said, looking into Psyche's eyes.

"Thank you Lord Apollo, I will try to be worthy of your trust in me." Psyche said timidly.

"Lady Psyche, the past was destined to happen. Your godhood is manipulation. It was necessary for you to fall under it's control so that you could truly understand the powers that you command. Now you are finally ready to take your rightful place among the pantheon as a full god of Olympus and stand with pride along with us. I have no doubt... you are worthy." Apollo said with confidence.

Psyche smiled as Apollo took her hand and removed the bracelet from her wrist and replaced it with another.

"Your rooms in the House of Intellect are prepared. If you would like, I will accompany you there now." Apollo said seriously.

"Thank you Lord Apollo, I would like that very much." Psyche said with a gentle smile.

Apollo extended his arm to her and she took gentle hold of him so he could properly escort her to her new home.

Ganymede and Asclepius stood stunned as Apollo and Psyche walked out of the room.

"Your dad does good work." Ganymede finally said.

"Yeah, I've never seen him change someone so completely." Asclepius said in stunned disbelief.

"Are you ready for the next stop? We need to talk to Hera and Lust." Ganymede said, shaking off his shock.

"Yeah, let's go." Asclepius said quickly and took Ganymede's hand before they transported to the main temple of Retribution.

* * * * *

//Hey Cupe, ya got a coupla minutes ta talk? I figured out mah retribution fer ya.// Strife's mind/voice sounded worried.

//Sure Strife, just let me ask Ter if he can watch Bliss for a couple minutes.// Cupid responded immediately.

"Sorry guys, Strife needs to talk to me for a couple minutes. He's got his retribution ready. I promise I'll be back as soon as I can." Cupid said with true remorse in his voice.

"Go ahead and get going. We'll be fine for a few minutes, just give us a yell if it's going to be long, okay?" Anteros asked, while trying to find the tickle spot on Bliss' belly that made his wings flutter.

Cupid took a moment to enjoy the sight of his brother and his son playing before he vanished, leaving a pink cloud.

* * * * *

"Before we go in, here's some money for each of you." Joxer said and produced three dinars each for the boys.

"This is nothin." Phobos said as he looked in confusion at the money in his hand.

"I know. Just follow my lead. One way to tell the nature of a mortal is by the way they react to someone who seems to be of a lesser station than themselves." Joxer said as he led the boys into a pub on the main street.

Joxer led the boys to a table and they waited for the waitress to come and take their orders.

A delicate Nubian woman came to the table and kindly asked, "What can I get for you gentlemen today?"

Joxer carefully dumped the entire contents of his money pouch on the table, then asked, "What can we get for five dinars for the three of us?"

"I can bring you soup and a small loaf of bread." The waitress said with a look of compassion in her eyes.

Joxer looked into her mind, then sent to the boys, //It costs seven dinars for the soup and bread. She is willing to pay the other two dinars out of her own pocket to see that you two are fed.//

"Thank you... What is your name good lady?" Joxer asked pleasantly.

"Senscie is what I'm called. I'll return with your food in a minute." Senscie said with a gentle smile before leaving them alone.

"Why would this woman care for strangers?" Phobos asked in confusion.

"Because you are children. When she was a child, she didn't always have enough to eat so she tries to see that children aren't left hungry." Joxer said as he reviewed the images he had drawn from her mind.

"So she's a good person." Phobos said in speculation.

"For the most part. Every mortal has good and evil in their souls, the only thing that defines one from another is the choices they make." Joxer said in thought.

"So you said you want us to use our god powers for good. What good can we do for her? She was nice to us, shouldn't we be nice to her too?" Phobos asked carefully.

"Yes, that's the idea. Deimos, look at her with your godhood and see her pain. What can you see?" Joxer asked quietly.

Deimos closed his eyes and concentrated on the waitress. After a minute of thought he said, "Her son. He was killed. It hurts her when she remembers."

Joxer looked into her thoughts and found the image of her son, almost a man, being mortally wounded in a raid by a ruthless warlord.

After a moment to consider the situation, Joxer said, "Phobos, can you see her fears?"

Phobos looked in the direction of Senscie and concentrated.

"She's afraid of being alone. That's why she took this job. She hates going back to her room at the end of the day cause there's no one else there." Phobos said slowly in thought.

Senscie brought the soups and bread to the table and all three smiled and thanked her before she left to attend to other patrons.

"Deimos, can you help her to accept her pain? Change it?" Joxer asked, hoping that he was right in his assumption of Deimos god powers.

"Dunno. Never tried." Deimos said and concentrated his thought into his godhood to see what he could do.

"Phobos, can you do the same with her fear? Not take it away, but lead her to overcome it?" Joxer asked seriously.

Phobos nodded and focused his power too.

While the boys were concentrating, Joxer focused his god power and found a long forgotten spark of mischief deep in her soul. It had been squashed, repressed and nearly extinguished many times, but somehow it endured.

Joxer focused his godhood and thought and the mischief bloomed into a beautiful fountain of humor.

Senscie paused and got a curious look on her face, then went back to her work.

"I done it." Deimos said proudly.

"What did you do?" Joxer asked curiously.

"I untwisted her pain. Now when she remembers her son, it still hurts but she don't get caught in the knot. The pain leads to memories of when they was happy." Deimos said with a proud smile of achievement.

"An now instead of gettin stuck in fear, she's gonna use it ta do somethin bout it." Phobos said with equal pride.

"Great work boys. Now there's only one thing left to do." Joxer said and focused his god power on Senscie. There was a flash, and anyone with supernatural sight could clearly see the smirking face mask floating above her.

"What'd you do?" Phobos asked as he looked at the floating icon.

"She has my blessing and protection." Joxer said with a smile.

"Can I do that too?" Phobos asked hopefully.

"Sure, just focus your power and attach your emblem to her spark. Anyone with even a drop of godly blood will be able to see that she is blessed and protected." Joxer said in an instructive tone.

Phobos pushed his power and did as he was told. A moment later another symbol was hanging above her. It was the image of an eclipsing sun, almost entirely blotted out by the moon.

Deimos didn't ask, he just did as his brother and the image of a firey red teardrop of blood formed into being.

Joxer looked on with approval and said, "Now let's enjoy this wonderful meal before it gets cold."

Both boys started to eat.

Even though the food wasn't very good by godly standards, Senscie's act of compassion added a special seasoning that made it delicious. All three ate their fill and both boys laid their three dinars on the table when they left to enjoy the rest of their afternoon in Arcadia.

* * * * *

"Cupe, ya know I love ya an I don wanna hurt'cha. I thought 'bout how we was afore an figured out what we did an how ta fix it. Cause, ta tell ya tha truth, I ain't angry at'cha but Ah still don trust ya not ta be like ya was afore." Strife said seriously and turned to look Cupid straight in the eyes.

"Ya treated me like I wasn't good as you. Like I was some kinda dirty secret. I wanna know that you think I'm your equal, I want tha mortals ta think I'm your equal. My retribution is that I want all your temples ta become our temples. I want alters same as yours and tha statues same as yours... but with clothes. I don wan them smelly mortals lookin at my bare ass. But anyways, when you done all that, Ah'll believe that'cha ain't ashamed of me an Ah'll trust ya if ya say you ain't better than me."

"Strife, it's not enough. I hurt you and used you for so long, it's not nearly enough to make up for all I did to you." Cupid said honestly.

"Ah know you wanna make up fer all that Cupe. But you asked what I wanted, an Ah'm tellin ya. If you feel you need to whip yourself or sumthin to make up for alla that, do whatcha need to. But all Ah'm askin fer is ta be same as you. No bettah, no worse." Strife said seriously.

Cupid thought about Strife's words, then nodded.

"Ah love ya Cupe. Remembah that. Now you need to get back to your cherub. Give me a yell when tha temples are done." Strife said, making it clear that they were finished.

Cupid whispered, "I love you too Strife." Before flashing back to his temple.

When Cupid was gone, Strife walked on shaking legs to his bed and flung himself to lay face down. [God's Cupe. Why do you have'ta make it so hard. I just wanna love you.] Strife thought as he held his pillow close.

* * * * *

"Let's go do that job for your dad now." Joxer said as he led the way down the street, toward the blacksmiths shop.

"What're we gonna do?" Phobos asked curiously.

"Let's see..." Joxer said in thought, then summoned his old sword from his mortal days.

"It's bent." Phobos said, stating the obvious.

"Yeah, and let's see if twenty dinars can get Codgis to repair this sword or provide me a suitable replacement." Joxer said to the boys as they walked.

"And if he does?" Phobos prompted.

"Then we tell your dad that he is a fair businessman, and a bad blacksmith. Maybe we'll ask Hephaestus to provide him some instruction or divine inspiration or something." Joxer said as they turned down a side street.

"If he doesn't?" Deimos asked carefully.

"Curse him, rain misfortune on him, something like that... We'll just have to see. I'm sure we'll know what to do in just a minute." Joxer said and pointed at the forge before them.

"Good day sir." Joxer said, as he was carefully walking among many carefully stacked piles of weapons on the ground.

"What you want?" Codgis asked as he worked the metal before him.

"I was hoping you could help me. I have two sons and I need to see after their protection..." Joxer began.

"What do you want?" Codgis asked again, still hammering the metal.

"My sword's bent. I only have twenty dinars, I was hoping I could get you to fix it, or get a replacement from you." Joxer asked hopefully.

"Got nothin for twenty dinars." Codgis said gruffly, then thrust the sword he was working on back into the forge.

"Let me see what you got." Codgis said quickly and held out his hand for Joxer's sword.

Joxer hurriedly handed the sword to Codgis.

After a brief inspection Codgis said, "Come back in half an hour. It'll cost you... five dinars for the work. Now go. I've got to make six more swords by the end of the day."

Joxer nodded and hurried out of the forge.

"What does that mean Joxer?" Phobos asked in confusion.

"Tell me about his fears." Joxer said in thought.

Phobos focused his power and said slowly, "He's afraid if he doesn't get all the swords made that were ordered by the king, he'll be executed like the last blacksmith."

Joxer nodded and looked into Codgis mind for himself.

"He's overworked. The order is too much for him to handle alone. He's making substandard weapons because he doesn't have the time to do a proper job on each one, he has to sacrifice quality to maintain production." Joxer said as he analyzed what he was seeing.

"So we don't get to curse him?" Phobos asked with disappointment.

"Sorry Pho. Maybe we'll find someone else for you to curse. Let's go talk to Hephaestus and find out if we can get Codgis some help." Joxer said seriously.

Phobos and Deimos nodded and followed Joxer to the Great Hall of Olympus.

Chapter Thirty-One

After a visit to Hephaestus and a promise from him to find Codgis some help, Joxer decided to walk to the Halls of War with the boys, rather than flash.

"Poppa Joxer?" Phobos said hesitantly.

[Poppa?!] Joxer thought in surprise, but only responded, "Yes?"

"Can we go back to tha mortal world? I wanna use my godhood again." Phobos asked with enthusiasm.

Joxer thought about the question and said, "Why don't we go back to the Halls of War and ask your father if he'd like to come with us? The festival is still going on in Arcadia, we could go there if you'd like."

Both the boys were silent as they walked. Finally as they approached the main door, Phobos quietly said, "Dad's ashamed of us. He never took us nowhere unless we couldn't be seen."

Joxer stopped and looked seriously at both boys, then said, "Do you want to know what your dad told me about his twin boys when I was still mortal?"

Both boys nodded enthusiastically.

"He said that his twins were just like him and his twin sister Eris when they were kids. He said that you two were each others best friends and that he wouldn't change that for anything. I think he's doing his best to provide you two the childhood he wanted to have had." Joxer said seriously.

"So he isn't disappointed in us?" Deimos asked in nearly a whisper.

"No. He loves you both and dreams of you two becoming his twin generals one day." Joxer said with delight in his eyes.

"Dad wants us to be his generals?" Phobos asked with disbelief.

"Someday. He hasn't told you because he doesn't want you to feel like he did. All his life he was told 'YOU ARE WAR!' by his father. He wants you two to grow up being Phobos and Deimos first, and Pain and Fear will just be your titles when you are working." Joxer said as he looked in their eyes.

Joxer found that both boys were on the verge of tears, so he thought he should calm them down before they faced their father.

"For right now, we need to focus on learning all the different things you can do with your godhoods. And the best way I know to do that is in the mortal world." Joxer said with a big smile.

"Thank you Poppa Joxer. Dad don't tell us stuff like that. But as long as we know, that's okay." Phobos said with a small smile.

"Yeah. I'm glad you're our Poppa." Deimos said in a husky voice.

"I'm glad I'm your Poppa too. Now let's go see your father." Joxer said as he put an arm around each boys' shoulder.

* * * * *

//Cupid, would you mind if I came to visit with Bliss?// Cupid heard in his mind.

//Psyche? Sure, come over, we were just playing.// He responded after the shock wore off.

There was a subdued flash of yellow light and Psyche appeared in the room.

"MOMMY!" Bliss cried out and ran to his mother.

"Yes baby, mommy's home." Psyche said as she held Bliss close.

"Daddy said you was sick and Uncle Pollo gonna make you better. You all better now mommy?" Bliss asked hopefully.

"Yes Mommy's all better now. Why don't you come over here and tell me what's happened while I've been gone." Psyche said as she guided Bliss to sit on a large sofa.

"Would you like us to leave you two alone for a while?" Cupid asked as he looked peacefully at his son's happiness.

"That's okay Cupid, you and Anteros can stay. I was just released today and the first thing I wanted to do was visit Bliss. I won't be staying long." She said as she rocked Bliss in a hug.

"Stay as long as you want. I put your stuff in the spare room... but you don't have a door." Cupid said with a blush.

"I noticed that, you've done some redecorating... I like it." Psyche said as Bliss started tugging on her arm.

She turned her attention to Bliss who said, "Daddy got a spankin."

Psyche's eyes got wide and she looked at Cupid, who blushed and nodded.

"Why did your daddy get a spanking?" Psyche asked Bliss with an indulgent tone.

"Cause he didn't read to me or play with me." Bliss said seriously.

"Now he does?" Psyche asked, devoting all her attention to Bliss.

"When daddy's not working, he spends all his time playing with me. He don't make me stay with grandma Dite or Aunt Hestia no more." Bliss said happily.

"You don't want to visit your Grandma Dite?" Psyche asked with concern.

"I want to visit Grandma Dite with daddy, not instead of daddy." Bliss said with certainty.

"Psyche, day after tomorrow I'm arranging a family dinner here. Would you please come?" Cupid asked hopefully.

"Me?" Psyche asked hesitantly.

"Yes. This isn't any big formal thing, just a meal for the whole family to share. You're invited if you'd like to come. If not, you can come to the next one. I'll probably be having one every week, and you'll always be invited." Cupid said sincerely.

"Thank you Cupid. I think I will come." Psyche said with a gentle smile.

Cupid smiled at her acceptance and took a seat on the other sofa beside Anteros.

* * * * *

"That's everything here, we're done for another lunar cycle." Hades said as he closed his scroll of business projections for the month.

//My Lord Hades, I would like to request your council if you have time.// Thanatos asked quietly.

"It must be serious for you to use the formal address. You haven't done that for millennia. Speak my friend." Hades said with worry.

//In all my time here, I have never sought the touch of another. It has never been a burden to be the personification of death... until now.// Thanatos said sadly.

"The young god that visited you earlier?" Hades asked curiously.

Thanatos nodded.

"I'm sorry my friend, you and I are bound to the essence of Asphodel. No magic in the world can make us other than what we are. If there were a way, I would offer it to you." Hades said with regret.

//Thank you Lord Hades. Perhaps the Widow Twanky was right, we can become lovers of mind and spirit. I just thought...// Thanatos trailed off in sorrow.

"I'm sorry. It cannot be done. The two of us, we are not just members of the house of death, we ARE death, it is part of us and we of it. If there is any boon in my power that I can grant to ease your way, you have but to ask." Hades said, feeling powerless to help his most faithful servant.

//Thank you my Lord, as always I am yours to command.// Thanatos said as he withdrew.

"I know my friend. I know." Hades said sadly to the empty doorway.

* * * * *

"King Hephaestus, I come to ask for your approval on a project." Ganymede said respectfully as he appeared in Hephaestus office.

"Ganymede, come in, you too Ace, come over here and sit down. Hephie was just telling me what you two are doing and I've got just the thing for you." Aphrodite said with a bounce.

"He did? You do? Who told?" Ganymede asked in confusion.

"King of the Gods... Omniscient." Hephaestus said with his best imitation of Aphrodite's 'duh' look.

Ganymede and Asclepius immediately felt more at ease. You just can't take someone too seriously who gives you the 'duh' look.

"Dip the tip of the arrow in this potion and it'll have such a romance whammy that Zeus won't know what hit him." Aphrodite said with glee.

"So you approve?" Ganymede asked in confusion.

"You chose him for his looks, didn't you Ace?" Aphrodite said with a sympathetic tone.

Asclepius tried to be offended on Ganymede's behalf, but it was funny, so he laughed.

Ganymede shot an offended glare at Asclepius, but it couldn't hold up to the laughter and finally broke under Aphrodite's titters of amusement and Hephaestus' gentle smile.

"Okay, dumb question. Will you two give the arrow a power boost? Then we'll take it to the others." Ganymede asked with a good natured smile.

Aphrodite made a few grand gestures, then very dramatically held her hands over the arrow and bathed it in a blue glow of power.

Hephaestus rolled his eyes at her production and glanced at the arrow. A flare of red power engulfed it, and was absorbed.

"You guys need to stop by sometime when you can visit." Aphrodite said enthusiastically.

Asclepius nodded as Ganymede said, "Sure. When everything settles down, we'll come by."

"Good. Hestia is going to show me how to roast a boar. I need for someone to try it." Aphrodite said happily.

Ganymede and Asclepius shot a glance at each other, then Asclepius hurriedly said, "We've got to get this arrow charged up before it gets too late."

When Ganymede and Asclepius were gone, Aphrodite asked, "Why does everyone react that way when I say I'm learning to cook?"

"Don't worry dear. The proof is in the tasting. I'm sure you'll be a wonderful cook and they'll all be terribly jealous of me for having a beautiful wife who can prepare food by hand that is fit for a god." Hephaestus said with a dreamy, loving twinkle in his eye.

"Ooooh, you are gonna get sooooo lucky tonight." Aphrodite said with adoration for her husband.

* * * * *

Joxer walked into the Halls of War with a twin under each arm to find Ares engrossed in a scroll.

"Dad, Poppa Joxer wants for us to go to tha mortal realm. Will you come with us?" Phobos asked hopefully.

Ares looked up with surprise. Then his expression slowly morphed from surprise to tenderness.

"Sure Pho. I'd love to go with you. Just give me a minute to finish this." Ares said quickly and went back to work.

"Why don't you guys change into something a little warmer. It's starting to get dark." Joxer said to the twins.

Phobos nodded and the boys both hurried out of the room.

"Poppa Joxer?" Ares asked with a tender smile.

"They came up with that themselves. They're great kids." Joxer said with a dreamy look.

"I was afraid you wouldn't be able to connect with them. Most people see them as their godhoods and never look any deeper." Ares said with a pained note in his voice as he wrote on a scroll.

"Arry, before we got together I dreamed about what kind of family I'd want to have one day... those two are the kids I always wanted. It took me four years to fall in love with you, it took half an hour for me to fall in love with them." Joxer said lovingly.

"They've chosen you as their parent Joxer. I've never seen them open up to anyone like this before. I think you'll be good for them." Ares said as he rolled the scroll and sent it away.

"Are you done?" Joxer asked hopefully.

"Yes. Did you get to visit Codgis?" Ares asked as he stood from his chair.

"Yeah, I'll let the boys tell you what we came up with." Joxer said as he pulled Ares into a warm embrace.

"You're sending them on missions for me?" Ares asked with a chuckle.

"They were afraid you were ashamed of them. I think they need to feel that you trust them." Joxer said as he nuzzled Ares neck.

"I just didn't want them to feel like I only wanted them for their godhoods. I wanted them to be free to be themselves and if they showed an interest, they could work for me." Ares said quietly.

"I know love, but I think maybe you went too far the other way. Instead of feeling that they're only wanted for their godhoods, they feel like their godhoods are worthless to you... and so are they." Joxer said as he held Ares close.

"Do we look okay?" Phobos asked, walking into the room wearing an animal hide coat.

"I think that might be too hot for tonight Pho... what do you think Ar?" Joxer asked.

"I think that will be fine as long as you don't fasten it closed. It looks good on you." Ares said carefully.

Phobos gave a big smile at his father. Deimos stepped forward to display his multiple layers of a shirt, an outer shirt, a vest, and a light jacket.

Joxer looked at Deimos consideringly and said, "I think that'll be just right Demi. You should really wear a vest more often, it looks good on you."

"He's right son. You look good." Ares said as he looked at Deimos proudly.

"I just thought of something. Why don't we see if Cupid and Bliss want to come with us?" Joxer asked the group.

"Why?" Ares asked curiously.

"Why not? Maybe they'd enjoy it." Joxer replied from Ares' side.

"Sure, let's go and see if they'd like to go." Ares said and prepared to flash them to the Temple of Love.

"Wait a minute Ar. It's such a beautiful night, let's walk over." Joxer said warmly.

"Sure Jox, come on boys. Let's go see your brother Cupid." Ares said as he and Joxer led the way out the door.

* * * * *

"Did they buy it?" Zeus asked hopefully.

"Yeah, Cupid's spending time with Bliss tonight but he said he'll do it first thing in the morning." Jett said with a smirk.

"Good, and I'm glad he's taking an interest in his son. That boy was being shifted all over Olympus. The only one who didn't spend time with Bliss was Cupid." Zeus said seriously.

"So what do you want to do now?" Jett asked with a leer.

"You know that bar we cleared out the other day? Let's go back there, something about doing it on the floor of a bar really works for me." Zeus said in a seductive growl.

"You're a sick and twisted god... I like that." Jett said and flashed them to the bar.

* * * * *

"So boys, what did you find out about Codgis?" Ares asked as they walked away from the Halls of War.

"Tha king has him makin a bunch a swords, an he ain't got time to do a good job. He's scared that tha king will kill him like he did the last blacksmith." Phobos said assertively.

"The last blacksmith publicly disrespected the king. It had nothing to do with his blacksmith abilities. Even Hephaestus agreed that the king had the right to have him put to death." Ares said as they walked.

"Uncle Heph said he would get Codgis some help so he could make good weapons for your warriors." Deimos said seriously.

"Good. That will make my job easier. It's hard to guide the outcome of a battle when the swords of the favored army keep breaking." Ares said plainly.

"Poppa Joxer said you wanted us to be your generals someday." Phobos blurted out.

"Yes, if that's something you'd be interested in doing." Ares said cautiously.

"Could we, like, help you in some of your wars sometimes?" Phobos asked hopefully.

Ares got a great smile of pride and said, "If you'd like to, I've got a battle starting in the morning. Mykantos and his men would benefit from a good dose of pain and fear... Joxer, you might be able to help too. I think a little mischief would make it a battle to remember." Ares said hopefully.

"That sounds great love, what do you say guys? Do you want to war with us tomorrow?" Joxer asked the boys.

Both boys were speechless, but nodded enthusiastically.

* * * * *

Ares, Joxer and the twins walked into the Temple of Love in time to see Psyche flash out.

"Dad?" Anteros asked with worry.

"Don't worry Ter, social call." Ares said with a smile.

Anteros nodded and looked to Cupid and Bliss.

"I like what you've done with the place. Roomy." Ares said as he looked around the spacious living area.

"Anteros didn't like the barriers I used to keep him out... now they're gone." Cupid said with a shrug.

"That's good." Ares said quietly, looking fondly at Anteros.

"We came to ask if you guys would like to come to the festival in Arcadia with us." Joxer said happily.

"Um, I don't really like to take Bliss to the mortal realm..." Cupid trailed off.

"It'll be fun. And besides, Bliss is older now, he can behave." Joxer said solidly.

"What do you say Ter? You want to go to Arcadia with us?" Cupid asked.

"Um... sure?" Anteros responded, obviously surprised at being asked.

"Great... What about Strife? Do you think he'd like to go?" Joxer asked with a knowing smile directed at Cupid.

"I could ask." Cupid said in thought, then his eyes went unfocused.

"Go ahead and ask, Pho and Demi, do you think you can find something for Bliss to wear. He'll get cold in that toga." Joxer said.

"Where's your room?" Phobos asked Bliss seriously.

"Come here. This is my very own room." Bliss said happily and led the two older boys out of the main room.

"He says he'll meet us there." Cupid said with a smile.

"Great." Joxer said happily.

"So what's the plan?" Anteros asked suspiciously.

"No plan. Just a night out with the family." Ares said with a warm glance at Joxer.

"Poppa Joxer, will you help us?" Phobos called from Bliss' room.

"I'll be right back." Joxer said as he left to help.

"The twins are calling him Poppa?" Cupid asked in wonder.

"Yeah. He's a great father. They asked me about helping in a war. They're going to join me in a battle tomorrow." Ares said proudly.

"That's great Dad. I know you've been holding off on including them in your work, but I'm glad they're finally going to get some practical experience with their godhoods." Anteros said seriously.

"You should join us in a battle sometime Ter, you're good with a sword." Ares said firmly.

"But I'm a love god." Anteros said in confusion.

"Yeah, but that's not all you are. You're a son of war. I'm not trying to push you, I'm just letting you know that you're invited." Ares said, looking Anteros in the eyes.

"What about Cupid?" Anteros asked, looking at his brother.

"Cupid doesn't like to fight." Ares said with a shrug.

"He's right Ter. Dad taught me how to defend myself, but I don't like the whole war, battle, bloodshed thing. It just doesn't work for me." Cupid said simply.

"Do you think you could spare me tomorrow. I think I'd like to try fighting again, just so I don't lose my touch." Anteros said consideringly.

"That's my boy." Ares said with a smile.

"Daddy, I'm ready." Bliss announced as he ran into the room wearing pants and an open back shirt that didn't restrict his wings.

"Are we going as gods or as mortals?" Cupid asked the group.

Silence fell over the room until Phobos said, "Mortals. That way we can watch the mortals and they won't know it."

"You heard him. All those with wings, start your glamours." Ares said to the group.

"Will you help Bliss with his glamour Dad? I haven't had a chance to teach him yet." Cupid asked hopefully.

"Sure, Bliss, come to Grandpa and I'll help you hide your wings." Ares said as he took a seat on the sofa.

Anteros and Cupid both concentrated and their wings faded out.

Everyone watched as Ares patiently talked Bliss through the steps to hide his wings from mortal sight.

Before long, Bliss' wings faded from view and they were ready to go.

* * * * *

The group of disguised gods walked through the streets of Arcadia. Joxer was enthusiastically pointing out items at vendors stalls, occasionally stopping to purchase something.

Ares was simply enjoying Joxer's excitement.

Cupid and Anteros were nervously watching the people around them, feeling horribly out of place.

The boys seemed to be vibrating with the excitement of all those around them.

"Poppa Joxer, can we go see Senscie?" Phobos asked as he pointed at the pub they had visited earlier.

"Sure, come on guys, we have someone for you to meet." Joxer said as he followed Phobos and Deimos to the pub.

The group walked in and found a table almost immediately.

"What can I get for you gentlemen this fine evening?" Senscie asked the group.

Cupid, Ares and Anteros stared in wonder at the Nubian woman with a radiant glow of happiness and the symbols of three godhoods blessing her.

"Soup and bread for all of us." Joxer said for the table.

"Oh, you've come back and brought some friends. It's good to see you again. I'll have your food right out, would anyone be wanting some ale?" She asked with a smile.

Ares and Anteros nodded.

"Could I have some wine... and some water for the children?" Cupid asked hopefully.

"Yes, it will just be a minute." Senscie said and hurried back to the kitchen.

"You blessed her?" Cupid asked seriously.

"She was nice to us. She thought we was poor an was gonna pay for part of our meal soes me an Demi could eat." Phobos said defensively.

"I wasn't saying it was bad, just not many gods bestow their mark on a mortal." Cupid said quickly.

"I was showing the guys how they could use their godhoods differently. It's like your godhood Cupid. You choose to bestow the blessing of love, but you could choose to bestow the curse of love if you wanted to." Joxer said, then fell silent as Senscie arrived with their drinks.

"I brought something special for the boys, it's a sweet tea that the young around these parts seem to favor. If they don't like it, I can bring them water." Senscie said as she placed their glasses.

"Thank you good lady." Joxer said with a smile.

"You're welcome." Senscie said with a gentle incline of her head, then retreated to the kitchen again.

"Curse of Love?" Cupid asked cautiously.

"Sure, if you can give love, can't you take it away too? Make someone so they have no love in their life?" Joxer asked curiously.

"Yeah, I guess I could." Cupid said speculatively.

"I figured that all the godhoods worked like mine, there's a side that gives a blessing and a side that gives a curse. It's up to the god to decide which side he uses." Joxer said to the table.

"That's really cool Joxer, I never thought about it like that." Anteros said with a smile.

"My husband is smart." Ares said with pride.

"He's gotta be if he's gonna be mischief." A voice said from behind Ares.

"Strife!" Cupid said happily and jumped up to pull Strife into a hug.

"S'Good to see you too Cupe." Strife said happily.

Cupid let Strife loose and scooted into the booth to let Strife sit beside him.

"Pho and Demi, out in tha mortal realm? What'd tha mortals do ta piss you off unc?" Strife asked with a smirk.

Phobos and Deimos looked a little hurt by Strife's joke, then Strife jumped up from his seat and patted out a fire on his butt.

"Those are my sons you're talking about. You don't want the god of mischief pissed at you." Joxer said with a big smirk.

"Ah gotcha Jox. Ah was kiddin Pho and Demi. Ah'm glad you're out having some fun." Strife said seriously.

The boys looked cautious but nodded in acceptance.

Senscie came to the table carrying a kettle and a stack of bowls.

"When you have this many people it makes sense to serve it this way." Senscie said to the group and started dipping soup into the bowls.

//You blessed her?// Strife asked Joxer with surprise.

//Yes, she acted compassionately to the boys.// Joxer responded with a smile at Strife.

"And another one has joined you. You look like you'd enjoy an ale." Senscie said to Strife.

"You got that right." Strife said with a smile to the radiant woman.

"Be right back." Senscie said and returned to the kitchen.

"You did more than bless her. Mortals ain't usually that happy. She's oozing peace and happiness." Strife said to Joxer.

"Pho and Demi did that, they transformed her pain and fear into something healthy and productive, I just awakened her humor." Joxer said with a smile.

"Daddy, I like this. Can we have this at home sometimes?" Bliss asked, indicating the sweet tea.

"Sure, I tell you what. Tomorrow, after work, I'll help you to learn how to materialize it for yourself." Cupid said warmly.

Bliss bounced with enthusiasm.

"Do you boys like the tea?" Sencie asked as she approached with a bowl and a mug of ale for Strife.

"S'Good. Thanks." Deimos said quietly.

Anteros and Cupid looked at Deimos in surprise. Neither could remember hearing Deimos speak before.

Sencie filled Strife's bowl and took the kettle back to the kitchen.

"Would you mind if I showed Strife your Temple Joxer?" Cupid asked between spoons of soup.

"That'd be great. You gotta tell me what you think of it Strife. Tell me if you have any ideas." Joxer said with excitement.

"Ah'll do that. Where you gonna be?" Strife asked after taking a drink of ale.

"I'm going to get my sword back from Codgis. It may seem stupid, but it's one of my mortal things and I don't want to lose it. That stuff reminds me of who I am." Joxer said as he squeezed Ares hand under the table.

"Would you boys like to go off and look at the merchant's stalls for a while?" Ares asked casually.

"Alone?" Pho asked with wide eyes.

"Sure. Cupid, would it be okay if Pho and Demi took Bliss with them to look at the market stalls? I think they'd have more fun without us tagging along behind them." Ares said, turning his attention to Cupid.

//What?// Cupid sent to his father in panic.

//Pho and Demi think I don't trust them. This'll let them know that I do. Bliss can call you if he needs anything.// Ares sent seriously.

"Um, yeah. Do you want to go look at the market with your Uncle Pho and Uncle Demi?" Cupid asked carefully.

Bliss nodded with excitement.

"Is that okay with you guys? I just figured you'd like a little time away from the old folks. You're welcomed to follow us if you'd rather." Ares said seriously.

"That'd be good dad. We was wantin ta watch mortals anyway." Phobos said, vibrating with energy.

"You guys have fun, watch after Bliss, and remember... don't kill anyone." Joxer said with a gentle smile.

"We'll just watch 'em. Come on Bliss." Phobos said and hurried from the table.

Deimos looked at the adults and gave a small smile to convey his own joy.

All the adults watched silently as the boys ran out of the pub.

* * * * *

"Are you sure they'll watch after Bliss?" Cupid asked with worry.

"They'll be fine. They're proving that they can be trusted. Bliss will be safe." Joxer said with assurance.

Cupid looked at the door with anxiety until Strife put an arm around his shoulder and said, "You wanna show me Joxer's temple?"

"Um, yeah. I think you'll love it." Cupid said absently and led Strife out of the pub so they could disappear away from mortal eyes.

"So Ter, how have you been doing? You don't stop in and visit very often." Ares asked as he scooted closer to Joxer so their thighs were rubbing under the table.

"Okay I guess. I've been helping Cupid get used to the 'head of the House of Love' thing. There's a lot more work to it than I realized. Mom may seem a little spacey, but I gotta respect her for doing that job by herself. I never knew she had to put up with so much." Anteros said as he pushed his empty bowl away.

"How are *you* Ter. Not your job?" Ares asked with concern.

Anteros noticed the concerned look in his father's eyes and said, "Not so good. I mean, I'm glad Cupid's getting straightened out, and the whole living together thing is really great, but I'm starting to feel like my life is empty. I thought having Cupid and Bliss would fill the void... but now... I just don't know."

"Why don't you get Cupid to do the whole 'romantic love' thing for you. He'll set you up with someone nice." Joxer asked seriously.

"Because I don't want a set-up. I want to fall in love for real. I always thought it would happen, but... I've been waiting for centuries and it hasn't happened." Anteros said in a lost voice.

"That's because you have to work for it." Joxer said seriously.

Anteros looked at Joxer curiously.

"You have to plant the seeds before you can harvest the fruit." Joxer tried again.

"I don't think the metaphors are working for him Joxer." Ares said quietly, sympathizing with his son's turmoil.

"You have to have friendships and relationships, sometimes a lot of them before one develops into something more. Your dad's told me that you like to keep to yourself for the most part, and that's fine. But you can't expect to develop a lasting relationship if you don't spend time with people." Joxer said with concern.

"Okay, I guess I can see that." Anteros said quietly.

"We're not trying to change you Anteros. You're old enough to make your own choices, I'm just telling you how it looks from the outside." Joxer said simply.

"Yeah, I just don't know how to start. I mean meeting people like that." Anteros said darkly.

"It's tough. If you want, we can help you. We won't set you up on dates or anything like that, but if we find a social situation where you might fit in, we'll invite you along and maybe you'll meet someone you'll enjoy spending time with." Ares said as he held Joxer's hand firmly.

"Thanks Dad, I guess I'll try it. Staying to myself hasn't been working." Anteros said with a distant look.

"If you all are ready, what do you say we visit the blacksmith, then enjoy the market." Joxer said, trying to lighten the mood.

"Yeah, and thanks Joxer. I'm glad Dad married you, you're pretty cool." Anteros said with a forced smile.

"I'm glad he's got such great kids, it's like an added bonus." Joxer said as he looked fondly at his husband.

* * * * *

"Can we look at that?" Bliss asked with excitement.

Phobos and Deimos looked at the stall Bliss was pointing to.

The stall had several finished pots, bowls and pitchers and a man was shaping a lump of clay into a bowl on the top of a large spinning wheel.

The three boys walked over and watched the man work, crafting the clay, shaping the bowl taller and shorter, making the exact shape and thickness he desired. The boys then noticed a woman who was painting the side of a finished vase. She was carefully painting fine details on the side and creating a delicate scene. All three boys then looked at the finished pottery before them and began to appreciate the work and skill that went into the creation of each piece.

All three were watching the man make the side of the bowl thinner and thinner when Deimos barely heard a little 'eep' from beside him. He turned to see that Bliss was gone and almost missed the sight of his feet being dragged between two stalls.

Chapter Thirty-Two

"Someone took Bliss!" Deimos said as he started running.

A heartbeat later Phobos was behind him, running into the small space between the two stalls.

A fat old man was holding Bliss' mouth firmly with one hand while trying to pull off his pants with the other.

Phobos reacted first and instinctively let out the essence of his godhood against the man.

The man froze, as if in shock as fear boiled up through him and paralyzed him where he stood.

"Come here Bliss." Deimos said and went down on one knee to be on Bliss' level.

Bliss ran to Deimos and hugged him tightly as tears fell down his chubby cheeks.

"We promised Poppa Joxer we wouldn't kill anyone." Deimos reminded Phobos who was trembling in his rage.

"I wanted to curse someone, but I never wanted Bliss to get hurt." Phobos said, feeling that this was somehow his fault.

"Save some for me." Deimos said as he stood, picking up Bliss and holding him close.

Phobos concentrated, remembering how he attached his blessing to Senscie. He attached his emblem and voiced his curse. "I curse you. Everythin ya fear will come ta you. Every hour will be filled with every fear ya ever had, coming ta life before yer eyes. Every time you sleep, every fear ya ever caused will haunt yer dreams."

Phobos symbol of the eclipsing sun appeared, but the sun was violently spewing streams of fire from the edge of the eclipse.

Deimos followed his brother's lead and lifted a hand toward the still frozen man. "I curse you. Every pain you ever had will come to visit you every day, every pain you ever caused will come to visit you every night."

Deimos symbol of the teardrop hung above the man and turned from firey red to deep putrid black.

Bliss looked up and saw what his uncles were doing to the man who tried to hurt him. He pushed his own god power out and said, "No more happy."

Bliss' symbol of a heart and arrow appeared above the man, the heart was cracked and crumbling and the arrow was warped and weathered.

"Let's get back to Dad and Poppa, I don't feel like looking at stuff no more." Phobos said quietly.

Deimos nodded and followed.

"Unca Pho?" Bliss called quietly.

Phobos stopped and looked into Bliss' watery eyes.

"You hold me?" Bliss asked hopefully.

Phobos responded by taking Bliss from Deimos arms and holding him tightly, conveying his concern and relief.

* * * * *

Joxer thanked Codgis and took his reformed sword out to show Anteros and Ares.

"He did a pretty good job... considering what he had to work with." Ares said as he looked at the reshaped metal.

"Yeah. Not bad." Anteros said from his father's side.

"Dad?" Phobos called half out of breath, with tears in his eyes, holding Bliss tightly.

"Pho, what's wrong?" Ares asked in immediate panic.

"I'm sorry. We was watching a mortal make a bowl and a fat old mortal took Bliss when we wasn't looking and he wanted to... wanted to..." Phobos said then started crying, holding Bliss even tighter.

"...to rape Bliss." Deimos said with menace in his cold voice.

"What!?" Ares said and pulled all three boys close to him.

"Where is he?" Joxer asked in a low voice that barely contained his rage.

Deimos pointed back the direction that they came from.

//CUPID!// Joxer sent, not holding back one bit of his rage in the call.

Cupid and Strife appeared less than a heartbeat later.

Bliss pulled away from his grandfather and went to his father.

"What happened?" Cupid asked, feeling terror in his gut.

"A bad man tried to hurt me. Unca Pho an Unca Demi stopped him." Bliss said through his tears as he hugged his father.

"Come on." Joxer said and started walking away from the group.

Ares picked up the twins and followed Joxer.

Cupid held Bliss close. Strife and Anteros walked on either side of him as they followed Ares.

Joxer was about to ask where the man was when he saw the three emblems above an insane man, who was screaming out in pain.

There was a crowd forming around the screaming man.

With a thought, Joxer changed from his 'mortal' clothes into his formal robes. Ares followed his husband's lead and changed into the formal robes of the House of War.

Cupid and Anteros released their glammers and changed their clothes to the formal robes of the House of Love. And Strife changed into his formal robe of the Prince of the House of Death.

The crowd parted as the group of gods approached the screaming man.

Ares sat his sons down, and with a thought they were dressed in formal robes for the first time.

Joxer looked into the screaming man's mind, and became suspicious. Quickly he scanned around the crowd and looked through a few mortal minds, trying to put the pieces together. What he found sickened him.

"I am Joxer, God of Mischief. This man attempted to rape my grandson." Joxer said in a booming voice.

Gasps and murmurs spread through the growing crowd.

Joxer sent the images he had picked up from the townspeople's minds to Ares.

"Some of you knew of this man's deeds. Others suspected. Yet you did nothing." Ares said and passed the images on to Cupid.

"As long as he confined his activities to commoner's children, it was overlooked." Cupid said with fury and passed the images to Anteros.

"A town that will not protect its children, doesn't deserve them." Anteros said with fire.

"Those of you who turned a blind eye to these activities shall be forever blind." Joxer said as his curse was bestowed on twelve people in the assembled crowd.

"Those of you who refused to voice your suspicions, shall spend the remainder of your days mute." Ares said coldly as twenty people fell silent.

"Since your city doesn't see fit to protect your children, you do not deserve to have any. No woman who is in Arcadia on this day shall bear another child until every child hurt by this man has been healed in mind, body and spirit." Cupid said in fury.

"No man who is in Arcadia this day shall father another child until all the damaged children have been able to trust and love again." Anteros said with a look of disgust at the crowd.

"Tha people of Arcadia have angered tha gods. Remembah tha days when you was happy cause it was tha God of Happiness tha old man tried ta fuck." Strife said as he preened Bliss' ruffled feathers.

"No more happy!" Bliss said and let loose his curse over the town.

Phobos felt the charge of fear rush through his godhood and instead of absorbing the power; he turned it into a curse.

"All of you will feel tha fear that tha kids felt. You'll never feel safe. Every time you're alone, you'll feel tha rapist watching you from tha shadows. Whenever you're around people, you'll be lookin ta see who's watching you." Phobos said, letting the crowd's increasing fear fuel the curse.

"Pain. You'll all feel tha pain that tha kids felt. Every night." Deimos said coldly.

"Don't bother with prayers and offerings. They won't ease your curse. The only thing that will release you is to heal every child this man ever hurt." Joxer said and turned to hold his husband.

"An when you get to tha underworld, don't expect ta see tha Fields. Until tha curse is lifted, it's straight to Tartarus fer every single soul from Arcadia." Strife said, then pulled Cupid and Bliss into his arms.

Joxer picked up Deimos as Ares picked up Phobos and they flashed out as a family.

Cupid, Anteros, Strife and Bliss flashed out next, leaving a shocked, horrified group of people standing silent except for the insane man still screaming and rolling on the ground.

* * * * *

"I'm sorry Dad. I was really watching him." Phobos cried in his father's arms as they appeared in the halls of war.

"Shhh. It's okay son. I saw what happened from the old mortal's mind. He was watching you before you even went to that merchant's stall. He was just waiting for you to look away for a second." Ares said as he rocked his son.

"Sorry." Deimos said as he buried his face in Joxer's chest.

Joxer looked helplessly at Ares.

Ares and Joxer held the boys, occasionally murmuring words of encouragement until both boys finally fell into exhausted sleep.

* * * * *

Apollo appeared in the Halls of War with an impatient expression.

"You cursed my festival? How dare you lay a curse on my biggest festival of the season." Apollo blustered dramatically.

Joxer and Ares stood silently, waiting for him to scream himself out. Both were emotionally exhausted and couldn't find the energy or will to get into a screaming contest with Apollo.

"You made them sterile! What possessed you to make an entire city sterile?" Apollo asked furiously.

"Impotent." Joxer said coldly.

"Impotent?" Apollo squeaked.

"The women are barren, the men are impotent. Making men sterile isn't much of a curse. It means they can screw around without consequences." Ares said icily.

Apollo shook his head, then continued his tirade.

"They have pain, nightmares, paranoia, depression! How did you manage that one, anyway?" Apollo screamed with increasing volume.

There was silence. Apollo was obviously waiting for an answer.

Ares remained silent and sent him the image from the fat old man's mind of what he intended to do to Bliss.

The golden god of the sun paled as he realized what had almost happened.

"How is he?" Apollo asked with concern.

"He's a little frightened, but he doesn't realize what the man was trying to do to him. Pho and Demi stopped him before he could do more than frighten Bliss." Ares said quietly.

"But why did you curse the town?" Apollo asked, this time in a much more reasonable tone of voice.

"He was a politician. He circulated in the upper class of the town. He confined his rapes and molestations to the children of lower class people, so it was overlooked." Ares said darkly.

"How dare they..." Apollo said as anger boiled behind his eyes.

"They have been cursed until every child that was ever hurt by that man is healed in mind body and spirit and able to trust and love again." Joxer said seriously.

"That's a tall order. It could take years." Apollo said in thought.

"It'll be time well spent if it'll teach them to cherish their children." Joxer said in response.

"Okay. Sorry I was so pissed off at you guys. I only got half the story. My priests in Arcadia were whining about the curse and wanting me to intervene." Apollo said in thought and his eyes became defocused.

"What are you going to do?" Ares asked cautiously.

"I'm going to send priests from my temples in the neighboring cities to the temple in Arcadia to help with the healing of those children. I just peeked into my Arcadian priests' minds... they knew. They never even spared a prayer for one of those children. I'm tempted to kill them but... I'll let them live with your curse. Those that knew will be blind, those that suspected will be mute. All of them will be banned from my service hereafter." Apollo said with a distant look.

"Thanks for supporting us on this Pol. If Pho and Demi had been one minute later... there probably wouldn't be a living soul left in Arcadia." Ares said seriously.

"And I'd help you salt the Earth." Apollo said in a whisper.

"Pol, can you let Heph and Dite know? I don't want them to get a distorted version of the facts." Ares said with concern.

"I'll tell them. You stay with the boys." Apollo said and motioned to the twins standing in the doorway, both looking sleep ruffled and worried.

"Thanks Pol." Ares said as he got off the couch to pull the boys into a hug.

"I thought you guys were asleep." Ares said as he held them close.

"We was, then I remembered Senscie. We don't want her ta be cursed. She helps kids." Phobos said sleepily.

Ares guided the boys to the couch and took his seat beside Joxer. He picked up Phobos and Joxer pulled Deimos into his lap to be held.

Ares cast his mind out and easily found Senscie by looking for the blessings of Pain, Fear and Mischief.

"She's fine Pho. Your blessings protected her. They might not have held up to a curse directed at her, but they were enough to protect her from a curse laid on the whole town." Ares said seriously.

"But she's around all tha cursed people. Can't we get her out?" Phobos asked in sleepy concern.

Ares looked to Joxer who was stroking Deimos back.

"I don't know. We could ask her if she wants to leave." Joxer said unsurely.

"Please Poppa Joxer. She's nice. We gotta make sure she's okay." Phobos said as he was drifting into sleep.

"I promise Pho, we'll make sure she's okay." Joxer said as he felt Deimos even breathing against his neck.

"Let's put these guys back to bed. I'll go check on Bliss, when I get back, you can take care of Senscie." Ares whispered.

"It's a deal." Joxer said with a smile.

* * * * *

Cupid, Anteros and Strife were sitting silently, watching Bliss sleep in Cupid's lap.

"He hasn't sucked his thumb in almost two years." Cupid said with worry as Bliss sucked his thumb in his sleep.

"I think he was as scared by our reactions as he was by the attack." Anteros said in speculation.

Hephaestus, Aphrodite and Apollo appeared in the room with little flourish.

"How is he Cupie?" Aphrodite asked in a whisper.

"He's okay mom. He just got scared a little." Cupid said, keeping his firm hold on his son.

"We looked in the halls of time, it wasn't Pho and Demi's fault. Please don't blame them." Aphrodite said sadly.

"I know mom. It's just... I should have been there. I should have said 'No' when dad asked if they could take him to the market." Cupid said with despair.

"Son, you know I always try to be honest with you, even when you don't like it, right?" Hephaestus said quietly.

Cupid nodded slowly.

"It isn't your fault, it isn't Phobos or Deimos fault, it isn't Ares or Joxer's fault. The mortals of Arcadia share the blame for this in varying degrees." Hephaestus said firmly.

"Thanks Daddy Hep. That makes me feel better." Cupid said as he rocked Bliss in his arms.

"Make sure you talk to Pho and Demi about this Cupie. They feel responsible for Bliss getting hurt, you need to show them that you don't blame them." Aphrodite said with uncharacteristic seriousness.

"I will mom. I know they wouldn't hurt Bliss. And Bliss is crazy about them. He's always wanted to be their other brother." Cupid said quietly.

"Then make sure that he gets to spend some time with them soon. They all need it right now." Hephaestus said seriously.

"I will Daddy Hep... are you angry about the curse?" Cupid asked hesitantly.

"I was for a minute, but I understand that it's what you needed to do. I have to admit that if I'd been there I probably would've been killing mortals for half an hour before anyone could talk sense to me. What you did was fine. Your mother and I will let the curse stand." Hephaestus said in a somber tone.

"Thank you Daddy Hep." Cupid murmured.

"Get some sleep Cupid." Aphrodite said as she gave Cupid a gentle kiss on the forehead.

"Goodnight Anteros." Aphrodite said and pulled Anteros into a hug and gave him a big kiss.

"Goodnight Strife, take care of Cupie for me." Aphrodite said softly as she hugged him.

Aphrodite, Hephaestus and Apollo left the room in a subdued flash.

"Ah gotta go talk ta dad bout tha curse." Strife said regretfully.

"Will he back us up?" Anteros asked with concern.

"Ah think so. Ah'll let you know." Strife said and gave Cupid a brief kiss to convey his love and worry.

"I love you Strife." Cupid said quietly.

"Ah love you too Cupe. If it's okay with ya, Ah wanna come back and spend the night here with you an Bliss." Strife said seriously.

"Thanks Strife. I need my family tonight." Cupid said as he looked from Strife to Anteros, then to his son.

* * * * *

Ares appeared in the Temple of Love to find Anteros staring at Cupid's bedroom doorway.

"How are they?" Ares whispered.

"Bliss is asleep, I think Cupid is watching over him." Anteros said without emotion.

"And how are you?" Ares asked with concern.

"Me? Nothing happened to me." Anteros said evasively.

"Your brother and your nephew, who you look upon almost as a son, just went through something horrible. I know it's got to effect you. How are you?" Ares asked as he took a seat beside his son.

Anteros ducked his head and said, "I feel so selfish. I wanted to hold Bliss and help him feel better. But Cupid did that. I wanted to hold Cupid to make him feel better, but Strife did that. I feel so useless, like I'm an outsider in the family."

Ares pulled Anteros close and said, "I know, this is hard on all of us. I wanted to hold my son and my grandson, and not let them out of my sight. But Pho and Demi are really torn up and I can help most by helping them."

"What's wrong with Pho and Demi?" Anteros asked with immediate concern.

"They were watching Bliss when he was taken. They feel responsible for all of this. I was trying to prove to them that I trust them, and now they feel like they let me down." Ares said with pain.

"How's Joxer holding up?" Anteros asked, his mind racing.

"Like a rock. If it weren't for him and his strength, I would have gone into a berserker rage and killed every mortal in Arcadia." Ares said honestly.

"Dad, you need to get back to Joxer. The thing about rocks is, if you put enough pressure on them, they crumble. Is there anything I can do to help?" Anteros asked hopefully.

"Yes, come with me. There may be one thing." Ares said in thought.

* * * * *

Joxer looked up as Anteros and Ares appeared in the living area.

"How are they?" Ares asked with worry at Joxer's despondent expression.

"Phobos woke up again. He said that he thinks this is all his fault because he wanted to curse someone. The fates heard him and made this happen." Joxer said with a pained look at Ares.

"Ter, would you mind staying with the boys? I think Joxer and I need some time to deal with things ourselves." Ares asked hopefully.

"Yeah, I'll stay with them, and thanks for letting me help." Anteros said with a sad smile.

"I've got to go check on Senscie, I promised." Joxer said quickly.

"You can do that in the morning, you need to come with me and relax for a while." Ares said in a calming voice.

"I can't. I won't be able to relax until I've done what I promised to do. Please Ar, let me do this and then I promise I'll come back and we can relax." Joxer said with an imploring look.

"You know I can't refuse you anything. Do what you need to do." Ares said in defeat.

"I'll be back as soon as I can." Joxer said and gave Ares a quick, firm kiss.

"I'll be with Ter." Ares said and sat on the couch by his son as Joxer flashed out.

* * * * *

Joxer followed the blessing that he had bestowed to Senscie. He materialized outside her room and gently knocked on her door.

"Who's that?" Senscie asked in fear.

"I would like to talk to you for a minute good lady, we met earlier in the day." Joxer said, then heard a howl of pain coming from another room.

"Good lady? Are you the man with the twins from this afternoon?" Senscie asked hesitantly.

"Yes, then again this evening." Joxer said, trying to sound calm despite the shrieks of terror coming from inside and outside the building.

Senscie stepped out the door and closed it behind her, joining Joxer in the hallway.

"How are your boys? They haven't been hurt have they?" Senscie asked with immediate concern.

"No. They're fine. In fact, I'm here because they're worried about you." Joxer said gently.

"Me?" Senscie asked in surprise.

"Good lady, my boys were raised on Olympus and never really met a mortal before today. I disguised us as commoners so we could watch people being themselves." Joxer said as he began to walk down the hallway, followed by Senscie.

"You're gods?" Senscie asked in wonder.

"Yes good lady. I am Joxer, the God of Mischief." Joxer said frankly.

"Oh gods, they said... they said a boy... a godling... did someone try to hurt one of your boys?" Senscie asked in panic.

"No good lady, but do you remember the younger boy from this evening, the one with the blonde curls and chubby cheeks? That's my grandson Bliss. He's the one who was taken." Joxer said with a note of hardness.

"Not the little one. Oh dear gods, no wonder this city's been cursed. The way he lit up when he drank the sweet tea, that little one's all happiness and joy." Senscie said as a tear dropped down her cheek.

"He wasn't hurt, just scared a little. If he had been hurt, no one would have survived." Joxer said as he led Senscie down the stairs to the pub.

"So why are you here?" Senscie asked with fear in her voice.

Joxer waved his hand and the oil lamps in the pub lit.

"Have a seat and I'll tell you." Joxer said, motioning to the nearest table.

After sitting down, Joxer said, "You were nice to us. The boys were impressed that you cared for them even though you didn't know them."

Senscie nodded, though she couldn't guess where this was leading.

"So they bestowed their blessings on you, and so did I." Joxer said, watching for her reaction.

"Is that why I feel... lighter? Freer?" Senscie asked curiously.

"Yes. And that's why you're excluded from the curse on this city." Joxer said quietly.

"I am?" Sencie asked in wonder.

"I'm here to ask you if you'd like to leave. It may not be safe for very much longer. These people are going to start turning on each other soon... you'd be better off elsewhere." Joxer said in thought.

"Where?" Sencie asked in a lost tone.

"Tonight, you'd stay on Olympus with us. Tomorrow we can take you wherever you want to go." Joxer said seriously.

"My husband's gone. My son is dead. I've got nowhere to go." Sencie said desperately.

"Then I've got an idea. I've just built my first temple in the mortal realm. If you'd like, you could serve as my high priestess." Joxer said in thought.

"What would I have to do?" Sencie asked cautiously.

"Water the plants, feed the toads, instruct anyone who comes to pray how to do it properly. Oh, and the main thing is, you'd be responsible for caring for children in the community. You'll be there to listen when they talk, to feed them when they're hungry, and if they need a place to sleep, you'll make arrangements through the community so no child has to do without." Joxer said with passion building in his voice.

"Thank you Lord. That sounds... it's better than anything I could have dreamed." Sencie said in wonder.

"Does that mean you accept?" Joxer asked hopefully.

"Yes Lord, it would be my honor to serve as your priestess." Sencie said humbly.

"Good, then your first duty as my High Priestess is... to stop calling me Lord. You, good lady, may call me Joxer." Joxer said with a smile.

"Yes Joxer, I can do that." Sencie said with a smile in return.

"Okay, let's go upstairs and gather your things. I have a feeling that neither of us are going to want to come back here." Joxer said darkly.

Sencie nodded and led the way out of the pub.

* * * * *

Joxer and Senscie appeared in the Halls of War.

"My gods!" Senscie exclaimed as she realized she was standing on Olympus.

"Yes, that would be us." Ares said with a chuckle.

"I've moved your things to the spare room down the hall. This is my husband Ares and my son Anteros." Joxer said pleasantly.

Anteros had a slight look of surprise, being introduced as Joxer's son.

"My Lords." Senscie said with a respectful curtsy.

"You're a guest in our home, so please be comfortable and call us by our names." Joxer said kindly.

"Yes, of course Joxer. It is good to meet you Ares, Anteros." Senscie said shyly.

"Would you come with me for a minute? I think the twins will be able to sleep better if they know you're safe." Joxer said as he walked toward the door.

"Of course." Senscie said and followed.

* * * * *

"You still have a room here if you want to spend the night Ter. You already cleared it with Cupid to have the day off tomorrow and a good war might help you feel better." Ares suggested.

"Yeah, thanks dad. I think I will." Anteros said, lost in thought.

"What's wrong Ter?" Ares asked quietly at his son's distant expression.

"Oh. Um, nothing wrong. I was just thinking how Joxer introduced me as his son..." Anteros trailed off.

"If it bothers you, I'll talk to him about it." Ares said immediately.

"No. It doesn't bother me... I think I like it. If he'd said he wanted to be like a parent to me, I wouldn't have believed him. But for him to automatically introduce me as his son... It just makes it real somehow. I've got a Poppa Joxer." Anteros finished with a smile.

"Everyone should be so lucky." Ares said warmly.

* * * * *

"Pho, wake up. There's someone here to see you." Joxer said quietly.

Phobos jerked awake and stared at Senscie standing in the doorway.

"Deimos, come on, wake up for just a minute." Joxer said, urging Deimos awake.

As soon as Deimos eyes were focused enough to recognize Senscie, Joxer said, "Senscie is going to spend the night here with us. Tomorrow she'll be moving to another town in the mortal realm. You two don't have to worry about her. She's safe."

"Thanks Poppa Joxer." Phobos said with a warm smile.

"Yeah." Deimos said and gave a brief ghost of a smile.

"I'll show you around and take you to your room now." Joxer said quietly as he watched Phobos and Deimos both fall asleep with smiles on their faces.

[And I'll do whatever I can to keep those smiles there.] Joxer thought to himself as they left the room.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Terpsichore was unable to sleep. She had felt something dark... wrong. She walked into the archive of the muses and found a single candle lit and a solitary figure reading a scroll.

"Can I help you?" She asked hesitantly, not sure who it was.

The man turned and looked at her, then gave a tired smile of relief.

"Maybe you can. I can't find what I'm looking for... if it even exists." Hades said as he looked back at the scroll before him.

"What is it that you're needing?" Terpsichore asked with concern as she took a seat beside him.

"I'm trying to find out about the original binding of death, and about Asphodel, back in the days of Erebus. I'm looking for a way..." He trailed off, not sure if he should be telling this secret.

Terpsichore thought about what he said, and what he didn't. She nodded and said, "I think I know what you're looking for."

Hades looked at her with surprise.

Terpsichore went to the back of the archive and came back almost immediately with a large scroll that was nearly worn to rags.

"Here." She said and began to unroll the scroll before him. She went nearly three-quarters through it before looking for what she wanted.

Hades watched and wondered how she could know what he was looking for.

"This one. This is the story of Erebus and Tsunami." She said seriously.

"Tsunami, I never heard of him." Hades said curiously.

"Poseidon knows about him, he's one of the progenitors of the ocean realm. This is an obscure story, but I think it has what you're looking for." Terpsichore said pleasantly.

"How do you know what I'm looking for?" Hades asked suspiciously.

"I introduced Jayce to Thanatos." She said simply and walked away.

* * * * *

Hercules heard a noise and woke with a start.

He reached over and shook Iolaus awake.

"What?" Iolaus asked in a whisper.

"Listen." Hercules said, barely loud enough to be heard.

"What is that?" Iolaus said as he came fully awake.

"It sounds like... gods, it sounds like hundreds of people crying out in despair." Hercules said as he jumped to his feet.

Iolaus was on his feet a moment later and ready to fight by Hercules' side.

"Come on." Hercules said, already running full out.

* * * * *

How they met will always be a secret kept between them. But Erebus and Tsunami did meet and their attraction was immediate. The forces that guide the hands of the fates have a bitter sense of humor for this to be so.

Tsunami was a god from the water realm, He was the sea god of growth and prosperity and bound by his essence to the creation of life. Erebus was the master of Asphodel and permanently bound to death. The touch of Erebus would kill Tsunami immediately, so their love could never be expressed physically... or so it seemed.

Eros felt the pull of their passion but was unable to help. He went to Rhea and begged her to find a way for the couple to come together. Rhea spent ten years searching for an answer and finally, nearly defeated, went to her mother as a last resort.

Gaea looked with sad eyes at the situation before her and announced that there was only one way. Regretfully she summoned Erebus and Tsunami before her. It pained her in her soul to transform the life-giving essence of Tsunami into the essence of death.

Forever after, Tsunami could only bestow death with his godhood and he became the sea god of death and destruction.

Erebus and Tsunami were finally able to touch, both bound permanently to death. But Tsunami couldn't accept the loss. He tried to persevere and be content with Erebus' love, but in the end. He could not.

Tsunami left Greece and is rumored to have joined a foreign pantheon. The rumors say that he is one of the most violent and bitter forces ever known, wiping out life indiscriminately without pity or regret.

Erebus continued on. Up until the fall of the Titans he continued to be alone, never again seeking the touch of another.

[Oh my friend. How can I even consider laying such a curse on you and your love?] Hades thought sadly.

* * * * *

Hercules and Iolaus ran into the city of Arcadia to a horrifying sight. People were screaming out in pain from their rooms. Some were running through the streets in terror. Hideous screeches and howls came from every direction.

"Gods! What could have happened?" Iolaus asked over the increasing wailing.

"Let's find out." Hercules said, knowing a god must be behind this.

He hurried to the nearest temple, the temple of Apollo.

As the pair walked in, they were stunned. The normally bright and shiny temple was dark; a single torch was lit which revealed an elderly priest, crying in the floor.

Hercules walked carefully to the priest and asked, "What's happened?"

"We're cursed, all of us, all of Arcadia... because of me." The priest said in despair with his head cast down.

"Please, tell me." Hercules said in a whisper of a voice as he turned the man to face him.

Both Hercules and Iolaus were shocked to see the solid white eyes staring sightlessly.

"The gods came to our festival... as gods often do. They simply came to enjoy the festivities..." the priest trailed off in disbelief.

"What happened." Iolaus prompted.

"One of their children, a godling of four or five years... he was taken. Pervus was going to... to have sex with him." The priest said in shame.

"Bliss." Iolaus said immediately.

Hercules turned his head at the name and a tremble of fear for the joyful cherub crawled up his spine.

"The gods cursed us all, those of us who knew that Pervus enjoyed... unwilling... boys..." The priest choked on the words.

"Go on." Hercules said, less sympathetically.

"We were blinded... our Lord Apollo said that no one, not one of his Arcadian priests had ever lifted up a prayer for one of the common children raped by that man." The priest said in a voice of disbelief.

Hercules went pale as he thought about all his children. And how he would have felt if any of them had been abducted and raped.

"I need to talk to Apollo." Hercules said with resolve.

"He won't hear me. All of us have been cursed and dismissed from his service." The priest said in a lost voice.

"Then I'll go to Cupid's temple." Hercules said sharply.

"It's gone." The priest said in nearly a gasp.

"Gone?" Hercules asked in a disbelieving tone.

After the curse was put on us, his temple crumbled to dust. His priests and priestesses said the House of Love will no longer hear prayers from Arcadia.

"What else?" Hercules asked darkly, knowing that couldn't be all.

"The Hestian virgins have left their temple and the hearth-fires of Arcadia have gone out... all of them. The temple of war has closed its doors. And I heard less than an hour ago that a shrine to the goddess Psyche exploded." The priest said as he began to tremble.

"We need to talk to someone, I've got to know if Bliss is alright." Hercules said desperately.

"Let's try your dad's temple." Iolaus said, leading the way out of the room.

"Please kill me." The priest begged as he began crying again.

"I wonder how many of those kids asked the same thing?" Hercules asked coldly as he walked out of the temple.

* * * * *

Bliss awoke and looked around. He was in his Daddy's bed, snuggled against his Daddy's shoulder. Strife was laying on Bliss' other side with one arm across Bliss' waste.

Bliss carefully lifted his head and saw his Mommy sitting and watching him from a chair at the foot of the bed.

Bliss looked at his Daddy and Strife again, then waved 'hi' to his mommy.

Psyche motioned for Bliss to 'come here' and helped him extract himself from between the two gods.

Quietly Psyche led Bliss out of the room to leave Cupid and Strife to sleep.

* * * * *

"Can I please talk to you? It's important." Hercules asked with worry at his father's temple.

"Hercules." Hephaestus said sleepily.

"Hephaestus? Where is my father?" Hercules asked in confusion.

"Asleep if he has any sense. It's three in the morning. You're calling for help in my temple, so I answered." Hephaestus said irritably.

"I just heard about what happened, how is Bliss?" Hercules said quickly, cutting to the heart of the matter.

Hephaestus looked at Hercules and could sense his genuine concern.

"Come with me." Hephaestus said, holding out a hand.

"What?" Hercules asked suspiciously.

"I'll take you to visit Bliss, he always liked you two." Hephaestus said, glancing at Iolaus.

"C'mon Herc. I really want to see the little guy." Iolaus said as he stepped forward to take hold of Hephaestus hand.

Hercules nodded and took hold of Hephaestus and Iolaus clasped hands.

* * * * *

Memories flooded her mind, The free feeling, a truly happy day, the curse, the gods... she was on Olympus! Sencie bolted upright in her bed.

She quickly put on appropriate clothing and made her way out of the bedroom and down the hall.

Anteros looked up at the movement from the corner of his eye.

Sencie froze in place.

Anteros smiled and said, "Come in Sencie, I couldn't sleep either. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Yes, thank you Anteros." Sencie said, having difficulty not using the honorific as she had always been told was proper.

Anteros produced two steaming mugs of tea and sat them on the low table before him on the couch.

"Come in, have a seat." Anteros said gently.

Sencie forced herself to move and took a seat on the sofa, the other end from Anteros.

"What's got you up so late?" Anteros asked and picked up his mug.

"I was sleeping, then it hit me... I'm on Olympus." Sencie said in a disbelieving voice.

Anteros smiled warmly and said, "The stories make it out to be more than it really is. The eternal springtime is true, but most of the rest is things mortals made up to make the story more interesting."

Senscie nodded as she picked up her mug and took a sip.

After an uncomfortable moment of silence, Senscie thought to ask, "Why are you up so late?"

Anteros gave a weak smile and said, "My whole family has been shaken to its foundations, and all I could do is stand by and watch."

"I know that feeling." Senscie said with sympathy.

"Really?" Anteros asked.

"Sure. I lost my son, Wayen. He was a good boy. He wanted to be a chef. We were poor, but happy for the most part. Then a warlord came to our valley and decided that he needed more soldiers. They took all the men, then killed the old and very young... I don't know why. The only thing Wayen knew how to do with a knife was chop vegetables... All I could do is stand and watch." Senscie said with eyes that looked into the past.

Anteros felt sympathy for the woman as he saw her reliving that day in her mind. Without thinking, Anteros moved beside Senscie and took one of her hands.

"Did you know he can hear you?" Anteros said as he looked deeply into Senscie's eyes.

"What?" She asked in confusion.

"Wayen, when you think about him, he hears your thoughts. He knows that you're thinking of him and shares your memories." Anteros said in a soothing voice.

"I hadn't heard that." Senscie said, then gave a pained smile.

"It's true. From what you said, your son would have gone to the fields. That means he spends his days doing the things he enjoys most... probably cooking, from the way you describe him. And every time you think of him, he knows that you still love him and care for him." Anteros said with certainty.

"Thank you Anteros. It helps to know that he's happy." Senscie said with a watery smile.

Anteros looked into her mind and found a very clear image of Wayen.

"I have something I need to do for a minute, I should be back before you finish your tea." Anteros said and got up to leave.

Senscie nodded as Anteros flashed out of the room.

* * * * *

Hercules, Iolaus and Hephaestus appeared in the main room of the Temple of Love.

"Hello Psyche." Hercules said with a warm smile.

"Unca Hercese." Bliss said happily and jumped off his mother's lap.

"Hello Hercules, Iolaus." Psyche said shyly.

"Will you see that they get home Psyche?" Hephaestus asked hopefully.

"Of course King Hephaestus." Psyche said with respect.

Hephaestus gave a slight bow and disappeared.

"What are you doing here?" Psyche asked with surprise.

"I heard some things in Arcadia and I wanted to see if Bliss is okay." Hercules said honestly.

"He was just telling me what happened. Come and have a seat, he can tell us all." Psyche said with a gentle smile.

Hercules went to sit beside Psyche without hesitation. Iolaus took a seat farther away... to watch.

* * * * *

Anteros returned to the living area to find that Senscie was still sipping the tea.

"I just had to be sure. I went to Asphodel and found out that Wayen *is* in the Elysian Fields. He cooks, plays ball with other kids his age and spends every evening with... 'Gwenhemina'?" Anteros finished hesitantly.

"Oh Gods! That's my older sister! She's in the fields with Wayen? Oh, thank you Anteros, thank you." Senscie said in relief as she pulled Anteros into a hug and held him tightly.

Anteros hesitantly put his arms around her and closed his eyes, as he felt the peace of being held and admired.

* * * * *

"BLISS!" Cupid gasped when he woke up and found that Bliss was gone.

Strife bolted out of the bed, alert and ready for battle.

"He's in here Cupid." Psyche's voice called from the living area.

* * * * *

"Can I see him?" Senscie asked from Anteros' arms.

"I'm sorry Senscie. The living aren't meant to visit the realm of the dead." Anteros said sadly.

"Why?" She asked shakily.

"Because the living have to be able to let go of the past and continue on. Being able to visit the dead would make that much more difficult." Anteros said in a soothing voice.

"I guess I can see that." Senscie said in thought, enjoying the feeling of being held after such a very long time.

"Be content knowing that at the end of your days you'll be able to join your sister and your son in the fields and enjoy eternity with them." Anteros said as he also enjoyed the comfort of her embrace.

Silence fell over the room as the two continued to hold each other until they both drifted off to sleep.

* * * * *

Cupid and Strife ran into the living area to find Psyche holding Bliss who was asleep. Beside her was Hercules and on the other sofa was Iolaus.

"Sorry about that. I woke up and Bliss was gone." Cupid said in embarrassment.

"It's fine. I heard about what happened and needed to see for myself that Bliss was okay." Psyche said quietly.

"Me too." Hercules said in a whisper.

Cupid gave a warm smile and said, "Thanks for coming."

"Maybe you could tell us more of what happened, Bliss' version of the story was a little... abstract." Iolaus said.

"Sure." Cupid said and took a seat on the couch by Iolaus, followed by Strife.

"Phobos, Deimos and Bliss were looking at the market..." Cupid began.

"By themselves?" Hercules asked darkly.

"Yes. Think about it. What could be more fun than being allowed to go and explore the festival market by yourselves for the first time? Dad wanted to prove to the twins that he trusted them... It was a good idea." Cupid said peacefully, finally reconciled to the fact that this wasn't his Dad's fault.

Hercules thought about that, then reluctantly nodded.

"There was a mortal watching them, he was waiting for Phobos and Deimos to look away from Bliss so he could grab him. Finally, after about ten minutes of waiting, he saw his opportunity and snatched Bliss from right between them." Cupid said darkly, feeling the dread and fear crawling in his gut from what might have been.

Strife noticed that Cupid was caught up in his feelings and continued the story. "The old mortal pulled Bliss between two stalls in the market and started trying to get his pants down when Pho and Demi found him. Pho froze him with fear and put a curse on him to make him see whatever he's afraid of. Then Demi cursed him to feel pain and Bliss cursed him to feel no more happiness."

"I'm surprised they didn't kill him." Hercules said absently.

"They wanted to, but Joxer asked them not to kill anyone." Cupid said quietly.

"Joxer?" Iolaus questioned.

"Oh yeah. You been gone for a while..." Cupid trailed off, wondering what he should say.

"Why don't we let Jox explain all that? He speaks mortal." Strife said with a smirk.

"Strife? Um... I don't mean to be bringing up any bad memories but... aren't you dead?" Iolaus asked hesitantly.

"Ah was, now Ah'm not. Ah was reborn." Strife said happily.

"Ouch. I bet that was a tough delivery. How's Discord." Iolaus asked with feigned concern.

Strife giggled in his manic way as Cupid smiled and proudly said, "Strife is the son of King Hades and Queen Persephone and is the Prince of Asphodel."

"Prince Strife?" Hercules asked with disbelief.

"Yeah, I got me a muthah an fathah who want me and care bout me." Strife said happily.

Hercules felt the snappy comeback die on his tongue as he could see that Strife was completely serious. Instead he said, "That's great Strife. And it's good that you can appreciate them."

Strife was taken aback by Hercules thoughtful response, he had actually been expecting some dig about Discord. All he could think to say is, "Ah do."

"What else has happened while we've been wandering in the Grecian wilderness?" Iolaus asked, breaking the silence.

"Um... Dad got married, Grandpa got divorced, three mortals ascended to gods... Psyche and I divorced." Cupid stopped and looked at Psyche who gave him a smile.

"You're divorced?" Hercules asked incredulously.

"Yeah. It's a big long story Uncle Herc. Me getting stuck with my own arrow, her getting a godhood that messed with her mind, when the magic finally broke... we didn't have anything between us as a foundation for a marriage." Cupid said sadly and noticed Psyche nodding in confirmation.

"I have to say, I've never been around a divorced couple that got along as well as you two." Iolaus said in disbelief.

"Why not get along? It didn't work out. It's not my fault, it's not Psyche's fault, it's sure not Bliss' fault. We're still a family, Psyche just doesn't live with us." Cupid said with a shrug.

"Thanks Cupid." Psyche said tenderly as she stroked Bliss' wings.

Iolaus gave a big yawn and said, "We'd better get back, I only got a couple hours of sleep last night."

"You can stay here if you want. I have a spare room right over there." Cupid said as he pointed to a doorless room.

"Um, sure, I guess." Iolaus said, looking to Hercules to see if he had any objection.

Hercules was focused on Psyche.

"If you like, I have a spare room in my suite of rooms at the Halls of Intellect that you'd be welcomed to." Psyche said, looking into Hercules' eyes.

Iolaus rolled his eyes; he'd seen this story play out a hundred times before.

"I think all of us should get some sleep. I'll put Bliss back to bed now." Cupid said and picked Bliss up from Psyche's lap.

"Are you ready to go?" Psyche asked demurely.

Hercules nodded, enthralled by her grace.

Psyche delicately laid a hand on Hercules' arm and they flashed out.

Iolaus seemed to slump as Strife gave a chuckle.

"Looks like Herc's fallen in love, once and fer all... again." Strife giggled.

"Yeah, the big goof can't see the pattern." Iolaus said with a shake of his head.

"What's up with you curly? Why do you hang around with tha big oaf?" Strife asked as he settled back into the sofa.

"Well, I really do believe in the whole hero thing. Now and then his 'leap before you look' approach gets him into trouble and I have to bail him out." Iolaus said honestly.

"And ya love him." Strife said with uncharacteristic seriousness.

"Yeah." Iolaus said sadly, not seeing any point in denying it.

Cupid had been listening and said, "I'm sorry Iolaus, but Uncle Herc don't feel that way about you."

"I know." Iolaus said sadly.

"Would you like me to do something about it?" Cupid asked unsurely.

"Oh gods no!" Iolaus said in horror.

"Just thought I'd ask." Cupid said with a shrug and settled in beside Strife.

"It's just about time for me to settle down I think. I need to find someone who *does* want me." Iolaus said sadly.

"Well if that's your only qualification, I've got someone for you." Cupid said immediately.

"What? I mean... oh gods... what did I say?" Iolaus said in panic.

Strife rolled off the couch and into the floor with laughter.

Cupid smiled at Strife's laughter and said, "I'm not trying to trap you or trick you Iolaus, I'm just saying that I know someone who's been admiring you for years."

"Who?" Iolaus asked in interest, then turned his attention to Strife laughing in the floor.

"Have you ever met the family, Uncle Herc's brothers and sisters?" Cupid asked in a leading voice.

"Um, not all at once, but I think I've met all of them at one time or another." Iolaus said in thought.

"Do you remember Hebe? She's Zeus and Hera's youngest daughter." Cupid said, hoping Iolaus remembered.

"Um, yeah. Goddess of... children?" Iolaus strained to remember.

"Right. She's been admiring you for years, but I wouldn't consider doing anything about it since you were pining for Uncle oblivious." Cupid said frankly.

"She's pretty, but kind of young." Iolaus said in thought.

"Yeah, she hasn't even reached her first millennia but she's a good person and she honestly cares for you." Cupid said as Strife finally found his way back onto the couch.

"I thought you shot arrows and arranged chance meetings to get people together." Iolaus said in confusion.

"I do. But it's four in the morning. Guy to guy, she likes you, I think you'd like her if you got to know her. Think about it, the worst that can happen is it won't work out... then you end up no worse off." Cupid said frankly.

"Okay, but how do I... I can't just go up to her and say, 'Hi Hebe, I hear you been watching me'." Iolaus said seriously.

"No, that might not be the best opening line... How about I invite you and Herc over to a family dinner tomorrow, I'll invite Hebe too. And that's all I'll have to do with it. What happens next is up to you and her." Cupid said, looking Iolaus in the eyes.

"Thanks Cupid, that sounds good." Iolaus said shyly.

"Good, now I'm going to get back to bed. It's been one Tartarus of a day." Cupid said and got up.

"I guess I'd bettah..." Strife trailed off, looking a little lost.

"You're going to help me keep Bliss safe aren't you?" Cupid asked with wide eyes.

"Yeah Cupe." Strife said with a smile.

"Goodnight Laus, if we're not here when you wake up, my office is out that door and down the hall to your right." Cupid said as he and Strife went to the bedroom.

"Goodnight Cupid." Iolaus said with a smile.

Chapter Thirty-Four

It was just before sunrise, but Hades knew that his grandmother would have been up for at least an hour by now. She always chided her grandchildren for being sluggards and sleeping in past sunrise.

"Grandmother, can I ask for your help?" Hades asked from outside Gaea's cabin door.

"Come in Hades... wipe your feet." Gaea said pleasantly.

"Thank you." Hades said as he did what he was told.

"Goodness, you look a fright. No sleep whatsoever." She said as she plucked the tops from berries and put them in a bowl.

"No ma'am. I've been looking for something." Hades said quietly, feeling powerless in her presence.

"What is it my boy? Here, help me clean some berries while we talk." Gaea said and pushed the bowl of berries between them.

Hades picked the green top off a berry and said, "Thanatos is in love."

Gaea stopped her movement for a moment, then said, "I see."

"I read the account of Erebus and Tsunami... it's the closest thing I can think of that could help him but..." Hades trailed off and tried to devote more of his attention to cleaning berries.

"You want a guaranteed happy ending." Gaea said with a nod.

"It would be nice." Hades said with a hopeful expression.

"That it would sweeting, however, I don't have one to give you. I can't give you any more than what you've got. A chance." Gaea said sadly.

"I don't know what to do." Hades said darkly.

"Do what's best. You'll have to decide what that is." Gaea said, knowing that it was thoroughly unhelpful.

"If they decide to try... would you do it?" Hades asked, looking his grandmother in the eyes.

Gaea simply nodded.

"Thank you grandmother. I'm going to return to my realm. I have a lot to think about." Hades said with a sad look.

"You need to come and visit more often... and you're too thin." Gaea said sharply.

"Yes grandmother." Hades said with a smile, glad to know that at least some things were constant in the universe.

* * * * *

Ares woke Joxer, then quietly went to wake Phobos and Deimos.

"Dad?" Phobos asked in confusion, not remembering the last time his father had come in to wake him.

"Do you still want to help me in the battle today?" Ares asked quietly.

Phobos eyes lit up and he nearly leapt out of the bed.

"Wake up your brother and get ready, I need to get Ter." Ares said in a whisper.

Phobos immediately went to Deimos bed and shook him awake.

* * * * *

Ganymede and Asclepius appeared in the Halls of Love, Ganymede was carefully holding the arrow that held so much power as Asclepius said, "Are you ready for this?"

Cupid looked up from his work with tired eyes and said, "Yeah, just put it down there, then you'd better go. If Zeus or Jett sense you here, they'll know something's up."

"Are you alright?" Asclepius asked with concern.

"Yeah, I just didn't get enough sleep. As soon as I get my desk cleared, I'm going to knock off for the day." Cupid said as he divided his attention between Asclepius and the scroll before him.

Ganymede laid the arrow on Cupid's desk and moved to Asclepius' side.

They gave one final look at Cupid's stooped, exhausted posture before flashing out of the temple.

* * * * *

Bliss awoke to feel warm arms wrapped around him. He opened his eyes to find that it wasn't his father, but his Uncle Strife.

"Unca Stwife?" Bliss called quietly.

"Yeah boogah?" Strife said in a whisper.

"Where's daddy?" Bliss asked with worry.

"He's workin'. He asked if I would stay with ya. How you feelin?" Strife asked in a sleepy voice.

"Hungry." Bliss said with a tummy growl for confirmation.

"How's bout I take ya ta see yer daddy, then we go to grandma Dite's for breakfast?" Strife asked with a tender smile.

Bliss nodded happily.

"You go get dressed and we'll go." Strife said as he sat up in the bed.

"Unca Stwife?" Bliss asked seriously.

"Yeah?" Strife responded, worried by Bliss' serious tone.

"You love my daddy?" Bliss asked, looking Strife in the eyes.

"Yeah, Ah do." Strife responded with a smile.

"You gonna be my poppa like Joxer is Pho an Demi's poppa?" Bliss asked, his eyes holding hope and curiosity.

"Yeah Boogah, as soon as yer daddy's ready, that's what Ah'm gonna do." Strife said with a tender smile.

Bliss pulled Strife close for a warm hug.

* * * * *

Ares walked into the living area and found Anteros and Senscie asleep and holding each other. A smile came over his face and he argued with himself for a moment before deciding to go ahead and wake Anteros.

"Ter, wake up, it's time to get ready for battle." Ares said in a soft voice.

Anteros opened his eyes and saw that he had fallen asleep in Senscie's arms. He blushed as he extracted himself from her embrace.

"We were talking and fell asleep." Anteros hurried to explain in a whispered voice.

Ares moved Senscie to her bed with a thought then said in a normal voice, "It's fine Ter, I thought about leaving you here but you said you wanted to battle with us, and I think Pho and Demi can use the support in their first battle."

"Yeah, thanks dad." Anteros said, then changed from his comfortable toga into his leather armor.

Joxer walked into the living area, followed by Phobos and Deimos.

"Come to the armory with me so we can find some armor for you." Ares said and led the way.

Everyone followed Ares down the hall to a room just off the main audience chamber.

Phobos and Deimos were filled with excitement since they had always been forbidden to enter this room.

"The armor's against that wall. Go and pick out what you'd like to wear. If it doesn't fit, I'll help fit it for you." Ares said, indicating the far wall.

Joxer, Phobos and Deimos walked over and began to look at the armor.

"I like this one." Phobos said, looking at a pure black leather armor with a helmet that looked like a panther's head.

Ares looked at the armor, then at Phobos and said, "Let's try it."

Ares flexed his power and in a flash Phobos was wearing the armor.

"How does it feel?" Ares asked as he looked at Phobos in front and behind.

"Good. It's not too heavy." Phobos said in surprise.

"That's important. Go over and look at the weapons. Remember not to pick something too big to be practical." Ares warned.

"Can I have this?" Deimos asked, pointing to a suit of armor that was much like Strife's signature outfit, but with many buckles instead of pins.

"Let's give it a try." Ares said and fit the armor to Deimos body.

"That looks great Demi." Joxer said, looking him over.

"Yes, a very good choice. Go choose a weapon." Ares said with pride.

"How about you love?" Ares asked, looking at Joxer.

"I want something like yours." Joxer said, looking lustily at his husband.

Ares moved in for a kiss. When the kiss broke, Joxer was dressed in armor identical to Ares, except there were bands of red on the wrist, ankles and waist.

"Let's get you a sword." Ares said with a proud smile.

Anteros stood aside, looking over the blade of his broadsword.

Joxer picked out a simple but sturdy sword from a rack on the wall.

Phobos had chosen two slender short swords, one fastened at each hip.

Deimos had a dagger in one hand and a sturdy short sword in the other.

"Good choices. Is everyone ready?" Ares asked as he felt the battle beginning through his godhood.

"Lead the way." Joxer said in contentment.

There was a large flash as the family went into battle.

* * * * *

Cupid looked up at the appearance of two gods in his office.

"You still willing to do it?" Jett asked quickly.

Cupid smiled and asked, "Are you still wanting me to?"

"Yeah. Let's do it." Jett said excitedly.

"Grandfather, I need to know that this is what you want." Cupid said, for forms sake.

"Yes. After millennia of laying next to the unmoving, unfeeling, frigid body of your grandmother, I'm ready to have a lover who knows what passion is and what to do with it." Zeus said vehemently.

"Too much information... but you answered my question. Look into each other's eyes." Cupid instructed as he summoned his bow.

"Romantic love is what you desire, with this arrow, I bestow the blessing of the House of Love." Cupid said as he shot Jett through the heart.

The arrow passed through Jett and embedded itself into Zeus. The two gods held each other's gaze as Cupid noticed movement from the corner of his eye and Strife walked into the room carrying Bliss.

Cupid reacted instinctively and flashed himself, Strife and Bliss out of the temple to the main hall of Olympus.

"Why'd ya do that Cupe?" Strife asked in confusion at the relocation.

"Because I didn't know how long it would take for that much power to settle. If they'd seen you... or Bliss even. You might have been woven into their love spell. It could have pulled you in. I've been waiting too long for us to be together for my grandfather to take you away from me." Cupid said seriously.

"Zeus ain't so bad... kinda sexy. Have you seen his ass?" Strife said in a dreamy voice.

"Oh gods! MOM! DADDY HEP! HELP!" Cupid called with panic.

"Calm down Cupe, I was only funnin." Strife said before breaking down into laughter.

Aphrodite and Hephaestus appeared before Cupid looking worried.

"What's wrong sweetie?" Aphrodite asked, confused by Strife's gales of laughter.

"Strife just pulled a joke on me... a good one." Cupid said, and began to laugh.

"I could use a laugh. What'd he do?" Aphrodite asked with a tired smile.

"He... he made me think... that... that... the super charged arrow pulled him into... Zeus and Jett's love spell." Cupid said as tears of laughter ran down his face.

Aphrodite laughed and Hephaestus chuckled a little.

"Ya screamed like someone tried ta pluck you." Strife said, holding his sides.

"Only the thought of losing you would make me react like that." Cupid said, bringing his laughter under control.

Strife sobered at the serious statement.

Cupid got down on one knee before Strife and said, "I never want to lose you Strife. Will you marry me? Be my one and only husband from now until the end of time?"

Strife looked at Cupid with wide eyes, then his expression melted from shock to tenderness.

"Ah love ya Cupe. Yes, until forevah." Strife said and took Cupid's hand to help him to his feet.

"Oh... that is soooo cool." Aphrodite said through tears as she held close to her husband.

"Congratulations boys, I think you're both ready for this. I'm proud of you." Hephaestus said seriously.

Cupid smiled and said, "Thanks Daddy Hep, I love you."

"Let's go tell my Dad and Mom. They're gonna flip." Strife said happily.

Bliss watched with joy to see his father so happy.

"You want me to watch Bliss while you tell them?" Aphrodite asked with a smile.

"Thanks Mom." Cupid said automatically.

"Hold up Cupe." Strife said with uncharacteristic seriousness.

Strife got down on one knee before Bliss and asked, "Do ya want me ta be yer Poppa Strife?"

Bliss nodded happily.

"Then, we're taking the boogah with us. I ain't just gettin a husband, I'm gettin a son too." Strife said seriously.

Aphrodite and Hephaestus smiled as Bliss hugged tightly to Strife.

Cupid smiled at his son and husband-to-be, holding close.

"I'll take care of everything, when do you want to do it?" Aphrodite asked with joy.

"Is tomorrow okay? I don't want to wait." Cupid asked Strife hopefully.

"Tommorra, but would'ja work with mom on the plans? I want her to be part of the wedding." Strife asked hopefully.

"Just let me know when you've told them. Persephone and I will make the best wedding that Olympus has ever seen." Aphrodite said with a gleeful bounce.

Strife, Cupid and Bliss pulled into a three-way hug and flashed out of the main hall.

* * * * *

Ares and his family appeared in the morning light as two armies approached each other.

"Here's what we've got. That army is led by Mykantos. This one is led by Lystius. Both are followers of mine but Mykantos has been withholding his tribute and breaking some of my rules of war. Anteros, you and Phobos work on Lystius side. Anteros can use the cause of 'Love Avenged' to inspire warriors to fight to preserve their loved ones and avenge the fallen. Phobos, you can inspire them to overcome their fears so they can fight without hesitation or indecision." Ares said seriously.

"How do I do that?" Phobos asked quietly.

"Anteros can show you." Ares said with a smile.

Phobos nodded and looked up to his older brother.

"Deimos and I will work on Mykantos side. I'll withhold the essence of war, filling them with doubt in their leaders and their cause. Deimos will project his power to cause any injury, even a nick or a stubbed toe to be agonizing." Ares said, then looked at Deimos and continued, "I'll show you how."

Deimos nodded and looked seriously at the battle.

"Joxer, Mykantos is a superior warrior and leader. I need you to rain misfortune on him. I don't want him killed, just defeated. When he slinks away with his tail tucked between his legs, I'll reveal that this is the price you pay for disrespecting the God of War." Ares finished with a growl.

"Anyone we need to watch out for?" Anteros asked, noticing that the first skirmishes were starting to heat up.

"Yes, just a few. I'll mark them for you. Two are Cupids, one is favored by Discord and... that's unusual, one is Hermes'. Help them out if you see they're in trouble. Otherwise, leave them alone." Ares said as he put a mark on the favored ones.

"Everyone ready?" Ares asked with a sparkle in his eyes.

"Ready." Joxer said, admiring the beauty of his husband.

"Let's go." Ares said and put his hand on Deimos shoulder to move them into the battle.

Anteros did the same for Phobos and Joxer transported himself to Mykantos camp to begin his work.

* * * * *

Zeus and Jett looked into each other's eyes with love and adoration.

"I never thought it would be like this." Jett said joyfully.

"Cupid's better at this than his mom. Her potions never felt this good, there was always something... artificial... about them. Come here." Zeus said as he pulled Jett into a deep, loving kiss.

Jett closed his eyes and felt like he was falling, floating, flying... every cell in his body screamed out with joy, the essence of his being flared with happiness. All over Greece, those that felt retribution and retaliation in the depths of their souls felt... satisfaction, peace, a rightness that everything would work out as it should.

Zeus felt passion like he hadn't known since before the fall of the Titans. Something that he thought had died within him millennia before suddenly awakened. He felt... giddy, innocent, pure. This was like first love. He felt youth, energy, vitality... everything in the world was in harmony. The skies over Greece filled with the most beautiful fluffy clouds, whizzing around in a merry dance, forming and reforming into incredible shapes, never before seen in the world.

Gaea felt the peace run through her own godhood and smiled. [It's about time! Zeus could have done this a few thousand years ago and saved us all a lot of grief. He always was stubborn, that one.] She thought as she whipped a bowl of cream.

Strife had just proudly announced his engagement to Cupid when he felt something pulse through him, the peace of death. The serenity of a life lived well. Unnatural creatures throughout Greece knew a moment of joy as their god was enraptured with the sensation of well being.

Bliss and Cupid forgot their surroundings and immediately hugged Strife close, sharing in the incredible warmth of the feeling that coursed through their godhoods. Cupid gazed into Strife's eyes and knew that everything was finally right. Bliss looked at his daddy and poppa and knew that he would always feel their love, he never had to doubt again.

Psyche felt the tremor through her godhood and went to Hercules' room to place a gentle chaste kiss on his cheek. Hercules awoke to find Psyche looking down into his eyes. Hesitantly he raised up and gave her a gentle, tentative kiss. Psyche pulled him close and deepened the kiss into one full of love and promise.

Hera and Lust looked at each other with wonder as they felt a ripple in their godhoods that signaled vengeance satisfied and lust fulfilled. Neither made the connection to Zeus and the arrow... which was probably for the best. Hera felt the last of her misgivings about her relationship with Lust give away and she pulled Lust close to her, to kiss her deeply and proclaim her love without words.

Ganymede and Asclepius felt a wave rather than a ripple, both were overcome with the feeling that they needed to progress. Asclepius' hesitation was logical, but unnecessary now. The path before them was clear and right. They never need be unsure if they were meant to be together. It was all so clear. Ganymede felt his fears melt away in this revealing light of love. Both knew certainty.

Ares felt the power wash over him and opened his link with Joxer to revel in their love. Joxer finished directing a bee to a war-horse's testicles before stopping to bathe in the glow of love with his mate.

Anteros felt the wash of power through his godhood and formed a link with Senscie's dreaming mind. His movements were purposeful as he hacked and slashed his way through enemy soldiers, feeling the rightness of his cause, avenging the death of Wayen by destroying the type of men who killed him.

Hephaestus and Aphrodite shared a long, meaningful kiss and enjoyed a peaceful moment when all was right with the world.

* * * * *

The fates watched carefully as the weft and weave of the great tapestry changed and flowed.

"It is done. The time has come daughters." Moira said, not breaking her intense concentration.

"But they haven't taken their places yet. They aren't ready." Clotho said with worry.

"It can't be helped." Moira said seriously.

"How bad is it?" Lachesis asked, worried by her mother's dire look.

"Mama? Is it time?" A small girl asked as she sleepily made her way into the room.

"Yes Destiny, it's time." Moira said sadly as Destiny's sisters looked on in horror. She would only awaken in the last days.

"Then I must deliver the prophecy, so they may have a chance." Destiny said, as she became more awake.

"Yes, and we'll have to help them. The time is now. If we do not intervene, then all is lost. Atropos, attend to the one who was broken. Clotho, attend to the one who must be changed. Lachesis, attend to the one who must be sacrificed. Hurry daughters, any delay could be the end of Greece." Moira said with great worry.

"Yes mother." The fates said in unison and disappeared in a collective flash of light.

[You yourselves will be tried in the coming days daughters. Please be strong enough... save us all.] Moira thought before she too left the cave.

Chapter Thirty-Five

"That's right Demi, do you think you can keep your focus if we join Anteros and Phobos for some fighting?" Ares asked carefully.

"Uh huh." Deimos said while trying to maintain his concentration.

Ares relocated them to join the battle.

* * * * *

Scencie awoke from the most unusual dream. [After what I went through yesterday, it's no wonder my dreams are strange.] She thought to herself.

As she got out of bed, she found a short note from Anteros telling her that he would return before lunch.

* * * * *

Deimos and Ares appeared beside Phobos and Anteros.

"Is he ready?" Ares asked Anteros quietly.

"Yes. His focus is good and he's itching for a fight." Anteros said with a fond smile at his brother.

"Okay, you've both been trained in combat for years, so remember your training. If you receive a serious injury, call for me and I'll get you to safety. Now get in there and show these mortals what the sons of war can do." Ares said proudly.

Phobos and Deimos exchanged a look before running full out to find an opponent.

"We're going to watch them, aren't we?" Anteros asked from Ares side.

"From a distance, just until they hit their stride." Ares said, watching his sons begin their first battle.

* * * * *

Destiny appeared in the main hall of Olympus before Hephaestus and Aphrodite.

"Destiny?" Hephaestus asked in fear.

"Hail King Hephaestus." The small girl said with strength.

"What's wrong honey-bunch?" Aphrodite asked when she noticed Hephaestus' pale clammy skin.

"Destiny... the end." Was all that Hephaestus managed to say.

"That is correct King Hephaestus. The end is near, it is time for the final prophecy." Destiny said seriously.

Hephaestus closed his eyes and hung his head.

"The end... of what?" Aphrodite asked in confusion.

"Of Greece." Hephaestus whispered.

Destiny looked at Hephaestus curiously, then produced a scroll and began speaking,

* * * * *

//Joxer?// Ares called.

//Yes love?// Joxer replied.

//Are you at a point where you can get away? You need to see this.// Ares said with pride and joy flowing under the words.

//Yes, I just finished adding the poison ivy to the campfires. I'll be right there.// Joxer sent with love.

* * * * *

Atropos appeared behind Cupid and Strife.

"A prophecy has been given. There can be no wedding." Atropos said sadly.

Cupid and Strife turned as one to look at her in disbelief.

"It is the last days, if you two marry... it's over. Greece will have no future." Atropos said, allowing the worry to show in her eyes.

"Spill it, what's gonna happen exactly." Strife said impatiently.

"Well, I, uh, don't know exactly." Atropos hesitantly admitted.

Strife got a curious look. After a moment of thought he said, "You didn't rhyme."

"No, I, um..." Atropos stammered.

"All this time, you talked like you was some great wise all knowing... it was an act, wasn't it?" Strife asked in challenge.

"Not exactly, but to tell you the truth..." Atropos began.

"Ah knew it! You three cooked up those prophecies soes you could look like you knew what was gonna happen. But you don't know shit!" Strife said in delight.

"We could see patterns... From that we made prophecies to guide people's decisions so the future could be made to the greatest benefit for the most people." Atropos fought to explain.

"So it was all a guess. You three was weavin that ugly rug an actin like ya *knew* what was gonna happen... and you was guessin. Well I ain't doin it no more. Cupe asked, Ah said yes, we're gettin hitched tommorah and ain't nothin you can do ta stop it." Strife said defiantly.

"What happens if we don't marry?" Cupid asked quietly.

Strife shot him a glare.

"I just have to know..." Cupid said with pleading eyes.

"You'll have to swear on the river Styx that you'll never meet again. Cupid would be confined to Olympus and Strife to Asphodel." Atropos said quietly.

"NO." Strife said firmly.

Cupid remained silent with a thoughtful expression.

"Cupe, this ain't right. Ya can't mean ta say you're thinkin about it?" Strife asked in terror.

* * * * *

"Look at our boys." Ares said as he held Joxer close to his side.

Phobos and Deimos were fighting, back to back. They had sufficient skill to make the combat a thing of beauty. They would lure their opponents into the fight, dodge and block attacks until the opponent made a mistake, then they would cleanly and efficiently dispatch their enemy before moving on to the next.

"Oh love, they're wonderful." Joxer said as he watched them fight.

"I can't believe how proud I am." Ares said in wonder.

"They're great dad. You've trained them well." Anteros said from beside his father.

"You had a hand in it too Ter. I recognize one or two of their moves coming from you." Ares said with a smile toward Anteros.

"I helped them train sometimes." Anteros said dismissively.

"You let them know that it's okay to be more than your godhood." Ares said frankly.

At Anteros look of surprise Ares continued, "I was there when they asked you how you could fight so well, since you were a love god."

"You were?" Anteros asked in surprise.

"Yes. Just a few feet away, resting under a tree. When I heard what you told them, I decided it was better if you didn't know I was there." Ares said quietly.

"What did I say?" Anteros asked slowly.

"You said, 'I'm just me. I can fight. I can love. I can sing. I can be anything I want to be. Love Avenged is just my title'." Ares repeated from memory.

"Oh, yeah." Anteros said softly.

"I'm glad you were there for them Ter. If I'd tried to say that to them, I don't think they would have understood." Ares said seriously.

"You're the one who taught that to me." Anteros said simply.

"I did?" Ares asked in surprise, then asked, "When?"

"Every time you hugged me. Whenever you told me a story. Every day you showed me that you were more than war." Anteros said softly.

"Thanks Ter. You're a good son, and I'm proud of you." Ares said and draped an arm around Anteros.

The three watched Phobos and Deimos for a minute longer before Ares asked, "Who's ready for some battle?"

Anteros and Joxer both drew their swords and smiled.

* * * * *

Clotho appeared before Jayce.

"Hi." Jayce said kindly.

"Hello." Clotho said in return, not used to anyone not knowing and fearing her.

"I'm Jayce, I don't think we've met." Jayce said and held out a hand.

Clotho took his hand and gently shook it as she said, "I am Clotho."

"Oh, I've heard of you, you're one of the fates." Jayce said, still not showing any fear.

"I have been given a prophecy and am here to tell you what must be done." Clotho said, feeling regret for having to hurt this young man.

"Me? I'm just a minor god, what's so important that I'm in a prophecy?" Jayce asked curiously.

"If you should choose to go to Gaea and accept the binding of your godhood to death, then you could doom us all." Clotho said darkly.

"Binding? My godhood with death? Why would I do that?" Jayce asked in confusion.

"It would allow you to touch Thanatos, but it would also break the seal on Greece and end the world as we know it." Clotho said in desperation.

Jayce looked carefully at her and said, "I don't know you, I don't trust you. I'm new to being a god, so I need to talk to someone I *do* trust to give me some advice about this."

Clotho stood in amazement as Jayce vanished from sight.

* * * * *

"Guys, guys, it's over. You can stop now. Mykantos called a retreat." Ares called to the twins.

"But Dad, it was just getting good." Phobos said through his heavy breathing.

"Come on you two, let's find your Poppa." Ares said with a smile and started looking for Joxer.

* * * * *

Lachesis appeared beside Anteros on the battlefield.

"Lach, don't sneak up on me like that or I might hurt you." Anteros said as he continued to fight a warrior.

"Ter, I'm sorry to be the one to tell you... there's been a prophecy." Lachesis said sadly.

"There's always a prophecy, it's what you do. What's up?" Anteros said as he finished off the warrior before him.

"This is different... it basically says, to save Greece, you have to sacrifice yourself." She said as her eyes began to sparkle with unformed tears.

"Wait, this isn't the place to be talking about this. Meet me at my dad's house in a few minutes, I've just got to tell him I'm going." Anteros said seriously.

Lachesis nodded and vanished.

[Just when I was getting my stress worked out...] Anteros thought to himself.

* * * * *

Joxer saw Ares and the Twins coming and said, "Is it over already?"

"Yes... I don't recall Mykantos having a limp, did you do that?" Ares asked as the group approached.

"Well, yeah. And I doubt that he'll be fathering anymore children... but he was being a real jerk." Joxer said as he hugged Ares.

Anteros flashed in and quickly said, "I've got to go home for a while. I'll see you back there later."

"Okay Ter. Is everything okay? You look worried." Joxer asked with concern.

"I'll let you know later Poppa Joxer. I've got to go." Anteros said quickly and flashed out.

//I think we should celebrate Pho and Demi's first battle in the traditional way.// Ares thought, with an undercurrent of hope.

//I don't follow. What do you want to do?// Joxer asked curiously.

//I want to take them to a brothel.// Ares replied hesitantly.

//YOU WHAT????// Joxer asked in shock.

//You were their age not too long ago. What would you have done if you fought in your first battle and your father declared, 'today you are a man,' then took you to a brothel. Wouldn't it be... perfect?// Ares sent as a plea for understanding carried under the words.

There was a long moment of silence in their link as Joxer considered, finally he nodded.

//If we're going to do this, I pick the place.// Joxer thought firmly.

//Thank you love. I know this will be perfect for them. // Ares sent with love.

Joxer nodded.

"Guys, now that you've fought in your first battle and joined the ranks of men, I thought we could go out and celebrate." Ares said to the boys.

Both boys... young men's eyes lit up at the statement.

"Your Poppa is going to take us somewhere." Ares said and turned his attention to Joxer.

"I can't transport us all, I'm not that good yet. Can you look in my mind and take us?" Joxer asked hopefully.

"Go ahead and do it, I'll boost you." Ares said with a smile.

Joxer concentrated and in a flash they were gone.

* * * * *

Destiny's voice was the only sound in the great hall.

*"On the day the Titans fell,
A seal was made to bind the land,
God and Mortal, land and sky,
All things bound, made as one.*

*All that begins has an end,
The coming end awakened me,
Love and death can break the seal,
Or choose to have the seal remade.*

*The broken cannot be made whole,
He must freely choose the path,
Love above and death below,
Must vow never again to meet.*

*The one who seeks the touch of death,
Must be changed to feel no love,
With eternity spread before them,
They must remain forever alone.*

*The avenger must forsake his love,
And take his life before us all,
The mortal woman made to watch,
As his life flows out and is no more.*

*When all these things have been made true,
The seal shall be remade,
God and Mortal, Land and Sky,
All shall be bound and made as one.*

Destiny sat the scroll down and looked sadly at Hephaestus for a moment before flashing out.

* * * * *

"Where are we?" Phobos asked as he looked around.

"Joxer?" A woman said with joy.

"Meg! I'm glad you're here." Joxer said and accepted a hug.

"Where else would I be? And who is this with you?" Meg asked, looking at the group.

"This is my husband and two of our sons. I need a special favor." Joxer asked hopefully.

"Ooooh, I've been waiting for years to give you one of my special favors." Meg said with a leer.

"Not that Meg." Joxer said with a blush, then turned to his husband. "I used to come here quite a bit... just to drink..." Joxer trailed off at Ares incredulous look.

"Don't worry big guy. As much as I tried to convince him, he insisted that he was waiting for 'true love'." Meg said with a roll of her eyes.

"And I found it." Joxer said with a delighted grin directed at Ares.

Meg stayed silent, but her eyebrows went up in surprise at Joxer's declaration.

Joxer decided to drag the conversation back to the point. "My boys. They just fought in their first battle today and we decided to celebrate by bringing them here. Do you have anyone who could take care of them?"

"First time?" Meg asked in thought.

Joxer nodded.

"You trust me don't you Joxer?" Meg asked, looking him in the eyes.

Joxer nodded again.

"Then let me take care of this. I'm guessing you want the works." Meg said as she looked around to see who was available.

Joxer nodded yet again.

"Ante up. I need to see at least a few dinars before I can get this going." Meg said seriously.

Joxer produced five gold coins and handed them to her then said,, "And there'll be ten more if the boys have a great time."

"It's a business doing pleasure with you. Would you two like a room while we attend to your sons?" Meg asked, looking Ares over carefully.

"Yeah, that would be great." Joxer said with excitement.

"Take the one by the bar. You always liked that one." Meg said with a smile.

Joxer looked at Phobos and Deimos and sent, //You two enjoy this. Don't use any god powers, just follow the lead of whoever takes care of you... we're proud of you.//

The twins nodded in unison.

"Thanks Meg. Just give a knock when they're done." Joxer said, then led Ares to their room.

* * * * *

"Cupe, talk ta me. Tell me ya ain't thinkin bout it." Strife begged.

"Um, no. I think you're right... I mean, something's wrong. Atropos, is this prophecy written down? I'd like to have a look at it." Cupid said with distraction.

"King Hephaestus has the prophecy in the Great Hall." Atropos said anxiously.

Cupid nodded and looked around to see Hades and Persephone watching them.

"King Hades, would you look at the prophecy with us? I have a feeling that Strife is right. I don't know what... we need to look at it..." Cupid trailed off in thought.

Hades nodded and the group relocated to the Great Hall.

* * * * *

"So do you guys know why you're here?" Meg asked frankly.

"Ta get laid?" Phobos asked uncertainly.

"Yeah, that sums it up." Meg said with a smile.

"Look around the room and tell me if there's anyone you'd like to spend time with." Meg said casually.

"Her." Phobos said immediately, pointing at a slender girl.

"Charise." Meg called across the room.

Charise ran to the table.

"Charise, I'd like for you to meet... I didn't catch your name." Meg said in thought.

"Pho." Phobos said shyly.

"I've got your payment, show Pho how it's done and make sure he has a good time." Meg said with a smile.

Charise took Phobos by the hand and led him to a room.

"And what's your name?" Meg asked with a smile.

"Demi." Deimos said quietly.

"You see anyone you like Demi?" Meg asked quietly, matching his tone.

"Him." Deimos said shyly, pointing to the younger of two men behind the bar. The boy had sandy brownish blonde hair and looked to be on the younger side of eighteen years old.

"Tad." Meg called out with a grand smile.

"Yes Ma'am?" The young man said quickly as he ran to the table.

"Could you take Demi and show him what goes where? See that he has a good time. I've already got your payment." Meg said with fondness directed at Tad.

"Yes Ma'am. Come on Demi, I'll show you my room." Tad said with excitement.

* * * * *

"Hail King Hephaestus. Hail Queen Aphrodite." Hades said seriously.

"Hail King Hades." They said in response.

"May we see the prophecy? My son seems to think that we're not being given all the facts." Hades said with a look of pride at Strife.

Hephaestus laid out the scroll on his desk as everyone crowded around.

* * * * *

Anteros appeared in the living area of the Halls of War to find Senscie sitting quietly.

"Hi." He said with a warm smile.

"Hello, I'm glad to see you." Senscie said shyly.

Lachesis appeared a moment later and said, "The prophecy has been given, it has been foretold that the separation of love and death can remake the seal that is failing on Greece.

"Can you tell us the prophecy? I just want to hear it." Anteros asked quietly.

Lachesis nodded and recited the prophecy from memory.

Anteros looked at her curiously and said, "What if we don't remake it?"

"We can see no future for Greece if we do not remake the seal." Lachesis said with a note of apology in her voice.

Anteros nodded and took a seat beside Senscie.

"What's going on?" Senscie asked with concern.

"She says I have to kill myself to save Greece." Anteros said in a hollow tone.

Senscie sat and thought about what she just heard, something niggled at the back of her mind.

"I'm sorry I had to be the one to tell you Ter, I wish there were some other way, but it's spelled out in the prophecy that you have to take your own life before an assembly of the gods and a mortal woman must watch the act." Lachesis said with sorrow.

Senscie's eyes snapped up as she remembered a children's story she told her son when he was young.

"Can we see the prophecy? I think there's something wrong here." Senscie asked with strength.

Anteros looked at Lachesis with question.

"The scroll with the prophecy is in the Great Hall." Lachesis said in a stunned voice.

Chapter Thirty-Six

"How old are you?" Charise asked carefully as she closed the door.

"I'll be fourteen next month." Phobos said quietly.

"Mmmm, hold still, let me undress you. There's something I want to see." Charise said as she moved close.

Phobos stood still as Charise began to slowly remove his leather armor. She was taking the time to caress each patch of exposed skin and inspect it carefully.

When she finally removed his pants and he was standing naked before her, he looked down to see her smile of approval.

"This is what I was looking for." She said as she gently glided her fingers through the small tuft of pubic hair.

Phobos couldn't find his voice to ask.

"I was worried that I was being asked to take care of a child. But if you've got these, it means you're a man." Charise said as Phobos erection began to swell under her gentle touch.

Phobos gulped reflexively.

"Come to the bed and lay down. I'm going to apply some scented oil to your skin, and when you're ready we'll move on to the next step." Charise said as she led him by the hand to the bed.

"I'm ready." Phobos said quickly.

Charise looked down and said, "I guess you are. Let me apply the oil and we'll begin."

* * * * *

Deimos timidly walked into the room behind Tad.

"Look at this. I've been collecting scrolls of epic battles. I love stories of warriors." Tad said as he pointed to a pile of scrolls.

Deimos got a curious look and walked beside Tad.

"This one is about King Jason of Corinth... before he became king. It's one of my favorites." Tad said as he indicated a scroll.

Deimos looked at the scroll, then at Tad in curiosity.

"Have you ever seen a battle?" Tad asked in excitement.

"I was in a battle today." Deimos said proudly.

"Will you tell me about it?" Tad asked hopefully as he began to unbuckle Deimos' leather armor.

"What are you doing?" Deimos asked cautiously.

"Oh, um, I'm still a little new at this. I'm going to take off your clothes, then I'm going to show you the things that feel good." Tad said simply.

"But... I thought." Deimos said in confusion.

Tad stopped his motion and said, "We can do whatever you want. I just thought it would be fun if I started while you told me about your battle."

Deimos nodded and Tad peeled back a panel of leather to expose Deimos' hairless chest.

Tad glided a fingertip over a nipple, then moved to the next buckle.

Deimos got a smile and said, "Our father took us to the battlefield just as the first men started to fight..."

* * * * *

Jayce found and followed the power signature of Thanatos. He had expected to find himself in Tartarus, but instead found himself on a battlefield.

He stood silently, invisible to mortal sight and watched Thanatos walking among the wounded. Every now and then Thanatos would reach out and gently lay his hand on one of the wounded and suffering men and they would silence.

Jayce watched the scene before him and had a greater understanding of just what Thanatos' job was.

//Thanatos?// Jayce sent unsurely.

//Jayce?// Thanatos responded, looking around curiously.

A look of delight crossed Thanatos' face as he locked eyes with Jayce.

//If you're busy, I can talk to you later...// Jayce sent hesitantly.

//No, my work here is done. There was little death here today, only the weak and ill-prepared fell to this day's battle.// Thanatos sent as he surveyed the many men tending to their wounded comrades.

//I just needed your advice, if you have a minute.// Jayce sent, feeling frivolous for worrying about his own problems.

//I can't express how glad I am to be asked for advice. It makes me feel... alive.// Thanatos sent with a look of warmth and compassion in his eyes as he made his way to Jayce.

//A woman, claiming to be Clotho, just appeared to me and said that I can't have my godhood bound to death... what do you know about that?// Jayce asked as he looked deeply into Thanatos' eyes.

//Nothing. But if it could be done... then we might be able to touch!// Thanatos thought with excitement.

//Who would know if it could be done?// Jayce asked with his own excitement building.

//Lord Hades, he said he couldn't change me... but I didn't think about asking him to change you. Let's find him.// Thanatos thought frantically.

Jayce moved to Thanatos' side and waited for Thanatos to transport them.

* * * * *

"Do you think they'll be okay?" Joxer asked as he made his clothes disappear with a thought.

"They'll be fine. This is a day they'll remember forever." Ares said as he looked appreciatively at his husband.

"Gods Ares, I never dreamed that I could be so happy. Having you as my husband is better than anything." Joxer said as he moved into Ares embrace.

"You complete me. Since I have you I've found passion, joy and freedom that I'd never known before." Ares said before moving in for a tender kiss.

Joxer pulled them down to the bed and said, "Our kids are great. They're strong willed and independent yet at the same time able to love and show compassion."

"I'm proud of them all for different reasons. Our family is the best thing in my life." Ares said in contentment.

Joxer glided a hand down his husband's body and took a firm grip on his growing erection.

Ares shifted slightly to give Joxer a firm kiss.

Joxer began a slow, lazy pumping motion as the kiss escalated into deep passion.

Ares finally broke the kiss and said, "Make love to me."

Joxer smiled. Ares didn't take that position too often, so Joxer was only too happy to oblige.

* * * * *

Hades read and reread the prophecy and finally said, "It doesn't say what will happen if the seal is broken. It just tells how to remake it."

"It's horrible." Aphrodite said in disgust at the thought of one of her boys forced to take his life and the other destined to be apart from his true love.

"I agree." Anteros said as he and Senscie appeared.

"Ter." Aphrodite screamed as she threw herself into his arms.

"It's okay Mom. I think Senscie has an idea." Anteros said in a comforting tone.

Aphrodite turned to Senscie and smiled.

"Senscie, this is my mother, Aphrodite. Mom, this is Senscie, a friend of mine." Anteros finished shyly.

"Pleased to meet you." Senscie muttered.

"Oh Ter, she's lovely. Now I know why you've been waiting all these centuries. A woman like this doesn't come along every day." Aphrodite said dramatically.

"Mom, you're embarrassing me." Anteros said in a whisper.

Senscie giggled at the sight.

"So everything is about how to remake the seal." Hephaestus said and caught everyone's attention.

"It's like a one sided coin." Senscie said and walked to the group at the desk.

"A what?" Cupid asked from beside Strife.

"Coins have two sides, but you can only see one at a time. But this coin only seems to have one side." Senscie said from beside Hephaestus.

"So what we've been given is half the story..." Hades said in thought.

"Destiny!" Hephaestus called out.

* * * * *

Phobos had been carefully oiled by Charise.

"There are a lot of things we could do now, but from your expression, I think we'll just get right to it."

"What do ya want me ta do?" Phobos asked hesitantly.

Charise guided Phobos on top of her and moved him carefully into position.

"Just put it in slowly. Take the time to enjoy the feeling."

As Phobos slowly entered her he felt such a variety of sensations that he couldn't have described half of them... even if he had had a voice.

"That's fine, now pull out a little, then push back in." Charise said softly.

Phobos did and his instinct took over. He moved from gently thrusting to outright humping.

"Slow down a little. It's like gulping your food. You need to take time to enjoy it... just a little slower... and harder." Charise said and began to feel pleasure.

"That's it Pho. Just like that." Charise said in a breathy whisper as she closed her eyes.

* * * * *

Deimos finished his story as Tad was slowly pulling off his pants.

"That was amazing. I can only imagine what it would be like to be so brave and strong." Tad said as he took Deimos hand and led him to sit on the edge of the bed.

"It was cool. Me an my brother have been training for years." Deimos said with a smile.

"That's why I'm not a warrior. I couldn't dedicate myself to the training like you've done. I admire your strength of will to be able to stick with it." Tad said as he let his fingertips glide down Deimos chest.

"Tad? What kind of a name is that anyway?" Deimos asked as he looked into Tad's eyes.

"It's short for Taddius. I like Tad better." Tad said with a smile.

Deimos nodded, then in a whisper he said, "I... I don't know what to do next."

"Do you mind if I kiss you?" Tad asked hesitantly.

Deimos shook his head.

Tad gently turned and pressed his lips to Deimos'.

Then Tad brought a hand to the back of Deimos head and guided him, showing him that he could press harder and move.

Deimos closed his eyes and enjoyed the feeling, then noticed Tad's tongue tracing across his closed lips.

Hesitantly Deimos opened his mouth and the tongue entered carefully.

Deimos nearly overloaded on the sensation of the tongue tickling and stimulating the inside of his mouth. He caressed the tongue with his own and gently sucked it.

The kiss finally broke and Tad said, "That was hot. You're a really good kisser."

"I never done it before." Deimos said in a breathy whisper.

"Then you've got natural talent. Lay back, let me taste you. You've got to tell me if anything I do feels bad or wrong. Everyone enjoys different things and we're going to try a lot of things to find out what you enjoy." Tad said as he guided Deimos to lay back.

"What should I do?" Deimos asked as he settled his head back on a pillow.

"Whatever you want. You can lay back and enjoy what I'm doing or you can touch me or taste me if you want to. All we're doing is having fun, it's okay to try anything you want, I like just about anything." Tad said as he moved beside Deimos and began to nuzzle Deimos just under the ear.

"Can I touch your thing?" Deimos asked hesitantly.

"As much or as little as you want. But I'd appreciate it if you'd use some of that oil in that pot beside the bed. It just feels better... let me show you." Tad said with a smile as he leaned across Deimos to dip his hand in the scented oil.

Tad's nipple was just above Deimos mouth, so he hesitantly stuck out his tongue and gently licked the nipple.

"Oh Demi..." Tad shuddered, "That's one of the hottest spots on my body."

"Sorry." Deimos said quickly.

"No, I'm not complaining, I'm just letting you know that I like it. If we don't tell each other what we like, it won't be nearly as much fun." Tad said as he brought his oiled hand to rest on Deimos semi-erect penis.

Deimos took in a shaky breath as he felt the foreign sensation of oiled fingers gently caressing his growing shaft.

"I like that." Deimos gasped.

"I'd hoped you would." Tad said with a smile.

"Can I touch yours now?" Deimos asked hopefully.

Tad responded by turning himself on the bed so his knees were beside Deimos' head.

Deimos reached over and dipped his fingers into the oil, then hesitantly grasped the turgid member beside him.

"Oh Demi, that feels great." Tad said at the sensation of Deimos' curious questing fingers.

Tad stuck out his tongue and tasted a clear drop of precum from the tip of Deimos fully erect shaft.

"Oh Tad! That! I like that." Deimos gasped.

"If you liked that, you'll love this." Tad said, then carefully took just the head of Deimos' cock into his mouth.

Deimos took in a gasp of breath as the sensation flooded him. He laid still, with Tad's erect shaft in his hand as he tried to get used to the new sensation.

Tad was careful not to move too quickly, realizing that Deimos was new to this and highly sensitive. He gently moved up and down over the head, only sucking slightly and not using his tongue until Deimos was more used to it.

Finally Deimos adjusted to the feel and in a gasping whisper he asked, "Can I taste yours?"

Tad said, "Scoot down a little on the bed and we'll do each other at the same time."

Deimos did so and once settled, he hesitantly took Tad's penis to his lips.

Tad tried to maintain his concentration and not overwhelm Deimos by giving him too much sensation too soon. He felt the lips move over his cock head and took in a gasp of air around the penis in his mouth.

Deimos froze for a second, then intentionally took in a gasp of air around Tad's cock.

Tad enjoyed the sensation and decided to try moving on to the next stage. He carefully pulled Deimos cock and guided the foreskin back to fully expose the head.

Deimos pulled back and did the same to Tad.

Slowly and carefully, Tad glided his tongue from the underside of Deimos glans and up the slit, gathering some precum as he went.

Deimos shuddered at the sensation, but soon did the same to Tad.

With great care, Tad began to trace around the mushroomed flange of the glans with his tongue which brought a gasp from Demi.

Deimos took the head of Tad's cock into his mouth and swirled his tongue around the flange.

"Oh Demi, that's wonderful." Tad said, then moved to do the same.

Deimos got a little more adventuresome and moved further down Tad's shaft.

Tad pulled back and said, "That's great. Now let's turn so you're on top of me, on your knees."

With a minimum of guiding, Tad arranged Deimos above him, then went back to sucking the hard cock that was dangling above him.

Deimos was in paradise and gave a tentative thrust of his pelvis, more by instinct than thought.

Tad gladly accepted the additional length into his mouth and slurped with approval.

Deimos looked at the erect shaft below him and shifted his weight to one hand as he used the other to guide the cock into his mouth.

Tad moved his hands to Deimos' butt and gently coaxed him into a rhythm.

Deimos immediately caught on and began to thrust into Tad's mouth as he happily sucked the cock below him up and down at the same pace.

* * * * *

Gaea and Destiny were sitting and enjoying bowls of berries and whipped cream when the call came.

"Hephaestus is calling for me." Destiny said sadly.

"They figured it out much faster than I expected." Gaea said calmly.

"Yes, perhaps it is time for the binding to be released... but the world is so big, and cruel. I hate to think of them having to face it without protection." Destiny said with worry.

"I know, but the day comes when the young ones are ready to go out on their own. Maybe they'll prosper without the fates guiding them. And a whole new world will be open to them. I hear the savages to the west have progressed to the point where we might be able to civilize them." Gaea said off-handedly.

"Yes, but they will need to feel that we are their *own* gods. They would fight to the death rather than worship the gods of another country." Destiny said in warning.

"Yes child. I suppose the decision has been made, now we just need to play it out. Do you want to be here for the binding of death to debauchery?" Gaea asked as she scraped the last bit of juice from her bowl.

"Yes, I want to see everything, the broken made whole, the changed become transformed and my power will be needed for the willing sacrifice." Destiny said cryptically.

"You haven't spoken much about that one? What is the sacrifice?" Gaea asked curiously.

"Let it be a surprise. I know you'll approve." Destiny said with a smile before vanishing.

* * * * *

Charise pulled Phobos head aside and began to nibble on his ear lobe which made him shudder.

"Pho, you feel so good. Do it harder." She whispered into his ear with hot, heaving breaths.

Phobos was consumed by the sensations and couldn't help but accede to her command. Nothing in his life had prepared him for this level of feeling. Thought left him as his entire consciousness focused on thrusting.

"Just like that. It's perfect. Oh Pho, I'm close, it's so good." Charise said in an increasing voice.

Another level of pleasure flooded through Phobos as a part of his mind realized that he was not only getting pleasure, but also causing pleasure. He knew such fulfillment that he couldn't contain his joy.

Phobos let out a howl as he reached his climax and thrust and held the impossible moment of pleasure. It coursed through his body and spasms of release seemed to come from his toes and course out of his body and into the body of Charise.

The abrupt thrust and the howl of pleasure was all that was needed to push Charise over the precipice of her own control. She responded with a low moan from deep in her throat.

The first spasm of Phobos climax subsided and he released the tension that seemed to have flexed every muscle in his body. Then the next spasm of release came and he thrust harder and impossibly deeper as he rode the next wave of his climax. He didn't even register the next howl come from his own mouth.

Charise gasped for air then felt the next thrust which took her to a new level of her orgasm. She let out a moan, one octave higher than the last as she felt her muscles

contract at the intensity of her pleasure. In some distant part of her mind the fact registered that this thirteen year old had curled her toes.

Phobos felt the vaginal muscles constrict around his engorged cock and it was as if it were drawing, milking, pulling the seed from his body. The sensation was so intense that he couldn't catch his breath. His entire body was concentrating on his next thrust.

Charise put her hands on Phobos firm ass, constricted with pleasure and grasped tightly. Her fingers dug into his flesh as he began to relax from his last thrust. She barely noticed the sound of Phobos gasping, trying to pull air into his lungs after his last scream.

Another thrust soon followed, and along with it a fresh wave of heightened sensations and howls of pleasures from both. Then another, and another.

Finally Phobos collapsed on Charise. She took in a shaking breath and waited for a moment for the stars to clear from her eyes.

"Pho?" she asked quietly and moved his head so she could look in his face.

There was no response, and the only sign of life in him was his slight breathing.

"Pho?" She asked louder with a tremble of fear.

The spark of fear in her, combined with their intimate contact and the sound of her voice was enough to pull Phobos back from the brink of oblivion.

"Charise?" Phobos asked quietly.

"Thank the gods, you scared me. Are you okay?" Charise asked with concern.

"I'm... you're... it was..." Phobos mumbled, not able to form words for what he was feeling.

Charise smiled and said, "Yeah, it was good for me too."

"If that was good, great would kill me." Phobos said as he came more awake.

Charise chuckled and said, "I've heard of that happening, someone passing out from pleasure... but I've never seen it happen before. It *was* great Pho, you're very special."

Phobos scooted closer to pull Charise into a deep kiss.

"Demi, hold on." Tad said quickly.

"Yeah?" Deimos said after releasing Tad's cock.

"I think we're ready to move on to the next thing." Tad said with a smile at Demi's flushed and feverish appearance.

"But I was enjoying the last thing." Deimos said frankly.

"We can go back to it later if you want. But... what did you think we were going to do when you came here?" Tad asked carefully.

"I thought I was gonna stick it in your butt." Deimos said, not meeting Tad's eyes.

"So do you want to do that now?" Tad asked gently.

"Would it be wrong if I wanted you to stick yours in my butt?" Deimos asked hesitantly.

"It's only wrong when you do something you don't want to. Is that what you want?" Tad asked carefully.

Deimos nodded and glanced up to look into Tad's eyes.

"Okay, but first you need to know that it's going to hurt when we start. No matter how carefully I prepare you, there will be some pain." Tad said, watching Deimos' eyes.

Deimos got a slight smile as he said, "A little pain won't bother me."

Tad could sense the truth of his words and moved down on the bed.

"Hand me those pillows, then raise up so I can put them under you." Tad said and extended his hand.

Deimos handed the pillows, then lifted.

"Now the oil pot, I need to be able to reach it." Tad said and held out his hand again.

When Tad was all set up he oiled both hands. He began to slowly stroke Deimos' cock with one hand as he gently massaged the general area of Deimos' most private opening.

Deimos relaxed under the dual sensations and waited expectantly as a finger kept finding it's way to his opening, then sliding away.

Finally after frustrating minutes, a single finger slipped in, up to the first knuckle.

Deimos was surprised by the feeling, he couldn't say there was any pain, but it was a little weird feeling movement down there.

Tad waited for Demi to adjust to the sensation before moving the finger in just a little more, then withdrawing it. He kept up, intruding just a little deeper each time until his entire finger was buried.

"Is that okay Demi?" Tad asked carefully.

"Um, yeah. A little weird, but it don't hurt or nothin." Deimos said in a considering voice.

"Good. I don't want you to hurt." Tad said tenderly as he withdrew his finger, then brought back two freshly oiled fingers.

Tad carefully pushed the fingers in and waited, just like before.

He slowly pressed them in, very carefully moving them around to coat the entrance with oil.

Finally when he was more than half way inside, he began to spread his fingers in a scissoring motion.

"That's, um... it's not bad but... it's tight." Deimos said with difficulty.

"Do you want me to stop?" Tad asked with concern.

"No, it's good, just different. Keep goin." Deimos said as he noticed that he was sweating.

Tad continued to scissor and stretch for a while longer before withdrawing and oiling three fingers.

"Wait." Deimos said and took a deep breath as he tried to adjust to the three fingers in his ass.

"Just say when." Tad whispered.

Deimos took two more deep breaths, then felt the muscle relax.

"Go ahead." Deimos sighed in relief.

"You're such a brave warrior. Lesser men have given up before this point." Tad said as he worked the fingers and spread the oil.

"I admire your ability to know what you want, and your courage to ask for it. I've known too many who come here and do things they don't enjoy because they think it's expected." Tad said as he finally got the muscle to loosen enough to allow him entrance.

"I'm going to put it in now, my warrior. Be brave and your perseverance will be rewarded." Tad said as he oiled his cock and lined it up at Deimos' opening.

"I'm ready." Deimos said with confidence.

Tad smiled at Deimos confident expression and pressed into the tight channel.

As soon as the head was completely in, he stopped.

"You okay?" Tad asked quietly.

"It's... like it's burning... but it's not bad... give me a second. It feels huge." Deimos said, trying to understand the sensation. He knew that Tad's cock was only about two inches longer than his own, but it felt as if he were being impaled on a pillar.

Tad waited, restraining his urge to thrust.

Deimos took a deep breath and felt the muscle relax.

"Okay, I'm good." Deimos said with a smile.

Tad was a little surprised at the smile. He had only had a few virgins, but all of them had been crying by this point. Deimos truly was a warrior.

"I'm half in, that was the tough part. Now I'm going to start, you've got to tell me 'faster', 'slower', 'harder', 'ease up', stuff like that. I won't know if you don't tell me, and we're here to have fun." Tad said seriously as he began to gently thrust.

Deimos responded by saying, "Harder."

Tad smiled and kept the same pace but moved with more force.

"Faster." Deimos said with a note of desperation in his voice.

Tad increased his rhythm and continued thrusting.

"Faster and harder." Deimos said as he enjoyed the feeling of being filled.

Tad again increased his pace and rhythm, then scooted forward slightly for a better angle.

"That there. Do that again!" Deimos said with a gasp.

Tad smiled at his accomplishment. He had hoped that Demi would be one of those blessed with a prostate that enjoyed stimulation.

"Gods! More!" Deimos gasped as Tad worked to encounter the magical spot with every thrust.

Tad looked at Demi and was taken aback at the beauty of this young man who was sweating, his hands balled in the sheets, lost in his ecstasy.

Deimos could feel a fluttering in his belly, getting stronger and stronger.

"Oh Demi, I'm close... I'm real close." Tad said as he felt his orgasm approaching.

Deimos was beyond rational thought and had become a creature of instinct and emotion.

Tad held Demi's legs with a bruising grip as he made a stabbing thrust and held it as his seed began to spill.

The sensation of the warm seed shooting inside him, coupled with the violent thrust pushed Deimos past the point of no return and just a second behind Tad, his own orgasm began.

Tad felt the sudden constriction of the muscles around his cock and the flow of his seed was completely stopped. He gasped at the sensation, never having felt it before.

As the first spasm of Deimos' orgasm released, so too, did his muscles relax, allowing Tad to release again.

"Oh Gods! Oh Gods!" Tad screamed as his seed released and he achieved a level of orgasm he had never before known.

Demi had tears running down his face from the overflowing pleasure that he was unable to process any other way.

"Oh Gods Demi, that was..." Tad gasped as he finally came to the end of the most intense orgasm of his life.

"Tad..." Deimos whispered, looking into Tad's eyes.

Tad took a deep breath, then thought to ask, "Did I hurt you?"

Deimos began to laugh at the thought.

Tad carefully withdrew from Deimos and let out a sigh of relief when he saw only a faint streak of blood... nothing serious.

"No, you didn't hurt me... that was the... I never felt nothin..." Deimos said, at a loss for words.

"Me either. You were wonderful Demi." Tad said warmly.

Deimos didn't have any answer to that, so he guided Tad to lay beside him and pulled him into a deep kiss.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

"Destiny, what is the meaning of this? You've only given us half the prophecy." Hephaestus said angrily.

"Please be calm. You are quite correct, but there is no more prophecy for me to give you." Destiny said simply, her large eyes conveying the truth of her statement.

"Please explain." Hades asked in a reasonable tone.

"Sisters, attend me." Destiny called.

A moment later, Lachesis, Clotho and Atropos were standing behind Destiny.

"Sisters, what did you see in the pattern if the three tasks are not completed?" Destiny asked forcefully.

"Nothing, we could see no future for Greece." Lachesis said automatically.

"Does that mean that Greece has no future or that no future is visible to you?" Hades asked carefully.

Atropos, Clotho and Lachesis looked at each other in puzzlement as Destiny smiled.

"I think you got it." Senscie said while watching Destiny.

Destiny smiled at Senscie and gave a gentle nod.

"It's the end of the known future. From here on out we'll be living each day without knowing what the next will hold." Hephaestus said in astonishment.

"Beyond that, the barrier that protects Greece from the influences of other Gods will be gone. You can expand your influence... and risk overextending your resources. Its a big and exciting world, and you won't be the only gods around. You'll have to deal with the Egyptian, Norse and Mayan gods to name a few. It could be a struggle to survive if they choose to try and conqueror you. It's a big decision with extreme consequences." Destiny said seriously.

"So what will happen to the fates if we do this?" Anteros asked with a look of concern at Lachesis.

"They will no longer be 'the fates'. King Hephaestus can choose their godhoods and their houses." Destiny said with a smile at her sisters.

"What about you?" Sencie asked quietly.

"I'm just a child. In all the millennia that I was sleeping, I didn't grow. Now I will grow and age normally. When I grow up I want to be in the House of Intellect." She finished with a smile.

"I am calling a full assembly of the Houses of Olympus. I am king and I will decide, but in this instance I believe that everyone should be included in the debate." Hephaestus said to those gathered.

Agreement spread through the office.

"I will call the meeting soon. Be prepared." Hephaestus said and walked away.

* * * * *

"Lord Hades, do you know anything about binding my godhood with death?" Jayce asked quietly

"Yes, but there is more to it than that. I have only heard of this being done once before and it... ended badly." Hades said regretfully.

"But if there's a chance, I've got to try. Than is so special and caring, he deserves to have someone to hold." Jayce said in a pleading voice.

"The last time, the one who was changed went mad. His godhood was changed to destroy life and not create it." Hades said with sympathy.

"My godhood doesn't create life, it just relieves stress. I'll give up my godhood if it comes to that, Thanatos is a lot more important to me than Debauchery." Jayce said simply.

"It's not my choice to make Lord Jayce, King Hephaestus will make the decision that is in the best interest of all involved. If he approves the change, I will offer whatever resources I can to aid you both." Hades said sincerely.

"Thank you King Hades... Thanatos is right for respecting you the way he does." Jayce said with admiration.

Hades inclined his head in acceptance of the compliment.

Jayce hurried away to try and talk to King Hephaestus.

* * * * *

"Mom, I trust daddy Hep. If he says I have to do it, I will." Anteros said firmly.

"That's just stupid." Senscie said immediately.

Anteros looked at her with question.

"My husband left me and I stood silently and watched him leave. My son died for no good reason as I stood silently and watched them kill him. I'll be damned to Tartarus before I'll stand silently and let you kill yourself. You're smart, strong, caring, and those wings are pretty damned sexy..." Senscie said, then blushed wildly as she realized what she just said.

"Thank you Senscie. Knowing that you care... for no other reason than you like me... It makes me want to live." Anteros said with a gentle smile.

"Oh, like any woman's gonna be able to stand up to that?" Senscie said in frustration, then pulled Anteros into a kiss.

* * * * *

"Cupe, I don't care if we have'ta go live in Gaul an eat snails an shit, I ain't gonna promise ta not see ya no more." Strife said definitely.

"Watch your language. Bliss." Cupid said, looking at his son soaking in every word.

"Yer daddy's right Bliss. Ya shouldn't say 'snails' in public." Strife said in as serious a voice as he could muster.

Cupid couldn't help but smile and pull Strife close for a hug.

* * * * *

Hephaestus and Aphrodite walked into the large open garden behind the great hall. Both were silent, contemplating the pristine beauty of the springtime day.

"I Hephaestus, King of Olympus call upon the host of Olympus - - attend me." Hephaestus called out in a booming voice.

Cupid, Anteros, Strife and Bliss appeared right beside Hephaestus. By ones and twos more and more flashes came, revealing an increasing number of gods.

"King Poseidon, attend me." Hephaestus called out.

"Hail King Hephaestus." Poseidon said formally.

"Hail King Poseidon, would you summon those of your realm to come forth. This decision concerns them as much as any of us." Hephaestus said gravely.

Poseidon nodded and summoned all the water gods of the Greek pantheon.

"King Hades, attend me." Hephaestus called to his other side.

Hades appeared and looked around, noticing Tethys and the others of Poseidon's realm. "You want me to call the gods of Asphodel?"

"Yes, thank you uncle." Hephaestus said quietly.

Hades called forth all the gods in his domain.

"This is a monumental day. We have been given a choice, to continue on as we have been, or to move out into the world. This could be the beginning of our end, or the beginning of a new chapter in our lives." Hephaestus called out for all to hear.

* * * * *

Phobos heard the call that only the king of Olympus could make.

"I have'ta go Charise. It was great." Phobos said as he hurried to pull on his armor.

"What's wrong?" Charise asked with worry at Pho's abrupt change in mood.

Phobos thought about the question as he saw the look of actual concern in Charise's eyes.

"I'm a god and I'm bein called by tha king of tha gods." Phobos said plainly.

"A god?" Charise asked with wide eyes.

"Phobos, god of fear." Phobos said hesitantly, waiting for her reaction.

A tender smile fell over Charise's face as she moved to help him with the last of his armor.

"That explains it." She finally whispered.

"Explains what?" Phobos asked curiously.

"I couldn't understand how a man as young as you could be such an accomplished lover. But since you're a god... I guess you would be better than an average man." Charise reasoned.

"Charise, I'm just me. I didn't use any god powers or nothin. If I was mortal, it would've been tha same." Phobos said, not knowing why it was important to explain, but just knowing it was.

"Okay Pho... Phobos. I guess if he's calling, you'd better go." Charise said as she began to pull on her clothes.

"I'll always remember you Charise. Always." Phobos said and disappeared.

* * * * *

Deimos and Tad were comfortably holding each other, basking in the afterglow when the call came.

"I gotta go Tad." Deimos said abruptly.

"What? Did I do something?" Tad asked with worry.

Deimos began to dress himself and said, "No. And I don't really want to go. But tha king of tha gods called, so I have to." Deimos said as he buckled on one piece of armor after another.

"King... are you a god?" Tad asked with worry.

"Yeah, Deimos... God of Pain." Deimos said shyly.

Tad looked on in awe and couldn't help but ask, "Deimos... Was I your first?..."

Deimos smiled and said, "Yeah Taddius, you was my first an I really liked it."

"Me too." Tad said shyly.

"I gotta go." Deimos said with regret.

"If you... ever need me... for anything..." Tad trailed off, trying to find the words.

Deimos pulled Tad close and asked hopefully, "Was it more than sex for you too?"

Tad nodded, then looked into Deimos' eyes.

Deimos smiled and said, "Next time I see you, I'm gonna ask you something. Think about what you want yer life ta be like."

Tad nodded and Deimos vanished in a flash of scarlet light.

* * * * *

As Ares and Joxer were reaching the apex of their sexual act, the call came through.

Joxer gave one final thrust and broke out into a gale of laughter.

Ares chuckled as he pulled his husband close and said, "Heph still has a great sense of timing."

* * * * *

Phobos appeared in the huge garden and was surprised to find so many gods around him.

A minute later Deimos appeared at his side.

"What's goin on?" Deimos asked as he looked around.

"No idea." Phobos said, then saw Ares and Joxer appear a short distance away.

"Did you guys have a good time?" Joxer asked as he walked up.

Phobos and Deimos both nodded enthusiastically.

"The Fates have decreed that Cupid and Strife cannot be married, they must separate and be forever bound to their respective realms. Jayce must be made to feel no love... ever. And Anteros must sacrifice his life to maintain the seal on Greece." Hephaestus called out over the murmurs and whispers of the assembled gods.

Ares and Joxer immediately began to push their way through the crowd to get to the front. A moment later, Phobos and Deimos followed.

"What is the seal?" Jett called from Zeus' side.

"It keeps the influences of other gods out of our realms. It keeps us safe from the outside world." Hephaestus said directly.

"What happens if the seal is gone?" Joxer asked from beside Ares.

"No one knows. The seal is what gives the fates the ability to divine the patterns of our future. If the seal is gone, we will have no clue as to what the future holds." Hephaestus said loudly enough for all to hear.

"Then it must be remade." Athena said with certainty.

"No!" Strife called out.

"It is for the greater good. Without the seal, we might not survive." Athena said emotionlessly.

"Anteros won't survive if we do. The price is too high." Sencie said, her own voice sounding faint among the gods.

"It is regrettable, but necessary." Artemis said, looking at Sencie defiantly.

"King Hephaestus, what are you going to do?" Joxer asked with a tremor in his voice.

"I am going to do what is in the best interest of us all." Hephaestus said with regret in his eyes.

Joxer immediately pulled Anteros into a hug and held him tight.

"There may be another way..." Lachesis said absently, deep in thought.

"What would that be?" Hephaestus said with hope.

"The prophecy is linked to Anteros' godhood... if his godhood were transferred to another... who could take his place... then perhaps..." Lachesis said weakly.

"It's trading one problem for another..." Hephaestus said, shaking his head.

"I'll do it." Lachesis said firmly.

"What?" Anteros said in shock.

"I'll take your place Anteros. You've always been a good friend to me. Mother or Destiny can take my place with the fates... please let me do this for you. For our friendship." Lachesis said hopefully.

"No Lachesis. Even if I were willing to do it. You can't accept Anteros godhood. Your presence among the fates is required." Destiny said firmly.

"Then me." Deimos said in a strong voice.

"No Demi, you can't." Joxer said in panic.

"Yeah Poppa, I can. I'm a warrior, this is what a warrior does. Sacrifices himself so tha people he loves can survive." Deimos said firmly.

Ares held Joxer close but said nothing. His pride for his son could clearly be seen in his expression.

"Then can I take Cupid's place? Then he can marry Strife an be happy." Phobos asked, directing his question toward Hephaestus.

"You'd be bound for all eternity to Olympus." Hephaestus said cautiously.

"Yeah, that's not so bad." Phobos said, looking with worry at Deimos.

"Enough." Destiny said in a booming voice which seemed strange coming from a five year old girl.

Even Hephaestus was startled by the action.

"The time is now. King Hephaestus, you must decide." Destiny said firmly.

* * * * *

Hephaestus nodded and called for all to hear. "All those in attendance, summon one mortal to witness the following. These events will effect us all and mortal interests must be represented."

The command was a surprise, but being a command from the king, no one could go against his will.

There were many flashes and Joxer was surprised at how many of the mortals he knew.

Meg was standing beside Ganymede. Autolykus was standing by Hermes. Xena was beside Ares and Hercules was beside Zeus. Iolaus was beside Hebe and Gabrielle was beside Psyche. An older woman was standing by Jayce, someone he vaguely remembered... Twanky?

Joxer was surprised to see two of the people from Meg's brothel standing beside Phobos and Deimos.

"You need to pick someone Joxer." Ares whispered.

"I think everyone I ever met is here." Joxer said, looking around.

"Then there is someone you could summon for me..." Ares said quietly.

Joxer nodded and an image filled his mind.

In a flash, King Iphicles of Corinth was standing beside Joxer.

"What? Where am I?" Iphicles said in puzzlement.

"A meeting of the gods. Favored mortals are being asked to bear witness to these events." Ares said in a moderate and respectful voice.

Iphicles was astonished, but finally nodded and said, "Thank you Lord Ares, I'm honored to attend."

"Why couldn't he be my brother instead of Herc?" Ares said with a shake of his head.

Joxer smiled and turned his attention back to Hephaestus.

"First order of business. There is but one choice before me. To remake the seal at the cost of the loves and life of my children, or to face the unknown future. There is but one choice. I am king, but I am a father first. Aphrodite, proceed as you will." Hephaestus stood aside.

Aphrodite was surprised but quickly walked before Cupid and Strife.

"Cupid, who stands with you to bear witness to your marriage?" Aphrodite asked curiously.

Cupid thought for a second, then smiled and said, "Psyche."

Psyche looked up in surprise, but hurried to Cupid's side.

"Psyche, will you stand by Cupid to support him in his marriage with Strife?" Aphrodite asked hesitantly.

"I will." Psyche said firmly.

"Strife, who stands with you to bear witness to your marriage?"

"Queen Persephone." Strife said without hesitation.

Persephone ran to Strife's side and took hold of his arm.

"Queen Persephone, will you stand by Strife to support him in his marriage with Cupid?"

"I will." Persephone said, beaming with love.

"Join hands." Aphrodite said to Cupid and Strife.

"Do you Cupid, avow before the assembled host of Olympus to take Strife as your one and only husband for all eternity?"

"I do." Cupid said firmly.

"And Strife, do you promise before all those gathered to love and cherish Cupid as your husband until forever?"

"Ah do." Strife said seriously.

Aphrodite bound their hands with a gold ribbon and said, "Then all in attendance, I confirm before you all that Cupid and Strife are forever joined in marriage."

Cupid pulled Strife into a firm kiss for all to see.

* * * * *

"Jayce, Thanatos, Gaea, come forward." Hephaestus boomed across the whispering gods as Cupid and Strife continued to kiss.

All three made their way to the front and waited expectantly.

"Gaea, I must admit, I don't know exactly what you're going to do, but proceed as you will." Hephaestus said quietly.

"Destiny, I call upon you to bring forth the essence of death that is to be transferred." Gaea said in a voice that all could hear.

Destiny stood forward and raised her arms.

A small whirlwind started which prompted gods and mortals alike to stand back out of the way.

The whirlwind increased until it was ten meters across and nearly three stories high.

Finally Destiny said, "I summon Tsunami, that the essence of death you carry may be halved."

A howl of rage erupted from the whirlwind before the sea titan of death and destruction took form.

The wind died down as the insane titan's rage became evident to everyone present.

"Stop that!" Gaea said firmly.

Tsunami continued to howl with rage that came from the depths of his soul.

Gaea balled her hands on her hips and tapped her toe.

Tsunami continued to howl.

In a voice that was nearly a whisper, but was still heard by all present, Gaea said, "Don't MAKE me have to take you over my knee in front of everyone."

Tsunami stopped his howling and a look of recognition came over his face.

"Well?" Gaea said, toe still tapping.

"I'm sorry Aunt Gaea. I'll behave." Tsunami said shyly.

"That's better, come down here and give me a hug. I haven't seen you in millennia." Gaea said with a gentle smile.

The titan began to shrink in size and finally stood before his aunt, looking like a skinny, lost teenage boy with pale skin and unruly green/brown hair.

Gaea pulled him into a hug and said, "I know you hurt little one, but you've had six thousand years to let it out, now it's time to do something about it."

Tsunami got a look of surprise as he pulled back to look into his Aunt's face.

"Jayce, come forward. I'd like for you to meet Tsunami." Gaea said, as if it were any other day.

"Um. Hi." Jayce said weakly.

"Hi." Tsunami said with caution.

"Jayce, if you're willing, I'm going to join your godhood to the essence of death that Tsunami carries. If I'm right, then you'll both have what you truly desire." Gaea said with hope shining in her eyes.

"And if you're wrong?" Jayce asked hesitantly.

Gaea thought about the question and said, "Then you two can go off and enjoy a six-thousand year long tantrum together."

Thanatos walked up beside Jayce and sent, //Don't do this. We can endure as things are, I can't bear the thought of seeing you hurt.//

Jayce looked into Thanatos' eyes and was almost ready to comply to his wishes when Gaea said, "With the essence of death reduced, Tsunami may be able to move on with his life instead of continuing as an insane force of nature."

Jayce looked from Thanatos to the scared and wild eyes of Tsunami.

"Go ahead." Jayce whispered.

Destiny linked hands with Gaea. Destiny directed her other hand toward Jayce as Gaea directed her free hand toward Tsunami.

Violent greens and yellows erupted around Tsunami and splotches of black would spark and flare in a dizzying swirl.

A peaceful violet glow surrounded Jayce, reflecting his nature.

Slowly the violent dizzying dance of colors abated as streaked green and yellow began to swirl slowly around Tsunami, revealing the occasional black patch every now and then.

Jayce's purple glow began to swirl and streaks of black could be seen.

"There, that's got it." Gaea said as she watched the colors settle.

"It is done. Death is now bound to the godhood of debauchery." Destiny said in an almost regretful voice.

"What does that mean for my godhood?" Jayce asked with concern.

"It means that the consequence of overindulgence in wine and debauchery is now death. Where before the worst one could expect from days of unrestrained drinking was a hangover, now it can be lethal. Unrestrained indulgence with sexuality can now lead to death by disease... every impulse of debauchery now leads to death if taken to its extreme." Destiny said sadly.

"What about me?" Tsunami said fearfully.

"Your godhood is still bound to death, but now it is a precursor to new life. Instead of causing mindless destruction without purpose, you can cleanse old stagnant systems out, making way for newer systems so that they might thrive." Gaea said warmly.

"Erebus... What happened to Erebus? I need to see him." Tsunami said in panic.

"King Hades, could you possibly find it in your heart to allow Erebus to join us?" Destiny asked with a 'puppy dog' eyed expression.

"My pleasure." Hades said and vanished from sight.

"Can we touch?" Jayce asked hesitantly.

"Yes child. Go ahead." Gaea said warmly.

Jayce brought a hand to Thanatos' cheek and gently dragged his fingertips down.

Thanatos brought up a shaking hand and pulled Jayce close, just holding him tight against his chest.

Hades appeared with a black robed figure standing beside him.

"Erry?" Tsunami asked with fear in his voice.

"Nami? You're back?" Erebus asked with shock.

"Erry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." Tsunami said and flung himself into Erebus' arms.

"Shhh, it's okay Nami... do you want to stay with me?" Erebus asked hesitantly.

"Yes... anything Erry... anywhere... yes..." Tsunami said between kisses.

"I live below the ninth level of Tartarus now... it might not be much of a future for you..." Erebus trailed off with regret.

"Erebus, if you would like. You two could move into the castle, your room is still there, just like you left it. It's always been your home, you just seemed to fit in with the others in Tartarus." Hades said quietly.

"Thank you Hades. I knew that I could come and go as I pleased because I am bound to death... I just never had reason to leave before. What do you say Nami?" Erebus asked hopefully.

"Yes. I say yes." Tsunami said with a glorious smile.

"I suppose it's time for the sacrifice now." Gaea said to Destiny.

Silence fell over the host of Olympus at that declaration.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

"Anteros, Deimos, and Senscie. Come forward." Destiny called.

The three named individuals stepped forward and waited with fear.

"Love and Death have been joined,
thus god and mortal have been unbound.
Death has been allowed to love,
thus land and sky have been released.
The willing sacrifice must still be made,
to make the changes firm and fast."

"No!" Aphrodite screamed.

Gaea held up a hand to silence Aphrodite and bid Destiny to continue with a look.

"Deimos, are you willing to take your brother's place? To sacrifice yourself so your brother can live?" Destiny asked while gazing into Deimos' eyes.

"I am." Deimos said firmly.

"I see the truth in your heart and in your words..." Destiny said, then turned her gaze toward Senscie.

A moment later Destiny looked over the crowd and said, "The bind of god and mortal can only be broken by the willing sacrifice of the god of love avenged and the will of a mortal for it to be so."

Destiny then looked Senscie in the eyes and said, "It is your choice who will be sacrificed here today. Choose."

Senscie looked at Anteros and Deimos in panic.

"Please Senscie, if you care anything about me at all, even a little, don't let my brother die in my place." Anteros said with tears streaming down his face.

"You love him, I may not be a love god, but I know you do. Let me do this, me an you wouldn't be happy if Ter died, but if I take his place, you an Ter can help each other move on." Deimos said with pleading in his eyes.

Senscie forced herself to look away from both men and looked into the eyes of the little girl.

"I choose myself." Sencsie said firmly.

"You aren't a god. You can't do it." Anteros said quickly.

"That's what Ambrosia is for." Sencsie said to Anteros, then looked back at Destiny. "Well, you said it was my choice and I chose, is it enough?" Sencsie asked with anger creeping into her voice.

Destiny looked deeply into Sencsie's eyes and said, "It is enough."

"No! Daddy Hep, you can't allow this, she's a mortal. We're supposed to protect mortals." Anteros pleaded.

Deimos stood silently, waiting to see what would happen next.

Destiny produced a small bowl of quivering jelly and said, "Eat of the ambrosia, then we may proceed."

"No, please Sencsie, you can't." Anteros begged.

"It was my choice. I can't stand by and let other people die anymore... I love you." She said, then took a bite of the ambrosia.

Destiny held out her hands to Gaea and Hephaestus. With concentration from all three, the godhood of Love Avenged transferred to the new goddess.

"Let's just do this before he talks me out of it." Sencsie said irritably.

"As you wish." Destiny said, then directed her voice to the host of Olympus. "It is done. The seal has been broken." Destiny said and smiled at Deimos.

"I... I don't have to die?" Sencsie asked in confusion.

"No, it was the willingness, not the sacrifice that was necessary for the binding to be completely broken. It was a failsafe. If our society wasn't ready to encounter the outside world, then no one would be brave and strong enough to willingly give up their life for selfless reasons." Destiny said happily.

"So it's done?" Hephaestus said in wonder.

"What can you see King Hephaestus?" Gaea asked in a leading voice.

Hephaestus' eyes became defocused as he gazed off into infinity. "Everything." he eventually whispered.

One by one, the gods looked out on the new world opened up to them. No longer was their vision stopped at the border of Greece. The whole world... the whole universe was opened to their sight.

* * * * *

"Everyone, May I have your attention!" Hephaestus called out to the congregation of Gods and mortals.

"In celebration of this joyous occasion, in celebration of Cupid and Strife's wedding, I make this decree. Any god who wishes to marry a mortal on this day may do so and I will grant immortality on your partner." Hephaestus said, looking directly at Harmonia.

Harmonia dragged her mortal husband forward to stand before Hephaestus.

"Thank you daddy Hep." Harmonia said with tears in her eyes.

"I know you love Cornelius, you've chosen to live as a mortal rather than be separated from him. Now you two can have eternity if you so choose." Hephaestus said with a smile.

Harmonia whispered to her husband and he nodded.

"Anyone else?" Hephaestus called out over the crowd.

Psyche led Hercules forward and asked, "Does that apply to us?"

"Yes Psyche, if that's what you both want." Hephaestus said with an approving look at Hercules.

"It is... thank you." Hercules said quietly.

"Um, if it, um, doesn't work out... what then?" Iolaus asked with Hebe standing at his side.

"Then you ask Joxer to perform a divorce. You will not be made mortal again, and there will be no punishment if you honestly tried to make it work." Hephaestus said to the couple.

"This is our one chance, we might not get another... what do you say?" Iolaus asked Hebe gently.

"Will you really try?" Hebe asked in a whisper.

"Yeah, I'll really try. I'm trusting that Cupid knew what he was talking about when he said that we'd be good together." Iolaus said as he looked in her eyes.

Hebe nodded shyly.

* * * * *

"I'm glad you're alive." Tad said to Deimos in a whisper.

"Me too." Deimos said as he held Tad's gaze.

"Are you still going to ask me?" Tad asked hesitantly.

"What do you want?" Deimos asked, his serious look conveying his meaning more than his words.

"You in my life." Tad said without hesitation.

"As your god? Your lover? Your husband? How do you want me?" Deimos asked with a note of desperation in his voice.

"However I can have you." Tad said shyly and tried to look away.

"I'm not asking what you'll settle for, I'm asking what you want. Please Tad, I need to know." Deimos said in a pleading tone.

Tad looked at Cupid and Strife and said, "I'm not ready for a husband. But I'd like to be your... boyfriend, and maybe more... later, if you wanted that too."

"I'd like that. Would you like to be my one and only priest?" Deimos asked hopefully.

Tad nodded and Deimos pulled Tad into a big hug.

* * * * *

"Anyone who wants to get married, move to the front. We're going to do this all in one go so we can go and explore our new world." Hephaestus called out to the crowd.

"Are you up to it dear?" Hephaestus asked Aphrodite in a whisper.

"Now you ask." Aphrodite said with an eye roll, then said, "Yeah Hephie, this is what I was made to do."

"Go ahead... I love you." Hephaestus said quietly.

Aphrodite pulled Hephaestus into a brief but firm kiss. Hephaestus pulled back and whispered something into Aphrodite's ear that made her chuckle.

"Who's first?" Aphrodite said and walked to the groups of couples.

"Me." Harmonia said with barely held enthusiasm.

"I'm so happy sweetie, let me talk to your grandmother for a second then we'll get started." Aphrodite said and walked to Hera.

* * * * *

"Son, I'm proud of you. You too Strife." Ares said as he hugged each man in turn.

"Thanks dad, you think you could watch Bliss for a night or two?" Cupid asked hopefully.

"Sure, but I thought your mom would want to." Ares said as he picked up Bliss and held him tightly.

"I think all the marriages today are going to give her such a power overload that she'll be focused on... other things tonight." Cupid said with a smile.

"Ares and I will enjoy having Bliss for a few days. Plus it will be good for him to spend some time with Pho and Demi." Joxer said with a gentle smile at his husband and grandson.

"Thanks Poppa Joxer." Cupid said as he pulled Strife into a hug.

* * * * *

"Harmonia, Goddess of Tranquility, do you take this man, Cornelius of Crete to be your husband from this day forward?"

"I do."

"Cornelius of Crete, do you take Harmonia, Goddess of Tranquility to be your wife from this day forward?"

"I do."

"Hercules, God of Heroes, do you take Psyche, Goddess of Manipulation as your wife from this day forward?"

"The god of what?" Hercules asked in disbelief.

"You performed the tasks for King Euristhias with the guarantee that one day you would ascend and become a god. This is the day. You will have the honor and duty to watch over heroes, to ensure they are worthy of the title hero and that their stories are told." Hephaestus said gently.

"I accept... and I do." Hercules finished and looked at Psyche.

"Psyche, Goddess of Manipulation, do you take Hercules, God of Heroes as your husband from this day forward?"

"I do."

"Asclepius, God of Healing, do you take Ganymede, God of Harlots to be your husband from this day forward?"

"I do."

"Ganymede, God of Harlots, do you take Asclepius, God of Healing to be your husband from this day forward?"

"I do."

"Zeus, God of the Sky, do you take Jett, God of Retribution and Retaliation to be your husband from this day forward?"

"I do."

"Jett, God of Retribution and Retaliation, do you take Zeus, God of the Sky to be your husband from this day forward?"

"I do."

"Hera, Goddess of Vengeance, do you take Lust, Goddess of Lust to be your wife from this day forward?"

"I do."

"Lust, Goddess of Lust, do you take Hera, Goddess of Vengeance to be your wife from this day forward?"

"I do."

"Eris, Goddess of Discord, do you take this man, Autolykus, king of thieves to be your husband from this day forward?"

"I do."

"Autolykus, King of Thieves, do you take Eris, Goddess of Discord to be your wife from this day forward?"

"I do."

"Hebe, Goddess of Children, do you take Iolaus to be your husband from this day forward?"

"I do."

"Iolaus, do you take Hebe, Goddess of Children to be your wife from this day forward?"

"I do."

* * * * *

"Do ya want to?" Phobos asked Charise quietly.

"If you want to, yes." Charise said uncertainly.

"But do *you* want to?" Phobos asked again.

"Not really. You're special and wonderful and everything. And maybe someday I might want to get married. But not today." Charise said, begging for understanding with her eyes.

"Me too. I like you and I want ta see you some more. But I ain't ready for this." Phobos said, looking at all the couples.

"Kiss me?" Charise asked hopefully.

Phobos smiled and moved in to give her a tender kiss.

* * * * *

"Jayce, God of Debauchery, do you take Thanatos, Death, to be your husband from this day forward?"

"I do."

"Thanatos, Death, do you take Jayce to be your husband from this day forward?"

//I do.//

"He does." Aphrodite called aloud to all the crowd.

"Erebus, former Titan ruler of the Underworld, do you take Tsunami, Titan of Death and Destruction of the Sea to be your husband from this day forward?"

"I do."

"Tsunami, Titan of Death and Destruction of the Sea, do you take Erebus, former Titan ruler of the Underworld to be your husband from this day forward?"

"I do."

"Senscie, Goddess of Love Avenged, do you take Anteros, God of Brotherly Love to be your husband from this day forward?"

Aphrodite smiled at the murmur that ran through the crowd at the new titles.

"I do."

"Anteros, God of Brotherly Love, do you take Senscie, Goddess of Love Avenged to be your wife from this day forward?"

"I do."

Aphrodite looked around, making sure she didn't miss anyone when she spotted Phobos kissing a girl and Deimos kissing a boy.

Aphrodite walked to Hera and received a basket of golden apples.

She pulled a few apples from the basket and handed them to her husband then walked to one end of the line to give each mortal an apple.

Hephaestus did the same, starting at the other end, and when he reached Hercules, he produced a bowl of Ambrosia.

Aphrodite produced a handful of gold cords and looked down the line of couples.

"Join hands." She said loudly enough for her voice to carry to the far end.

With a flex of her power, the pile of cords disappeared from her hand and appeared around the joined hands of each couple.

"Then all in attendance, I confirm that all these couples are now bound in marriage. You may kiss." Aphrodite called out.

Aphrodite hurried to her husband while all the couples kissed.

Hephaestus and Aphrodite enjoyed their own kiss before Aphrodite asked, "Do you know who those people are with the twins?"

"Yes, friends. And unless I miss my guess, your son and daughter-in-law, in due time." Hephaestus said, glancing at the two couples.

* * * * *

Hephaestus reluctantly separated from his wife and called out, "Everyone, may I have your attention! I have some new godhoods to confer."

"First, may I present my son, Anteros, God of Brotherly Love." Hephaestus said proudly.

There was a round of applause as Anteros pulled Senscie into a hug.

"May I also present Senscie, Goddess of Love Avenged." Hephaestus said, smiling at the couple.

"Atropos, Goddess of Grandparents." Hephaestus said with a gentle smile directed at Atropos.

"Lachesis, Goddess of Spiritual Love."

Anteros and Senscie pulled Lachesis into a three-way hug of congratulations and thanks.

"Clotho, Goddess of Voyeurism and Exhibitionism... you know why." Hephaestus said with a smirk that made Clotho blush a bright crimson.

"Moira, Goddess of Dedication and Industry"

"Destiny, Goddess of Vision and Foresight."

"Hercules, God of Heroes."

The applause continued half a minute after the last announcement.

"Now it's time to celebrate!" Hephaestus yelled and real applause rose up, exposing the previous applause for the half-hearted courtesy that it was.

* * * * *

Deimos dragged Tad behind him to Ares and Joxer.

"Dads, I got someone for ya ta meet." Deimos said quickly.

Ares and Joxer turned their full attention to their son.

"Dads, this is Taddius." Deimos said with an ebullient smile.

"Nice to meet you Taddius." Joxer said warmly as Ares nodded his introduction.

"Please call me Tad." Taddius said shyly at all the attention directed at him.

"Where did you guys meet?" Ares asked casually as he held on to Joxer comfortably.

Deimos looked to see if Tad wanted to explain. When Tad gave a slight shake of his head, Deimos said, "Tad was tha one who took care of me at Meg's."

Tad cast his eyes down in shame.

Ares shot Joxer a look, and it was evident to Deimos that they were talking in their minds.

"Demi, come here for a second." Joxer said seriously and led Deimos away from Tad.

"Tad, we need to have a talk." Ares said firmly.

* * * * *

"Poppa, don't let dad scare Tad. He's my friend and he likes me." Deimos pleaded.

"We paid him to spend time with you. We're just worried about you getting hurt if he doesn't feel the same way about you that you feel about him." Joxer said with concern.

Deimos got a stubborn look and walked away without a word, not toward Tad, but toward a small group of people gathered by Apollo.

* * * * *

"Are you using my son to gain godly favor?" Ares asked bluntly.

Tad's eyes opened wide in horror.

Ares glared at the frightened boy, waiting for an answer.

"I just like him... he's everything I want to be." Tad said with fear in his voice.

"A god?" Ares asked simply.

"No... I mean, yes, of course he's a god, but he's brave and strong. He's funny and really nice to spend time with." Tad rambled.

Ares continued to glare as Tad squirmed under the attention.

"You think I'm not good enough for him." Tad finally said in defeat.

Ares narrowed his gaze but said nothing.

"You may be right... but... as long as he's willing to spend time with me, I'm going to do my best to be his friend." Tad said, trying to sound confident.

"He's over here." Deimos said, dragging a young woman behind him.

"Dad, Thalia is the grace of friendship and if she says that Tad is really my friend and ain't pretending, will you leave him alone?" Deimos asked somewhere between defiantly and hopefully.

"No." Ares said shortly.

Deimos sent a glare at his father that was worthy of Ares himself.

"I'm sorry Demi bothered you Thalia, but I don't need for you to use your godhood. I'll trust Demi to choose his friends." Ares said to Thalia and Deimos, then turned to face Tad. "And I approve of his choice."

Deimos and Tad were both stunned by the statement.

Thalia looked at both boys and smiled before she made her way back to Apollo's group.

"What did I miss?" Joxer asked as he found his family again.

"I don't know." Deimos said and looked at Tad, who shrugged.

"We'd better get Bliss and go back to the house. I'd like to show Tad around since I expect him to be visiting a lot." Ares said softly.

Joxer got a surprised look, but quickly ran to find Cupid and Bliss.

* * * * *

"There's my brother and my Dad, I want you to meet them." Phobos said happily.

Charise followed Phobos and stopped suddenly when she recognized Ares.

"Lord Ares!" She gasped.

"Yes?" Ares replied casually.

"I'm sorry Lord, my father was a follower of yours all his life. I never expected to meet you." Charise said reverently.

Ares peeked into her mind and found an image of her father.

"Yes, Ainos was a fine warrior and a good leader. His death came far too early... I'm sorry for your loss." Ares said sincerely.

"Thank you Lord. He served you faithfully, it's good to know that you remember him." Charise said quietly.

"He lived well and served me faithfully. His death came through no fault of his own. He earned a place with the most honored warriors in the afterlife. He's happy." Ares said with assurance.

Charise forced a smile.

"Dad, I want you to meet Charise... my friend." Phobos said hesitantly, worrying about his father's reaction.

"Pleased to meet you Charise. Where did you meet my son?" Ares asked, having a feeling he already knew.

Charise flashed a panicked look at Phobos.

"We met at Meg's, Dad." Phobos said, watching his father carefully.

"Oh, I see. We're going to go home as soon as your Poppa gets back with Bliss. You're welcomed to join us Charise." Ares said casually.

"Th... Thank you." Charise said in shock.

Phobos was shocked by his father's reaction but remained silent.

"Deimos, why don't you introduce Tad." Ares asked pleasantly.

Charise and Tad locked eyes and smiled.

"Yeah, Pho, Charise, my friend Tad." Deimos said quickly.

Tad leaned close and whispered, "Are you ashamed of me?"

Deimos whispered back, "No, them."

Tad smiled a great smile and hugged Deimos.

"We're ready to go." Joxer said happily as he joined his family, with Bliss walking by his side.

"Hey, there's Hercules, I just want to say congratulations." Joxer said quickly.

"He's your friend, I'll just wait here." Ares said simply.

"You're really friends with Hercules?" Tad asked with wide eyes.

"Yeah, when I was mortal I used to travel with him... well a few times anyway. I mostly traveled with Xena." Joxer said as he turned his attention to Tad

"Xena... The warrior princess?" Tad asked with wide eyes.

"You've read some of Gabrielle's scrolls haven't you?" Joxer asked with a smile.

"Gabrielle, the bard from Poteidaia?" Tad asked in disbelief.

"Come on Tad, you and Demi come with me. If we hurry we can probably catch Herc, Gabby and Xena before any of them leave." Joxer said as he motioned for Bliss to join his grandfather.

"Now?" Tad asked as he scrambled up from the table.

"Gods, now I know why they need a god of heroes, that much worship shouldn't go to waste." Ares said with a grin to Phobos and Charise.

* * * * *

"Hercules. Congratulations on the wedding... and being a god." Joxer said hurriedly.

"Thank you, I guess I should say the same to you. Psyche's been filling me in on what I've missed." Hercules said, holding close to Psyche.

"Thanks, this is my son Deimos and his friend Tad." Joxer said with a proud smile.

"Hi." Hercules said simply, looking at the two boys.

"Hi." Tad said with eyes full of wonder.

Hercules got a strange look, then turned to Joxer in question.

"It's worship Uncle Herc. Tad has been reading scrolls about heroes." Deimos said with a fond look at his friend.

"Thank you Tad... you're my first worshipper." Hercules said with a smile.

Tad had a look on his face like he was going to pass out.

"I'll let you get back to the party, I just want to introduce Tad to Xena and Gabrielle before we call it a night." Joxer said with his own fondness directed at Tad.

"Gabrielle is over there, by the food." Psyche said, motioning to some nearby tables.

"Thank you, I'm glad you're better Psyche." Joxer said quietly.

"Better than I've ever been." Psyche said and looked lovingly at Hercules.

* * * * *

"Gabby, have you got a minute?" Joxer called out when he spotted her walking away from the table.

"Joxer? It's been months... how are you?" Gabrielle asked with concern.

"Good, great in fact. I've brought someone who'd like to meet you." Joxer said happily.

Gabrielle looked from Joxer to the two boys who were following him.

"Gabrielle of Poteidaia, this is Taddius. He's read some of your scrolls and admires your work." Joxer said with a smile.

"Really?" Gabrielle said with a glowing smile.

"Yeah, I've got the one where you were made Queen of the Grecian Amazons and the one where Xena fought the Cyclops outside Tanegra." Tad said with excitement.

"You really liked my scrolls? I didn't know if anyone read them. Every time I visit my family I leave a few with my sister Lila to sell... to help them out." Gabrielle said happily and took a seat in the grass.

Joxer and the boys followed her example and Joxer asked, "Do you maybe have any that Tad would like to read? I could pay you for them." Joxer asked hopefully.

"Yeah, let me look in my pack." Gabrielle said quickly.

"Really?" Tad asked in wonder.

"Just give me a minute." Gabrielle said as she unrolled a scroll.

Gabrielle took out her quill and ink pot, then wrote on the bottom of the scroll. *'To Tadius, Every day is an adventure, Every story is an epic, Every word is poetry, with truth and love. Gabrielle'*.

"So what's been going on with you Gabby? You seem a lot different since the last time I saw you." Joxer asked seriously.

"I don't really know. I just woke up the other day feeling... like my old self. Most of the last few months are just a hazy blur. But I'm fine now and feeling better than ever." Gabrielle said with a smile.

"That's great Gabby, I've got to get going now. I want to find Xena before she leaves." Joxer said quickly.

"Too late, she left a little while ago. A god with wings... Anteros I think, he flashed her out right after the ceremony." Gabrielle said sadly.

"Don't worry Gabby, things will work out. You know they always do." Joxer said with a sunny smile.

"Yeah, I guess they do." Gabrielle said, forcing a smile back on her face.

"Come on guys, let's get back to Ares. We don't want him feeling unloved." Joxer said as he pulled himself to stand.

"Ares?" Gabrielle asked in surprise.

"Yeah, long story. He's my husband. Deimos is one of our sons." Joxer said, indicating Deimos. "I'm the God of Mischief now... okay, I guess it's not that long of a story." Joxer finished with a shrug.

"It'd be good if you could sit down and tell me the long version sometime." Gabrielle said hopefully.

"I will, I promise. But right now, I have a husband and son waiting on me." Joxer said as he turned to leave.

Gabrielle watched them leave with a tender smile.

* * * * *

"Come on, I need for you to deal with this. They're cursed and they need your help." Apollo said seriously.

"I know they're cursed, I cursed them." Ares said in return.

"What's going on?" Joxer asked with concern.

"Arcadia. The townspeople are going to stone everyone who was blinded or made mute for bringing the curse down on them." Apollo said, trying to appeal to Joxer's compassion.

Joxer looked at Ares and saw the stone-faced expression that Apollo had been facing all along.

"Boys, do you want to help me with this?" Joxer asked, looking to Phobos and Deimos.

"Yeah, we'll help you Poppa Joxer." Phobos said quietly.

"We'll meet you back at the house love, we won't be long." Joxer said simply.

"You're not going without me." Ares said firmly.

"Let's go then." Joxer said and looked to Ares.

"Go ahead, I'll boost you." Ares said with a smile.

"Thanks Love." Joxer said as he pictured Arcadia.

* * * * *

"Don't worry Tad, they can't see or hear us." Deimos said as he saw the look of fear come over Tad's face when he saw the angry mob.

"Someone's going to die if we don't bring on the divine intervention, like right now." Apollo said as he looked at the crowd.

"Pho, dampen their fear, maybe it'll help them to think." Joxer said as he changed into his robes with a thought.

Phobos concentrated and began to channel the collective fear of the crowd into his godhood.

Joxer appeared with a huge flash of light and a green/black cloud of smoke.

"People of Arcadia, this action is not sanctioned by the Gods." Joxer said, projecting his voice for all to hear.

"They brought this curse down on us. They must be punished." A man called out from the crowd.

"Do you presume to know better than the gods?" Joxer asked, looking directly at the man.

"These people have been punished. To live with the curse is their punishment. Their curse is permanent, yours can be lifted... what have you done to heal the children that were raped by that man?" Joxer asked the crowd.

"The priests of Apollo's temple are taking care of them." A woman called out from the crowd.

"The priests of Apollo can help the children, but they also need their community to support them. They need to know that they are loved and wanted, not just the means to end a curse." Joxer called out.

"Tell us what to do. Doing nothing is going to drive us insane." A man called out desperately.

"Choose leaders who will act in the best interest of everyone in your city, even the young and very old. Treat each child as a precious treasure whether they are your child or not. Ease the way for your children so that when they grow up, they will have the skills and knowledge to live at least as well as you do. These are the things that will help your children, please your gods and ease your curse." Joxer said, addressing the entire crowd.

Joxer looked to Apollo and sent, //How are the children?//

//Better. It will be a while before they're completely able to love and trust again, but children are amazingly resilient. They're better than I would have expected.//

//Ares, can you talk to the others about lifting the curse... just a little. As the children improve, we make the curse less.// Joxer sent with hope.

//I'll ask around. Give me a minute.// Ares sent with an undercurrent of love.

//Phobos, Deimos, would you be willing to appear with me and reduce your curse right now? That way the people can know that there can be an end to this.// Joxer asked his sons.

As an answer Phobos and Deimos appeared on either side of Joxer in twin flashes of light.

"People of Arcadia, Apollo has told me that the children are improved from their original condition. Phobos and Deimos have volunteered to ease your curse accordingly." Joxer said and stood back.

"The fear will ease, a sudden movement, an unexpected touch, or a sound from behind will bring it back, but you should be able to sleep through the night." Phobos said coldly.

"The physical pain will ease, but the emotional pain will stay. Remember these feelings. The kids will never forget them." Deimos said as he let his curse weaken.

//Bliss is going to remove his curse, but let's not tell them about that one yet. I think the happiness will be sweeter when they aren't expecting it.// Ares sent warmly.

"People of Arcadia. Love your children. Cherish them the way you want to be cherished. If you do that, the gods will be pleased." Joxer said, then flashed out along with Deimos and Phobos.

"That was really something Pho, do you do that all the time?" Charise asked in wide eyed wonder.

"It's a god thing." Phobos said, trying to be dismissive.

"You looked great out there." Tad said in an impressed voice.

"It's tha robe." Deimos said with a smile.

"Let's go back to the party and tell Hephaestus what's going on, then let's go home." Joxer said and looked to see that Ares was going to boost him.

At Ares nod, Joxer flashed his family back to the wedding reception.

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While Ares, Joxer and Apollo were talking to Hephaestus, Phobos and Deimos were watching Bliss.

Phobos had most of his attention focused on Charise and Deimos on Tad.

A small figure walked past them and sat on the ground beside Bliss.

Destiny glanced quickly at Bliss and carefully took his hand.

Bliss looked into her eyes curiously as she asked, "So, do you come here often?"

Uncontrolled Chaos

Chapter 1

Ares and Hephaistos were sitting in silence, each thinking their own thoughts.

"I just don't know Heph, I can't see how we can cover another country." Ares said simply.

"I know." Hephaistos said quietly.

"If you leave the other houses out of it, the House of War can't divide it's resources that much. The entire power structure of both countries would collapse if we tried." Ares said, then took a drink of his wine.

"It's the same with all the other houses. I've already had the same conversation with Demeter. She says that the House of Nature won't be able to do double duty, even if she had the assistance of Persephone... which she doesn't." Hephaistos said absently.

"She'll never concede that point." Ares said with a shake of his head.

"Zeus left me a real mess. The Grecian power structure was in such disrepair when I inherited it that I'm overwhelmed just trying to keep things going." Hephaistos said in an exhausted voice.

"Heph... have you considered asking for help?" Ares asked carefully.

"There is no help." Hephaistos said in desperation .

"What about Uncle Hades and Uncle Poseidon?" Ares asked in a quiet voice.

"They have their own realms to oversee." Hephaistos said tiredly.

"At least ask for their advice. You won't do any good to anyone if you drive yourself to exhaustion. If you won't do it for yourself, then do it for Greece." Ares said in an imploring voice.

"Yes Ares, I suppose that would be a wise course of action." Hephaistos said with resolve.

Ares nodded but stayed silent.

"How are your family doing? I don't get to visit as often as I'd like." Hephaistos asked with a gentle smile.

"They're fine. The twins have accepted Joxer as their parent, Anteros and Cupid have finally come together as they should have been centuries ago. And now Harmonia is happy, thanks to you." Ares finished contentedly.

"That's good. I knew that she was denying her legacy to be with her husband. Now maybe she can attain her godly potential." Hephaistos said in thought.

"Is that why you did this?" Ares asked with concern.

"Yes, why?" Hephaistos asked curiously.

"Don't take this the wrong way Heph, but that was a move worthy of Zeus." Ares said carefully.

Hephaistos looked shocked, so Ares continued.

"I thought you wanted her to be happy. If you bestowed immortality on her husband to encourage her to take up her godly duties again, then you're trying to control her actions, and disguise it as caring. It's wrong Heph." Ares said darkly.

"I... I didn't do that did I?" Hephaistos asked in confusion.

"Only you can answer that, but I think it's important that you understand your true motivation. If you're starting to think like Zeus, you need to get help as soon as possible. I don't want to lose the Hephaistos that is the example to all of us of what a father should be." Ares said in a pained voice.

"Yes. Perhaps I should take some time to reflect on my motivations. Thank you Ares, for being honest." Hephaistos said quietly.

"Try and get some rest Heph. I think you need it." Ares said as he stood to leave.

"I can but try. There's so much to oversee that I'm afraid that if I let my attention lapse for an instant, the whole country will collapse." Hephaistos said in despair.

"Then call Hades and Poseidon. If they can't help directly, maybe they can suggest what will help." Ares said as he walked toward the door.

"You've convinced me. I'll call them." Hephaistos said as he stood.

"Take care of yourself Heph. We all need you healthy and strong to face this new age." Ares said, standing by the door.

"You too Ares. You aren't only War, you're also our defender and protector. Now that the barrier is down, we need you more than ever." Hephaistos said, while looking him in the eyes.

Ares gripped Hephaistos forearm in the warriors grip, then walked out of the room.

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Ares walked through the Halls of War and made his way back to the private chambers engrossed in his thoughts. As he walked into the sitting room, he felt ice flow through his veins as he saw a foot laying unmoving from the other side of the sofa.

"Joxer?" He asked in a small voice as he moved around the sofa to see Joxer laying in the floor, face-down in a pool of blood.

"Joxer!" He screamed as he pulled Joxer out of the blood and tried to find any sign of life.

//Asclepius! Apollo! Joxer needs your help NOW!// Ares sent with such intensity that no god could possibly ignore it.

In twin flashes of light Apollo and Asclepius appeared in the room. They immediately started scanning and probing Joxer to determine his condition.

Only a few minutes passed as the healers performed their examination but it could have easily been years in Ares' opinion. Finally Ares was jolted by a break in the silence.

"I just don't know. Come on Ace, let's get him to the temple." Apollo said suddenly.

"What's wrong with him?" Ares asked in panic.

"Give us time to find out. I promise he'll be alright. Give us time to do our jobs." Apollo said, then nodded to Asclepius.

There was a sudden flash of light, then Ares stood alone in the room... looking at the puddle of blood at his feet.

* * * * *

"What's wrong dad?" Phobos said as he flashed into the room.

Ares stood silently.

Phobos saw the blood in the floor and could clearly feel the waves of fear coursing off his father.

"Is... Is it Poppa?" Phobos asked hesitantly.

Ares turned his gaze to Phobos, revealing the tears filling his eyes.

//Deimos! Cupid! Ter! Something's happened to Poppa!// Phobos sent in panic.

Cupid, Strife, Anteros, Senscie, Deimos and Tad appeared in the room.

Ares turned his gaze back to the floor and stared at the blood.

"What's wrong Pho? What happened to Poppa?" Demi asked quickly.

"I... I don't know. I found dad like this... and there's blood." Phobos said in a quavering voice.

"Pho, help dad. Do something with his fear so he can tell us what's going on." Cupid said as he held close to Strife.

Phobos nodded and concentrated his power on his father. It wasn't the same as altering the fear in a mortal, but he soon got control of the fear and was able to move it aside.

Ares looked around the room in dawning comprehension.

"Dad, what happened to Poppa Joxer?" Anteros asked quietly.

"I... I don't know. I came home and he was..." Ares trailed off and looked at the puddle of blood again.

"Where is he Dad?" Cupid asked forcefully.

"With Apollo and Asclepius." Ares said quietly.

"Come on Dad, you and me are going to Apollo's temple. Strife, will you stay here with Ter and the boys?" Cupid asked as he walked to his father's side.

"We want to go too." Phobos said immediately.

"It won't help Poppa to have us getting in Apollo's way. I'll tell you as soon as we know anything, just as soon as we find out what's wrong, I promise." Cupid said as he looked into Phobos' eyes.

"As long as you promise." Phobos said quietly.

"I swear, come on Dad, let's go." Cupid said and pulled his father into a hug.

There was a flash of light and they were gone.

* * * * *

"Pol, what's wrong with Joxer?" Cupid asked as soon as he appeared.

"Get back Cupid, I'm not sure if this is some kind of plague. Jett seems to have the same problem as Joxer." Apollo said with worry.

Cupid paled as he saw Jett laying deathly still on a bed being examined by Asclepius next to the one Joxer was on.

"Dad and I are the only ones coming, I got the rest to wait at the Halls of War." Cupid said as he guided Ares out of Apollo's way and noticed Zeus watching Jett with worry.

"Good, thanks Cupid. We should put up some kind of a shield or something to keep anyone else from coming in case it's... Tartarus... I can't leave Joxer... Jace has collapsed..." Apollo announced.

"Thanatos is bringing him... Cupid, can you whip up another bed, I can't divide my attention any further." Apollo asked as he held his glowing hands over Joxer.

Cupid concentrated and another bed appeared.

"What in the nine levels of Tartarus is going on here?" Apollo asked as he hurried across the room to assess Jace's condition.

"Don't leave Joxer." Ares said in a growl.

Apollo stopped in his tracks, and thought.

"Ares, feed Joxer power. That's all I've been able to do for him so far." Apollo said then continued to Jace.

"Come on Dad, we'll both feed him power." Cupid said and led Ares to Joxer's side.

"Cupid, another bed, quick." Apollo called.

Cupid was stunned, but he quickly made another bed.

A second after the bed formed into being, there was a green/black flash and the unconscious and bleeding body of Tsunami appeared with a worried and crying Erebus holding his hand.

"Oh Gods, not you too." Cupid said with worry filling him.

"Zeus, feed power to Jett." Asclepius said in a rush as he ran to Erebus and Tsunami.

//Cupid! Charise just prayed to me. Ganymede just passed out at Meg's, he's bleeding out of his mouth!// Phobos sent in terror.

//Can you and Demi bring him here? I'm kind of busy... And ask Strife to get Bliss and keep him safe... a lot of Gods are getting sick, all at once.// Cupid sent with dread.

//We'll get Ganymede, Strife is going to Hestia's now. Ter and Senscie want to know what's going on.// Phobos sent, more calmly than before.

//A lot of sick gods... That's all I know.// Cupid sent seriously.

There was a bright flash of light and Cupid turned expecting to find Deimos and Phobos with Ganymede, instead he was facing Hestia holding the unconscious body of Strife.

* * * * *

"Apollo! Come here, look at this!" Ares called out from beside Joxer.

"I'm kind of busy here." Apollo said from Jace's side.

"I think I know what's wrong." Ares said firmly.

Apollo looked up at that and said, "Feed him power Thanatos, I'll be right back."

Thanatos nodded and moved his hands over Jace's body.

"What about Strife?" Cupid asked with tears.

"Give me a second, your dad may have found something." Apollo said as he hurried away.

"GAN!" Asclepius said in panic as he saw Phobos and Deimos with Ganymede.

"Pol, look at this, right here... is that what I think it is?" Ares asked as he pointed at Joxer's abdomen.

Apollo focused his power and looked at the area Ares indicated.

"Ace, come here, you've got to see this." Apollo called out.

Asclepius started to walk to his father's side, then crumpled to the floor.

"ACE!" Apollo said and ran to his son.

"Apollo, what can we do for Ganymede?" Cupid asked as he and Hestia fed power into Strife.

"Pho and Demi... feed him power." Apollo said as he rushed to examine Asclepius.

Phobos and Deimos both raised their hands immediately and began projecting their power.

"What is it Dad?" Cupid asked as he reluctantly left Strife to join his father.

"Look there..." Ares said in a calm wondering voice.

Cupid concentrated and took in a gasp of astonishment.

"What is it?" Cupid asked in panic.

"Hang on." Apollo said and moved to examine Jett.

"Strife is bleeding again!" Hestia said in uncharacteristic panic.

"Cupid, check out Strife. Ares, check Tsunami." Apollo said quickly.

"Strife's the same as Joxer." Cupid said, focusing his vision tightly.

"Tsunami too." Ares said as a smile crept across his face.

"Everyone! Listen up! They're all going to be fine. I can't tell you why this is happening all of a sudden, but for some reason, they're all pregnant." Apollo said to the room, then noticed that he was visibly shaking.

"Pregnant?" Cupid squeaked.

"Really?" Phobos asked in wonder.

"Yeah, I know it's possible for a god to bear children, but it's like a really rare thing. It usually takes a major shift in a god's power base for that to happen, like the fall of the Titans... no offense Erebus." Apollo finished shyly.

"None taken." Erebus said without emotion.

"A major shift... like the breaking of the seal?" Ares asked.

"Apparently so... and if that's the case... the goddesses will probably be pregnant too. They just won't have to grow new internal organs to accommodate the babies." Apollo said in thought.

A silence fell over the room as each of the gods comforted their loved one.

"Um, could a God get pregnant from a mortal?" Deimos asked hesitantly.

"No, I don't think so... but if you'd asked me a few days ago if this was possible I would have said 'no'." Apollo said with a shrug.

"So Joxer's going to be okay?" Ares asked with tension.

"Yes Ares, his body is just making a safe place for the baby to grow. Keep feeding him power and when he wakes up, feed him some ambrosia. I expect him to be back on his feet by the end of the day." Apollo said in a considering voice.

//It can't be... I'm death...// Thanatos sent in confusion.

"Your aspect of death is different than that of Hades. Yours is the touch of death, but since Jace can tolerate your touch, there is nothing stopping him from conceiving your child." Apollo said seriously.

"Me too?" Erebus asked from Tsunami's side.

"Yes. I'm not as familiar with your godhood as I am with Thanatos' but the evidence before us would seem to support that conclusion." Apollo said professionally.

//I'm going to be a father.// Thanatos sent in shock.

Everyone looked at him and felt tenderness for the shocked god of death.

"Strife and I are going to have a baby." Cupid said with a grand smile.

"After I've checked everyone out, you'll be able to take them home. Just feed them power until they wake, and feed the Olympian gods ambrosia when they wake up. Feed the members of the house of death Asphodelain blood wine when they wake.

And all of them will need to stay in bed for the next three days for their new organs to complete their development." Apollo said to the group before moving to examine Joxer.

"Thanks Pol." Ares said in a whisper.

"You had the tough part, I'm glad they're all going to be alright." Apollo said as he finished examining Joxer.

"Go on, take your husband home." Apollo said as he moved to Jett.

Ares nodded and looked to see Phobos and Deimos watching him.

"Come on boys, let's take your Poppa home." Ares said and waited for his sons to join him.

"I'm going to take Strife to his parents, I think he'd want that." Cupid said to his father.

"Just let us know how he's doing." Ares said tenderly.

"I promise." Cupid said and waited for Apollo to make his way to Strife.

Chapter 2

As soon as Deimos appeared in the room, Tad immediately pulled him close in a hug of relief.

"Don't worry Taddy, I'm fine." Deimos said in a soothing whisper.

"What's wrong with Joxer?" Senscie asked in near hysteria.

"Joxer's pregnant." Ares said with a grand and glorious smile as he arranged Joxer on the couch.

Silence.

"We're gonna have a baby brother or sister?" Phobos said in realization.

"Yes... and nephews, nieces, cousins... It seems that all the newly married couples are pregnant." Ares said with joy.

Senscie got a look of surprise and looked quickly at Anteros.

The look of peace and joy that Anteros gave her burned itself into her soul for eternity.

"We need to check to be sure." Senscie said in warning.

Anteros dropped to his knees before her and held his opened palm before her abdomen.

As Senscie watched the glowing hand move, she held her breath, not daring to hope.

"There it is... our baby." Anteros said as tears of joy fell down his cheeks.

"Can I see?" Senscie asked in a whisper.

Anteros took her hand in his and guided her mind to be able to focus on the baby.

"That little spark is our baby?" Senscie asked in wonder.

"Yes. Our baby." Anteros said with joy.

Tad was still holding Deimos tightly when he felt him start to shake.

"What's wrong Demi?" Tad asked immediately.

Deimos' eyes rolled up in his head and his weight fell fully against Tad.

"Someone help me, Demi just passed out." Tad said in panic.

"Ease him to the floor." Ares said as he moved to Deimos side.

"Is he? Is it?" Tad stammered.

Ares moved his hand gently across Deimos abdomen to be sure.

"Yes Tad, it looks like you're going to be a father too." Ares said cautiously, waiting for Tad's reaction.

"A... a father?" Tad asked, then went pale.

Fortunately Sencie was close by and caught Tad as he fell unconscious.

"Lay him beside Deimos... I guess I'd better check him to be sure." Ares said and moved his hand over Tad.

"He just fainted... thank the gods for that. His mortal body couldn't have handled the formation of new organs." Ares said in relief.

"Besides that, Deimos and Tad are going to have their hands full taking care of *one* baby." Anteros said, watching his brother with sympathy.

"It's too early to be sure of that... Deimos *is* a twin." Ares said frankly.

"So are you." Anteros said, then added, "And Joxer's a triplet."

Ares eyes went wide at the thought.

"Dad, you can't pass out... there's no one left to catch you." Anteros said, trying to distract Ares from the thoughts racing through his mind.

"I've got to go check on Charise... I mean, if Deimos is pregnant..." Phobos said with wide eyes.

"Go ahead Pho... bring her here. And let everyone at Meg's know that Ganymede is going to be okay." Ares said seriously.

Phobos nodded and flashed out of the room.

Tad's eyes began to flutter, then he said, "I just had the weirdest dream."

Ares, Senscie and Anteros shared a look of amusement.

Tad looked to see Deimos beside him and then around the rest of the room.

"Oh gods! It wasn't a dream... I'm going to have a baby!" Tad said in panic.

"Well, Deimos is going to take care of that part, but yes, you're going to be a father." Ares said with amusement.

"I can't... I mean... I work in a brothel... I can't be a good father." Tad said in anguish.

Anteros released Senscie reluctantly and moved to Tad's side.

"Do you love Deimos?" Anteros asked seriously.

"Yes." Tad said without hesitation.

"Do you want this baby?" Anteros asked, sending an undirected prayer to whoever would listen that the answer was 'yes'.

"Of course." Tad said with offense, hurt that Anteros had even asked the question.

"Then you'll be a fine father." Anteros said with assurance.

"Should I marry him?" Tad asked, and shifted his gaze to Deimos.

"That's between you and Deimos. You should really talk to Dad about that... Ares. Him and Mom never married but they were the best parents anyone could ask for. If they'd gotten married... it probably would have been a living Tartarus for everyone. If you decide to get married, do it because you want to be married to Deimos, not for your child. You'll be the baby's father no matter what." Anteros said softly.

Tad nodded, then smiled at Anteros.

"Thanks Anteros. With a brother-in-law like you to give me advice, I can't go wrong." Tad said as he held one of Deimos' hands firmly.

"Let's get him to bed so he won't be stiff and sore when he wakes up." Anteros said with a smile.

Tad scooped Deimos up in his arms and walked to Phobos' bedroom.

"Deimos' room is here." Anteros said from the door Tad had just passed.

"I know, but Demi told me that they put two beds in Phobos room so they could share it. I think he'll need his brother right now more than ever." Tad said as he toed open the door and laid Deimos gently on the bed.

"There's no doubt that you'll be a good husband to him if you decide to marry." Anteros said from the doorway.

"Thanks." Tad said as he arranged Deimos to be comfortable.

"We'll be coming in to feed Deimos power in a few minutes. I'll give you a few minutes alone now." Anteros said and withdrew.

"Thanks again." Tad said as he moved a few strands of hair from Deimos' forehead.

* * * * *

"What happened?" Jett asked in confusion.

"You passed out." Zeus said in a whisper.

"Am I sick?" Jett asked as he tried to shake the fog from his mind.

"No my love, you're pregnant with our child." Zeus said happily.

"Really?" Jett said with wide eyes as he looked at his stomach.

Zeus guided Jett's hand to the spot that housed their baby and guided his supernatural sight to see the child.

Jett's eyes went wide as he understood what he was seeing.

"That's our baby." Zeus whispered as he began to stroke Jett's hand gently.

"Our son." Jett said in wonder.

Zeus looked at Jett in question.

Jett noticed and elaborated, "Can't you feel his presence? He's passion, power, and.... and like you. He's a force of nature."

Zeus carefully merged his mind with Jett's to see what he was seeing.

"Whirlwind... Tornado... Waterspout... our child, our son, he's going to have such power." Zeus said between wonder and joy as he looked at Jett's abdomen.

"Our son." Jett said and drew Zeus' gaze and held it.

* * * * *

"HE'S WHAT?" Hades asked in a booming voice.

"Pregnant." Cupid said in a small voice, still feeling intimidated by Hades.

"How? Wait, I know how, but... how?" Hades stammered.

"The power shift. It caused supernatural fertility." Cupid said as he rested one hand on Strife's slim belly.

"So Strife's not the only one?" Hades asked in thought.

"No, Joxer, Jett, Jace, Tsunami, Ganymede and Asclepius as far as I know... probably a lot more." Cupid said shyly.

"Thank you for bringing him here Cupid." Persephone said quietly as Hades absorbed the news.

"I knew he'd want to be with you both. He loves you so much..." Cupid said as he gazed at Strife.

"He loves you too." Persephone said as she took a seat by Strife's other side to look fondly at her son.

"Yeah. I've been a love god all my life and never knew this kind of love existed... it's humbling." Cupid said in a distant voice.

"Cupe?" Strife asked with his eyes still closed.

"Right here, lay still." Cupid said quickly.

"Bliss?" Strife asked immediately.

"He's with Hestia." Cupid whispered.

"Ah need ta talk ta him." Strife said firmly.

"Shhh. Give yourself a few minutes to wake up, then I'll get him." Cupid said in a soothing voice.

"Ah felt mahself fallin unconscious, an Ah saw tha look in his eyes. He was scared Cupe. Ah need ta let him know Ah'm okay." Strife said with more strength.

"I'll get him now. Your mom and dad are right here if you need anything." Cupid said to Strife, then looked to Hades and said, "Apollo says he needs to drink some Asphodelian Blood Wine."

"I'll take care of it. Go get my grandson." Hades said with a smile.

Cupid froze for an instant. Hades had never acknowledged any kind of relationship to Bliss before.

Soon Cupid snapped out of it and went to collect Bliss from Hestia.

* * * * *

Apollo appeared in the living room of the Halls of War looking exhausted... but happy.

"So what's the news 'Pol?" Ares asked as he fed Joxer power.

"As near as I can tell, the shift in the power base made everyone present in the field that day supernaturally fertile." Apollo said as he sat heavily in an armchair.

"Supernaturally? How do you mean?" Anteros asked from Sencsie's side.

"For example, Lust is pregnant by Hera. Apparently..." Apollo said with a pained expression.

"Please stop. Hera's my grandmother and I don't want to have to live with the mental image I think you're about to give me." Anteros said with a sour look.

"I'll stop." Apollo said with sympathy.

"Anyone else?" Ares asked casually.

"Well, of course all the newly married couples are pregnant. It seems that Charon and Celeste are going to have a child even though they never technically had sex." Apollo said weakly.

"How? I mean, what do you mean *technically*?" Anteros asked.

"You really don't want to carry that image Ter, I'm thinking of asking Lethe to give me something to get it out of my head. Some of the members of the house of death

have very different ideas about what constitutes sex." Apollo said with a queasy look.

Anteros nodded hesitantly.

"Athena's pregnant." Apollo said quietly.

"What? She holds her virginity up like a banner... or a shield. How can she be pregnant?" Ares asked in confusion.

"I guess the power shift along with millennia of unsatisfied sexual tension combined to cause her to spontaneously regenerate." Apollo said unsteadily.

"She's asexual?" Sencie asked with a furrowed brow.

Apollo considered that for a moment, then smiled and said, "Yes Sencie. In fact, that explanation not only fits the situation, but her personality. Thank you."

Ares chuckled.

"I'm here to see if any of the other members of the House of War have fallen pregnant." Apollo said, back to his professional demeanor.

"Yes, Deimos is pregnant and so is Phobos' mortal girlfriend, Charise." Ares said seriously.

Apollo nodded.

"Did you get anyone pregnant?" Anteros asked, knowing Apollo's reputation for being a horn-dog.

Apollo nodded shyly, then said, "I guess everyone will find out soon anyway. Three muses, a priestess in Thebes and..."

"I didn't catch that last one 'Pol." Ares said curiously.

"I said Pan." Apollo said in a humiliated voice.

"Pan?" Ares asked with wide eyes.

"We were drunk and having a good time and one thing... yeah, Pan. He's a nice enough God." Apollo finished defensively.

"I'm sorry 'Pol, I just never expected..." Ares trailed off.

"I'm actually worried about him. None of the male gods are designed for childbirth, but I think Pan is going to have a more difficult time than anyone else." Apollo said with actual worry.

"If there's anything we can do to help, just let us know Pol." Ares said seriously.

"I'll keep you posted. In fact, I need to check on Ace and Gan, then get back to Pan. I'm really worried for him. He's not physically equipped for this, but he's even less emotionally equipped." Apollo said in a quiet voice.

"If you think it would help, you could bring him here to visit. Being around so many other pregnant male gods might give him a sense of normalcy about it." Ares said thoughtfully.

"I may do that. Thanks Ares. Remember to start feeding them Ambrosia as soon as they wake up, the babies will need it." Apollo said as he stood to leave.

"Even Deimos? His child is a demi-god." Anteros asked quickly.

Apollo stopped and thought.

Finally he said, "Yes, especially Deimos. Him being so young, he'll need the Ambrosia to help him cope with the birth. The child will be born a full god, but the other choice is the possibility of losing them both."

"Thanks 'Pol. When everything settles, we'll bring everyone by for a checkup." Ares said as he stood.

"Please don't. It makes no sense to bring everyone to my temple when I can come over here. Call me if you have any questions or concerns, otherwise, I'll be back later this week to check everyone out." Apollo said, then flashed out.

* * * * *

Tsunami's eyes began to flutter open.

"Nami? How are you feeling?" Erebus asked with panic and concern.

"I'm... I don't know. What happened?" Tsunami asked, puzzled by Erebus' worry.

"You're pregnant." Erebus whispered.

"I'm WHAT?" Tsunami screamed as he bolted upright.

"Nami, you need to stay laying down. Your body is creating a safe place for our baby to grow." Erebus said as he tried to ease Tsunami to sit back.

"How did this happen?" Tsunami asked in confusion.

"Well, when two gods really love each other..." Erebus began with a playful smile.

Tsunami rolled his eyes, then chuckled.

"Apollo thinks that the breaking of the seal made everyone super fertile." Erebus said, then took Tsunami's hand to his lips to give a gentle kiss.

Tsunami smiled at the loving gesture and pulled Erebus down into a slow kiss of love.

After a long minute of kissing, Tsunami suddenly broke the kiss and asked, "How's the baby? Is it going to be alright?"

"Shh Nami. Here, drink this and the baby will be fine." Erebus said as he produced a chalice of blood wine.

Tsunami sat up with Erebus' help and sipped the wine.

"This is really good." Tsunami said with a curious look.

"It's Asphodelian Blood Wine. It serves the same purpose to the members of the House of Death as Ambrosia serves the other houses of Olympus." Erebus said as he guided Tsunami to take another drink.

After finishing the wine, Tsunami rested back and looked into Erebus' eyes with worry.

"What is it Nami?" Erebus asked with concern.

"What kind of a life can we give our child? We're Titans in a world of Gods." Tsunami said darkly.

"I don't understand." Erebus said quietly as he held Tsunami's hand firmly to his heart.

"Our time has come and gone. We have no purpose in this time. Maybe it would be better if we lived beneath Tartarus, at least we'd be among our own kind and in our proper place." Tsunami said as tears filled his eyes.

"Nami? Why haven't you told me you feel this way?" Erebus said with pain.

"I love you so much. Being with you was enough, but now we have to do what's best for our baby." Tsunami said darkly.

"I'll find us a place Nami. Don't worry, by the time our child is born, we'll have a purpose." Erebus said firmly.

"Thanks Erry, you've always kept your promises to me. I won't worry about it anymore." Tsunami said with heavy lidded eyes.

"Sleep now my love. You need plenty of rest so our baby will grow to be a big strong Titan." Erebus said with love.

A tender smile fell across Tsunami's face as he drifted into sleep.

Chapter 3

"Ares, do you mind if I bother you for a minute?" Hephaistos asked quietly as he faded into being.

"Anytime Heph... I mean, you *are* king of the gods after all." Ares said as he kept his power flowing into Joxer.

"I'm not visiting you as a king, it's as a brother." Hephaistos said as he produced a chair for himself and sat beside Ares.

"What's wrong Heph? You sound really worried." Ares asked with concern.

"It's Aphrodite..." Hephaistos said with pain.

"What's wrong with Dite?" Ares asked and turned his full attention to Hephaistos.

"This whole pregnancy thing plus all the marriages are kind of overloading her godhood." Hephaistos said with worry.

"Marriage and Childbirth... I can see how that could happen." Ares said as he stopped the flow of power and took Joxer's hand to hold.

"She needs to be pregnant." Hephaistos said in a pained voice.

Ares stared as he thought about that.

"It's about the only thing I can't do for her... and she needs it." Hephaistos said with anguish.

"Heph, if you're asking what I think you're asking, I can't... I'd never do that to Joxer." Ares said firmly.

"I know. What I'm asking is for you to help me find someone... it will kill me to do it... but I need to find someone to make her pregnant." Hephaistos said with tears forming in his eyes.

"I don't know." Ares said as he thought.

"Arry?" Joxer said in a weak voice.

"Joxer? How are you feeling? Do you need anything?" Ares asked immediately.

"Drink." Joxer said in a whisper.

Ares produced a glass of water and helped Joxer sit up so he could drink it.

"Thanks Ar, what's wrong with Aphrodite?" Joxer asked with concern.

"When the seal on Greece was broken the increased power base made everyone super-fertile, so every couple there... and a few others... became pregnant. Aphrodite is feeling the power boost from her godhood plus the super-fertility and it's hurting her." Ares said with concern.

"Is that? Am I?" Joxer puzzled.

"Yes, you're pregnant with our baby." Ares said with a glorious smile.

Joxer pulled Ares to kiss him deeply.

"I'll come back later." Hephaistos mumbled.

Joxer pulled out of the kiss and said, "No, please don't."

Hephaistos waited with a look of question in his eyes.

"Ar, I heard you talking before, what you said, and I love you more than ever because of it. But you have to understand how I feel." Joxer said with determination.

Ares nodded.

"I want you to do it Ar. I've never been jealous of Aphrodite for even a minute since we've been married. She's the mother of all your godly children and that's just her part in our family. I know you love her, but you're in love with me, and I trust you completely. Go and make her pregnant, then come home to me. Do it for our kids mother if for no other reason." Joxer said in a begging tone.

"I never thought it was possible to love you even more..." Ares said with tears in his eyes.

"Go ahead and do it Ar, she's suffering." Joxer said with a smile.

Ares eyes defocused. A heartbeat later Anteros and Senscie appeared in the room.

"What is it dad?" Anteros asked with worry.

"Will you stay with Joxer while I go help Heph with something?" Ares asked quietly.

"Sure. Will you be gone long?" Anteros asked casually.

"No longer than I have to be." Ares said with a tender smile directed at Joxer.

"Okay, we'll be fine." Anteros said and took the seat that Ares vacated.

"Oh, and get him to eat some ambrosia, the baby needs it." Ares said as an afterthought.

"Will do." Anteros said and produced a bowl of ambrosia.

Ares waited for Hephaistos to join him and watched tenderly as Anteros said, "Come on Poppa Joxer, open wide."

* * * * *

As Jace awoke, he recognized the sensation of being held.

//Than?// Jace asked hesitantly.

//How are you feeling, my love?// Thanatos asked with such intensity that tears came to Jace's eyes.

//Confused. We were talking about putting in a garden, then... I'm here. What happened?// Jace asked as he snuggled closer into Thanatos' chest.

//You're carrying our child.// Thanatos sent with such absolute joy that Jace couldn't help but pull Thanatos into a deep kiss of passion.

When the kiss finally broke, the words really registered in Jace's mind.

//I'm pregnant?// Jace asked in confusion.

//Yes my love. You've given me a gift that I'd never thought possible. We're having a baby.// Thanatos sent in glorious rapture.

Jace felt a tear fall on his cheek and looked to see the tears of joy freely flowing from Thanatos' eyes.

[I've never done anything to deserve such a wonderful gift as Thanatos. I can never be worthy of such love. But I swear by all that is good and holy in the universe that I will do everything in my power to provide the happiest, best home that Thanatos or the baby could ever dream of.] Jace thought to himself.

//Here, drink this.// Thanatos thought hurriedly and produced a chalice of Blood Wine.

Jace obediently drank the wine, then pulled Thanatos into another kiss.

[A baby, our baby.] Jace thought in wonder.

* * * * *

Ares and Hephaistos appeared in the private rooms of the Main Temple of Olympus.

"Ares came to help us with our problem." Hephaistos said quickly at Aphrodite's inquisitive look.

"No Hephy, I can't do that to Joxy. It violates their marriage vows." Aphrodite said immediately.

"Joxer asked me to come here and make you pregnant." Ares said quietly.

"What?" Aphrodite asked with wide eyes.

"He said that you are the mother to all of our godly children, that's your part of our family. You're suffering, so I'm to come over here, make you pregnant, then come home." Ares finished with a great smile.

"Oh Ar, you'd better appreciate him. I can't think of anyone else, god or mortal, who would do that." Aphrodite said as tears formed in her eyes.

"He's my one true love." Ares said with a tender smile.

"Then let's not keep Joxy waiting." Aphrodite said with purpose.

Ares and Aphrodite began walking to the bedroom as Hephaistos watched.

"Come on Heph, we're making your child, you need to be there." Ares said gently.

Hephaistos stared apprehensively.

"He's right honey bunch. This is going to be our baby, and I want it to be conceived in love. Ares is going to provide the seed, but you need to provide the love." Aphrodite said as she gazed into her husband's eyes.

Hephaistos finally smiled and said, "I can provide all the love our child will ever need."

Ares and Aphrodite pulled Hephaistos to walk between them and led him into the bedroom.

Ganymede opened his eyes hesitantly as he felt something... off.

"How are you feeling Ganymede?" Apollo asked as he moved to Ganymede's side.

"Um, okay, I guess." Ganymede said as he looked around.

"Let me help you sit up so you can eat some ambrosia." Apollo said professionally.

Ganymede allowed Apollo to help him to a sitting position, then noticed Asclepius on the next bed over.

"ACE?" Ganymede said with panic.

"Shhh, let him rest a while longer. He'll be fine, I promise." Apollo said as he held a spoon full of ambrosia before Ganymede's mouth.

"What's wrong with h..." Ganymede started to say, but was interrupted by a spoon of ambrosia being popped into his mouth.

"He's pregnant." Apollo said as he withdrew the spoon and loaded it again.

Ganymede's eyes went wide and his mouth dropped open slightly... and it was promptly filled with ambrosia.

After swallowing the mouthful of ambrosia, Ganymede asked, "How is he? How's the baby?"

Apollo smiled warmly at Ganymede and said, "Both are fine... but there's more."

Ganymede looked at Apollo warily.

"You're pregnant too." Apollo said, waiting to catch Ganymede if he had to.

Ganymede's eyes went wide and jaw went slack again.

Apollo couldn't resist the opening and hurriedly spooned in some more ambrosia.

Ganymede looked at Apollo with irritation and swallowed before asking, "How? I mean, we only tried it once."

"Gan, once is all it takes." Apollo said with a look of apology.

"So we're both pregnant... by each other... please tell me that's all the news." Ganymede asked as he looked into Apollo's eyes with begging worry.

"Yeah, that's all the big news. Except that just about every godly couple on Olympus is pregnant." Apollo said as he eased Ganymede to lay back on his bed.

"Ace is really okay?" Ganymede asked with worry.

"Just fine, he should wake up soon." Apollo said with a gentle smile.

Ganymede nodded and turned to watch Asclepius sleep.

"Ganymede?" Apollo asked hesitantly.

Ganymede turned slightly to look at Apollo.

"I don't remember if I said it before... Welcome to my family. I can see how much you and Ace love each other... I don't know how else to say it..." Apollo said unsteadily.

"I understand. This all came up so fast that we didn't ask for your blessing or approval. Thank you for giving it." Ganymede said with a sincere smile.

"Yeah, that's what I was trying to say." Apollo said with relief.

Ganymede nodded and turned his gaze back to Asclepius.

* * * * *

"What's going on Poppa Joxer?" Anteros asked when the last of the ambrosia had been eaten.

"Your dad is making your mom pregnant." Joxer said with a peaceful smile.

"Really?" Anteros said in surprise.

"Yeah. I don't really understand it completely, but all I know is that she was suffering because she needed to be pregnant and Hephaistos couldn't do it for her." Joxer said, looking into Anteros' eyes for understanding.

"And you're really okay with that?" Anteros asked hesitantly.

"Yes Ter, I really am. Your father and I both love Aphrodite as part of our family and... I don't know if I can explain it except to say that it feels right." Joxer said in tranquility.

Anteros got a distant look, then a smile flooded across his face.

"What is it Ter?" Joxer asked curiously.

"My new godhood... Everything is going to be fine." Anteros said, looking like he was about to cry with joy.

"Tell me." Joxer said, in awe of Anteros' expression.

"The essence of Brotherly Love. Dad and Hephaistos... it's beautiful. Oh gods Joxer, I didn't understand this type of love before... I've got the best godhood ever." Anteros said as the tears began to fall.

"I guess that means that Heph and Arry are both at peace with this." Joxer said happily.

"Yeah. I think dad is doing this out of love for Hephaistos as much as love for mom. It's so beautiful..." Anteros trailed off.

"Good, every child should be conceived in love, their child will be a child of the romantic love of Hephaistos and Aphrodite, brotherly love of Hephaistos and Ares, and the physical love of Ares and Aphrodite... the child is blessed." Joxer said peacefully.

"There's one more..." Anteros said, drawing Joxer's attention.

"What's that Ter?" Joxer asked curiously.

"The spiritual love that you have for Daddy Hep and Mom. You're there with him in spirit, dad carries you with him." Anteros said with certainty.

Joxer placed a hand on his abdomen and said, "Their child will be a brother or sister to my child..."

"And you'll be Poppa Joxer to both of them." Anteros said contentedly.

"And if she'll allow it, Aphrodite will be my child's mother, just like she's mother to the rest of my children." Joxer said in realization.

"So both babies will have a Dad, Mom, Daddy Hep and Poppa Joxer." Anteros said joyfully.

"That sounds perfect Ter. Do you think it can work?" Joxer asked hopefully.

"We'll make it work Poppa." Anteros said happily.

* * * * *

"I love you." Hephaistos whispered to his wife as he kissed her.

"I love you too Hephy." Aphrodite said after the kiss broke.

"How do you want to do this?" Ares asked hesitantly.

"The easy way." Aphrodite said and their clothes vanished with a thought.

Hephaistos blushed deeply and he turned away from Ares slightly.

Ares looked at Aphrodite curiously and she nodded.

Ares moved to Hephaistos and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Heph, we'll only do this if you're really okay with it. I'm here for you as much as Aphrodite." Ares said seriously.

Hephaistos nodded and turned to look at Ares.

A look of surprise came over Hephaistos when he saw the peaceful and joyous expression of love in Ares' eyes.

"Thank you." Was all that Hephaistos could say as he was led by Aphrodite and Ares into the bed.

The three settled in quietly, then gentle petting began in prelude to the act of love.

* * * * *

"What are you doing out of bed?" Joxer asked seriously.

"Need my Poppa." Deimos said shyly as Tad and Senscie led him to the other sofa.

"Do you need anything right now?" Joxer asked while Deimos was getting settled.

"Don't know what's gonna happen. Never thought I'd be pregnant." Deimos mumbled.

"To be honest, I don't know what's going to happen either. But we'll all be going through it together." Joxer said peacefully.

Phobos and Charise walked into the room next.

Phobos looked around, then produced an overstuffed chair for Charise to sit in.

"How are you doing Charise?" Joxer asked with a smile.

"Pho won't let me lift a finger to do anything. He treats me like I'm made of glass." Charise said as she took Phobos' hand and held it to her heart.

"Good for you Pho." Joxer said proudly.

"Thanks Poppa." Phobos said shyly.

Anteros blushed a little and produced a chair for Senscie.

"It's okay Anteros, I could have done that." Senscie said with a chuckle.

"I should have thought of it earlier." Anteros said hesitantly.

"Don't start with the guilt already, I'll make you a deal. If I need you to do something, I'll tell you. How's that?" Senscie asked seriously.

Anteros nodded.

"Poppa?" Deimos said carefully.

"Yes?" Joxer responded.

"What would you think if me and Tad got married?" Deimos asked carefully.

"Why do you want to get married?" Joxer asked slowly.

"Cause I don't want to be without him." Deimos said hesitantly.

"How do you feel Tad?" Joxer asked, liking Deimos answer.

"The same. I want to be with Demi." Tad said as he looked into Deimos eyes.

"Guys, I think it's a good idea. You two should talk to Aphrodite and get her advice on how best to proceed. Her godhood is marriage and she should be able to give you the best advice." Joxer said peacefully as he absently stroked his stomach.

"Thanks Poppa Joxer, we'll do that as soon as I'm allowed to get up." Deimos said quietly.

"Yes, thank you..." Tad trailed off, not knowing the proper address for Joxer.

"Call me Poppa Joxer, Tad. I'm going to be your father-in-law and grandfather to your child." Joxer said with peace and joy.

"Okay, thank you Poppa Joxer." Tad said with a watery smile.

Chapter 4

"How you doin boogah?" Strife asked as he hugged Bliss gently.

"You gonna be okay Poppa Stwife?" Bliss asked with tears in his eyes.

"Yeah, I promise. Yer Daddy's gonna take good care of me, jest like he takes good care of you." Strife said gently.

"Auntie Hestie said you gonna have my baby brother or sister." Bliss said carefully.

"Yeah. I got yer baby brothah or sistah right in here." Strife said as he pointed to his abdomen.

"You ate him?" Bliss asked with the tears starting to flow again.

"No boogah. Ah'd nevah do that. Yer Daddy put the baby in here soes it can be someplace safe until it's ready ta be born." Strife said lovingly as he pulled Bliss tight to his chest.

"My Daddy can do anything." Bliss said with a watery smile.

"You got that right." Strife said happily.

* * * * *

"What happened?" Joxer asked in confusion.

"Ya fell asleep. Can I get'cha anything?" Phobos asked gently.

"Um, no. Not right now. Let me wake up a little bit first. I feel like I've been sleeping for over a year." Joxer said as he blinked his eyes.

"Ten minutes, fifteen tops." Phobos said with a smile and took a seat on the chair by the sofa.

"Where is Charise?" Joxer asked as he looked around.

"Taking a nap. Everyone is. I guess when they saw you sleepin it sounded like a good idea." Phobos said with a smile.

"Why aren't you taking a nap with Charise?" Joxer asked curiously.

"Cause I'm not sleepy. I wanted ta be in here when you woke up soes I could give ya a message from Dad." Phobos said seriously.

"Oh? What did Arry have to say?" Joxer asked, beginning to feel more awake.

"He didn't want to wake you up. He said that since you was sleepin, he had some stuff he wanted ta get done in tha mortal realm. War stuff. I asked if he wanted me ta help him but he said this was just some boring stuff that he could take care of." Phobos said as he crossed his legs and began to shake his foot with nervous energy.

Joxer watched the foot for a moment, then said, "Well, if you don't have anything else planned, I could use your help with something."

"What can I do fer ya Poppa?" Phobos asked immediately as he placed both feet on the floor.

"You know I just made my first temple in the mortal realm..." Joxer said slowly.

"Yeah." Phobos said quickly.

"I thought I had a high priestess selected, but she ended up marrying Anteros." Joxer continued.

"Yeah." Phobos said anxiously.

"So there's no one to take care of my temple. Someone needs to feed the toads and water the plants." Joxer said seriously.

"I can do that!" Phobos said and immediately hopped up out of the chair.

"Wait a second Pho. There's more." Joxer said quickly.

Phobos slowly sat back down, this time on the arm of the chair.

"You remember how we acted when we visited Arcadia?" Joxer asked slowly.

Phobos nodded quickly.

"It'll be best if you act like that... Like a mortal." Joxer said seriously.

"Yeah. I can do that." Phobos said with a smile.

"One other thing... I know that as the god of fear, that you like to scare people. There probably won't be anyone in my temple, but if there is, I need for you to

treat them kindly. I want my temple to be a place of refuge for people who need help... especially kids. Will you promise me?" Joxer asked seriously.

Phobos looked at Joxer in consideration for a moment before saying, "Hows bout this? I'll be nice ta any kids around, and I'll just leave tha adults alone?"

Joxer smiled and said, "Close enough. Are you going to be okay going to the mortal realm on your own?"

"I wouldn't want ta go ta Thebes or Athens by myself, but I'll be okay at yer temple." Phobos said seriously.

"Since I have to stay in bed, I'm not allowed to use my god powers, but you can still mind-speak with me if you have any questions or need anything." Joxer said seriously.

"Yeah. You need anythin before I go?" Phobos asked quickly.

"No. I'm fine. But if I do need anything, I'll call you. I promise." Joxer said with a gentle smile.

Phobos rushed to Joxer's side and gently hugged him as he said, "Thanks Poppa Joxer. No one never trusted me or made me feel important before."

Joxer smiled and said, "Soon you're going to be a father. If you're old enough to handle that kind of responsibility, then I think you're old enough to take a solo trip to the mortal world."

Phobos quickly stood and said, "Okay. I love you Poppa Joxer."

Joxer watched with a tender smile as Phobos vanished in a bright red cloud with silver sparkles.

* * * * *

"Gan?" Asclepius asked in confusion as he started to come awake.

"How are you feeling Ace?" Ganymede asked immediately.

Asclepius put his hand on his abdomen and said, "Sore, like I was punched in the gut... did Hercules catch me off guard?"

Ganymede motioned for one of the temple priests to come to him and said, "Tell Apollo that Asclepius is awake, then get him some ambrosia."

The priest nodded once and left to perform the appointed tasks.

"What happened?" Asclepius asked in confusion, then paled as the memory of Ganymede, unconscious and bleeding, filled his mind.

"I'm fine Ace. I promise..." Ganymede began to say when Asclepius broke in.

"The plague! Did Dad find a cure for it? Are you going to be okay?" Asclepius asked in escalating panic.

"It's not a plague, everyone is pregnant." Ganymede said quickly, hoping to assure Asclepius before he became so worried that he got out of bed.

Asclepius' foggy mind tried to process the statement and make sense of it.

"Ace, I'm pregnant with our baby." Ganymede said in a softer voice.

"Oh Gan! How?" Asclepius asked in wonder.

"You remember last night when we decided to... um..." Ganymede began shyly.

"I know how. I mean... how?" Asclepius asked with frustration.

Before Ganymede could answer, Apollo walked to Asclepius bedside and said, "When the seal on Greece was released, all the gods were flooded with power from the expanded power base. I suppose the natural reaction to overwhelming power is to produce more gods to help channel it."

Asclepius squinted at his father in thought, then a look of realization came over his face.

"Gan's pregnant?" Asclepius asked in a gasp of disbelief.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you." Ganymede said in a hesitant voice, not knowing what Asclepius' reaction would be.

"Both you and Ganymede are pregnant." Apollo said firmly.

Asclepius looked into his father's eyes, hoping to find some hint of this being a joke... he found none. Finally he whispered helplessly, "What am I going to do?"

"You're going to sit up and let me feed you some ambrosia." Apollo said as a bowl of ambrosia appeared in his hand.

Asclepius sat and stared in shock as Apollo spooned the ambrosia into his son's mouth.

"Ace?" Ganymede asked in fear, not wanting to even consider that Asclepius might not want their children.

Asclepius turned absently and glanced at Ganymede.

A bolt of ice ran up his spine when he saw the expression on Ganymede's face.

"I love you Gan, we're going to have some wonderful babies. " Asclepius said with assurance, hoping to alleviate Ganymede's fear.

Ganymede rested back in relief at the statement and said, "I love you too Ace."

"Good. That's what's most important right now." Apollo said seriously as he put the last spoon of ambrosia into Asclepius' mouth.

Apollo noticed that both Asclepius and Ganymede were looking at him with question, hoping for some guidance.

"Guys, for the next couple days you both need to stay in bed to give you time to fully develop the new organs your babies will need." Apollo said clinically.

"Ace, you need to pick one or two of your priests to watch over you. Let me know who it is and I'll see that they're brought here." Apollo said in thought.

"Cleptus and his wife Alonnia would be a good choice. Cleptus is as good a mortal healer as I've ever seen and his wife is a talented midwife." Asclepius said in thought.

"What about you Ganymede, are there any of your priests or followers you'd like to have brought to Olympus to take care of you?" Apollo asked casually.

Ganymede thought for a moment, then said, "There's a boy named Dorin from a small village East of Corinth. When his sister became my follower, Dorin followed her example and dedicated himself to me. He's too young to do... um... the usual work. But I think he would take good care of us and be good company besides. He's really a nice kid."

Apollo smiled and said, "Good thinking, both of you. Ace's priest can help ease any physical discomfort that might arise and Ganymede's acolyte can help to alleviate the boredom that comes with extended bed rest."

Asclepius looked at Ganymede with a gentle smile, feeling pride on behalf of his husband.

"My priests will be in to move you to Asclepius rooms. You are both to stay in bed and use no godly powers." Apollo said firmly.

"Don't worry. I'm sure we can survive a few days together." Ganymede said with an expression of love directed at Asclepius.

After a long moment of looking into Ganymede's eyes, Asclepius said, "Three days in bed with you... I can't think of anything better."

Apollo smiled at the statement, then walked to the priest by the door to give his instructions.

* * * * *

Phobos followed the glimpse of the location that Joxer had mentally sent to him and appeared before the temple in the mortal realm.

He was about to go in and get to work when he stopped and tilted his head a little one way, then the other as he looked at the building. It was somehow misshapen, off-center and the whole thing seemed to be tilted slightly to the left.

Phobos shook his head to dismiss his curiosity and get to work.

As he stepped through the large entry door he nearly stepped in something.

"Ewww." He said to himself, as he looked at it, then realized that it was made out of stone.

Phobos looked at the 'sculpture' for a moment longer, then giggled as he muttered to himself, "Pretty cool Poppa Joxer."

The sound of hungry toads drew his attention and he walked to the pit that was to the left of the floating alter.

"Don't worry guys, I have lots of food for yas." Phobos said into the pit as he produced a bowl full of live meal worms.

"Did you say food?" A voice asked from behind him that made Phobos jump nearly a foot in the air.

Phobos whirled around to find a boy a few years younger than himself looking dirty and hungry and more than a little frightened.

"I'm sorry if I scared you." The boy muttered in a trembling voice.

Phobos began to giggle and said, "That's okay. I've scared lots of people before, but not many people have scared me... My name's Pho, what's yours?"

The boy wilted with relief at Phobos' friendly nature and happily said, "I'm Van... Did you say something about food?"

Phobos looked down at the bowl of meal worms he was still holding and said, "Yeah, for the toads."

Van followed his gaze down to the bowl and reluctantly said, "A few more days and that might even look good."

Phobos thought for a moment before saying, "I've got to feed the toads and water the plants. But when that's done you could come to my house for dinner if you wanted."

"Really?" Van asked with wide eyed excitement, then asked in a guarded tone, "Your mom won't mind if I come over will she?"

Phobos reached into the bowl of worms and began to casually scatter them into the pit of toads as he said, "I never lived with my mom. I live with my Dad and I know he won't mind."

"I've always lived with my mom... at least she says she's my mom." Van finished bitterly.

"If you'll take that bucket and water the plants we can get done faster and have dinner." Pho said as he pointed.

Van nodded and walked to pick up the bucket as he said, "My mom lied to me all my life... about everything."

"I don't think my Dad ever lied to me. He's sometimes too busy with work to spend time with me and my brother. Or sometimes he gets to thinking about other stuff and kind of forgets us for a little bit. But he never lied." Phobos said in thought as he continued to scatter the meal worms among the appreciative toads.

After drawing some water from the pool where the alter was floating, Van began to water the plants as he said, "I never knew my dad. I think I met him once when I was just a little kid, but... I'm not sure. He might've just been some guy... He was nice to me..."

Phobos turned over the empty bowl and tapped it a few times over the pit before going to the pool and dipping some water to help water the plants.

"Did you run away from home?" Phobos asked as he walked to the next flower box and began to pour the water.

"Yeah... A couple weeks ago." Van said quietly.

"What are you gonna do?" Phobos asked with interest.

"I don't know. I didn't think it would be like this. I thought people would help me and take care of me like... like they always did before." Van said with a distant look in his eyes.

"Maybe you should think about going back to your mom. She's probably worried about yas." Phobos said quietly.

Van shook his head and said, "No. I can't live with the lies anymore. I've grown up believing things that were all wrong. I have to find out what's real before I can go back there. Otherwise she'll be able to lie to me and make me believe her again."

Phobos thought about what Van was saying and was assaulted by inspiration.

"What would you think about being a priest?" Phobos asked suddenly.

"A priest?" Van asked in confirmation.

"Yeah. This is tha temple of tha god of mischief. Tha priest that was s'posed ta take care of this temple ran off and got married. I bet if we talked to my Poppa, he could fix it soes you could live here an take care of tha place." Phobos said quickly.

Van looked around the room in wonder, as if seeing it for the first time. Finally he said in amazement, "That would be so great. It would be like an answered prayer... if I knew how to pray."

"You don't know how to pray?" Phobos asked with astonishment.

"No. That's one of the things that my mom lied to me about... We're done in here, are there any plants in the next room?" Van asked curiously.

"Dunno. I never been here before. Let's find out." Phobos said and approached the door.

The boys passed through the door and waited for their eyes to adjust to the much dimmer light.

"What's that?" Van asked suddenly and pointed to something low to the ground that moved toward them.

"I don't know, I can't see it. Close the door and I'll get a torch." Phobos said then looked around to see if there were any torches in the room.

He didn't find any, but glanced at Van and found him peeking through the crack in the door.

With a thought, Phobos produced a torch, then for good measure produced a second one for Van.

"Here." Phobos said as he handed Van a torch.

"It's over there." Van whispered and pointed across the room.

"I'll go in and see what it is. You stay by the door and be ready to close it behind me if the thing chases me out." Phobos said seriously.

"Okay." Van said seriously.

Phobos started to walk, then turned to look Van in the eyes as he said, "Wait for me to run by *then* close the door.

"I will Pho, I promise I won't shut you in. You're the first friend I've had that my mom didn't pick for me... you're my first real friend." Van finished softly.

Phobos smiled at the statement briefly and said, "Okay friend. Watch out while I see what this is."

Van nodded and held the door open for Phobos to enter.

* * * * *

"How are you doing Nami?" Erebus asked in a whisper as Tsunami's eyes fluttered open.

"I've never felt so loved." Tsunami said as he looked up into Erebus' eyes.

"I've done some checking since you've been asleep and I think I found a place for us." Erebus said gently.

"Where?" Tsunami asked in delight.

"I still need to talk to Hephaestus about it, but... the savages to the West haven't claimed any gods as their own. They are just beginning to become civilized enough to really grasp the concept of religion. I don't think Hades could administer their underworld in addition to this one. I'm going to ask King Hephaestus if we can go there and start a new underworld. You can still be the Titan of Death and Destruction of the sea... we could work together." Erebus said happily.

"Do you really think King Hephaestus will allow it?" Tsunami asked in thought.

"He cares for the mortals. When I point out that the souls of the fallen savages aren't moving on to an afterlife, but are left to wander the mortal realm, I'm sure he will agree. Not only does this solve our problem about not having a purpose but... we really are needed." Erebus said with an expression of honesty.

Tsunami gave Erebus a gentle smile and said, "I knew you'd come up with a way for us to be happy. You're going to be such a wonderful father."

Erebus leaned in to give Tsunami a gentle, tentative kiss.

Tsunami pulled Erebus down to make the kiss one filled with all the love that he felt.

* * * * *

"It's okay Van, you can come in." Pho said from inside the room.

Van walked in to find Phobos looking at the strange... thing curiously.

"What is it?" Van asked as he hesitantly approached.

"I have no idea... but it seems friendly." Pho said as he moved around to look at it from a different angle.

"Maybe my mom was right... the gods must be really cruel to create something like this. Something born to suffer." Van said in a troubled voice.

"I don't think so." Phobos said speculatively.

Van looked at him curiously.

After a long moment of silence, Phobos said in a considering voice, "It's not alive."

"Are you sure?" Van asked as he looked at the 'whatever it is' more closely.

"Yeah. It doesn't breathe or eat or have babies. It doesn't even think." Phobos said in deep thought.

"Then how does it move?" Van asked curiously.

"It's enchanted. The gods can put a spark of their power into an object to allow it to move or give a mortal a special ability or even effect a god's powers." Phobos said in thought.

"Could you recognize one of those enchanted things if you saw one?" Van asked hesitantly.

"Yeah." Pho said, then realized that he'd just admitted to having godly sight.

"I'm not really sure I want to know, but... would you look at this?" Van asked quietly and held out his arm to reveal a metal bracelet.

Phobos looked closely at the bracelet and gasped.

"Is it something bad?" Van asked with a sinking feeling.

"It's Hephestian metal!" Phobos said in astonishment.

"Is that bad?" Van asked with dread.

Phobos finally noticed his friend's mood and quietly said, "No. It doesn't have any effect at all on mortals."

Van let loose a sigh of relief and said, "Good. I was worried because my mom put this thing on me and I can't get it off."

"I tell you what. Since you're coming over for dinner anyway, we can show your bracelet to my dad. I'm sure he'll know how to get it off." Phobos said casually.

Van smiled at Phobos and whispered, "Thanks."

Phobos smiled, then looked around the room and said, "There aren't any plants in here. We can go to my house if you still want to."

"Sure I do. How far is it? Can we get there before nightfall?" Van asked, suddenly reenergized.

Phobos looked at the floor at his feet and quietly said, "I've got to be honest with you Van"

"Your family doesn't have enough food?" Van ventured to ask.

"No. That's not it. We've got plenty of food and we'll be happy to share it with you. It's just... Since you're my friend, I don't want to lie to you." Phobos finished in a mutter.

"Just tell me Pho. Whatever it is I won't be mad at you." Van said gently.

"Okay... Van, I'm a god." Phobos said quietly, watching for Van's reaction.

Van looked at Phobos with fear and disbelief.

Phobos disappeared in a cloud of red smoke and silver sparkles.

A second later he appeared on the other side of the room.

Van looked as though he were ready to run away in terror, but somehow he was able to keep his place.

"If you still want to come to dinner with me, you're still invited." Phobos whispered.

Van looked into Phobos' eyes and said, "My mom always told me never to trust gods. That all they ever did was trick and lie to mortals to make their lives miserable..."

Phobos nodded in acceptance.

"But since I figured out that she's a liar, I guess I don't need to worry about that. I'll just listen to my stomach..." Van finished with a smile of accomplishment.

Phobos chuckled at the statement, then said, "Since you're wearing that bracelet, I won't be able to transport you. But give me a second and I'll get my brother's help to make a gateway so we can just walk."

"What do I need to do?" Van asked quietly.

"Just wait." Phobos said with a smile, then concentrated.

//Ter. Can you help me make a gate from the mortal realm?// Phobos sent seriously.

//Why do you want to create a gate?// Anteros asked with confusion.

//I made a new friend and I want to bring him home to meet Dad and Poppa. Will you help me make a gate or not?// Phobos asked insistently.

//Give me a second to get into the entry hall, then you push and I'll pull. We'll have this thing opened in no time.// Anteros sent as he walked into the next room.

"Is everything going okay?" Van asked quietly.

"Fine. Just one more second." Phobos said gently. Then turned his attention back to Anteros.

//I'm ready.// Anteros sent as soon as he was in position.

//Let's do it.// Phobos replied and extended his arms in a dramatic gesture.

Van involuntarily took a step back as a swirling mist started to form.

//That's it Pho. You're doing it just right.// Anteros said with encouragement.

//I feel it Ter, it's just like you taught us. I never thought I'd make a gate without Demi.// Phobos said with some effort in his mind voice.

//That's it Pho. It's stable. You can let go now.// Anteros said gently.

//Thanks Ter, I'll see you in a minute.// Phobos sent happily, then turned to Van and said, "This is a shortcut to my house. You still coming?"

"Um... yeah." Van said in astonishment as he followed Phobos into the vortex.

* * * * *

"Hi. You must be Pho's friend, I'm Anteros."

"Really?" Van asked with wide eyes as he looked at the young man with wings standing before him.

Anteros smiled gently at Van, and nodded.

"Yeah. That's Ter, come down the hall and meet my Poppa Joxer. That was his temple we were in." Phobos said with excitement as he led the way toward the door.

"Pho, you don't want to leave the gate open do you?" Anteros asked in a leading tone.

Phobos stopped in his tracks, then shyly said, "I forgot."

Anteros smiled and watched as his brother skillfully collapsed the gate.

* * * * *

"Poppa Joxer, this is Van. I thought that if it's okay with you, he could take care of your temple." Phobos said in a rush as he hurried into the room.

Van froze in the doorway when he saw the man standing beside the couch.

"You're him..." Van said in astonishment.

Ares turned and looked at the skinny, dirty boy and hesitantly said, "Evander?"

Chapter 5

Ares looked curiously at his son, not sure about what he should say.

"Are you okay Van?" Phobos asked, concerned by the shocked look on his new friend's face.

Van broke out of his racing thoughts and glanced at Phobos.

"Yeah, it's... this is the guy I was just telling you about, the one that might be..." Van trailed off, then looked at Ares again.

Phobos thought about the statement for a moment, then his eyes went wide as he realized what Van was thinking.

Ares felt Joxer take his hand and give it a squeeze.

Joxer looked up at Ares and mouthed, 'Love you'.

A warm smile came over Ares' face as he silently responded, 'Love you too'.

"Ask him." Phobos said firmly.

Van looked at Phobos with fear and indecision.

"He'll either say 'yes' or 'no'. Nothin bad's gonna happen either way." Phobos said seriously.

Van nodded, then took a deep breath and looked at Ares again.

The man before him had such an expression of peace and love on his face that Van couldn't help but wish that the answer might be 'yes'.

"Are you my father?" Van asked in a whisper.

Ares peaceful expression transformed into a full radiant smile as he said, "Yes Evander, I am."

Evander stood there, stunned at the statement. He didn't have a clue as to what he should say or do next.

Phobos saw the overwhelmed expression on Evander's face and quickly said, "Come on Van. I bet you'd feel a lot better if you had a bath and got into some clean clothes. We can talk to dad some more when we get back."

Ares opened his mouth to begin to protest, but stopped at the feeling of his hand being squeezed again.

"Let Pho take care of him Love. From the look of him, he's been going through quite a bit and may need some time to deal with things." Joxer said quietly.

Phobos took hold of Evander's arm and slowly guided him to turn around.

Ares silently watched as his sons left the room.

* * * * *

Erebus appeared in the Great Hall of Olympus and was surprised to find Hephaestus and Aphrodite engaged in a passionate kiss.

"My apologies King Hephaestus, I can come later if it is more convenient." Erebus quickly stammered.

Hephaestus pulled out of the kiss and peacefully said, "It's no bother Erebus. Please have a seat and tell me what's on your mind."

"King Hephaestus, as you may have heard, Tsunami and I are going to have a child." Erebus said quietly.

"Oh, that's so wonderful! So are we!" Aphrodite said, literally glowing with her happiness.

Erebus smiled warmly and said, "Congratulations to you both."

"Thank you Erebus. And may I offer my congratulations to you as well." Hephaestus said as he pulled Aphrodite into a one armed hug at his side.

"Thank you King Hephaestus. But since we're becoming parents, we've become concerned that we don't have a purpose in this world of gods." Erebus said gravely.

"I see." Hephaestus said seriously.

"I thought, I mean, if you have no other plan, Tsunami and I could move to the West and establish an underworld for the savages." Erebus said seriously.

Hephaestus thought for a moment, then said, "That sounds like a very good idea. As you're getting it established, you could use the other members of the House of Death to help you with things like gathering the wandering souls and enforcing the boundaries of your new realm."

Erebus smiled as he nodded at the practical suggestion.

Hephaestus thought for a moment, then said, "This seems the answer that I've been searching for in regard to the Western underworld. I don't see any reason to delay. I, Hephaestus, King of Olympus hereby decree that the titan Erebus shall henceforth be known as Pluto, God of the Roman underworld and afterlife."

"Pluto? Wealth?" Erebus asked cautiously.

"Yes. I look at you and see that you carry a bounty of all the best and most important things that any being could desire. Let the Romans explain it however they want, it is my decree that you are to be known as Pluto... at least when you're acting in your capacity as Roman god of death." Hades finished with a smile.

"Thank you King Hephaestus. This is far more than I expected. I am very grateful." Erebus said sincerely.

"I'm assuming that Tsunami will be moving to the Western world with you. So when your child is born and Tsunami is recovered, come to me and we'll find them titles in the Western world as well." Hephaestus said warmly.

"Thank you King Hephaestus. I know that will make Tsunami very happy." Erebus said respectfully.

"There is one thing that you need to do immediately, before anything else." Hephaestus said firmly.

"Yes?" Erebus asked cautiously.

"Right this minute you need to decide what your priorities are. Once you've decided that, make your other decisions accordingly." Hephaestus said as he looked Erebus in the eyes.

"Nami and the baby are my first priority." Erebus said immediately.

"Good. Then go and be with your husband. You've decided that he and your child are more important than anything else so you should treat them as such. When things have settled and you can devote your attention to other things, then you can begin to concern yourself with the matters to the West." Hephaestus said seriously.

"Thank you King Hephaestus, I will do as you say." Erebus said reverently.

"Go on." Hephaestus said with a smile.

Erebus flashed out of the room in a black blur of power.

"Hephy, you really are getting the hang of this king thing." Aphrodite said as she happily snuggled her husband.

"I hope so. I think Erebus' idea has a good chance of working. Now I just need to find someone to oversee the sea and mortal realms." Hephaestus said in thought.

"What's your first priority Hephy?" Aphrodite asked in a leading tone.

"You are, you know that." Hephaestus said with a smile.

"Show me?" Aphrodite asked with a giggle.

Hephaestus smiled and moved in to give his wife a loving kiss.

* * * * *

"Get undressed and into the water." Phobos said as he started to take off his clothes.

"What?" Evander asked in confusion.

"Let's take a bath. It'll make you feel better." Phobos said as he climbed into the bathing pool and slowly eased himself into the warm water.

"Oh, yeah. Okay." Evander said distantly.

Phobos watched silently as Evander shed his clothes and climbed into the water.

After a moment of soaking in the water, Evander seemed to come back to himself and looked around.

"Listen Van. No matter how stuff works out, I'll make sure yer gonna be okay." Phobos said with assurance.

"Do you think he wants to be my father?" Evander asked quietly.

Phobos smiled and said, "I know he does."

"How do you know?" Evander asked hesitantly.

"Cause if he didn't he woulda said 'no' when you asked him." Phobos said frankly.

Evander thought about the statement, then reluctantly nodded.

"If you'll dunk under to get your hair wet, I'll wash your hair." Phobos said gently.

Evander looked at him curiously for a moment, then dunked himself under the water.

Phobos scooped his fingers in the dish of soap by the side of the bathing pool, then said, "Turn around. It's easier from the back."

Evander turned, then felt Phobos' fingers begin to work the soap into his hair.

"Why are you being so nice to me?" Evander asked cautiously.

Phobos continued to work the soap into Evander's hair as he said, "Well, at first it was because you were in my Poppa Joxer's temple. He asked me to be nice to any kids I found there."

The job of working in the soap became more of a gentle massage as Phobos quietly continued, "I guess at first I felt sorry for ya cause you were all skinny and hungry and dirty and stuff. So I was gonna bring you home with me soes you could get somethin ta eat."

Evander felt his heart sink at the statement but remained still as the fingers slowly massaging his scalp soothed him.

"Then when I started talking to ya, you were all nice and stuff soes I started thinkin of ya like a friend." Phobos said in deep thought, then said, "Cover your eyes so I don't get soap in 'em."

Evander absently brought up a hand to protect his eyes from the soap as Phobos continued to wash his hair.

"Now I guess yer my brother. I love all my brothers so that includes you too." Phobos said happily.

"Brothers?" Evander asked in wonder.

"Yeah. If my Dad is yer dad, then we're brothers." Phobos said carefully.

"I always wanted a brother." Evander said with the beginning of excitement.

"I hope ya wanted a lot of 'em cause that's what'cha got." Phobos said with a smile.

"How many?" Evander asked cautiously.

"Um, Cupid, Anteros, Demi, Me... you got four brothers and two sisters." Phobos said seriously.

"Two sisters?" Evander said in wonder.

"Yeah, Enyo and Harmonia... Oh, and since Poppa Joxer is pregnant, yer gonna have one or two more in a couple months... maybe even three." Phobos finished speculatively.

"Wow." Evander said in wonder.

"Dunk under the water to rinse out the soap. I'm done." Phobos said seriously.

Evander took a deep breath, then went under the water to rinse the soap out of his hair.

When he came up, Phobos said, "If you'll turn back around I can wash your back while you wash your front."

Evander was surprised by the offer, but quickly turned, then grabbed a cloth and some soap to begin washing himself.

"Thanks for being so nice to me. I was really scared." Evander said quietly.

"I thought you might be. If you weren't wearing that bracelet I would have known for sure. I'm tha god of fear." Phobos said casually as he washed Evander's back in small circles.

"You are? But doesn't that mean that you should be trying to scare me?" Evander asked cautiously.

"Nah. I mean, I guess I could, but I don't usually scare tha people I like... well, I sometimes like to jump out of a dark corner or something like that. But that's just for fun. It's not like my job or anything." Phobos admitted shyly.

"It sounds like fun." Evander said with a smile.

"I'll let you help me get the jump on Cupid sometime when he comes to visit. He's easy." Phobos said happily, then said, "I'm done, rinse off."

Evander dunked down in the water to rinse, then turned as he stood again.

"If you'll sit on the ledge thing, I'll wash your hair now." Evander said shyly.

Phobos smiled and sat down so Evander could reach his hair more easily.

"This is really nice. I don't even remember when my mom used to bathe me." Evander said as he started to work the soap into Phobos' hair.

"Well, me and Demi bathe together all the time. But now that he has a boyfriend, he probably won't want to as much." Phobos said frankly.

"A... boyfriend?" Evander asked cautiously.

"Yeah. His name is Tad. He seems really nice." Phobos said casually.

"So you don't think it's wrong for two guys to... you know..." Evander trailed off uncomfortably.

"Love each other?" Phobos asked curiously.

"Yeah." Evander whispered.

"Nah. Love is love." Phobos said as he relaxed into the massaging sensation of Evander's fingers.

"Wow. My mom always said that it should just be a man and a woman. That's it." Evander said seriously.

"I don't see why me and my girlfriend Charise being together would be right and Demi being with Tad would be wrong. It just don't make sense." Phobos said consideringly.

"Mom said that since two men can't make babies, that's what makes it wrong." Evander said carefully.

"Where in Tartarus did she come up with that? Who you love don't have anythin ta do with being able ta make babies. Does she think that women who's barren or guys that can't father kids shouldn't be able to get married?" Phobos asked in confusion.

"I don't know why my mom thinks the stuff that she does. But since I lived with her all my life, that's the only stuff I've ever known. I may need your help to see things the right way." Evander said carefully, then thought to say, "Cover your eyes."

"I tell ya what. When you say somethin like 'two men can't love each other', I'll do like I just did and tell you why I think you're wrong. You can decide what you think is right and wrong fer yourself." Phobos said carefully.

"You can rinse off now." Evander said as he thought about the words.

When Phobos came up out of the water, Evander quietly said, "Thanks for being honest and thanks for wanting me to decide things for myself. I don't think anyone has ever done either of those things for me before."

"I think that's why all us brothers are so different. We all love each other even though we all don't believe the same things." Phobos said thoughtfully.

"Turn around and let me get your back." Evander said gently.

Phobos nodded and quickly turned.

"Do you get along with all your brothers and sisters okay?" Evander asked casually as he lathered Phobos' back.

"Yeah. OUR brothers and sisters are all pretty cool. I mean, Enyo's a little scary when she does tha 'Goddess of Destruction' thing but she's usually okay when she's 'round here. And Cupid's alright if you can get him to pull the stick out." Phobos said in thought.

Evander started laughing at the irreverent statement.

"You okay back there?" Phobos asked with a smile.

"Yeah. Great." Evander said with a chuckle.

"I'm glad yer feelin better. You was lookin like you was wantin ta run off when we was in with Dad." Phobos said carefully.

"Yeah. I was. Thanks Pho. As long as you're with me I think I'm going to be okay." Evander said quietly.

"I'll stick with ya bro." Phobos said seriously.

There was a moment of silence, then Evander quietly said, "Okay, Just as long as that's not the same stick that Cupid pulled out."

The sound of the brothers laughter carried out into the hall.

* * * * *

Apollo faded into being and saw that Ares was sitting behind Joxer on the couch, gently hugging him from behind.

"Am I interrupting?" Apollo asked with concern.

"No Pol, it's fine." Ares said peacefully.

"I just wondered if I could bring Pan over to stay with you guys for a while. I've got to make the rounds and check on everyone and I don't want him to have to be alone." Apollo said with concern.

"Sure. Pan is always welcomed." Ares said with a gentle smile.

Apollo looked around, then asked, "Would you mind if I put him on the couch? He needs to be laying down."

Anteros stood and moved to one of the chairs without comment.

"Thanks Ter." Apollo said quietly.

"Don't worry about it Uncle Pol." Anteros said with concern at Apollo's uncharacteristic quiet mood.

After a long silent moment, Pan slowly resolved into being on the couch.

Apollo knelt by Pan's side and quietly said, "I have some work to do. Just stay here and you'll be fine."

Pan looked around the room with panic at the unfamiliar surroundings, then into Apollo's eyes.

"You're safe here. I promise. You can call me if you need anything at all." Apollo said in a whisper.

Pan reluctantly nodded.

"Thanks guys. I won't be gone any longer than I have to be." Apollo said as he stood again.

"Take your time Pol. I haven't visited with Pan for decades, it'll be good for us to have some time to talk." Ares said with a gentle smile at Pan.

Apollo gave an appreciative smile at Ares, then slowly faded away.

Pan got an expression of panic on his face when he realized that Apollo was gone.

"Pan, this is my husband Joxer." Ares said quietly, trying not to startle Pan unnecessarily.

After a moment of looking around the room, Pan glanced at Joxer and whispered, "Hi." in a barely audible voice.

"Do you need anything to make you more comfortable? Some pillows?" Joxer asked with concern at Pan's frightened expression.

"I... I'd really be more comfortable on the floor." Pan said quietly.

"I'll help you Pan. Where do you want to lay down?" Anteros asked as he walked slowly to Pan's side.

"By the fire, where it's warm." Pan said in a whisper.

Anteros thought about it for a moment, then produced an overstuffed featherbed in the floor by the fire with several small blankets.

Pan saw the inviting place made for him and wriggled to get off the couch.

"You're not supposed to get up. Let me take care of you." Anteros said gently and lifted Pan off the couch.

Pan looked at Anteros with a moment of indecision and fear, but then snuggled against Anteros' chest.

Anteros carried Pan to his place before the fire and gently laid him down in the center.

"Thank you." Pan whispered with contentment.

"Just let me know if you need anything at all." Anteros said as he smoothed Pan's wild hair with his fingertips.

"Nice..." Pan said as he snuggled into the warm blankets.

Anteros continued to soothe Pan until he had fallen into a peaceful sleep.

* * * * *

"Sorry guys. I needed to take care of some other things. How are you settling in?" Apollo asked as he looked at Asclepius and Ganymede with concern.

"We're both kind of thirsty. Could you get us some juice or water?" Asclepius asked hopefully.

"Of course. And I think it's time to get your priests so they can be given instruction in how to care for you properly." Apollo said as he produced two glasses of fruit juice.

"Cleptus is in your temple in Thebes. He's in the scroll room." Asclepius said in concentration.

Apollo's eyes became distant, then he said, "I see him. I'll be right back."

"Thanks Dad." Asclepius said as he snuggled against Ganymede's side.

Apollo stopped and looked at his son with love for a moment, then said, "I love you son. Don't worry. Everything is going to be fine."

Asclepius nodded his agreement as he watched his father vanish in a golden shower of sparkles.

* * * * *

"You are the priest known as Cleptus?" Apollo asked as soon as he appeared in the scroll library.

"Yes, how may I..." Cleptus said as he looked up from the scroll he was reading, then realized who had asked.

"My Lord Apollo! How may I serve you?" Cleptus asked as he bowed reverently.

"I asked my son Asclepius to choose among all his followers for the one who would be able to serve him best. He chose you." Apollo said seriously.

"I am honored my Lord." Cleptus said with his head still bowed.

"Fine, fine. Is your wife nearby?" Apollo asked, feeling that Cleptus was taking the 'humble' thing a bit too far.

"Yes Lord. She is in the main hall instructing the children how to worship." Cleptus said quickly.

"Go and tell her that you'll be coming to Olympus with me. I have another stop to make, but when I return, be ready to leave." Apollo said firmly, now certain that he didn't like Cleptus' servile attitude.

"Yes Lord. Right away Lord." Cleptus said and stumbled out of the room as quickly as he could.

Apollo shook his head, then flashed out of the room.

* * * * *

Apollo appeared in a small wooded area, at twenty minute walk distant from the nearest town.

"Mind if I join you?" Apollo asked the young boy who was sitting on a fallen tree.

"I don't mind." The boy said quietly.

"Are you Dorin?" Apollo asked, already knowing the answer, but going through the motions for the mortal's benefit.

"Yeah." Dorin said quietly.

"What's wrong?" Apollo asked before he could think better of it.

"I just... I pledged myself to my god and prayed and prayed for guidance and never got an answer." Dorin said as tears welled up in his eyes.

"What answer are you looking for?" Apollo asked gently.

"All I want to know is how I can serve Ganymede. My sister talks about how wonderful he is and how much better her and all her friends lives are now that he's taking care of them and... I want to serve him too." Dorin said imploringly.

"What kind of thing do you want to do for Ganymede?" Apollo asked gently.

"Anything. I mean, I know about what most of the people do who serve him and, well, I've never done that, but I would if he wanted me to. I'd do anything just to serve the god who made my sister happy again." Dorin said as he looked into the stranger's eyes.

Apollo smiled and said, "Then I think you should wipe your eyes. Then we can go tell your sister that your prayers have been answered."

Dorin looked at the stranger with question.

"I am Apollo. I asked Ganymede which of his followers he wanted to personally attend him and he chose you." Apollo said gently.

"Really? I'm going to get to meet Ganymede, like, for real?" Dorin asked with excitement.

"More than meet him. You will be his personal attendant." Apollo said with a warm smile at the boy's excitement.

"Thank you. Oh wow! Thank you." Dorin said happily.

Apollo chuckled at the boy's excitement, then said, "Are you ready to talk with your sister?"

Dorin nodded happily.

"Take my hand and we'll go the fast way." Apollo said gently.

Dorin quickly took the offered hand and was nearly vibrating with anticipation.

* * * * *

"Sharis, come here!" Dorin called across the room.

"Dorin! I've told you about screaming in here." Sharis said harshly as she ran to her brother.

"Sharis, this is Apollo... you know, like, THE Apollo." Dorin said in an urging tone.

"You'll have to excuse my brother..." Sharis said indulgently, then really looked at the man who was standing before her.

"...Oh MY God!" She exclaimed.

"No. Unfortunately, that would be Ganymede. But if you're ever in the market..." Apollo trailed off with a smile.

"Lord Apollo, how can I be of service to you today?" Sharis asked respectfully and gracefully curtsied.

"Oh, if I had more time... no, I can't. I'm here on business." Apollo finished with a pained expression of loss.

"Lord Apollo said that I can be Ganymede's attendant... I think that's like his helper." Dorin said proudly.

Sharis looked at Apollo with disbelief and question.

"Dorin swore himself to Ganymede's service. Ganymede was concerned that Dorin was too young for the 'usual' work, so when I asked Ganymede who he would like to attend him he chose Dorin." Apollo explained.

"Thank you Lord Apollo. I know that if you say it, then it must be the truth. I won't be worried." Sharis said reverently.

"I'll see that Dorin is taken care of. We must go now, I have to collect a priest in Thebes, then we're off to Olympus." Apollo said as he watched for Dorin's reaction.

"Olympus? Really? I... I'm getting to go to the home of the gods?" Dorin asked in breathless wonder.

"That's right Dorin. Come along." Apollo said and extended his hand.

Dorin bounced to Apollo's side and took the hand as he said, "Bye Sharis, I love you."

"I love you too Dorin." Sharis said with a proud smile as she watched her little brother vanish in a shower of golden sparkles.

* * * * *

"Cleptus, are you ready?" Apollo asked as he and Dorin appeared in his temple in Thebes.

"We have provided music for your enjoyment and a small feast if you would care to dine." Cleptus said quickly as three priests began to play lyres.

Apollo rolled his eyes, then whispered to Dorin, "Pay close attention to this man. This is what NOT to do when you meet a god."

Dorin nodded his understanding, then watched Cleptus carefully.

"Are you ready to go Cleptus?" Apollo asked impatiently.

"My Lord Apollo, the acolytes have prepared a series of poems inspired by..." Cleptus began to say.

"Cleptus. I don't want your music, your food or your poetry. I want you. To come. With me. Now." Apollo said firmly.

"But Lord Apollo. We have prepared..." Cleptus began to say.

"Why doesn't he just shut up and do like you said?" Dorin asked quietly.

"I don't know. Let's go." Apollo said with a smile at the boy.

Dorin took Apollo's hand and smiled.

"My Lord Apollo! If you will just wait one minute..." Cleptus called out.

"You had your chance." Apollo said, then vanished in a shower of golden sparkles.

* * * * *

Phobos and Evander walked into the room and both immediately noticed Pan asleep by the fireplace.

"What's Uncle Pan doing here?" Phobos asked curiously.

"Apollo didn't want him to have to be alone." Ares said as he looked cautiously at Evander.

"Dad, Van's got a bracelet that you need to look at." Phobos said as he walked to his father's side.

"Come here and let me see." Ares said quietly, not wanting to frighten his son.

Evander hesitantly walked to Ares and held out his arm.

With little more than a glance, Ares confirmed what he had already suspected.

"It's Hephestian metal." Ares said darkly.

"I knew that. How do we get it off him?" Phobos asked somewhat impatiently.

Ares smiled at Phobos' irreverent tone, then looked Evander in the eyes and said, "The only people who can take this off are the person who put it there and Hephaestus, the one who made it."

"Well, I know that mom won't take it off. I asked her lots of times and she always said no." Evander said darkly.

"I don't think Heph will mind doing it. We can go ask him now if you want." Ares said seriously.

Evander looked at Phobos with question and concern.

"Arry, why don't you let Pho walk over with him? I think he'd be more comfortable that way." Joxer asked quietly.

Ares saw Evander's look of relief at the suggestion and said, "If that's what you want to do, that's fine. I'll let Heph know you're coming. But before you go I need to tell Evander something."

Evander looked into Ares eyes with fear.

"I need for you to know that I always loved you, I always wanted you and that if there were any way I could have arranged it, I would have been a part of your life." Ares said sincerely.

"Then it's because of mom. Isn't it? She made you stay away. She kept me from having a father." Evander said bitterly as tears welled up in his eyes.

"No Evander. It was my choice to stay away. Your mother and I started off well, but we soon developed some very serious problems with our relationship. None of that was your fault and it's not fair that you had to deal with the result. The way things worked out, I just couldn't be a part of your life. Your mother and I were both too emotional to have even that much contact. I visited once and I could see how much trouble it caused for you. I wanted you to grow up to be happy and that was the only way I could make it happen." Ares finished quietly.

Evander thought about the words for a moment, then looked up when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"You can think about this stuff while we're walking over to Daddy Heph's" Phobos said quietly.

Evander nodded his agreement and turned to leave.

"Evander." Ares said in a quiet tone.

Evander hesitantly turned to look at his father.

"I *do* love you." Ares said seriously.

Evander nodded that he heard, then turned to walk with Phobos out of the room.

Chapter 6

"All my life I've wanted a father and now I've found him and... why can't I just believe him and be happy?" Evander asked distantly.

"Fear." Phobos responded, as if the answer were obvious.

Evander thought about the single word response for a moment, then reluctantly nodded.

"If you wasn't wearing that bracelet I could probably help you with it. I'm not really good at taking fear away, yet. But even if I couldn't fix you completely, I bet I could help." Phobos said cautiously.

"You're helping a lot, just by talking to me." Evander said honestly.

Phobos thought about that for a moment, then smiled as he said, "Then I think you just helped me learn something new about my godhood."

"Really?" Evander asked with surprise.

"Yeah." Phobos said introspectively, "Poppa Joxer told me and my brother that we could use our god powers for good and that was pretty kewl and stuff. But what you just showed me is that I don't need to use god powers all the time. Talking and listening can work as good."

"I taught you that?" Evander asked incredulously.

"Yeah." Phobos said with a grin, then continued, "We're here."

* * * * *

Dorin looked around in wonder at his new surroundings.

"Let's sit down and talk for a minute so I can tell you how to help Ganymede." Apollo said as he led Dorin by the hand.

Dorin seemed nervous, but went along with Apollo willingly.

With a little coaxing, Apollo guided Dorin to sit on his knee.

"Ganymede and Asclepius have both been ordered to stay in bed for the next three days." Apollo said gently and put an arm around the boy.

"Are they sick?" Dorin asked with concern for his god.

"No." Apollo said immediately, then continued more gently, "Both Ganymede and Asclepius are pregnant. They're going to have babies."

Dorin looked at Apollo dubiously, then cautiously said, "I thought only girls could have babies."

Apollo smiled at the fact that Dorin was comfortable enough with him to question what he was being told.

"Yes Dorin. That's true of mortal people like you. But the gods are a little bit different." Apollo said carefully, trying to find the right words to explain it so Dorin could understand.

"You know that the gods can do things that mortal people can't, right?" Apollo asked gently.

"Yeah. Like disappear and answer prayers." Dorin said seriously.

"Yes. That's right." Apollo said with a smile.

"Well, this is another thing that gods can do that mortal people can't." Apollo said carefully, then waited to see that Dorin understood what he was being told.

After a moment, Dorin seemed to be at peace with the statement.

"Well, when a god becomes pregnant, it makes that god weak for a few days and they need someone to take care of them until their bodies adjust to carrying a baby." Apollo said slowly.

"But I don't know how to take care of someone who's sick." Dorin said with concern.

Apollo smiled at Dorin's words and said, "That's why I'm talking to you now. I'm going to tell you what you need to know."

Dorin turned slightly so he could look into Apollo's eyes and devoted his full attention.

"Have you ever been sick and needed someone to take care of you?" Apollo asked quietly.

"Yeah. I was really sick with a fever and my sister stayed with me and talked to me and told me that I was going to be okay." Dorin rambled.

Apollo smiled and said, "That's all I'm asking you to do for Ganymede and Asclepius. Stay with them. Talk to them. Make them comfortable and help them to do the things that they're not well enough to do for themselves."

Dorin thought about the words for a moment, then quietly said, "I won't know where to find things. Like if they need food or a drink."

"There will be priests available to provide anything that Ganymede or Asclepius might need." Apollo said with a smile, then added, "But what they can't provide is companionship. That's why you're so important."

"I am?" Dorin asked with surprise.

"Yes you are." Apollo said assuringly. "When you were sick, how did it make you feel to have your sister there, knowing that she was watching out for you and concerned for you?"

"It made me feel safe. Like I knew that I was going to be okay." Dorin said distantly.

"That's why you're important. My priests would attend to their needs, but I doubt that they would be very good company." Apollo said with a smile.

After a moment, Dorin nodded that he understood.

"Good." Apollo said with satisfaction. "Now that you know why you're here, let's go so you can get to work."

"Thank you, Lord Apollo." Dorin said sincerely as he stood.

Apollo put out his hand and waited until Dorin accepted it before saying, "Just remember that Ganymede chose you because you're you. Don't make the mistake that Cleptus did."

Dorin remembered the annoying servile priest that they had encountered and said, "I'll remember."

* * * * *

The sound of whimpering woke Joxer from his light sleep.

It took him a moment to come awake enough to realize the source.

//Anteros, could you help me for a minute?// Joxer called in his mind.

"What can I do for you Poppa Joxer?" Anteros asked immediately as he appeared at Joxer's side.

"I think Pan is having a bad dream. Do you think you can help him. I would but I'm confined to this couch." Joxer asked hopefully.

"Sure thing, Poppa Joxer." Anteros said fondly, then moved to kneel beside Pan who was whimpering and twitching in his sleep by the fire.

Anteros gently placed a hand on Pan's shoulder and whispered, "Don't worry, Pan. You're in the halls of war, and you're safe."

"Where's Apollo?" Pan whispered in a trembling voice.

"He's just gone to take care of some things for a few minutes. Would you like for me to call him for you?" Anteros asked gently.

"I don't know what I'm... he said I'm going to have a baby..." Pan said as tears filled his frightened eyes.

"Shhh. You don't need to worry about it, Pan. My Poppa Joxer and my brother Deimos are going to have babies too. You're not the only male god who's going through this." Anteros said assuringly.

"But what if... I mean, how can I do this? I'm the god of wild animals. Males don't nurture their young, that's for the females to do." Pan said desperately.

"I think there are people who would disagree with you about that." Anteros said gently.

"But I'm not talking about people. I'm from the house of nature. My essence is tied directly into the creatures I protect." Pan said imploringly, trying to make Anteros understand. "In the wild, the male mates, then moves on. That's his role. A successful male will father as many young on as many females as possible to spread his seed far and wide. Other males try to do the same, so only the strongest, healthiest and smartest produce many young."

"Okay, I think I understand what you're saying." Anteros said slowly.

"When this baby is born... what am I supposed to do?" Pan asked in a trembling voice.

"Pan." Joxer said quietly from the couch.

After a moment, Pan lifted his head and turned slightly to look at Joxer.

"I'm not telling you what to do, but maybe you should consider that you're not an animal. You're a god. Don't let their instincts rule your godhood. Let your godhood show your animals how a father can behave. Think of how much better it will be for your creatures if the father will protect and defend his young." Joxer said gently.

"I've never tried to do something like that, I don't know if I could." Pan said quietly.

"It sounds as if it would be worth the effort." Anteros said quietly.

"I don't think I'm strong enough to change them all." Pan said in a considering voice.

"Well, maybe that's a good thing." Joxer said absently. "Rather than have all your creatures behave in exactly the same way, it might be good if you had some species that behaved differently."

After a moment of contemplation, Pan looked at Joxer and gave a hesitant smile.

"Are you comfortable, Pan? Can I get you anything?" Anteros asked gently.

Pan thought for a moment, then smiled at Anteros and said, "No. This is nice."

"Good. Just let one of us know if there's anything at all that you need. Everyone here will be happy to help you." Anteros said as he absently petted Pan's wild hair.

"Just need Apollo." Pan mumbled as he drifted back to sleep.

* * * * *

Evander looked up and up and up at the huge temple before them.

Nothing in his life had prepared Evander for what he saw.

The enormous structure was breathtaking in its construction.

The scale of the architecture was far beyond the ability of mortal men to create.

Evander froze in place and stared at the huge marble statues and tinkling fountains.

"Daddy Heph should be over here." Phobos said quietly, urging Evander to follow.

"I'm on Olympus." Evander gasped in awe.

Phobos stopped to look around at the great hall, trying to see it from Evander's 'mortal' point of view.

"Yeah. It's pretty. Ain't it?" Phobos chuckled.

Evander reluctantly tore his gaze from his surroundings and looked at his newly discovered half-brother with question.

"I'm used to it, but I guess it is nice." Phobos said with a smile, then continued, "Let's go see if we can get that bracelet off of you."

Evander slowly blinked as the words worked their way past his shock and he finally nodded his agreement.

"Come on." Phobos said, then started walking again.

Evander obediently followed as he continued to try to absorb every detail of his new surroundings.

* * * * *

"Ah don't think there's nothin cuter than a sleepin cherub." Strife said as he gently stroked Bliss' wings as he slept against Strife's chest.

"I love you, Strife." Cupid said in a voice of awe.

Strife looked at Cupid curiously, then quietly said, "I love ya too, Cupes."

"I mean... Gods, Strife. I loved you before. But this... it's like a level of love that I never even knew was there. I love you so much..." Cupid trailed off as tears streamed down his cheeks. "I don't have words."

"Well, if ya don't have tha words. Mebbe ya could climb on up here and show me." Strife said with a grin. "There's some room ovah here."

"What about Bliss?" Cupid asked with concern.

"Aww, get yer mind out of tha gutter, Cupes. Ah jes wan ya ta lay down with me an Bliss an hold us an be with us an... ya know?" Strife asked hopefully.

"That sounds perfect to me." Cupid said as he climbed into the bed beside Strife.

"Ah woulda thought that tha god'a romantic love would have alla tha answers bout stuff like this." Strife said with a smirk.

"I guess not." Cupid said as he cuddled up to Strife's side. "But what fun would that be?"

"Good point." Strife said, then turned his head to give Cupid a gentle kiss.

* * * * *

"Wait over there by the door. There's something I need to do. I'll tell you when to come in." Phobos whispered.

Evander looked at Phobos uncertainly, then walked to the edge of the doorway and waited as he was told.

"YEAAAAH!" A man's voice screamed from inside the room, and Evander couldn't resist the urge to look inside and see what had happened.

Hephaestus was sitting and panting slightly as Phobos was nearly doubled over with laughter.

"I don't understand it. My godhood makes me omniscient. Ares called and told me that you were coming. And somehow you still managed to surprise me." Hephaestus said as he tried to get his breathing back to normal.

Phobos giggled, then glanced at the doorway and motioned for Evander to join him.

"What's wrong, Hephy?" Aphrodite asked as she flashed into the room, then noticed Phobos by Hephaestus' side.

"Pho? Come over here and give your mama a hug." Aphrodite said joyfully.

"Hi mom." Phobos said hesitantly before he was engulfed in Aphrodite's hug.

Evander watched the scene and felt an ache in his heart, knowing that he was at odds with his own mother and wouldn't be received as joyfully.

"Mom, this is Evander... my brother." Phobos said, not sure of what her reaction was going to be.

"Hello Evander, it's wonderful to finally meet you." Aphrodite said in a gentle, motherly tone. "Come over here and give me a hug."

"You'll have to forgive Aphrodite. She's always exceptionally affectionate when she's pregnant." Hephaistos said at Evander's obvious surprise.

"Complaining?" Aphrodite asked as she glanced at Hephaistos.

"Hardly." Hephaistos said with an answering grin.

"Come on Honey. I won't bite." Aphrodite encouraged as she held out an arm to him.

Evander reluctantly began to walk toward the beautiful woman, and as soon as he was within reach, she scooped him into a firm hug.

After just a moment, Evander became comfortable in the hug and returned it with all his might.

Phobos noticed the contented look on Evander's face and whispered, "Thanks Mom."

* * * * *

"Tad?" Deimos asked as his eyes slowly opened.

"I'm right here, Demi." Tad said from the chair at Deimos' bedside.

"What're you doing all the way over there?" Deimos asked quietly, still sounding a little bit sleep fogged.

"I didn't want to take a chance of hurting you." Tad said timidly.

"I think as long as you don't, like, hit or punch me or anything like that, it should be okay." Deimos said frankly.

"Okay, Demi. I just wasn't sure and didn't want to take the chance." Tad said in a more relaxed tone of voice.

"Get in bed with me, Tad. I want to hold you." Deimos said imploringly.

Tad hurried to take off his shoes, then climbed into the bed beside Deimos.

"Ya know, I was thinkin about what I'd like to do when I'm aloud to get outta bed." Deimos said as he cuddled close to Tad.

"What were you thinking?" Tad asked curiously.

"Well, you know, about what we was talking to Poppa Joxer about." Deimos said shyly.

"About us getting married?" Tad asked hesitantly.

Deimos pulled back to looked Tad in the eyes and asked, "You still want to, don't you?"

"Yes!" Tad answered immediately.

"Good." Deimos said with a relieved smile.

"So what were you thinking about?" Tad asked curiously.

"I was just thinking that, you know, after we go and talk to my mom and she says that it's a great idea, that you and me... I mean, after the wedding, you and me will be married and... I was just thinkin that it would be nice if we had our own place. A place just for you and me and our baby." Deimos said quietly.

"A home." Tad said quietly.

"Yeah. OUR home. That belongs to us." Deimos confirmed. "What do ya think?"

"That sounds nice. But how would we do that? I mean, I don't know all the stuff that gods can do. Can you just 'make' a home?" Tad asked curiously.

"It takes a little work, but yeah. I can make a house." Deimos said confidently, then looked deeply into Tad's eyes and quietly added, "But I'm gonna need your help to make a home."

Tad broke into a loving smile at the words.

* * * * *

After a long hug with Aphrodite, Evander finally released her.

"Ares said that you have a bracelet for me to look at." Hephaistos said frankly.

"Yeah. Evander, this is my Daddy Heph. He's tha king of tha gods and the blacksmith of tha gods." Phobos said quickly.

"I thought Zeus was the King of the Gods." Evander said carefully.

"He was but..." Hephaistos began to say, but was interrupted.

"Things change." Phobos said quickly.

Hephaistos considered the words, then nodded his agreement.

"Dad said you should be able to take this off of Evander." Phobos said as he lifted Evander's left arm to show the bracelet.

"Yes. It's one of mine." Hephaistos said with a nod.

"One of yours?" Evander asked curiously.

"Daddy Heph is a blacksmith. He's tha one who made tha bracelet." Phobos said seriously.

"Here, let me get that off of you." Hephaistos said as he touched the clasp of the bracelet with one finger.

As soon as Hephaistos made contact with the metal, the bracelet opened and fell off Evander's wrist.

Hephaistos caught the bracelet, then watched Evander carefully.

A red glow started to flare out from Evander, causing Phobos to reflexively take a step back.

Hephaistos stayed where he was and watched the expression on Evander's face curiously.

A look of anger came into Evander's expression, then it turned into fury.

"YOU LIED TO ME!" Evander screamed in a godly voice that could be heard all over Olympus.

There was a burst of red power in front of him and his mother, Nemesis, fell out of mid air to land in a heap on the floor.

The fury in Evander's eyes deepened to absolute hatred as his red power began to crackle and sizzle in the air around him.

Nemesis looked up in fear at her son's rage.

Evander suddenly turned as he felt something on his arm.

Confusion filled his eyes as he realized that Hephaistos had just put the bracelet back on him.

"I... What did I...." Evander muttered as his eyes went wide in horror.

Before Hephaistos could answer, there were multiple flashes of light, heralding the arrival of a group of gods.

"Heph. There was just an eruption of power." Ares said cautiously.

"It felt horrible. It was like 'total war'." Enyo said from her father's side.

Hephaistos looked around the group and noticed that Ares, Eris, Enyo, Phonos and Mania had all come to investigate the eruption in the essence of war.

"Phobos, would you do something for me?" Hephaistos asked quietly.

"Yeah. What can I do, Daddy Heph?" Phobos asked with surprise. He couldn't remember Hephaistos, or any god for that matter, asking for his help before.

"Could you dampen their fears for a few minutes while I help Evander?" Hephaistos asked hopefully.

"Sure thing, Daddy Heph." Phobos said with a grin, then drew upon the essence of fear to gently calm everyone in the room.

"Ares. Come over here." Hephaistos said, not so much as a command as a request from one brother to another.

"Would you summon your Sword of War?" Hephaistos asked hopefully.

Ares looked at Hephaistos with surprise at the unusual request, but held out his hand and his large broadsword appeared.

"Evander, please watch your father and see how he channels his godly power through his sword." Hephaistos instructed gently but firmly.

After an uncertain glance at Hephaistos, Ares called up the essence of war and directed the power to flow into his sword.

Slowly, the sword began to glow a dull red then to crimson which brightened orange. It continued to brighten to yellow and finally became nearly white. Crimson lightning crackled and hissed from the blade, as if it were burning the air itself.

Evander stared in wonder at the display of raw power.

"Thank you Ares." Hephaistos said with a smile at his brother.

Ares gave one nod, then the light around the sword began to dim. Within less than a minute, the sword was back to looking like any other mortal weapon.

"Evander, if I remove the bracelet from you again, do you think you can keep yourself from attacking your mother?" Hephaistos asked gently, drawing his attention away from Ares.

"I... I don't know." Evander responded in a trembling voice.

"Will you try?" Hephaistos asked hopefully.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to stop it." Evander said honestly

"I'll help you, Van." Phobos said as he walked to stand at Evander's side.

At Evander's uncertain look, Phobos continued, "I'm the god of fear. I can help you not be afraid of your power. That should help you be able to control it."

After a moment to consider, Evander looked at Hephaistos and reluctantly nodded.

Hephaistos looked at the other gods in attendance and received unspoken assurance from all that if things went badly, they wouldn't let Evander get too far out of control.

After a look into Evander's eyes, Hephaistos released the bracelet again.

Evander started to glow a bright red as before but this time seemed to be struggling, fighting against it.

Phobos concentrated on his brother with all his might, trying to keep him calm.

Finally, Evander took a deep breath and the power that was surging around him seemed to calm somewhat and become stable.

"Very good." Hephaistos said with relief.

A glance was all that Evander could give as a response, lest he lose control of the almost overwhelming power.

"Evander, this will be your sword of power, like your father's." Heph said as he held out his hands and a two-handed broadsword appeared.

It seemed that Evander was struggling to figure out how to maintain control of his power and his body at the same time, but eventually Evander held out his hands to accept the sword.

Hephaistos placed the sword in Evander's waiting hands, and as he let it go, he noticed Evander nearly buckle under the sword's weight.

Evander managed to awkwardly lower the tip of the sword to the ground, then took hold of the hilt and stood it on end.

Ares and Hephaistos exchanged a look, both noticing that when the sword was standing upright, it was as tall as Evander.

"Don't worry, Evander. You'll grow into it." Heph said gently.

Evander was able to give a small smile at the assurance.

"Now, do you remember what your father did? That's what I need for you to do now. Imbue the sword with the essence of your godhood so it can help you to channel your power." Hephaistos said instructively.

"How?" Evander asked curiously.

"The sword was crafted to be a vessel. It is empty and waiting to be filled by you. Just will the power that is overwhelming you to fill the sword. You won't be giving up your power, you'll only be holding in reserve for when you need it." Hephaistos said seriously.

Evander nodded, then closed his eyes and concentrated on the sword that he was holding with both hands.

Everyone watched as Evander's bright red power began to encompass the sword.

"Good. You're doing it. Can you feel the power?" Hephaistos asked encouragingly.

"Yes.... It's not like it's leaving me, it's more like it's... I don't know.... flowing to the sword and back to me." Evander said with difficulty.

"That's exactly what's supposed to happen. This sword is your emblem now. It will help you manage your power during calm times and it will amplify your powers in the heat of battle." Hephaistos said in a voice that was somewhat triumphant.

Evander looked at Heph with surprise.

"All of Olympus, hear me. Rejoice with me in the awakening of a new god, Evander. Among mortals he shall henceforth be known as Mars. The Roman God of War."

Silence filled the great hall as everyone puzzled over what Heph had just declared.

Chapter 7

"Hold on, Heph. 'Roman' god of war? As in THE Roman god of war?" Ares asked cautiously.

"Yes." Hephaistos said firmly. "If Evander were to stay in Greece, he would have no opportunity to fulfill his potential. He is the son of war and retaliation. The essence of his godhood is righteous war."

"But... I'll have to go there... alone?" Evander asked in a trembling voice.

"No, no. By the time your training is complete, I'm sure there will be many other gods either already there, or soon on their way." Hephaistos said with assurance. "Your father should be able to keep things going until then."

"With your help." Ares said with a hopeful smile at Evander.

"And If you wanted, I could go with you." Phobos said simply.

"You'd do that?" Van asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I mean, if you wanted me to. You might be sick of seeing me by then." Phobos said frankly.

Van smiled at his newly discovered brother, then his gaze shifted to his mother and the smile left his face

"Evander, we have some things that we should discuss." Ares said seriously.

After a moment, Evander reluctantly turned to face his father.

"Why don't we go to the halls of war to talk and let Heph get back to the business of running everything?" Ares asked hopefully.

Evander glanced at his mother, then looked Ares in the eyes and reluctantly nodded.

"Nemesis, would you join us?" Ares asked gently.

"Only if Evander wants me to." Nemesis said hesitantly.

"What do you say, son? Do you want your mother to join us for our talk so we can get everything settled?" Ares asked with a hopeful smile.

"I'll be there with you, Van. I've got you covered." Phobos said from Evander's side.

"Yes, Father. I think it would be good to put some things behind us. But what do I do with this?" Evander asked as he slightly shook the enormous sword standing before him.

"If you want, you can ask it to be smaller so you can carry it easily." Ares said frankly.

"How do I do that?" Evander asked slowly.

"Just as I said, you ask it to be smaller and kind of wish for it to be so. This is your sword of power, its nature is to do your bidding." Ares said carefully.

"Um, excuse me, sword... would you turn into a little dagger for me, please?" Evander asked cautiously.

There was a burst of crimson power, then the large broadsword began to levitate itself into the air and shrink.

Evander watched it become smaller and smaller.

When it had finally stopped shrinking, it was barely more than four inches long and looked like a child's toy.

Evander pulled the small dagger out of the air, then stuck it in his pocket.

"Since Van's not used'ta transportin', we'll meet ya's there." Phobos said casually.

"If you wouldn't mind the company, I think all of us would enjoy the walk." Ares said with a proud smile at Phobos.

"That okay with you, Van?" Phobos asked hopefully.

"Yeah." Evander said with a genuine smile at Phobos who had so recently become not only his brother, but his friend.

* * * * *

As Evander walked, he puzzled over what he was feeling, or more accurately, not feeling. Intellectually, he knew that being told that he was a god should have been enough to freak him out. But he felt uncharacteristically calm and self-assured, even for him.

"You're controlling my fear, aren't you?" Evander asked Pho in a whisper.

"Yeah. I was thinkin' you might like it best if you looked strong in front'a Dad." Pho answered quietly.

"Thanks. I appreciate that. But could you go ahead and let me feel my fear for a few seconds? Not feeling it's making everything seem unreal to me." Evander slowly explained.

"Yeah. Sure. Just hold on ta yerself for when it hits." Phobos warned, then carefully withdrew his godly influence from Evander's fear.

Paralyzing fear froze Evander in his tracks as every bit of color seemed to rush out of his face. He couldn't process anything past the barrage of anxiety that dominated him.

"I got it, now." Phobos said as he gently took hold of the fear.

Finally, Evander was able to breathe again.

"You alright?" Phobos asked with concern.

"Yeah. But I didn't think it'd be that bad." Evander said in a shaky voice.

"It really ain't. It's mostly show. If you's ta look behind the huge scary thing that's causing tha fear, there's really not much there." Phobos said frankly.

"I couldn't do anything. I was frozen."

"That's how it gits ya. Soon as ya stop tryin' ta fight it, you've lost."

"Can you help me do that?" Evander asked hopefully.

"Yeah. Thanks ta Pappa Joxer, I think I can." Phobos said with a grin at his brother.

"Will you boys be joining us?" Ares called out from ahead of them.

"Be right there." Phobos called back, then smiled at his brother as he silently urged him to pick up the pace.

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Ace?" Apollo gently asked as he walked into the room with Dorin at his side.

"Everything hurts. Are you sure that there's nothing wrong with me?" Asclepius asked in a slight whine.

Apollo walked to Asclepius' bedside and closed his eyes as he briefly scanned his son, then said, "You're perfectly fine. Your body's just adjusting to its new situation."

"How are you feeling, Lord Ganymede?" Dorin asked timidly.

Ganymede smiled at the shy boy and quietly said, "I'm doing just fine."

"Dorin is here to take care of you. Let him know if you need anything." Apollo said with a slight smile at the boy.

"What about Cleptus?" Asclepius asked cautiously.

"He won't be joining us. I've spoken with Dorin and he has my complete confidence." Apollo said as he looked his son in the eyes.

Asclepius seemed uncertain, but finally accepted his father's words.

"Now, Dorin, if Ganymede or Asclepius need anything, you can step outside this door and catch the attention of one of my priests and they'll get you whatever you need." Apollo said warmly.

Dorin nodded his understanding.

"I need to make the rounds to check on the others. Call to me if anything happens that concerns you." Apollo said to the men in the bed.

"Thanks, Dad." Asclepius said sincerely to his father with a slight smile.

Ganymede nodded, including himself in Asclepius' thanks.

Apollo gave one last look at the bed before vanishing in a shower of golden sparkles.

* * * * *

"How is everyone doing?" Apollo asked as he appeared in the sitting room of the halls of war.

"Apollo!" Pan yelped as he tried to sit up.

"Stay still, Pan. You need to relax." Apollo said as he hurried to kneel at Pan's side.

"I can't do this." Pan whispered as tears welled in his eyes.

Apollo saw the fear and followed his instinct. He moved in and gave Pan a long, slow, lingering kiss.

Joxer and Anteros exchanged a surprised look at the actions of the usually superficial god.

"You can do this." Apollo finally said against his lips.

"I don't know how to be a mother... or a father. All I've ever done is plant my seed and move on. I don't have any idea of what you do with young." Pan struggled to explain.

"Honestly, I haven't been involved in the care of any of my children until they were much older. It wasn't until Asclepius decided that he wanted to learn about medicine that I took much of an interest in him. But I promise you, Pan, I'll love our child and share in taking care of him. You won't be alone. I'll be beside you every step of the way."

"You'll stay with me?" Pan asked hopefully.

"For as long as you'll have me." Apollo whispered in the tone of a vow.

"Apollo? I didn't expect you to be here. How is everyone doing?" Ares asked as he led a small group into the living room.

"I was just about to check on them. I heard the announcement, is this Evander?" Apollo asked from Pan's side.

"Yes. My son. The Roman God of War." Ares said proudly.

Evander's eyes began to fill with tears at the sound of his father's proud declaration. It soothed an ache within him that he had carried all his life.

"Congratulations, Evander. I am your Uncle Apollo, and this is your Uncle Pan. Please call on us if we can help you with anything."

"I will." Evander said slowly as he watched Apollo gently holding Pan in his arms.

Ares gestured beside him and a new couch appeared.

"Nemesis, please have a seat and be comfortable." Ares said, then walked to Joxer's side.

"How are you feeling, Love?" Ares said quietly.

"All better, now that you're here." Joxer said tenderly.

Ares leaned in to give him a brief, but heartfelt, kiss, before turning his attention back to the others in the room.

"Evander, I know that you're upset with some of your mother's decisions, but I'm going to ask you to set that aside for a moment and try to understand the choices that she made." Ares said gently to his son.

"She lied to me about you and about me and about... everything!" Evander implored his father to understand.

"She gave up her godhood and basically chose to live in exile from her own people to protect you from the truth that might well have destroyed you." Ares said as he held Evander's gaze.

After a moment of staring into his father's eyes, Evander hesitantly asked, "You think she did the right thing?"

Ares considered the question for a moment, then said, "There's no way to know if there was a right thing. She found herself in a difficult situation and had to make several choices. I can't say if they were right or wrong, but I know that she made all of those decisions with your best interest at heart."

"Thank you." Nemesis whispered as she looked in awe at her ex-lover.

"I didn't like some of your choices at the time, but I respected them. And seeing as our son turned out to be such a fine young man... I can't find any fault in what you've done." Ares said honestly.

Nemesis smiled at his words.

Evander looked back and forth between the two, then seemed to come to a decision.

"I'm mad because you kept me from knowing my dad and because you lied to me. But if Dad says that you had good reasons, I'll believe him." Evander said in a tightly controlled voice.

"Thank you, Evander. All I ever wanted is for you to grow up being a happy, normal person free from the burden of godhoods and duties." Nemesis tried to explain.

"But I am a god. No matter how hard you wish or how much you lie, you can't make me be anything else." Evander said seriously, then glanced at his father for a

moment before continuing, "But, I think growing up the way I did might make me a different god than if I was raised here."

"You're probably right about that." Joxer said with a smile from his place on the couch.

"Will you come and visit me?" Nemesis asked cautiously.

Evander thought about it for a moment, then slowly nodded.

"He may be busy training and learning his new duties for a while, but I'll see to it that he takes a break to visit with you every so often." Ares assured.

"Thank you, again." Nemesis said gratefully.

"Are you ready to go home?" Ares asked cautiously.

"Evander, can I have a hug before I go?" Nemesis asked hopefully.

It only took a second for Evander to decide, then he ran into his mother's arms to hug her tightly.

"You'll be fine. Just listen to your father." Nemesis said as she returned his hug.

"I will." Evander promised as he finally released her.

Nemesis gave Evander a quick kiss on the cheek, then vanished in a flourish of red sparks.

* * * * *

"How are the babies doing?" Joxer asked cautiously as Apollo examined him.

"Babies? Like, twins?" Ares asked to confirm.

"Yes... Well, um..." Apollo stammered as he scanned Joxer again.

"Is something wrong?" Joxer asked as he felt panic beginning to rise.

"No, no. They're fine. There's just... three of them. I wasn't expecting that." Apollo said as he watched for any reaction.

There was a long moment of silence, then Ares quickly asked, "Is Joxer going to be alright?"

"Multiple births aren't uncommon on Olympus. Given Joxer's age and general health, I'd say that he should be fine. Although he's going to need to eat lots of ambrosia and get lots of extra bed rest. Remember, godly births aren't always like mortal births. Anything could happen.

Ares paled as he remembered several extreme and extraordinary birth stories from the gods over the millennia.

"We'll get him through it. Now, where's Deimos? I need to check him out." Apollo asked as he stood.

"He's in his room with Tad, back this way. Come on, Van." Phobos said as he hurried toward the hallway.

Although Evander was reluctant to leave his father, he couldn't resist his brother's impatient urging.

* * * * *

As they walked into the room, they stopped at the sight of Deimos and Tad snuggled together, fast asleep.

Evander noticed a tear in Phobos' eye and asked, "Is something wrong?"

"I never thought I'd see him this happy."

The sound of Phobos' voice woke Tad and he glanced at the visitors in his doorway.

"I just came to check on Deimos and the baby, to make sure everything is progressing normally." Apollo said gently.

"Demi, wake up." Tad said quietly as he smoothed the hair off Deimos' forehead.

"Love you." Deimos muttered, semi coherently.

"I love you, too, Demi. But we've got company." Tad said shyly.

Deimos cracked one eye open, then looked at Phobos, Evander and Apollo in his doorway.

"I just need to do a quick scan to make sure everything's going the way it should." Apollo said seriously.

"Does Tad gotta move?" Deimos asked as he became more awake.

"Only a little, and only for a moment." Apollo said as he walked to the bedside.

"Who's that, Pho?" Deimos asked slowly as he looked Evander over.

"Our brother, Van." Phobos said frankly.

Deimos looked at Phobos in surprise, then asked, "How'd that happen?"

"Dad, Nemesis..." Phobos said and finished with a shrug.

"Nice to meet you, Van. You can call me Demi." He said cordially, then Apollo's worried expression caught his attention.

"What's wrong?" Deimos asked firmly.

"It looks like you're having twins." Apollo said gravely.

"Yeah? Is that a problem?" Deimos asked cautiously.

"At your age, yes, it might be." Apollo said frankly.

"Why?" Phobos asked as he automatically walked to the bed to be closer to his twin.

"Your body is still growing and you're making some unusual demands on it right now. It may not be up to the challenge of adapting this far." Apollo tried to explain.

"So, what are you saying?" Deimos asked cautiously.

"I may need to take one of the babies, so you'll be able to carry the other one to term." Apollo said regretfully.

"No." Deimos said firmly.

"Demi, you're too young. Your body can't handle it." Apollo implored him to understand.

"No. I refuse." Deimos said without hesitation.

"Trying to carry both babies to term could end up killing all three of you." Apollo said bluntly.

"I understand that." Deimos said seriously, then looked at Tad cautiously.

A single nod from Tad was all it took to reconfirm his resolve.

"You're going to need lots of ambrosia and lots of bedrest." Apollo said as he stepped away.

"Tad'll take good care of me." Deimos promised.

Apollo looked at Tad, then said, "Yes. I believe he will."

* * * * *

A rumbling in the distance drew Hephaistos and Aphrodite's attention.

After a moment of looking at each other, they turned in unison and began to walk to the balcony that was just past the door to Hephaistos' office.

As a multi-hued light began to flood in through the archway, both remembered the arrival of the visitor that had changed their lives so dramatically.

But when they arrived on the balcony, what they found instead of the visitor was one end of a truly awesome sight, a rainbow bridge.

"Honey Bunny, where'd that come from?" Aphrodite asked cautiously.

"If I'm not mistaken, that is the bridge known as Bifrost." Hephaistos said as he watched a lone figure walk toward them on the bridge.

"What's it doing here?" Aphrodite asked quietly.

"In ancient legends, it was said that the Elite Asgardians, the Elder Norse Gods, from the North, would use Bifrost to make formal visits to other realms. In essence, it means that they come to us in friendship." Hephaistos said cautiously.

"Very good, Olympian. There were those of us who feared that you might not understand the overture and perceive it as a threat." A large man... god... said as he approached.

"You would be Heimdall, I presume." Hephaistos said as he offered his scarred and disfigured hand.

"Yes. Although, you do not appear to be Zeus." Heimdall responded as he shook the offered hand with extra care.

"No, I am Hephaistos. I was recently instated as King of the Gods, and may I present my lovely wife, Aphrodite." Hephaistos said as he gestured to her.

"Lovely indeed! It's an honor and privilege to meet you, dear goddess." Heimdall said as he gently kissed the back of her hand.

Aphrodite demurely giggled at the surprising action.

Hephaistos rolled his eyes in fond amusement, then asked, "What brings you here to us, today, Heimdall?"

"There are those who would like to visit with you to discuss recent developments in the world at large, I simply came ahead to be sure that they would be well received." Heimdall said diplomatically.

"It would always be an honor and a pleasure to receive a visit from the Norse pantheon." Hephaistos said formally.

"Then I will take my leave and they will arrive shortly. It was a great pleasure to meet you and your lovely wife, King Hephaistos."

"Thank you, Heimdall. It was our pleasure to meet you, as well." Hephaistos said sincerely, then watched as Heimdall began to walk away on the multi-hued bridge.

"What do you think..." Aphrodite began to ask, when three forms came into view in the distance.

"Hephy, isn't that..."

"Yes. But what is Isis doing traveling on Bifrost?" Hephaistos asked in bewilderment.

As the three women reached the end of the bridge and stepped onto the balcony, Isis said, "I remember you, Hephaistos, the blacksmith god, isn't it?"

"Yes, you honor me by remembering. Although, now I am King of the Gods as well as God of Blacksmiths. And may I present my wife, Aphrodite, Goddess of Marriage and Childbirth." Hephaistos said regally.

"A pleasure to meet you, however, our time is short. We will have time for pleasantries later. Accompanying me are Freyja, the Norse Goddess of Love, Battle and Death. And Astarte, the Phoenician Goddess of Fertility, Motherhood and War. As we are sure you are aware, there has been a tremendous shift in power that has had some unexpected consequences for the gods of all our realms." Isis said seriously.

"Do you mean, the supernatural fertility?" Hephaistos asked cautiously.

"Primarily, yes." Freyja said grimly. "With so many of our men incapacitated by their unexpected pregnancies, it has fallen to us to sort matters out."

Astarte nodded her agreement, then said, "And it has been discovered that several of our unborn children have bonds to the new world. It is going to take all of our cooperation to navigate this development without it becoming a war among the gods."

Hephaistos looked at the three strong women who were visiting, then at his beautiful wife.

After a moment to consider, he quietly said, "Since the women of the other pantheons are representing their interests in this, I believe Greece should do the same. Aphrodite, please represent our interests well, but know that whatever decisions you make, that you will have my full support."

"I'll do good for you, Hefhy." She said with a loving smile at her husband.

"Remember that I've already made commitments regarding Erebus and Evander. I'll leave the rest to you." Hephaistos said gently.

"You got it, Honey Bunch." Aphrodite said with a grin and a wink at her husband.

"You're so lucky, Aphrodite. You'd think from the way our men were sniveling that they were the first beings in the whole history of the whole history to become pregnant. I've still got Thor's whining about sore nipples ringing in my ears." Freyja said as Aphrodite led the women inside.

Hephaistos smiled after his wife and felt strangely assured that she would, indeed, represent them well.

To Be Continued...