

Loose Id

*Under Her  
Skin*

MARY WINTER

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Loose Id.®

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This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable.

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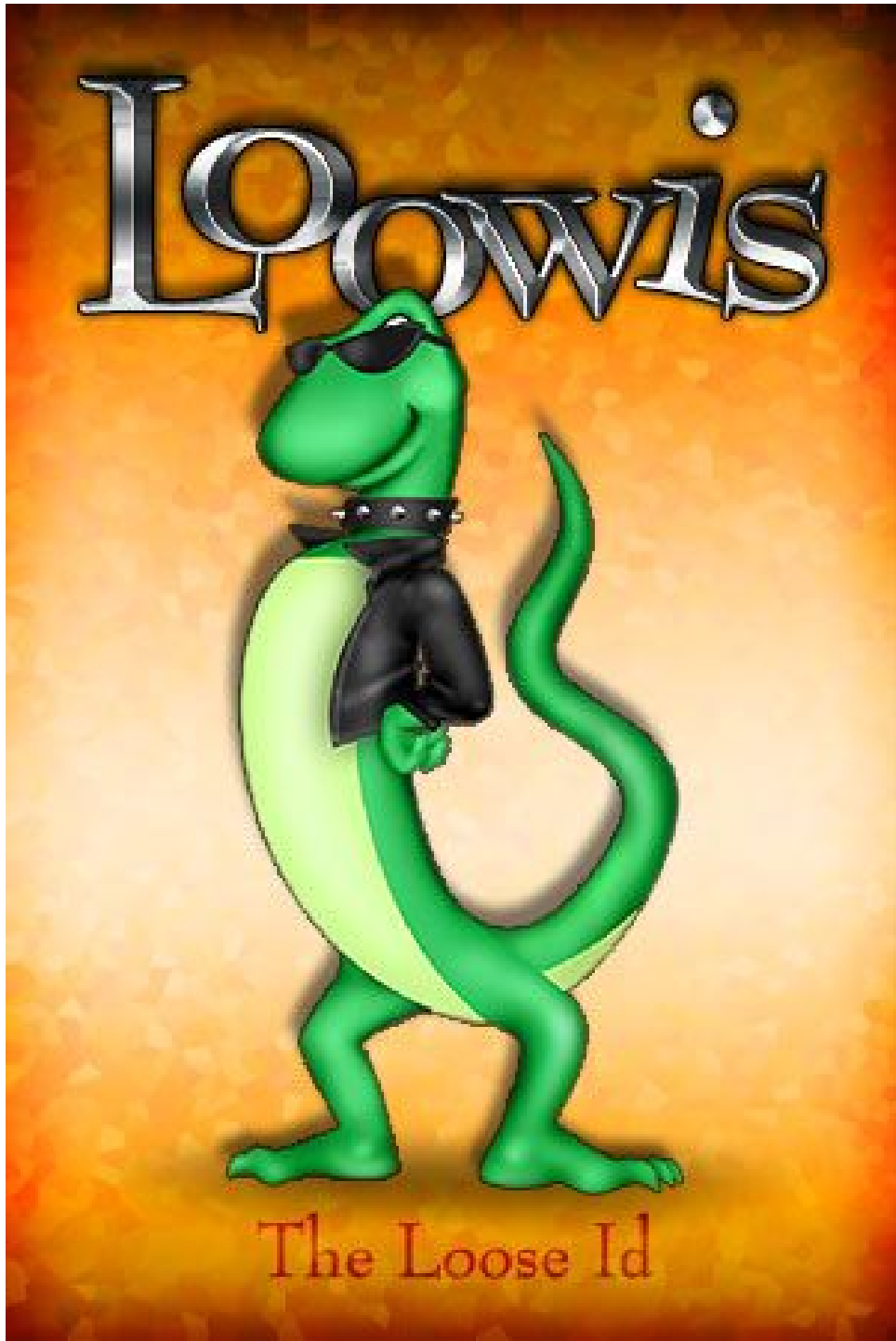
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## Prologue

Walking in a land steeped in history should have made Ari forget all about the scars covering her body. The grace and beauty in the Greek architecture, the people, and the artwork reminded her of the car accident that had torn her world asunder. Though clothing hid the worst of her scars, she knew she'd never again be as beautiful as the goddesses the ancient Greeks once worshiped.

Ari paused to stare at partially excavated buildings. Chills ran up and down her spine as she thought of those who once lived here. People had laughed here, loved here. The history of the place awed her.

Though the ruins of Abdera didn't seem like much, she suspected in its heyday the city had covered far more than these seven hills. Outside the city, people eked out a living from the land. Mythology said Hercules founded the city. Looking around, Ari knew it would take a miracle to release the city from ages of neglect.

A small temple caught her attention. It drew her, and she walked toward it thinking that if anyone needed a miracle, it was her. The Mediterranean sun beat down, and Ari plucked at the long sleeves covering her scarred arms. A wide-brimmed hat shielded her face. She wished it would hide the puckered scar high on one cheek and the nasty white line

radiating away into her hairline. Pursing her lips, she paused in the paltry shade cast by the building. The locals had warned her against the midday heat.

She should have listened. Her calm place on the beach had been disturbed by two local lovers. She fled before they saw her, and before they could remind her of things she'd never have again. Physical therapy and surgeries -- through it all she promised herself a trip to Greece. And now she ventured beyond the cities to explore areas not overrun by tourists. Athens had been all right, and she'd seen the major attractions. But here, away from it all, she allowed her heart to be free and the burdens she carried to lift, just a little.

Rested, she rose to her feet and walked to the small temple. It would be nice to rest here for a while, and maybe the gods would have mercy on her and no one would disturb her. She wanted to be alone, far away from the pitying looks. She'd seen them. The man who tried to flirt with her in the airport, yet when she'd turned the scarred side of her face to him he'd smiled apologetically and turned away. The cab driver who'd winked then frowned once he fully saw her. Ari traced her fingers over the two visible scars on the side of her face. They'd long since failed to bring physical pain, but the emotional -- oh, how it still hurt.

Ari stepped into the temple. The austere decorations gave no clue as to which god claimed it. There were so many in Greek mythology, and she had only learned about a few before her trip. Maybe Apollo who made the sun shine so brightly. Or perhaps Zeus, who lorded over everything, though the temple seemed too small for him. Ari shook her head. A low bench sat before a block of stone. Perhaps it was an altar. Her feet carried her there, and she knelt.

"I don't know which god rules this place, but whoever you are, I'm so very alone. If only someone could see past my scars to the woman inside. I didn't change with the car accident, only my skin, but even my friends don't know what to say when they see me. So they go off dancing by themselves, and I've ended up here. If only I had someone with whom to share my love of old things." She smiled and stifled a yawn. Stretching out on the

bench, she thought of the ancient Greeks worshipping gods at this temple and decided she'd rest here for a while.

She stood in the center of a party wearing a gorgeous dress. The bodice hugged her, curving around her breasts and nipping in at her waist like a lover's caress. With her wavy brown hair French braided, it left her neck and shoulders bare. A strand of pearls shimmered around her neck. She slid her hands over the silk skirt, smiling at the calf-length. The strappy sandals on her feet added inches to her height. A chill breeze caressed her bare back, and Ari shivered. A strapless, backless dress. She'd always wanted to wear such a creation but hadn't since her accident. Too many scars and too much skin. Still, in this dress, in this moment, she felt like the most beautiful woman in the world -- a princess.

A passing waiter handed her a flute of champagne, but as she took the sparkling drink she couldn't miss his look of pity. Men turned to her, started toward her, then frowned and turned away. Across the room a woman laughed, high and shrill. "Who does she think she is? She's ugly and scarred." The woman's hurtful words carried across the room.

Ari turned away. She stared back at the way she'd come, debating whether to leave or not. The beautiful dream turned into a nightmare, so much like the ones she had nearly every night. She thought about opening her eyes. Waking up would relieve her of the pain. The woman spoke again, more hurtful words. Laughter, sharp and cruel, filled the air. Tears stung Ari's eyes. She looked around at the men in their tuxedos, the women in their beautiful gowns. Once she'd belonged in this world, but nevermore.

A man stepped from the crowd. His thick dark hair begged for a woman's fingers. His suit marked his broad shoulders and narrow waist. And his eyes, dear goddess, his gaze penetrated her, made her feel as if he could see to her very soul. Heat blossomed, a fluttering in her stomach. His strong chin and Roman nose reminded her of a statue of a Greek god.



“Ignore them,” he said, extending his arm to take hers. “They’re all jealous of your beauty.”

His words warmed her from head to toe. Against the bodice of her dress, her nipples hardened. “My -- my beauty?” she stammered, and then looked at the ground. “I’m not beautiful.” Her lower lip quivered, but she refused to give in to emotion in front of this man.

In all his years as a god, he’d never seen anyone as beautiful as the woman standing before him. They came to his temples for healing: the young, the old, the infirm, and the physically healthy, but none had touched him like the woman sleeping in his temple at this very moment. It had been a long time, too long, since anyone had come here in search of healing. To look at her beautiful countenance, he knew he’d found someone worthy of everything he could give.

And now, she’d finally come. He’d seen her, even been the consulting doctor on her case, though she knew not of his divine origins. Though in her dream, he doubted she recognized him. She’d seen so many doctors. His heart, and his cock, leapt at her nearness. He ached to taste her. And taste her, he would.

With a smile, he propelled her away from the mocking laughter and other guests. A wave of his hand dismissed them, and he stood alone with her on a beach. She still wore her dress, though in her dream the sunlight shone on her scarred face. He was naked. Lightly, he traced a finger along her chin until he tilted her to face him. “Yes, your beauty.” He kissed her. A gentle brush of lips, but in that touch sparks flew. “You’re beautiful.”

She pulled away and looked down. “I don’t feel beautiful.” She swallowed hard, not quite certain where to rest her gaze. “Since the accident, all the surgeries... I’m not beautiful. Not like they were.”

He smiled and forced her to look at him once more. “Beauty on the outside doesn’t mean beauty on the inside. Let me show you how beautiful you are.”

She swayed at his words. Cupping her hand, he stood beside her. Waves crashed in the background, counterpoint to the blood pounding in his veins. The setting sun completed the perfect surroundings in which to love her. He traced the faint white lines down the lengths of her arms, worse on the right from where the car window had shattered and sliced her skin. Across her shoulders, the few scars on her abdomen and along her hips and legs, he touched those, too. In the days of old when petitioners had flocked to his temple, he'd had power then. He could cure the lame, the sick, the dying. Now, he hoped he had enough power left to show Ari her true beauty.

Her back would bear more scars, faint white lines as dim as modern medicine could make them. He wanted to kiss them, to run his fingers and tongue over her buttocks and the backs of her thighs, until he'd tasted every single mark on her body.

He widened his stance, letting her see the full effect she had on him. His turgid cock surged hard and proud between his legs. His balls hung full and aching. Let her see this god among men who wanted her. And in the air, he scented the sweet perfume of her cream.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ari looked at the man standing before her. Moonlight illuminated his naked form, turning the planes and hollows of his chest and abdomen into a study of shadows and light. Dark hair curled over his chest and between his pectorals to follow a straight line over his abdomen and down to the cock standing at attention in a nest of black hair. Ari licked her lips at the sight of his erection, her shame at her own scarred visage forgotten. In this light, she, too, would be shadows and light, not pink and white scars jagged against creamy flesh.

He extended his hand, and she took it. Warmth zinged up her arm. She looked at him, not wanting to step forward if it meant breaking the spell of the moment. Standing apart from him seemed abhorrent. "Who are you?" she asked.

"Just a man."

Ari chuckled. She'd never imagine him as just a man, though a man he most definitely was. "Do you not have a name, just a man?"

He laughed and pulled her forward. Ari fit neatly into the circle of his arms, his shoulder the perfect height for her to rest her head. A lazy hand caressed her back from neck to tailbone, then back again. The motion soothed her. "I am called many things. If you need to shout out something in your passion, you can call me a god."

His bold words should have shocked her. Instead, in her dream, she could easily imagine him as a Greek deity. "All right then." She pressed her lips to his shoulder, the skin warm. "I shall trust the gods to know I do so at your behest." She laved the spot where her lips had touched with her tongue.

"Oh, they know." She didn't need to see him to know he smiled, for it filled his voice. He stepped back and gently led her down to a blanket.

Ari lay back on the soft fabric, the sand form-fitted to her shape beneath her. He stretched out over her, one hand above her head, the fingers playing with her hair, the other idly caressing her ribs and breasts. Her nipples thrust up at him. Bending his head, he laved one distended tip with his tongue. The gentle touch rocketed through her body and had her arching her back to beg for more.

"Mmm, so beautiful," he murmured against her flesh. Sliding down her body, he brought his other hand down to fondle the breast he wasn't kissing. He wrapped his lips around a nipple and sucked deep. Ari threaded her fingers through his hair and cried out.

This man -- this god -- made her feel beautiful. Each caress of his tongue, his lips, over her flesh sent fresh shocks through her system. Her legs moved restlessly against the blanket. Her pussy ached to be touched. Moisture coated her nether lips, and she wanted to feel him rising over her, fucking her on the beach. She held him to her breast with a murmured, "please."

His exquisite lips traveled over her flesh. Scars she knew must be there faded beneath his touch. The mocking people in the party receded into the dark parts of her mind. It was only her own fears she conjured, and this man took them away. Whoever he was, she thanked him and wished he didn't only live in her mind. With gentle nips, he slid lower over her body. His tongue swirled in her navel, then he rested between her parted thighs.

He licked her. Ari's breath caught in her throat as he parted her labia and blew a hot, moist breath against her sex. She arched and cried out as his tongue teased tiny circles around her clit. "Oh, god! Please!" she begged.

Her hips moved, up and down, as she begged for release with her body. It had been long -- too long -- since she'd had sex. She wanted him, his entire silken, hard length inside her. And she wanted it now.

"Fuck me!" A breeze carried her words away. She didn't care who heard.

He chuckled. The husky, masculine sound curled her toes and nearly set off her perilously close orgasm. He moved over her body and settled between her legs. The tip of his cock brushed her folds. Ari wanted deeper contact, a more intimate touch from him. He braced his weight on his arms. "Do you believe you're beautiful?"

Ari licked her lips. She wanted to say yes. In her mind's eye, she saw the scars crisscrossing her body and the looks of scorn from the partygoers. Closing her eyes, she shook her head. "No." The tiny word emerged as a squeak.

He slid inside. "Believe it." With those words, he sheathed himself inside her. Balls-deep, he captured her gaze, holding it.

"With you inside me, I feel beautiful." She raised a hand to the nape of his neck and pulled his lips to hers. She kissed him, putting all her emotions into the movement of her lips across his.

He groaned and began to move. He didn't just fuck her, he ravished her. Long, deep thrusts that left her breathless and hanging until he filled her anew. Stars shone behind her

closed eyelids, or it might have only been the sky. She clung to him. Her tiny, breathy gasps mingled with his deep moans, and soon she flew off the edge of the cliff as she orgasmed. “Oh god!” she screamed. “Oh fucking god!”

He thrust once more, deep and strong, then went rigid above her as he climaxed. He braced himself, then gently curled to the side and tucked her into the protective curl of his body.

Lying there, Ari believed him. He made her feel beautiful. With a sigh, she settled against him and the dream faded into deep sleep.

## Chapter One

The nearly steady jingle of the bell over her shop door and the chatter of customers made up for having to be back at work. Her first day back since her Grecian vacation, and she hadn't had a moment's rest. Of course, that was her fault. Catherine, one of her two full-time employees, offered her a long lunch, but Ari had declined.

"Better throw myself back into it," she had said and waved dismissively at the offer to go down to the corner café. Eric, her cashier and delivery driver, clucked over her like a mother hen. Finally, she sent him out for floral deliveries with the promise that she'd take a break.

"I'll leave a list for the next order in your office," Catherine called through the open space separating the cashier's area from the workroom.

"Thanks." Ari twirled a long-stemmed rose in her hand and stared dreamily at the display before her. The note said the arrangement had to be special and elegant. Tiny bachelor's buttons surrounded the three long-stem roses and greenery. Ari released a breath and set the fourth rose into the arrangement.

Catherine poked her head into the workroom. "That's gorgeous." She picked up a can of diet soda left on the counter and took a long swallow. "Wow, that was quite the rush."

“I trust you’ve kept things running well in my absence.” Ari turned the arrangement, studying it from all angles. She’d really fallen in love with her work. Some very special lady would be quite happy. Ari smiled. That’s what made her job worthwhile.

She rose from her seat and studied the arrangement from across the room. She walked over to the table and tweaked the tilt of a flower, then stepped back again. It looked wonderful. Before she could make any more changes, she inserted the sealed card and wrapped the flowers for delivery. Eric could take them out with his afternoon run.

The next order took only a few moments, a bunch of carnations with some baby’s breath, but she arranged it as carefully as the arrangement before. Once she had it wrapped and ready for delivery with the other five bouquets, she sat back in a plush chair. Memories of her trip filtered through her mind. The food, the people, the beauty, all of it came together in her mind, only to be trumped by the dream.

He said to call him a god, and even a week after she’d met her dream lover in a Greek temple, her body still hummed for his touch. Closing her eyes, she pressed a finger to her lips, thinking about how he’d kissed her, loved her, and made her feel beautiful. She glanced down at her long-sleeved light jacket and the slacks that went to her sensible shoes. The only skin in sight was her hands and face. Lightly, she ran her finger over her lips, imagining his gentle touches. If only she could bring that sense of beauty into her personal life.

Ari squared her shoulders. She caught Catherine looking at her through the window, her employee’s attention quickly pulled away by the jingle of the bell over the door. A young woman, her stomach rounded in pregnancy entered. She paused by the arrangement cabinet and grinned. “That one,” she said before turning to the counter

“Welcome to Floral Fantasy,” Catherine said. “Looks like you found something you like.”

“Yes.” She pointed back toward the cabinet. “The purple arrangement. It will be perfect for my mother.”

Catherine smiled. “Great choice.” She walked over to the cooler and quickly brought the bouquet back to the counter. In moments, she’d totaled the purchase and packaged the flowers for a safe ride to their destination. Eric returned, then quickly left with the van loaded full of bouquets to be delivered.

Ari tidied the workroom and checked her office. A sudden need to be home with the memory of her dream lover filled her. Work could wait. After all, she owned Floral Fantasy and this was her first day back from vacation. “Do you mind if I head home?” she asked Catherine. “I think I’ve done enough for today.” She slipped her purse over her shoulder. She’d promised herself she’d take it easy after her vacation.

“I can finish things here. Thanks for doing those bouquets. Why don’t you go put your feet up and enjoy a drink?” Catherine waved her hand toward the door as she checked the day’s receipts.

“Thanks. I think I will.” She sketched a wave in the air and went out to her compact hatchback. It looked like an egg on wheels, but it made getting around in town so easy. Moments later she merged into traffic, determined to have a good evening. She had a book on her nightstand she’d started on the plane from Greece. Maybe she’d start reading, or perhaps head out to the nearby botanical garden. Either way, she knew she’d enjoy herself knowing her shop had survived her vacation and Catherine had everything under control.

Ari pulled into her driveway. A few moments later, Bea, her neighbor rushed out. “Ari, dear. I have a delivery for you. It was left at my house.”

Ari opened the door and stepped out. “Oh, thank you. I’ll come over and get it.” She grabbed her purse and crossed her small front lawn to Bea’s little white bungalow. Bea stepped inside and emerged carrying a huge bouquet of flowers.

Ari’s breath caught in her throat. The long-stemmed roses, the greenery. Even the elegant vase. She recognized the arrangement as the one she’d completed earlier today. She



hadn't seen the address. Eric handled all the receipts when he made deliveries. "Oh my goodness," she said as she took the flowers from Bea. "I wasn't expecting these."

Bea smiled. "You work too hard. Some young man should send you flowers more often. So tell me about him. Who is he?"

Ari shook her head. "I'm afraid I don't know. I haven't --" She swallowed hard and tried to calm her racing heart. "I haven't met anyone. I don't know who would send me flowers."

"Well, take them inside and enjoy them, dear. And find out who sent them. He might be a keeper." With a wink, Bea returned to her house.

"Thanks." Ari tried to wipe the bemused grin off of her face as she stared at the flowers and carried them inside.

\* \* \* \* \*

When it came to finding people, Thanos knew he had a bit more luck in that department than most. His contacts with the plastic surgery department in the local hospital helped, as did a knack for ferreting out hidden information. He'd seen her in the hospital off and on, though less frequently now that he no longer consulted on her case. She brought light with her wherever she went, and when her doctor told him about her dream of visiting his native country, he knew he must see her. He suspected that although her physical body might be nearly as good as new, the emotional still needed work. And although he practiced plastic surgery, he liked to think that he had a bit of skill with the emotions.

Slowing his Mercedes, Dr. Thanos Soterios stared at the address he'd scrawled on a prescription pad, then looked at the house, a small brick bungalow on a quiet cul-de-sac. Flowerbeds planted with hardy petunias and marigolds flanked the cement stairs leading to the front of the house. An older compact car sat in the driveway. Thanos parked along the street.

As he opened the car door, he wondered why nervous flutters filled his stomach. He'd met women before, hundreds of them. With his looks and charm, meeting a member of the opposite sex came as easily as breathing. But Ari was different. He knew it when he'd consulted on her case, and when she'd visited his temple. Though she was scarred, he found her beautiful. He'd seen the final work and the surgeon who'd completed it was one of the best in his field.

Squaring his shoulders beneath the Armani suit he wore, Thanos crossed the street and walked up the driveway. He wanted to see her reaction to his flowers. He'd stopped into the shop yesterday, certain she'd still be on her vacation, and requested the arrangement. He hoped she'd put the bouquet together herself; nothing like giving a woman what she wants. He smiled and ascended the stairs to her cozy home, then rang the doorbell.

The multi-toned chime echoed through the house. Inside he heard the patter of her feet and a soft, "just a moment." The sound of her voice filled him with hope. The musical notes washed over him, made him think of flowers in summertime or the lap of waves against the shore. He wanted to see if the bouquet matched the beauty of the woman inside.

The door opened just a crack, stopped by the safety chain. "Hello?" She peered around the door and looked. Interest flared in her gaze, quickly banked as she looked him over and shook her head. He noticed she kept the door angled so he saw only the unscarred side of her face. It looked second nature. "Hello?"

"Are you Ari Levington? I'm Dr. Thanos Soterios."

"I am," she said as she removed the chain. "Is everything all right, Dr. Soterios?" She thought for a moment. "You look familiar, but I'm afraid I don't recognize your name."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ari caught her breath at the sight of the handsome man standing on her front stoop. Thick black hair, just wavy enough to tempt a woman's fingers to run through it framed a

handsome face dominated by rich, coffee-brown eyes. A straight, patrician nose bisected his face and led to a pair of full, kissable lips. His strong jaw enhanced the entire package.

And his suit. Ari sucked in her breath at the broad shoulders delineated by the cut of the tailored charcoal gray suit jacket. His broad chest, covered by a white casual shirt, tapered to narrow hips and long legs. Expensive leather loafers covered his feet. If she didn't know any better, she'd think he was the man from her dream.

"I consulted on your case. We met very briefly," he said. His rich voice washed over her like warm honey, all gooey and sticky, making her want to roll it around on her tongue for a while.

A plastic surgeon. She should to have known. Such wealth didn't come from just anywhere, and from the cut of his suit to the Mercedes parked in the cul-de-sac, he clearly came from money. She forced a smile on her face. After her accident, she'd seen enough of doctors. Ari kept one hand on the door as she removed the chain, still wondering why this particular doctor had shown up on her doorstep.

"I don't usually do this." His gaze swept over her from head to toe, bringing with it the heat of an intimate caress. She had no doubt he knew exactly what lay beneath her clothes, every scar and every line. For once, she didn't care. "But I've been following your case and have nothing but admiration for you. I was hoping we could get to better know each other." He flashed a megawatt smile that curled Ari's toes. A single glance, a brilliant smile, and he had the ability to send heat flushing to parts of her that had been re-awakened by the encounter in the Greek temple.

Ari opened the door wider, suddenly realizing that she was about to invite this man into her house. The long sleeves of her blazer brushed comfortingly against her arms, her slacks loose enough to disguise any disfigurement. His slight accent reminded her of the Grecians she'd encountered during her visit. "Dr. Soterios," she said, testing his name on her lips. "That's a Greek name, isn't it? I recently visited Greece. It's a beautiful country."

“Thanos, please. And yes, she’s very rugged in places, but certainly beautiful.”

A flush swept across Ari’s cheeks, the heat warning her she was out of her league with the handsome doctor. “Yes, it is.” She stepped aside. “Would you like to come inside?”

“That would be lovely, thank you.”

She closed the door behind him, noticing the scent of his cologne. The bright, airy scent made her think of warm, sunny days spent on the beach and rolling in silk-soft sand. Without realizing it, she leaned closer to pull more of the tantalizing aroma into her nostrils. She stepped away and turned toward her dining room. “Would you like some iced tea? I was just pouring myself a glass when you arrived.”

“That would be wonderful, thank you.” He followed her through the small foyer and living room to the kitchen and dining area with its curtains wide open to catch the late-afternoon sunshine.

Ari grabbed a glass from the drying rack and filled it with iced tea. She topped off her own glass before placing the pitcher in the refrigerator. Turning to him, she saw his gaze captured by the huge bouquet she’d set in the middle of the table.

“Those are gorgeous flowers,” he said as he accepted the glass from her. Their fingers brushed for an instant. Heat sizzled through her veins. She found her gaze drawn to his eyes and thought about losing herself in their dark brown depths. Just like the eyes of her dream lover in Greece. She pulled her hand away, certain she could still feel him touching her.

“Thank you. I wish I knew who sent them.” She pulled out a chair and motioned for him to sit.

He did and brought the glass to his lips. He drank, his Adam’s apple bobbing with each swallow. Ari watched the movement, wondering what it would be like to draw her tongue down the smooth flesh to kiss the tanned base of his throat. She pulled her thoughts away from exploring Thanos’s body with her tongue. It’d been too long, and her dream-awakened

feelings she thought better left dead. The hunky doctor probably had no designs on her body, especially once he saw the designs left behind by healed wounds.

“A secret admirer? I’m sure you have many,” he said.

Heat crept over her cheeks and down her throat. Ari shook her head, studying the pattern of condensation dripping down the sides of the glass. “No. Not that I know of.” She reached for her glass.

Thanos twined his fingers with hers. He brushed her palm with his thumb, each sweep sending sparks shooting through her body. The soft, seductive caress hardened her nipples against her bra. Lips parted, she looked at him.

Blatant desire filled his gaze. “Why do you sound so uncertain? You’re a beautiful woman.”

“No, I’m not. My scars.” Embarrassed, she stared at their clasped hands.

He reached out and trailed his fingers along the scar along the right side of her face. Ari turned her head, intending to hide the mark, but her actions only pressed her scar more solidly against his fingers. His light strokes fanned flames already burning. His thumb slid over her full, lower lip, and she parted her lips. Her eyes fluttered closed.

“With beauty such as yours, scars are of no consequence. Perhaps they show that you’re a real woman, and not some goddess fantasy brought to life.” His soft, husky words washed over her.

“I --” Words failed her.

Ari opened her eyes to find Thanos staring intently at her. Hunger filled his gaze. She moistened her lips with her tongue.

Thanos followed the movement and swallowed.

Ari stared into his warm, dark brown eyes. Drowning in his gaze, she leaned forward, offering her lips to him.

Thanos closed the distance between them. His lips settled on hers, warm and sweet. With gentle care, he kissed her, drank from her. Beneath the sensual onslaught, Ari opened her mouth. She swooned against him, her hand flat against his chest. His heart hammered beneath her touch.

Thanos deepened the kiss. His tongue slid into her mouth. The thick invasion filled her. Ari's pussy wept with need. Slowly, she slid her fingers around the back of his neck, twining them into his hair. She needed him closer. His scent, spicy and male, surrounded her.

A moan rumbled from Thanos's chest. His tongue plunged into her mouth, making it quite clear what he wished to do with her body. His nimble fingers skimmed her sides, up and down, and wherever he touched, tiny electric sparks danced through her. She wished to close her eyes and never wake up from this wonderful dream.

Fire and heat danced through him. She tasted like summer, heat and light with just a hint of tart sweetness. He fucked her with his mouth. He needed to move between her legs and into her warm, tight pussy. Her hand fisted in his shirt and drew him closer to her. Tasting her only made him want more.

His cock hardened, balls tightening. He brushed his fingers across her breasts. Through the layers of shirt and bra, her nipples tightened and pressed into waiting fingers. Thanos palmed her breast. She moaned into his mouth, and he greedily swallowed it.

For so long he'd waited for her. He'd helped on her case, bided his time until she became an adventurous woman who fell asleep in his temple where in her dreams, under his tutelage, she became the wanton temptress. He feathered light caresses across the scar along the side of her cheek, the transition between scar and flesh drawing his fingers. He wished for powers to remove it with only a touch.

He rubbed his tongue against her bottom lip, drawing the plump flesh into his mouth to suckle. A light nip, quickly laved with his tongue, made her shudder. In a few moments,

he'd haul her onto his lap, her legs straddling him. His cock, hard and tight, would rub against her pussy, and he'd fuck her senseless.

Thanos pulled back and sucked air into his starved lungs. He couldn't take her like a rutting animal. She deserved more, deserved better. With his thumb, he gave her lower lip a last, loving caress, and leaned back into the chair.

Ari forced herself to draw air into her lungs. She stared at Thanos, his pupils dilated with arousal. Need thrummed through her body, from her aching nipples to the warm desire in her pussy. Never before had she thrown herself at a man. Her dream had changed her, she realized. Swallowing hard, she forced her body to relax, not to give in to the urge to cross the space between them and drape herself across his lap.

"I don't usually do things like that," she said, when at last she could form coherent thought.

He nodded and smiled. "You are a beautiful woman, Ari. You should do things like that more often." Thanos rose to his feet. "There is an outdoor concert tomorrow. I'd like it very much if you were to go with me. I can pick you up at six-thirty."

In spite of what had just transpired between them, a flush crept over her cheeks. She felt it in the warmth flaming from her face and the back of her neck. "That would be nice, thank you."

"Very good, then." He turned, starting to walk out, when he looked back at the bouquet, and at her. "I'm so glad you liked the flowers."

Ari sat dumbstruck at his words as she watched him walk away.

## Chapter Two

A soft breeze teased errant strands of Ari's hair. She'd pulled it up into a twist, leaving a few tendrils down to frame her face and to hide her scar. Dressed in a long-sleeved jacket over a camisole and loose trousers with sandals, Ari found it way too easy to close her eyes and pretend she was on a date with the man of her dreams.

Thanos intrigued her. The handsome doctor obviously could have his pick of the ladies. She'd thought about declining his offer, but it'd been far too long since she'd just let herself have fun with another person. Besides, it was outdoors and in a public place. A handsome man had asked her out. She'd be a fool not to enjoy the moment. Women cast covetous glances in his direction, though he seemed blissfully ignorant of the attention.

A heady saxophone filled the night air with a tune full of longing. The five-piece band, with a smoky-voiced female singer, performed a mixture of their own jazz tunes and old favorites. Sitting on the soft blanket with Thanos, Ari couldn't find a better way to spend a relaxing evening. She leaned against him, using his broad chest as a backrest and letting her head fall against his shoulder. His arm draped loosely around her middle. The comforting weight felt familiar, somehow, and her thoughts were pulled back to her dream in Greece.



Thanos brushed his lips against her temple. “You seem lost in thought,” he said during a break in sets.

Ari picked up her glass of chardonnay. She sipped from the vintage far more expensive than anything she purchased for herself and enjoyed the bouquet of flavors on her tongue. Tilting her head up, she looked at Thanos and smiled. “Just enjoying the evening.”

“I’m glad.” With his free arm, he opened up the picnic basket. “You know we haven’t had dessert yet.”

The husky timbre of his voice sent shivers down her spine that had nothing to do with food. Instead, she remembered the feel of his lips beneath hers, his hard body pressed against hers, and she wanted to feel it again. “Really?” Reaching up, Ari traced the strong line of his jaw with her index finger. Boldness she’d never felt before made her seek out his warm skin. His lips parted, and she brushed her finger against his sensual lower lip. Perhaps it was the gathering twilight that hid the scar along her face or the knowledge he wouldn’t be able to see her scarred body beneath her clothes; either way, a rush of feminine power filled her.

Behind her, Thanos shifted. “You’re a temptress, do you know that?” The band began their second set, effectively cutting off further conversation. No words were needed, however, as Thanos reached into the picnic basket next to him and pulled out two containers of tiramisu. He handed one to her along with a fork.

*I’d rather have you.* The words filled her mind, but she dared not speak aloud. Instead she smiled and picked up her fork. The first bite of the torte filled her mouth with a burst of flavors and melted on her tongue. She ate, eyes closed in ecstasy. A small moan escaped her throat, and she heard Thanos’s throaty chuckle.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ari’s moan shot straight to his cock. Sitting as she was, leaning against him, he hoped the ridge of his arousal didn’t press demandingly into her backside. Oh, he wanted it to. As the sun threatened to slip below the horizon, he saw her open up, less self-conscious of her

scarred body. Did she not know the effect she had on him? On the way to the park they'd spoken of work, his and hers. She told him about her flower shop, her passion for beauty and growing things. He thought of his condo without even a yard requiring care. How barren and desolate it would seem to her to be penned in two stories above the ground. Her small bungalow made up for its lack of space in the sheer warmth she brought to it.

He spoke of his work, how he preferred clients who needed the plastic surgery rather than wanted it. He preferred to heal, not make more soulless beauty. He spoke of a wife who had come to him for a breast enlargement, only to find her husband reluctant because he loved her just the way she was. He told the story, not to brag, but in the hopes she'd see that not all beauty had to be picture perfect. But by then, they'd reached the park and as he laid out the blanket and produced the picnic dinner, she'd gone silent. Then, the music had begun.

He played among mortals because he could. Though the centuries and fashions changed the need for his gifts hadn't. Ari fit perfectly into the curve of his body. With his arm protectively around her midsection, he nuzzled her temple. He thought he could sit there forever. He bent down and lightly drew his lips along the long column of her throat, pausing where it met her shoulder. He kissed gently, using lips and tongue to devour her as eagerly as she ate the dessert. She relaxed against him.

"Want some?" She held up a forkful.

"Yes," he said, and leaned forward to sample what she offered. He closed his eyes at the flavors in his mouth, though they didn't taste nearly as good as she did. "But I'd prefer to nibble on you." He resumed his slow seduction.

The band moved into a slow, sensual number with a thrumming bass beat that made him think of making love long and slow until they both tumbled over the precipice into satisfaction. His hand slid over her stomach to brush against her breast. Through the layers of fabric, her nipple pebbled, and he paid close attention to the raised bud.

“Oh, Thanos.” The fork slid into the nearly empty plastic container with a soft clatter. She leaned into him.

The concert, the crowd, it all fell away until he found himself battling the desire to lay her back on the blanket and make love to her there in the park. Never before had a woman affected him so much, but then he suspected there’d never been a woman like Ari. So many petitioners, and over the years, and he’d never met anyone who could move him as she could.

Tilting her face toward his, she kissed him. She tasted like wine and chocolate, two heady flavors. Her lips moved across his, coaxing, giving, demanding. A low moan vibrated through his chest, and she reached up to twine her fingers into the hair at the nape of his neck. At long last, she pulled her lips from his and stared into his eyes. The desire in her gaze shook him to the core. So many fantasies, so many desires, and Thanos knew he could make every one come true.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ari leaned back in the plush, leather seats of Thanos’s Mercedes and enjoyed the ride. Inside the car, the outside noise faded away to just the mellow tunes of ambient music on the satellite radio. Thanos handled the car with ease. Surprisingly, riding with him made her feel secure, cared for, and none of her anxiety about not being the driver made an appearance. Only rarely did she ride as a passenger, preferring to drive. She’d always been that way, but after the accident it had gotten worse.

She glanced out the window at the slightly unfamiliar scenery. Thanos drove past an exclusive looking golf club and turned down a road lined with homes she was certain cost at least a quarter of a million dollars. She tried not to be impressed as he pressed a button, activating a gate on a community marked “Wildwood.” Expensive homes formed a gateway to condominiums, all surrounding a lake. Ari exhaled and glanced back at Thanos. He

grinned at her. “We’re almost there,” he said as he drove down into underground parking. He parked in a spot numbered 205 and turned off the car.

Ari reached for the door handle.

Thanos covered the hand closest to him with his own. Heat radiated from his palm, and Ari hoped he couldn’t hear the pounding of her heart. “Let me.”

“All right,” she said, stunned by his manners. Not that she expected any less, but most of the guys she’d dated before her accident didn’t mind if she opened her own car door. She watched in the mirrors as he walked around the vehicle and paused beside her door. If she got out, she’d go upstairs to his apartment, and if she did, she’d make love to him. The realization shook her.

Concerns about her scars filled her mind, warring with the image of the two of them in the park snuggled close together. Surely he’d seen worse being in the medical profession, but Ari wished he wouldn’t see them on her.

Thanos opened the car door. “Having second thoughts?” he asked when she hesitated.

Ari shook her head and reached for his offered hand. “No,” she said, though if her voice didn’t sound completely positive, she hoped he didn’t notice. “I’m not used to such chivalrous treatment, that’s all.” She grinned, and his answering smile put her more at ease.

“Would it help if I called you my ‘goddess?’” His smile became playful.

Ari chuckled. “I wouldn’t go that far.” She rose to her feet and slipped her purse over her shoulder.

“I would.” The heat in Thanos’s gaze made her believe it. He settled a hand on the small of her back. “This way.” Reaching behind him, he remotely locked the car, then steered her toward a door.

A few moments later they stepped into an elevator. Warm cherry paneling lined the walls, the buttons bright and silver. A quick whoosh, and the elevator dinged, stopping on the second floor. Trying to battle the trepidation rising within her, she stepped into a

hallway carpeted in plush Berber. She didn't belong here. The glitz, the glamour, living in this gated community probably cost twice as much as her tiny bungalow in a nice part of town. Thanos was so sure of himself, each stride full of purpose. The hand on her back soothed even as he propelled her down the hall beside him. Heat radiated from his body.

They stopped at a door the color of dark walnut. A small intercom hung on the wall beside it, and a golden 205 hung above. Ari looked around, trying to conceal her nervousness. If she walked inside, she sensed her life would change. No longer would she be the mousy, scarred florist who preferred flowers over men. She'd spent an enjoyable evening. There was only one way for it to end, only one way she wanted it to end. She nibbled on her lower lip.

"Nervous?" he asked as he swung the door inward. "You don't have to be. We won't do anything you don't want to do." His husky voice sent shivers darting down her spine.

"That's what I'm afraid of." She unabashedly admired his broad shoulders and firm chest. "What I want to do."

His chuckle, rich and full of promise, wrapped around her like a cocoon. Reaching up, he lightly brushed his knuckles against her cheek. "Whatever happens, it will be as it should be." He leaned forward and pressed a quick kiss to her forehead, then stepped inside. Ari followed, a bemused expression on her face.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ari's shyness touched his heart. He knew her inner demons, for he had seen them in her dream. It wasn't just in his temple in Greece, though he felt her much stronger there, but nearly every night since then, she'd dreamed, and every night, he'd protected her. Only she never knew who he was. Though it tested the limits of his self-control, he remained in shadows, cloaked from sight. Now, she'd see him, just as she had in her dreams. He wondered what she'd do.

He caught her looking over his home and tried to see it through her point of view. Decorated in dark woods, it exuded a masculine feel. No frills or knickknacks to create that personal touch. He showed her into the living room with its cream-colored leather couch, clearly the couch of a petless, childless bachelor. "Have a seat," he said. "I'll be right back with some drinks."

"Thank you," she said, running her small, pink tongue over her lower lip. He hit a button and the gas fireplace came to life. She smiled. "How nice. I've always wanted a fireplace." She took a seat on the end of the couch. "Don't be too long."

One minute shyer than a vestal virgin, the next a seductress. He hurried into the kitchen where he set a bottle of wine in a silver bucket surrounded by ice, and added two goblets to a tray. Then, he set out two bottles of water in case she didn't want more wine. He arranged everything on the silver tray and moments later stepped into the living room. Setting the tray down on the coffee table in front of the couch, he sat beside her and casually laid an arm across the back of the couch.

"Your home is lovely." She glanced around, and he yearned to show her everything. Especially his bedroom. He longed to see her spread out on his black satin comforter atop his king-sized bed.

"Thank you. I didn't know if you wanted more wine, though this is a good vintage, so I brought some water." Lightly, he brushed his fingers along her shoulder and the back of her neck. She leaned into his touch, purring slightly.

"Water, please. I don't usually have more than a glass of wine with dinner, and that's on a special occasion." She accepted the offered bottle of water and drank. He watched her throat work and longed to run his lips over the smooth, silken flesh. Leaning forward, she recapped the bottle and set it on the tray.

Ari battled the nervousness inside her. “The concert was very nice. Thank you for taking me.” She knew she babbled, yet couldn’t stop the words. His light touch sent shivers of pleasure through her body. The gentle stroking reminded her how long it’d been since she’d been with a man -- a good year before her accident. The years of celibacy wore on her. Closing her eyes, she knew she wanted nothing more than to lean against Thanos, offer him her lips, and make love to him all night long. Yet, his fingers strayed perilously close to a large scar that ran down the length of her back, courtesy of jagged car metal. Swallowing hard, she wondered whether she wanted him to see it or not.

“You’re trembling.” Thanos leaned close to her and brushed his lips across her temple. With his free hand, he reached over and tangled her fingers with his. “You remind me of a scared fawn.”

“I’m -- I’m sorry.” Her own inner demons worked against her. Thanos made her feel beautiful. Wasn’t that enough? She tilted her head to look into his dark eyes, and the desire she saw there took her breath away. Hunger burned in his gaze. “It’s been so long. And I’m...” Her words trailed off. She didn’t want to draw his attention to things he couldn’t see.

“Beautiful.” He released her hand to cup her chin. “If I could grant wishes, I would want you to believe that. Yes, your body is scarred. You had a horrible accident, Ari. But you lived through it. I don’t have to read your file to imagine the hell you went through for three years. Surgeries. Physical therapy. Lesser women might have caved, but not you. You survived it, and now you’re sitting here, a very desirable, very beautiful woman.”

He didn’t give her a chance to counter his words. He brushed his lips across hers, a gentle caress. Once. Twice. Then, he settled his mouth against hers and kissed her. His tongue traced the seal of her mouth, pausing to taste her full, lower lip.

With a sigh, Ari melted against him. The intoxicating kiss, combined with his words, melted her core. Her pussy wept and unshed tears stung her eyes. His fingers skimmed her side, sliding a fleeting touch over the curve of her breast.

Then, his palm settled against her. He cupped gently, testing her weight in his hand. She sighed with pleasure as his thumb stroked her nipple, and his tongue swept into her mouth. A most welcome invasion, she wanted Thanos to taste her -- all of her. Boldly, she stroked the length of his tongue with hers, drawing it deeper into her mouth.

He groaned. The masculine sound vibrated through her. She palmed his chest, her fingers searching for more intimate contact. Thanos snaked an arm around her waist and hauled her to him. She ended up half-sprawled against his chest, but she didn't mind. He shifted until she lay between his spread legs. His cock thrust against her, and the thought he wanted her so much sent a flush of pleasure through her body.

Ari tugged on his shirt. It slid free from his pants, and at last her fingers skimmed over his warm, naked flesh. She sighed, pulling her lips from his to focus on undressing him. Thanos moved away long enough to toss his shirt over his head. At the first glimpse of his naked chest, Ari sucked in a breath. Whorls of dark hair divided his pectorals, spreading out to cover them. The hair came together, narrowing down over a washboard stomach to disappear into the waistband of his jeans. Ari swallowed. "You're gorgeous," she said, dragging her gaze back to his face. Her pussy contracted at the rush of heat she saw in his gaze.

Thanos brushed his thumb across her cheek. "Thank you," he said, then leaned forward to capture her lips once more.

Now that she'd seen his chest, Ari wanted to see all of him. Just thinking about him naked made her nipples harden into tiny points. Thanos caressed her, one hand delving beneath her shirt to cup her lace-covered breast. Then, he had her shirt off and reached around her to work on her bra. At last, she showed him her bare breasts.

Ari stiffened. She searched Thanos's gaze, knowing what he'd see. He licked his lips, his gaze riveted to her. For one, horrible, terrifying moment, she thought her scars repulsed him.



“Beautiful,” he breathed. “Fucking beautiful.” His harsh words and husky voice sent a coil of heat low in her stomach. For tonight she’d forget about her scars, her accident, and be with this man.

“Thank you.” Ari pressed her lips to his cheeks, afraid he might see the tears shining in her eyes. She dropped her hands to his waistband and worked on removing his jeans. Tonight, she didn’t want to think at all.

### Chapter Three

He'd been in her dreams, but now he held the real woman in his hands. Almost reverently, Thanos ran his hands over her body, stroking, caressing. Her tiny hesitation when he removed her shirt warmed his heart. Though the words came out more crudely than he'd intended, he wanted her to know he thought she was beautiful. Gods knew beauty when they saw it. She shouldn't doubt him.

He leaned forward sucking the peak of one breast into his mouth. Miraculously, her breasts were unscarred, perfect, pale pink globes against the darker tone of her skin. He laved her nipple with his tongue, drawing a strangled cry from her. She tunneled her fingers into his hair and held him close. Stroking her back, he traced the skin above her waistband. She shuddered, and he drew his hand over her hip and down her thigh. Back and forth he stroked, until he cupped her knee and slid his hand up the inside of her leg. Ari moaned and arched her hips, drawing him closer.

His cock jerked against his pants. Clothes...they had way too many clothes on, and reluctantly, he released her breast to slide her off his lap. "My bedroom. I don't want to take you on the couch," he said.

She whimpered and looked up at him, her eyes telling him that he could take her anywhere. With a grin he rose to his feet and scooped her up into his arms. Her little gasp of surprise turned into a snuggle as she laid her head against his chest.

He carried her into the bedroom.

As soon as Thanos set her on her feet, she reached for him. Her hands roamed over his chest, his shoulders, his arms, anywhere she could reach. Quickly, he shucked the remainder of his clothing, then quickly helped Ari out of hers.

He burned. One glimpse of her naked body -- scars and all -- and he found himself drawn into the maelstrom of desire that had filled him during her visit to his temple. He allowed his gaze to roam her body, pausing at the thatch of curls at the juncture of her thighs. She moved away from the edge of the bed, arm extended in invitation.

Thanos stepped forward. His arms came around her, and she clung to him. A few steps and they tumbled into the bed, Ari sprawled on top of him. He reached up and cupped her breasts, loving the way her back arched. Her breathy moans drove him on, and when she rocked her pussy against the hard length of his cock, he thought he might come right there. She leaned over and kissed him, and he knew he was lost.

A sense of feminine power so strong it nearly brought her to orgasm shot through Ari. Looking down at Thanos, his hands on her breast, his gaze locked on her, she knew she had him in her thrall. This man, this handsome man, wanted her. As if in answer to her thoughts, his cock twitched against her slick pussy lips.

God, she wanted him inside her. To feel the silken slide of his cock into her after all these years would be heaven. She feared she wouldn't be able to wait. Then his hand slid over her stomach, his fingers twining through the curls covering her sex. Ari shuddered. Her body tightened, her pussy clenched. "Please," she whispered. His fingers brushed her, and a bolt of awareness like she'd never felt before jolted through her. "Please, inside me."

She'd never been demanding in bed but Thanos's fingers swirling ever so carefully around her clitoris made her want more. She longed to bounce on his cock, feel his organ, his fingers, anything inside her to ease the pressure that kept growing and growing. He brushed his thumb against her clit.

Ari stifled a scream. She shuddered, her body imploding upon itself. For one long, torturous moment she clung on the precipice. Her orgasm crashed through her like waves upon a shore. A low moan erupted from her throat, and her body clenched. Surely he must feel her pussy tightening. She longed for him to bury his fingers into her slick channel. He did, the first slide of two digits into her causing more tremors to race through her body.

Never before had she felt this earth-shattering orgasm. Her eyes flew open, and she found Thanos watching her. Slowly, deliberately she scooted back against his cock. "What about you?" she asked when once again breath filled her lungs.

"What about me?" Thanos arched an eyebrow. He flicked her clit. She shuddered.

"Don't you want to come?"

"Don't worry, baby. I will." He massaged her clit with his thumb while two fingers stroked in and out of her. The lazy motion nearly drove her crazy. Hard and fast, she wanted him, the wild, mindless fuck his hungry kisses promised. The slow strokes only drove her crazy and made her want to impale herself on his thick cock, but oh, how sweetly his fingers stroked her pussy. She didn't want move except to pump her hips against the motion and feel the swirl of her orgasm build again.

He pulled away so slowly, she whimpered with need. Then, he replaced his fingers with his cock. Oh yes, the silken slide of him reminded her of her dream lover. Thick and long, he completely filled her. For long moments, he rested inside her. Then he began to move. Slowly at first and then faster. She met him thrust for thrust, the delicious sensation of being fucked by him driving all thoughts from her mind.

He claimed her lips, letting her know in exact terms what he wanted to do -- possess her body and soul. Ari moaned into his mouth, so close to breaking, yet so far away.

Thanos shifted his angle. With each stroke he brushed against her clit. Fisting her hands against his back, Ari convulsed around him. She pulled her lips away and screamed her pleasure as the biggest orgasm of her life ripped through her. Over and over until she lay beneath him, boneless with ecstasy.

Pausing, Thanos brushed a sweaty strand of hair from her forehead. "You still with me, baby?" He shifted slightly, his cock stroking deep inside her.

"Mmmm," Ari said. She wiggled her hips, letting him know he wouldn't rid himself of her that easily. "I think so."

"Good." He thrust again, each stroke only lighting her anew. Ari kept her eyes open, watching the play of emotions across his face. He looked beautiful, face contorted with ecstasy. The cords of his neck stood out, and every muscle screamed of a man trying to find his release. Then, at last, his face changed into a mask of pure bliss. Above her, Thanos stiffened, and the knowledge that he came triggered her own orgasm. His cock pumped inside her, and for long moments, he remained there, like a he was caught in time.

At last, he relaxed, his lips brushing against her forehead. His pants echoed in her ear, mirroring her own heavy breathing. Sweat coated their bodies. Lying beneath him, Ari knew she'd never felt as replete, or as satisfied as she was now.

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A light breeze toyed with strands of her hair, blowing them away from her face. The sleeves of her long-sleeved shirt rippled in the wind, as did the skirt falling nearly to her ankles. Her sandals dangled from her fingers, her other hand twined with Thanos's hand. He looked magnificent in a polo shirt open at the neck and a pair of khaki shorts. Sandals cradled his feet, and watching him stand on the sandy shore of Lake Michigan, Ari wondered

if she'd ever seen a more attractive man. Gulls swooped and called out, entertaining those walking on the beach.

Old habits died hard. She watched a young couple, the girl in a barely-there bikini playing Frisbee with a handsome man in swimming trunks. Ari forced herself not to be envious of the fact that she'd never wear a bikini again. At least not in public. Thanos stopped.

She watched him stare across the lake, down toward the factories, or up toward the large sand dune towering over the cliff. "It's not as beautiful as Greece," she said at last.

Thanos smiled. Turning toward her, he brushed his thumb across her chin. "She is beautiful," he said. "I don't think anything could compare." His fingers toyed with the buttons on her shirt. Through the light fabric, she knew he saw her dark purple maillot. She loved the one-piece, and even with its scoop back had used it during physical therapy. He pulled one button from its hole, to reach inside and caress the silky fabric. "Aren't you warm?"

She was, but not from the sun overhead. "Couldn't be better," she said, reaching up to run her fingers through his wind-tousled hair. "But if you're warm we could go sit in the shade."

Thanos nuzzled her neck. "I don't think we need shade right now, honey."

Ari shivered. She knew what they needed, privacy and a few hours so she could fuck him again. Even though three days had passed since the earth-shattering night in his apartment, every night she'd thought of nothing but wrapping her body around his and never letting go. Ari wanted to dismiss the silly notion, though Thanos's daily calls kept him foremost in her mind. He'd even ordered her more flowers, having Catherine create the order then calling him once Ari had left on her lunch breaks to pick them up. He delivered them in person, leaving after a chaste kiss or lingering caress. How much more of his teasing she could take, Ari didn't know.

He slipped another button free of its moorings, then another, until the blouse fluttered around her. "It's such a gorgeous day. I think you have too many clothes on."

Ari chuckled, even as heat seeped into her cheeks. "You always think that." Already they bantered like long-time lovers. Light-heartedness filled her as she freed the last two buttons, leaving the shirt open. It wouldn't harm anything and still covered her back. Immediately she wished she hadn't, for the material whipped around her.

Thanos grabbed the ties. Quickly he fastened them under her breasts. Ari smiled at him. "Thank you," she said.

"The pleasure is all mine." Leaning down, he brushed a quick kiss across her lips.

Thanos loved the startled look on her face. Eyes wide, she stared at him. He knew her lips still vibrated from the quick kiss; he knew his did. With the ties of the shirt framing her full breasts covered by the purple suit, she looked good enough to eat. He wanted to, but with so many people on the beach, he doubted she'd agree.

He wished she'd loosen up. Sure, he could see the faint outline of her scars through her shirt. He didn't think she knew when the wind blew it away from her body and the sun shone through the material, it turned transparent. If she did, he had no doubt she'd scurry back to the car and demand to be taken home. Damn, he wished she knew her scars weren't everything. Just looking at her tightened his cock. Wrapping one arm around her waist, he pulled her against his side, loving the brush of their bodies. More torment to be sure, but a delicious torment at that.

Gulls cried overhead, drawing his attention from the white-capped waves of the lake. Nothing like the ocean, no, too small and contained, but if he closed his eyes and listened to the waves lapping against the shore and the cry of gulls, he could pretend he was back home in Greece. Only the tang of salt was missing from the air. Ari leaned against him, one arm slung around his hips. He longed for her to slide her hand into his pocket and feel how hard

he really was, but doubted she'd do that in such a public place. Alas, in Europe women ran around topless on beaches and back when he'd been revered as a god... Thanos forced his mind away from the past.

Arm in arm they walked a little way further down the beach where a young towheaded boy built a sandcastle. Ari watched him for long moments, a look on her face he'd seen many times. Children. Family. She wanted it all, but feared she'd never find it. He wanted to reassure her. Hell, to tell her he was a Greek god and could grant her every wish. He didn't, more so because he feared that she wouldn't want those things with him rather than worrying about his heritage.

He'd come here to help her. Sure, he occasionally took on mortal form to frolic among his worshippers, but this was the first time he'd been moved so much by one person to come to her side. She didn't want pity. He saw it in the strong set of her shoulders, her determination to make her life better. She wanted companionship. That, he could offer.

"Want to go play in the waves?" He paused and started to toe off his sandals.

"Sure, why not?" She grabbed a handful of her skirt, holding it just at the middle of her calves. She had no scars there, he knew. They stopped just below her knee, and he'd kissed and licked each one. She dropped her shoes a good distance away from the waves, and his joined them, then she moved forward, hesitancy in every step.

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Thanos bounded across the sand. His long strides brought him quickly to the water's edge. He stood there as a wave washed over him, then quickly receded. "Come on in." He motioned for her to join him.

Ari watched. She longed to feel the water over her feet, to dig her toes into the squishy, wet sand. It looked so enticing, but she knew Thanos's plan. He wanted her to loosen up, to have fun, and ignore the fact that scars covered her back and limbs. She knew if she lost the shirt and hiked the skirt to enjoy the day, he'd love it, and not just because of the view. Oh,



how he tempted her. No one else seemed to notice them. The young couple moved their Frisbee game farther down the beach, and the boy's mother pulled him away from the sandcastle. A few teenagers listened to music, and other beachgoers walked further away from the water. No, no one would probably notice if she bared everything. But did she dare?

Thanos kicked water in her direction. It fanned onto the sand well away from her, but even so, she imagined she could feel the cool spray on her ankles. Pursing her lips, she stared at the handsome doctor as he splashed in the waves. A jazz concert, making love in his apartment, she'd seen many sides of him, but never this playful one. She liked it and desperately wished she could let her own playful side out.

Ari inched toward the waterline. What could it hurt to get her ankles wet? She held her skirt with one hand, not wanting the faded, cotton fabric to get wet. Thanos smiled at her, the simple gesture warming her heart. He could make fun of her for being such a chicken. Instead, he gently showed her what fun it would be, and enticed her further. "Is the water cold?" Ari paused just beyond the reach of the waves.

"Not really. Not once you get used to it." Thanos flipped a little water in her direction. A few drops landed on her foot.

Ari shivered at the chill touch of the spray, but ventured further. "A gentleman doesn't splash a lady." She tried to hide the wicked gleam in her eyes. A wave came in, and before he noticed, she kicked a large spray of water onto his legs.

Thanos laughed. The warm notes filled her chest and made her heart expand. She could grow to like spending afternoons with this man, a lot. He kicked back, though the spray wasn't as much. "You might want to hike up your skirt a little higher."

"Why, so you could look at my legs?" In spite of the teasing tone of her voice, she did as he suggested, bringing it nearly to her knees. Only a few more centimeters and her scars would show. She tried to ignore the fact and focus on the joy of having water splash over her feet. In Greece, she'd sat on the edge of the shore, feeling the waves lap at her skin. Looking

over at the handsome man standing next to her, it would be too easy to imagine herself back on those idyllic beaches.

A gull landed not far from her, bobbing in the shallow waves. Ari watched as it paddled out before taking flight again. The wind teased strands of her hair. Hastily, she brushed it behind her ears. She turned to find Thanos staring at her.

Self-consciousness filled her. Though his gaze rested on her face and not her legs, she knew what he must imagine beneath her shirt and skirt, and it wasn't the image of the purple one-piece caressing her curves, either. She wished she could get over the physical state of her body. After all, the crash had been years ago, and Thanos made her want to be perfect for him.

"What is it?" she asked when his gaze didn't waver.

"You."

Ari backed out the water and dropped her skirt back down to her ankles. "What is it?" She turned, not wanting to see the pity she knew she'd find in his eyes.

A few quick steps and Thanos wrapped his arm around her shoulder. "Don't run." Gently, he turned her toward him. "Don't go. I didn't mean anything bad."

Ari squeezed her eyes shut to battle the tide of emotion rising within her. "I know," she said at last. "It's me. A day like today I should be focusing on the good things. Your wonderful company. The waves washing against the shore. The beautiful weather, anything but the fact that if my skirt came up a little bit higher, you'd see my scars. It's a stupid little thing to hold me back, isn't it?" She started to look down, away, anywhere but in Thanos's eyes.

A tilt of his finger beneath her chin, and she looked directly at him. "I've seen your scars, all of them." Heat flared in his gaze.

Answering warmth filled her pussy as she remembered in vivid detail how he'd caressed each scar with his lips, his tongue. He'd seen them all quite up close and personal

and didn't seem to be horrified. She licked her lips, suddenly dry, and he followed the movement.

When she didn't speak, he trailed his fingers along her arm, perilously close to the curve of her breast. "Your scars don't bother me, Ari. They only remind me how strong you are to have survived such a thing. I can't imagine you in the accident that caused them, and I can't bear to think of you dealing with the grueling surgeries and physical therapy for so long. I'm a doctor. I know exactly what those scars mean, and they don't repulse me." His hand drifted lazily over the curve of her breast. "I'm not attracted to the flesh, but the woman inside it. It just so happens, her exterior is just as beautiful as the interior." His hand closed around her breast and he kneaded softly, drawing a moan from Ari's throat.

Heat washed through her. She leaned against him, his thumb flicking across her nipple. Moisture flooded her pussy, and she wished he'd take her right there on the beach with the soft sand beneath her. A shiver darted through her. "Please," she whispered, though she didn't know for what she asked.

"Please keep touching your beautiful breasts? Please keep telling you that I think you're beautiful? Please make love to you?" His lips nibbled along her neck with every sentence, until he pulled the tip of her earlobe into his mouth and suckled. "What do you want me to do, Ari?"

*Take me. Make love to me.* She refused to speak the words humming in her mind. The laugh of children, the rush of waves, all of it disappeared beneath the sensual onslaught that was Thanos. The ridge of his erection rubbed against her hip.

"I --" She turned, lips parted.

Thanos needed no further invitation. He kissed her, his tongue plunging deep into her mouth. She clung to his broad shoulders, wishing she could wrap herself around him and never let go. His tongue stroked hers, a gentle caress that left no doubt about his intentions.

His right hand slid from her shoulders to cup her rear, bringing her in closer contact with his erection.

Ari wanted to rub herself against his hard cock and purr like a cat. Instead, she twined her fingers around his neck and pressed closer to him. At last, she pulled back for air.

Slowly, Thanos slid his hand from her breast to join its partner behind her. Holding her close, he rested his head next to hers. For long moments, he said nothing. Ari listened to the pounding of his heart and tried to calm the desire flaring in her blood. Like the god in her dream, he made her feel comforted, cherished, as if she could stay in his arms forever. She debated on telling him about her dreams. No, it would be her secret.

Thanos stepped away and captured her hand in his own. “Why don’t we go play in those waves?”

Ari nodded. Bending down, she picked up her skirt and knotted it so it fell down to her knees. At Thanos’s smile, she followed him to the water’s edge. All she had to do was remember her dream in Greece, then she wouldn’t feel so self-conscious about her scars. As the first waves broke over her feet and ankles, she looked at the man standing next to her. He made it easy to believe she was beautiful.

## Chapter Four

Full on pizza, and listening to soft rock music coming from the radio, Ari leaned back in the car seat and enjoyed the sensation of being chauffeured by Thanos back to her house. A flash of lightning shone in the distance, and Ari shivered with the chill blast of air from the air conditioning.

“Too cold?” Thanos reached for the controls.

“Just fine. Besides, we’ll be home soon.” She watched him slow the fan.

“Yes we will. Then, I can warm you up properly.” He flashed a grin that sent heat straight to her pussy.

Her nipples pebbled, though not from the chill air. She watched Thanos pilot the car, his hands sure on the gearshift, steering the car with confidence. Just like he drove her body. She tried to mask an indrawn breath just thinking about him touching her, caressing her. They hadn’t discussed what was going to happen tonight, but she knew, not from the kiss on the beach, but from the way he looked at her that they’d end up making love.

Not sex. Ari bit her lip as he exited the highway and started to turn toward her neighborhood. It ceased being sex that first time. As much as she tried to steel herself against

Thanos's charms, she knew she was falling in love with him. She only hoped he felt the same, because after feeling beautiful in his arms, she didn't want to leave.

A companionable silence settled over the car, leaving Ari alone with her thoughts as Thanos navigated the streets leading to her small bungalow. At last, he pulled into the driveway next to her compact car and turned off the engine.

"You fall asleep on me?" he asked as he unfastened his seat belt.

Ari roused herself enough to shake her head. "Nope, just enjoying having someone else drive for a change." She'd never felt comfortable with other people driving until Thanos. Quickly she unfastened her seatbelt and opened the door. "Want a nightcap?"

"I'd love one." He followed her out of the car, his hand solicitously on the small of her back as she walked to the front door.

A few moments later she unlocked the door and led him inside. "Why don't you take a seat on the couch? I'll be right back with our drinks."

"You don't have to play the hostess with me," he said, his hand not leaving her. "C'mon. I'll help you." Leaning down, he brushed his lips across her temple.

Ari closed the door. She longed to lean against him and feel his strong arms wrapping around her. Ever since their near make-out session on the beach, Thanos never left her side. He kept a hand on her arm, her hip, anywhere close by. The hum of his touch brought her to a state of low-level arousal, the flames ready to fan at any moment. Just the feel of his lips against her hair made her nipples harden in anticipation. Now that they stood inside her house, there was nothing to stop him from taking her.

Once inside the kitchen, Ari grabbed a couple of wine glasses from the rack beneath her counter. Not offering him a nightcap of tea or soda seemed childish when she had a good bottle of wine in the fridge and someone to share it with. She stepped away from him long enough to retrieve the bottle and open it, pouring generous amounts of the Shiraz into the goblets. "Here you go." She offered him one of the glasses.

Thanos accepted it with a smile, and then when she had her glass in hand, raised it. “A toast.”

“To what?” Ari tried to hide her pleasure at his words. No man had ever toasted her before, and she felt certain before she heard him speak that he’d be offering a toast to her, or to them. Either way it would be horribly romantic and wonderful.

“To you. To us. To today.” Gently, he clinked his glass with hers.

“To us.” Ari sipped. “Thank you.” She gestured to the living room. “Shall we relax?”

“After you.” Thanos motioned for her to precede him, and Ari did, trying not to feel self-conscious. After the excitement on the beach, her leg ached. She sat on the couch, resting her foot on an ottoman, and set her drink on the table next to her. She quickly tapped the stereo’s remote and soft jazz filled the air. The tones reminded her of their first date and how it ended.

Thanos sat beside her, his arm stretched along the back of the couch. Occasionally he’d brush the back of her neck or her shoulder with his fingers, and Ari fought the shiver darting through her at his touch. He glanced at her leg. “Is it hurting?”

Ari fought a grimace. She hadn’t wanted him to notice, though as a medical doctor, he probably saw her slight limp. “Yeah, a bit.”

“Where does it hurt?” He set his drink on the other end table, then knelt next to the ottoman.

“My knee and thigh. My lower body was pretty banged up in the accident.”

Thanos slid the skirt up to her waist, baring her leg. In the light, the white scars crisscrossed her leg and thigh, working up toward her hip. “You were pinned in the car, weren’t you?”

Ari nodded, not wanting to remember that horrific night.

“It’s okay.” Lightly, he caressed her skin, working with the muscle. “Sometimes things don’t ever come back one hundred percent like they were. But I certainly couldn’t tell. Though if I pushed you, I hope you would have said something.”

Ari caught his gaze, and the concern there nearly took her breath away. His tender fingers traced a path from her knee to her hip and back again, stopping only at the edge of the scars and the purple swimsuit she still wore. “It’s okay,” she said again, then wondered why. “I push myself harder than you will, I suppose.” She gave him a wry grin and he nodded. She sensed he understood.

“I think you need someone to pamper you.” Leaning over, he followed a path with his lips that his fingers had taken, starting in the center of her knee and working up her thigh.

Her pussy tightened. Her breathing hitched.

Thanos paused where her thigh met her hip, swiped the crease with his tongue, then started back down again. With his hands on either side of her thigh he massaged the underside as he kissed and nibbled the top.

Ari leaned against the cushions. Her legs parted as he concentrated on the one spot, the stubborn ache forgotten. Gentle rubs and soft kisses combined to relax her the way no massage ever could. She wanted to lay back and let Thanos devour her. Surely that close to her pussy he could feel the heat, smell the rush of arousal that brought dewy moisture to her sex. If he did, he said nothing. She didn’t even dare to glance down at his trousers, not wanting to see how touching her affected him. Then, she’d want more.

At last he sat back on his heels and stared at her, eyes dark with desire. Ari licked her lips. She wanted to kiss him so bad she ached with it, but knew once her lips touched his she wouldn’t be content with just a kiss. No, she’d want it all.

“Why don’t we retire to the bedroom?” Her own boldness shocked her. “That way I can stretch out. It will make my knee feel better.”



Thanos traced the contours of her knee. “I don’t think you’ll be worrying about your knee when I’m done with you.” He rose to his feet and bent over her. “Here, wrap your arms around my neck.”

“I can walk,” she started to protest, then reached for him. After all, how often was it that a handsome man offered to carry her off to bed? Not damn often, that was for sure. Thanos slid his arms beneath her and cradled her against his chest.

Ari leaned her head against him, listening to the beat of his heart. It lulled her, just as his long strides brought her closer to the bedroom. At last, he brought her to her bed and laid her down, then quickly removed her shirt and skirt. She lay there in her purple one-piece suit and felt more exposed than if she’d been naked. The spandex clung to every curve, lifting her breasts, and drawing the attention to the flare of her hips. Reaching up, she slid a strap from her shoulder.

Thanos’s eyes widened. He quickly pulled off his shirt.

She drank in the sight of his bare chest with its mat of hair narrowing down to his belt. The hard planes drew her attention. Rising up on an elbow, she reached for him with the desire to caress each dip and hollow with her fingers.

Closing his fingers around her wrist, he pulled her hand away. “Not yet.” He knelt on the bed and turned his attention back to her legs.

Ari leaned back against the plush pillows as he kissed her knees. Both of them. With a gentle touch he lifted her leg and lavished attention on the sensitive hollows behind her knees. A bolt of arousal shot through her. She bit her lip, not wanting to cry out as he laved her with his tongue. Quick nibbles along her calf brought him to her feet, where he kissed each toe, before taking her foot in his big hands and began to massage.

Oh, it felt heavenly when he rolled her ankle, first one way then the next, before applying pressure to just the perfect places. Boneless, she lay against the bed, wanting him to touch her more intimately, yet not wanting the massage to end. She moaned as he worked

his way back up her calves, carefully kneading taut muscle, and softened his touch around her knees. Not even the massage therapist her doctor recommended made her feel this good.

He licked and nibbled all the way to the edge of the suit, then reached for her hand. He mirrored his actions with her fingers and arms, working the muscles until all tension seeped from her body. She couldn't restrain her soft sounds of pleasure, and against her skin, she felt Thanos's smile.

"You're wonderful, you know that?" she asked as he made his way up her arm to her shoulder.

Thanos kissed where her neck met her shoulder, then began to work his way to her earlobe.

Ari lay there, her entire body a mass of sensation. Fully relaxed from the massage, yet aching for more. Her nipples pebbled, clearly visible through the thin swimsuit material. Her pussy ached. She wished he'd kiss her there, lave her clit and labia with his talented tongue.

He drew her earlobe into his mouth and suckled.

Ari reached for him. She clenched her hands on his shoulders, clinging to him as if he were her anchor. His long legs tangled with hers, and the feel of his hair-roughed skin against her own only enhanced her pleasure. He was so masculine, so much like her dream, that it was too easy to close her eyes and imagine it was her dream lover instead of Thanos. Her eyes flew open. No, she wanted to know it was Thanos making love to her, because God help her, she was making love to him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thanos felt the moment Ari surrendered to him. Only then did he splay his hand on her stomach and marvel at the fluttering of muscles beneath his palm. He slid his hand up to cup her breast, loving the full weight. Her nipple pressed against him, diamond-hard, and he smiled against her skin. He loved the fact he brought her to such a ready state of arousal, and

in his mind, he called the mortals foolish for not seeing beyond her exterior to her inner beauty. For Ari was a most beautiful woman.

He exhaled, following her neck down to the shoulder straps of her suit. His cock jerked, confined behind boxer briefs and shorts. He ignored it. With Ari lying on the bed so sweet and responsive, he wanted to savor her.

Light licks and nibbles brought him along the slender column of her neck. A quick slide and her swimsuit strap slid off her shoulder. He laved the exposed skin with his tongue before dragging the material down. Ari shuddered beneath him. Her fingers clenched on his back; her thighs parting in silent invitation. He skimmed his teeth over her covered breast to wrap his lips around a turgid nipple.

Ari moaned.

The sound shot straight through him as he sucked on her tender flesh. Raising his head, he slid the strap off her other shoulder, then pulled the front of the suit down to free her breasts. He smiled at the invitation of those rounded globes with their dusky, pointed nipples. He licked one, drawing a gasp from Ari, before settling his lips around the same nipple and sucking. With teeth and tongue he teased her.

Ari arched her hips against him, and he fought against the urge to strip her and fuck her right there. The orange sunset cast rays of light through her bedroom windows, the lace curtains filtering it to a gauzy glow across her body. He loved her in this light, where her flesh became shadows and hollows. The thin white lines of her scars were still visible, but as he drew his tongue across a wide scar between her breasts to make it to her other nipple, he accepted them as part of her. Her scars did nothing to detract from her body. As he drew her other nipple into his mouth and sucked hard enough to hollow his cheeks, he hoped she believed it.

He skimmed his fingers along her sides, up and down, in tantalizing strokes that drew closer and closer to her pussy. A quick caress along her inner thigh, and he felt her heat. At

last, he drew his fingers past her suit to her plump folds. Dewy moisture coated his skin. Her warm, tight heat beckoned him, and he had to slide a finger inside to sample her.

Ari moaned and clenched her fingers on his shoulders.

Thanos brushed a knuckle across her clit, loving the way she threatened to come apart in his arms. Tiny quivers darted through her thighs, and against his fingers, her vaginal muscles contracted. He dipped a finger inside.

A quick cry when he brushed his finger against her g-spot, then shudders ravaged her frame as she orgasmed. “Oh, God, Thanos,” she moaned. He plunged two fingers inside her, and felt her come from the inside. Her panting breaths, clenching fingers, even the way she arched her breasts against his lips, all of it hardened his cock to the point where he had to be inside her or he would burst.

But damn it, he was a god. He had control. Pulling away, he slid the suit off her body and dropped it beside the bed. His cock begged to be free, but not yet. One touch against her skin, and he might spill himself like an untrained teenager. No, this was for her, not him.

Thanos worked his way up her body until he settled his lips against her labia. A swipe of his tongue made her moan again, and soon he delved inside and swirled his tongue around her clit. Her fingers tangled in his hair, pulling him closer. He felt her desire in the way her thighs pressed against his face and held him to her. Her husky breathing and low moans as he speared her with a pointed tongue only made him want her more.

“Yes,” she moaned. “Yes!”

He fucked her with his mouth. The desire to feel her come apart against his lips drove him. Balls tightening against his body, he cupped his hands under her ass and tilted her closer. He wanted to give her this, had to give her this. No mortal before or since, he suspected, needed his healing touch the way Ari did. Her muscles rippled against his lips and tongue. A tiny nibble on her clit, and her low moan told him she was close to coming.

“Please,” Ari whimpered. “I want you inside me.”

Her pleading words undid the last of his control. He pulled away amid her soft whimpers long enough to shed shorts and underwear, then crawled back over her.

Eagerly, Ari parted her legs, tilting her hips so her wet pussy dragged across the head of his cock. Thanos bit back a groan. He held himself poised over her, his cockhead just breaching her folds. Leaning forward, he captured her lips in a bruising kiss. Ari returned his kiss with ardor, her tongue stroking along the length of his. Then, he plunged inside.

Her pussy fisting around him shred the last of his control. He thrust into her, sinking deep into her heat. Ari met him, her body straining toward his as he pulled back, then surged forward once more. She clamped her hands on his ass, her fingers digging into his flesh. He couldn't help himself, not when her pussy fit his cock like a glove, and she gave everything to him.

The wet sounds of sex filled the room, the tang of desire on the air. Thanos drank it all in, even as he continued to kiss Ari, drinking in her as well. The slap of bodies surrounded them, and soon, too soon, she crested beneath him, fingers digging into his butt cheeks, pussy rippling around his cock. She tore her lips from his and cried out, body arched like a bowstring beneath him.

Thanos held himself still, feeling her pussy milking his cock. He wanted to remember this moment forever. Then, his own desire overrode him and he thrust inside her once more. She met him, eager to climb toward orgasm again. One stroke. Then another. Thanos feared he wouldn't take her with him when he went. He shifted angles, reaching between her legs to find her clit. Rubbing it in his fingers, the first tremors began deep inside her.

With a groan, Thanos thrust again. He stiffened as his orgasm raced from the base of his spine. His body shook, yet he could do nothing but press his cock as deep inside her as it would go. His body pumped, and looking down at Ari, he'd never felt as complete in his life as he did in that moment.

After long moments he rolled to the side, pulling her against him. She murmured and snuggled. He stroked her hair, and for long moments just held her.

## Chapter Five

Memories of a weekend spent in Thanos's arms made the week pass quickly, and as she stood near the French doors at a lavish party, she wondered if she'd truly known the world in which he lived. He looked elegant in a tuxedo, the obviously tailored cut emphasizing his wide shoulders and narrow waist. That she intimately knew each muscle hidden beneath the expensive fabric heightened his attractiveness in her eyes.

He'd convinced her to wear what she called a "pre-accident" dress. He'd happened to see the strappy red number in her closet when she'd dressed early last Sunday morning. Wearing three-inch heels she knew she'd pay for in the morning, and showing a generous amount of skin, she found, for the first time, she forgot about her scars. One look at the heat in Thanos's gaze as she modeled it for him was enough to tell her she was a desirable woman.

She sipped the last of her champagne, and then placed the flute on a passing waiter's tray. Several medical colleagues had cornered Thanos, whisking him away into the corner. Not wanting to intrude, she'd told him she could fend for herself. A hand on her waist made her turn.

Thanos looked down at her, his gaze caressing her from head to toe. “I’m sorry they took me away from you. Hospital politics can be a maze of intrigue sometimes. But let’s not talk work even if you were admiring those floral arrangements,” he said with a grin.

She blushed, because the floral designer in her saw the graceful sweep of color, the arch of a lily or a spray of greenery to accent the entire arrangement.

“Let’s dance.” Gracefully, he steered her into the cleared area where several couples danced cheek to cheek. A quartet played smoky jazz tunes. Thanos pulled her into his arms, and Ari nestled against his strong frame. With one hand clasped with hers and the other on her hip, he swayed in time to the music.

A part of her wished he’d take her dancing more often. He led effortlessly, as if he’d danced many times. Before her accident, she’d loved to dance, and the love hadn’t left. Being in Thanos’s arms made her think of the nights she used to go out to the clubs just for the sheer joy of dancing. She wanted that again, only with her handsome doctor on her arm.

The music changed, slowing into a number that made her think of tangled legs and silk sheets. The beat throbbed low in her body. Against her stomach, the ridge of Thanos’s cock pressed against her. He seemed unaffected by his arousal, while she wanted to wiggle in delight. Instead, his hand dipped to the small of her back, his fingers just touching her buttocks. The back of her dress dipped low, nearly to the base of her spine, with tiny straps crisscrossing her exposed flesh. Where he touched her skin, she burned.

“Glad I invited you?” Thanos asked. His lips hovered close to her ear, so close she felt his warm breath.

“Very glad,” she said as she pressed her head against his shoulder.

The song ended and the band announced a ten-minute break. Reluctantly, Thanos stepped away and steered her from the dance floor. He found a plush chair sitting out of the way and he directed her toward it. “Sit,” he said. “Your feet must be killing you.”



Ari shook her head. She'd forgotten all about the slight ache in the arch of her foot and the warning twinge in her knee. Now that Thanos mentioned it, the pain returned. She refused to give in to it. "I'm fine, thank you."

"If you're sure?"

His solicitous manner warmed her. "I'm fine, thank you." She saw a group of his medical colleagues speaking to someone. "Why don't you introduce me to your colleagues?"

"I'd be happy to, but don't say I didn't warn you. Shop talk will bore you to tears."

"If I'm bored to tears, at least it's with you." Wrapping her arm in his, she steered him toward the colleagues he'd spoken to earlier.

True to his word Thanos introduced her. She smiled and nodded, recognizing a few of the names from charity functions around the city. In person, the men spoke kindly to her, and soon caught Thanos up in a conversation about the board at the hospital. Like he said, the conversation bored her to tears.

She kept a smile on her face until she could gracefully slip away under the guise of answering the call of nature. While the men's wives tried to be sociable, she had seen the pity in their eyes and the speculation. Ari hurried into the ladies room intending to freshen up. She slipped into one of the stalls for privacy.

"Did you see her?" the whisper on the other side of the stall said.

"You mean the scarred woman in the red dress? Yeah. If I looked like that I wouldn't allow myself out in public. Yikes!" a younger voice said a few stalls down.

Ari sat on the toilet, horrified. Quickly, she tucked her feet up, not wanting the women to know their private gossip session had been interrupted. Ari swallowed hard. She should stand up, announce that she was in here, but a morbid curiosity kept her quiet.

"She showed way too much skin for a handicapped person."

"Yeah. I don't know how Thanos could stand to be around her. He usually has better taste in women."

Ari pressed her knuckles to her lips, holding back a choked-off sob. Thanos. He acted so nice, so supportive of her. Deep inside, did he want to find a more beautiful woman? Was he lying when he told her she was beautiful? Ari squeezed her eyes closed. A vise of pain constricted around her chest. She had to leave. Get out of here. Flee. She was stupid to think she could ever pass in such a crowd.

The toilets flushed in near-unison and the two women left. Water ran, and a few moments later she sat alone in the bathroom.

Ari sucked in a ragged breath. After the years of therapy, she supposed she should be used to the remarks. Instead, they cut just as the patronizing looks on the nurses' faces had after her first surgery. Breathing deeply, Ari slid her feet down to the floor. She stood, wobbling on her high heels and stepped out of the stall. She hadn't even needed to go in there, except to be alone. She should have sat on one of the couches outside. She hadn't, and now she couldn't pretend she hadn't heard the hurtful remarks.

Luckily her makeup wasn't damaged badly, and she fixed the tiny smudges in the mirror. Her heart slowed to a more normal pace, and the grief ebbed. Those women were catty and vindictive. They knew nothing. Thanos acted just like her dream man. Surely it was for a reason, and not to hurt her.

She laughed at her own foolishness. If she broke down when anyone said bad things about her scars, she'd spend her entire life crying. No, those women were stupid, and probably ugly. Thanos cared for her. His actions showed it, and they were just jealous. Filled with newfound courage, Ari walked out of the room and back into the party.

A waiter came by and she grabbed a second, and her last, flute of champagne. She sipped it, scanning the crowd for Thanos. The doctors seemed to have dissipated, though she hadn't been gone long. She found two of the couples on the dance floor, the third chatting with someone by the dessert table. Again, she scanned the room for any sign of Thanos.

Movement in the corner, near two large potted palms caught her attention. Ari stared, horrified, as she watched Thanos whirl back toward a petite blonde in a killer dress. The woman's pale breasts nearly spilled from the azure fabric, and the four-inch heels she wore had "fuck me" written all over them. Ari's stomach flip-flopped.

Thanos grabbed the woman's wrist. He pulled her to him.

Ari looked away. It was true. All the horrible things those women said. They were true. Her hand opened. The champagne flute fell to the floor. Ari whirled, knocking into a man and his companion on her way out. The French doors led outside, away from here. Glass shattered on the floor with a crash. The room quieted.

Ari fled.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thanos fought to rein in his temper. "I'm not interested," he snapped. He grabbed the woman's wrist, intending to toss her ass onto the couch behind them. Horrified, he watched Ari's face crumple. Her hand opened and the glass she held fell toward the ground.

Thanos yanked his sleeve out of the woman's hand. "Excuse me," he growled. One step, two, then he was free and racing across the floor. He had to get to Ari, had to tell her she hadn't seen what she thought she had seen.

Shocked faces surrounded him. He'd made a scene at the party and damn it, he didn't care. Ahead of him, the doors slammed. Thanos increased his stride, wanting to catch up with her. His mortal form seemed limiting, and for one moment, he thought about abandoning it for his god form. After all, then he'd be all powerful, all knowing, and he could show her he was the man from her dream, the one meant to love her forever. His heart clenched. Dear gods above, what if he lost Ari?

\* \* \* \* \*

The cool night air surrounded her in a comfortable embrace. Ari ended up in a garden. She stumbled, pitching herself against a marble bench. She caught herself, the stone edges of the bench biting into the palms of her hands. Her flesh stung, and she felt the first drops of blood welling in the cuts.

Ari sat long enough to yank her expensive heels from her feet. Chucking them into the bushes, she rose to her feet and hurried down the smooth, flagstone path away from the house. Tears ran unchecked down her cheeks. With the back of her hand, she wiped them away, furious at herself for crying. Now in addition to being scarred she had raccoon eyes. At last she sank down onto a bench and buried her head in her hands. High bushes surrounded her, shielding her from view. Back toward the way she'd come, she heard a door slam. Thanos, she wondered, then shook her head. He wouldn't come for her. He was too busy with that floozy.

How long she sat there, tears running unchecked down her cheeks she didn't know. Five minutes? Ten? An eternity, it seemed, before a strong arm curved around her shoulders. Thanos's scent surrounded her, and Ari leaned into it. He wrapped his arms around her, one hand flat against the back of her head, the other on her bare back. Slowly, he stroked her, caressed her, until she snuggled against his broad chest. "I'm sorry, baby. That wasn't what you think," he said.

Ari nodded against his chest. How gullible would she be, she wondered, if she simply believed him? She'd only seen a few seconds of interaction between him and the blonde. She had nothing to base her accusations on, except the cruel words of two women in the bathroom and her own insecurities. Ari sniffed. She started to pull away, aware she'd probably smudged his tuxedo with her makeup.

Thanos kept her pressed close to him. He shifted so his body cradled hers. All his strength, his will, all of it transferred to her. Leaning against him, Ari wondered how she could be so foolish as to doubt him. Still, the dress, the party, it wasn't her scene. She swallowed hard and licked her lips. "Take me home, Thanos. I don't belong in your world."

“Oh, Ari. I’m so sorry,” he whispered against her hair. “You belong here as much as anyone.”

“But I made a scene and broke a glass.”

Thanos’s harsh bark of laughter hardly reassured her. “There’s been worse done at these parties and worse may happen tonight. I’m sorry you had to witness what you did. That was Amber, the hostess’s daughter. I was trying to disentangle her from me when you walked back into the room. She’s a…”

“Bitch?” Ari offered in a tiny voice.

“Yeah, she’s a bitch.” Against her hair, she felt his smile. “You know I’d never do anything to hurt you.”

The women’s words haunted her. “Not when you usually come to these parties with more beautiful women than me? Not when you could have anyone?” Ari sighed and leaned away. Reluctantly, he let her go, his fingers skimming over her exposed flesh. She shivered and hoped he thought it only from a chill breeze. It would be best if she stepped away from him, quietly, and with dignity. She’d seen what could happen. If she kept comparing herself to all the other women who might throw themselves at him, Thanos could be a white knight, and she’d still get hurt. She ached to put some space between them.

“Who has been feeding you tales?” Lightly he caressed her chin, running the pad of his thumb over her lower lip.

Ari ached to touch it with the tip of her tongue and draw it into her mouth, suckling gently. “I heard.” She turned away, not wanting to meet his searching gaze.

“From who? I want to know, Ari. If anyone said anything to hurt you, I want to know about it. Because whatever they said, it’s wrong.” An aura of controlled power surrounded him, of an anger that she didn’t want to provoke.

“Even they said you usually come to this kind of party with women far more beautiful than I. Come on, Thanos. You’re gorgeous. You’re a rich, handsome doctor, and you could

have anyone, probably even supermodels. I don't buy it. So you consulted on my case and now, months after my treatment ended, you came to meet me? You seduce me with beautiful words and beautiful flowers, even if I did arrange them myself, and I'm supposed to believe you." Ari rose to her feet, suddenly wishing she hadn't tossed away her shoes. "Things like that don't happen to girls like me."

Thanos stood beside her. "And what is supposed to happen to a 'girl like you?' I can't make you believe anything, but how I wish I could." He expelled a harsh breath. "I'll take you home, Ari, but this isn't done. Not by a long shot."

Ari wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly chilled by the night and his words.

Thanos took off his coat and wrapped it around her shoulders. "Come on." He glanced down at her bare feet. "Where are your shoes?"

Ari pointed back toward the bushes near the house.

"Wait here. I'll get them." Without giving her a chance to say anything further he turned and went in search of her heels.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thanos battled frustration as he scanned the hedges near the house for her red heels. As a god, he should be able to fix Ari, to make her believe he'd do nothing to hurt her. The fact she even thought he might have had a relationship with Amber sickened him. What kind of men was she used to? If he found them, he'd smite them, regardless of the rules against such blatant uses of power.

A flash of red caught his eye. He retrieved the shoes, brushing leaves and dirt from the expensive leather. Turning, he returned to Ari. The sight of her standing there in that scrumptious dress, her makeup running from her tears, tugged at his heart. If she wanted to go home he'd take her, but he'd be damned before he let her run out of his life. He loved her.

Thanos stopped. In all his years as a god, thousands of petitioners, goddesses and muses alike, and he'd finally found a woman to love -- a mortal woman. His breath left his lungs.

Ari turned to look at him. The defeat in her eyes tore at him like a knife to the gut. Walking forward, he held out her shoes. "Your shoes, my lady." He knelt and offered them to her like the prince to Cinderella.

Tears welled in Ari's eyes. She sat, then held out her foot. Her lower lip trembled, and he longed to kiss away the sorrow on her face.

Slowly, Thanos replaced her shoes, gently fastening the straps and buckles around her feet. He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her ankles, then rose to his feet and offered her his hand.

Ari wrapped her fingers around his, not saying a word. She walked beside him as he led her out to the valet for the car. Occasionally she'd sniff or hiccup, but all other traces of sadness, aside from her smeared makeup, were gone. A wall surrounded her. Thanos didn't like it. He glanced at the starry sky above, wishing for a moment he could confide in his celestial family. However, whenever he came to the mortal plane he severed all ties with them.

If the valet noticed Ari's smeared makeup or his early departure he said nothing. Instead, he had Thanos's Mercedes brought around. Thanos helped Ari into the car, then walked around to the driver's side. He generously tipped the man and drove away.

Ari remained mute. Risking a glance at her, Thanos wanted to say something, anything that would bring life back into her features. He hated her stony glare. She stared out the window, an air of despair surrounding her. For the first time in his immortal life, he didn't know what to say. He would have barked laughter if he didn't think it would further distance Ari from him. He, a healing god, had no idea how to cure Ari's pain. With a heavy sigh he pulled in front of her house.

“We’re here.” He laid a hand on her shoulder. “I really would like to see you again.” He stroked her cheek, a gentle caress that had her turning into his touch. His heart leapt. She still wanted him. Her eyelids fluttered closed as he touched her, tracing the high cheekbones and down to her stubborn chin. She opened her eyes and gazed at him.

“I’ll -- I’ll call you.” Before he had a chance to respond, she opened the door, clutched her small purse, and hurried up to her house.

Thanos opened the door, his long strides carrying him across her yard. He stopped behind her, but she dashed inside, the door slamming in his face.

Thanos stood there in shock. He stared at the closed door, wishing he could see beyond it to the woman inside. Listening, he heard her walk away from the door, away from him. His heart clenched. Gods above, he loved her. Couldn’t she see that?

As he turned away, he debated about going back to the party. He could find Amber and tell her how she’d royally fucked things up this time with her antics. In the past, he’d dismissed her cloying tactics, usually by directing her to more eligible bachelors. He’d only held this mortal form for a couple of years, but his knowledge of such women went back centuries. And whoever’s vicious words Ari had heard, if he ever got his hands on them... Gritting his teeth, Thanos returned to his car. He slid behind the wheel, closed the door, and drove away into the night.

Somehow, someday, he’d find a way to breach Ari’s defenses and get her to admit she loved him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ari listened to the soft hum of the Mercedes as Thanos drove away and out of her life. That’s what she wanted, right? Then why did she have this dream he’d pound open the door, rush inside, and confess his undying love? Ari’s hoarse laughter filled the room. Yeah, after the way she’d treated him she’d be lucky if he answered the phone. If she called.



The tears she'd held at bay emerged in a flood. Reaching behind her, she unzipped her dress, banishing the thoughts she'd had earlier in the evening of Thanos doing it for her. She slid the straps off her shoulders and the dress fell in a puddle on the floor. She stepped out of it, then removed her shoes, tossing them away. She rushed into the bathroom where she scrubbed the makeup off her face. Now instead of raccoon-eyes, they were red from crying. She glanced down at the scars covering her skin, and a fresh round of tears filled her eyes. She was doing the right thing. Eventually Thanos would tire of her and end up with some beautiful woman who wasn't afraid to show off her body. With a heavy sigh, she padded on stocking-clad feet into the bedroom. She fell into bed and wished it didn't hurt so much.

## Chapter Six

The next morning brought only a lingering headache from too much champagne and red, itchy eyes from crying too much. Ari sat up in bed and reached for the box of tissues on her nightstand. After blowing her nose, she stared out the window at the bright, sunshine-filled day. She only wished her inner world was as bright as the day outside. Pursing her lips, she released a huge sigh.

She rose to her feet and hobbled into the bathroom. Her ankles and hips hurt after wearing heels last night, and she vowed never to wear the torturing shoes again. A quick shower later, she dressed in her baggiest, ugliest sweats, and slumped on the couch. Nothing sparked her interest. Working in her flower gardens would only inflict more pain on her already strained muscles. Nothing on television looked remotely interesting, and the last thing she wanted to do was read a book full of happy endings she'd never have.

Her eyes fell on a small personal altar containing photographs and some seashells she'd purchased in Greece. The happy memories of that time battled with the heartbreak of last night. Swallowing hard, she picked up the remote control for her stereo and turned it on. Immediately, the sound of waves crashing against the shore filled her living room. Leaning back on the couch, Ari closed her eyes and let the sounds wash over her.

The temple. Her dream. Deep in her heart, Ari knew if she hadn't gone to Greece and fallen asleep in the temple, she wouldn't have had the strength of will to go out with Thanos. She might have thanked him for the flowers, for his attention, then gently, but permanently extracted him from her life. It might have been easier.

Rising to her feet, she crossed the space between her and the altar to kneel before it. Ari picked up a tiny piece of pottery she'd purchased in the same city as the temple she'd visited. Rubbing her hands over the soft surface, she held it against her breast. She didn't stop the tears filling her eyes.

"I should know better." Ari hiccupped on a sob. "He was only a dream. A man like that can't really exist. I was foolish to believe it might be more."

*Maybe he wasn't a man. Maybe he was one of the Greek gods.* Hysterical laughter bubbled up from her throat. She laughed so hard tears ran down her cheeks. The Greek gods were myths, legends, not beings come to life. Even though she dreamed about a Greek man seducing her didn't mean he was a god, and most certainly didn't mean it was Thanos.

She set the pottery back on the altar and curled up on the plush carpet. Emotional weariness tugged at her and pulled her into a deep sleep.

"My love, I'm sorry." The Greek man from her dream appeared before her, looking more like Thanos than ever before. He sat on a bench, wearing a white toga belted at the waist with a gold cord. A crown of fig leaves sat in his hair like the ones she'd seen on statues of gods, and leather sandals covered his feet and laced up his calves. He reached for her, twining his fingers with hers, and pulled her down to the marble bench beside him. With his thumb, he brushed away a tear.

Ari swallowed hard. "I'm dreaming. You're not real." She started to back away.

"How do you know I'm not real?" His deep voice rumbled over her, soothing frayed nerve endings.

She wanted to curl up against him and never emerge into the real world. Staying here with this fabrication would be so much preferable. “I know. I fell asleep in my living room.” She reached up and caressed his forehead, pausing to finger a leaf in his crown. “You look like someone out of a history book.”

“What if I am?” He grinned.

Ari looked at him, completely confused. He acted like Thanos, looked like Thanos, talked like Thanos, but Thanos couldn't be in her dream with her, could he? She frowned and the image faded away.

Ari woke on her living room floor. She blinked, taking in the familiar surroundings. Could her dream have been real? Could it really be Thanos? She bit back mocking laughter. She glanced at the phone, then back at the altar. An urgent need to call Thanos filled her. She squeezed her eyes closed and tried to eradicate memories of last night from her mind. No, she wouldn't call him. Not yet.

\* \* \* \* \*

Stripped down to his briefs, Thanos sat on his couch. For a moment, Ari had pulled him into her dream, and then she had awakened. He stared at the wall, at a painting done for him by a talented young artist. An onyx sphere sat on a gold stand below the painting. Tiny flecks of gold shone in the sphere's surface. Thanos rose to his feet.

He crossed the room to the sphere and lifted it from the stand. The stone glowed warm in his grip. Sighing, he turned it around and around. To return to his god form all he had to do was concentrate on the sphere. It would be so easy to do it, to leave this world and leave Ari to her own devices.

His gut twisted. Pain speared his heart. No, he wouldn't do that. He loved her. And deep inside, he felt pretty certain she loved him. The party spooked her. That was all.

Replacing the sphere, Thanos paced his living room. Ari had shoved him out of her dream. He appeared to her as he truly was, a god, and she'd dismissed it. Called it crazy. He

felt the disbelief radiating from her. How would she feel if he showed up on her doorstep and announced it to her face? Would she shove him away then?

The sound of sobs reached his ears. Horrible, gut-wrenching sobs of a heart breaking, and Thanos knew to whom they belonged. Ari. He pressed his fist to his chest, tuning in on her sadness. It called to him. Swallowing hard, he stepped away. In his mind's eye he saw her slumped before a shelf containing artifacts from his home country. Tear stains marred her face, her eyes red-rimmed with sorrow. Idly, she traced a scar running along her arm. A palatable aura of despair surrounded her. Her lips moved, though he couldn't hear what she said.

He longed to go to her. She rose to her feet, wobbling slightly, and went back to the couch, curling up with an afghan over her shoulders. Grabbing the remote, she flipped through the channels, then turned the television off. She picked up a book, looked at it, and put it back on the shelf. Her gaze returned to the small altar.

At last, she stood and left the room, severing the connection.

Thanos stormed into the bedroom. He tossed on clothing, jeans and a shirt, not caring if he looked handsome or debonair. Ari needed him. That simple fact thrummed through his veins, drove him onward, so he ran down the hall to the elevator, his car keys tucked into his hip pocket. The elevator took too long. At last it stopped in the parking garage and he raced to his car. *I'm coming, Ari. And then you'll know how much I love you. I won't let you get away ever again.*

Thanos pulled into the driveway and parked behind Ari's compact car. He smiled as he blocked her in. Just one more way she wouldn't be able to avoid him. Power crackled through him, and he pushed it away. He wanted to approach her as a man.

Thanos stalked across the front yard, his long strides quickly carrying him to her front door. He opened the screen door and listened. Hearing nothing, he tried the doorknob.

Unlocked. Without knocking, he opened the door a little bit, listening for any noises coming from the inside. When he heard nothing, he entered.

The soft strains of a radio filtered in sounding as if they'd come from the backyard. Thanos moved through the house, looking for Ari. He saw her through the patio doors, bent over a flowerbed, wrist-deep working the soil with a hand trowel. A fierce expression covered her face. Thanos fought against the laughter bubbling in his throat.

He stepped outside.

Ari looked up. She sat back on her heels, wincing a bit and rubbing her hip. Even that slight pain moved him, and he wanted to scoop her into his arms and carry her into the house. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

Reaching out, he brushed a smudge of dirt from her cheek. "I couldn't stay away." He gathered her hands in his and held them tightly. "I can't stand to see you hurting, Ari. And if I did anything to cause such pain, I'd tear out my heart and offer it to you on a platter. Not just any woman could capture the heart of a god."

Ari stared at him. "Did you say a god?" Her dreams, both of them, came crashing into her memory. "Don't joke with me. Not now."

He had to be joking, had to be humoring her. But how could he have known about her dreams? To have dreamt about him before she met him. It made no sense.

Thanos swallowed hard.

Her eyes followed the movement of his Adam's apple, remembering following the same path with her tongue.

"I'm not joking," Thanos said. He dropped to one knee and held out his hand.

She took it, wrapping her fingers around him and clinging as if he were a lifeline.

"I come to you and give you my true name. I am the god Asclepius," Thanos said.

Ari looked at him through the shimmer of unshed tears. A bright halo of light surrounded him. For one moment he indeed looked like a god. Then she blinked, and the light faded.

“The Greek god of healing,” she said. She glanced at their clasped hands, then looked at her bare arms with their scars. “I don’t understand. You can’t be a god. The ancient deities are just myths. Aren’t they?” She started to pull away, afraid he would impart some horrible news.

“Every myth is real. We exist and because people believed in us, worshipped us, our myths became known. I am a god, and once I discovered you, I chose mortal form. I love you, Ari. I’ve loved you since you fell asleep in my temple back in Greece. I’ve loved you since I looked down from my life with the gods and saw a beautiful, strong, and wonderful woman battling the aftermath of a horrible trick of fate. I feel as if I love you forever, and I want to spend the rest of my life, our lives, together.”

Ari blinked away the tears shining in her eyes. Not tears of sorrow, but joy. A part of her struggled to believe Thanos’s words. In the end, it didn’t matter. Whether he was a god or not, she had a handsome, wonderful man who said he loved her. “My dream. You were the first man to make me feel loved for me, not out of pity, not for any other reason but me. When we were together I felt loved, cherished, safe. It doesn’t matter if you’re a god or not. I still love you.” Leaning forward she pressed her lips to his.

Thanos’s hands went around her waist, hauling her against his hard body. She sighed, opening her mouth to him, knowing she was exactly where she wanted to be -- in Thanos’s arms. She loved him. Her tongue stroked his, inviting him deeper into her mouth. With her hands, she caressed his back, his hair, the sides of his face, everywhere she could reach if only to convince herself he was real and not a dream.

She pulled away and sucked in a much needed breath of oxygen. “I love you, Thanos. In my dreams or in my backyard, I love you.” She pressed her head against his chest. “I can’t believe you’re here. I hoped. Do you know how much I wanted you to walk inside last night

and tell me how wrong I was?" She let the tears roll down her cheeks, cleansing her of her fears. Relief washed through her. "I thought I lost you forever." Her voice broke and she chuckled. "You're really a god?"

Thanos nodded, an answering grin crossing his face. "Apollo was my father. I could tell you stories." Merriment danced in his gaze. "But I won't. Not yet anyway. Right now I want to convince you that you're the only one for me." He stood, pulling Ari to her feet.

Her body tingled with the promise in Thanos's words. His strong arms pulled her against his body. Every hard muscle, every inch of flesh pressed against her. Through his jeans, she felt the pulse of his erection, the thick rod jutting against her stomach. His arms came around her, hands cupped on her ass, and he kissed her.

Not just any kiss, but a kiss of claiming. The first touch of his lips sent shivers through her body. Her nipples tightened. Moisture flooded her pussy. A sense of homecoming, so profound it nearly made her weep, filled her. Slowly, she twined her arms around him, pressing her hands against his broad, muscled back. Ari melted, pliant in his arms.

His tongue slid into her mouth, stroking and tasting. Ari gave herself to him. She drew him deeper, sucking gently on his tongue until a low moan bubbled from Thanos's throat. His fingers tightened on her ass and pulled her closer. Ari rubbed against him as sinuous as a cat. Her body ached. Even through their clothing she felt the friction of his chest against her sensitive nipples. Her pussy ached, softened, waiting for something that only Thanos could give her.

The need for air parted them, but only for a moment. Thanos nibbled her jaw, her cheek, her neck; anywhere he could reach, he rained tiny kisses. Ari wanted more. She tugged at his shirt, freeing it from his jeans, then slid her hands over his warm, smooth skin. Oh yes, she wanted to touch him, to feel his skin. Her hands roamed his flesh. Tugging on his shirt some more, she managed to lift it high enough to press her lips to his chest.



With her tongue, she circled a flat nipple before drawing it into her mouth. Her own nipples hardened even more in response. Thanos ripped his shirt over his head, throwing it behind them. Standing bare-chested in her yard, Ari didn't care if anyone saw. The fact someone might actually be watching them only made her want more. She nipped him gently, then licked and nibbled a path across his abdomen. In her dreams he'd taken the lead. Now, she wanted him begging and at her mercy. She dropped to her knees before him.

Thanos cupped the back of her head. "Baby, wait," he moaned, though he pressed her close against his hard cock.

Ari shook her head. "I want you," she said, sliding her hand around to cup his taut ass. Gently, she squeezed his buttocks, evoking an indrawn hiss from Thanos. She stroked him, running her hands over his hips, up his sides, then stroking the front of his fly with her knuckles. "I want this." She quickly unbuttoned his jeans and drew the zipper down.

His cock surged through the opening. The thin, cotton material of his bikini briefs kept him contained, and Ari stroked him through the red material. Slowly, she drew it down to reveal the plump, purple head of his cock. Ari licked him.

Thanos shuddered.

Ari grinned. She licked him again, wrapping her lips around him and laving the underside of the head with her tongue.

Thanos tunneled his fingers through her hair.

Power filled her. A sense of control so profound it shook her to the core raced through her body. Sitting back on her heels, Ari slid her lips down Thanos's cock until she had him buried as deep as he could go. She kissed him. She licked him. All the while, delighting in his tiny moans and the feel of his fingers clenching the back of her head. This was how she wanted him, now and always. She loved this man who looked like and claimed to be a Greek god and she wanted him to know.

Ari sucked harder wanting to feel his warm come slide down her throat. She reached between his legs to fondle his tightening balls. Her own arousal pounded through her body. Her pussy, slick with need, clenched, wanting to feel the hard length of him inside her. She forced herself to wait, stroking the sensitive skin just behind his balls. This time was for him.

“Ari,” he gasped an instant before his body stiffened.

She sucked harder, triumph filling her. He shouted his release and his cock shot warm streams into her mouth. Ari swallowed, loving the salty, sweet taste of him. The ache in her pussy intensified. She wanted all of him. In her mouth. In her cunt. She wanted Thanos any way she could get him.

Slowly, she pulled her lips away, licking the last of him. On shaky legs she rose.

Thanos pressed his forehead to hers, his half-hard cock still naked in the open air. “I want to fuck you.” He slid a hand beneath her shirt and cupped her breast, pinching the nipple.

Ari moaned. “Please,” she whimpered.

Thanos glanced around. “Not out here. I don’t want to share you with anyone.” A wicked glint filled his eyes and before she could speak, he fastened his pants, then hoisted her over his shoulder.

Ari stared at the delicious view of his taut ass while he carried her toward the house.

Once inside, Thanos didn’t let her go. Ari waited, his hand spread on her ass, holding her still. He didn’t stop until he tossed her onto the bed and pulled her clothes from her.

Ari propped herself on an elbow to watch Thanos as he stripped. “My very own Greek god,” she said, a huge grin on her face. “I’d compare you to the statue of David, but he doesn’t have anything on you.” Her gaze lingered on his cock, once more thick and long.

“You’re more beautiful than any goddess.” Thanos knelt on the side of the bed, then crawled toward her. “More beautiful.”

The love shining from his eyes nearly brought tears to her own. Watching him, Ari believed every word he said. She spread her legs, ready to welcome him into her body.

He avoided her pussy, though his hot gaze seemed riveted to her plump, pink folds. Instead, he stopped and kissed her ribs, licking with his tongue. It tickled, and Ari wiggled. Thanos chuckled against her skin, then nibbled a path to her breast. He sucked on her nipple, palming the other globe with his hand.

“Yes,” Ari hissed, head tilted back. She offered him her body, the heat pooling through her, begging for release. All her life she wanted to be loved, to be consumed by the flames of desire, and now, she was burning, yearning for the feel of his lips on her skin and his cock between her legs. If this was what love was, she didn’t want to ever let it -- or him -- go.

Her fingers tangled in his hair, holding him to her breast, her other hand sliding down his shoulder and arm. Muscles bunched beneath her touch. He nipped her lightly, then laved the wound with his tongue.

“Please,” she pleaded, arching her hips beneath him. “Fuck me, please.”

Thanos turned his attention to her other breast. He ate her slowly, little nibbles and kisses that had her writhing for release beneath him. It was as if he had all the time in the world to enjoy her body, and she burned beneath him. His hand slid from her breast over her stomach. He paused at the curls between her thighs, then stroked her pussy. Her juices coated his fingers.

Ari lifted her hips on a long moan. His digits slid easily into her, his thumb brushing her clit, two fingers sank deep inside her. He curled them, hitting her g-spot, and she shuddered.

“Come for me, Ari.”

Ari sucked in a breath, her entire body tightening. As if he commanded her flesh, tiny contractions fluttered through her pussy, building and deepening until she keened her release while she came apart under his fingers.

She lay there, panting, Thanos's fingers still deep inside her pussy. Ari reached for him as he moved over her. Bracing his hands on either side of her head, he shifted until he rested within the cradle of her thighs. His cock brushed her. He slid forward, until just the tip of him rested within her slick channel.

He kissed her, hard and hungry. "I love you, Ari." He surged inside her.

Ari groaned. "Oh God, I love you." He pulled back, then thrust once more. "And I'll love you even more if you keep doing that." She grabbed his ass and tightened her vaginal muscles around him.

Thanos grinned wickedly. "As you wish, my dear." He fucked her then, with long, sure strokes, each one deeper than the last.

Ari wrapped her legs around his hips, ankles locked behind him, and hung on for the ride. She met his thrust for thrust, pouring out her heart and soul into the movements. She kept her eyes open, not wanting to miss a single moment. The rapture on Thanos's face moved her, and she knew it mirrored her own pleasure. Higher and higher he took her until, like Icarus, it seemed they touched the sun.

Her release washed through her. She clung to him, the pleasure pounding through her body almost too much. Stars shone before her vision.

Above her, Thanos stiffened. With a guttural cry he came, releasing his seed into her body. For long moments they stayed that way, locked in an embrace. Thanos rolled to the side, taking Ari with him. Reaching up, he smoothed a strand of hair away from her forehead. "I love you," he said again. "I don't know how I made it all these years without you."

Ari smiled. "I love you, Thanos. Though it may take me a while to fully believe that you're a god."

He chuckled. "Then I'll just have to prove it, won't I?" His husky voice caressed her senses.

“Every day for the rest of our lives,” she said a moment before she kissed him hard and deep. She straddled him and leaned forward, brushing her breasts against his chest. As Ari kissed her, a sense of contentment filled her. Not only had she fulfilled her dream by going to Greece, but she had her very own god. It didn’t get much better than this.

Thanos slid his fingers between her legs, and she grinned. Unless he did that...and then she couldn’t think at all.

 THE END 

## Mary Winter

Mary commutes between her dream home near the Mark Twain national forest in Missouri, and her current residence in Iowa. She lives with a menagerie of animals including an opinionated horse and a cat who was a dog in past life. When not writing spicy tales of erotic romance, she enjoys writing science fiction and fantasy, spending time with her horse, and enjoying the outdoors. Lucky for her, her partner (hero) shares these same passions, and usually both of them can be found in their respective dens writing.