

Paranormal Mates Society: Loving Fury
Amelia Elias

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Dedication:

To the ladies of the Bat Cave, for snark above and beyond the call of duty.

Prologue

Fingers flew over the keyboard, each keystroke a digital chisel that chipped away at the final firewall separating him from the inner sanctum.

Ceyx grinned as the firewall gave in to the pressure, finally showing a weakness he could exploit. Slipping through, he typed a few careful commands. Passwords were no problem for him. He'd been doing this since computers had been created.

Ahh. Success.

Logged in as Administrator, Ceyx took a moment to scroll through the client list. Quite a variety, he mused, glancing at the profiles. Angels, demons, nymphs, werewolf - - with photos of both their forms -- and vampires, complete with artist sketches to compensate for the impossibility of photographs. Every type of mythological creature seemed to have a representative here.

Including a certain satyr who should really have known better than to get wasted and accept a dare.

Well, easy enough to fix it now. He scrolled through until he found his photo and "ad." Just reading it was enough to make him wince. Luckily, the hit counter at the bottom of the page registered 0001 -- only one person had viewed his profile, probably the agency's true administrator.

Breathing a silent sigh of relief, Ceyx selected the file and hit delete.

Error

Error

Unauthorized Command

Access Denied

Network Administrator Contacted

The screen went black. Ceyx swore aloud and backed out of the program, thinking fast. What possible detail had he overlooked? He'd never been caught hacking before, and he damn sure wasn't planning to ruin his perfect record tonight.

He paused, drumming his fingers on the table. Damn it! Failure just wasn't an option. Well, where one way into a program existed, there were usually more, and he knew how to find them. It didn't take long before he was back in the system.

All right, so he couldn't delete files. That left only one alternative.

He accessed the compatibility database, the system that matched couples according to shared interests, goals, and, in the case of weres and vampires, clan or species. Pulling up the algorithm took no time at all. He'd just tweak the system a bit so his name never came up.

Quickly scanning the options, he shook his head. This was so simple -- why on earth did anyone need a computer for this? Did it really take an algorithm to determine that vampires and river sprites were incompatible? That shared interests increased the probability of a successful date? That angels and trolls were unlikely to see eye-to-eye on major political issues -- or anything else?

For Loki's sake, he could do this kind of matchmaking in his sleep! The profiles were ridiculous too. Even his drunken attempt at a profile read better than these.

Holy shit -- was that a real *god* on here? He scanned the profile and shook his head in disbelief. Oh, how the mighty had fallen if a god needed help to get laid!

And with that thought, the familiar mischievous urge tickled his mind. His hands hovered over the keys, hesitating only a moment before beginning to type again.

It wasn't so bad, really -- he was just helping these poor, misguided fools to see how silly it was to leave such an important process in the hands of a stranger. Besides, if he was ever -- Loki forbid -- sent out on a date, he could quite honestly say that they had nothing in common. He'd be well within his rights to withdraw his profile and get a refund after such a disaster.

But first... the opportunity to mess with a few heads was just too tempting to pass up.

Save changes to profile?

Save.

Reset to default settings?

Accept.

New match alignment protocols?

Ceyx smiled as he keyed in the new parameters. Really, this was barely troublemaking at all. He was simply giving ParanormalMatesSociety.com a little help with their overly-simplistic matching system and helping a certain god realize the error of his ways.

Opposites attract, after all.

Chapter One

You've got a vibe!

I stared at the blinking message on my screen for a full minute, waiting for it to disappear or reveal itself as a figment of my imagination. Neither would surprise me.

The real thing, now... that would shock the hell out of me at this point.

It kept right on blinking.

Vibe! Vibe! Vibe!

It was almost enough to make a girl start singing the Beach Boys out loud.

Still, you can't blame me for my disbelief. It had been almost a month since I'd joined www.ParanormalMatesSociety.com -- at the most expensive level, no less -- and in all that time, I hadn't gotten a single iota of interest. No matter how many profiles I perused, how many vibes I sent out or e-mails I typed, one cold, hard fact kept slapping me right in the face.

No sane male wanted to date a Fury, and even the insane ones were wary.

Much as I hated it, I supposed I couldn't blame them. I am the Alekto, the Force of Natural Destruction -- the most obvious one of the three Erinyes, or in the modern translation, the Furies. My sisters and I don't exactly have a warm and friendly reputation. I've lost count of the eruptions, earthquakes, and floods I've engineered, and I've wrecked so many cities that it's not even special anymore.

Does that mean I'm doomed to never get laid throughout the rest of eternity?

The www.ParanormalMatesSociety.com thing was my last and best hope. The slogan grabbed my interest and pulled me in the first time I read it:

Welcome to Paranormal Mates Society, where finding the love of your life is supernatural, super easy.

Tired of squeamish humans passing you over because blood is your beverage of choice? Do you long to indulge in intimate moonlit jaunts with a potential Pet Smart Companion? Are your fins fed up with the goldfish bowl of dating? Did the devil make you give up on ever finding your soul mate? Long to soar to the heavens with the match of your dreams?

Fill out our in-depth entry form. Browse thousands of profiles from paranormals just like you! Make new friends -- find the immortal man or woman of your dreams with just one easy click.

Talk about exactly what I needed -- a service that could find a male who wouldn't run screaming the first time my hair hissed at him or dump me if I accidentally knocked his house down.

But after spending hours agonizing over my profile, begging one of my sisters to take a flattering picture of me and searching hundreds of profiles, I hadn't gotten a single response.

Until now.

That Vibe! Vibe! blinked at me and I couldn't stop myself from grinning. Someone, somewhere, was finally brave enough to talk to me! I clicked the button and pulled up the profile, biting my lip to keep from giggling with excitement.

"Aaron S.," I read aloud, savoring the name. He was a wind sprite -- I wasn't quite sure what that was, but it sounded good to me. I mean, I'm the Fury in charge of natural disasters. I can do all kinds of weather stuff -- some of it even on purpose -- so there's something we'd have in common.

My excitement built as I read more. No age listed, which I couldn't fault him for since I hadn't listed mine either. Let's face it, there comes a point when the numbers become somewhat meaningless and you're either old, damn old, or *way* damn old.

In the hobbies section he'd listed walks on the beach and surfing. Great! Big waves are something of a specialty of mine, so we could certainly have fun doing that.

But it was his self-description that really sucked me in.

Sensitive, gentle immortal seeking a strong female to share my eternity with; a

lady with a taste for the finer things, who loves to snuggle and won't mind if I cry at romantic movies.

Perfect.

Aaron sounded exactly like the mate I'd been hoping to find.

After thousands of years of mindless destruction at the whims of the multitude of petty, vengeful deities, I was just about sick of the macho-god type. Hurling lightning and dodging the angry curses of my victims had gotten old a very long time ago. A little sensitivity would go a long way in my book. I mean, yeah, I can kick ass and crumble mountains with the best of 'em, but what I really, truly want more than anything else has nothing to do with power or divinity.

Fun. A little "me" time and a chance to unwind.

A few dozen stellar orgasms wouldn't go amiss either. And Aaron sounded like just the one to give them to me.

I clicked the "e-mail me" button as another alert popped up on my screen.

Oh my heavens. No freaking *way* was I this lucky!

I held my breath and clicked the alert, and yet again, I wasn't imagining it. Aaron had not only sent me a vibe, he'd e-mailed me! I grinned from ear-to-ear and indulged in a little chair-dance of elation as I opened the e-mail. He really did want to flirt with me!

Maybe my joy was a bit more than the situation called for, but this had never happened to me before. Could he really not be put off by my rather... unique... skill set?

Dearest Thera,

I do hope this isn't too forward of me, but I find myself fascinated by your profile and your beautiful photograph. I'd love to take you out to dinner, if some other lucky male hasn't already snapped you up. I beg your indulgence for rushing things. Would you meet me for dinner tonight? I'll wait for you on the balcony of the Plaza Hotel's rooftop restaurant -- I'll bring a night-blooming orchid, so that you may know it is me. I hope to see you soon, lovely Fury!

Yours, Aaron S.

Tonight?

He wanted to take me out to dinner *tonight*? Talk about a change of fortunes! Three and a half weeks of an utter drought that would put the Sahara to shame, and now this great guy was falling all over himself to meet me.

This kind of news had to be shared. I ran out of the office, dying to find my sisters and gloat.

Our office was modern, but our home certainly was not. The Great Temple of the Erinyes has always been the home of the Furies, and it was designed with intimidation in mind. All creamy marble with bright shining patches of gilding, high-ceilinged and filled with statues twice and three times taller than the largest man, it was a monument to our power and ruthlessness. The great open spaces only made the supplicant feel small. The brutal images meticulously rendered in the mosaic tile reminded any who entered of just what the three of us could do, should they displease us.

Home, sweet home.

I sailed through the great central courtyard and ducked between two of the enormous marble columns that created our Temple's outer border. As I'd expected, my older sister was lounging beside the enormous bathing pool, relaxing on velvet cushions and wearing a gauzy *peplos* made of cloth of gold. Three acolytes attended her, one feeding bits of delicacies to her black snake-tipped tresses, one carefully painting her toenails jet black, and the last massaging her hands in preparation for a manicure.

Maura, our Megaira -- the Force of Greed, Jealousy, Betrayal and Revenge -- did greatly love to be pampered.

"Maura, you won't believe what just happened!"

She didn't even open her eyes. One of the black snakes snapped playfully at the acolyte, demanding another treat. "Let me guess," she said dryly. "You've come to your senses and decided to stop throwing money away on that stupid dating site."

"We're richer than Midas," I said, repeating the old argument. "What does it matter if I throw away a few bucks? You spend more than that on chocolate every week."

"It's the principle of it," she replied, as she always did. "And besides, it's not working, so why bother?"

Since her eyes were closed, she didn't see the face I made at her before replying. "I beg to differ," I said smugly. "I have a *date* tonight."

She still didn't open her eyes. "With who -- or should I say, with what?"

"A wind sprite named Aaron."

"And what is a wind sprite?"

"I'm not exactly sure," I had to admit. "But you know that I'm in tune with the weather, so I thought we'd have that in --"

"Listen to yourself!" Maura sat up to shoot me a disdainful glare. "You're a Fury, not the Weather Channel! Listen, Thera, why won't you just go grab one of Apollo's priests and do what comes naturally? Don't let a wind sprite screw you -- he sounds like a wimp anyway. You'll probably break him in half."

She reclined again, eyes closing, and I made an uglier face at her -- this time adding a pair of one-fingered salutes. The acolyte at her feet bit her lip to keep from laughing. I love my sister, I truly do, but she can spoil a good mood faster than anyone I've ever met.

Then again, considering her specialty of undermining governments and dynasties, I suppose it comes naturally to her.

"Ignore the sour-puss," a sweeter voice said behind me. "You just let me know if he doesn't treat you right. I'll fix his ass up good."

I turned to smile at my other sister, the Tisiphone -- she commanded the Force of Plagues. If I am brute force and Maura is intrigue, Odessa is a combination of the two. Untraceable, quiet, easy to overlook... until the outbreak is out of control, utterly devastating everything and everyone in its path. Of all of us, she looks most delicate with her white hair falling in soft waves to the dainty snake-heads and her petite figure,

but of the three Furies, she is the most feared.

“Planning to give him a good dose of the clap if he stands me up?” I teased her.

She didn’t smile. “I’ll start with the flesh-eating virus on his balls,” she said with utter seriousness. “And then I’ll move on to something really uncomfortable.”

I hugged her, touched by her concern. “That’s sweet, sis, but I’ll be fine. What I really need is some help with my hair.” Maura groaned and I looked back at her. “Please? No one can charm my hair like you can. You’ve got a gift for dealing with the snakes, and I’ve never mastered it.”

When dealing with Maura, flattery will usually get you everywhere.

She sighed and opened her eyes again. “I shouldn’t,” she said. “This is a bad idea, you mark my words.”

Shouldn’t wasn’t the same as *won’t*, and I knew I had her. “Consider them marked,” I said, grinning again. “And you’ll do it because you love me.”

“No, I’ll do it because then you’ll go away and take this obnoxious sunshine with you. I hate it when you’re happy, Thera. It hurts my eyes.”

Chapter Two

Two hours later, I flashed down into the mortal world, aiming for a stall in the lobby area ladies' room of the Plaza Hotel. When no one screamed, I sighed in relief. I'm not as good at the flashing thing as either of my sisters -- let's face it, subtlety and I are only passing acquaintances -- and I hated it when I miscalculate and surprise some poor human woman in the middle of what should really be a private moment.

After listening to make sure the restroom was empty, I left the stall and paused in front of the full-length mirror. Sometimes the snakes got fidgety when I teleported, and I wanted to admire myself one more time anyway.

My red waves were still tucked into a neat twist, just the way Maura had charmed them. She really did have a gift with them -- not only had she persuaded them to knot themselves into this tight style, she'd arranged them so that not a single scale of their heads showed. They were all neatly tucked away, holding the style in place with strategic bites.

"Terrific job, ladies," I murmured. "Don't move a bit. You look lovely." They gave a soft hiss of pleasure when I patted them.

Then I straightened the hem of my short red dress -- fire-engine red, just like my hair. Odessa had advised me to wear something understated, to try and downplay my obviously inhuman characteristics, but Aaron shouldn't mind seeing me as I truly was. After all, he wasn't human either. The dress was cut high on my thighs, low at my cleavage, and clung lovingly to everything in between. My heels were little more than a few straps and a spike, and they showed my red toenails and the small snake tattoo on my left foot to perfection.

My eyes were the only thing that didn't match the color scheme, and that was a good thing for everyone. Right now I was excited and happy, so they were the clear

blue of a spring sky. I dabbed on a little more lipstick, smiled to make sure I didn't have any on my teeth, and went to meet my date.

As soon as I stepped out of the elevator and into the restaurant on the top floor, I knew I'd made the right decision to come. The dining area was absolutely lovely, a romantic dream come true -- crystal chandeliers, soft music from a tuxedoed string quartet in the corner, flowers and candles on every table. Clearly, Aaron had exquisite taste.

I hadn't even seen his picture yet and I was already half in love.

"Welcome, madam. May I seat you?"

I turned to smile at the maitre d', then froze when I caught sight of his face. Gorgeous was the only word for him, with shaggy dark hair and the hint of a five o'clock shadow. His dark eyes sparkled with humor. He looked like no maitre d' I'd ever seen, even without the short horns protruding from his forehead.

"You're a satyr," I whispered, stunned. "What are you doing down here?"

He raised an eyebrow and gave me another of his devastating smiles. "Always a pleasure to serve the gods, my Lady," he replied with a smooth little bow. Everything about this satyr was smooth, despite his rough-around-the-edges appearance. His voice dripped sexual promise. "I believe I know who you're here to meet. Will you follow me, please?"

Too surprised to do anything but comply, I followed him with my mind spinning. Only now did I think to scan the diners around me for other supernatural beings -- there was no way a room full of mortals wouldn't have noticed that their maitre d' came equipped with a set of horns -- but everyone else in the restaurant was human.

Except for one being on the balcony.

The energy I felt from him was overwhelming, a bright ball of power and aggression. Whatever the hell a "wind sprite" was, I didn't think it would have an energy signature like that, and I stiffened with unease. "That's not Aaron," I said, stopping halfway across the dining room. "Explain, satyr."

He turned to me, still smiling. "Forgive me, my Lady," he said, bowing again. "I am but a servant to the gods and not privy to their secrets. Will you follow me and have your explanation from your date?"

I narrowed my eyes at him and had the satisfaction of seeing that smooth smile waver a fraction. Yeah, the hell he was just a servant. I stared at him a moment longer than necessary, until his gaze flickered and dropped, then adjusted the strap of my purse over my shoulder. "Lead, satyr," I said coldly. "And have a care before you play the fool with me again. You don't want to piss me off."

"No, Lady," he murmured, walking forward again. "I certainly wouldn't want that."

Satisfied that I'd made my point, I followed him through the dining area and out the wide arched doors that led to the balcony. Several tables lined the stone terrace, but only one was occupied. A man sat at the table farthest from the door, his back to us, staring at the flickering flame of the lit taper gracing the table's centerpiece and drumming his fingers as if he'd been waiting less than patiently.

No, not a man. A male -- something -- that definitely wasn't a wind sprite.

The subtle perfume of the promised orchid teased my nostrils and killed my hope that this was all some elaborate mistake. This was Aaron, all right, and he was nothing like what he'd described.

Why the deception? What did he have to hide?

I allowed the satyr to seat me and shot him a glare when he tried to unfold my napkin in my lap. He dropped a couple of menus before us and bowed with a grin. "Enjoy your date, my Lord, my Lady," he said, and retreated back toward the archway, leaving me alone with my deceiver.

And I looked up and had to bite my tongue to keep from yelping with shock. I knew him. I'd known him forever -- literally. His massive shoulders blocked my view of the satyr's retreating back, the black waves of his hair just brushing them. The impeccable Armani suit he wore couldn't disguise the raw power in that big body, power that glowed from his dark eyes. And by the look in those dark eyes, he wasn't

any more thrilled to see me than I was to see him.

"Ares," I said when I could be sure my words wouldn't come out as a snarl. They still dripped with anger. "Well, this is certainly a surprise. Or would you prefer I call you Aaron?"

He narrowed his eyes at me. "Why on earth would I want you to call me that?"

"Oh, maybe because that's the name on your fake profile?" I shot back. "Tell me, why the 'wind sprite' thing? Any paranormal worth her salt would see through that the first time she felt your energy. Who exactly were you trying to fool?"

I knew exactly what I was doing as I unloaded on him. I was off-balance and feeling vulnerable. When in doubt, I prefer to attack. If he was on the defensive, maybe I could regain my footing long enough to figure out just what the hell had happened here.

But the God of War was nothing if not well-versed in battle, verbal as well as physical, and he didn't fall for it. "Fine, call me Aaron if it makes you happy," he said, leaning back and hooking one powerfully muscled arm over the back of his chair. "I'll just call you Theresa, shall I?" When I blinked blankly at him, his lips pulled back in a feral expression only a fool would take for a smile. "What, don't you remember your profile? I didn't think Artemis's acolytes were so forgetful."

This time it was harder to hold in the snarl, and the clear night sky dimmed with clouds as my temper started to affect the weather. "I do not worship your sister," I said through clenched teeth. Gods forbid I ever bind myself to the Huntress -- I wanted to get *laid*, damn it, not follow a goddess who'd taken a freaking vow of eternal celibacy!

He lifted his wineglass and took a slow sip. I watched his throat move as he swallowed. I'd never seen Ares in a suit before, and damned if he didn't look better than ever in it -- and he usually looked too good for any female's peace of mind.

Only when he spoke again did I snap back to the conversation at hand. "You're slow, Fury. Try again and let's see if you can figure it out this time."

I started to snap at him and shut my mouth instead. If he'd heard from an acolyte named Theresa and I'd been contacted by a sprite called Aaron, either there had been a

coincidence of cosmic proportions that we were meant to meet our dates at the same place and time, or... "We've been set up."

He raised his glass to me. "Indeed."

Chapter Three

Heat lightning sparked between the clouds and I made an effort to calm down, but, damn it all, I was so disappointed. Yet another male who didn't want anything to do with me. Still, I didn't much fancy the idea of a freak thunderstorm drenching me as I sat there, and if I didn't get a grip, that was just where this was heading.

"And who set us up?" I asked, reaching for my water goblet and wishing I had a glass of wine like Ares. Or possibly a triple-shot of vodka.

He shrugged. "Probably the website," he said, sounding as if he truly didn't care that he'd been manipulated. "Although I have no clue why they'd match me with you. You're pretty much exactly what I'm not looking for."

Ouch. I wanted to strike back, but that one had hit me a little too hard for a quick comeback. I opened the menu instead and stared at it with sightless eyes. Yeah, Ares really knew how to strike a disabling blow.

Suddenly his hand covered mine briefly. "That didn't come out as I intended," he said softly as his touch slid away. "I didn't mean to offend you, Thera."

"Of course you didn't," I said in a bland, unconcerned voice. "You know what I can do."

"Actually, I'm more impressed by what you don't do," he said, surprising me into looking up. His expression was no longer so furious, although still not pleased by any stretch of the imagination. "From what I've heard, you've never decimated anyone just for a misspoken comment."

Complacent bastard. "There's a first time for everything," I growled, letting my eyes flash red for an instant before looking at my menu again. "Stay or go, I don't care. I'm eating."

I heard his menu snap open. "Fine," he said, and his voice was tight enough to

tell me that I'd offended him by refusing his apology. Good. "Just so you know, this isn't a date."

"And thank Zeus for that," I shot back. "I see more than enough of you on Olympus. You're the last person I wanted to spend an evening with."

If I'd struck him as he'd struck me, it didn't show. *Arrogant pig*, I thought, and concentrated on the menu again. Well, if he was staying, then he was buying, and I was petty enough to try to injure his wallet at the very least. It was difficult to figure out what the most expensive thing on the menu was, since this was the kind of place that didn't bother to put prices on the entrées, but I took a guess and decided on something with scallops and truffles and a few other things that sounded pricey.

When the satyr came back, he didn't seem the slightest bit daunted by the obvious tension at our table. I gave him my order without glancing at Ares, then asked for their finest bottle of champagne. Ares ordered a large hunk of meat and half the side dishes offered, and then glanced at me with a raised eyebrow before adding, "We'll both have half a dozen oysters on the half-shell."

"The hell I will."

He smiled again. "They're expensive, my dear. I had the impression you wanted the... best items they offered. Was I mistaken?"

Mocking me? The insufferable fool was actually mocking me now? I glared at him and spoke without glancing at the satyr. "We'll each have a dozen. Now go get my champagne."

Ares raised an eyebrow, still looking coolly amused. "A dozen each? Don't you want to save room for dessert? I hear their pastry chef has a specialty dish that will set me back a good fifty bucks."

I smiled sweetly -- or at least, I tried to. I haven't had much practice at it. "I can always get it to go."

"Fairly pointless trying to exceed my credit limit, Thera. I'm just as obscenely rich as you are."

"Are you suggesting that we go Dutch?"

He laughed aloud. "No, I wouldn't want your sister to give me the clap or something."

I went rigid in my chair. "How *dare* you spy on us in our Temple!" I cried.

Ares stopped laughing. "You're joking," he said, but he finally sounded shaken. "You didn't really discuss --"

"Your castration by flesh-eating virus?" I interrupted. "We certainly did. Is that a problem?"

A cork sailed across the table between us, knocking over the candle and splattering wax all over the menus, before he could reply. We both turned to glare at the satyr. "Watch it!" we snarled in unison.

He froze, then regained his cocky smile. "Your champagne, my Lady," he said, pouring a glass for me before dunking the bottle in the ice-bucket I hadn't noticed him putting beside the table. "Your appetizers will arrive shortly."

Ares's arm shot out and blocked the satyr's retreat. "You," he said coldly. "What is your name?"

"Ceyx."

"Subtle," I remarked, shaking my head.

He grinned at me. "Subtlety is overrated, my Lady," he said. "I'll be right back with your aphrodi -- I mean, appetizers." He ducked under Ares's arm and was gone in a flash.

"That satyr is up to something," Ares growled.

"Aren't they always?" I wasn't in the mood to talk about the damned satyr. In fact, I wasn't in the mood to talk about much of anything. Instead, I busied myself with the urgent task of draining my champagne glass.

He watched me drink it down, one eyebrow still cocked. When I reached for the bottle to refill my now-empty glass, he shook his head and covered my hand on the bottle, preventing me from lifting it. "I don't think that's such a good idea, Thera. Getting plastered in the mortal realm is rarely a good plan for a god."

"One glass of champagne won't do me in," I said, brushing his hand away. "And

I need it if I'm going to deal with you all night."

"What makes you think you'll be with me all night?"

Ooh, he was really pissing me off now, but I was ready this time. "You ordered the oysters. You tell me."

And he actually blushed. I grinned and prepared to give him hell, but Ceyx was back again, dropping plates of iced oysters before both of us. I had to shake out my napkin and brush ice chips off my skirt, and I saw Ares had been similarly splattered by the satyr's less-than-suave serving skills. "Suck 'em into your mouth, roll 'em on your tongue, feel the slick juices running down your hot throat," he said, deadpan. "Enjoy."

And now Ares wasn't the only one blushing.

Our eyes met for a bare instant, both of us thrown off-balance by the blatant innuendo, and suddenly I laughed. After a moment, Ares joined me, his deep chuckle a bass counterpoint to the giggles I couldn't stop.

"Damn," he said as I wiped my eyes, trying not to smear my makeup. "That satyr is a walking 900 number."

"He definitely missed his calling," I agreed.

The oysters glistened on the plate, twelve perfect grey globs of raw meat, and I really regretted increasing the order from half a dozen. Yum, a dozen dead sea creatures, disemboweled and served in half their own exoskeleton. Now I'd have to eat all the damn things, and raw oysters were a taste I'd never much cared to acquire.

Ares had no such hesitation. Still smiling, he reached for a wedge of lemon and squeezed it over one of the oysters before bringing his glistening fingers to his lips and licking the juice away. He had great hands, I couldn't help but notice -- large, square, long-fingered, and graceful. His tongue flicked over one knuckle to catch the last drop, and I realized where my mind was going and grabbed one of the oysters, downing it before I could think too hard about what I was doing.

Ughhhh! The slimy, cold glob quivered on my tongue for far too long before I could force myself to swallow. The feel of it sliding down my throat made me shudder. I dropped the shell in the depression on the side of the platter and fought to keep the

oyster where it was, happily marinating in a champagne bubble-bath in my stomach.

And there were eleven more just waiting to jump in after it.

It'd be a real oyster party down there. Ick.

Ares sucked down his oyster with a lot more grace than I had. "You're doing it all wrong, you know," he said as he put the empty shell down. Pausing to lick his fingers again, a gesture that should've been hopelessly uncouth, not sexy, he met my eyes across the table. "Can I show you?"

What the hell. "Go for it."

He reached across the table and picked up one of my lemon slices. "You held it in your mouth too long," he said as he squeezed juice on another oyster. "If you don't eat oysters much, when you taste it, it's all over. You want to let it glide down your throat. The lemon juice will help disguise the taste until you get used to it."

He put the lemon aside and lifted the shell to my lips. The thought of licking the juice from his fingers as he had was way more tempting than it should've been. Luckily I could blame it on the alcohol, even though gods are fairly immune to the weak wines of mortals -- it was a convenient excuse and I was clinging to it with both hands.

"Open," Ares murmured, and I couldn't look away from his dark eyes as I obeyed.

Chapter Four

I'd like to say that the oyster slid right down this time. I'd love to tell you that his help made all the difference, that the rest of my oysters went down easy, and that I finished them off like a pro.

But the bastard had to wink as he tipped the oyster into my mouth, and that wink made me jump, which made the lemon juice shoot straight down my windpipe, which made me cough and shoot that damned oyster right back into his face.

Where it stuck for a split second, right between his eyes, before falling onto the table with a very audible *plop*.

Coughing violently, my eyes watering from the sting of the lemon juice, I started laughing. I couldn't help it. I positively *roared* with laughter. For a moment I thought I'd actually pass out from it, unable to get a breath in for the spasms of coughing and laughing so hard it hurt. Ares just watched me, his face as stony as one of his statues, and the thought of adding a stone oyster between the eyes of his bust in the Great Hall of Olympus was enough to get me going again.

Oh, I was so doing that on April Fools' Day, and screw him if he couldn't take a joke.

He waited until I'd wheezed to a stop before he moved, bending to hand me my napkin from where it had slid to the floor. I wiped my eyes, struggling to catch my breath, one arm wrapped around my aching stomach as dark spots danced before my eyes. Sweet Zeus, I couldn't remember the last time I'd laughed so hard.

"Are you quite finished?" he asked, his voice positively frosty, and it was a struggle not to start giggling all over again.

I managed it. "For now," I said, my voice quivering with suppressed laughter. His expression clearly showed that he didn't appreciate being the cause of such hilarity,

and I tried harder to sober up. "I'm sorry, Ares," I said. "I didn't do that on purpose, I swear on my Temple."

He didn't look altogether mollified, but I decided his bad mood was no longer my concern. We glanced at the oyster lying innocently on the tablecloth, still glistening with lemon juice, and I had to bite both my lips to keep from getting absolutely hysterical again. He pinched it between his thumb and forefinger and flipped it over the railing.

I tried really, really hard not to picture some poor mortal getting slapped in the head with the thing when it landed. I might not have been thrilled to find myself having dinner with Ares, but I didn't want to totally offend him, either -- well, no more than I already had.

But he winked again and leaned over the banister, watching the oyster fall, and I laughed again. "Three, two, one," he murmured, leaning a little further, "*contact!*"

And then he was laughing with me, reaching over to squeeze another lemon for me, and I knew my apology had been accepted. He held his napkin up like a shield when I lifted the shell and I inhaled the thing as fast as I could, not wanting to repeat the lemon-juice-in-the-lungs thing again.

This time, it went down easy, but the experience still wasn't anything to write home about. "I think that's about enough for me," I said, unable to face eating nine more balls of slime and feeling a little bad about wasting them.

But they didn't go to waste. Ares finished his off within minutes, then casually lifted my platter and set it atop his empty one to devour the rest of mine without even asking. "Twenty-one oysters?" I said, shaking my head in amazement as the last one disappeared. "That just can't be a good idea."

He grinned and leaned back as Ceyx arrived to clear the platters -- which he simply dumped on a table a little further away. "Afraid I'll lose control and jump your bones?"

I snatched up my champagne glass to save it from getting knocked over as Ceyx served the soup course, sloshing a good third of it onto the tablecloth. He snapped his

fingers and the stain vanished, then he tossed a basket of bread down between us and retreated again. "The service here doesn't exactly live up to its billing," I said, "and no, I'm not the least bit worried that you or anyone else will try to jump my bones."

He dipped his spoon in the soup -- half his was gone, thanks to the satyr -- before answering. "Why did you join the service then, if you're not interested in having your bones jumped?"

I rolled my eyes. "I never said I wasn't interested." I took a spoonful of my own soup. It was perfect, delicately seasoned and smooth as silk. I relished the flavor overriding the aftertaste of the oysters. "Just that I don't think it's very likely."

Ares frowned and took a few bites as he gave me a very thorough once-over. "I don't get it," he said at last. "You joined the site, you came here dressed for sex, and if those aren't fuck-me heels, I'll hire that damned satyr as my personal attendant. What's the deal?"

"Don't be obtuse," I snapped, staring down into my own soup, which now tasted like glue. "Why don't you want me? Because I'm a Fury," I answered before he could speak. "Every other male is the same. Even you went pale at the thought of my sisters going after you. Do you think a vampire or a selkie would want to chance dating someone a full-fledged god wouldn't touch with a thirty-foot pole?"

"I think you're overreacting a bit and putting words in my mouth too," Ares interjected when I stopped for breath. "You're not my type, Thera, but it's not because you're a Fury. You're... just not what I'm looking for."

I drained my second glass of champagne, wishing I had one of Bacchus's fine wines instead. "All right," I said, mentally steeling myself. I didn't think my ego could get much more crushed right now anyway. "Let's hear it. What are you looking for?"

Now it was his turn to toy with his soup. "Innocence," he said at last, and damned if there wasn't a hint of a blush on those killer cheekbones again. "It's really not you, Thera. I don't want *any* Olympian. I've known all of you for far too long. I'm tired of the games the nymphs play, the constant petitions for favors from the acolytes, the meaningless encounters with goddesses. That's why I joined the stupid website. Are

you happy now?"

Definitely defensive, which probably meant he was being honest. Ares was just as skilled at deception as he was at out-and-out battle -- both were tricks of war, and he was the master at that -- but I didn't think he was lying now. And damned if he hadn't made me genuinely feel better too.

"I understand," I said, reaching out and touching his hand, which was strangling his spoon within an inch of its life. "Now eat. I'm afraid we'll end up wearing whatever's left in these bowls if they're not empty when Ceyx comes back."

"If he tries it, he'll end up wearing his heart on his sleeve -- literally," Ares growled, and I laughed.

We finished our soup in a silence that was remarkably companionable. When the satyr returned to clear away the bowls, tossing them beside the discarded oyster platters on the other table, Ares shot him a glare that should have sizzled him where he stood. "Look, *Ceyx*," he growled, the name dripping with derision, "you might not have noticed, but you're serving a goddess tonight. How about working on your presentation before I'm forced to show you the error of your ways?"

Ceyx bowed low, but not before I saw him grin as if Ares's threat was just what he'd been hoping to hear. I didn't waste time wondering about it though. I was too busy being stunned and amazed that he'd protested not because the satyr wasn't treating *him* with the proper respect, but because his blasé serving style was insulting to *me*.

It was the first time in my entire existence that any male had been offended on my behalf. Even if it came from a god I'd never much cared for, I was determined to enjoy the novelty of it. I didn't think anyone had ever thought I needed defending.

When I tuned back into the conversation, Ceyx was serving plates of some kind of fancy salad with a tiny fried egg atop it. He set mine down with exaggerated care, dropped me a wink, and hesitated a moment -- I could practically hear him thinking about it -- before doing the same for Ares. The god looked ready to blow, so I blurted out the first thing I could think of to distract him. "What's this, Ceyx?"

He smiled and reached for my plate. "That's a fried quail egg," he said, flicking it

with his finger. "These shaved white thingies --" he picked one up and held it under my nose, "are white truffles. And the black goo, naturally, is caviar." He dropped the truffle and flicked his fingers, sending caviar bits flying. "There's some kind of balsamic vinegar dressing on it, not sure exactly what. The chef keeps going on about the thirty-year-old vinegar like it's something special, but to old farts like you, it might as well be from five minutes ago. Anyway," he concluded, wiping his hand on the tablecloth, "eat it. And don't ask me what's in your entrée unless you want to hear about snails and duck liver. Bon appetit!"

We both gaped at him as he walked away. I looked down at my salad, now thoroughly picked-over, and poked it with my fork. "Well, at least I didn't ask him what was in the soup," I murmured.

Chapter Five

Although Ares laughed, I could tell he was still pretty pissed off at the satyr. “He has no sense of self-preservation at all,” he growled, confirming my suspicions. “I’ll trade plates with you, if you want.”

I shrugged and put my fork aside. “No, go ahead,” I said. “I’ve heard of egg salad, but quail and fish eggs aren’t what I would consider the perfect ingredients for one.”

He demolished his salad within minutes and I helped myself to a thick slice of the bread. Soft, warm, and light, it practically melted in my mouth. I cut another slice and slathered it with the fresh butter again, knowing I was starting in on Ares’s share of the bread and not really caring. I mean, he’d already seriously impacted the world’s oyster population and finished two other courses, so he wouldn’t starve if I ate his bread.

This time, Ares’s glare seemed to have an impact on Ceyx when he came to add our salad plates to the growing pile on the other table. “Shouldn’t you take those back to the kitchen?” he said, nodding pointedly at the mess. “This place has a reputation for a certain mood, you know. I can look at dirty dishes anytime.”

“Whoops,” the satyr replied, his eyes still twinkling even though he didn’t smile. “I thought you two were mad about being matched up. I didn’t realize you wanted the whole romance gig. I’ll see to it at once.”

And ignoring both of us as we sputtered incoherent replies about not wanting romance *at all*, he flipped up the edges of the other tablecloth and slung it over his shoulder, dishes, flowers, candles and all, before vanishing around the corner. There was a loud crash that told us he’d dropped it just out of sight, and I thought Ares was going to explode.

“Look,” he growled, meeting my eyes across the table, “I know we didn’t want to meet up with each other here, but I do apologize for this. I’ll castrate him as soon as we’re finished.”

I grinned. “Oh, you’re no fun. I was anticipating a little dinner entertainment, and now you’ve gone and destroyed my hopes.”

He didn’t smile, but I saw amusement in his dark eyes. “If I don’t wait until we’ve gotten all our food, he’ll just limp and whine,” he said. “It’ll be much better as an after-dinner show.”

Ceyx returned with our entrées. As soon as my plate was presented to me, I knew I’d made a mistake. Ares’s steak was still sizzling and smelled divine, his baked potato looked like something out of a gourmet magazine, his asparagus glistened with butter -- in short, his plate looked like heaven, and everything was recognizable.

My plate, however... something was swimming in a creamy sauce at the bottom of the dish, and I wasn’t sure if they were scallops or lumps of beige rubber. Lumps of brown, shriveled things lined the plate’s edge -- probably the truffles that cost so much. They looked like little turds. Pasta shells and various bits of vegetables I wasn’t sure I recognized were arranged in an artistic pattern that could’ve been pretty, should the diner happen to be a big fan of Picasso.

Ceyx poured the wine -- red for Ares, white for me -- and bowed his way back into the main dining area with such exaggerated respect that I was fairly certain he’d heard us discussing his “tip.” I glanced again at Ares’s plate and couldn’t keep the longing from my voice as I asked, “Want to trade?”

He grinned wickedly as he cut a bite of the steak -- oh, sweet Zeus, he cut it with the butter knife, it was so tender! -- and waved his fork at me. The bite of meat was cooked perfectly, nice and red in the middle, and I had to bite my lip to keep from leaning over and snapping it right off his fork. “Expensive isn’t always better, Thera,” he said, and popped the meat into his own mouth as I drowned in jealousy.

He closed his eyes with pleasure as he chewed. I glared at him, although I knew he couldn’t see me, before scooping up a forkful of my own dinner. For something that

looked more like the results of a food fight than an actual entrée, it tasted all right. I mean, I was never going to be a huge French food fan, but my uneducated palate could tell it was prepared to perfection, even if it didn't bowl me over.

I couldn't stop looking longingly at Ares's plate though, and after a few minutes of silence, he cut another bite and held it out to me. "Here," he said, and I didn't even think of refusing.

The steak tasted as good as it looked. I closed my eyes and moaned, savoring the flavors bursting over my tongue. Where my dish was perfectly mild and balanced, his steak was everything I could have imagined -- tender, slightly spicy, and so damn good I was seriously tempted to arm-wrestle him for the rest of it.

As it turned out, I didn't have to. When I opened my eyes and found him staring at me, a strange expression on his face, I didn't even have time to ask for more before he offered another bite. I nudged my plate aside as he continued to feed me, his enormous meal providing enough for both of us. Every bite was incredible. He offered me a forkful of his baked potato, dripping in butter and sour cream, and I didn't hesitate to open wide for it. A droplet of butter ran down my chin, and I caught it with my finger before licking it clean.

Ares was looking decidedly flushed now, and I finally figured out that I was moaning with each taste of his food. A burst of excitement rocked me. Wasn't this what I'd wanted? A little flirtation with a gorgeous man, one who wasn't too awed by my powers to realize that I was a female as well as a Fury?

And even though he wasn't who I'd wanted to meet, I couldn't resist playing with him a little more, this time on purpose.

The next thing he offered me was a spear of asparagus, and instead of opening my mouth, I plucked the spear from his fork. The tip was tender, lightly glazed with a tangy lemon sauce. I sucked it between my lips and laved every drop of that sauce away before biting down. Daring a glance through my eyelashes at Ares, I barely stopped myself from laughing. He was so intent on my performance that he hadn't even noticed his elbow rested on his bread plate.

The spear wasn't long enough to really imitate the act I was thinking of -- not that I had the confidence to imitate it properly -- so I merely gave the rest of the vegetable a swipe of my tongue before engulfing it whole. Ares's eyes went unfocused and I leaned over, resting my elbows on the table in a move calculated to enhance my cleavage. "More," I breathed, opening my lips. He missed the steak twice before managing to stab it again with his fork.

Too soon the plate was empty, and Ares hadn't eaten much of it. I sat back as Ceyx came out to take our plates again, smiling and satisfied. "That was incredible," I said in a near-moan, licking my lips once more to make sure I'd gotten every drop. The satyr snickered and Ares glared at him.

"What are the dessert choices?" I asked before the god could decide to demolish our waiter. Full as I was, I still wasn't quite satisfied. After the satyr recited the desserts, I ordered the chocolate mousse cannelloni, and Ares chose the specialty cheesecake.

Somehow I wasn't surprised when my cannelloni arrived sporting two artistic dollops of whipped cream at its base and a distinctly phallic shape to the tip.

Ares was staring and I tried hard not to laugh. "This looks like just what I wanted," I said, and ran my fingertip over one of the dollops. The cream clung and I licked it clean before doing it again and offering my finger to him. "Want to try it?"

His dazed expression vanished in the blink of an eye. "No," he snapped, slicing into his cheesecake with a bit more force than necessary. "You'll have to take care of that yourself, Fury. I'm afraid I can't help you there."

And just like that, my own teasing mood evaporated. I wiped my finger on the napkin, feeling unaccountably hurt by his rejection. Why, I wondered? I knew he didn't want to date me any more than I wanted to date him, so why did it sting that he'd so firmly rebuffed my flirting?

But it did. I couldn't even laugh when I cut into the cannelloni and a spurt of white cream shot out the end. I drank more of the sweet dessert wine, hardly tasting my chocolate as I thought about the evening I'd dreamed of.

All my high hopes for nothing. Aaron was no more real than my dream had

been.

When Ceyx came with the check, I excused myself to use the ladies' room, hoping to poof right back to Olympus and lick my wounds in private. It was far too crowded for that though. So after I reapplied my lipstick and washed my hands, I had no choice but to face Ares again.

Joy.

Chapter Six

I found him standing outside the restroom, hands in his pockets and looking bored. "You didn't have to wait for me," I said, meaning it.

He shrugged, which only emphasized the width of his shoulders under the fine wool of the suit. Damned if he didn't look even better standing than he had sitting at that table with the candlelight playing in his dark eyes! "It started to rain," he said, and his bored tone told me he'd written this evening off as a total waste of time.

"Is the satyr still breathing?" I asked, trying to hide my own disappointment by returning to the lighter mood we'd shared at the table.

"For now," he growled, clearly not embracing the humor I'd been trying for. "I guarantee nothing beyond that. Now let's get out of here."

The elevator was waiting for us when we left the restaurant, and I made sure not to brush against Ares as I entered. He punched the button for the lobby as the doors slid closed.

"We could just leave from here," I said, staring at the floor indicator. "It's private enough." Then I wouldn't have to endure his company any longer than absolutely necessary.

He nodded toward the corner. "Cameras," he replied simply.

Naturally. I leaned against the back wall and waited to reach the lobby, no longer inclined to break the stiff silence.

Ares did, however. "You know, this wasn't completely unbearable," he said, turning and giving me a hint of his godly smile. "So it wasn't what I wanted -- you were still a decent dinner companion, despite the snake-heads and temper tantrums."

That was the last straw. I straightened abruptly, so furious I was shaking. "What the hell do you mean, despite the snake-heads and temper tantrums?" I snarled. "I

didn't start this, Mr. High-and-Mighty, so you can take your condescending attitude and shove it!"

Ares actually looked taken aback. "What's the matter with you? I meant that as a compliment!" he protested. "All I was trying to say was that you contained your real nature pretty well tonight, and I appreciate it. There's no reason to get all --"

"My *real nature*?" By now I was so angry that I could hear the thunder crashing as the storm built, even through layers of concrete and steel. "What do you know about my real nature? All the conversation you've ever had with me consisted of 'Thera, destroy this, maim that, strike down this general, sink those ships.' Where do you get off assuming that's all I ever think about?"

Now he was starting to get mad too. The lights in the elevator flickered as he closed the distance between us with one long stride. "You're a Fury," he said, biting off every word. "Your only purpose is to destroy and maim and strike down and sink. It's what you were created for, Thera, so don't bitch at me if you get a hard-ass reputation for it!"

"*I was not created only to destroy!*" I shrieked. And with an almighty crash of thunder, the elevator went pitch black and shuddered to a stop.

The sudden stop threw us both off-balance. I had the benefit of the rail to hold onto, but Ares ended up staggering to the side and crashing into the opposite wall. The dim light of the emergency phone provided the only illumination.

Ares steadied himself and glared at me. "Nice one, Fury. Maybe you should learn to control that temper of yours before the next time you decide to convince someone you're warm and cuddly."

I growled and launched myself at him, enraged because at least in part, he was right. He met me halfway, even allowing me to get in the first slap I threw at him before catching my arms and pinning them behind my back with altogether too much ease. I tried to head-butt him and only ended up hurting my forehead on his chest.

Damn, why had I thought it was a good idea to attack the God of War?

I struggled for a moment longer, holding onto my anger with both hands, hating

him both for being right and for saying those things out loud. He laughed when I tried to kick his legs out from under him and I quit fighting, abruptly drained. "Let me go," I said, standing limp and defeated in his arms.

"Why, so you can hit me again?" The bastard didn't even have the decency to *pretend* he wasn't amused.

"No, so I can get the hell away from you and forget this night ever happened," I snapped back. Tears stung my eyes as I again remembered my high hopes. Well, my sisters would be glad to hear they were right. If nothing else, tonight had taught me that I was about as dateable as the Black Death.

Ares's grip loosened but he didn't let me go. "Don't try that pitiful poor-female tone on me, Fury," he laughed. "You're not going to catch me off-guard that way."

"Let me go!" I shouted, kicking at him again, hurt and furious and humiliated. I wanted to follow up with some hideous threat about what Maura and Odessa would do to him once I told them how awful our date had been, but my throat was so tight I knew he'd hear how upset I really was if I said another word. Despite my efforts to stop them, two fat tears trickled down my cheeks. If I didn't get out of here soon, he'd get to witness a hell of a lot more of them, and that would be the perfect finish to the night.

He released my wrists, only to catch me by the upper arms. "By Zeus," he said, no longer laughing. "You're not crying, are you?"

I kept my face turned away even when he tried to nudge my chin up and force me to look at him. "Let go of me so I can go home," I said, my voice very low. While he was touching me, I couldn't flash back to the Temple without taking him with me and that was the very last thing I wanted.

"Hey," he murmured, cupping my face in his hands. "Thera, talk to me. What's going on?"

I tried to bat his hands away. They stayed put, stubbornly unbattable. Finally I gave in to the inevitable and glared at him, not hiding the moisture on my cheeks. "There, are you happy now?" I snapped. "Want to make fun of me a little more? Maybe this will solidify your reputation as the Bad-Ass of Olympus -- the Great Ares, the god

who made a Fury cry. That'd be perfect for you, wouldn't it?"

"Shit," he whispered, but he didn't release me. His hands slid down to my shoulders, holding them in a gentle grip that was still unbreakable. "Thera, I -- damn, I'm sorry. I thought... well, I mean, I assumed..."

"I know what you assumed," I said, trying to get hold of myself and failing miserably. The tears were falling in a steady rain now. "You assumed what everyone else does -- Furies don't have feelings. We don't think of anything but destruction, don't want anything but blood, don't value anything but suffering. Well, guess what? You and everyone else forget one little fact -- I'm a goddess, same as any other! Does Athena think only of collecting more wisdom? Does Artemis hunt all the time, forsaking everything else? Does Aphrodite spend her every waking moment screwing?"

Ares was looking at me like he'd never seen me before -- and I suppose he hadn't. "With Aphrodite, it's close," he said, but he didn't smile. "I'm sor --"

"Yeah, you're sorry, everyone's sorry, big fucking deal," I interrupted, again trying to escape his grasp and again failing. "At least you've done one thing for me -- I won't waste any more time trying to be something no one will let me be. Damn it, Ares, will you let me go already?"

He shook his head. "Not until you let me apologize properly," he said, and when I took a breath to yell at him some more, he stopped my mouth with his own.

I froze. His lips were firm, his tongue teasing; he tasted of the sweet dessert wine and a hint of spice, and I didn't have a clue what to do with him when he was kissing me. He nipped my lip, surprising a gasp from me and making me aware for the first time that I wasn't breathing. I jerked my head away as if waking from a dream.

"What do you think you're doing?" I snapped, trying for outraged and only achieving breathless.

"Apologizing," he murmured as he scattered little kisses over my jaw.

"I don't need a pity-fuck in an elevator to make me feel better," I growled, and tried to shut up every neglected part of my body that was screaming for me to take it back, that pity-fucks were just fine and they'd like one or two of them *right now*.

He nuzzled my earlobe, which immediately joined the chorus of body parts clamoring for a good fucking, pity-induced or otherwise. "Too bad," he whispered. He caught my hand and pressed it to the front of his slacks, molding my palm against the rigid length behind his zipper. "What about one to make me feel better?"

Yes! my body screamed. I told it to shut up and tried not to notice the thickness of his cock under my hand, the warm, hard size of it. I failed utterly. "Get off me!"

"No," he said, and this time when he kissed me, he was serious about it.

Chapter Seven

His tongue didn't tease this time. He pressed a thumb against my jaw until I opened for him and then dove inside, conquering like the warrior he was. I whimpered -- yes, I actually whimpered -- and grabbed the railing behind me, unable to pull away and not entirely sure I wanted to. Experimentally, I met his questing tongue with a stroke of my own.

He rewarded me with a deep groan. His hands slid down to my waist and pulled me hard against him, away from the rail, leaving me with nothing to hold onto but him. His shoulders were perfect for steadying myself. He kissed me again, long and deep and so damn good I felt my panties getting wet even before he ground his hips against mine.

The hard length of his cock pressed against my belly, thick and insistent. I wanted nothing more than to feel its satiny strength in my hands.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, a voice was screaming that I was acting like an idiot and would really regret this in the morning.

My body told that voice very firmly to shut the hell up.

I melted against Ares and gave myself up to anything he wanted to do to me. The morning could take care of itself as far as I was concerned. For the first time in my life, I submitted and let someone else take control.

"Damn, you taste good," Ares growled, releasing my mouth to press a line of hot, open-mouthed kisses down my throat. He nipped the skin over my pulse and I jumped. "I've been wondering all night what you were wearing under this sexy little dress, Thera. Are you going to let me find out?"

My head thrown back to grant him full access, my heart pounding and my pussy getting more slippery by the second, it was a moment before I could find my voice to

answer. "Try it and see," I whispered.

He growled and suddenly his hands were on my thighs, just beneath the hem of my dress. His mouth came back to mine as those big hands slid up my legs, disappearing beneath my dress, finding the lace tops of my stockings and dipping a fingertip beneath them. He shuddered as his fingers played. "Oh, hell yeah," he groaned against my lips. "I love stockings, baby. I want to see you in them and nothing else."

His words fired my own need and I could no longer stand not touching him. I grabbed his jacket and shoved it off his shoulders, mourning the loss of his hands for the moment it took him to drop the jacket to the floor. I kissed him this time, sucking his lower lip for a delicious instant before he took command of the kiss.

Dominant to the bone, and on some level I'd always known he would be. Here was a male who wouldn't be intimidated by me, who would control the pace and make me wait until he was good and ready. It excited me more than I ever thought it could.

When his hands came back, they pushed my skirt all the way up to my waist and cupped my ass. He groaned again as his fingers traced the line of my thong. The kiss deepened, quickened, became more desperate. I unbuttoned his shirt frantically, aching to feel him, to make him as hot as I was.

The warmth of his skin under my palms sent a jolt of hot lust through my entire body, bringing my nipples to aching peaks and shooting another wave of hot cream to my pussy. I broke the kiss to run my tongue down his throat, needing to know if he tasted as good as he felt. He responded by thrusting his knee between my thighs and backing me against the wall.

The rail made my back arch, thrusting my breasts forward, and he cupped them through the dress. I pinched his nipples, hoping he'd do the same to me, and was gratified when he yanked the bodice of my dress down and bared my scarlet lace bra. Instead of pinching me, he dipped his head and sucked my nipple into his mouth, bra and all.

I couldn't stop the cries of pleasure as he flicked his tongue over my aching

nipple. Hotter than I could ever remember being in my entire existence, all I could do was tangle my fingers in his hair and pray he wouldn't stop.

He didn't. So focused was I on the incredible things his mouth was doing to me that I didn't notice him unfastening my bra until he pushed it aside and captured my other nipple, suckling hard.

The hot silk of his tongue against my breast, no barrier between us, was almost enough to make me come. My knees went weak and I would have slid to the floor if his thigh hadn't been between mine. The hard contact of his leg against my aching pussy was incredible. I ground against him, unable to stop myself as pleasure built and tightened deep in my belly.

"Oh, no you don't," Ares growled, grabbing my hips and stopping my movements. "You are not getting yourself there without me, damn it."

The next thing I knew, I was lying on the elevator floor, my dress bunched around my waist, looking up at Ares in the dim light as he tore off his belt and unzipped his slacks. The thick length of his cock sprang forward as he shoved his pants and boxers down. I instinctively spread my thighs, dying to know what it would feel like to have that gorgeous cock buried deep inside me, thrusting hard.

And then he was on the floor with me, his weight on his elbows as he kissed me hard, deep, and wild. I wrapped my legs around his hips to urge him on. He didn't need much encouragement. The head of his cock slid once against my clit, a delicious caress, and then found my pussy and sank inside.

The feeling of fullness, of impalement, was incredible as he sank deeper. "Ah, damn, Thera, you're so tight," he gasped, drawing back to thrust a little deeper. "So hot and slick and, by Zeus, so fucking good, baby."

I couldn't even remember words right now to answer him. I raised my hips for his next surge, loving the way his cock stretched me, filling me with his strength and heat. The incredible pleasure far outweighed the discomfort, and I rubbed my breasts against his chest. The added sensation was so damn erotic I had to do it again, and would've kept going if he hadn't growled with pleasure and thrust hard, sinking inside

me all the way to the balls.

I cried out and stiffened -- I couldn't help it. There was no barrier, of course -- I'd taken care of that long ago with the first of a long succession of toys -- but nothing could compare to the incredible fullness of a real cock buried inside me. As my body adjusted, I realized that I'd bitten Ares on the shoulder and dug my fingernails into his back. "Sorry," I whispered, loosening my grip and looking up at him.

The near-total darkness hid his expression, but I could hear the shock and confusion in his voice when he said, "You're -- sweet heaven, Thera, you're a *virgin*?"

I gave an experimental wiggle as the pain faded and moaned as his cock rubbed me deep inside. "Not anymore," I said. I tightened my legs around him, afraid he'd pull away. "And if you stop now, I really will let my sisters have you."

He groaned and dropped his head to my shoulder. "There's no stopping now," he growled as his hips rocked gently against mine. "But you shouldn't have let me hurt you like that. You should've said --"

I shut him up with a kiss and wiggled my hips again, urging him to move faster. "Forget it. I'm used to pain," I told him between kisses. "But pleasure is something new to me and I want more of it. Now shut up and do me, Ares. I want to know what it feels like to come on a real cock."

"Christ," he whispered, and thrust faster.

Resting all his weight on one elbow, he kissed me hard and palmed my breast, pinching and plucking and rolling the nipple until I could hardly breathe. My moans filled the elevator. I ran my hands down his back and grabbed his ass, loving the feel of his tight muscles clenching with every thrust, loving the way his abs rippled against my stomach with every surge of his thick cock. And when he broke the kiss to bite my other nipple, I came so hard I screamed his name.

His body went rigid and he groaned as he came, his cock swelling and throbbing inside me. I tightened all my inner muscles to milk him for every last drop. When he collapsed on top of me, I could hardly breathe and I didn't care. My body felt used, battered, aching and absolutely wonderful.

Who needed to breathe when I felt like this?

He stayed like that for a seemingly eternal time, both of us silent, trying to catch our breath. I slowly became aware that my zipper was digging into my back. Ares finally raised his head from my shoulder and cupped my face. "Are you all right?"

I laughed despite the fact that he was crushing the air out of me. "Are you kidding?"

He rolled off of me and I instantly mourned the loss of his hard body. Almost as quickly, my common sense, silenced by the demands of my libido, roared back to life and I realized how awful I must look right now. Lying on the elevator floor, skirt hiked up and tits hanging out, my hair a mess and the snakes exposed.

I just fucked Ares!

Okay, yeah, so that realization should've occurred before now. I know that. But as what I'd done really hit me, I was mortified. I'd actually fucked Ares! Was I insane? He didn't even like me -- I didn't even like *him* -- what the hell was I doing fucking him on the floor of an elevator? What would Maura and Odessa say when they found out?

Ares took a breath to speak, and I panicked. Rolling away from him so that we were finally no longer touching, I flashed myself back to my chambers on Olympus, too chicken to hear whatever he was going to say.

Yes, that's me, all right. Thera, the Fury of Cowardice.

Chapter Eight

I managed to dodge my sisters' questions for three full days, quite an accomplishment considering Maura's innate ability to ferret out secrets. I was noncommittal, I was vague, I changed the subject with an utter lack of tact whenever they tried to ask me about the date. Maura kept popping into the office whenever I used the computer, asking leading questions about Aaron, and so far I'd been able to put her off with a muttered "he wasn't what I expected."

And if that wasn't the understatement of the eon, I didn't know what was.

Work took up all my spare time and I threw myself into it with abandon. Volcanoes erupted around the Earth's Ring of Fire, my favorite string of volcanoes ringing the Pacific Ocean, and set off a series of earthquakes -- some minor, some a bit more fun. My emotional turmoil had already led to an abnormally busy hurricane season. As I looked down on the world from Olympus, stirring the clouds into ever-tightening swirls with a lazy finger, I let my mind wander.

This just wasn't as much fun as it used to be.

I couldn't get Ares out of my mind. Why had he kissed me in the elevator? Hell, why had he *fucked* me in the elevator? I couldn't figure it out. He had made it painfully clear that I wasn't what he wanted, and then when he'd succeeded in hurting me, he'd suddenly been all over me. Was he the kind of sadistic bastard who got turned on by making a woman cry?

That just didn't add up. I'd known Ares for more years than I wanted to count and if he was into shit like that, I'd know about it. There were no secrets on Olympus. The juicier the gossip, the farther and faster it spread.

So what was the deal? I gave up on the hurricanes and paced around the central courtyard, hardly paying any attention to where I was going as I chased my own

thoughts.

I ran into Maura -- literally. "Brooding about that stupid date again?" she asked, brushing an invisible spot of dust from her immaculate *peplos* and regarding me coolly.

"I'm not brooding, and for the last time, nothing happened on that stupid date," I replied, weary of repeating the same words over and over. "There's nothing to brood about. Will you give it up already?"

She snorted. "Sure," she said, her tone dripping sarcasm. "That's why we've had thunderstorms on Olympus for the last three days straight, there's a heat-wave in Siberia and blizzards in Death Valley, and even the sunspots have been extremely active. You can't lie for shit, Thera, so come off it. What happened and who do we need to kill?"

I silently cursed my affinity for the weather and opened my mouth to deny it all yet again, but at that moment a messenger sprite zoomed through the Temple to come to a fluttering stop between us. "My Great Lady Alekto," he squeaked, bowing in midair, "the Divine Lord Ares requests an audience and commands me to return with your reply."

"Tell him to go fuck himself," I snapped without thinking.

Maura's eyes widened as the sprite almost dropped out of the air in shock. I could have cheerfully bitten out my tongue. "Oh, you are shitting me," she breathed, clutching her chest. "Ares? We have to go kill the damned God of War? Thera, are you absolutely *insane*?"

The sprite was looking alarmingly close to heart failure, and I used him as an excuse to ignore my sister's question. "Sit down and don't take that message back," I told him, waving toward the nearest pedestal. "And take a breath, for Zeus's sake."

The little messenger gasped in a breath and plopped down on the marble. I almost felt sorry for him until I remembered who he worked for, and then I shot him a glare that sent him straight back into panic mode.

"Leave the poor thing alone and answer your sister," Maura snapped. "Tell me what happened to the wind sprite and how you ended up going out with Ares. And

then I want to know exactly how he offended you so Des and I can plan his murder. Spill it, Thera. Now."

I transferred my glare to her and heard the ever-present thunder rumble outside. At least it hadn't rained today since I hadn't cried, but if I went back over every little detail like she wanted me to, we'd be having flash floods in no time. "The wind sprite was really Ares, but it wasn't his fault. It was the satyr who set us up. The food was good, the date was fine. I'm just pissed off that I got tricked. You don't have to maim or torture the God of War. Story time is now over, the end. Got it?"

Odessa stepped out from between two tall columns and shook her head. "Not the end," she began, but a booming voice cut her off before she could start trying to bully me too.

"You know, Thera, it really doesn't take this long to say yes and send my sprite back out."

All four of us spun around at the sound of Ares's voice. He leaned casually against a column at the head of the Temple, his long, muscular legs crossed at the ankle. I remembered how those legs had felt against mine and shivered before I could stop myself. He'd looked like sin in Armani, but now, wearing faded, well-worn jeans, a cream-colored button-down shirt, and black biker boots, he was a fantasy come to life.

He cocked his head to the side and smiled at me as the movement sent his hair sliding over one shoulder. "I refuse to believe you're speechless, Fury."

Odessa and Maura shrieked in unison as if his words had jolted them out of a spell. "How dare you disrespect our sister!" Odessa cried as she and Maura charged.

Before I even realized I meant to do it, I flashed across the Temple and materialized in front of Ares, determined to shield him from my sisters. As a result, I nearly got skewered as he drew his sword from nowhere to defend himself and missed me by less than an inch.

"Damn it, Thera!" he snarled, grabbing my arm and thrusting me behind him so I wouldn't get caught in the conflict.

"Stop it, all of you!" I shouted, infusing my voice with the power of the thunder

that was mine to command and sending a cyclone-force gust of wind at my sisters, driving them back. I yanked Ares around to face me. "You will not draw your sword in my Temple. Is that understood?" I snarled, offended beyond measure.

He opened his hand and his weapon evaporated. "Your pardon," he murmured, ignoring the rage of my sisters as I used the wind to keep them away from him. "I came to ask your pardon for many things, not add to my list of offenses. Will you come with me and hear what I have to tell you?"

"She will not!" Maura hissed, the sound echoed by all the snakes of her hair. "Thera, strike him down for what he did to you!"

I whirled on her and knew my eyes were glowing red with the force of my rage. "And what the hell do you know about it?" I demanded. "From the moment I returned, you assumed the date was a disaster. I don't need your help in this, so just butt out!"

There was a tiny *thud* as the messenger sprite fainted, and we all ignored it.

Ares didn't even glance at Maura as she continued to scream threats at him. "I do not fear you, Thera," he said softly, meeting my glowing eyes, the eyes of an enraged Fury, without flinching. "And I do not need you to protect me from these two. Come with me, listen to me. If you wish revenge afterward, I will go with you to Dike and accept her judgment on me. All right?"

Odessa and Maura both objected vehemently, and that made up my mind for me. "Fine," I snapped. "But make it quick. I don't have all day to waste with you."

He smiled as if I'd happily accepted and offered me his arm. I rolled my eyes but rested my hand in the crook of his elbow, trying not to let the gallant act charm me, and followed him out of my Temple.

At the bottom of the marble steps, he reached down and scooped up a wicker picnic basket. "What's that?" I asked with a frown.

He turned that megawatt-smile on me again. "I wanted to make up for the dismal service at the Plaza," he said. "Since I can't guarantee that same satyr won't show up at any other restaurant I might take you to, I decided on a picnic. Is that all right?"

In truth, the gesture touched me more than I wanted to admit. Despite everything, he really had been angered by the satyr's lack of respect -- not to *himself*, but to me. His effort to make amends was nothing I would have ever expected. I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

Don't read too much into this, I warned myself. He might just be doing this out of guilt over what had happened in the elevator, not some deep and abiding affection. *One picnic lunch does not a boyfriend make, you know.*

Why did the voice of reason always sound just like Maura?

Ares led me down the hill, the Olympian grass springy under our feet. The sun was out now, peeking between stormy clouds, betraying my mood as always. He didn't glance up. Instead, he kept his eyes on me as he said, "I have a garden behind my Temple, much like yours, that is shielded from prying eyes. I give you my word of honor that nothing would happen there that you do not want to happen. Would you like to dine there, where we can be assured of privacy?"

"I wouldn't bet on Maura not being able to get in if she wants to," I replied, looking away after only a moment. His dark eyes were much softer than I'd remembered them, and much sexier. Damned if I wasn't suddenly figuring out the answer to the questions I'd been asking myself for the last three days.

Why had I let Ares kiss me? Why had I ripped his shirt off and licked his neck? Why had I let him take me on the elevator floor?

Because he was six and a half feet of the most gorgeous, incredible, tight, prime male flesh I'd ever seen, that was why. And when he looked at me like that, it was hard to remember any of the very good reasons why I shouldn't let any of it happen again.

I heard his answering smile in his voice. "Well, let her try then," he said, and with a faint *pop* we flashed away from my Temple and into his.

Chapter Nine

I'd been in Ares's Temple many times before, and I was always impressed. Ancient weapons from around the world were displayed on the walls, each era separated by the thick marble columns common to all the temples on Olympus. I'd seen him in action enough to know that he was a master of all of them. As he led me past a full set of shining Roman armor, I couldn't help but remember the times I'd seen him in it, his long legs bare and golden beneath the skirt of leather pteryges that covered his hips and groin.

It was all I could do not to moan at the very thought.

Ares glanced my way, saw where I was looking, and gave me a grin that could only be described as devilish. "You sexist," he teased. "Drooling over a man in a short skirt. I could file harassment charges on you for that, you know."

I laughed out loud. "Dressed like that, you were just asking for it," I shot back.

His deep chuckle complemented mine, and then we passed through the stately columns at the back of the Temple and out into the gardens. "I could put it on for you, if you really want me to."

"Planning on doing battle?"

He grinned at me. "I'm always up for a little wrestling with a lovely lady," he said, and my snakes chose that moment to unravel from their loose twist and hiss at him. "Well, you might have a slight advantage," he added, reaching up to stroke one slithering head, and, to my surprise, he didn't get bitten.

Incredible.

I pulled away before the snakes could change their minds about taking a piece out of his finger and looked around his garden, which I'd never seen despite all the times I'd visited his Temple. Like the one I shared with my sisters, it was laid out

around a long, shallow pool and surrounded by lush trees, but there the resemblance ended. His garden was filled with roses of all things -- roses surrounding a splashing fountain, roses in neatly trimmed hedgerows, roses climbing in wild disarray over statues of entwined figures, loving and fighting and reclining in stone splendor.

This was no monument to war, Ares's garden. This was a refuge from it.

"Wow," I murmured, reaching out to touch a perfect, white blossom. "Not what I would've expected."

When I glanced up, Ares was looking at me with a strange intensity. "It's peaceful," he said. "I need that at times. Don't you?"

And I realized what the intensity in his gaze was -- empathy. I felt the sting of tears in my eyes at the strangeness of it. Here was someone who truly knew what I went through daily, the savage nature of my work and the sometimes overpowering desire for a respite. I blinked and looked down at the rose, the soft petals under my fingertip. "Yes," I whispered. "I know just what you mean."

A gentle caress of my shoulder brought me back to the present. I smiled at him, suddenly unsure and trying to hide it. Ares smiled back and let his hand slide down to take mine. "Shall we dine, my goddess?" he asked, drawing me deeper into the garden.

All I could do was nod.

Ares led me through the statues to a small, marble gazebo, open to the sky. Roses climbed the pillars and entwined in multicolored splendor above our heads, a living canopy. Silk and velvet pillows were strewn over the plush rugs that covered the floor. Ares put the basket down and knelt, plumping a few cushions together and pulling me down to rest on them. "This time," he said when I was seated, "I will serve you, and I promise I won't spill half of it all over the place."

I laughed. "Then I promise not to spit any food in your face this time either."

His booming laugh filled the gazebo. I reclined on the cushions and watched him unpack the basket, content to just look at him. His big body was relaxed, comfortable in his worn, mortal clothes. The muscles of his arms rippled enticingly as he withdrew a bottle of red wine and crystal goblets from the basket. When he uncorked the wine and

poured a glass for each of us, he dipped a fingertip into his glass and offered a few drops of wine to one of the snakes that slithered gently in my hair.

"You're going to win friends for life like that," I said, feeling the rest of them moving toward Ares's hand, hoping for some of the liquid. "Our acolytes don't tend to offer tidbits to my hair. They're afraid of the poison."

He dribbled a few more drops of the crimson wine into the waiting mouths, not flinching from the fangs that could kill even him within seconds. "I'm not afraid of anything about you, Thera," he said, meeting my eyes as he said it. A tight ball of nerves contracted in my stomach.

Zeus save me, but I was starting to dream of impossible things again. "Maybe you should be," I whispered. "Look, you were right. I'm not warm and cuddly, and I'm not always in control of what I can do. The storms that night and the lightning --"

"Were because I acted like an asshole and pissed you off," Ares interrupted me. "You were right. I had no right to say the things I did to you when we were in the elevator, and I'm sorry for it. The Pantheon misjudged you, and I went right along with it even though I, of all the gods, should know better. I'm the God of War, and I long for peace. Why should you, a goddess of destruction, be any different?"

I blinked rapidly and took a sip of my wine to hide it. "You're going to make it rain if you keep that up," I whispered, not meeting his eyes.

He left the snakes and caressed my cheek instead. "I'm trying to bring the sun out," he replied, and leaned down to kiss me.

It was like I'd been waiting for this since the moment I'd flashed myself home, and I went off like gunpowder to a match. His lips were soft, the kiss gentle, soothing even. It was so close to what I wanted, and at the same time not nearly enough, that I wrapped both arms around him and held him tight, trying to urge him on to something more passionate.

Unfortunately, I'd forgotten the wineglass in my hand.

I smelled the sudden tang of wine in the air just as Ares jumped. When he pulled away, I saw the crimson stain running over his shoulder and down his chest. Several

droplets splattered my *peplos* as I dropped the nearly-empty glass, mortified at what I'd done. "Oh, no," I said, grabbing the edge of my *peplos* and dabbing frantically at the shirt. "And here I just promised not to start another food-fight!"

Ares laughed and caught my hands. "You just gave me a very good excuse to take off both my shirt and your *peplos*," he teased. "You expect me to complain?"

And then he was kissing me again, deep and hot and dominant this time, pressing me back on the cushions and covering my body with his. I forgot about the stupid wine and tangled my fingers in his hair to hold him there for more. He was only too happy to comply. His tongue flicked over mine and drew it out to play as his hands found the clasps that held my *peplos* at the shoulders. I barely registered the faint thump as they fell to the carpets. I slid my hands over his shoulders and down his back, bare now -- apparently he'd flashed out of the soaked shirt, and I heartily approved of it -- and tried to silence the confusion that clamored for attention at the back of my mind.

But this time, I knew where this was headed and the questions refused to be ignored. "Why?" I gasped when he broke the kiss to lick a hot path across my shoulders. "I'm not what you want, Ares. You said it yourself. I'm not helpless or peaceful or any of it."

He didn't stop kissing my skin. "Maybe I didn't know what the hell I was talking about," he murmured, nudging the edge of my *peplos* lower, his breath warm on the swell of my breast. "Maybe I don't need someone who doesn't know what war is, Thera. Maybe I need someone who understands me and wants me anyway."

He raised his head then and caught my face in his hands. "Maybe you're exactly what I want and maybe you're not. Point is, how will we know unless we explore the possibilities?"

My heart pounded so hard I was amazed he didn't seem to hear it. I couldn't even care what my rioting emotions were doing to the weather. "That's what this is?" I said, hesitant in spite of the hot desire flowing through my veins. "We're -- you want to explore the possibilities?"

His thumb caressed my lower lip and I caught it between my teeth. "That's the

point of dating, isn't it?"

A sudden burst of sunlight, lemon yellow and glorious, filled the garden. Ares grinned. "I'll take that as an indication you like my plan," he teased, and bent down to kiss me again.

It lasted only a moment though before he pulled away once more. "Ares!" I cried, trying to drag him back. "Don't tease!"

He reached for his wineglass and gave me a wicked grin. "Why not?" he shot back. "Teasing can be fun, sweet Fury. Very, very fun." He dipped his fingers into the wine again, but instead of offering the drops to my snakes, he let them fall onto my skin, collecting in the hollow of my throat. "Very nice," he whispered, setting the glass aside. "A good place to start, don't you think?"

Chapter Ten

His tongue flicked over my pulse and I moaned, understanding his game. He traced the path of every last droplet, suckling gently, occasionally biting and making me jump. When he reached the hollow of my throat, he opened his lips over the little puddle there and sucked, caressing the skin with his tongue as he eased my *peplos* down to my waist. "Ares," I whispered, running my hands through his hair, no longer wanting to rush him.

This time, instead of sprinkling drops from his fingertips, he poured a thin trickle of wine over my breasts. The slight breeze chilled the liquid, making my nipples peak, making me yearn for the heat of his mouth on them. He didn't appease me no matter how I begged. Instead, he licked between my breasts, down my belly, over my ribs, chasing every stray drop and ignoring me when I tried to drag his mouth to where I wanted it. He chuckled against my skin and I growled impatiently as heat lightning flashed in the sunny sky above us.

"Temper, temper," he chided, then dipped his fingertips in the wine and rolled my nipples between them.

"Oh!" I cried, arching beneath him, wrapping my legs around his hips. He growled and kissed me hard. I opened without hesitation, wanting more, wanting anything he wanted to do to me, giving him lips and teeth and tongue as he plucked and rubbed my nipples, the wine slippery on his fingers. When he abruptly broke the kiss and sucked one nipple deep into his mouth, laving it with his tongue to get every last drop of the wine, I grabbed his hand and sucked his finger, wanting to taste the wine on his skin as he was tasting it on mine.

His deep groan was my reward. He switched to the other nipple, giving it the same thorough attention he'd given the first. I slid his finger in and out of my mouth,

running my tongue all around it. His breathing quickened and the movements of his tongue became faster, almost frantic. When I nipped his fingertip, he groaned again and pulled his hand from my grasp.

“Damn it all, Thera,” he growled, raising his head to meet my eyes, “you’re making me forget why I wanted this to be slow and sweet. I wanted to make up for the way your first time was, and now you have me wanting to do you hard and fast all over again!”

I smiled with a surge of pure, feminine satisfaction that I could bring him to the edge of control. “Hard and fast now,” I said, letting my hands slide down to squeeze that tight, hard ass. “Slow and sweet later.”

“I like the way you think,” he said, and then he was kissing me again and neither of us was coherent enough for any more words.

His jeans vanished and my disheveled *peplos* soon followed. The caress of the silk and velvet cushions against my bare skin was almost as intoxicating as the feel of Ares’s hair-roughened chest against my breasts. I arched beneath him, rubbing my nipples on his chest as I had that night in the elevator, and it made me just as crazy now as it had then. He broke our frantic kiss to lick his way down my belly. When I realized what he intended, I bit my lip hard to keep from moaning aloud at the mere thought.

How many movies had I watched, how many books had I read that described the feel of a man’s mouth playing with a clit, a man’s tongue sliding deep inside a pussy? How many times had I touched myself and wondered what it would really feel like, if it could possibly be as good as the books said it was? I’d gone thousands of years without knowing. Now I couldn’t wait to find out. As he took his time licking and kissing his way down my belly and over my thighs, I fought to keep from begging him to hurry *up* already.

From the first touch of Ares’s lips on my labia, I shuddered with an almost violent rush of pleasure. He raised his head just enough to grin at me, clearly reading the anticipation on my face, before settling between my thighs and blowing a soft, warm puff of air over my wet folds. “I should really save this treat for dessert,” he

murmured, holding my eyes as he slid a finger through the crimson curls.

“Don’t you dare stop now,” I growled.

He laughed and caressed me again, this time just grazing my clit with his fingertip. “That sounds like a threat, sweetheart,” he said, withdrawing the finger and flicking his tongue over it. I moaned at the look of bliss on his face as he tasted me.

“It is a threat, damn it,” I said, positively shaking with need. My inner muscles clamped down on nothing, making me feel so very empty inside, throbbing and aching to be filled. “Don’t tease me!”

He nipped my thigh, then soothed the sting with his tongue. “I like to tease you,” he whispered, draping my thighs over his forearms, spreading me wide for him. “There are few enough firsts in an immortal’s life, Thera, and I’m going to make this one incredible for you.”

When his head descended this time, he didn’t tease. I cried out again and again as he swept his tongue over my clit, humming a low note that sent the most delicious vibrations shivering down my nerves before his tongue licked deep into my pussy. I arched on the pillows, writhing, totally mindless with the sheer, unimaginable pleasure of it.

It was everything I’d imagined. It was more. It was... heaven.

He returned to my clit and slid two fingers inside me, thrusting them in and out as he suckled my clit. I came so hard I screamed, and he didn’t stop until he made me come again, hard and fast on the heels of the first orgasm. Hands fisted in the cushions, my body drawn tight as a bow, I couldn’t stop moaning as he licked me clean, taking his time and making a very thorough job of it.

“So, so damn good,” he growled, giving my clit another teasing flick of his tongue. “I’m dying for you, Thera. Please tell me you’re ready for me!”

I couldn’t think of anything I wanted more than to feel his cock deep inside me, filling me up. “More than ready,” I whispered, too breathless to demand, but it was enough for him.

Ares crawled up my body, still holding my legs over his arms, and kissed me as

he slowly impaled me on his throbbing cock. I wrapped my arms around him, unable to get close enough, and as he started to thrust I was all but sobbing with the pleasure of it. He buried his face in my hair, uncaring of the snakes, trusting them not to harm him as he took me hard and fast, deep and so incredibly good that I came and came and came, unable to tell where one orgasm stopped and the next started.

When he finally went rigid in my arms, groaning as his cock throbbed inside me, I tightened my thighs around him and wiggled my hips, bringing another, louder moan from him at the delicious friction of it until he collapsed atop me, breathing hard, both of us utterly spent.

I loved his weight on top of me, even though he was crushing the air out of me, and I closed my eyes to better memorize the sensation of his hot body covering mine. For a long time we lay like that, arms and legs entwined, his face pressed to my throat, his softening cock still inside me.

I could've stayed like that forever, but when bursts of light flashed repeatedly through my eyelids, I reluctantly opened my eyes to make sure I hadn't inadvertently set fire to his garden in my mindless ecstasy.

Instead, I saw streaks of light tracing white fire across the blue sky. I grinned in mingled relief and amusement, and nudged Ares. "Look up," I said. "You've got to see this."

He lifted his head and saw the shooting stars through the tangled rose branches before letting his head fall back, laughing. "I think most of Olympus knows you just had a very good time," he teased.

I laughed too. "At least you can't accuse me of faking it."

Ares shifted, rolling to his side and drawing me into his arms. "I'll remember that," he promised. "Never stop loving my Fury until we both see stars."

* * *

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I tapped the edge of the keyboard, staring at the screen and trying not to let the goofy smile take over again. *Goofy smiles are not becoming of a Fury*, I reminded myself. *Snarls, scowls, cold stares that freeze the blood...*

It wasn't working. The goofy smile had become a permanent addition to my face lately. I supposed it was a side effect of regular, spectacular, utterly divine sex. If that was the case, it was an expression I'd just have to learn to live with.

The box on the screen stared at me and I rested my chin on my hand, trying to marshal my thoughts. Finally I smiled and started typing.

I don't know what I expected when I signed on to this matchmaking site, but it's not what I got. What I got is much better than anything I could ever have hoped for. Just goes to show you that even the gods don't always know what they need. Thanks for not giving me what I asked for -- thanks for giving me what I needed.

That'd have to do. Ares was waiting, and he'd promised to wear his armor today. I hit "Send" and ran out to meet him.

Amelia Elias

Amelia Elias is the nom de plume of a Central Texas home health nurse and mother of ten -- six cats, two dogs, and two monkeys who insist they're really boys. Amie was introduced to romances at the tender age of twelve by her late grandmother, who always packed a paperback for her to read during Bingo. After the last number was called, Amie would stay up late and, armed with a notepad and pencil, try to fill in those frustrating blank spots in the story when the characters closed the bedroom door. And yes, she still has those first clumsy attempts at writing the good stuff. Hopefully she's learned a thing or two since then. Learn more about Amelia by visiting her website at www.AmeliaElias.com.