

Mythos 2: Mortal Retribution

Isabelle Spurrier

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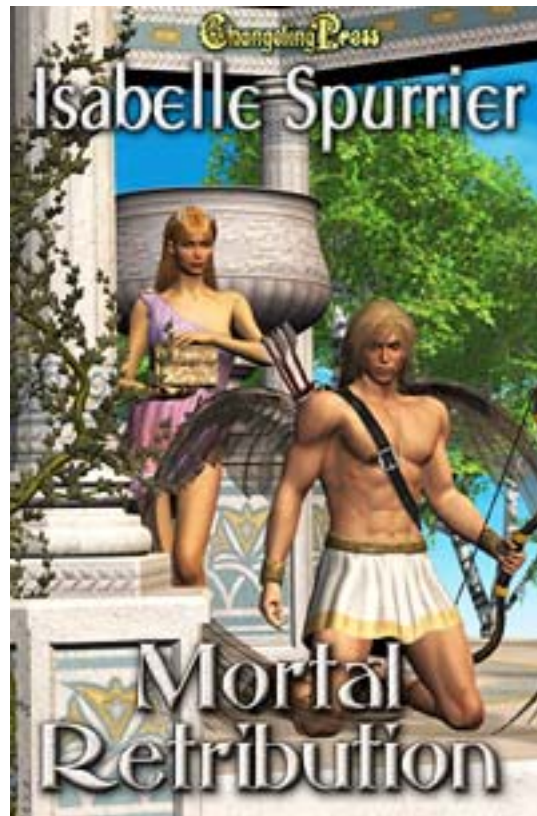
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Prologue

Psyche looked around with growing anger. This beautiful place, her home, was no longer pleasing to her. Every object, every table and chair and objet d'art, caused the bitterness to well up inside her breast like a cancer. She had wept for her losses only a few minutes before.

Not now. Not any more.

Now she was angry.

Love cannot live where there is no trust. You have forfeited your claim upon me, Psyche.

"Have I?" she wondered aloud, a slight edge rising to her voice. "We'll just see about that!"

The knowledge of Aphrodite's manipulation of her affairs boiled within her belly until the gnawing knot of anguish receded. Her eyes fell upon the huge bed, swathed in gauzy draperies and still tousled from the night before.

The lamp trembled in her hand. As she jerked it away, a wave of the searing oil splashed from the lamp onto Eros' shoulder. He awakened with a roar of pain. His startled eyes flew upwards and took in Psyche and the lamp with one incredulous glance.

Eros rose from the bed. The look on his face struck fear into Psyche for the first time, the divine anger of a god flashing from his sapphire eyes so that she shrank away from him. He curled his lip and said softly, "There is not enough light for you to see by, Wife. Let me provide you with more."

Psyche winced. Oh, yes, she'd fallen readily enough into Aphrodite's plans. Her lovely eyes narrowed at the thought that followed -- *and her sisters'.*

She'd just have to deal with that.

* * *

Aphrodite was composed, languidly reclining on her favorite couch while her attendants brushed out her glorious hair. It was with a look of mild surprise that she glanced up when her son raged through the door.

"Eros?" She rose from the couch, staring at him in apparent fear. "What is the matter?"

Eros had instinctively come to his mother's house, searching for solace from his pain. He was an immortal, after all, and unused to any sort of physical discomfort.

Or grief.

"I am injured, Mother, through no fault of my own," the young god complained.

"Injured?" Her immortal eyes flashed with sudden ire. "Who *dared* to injure my son?"

"A mortal who betrayed my trust," Eros replied. His throat tightened as he made the statement.

"I will destroy this presumptuous mortal, then, and avenge your hurts!"

The god hastily intercepted that train of thought. "It is not needful, Mother; I have already punished the one responsible."

"Then come to me, my beloved boy, and let me tend your wounds," his mother cooed, sincerity radiating from every pore of her skin.

Eros went to her and laid his head upon her bosom, a few hot, bitter tears scalding against his lids as he did so. Over his head, the goddess smiled.

* * *

The forest god Pan moved quickly through the woods on the lower slopes of divine Olympus, his mind working busily. Who could he get to help him? Most of the immortals were not particularly fond of Eros, whose mischievous nature had managed to place all of them in some really embarrassing situations. Pan chuckled as he remembered Apollo's particular predilection for falling in love with mortal women who would not have him. It would probably be best that he did not approach the god of the sun for assistance.

Suddenly, the god stopped. He knew *exactly* who to recruit for help! A grin creased his saturnine face into an expression so maliciously gleeful that a young rabbit squeaked in sudden alarm. Pan laughed shortly and moved with new purpose for the edge of the gods' wood.

Chapter One

"Milady?"

Myrne looked up from her work. One of the things she hated most about her middle-aged husband was his insistence that she oversee all of these tedious accounts. "Yes? What is it?"

The servant was unfazed by the note of irritation in his mistress' voice. "Your sister is here and begs admittance."

"Tell Clyte I'm busy," Myrne replied indifferently.

"No, milady, your other sister."

Myrne stared at him. "Psyche? She's here?"

"Yes, milady."

Myrne laughed in sudden delight. "Bring her here."

* * *

"Sister!" Myrne's voice had a note of genuine surprise in it for her younger sister had collapsed, weeping, into her arms. "What is it?"

"I was wrong!" Psyche wailed. "Wrong! I did as you said and he has left me! My lack of faith in him drove him away!"

"What happened?"

Psyche related the story in gasping, broken sentences. She told her older sister of how she'd looked upon the supposed monster and found instead a beautiful, golden youth, then how the treacherous drop of oil had awakened him. She cried when she told of her subsequent repudiation by her husband, who now was more beloved for his absence.

Myrne felt a surge of triumph. It had worked! She'd been right, obviously, that Psyche had somehow snared the love of an immortal and now had lost it due to her

own folly. She particularly enjoyed the fact that her sister's tragedy was due to her own, malicious machinations.

Psyche lifted a tear-stained face to Myrne's. "Will you go to my husband and plea on my behalf, my sister?"

Myrne smiled sweetly. "Why, of course, Psyche. You stay here and rest and I'll go back to your house."

"Just call the wind to take you there," Psyche told her, not a glimmer of anything other than tragedy in her huge eyes.

* * *

As soon as Myrne left, hurriedly tying her favorite scarf about her hair, Psyche smiled grimly and went to her other sister's home. Clyte fell into Psyche's trap even more readily, charging out of the room before Psyche had a chance to repeat her pitiful request.

Psyche smiled.

* * *

"What are you doing here?" Myrne demanded as her sister rushed up the slope to join her.

The valley was shadowed by the dark clouds skidding overhead. The wind moved restlessly, twisting the wildflowers and bushes with angry fingers as the sisters confronted each other.

"Psyche told you too," Clyte said in a flat voice.

"Of course she did," Myrne replied with a sneer.

"If he has disavowed her then perhaps he will want one of us."

"Why would he want you, as used up and old-looking as you are?" Her sister's voice was cruelly blasé causing Clyte to grit her teeth.

"Or you, since you've started to put on a few extra pounds?"

Myrne hesitated. There was no need to fight with Clyte; she was so much prettier than her sister that she, at least, had few qualms over whom the angry god -- whoever

he was -- would choose. She smoothed her face into a blank mask and said, "Why argue? Let us offer ourselves to the god and see which one of us he chooses."

"How do we do that?"

"Psyche said that we just call the wind to take us there."

The sisters moved to the edge of the cliff. The drop fell straight down to the rocks at the edge of the sea, which was roiling beneath them with grey-edged whitecaps. Clyte looked doubtfully at her sister.

"Are you sure about this?"

"He took Psyche, didn't he?"

Myrne lifted her arms to the heavens. "Great God, we know you found our younger sister lacking! We know that she betrayed you! Send the wind to us so that we may offer ourselves to you in her stead!"

The wind howled with swift fury. Clyte clutched at Myrne's arm in fear as the gale slammed the two women together. In the moment of disorientation that followed, both of them plummeted to their deaths on the rocks below.

* * *

"So you see," Pan continued, absently fingering the pipes at his waist, "Aphrodite engineered the entire thing. The mortal girl is wandering in search of her husband and Eros is sulking in his mother's house."

"I still see no need to get involved."

Dionysus lounged indolently against a tree, a jug of wine at his side. Despite the appearance of benignant charm, which was contrived, Dionysus with his control of madness and drunkenness was one of the most powerful gods to deal with the mortal realm. Pan's eyes narrowed shrewdly.

"Don't you think it's a good idea to have the god of love owe you a favor?"

Dionysus toyed with the wine cork. "I think it is a good idea not to get involved. If I help one, I cross the other. Zeus knows what Aphrodite would do if she knew I'd helped her mortal daughter-in-law."

"Coward." Pan made the statement light, almost affectionate, but there was no doubt in Dionysus' mind what his cousin meant. He frowned, and the band of women behind him laughed derisively.

"I am not as brave as you are, cousin," Dionysus agreed. "I am also not quite as foolhardy. Get mixed up in this war of love if you wish, but I'd advise you to sit here and get drunk with me."

Pan eyed the laughing women nervously. "Uh... no, thank you anyway. If you won't help me, I must find someone else who will."

* * *

Aphrodite laughed. The sound was lovely, like a tiny, tinkling bell, but the attendants glanced at each other uneasily. One of the major problems of serving the goddess of love and beauty was her ability to mask her worst intentions beneath something that was utterly desirable. That laughter marked the goddess at her worst. Hastily, they each found excuses to leave.

Aphrodite smiled lazily and tapped a rolled parchment with her almond-shaped nails. Ares, her lover, was coming to her chambers tonight. She knew that Hephaestus would never think that his wife would cheat on him, poor dear! He was still so grateful that she'd chosen him over all the other suitors for her hand! She thought with relish of her secret hideaway tucked into the hills below Olympus, and her entire body clenched. Ares was such a wonderful lover! Of course, it was difficult to expect anything less from the god of war, he took such great pleasure in any act of physicality. And, of course, as the goddess of love it gave her great pleasure to force him to submit to her ministrations. She rose to her feet. It was time to take a long, leisurely bath and prepare herself for the exertions of the night ahead. As she moved for the house, the parchment fluttered unobserved to the flagstones of the terrace.

Eros emerged from the shadows where he'd been hiding. Thoughtfully, he picked up his mother's letter and read it. A ghost of his old, mischievous smile flitted across his face. *So, she's up to her old tricks, is she?* He tucked the note into his pouch without really thinking about it and sighed.

He already missed her. Psyche had seemed obedient, compliant to his wishes in all things. The young god frowned and unfurled his great wings. As he rose into the air, he considered his young wife and her disobedience.

What could have happened to make her betray him so? Granted, she was a mere mortal and mortals were notoriously curious about their surroundings. He'd used that natural curiosity to gently prod her along the paths of sexual awakening. This sudden mistrust of him was a staggering blow. He could still feel her satiny skin under his fingers, smell the musk of her arousal every time the wind blew, hot and dusty from the fires of Mt. Aetna in the distance. Disconsolately, he dropped back to the ground and settled beneath a sprawling tree to brood some more.

* * *

Psyche staggered into the coolness of the mountaintop temple. Reaction had set in from her sisters' deaths, orchestrated by her thirst for retribution. She felt little remorse. Some of the implacableness of the god she'd loved and laughed with had rubbed off on her. She felt the need for absolution, however, and it was for this reason that she'd come.

The temple was deserted, quiet, and almost cold. Judging from the heaps of grain and corn and the untidy jumble of scythes and sickles, this was a temple of Demeter, the goddess of growing things. Psyche frowned.

It was unseemly that the temple of a goddess be so messy. More as a way to keep her mind from her troubles, she began to sort through the mess, separating the different grains into neat stacks and laying the implements aside with reverence. As she stacked the last heap of wheat sheaves, a musical voice emanated from the darkness.

"Why are you doing this, my child?"

Psyche sighed. "Because no god's temple should be so untidy. It is insulting to Demeter for these offerings to be in disarray."

"Most mortals do not care for such things."

"I am the daughter of a king, lady, and I was raised to be considerate and respectful of the gods," Psyche replied, looking around for the source of the voice.

A lovely woman stepped into the dim light, her wheat-gold hair shining as it tumbled down her back. She smiled at Psyche, who immediately fell to her knees. "Forgive me, immortal Demeter," she said, bowing her head. "I did not realize that I spoke with you."

"Fear not, beautiful mortal," the goddess replied. "I know of you and of your troubles."

"Then you know that I am cursed," Psyche said bitterly. "I am despised by my husband and hated by his mother."

"You are deserving of great joy, mortal daughter. I can do nothing for your plight," the goddess informed her compassionately. "I can, however, try to help you help yourself."

"Is that even possible?" Psyche asked, her eyes brimming.

"Anything is possible, my child, even forgiveness."

"If Eros would only forgive me, I would bless your name forever!" Psyche said fervently.

The goddess smiled. "Have you not already proven your piety? If any goddess other than Aphrodite had a son who loved you, that goddess would count her son fortunate and bless the mortal who showed such love for the gods. Your husband's mother is a jealous and vain goddess; she will not bend unless you subject yourself to her will. Go, then, and give yourself up to your mother-in-law; offer yourself to her service. If you can gain her favor then perhaps your husband will return to you."

"Her service?" Psyche echoed. "My lady, perhaps you have mistaken me. I cannot be subservient to a goddess who has done nothing but punish me for something that is not my fault! I cannot serve Aphrodite, I would rather kill myself."

Demeter's eyes gleamed suddenly. "Does Aphrodite strike you as particularly smart?"

Psyche's mouth fell open.

Demeter laughed. "I am the goddess of growing things, of farms and fields and forests. I know that the first thing required for mating is *proximity*. You cannot regain

Eros' favor wandering out here, child; you need to be where he is, on Olympus. He was struck by his own dart and cannot help but love you. Seeing you every day, laboring under the yoke of his mother, will stir that love in his breast once more. Eros has always chafed under the rule of Aphrodite; he will not like to see you under her thumb as well."

Psyche stared at her and suddenly laughed as well, the first real laugh she'd had since Eros had left. Demeter winked at her in conspiratorial fashion. "Zephyr will take you to Olympus, mortal daughter, and there you can begin your assault. Only one other word of advice do I have for you: it is best that you conceal your true intentions from all, even Eros should he relent. Be submissive and save your energy. There will come a time that you should have to fight for what you want."

"I understand, blessed goddess," Psyche said gratefully.

* * *

"I've been looking for you," Pan said, abruptly stepping from the shrubs.

"Come to gloat, cousin?" Eros demanded, scowling.

"No," Pan replied easily. "I have come to inform you of a few things you might want to know."

"Such as?"

"Such as your little wife is traveling the world, mourning for you," Pan replied brutally.

Eros' face didn't change expression. "Would you allow a mortal to betray you in such a fashion?"

"No, but I would make damn certain I knew all of the facts before I acted like an ass," the forest god returned coolly.

Eros' eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"Are you aware, cousin, that this entire fiasco was designed and manipulated by your mother?" Pan trimmed his nails with a small knife, apparently unconcerned with Eros' reactions. "Your wife is a mortal, after all. It's not like she can withstand your

mother's will. Neither could those hideous sisters of hers, who now have died for their tricks."

"How do you know my mother arranged it all?"

"I watched her," Pan shrugged. "Oh, by the way, I see why you wanted this one. She's beautiful when she's clothed, but naked she's absolutely delectable."

"You watched?" Eros sounded shocked.

"Of course." Pan grinned evilly. "I watch all sorts of things. After all, my love life is confined to -- what was it? Slugs, sea urchins and cacti?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Eros said shortly. He rose to his feet, fingering an arrow.

"I told you your secret was unsafe," the forest god reminded him. "Hera told your mother about your wife the same afternoon."

"And she worked her will on Psyche without my knowledge."

"She was watching from the edge of the terrace just like I was," Pan confirmed. "I thought it rather odd that a mother would watch her son having sex, but there you have it."

Eros halted suddenly. A feeling of joy welled within his breast. She hadn't really betrayed him after all! The happiness lasted for a full second before his cousin brought him back to reality with a casual, "Of course, the way you cast your wife aside probably hurts her more than anything."

Eros winced.

"It's not like it's *entirely* your fault."

"Are you having fun?" Eros asked acidly.

"Just a little bit," Pan replied. "It's even worth 'sticking my overeager dick into a cactus'."

Eros was shaking. His anger with Aphrodite overwhelmed every other emotion. He swore viciously, then stopped in his tracks. A slow, malicious smile spread over his face, enough so that Pan rose to his feet in alarm.

"I was just kidding!" the forest god said hastily, backing away. "There's no need to get mad at me!"

"What plans do you have for the next little while?"

"None! I promise."

"Good." Eros laughed as the forest god paled. "I want you to pay a visit with me."

With that, the young god of love turned toward the red-haloed peak of Mt. Aetna. Pan frowned in confusion as Eros patted the pouch at his side. "I think I want to see my stepfather," Eros growled.

Pan shuddered. Whenever Eros had that tone of voice, it boded ill for someone.

* * *

"So."

Psyche didn't glance up from where she knelt upon the floor. She could smell the delicate perfume that wafted from Aphrodite's robes and see her slender feet shod in dainty golden sandals, but she kept her head lowered modestly.

"My son's wife." The sentence was scornful. "I don't see what he sees in you; you are not... ill-favored, perhaps, but Eros could have had the choice of any immortal maiden. Why he chose you, a mortal, I cannot fathom! Particularly as you couldn't even obey his one, single command. Do you know where he is now?"

"No, blessed goddess."

"He lies, fevered upon his couch, ill from the wound that *you* gave him. You are faithless and worthless, beneath every aspect of his consideration. Now you are insolent enough to come to me -- to me! -- in hopes that I will restore you to his side."

"Is he getting better?" Psyche asked, lifting her face to stare the goddess in the eye.

"Slowly," the goddess replied coldly. "It is possible that the wound will never heal. Immortals have no need of healing agents, and any wound we receive may be permanent."

"Should I not tend to him, then? It is my responsibility to look after him while he is sick."

"No!" the goddess snapped. "Why would I subject my well-beloved son to more grief?"

"I am his wife," Psyche reminded her, then stopped. Demeter's warning flashed into her mind, and she lowered her head once more. "But, you are probably right. I am unworthy of him. I throw myself on your mercy, beloved goddess."

Aphrodite smiled over the girl's head. "Perhaps I can find some use for you," she mused. "Put her in the storeroom until I decide what to do with her. I have an appointment tonight. I'll get back to you in the morning," she promised as she moved off in a swirl of delicate fabrics and spicy perfume.

Unbeknownst to Aphrodite, Psyche was also smiling beneath the fiery curtain of her red-gold hair.

Chapter Two

Aphrodite slipped into the darkened room. This lovers' nest was very small, only a single room, but it was furnished with everything the goddess loved. There were bowls of flowers, bottles of good wine and a pair of crystal goblets her husband had given her some time before. Filmy fabrics swathed the wide windows, and the only piece of furniture was the immense bed that sat precisely in the center of the white marble floor. It was a lovely thing, with bedposts carved with lilies and gilded, hung with curtains of golden netting and white gauze that fluttered seductively as the wind whispered through it.

She'd prepared herself for this encounter with Ares with the meticulous attention one would expect the goddess of beauty to take. Her hair was loose as he liked it, but still curled intricately and scented with an aromatic essence of violets. Her gown was nearly transparent, of a delicately tinted lavender shade with a slender gold belt accentuating her curvaceous figure and large breasts.

Incense sweetened the air as she glanced at a tiny brazier swinging above the bed. Everything was ready, *perfect*; now all she had to do was wait for Ares. She poured herself a glass of wine and curled up in a pile of pillows against one wall. Her lips curved in a reminiscent smile. One of her favorite things about Ares was his unfailing creativity. The pillows were there as a result of the one time that they'd really needed them.

"What are you thinking about?"

Aphrodite looked up. Ares stood in the door, his armor gleaming ruddily in the low light. He was a big, handsome god, with the same shrewd green eyes as his father, Zeus.

Aphrodite rose gracefully to her feet. "Nothing other than you," she replied truthfully. She walked by him toward the wine, feeling his eyes burn upon her flesh as she passed. "You must be thirsty. Did you have a long day?"

"Boring," he said petulantly, tossing back the wine as soon as she handed it to him. "You know that everything is quiet right now; the big war won't start for a few more years so all I have to occupy my time are a few skirmishes."

"And me."

"And you."

Ares set the empty wineglass on the table and removed his helmet. His hair was dark, cut short in defiance of Olympian fashion, so that it curled crisply along the back of his sunburned neck. Aphrodite came to help him from the heavy breastplate that protected his muscular chest. He sighed as the buckles rang free, and sat on the edge of the bed to remove the greaves from his long legs.

"I hear that Eros is causing you some grief," he noted, not looking at his mistress while he stowed the armor neatly beneath the bed.

"Not anymore," the goddess replied with a tiny smirk. "I took care of the problem."

Ares shook his head. "I don't think I'd want to cross Eros, my love. He is your son, but if he finds out you interfered there's no telling what he'll do."

"He won't do anything," she said confidently, and slid into his lap. Immediately, she felt his erection stir to life beneath the battle-tunic he customarily wore. She nuzzled her face into the side of his neck.

"You've been bad, haven't you?" he asked, his arms sliding up around her.

"Very bad," she agreed. His mouth moved to the curve of her throat, sucking with swift savagery against her fair skin as his hands threaded into the wealth of her hair.

"You should be ashamed," he noted, pulling her head back to expose the long, sinuous line of her neck.

"I have no shame," she assured him. Her nipples hardened beneath the thin fabric of her gown as his big, callused fingers moved to twist them lightly.

"That's what I like about you," he agreed. His mouth fell upon hers, forcing it open with one, expert thrust of his tongue and Aphrodite melted against him. Her breasts were aching, throbbing painfully under his touch, and she felt the beginning of the sexual shift within him as he growled under his breath.

Ares, the god of war, was enthralled by any physical sensation that told of his overwhelming masculinity. He was a slave to his senses, helpless against any feeling that took control of his volatile personality. Aphrodite, goddess of love and inventor of all the seductive wiles used by women, understood this instinctively. She knew his weaknesses and played upon them with all of the devious methods of control within her nature.

There were, after all, quite a few of them.

Their love-play began the same way every time; he was the male, in control, ravaging her body with all of the predatory aims of the male species. Her reaction only fueled him more.

But she always knew when he crossed the line from predator to prey. Always.

His fingers fumbled at the ribbons that held her gown together. The only steadfast rule she had with him was the sanctity of her property. He wasn't allowed to rip anything off. Instead, completely against his nature, the god of war was forced to untie intricate little knots and undo tiny little buckles. Aphrodite knew that the delay only inflamed him further. It was another mark of her power over him.

His cock shifted beneath her, scorching into the back of her thigh with hot moisture soaking her gown. She moved, just a little, and was rewarded by his muffled groan. As he desperately tried to undo the first ribbon, she fastened her mouth upon his ear.

Another weakness.

Her tongue feathered lightly into it while she breathed swift little gasps. Her slender hands untied the lacing at his throat with ease, sliding the tunic open over his

bare muscles and fluttering over his smooth skin. She loved the smell of him. That spicy, male scent of steel and leather drove her absolutely wild. She started to suck on his earlobes while her fingertips teased his hardening nipples, flicking against them with her nails until his breath came faster.

"This is cruel," he mourned, tugging at the ribbon resignedly.

She laughed at him. "I'll undo the first one for you," she told him in the mock-concerned voice that she knew irritated him beyond measure. Nimble, her fingers tugged the knot free, and her gown sagged to reveal the tip of one rosy breast. Ares fell upon it, suckling the nipple eagerly while his hands continued to fumble at the other ribbon.

Amazingly, it fell free. The gown dropped to her hips as his big hands encircled her bare flesh, kneading her breasts while his mouth moved greedily from one to the other. Aphrodite sighed with contentment and bit lightly on the god's ear. He roared and jerked her against him. Her breasts flattened against his chest while his mouth devoured hers once more, his hands moving feverishly to pull the rest of her gown away. She lifted her hips slightly to help him along and was promptly tossed onto the bed. She lay there, her lips swollen with pleasure, watching as Ares divested himself of his own clothes.

Her eyes ran over him. He was beautiful, his body sculpted beyond the skill of any artisan, mortal or divine. His skin was sun-bronzed and smooth, with none of that distasteful hair that Hephaestus sported. He was tall and impressive, his huge cock brushing his belly as he stared at her, his eyes blazing with passion and his fists clenched.

This, too, was part of their game.

"What do you want?" she purred, running her hands down her slim body so that her bracelets tinkled.

"You," he grated.

"How?"

He licked his lips. "I want to fuck you."

"Tsk, tsk, dearest," the goddess chided him, her fingers toying in the golden patch of hair that covered her sex. "I've told you that I don't like that sort of crudity."

Ares hesitated. Aphrodite smiled as his dick throbbed against his stomach. "What do you want me to do?" he asked, his voice harsh.

Deliberately, she spread her legs. "Pleasure me first and then we'll see."

He climbed onto the bed slowly, his eyes fastened upon her sex with a gleam of anticipation in his eyes. He moved between her legs, staring at her until a warm flush rose to her perfect skin. Without preamble he spread her wide open, exposing her vagina to his eyes.

Ares knew how to play the game too.

He bent and kissed her right leg, just above her knee. He then kissed her left leg, just on the inside of her thigh. His big hands curved around her hips, caressing her flesh with steady fingers. He lowered his face until his breath stirred her pubic hair and blew lightly on the erect clitoris that was already stirring at his touch. "Here?" he asked.

"Yes."

His tongue darted out, parting the hair and flicking against her. She moved a little, restless as it snaked forward again for several more glancing blows. He lowered his mouth onto her fully, his tongue moving around her clit in a leisurely, deliberate circle.

"You like that, don't you?" he asked, a laugh hovering just around his voice.

"Yes," she breathed. His hands traveled up her heated skin and fastened around her breasts as he stroked her lightly. "Harder!" she urged him, squirming against his face.

The god laughed. The vibration of his teeth against her clit sent an unexpected surge of desire searing through her body. He ignored her demand, continuing his slow, gentle assault upon her pussy until she was dripping wet and writhing beneath him. Aphrodite tried to coerce him to obedience, but whenever she tried to bring her power to bear upon him it slipped away from her for some reason. She stared at him until he glanced up.

Ares grinned.

"What are you doing?" she gasped. "I am the goddess of love... of *pleasure*! How are you able to withstand me?"

Ares sucked on her clit, hard, and she screamed, her back arching despite her confusion. He lifted his head and moved a single finger back to tease her some more, sliding around the entrance to her cunt while he watched her spasmodic movements. "Did you forget, my dear? I am the god of war, and I lay siege as I see fit."

He rose above her, the finger moving firmly now on her clitoris with tight swift circles. Helpless against his assault, she moaned as the head of his cock nudged against her. He impaled her with one, brutal movement, his dick filling her pussy with violent possession. Without comment, he pounded into her, his fingers digging into the tender flesh of her hips as he drove mercilessly toward his own gratification.

Suddenly, he fell forward with a startled exclamation. Aphrodite was pinned beneath him, her breasts heaving as she tried to catch her breath. For some reason, he wasn't moving anymore. His cock was throbbing within her but the big god's body was completely motionless. Vainly, her hands fluttered up to shove against his shoulders. Ares' muscles were straining, bunched into tight, sinewy bands as he pushed against the bed.

"What in the name of Hades is the matter?" she snapped.

"I can't move," he grated. "It's like I'm --"

"Trapped," a new voice said from the door. Aphrodite went cold. She instantly recognized the voice, and the shuffling sounds of limping footsteps to the side of the bed.

"Hephaestus," she breathed.

"Well, *wife*," the god of the forge said in his gruff way. "It looks as if you're in a slight predicament."

"I -- I --"

"No need to explain," Hephaestus said kindly. "I'm too stupid to understand the meaning of this, of course, so I've asked some others to help me decide what the truth of the matter is."

"What are you talking about?" she shrieked.

There was a murmur of laughter somewhere and Aphrodite blanched.

"Well, I realize that I'm so great a fool as to listen to any excuses you might offer for this," Hephaestus remarked, and his voice was suddenly cold. "So, the rest of the Olympians are here to help my poor, feeble brain decide what is best to do."

Aphrodite's eyes widened in horror as the face of Pan suddenly appeared over Ares' shoulder. "Damn it all, Hephaestus, you dropped the thing too soon! I can't see anything but his back."

"Come over here," Dionysus' voice advised merrily. "There's a great view from this end."

Her husband sat on the edge of the bed, his work-hardened thighs brushing against her face. He smiled at her with eyes that burned as fiercely as did his forge and said, "You should always check to see if something is different in your hideaway, my dear." His voice changed into a bright invitation. "Come along, friends! The show's just begun!"

* * *

Eros watched from the edge of the room. His mother couldn't bear humiliation of any sort, and it was quite likely that her previously indulgent husband would make certain she was trapped for a long time. Hephaestus winked at him, obviously enjoying the fact that Ares' nose was quite close to his balls under the sweat-stained, short leather tunic that he wore. As the gods gathered around the guilty pair on the bed, Eros slipped into the night. His wings made no sound as he made his way to his mother's deserted house.

Psyche was a sweet, compassionate mortal girl. She would understand the influences at work, wouldn't she? He wished more than anything that he could simply

take her into his arms, hold her for a moment, maybe even kiss her until she forgave him. *Love cannot live where there is no trust. You have forfeited your claim upon me, Psyche.*

The god sighed. Most mortals -- and immortals too, for that matter -- were always ready for love, always seeking it and craving it. He could only hope that his wife was normal in that respect. Until she relented, until she forgave him, he could not touch her.

* * *

Psyche huddled in the corner of the storeroom, just miserable enough to be angry. Granted, Demeter's advice was good, but she'd been here for hours. There was nowhere to get comfortable, nothing to eat or drink. Her mind replayed the humiliating interview with Aphrodite over and over until her rage was only barely contained.

Abruptly, her thoughts reverted to Eros. *"You are mine," he breathed, the words tickling her ear. "I am the fiend you fear so greatly. I am your destiny, your fortune, your betrothed fate. I am he who moves through the shadows of the night to show you the heights of the gods themselves."*

Psyche smiled bitterly. *He never lied to me.*

There was a tiny click of sound. Psyche lifted her head from her knees, staring around at the dim room apprehensively. What punishment would the goddess deliver to her now that she was so firmly in her power? Another click had her on her feet, her back pressed against the wall.

Her temper got the better of her. "Don't play with me," she said scornfully. "Do whatever it is you're here to do and get it over with."

A gust of air brushed against her face and she drew in her breath. It felt... familiar...

"Eros." Psyche's voice was flat as she made the connection. "Here to berate me again?" She returned to her seat on the floor. "Go ahead," she challenged the god.

"Psyche."

She kept her face expressionless. "What?"

Eros materialized before her. As her eyes adjusted to his figure, she saw the great wings furl upon his back. Every outline of his body was familiar to her. In her mind's eye rose the image of the one time she'd seen his face, but she repressed it ruthlessly.

"Are you not glad to see your husband?" The question was reproachful.

"Why should I be glad?" she countered. "Let's see, I was manipulated by your mother, misled by my sisters, repudiated by you, and now I'm imprisoned by the will of an angry goddess. Tell me, Eros, what reason do I have to be happy?"

"You don't," he agreed quietly. "You're absolutely right."

She digested this in silence. Eros shifted, ill at ease, and waited.

"I know," she said at last, her voice cool.

Eros was taken aback. "I was wrong to treat you so, Psyche. I should have known my mother was behind it."

"Yes, you should have. As you chose not to consider what had really happened, however, I fail to see why this confession of yours should make me feel better."

The young god sighed. "I have come to take you home."

"Home!" She leapt to her feet. "I have no home, *my husband*, not anymore."

"Your home is where I am," he retorted, an edge rising to his voice.

"Oh really? Why?" Psyche advanced upon him until she stood just before him. The light in the room was just enough so that she could make out his features and she swallowed the instinctive gasp of awe at his beauty. "So I can wait for you to come to my bed -- but only when it's convenient? So that I can give you pleasure with my body - but only how you want me to do it?"

"That's not fair," he complained. "I was always more concerned with your pleasure than my own."

"Which *is* your delight," she said with emphasis. "You are the god of love; you find great joy in the pleasure of others. What happened between us wasn't mutual, my husband, it was orchestrated by you with that view in mind."

"Not always," he murmured.

"True," she said after a moment. "Not always."

Silence fell between them. He was near enough that she could taste the tang of his skin on her tongue, but she remained aloof.

"You are angry with me," he said, his voice gentle and sad.

"Yes," she admitted. "Haven't I the right to be?"

Eros was unused to admitting faults. Even in his worst moment, when Zeus threatened to blast him into Chaos for causing him to lust after the mortal girl Semele, he'd been incapable of taking the blame for his own actions. After a moment's hesitation, he replied, "Yes, you do have that right, beloved. I have come to ask your forgiveness."

"Forgiveness," she breathed. Psyche's hand stretched out and touched his chest lightly, right above his left nipple. "You want me to forgive you?"

"Yes," he growled, increasingly aware of her fingers running lightly down his torso.

Her hands moved lower, tracing a pattern between his navel and the top of his kilted skirt. She pressed her lips to his chest, swirling her tongue against the warm saltiness of his skin. "You want me to touch you?"

"Yes." His voice was tight, low in his chest. She slid her hand under the hem of his kilt, running the tips of her fingers lightly along his balls. He stiffened in her grasp, his cock swelling proudly as her cool fingertips traced widening circles around its head. She nibbled gently up to his neck.

It was almost as if he were awaiting permission to touch her. She reveled in the feeling of power as her lips brushed softly against his. "You want to touch me, don't you?"

"I can't," he groaned, confirming her guess.

"Why not?"

"Love cannot be forced; it must be accepted," he replied without thinking and her fingers tightened around his cock. Instantly, Eros knew he'd made an error, a fatal error.

"I see. So you're bound by your own rules, aren't you?" She released him abruptly, tilting her head back to smile up into his face. "The same rules that forced you to cast me aside now compel you to wait until I accept you again, isn't that right?"

He nodded with a sinking feeling in his gut.

For a moment, she felt a touch of pity. It was obvious, very obvious, that he was sincerely regretful and apologetic. She hesitated, then asked quietly, "Can you make it a little lighter in here? I want to see your face."

Immediately, the room was illuminated as the single brazier flared into life. Psyche stared at her husband consideringly. His blue eyes were dulled, his face taut and his hands clenched. On his shoulder, the burn she'd left still glared fiery red against his golden skin. She sighed as her eyes fell upon it.

"Does it hurt?"

"Not as much."

"I am sorry for that," she confessed, her eyes brimming with regretful tears.

"It isn't that important, Psyche."

"Yes, it is," she retorted. "You told me that love couldn't exist where there was no trust. Tell me, Eros, why should I trust you now?"

He didn't reply, thrown off-balance by the quick question and the no-nonsense tone with which it was uttered.

"For that matter, why should you trust me?" This question was bitter, as she stared up into the face denied her for so long.

"It was neither of our faults, beloved. My mother found out about us and decided to destroy our faith in each other," he explained.

"True, but only *your* faith was destroyed," she pointed out. "I still have faith in you, obviously, or else I wouldn't find myself here as your mother's prisoner, waiting for her to punish me for the crime of being loved by her son!"

"I can practically guarantee you that she won't be home for quite some time," Eros offered with the slightest touch of impish delight in his voice.

She looked at him suspiciously. "What did you do?"

The wicked grin that spread across his face took her breath away. "Oh, I just let my stepfather know that she was cheating on him," he said innocently. "I didn't really *do* anything to *her*."

"Not visibly at least," she agreed and smiled in spite of herself. She stepped closer, winding her arms around his neck and pressing against his body. She felt his body harden with delight and helped it along with a teasing kiss.

"I must confess, beloved," she whispered against his skin. "I really want to forgive you."

"I wish you would," he replied. "This is torture."

To the god's surprise, she laughed. "I know. That's why I have no intention of forgiving you yet."

"What?"

She put her mouth on his collarbone and bit down on it. "I'm not going to forgive you yet. You don't deserve it. Between you and your mother, you have played quite a little game with me, Eros. I don't think you really had any idea who you were playing with. I am not a normal mortal, after all. I am the daughter of a king and I have my pride."

She trailed her nails down the skin of his back, gratified by the way his breath hissed between his teeth. "Don't worry; I'm sure I will forgive you... eventually. Until then, however, I don't think I want you touching me." Her voice hardened slightly. "I've learned a great deal from you, my husband, and from your mother. I don't think you have any idea what sort of weapon you've created."

"Weapon?" Eros' voice was shocked, his jaw clenched against the sensation of her against him.

"Yes, my love, I said *weapon*. Tell me, do you know what my name is?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Do you know what 'psyche' means?"

He stared at her, his eyes widening.

"That's right," she purred and kissed his mouth, hard. "Psyche means soul. The workings of the soul, of the mind, are my strengths. Now you've given me a great advantage, Eros. Now my strength has been tempered with the attentions of love. You've taught me a great deal about pleasure. The only route to that pleasure for either of us lies through the soul. If I am to forgive you, god of love, then you must survive the game of the soul, the teachings of the mind."

She smiled as her hands darted to his hips. Her fingers gathered up the fabric, drawing it sensuously against his skin until she could reach around and grasp his ass. His longing was written clearly upon his face; his eyes had changed, darkened as the flush of desire rode high upon his skin.

"Yes," she murmured. "Physical pleasure is within the domain of love, but desire, true desire, lies within the realm of the soul, Eros. *My* domain. We will return to love, you and I, but only after you've experienced the true power of desire."

With a quick movement, she untied his kilt. The linen garment fell to the floor at his feet. The god looked down at his mortal wife, who'd never looked quite so lovely as she did at that moment, laughing at his surprise. Eros realized that, emotionally, Psyche had already forgiven him. She was not prepared, however, to resume their old relationship. Inwardly, he sighed. It was going to be a long, frustrating series of weeks.

Wishing with all of his heart that he could touch her, Eros said, "Show me."

Chapter Three

Psyche smiled.

She kissed him again, her tongue darting between his lips. He could have screamed with frustration, wanting nothing more than to return her kiss but the rules that bound him prevented it. As she pulled away, she ran her tongue over his lips and slanted a look up at him from under her lashes.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

"I'm thinking that if you ever do forgive me, I might just spank you," he replied evenly.

She laughed in delight. "That might be fun."

His dick twitched again, much to his wife's amusement. Her hands swept over his skin, moving back to his balls with feathery caresses. One small hand wrapped around the head of his penis, moving the cum gathered there with circular strokes while the other gently caressed his scrotum. He felt the pressure building within his body and gritted his teeth.

"I'm terribly afraid you're going to have to talk to me," Psyche said, taking his nipple into her mouth and sucking on it hard. "I'm going to be busy."

"Talk to you about what?" he asked, trying to maintain a note of sanity.

"About us," she suggested.

"What about us?"

"Tell me what you want."

"Now?"

She laughed and the young god groaned. "Now, or tomorrow, or next week, or two centuries from now."

"At the moment I really want to kiss you."

"Poor thing," she cooed. Lifting her head, she kissed him passionately. Pulling away, she asked sweetly, "Did that help?"

"No," he snarled. "I want to kiss *you*. Not the other way around."

"Isn't it all the same?"

"Not hardly."

Her hands were moving quicker on his cock, stroking it with long, twisting motions. Eros closed his eyes as the friction began to work on him. Desperately, he tried to cast his mind to something else -- anything else -- to distract him from the growing pleasure of his arousal.

"You aren't talking to me," she reproved.

"I can't think of anything to say," he admitted, the muscles of his arms straining so tightly that they trembled.

"Nothing?" she asked sadly. "There's nothing that you want?"

Her long hair was brushing lightly against his skin, sensitizing it almost to the point of pain. He felt an orgasm building within him as she continued to pull upon him, drawing his dick so hard that the responsive flesh of its head brushed against the fabric of her dress.

"That's a shame," she said, falling to her knees. "If you could think, you'd probably ask for this."

Her mouth enveloped him. Instantly, his body screamed with the need to respond, to move within the tight, hot wetness that swirled around his cock. Every motion of her head brought that hair to flick against his skin. Her nails were digging into the flesh of his ass until he thought he'd die of pleasure. His legs trembled, frantically willing his hips to move against her as the desire grew within him.

"See?" she murmured against his flesh and he stilled abruptly. "Perhaps you should think of something to say."

With that, she suckled him so hard that he shouted. She moved slowly, torturously around him, her tongue swirling around the hypersensitive shaft of his penis with deliberate strokes.

"I would give anything to touch you."

She didn't reply. Instead, she moved even quicker, building him rapidly to the point of orgasm. Her teeth scraped gently along the top of his cock as she sucked harder. The pleasure he felt was amplified by the frustrated urge to thread his fingers through her hair, to pull her up and tighten his arms around her body --

-- to taste her himself.

The orgasm erupted from him. His legs weakened as she took his essence into herself, drinking it as it spurted from his throbbing dick. When the waves of release finally subsided, she pulled away from him reluctantly, a tiny smile curving her lips.

As soon as she no longer touched him, he half-sat, half-collapsed upon the floor. She watched him with that strange half-smile upon her face, still kneeling only a short distance away.

"Have you forgiven me yet?" he finally managed to say.

She considered him, cocking her head to one side with an air of appraisal. "Not quite yet," she replied. "Why? Do you want to be forgiven?"

"More than anything I've ever wanted," he said, passion deepening his voice. "I want to touch you, to kiss you, to give you the kind of pleasure you just gave to me."

Psyche rose to her feet. "Then you've learned your first lesson."

He stared at her. "What do you mean?"

She shrugged, straightening her gown. "Pleasure is greater when it's shared," she said in a low voice. "You told me once that the sexual act was intended to give pleasure to the woman. I think perhaps you've just learned that it's actually intended to be shared, to be met and matched by one's lover instead."

Eros sighed. The truth of her words shamed him. "You're right."

She smiled once more. "I know."

Psyche leaned forward and kissed him, and he marveled at the salty taste of himself upon her lips. "Come back tomorrow night," she murmured. "Maybe I'll have forgiven you by then."

* * *

Aphrodite was furious, humiliated, almost weeping with her thwarted emotions. The golden hangings she'd admired earlier were really nothing but her husband's trap, pinning her lover inside of her while the other gods laughed and made crude comments. She had yet to hear another goddess in the room; she could only presume that Hephaestus meant to teach her a serious lesson about providing her ample charms to the males of their extended family.

He remained at her side, smelling still of the sweat and iron of his forge. Somehow, he'd wormed his lame leg beneath the god of war's cheek, so that Ares' nose rested quite firmly on the smith's huge balls. Most of the other gods thought this was extremely funny.

"After all, it's only fair," Apollo pointed out, his musical voice rising above the general chatter. "Ares has been everywhere else that Hephaestus' cock has been; he should know what he's after -- intimately."

Aphrodite closed her eyes and wished it were possible for an immortal to die. She wasn't certain who she wanted dead most -- it might even be herself.

"So, tell me, Ares," Hephaestus said conversationally. "Do you think you might reconsider your desire to make a cuckold of me?"

"When you let me out of here, I'm going to gut you like a fish," Ares replied.

"No, actually, you won't," a stern voice interjected and the mighty god of war actually winced. Hephaestus stood swiftly, his face concerned.

"Father!"

"Son," Zeus replied, his eyes twinkling. He looked at the trapped gods' predicament and sighed. "Was this absolutely necessary?"

"I thought it was," the smith god retorted.

Zeus merely ordered, "Release them."

Instantly, the golden net dissolved. Ares reared from the bed, one hand already reaching for the huge sword beside it. A crash of thunder exploded over the little house and Zeus bellowed, "Enough!"

Ares halted in his tracks. Hephaestus' eyes gleamed momentarily and one big hand twitched. It was exceedingly apparent that the powerful smith wanted nothing more than to throttle his older brother. Ares saw the motion too and a flash of doubt flitted across his face. Aphrodite drew the sheet over her nude body, her cheeks flaming.

Zeus skewered her with a look. "Don't even think about leaving."

She shrank back against the headboard, tears filling her lovely eyes. Zeus didn't even glance at the other gods, who drifted silently from the room. His eyes fell then upon Hephaestus. "Tell me what happened."

The smith told his tale, omitting nothing but the identity of his informer. As she listened, Aphrodite's cheeks grew pale. *Someone had spied on her!* Who would *dare* do such a thing?

Zeus' eyes were twinkling suspiciously when his youngest son had finished, but he turned a stern look upon Aphrodite. "You have apparently offended someone mightily, Daughter," he said. "I would advise you to have a care who falls beneath those pretty feet in the future. I do not wish to have to deal with anything like *this* again. As for you, Ares, you'd be well-advised to have a care where you stick your sword in the future. Sometimes an opponent is better-armored than you guess."

The father of the gods looked at the guilty pair and said, "Go."

The last sight Aphrodite had of her now-despised lovers' nest was her husband, watching her depart with Zeus' hand upon his shoulder.

* * *

The next morning, Eros visited his mother in her rooms as was his custom. He entered, inwardly amused at the trappings of illness around the huge bed. His mother was taking her shame hard, evidently. She lay upon her pillows, her face pale amid the spilling glory of her golden hair, one hand laid delicately over her eyes.

"Good morning, Mother," Eros said pleasantly. "How are you feeling today?"

"Not well," she replied without looking up.

"That's a real pity," he remarked, his voice hardening. "I understand that you have confined my wife within these walls."

She sat up in genuine shock. "You know?"

"Of course I know!" he snapped. "You, of all people, should know what the limits of my consciousness are. I haven't lost track of Psyche for a moment."

"You should!" she retorted, thoroughly annoyed. "Why on earth you'd be so stupid as to marry a mortal I have no idea! Toss her back among her own kind, Eros. She is unworthy of you."

"Why is she unworthy of me?" he challenged her.

"She betrayed you, did she not?"

"Did she?" he asked the question musingly, fingering a lead-tipped arrow with seeming nonchalance. His mother paled at the sight of it.

"Of course she did," Aphrodite said in a more reasonable tone of voice. "You only have to look at your shoulder to know that."

"Oh, I know she disobeyed me," Eros said lightly. "But, she was encouraged to do so, wasn't she?"

Aphrodite's voice suddenly went cold. "You did it," she accused him.

Eros laughed and leaned upon his bow. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I did," he replied. "How did you enjoy your 'engagement' last night, Mother?"

"You traitor," she hissed.

"Traitor? Me? Coming from you that's really funny. If I am a traitor it's because I learned it at your breast. Now, let's discuss your treatment of my wife before I lose my temper again."

"There is nothing to discuss. She has come to me, as is fitting for a blasphemer, and I will deal with her accordingly."

"A blasphemer?" Eros glared at her in disgust. "I suppose your new definition of blasphemy is a mortal who rivals you in beauty?"

"She has offended me from the beginning!" Aphrodite screeched.

"And you have punished her, and me, for it," Eros interrupted.

"You had no right to marry without my permission."

"I have no need of your permission for *anything* I do," the young god replied, his beautiful face taut with fury. "I am not asking you. I am *telling* you to release Psyche now, at this exact moment, and to stop interfering in our lives together."

Aphrodite's eyes narrowed shrewdly. "Why don't you just take her?"

"Because of your interference, my wife is quite understandably angry with me," her son said. There was a flash of pain on his face, swiftly concealed beneath this new, cold expression he now wore.

"See? She is not worthy of you."

"No, Mother," Eros retorted. "I am not worthy of her. Will you relent or not?"

Aphrodite regarded him steadily. "No, I will not."

The god sighed. "Very well, then." He tossed the quiver of arrows at her feet. "I won't be needing these again so you can have them. I'll just keep the bow," he added maliciously. "I'll need to hunt."

"You can't be serious!" she gasped, horrified at the gesture. Only Eros' bow could launch the darts of love. By renouncing the quiver of enchanted arrows, he was effectively ending the business of love. Aphrodite had a horrific mental image of her temples crumbling into dust, her altars rotting under untended sacrifices, and an entire universe of males unwilling to do her bidding and was stunned into speechlessness.

"I am completely serious," he replied quietly. "Goodbye, Mother."

Eros dissipated into the golden haze of the morning while his mother screamed in frustration and fury from the solitary coolness of her bed.

Chapter Four

Eros' threat was not idle. He adamantly refused to go about the business of his mother's domain. Aphrodite sent her attendants in search of him some hours later. They reported back that he was carousing with Dionysus and Pan, drinking wine and telling vulgar jokes involving golden nets. Her lips tightened to the point of invisibility and she sent her maids on their way, pelted by an unrelenting string of shattering perfume bottles.

In the storeroom of the goddess' house, Psyche awaited her fate. Invisible servants had brought her breakfast, a hot bath, and clothes when she awoke. She knew without asking that this was done at Eros' command, that he was concerned for her well-being. She also knew that he would respect her wishes entirely; she would not see him until the night. He was leaving her to handle his mother as she saw fit.

Psyche smiled lovingly as she brushed out her hair. It was adorable, really, to witness a god's confusion. She knew he was trying his best to concede to her demands, but the immortals had very little experience with guilt. It was new territory for him and he was handling it as best he could.

Which was actually sort of funny if you thought about it.

The door flew open. Psyche glanced up, surprised, at the red-faced nymph who stood there. "You're to come now!"

"I see." Psyche laid the brush aside and rose to follow her guide.

* * *

Aphrodite was still lovely, but unusually pale as she regarded her daughter-in-law from her lofty throne. "So... you've managed to keep my son in thrall to you."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Eros!" the goddess snapped. "He has refused to do his work, my work, because of your presence here! He thinks I am holding you against your will."

"Aren't you?" Psyche asked mildly. "After all, most mothers-in-law don't keep their sons' wives locked in storerooms."

"That is enough!" The goddess' voice fairly crackled with her anger. "Any other mortal who was so insolent to me would find themselves blasted into nothingness."

Psyche believed her. She bowed her head and waited for what Aphrodite would say next.

"I have a task for you," the goddess said. She beckoned for the girl to follow her. In a few moments, they found themselves in the storeroom of Aphrodite's greatest temple on Cypros. Huge mounds of grain were piled haphazardly together. "I understand you have great skill in sorting things," Aphrodite said spitefully. "I wish you to separate all these grains into individual piles so that I can make some sense of them."

"You must be joking!" Psyche gasped.

"Not in the slightest," Aphrodite retorted with a malevolent smile. "Oh, and see that it's done by midnight, would you?"

With that, the goddess sailed from the room, slamming the heavy door behind her. Psyche sank to the floor. The nearest pile was only a few feet away and at least five feet in height. Oats, barley, wheat, and rye were mixed together without logic or reason.

It was impossible. Conditioned as she was to obey the gods without hesitation, Psyche knew a moment of great despair. She let her face fall into her hands and knelt in misery.

* * *

Eros watched from his invisible vantage point along the far wall, his eyes narrowed. It was obvious that his mother never intended for the task to be done. It was yet another way of punishing his wife, particularly when faced with the sheer hopelessness of the chore. His hands clenched in fury.

Something tickled his foot. Annoyed, he looked down to find an ant crawling across the top of his big toe, laden with a kernel of corn. He went to shake the creature off then stopped with a broad grin.

Psyche never noticed as a steady stream of ants poured into the storeroom, each lifting a separate grain and carrying it across the room.

* * *

"How did you do this?" the irate goddess demanded at sunset.

Psyche merely looked at her. She'd watched the ants work all day with laughter in her heart, but knew better than to antagonize Aphrodite further. "Since the task is complete, blessed goddess, may I see my husband now?"

"No. You did not do this task. He did in his fascination with you. Return to your storeroom. I'll have a new task for you in the morning."

Psyche rose to her feet. "Don't think I don't realize what you're doing," she commented quietly. "You're giving me tasks that can't be done, hoping that I'll give up. I should probably warn you, immortal Aphrodite, that I will never give up."

"You think you know a great deal, mortal daughter," the goddess retorted. "I wonder if you are as clever as you think you are."

* * *

"So! You've deserted your poor mother in her hour of need," Pan started, a sly twinkle in his eyes.

"Don't start," Eros said shortly.

"Sorry, cousin, I just can't help it. I must admit that your love life is giving me many hours of amusement."

Eros lifted an eyebrow at the forest god, who laughed. "I'm glad you're finding it funny."

"Almost as amusing as Aphrodite and Ares trapped on that bed with Hephaestus grinning away next to them like a guard of Hades," Pan admitted, wiping tears from his cheek. "I hope I fall asleep with that image in my head for the rest of eternity."

Eros grinned. "It was funny."

"I just hope she doesn't find out it was us who told on them to the smith," Pan remarked, a slight frown of concern suddenly appearing.

"She knows."

"*What?*"

"Oh, not about you. I took full credit," Eros reassured him. "It was my idea, after all, and I didn't think it fair that you suffer any, er, repercussions."

"Thanks," Pan said dryly.

"Don't mention it."

"And how are things with your wife?"

The young god frowned. "Not too well at the moment. Mother is giving her impossible tasks and keeping her in a storeroom. But, Psyche is handling the situation well. A little too well," he added thoughtfully.

"She still hasn't forgiven you, eh?"

Eros glanced curiously at his cousin. For the first time since he'd known Pan, the god had a look of compassion on his weathered face. "No," he admitted. "She hasn't. I don't think she will anytime soon, either."

"Can you blame her?" Pan asked gently.

"No, not really."

"As long as you think like that, she will," his cousin predicted.

"I hope so."

Pan clapped him on the shoulder. "Trust me, Eros. She wouldn't be trying so hard to please your mother if she didn't truly love you."

"I know she loves me!"

"As well you should. It's your department after all."

* * *

Psyche's storeroom was a little more comfortable than on the previous night. Somehow, a broad couch was tucked into the corner, next to a small table spread with a light meal. After she ate, she lay upon her couch and thought. The day's events had

cheered her immeasurably. For the first time since the terrible events at her own house, she was confident that, somehow, she and Eros would find a way to overcome their troubles.

"You're thoughtful, beloved."

She looked up to see her husband lounging against the far wall. "I have much to consider."

"As do we all."

"How do you manage that?" she asked with a touch of asperity.

"Manage what?"

"To get in here without using doors."

He grinned at her. "It's part of my charm."

Psyche laughed. "It must be a useful skill. I take it that your mother has no idea you're here."

Eros grimaced. "She doesn't. I'm sure she's a bit preoccupied at the moment with screaming at the hired help. She doesn't take being thwarted very well."

"Like her son refusing to do his work?" she asked shrewdly.

"And her daughter-in-law managing a task no mortal should be able to do." He smiled as he made the comment.

"I should thank you for that."

"Don't." His response was immediate. "Don't thank me for trying to insure that my love isn't abused by my mother. You shouldn't be in this position."

"No," she agreed. "Nor should you."

"True."

They stared at each other for a long moment. Psyche felt a queer little thrill in her stomach, unlike anything she'd ever felt before. This was more than desire, more than the mindless love she'd borne an unknown and unseen lover. This was deeper, resonating with some power quite beyond what she'd known.

"So, am I forgiven?" he asked, smiling affectionately at her.

"I'm not sure yet," she replied. "I really enjoyed having you subject to my every whim."

"I enjoyed it too, but it was more than a little frustrating," he said, wincing slightly. "I would like to get some sleep sometime before Chaos claims me."

"Do gods really need sleep?"

"Unless you want us to become irritable."

She laughed and beckoned for him to come closer. "I'd hate for you to become irritable. Why don't you come and give me a kiss?"

Instantly, he was across the room and kneeling at her side. His eyes met hers, searchingly, before he lowered his lips to hers. His lips met hers gently, tenderly, and her eyes closed. It was the merest brush of a kiss, a sweet, quiet caress that said nothing of passion and everything of love.

"Well," she said breathlessly as he pulled away. "That was definitely different from your other kisses."

"Pleasure is intended to be shared," he reminded her. "That was your first lesson for me, little teacher."

"A kiss given in love is just as pleasurable as one driven by desire," she murmured. "Thank you."

"May I kiss you again?"

"Do you have to ask?"

He rolled his eyes. "Yes."

She grinned wickedly. "Oh, really? How interesting. Yes, please, kiss me again."

This time, the kiss was deeper, more intense, with a tentative mating of their tongues. Psyche noted dimly that he still didn't touch her, that his arms were bunched above his still hands, and another piece of the puzzle clicked into place.

"So, you still can't touch me unless I allow it," she said, her eyes lowered demurely.

Eros sighed. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am. I'm enjoying it quite a bit as a matter of fact."

"You're a cruel woman," he mourned.

"Everything I've learned, I learned at your hands," she reminded him. "You have only yourself to blame."

"That's true. Don't you think this lesson is a little too hard?"

"Oh no," she replied. "I like hard things."

He stared at her, then burst out laughing. Without hesitation, she threw her arms around his neck. "Hold me," she urged him, her lips moving against his.

He needed no further encouragement. His arms tightened around her, pulling her firmly to his chest. He kissed her again with restraint, his lips soft against her own. Psyche reveled in his touch, his kiss, the strength of his arms. Her hands caressed the base of his wings and he sucked in his breath.

"Sensitive spot?" she asked, her fingers stroking the feathers lightly.

"Just a little," he grated, unable to keep his body from hardening against hers.

"Who would have thought?"

Their kiss intensified, her mouth opening under his and welcoming the mating thrust of his tongue with answering abandon. His hands worked into the silent wealth of her hair, tangling in the red-gold curls as his fingers clenched against her skull. "Touch me," she moaned.

His hand slid to her breast, caressing it gently so that the thin fabric of her gown teased her nipples. They hardened instantly under his touch, poking urgently against his palm. He growled low in his chest, transferring his other hand to her breasts, kneading them gently, brushing his fingers across the erect peaks until she gasped. His mouth left hers, gliding down her smooth throat then back to her face. Keeping his caresses feather-light and sensuous, he kissed her chin, her cheeks, brushed his lips across her eyelids and brow, all the while. Her hands slid up his muscled shoulders, curving around the back of his neck in exaltation.

"This is killing me," he muttered against her mouth.

"What is?" she asked, her mind whirling.

"I want more."

She laughed in delight and nibbled on his earlobe. "But, I haven't forgiven you yet."

She traced lines with her fingertips back to his chest as her mouth forged a wet, hot path down his neck. She rolled his nipples between her fingers, enjoying the way they stiffened at her touch. Her lips moved to the flat space between his pectoral muscles. He loosened his arms as she pushed him back against the floor. When he lay flat, she straddled him with a wicked smile, her fingers toying with the fastenings of his tunic.

He caught his breath as the garment fell away. She lowered her mouth to his flesh once more, tossing her hair over her head to drape across him like a silken shroud. Without hesitation, she took his pulsing cock into her mouth, drawing hard upon it. Her slender fingers tickled the undersides of his swollen balls, playing with them lightly. Eros moaned as she moved deliberately over his heated skin.

"Do you like that?" she murmured. The vibration of her voice intensified the building pressure within him.

"Yes."

She smiled against the head of his penis. Her mouth left it, leaving it aching with need and cooling in the night air, and nibbled down the inside of his leg. Her hands wormed under his ass, her fingernails digging into his flesh. His body convulsed with pleasure.

Psyche sat up, running her fingers through her hair to pull it back from her face. The motion was primal, sexual, a woman's celebration of her power over the man she loved. Eros' eyes darkened as her breasts jutted through the gossamer fabric. Her legs were bare almost to her crotch, the tunic bunched around her waist. She stretched her body over his, and the heat from his skin scorched her through her sheer gown. She looked into his face, all humor drained from her lovely eyes.

"I forgive you," she breathed.

Instantly, the young god was on his feet, holding her against his body with fierce possessiveness. His mouth fell upon hers, devouring her, his lips grinding against hers,

while his tongue captured her own. Psyche's feet lifted from the ground. Convulsively, she threw her arms around his neck.

There was a swift, disorienting flash of movement. Psyche felt a sudden rush of cool air against her back. She pulled away from her husband's kiss and gasped.

"You have no need to be afraid," Eros said against her ear. "You are flying with me."

They were ascending in the night sky. The stars were gleaming with particular brightness, as if in a benediction, and the moon's soft, silvery glow was just brushing the top of the mountains. Eros' arm was warm against her back, his cock stabbing into the tender flesh of her belly as he sucked on the sensitive spot just beneath her ear. Psyche relaxed, closing her eyes against the fear. Her gown suddenly fluttered away and she was deliciously nude, pressed against her husband passionately.

"You are mine," he growled, his free hand coming up between her legs. She shuddered as his fingers plowed into her. The air swirled around their entwined bodies, creating ripples of sensation against her skin. Eros' thumb worked its way to her clitoris, manipulating it with swift, sure strokes. She arched against him, her head falling back in rapture.

"Say it," he demanded, biting down on her shoulder. "Say that you are mine."

His hand was torturing her, driving her mad. His arm was like a steel band, crushing her against him. His mouth was teasing her to greater arousal. She couldn't focus her thoughts.

"Say it," he whispered, barely audible over the rush of the wind.

"I am yours," she moaned.

His hand abruptly left her pussy. She felt a pang of disappointment, craving a greater release. A moment later, he lifted her higher against his body. Before she could ask why, he'd driven into her.

She screamed, the sound lost against the wind that whistled through the mountains. Instinctively, she clamped her legs around his waist as he drove into her, the rhythm of his strokes pounding his possession of her into her compliant body. His

mouth fastened upon her breast, suckling greedily at her nipple. He worked his hand between them, returning his fingers to her already-aroused clit. This added stimulation drove her over the edge until she was writhing helplessly in his grip.

Underlying the pleasure was the fear, the dread of the vast emptiness below them. It intensified the sensations, driving her higher and faster than ever before. She arched back, the wind running stinging fingers over her throbbing nipples while Eros' cock moved faster within her, chafing against her with such speed that she could only sob at the exultation of it.

"Now you know what it is to be loved by a god," he grated. He slammed into her one final time, and the orgasm took them both. It exploded within her, his pubic bone grinding into her own as she strained against him, lost in the mindless joy that raced with her blood.

"You have flown high this night, beloved," the young god said in her ear. "In time, you will fly even higher."

There was a small jolt as his feet touched the ground. Cradling her against him, he sank gently to his knees and laid her upon the ground. The convulsive grip of her ankles around his waist loosened and her limbs fell into languorous bonelessness as his weight settled upon her. Psyche opened her eyes, gazing up at the benevolent stars and the gentle smile of the moon, and wondered lazily if it was dew upon the thick grass or yet another manifestation of their love.

"Now you know what it is to be loved by a mortal," she whispered. "I hope it is enough for you, my love."

Chapter Five

Aphrodite wept stormily, her perfect face unmarred by the tears that rained upon her silken pillows. Her grief was justified. Since Eros had so maliciously deserted her, the worship of love and beauty was dwindling among the mortals. Her temples were dusty and echoing, the few remaining offerings rotting unattended along the walls. Her priestesses had deserted her. Mortal women were occupying their time with exercise -- exercise! -- and study. Even mortal men, who were normally enslaved by the wiles she exuded over their humdrum lives, had found other things to occupy their time.

There was a knock upon the door. Aphrodite didn't even lift her head when one of her maidservants came into the room. "Blessed goddess, you have a visitor."

"Eros?" The goddess' head rose hopefully from her cushions.

"No," the girl breathed, her eyes widened with awe. "It is immortal Zeus."

Zeus! Aphrodite's tears stopped abruptly. With an impatient snap of her fingers, she directed her maids to attend her. A few minutes later, powdered and perfumed, she sailed into her sitting-room. Zeus sat on the huge couch where Hephaestus normally sat, his face somber.

"Father," she greeted him with a respectful bow of the head.

"Daughter," he answered gravely. "I am concerned with the sorry state of things in the mortal realm."

Aphrodite was a creature of whims, of capricious desires and selfish gratification. Yet, she was also a goddess, and skilled at knowing how to submit instantly to greater power. She lifted her face to his and answered him quite naturally. "I know, Father. Love no longer walks among the mortals."

"Why is that?"

"My son is angry with me."

Zeus' eyes twinkled for a moment. "I have heard something of it."

"He is disobedient and contrary!" she snapped, unable to restrain the petulant comment.

"He is a man and a god," Zeus pointed out. "If he truly loves this mortal girl, which he obviously does since that province is directly under his control, there is nothing you can do for it but accept that fact."

"A *mortal* marry *my* son?"

"There is nothing wrong with loving a mortal. I seem to recollect an occasion when you, my dear, fell in love with a shepherd lad --"

"That was different. I didn't marry him."

"And Eros did." Zeus' tone was flat. "It is already done, Aphrodite. Why fight it? Reconcile with your son and learn to love your new daughter. Mortals need the offices of love if they are to survive their lives with some experience of joy. Too many suffer needlessly because of this feud."

"But, I --"

"End it." His voice brooked no refusal. "I command you to solve this problem immediately, my daughter."

Aphrodite blanched. "It may be too late."

The king of the gods rose to his feet, towering over her while his hair and beard suddenly bristled with electricity. "Why would that be?"

"I -- I sent her to Hades."

"*Hades?*"

"Yes, Father."

"Why?" Thunder rumbled threateningly overhead.

"To fetch some of Persephone's beauty and bring it back to me," Aphrodite replied, a sick feeling in her stomach.

"You sent your son's wife to the bride of death to gather her beauty?" Zeus was incredulous. "You sent a *mortal* to hell?"

Aphrodite faltered. "It's not entirely my fault --"

"It is completely your fault," he retorted. "Get her back to safety, my daughter, before any harm comes to her. If anything happens to her, your infernal son will make all of our lives a merry hell! Do not fail me on this, Aphrodite, for I will certainly hold you responsible. If the mortal girl Psyche is not kneeling before me by the time the sun sets over Olympus today, I will make your recent humiliation seem like a joke."

* * *

Psyche, at that moment, was staring numbly over the edge of a tall tower. It was only through her persistent pleas that Eros had agreed to let her try to propitiate his mother. When Aphrodite, smiling sweetly, had ordered her to the realms of Hades she knew she'd made a fatal mistake.

There was only one way for a mortal to get through the portals of hell.

She looked down at the ground. The fall was certainly long enough; she'd definitely not survive such an impact. It wasn't fair! She was finally reconciled with Eros and instead of enjoying that she had to attempt some other stupid task set by his vindictive mother.

How vindictive was the goddess? The only way for Psyche to succeed at the task was to die first.

She wondered if there was any way to call Eros to her, thinking maybe he could help her from this predicament.

"Surely, you aren't thinking of taking a dive from this tower," an amused voice said.

She whirled and gasped. Pan leaned negligently against the doorway behind her, his eyes narrowed. Flustered, Psyche made a hasty obeisance and the forest god rolled his eyes.

"There's no need for all that," he said kindly. "So! Why are you considering death, fair mortal? I'd certainly hate to see your lovely face splattered all over the ground. So would your husband, I'd wager."

Psyche explained her mission. As she talked, the god's face tightened until he looked quite feral. "I don't know what Eros was thinking when he allowed you to continue these 'jobs' for his bitch of a mother," he said at last, his mouth thinned into a disapproving line.

"Allow?" she echoed, her voice rising. "How could he stop me?"

The god took one look at the girl before him, her back straight and her eyes flashing with anger, and burst into laughter. "He's only a god," Pan said plaintively. "Well, as he is occupied at the moment, the least I can do is make certain you get to Hades safely. There is a way to enter the realm of the dead without any drastic measures. I'll take you there."

Psyche relaxed, her anger seeping away. "Thank you."

* * *

Eros paced through the long reception hall of Zeus' house. Unlike most mortal conceptions of Zeus' home, this was no palace. It was a simple house, with several smaller chambers radiating from the central hall. There were a few couches scattered around the room and no celestial throne in sight. In the precise center of the room was the only remarkable object in the entire place. A huge sphere of crystal was embedded into the floor. Inside it, flashes of light illuminated a churning mass of dark clouds. This was the center of Zeus' power, the focus of his control over the storms that were his specialty. A particularly bright flash of lightning within the sphere was echoed almost immediately by a rumble of thunder overhead, and Eros knew that the king of the gods had returned to his home.

A few moments later, Zeus strode into the room. His eyebrows rose at the sight of the young god waiting impatiently near the sphere, but he made no comment until he settled himself onto a couch and gestured for Eros to join him.

"Well?" Eros asked.

Zeus considered him. For eons, the gods of the Pantheon had discounted Eros as a silly, mischievous young man under his mother's thrall. This new, determined god of

love was not someone to be dismissed lightly. He had a brief vision of finding himself attracted to a wallowing pig and sighed.

"Your mother has sent your wife off on an impossible mission," he said.

"Impossible? How?"

"The girl has been sent to Hades to retrieve Persephone's beauty."

"What?" Eros rose from the couch, his wings already unfurling.

Zeus' expression was grim. "I commanded your mother to fetch the girl and bring her here. If she does not, she will be punished."

"How is Psyche supposed to get there?" Eros demanded, his eyes flashing fire. "There's only one way for a mortal to reach the realms of the dead."

"I sent Pan to forestall any inclinations she might have of that path," Zeus replied. "He'll take her the hidden way, and instruct her on how to return safely. If your mother reaches her first, of course, we won't have to worry about it. If she doesn't, however, then Pan's instructions should keep her alive -- if she follows them."

"If anyone could accomplish this task, Psyche can," Eros said, his fierce expression softening into quiet pride. "She's a very determined girl."

"If your wife manages to do so, then she will have proved herself beyond mortal," Zeus mused. The sphere flashed once more and the answering clap of thunder sounded like a promise.

* * *

"Once you pass the dog, you must convince Charon to ferry you across the river," Pan instructed. "Do you have any gold on you? No? Here, then, take these." He handed her three gold coins. "He can be bribed. Use only one for the journey across and the other two for the trip back. It should be easy for you to find the palace of Hades once you're in his realm. Take nothing offered you, no wine or food, unless you intend to remain in the halls of the dead forever. Simply do whatever they ask you, get the box, and come back out. One thing you must absolutely obey, however: do not open the box for any reason."

"Why?"

"Looking upon the gathered beauty of the queen of hell couldn't possibly be healthy for any mortal," he replied. "Leave the ways of the gods to the gods. Just finish your task as quickly as possible and get back. I'll wait for you here and escort you to Eros when you're done."

"Why are you doing this for me?" she asked abruptly.

"Eros is my cousin and for a long time has been my friend. I once thought he'd never get out from under Aphrodite's thumb, that he would be content with playing tricks on the rest of us. You have changed him and changed him for the better. Before he fell in love with you, he was a boy, nothing but a mischievous, irreverent boy. Now, he is a man. You have strengthened him and in the long run that can only bode well for the rest of us, mortal and immortal alike." Pan grinned suddenly. "Besides, I'll find any way I can to throw his mother into a snit."

* * *

Aphrodite was frantic. She'd flashed over the cities closest to Olympus, searching desperately for the mortal girl. She knew that Zeus meant what he said. If she didn't find Psyche, she could look forward to an existence much like Prometheus'. She shuddered at the thought of being chained to a mountainside while a huge eagle ate eternally at her liver, and redoubled her efforts.

Where was that dratted girl?

No matter how hard she looked, she saw no sign of Psyche's passing. The goddess suddenly gasped. *What if she knew of the secret cave?*

Aphrodite sped toward the cave of Tanaerum, praying that she wasn't too late.

* * *

At first, the trip through the cave was rather pleasant. Psyche held the torch Pan had given her aloft, its dripping flame lighting the cool darkness around her. She'd never been in a cave before. Near the entrance, naturally, it had been rather slimy and muddy. As she traveled deeper, however, the path dried out into a sandy trail moving ever downwards. The walls were sparkling as the light reflected from the granules of quartz scattered against the brownish-red stone.

After a journey of about a half hour, she noticed a sound. It grew steadily louder as she walked, a rushing sound that reminded her of a roaring fire. She swallowed nervously. The cave abruptly turned to the right, leading her down a passage that was broader and darker than the first, and as she continued the sound grew until it was almost deafening.

Suddenly, the passage was bright with an orange-red glow. She dropped her torch and it fell to the sandy dirt, sputtering out as the impact jarred the flames' tenuous existence. Stretched before her was the river of fire, the first of the rivers surrounding the realm of the dead. Barring her path, the dog Cerberus turned all three of his heads to regard her.

Psyche stilled as Cerberus growled. The sound reverberated through the cavern, amplified by the stone as well as the fact that it stemmed from three throats instead of just one. She knew that the hero Heracles had wrestled this beast and defeated it, but she didn't have the strength to accomplish such a feat. Instead, she reached into the pouch at her side and withdrew the items Pan had given her for this occasion, tossing them at the monster.

It was a good thing that all dogs liked steak.

* * *

"What are you doing here?" Aphrodite demanded ungraciously, her brow puckering at the sight of Pan leaning against a tree and playing his pipes. The forest god lowered his instrument and stared at her with something very close to active dislike.

"I'm waiting for your daughter-in-law to come back."

"Oh, no! Tell me she hasn't already gone to Hades!"

"Of course she has. You wanted her to go, Aphrodite. Don't complain now that she has."

"Zeus will kill me!"

"He should spank you at the very least," Pan agreed with a dry smile. His eyes gleamed suddenly and he lifted his pipes to his lips and played a little trill. A linden

tree behind the distraught goddess suddenly reared back and whipped across her backside. Aphrodite screamed, then turned to glare at the silently laughing forest god.

"That wasn't funny," she said with an attempt at injured dignity.

"Maybe not for you," he retorted rudely.

* * *

The river Styx was the last of the fabled rivers of the underworld. It stretched before her like a ribbon of black in the greyish gloom and Psyche shuddered involuntarily. The entire river basin was silent and still. Nothing moving save the mists that shrouded the far bank, and the wraiths that were the souls of those unfortunate enough not to be able to pay the ferryman's toll. As she stood uncertainly on the riverbank, a sudden splash penetrated the silvery fog that hung over the river. Charon was coming.

The longboat bumped against the shore with a ripple of waves. Psyche looked up into the tall, gaunt form of the ferryman of the dead. She could discern no features under the obscuring hood. Even his hands were hidden behind black gloves. "Lord Charon?"

"Just Charon." The voice was a dry, dusty whisper, like the hiss of leaves across stone.

"I wish to make a bargain with you."

"I do not bargain with the living."

"I will pay your standard toll to cross," Psyche went on bravely. "I will pay double to return."

The figure considered her from the depths of his cloak. "What business does a living mortal have in the realms of the dead?"

"I have been sent by the goddess Aphrodite to beg a boon from the queen of the underworld."

"You serve the goddess of love?"

"It is more accurate to say that I serve her son," Psyche replied with a twinge of sarcasm. "I must perform this task in order to serve him well."

Charon held out his hand. "I accept your offer, fair mortal."

Psyche dropped a gold coin into the black glove. As the ferryman's fingers closed around it, he gestured her onto the boat. "Board, mortal daughter. I will take you to the palace. I only hope you have not deceived me, for my master will punish me if you have."

"I haven't," she assured him, stepping past him and settling on the single seat. As the boat pulled away into the drifting mists, the wraiths on the shore set up a howl of despair.

It was only a few minutes later that Charon intoned, "There it is, the palace of the king of the dead."

Chapter Six

The building was huge, looming over the plains of the underworld with black solemnity. Psyche stood for a moment staring at it as the sounds of Charon's boat drifted back into the mists. Constructed of black basalt, it was dark and luminous at the same time. There were no guards that she could see, no spirits wandering about, only the eerie, nerve-wracking silence that caused her heart to pound uncomfortably against her breast. She climbed the slight incline carefully.

Before her, a huge door stood open. She regarded it thoughtfully.

If I can just do this, then Eros and I can be together.

With that thought firmly in place, she gathered her courage and entered the house of Hades, grim lord of the underworld, and his queen, Persephone. As she crossed the threshold, she shivered. The otherworldly chill penetrated through her thin gown and gooseflesh rose along her arms.

The door led to a huge audience chamber. The ceiling reared into immensity, the black walls towering overhead and disappearing into the inky shadows that masked the ceiling. At the opposite end of the room was a dais with two thrones. In one, a tall, dark, frowning man looked at her with an air of impatience, in the other, a pale, lovely woman sat with her face turned from her husband.

Hades and Persephone.

"How did you come to my realm?" Hades' voice was soft, burred with an underlying threat and just a hint of curiosity.

"Pan showed me the secret way," Psyche replied, instantly dropping to her knees and pressing her forehead to the floor.

"Why?"

Psyche raised her head. "I've been sent by the goddess Aphrodite to ask a boon of your queen."

Persephone turned her pale, apathetic face toward the girl. "What sort of boon?"

"Aphrodite asks that you send her some of your beauty," Psyche recited dutifully.

"Why would the goddess of beauty need mine?" Persephone asked in a cool, dead-sounding voice.

"Because in tending to her injured son she fears that she has lost some of her own," Psyche replied, unable to prevent the sarcastic note from creeping into her words.

Persephone's eyes sharpened. "You are Psyche, Eros' wife, are you not?"

"I am."

Persephone smiled. "Your mother-in-law must hate you."

"She does."

"I will grant Aphrodite's request," Persephone announced, "on one condition."

"What condition is that?" Psyche asked warily.

The queen of the underworld rose from her throne. Without glancing at her husband, she crossed the huge room. She lifted Psyche to her feet with one cold hand and stood peering at her intensely. Persephone was lovely, with long, curling brown hair and bright blue eyes. Her skin was abnormally pale, as if she never felt the kiss of the sun upon it. The only flush of color was upon her full red lips.

"What do you think?" the goddess asked suddenly, glancing at Hades.

The god of the underworld pursed his lips. "I don't know..."

"I think it might work," Persephone replied.

Psyche was bewildered. What in the world were these two talking about?

"Come," the goddess said, taking her by the hand. Perplexed, Psyche followed her across the great hall to the dais. Once there, she felt herself blushing under Hades' regard.

"I think you're right. It just might work," he said after a moment's reflection.

"What might work?" Psyche demanded.

"There is a price for my favor," Persephone said, her hand trailing down Psyche's hair.

"And that is?"

"The goddess of love and her son rarely venture into our domain," the goddess said. *"We are without the special solace that love can bring."*

"But you, you are the bride of love," Hades picked up where his wife left off. *"You have your own place in the governance of matters of love... and sex."*

"I do?"

"Of course you do," the god replied in a matter-of-fact voice. *"We require your assistance in a personal matter."*

Psyche looked from one to the other and shook her head. *"Absolutely not,"* she said.

"Did you think we both wanted to have you?" Persephone asked, amused.

"It's not unheard of."

"No, your participation would be peripheral at best," Hades said. A tiny smile tugged at the corners of his mouth, making him seem much more handsome than he had previously. Although his dark eyes were bland and his lips cruel, he had a certain devilish allure that was quite intriguing. Psyche heard a sound just behind her, but before she could turn her arms were taken.

"You see, the sight of another's pleasure incites our own," Persephone explained. *"Without that stimulation, we cannot consummate our love."*

"I am married to Eros. I cannot be unfaithful to him."

"But you're not being unfaithful," Persephone purred. She leaned in and put her mouth on Psyche's. Psyche was startled. The goddess' mouth was soft and pliable, her tongue snaking between Psyche's lips in a caress that sent shivers down her spine. As the goddess pulled away, her eyes were gleaming lazily. *"You are helping him perform his duties."*

Persephone mounted the dais, her draperies trailing behind her like a song. Hades held out his hand to his wife and quirked an eyebrow at Psyche. "Are you willing to pay my queen's price, mortal daughter? If you agree, we will give you all that you ask for."

Psyche hesitated, then nodded. Hades nodded to someone over her head and pulled Persephone onto his lap.

A cold hand moved to the ties at the shoulders of her gown. A moment later, it slithered away, pooled upon the floor at her feet. Her skin prickled as the chilly air hit it, and her nipples hardened in response. The hands holding her arms to her sides were almost painful as a result of the deathly chill emanating from them and Psyche tried not to think about what it was that restrained her.

Abruptly, something pulled her backwards. She sprawled atop a wide bed, uncomfortably aware of her nudity before the watching gods. *You'd think I was an actress*, she thought sourly. *Or a whore*.

In the next instant, her discomfiture evaporated. Two figures loomed over her, one on either side of the bed. They were, thankfully, apparently human, with splendidly naked male bodies revealed to her gaze. The only disconcerting thing about them was that they both wore half-masks, obscuring all of their faces save for their mouths and chins. She raised herself on her elbows, eyeing them warily.

The men sat down. She looked from one to the other, noting that both of them were extremely well-hung, their cocks stirring to life like twins. Moving as one, they lowered their mouths to her breasts. Their hands moved on her flesh, encircling her breasts and massaging them while they sucked. Psyche closed her eyes. It didn't give her quite the same feeling as it did when Eros touched her, but on the whole it wasn't unpleasant.

"I don't think you're pleasing our guest," Persephone said suddenly. Psyche looked up to see that the goddess' gown was loosened, baring her breasts to her husband while he feasted upon them. "Excite her more."

Obediently, the men separated. While one moved up to lick and lightly bite the side of her neck, the other moved down, doing the same thing to her flat abdomen. Psyche drew in a breath as the feelings of pleasure rippled through her body. The men were cold, their skin icy, their lips branding against her flesh with the fiery bite of mountain snows. It was stimulating, exciting, the way that the chill from the men counteracted the growing heat of her body. One of them rolled her right nipple between his fingers and she gasped aloud.

Icy fingers trailed up the insides of her thighs, tangling briefly with her pubic hair before sliding against her clitoris and moving on. Each contact was brief, fleeting, but stirred Psyche to greater desire. She opened her eyes again.

Persephone sat upon the huge throne of her husband, her glorious body completely nude. Her legs were spread wide, her knees draped over the arms of the chair while Hades knelt before her, his tongue flicking rapidly against his wife's clitoris. His big hands were kneading her breasts and Persephone's eyes were glazed.

But they were still fixed on Psyche.

Psyche's eyes snapped shut. One of the masked men was nudging at her vulva with his tongue, parting the hair. The other sat above her head, caressing both of her breasts with cold, smooth hands. She gasped as a pair of glacial lips fastened around her clit, sucking hard. As she squirmed, trying to evade the wintry mouth, the man above her pulled her arms over her head. Her breasts jutted high into the air as the man stimulating her sex suddenly pushed her against his partner. She was in a half-sitting position now, exposed completely to the view of the gods making love on the dais.

"Go ahead." The goddess' voice was slightly breathless. "Do it."

Psyche's legs were spread wide. The man nuzzling at her clit sat up abruptly, his fingers moving to replace the cold arousal of his tongue. She writhed at the stimulation, arching as he slid a single finger into her. The man above her suddenly moved away, and she fell back onto the bed. The hand disappeared as well, and once more she opened her eyes.

Gods, how she wanted this! It was so arousing, this encounter with strangers in hell, while the king and queen of the dead used her pleasure to elicit their own. She heard a small moan from the throne, but was unable to see what provoked it. A moment later, the man's fingers slammed into her. They were huge, thick and cold with the dark chill of the underworld. He remained completely upright, lifting her hips to slide his thighs under her ass. Then the second man's mouth fastened on her clitoris and she screamed.

The sensation was maddening, almost terrifying in its intensity. She moaned helplessly as the twin assault continued, one pounding into her pliant, wet body with increasing fury, the other sucking and licking at her heated flesh with almost desperate intensity. A rhythmic sound from the dais informed her that Hades and Persephone were emulating them. The joyous mating of the gods permeated the room. Everything sounded of sex, smelled like sex, she even tasted sex upon her tongue as she arched and cried out with the force of the orgasm that ripped through her. Instantly, the fingers withdrew from her and the mouth vanished from her sex. She opened her eyes and hazily watched as the two masked men traded places.

Then it all began again.

* * *

"Thank you for agreeing to our little game," Hades said pleasantly a couple of hours later. "I am truly grateful."

"And here," his wife added, holding out an intricately decorated golden box. "Take this to Aphrodite. Perhaps then she will leave you alone to love your husband in peace."

"You might mention to Eros as well that we would welcome more of his attention," Hades added, a slight twist to his cruel lips.

"I'll tell him," Psyche promised. She'd followed the queen to her bedchamber, where Persephone's attendants had bathed and dressed her, smoothing her tousled hair into a demure braid that fell heavily down her back.

"Good luck," Persephone said. She smiled and Psyche recognized the beginning of friendship in that smile, a promise of closeness that warmed her through. For the first

time since entering the realm of the dead, the gooseflesh receded from her skin. She had succeeded. Her task was done.

* * *

Charon rowed her back across the river Styx without a word, the oars dipping into the black waters with tiny splashes of sound. Once on the opposite bank, she thanked him prettily and walked away, clutching the box under her arm. She passed by Cerberus without incident; the huge beast was contentedly chewing on his bones. His single tail, so incongruous with his three heads, thumped in friendly fashion upon the ground as she gave each of his heads a pat and a scratch behind the ears. So Heracles needed his strength to conquer Cerberus? How ridiculous! She'd managed it with a few T-bones!

The cavern was no longer quite as dark and forbidding as she traveled back to the world of the living. She found her torch propped against a rock and burning merrily, as if someone knew that she'd be back and need it to make her way home. Psyche lifted it over her head and walked in the golden circle of light without fear. After all, what had she to fear now? She'd descended into hell -- and lived. A smile curved her lips at the thought of exactly how much fun that living was.

She stepped from the cavern with a smile still twinkling in her eyes. Pan looked up from his seat in surprise. Behind him, the sun was sinking behind the mountains in a blaze of crimson-tinged glory, its final rays extending toward the darkening skies like imploring fingers clutching at hope. Those fingers gilded Psyche's hair, giving her a halo of fire and beauty that struck at the very depths of the forest god's heart.

"Did you wait for long?" she asked.

"Not that long to a god," he said sourly. His eyes widened as they fell upon the box. "You mean you *actually* got it?"

Psyche put on her most innocent expression. "Of course I did."

"How?" he demanded.

She laughed. "Let's just say that they owed me a favor."

* * *

"I am sorry," Aphrodite said, kneeling before Zeus' couch. "I could not reach her in time. She was already descending to the realm of the dead before I could stop her."

"I cannot believe that you sent my wife to hell," Eros said coldly. The gathered gods murmured as they watched the scene, entranced by the young god's sudden and absolute dominance over his mother. "You condemned a mortal to an untimely death out of your selfish need for revenge."

"I was wrong!" Aphrodite looked up at Eros with all of the appeal that she could generate on a moment's notice. Eros stood just behind Zeus, his face pale and stricken. Zeus, on the other hand, looked completely unconcerned. All the gods knew that expression marked him at his worst temper, and not a few of them were inwardly pleased that his wrath would be directed at Aphrodite's curled head and not their own.

"Yes, you were wrong," Zeus agreed mildly. "Not only were your petty jealousy and spite responsible for this fiasco, among others," he added, with a significant look at the scowling Hephaestus, "but you have interfered in the workings of another deity's domain. You have no right to question the way that Eros' arrows strike, nor do you have the responsibility of determining when a mortal should die. You have erred more than once on this matter, my daughter, and I am mightily displeased."

Aphrodite took one look at the flash of lightning-quick ire behind his eyes and flinched. Eros moved around the couch to kneel beside his mother. Zeus' eyes narrowed shrewdly as he asked, "Well, Son, what is it?"

"Please, sir, can we not find my wife? She has been gone for hours! What if something has happened to her?"

"You know that we cannot interfere in the workings of the underworld," Zeus replied, not without pity. "The best I can do is summon my brother and his wife here to ask after the girl."

The sphere in the center of the room flashed suddenly. A few moments later, Hades stalked into the room, Persephone smiling demurely at his side. As soon as the god of the dead rocked to a halt, his wife sped across the room to throw herself into her mother's arms. Demeter held her daughter closely, a pleased smile on her face.

"Do you know why I've sent for you, brother?" Zeus growled.

Hades sent him a dark look. Relations between the brothers were touchy at best. "No idea."

"Did the mortal wife of Eros pay you a visit today?"

Hades smiled. "Yes, she did. She's a lovely girl," he added to the young god at Zeus' feet, his eyes gleaming darkly.

"Then where is she now?" Zeus asked. "She is not yet returned."

Hades frowned. "She left some time ago; she should have been back by now."

The watching gods were instantly aware of the god of hell's puzzlement and began to murmur among themselves. Zeus and Eros exchanged a quick look.

"Charon ferried her back across the Styx and Cerberus let her pass unmolested," Hades added, stiffening at the undercurrent of suspicion that coursed through the room. "I commanded it and they obey me absolutely. Something must have happened after she left my domain, for I would have known of it had something gone amiss in the realm of the dead."

"Did you caution her not to open the box?" Zeus queried softly, and the sphere flashed with brilliant energy as the clouds grumbled threateningly overhead.

Hades' pale face blanched even further. "No," he admitted.

Eros leapt to his feet. "I must look for her! If she opened that box, there's very little time left to lose!"

Zeus turned his glare to Aphrodite. "Did *you* warn her against such an action?"

"No," she replied in a quiet voice. "When I assigned her the task, I hoped she would fail. If she did succeed, however, I counted upon her human curiosity to condemn her back to hell. I knew her curiosity had ruined her life once before. I hoped it would happen again."

Zeus' hair and beard bristled alarmingly. "Instead of giving the girl a chance, you condemned her twice over to death."

"When I was at Tanaerum, Pan was waiting by the entrance for the girl," Aphrodite said suddenly. "Perhaps he knows what has happened to her."

“Pan?” Eros’ voice rose in fury and the watching gods all flinched.

Chapter Seven

"Uh oh," Pan muttered to his companion. They were, as was the forest god's wont, spying on the proceedings from outside Zeus' windows.

"Why be in such a hurry?" Psyche asked, the corners of her mouth twitching.

Pan rubbed his pointed beard uneasily. "I've been the butt of enough of Eros' jokes in the past to know better than to get him seriously mad at me."

"He won't get angry with you," Psyche reproved him. "After all, you brought me here."

"It might be best if we keep that knowledge to ourselves. Why don't you go ahead on in and I'll sneak around the back and come in that way?"

"Coward."

"Absolutely," Pan agreed, his hooves shuffling uneasily. "Although I'll admit I really wanted to stay out here so we could have the pleasure of watching whatever punishment Zeus has in store for Aphrodite, it doesn't seem quite as important anymore. Let's just go."

* * *

"I'll kill him," Eros grated.

"You don't know that he's done anything," Dionysus spoke up. He was twirling a half-full wine glass in his hand as he regarded his cousin. "It sounds like another try by your mother to stir things up."

Every eye turned back to Aphrodite who flushed angrily. Zeus sighed. "At least one of us has the ability to withstand the wiles of love."

Dionysus smirked slightly and refilled his cup.

"Most drunkards can," Apollo murmured. Dionysus glared at him and took a large swallow of his wine.

Zeus got to his feet. He stared down at the kneeling goddess then at her infuriated son. "Well, Eros? What do you want me to do?"

Before the god could answer, a sweet, young voice interjected, "Excuse me. Am I interrupting?"

Psyche stood framed in the doorway. Her red-gold braid curled richly over her shoulder, which was flushed with laughter and success. Her wide, green eyes were sparkling in triumph, for between her slender hands she held a small, golden box.

"Psyche!" Eros exclaimed, joy throbbing in his voice. He flew to her side, pulling her against him with a startled oath.

Zeus glanced at Aphrodite. "Well, Daughter?" he asked mildly, his eyes narrowed to mere slits. Obediently, she rose to her feet, gathering her voluminous veils around her.

In complete silence, the goddess crossed to stand before her erstwhile daughter-in-law. More than one of the onlookers caught their breath. Mortal beauty reflected from divine, human and goddess, they seemed to be two perfect statues in the garden of the gods.

"I see you have succeeded at your task," Aphrodite said quietly.

"I have, blessed goddess." Psyche pressed the box into Aphrodite's unwilling hands. "Can I now be with my beloved husband?"

"Mother!" Eros' voice rang out suddenly over the stillness of the room. Aphrodite turned her lovely eyes to him, a spark of irritation rising within them.

"Yes?"

"Do you remember when you promised me that, when I asked, you would grant me a favor without demur?"

Aphrodite's heart sank. Her reckless promise had resurfaced in the most public and terrible way. It was impossible to lie in the presence of the king of the gods, so she contented herself with a curt nod of her head.

"Then I ask that you welcome my wife, Psyche, and torment her no further." Eros' voice was quiet, laden with a small tone of threat. Aphrodite looked wildly from one face to another, desperately seeking someone else to take her side.

"What have I missed?" She whirled to see Pan, grinning maliciously, step daintily into the room on shining hooves. The forest god grinned and answered his own question. "Oh, good! I got here just in time for the capitulation."

Dionysus and Apollo snickered. Aphrodite made note of this and filed it away, as she did all taunts imagined or real. She glanced back at her son and her heart softened a bit. He looked so beautiful, so proud! One arm around his wife and the other clenching his bow, he was the epitome of male grace and power.

"Of course I will," she said. Aphrodite stepped forward and gave her daughter-in-law the kiss of greeting. As the two women embraced, Zeus cleared his throat.

"I told Eros that if his wife succeeded in this task, she would have accomplished something beyond what most mortals could do," he announced. Psyche looked at the king of the gods inquiringly, then knelt as he approached her. Eros' legs were warm and strong against her back, supporting her until Zeus lifted her from her obeisance.

He held out a cup. "It is not fitting that the bride of love should wither and die like all mortal flowers," he said kindly. "Drink of this, mortal daughter, and share in our immortality! You, too, will be a goddess of love; a goddess of mental love, of deliberate kindness and sweet reminders of consideration in love. You will temper the crueler barbs of physical love and lust, Psyche, and fly as high as your chosen husband."

His eyes twinkled at her so kindly that she smiled without even thinking about it. Psyche took the cup from the god's hands and bent her head to drink of the ambrosia within it.

Almost immediately, she felt it buzzing through her veins. The world tilted sideways and Eros caught her in his arms before she fell. There was a flash of bright colors, then a jolt, and suddenly two pairs of beautiful, delicate wings burst from her back. She fluttered them without even realizing that she did so and as they extended

she saw them for what they were. They were gauzy and delicate, as pale as her gown and shimmering with the ichor that now ran through her body in place of mortal blood.

"A butterfly's wings," Aphrodite breathed, glancing at Psyche with new respect.

Zeus leaned in to give her the kiss of welcome, his beard tickling her skin. "She is the personification of a soul in love, and a mind in flight. It is only appropriate that she has wings so she can join her husband in joyous abandon."

"Thank you, Father," Eros said, his voice quiet and grateful.

"Just remember this the next time you think of me and cows in the same breath," the king of the gods replied with a pained wince.

* * *

Later that night, Eros and Psyche lay entangled in their sweaty sheets, gazing at the stars. The night sky was luminous, shimmering with bands of color as if the heavens themselves were celebrating this newest marriage among the gods. Psyche turned slightly, still ill at ease with her new wings, and laid her chin on her husband's chest.

"Eros?"

"Hmmm?" The young god was sleepy. Now that he'd finally achieved all that he wanted, the lack of rest was catching up with him.

"Do you think your mother has *really* accepted me?"

"As much as she can," came the candid reply. "Mother doesn't really care for other females, whether they are mortal, immortal, or beast."

"That doesn't make any sense," Psyche complained. "Isn't that rather counterproductive?"

"Well, no one ever accused my mother of being reasonable."

They were silent for a while. The cool winds blew through the windows, billowing the draperies so they brushed across Psyche's skin with sensuous fingers. She stirred, pressing closer to Eros' side, and he hardened in response.

"It's a good thing I'm immortal now," she commented in amusement as his penis rose against her. "Otherwise, you'd probably kill me."

"I would endeavor not to do that," he mumbled, his lips seeking the sensitive spot just below her ear.

"That's good to know. Tell me, are we supposed to work together now?"

Eros considered the question as his hands toyed with her breasts. "So it would seem. I'll teach you what you need to know."

"I've promised a few favors," she admitted, rubbing her thigh languorously over his and enjoying the feel of his hard muscles sliding against her.

"We'll see them done," he promised, his fingers sliding between her legs.

She gasped, then laughed with a throaty sound as he began to arouse her once more. "Do you think we'll ever have any children?"

The god's hand stilled abruptly. "I would think so."

"I do too."

"I'd like a daughter," Eros said dreamily, his fingers returning to stroke her clitoris with quick, circular motions.

"What would we name her?"

"Pleasure," he growled, and buried himself within her.

* * *

It was almost dawn. Aurora's veils were fluttering across the sky with their hues of yellow, red, purple, and green when Psyche rose from her marriage bed. She stretched, smiling sweetly at her dozing husband.

She was a goddess now. She'd found a way to circumvent Aphrodite's hatred of her and had made her way into the pantheon of deities. Perhaps mortal retribution was more powerful than a goddess' revenge.

Eros awakened slowly as his wife kissed his brow. He lay there for a moment, appreciating her beauty as he'd never done before. Lovely as she'd been when mortal, as a deity she was breathtaking, her delicate fairness enhanced by the gossamer wings that folded around her like a mantle. He smiled, an impish sparkle rising to his eyes.

"What are you thinking about?" Psyche asked as she began to brush her hair.

"Oh, just how much fun it will be to work together." His eyes suddenly glittered with amusement.

"Oh really? Did you have something specific in mind?"

He glanced at her, surprised. She was looking at him with a definite gleam of disapproval. Hastily, the god backtracked. "No, not really."

"Uh huh."

"You don't believe me?"

"Should I?"

Eros hesitated, then thought it best to confess. "There were a *few* so-called friends of mine who were not quite as supportive as I would have liked," he admitted.

Psyche grinned at him and the sudden wicked look took his breath away. "I don't think I want to know about this," she remarked primly. "I don't suppose you have planned this all out already, have you?"

Eros laughed. As he rose from the bed, he personified the mischief that was his trademark. She admired his body for a moment as he bent over and picked up his restored quiver of arrows. He fingered one lovingly and said, "Oh, I have a few ideas."

Isabelle Spurrier

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