

NICA BERRY

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Author's Note

Writers are often asked where they get their ideas. The origins of this story are easy to trace. I bought a cicada-shaped ring at a store I work at, because I like bugs, and decided to look up what cicadas might symbolize. In doing so, I came across this article about cicadas in the context of cultural entomology: http://www.insects.org/ced3/cicada_ancgrcult.html. The main storyline grew from ideas gleaned from that article. And while I did research quite a bit about ancient Greece and the pantheon and stayed as true to it as I could, some elements have been changed to fit the context of the story, so any errors or omissions are necessarily my own.

Chapter One

Many years ago, a handsome youth named Tenthus tended his family's flock of sheep on the hillsides near the great temples. He did not sing, nor did the sheep wear bells, for music and song were gifts not yet granted to the people. He watched the sheep as they grazed, daydreaming as the almond blossoms drifted around him. He often lay back in the soft grass to sleep, naked and unashamed, enjoying the warmth of the sun on his skin.

Far above the hill, in the realm of the gods, one of the nine muses, by the name of Euterpius, saw the beautiful young man and was so taken by Tenthus's appearance that he decided to pay the shepherd a visit. He stole upon Tenthus as he slept, admiring the fine muscles of his chest and legs and the *phallos* resting limply against his thigh. Euterpius, naked as his prey, tucked his *aulos*, a double flute, into the crook of a tree branch for safety and to free his hands. He longed to touch the shepherd's phallos, to feel it harden beneath his fingers, and to kiss the full lips now slightly parted as Tenthus slept.

With one hand held just above Tenthus's skin, he traced the outline of the shepherd's body, not quite touching it. Such a tenuous, fleeting beauty these mortals had, and a wonder no other god, such as Pan, had chanced upon this prize. Euterpius had a mind to take advantage of it before it disappeared altogether.

One of the sheep bleated, startling Tenthus awake. Euterpius stayed where he was, staring straight into Tenthus's brown eyes. The youth's mouth parted in surprise. "Who are you?"

"A muse. Right now, you are mine." Euterpius could no longer contain himself; he pressed his lips to the other man's. It was just as he'd imagined, sweet and soft, stirring his loins to life.

Instead of drawing away, Tenthus arched toward him, extending his tongue to meet Euterpius's. They teased each other for a moment before Euterpius pulled back, panting with desire. "I would ask a boon of you," Euterpius said, "and for this, I will give you a gift, one such as no mortal has ever been given." If Tenthus refused, Euterpius had half a mind to take him anyway.

Tenthus smiled, lust evident in his eyes. He reached up to stroke Euterpius's face. "I need nothing except the pleasure of meeting a muse, but if it pleases you, then I accept. What is it you wish?"

"I desire to make love to you." Euterpius dared to stroke the phallos, now hardening at the mere suggestion of lovemaking.

"Surely some pretty maiden would sate you just as well," Tenthus replied, one eyebrow raised.

"And why settle for some virtuous maiden when I have here a handsome, naked shepherd who possesses everything I desire?" He dared to grasp the youth's manhood, giving it a gentle squeeze for emphasis. "And you? Do you dream of a nubile young woman while you're out here alone?"

"No. I have no desire for women," Tenthus said, his voice hoarse. Euterpius's ministrations caused him to harden. He thrust his hips slightly upward, which the muse took as a sign to continue. Lunging forward, he clasped the back of the muse's neck. Their lips met

again. Euterpius wrapped his arms around the youth's chest, dancing his fingers along the knobby spine.

Tenthus pressed his body as tightly as possible against the muse, trying to thrust his phallos between Euterpius's legs. Euterpius laughed. "Easy, now. There will be a time for that. But for the moment..."

He kissed Tenthus again, all the while lowering him back down to the ground. The shepherd's skin was flushed, making him even more attractive. It took all of Euterpius's self-restraint not to use his spear to impale Tenthus right then, but he wanted to cherish every moment of this encounter.

The shepherd, too, seemed to want more, but Euterpius forcefully held him down and gave him no choice. Euterpius kissed the handsome, heaving chest, loving the way it felt under his hands and lips. Eventually, Tenthus stopped struggling and lay still as Euterpius worked.

The sheep bleated again. "Tending sheep is a lonely business," Tenthus said, eyes wide and fevered. "Stay with me forever."

Euterpius laughed. "Alas, that gift is not within my power. I have other duties to attend to."

"But not right now." Tenthus moaned as Euterpius's mouth enveloped his phallos. "Not for a long time yet."

"Not yet," Euterpius agreed, speaking almost incoherently around Tenthus's phallos. He didn't want to let it go. His eyes drifted upward to see Tenthus's face, muscles strained, eyes closed, submitting wholly to Euterpius's passion. The shepherd cried out as Euterpius palmed his testicles, gently massaging them while never releasing his phallos. Tenthus's voice was clear and musical, caught as he was in the throes of lust. Euterpius wanted to hear more.

When Euterpius slid a finger down the smooth skin between Tenthus's legs and fingered the entrance there, Tenthus tensed. His eyes opened and he raised his head to look.

“What are you doing?” He rolled onto his side, curling up with his back to the muse to escape Euterpius’s fondling.

“It’s pleasure. I promise you that.” Euterpius positioned himself so he lay spooned with Tenthus, though did not touch him. “I am a muse. A son of Zeus and skilled in the arts of love. I will not hurt you. Relax.”

Tenthus hesitated, fear and wonder warring in his eyes. Euterpius stroked the shepherd’s cheek, then placed his face near Tenthus’s ear. He started to hum, a sound that both startled and soothed his lover.

“What is that?” Tenthus asked, low, wonderingly.

“Music,” Euterpius said. “My gift to you in return for...” His hand trailed down Tenthus’s smooth back, down to the fleshy curves of his buttocks. This time, Tenthus didn’t resist as Euterpius touched him there. Still humming, Euterpius traced the wrinkled entrance until Tenthus had relaxed enough to slide his finger inside. One of the benefits of being a muse; he had no need for external lubrication to make his trysts pleasurable.

Tenthus gasped but did not tighten or pull away. Euterpius explored him internally, marveling at the warmth and softness, enjoying the sight of Tenthus’s twitching body when he pressed against that internal pleasure point.

Humming turned to a wordless song. Tenthus reacted as if bespelled, letting Euterpius continue to explore him. The shepherd began to pant. His phallos looked so hard as to be painful.

“More,” Tenthus said.

With his own phallos demanding attention and relief, Euterpius obliged. He couldn’t wait any longer, gentle though he wanted to be with this young, naive shepherd. Roughly, he positioned Tenthus with his rear end in the air, which left the youth tantalizingly exposed. At the sight, all restraint vanished. Euterpius’s voice rose as sense fell away, and there was nothing left for him except the need to be inside Tenthus’s body. He speared it

with his phallos, over and over. Tenthus yielded to him as if they were made for one another, two parts of the same whole. Bliss. Complete and utter bliss, such as Euterpius had never felt, not anywhere on this Earth or above. Tenthus was perfect in every way.

The shepherd's hands raked the grass, tearing at it. His grunts punctuated Euterpius's song, adding a sort of primal rhythm. Euterpius managed to reach around Tenthus's waist to fist the shepherd's phallos, using his own momentum from behind to force Tenthus back and forth in his hand.

Not long after, Tenthus's voice joined his in a perfect duet, one born of instinct and innate talent. His body convulsed beneath Euterpius. The muse felt a warm stickiness cover his hand, and he thought he had never been part of anything so perfect and beautiful. His own release came, and with it, a cry to the realm above, a long, pure note of joy.

Moments later, they lay spooned, breathing hard. When at last Tenthus could speak, he said, "I love you."

Euterpius didn't answer. He'd thoroughly enjoyed himself with Tenthus, but love? It couldn't be a factor in this. He'd seen how his father loved men and women alike, only to throw them away when someone new caught his eye. Several he loved without asking first, kidnapping them to fulfill his pleasure. Euterpius wouldn't be like that. He'd asked, and he'd give Tenthus a gift in return. Pleasure for them both, but not love. Surely it was only the aftermath of sex that had made Tenthus speak so carelessly.

Tenthus swiveled his head around to look at Euterpius, his mouth curled into a lazy smile. "Again?"

Euterpius indulged him. He, too, felt the second resurgence of lust. This time, they rolled in the grass, scattering sheep in every direction. Euterpius would let him come tantalizingly close to lips or chest or phallos and then use his ample muscles to push him away. The muse laughed and sang, enjoying the dance of bodies.

From time to time, Tenthus would join him in song, timid at first, then growing in confidence as Euterpius repeated phrases until Tenthus caught them and sang them back perfectly. As a reward, Euterpius kissed him, then held him at bay until Tenthus performed for him again.

Night fell, and the moon rose high in the sky before both of them finally became too exhausted to do more with either body or voice. All around them, the torn ground showed evidence of their play. The sheep had long since vanished, and Tenthus admitted he didn't care what happened to the dim-witted beasts. "They're nothing compared to you," he told Euterpius and followed it with a kiss.

A chill settled over Euterpius as he retrieved his aulos from the tree. Tenthus was obviously infatuated. The muse hoped that his gift would give Tenthus something else to be obsessed with. "And, here, at last, is my gift to you." He sat behind Tenthus, knees and arms wrapped around the other man. "Your fingers go here, and here." One by one, Euterpius placed Tenthus's fingers on the instrument. "And your mouth, just so." He positioned Tenthus's lips into the correct embouchure. "Now, blow."

He did. And from the instrument came sounds sweeter than anyone could produce other than Euterpius himself. The muse would sing a line, and Tenthus would repeat the phrase perfectly. The shepherd truly had the talent for making music; Euterpius had simply given him the means to do so. Tenthus, enraptured by this new device, played on and on, oblivious to anything besides the sweetness of the notes.

The muse listened, pleased that he'd chosen so well. His heart soared with joy tempered by sadness. Wonderful as the afternoon and night had been, he could not stay. Tenthus would be disappointed, but it couldn't be helped and besides, Euterpius had granted him something no other mortal had before. Music should be more than enough to stave off his disappointment.

Quietly, he slipped off, leaving Tenthus to his music.

* * * * *

Night faded into morning. Tenthus, still playing, wandered down the hillside and toward the village. A crowd gathered to see what the sound was. For all of them, it was the first time they'd heard music, and they were awed. Day after day, the crowd continued to grow, and a few enterprising men and women started creating their own instruments: a drum, a lyre, and pipes. Others put words to music, and soon the hills echoed with the joyous sounds of instruments and voices.

Only when the villagers had gone back to their own lives did Tenthus realize how alone he suddenly was. To his surprise and anguish, Euterpius was gone. As much as Tenthus enjoyed his music, he wanted the muse's love more. He poured his longing into his songs, and they soon turned from happiness to bitterness. Around him, the music he'd inspired changed to reflect his sorrow. The people wept for his grief and soon drove him away from the village, unable to withstand the heavy emotions.

Finally, after a month in which Tenthus neither stopped wandering nor stopped using his instrument to grieve, Euterpius returned. The days following his tryst had not been easy on the muse. Full of love and joy, he'd returned home, only to face Zeus's wrath. Much of his father's anger came from Euterpius being so careless with his gifts, but no little part of it came from jealousy. Zeus, too, was fond of handsome young men and was annoyed that Euterpius had noticed Tenthus while he had not. Zeus forbade his son to leave their realm as punishment, but thankfully, did not approach Tenthus himself. Euterpius sulked, even as the music grew and spread across the land. One constant, sorrowful strain continued to haunt his ears, and nowhere could he flee to be rid of the anguished sound of Tenthus's pain.

At the end of the month, Zeus summoned Euterpius. The muse knelt on one knee, head bowed while his father ranted. "Your shepherd must be done away with, for his music is making gods and mortals weep alike!"

“Do not kill him,” Euterpius said, close to tears. He’d never thought that Tenthus would take his absence so badly. “His pain is my fault, and his talent is too great to waste.”

“Yet such skill should not be borne by a mortal.”

“Then I beseech you to make him --”

“Immortal? I do not like the idea. Even I could not listen to such music so often, especially since it is tainted with pining for you.” Zeus thought a moment. “Since he plays and lives for love, just as a cicada does, he will be granted an immortality akin to that insect. As the cicada dies and is reborn, so shall be Tenthus. He will have one month every seventeen years to live sustained on music and love. I will see to it.”

Euterpius prostrated himself. “Please, Father, let me do it. Let me go to him.” In truth, he feared what his father would do to Tenthus if he met the shepherd directly. “I beg you.”

He felt Zeus’s gaze. “Go, then. Your next tryst will give him both life and death.” A wave of his hand, and power coursed through Euterpius. “Do not go against me in this, or you will be punished and your lover killed.”

“No, Father. I will abide by your wishes,” Euterpius said, as relieved as he could be under the circumstances. He went down to the Earth, torn between his bodily need and the knowledge that he’d ruined Tenthus’s simple life.

He found Tenthus alone on the hill, starved and thin, his feet scratched and bloody from wandering. A filthy, torn *chiton* was his only clothing, and the single piece of linen was so tattered as to be nearly useless. The song he played was so mournful it broke Euterpius’s heart. The muse wept openly.

Upon seeing Euterpius, Tenthus threw down his aulos and launched himself into his arms. The muse held him, breathing in the heady masculine scent, feeling the body grown tense with fear and despair. Tenthus’s lips found Euterpius’s face, kissing away the gathering tears. No more could Euterpius resist him, no matter the consequences.

“I couldn’t sleep because of you,” Tenthus told him. “I couldn’t eat, couldn’t think of anything but having you back, so I played. I didn’t know how else to reach you.” He ran warm fingers through Euterpius’s hair. “Did I do wrong?”

Euterpius didn’t answer, too ashamed to mention his own injustice. He didn’t regret giving music to Tenthus, nor seeing it take hold in the nearby cities and beyond. He regretted his own rash actions and for being unable to deny his physical desires, because that’s what this was, a sudden, ill-conceived idea, an afternoon’s passion and lust that had brought far too much attention to his beloved shepherd. No happy outcome could be had for a muse and a mortal.

He hated himself now for what he had to do, but his desire did not let him hesitate or change his mind. Fear of his father’s wrath if he failed urged him on. With trembling hands, he ripped off the remains of Tenthus’s clothes. The shepherd’s body, wasted though it was, still welcomed him. Euterpius was as careful as he could be, frightened that Tenthus would break. “I’m sorry,” he said. “It was only supposed to be for an afternoon.”

“Don’t talk,” Tenthus said. Two of his fingers pressed Euterpius’s lips shut. “I need you. Not your music.”

The words stung. Love between them could not be, but Euterpius could see no way out of the trap he’d built. Despite his appearance, Tenthus still had strength enough for love. Euterpius hesitated, not wanting to hurt Tenthus more than he had to. The shepherd’s face fell, and Euterpius couldn’t stand it any longer. Gods, he *wanted* Tenthus, and if this was to be their last coupling, then he meant to make it memorable.

He sought Tenthus’s mouth, the lips now dry and cracked from lack of care. Heartbroken at the way this had turned out, Euterpius peeled away the tattered chiton to better survey the damage he had caused. Tenthus’s shoulders were little more than bones, each rib visible across his thin chest. Scabs and insect bites covered the dried, sun-browned skin.

"I'm sorry," Euterpius whispered.

Tenthus placed a callused palm across Euterpius's mouth. "Don't talk. Just love me."

The request scored the muse's heart. It couldn't be. Tenthus would hate him for what he was about to do.

Euterpius did it anyway, knowing it was Tenthus's only chance to live. He nodded his assent. Tenthus removed his hand, and Euterpius kissed him. Tenthus closed his eyes, his body malleable to everything Euterpius wanted to do to him.

They sank to the ground. Tenthus folded himself into Euterpius's arms. The muse held him, stroking the ravaged body. Arms, shoulders, thighs, then down between them. A few more intimate caresses and Tenthus's shaft hardened in Euterpius's hand. Tenthus jerked his hips forward so that his phallos thrust in the center of Euterpius's fist.

Euterpius felt his own arousal hard against Tenthus's thigh. The harder his phallos grew, the less time they had. Kneeling and still fisting Tenthus with one hand, he managed to work the shepherd around so that he faced Euterpius and his legs straddled the muse's. Euterpius reached around to grab Tenthus's buttocks and slide a finger between them. Tenthus rose enough for Euterpius to arrange his erection just so. Hands around Tenthus's hips, Euterpius eased him down.

The muse both relished and dreaded the moment he entered Tenthus. The warmth he craved hugged his phallos. Tenthus clasped his hands around the muse's neck, head raised, mouth wide. Euterpius watched him, drinking in his lover's pleasure, holding on to it while it lasted. Tenthus braced his arms on the muse's shoulders and sinuously moved his body up and down. Euterpius moved with him, matching his movements to the shepherd's. Heat rose within him, and with it, a tingling of power. Soon, now.

Too soon. Without wanting to, Euterpius shuddered and released his seed. Zeus's spell went with it, passing from the muse's body into the shepherd's with a sudden, bright heat.

Tenthus threw back his head and screamed. His nails dug into Euterpius's back hard enough to draw blood. The muse pulled him close so that Tenthus's head rested on his shoulder and held him tightly, guilty at being the cause of his lover's agony. As Euterpius watched, two slits opened up on either side of Tenthus's spine. Golden fluid leaked from them, oozing down his back like honey.

Shaking from pain, Tenthus craned his head around, not quite able to see the wet lumps of insect wings emerging from the slits. "What is this? What's happening?" The wings grew, stretching out and lengthening until they went past Tenthus's buttocks. "What did you do to me?"

Euterpius cradled Tenthus's head in his hands for comfort. "My father's gift and curse. You are granted immortality, but in the form of a cicada, to rise every seventeen years."

"No!" Tenthus clawed at his lover, now horrified. "How could you do this? I thought you loved me!"

Love wasn't the right word. Respected, adored, lusted after...but not loved. Guilt stabbed through Euterpius. Maybe he'd done wrong in doing this without asking Tenthus. Maybe it was selfish...but it was the only way Euterpius knew to keep his talented shepherd alive. "He wanted to kill you. I could not let that happen." He held Tenthus at arm's length, praying that the young man would understand and forgive him. "I could not let you suffer because of my wrongs. This way, you will live. You will play. And you will feed on love."

Tenthus's voice cracked. "With you?"

"I can't feed you the way a mortal must." Euterpius shook his head. "I will visit, but there must be others."

"No!" Tenthus pounded at Euterpius. "How *could* you! I should have known better than to love a muse. I should have known."

"I'm sorry," Euterpius said. The man before him began to change. It looked as if Tenthus were melting. Liquid secreted from his skin, coating every part of him in a substance

as thick and golden as honey. Tenthus wiped at it, but it gathered more quickly than he could be rid of it. The last thing Euterpius could see clearly was Tenthus's face, a mixture of sorrow and horror, before it, too, was covered up. Now, all that was left of Tenthus was a limp body wrapped in a hardening cocoon.

With his own hands, Euterpius dug at the soft earth to give Tenthus a resting place. It took a day and a night before he was satisfied, and he lowered Tenthus into the hole. Carefully, he layered dirt over the cocoon, which would keep his lover safe and warm until it was time for him to emerge. Then he picked up the aulos and went into the city to instruct the people on how they should care for their new immortal.

And there on the hillside where Tenthus and Euterpius had first made love to each other, a temple was raised. Rites were created, priests selected, young men trained for the day when Tenthus would rise. They dedicated their bodies and souls to the idea of Tenthus, each one hoping that, one day, he could prove to be a lover equal to Euterpius.

As for Euterpius, he watched and waited, hoping that one day Tenthus would find the mortal man he was truly meant to love.

Chapter Two

Many years later, so long that Tenthus's origins were more myth than fact, Phaedrus stood in the Temple of Tenthus, naked. He held his chin up and looked his mentor, Diomedes, straight in the eye. This was his final test to become Tenthus's chosen, to let his mentor rouse himself to climax by fondling Phaedrus, with Phaedrus revealing none of his own enjoyment. The temple considered it unseemly for the younger of the pair to react. Diomedes's hands were skilled, and it didn't take long for Phaedrus to produce an erection. The real test lay in restraining himself until Diomedes reached his own climax.

Diomedes was a difficult man to rouse and chosen purposefully for these tests. Well past the age of virility, he nonetheless oversaw the training of all who entered Tenthus's temple. He wore a silver pectoral to proclaim his status as head priest of the temple, the gilt showing the blessed Tenthus. He was still handsome, with curly white hair that reached his shoulders and a full beard that he enjoyed stroking whenever he was thoughtful.

Now, Diomedes's thoughts were focused entirely on one thing alone, and his hands were far too busy to clutch his beard. Phaedrus kept his attention on his mentor, staring unblinkingly into the cold brown eyes that had never really held any affection for his

student. Phaedrus couldn't help provoking the stolid old man; he grinned and licked his lips, breaking protocol.

One of Diomedes's hands went to Phaedrus's throat. If they weren't being watched, the priest wouldn't have hesitated to slap Phaedrus, but his face could be seen by the other priests and students in the room. None of the other *hetairo*, male courtesans trained to serve as sexual companions, would ever dream of disobeying, especially during a trial such as this.

But then, Phaedrus refused to be as docile as they were.

Diomedes bowed his head until they were forehead to forehead. "Damn you," the priest said so the others couldn't hear. "This is not the time. Behave yourself."

Phaedrus laughed silently. Let the observers think his shoulders shook from tension. Of course he would disobey, no matter the circumstances. It worked. Diomedes's anger and frustration made him hard.

Phaedrus swallowed a groan as his mentor placed his phallos between Phaedrus's thighs and pumped. Diomedes's hard stomach battered against Phaedrus's erection. Agony, pleasurable as it was, tested the limits of Phaedrus's endurance. He wanted to moan, but that, too, was forbidden. His little disobediences were between him and Diomedes.

Three other youths, Phaedrus's companions and competitors, sat glumly against the wall having failed in their tests. Years spent training for the rebirth of Tenthus wasted, hopes vanished in the course of an afternoon. They would all find work in a pleasure house, but only the one who'd gained the honor of serving Tenthus would be treated as a demigod, given the honor of choosing his own lovers and a roomful of servants to see to his every need.

Phaedrus had no intention of losing this final test, not to any of his proud and obedient peers. Especially not when they constantly flaunted their goodness and "purity." All of them had been stoic during their trial. No movement, no tricks.

Diomedes continued to thrust, warming Phaedrus's groin with a heat he wasn't allowed to express. The force of the thrusts would have knocked Phaedrus off his feet if it weren't for the bruising grip on his upper arms, another reason that so many of the other hetairo failed. If it wasn't from being unable to control their own pleasure, it was from not being able to endure other discomforts. Phaedrus didn't mind. Rather, he welcomed the pain.

Their hips slammed together. Phaedrus's own desire and need for release grew. Much longer and he wouldn't be able to help himself. He gritted his teeth, wishing he could close his eyes, but he didn't. Diomedes continued to stare coldly at him, strain and physical need mixing on his face. The old priest, for all his lessons, never seemed to *enjoy* them, no matter what Phaedrus did.

At last, Diomedes stiffened, letting out a groan as his seed trailed down Phaedrus's legs. Holding on any longer was pure torture, but Phaedrus did, just long enough for his mentor to expend himself fully.

Then it was over. Diomedes stepped away with one last stroke between Phaedrus's legs. Phaedrus didn't bother to hold in his own pleasure anymore; he let out a yowl like a cat in heat as the much-needed release wracked his body. Diomedes watched from a distance as Phaedrus dropped to his knees from the force of his pent-up climax. This time, he closed his eyes. He couldn't help it. He breathed hard, reveling in the heat and sensation of his body as it spasmed.

Done at last, he knelt on the sticky floor, waiting with head bowed for his decree. A sweet-smelling garland came to rest around his shoulders and another atop his head. Laurel. For the victor.

Pride touched Diomedes's voice as he spoke loud enough for everyone to hear. "You have succeeded, my student. Do you accept your place and duty as companion to an immortal?"

Phaedrus looked up to see his mentor's pleasure. "I do, my teacher. It is my wish." He said the words just as he had practiced daily for the past many years. They still came easily, more so now that he was truly victorious.

He grinned, savoring the word. *Victor*. For once, he'd succeeded where his overzealous classmates had not.

Diomedes extended a hand. "Then come. We feast tonight, and tomorrow you will be prepared as is fitting. The ritual for calling Tenthus will be explained and performed, and after that, you will belong to him alone."

Phaedrus accepted his mentor's hand and rose. His classmates watched him, all close together and whispering. Jealousy, Phaedrus thought. Certainly their losses were disappointing, but he thought it only fair. He'd put up with their jibes and barbs long enough, and was quite happy to succeed where they had not.

"Son of a murderer," one of them whispered as he walked past. "Serves you right."

Despite his win, despite his resolution, the words still stung.

* * * * *

Later that afternoon, Phaedrus sat in his room, staring into the polished bronze of a caryatid mirror with, appropriately, a nude, cicada-winged Tenthus as the figure on the base. Phaedrus was scarcely able to recognize himself as one of his classmates, Aristes, arranged his hair using bits of wax to keep it in place. It all seemed unreal that he'd finally been chosen as the sexual companion to Tenthus, he who was reborn.

Phaedrus had been raised for this, chosen along with the best of several other nubile youths trained to be an hetairos. He was nineteen now, skilled in every bodily art imaginable. The perfect massage came easily to his fingers, as did the knowledge of how to make a lover's tryst last the entire night without becoming exhausted. Like the others in Tenthus's temple, he could play any instrument at hand and sing with a sweet, sibilant voice.

None of that, it was said, could even come close to matching Tenthus's skill at music. Still, the priests deemed it wise to teach their students as many ways to please Tenthus as possible.

The scholars and priests all said Tenthus fed on lust and a man's seed, hedonistic in his pleasures, but the music he created was beyond anything imaginable. It would be Phaedrus's duty to provide for Tenthus, to see to his every need, bodily and otherwise, and not to give in to his own desires. That last, he knew, would be difficult.

"I hear he's a monster," Aristes said as he tugged roughly at a knot in Phaedrus's shoulder-length, curly hair. "Our prayers and supplications mean nothing to him. Other offerings have died out there when they saw him. Either that, or they went mad."

Phaedrus feigned nonchalance, mentally shrugging off the warning. Diomedes and the others wouldn't keep such secrets from them. Phaedrus, too, had heard the rumors of death and madness, but there were also those who said Tenthus was exactly the kind of lover an immortal was reported to be. Fierce and gentle at the same time and a provider of unimaginably good sex.

"Some of the latest ones, he took them, and took them hard. They screamed, and he didn't care."

"Stories," Phaedrus said, secretly wondering what exactly Aristes meant by *hard*. There were days when Diomedes had treated Phaedrus to some of the rougher aspects of sex, with ropes and force. Not the others, though. Diomedes had never taught them anything but the strict, acceptable forms of pleasure. Phaedrus had enjoyed his private sessions. It seemed the only way he could be aroused and enjoy himself lately.

"Not stories. It's written down. The priests keep records. Every offering, they make a note of what happened. Germaius and I saw them once."

Germaius was one of their other classmates. Phaedrus had no fondness for him. "You broke in to the records room?" It surprised him that someone as obedient as Aristes would dare to break the rules. Anyone who did so would be beaten if they were lucky, killed if they

were not. “What did the papers say?” Aristes had a superb memory; he could recall nearly everything he’d heard or seen written.

“He’s a monster, I tell you. He got so violent with one offering, he unmanned the poor thing. The next one heard and tried to run away, but the priests wouldn’t let him. They tied him up so he couldn’t defend himself when Tenthus came. That one went mad. He screamed every time Tenthus went near, but Tenthus fed on him anyway. And you know what they did to the offering afterward? They killed him.”

“You’re not scaring me,” Phaedrus said. Aristes had always been prone to gossip and spreading rumors. No doubt he would play his future patrons against each other much as he had his classmates. Most likely he was lying about seeing the records room and just making up fanciful tales to try and spook Phaedrus. It wasn’t working.

“Want to know a secret?” Aristes leaned close to Phaedrus’s ear. “I failed on purpose. I don’t care if being an immortal’s chosen is the ultimate honor. I feel sorry for you. Germaius and I get real men. You get a monster. But then, it’s only to be expected, knowing what you are and what you’ve done. You deserve it.”

Privileged bastard. Phaedrus resisted the urge to shove Aristes away. The young man repulsed him.

“He’s as ugly as the insects he takes after.” One final sneer and Aristes backed off. “The records say that too. Horrifying. A man that looks and acts more like an insect than a man. I’m sure *you* won’t have any trouble with him.”

Keeping a plain expression on his face was difficult. Aristes had always been obnoxious, but now that he knew Phaedrus’s future, he was being downright cruel.

“Good luck,” the other young man said. He dipped his head down to speak directly in Phaedrus’s ear. “Enjoy the feast tonight. It will be your last as a sane man.”

Furious, Phaedrus threw the bronze mirror after him. It missed, striking the wall and clattering to the floor. Aristes fled, but not fast enough. Phaedrus caught a handful of fabric,

enough to tug Aristes off balance. In moments, Phaedrus straddled Aristes and grabbed his hair. Aristes screamed as Phaedrus struck his head against the tiled floor. "Take it back!" Phaedrus said. "Coward! *Take it back!*"

Their shouting attracted attention. Diomedes and two of the other priests rushed in. One of them bodily pulled Phaedrus off his victim. Phaedrus struggled against his captor, still furious at Aristes.

Diomedes and the other priest helped Aristes to sit up. Blood and snot and tears had turned his face into a mess. The look on Diomedes's face as he examined Aristes's injury was one Phaedrus had come to expect, annoyance that once again Phaedrus hadn't been able to control his temper.

"Nothing broken, nothing too deep. He's lucky," Diomedes said with a glare at Phaedrus. "And so are you." He nodded at the priest holding Phaedrus. "Leave us. Take this one away and get him cleaned up."

The priests, Aristes in tow, had barely left before Diomedes struck Phaedrus across the face. "I thought I taught you to keep hold of yourself! How dare you do such a thing in Tenthus's own temple?"

Cheek still stinging, Phaedrus knelt to prostrate himself. "He profaned, my master. He told lies about the blessed Tenthus. About how he and Germaius had sneaked into the records and saw that the other offerings went mad because blessed Tenthus is a monster." Phaedrus didn't regret what he'd done. Not at all. "I'm sure he was lying. My master wouldn't keep such secrets from us." He let his gaze drift upward. The smile he used was the one that always provoked Diomedes the most.

The face of his mentor remained impassive as it judged him. Diomedes had never shown him any great affection, so it had become a game to taunt the old priest as much and as often as possible.

Phaedrus rose to his knees. He leaned forward to nuzzle Diomedes's groin. "Aristes said he failed the test on purpose because he had no wish to be given to a monster."

Diomedes stroked Phaedrus's head. "And his tales? Did they frighten you?"

"No," Phaedrus said. In truth, he felt relieved that Tenthus might not be wholly a benign, benevolent immortal after all. He wouldn't have felt worthy of being his consort. "Nothing scares me anymore." At Diomedes's harsh look, he averted his eyes.

Diomedes sighed. His hand caught in Phaedrus's hair. "He should not have spoken of these things. To you, least of all."

Phaedrus wondered at that. He knew as well as his mentor that he was different from the other hetairo, not in the least because he used pain and disobedience to find his pleasure. Though this time, he had the sense that Diomedes hinted at something else. Silence stretched between them. Phaedrus dealt with his unease the only way he knew how. From the position he was in, it was easy to slide a hand beneath the edge of Diomedes's chiton and up to his tender parts.

"Do you think of *nothing* else?" Diomedes used his grip on Phaedrus's hair to jerk his student's head back. "Not now. Not here. You know better."

Of course he knew better, but that wasn't the point. Diomedes could be a stiff-necked old buzzard when he wasn't teaching.

"I think as you taught me, my mentor. Won't you miss me, after tomorrow? I'll have to give all of my attentions to an immortal who may or may not be a monster. And you," he said, giving Diomedes a little squeeze between the legs, "will have to put up with those boring, bland young men who call themselves hetairo."

The priest's voice held no warmth. "Those 'boring and bland' hetairo will carry with them the honor of the temple when they leave here, unlike you, my dear student. They are fervent in their beliefs and dedication to the gods. I don't know when, or if, I will dare to loose you in the world."

“I believe in the gods. You know that.” Phaedrus laughed to hide his discomfiture. “What need of the world have I, when I can find all my pleasures right here?” He doubted he’d be able to rouse his mentor; the priest was in too foul a mood. He tried anyway, cupping Diomedes’s testes in his palm and gently manipulating them.

His efforts made Diomedes cringe. The priest shook his head and shoved Phaedrus away. “Get up. Come with me.” They went through the atrium toward the priests’ quarters. Phaedrus had never been here; hetairo were never allowed on this side of the temple. No doubt Aristes would be punished for sneaking over here. A few of the blue-clad priests glanced up from their conversations and duties as they passed. They nodded to Diomedes out of respect.

Diomedes led him into a room lined with artifacts, from bronze and stone statues to pottery. Stacks of tablets rested in the corners. A closer look at the statues kept Phaedrus staring in fascination. Most of them were of a half-human, half-insect god clutching at a handsome young man. The sight, and imagining the acts and emotions behind it, was enough to cause an erection. “Aristes was telling the truth.” He didn’t know which appalled him more, the fact that Aristes had been right or the fact that he was aroused by the violent images.

“Yes.” Diomedes watched him. “No other offering has been here to see this. Generally, we thought it best not to tell them beforehand so they wouldn’t be frightened.”

“I’m not.” Phaedrus traced the musculature on a nearby bronze Tenthus. The cicada-man wore a look of immense satisfaction while his consort stood limp and afraid in his arms. He didn’t look so inhuman; only the insect wings on his back looked out of place. His detailed phallos stood thick and erect, aimed just right to impale the frightened young man before him.

“I didn’t think you would be.” There was a warning there in Diomedes’s voice. “Need I remind you of your duties?”

“Respect and honor to Tenthus and the temple, in that order.” The reminder annoyed Phaedruss because he’d heard it every day of his life. “Have I not served you well, my master? Have I ever once placed anything above my duty to the temple?”

“Your own pride. Your shameful desires.” Diomedes’s gaze flicked to Phaedruss’s waist. “Your anger.”

With that look, Phaedruss felt ashamed. The material gathered in this room was meant to record and inform, not to arouse. “Perhaps you should choose another.” The offer tasted like bile. After wearing the laurel, he didn’t know if he could bear the shame of setting it aside.

“There is no other. Not now. For better or worse, you are the one who has succeeded.”

“Aristes failed on purpose. You could test him again.”

“He failed because I asked him to.”

Phaedruss stared at him in disbelief. “Why?” The realization was like a crushing blow to his stomach. He’d wanted to win on his own merits, not because Diomedes had told the others to lose.

Diomedes took Phaedruss’s face in his hands and refused to let him go when Phaedruss tried to escape. “I have watched you these past seventeen years. You are not like the others who take their pleasures simply and cleanly. You hunger for the forbidden, and this frightens me, yet...” Diomedes pressed his forehead to Phaedruss’s. “I have been a priest here for many years. This will mark the fourth time I have seen Tenthus rise. Every time he comes, I lose a student, a young man I have come to love, to madness. We taught you all as best we could, believing that purity of body and mind would be the best means of dealing with Tenthus. We were wrong.”

He let go of Phaedruss and gestured to a few sheaves of papyrus. “Those are the records. I wrote them. I was a consort myself; I learned from my mistakes and devoted myself to teaching my students how to succeed. Tenthus has grown more violent with each offering.

We hoped to change his mind, to restore him to the honorable immortal he once was. The hetairo chosen -- they were perfect. Better than perfect, but each of them failed. My successor wouldn't stop screaming when Tenthus rose, and he tried to kill himself after the first few feedings. We had to drug him so that he would cooperate. The next we kept sequestered for most of his life here. He ate only blessed foods, read only from sacred texts, and remained entirely chaste until he met Tenthus. His fervent prayers did him no good. Tenthus's immoral behaviors destroyed him utterly." Diomedes stared at the nearest statue, one of Tenthus mounting a screaming hetairos from behind.

"What happened to him?" Phaedrus had to ask. "Aristes said -- he said you killed him."

Diomedes regarded his student with a wary expression. "He jumped from the cliff. We let him."

"Monster," Phaedrus said, suddenly repelled.

Diomedes spread his hands in a gesture of supplication. "It is Tenthus who is the monster, and it is time he was stopped. I do not want to lose you as we've lost so many other offerings before their time. Tenthus is no longer an immortal worthy of reverence; it's time he was done away with."

"You mean kill him?" Phaedrus's head reeled. For his entire life, he'd been taught to revere the blessed Tenthus above all else, and now -- to be rid of him? Diomedes must be mad. Surely he was mad. But another glance around the room, taking in the statues and drawings of Tenthus doing violence toward his consort, and Phaedrus changed his mind. Perhaps his mentor had been right to keep this a secret after all.

Diomedes nodded emphatically. "Yes. It can be done."

"How?" Phaedrus had no idea how one could kill an immortal, or in fact, if one should.

Diomedes went to a small tin box and lifted the lid. From it, he withdrew a bronze chain with a cicada-shaped pendant. "This." He put the chain around Phaedrus's neck. Using his thumbnail, he pried it open to reveal a tiny vial inside. "A few drops, and he will die.

None of us may do it, for we can't get close to Tenthus. It must be a consort. He always weakens near the end of the month as he feels the pull of the ground. Give it to him then, while he is feeding. He will go to ground and not wake again." Diomedes closed the pendant and smiled at him. "You're the only hope I have."

Phaedrus felt ill, but he did his best to hide it from his mentor. Whatever game Diomedes was playing, he didn't want to be a part of it. "So you think because of...of what I am, that I'll somehow survive Tenthus's attentions for a month, and then I'll be able to hurt him?" He sidled up to Diomedes and wound a finger in the thick beard. "What happens if I don't do this?"

Hand on Phaedrus's jaw, Diomedes wrenched his student's head back. "Your punishment for defying the temple will be a return to the jail in which you were born. I do not think you will enjoy the guards' attention, no matter your outlook on pain."

That was his choice -- one death or another, neither of them altogether honorable. He trusted Diomedes, and the statues and records were proof enough of Tenthus's evil deeds, but to be asked to kill the same being that he'd been raised to worship made him feel utterly betrayed.

"He is *evil*. I know this better than anyone. He is a vile creature, given to the most obscene of acts, a destroyer of souls." Hatred filled Diomedes's voice. He stroked Phaedrus's face. "You will do this, and rid us of a creature that should never have walked the earth. Or" -- he paused to run a hand down Phaedrus's chest to his groin -- "you will suffer as you never have before. There will be no quick and merciful death for you. You do not deserve one."

Phaedrus remained nonplussed on the outside, but inside he shook with fury. He'd been tricked. His duty, once an honor, was now a corruption that threatened to tear him apart from the inside. "I may be the son of a murderer, but that does not make me one."

“He’s a fiend,” Diomedes whispered in his ear. “A threat to our people. Because of him, too many of our hetairo have died terrible deaths. Do this, and free us of the immortal no longer worthy of our worship.”

Phaedrus’s vision blazed red, and he made a lunge for a nearby bronze. Diomedes knew him too well; his mentor snatched Phaedrus’s wrists before Phaedrus could grab one of the statues and use it as a weapon. Even so, Phaedrus struggled in his mentor’s grip, angry beyond words. “You don’t have the right to decide this!”

“No right? No *right*? I am the high priest of the Temple of Tenthus. I have seen over seven decades on this earth. Everything that passes under this temple’s roof does so because I wish it to, whether I choose to allow lowborn trash inside to see if it can be taught or to ensure the death of an immortal. My choice. My right.”

“I’ll face the wrath of the gods if I do this!” Phaedrus continued to struggle, but Diomedes held him fast, his back against the priest’s chest. Diomedes might be old, but he knew his student’s body well. Any sort of restraint roused rather than frightened Phaedrus. A sudden, urgent heat flooded through a body already stirred by the images of a naked, violent Tenthus. Phaedrus wriggled, hating himself for his lack of control.

“Calm yourself.” The voice, short and sharp, still had the power to make Phaedrus go still. One hand still encased Phaedrus’s wrists, while the other wandered down to grasp his phallos through the fabric of his chiton. “The gods will thank you for this. I swear. I will let no one harm you, least of all that fiend. Do you understand?”

Diomedes kissed him on the cheek. To Phaedrus’s heated skin, it felt like ice. He shivered, violated by that simple gesture.

Now, he realized, it had all been for naught. Diomedes had one goal, one dream, and Phaedrus had become an unwitting part of it. His gaze landed on another statue, one where Tenthus gripped his victim much in the same way Diomedes held him, hand around his phallos, a sick, leering grin on his face.

“Your disobedience is at an end, little Phaedrus. It’s time you repaid me for my generosity toward you.” The priest fisted him, the painful grip driving the anger away. Phaedrus went lax, unable to resist. “Will you be a hero and rid the world of a monster, or will you be put to a slow, painful death in the same place you were born?”

Would he murder an immortal to save himself? Surrounded by the erotic bronzes and the pottery, stubbornness rose inside him. He would. Of course he would, because he had not spent his life learning the temple arts only to die like a mongrel in jail, unwanted and despised by the gods.

Climax came when he croaked out his final, inevitable answer. “Yes.”

Chapter Three

They called it the Tenthea, the day of celebration for the rebirth of Tenthus. Phaedrus, as the offering, was given a place of honor. Long before dawn, he had risen so the priests could bathe him in water from a sacred spring that smelled of orchids.

Phaedrus's only covering was a dusting of gold powder and a crown of laurel in his hair. The pendant hung around his neck, heavy. By dawn, he was at the seaside where the traditional procession started. He sat in a tall chair borne on the shoulders of male slaves so the entire city could see his perfection in being Tenthus's chosen. The rising sun made his skin sparkle, and more than one onlooker called out his or her appreciation. Outwardly, he kept his face placid, but inside he was seething from Diomedes's betrayal.

Diomedes led the procession wearing his best finery, a loose, unbelted robe trimmed with cicadas. He, like everyone else, wore a wreath in celebration. Behind him came his fellow priests and the hetairo, along with the state officials who presided over the financial affairs of the temple. Flanking Phaedrus's chair were government and military officials. Bringing up the rear were the men, women, and children of the city, each of them wreathed and dressed in fine festival garb.

The procession made Phaedrus heady. The constant noise from the crowd deafened him. The steady rocking of the chair along with the rising heat of the day made him feel slightly nauseated. Still, he sat stiff and proud, knowing that he was the symbol of blessed Tenthus, soon to be reborn, knowing, as no one but Diomedes and the priests did, that the whole festival was a sham. They celebrated death, not life.

It took half the morning to travel through the city and up the long, stone staircase back to the temple and sanctuary beyond it on the hill. Tenthus's sanctuary was outdoors, a large, grassy area bordered by ash trees, blossoming almond trees, and flowers of every shape and hue. The low altar rested in the middle, facing east, with Tenthus's grave on the eastern side of it. As everyone stepped through to the sanctuary, they sprinkled themselves with holy water as an act of purification. The sanctuary was large enough to house the thousand or so people in the procession, and all of them gathered around to get a good view as Phaedrus was helped from his chair to sit on the altar.

A chorus of boys sang the hymn, the tale of how the muse of music, Euterpius, had chosen Tenthus to be the first to receive his gift, and how Tenthus had been so smitten with the muse that he played for thirty days and nights, fed only by his love for and from Euterpius. It ended with Euterpius's lament, mourning that the only way to keep Tenthus alive forever was to give him the life cycle of a cicada and for him to continually be reborn.

Usually, Phaedrus loved the tale, romantic as it was, but this time he felt nothing but bitterness toward it. It should have been an honor to be chosen as the lover of blessed Tenthus. Fatigue and headache from the morning made his temper even sharper, more suited to the sight and sound of the wine-dark sea crashing into the shore far below. Beyond the shore, the smooth green expanses of islands and other hills rose from the water. A cool breeze tugged at his hair, carrying with it the scent of salt air and easing his headache just a little.

The hymn ended. The people stood enraptured, many with tears in their eyes. A brief, manic thought of denouncing the temple and its practices in front of this audience flitted

through Phaedrus's mind, but a dark glance from Diomedes made him think otherwise. If he said one word against them, he had no doubt the priests would converge on him in an instant and waste no time in binding him and drugging him senseless. He had no choice but to go through with the ceremony and keep the temple's secrets. Better to do it with a sound body and mind rather than letting the priests control him any more than they already did.

Diomedes stood on the west side of the altar, giving his attention to all those surrounding them before spreading his palms wide and addressing the as yet unborn Tenthus. His voice carried so that none had to strain to hear. "We pray to you, blessed Tenthus, that you will receive the honors we are about to bestow upon you with an open heart and mind. May you choose to honor us with the gift of music the muse Euterpius has bestowed upon you, and may your visit to us be fruitful and fulfilling. We honor you, blessed Tenthus, and pray that our offering will aid in your rebirth and after, so that you may be strong."

Phaedrus's heart fluttered. This was it, his moment of truth. Today's ritual was meant to bless the ground, to recall Tenthus to life, and nothing would do that better than an offering of the seed to his future lover.

Diomedes knelt on the ground beside Phaedrus, studying him with a measuring gaze. "Are you ready, my student?"

Ready to kill an immortal? Never. But Diomedes had given him no choice. The lie came bitterly to his tongue. "Yes, my teacher. I am ready." The last thing he wanted was for Diomedes to touch him, but again, he had no choice. Phaedrus breathed deeply as his mentor placed a bronze bowl on the altar in front of him. He positioned himself so he knelt with legs splayed and phallos over the bowl. He knew nerves could make him fail. He'd seen it happen before with other hetairo. Their manhood shriveled in front of an audience no matter how hard they tried to coax it to life.

Fortunately, this was the last duty of the priest toward him. Phaedrus refused to look his mentor in the eye as Diomedes clasped his phallos. Instead of the pleasurable warmth it

usually induced, Phaedrus felt chilled. It worried him. He could not let his training fail, not now.

Diomedes was an expert, but this time, his hands failed to coax the life from Phaedrus's loins. Diomedes glared at him, silent and furious. Phaedrus gave a tiny shrug. His mentor gripped harder, letting his nails dig slightly into Phaedrus's tender skin. Phaedrus flinched, but at last, he felt himself harden. Diomedes continued to work him, being as harsh as possible without attracting undue attention from the onlookers. Neither of them wanted to expose Phaedrus's reliance on pain.

Much as Phaedrus wanted to comply and finish with this part of the ritual, Diomedes's hands were smooth without the calluses of rough work. Once a comfort to him, the fondling now brought him only a hollow disgust. Diomedes clasped his testes and squeezed, hard. Phaedrus whimpered, not loud enough for anyone but his mentor to hear. It still wasn't enough. Pain, now, would be the only way he could think of something other than his mentor's traitorous touch.

Phaedrus bore the rough treatment without letting it show in his face. The experience enervated him, made him wish they were alone so Diomedes could use the ropes for a heightened climax. But they weren't, and Phaedrus focused inwardly, willing his body to give what was needed without the stimulation that made it so much easier.

Climax came at last, weaker than it should have been. For show, Phaedrus threw back his head in feigned ecstasy. Twitching, he saw a look of approval upon his mentor's face. At his nod, Phaedrus lifted the bowl and sprinkled the contents upon the grave.

Quietly, everyone except Diomedes and two priests filed out, knowing that whenever blessed Tenthus chose his rebirth, it was a private matter between him and his lover, not a spectacle for the crowd. Besides, they had more to look forward to, with a feast and a musical contest to be held down in the center of the city, both of which would last long into the night.

“Well done,” Diomedes told him when the crowd had left. He patted the altar. “Now lie down.”

Phaedrus did as his mentor bid, stretching out along the chill surface. He took a few deep breaths, trying to still the welling anticipation within him.

“You enjoy this too much,” Diomedes said, noticing his eagerness. He’d already begun to harden again at the thought of being restrained. One of the other priests handed Diomedes a few lengths of rope to bind Phaedrus’s wrists and ankles to the corners of the altar.

Phaedrus calmly looked at his mentor. “I will do as you ask. But I do not have to like it.” He tested the restraints. No chance of escape.

“I don’t care if you like it or not. Not a word to anyone about your task. Not a single word, lest it reach Tenthus’s ears, or his wrath will be the equal of mine.” Diomedes gave him one last, lingering kiss. This time, Phaedrus didn’t bother to hide his discomfort. He writhed, but the restraints held tight. Diomedes smiled with half of his mouth upturned. “Make your temple proud, my student. Remember your duties. Serve Tenthus well and let him suspect nothing, even at the end.” He set Tenthus’s aulos, the double flute, at Phaedrus’s side, along with a cloth bag containing massage supplies. He disappeared beyond the borders of the sanctuary, leaving Phaedrus to his destiny.

Phaedrus’s anticipation dwindled the longer he waited. Some honor this was, to be stretched naked and tied to a slab of rock, waiting to be eaten alive. The hot sun made him drowsy, and he dozed away the afternoon, waking to see a darkened sky. The full moon cast eerie shadows from the various trees and statues. The coming of night also brought with it the fear of what could happen to someone bound, arms and legs wide, helpless and vulnerable. This near to the forest there was always the risk that a satyr, hairy and horse-tailed, might see and hunger for him, and waste no time in using his overlarge, always-erect phallos.

That thought made Phaedrus shudder and remember things he'd rather forget. So he focused on his surroundings, on the constant buzz of the cicadas and the calls of a few lingering birds. A slight breeze rustled the leaves of the cypress trees and brought with it the sweet scents of iris and almond blossoms. Nymphs lurked in the trees, though Phaedrus hadn't seen any of late. His ears strained for the eerie sound of a *syrinx* on the breeze, but thankfully, he heard nothing.

The heat from the afternoon sun had left him thirsty, but there would be no respite. Not until Tenthus chose to emerge, which could be any time from now until tomorrow morning, or never at all if his offering had displeased the immortal. And if Tenthus never emerged, Phaedrus would die here, pinioned to the altar. So too, would he stay if Tenthus ignored him and refused to feed.

Phaedrus turned his head and spoke to the ground covering Tenthus's cocooned body. "You'd better come up, you bastard. Do you hear me? I'm going to die an honorable death, not one of starvation while I lie here waiting for you to come."

As if he'd been heard, the ground shifted. Phaedrus felt it first, a deep, underground movement that vibrated the altar. Taking deep breaths to calm himself, he watched the bare patch of earth undulate. A lump grew and then split, rivulets of dirt cascading over either side of a slick, shiny mass.

He'd been warned about Tenthus's appearance, but the warnings hadn't been preparation enough. Phaedrus's stomach heaved as he saw the membrane-covered form emerge from the soil, a grotesque white form that wriggled with the exertions of the creature within. This was the nymph, the earliest stage of Tenthus's rebirth. It looked like a gigantic worm, writhing and thrashing until it had completely freed itself from the earthy prison. Then it lay aboveground, expanding and contracting, breathing hard after its efforts. The membrane slowly dried, cleaving closer to its true shape. Phaedrus could see the faint silhouette of an indiscernible form within.

The drying shell cracked. More convulsions ensued as this time bits of fluid-covered limbs and skin that might be human broke through the hard casing. Phaedrus froze in horrified fascination as the glimmering, naked body of a man fought to emerge. What he could see of the skin was white and thick and ghostly. Black lumps rose on either side of his scaly spine. Wings, as yet unfurled.

The entire process took so long that the moon was halfway across the sky before any real progress had been made. A hand would jut out, only to sink back inside as the body struggled to find the best way from its tight prison. It must have been exhausting; Tenthus had to rest, chest heaving after every bout of thrashing. A shoulder. An arm. A hip followed by one rounded buttock.

The head, with its cascade of damp auburn hair, appeared at last. Tenthus coughed and groaned, expelling fluid from his lungs. His face lay toward Phaedrus, eyes closed, slack from exhaustion without any sign of the cruelty evident in the statues. Disappointing, but for all that, Tenthus was a man, not a monster. Only a man and therefore within Phaedrus's skills to deal with.

And a handsome man, as well. All the paintings and statues in the temple didn't do justice to the real Tenthus. His body was long and lean and muscled, pale in the moonlight. Except for the wings and a few rough, scaly patches on his back, nothing about him looked at all monstrous. Phaedrus found himself attracted to the exotic differences rather than repulsed by them. Any fear he might have had dissipated, replaced with an anticipation that made his phallos stiffen. He had an entire month before Tenthus would die. He wished it were sooner. In the meantime, Tenthus would pay for what he'd done to his other consorts.

Chapter Four

Tenthus lay half in, half out of his cocoon, fatigued from the efforts it took to work his way up to the ground. He'd never gotten used to the fact that his stay of execution had resulted in going from human to half insect, with all of the indignities that came with it. It wasn't natural, but it was certainly...unique. The first few times he'd found it novel enough to endure, but now he was sick of it.

He cursed inwardly, wishing he were still obviously underground. He hadn't been able to ignore the offering. He never could; its call was as powerful as if someone had reached down to pluck him out of his cocoon by hand. Once he caught the taste of it he came alive, helpless to resist, having no choice but to fight his way up to the surface to feed properly.

And what might he feed on this time? With effort, he opened his eyes to look. Another beautiful, gold-dusted young man lay on the stone altar before him, showing the true ideal of male beauty, broad shoulders and chest, a tapered waist, muscular thighs, and long calves. His face, too, was perfect: forehead not too high, straight nose, rounded chin, eyes with the penetrating gaze of a hawk, and curly hair that flowed around his head like a lion's mane.

Neither was his erect phallos oversize, which Tenthus preferred; men who were too large looked like monkeys. A bronze cicada rested on his chest. A pendant.

He'd lost count of the number of youths he'd risen to find waiting for him. During the first few rebirths, his consorts had been willing and pleasant, handsome young men who saw to his every need. Lately, his consorts had been different, more of a nuisance than an enjoyment. They'd also been terrified of him, so much so that priests had taken to tying his consorts to the altar to prevent them from fleeing in fear. One pitiable young man had been frightened witless at the sight of Tenthus's emergence and wouldn't stop shrieking. The last one hadn't ceased uttering prayers and had refused to acknowledge Tenthus's presence.

Gentle as Tenthus had tried to be, he could never get the most frightened of his consorts to trust him. They had been terrified outright, and while it had pained him to take them, hunger overcame his morality. Shame and guilt had long since been his companions. Those unfortunate offerings had gone mad right before his eyes.

This one, however, showed promise. Tenthus couldn't have asked for a better-looking consort, but for now, all he could do was lie still, his face an arm's length away from the young man, and pant from exertion. The process of rebirth was exhausting. Soul sucking, if he hadn't been assured that his soul would continue on.

Gods, he was tired of this. Life, death, and life again in an endless cycle. Penance for wanting too much, for being the muse Euterpius's first and best musician, and for trying too hard to keep the muse's love. And now with his consorts losing their minds at the sight of him, he felt no joy in his rebirth. Instead, he was terrified.

With a sweet little sigh, the young man looked directly at him, and with the gesture came the moment of truth.

No fear. Only a dark, bitter resentment. A dare rested in those haunted eyes, willing Tenthus to do his worst.

Tenthus grasped at the realization as much as if it were the nectar that sustained him. He felt a brief flare of hope before he killed it. Tenthus held himself back. If he did not feed, he would not send another innocent young man into madness.

“What are you waiting for, my master?” The question was a challenge as much as a threat. The young man gestured with one entrapped hand, showing off his muscular arm. “At least free me before you decide not to feed. I don’t want to starve to death.”

It went against his better judgment, but Tenthus found he couldn’t refuse someone as handsome and naked as the young man before him. It took most of his strength to manage the simple task of lifting his arm and half of his dulled wits to manage the simple knot. The young man shuddered when their skin touched, which stirred Tenthus to the core. Tenthus wanted him. Badly. “What is your name?”

“Phaedrus, my master.” He moved languidly, as if the time spent lying on the altar hadn’t stiffened his muscles at all. In moments, the rest of his restraints had fallen, and he was on the ground next to Tenthus with a bag of supplies. The young man immediately set to work, putting hands beneath Tenthus’s arms and lifting the cicada-man from his casing and onto his back on the body-warm stone of the altar. His smile was almost mocking. “Welcome, my master Tenthus. Are you as much of a monster as the tales say you are? You don’t seem like it.”

A monster? Tenthus thought guiltily of his past consorts. His treatment of them hadn’t been exactly kind and understanding, but he’d been driven by hunger and an insatiable need to feed. The same hunger still lay within him, but he refused to give in, to be a monster, as Phaedrus had so aptly named him. The youth’s nearness did nothing but heighten his need; Tenthus’s entire body cried out for nourishment.

Gritting his teeth, he remained limp, determined to do nothing more to his consort than stare at him. The young man pulled a strigil from his bag and used the curved metal to scrape the fluid from Tenthus’s skin.

Tenthus stiffened and tried to push him away. His arms flopped back to his sides. “No. Please.”

“But I must, my master. This is my duty, to look after you and to see to your needs.” He bent over and kissed Tenthus lightly on the lips, which sent a red-hot flare of desire through the immortal. “Let me get you cleaned up a little, and afterward, I will let you feed.”

There, again, was the faint note of mockery. It was almost enough to make Tenthus forgo his decision.

“No...” Tenthus said, but his will lessened as the handsome young man worked his body. He didn’t want this. No more death and rebirth. Without sustenance, he would die and be relegated to the ground forever. And now this damnable youth was making his dream impossible. He wielded the strigil with exquisite, excruciating care, running it along the tender undersides of Tenthus’s arms and around and along the inside of his legs.

And *between* his thighs. Tenthus couldn’t help his arousal when the metal scraper delicately traced the tenderest parts of him, along the length of his manhood and down around his testes until they, too, were cleaned of residual fluid. Phaedrus wore a wicked, knowing smile, knowing full well that he was driving Tenthus to the brink with need. “Stop. I beg of you.”

“Is that what the other offerings said to you? The ones who screamed when they looked upon your hideous form?” Phaedrus dipped his head low. “I know what you did to them. Diomedes showed me. I’m not afraid of you, monster.”

The words stung. Tenthus couldn’t speak, knowing he deserved Phaedrus’s harsh accusations. Phaedrus rolled him over to lie prostrate on the stone while continuing to slide the strigil against his skin, over his neck and shoulders, around the curve of his buttocks and in between. His wings, still tender, wet lumps, were only just beginning to dry and lengthen along his back. Merciless, Phaedrus left no portion of his skin unscathed. Any protests Tenthus might have had disappeared when Phaedrus exchanged the strigil for his hands. He

was skilled. Not surprising, coming from the temple. They'd all been raised to know how bodies worked and what would please them best, but Phaedrus went at it with a single-mindedness that Tenthus had rarely seen. Phaedrus was intent on making sure Tenthus enjoyed himself, but he also seemed to have some secondary reason for doing so.

Not that Tenthus had the ability to ask at the moment, not with his body coming to life as it was. After so long underground, his limbs were sluggish and slow. Phaedrus oiled his hands. Tenthus recognized the scent; a base of olive oil with the fragrant essence of fir, meant to rejuvenate and revive. Phaedrus kneaded the tired muscles inward toward the heart until the blood began to flow again in earnest, causing all of Tenthus's body to tingle almost unpleasantly. The massage wasn't meant to relax, but to ready his muscles for activity, much as it did in the gymnasiums.

"My master?" Phaedrus asked at one point, concerned. Tenthus noted the young man's phallos was erect and hard. Tempting, so damn tempting. Phaedrus noted Tenthus's gaze. "Is there something else you require?"

The activity made him hunger for the other man's body. Starving, in fact. He could move more easily now, and did, extending an arm so he could reach Phaedrus's waiting phallos. Phaedrus obliged, moving his hips nearer, spreading his legs to make himself more accessible. The increased flow of blood must have overcome Tenthus's good sense; hand around his consort's phallos, he pulled Phaedrus on top of him as roughly as he dared.

All thoughts of starving himself fled. Phaedrus was perfect, willing as no other consort had been for the past several rebirths. Tenthus's mouth sought his, prying the young man's teeth apart with his tongue. Phaedrus yielded, his body lying like a warm blanket over Tenthus's. The heat of him, the nearness... Tenthus couldn't get enough. Neither did he let go of Phaedrus's erection; Tenthus rubbed and stroked with a strengthening grasp that elicited low moans from Phaedrus.

Hunger overwhelmed his good sense, just as it did at every rebirth. Tenthus rolled Phaedrus over until the younger man was on his back. He then positioned himself so that he

straddled Phaedrus, his legs pinioning his consort's arms to the altar. His hands spread Phaedrus's thighs and held them down so the younger man was completely immobile, his phallos completely at Tenthus's mercy.

And Tenthus intended to show it none. He breathed deeply of Phaedrus's masculine scent and gloried in the sight of the glistening tip emerging from its sheath. Curving his neck, he bent down to lick away the gathering fluid. Phaedrus shuddered. Soon.

Not soon enough. Tenthus took the entire shaft into his mouth, licking and sucking, desperate for the sustenance he knew lay within. Phaedrus moaned, and Tenthus remembered too late that the temple-raised didn't subject themselves to fellatio, at least not willingly. Pleasure came from hands and from rubbing between the thighs with the lovers gazing into each other's eyes, which he considered a rather limited view of lovemaking.

Monster, Phaedrus had called him. Perhaps he was. Tenthus cared, but not enough to stop. He was ravenous. Phaedrus tasted good and was too close to coming for Tenthus to do anything but continue.

Phaedrus's hips wriggled. His phallos grew hard enough for Tenthus to be able to trace the veins with his eyes as well as his tongue. Tenthus took him as deeply into his throat as possible. As a further torment, Tenthus shifted his position so that his forearms held Phaedrus's thighs down and his hands could easily reach Phaedrus's testicles, now hardened and drawn closer to his body. A stray finger or two massaged the smooth, soft area between Phaedrus's legs, eliciting more moans and involuntary shudders.

All of this was too much for Phaedrus. One final jerk and he came, filling Tenthus's mouth with the seed he needed to begin this cycle of rebirth and life. Tenthus swallowed it all, reveling in the moment, his thoughts given to nothing beyond his own physical pleasure. Phaedrus's cry split the night. Beneath Tenthus, his consort convulsed until he had expended everything he could.

When the shudders had stopped, Tenthus carefully dismounted from his consort. Panic hit him, chill as a northern wind. “Phaedrus? Are you all right?”

Phaedrus was breathing deeply, eyes half-closed, expression unreadable. Tenthus’s only comfort was that the young man hadn’t gone mad. He wasn’t screaming and flailing, but neither was he showing any signs of reaction. It could merely be the inevitable postcoital languor, but Tenthus couldn’t tell.

“Not again.” He felt a stab of guilt, ashamed again at his own bestial needs. Again, he cursed the gods and his own idiocy in ending up like this, ruining so many young lives. All of it because of his own selfishness. His own and Euterpius’s.

Phaedrus’s abandoned sack lay at the edge of the altar. Inside Tenthus found, as he’d expected, his aulos, the double flute that had gotten him into all this trouble in the first place. If there was any way of keeping Phaedrus sane, music would be the key. Using it to soothe his hardworking consort seemed the least he could do.

He put the instrument to his lips and played a quiet, soporific tune. Phaedrus’s breathing evened out. His eyes drifted closed.

Tenthus kept playing long after he was certain Phaedrus had fallen asleep. With luck, his new consort wasn’t the only lover he’d have tonight. He had a word or two to exchange with Euterpius.

Chapter Five

As Tenthus had expected, the sound of his aulos affected more than humans. Shy dryads hovered near the safety of their trees, listening. Phaedrus now lay beneath the sheltering branches of one of those trees, a blooming almond, a place Tenthus deemed to be more comfortable than the hard altar. The dryad there seemed pleased that her tree provided such comfort.

“Well met,” Euterpius said, emerging from behind one of the cypress trees. He walked naked, undisturbed by the modesty that plagued so many of the mortals. He was the muse of music and joy and delight, the one who’d captured Tenthus’s heart with a single glimpse. The dark beard defined the angular bones in his cheeks and jaws. Every muscle on his chest, arms, and legs was perfect. He, too, carried an aulos, Tenthus’s passion as well as his downfall.

No more. Now, Tenthus knew the attraction for what it had been: lust, not love. Euterpius was still devastatingly attractive, and Tenthus ached to be within his arms again. His body agreed, making his desire evident with another erection.

“You should have been born a satyr,” Euterpius said with a wry smile. “You’ve worn out your new consort already, yet you are ready for more.”

Phaedrus. As achingly sweet and skilled as Euterpius was driven and spontaneous. “He wasn’t afraid of me. Not like the others.”

“Really?” Euterpius arched an eyebrow. “There’s hope for you yet. Except for a while, I thought you might not want your lover.”

“I didn’t. I don’t,” Tenthus said. Guilt and shame wracked him; how easily his resolutions had been broken. “I’ve grown weary of this game of death and madness. I wish to take no more sustenance and die a true death.”

“You don’t mean that.” The muse looked concerned. “You would throw away the gift I’ve given you?”

“Gift? I play music no one can stand to listen to for long without fear of being overcome. I frighten my would-be lovers because I look more like an insect than the human I once was. They shriek at the sight of me, and I have no choice but to feed from them anyway.” His throat tightened, and he could hardly speak. His wings buzzed in frustration. “I despise myself for that. I confused lust with love, and for this I was punished by the father of a selfish muse.”

Euterpius crouched before him. “Selfish. An apt word. But so were you, then, adamant to bend my heart toward you and you alone with music. Playing so beautifully that no one could stand to listen for long without going mad.”

“An exaggeration.”

“The truth.” Euterpius caressed Tenthus’s face, wringing a shudder from the immortal. “This was the only way I knew how to save you and yet hear you play. Do you hate me for it?”

“Every time I claw my way to the surface, a giant, disfigured larva. Every time the membrane splits and I have to fight my way out. Every time the consort chosen for me faints from terror and resists me with all of his might. I hate you.”

“But you don’t hate Phaedrus.”

“How could I? He’s as angry as I am, for his own reasons, but he’s young, sheltered, and trained to have no idea in his head but to please me.”

“Did he?”

Tenthus watched the steady rise and fall of his consort’s chest. Sleep softened Phaedrus’s features, making him look even more handsome. Tenthus’s groin throbbed with desire. “Sweet Eros. Yes.”

“So why are you afraid of him?”

Damn the muse. “I’m not afraid of him. I’m afraid of *me*. My last three consorts went completely, utterly mad before I’d had them a few days. I’ve changed somehow. I don’t want to drive this one mad as well.”

Euterpius palmed Tenthus’s face, stroking his cheek with his thumb. “Nothing you have done has caused their madness.”

Tenthus looked at him, pleading, embarrassed by the way his voice cracked. “How do you *know*? I’ve lost three consorts in a row. How can it *not* be me?”

“There are other reasons. Use your head instead of your heart, and you will find them.”

Tenthus broke away. “There had better be. I don’t want another to suffer madness because of me.” He looked over to the tree, under which Phaedrus continued to sleep soundly. “Especially him.”

“Lovely as he is, you cannot love him. Only lust after him.”

“Untrue,” he said, too quickly.

“Is it?” Euterpius cocked his head. “What if I told you that he can’t love anyone, either?”

Tenthus said softly, “I’d pity him.”

Euterpius grinned and fingered his beard. “A bet, then. You have a month before you must return to ground. Turn your latest consort into your perfect mate by loving him completely and fully, see he that loves you enough to earn wings of his own, and by my

father's word, you shall be set free from the cycle to live an ordinary, mortal life. No more terrifying your consorts."

"A trick," Tenthus said, and likely an impossible one. Gods and muses alike were known for their pranks. "What if I lose?"

"Then the cycle will continue whether you feed or not. Madness will take you if you refuse sustenance." A look of pity crossed his features.

"This is your doing?"

"Yes." Euterpius sighed. "I do not like to see you suffer. I know you are unhappy."

"Your consideration is touching," Tenthus said, without meaning it.

Euterpius ignored him, going over to crouch beside the sleeping Phaedrus. "He is sweet, isn't he?" He tousled the young man's curly hair. "Perhaps a kiss."

"No," Tenthus said as the muse bent over. "No more meddling of the gods. My life is terrible enough. I wouldn't want to inflict it on anyone else."

"You will never forgive me for this, will you?" Euterpius's brown eyes met Tenthus's. "I don't blame you, but a month is but the blink of an eye. Are you sure I may not give him a kiss, a mere peck to inspire him to a life beyond his own?"

Tempting. Oh so tempting, but Tenthus stood fast behind his resolution. "No. I must do this alone."

"I chose rightly when I chose you." Euterpius smiled, the same beatific expression that had haunted Tenthus's vision for years. He crept back to Tenthus's side. "Is my father right? Am I toying with you?"

"Your father's one to talk," Tenthus said. Euterpius's face was so close, Tenthus felt the heat from his skin. A hand traveled up the inside of Tenthus's thigh. "You were my teacher. In more than music. And yes, you play me like a lyre that you pick up only when the mood suits you."

“But I do play whichever instrument I choose beautifully. You are my first and best pupil. My greatest work and my costliest failure.” Euterpius’s lips brushed his. “I’m sorry, if it makes a difference.”

“Not really.” The light touch roused him as no mortal caress ever had. Yet this time, there was nothing beyond the physical. Euterpius might be a muse, but he was also fallible. He’d made mistakes letting his own passion and curiosity get the better of him.

Feeling lust instead of love certainly wasn’t going to stop Tenthus from taking advantage of the muse’s offer. Fickle Euterpius might be, but Tenthus trusted him. Never once had the muse lied to him, and he had, several times, protected Tenthus from the higher gods who considered him an abomination. Now, it seemed that Zeus had been bored enough with Tenthus to allow his son to convince him to try some new entertainment. Tenthus thought he should be afraid, but curiously, he wasn’t.

The lack of fear might have something to do with the way Euterpius stroked his phallos and pressed his unearthly body to Tenthus’s. Tenthus jerked, unable to contain himself as the muse’s agile fingers set alight the nerve endings that Phaedrus had only managed to tease.

Not love, Tenthus had to keep reminding himself. Lust, which both of them needed the other to sate.

“Like the cicadas, you thrive on love and song,” Euterpius said. “I am the muse of joy as well as music, and I wish to see you happy.”

As his hands were busy, Euterpius sang instead of using his flute. His clear tenor carried through the grove. The dryads sighed to hear it, and even a few night birds paused in nearby branches to listen.

Tenthus shuddered in his arms, did not and could not resist as Euterpius moved behind him. The unearthly voice continued, rendering even the wind still to listen. It wove its way through Tenthus’s body as if Euterpius physically reached inside to touch every part of him,

electrifying and terrifying at the same time. He and Euterpius had shared a night or two together after every rebirth, but Euterpius rarely used his voice to heighten his experience.

Tonight was something special. Tenthus, too, felt a maddening hunger rise within him. He *had* to have the muse, to taste his body. Now.

The muse let Tenthus have his way. Tenthus forced the muse down onto his back and straddled him so that he faced Euterpius's legs. His phallos jutted within easy reach of Tenthus's mouth. Tenthus swallowed as deeply as he could, desperate for the taste and touch of Euterpius. His manhood was thick and rigid, a condition mimicked between Tenthus's legs. The muse never stopped singing, though the words and rhythm changed slightly to reflect his growing arousal.

The music drove Tenthus harder, nearly stealing every bit of will he had left. Euterpius wanted this as much as he and soon freed his arms to clench Tenthus's buttocks. Fingers traced the sensitive curves, stopping to tease the wrinkled entrance. Tenthus groaned as one and then two fingers slid in easily.

With his other hand, Euterpius stroked the thin wings, finally drying and gaining strength. They ran the length of Tenthus's body from his shoulder blades to the backs of his knees. The sensitive membranes added another dimension to the lovemaking, since Tenthus hadn't had them the first time. It tickled.

Tenthus concentrated on wringing everything he could from Euterpius's phallos. Soon. He could tell by the way the muse's hips strained to wriggle beneath him. One of Tenthus's hands wrapped around the base of his phallos while the other alternated, manipulating the testes and tickling the soft expanse of skin. Euterpius's song grew fainter, hoarser, but lost none of its power.

Before he could finish, Euterpius used his strength to ease Tenthus forward off his body. Tenthus lay still for a moment, stunned, but yielded easily when he felt the muse's hands at his buttocks, guiding them into the air.

He'd endured this before, once, the first night he'd met Euterpius. The muse had sung then as he did now, a sweet, complicated tune that made Tenthus weak enough to give in to any of the muse's requests. The hardened phallos pressed between his buttocks, sliding in with an almost-unbearable pressure until Euterpius had speared him to the hilt.

And the pressure turned to ecstasy.

Euterpius's tune changed slightly so the rhythm matched his thrusting. The muse's song continued to writhe within Tenthus, blinding him to anything but the insatiable need to earn his release.

He hadn't given any thought to innocent Phaedrus, until his eyes darted over to see his consort watching in wide-eyed wonder...or horror? Tenthus couldn't tell, couldn't stop to wonder. It wasn't possible to focus more than a moment on anyone's need but his own. Euterpius's body slid in and out of his, building Tenthus's climax along with the song's tempo. The words had gone primal, speaking of a body's rhythm and need, absent of anything but the most basic instinct.

Every part of Tenthus's body pulsed and throbbed and ached. His muscles grew tired, but he would not give up, not yet, not when he was so close. His groin flared. Any moment now, he would surely break apart from the strain.

A moment later, he did. Climax came for both him and the muse with such a vigorous, powerful rush that he could not contain it. Aware of nothing more than sound and feeling, he cried aloud, adding his voice to that of the muse in a duet of ecstasy and agony. Already he felt a new potency race through his body. His wings straightened and stretched to their full capacity. He felt...full. Completely reborn. Phaedrus had given him life, but Euterpius gave him strength. And such a strength, he felt as though he were losing his entire body and soul, falling forever, trapped in this madness.

Until the song changed, cool and soothing amid the heat of passion. It drew Tenthus back to his body, gently, as if nursing him back to health after a long fever. The raging fury abated.

When he came to full awareness, he found himself wrapped in Eterpius's arms. His groin still ached from its activities. "I can't do this again," he managed to croak. "If you want me to succeed, I can't see you again."

"I know. Think of it as a good-bye gift."

"I still hate you."

"I am a muse," Euterpius said quietly. "I hope I've inspired you to be satisfied with someone less...dangerous."

Tenthus collapsed, aware of nothing more.

From the shadows beneath the almond tree, Phaedrus watched the muse and the immortal as they coupled. Euterpius -- whom he recognized from various graven images as well as the aulos nearby -- sang a tune likely meant for Tenthus's ears alone, but this close, Phaedrus couldn't help but feel some of its effects as well.

Tenthus's treatment of him had left Phaedrus dizzy and confused. Never once had Diomedes ever actually used his mouth anywhere below Phaedrus's waist. It was forbidden, considered an emasculating act for both of those involved. But Phaedrus had to admit, it had felt *good*. Amazingly good, so much so that Phaedrus had been too worn-out to speak or think clearly afterward. Just like he'd been after Pan.

He shoved that thought away.

Neither did the muse seem to have any shame about his own sexual inclinations. As their twisting bodies shone in the moonlight, Phaedrus felt the heat within his own phallos. He'd watched copulatory displays within the temple walls dozens of times, but none had aroused him so much as this, watching two immortals vie for each other's bodies in an eerie

parody of the bronze statues in the records room, except that Tenthus was the submissive one.

And when the immortal allowed the muse to mount him, Tenthus's eyes had met Phaedruss for one frightening moment, and Phaedruss *knew*. These two took pleasure in the forbidden, and they had not gone mad. He wanted desperately to be a part of that, to experience the freedom that Diomedes always curtailed. He'd been dreaming of it ever since he'd visited Pan and been party to the faun's orgiastic delights.

Except Phaedruss *had* gone mad afterward. Diomedes had been the one to bring him back from the brink. The priest had threatened, time and time again, that mating like a beast brought madness, and Phaedruss had been proof enough of that truth. These were god-touched, a muse and an immortal. He was only mortal, subject to weaknesses Tenthus and Euterpius did not have.

But he *wanted* it. Craved to be with the muse and the immortal, to touch their bodies and to be the one penetrated. To have Tenthus hold him almost too tight to breathe and to gasp as the immortal's phallos speared him to the core.

Madness.

Phaedruss felt lost, drowning in a wash of emotions not his own. His erection made it plain that the scene was affecting him no matter his conflicted emotions. Diomedes's chiding echoed in his head. Only the lowest of prostitutes subjected themselves to intercourse like a pair of dogs. No one ever actually *let* this happen. No sane man wanted it.

Which meant that Phaedruss wasn't sane. Somehow, he found that thought comforting.

A part of him kept expecting Tenthus to be humiliated, but there were no signs of it, only a feral, satiated look like a cat in the midst of dining on a caught rat. His eyes glazed over. Phaedruss rolled onto his back, suddenly hot and confused. He couldn't take his eyes from the pair. Tenthus's wings stood half-erect, tension holding them in midair as the muse's body slammed into his. Phaedruss's hand drifted toward his own aching phallos.

Catching himself, he rolled on his side and lay curled with his arms around his belly. No wonder Diomedes considered him the only one able to fulfill his task. He was as depraved as Tenthus himself to be aroused by pain and such immoral acts. Only someone as twisted as he was could kill an immortal.

Tenthus let out a wail that merged perfectly with Euterpius's song. The effect made Phaedrus lose what little control he had. His own body clenched with an orgasm brought by sight and sound alone. Shameful. The priests would have been disappointed by his lack of control. *This* was the monstrosity suffered by the other offerings, the indignity of losing their manhood to the immortal's basest desires. No wonder the other offerings went mad.

Phaedrus briefly considered following their example, but after his earlier brush with madness, he had no intention of going there again. He would let Tenthus use him in whatever manner necessary, but Phaedrus would be the one to survive. Tenthus's obscene desires could be dealt with despite some dark part of his mind that *wanted* this, no matter how wrong it was. All he had to do was remember that he would still be alive at the end of all this. Tenthus would not.

When at last he could breathe again, he looked over to see the muse with Tenthus's body in his arms. "Take care of your master," Euterpius said as he eased the limp form to the ground. "He is special to me."

Lithe-winged Tenthus looked to be in a deep, postcoital slumber. The muse gave him one last kiss on the cheek before making his way over to Phaedrus's nest. Phaedrus trembled; the muse practically secreted an air of masculine sexuality that would have had every priest and hetairos in the temple fall at his feet and beg to be bedded by him. Fatigued and spent as he was, Phaedrus felt his phallos stir again just from the nearness of the muse and despised himself for his weakness. Another monster, if one dared to call a muse such a thing. A lovely monster.

Phaedrus tilted his head upward to kiss the muse, uncaring about the temple doctrines. But to his disappointment, Euterpius placed two fingers perpendicular to Phaedrus's lips.

“Ah, no, I promised. Sweet and tempting as you are.” Still, he stayed close, deep brown eyes taking Phaedrus’s measure. “What are you thinking?”

He knew that voice, somehow, but couldn’t fathom from where. Phaedrus looked away, confused at the surge of emotions within him. He longed to have Euterpius touch him as he had Tenthus, to ride him as if he were nothing more than a dog in the street. But that was forbidden. Damn both Euterpius and Tenthus for causing such confusion within him.

Phaedrus took a deep, shuddering breath. “Monster. Both of you.”

Euterpius laughed softly. “Are we such monsters for giving in to our own desires? Is it not more monstrous to be bound by rules that your priests claim lead to a fulfilling life?” The muse was so close now that his words warmed Phaedrus’s ear. “You have your own desires, kindled early and wrongly by those who took advantage of an innocent raised in the temple. But fear has made you bury them deep, though not so deep as to be unreachable. Do not be afraid of them. I would *love* to help,” Euterpius said, running a tickling finger across Phaedrus’s cheek, “but Tenthus has forbidden me.”

The light touch set Phaedrus’s entire body on fire. Heat blossomed in his groin that made his phallos painfully stiff. All it would take was just one more little touch from Euterpius and Phaedrus would explode right there.

The touch never came. Instead, Euterpius carefully prodded the bronze cicada. “I know what this is and what you mean to do with it. I know why. And I ask that you don’t.”

All pleasure faded at that.

“Please,” Euterpius said.

The single word carried with it such emotion that Phaedrus hardly knew how to react. No one had ever cared for him that much, not even Diomedes. Any deep relationships among those at the temple were discouraged, as most of them would not be together for long. Phaedrus had always felt apart from his peers anyway, and none had offered to tryst with him. It made Phaedrus hate Tenthus even more, because someone cared for him so deeply.

"I do not wish for him to die, although I know, if you are determined, that I will not be able to sway your mind." Euterpius cocked his head.

His expression was such that it made Phaedrus want to tell the muse everything, Diomedes's hatred, the pact he'd made to spare his life, the time with Pan in which he'd felt no shame until he returned to the temple. Euterpius was the son of Zeus. If anything might be done to spare Tenthus, surely he would know.

Instead, fear made Phaedrus hold his tongue. If Zeus knew he meant to kill an immortal, a god's wrath would certainly be worse than anything Diomedes could dream up. "I don't have a choice."

"There is always a choice. I pray you make the right one." He paused, thinking. "You're different than the rest. I've seen them. I watched Tenthus with them, saw his heart broken time and time again. They were all hollow, soulless, for all that they were raised in the temple. But you...you have a chance. See that you take it." He inclined his head and gave Phaedrus a smile that made the younger man's heart pound. "Please. This need not end in death for either of you."

Before Phaedrus could ask anything further, the muse had backed away and vanished into the darkness. Phaedrus blinked back tears of dismay and fatigue and struggled to still the mixed emotions that the muse had stirred up. Longing, for one. Lust and disgust, for others. All of them forbidden. Muses were tricksters like the rest of the gods. No doubt he'd only spoken to Phaedrus to get him to put aside his years of learning inside the temple for some grand amusement.

But Euterpius had said, "Please." A single word said in a voice that cut straight to Phaedrus's soul.

"Damn you," he muttered, annoyed by the muse's request. He fingered the pendant. Keeping Tenthus alive wasn't possible. It just wasn't.

And neither could he let his emotions get the better of him. He choked them down, remembering where his real duty lay for the next month. With Tenthus, tending Tenthus. Seeing to the god's every need so that he suspected nothing.

The immortal still lay where Euterpius had placed him, wings glinting in the moonlight. The remains of the cocoon were no more than a silhouette, a reminder that both life and death lay ahead of them. Sleeping naked, Tenthus looked innocent and vulnerable. His skin wore a blanket of goose pimples, and he shivered a little. Phaedrus could see just how young he looked, as if he had not passed his twenty-fifth year, although he'd lived for centuries, if the tales were correct. Curls of hair drooped over his face. Phaedrus pushed them away, gazing on the face so peaceful at rest.

"Who do I believe?" Phaedrus asked quietly. "The one who cares for you, or the one who hates you?"

Tired of thinking, of worrying, of being confused, Phaedrus snuggled up to Tenthus, willing the heat of his body to leach into the immortal's. His warmth calmed Tenthus, but Phaedrus could not sleep. It felt...nice to be here like this, under the stars, arms wrapped around a lover. Far better than any of the nights he'd spent with Diomedes, who'd was old, bony, and snored in his sleep. Tenthus was none of those things, only a worn-out soul in a forever-young body.

And a monster, Phaedrus thought, recalling what he'd seen. He couldn't be thinking this way about Tenthus; if he cared for the immortal at all, he'd never be able to do what was needed. He spent the rest of the night quashing the unwanted emotions, pushing them away until only his purpose and training remained. Tenthus would die. Phaedrus would see to it.

Chapter Six

The clamor of cymbals, drums, and flutes jarred Phaedrus from his restless doze. Tenthus, too, started awake, sitting up and impulsively clutching Phaedrus closer to him. The cicada wings buzzed a little. Nervousness, Phaedrus suspected, and he shuddered before remembering his vow.

The music heralded the arrival of not only Diomedes, but his priests. All were dressed in formal attire, chitons in bright blues and greens trimmed with gold, and watched Tenthus with mixed expressions of awe and reverence. Not one of them paid any attention to Phaedrus, crouching naked next to the immortal.

“He has risen!” Diomedes cried, hands raised to the air. Just over his shoulder, the sun had begun to rise, casting the sky in a brilliant orange hue. The cocoon had crumbled, now nothing more than dust carried away by the breeze. “Behold, our immortal has returned to bless us.” Behind him, the other priests clamored in response. They knelt as one, prostrating themselves before Tenthus.

The immortal looked upon them with exasperation. “Diomedes. You’re still here.”

“Yes, blessed Tenthus. At your service, as always.” Not a bit of his tone or demeanor conveyed the hatred Phaedrus had seen two days before. Diomedes prostrated himself a few

more times for effect. Phaedrus watched, reserved, glad he no longer had to copy his mentor's actions. "And now, great Tenthus, if it is not too much for a humble priest to ask, may we have the pleasure of a concert? It would be a simple matter to arrange a symposium."

The rest of the priests murmured similar benign pleas. Tenthus listened, stone-faced, then said, "No."

A shocked silence fell over the grove. Diomedes caught Phaedrus's eye. His expression was clear enough: *do something*. No matter how much they wanted Tenthus dead, they had to play along, pretending that Tenthus's visit was just as it should be.

Phaedrus kept his face emotionless, but he pressed his body against the immortal's and tilted his head up so he could speak in Tenthus's ear. "Please, my master." His hands slid down Tenthus's chest to tease the nipples. "Play for us."

Tenthus's stiffness melted just a little at Phaedrus's touch. He let the priests grovel awhile longer before answering. "I will not play again for schemers and undeserving liars."

The look on Diomedes's face was one Phaedrus knew well, the blankness that hid a seething anger beneath. Fury-filled eyes met Phaedrus's. Again, the look said, *Do something*, but there was an added threat beneath it that caused fear to spike in Phaedrus's belly.

"I beg of you," Phaedrus said. "Play for us tonight. If you don't..." He dropped his voice so only Tenthus could hear. "There are those within who have never heard you play. It would be a shame if they were not given the chance. Give us the honor of your music, and I...I would be forever grateful." He nuzzled Tenthus's neck. After a moment, Tenthus responded, kissing Phaedrus lightly on the forehead.

"In four days' time," Tenthus said, voice as expressionless as his face. "After the moon has risen. Call a symposium. Invite the people. I will play for anyone who will listen."

Phaedrus glanced up to see the dismay in Tenthus's eyes. His consort didn't like this any more than he did. Tenthus tightened his grasp around Phaedrus's shoulders as if sensing

his discomfort. A warning. Phaedrus checked himself. One deep breath. Two, and Phaedrus calmed. The unwanted emotions vanished.

"It will be done," Diomedes said and bowed again. His followers did likewise. "Now, if you will come with us, honored Tenthus, we will see to your other needs."

Together, Tenthus and his consort rose to follow the priests up the hill and into the temple. The long hallway to the north led to the bathing rooms. The rest of the slaves and students had gathered along the corridor to see the legend reborn. Some of the older priests and slaves had seen him before, but many, like Phaedrus, had been too young to remember Tenthus's last rebirth.

Tenthus went straight to the smaller of the two pools, ignoring the courtesy of submitting to another scraping to keep the water fresh. Braziers heated the round pool from below. His head was back, resting on the edge, his eyes closed. Two slaves crouched nearby with towels and fresh clothing for Tenthus, but neither would touch the immortal.

Phaedrus waved them away, and they left the items on a nearby bench and fled, bobbing in gratitude. Diomedes's introspective gaze rested briefly on his former pupil. Their eyes met. Phaedrus gave him a slight nod in return, a silent confirmation that he would follow through with his mentor's wishes. The old priest left, finally. Relieved to be alone, Phaedrus knelt just behind Tenthus. "My master."

"I'm not hungry," Tenthus said, not bothering to open his eyes.

"I did not come here to feed you, my master, but to ensure your comfort."

"I don't need you. I'm perfectly capable of seeing to my own needs."

"But it is much more difficult to use the oils on yourself, and you cannot give yourself a decent massage."

At this, Tenthus opened his eyes. "And I remember your precious rules. No one is allowed to touch me except my chosen consort. And that, I do not wish." With a sigh, he caught Phaedrus's wrist. "I want a calm, quiet bath. Nothing more. Do you understand?"

Rage rose at Tenthus's belief that he was somehow stupid, but he forced it down. He nodded. "Yes, my master."

"Good. See to your own bath. I will be ready shortly."

Phaedrus did as he was bid, resentful of Tenthus's imperious tone. He couldn't fathom what he'd done to make Tenthus angry with him, unless Tenthus knew what the cicada pendant meant. Already, he missed the Tenthus of the night before.

Stop it, he told himself. Tenthus was meant to die. Better for Phaedrus to dislike him. He snatched a glance back at the immortal. The immortal's eyes were closed, and he looked tired and worn. He should be, Phaedrus supposed. It couldn't be easy being reborn.

Despite Tenthus's admonition, he took his time, wanting to be as clean and perfect for the immortal as he could. The strigil came away covered in gold as Phaedrus scraped the dust from his skin. It was more fun when another hetairos or even Diomedes did this; then, it became a game, tracing the lines of another's body, toying with it, just as he had with Tenthus the night before.

Alone, it became a dance. He stood within full view of Tenthus, who was so relaxed Phaedrus wondered if he might be asleep. Either that or he faked it well. Phaedrus turned his back to the immortal and made each stroke of the strigil slow and deliberate. Down and around each outstretched arm, against the muscled chest he kept toned with exercise, around his back to slide between his buttocks.

Another glance at Tenthus. Nothing. The immortal hadn't moved. Shaking his head ruefully, Phaedrus stepped into the larger, colder pool and swam a few lengths. He made every movement as sensuous as possible, far easier in the water.

Still nothing from Tenthus. Much longer in the hot pool and the immortal would become overheated. Phaedrus exited the pool and reached for a towel to dry himself. He couldn't understand Tenthus's sudden reticence. Last night he'd been unable to resist his

craving for Phaedrus's body. This morning he wanted nothing to do with his consort, and nothing Phaedrus did earned the immortal's attention.

Enough was enough.

Phaedrus tiptoed around the pool to kneel behind Tenthus. The immortal's head still rested against the edge of the pool. Gently, Phaedrus put his hands on either side of Tenthus's head and began to massage his temples. Slow, steady strokes. He cupped water in his palm and let it trickle over Tenthus's hair. A cup of hair oil sat nearby; Phaedrus used some of it, scenting the salt and sage mixed in, to lather Tenthus's hair. The immortal said nothing and remained unmoving while Phaedrus worked.

A few more handfuls of water and Phaedrus rinsed the last of the oil from Tenthus's hair. He balanced carefully on the edge of the pool and angled himself so his lips touched the immortal's.

For a moment, it was exquisite. Soft and welcoming, Tenthus's lips parted to welcome him.

The next, Tenthus's palm covered Phaedrus's face and shoved the younger man backward. Phaedrus slipped on the wet tiles. He scrabbled in an attempt to get to his feet, late in attending to his duties. He froze, caught by the sight of Tenthus's body as he rose from the water. Rivulets ran around the curves of his chest muscles, down to the dip in his belly. Lower...

His phallos jutted forth, shiny and dripping. Phaedrus couldn't help the quiver of desire that clenched his belly. He wanted to touch it, to have Tenthus spear him as Euterpius had done last night. His mouth watered. All he would have to do was lean forward, and he'd be able to have a taste.

Seeing where Phaedrus's gaze had landed, Tenthus snatched a towel from the bench and used it to dry himself off. "If I want anything from you, I'll ask. Understand?" he said again.

Fuming, Phaedrus bowed his assent. A few deep breaths and his anger faded. It didn't matter what Tenthus said to him. Again, he forced his emotions away. He would do his duty, or at least as much as Tenthus allowed of it. He wasn't so different than Diomedes after all; neither wanted Phaedrus's attentions until it suited them.

"You may help me dress."

Phaedrus did, draping the large single piece of linen around Tenthus's body, careful to tuck it under the immortal's fragile-looking wings. He used cicada-shaped pins to fasten the cloth over one shoulder. A golden belt looped around Tenthus's waist. Phaedrus took his time fastening the belt, savoring the feel of the hardened muscles beneath the cloth. Fully clothed, Tenthus looked stunning, more handsome than Phaedrus could have imagined. If his erection pained him, he gave no sign.

As for Phaedrus, he wore nothing, and would not, a way of being ready whenever Tenthus needed to feed.

If he would ever feed.

When his fawning consort had finally decided he looked as he should, Tenthus headed for his old room, the one kept for him on his visits. Phaedrus followed and set to work arranging things in the already-immaculate room.

A breeze, cool and refreshing after the heat of the bath, blew in through the curtained doorways from the garden. Tenthus dropped to one of the couches and stretched out along its length, already weary at the thought of what was to come. He hated these first days with a passion. Not only was he fatigued and disoriented from the transformation, but these idiot priests also expected him to perform as soon as possible. He still loved his music, but he'd lost the desire to play before an audience. Music had become a private thing, a way to express his emotions as well as a way to communicate with Euterpius.

Still, there was no getting out of the symposium unless he abandoned the temple. Tempting thought. He'd had enough of these conniving priests and their ceremonies, enough pretending to enjoy his role as a pampered, worshipped immortal. And for Euterpius to try and bribe him with thoughts of love... Tenthus chuckled bitterly to himself. Now that it was a new day and he was far away from his beloved muse, the idea of being able to love anyone seemed impossible.

Tenthus studied his consort, admiring the lines of Phaedrus's naked body as he went about smoothing imaginary wrinkles out of the bed linens. The youth had been taunting him on purpose in the baths, and Tenthus hadn't been able to help his arousal. Tenthus began to wonder if he'd imagined the anger he'd seen and sensed from him the night before. Phaedrus continued to be an annoyance, disobedient as he was. Every move was a sign of seduction, a willingness to see to Tenthus's every pleasure, although Tenthus's only wish was to be left alone. Still, Tenthus was grateful that his newest consort showed no signs of madness.

Yet.

Phaedrus busied himself readying the food on a three-legged table: a bowl of figs, grapes, and pomegranates, a flask of honey mead, and a dish of garlic prawns. Surely Euterpius was wrong about Phaedrus being the one for Tenthus to love. Phaedrus was made only for pleasure, and not someone Tenthus would have chosen. He was handsome, well endowed, and likely skilled in every art, but almost certainly lacked the sophistication that Tenthus desired in a permanent mate. Youths like him were trained to be able to continue a discourse on nearly any subject, but their conversation lacked any real fire because they never left the temple to experience life beyond its walls. They'd been kept jessed and sheltered; no wonder they'd gone mad.

It eased his mind to know that Euterpius believed that the madness of Tenthus's consorts was not Tenthus's fault. He also made it sound as though loving Phaedrus would be an easy task, but Tenthus doubted his own affections for the young man would grow. He was

too afraid of the consequences. As for the thought of Phaedrus loving him, Tenthus had to laugh. Phaedrus loved nothing but his own pleasure.

But fear alone couldn't stop the desire he had for the handsome young man. When Phaedrus had adjusted the placing of the bowls one too many times, Tenthus called to him. Phaedrus came, and as soon as he was close enough, Tenthus wrapped an arm around his consort's waist and yanked him down. It wouldn't hurt, surely, to get to know his consort a little. He tasted Phaedrus's shoulder, smelling damp and fresh from the baths. Phaedrus responded immediately, becoming limp and subservient. His hips ground against Tenthus's, strengthening the erection he'd been trying to ignore since the bathing room.

But when he slid a hand into the crevice of Phaedrus's buttocks, the young man flinched. Beneath the utterly willing exterior, Phaedrus was afraid.

"What's the matter?" Tenthus asked.

Immediately, the emotionless facade returned. "Nothing, my master. Forgive my lapse."

"Tell me," Tenthus said, although he had a fair idea of what had bothered Phaedrus. During the past hundred years or so, the ideas about acceptable sexuality had changed, not in terms of partners, but in terms of acceptable acts. "How much did you see last night?"

"See, my master?" he asked innocently as he broke from Tenthus's embrace to pour a cup of honey mead. He handed it to Tenthus, who took it but did not drink.

"After I played. After you slept, you woke when I had a...a visitor. How much did you see?" Still the young man hesitated. With a brief exhalation of annoyance, Tenthus grasped Phaedrus's chin. "I will not be angry with you, no matter what your answer is."

"I saw blessed Euterpius, my master, although I daresay I heard more than I saw. He sang, like nothing I've heard before."

"You witnessed our trysting?"

The youth's downcast eyes told him enough. "I saw, my master."

For Euterpius to take Tenthus from behind must have been shocking to poor Phaedrus's sensibilities and had likely induced a fear that Tenthus would do the same to him. Tenthus *wanted* to, of course, and had, with several of his other consorts. He desired Phaedrus more than any of them.

But he couldn't have him as he wanted, no matter what Euterpius said. He downed the entire cup before saying, "It doesn't hurt. It actually feels good."

A pinched look crossed Phaedrus face, and with it, a faint hint of lust that surprised the immortal.

"Of course," Tenthus said, "I'm not interested in such things with my consort." Liar, he knew, but he didn't want to upset Phaedrus.

The brief glimpse into the real Phaedrus vanished. The consort set Tenthus's cup aside and knelt beside the couch with his head resting on Tenthus's stomach. "I am yours and yours alone, my master. You may use me however you desire. As for blessed Euterpius, it is your right to choose whom you love."

"And you?"

"I do not love, my master. It is forbidden."

And there lay the crux of Euterpius's bet; would it be possible to undo years of training and adherence to the temple doctrines in a month? "Not even your consort?" He brushed aside Phaedrus's hair to expose his neck.

"I am here to serve you. If you wish me to love you, I will."

"But you will not of your own free will?" Just hearing Phaedrus say the words wouldn't be enough, Tenthus knew. He'd have to get the young man to love him, body and soul, for only when someone loved so deeply and openly did the soul sprout wings.

Phaedrus trembled as he yielded to Tenthus's caresses. "I am a hetairo, my master. Raised in this temple to fulfill one duty and one only. With your permission, I will do so."

So that answered his question. No free will. Or if he had it, it was buried so deeply as to be inaccessible. And if he had no free will, he could not love or earn wings. His mind simply wouldn't be able to process it and would break.

Tenthus pitied him then, this hawk-eyed, curly-haired young man. There was no need for this month to be unbearable for the both of them. "Will you trust me, pretty Phaedrus? Trust me not to hurt you or go against your temple doctrines?"

"It doesn't matter whether I do or not. You are the immortal I serve. I am your consort." As if to prove it, he slid a hand beneath the chiton to wrap it around Tenthus's phallos. Tenthus ground his teeth together, doing his best not to react to the warm fist that clasped him, moving slowly up and down and causing Tenthus's need to spike sharply.

The immortal reached down and caught Phaedrus's arm to extract his hand. Phaedrus's face went from crestfallen to angry.

"It matters," Tenthus said. It hadn't before. The other young men had been handsome, but only that, and he'd paid little heed to their desires until the last few had gone mad. Then, Tenthus would have done anything to stave off their anguish. He couldn't bear seeing the same thing happen to Phaedrus, especially if he was somehow the cause. "It matters a great deal to me."

"Are you hungry, my master?" Phaedrus changed the subject. He knelt in a position of obeisance, a perfectly seductive gesture. "I am yours, if you desire it."

He *was* hungry and had been since the bath. Seeing his consort there, knees wide on the floor, phallos within easy reach, drove both desire and fear straight to Tenthus's gut. Phaedrus had survived the night, but what of today and tomorrow? After his past few consorts, Tenthus found it hard to believe that Phaedrus wouldn't turn on him in the same way.

Tenthus crouched beside him, tilting the young man's head up. Those lips... Tenthus caught his breath. "No. Not now."

“Have I offended, my master?” Phaedrus didn’t seem to believe him.

“No. You are a superb consort. I do not wish to feed, for now.” Liar, he said to himself again. His hands ached to touch Phaedrus’s skin. His mouth recalled Phaedrus’s taste, musky and masculine.

And suddenly he was starving, ravenous, and it took every bit of self-control he had not to pounce on Phaedrus. His eyes, his scent brought him to the edge of mindless ravishment. His phallos ached unbearably.

“It’s all right, my master,” Phaedrus said. His lips were close, so close that his words warmed Tenthus’s cheek. “Do what you will to me.”

Out of an instinct to preserve himself, Tenthus shoved the young man so Phaedrus landed on his back, knees raised, the whole of him exposed. And there...the glint of rebellious pleasure in his eyes.

Tenthus jerked back. Something was deeply amiss with Phaedrus, something that Tenthus couldn’t quite place. His consort lay on the floor, breathing hard, fingers sliding on the tiles. His eyes were round and dark, full of a feral need that Tenthus feared to sate. Euterpius was wrong. Phaedrus could not be someone for him to love. The youth already had a touch of madness within him. Tenthus could not -- *would* not -- bring it out, no matter how hungry he became.

“I don’t need you right now,” Tenthus said again. He lurched to his feet and headed out of the room, grateful that his chiton covered his obvious lie.

Chapter Seven

When Tenthus had left, Phaedrus rolled onto his side, wondering what had gone so terribly wrong. Tenthus had left him. His hunger and desire had been obvious, but Tenthus had *left*.

Phaedrus's phallos ached, but it was bearable. His body still reverberated with the jolt of desire that had come when Tenthus shoved him to the ground. *More*, he'd silently pleaded then, *more*, but Tenthus had backed away.

So the immortal was disgusted by him too. Phaedrus hated himself for wanting what he did, for being aroused by pain and humiliation. It showed, obviously. Now it was going to be far harder to do his duties toward the immortal.

Steeling himself, he headed in the direction Tenthus had gone. The hallways here were lined with murals, paintings of the blessed Tenthus with his aulos, Tenthus with a crowd of admirers, Tenthus pulling a consort toward him, each of them with a stiffened phallos.

The latter painting made Phaedrus ill. He kept his gaze on the mosaic floor, not looking up again until he reached the bathing rooms. Through the columns, the sun sank behind the trees, turning the sky pink and orange.

Again, Phaedrus averted his gaze. He had no wish to see the forest or to think about what went on within it. He turned his attention to finding Tenthus. He could not see the immortal anywhere, not in the baths themselves nor lounging on one of the stone benches. The curtain of the *aleipterion*, however, had been drawn shut, and from behind it came muffled, fleshy sounds. Curious and still determined to find the immortal, Phaedrus went to look.

He peered through the crack between the curtain and the wall. It wasn't Tenthus, but Aristes and Germaius.

Aristes lay prostrate on the marble table, his head pillowed on a towel. With a savage delight, Phaedrus noticed the new black and green splotches of bruises that covered his arms and legs, along with the reddened welts across his back. He'd been punished.

So had Germaius. Germaius stood at the side of the table, his hands dripping with oil he massaged into Aristes's skin. Phaedrus had a good view of Germaius's back; he was sturdier than the rest of the hetairo, with a warrior's muscled build, but the handsome flesh had been marred as badly as Aristes's. Welts from a cane raised inelegant lines across his back, and his buttocks were bright red, as if he'd been sunburned.

And what they were doing now was enough to get them an even direr punishment, if Phaedrus chose to say anything. Trysting with each other was expected and accepted as long as they stayed within the proscribed methods. Between the thighs, not the buttocks. Hands, not mouths, and certainly no penetration at any time. They all knew about it, of course; Diomedes made sure they did, but as hetairo, they were never expected to have to put up with such demeaning behavior. Their eventual customers would be of a high enough class that they wouldn't ask such things.

These two obviously didn't care. Germaius dipped an oiled hand between Aristes's buttocks, lingering there so long that Phaedrus had little doubt as to what they were doing. Aristes's face scrunched up as Germaius worked him. His fingers made wet, sucking sounds.

Phaedrus knew he should leave, but he couldn't move, arrested by the sight. Aristes moaned, the sound cut short when Germaius covered his mouth. He squirmed. Germaius's intrusive fingers moved faster for a while, then withdrew. He bent down to whisper something in Aristes's ear. Flushed and shining with perspiration as well as oil, Aristes nodded and eased himself over onto his back. With Germaius's help, he scooted down toward the end of the table so his buttocks rested at the edge. Germaius grabbed a few more towels and propped them behind Aristes's head and shoulders so he could get a clear view between Aristes's raised, spread knees.

Germaius oiled his hands again, and this time stood at the end of the table between Aristes's legs. He didn't go for the most vulnerable parts; instead, he started with Aristes's right foot, massaging it before moving up to the calf and knee. The thigh he teased, running his fingers lightly along the inside, almost but not quite touching the bobbing erection. He repeated this for the other leg, and by the time he was done, Aristes was panting, the corner of a towel caught between his teeth to prevent any sounds from escaping.

At last, Germaius moved his hands to Aristes's tenderest parts. Phaedrus gripped his own phallos as he did so, mimicking Germaius's movements as the bigger hetairos massaged Aristes. His hands rotated from side to side up and down the length of the shaft and around the head. To Phaedrus's surprise, Aristes went soft under these ministrations, but Germaius soon coaxed him back into hardness. The moment Aristes tensed, Germaius backed off until he relaxed again. Clearly, Aristes wasn't going to climax until Germaius allowed it.

And Germaius was determined to torment Aristes as long as he could. His own arousal was evident; Phaedrus had seen Germaius naked several times before, but the thickness of his phallos had never failed to impress him. Aristes writhed as his partner palmed his testes and rolled them around. This time, when Germaius poured oil into his palm, he rubbed it on his phallos and then nudged the opening between Aristes's legs.

Phaedrus cringed. To willingly mate like beasts, as Aristes and Germaius were doing, was unthinkable inside the temple, yet they did it anyway. Germaius's phallos, long and

thick, worked in and out of Aristes's body while his hands stroked his partner's erection. Aristes's bone white hands clutched the edges of the table. His chest arched upward every time Germaius plunged his phallos deep inside. The room had a heady scent of sex, sweat, and sandalwood that sent bolts of desire straight through Phaedrus's body.

Phaedrus removed his own hands to keep himself in control. This was neither the time nor the place to see to his own needs, no matter how much the scene aroused him. Germaius's hands shone in the sunlight streaming in from the windows. He wrapped them around Aristes's phallos with the utmost care, while at the same time sliding and stroking in a rhythm to match his other efforts. His smile was pleasant, far from the disdainful expressions Phaedrus was used to seeing. Aristes smiled back, his mouth wide and panting, obviously enjoying himself and feeling no shame.

They were in love, Phaedrus realized. The act he witnessed was at the level he'd seen with Euterpius and Tenthus. Both hetairo gazed into each other's eyes, never looking away, not even when Germaius extracted himself long enough to climb onto the table so he could be as close to Aristes as possible. He was mindful of Aristes's many bruises. It took a few fumbling, awkward moments before Germaius figured out how to reinsert himself, but they managed it. Aristes welcomed him, wrapping languid arms around his lover's neck. A few more thrusts and Aristes went taut. Germaius clasped Aristes's face, placing his mouth over his partner's just in time to stifle a scream of climax. Toes curled. Both bodies twitched from uncontrollable spasms. Sticky whiteness leaked from between their two bodies and from between Aristes's buttocks when Germaius reached his own climax.

Carefully, Germaius withdrew and lay beside his lover. They stayed that way for a long time, saying nothing, just gazing into each other's eyes and stroking each other's cheeks.

A deep, bitter emotion bubbled up from within Phaedrus. He hated them. He always had. It didn't make sense in his mind that they could be so gentle and considerate with each other while treating the other hetairo so badly. Their constant sniping was a cover, then, to hide their true feelings from everyone.

Phaedrus despised them even more for that. No one had ever been anything but condescending toward him. It wasn't fair that they could be so happy and content while his own life had been torn apart, his beliefs ravaged. These two committed sacrilege, had been for the gods knew how long, and were getting away with it. The old, familiar fury took hold. His fingers itched to strike them both, to rend them to pieces for disrupting his beliefs even further.

But he couldn't. Not without attracting unwanted attention. One word to Diomedes, and they could both be killed. Even so, he had the sudden, irresistible pleasure of knowing that he held the lives of his enemies in his hands. He pulled the curtain aside. "Having fun?"

Germaius, enraged, leaped off the table to strike at Phaedrus but stopped short of actually hitting him. Phaedrus hadn't flinched. He was enjoying this far too much.

Aristes sat up, painfully, his expression a mixture of fear and guilt. "Don't tell, Phaedrus. Please, don't tell." The malevolence had gone from his voice, and he became a man Phaedrus didn't know. Weak, pleading. "You understand, don't you? Especially after last year when --"

"Shut up," Phaedrus said. Anger rose within him. How dare Aristes use Phaedrus's shame to manipulate him. How *dare* he! "I should find Diomedes right now. He told me he said to fail on purpose, but did you have another reason, you sniveling little brat? So you and your *lover*"-- he said the word with as much sarcasm as he could -- "would stay together?"

"Yes," Germaius said. "And if you had any decency at all, you would --"

"Decency? *Decency*? You're one to talk, behaving like dogs in Tenthus's own temple. You've been hateful, spiteful creatures for the entirety of our lives, and you want *me* to be *decent*?"

"And why not?" Aristes countered. "You're half mad yourself, especially after last year. You're colder than the river Styx. You'll never love anyone. Not when all you have is rage," Aristes sneered, more like his usual self. "If you'd been anything other than a stuck-up,

selfish prude, I might have told you what else we discovered while we were in the records room. To think I actually felt sorry for you, especially after we found out about what happened to the last three of Tenthus's --"

All three hetairo froze when they heard Diomedes's telltale footsteps on the tile floor of the bathing room. Aristes and Germaius looked horrified. Both of them stared at Phaedrus in sheer panic.

A word. All it would take was a word to Diomedes, and insufferable Aristes and his partner would be gone forever.

But if they were gone, so too would be whatever Aristes had been about to tell him. "Lie down," he said quietly to Aristes. "And you, you were giving him a massage, nothing else, when I found you. Your lives are mine. Remember that."

The two hetairo moved. Aristes rolled onto his stomach while Germaius grabbed a bottle of oil.

The curtain raked open. "What's going on?" Diomedes eyed the three of them. He sniffed the air. "You've been trysting."

"You *did* say it was a good way to relieve soreness and stress," Aristes said with a sly smile. Phaedrus saw him wince when Germaius pressed a bruise too hard.

"So I did," Diomedes said. He turned, at last, to Phaedrus. "What are you doing here? I told you to leave them alone."

"I came to fetch some oils for Tenthus. These two were already here. We always bicker. You know that," Phaedrus said. To his relief, the pair managed to keep their disdainful expressions.

"Get them and go," Diomedes said.

Phaedrus forced himself to walk slowly and to actually pick bottles that made sense. Sandalwood, of course. Evergreen. Diomedes's judgmental gaze never left him. He left without looking again at Aristes or Germaius. Though he scoured the rest of the temple and

the grounds, Tenthus was nowhere to be found. When he went back to his room, defeated, he saw a bowl of still-hot *loukoumades* on the table. Next to it stood a bottle of scent, the evergreen that Aristes favored. These were from him, then. Phaedrus took one of the *loukoumades*, savoring the fried, honey-covered dough, a treat the temple-raised got only at city celebrations. The temple kitchen didn't make them, which meant they'd been brought from the city at an expense.

"How thoughtful," Phaedrus said, savoring the sweets. And how nice it was to have Aristes at his mercy.

* * * * *

Over the next several days, Phaedrus saw no sign of Tenthus. He stayed away from Diomedes, not wanting his mentor to know how miserably he was failing as a consort. He wondered if Tenthus had any idea what Phaedrus meant to do and if that was why he remained absent. What other reason could there be, unless he found Phaedrus so utterly repulsive that he couldn't stand to be near him?

On the fourth day, Phaedrus decided to see how the preparations for the night's festivities were progressing. Diomedes acted as *symposiarch*, instructing the slaves on how much the wine should be watered as well as giving instructions to the acrobats and hetairo about the night's entertainment. Phaedrus hovered at the edge of the room, taking note so he would be able to tell Tenthus what to expect.

In the midst of giving orders, Diomedes bent his head near Phaedrus's ear. "That was a near thing the other morning. Do not let him get out of hand, especially tonight."

The red tinge of rage clouded over Phaedrus's eyes. As if he could control anyone, let alone an immortal!

"Mind yourself." Diomedes gripped his arm bruisingly hard. "Or you will be punished."

"Never fear, dear mentor. Everything's under control. Tenthus will do as we ask." He patted Diomedes's cheek.

The priest clenched his jaw and made to strike Phaedrus, but the festivities took his attention away for a moment. “No, no, set the wine in the center!” Diomedes shouted at two slaves carrying a large *krater*. They adjusted their course and set it in the appropriate spot. Diomedes lowered his voice for Phaedrus. “See that he plays. See that he enjoys himself. After all, we wouldn’t want him to suspect that we aren’t appreciative of his presence.”

The last words were heavy with sarcasm. Phaedrus forced a smile.

Diomedes knew him too well. He gripped Phaedrus’s other arm. “You are doing as I’ve asked, aren’t you? I haven’t seen Tenthus lately. Tell me, where has he been?”

“He’s...around. Resting. He wants me to leave him alone.”

“And why is that? Aren’t you good enough for him?”

Phaedrus resented the implication. “He’s not hungry. That’s all.”

Something in Phaedrus’s flippant answer made Diomedes suspicious. “That isn’t all, is it? Tell me the truth, Phaedrus. He doesn’t want you. Is that it?”

Caught, Phaedrus nodded. “He’s afraid of me; though I don’t know what I’ve done. I’ve hardly seen him since his rebirth.”

The priest tugged at his beard. “This must be some new cruelty of his to taunt his consort so. Go to the kitchen. Tell them to prepare a dish of hyacinth bulbs, honey, and sesame seeds.”

All foods that were aphrodisiacs, Phaedrus knew. It certainly couldn’t hurt, though he doubted Tenthus would return in time to enjoy it. While the immortal could still eat and drink mortal food, it was the seed of lust that sustained him. Phaedrus bowed and left Diomedes to chastise another slave for his placement of the couches along the wall.

A short while later, he had his dish, hot and steaming, prepared by cooks who complained bitterly about being diverted to make something special in the midst of the chaos of preparations for tonight. Phaedrus had said nothing and did his best to stay out of their way.

He trudged back to his room with the dish and was shocked to see Tenthus there, asleep with one arm dangling over the side of the bed. He'd tossed his chiton to the floor. The translucent wings did little to cover his bare back and buttocks. The wings shivered as Tenthus breathed.

Phaedrus clutched the vial around his neck. If only he could do this now and get it over with. A few drops into Tenthus's open mouth, and this would be over. No more threats from Diomedes. No more fearing for his life.

Only a deep guilt because of Euterpius.

"It won't work, you know." Tenthus spoke without opening his eyes. "I know what you've brought and why. I won't feed from you. And I won't eat anything that will tempt me to."

The dish shook in Phaedrus's hands. Without thinking, he dashed it against the far wall, sending shards of pottery flying. A golden, sticky mess clung to the plaster and dripped slowly to the floor.

Tenthus had opened his eyes. Phaedrus saw something new there. Fear.

For a long time, Tenthus glanced from the scattered food and dishes to the ruddy face of his consort and back again. "That's a waste of good food."

"Sorry. I'm not hungry," Phaedrus said in a tone that mocked Tenthus. "I'd rather starve than eat the delicious things put in front of me."

Tenthus ignored the jibe. "I'm sorry if I've hurt your feelings."

Phaedrus knelt on the floor beside the bed, his face a hairbreadth away from Tenthus's. "Good. You should be. But if you really mean it, I want a different sort of apology."

No, Tenthus meant to say, but Phaedrus cut him off with a kiss. His hands were tight around Tenthus's head so the immortal could not draw away. Not this time. The hetairos's tongue sought his, rolling around inside his mouth in a game of hide and seek.

Without letting go, Phaedrus wormed his way onto the bed. One leg wrapped around and between Tenthus's, locking their two bodies together, groin to groin. Phaedrus ground his hips against Tenthus's.

Tenthus balked. He couldn't do this. Much as he wanted to, giving in to Phaedrus could lead to nothing good.

"*Enough!*" Tenthus put his foot on Phaedrus's stomach and used it to shove the hetairos off of him. The immortal rolled out of the bed and onto the floor, flushed and panting. He ached. Gods, he ached, but he would not -- could not -- take the chance of driving Phaedrus mad.

"Why?" Phaedrus asked from the bed. "Why do you hate me?"

"I don't." Tenthus turned away, unable to look his consort in the eye.

"Then why won't you feed from me? Am I that disgusting?"

"That's not why," Tenthus said emphatically. "It's just -- I can't."

"But *why?*"

The pleading in his voice stung, but Tenthus didn't respond to it. "I'm going to the bathing rooms to get ready for tonight. And I'm going *alone*."

Halfway down the hall, he could still hear Phaedrus's scream of frustration.

Chapter Eight

The symposium started without Tenthus, as it should, to give the guests time to arrive and settle and sample the wine. Phaedrus watched from a curtained alcove as city men wandered into the courtyard to mingle with the priests and hetairo. Musicians playing drums and syrinx entertained them. Beautiful, naked slaves danced, and one particularly flexible young man showed off his acrobatic skill. It was a perfect, cloudless night. Stars shone, and with the moon nearly new, the only light came from torches flickering on the walls.

Naked male and female slaves dipped pitchers into the krater of watered wine, then went from guest to guest to refill the glasses. Many amused themselves in a game of *kottabos*, flicking droplets of wine from their cup at small saucers floating in a basin of water in an attempt to sink them. Men alternately cheered and jeered at the form of their fellows as they hit their targets. More *hetairai*, the women, and hetairo hovered nearby, waiting to kiss the winner or to dole out a penalty for a poor throw.

In the midst of this Dionysian revelry, Phaedrus had never felt so completely alone. Always before he could dance with the other men or take them as lovers, as many as he wanted. Once, he'd been the one giving out kisses to the winners. Practice, the priests had told him. A chance to learn more about pleasuring others. His former classmates did so with

abandon. Aristes dallied with not one, but two drunken men. He was sandwiched between them, one groping him from behind, the other attempting to push his phallos between Aristes's thighs. Aristes tilted his head upward, breathing hard. Germaius shared a couch with another man. He kept arching back, ever so slightly, as his partner fondled his phallos.

Phaedrus turned his head away from the spectacle. Eroticism permeated the air, and it was difficult to keep his own body from responding. He was meant for Tenthus alone, and he would shame his temple and anger Diomedes if he were seen to be roused by anything else.

A hand brushed his shoulder. Phaedrus glanced up to see Tenthus, who looked cold and distant, unhappy about having to play.

"My master? Is there any way in which I might serve you?" His eyes flicked down to Tenthus's waist in the hopes that he could be of some use. Maybe now that the atmosphere was so potent, Tenthus would be rid of that damnable reticence of his. "Are you hungry?" He couldn't keep the eagerness from his voice.

"No," Tenthus said shortly. Aulos in hand, he shoved past Phaedrus and out into the courtyard. The musicians stopped abruptly. Silence fell as Tenthus took his place on the dais. Phaedrus, sullen at Tenthus's continued mistreatment, took his place just behind the immortal, filled with a foreboding that the concert wasn't going to be as Diomedes had hoped.

Tenthus had no compassion for Diomedes or any of his followers. The old priest was a selfish, bitter man, one of many of Tenthus's consorts who had gone on to become temple priest. In this case, the choice had been a bad one. Diomedes had altered the temple's teachings to suit his own neuroses. The rest of the guests... Well, Tenthus had less to be angry with them about, but many of them were still rich, pompous fools from the city, here for the wine and the sex and to brag to the less fortunate of the night they were able to listen to the blessed Tenthus.

So Tenthus wasted little time. Instead of the sweet, moving tunes he'd played in the past, he went directly for the erotic. The music started low and primal, stirring loins as effectively as if Tenthus had used his hands. Unattached hetairo swayed, and one by one drifted to the couches and to the lovers who waited there. Even the slaves slowed in refilling the cups, and they, too, soon found partners.

Tenthus's eyes kept roving back to the stone-faced figure seated on the dais just behind him. How was it that he'd never noticed how utterly alone his consorts were before this? Even the marble statues had more emotion than the proud Phaedrus. This too seemed a kind of madness, to be unmoved by the music.

Perhaps it was only because his other consorts had shown an excess of emotion that Tenthus now noticed the lack of it. It was an obvious strain for the young man to keep his emotions, and his body, in check. The doctrines had grown more and more foolish over the years, Tenthus thought. Whereas many years ago, Tenthus's body slaves had been allowed to be acknowledged and to at least react to their surroundings, their role had over time become focused to such an extreme that his consorts were miserable.

In the midst of a celebration of madness and ecstasy, Phaedrus's reticence stood out, although Tenthus was certain he was the only one who noticed. Everyone else had found a lover or two or three and cared little about who saw them. Even in their debauched state, they retained their precious morals and used hands or phalloses for arousal. No mouths. No degrading the hetairos by coupling with him as a beast would.

Tenthus continued to play, inciting the revelers to new heights of madness. Bodies writhed and glistened in the firelight. Wine flowed freely, tipped from the cup of one man into the mouth of his lover stretched out on a couch or dribbled over another's skin for his lover to lick off in the most erotic manner possible. Despite being open to the air, the courtyard grew unbearably warm. Men were gasping for air even as they cried out for their lovers to continue. Tenthus's music could not cut out the cries of those who reached climax;

rather, it seemed to punctuate every grunt and groan to harmonize with the victorious shouts.

Tenthus felt a hot, bright satisfaction at being the cause of such an orgy. To the immortal's bitter amusement, even old Diomedes had been unable to resist the pull of the music. His priestly garb was rucked up around his waist. He'd cornered one of the female slaves and had her pinned to one of the columns. His hips pumped. He never had been fond of masculine love; it had only been his religious fervor that had earned him the right to be Tenthus's consort and the high priest afterward.

Nearby, Phaedrus started to shiver from the effort to keep himself still and chaste. He kept his hands locked behind him, away from his erection. Guilt stabbed at Tenthus, but he kept playing, anyway. He'd make it up to Phaedrus later. Somehow. Right now, he was more intent on making sure his guests enjoyed themselves and using their excitement to feed vicariously. Not nearly as fulfilling as actually trysting with his consort, but enough to stave off his hunger for a while.

He continued to play. Harder, faster. Clothing littered the floor. Wine cups tipped to bleed across the tiles. Bodies piled atop one another, groping and thrusting. Moans and groans and screams wove their way in and out of Tenthus's music. Inwardly, he grinned at the sight, glorying in the way he was able to manipulate Diomedes and the rest of his followers. Next to him, Phaedrus choked and whimpered, but Tenthus paid him no mind. It couldn't be helped.

"What are you doing?" came a quiet, musical voice in Tenthus's ear. The music faltered for just a moment. "You're being needlessly cruel. This is not what I had in mind when I gave you this gift."

Tenthus turned his head to see Euterpius. With the aulos in his mouth, he could not reply to the anger in the muse's expression.

"End it. Now."

Tenthus obeyed.

The concert was, Phaedrus decided, pure torture. The music tugged at his mind and body as if a hundred men touched him, used him, violated his innermost parts. Worse, he had to stifle what arousal he could. That was his duty as a consort, to save himself until Tenthus wanted him. But it was impossible. His erection came, hard and insistent.

No one needed to touch him to bring him to the edge of a powerful climax. The notes did it for him. He wanted to beg Tenthus to stop, but his mouth wouldn't cooperate. He couldn't move, couldn't do anything besides submit to the music's will as he had last year in the forest. Only Tenthus was worse, because he wouldn't touch Phaedrus to give him any relief. The climax kept building until Phaedrus screamed inside, wondering how long he could bear the growing heat before he died of it.

Dozens of fantasies rolled through his mind. Tenthus pinning him face down, taking him by force. Tenthus tying him to the bed, his sweet, warm mouth sinking over Phaedrus's exposed, helpless phallos, teasing and merciless. Tenthus's hard, insistent fingers sliding inside him, probing at that forbidden, wonderful place, tickling until Phaedrus screamed for mercy.

Those made him shudder and wish for release even more, but it would not come, and the music did not stop. The fantasies grew more sinister. Tenthus, cane in hand, thrashing Phaedrus's naked body until the pain brought him to the ultimate arousal. Being held down, legs spread wide, while Pan --

No, not *Pan*. What was he thinking? Tenthus. *Tenthus*.

Tenthus with hairy legs, a goat's feet, and horns. Short, pitiless Pan with the wings of an insect. Both grabbing at Phaedrus, mounting him, riding him until Phaedrus was nearly senseless. Tenthus's music droned on. Phaedrus's fantasies, past and present, blended, merged

so that he couldn't tell one from the other. He lost sense of everything except the raging need within him and the knowledge that this time the immortals would drive him mad.

And then, thank the gods, a cool hand touched his forehead, and Phaedrus came back to an awareness of himself lying on the dais, victim to Tenthus's music. He heard a familiar voice telling Tenthus to stop. The music changed, going softer, sweeter, until it finally ended.

And for the second time in his life, someone lifted him and said, "It's all right. You're safe now."

Chapter Nine

Phaedrus slept the rest of the night and late into the next day. Tenthus didn't sleep at all. Not that he didn't want to, because the concert had worn him out, but because he couldn't get his mind to stop working long enough to rest. Phaedrus was going mad. Maybe he wasn't. If he did, he was supposed to. Tenthus was supposed to love him anyway. Phaedrus was supposed to love him back. It was enough to make Tenthus question his own sanity.

He left Phaedrus only long enough to visit the kitchens, where the surly cooks were busy making batches of remedies for wine headaches. Phaedrus, as far as Tenthus knew, hadn't drunk the wine, so he didn't bother bringing any of the remedy back to the room. He returned instead with a dish of leeks and apple, enough for two, and a plate of *pasteli*, a candy made from honey and sesame seeds.

Phaedrus, when he woke, wouldn't eat. He crouched on the bed, back pressed to the wall, and watched Tenthus with the wary expression of a trapped wildcat. Tenthus feared to go near him, so he hummed to himself, quietly, a soothing little tune that took the edge off of Phaedrus's temper without being obvious.

"Stop it," Phaedrus said. "I can't stand to listen to music anymore. I can't."

After last night, he should have known that music might cause more harm than good. Tenthus looked back to see his consort wild-eyed and shivering, close to panic. The immortal stopped his tune. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you. And I'm sorry about last night."

Phaedrus muttered something derogatory in reply.

"Excuse me?" Tenthus said. He dared to take a couple of steps closer.

"You're a monster!" Phaedrus said. "Not because of the wings, but because...because --" He broke off, tongue-tied and frustrated. "Forgive me. I should not have spoken."

Tenthus, too, felt his shoulders knot. "Tell me."

Stubborn Phaedrus pinched his lips together.

Growling, Tenthus grabbed him by the upper arms and slammed him against the wall. Instead of fear, as Tenthus would have expected, Phaedrus smiled. Already irritated with himself over the previous night's debacle, an irrational anger overtook Tenthus. He didn't have the patience to coax Phaedrus into talking. It would be far easier to beat his consort into telling him what the matter was.

Phaedrus must have sensed his anger. "Go on. Do whatever you want to me. I'm not like your other consorts. I won't break." He smiled, that sweet, devastating smile that could provoke any man to go against his nature. Euterpius had been wrong, dead wrong, if he thought Tenthus could ever love a stubborn, angst-ridden brat like this. He *wanted* the violence. Only the gods knew why, but he *did*. And if it was the only way to reach him...

"Like this?" Tenthus asked. His hand was on the back of Phaedrus's neck, driving his consort's face down into a pillow. His buttocks were deliciously bare, just waiting for Tenthus to breach them for the first time.

Phaedrus said something muffled by the cushion.

"What?" Tenthus asked. He eased his hold slightly. "Do you have something to say to me?"

“Monster. Torturing me like that. Everyone else had someone. Do you realize that? Everyone except me, because you *won't*. What's the matter with you? You could let Euterpius fuck you from behind like an animal, but you won't even *touch* me!”

Tenthus smacked him. Phaedrus slammed against the wall. Shoulders shaking in amusement or disbelief, he rose to his knees and braced himself against the wall.

“See? You *are* a monster. Hit me again. I dare you.”

The taunting was too much. Tenthus climbed on the bed behind him. Hand on the back of Phaedrus's neck, he ground his consort's face against the rough wall. Maddeningly, Phaedrus laughed. He was *enjoying* this! Tenthus twisted him back around so Phaedrus once again lay prostrate on the bed, his buttocks temptingly near.

“Go ahead. Do it.”

Tenthus wasn't sure if he'd heard right. “What?”

Craning his head around to look at Tenthus, Phaedrus said, “Do it. I want you to.”

The immortal's desire faded as quickly as it had come. After his previous consorts, the last thing he wanted was to drive another mad by taking him from behind. It wasn't an act one did without thought and care, especially if it was for the first time.

Not that Tenthus didn't *want* to. His own phallos throbbed at the temptation of driving himself inside of Phaedrus, of feeling the slick, hard warmth surround him. He couldn't resist running a hand down the smooth slope of Phaedrus's back. The youth's buttocks were soft and malleable at his touch. He slid his hand between them, tracing the slit down to the rough opening --

Phaedrus maneuvered himself to meet the exploring fingers. Tenthus caught himself. Phaedrus was manipulating him again.

Tenthus, angry, flung Phaedrus to the tiled floor. Phaedrus twisted around to grab Tenthus's ankle. One sharp tug pulled Tenthus down on top of him. They grappled. Phaedrus squirmed, making sincere efforts to escape, but Tenthus outweighed him. The activity

reminded Tenthus uncomfortably of his last three consorts, the ones who had fought as if Tenthus meant to murder them. Phaedrus was like them, yet different. He fought, but instead of cries of terror, he groaned as if every bruising grip brought him the utmost pleasure.

He twisted around, and Tenthus saw the physical signs of his arousal. His phallos was already erect, the tip shiny with fluid. Hunger clawed at Tenthus's belly. One taste. One little taste was all he wanted, and he could be sated...

No. He shoved Phaedrus away, repulsed. And there, just briefly, Phaedrus's lustful facade fell, allowing Tenthus to see the frightened, confused youth within. Tenthus didn't know what was going on or why, but he was determined to put a stop to it. With no better idea in mind, he grabbed the water pitcher and poured its contents onto his feral consort.

It cooled Phaedrus off, at least a little. He spluttered. His palms smacked the puddles, sending droplets flying.

"Now then," Tenthus said, crouching down beside the dripping youth. "Why don't you tell me, Phaedrus? Why do you want me to do this to you?"

Phaedrus wouldn't speak, miserable and wet and forlorn as he was. Tenthus wavered between wanting to tie him up and leave him there, to beat him until Phaedrus admitted what bothered him so deeply, and to hold him crushingly close while making love to him, convincing him that everything was all right.

"Tell me, damn you," Tenthus said at last. "I've had enough. Why are you acting like this?"

Phaedrus took one long, shuddering breath and said, "Because you're not the monster. I am."

* * * * *

In truth, Phaedrus couldn't forget the night he ran away from the temple. Diomedes had been exceptionally cruel to him that day, caning him until welts covered his flesh, for asking the wrong question during one of his lessons. He knelt on the ground, bent over one of the couches in Diomedes's chamber, unable to escape the blows.

"Insolent, useless wretch! Love, other than the fondness between master and student, has no place in this temple. I've spent too many years on your education for you to waste your thoughts on some fanciful notion such as *love*!" The cane whistled through the air before it cracked against Phaedrus's skin. Phaedrus flinched but did not make a sound despite the agony blossoming along his back. "We do not become hetairo for *love*. We do not honor the temple by being so foolish. Your duty is to become skilled in the pleasures of the flesh to honor the temple and Tenthus. If you think you've a better method than I, go on. Make your own lessons. Learn to serve an immortal by yourself."

Diomedes had always been cold toward him, but this was the first time he'd seen his mentor truly furious. The white beard and hair stuck out in every direction, giving Diomedes a terrifying appearance. Specks of blood -- Phaedrus's blood -- ruined the pure white of his chiton.

"Get out, I said. *Get out!* And don't you dare let me set eyes on you until you've learned your lesson!"

With Diomedes's harsh words echoing in his ears, Phaedrus fled down the hill behind the temple. Soon enough, he lost himself in the darkness of the forest that many claimed housed nymphs and other, more powerful denizens. Crazy, he had half a mind to let a round dozen of the forest creatures claim him, just to spite Diomedes and his teachings. He'd show the vicious old priest he didn't need this training, not at all. And if anything untoward happened to him, then it would be Diomedes's fault for throwing him out.

A fair way into the trees he stopped, bent over double and panting, his knee-length chiton soaked with perspiration. He should have known better than to think he could go anywhere and still be alone. The eerie sound of a syrinx wound through the trees, carried on

the wind. Phaedrus stayed where he was, knowing that only one god played that instrument, and it was one who would suit Phaedrus's needs perfectly.

The sound of the pipes drew nearer, and soon laughter and heavy footsteps accompanied it. The music continued, making him feel heavy and languid. He sank to his knees on the loamy ground, immobile.

"What have we here?" a thick, masculine voice said.

The pipes ceased.

"One of the temple's get, I think," another male said. "A pretty one too."

"From the temple?" said the first. "All the better for sport, then."

Phaedrus watched two dark shapes emerge from the trees. One, the taller of the two, bore a thick beard, pointed ears, and a horse's tail switching impatiently behind him. A satyr. The second was none other than Pan, goat-footed and wearing a grin as telling as his companion's thick erection. Phaedrus felt his groin clench in response. He'd heard tales of the satyrs, sexually insatiable creatures, and Pan, who was quite fond of seducing unwary shepherds. Perfect.

"What are you doing here, temple boy?" Pan said. He cocked his hairy, goat-horned head to study Phaedrus.

Phaedrus, still feeling dazed and aroused, found it hard to speak. "Looking for you."

"For me? I'm flattered. Why?"

"Because..." Phaedrus's eyes wandered down to the faun's waist where a red and shiny phallos jutted eagerly from between the hairy thighs. "My mentor told me to make my own lessons."

"Did he now? A handsome thing like you?" Pan scratched his bearded chin. "We might have a few ideas, right, Lykos?"

The satyr shook his bearded face, grinning. "Right. It would be a shame, it would, to let someone with so many obvious talents waste them."

“Teach me,” Phaedrus said desperately. “I’m being trained to serve an immortal, but I could use some practice.”

“Tell you what.” Pan’s eyes glinted. “Why don’t you show us what you’ve learned so far about pleasing an immortal, temple boy, and we’ll go from there?” Pan twisted a finger in one of Phaedrus’s curls, bending down so his face nearly brushed the youth’s. Over the faun’s shoulder, Phaedrus could see Lykos leaning against a tree, tail swishing, hand wrapped around his sizable tool. Again, a shudder of desire wracked Phaedrus’s body. He would please these two. He *had* to.

With Pan’s breath hot against his cheek, Phaedrus reached up to release the pins fastening his chiton over his shoulder. The linen dropped to pool around his waist. Pan crouched and kissed him, cheek, neck, shoulders, letting his hands stray to caress Phaedrus’s exposed chest. With exquisite care, his fingers traced the welts Diomedes’s cane had raised on his skin. “Tell me, pretty one. How came you by these?”

The pain and swelling faded, replaced by a stirring of desire. “My mentor. I angered him.”

“And you will anger him further by coming here, no doubt,” Pan said with a wry smile. “What kind of punishment will you get when you return, I wonder?” The wrinkled face with its prominent chin studied him, curious. “Ah, well, never mind that for now.”

The satyr grunted. “The rest of it. Come on.”

Working around Pan’s busy hands and arms, Phaedrus untangled the rest of the cloth and tossed it aside. He barely had a chance to take a breath before Pan clutched his erection and whispered, “Bring yourself to climax. I want to see.” He let go and worked his way around so he knelt at Phaedrus’s back, arms around the youth’s waist and head resting on Phaedrus’s shoulder so he could watch. He tucked his phallos neatly between Phaedrus’s legs.

“Go on,” Pan said, impatient.

The faun's warm body pressed tightly to his made it hard for Phaedrus to concentrate. But with the control he had learned over the years, Phaedrus thrust his own desires aside and focused on the faun's. Pan wanted to see him come. So come he would.

All of the hetairo were encouraged to explore their own bodies, to test the extent of their control and to push beyond it. More than once, Phaedrus had brought himself to the brink only to stop and force himself to endure the resulting agony. All of it for control, for keeping his mind in charge of his body so that he might be better suited to please his consort. This time, he doubted Pan would leave him unsatisfied for long. The faun's wandering hands and stone-hard phallos were proof enough. And for once, Phaedrus doubted his own ability to endure in this different, wild environment.

Phaedrus spat in his palms and went to work. Whether it was nerves or Pan's presence, from the first touch he felt as if he could hardly control himself. Heat flushed throughout his body, making him dizzy. He stopped moving, trying to catch himself, but Pan's hands covered his. Phadrus groaned as Pan manipulated him to stroke and squeeze in all of the right spots.

Pan moved Phaedrus's hands down and around to cup the sacs beneath his phallos. Phaedrus let his fingers stray farther to explore the soft expanse of skin between his legs and to touch the other phallos resting there.

Pan viciously pinched Phaedrus's nipple in response. "Not yet, you naughty boy. Do as I say."

It wouldn't be long now. Glistening droplets appeared at the head of his phallos. Pan's constant movement sent tingles of anticipation through him. Together they writhed in a steady undulation, with Phaedrus riding the waves of need, half wishing it would be over now and half wishing it could last forever.

When Pan nibbled at Phaedrus's ear, Phaedrus lost all hope of control. He threw back his head and gasped, unable to stop the climax rushing through his body. And Pan wouldn't let him stop; he kept stroking, eking out every bit of satisfaction he could.

At last, he let Phaedrus go. Phaedrus collapsed on his side, panting, unsure how to take what had just passed. "Did that...please you?"

Pan's laughter echoed against the trees, as eerie as his syrinx. "Not yet, temple boy. Not even close. I have more lessons in mind for you."

Pan snapped his fingers. The satyr yanked Phaedrus to his feet and slammed his back against the trunk of a pine, pinning his shoulders there with powerful, callused hands. He thrust his thick erection between Phaedrus's legs and pumped hard, continuing until Phaedrus felt raw and burned. Pan lay idly on the ground, mouth to his syrinx, playing a tune that lulled Phaedrus into complaisance. His body went languid even as Lykos took advantage of it. Training took over, and Phaedrus gave himself completely to the satyr, turning his head to the side to let Lykos nip at his ear and shoulder.

When he bit hard enough to make Phaedrus wince, the music stopped. "Now, now, that's no way to treat one trained in the temple," Pan told his friend with disapproval. "You have to be gentle." He elbowed his companion aside and faced the panting Phaedrus.

Phaedrus trembled as the faun pressed up against him, groin to groin, the hairy goat legs far softer than they looked. Pan caressed Phaedrus's cheek with the back of his hand, sending tremors of excitement straight down to the tips of his toes.

"These humans," Pan said in a husky voice, "think the only civilized way to rut is from the front." He thrust his hips forward sinuously to make his point. Phaedrus trembled so badly that Pan had to hold his arms against the tree to keep him upright.

The satyr fondled his own erection and grinned. "Shall we show him differently, then?"

Little by little, Pan eased Phaedrus down and away from the tree so they knelt across from each other. Pan took Phaedrus's face in his hands and gave him a long, succulent kiss. The faun smelled of the woodlands, green and heady and thick, and tasted of a sweet pomegranate. He kissed Phaedrus's face and neck, down his shoulders to his bare chest.

So entranced was Phaedrus by the faun that he didn't see Lykos creep around behind him. He didn't notice anything but Pan until Lykos used his fingers to explore the crease between his buttocks. Phaedrus tried to look, to tell the satyr to stop, but Pan wouldn't let him. The faun's hands clenched Phaedrus's face, forcing him to look forward at the bearded face that held a look of absolute lasciviousness. "Don't worry about him," Pan said between kisses. His voice was so low and musical that Phaedrus relaxed.

It was when the satyr's fingers grew more invasive that Phaedrus began to panic. He wriggled, but neither Pan nor the satyr would let him go. "Stop it," Phaedrus pleaded. "I'll be ruined."

"You're already ruined," Pan said with glee. "From the moment you left the safety of your temple and ventured into my woods, you gave up your illusion of safety. You, my handsome youth, belong to us."

With that, a hard thickness probed between Phaedrus's buttocks. Phaedrus breathed hard as it eased its way inside, stretching and filling him until the sensation made Phaedrus want to cry tears of agony or pleasure. The satyr's hands gripped his waist, making it impossible for Phaedrus to escape.

Phaedrus tried to strike at Pan, but the faun held his wrists tightly. "They do not teach you this in the temple, do they? What pleasure there is to be had by rutting like beasts?"

"I'm not a beast," Phaedrus said, hardly able to speak now that the satyr had begun to move his body in and out of Phaedrus's. The horse tail flicked against his thighs.

"No, but we are," Pan said. "Denizens of nature, as wild as they come." He transferred both of Phaedrus's wrists to one hand and reached down to grab the youth's phallos with the

other. The light fingers danced across Phaedrus's testicles, eliciting sensations that no one in the temple had ever told him were possible. He couldn't help but angle his hips forward to seek those fingers, wanting them, desperately. Pan chuckled and continued to tease him mercilessly.

The satyr's sudden thrust elicited a sharp gasp from Phaedrus as the oversize phallos rubbed against a pleasure point within him. Any thoughts of shame fled from his mind, lost in the turmoil of his aching, needy body. Lykos's movement kept forcing Phaedrus up against Pan. The faun kept kissing, kept rubbing, ignoring Phaedrus's pleas and whimpers.

"Please," Phaedrus whispered, although whether it was for his companions to stop or to take him over the edge before he went mad, he didn't know. It burned where the satyr entered him, but the pain soon turned to a newer kind of pleasure deep in his belly. He whimpered, louder, and rested his head in the crook of the faun's shoulder.

Between the faun and the satyr, his body was tingling with sensations so pleasurable that he thought he would burn alive. No one could endure this and stay sane. But Lykos continued his thrusts, half lifting Phaedrus from the ground with his eagerness. The large phallos kept pressing against something deep inside him that made him want to scream with the ache of it.

When climax came, it hit hard, crashing over him like waves during a storm. He couldn't move, couldn't do anything but feel his muscles spasm. Pan's gleeful laughter sounded in his ears as he spent himself on the ground. Lykos didn't stop; he kept pounding until Phaedrus was sure he'd be torn apart.

"Enough," Pan said. He held the still-trembling Phaedrus to his breast.

"Just...a little..." the satyr said between thrusts, and then he shouted so loudly that he startled birds from the trees. Phaedrus groaned as the satyr came inside him.

When the satyr had finished with him, Phaedrus fell against Pan. "What did you think of your first lesson?" the faun asked him.

It was a long while before Phaedrus could answer. All he wanted to do was sleep. “More,” he mumbled into Pan’s hairy shoulder.

“More?” Pan said. His chuckle reverberated within Phaedrus’s body. “Good. We’re not done with you yet. Not at all.”

The faun whistled. From the trees, a dozen more figures emerged, horse tails flicking and phalloses as erect as their pointed ears. More satyrs. Phaedrus’s scream was cut short by Pan’s hand over his mouth. “You asked for more, did you not? Well, pretty Phaedrus, here they are.”

In moments, they were upon him, petting and stroking, using lips and hands to explore every part of his body. Phaedrus let them, having never felt anything so wonderful. Diomedes’s training had been nothing like this. He felt free in ways he never had at the temple. Rules had no place here. No more enduring the glares and whispers of the other hetairo and priests. Pan and the satyrs didn’t care where he’d been born or who he was, only that he was handsome and willing.

Coarse tails flicked his skin. The satyrs turned him over. He raised his buttocks, eager for more of the pleasure Lykos had shown him. Diomedes and the other hetairo would have had conniptions at the mere thought of volunteering for such a violation. Phaedrus smiled, gleeful, knowing that he had chosen a road his peers didn’t have the brains to imagine or the guts to survive.

Phaedrus had no way of telling time in the forest. The dark canopy of trees made it difficult to discern sunlight from moonlight, and anyway, Pan and his satyr friends kept him too busy to think about anything other than his body. The satyrs brought with them wine to slake Phaedrus’s thirst and oils to keep his body limber. Both Pan and the satyrs helped themselves to the wine, which only seemed to increase their libido. The satyrs sampled Phaedrus as they did the wine, dipping into him over and over, never completely satisfied.

Neither was Phaedrus. Every time a satyr left him, he begged for another. The sweet notes of Pan's syrinx kept him company as well, keeping him soundly in a mood of subservience and lust. Pan took over between satyrs, ensuring that no part of Phaedrus was left untouched. He rubbed Phaedrus's skin with the finest of oils and spent copious amounts of time massaging Phaedrus's phallos, bringing the youth to the brink of climax again and again before letting him have any relief. And when the climax came, Phaedrus cried out at the release.

The relentless activities tired Phaedrus as much as they excited him and left his body aching. Every time he dozed, someone else was upon him, sating their own pleasure. Every time he opened his mouth to speak, Pan was there, ready with another tune or kiss that kept his pleasure at a high, almost-unbearable level.

During one of the rare times they left him alone, Phaedrus heard a wrathful voice speak. "Music was my gift to the world, as was Tenthus's temple and those who serve it. I will not stand for the abuses of either. Leave, now, before I ask my father to find a just punishment for you."

The ground trembled as Pan and the retinue of satyrs fled. Phaedrus shivered, cold after his sudden abandonment. He tried to get up to go after them, but his legs wouldn't hold him. Without the music, sudden, cruel clarity returned. Hunger, pain, and confusion hit all at once. "Come back. *Come back!*"

Strong arms lifted him. Phaedrus fought, wanting only Pan and the satyrs. "Rest now," the voice said, as soothing in its musicality as Pan's syrinx was intoxicating. "You're safe."

"I was safe with them!" Phaedrus protested. "Take me back!"

"They would have killed you. A pleasurable death, to be sure, but a death all the same. Now, sleep."

The voice gave him little choice. Phaedrus slept.

Diomedes had told him later how he'd found his student, missing for twelve days, curled up on Tenthus's altar and delirious from shock and exposure. The priest had carried him inside to the temple and dosed him with herb-laced wine. Phaedrus started awake every so often, hallucinating and rambling nonsensically, speaking of gods and spirits, pleading with Diomedes to let him go back.

"He's ruined," another priest said, looking at the disheveled youth. "We should cast him out."

"No," Diomedes said. "He returned to us for a reason. It's worth the effort to restore him." He sent for several of the city's best physicians, who did what they could to mend Phaedrus's ravaged body. His bruises and cuts would heal cleanly, leaving him still handsome, the ideal of beauty, as long as they could get his mind back.

And that would take a great deal of effort. Phaedrus ranted about Pan and the satyrs until his voice went hoarse from strain. He waved his arms in such a manner that Diomedes couldn't tell if he were fighting off his captors or welcoming them. And from time to time, Phaedrus's body would move and twist as if he trysted with an unseen lover. Diomedes watched, fascinated and horrified. Phaedrus's constant erection, along with grunts and cries, left little to the imagination about what he must have endured out in the forest.

The physicians dosed the raving youth with various potions to calm him, but the hallucinations refused to abate. For days afterward, they kept him bound and leashed to his bed, because Phaedrus kept trying to leave. His screams of frustration roused the entire temple until Diomedes gagged him. "Those foul creatures have taken you into the darkness, but you must overcome this. You must come back to me," Diomedes said, kissing his student's lips around the cloth gag. Fearful of Phaedrus's fate, Diomedes hardly left his side and spent many hours in prayer, begging the gods to return Phaedrus's wit.

He kept this up for a few days, until finally, the fever broke, and Phaedrus looked at him with recognition. "Welcome back," Diomedes told him. Phaedrus managed a weak smile in return.

To Diomedes's relief, the youth's recovery went quickly after that. When Phaedrus was well enough to return to classes with the other hetairo, they all watched him with ill-concealed disdain. More than once, when they thought Diomedes was out of hearing, they taunted Phaedrus. "What's the matter?" Germaius said. "Us lowly mortals disgust you so much you had to go out into the forest and rut with the beasts?"

The illness had done nothing to lessen Phaedrus's temper. He struck Germaius square in the face, breaking his nose with an audible *crack*. A swift punch to his chest followed, and Germaius doubled up on the floor, blood streaming down his face.

When Diomedes went to intervene, Phaedrus trembled beneath his grip, still scrabbling at the floor like a wild thing. His fellow priests knelt beside the stricken boy. "He should be dismissed!" they said, pointing fingers at Phaedrus. "He's a danger."

But Diomedes would hear none of it. He had every faith that Phaedrus would fulfill his expectations and meant to prove it. During the day, Diomedes punished his behavior as necessary, but at night, Diomedes tamed and taught him, determined that his favorite student would not succumb to the mistreatment of the gods.

* * * * *

"But when I was ill, something happened. Something I didn't tell Diomedes." Phaedrus was far calmer than he had been earlier. He leaned against Tenthus's chest, and the immortal was happy to provide him comfort. This quiet, sane Phaedrus was someone with whom he could deal. "There was one night he left me alone. I knew because I was cold, and the dreams came back. Pan's face, leering at me even while he held me down and used me as if I were a dog. I heard music. Not his syrinx, as I had all the time in the forest, but an aulos, sweet and comforting. The dreams went away, and for the first time since I left the temple, I was aware of myself. I was hot and sticky and sore, and my throat hurt so badly I couldn't speak. The music soothed all that too. The pain went away for a while. And then the music stopped, and someone spoke to me. 'You mustn't go mad,' he said. 'You must get well and finish your

training. Tenthus's rising draws nigh, and you must be ready for it.' And the music started again, and I slept. Diomedes was surprised when I woke and recognized him."

Phaedrus laughed uncomfortably. "I'd forgotten all about that until just now. And I think..." He looked to Tenthus for confirmation. "I think it was Euterpius. And I'm sure, now, that it was he who rescued me from Pan and the others."

And from Tenthus, last night, although Tenthus didn't say it. The immortal held him close, reveling in the warmth and perfection of his body. He was both grateful and angry toward Euterpius, furious that the gods had meddled in his affairs before he'd even risen this time, and grateful that the muse had been there to spare Phaedrus any further torment.

The hetairos wasn't finished, though. "Afterward, when Diomedes started my lessons again, everything was...different. Sex wasn't like it had been. Diomedes couldn't rouse me with his hands alone as he'd been able to do before. He was both puzzled and furious. I felt guilty. I'd ruined everything for him. And then one day when he lost his temper, he beat me." Phaedrus licked his lips, a feverish look in his eye. "Just a cane, at first. It hurt, but it also felt good. I knelt there and took it without crying out, and to my surprise and his, I felt the stirrings of desire. I had an erection for the first time since I'd recovered. A few more strokes and Diomedes brought me to climax.

"He told me, later, what he'd done while I was ill, how he'd had to tie me to my bed and..." He shuddered. "We kept it a secret from everyone else. I could rouse him just as easily as I had before, but in return, he had to hold me down or tie me or beat me. I didn't mind. I craved it. I still do. At first, he was appalled, but then he started to see it as a blessing. I didn't know why until after he showed me the records room, and he told me what you'd done to your other offerings. I, out of all of them, wouldn't go mad from the pain because it's the one thing that sustains me. I owe him. He saved my life."

Phaedrus's confession shocked Tenthus, even as all of the pieces of his existence fell into place. The fearlessness, the anger, the dark desires... A feeling of revulsion crawled through Tenthus's stomach. Phaedrus was nearly as unnatural as he was, made by the gods.

For a long time, neither of them spoke. “Are you afraid of me?” Phaedrus asked at last. “I’ve seen the way you look at me.”

Yes, Tenthus wanted to say, but Phaedrus’s anger was no longer a part of it. They had more in common than he’d thought. “Afraid? Was it not you who called *me* monster?” He clasped Phaedrus’s cheeks. “No. I am not afraid of you. I understand you, now, and for that I’m grateful.”

“You haven’t seen me angry. Truly angry. Diomedes punished me for it, often. Fits, he called them. I haven’t had one in a while.” His head lay in the crook of Tenthus’s shoulder, calm and innocent as he must have been before he’d ventured into the forest. It nearly broke Tenthus’s heart to think about how ill-used he’d been by gods, classmates, and priests alike.

Yet he was frightening too. Tenthus didn’t doubt the rage; he remembered Phaedrus’s face the first time he’d seen it, almost cruel in its manner. It was hard to merge the two together, to find the real Phaedrus beneath. Could Phaedrus be tamed?

Tenthus wound his fingers through the youth’s hair, marveling at the feel of it. The telling must have exhausted Phaedrus; his eyes were closed, and the slow, steady breathing meant he’d gone to sleep. Gently, Tenthus lowered him down onto the couch and left him there to rest.

He went for a walk, needing to clear his head.

Chapter Ten

Worn out, Phaedrus dozed on the couch, hardly aware that Tenthus had left except for the chill worsened by the light breeze coming in from the garden. Phaedrus opened his eyes and stared dully outside. Crickets chirped. A bat swooped by, intent on its prey.

“Phaedrus.”

The voice came from the other side of the room, in the shadows. It wasn’t Tenthus, but Diomedes who stood there, the white chiton making him look like a spirit. Phaedrus sat up slowly. “I can’t do it.”

“Oh yes, you can, my dear student.” Diomedes uttered a brittle chuckle. “If you don’t, I swear to you that I will return you from whence you came. The guards at the jail would be happy to have a hetairos in their midst and would think nothing of using him as much as they’d liked. Think of it. No more sun, no more scent of the sea, only you, languishing in the darkness, waiting for the next horror to arrive. Do you still want to tell me no?”

Phaedrus felt sick with terror. He shook his head.

“Good boy.” Diomedes inclined his head in approval. “That was a fine story you told Tenthus, but there are parts missing.”

Phaedrus tried to stay calm. “Such as?”

“Such as the reason I beat you hard enough so you would run that day.” He smiled without warmth. “I knew what Tenthus would do to you, but I could not be the one to teach you such things. The madness was a side effect I had not anticipated, but you weathered it quite well, I thought.”

Phaedrus pressed his back against the wall, filled with revulsion. This man had raised him, used him, lied to him.

Diomedes continued as if he didn’t notice Phaedrus’s emotions. “You owe me, Phaedrus, for all I’ve done for you.” His eyes glinted. “I didn’t mean for it to turn out quite like it did, not with you finding pleasure only in pain, but you survived. You’re something *more*.” A cold smile spread across his face. “A few nights hence, you will be able to fulfill your duties. It’s time to repay Tenthus for what he’s done.”

“No. I *won’t*. How could you possibly think that I would after this, knowing you’ve lied to me? Get out. Leave me alone!” He didn’t dare touch Diomedes, but it didn’t mean he couldn’t find other ways of expressing his rage. He stumbled around the room, fumbling for whatever trinkets came easily to hand. A cup. A bowl. The carved chest that held his jewelry. The small knife used to cut fruit. All of it went flying toward Diomedes.

All of it missed. Diomedes vanished as quickly as he’d come. Phaedrus’s projectiles crashed against bare wall and clattered brokenly to the floor. He continued to scream as he bashed his fists against the plaster. Anger brought a haze over his eyes and then he could see nothing at all, feel nothing except the fury coursing within him.

He’s done it. He’s gone mad, and it’s my fault, Tenthus thought. He stood in the doorway, watching Phaedrus shriek and destroy everything he could get his hands on. Tenthus took a step back, panic welling within him. Not again. *Not again*.

Phaedrus had now moved onto the bed, tossing the blankets aside. Tufts of wool soon littered the room as he tore the mattress apart.

Reluctantly, Tenthus went inside, mindful of where he stepped. Shards of pottery covered the floor along with spattered fruit and fish. Chairs and tables had been overturned, one table leg broken off. Phaedrus was still tearing at the mattress, unaware of Tenthus's nearness.

Tenthus set his aulos inside the chest where it would be safe. Gathering his courage, he grabbed Phaedrus's wrists and wrapped his arms around the youth's chest, pinning Phaedrus to his body.

"Stop," Tenthus said, frightened at the frenzy his consort had worked himself into. Phaedrus struggled against him, kicking and biting as if he were feral. His hips ground against Tenthus's groin, rousing the immortal even as he fought. Muscles flexed under Tenthus's grip, and at any other time, the immortal would have been immensely aroused. He'd taken more than his share of unwilling offerings and was perfectly capable of subduing Phaedrus by force, but Phaedrus had linked pleasure with pain. There had to be a means of teaching him there was another way.

Phaedrus continued to thrash.

"Hush. It's all right. I won't hurt you. I swore it," Tenthus said. Phaedrus's eyes were wide and wild. "You'd do the maenads proud." Tenthus referred to the wild, crazed women that often accompanied drunken Dionysus. Phaedrus either didn't appreciate the reference or didn't hear it. He kept fighting for all he was worth. "And you called *me* a monster, little wretch."

At last, some sense returned to Phaedrus's eyes. "Kill me. Please. I can't take the shame."

"Don't. Phaedrus --"

Tears streamed down his cheeks. "It's a lie. Everything's a lie. He let them hurt me. *He let them!*" Phaedrus's voice rose to a high-pitched scream.

Fear struck Tenthus in the gut. “What are you talking about?” he asked, but Phaedrus was too hysterical to answer. Tenthus shoved him down onto the couch, the only extant piece of furniture besides the chest, and slapped him. It was enough to get Phaedrus’s attention. “Who let them hurt you?”

“Diomedes,” Phaedrus said, voice gone suddenly flat. “He just left.”

The bastard. It made sense then, why Phaedrus had snapped. The hetairo were raised to trust and believe in their mentors completely, and for Diomedes to break that trust would be a hard thing for Phaedrus to bear. Tenthus had never liked the priest. He remembered the time he’d risen to see Diomedes, a fervent, sycophantic youth who, as Tenthus’s consort, had done everything he could to change Tenthus’s ways to conform to his own beliefs. Tenthus hadn’t trusted him then and still didn’t.

“What did he tell you?” Tenthus asked, uneasy. He sank down to the couch, maneuvering Phaedrus’s head so that it was pillowed on his lap.

Phaedrus didn’t move and spoke in the same dull monotone. “He said he beat me on purpose so I would run and learn from Pan what he would not teach me. He said he knew what you would do to me. He hates you. I don’t know why, but he does.”

“I do.” Tenthus felt ill, thinking of his own part in it. Bits of Diomedes’s tale were true. “He was my consort once. Did you know that?” Phaedrus didn’t answer. Tenthus told him anyway. “He was as handsome as they come, but entirely obsessed with his worship. They chose him because of his dedication to the temple, not because he preferred men. He didn’t; he loved women and trained to pleasure them. Whether through his own refusal to acknowledge what might happen, or because the priests kept him ignorant, he didn’t know how I would feed. He was stubborn. The first night, he was entirely willing. I was gentle. But when my lust got the better of me and I took him from behind, he changed. He was the first consort I had who tried to tell me the proper way of making love. Face to face, between the legs, no mouths, no penetration. No fun, was my thought. We spent the entire month

arguing. I shamed him, I'm afraid, though that wasn't my intention. In the end, he blamed himself for not being good enough or pure enough to change my mind."

He stroked Phaedrus's head, wishing he had a way to take away the youth's pain. "I wouldn't do that to you. I wouldn't force you. Why do you think I stay away? You're a handsome, wonderful consort, one of the best I've had, but I don't want to hurt you. I don't want to drive you mad as I did Diomedes and those who followed."

There. He'd uttered his worst fear. He stroked Phaedrus's shoulder, hating himself, and Euterpius, anew. It wasn't fair, the burdens that came with his immortality.

"I'm already mad." Phaedrus laughed, more breath than sound. "I'm sorry, my master. I lost my temper. I should not have spoken to you as I did. I wish..."

"What?" Tenthus said. A shiver of nervousness rushed through him.

Phaedrus's brown eyes looked at him, full of longing and pain. "I wish you wouldn't go to ground. I wish I didn't have to..."

Whatever else he wished, Phaedrus couldn't say. He clutched the cicada pendant around his neck. A lump formed in Tenthus's throat. He couldn't speak either. Both of them had little control over their own lives. Tenthus had experienced many moments he did not regret, but they were far outnumbered by those he wished he could take back.

Not fair. None of it was fair. Euterpius had offered him a way out, if only... Tenthus held his breath. If only they could love each other.

If only it could be so easy. "Do you trust me, Phaedrus?"

His sad brown eyes searched Tenthus's face. At length, he nodded. "As long as you don't use music."

"I won't. Lie still," Tenthus told him. "Let me show you something." He eased Phaedrus onto his back, taking a moment to admire the tanned skin of his naked body. With one hand he traced the smooth curve of one shoulder, the faint outline of his ribs, the manhood that, for now, rested limply against one perfect thigh.

Phaedrus fought to sit up. “No, my master. It’s improper. I should be serving you --”

A note of irritation crept into Tenthus’s voice as he held his consort down. “This is the way I want you to serve me. Lie there and let me make love to you.”

“It won’t work.” A hint of his old rebelliousness returned. “I told you. Get some rope.”

“No.” Tenthus tapped the youth’s lips with his finger. “There are other ways of love. Ways that do not include force or trickery.”

“I need it,” Phaedrus said, voice breaking. “It’s the only way. That’s why they chose me as your consort, in case you were...cruel. I could withstand it. I’m impure.”

“No, you’re not.”

He could see Phaedrus struggling with Tenthus’s words. “My father was a murderer, my mother a thief. She bore me inside a filthy prison.”

“It doesn’t matter to me where you were born or who your parents were. It doesn’t make any difference *here*.” He rested a hand on Phaedrus’s chest over his heart. “You are not them. Nor are you doomed to follow in their footsteps.”

Phaedrus paled at that. Tenthus was running out of ideas of what to tell him. The poor youth had probably never been praised other than for his skill at performing to Diomedes’s standards, and in between, had been told how wretched and lowborn he was.

“Whatever awful things Diomedes has told you, they’re not true. You’re perfect as you are.” Tenthus kissed his forehead. “Cold, unfeeling Phaedrus. I want you to care. I want you to have a choice. Do you desire me?”

His lusting eyes betrayed his voice. “I...it’s not for me to say, my master. I am not allowed.”

“Says who?” Tenthus pressed his lips to his consort’s, savoring the delicate softness. “I am an immortal. Those who trained you are mortals, their myths and whims passed from generation to generation, growing wilder with each telling. I want you to enjoy yourself.” Tenthus nibbled down Phaedrus’s neck.

Phaedrus looked at him, disbelieving and confused. The young man's body was entirely willing and open, but Phaedrus, the true Phaedrus, could not be reached.

Chapter Eleven

Stay aloof and keep distant, were Phaedrus's thoughts when Tenthus held him, but his heart wouldn't listen. Inwardly, Phaedrus trembled at Tenthus's caresses. The immortal wasn't quite like Euterpius, who emitted sexuality as if he wore a fine perfume, but he was a strong, virile man, wings and all, and although it took a little more effort, Tenthus became exquisitely sexual.

For a brief, insane moment, Phaedrus wanted Tenthus to touch him everywhere, even that forbidden place between his buttocks. He recalled the look of pleasure Tenthus had worn that first night. He wanted this. Gods, he wanted it, and had since he'd seen the bronze representations of Tenthus.

Could it be possible?

"Do you fear me, young Phaedrus?"

He'd asked that before. The answer was the same. "No." Especially not now after he'd told Tenthus what he'd done with Pan. "I don't fear you. I'm afraid that..." He couldn't say it.

"You won't go mad again. I swear it."

That wasn't what he'd meant, but he was content to let Tenthus think so. It was hard. Oh, gods, it was hard to do and be done to and to keep his secret. If he'd wanted to, it would be so easy to love Tenthus, a handsome, intelligent man who cared more for Phaedrus than anyone ever had, but he could not, dared not.

He could only pretend. Diomedes had lied about a great many things, but Phaedrus was certain that the priest would not make idle threats. If Phaedrus didn't kill Tenthus, someone else would, and Phaedrus would be back in the prison facing a long, slow death of his own.

"Phaedrus," Tenthus murmured. On their knees, chest to chest, they embraced each other. Phaedrus curved his arms upward around the immortal's back, beneath his wings, while Tenthus moved his arms downward to clench his hands around Phaedrus's buttocks. They stayed that way for a while, breathing in the heady scents of each other, reveling in the feeling of flesh against flesh, of erection against erection.

Phaedrus didn't want to move. Tenthus had been right. Diomedes had never done anything like this, never been considerate of anyone's needs but his own. Grief settled in Phaedrus's chest. He hugged Tenthus tighter, head on the immortal's shoulder, as tears leaked from his eyes.

"Are you all right?" Tenthus reached up to wipe away the tears.

"I never knew..." His throat closed off before he could finish.

"Diomedes is a bastard to use you like he did. You're worth so much more."

Tenthus kissed him again. Tongue met tongue. The immortal held him close as he eased Phaedrus onto his back.

"Are you ready?" Tenthus asked.

Warm and comfortable, Phaedrus nodded. He obediently rolled onto his stomach, making his rear end available to Tenthus. The immortal took his time. Oiled hands rubbed expertly at Phaedrus's shoulders and upper back to relax him even further. Languor

overcame him so that Tenthus touching him between the buttocks seemed no more than a natural extension of the massage.

Tenthus fingered him, circling the wrinkled entrance before gently sliding a finger inside. Phaedrus squirmed a little, but it felt nice. He told Tenthus so.

“Good,” the immortal said. A moment later, a second finger joined the first and pressed against a sensitive internal spot.

“Ohhhhh...”

Tenthus laughed. “Did Pan and the satyrs bother to do this? Or were they too much in a hurry to stick you?”

“A little. I don’t know. I wasn’t paying much attention. Gods, that feels good. Don’t stop, don’t...”

“I’ll have to, eventually.”

Phaedrus clawed at the sheets. “Just...oh, gods!” The constant rubbing made Phaedrus’s entire body tingle with pleasure. He wriggled. He couldn’t help it.

Tenthus laughed again and, maddeningly, pulled his fingers out. “See? Nothing to be afraid of. You haven’t gone mad yet.”

“If you don’t finish what you started, I certainly *will*,” Phaedrus said.

“Lift up a little.”

With Tenthus’s hands at his waist, Phaedrus gathered his knees beneath him. His erection was so hard it hurt. A new hardness pressed against his backside. Little by little, Tenthus eased himself inside. Phaedrus groaned at the fullness. He reached down to fist his phallos.

Tenthus stayed where he was to let Phaedrus grow used to his presence. Then, slowly, he slid in and out, in and out. Pressure built deep inside Phaedrus. He moved the hand around his phallos faster to match Tenthus’s growing speed. Tenthus pounded against him

now, the friction causing an incredible heat to grow within him. His vision narrowed. He breathed hard. Not much longer now and he would --

He and Tenthus cried out at the same time, their voices mingling in joint pleasure. Phaedrus's body twitched and jerked as climax overcame him. He felt the warm rush of Tenthus's seed just as his own wet his fingers.

With a groan, Tenthus pulled out and dropped onto his side. He tugged Phaedrus to him, wrapping his arms and legs around his consort to keep them together as long as possible. "Are you all right?" Tenthus asked again.

"Gods, yes." Phaedrus could hardly speak. The shell he'd kept so tightly around his heart cracked open. Tenthus held him as he wept. He felt...free. Diomedes could torment him no longer. Here, he had everything that mattered. Tenthus's love, his trust. Freedom to be himself and to have his own needs seen to. The ability to *have* needs.

"Your teacher has wronged you in many ways, and this was but one of them." Tenthus teased Phaedrus's nipple. "He is a foolish man with even more foolish ideas. Love is the higher ideal. Don't you see? None of my other lovers have made it as far as you. They could not open their closed little minds to what might be or accept love and pleasure for themselves. You have."

At a price, Phaedrus thought, huddling deeper into Tenthus's arms. A terrible price.

* * * * *

He watched Tenthus sleep, sated after their lovemaking. The experience had been beyond pleasurable, more fulfilling than anything Phaedrus could have imagined, but Tenthus had no idea of the conflict he'd just engineered within him.

And Phaedrus hated him for it. This wasn't fair. Tenthus was supposed to die. Phaedrus wasn't supposed to fall for him.

Tenthus shifted position so his mouth fell slightly open. Phaedrus's gut clenched. This was his chance. A few drops.

His hand trembled as he gripped the pendant around his neck. If he didn't do this, Diomedes would kill him. Painfully. And then he would find another way to get rid of Tenthus, and it might be worse than a painless death by hemlock. If he did, his terrible internal conflict would be over. He would be redeemed. He would live. And he would lose the only man he'd ever truly loved.

So what was he more afraid of? Death or love?

"What is that, anyway?" Tenthus asked sleepily, startling Phaedrus out of his thoughts. The pendant had split open to reveal the vial inside. "Some love potion?" He took hold of it for a closer look.

Phaedrus tried to pry Tenthus's fingers away. "No. Don't!"

Too late. Tenthus sniffed the vial within, and his face changed at once, from loving to confusion. "What *is* this?" Tenthus asked.

Phaedrus's mouth worked, but no words came out.

"Hemlock?" Tenthus yanked the chain chokingly tight around Phaedrus's neck. "What were you going to do, my *consort*? Kill me as I slept?"

"I didn't... I don't..." He couldn't get any more air to speak.

"What kind of sickness was this, to play me as you had? To earn my trust and then turn it against me?"

This was the monstrous Tenthus Phaedrus had seen represented in the records room. Eyes blazing, face drawn back in a sneer. He pulled, hard, and the chain snapped from around Phaedrus's neck.

"I thought... Gods, I believed you were different. After what we just shared... Oh, Phaedrus!" The immortal buried his hands in his face. "Tell me there's a reason for this. Tell me you didn't mean to kill me."

He couldn't. Phaedrus could only stay there, huddled, absorbing Tenthus's disappointment and feeling his own.

A heavy blow landed on the side of Phaedrus's face, sending him tumbling into the wall. "After Euterpius, I dared not care for anyone. Until you. And you --"

Phaedrus curled up, trembling. His face throbbed, and his body felt like one gigantic ache. He couldn't look at Tenthus. Every word the immortal said was true, and they hurt far worse than any threat Diomedes had ever given him.

"You lied to me. Even Euterpius the trickster didn't do that." He spat, the warm globule hitting Phaedrus's chin. "How *could* you? If you like pain so much, feel *mine*!"

Blow after blow landed on Phaedrus's exposed flesh. This time, the pain didn't excite him. Instead, he felt more and more dejected.

"Wretch. May Hades take a personal interest in you and punish you for all eternity."

With that, Tenthus turned and strode outside into the rain.

* * * * *

"This way." Aristes spoke just loud enough for Germaius to hear him. He tugged at the bigger hetairos's arm, leading him toward the garden behind Tenthus's quarters. Much as he hated getting wet, tonight he was grateful for the rain that would cover their tracks as well as mask any little noises they might make. He kept reaching under his woolen cloak to pat the scroll he'd tucked there. If any of the priests caught them with it, they wouldn't live until morning.

Germaius grumbled but followed his lover anyway. Aristes knew it was risky to come this way, but a path led from Tenthus's garden down the cliffs to the ocean. From there, they'd walk up the coast with the waves to wash away their steps. Sooner or later, they'd reach Mykenae, the hilltop city of Aristes's birth, and claim his inheritance.

All they had to do was make it through the garden without being seen. Aristes hugged the cloak tighter around himself, praying that the dark color would continue to hide him.

A voice, barely strong enough to be heard above the rain, called his name. "Aristes!"

They froze. Aristes's heart pounded in his chest. He turned.

"Aristes. Please."

Through the wet, Aristes could just make out the interior of Tenthus's sleeping area. It looked as though a storm had struck it. The furniture had been torn in several pieces, which lay scattered across a filthy floor. And in the middle of it all was Phaedrus, lying on the ground.

Germaius caught his arm. "Don't. We have to go. He's not worth the risk."

Maybe not, but Aristes wasn't so cold-blooded that he would just abandon someone who'd called for help, even if it was the wretched Phaedrus. A step closer and he could see that Phaedrus was hurt. But if Phaedrus was like that, alone, where was Tenthus?

"It's too late. Tenthus is dead. We have to go."

"We don't know that. Maybe something happened. Maybe Phaedrus changed his mind."

"That son of a whore? He wouldn't. He's not worth our time!" Germaius clutched at his lover's cloak.

"We shouldn't leave without knowing for sure whether Tenthus is alive or not." He tore free from Germaius's grip and went inside out of the rain, stepping carefully over the litter on the floor. He shook droplets of water from the woolen cloak like a dog. "Phaedrus?"

Germaius stayed in the doorway. "Come away from there. Leave him. It serves him right."

But Aristes ignored him and cleared away a bit of debris with his foot before kneeling beside Phaedrus. Bruises covered the hetairos's face. Blood trickled from his nose and one puffy lip. One leg looked red and swollen. Broken, Aristes thought.

“Aristes.” He tried to adjust his position. Pain made him hiss through his teeth. “I need your help.”

Aristes kept his amusement to himself, having an idea of what it must have cost Phaedrus to ask. He wasn’t, however, willing to be entirely at Phaedrus’s disposal. Not yet. “What happened to Tenthus? Is he dead?”

Phaedrus’s eyes flashed. His jaw worked, as if he wanted to ask how Aristes knew but couldn’t bring himself to ask. Instead, he said, “I don’t know. He took the cicada pendant with him. Whether he drank the hemlock or not, I can’t say.”

“You got your answer. Let’s go.” Germaius was firm.

“Not just yet,” Aristes said. He held up a piece of broken pottery for Phaedrus to see. “How did this happen? Another one of your fits?”

A look of hatred crossed Phaedrus’s face.

“The truth, Phaedrus, or we won’t help you.”

“Yes, dammit!” He slammed his fist down and managed to cut it on a shard of glass. He swore. Germaius laughed. Aristes shot him a withering look.

“And who did this? Diomedes or Tenthus?”

“Tenthus. How did you...? Oh, gods, I don’t care. Just help me up to the couch. I don’t want to lie here and die like...like a dog.” A draft caused a few tufts of bedding to drift into the air. “Are you satisfied? I’m here, helpless and humiliated before you. Isn’t that what you always wanted? To see me lose?”

“Not like this.” He gently prodded Phaedrus’s cheek. Bruised, but not broken. “Tell me something, Phaedrus, and tell me the truth. Did you truly mean to kill Tenthus?”

A drop of perspiration slid down to sting Phaedrus’s eye. He tried to blink it away. “At first.”

“We don’t have time for this,” Germaius grumbled.

Aristes waved his friend to silence, then used the corner of his cloak to wipe Phaedrus's forehead. "Why?"

"Because Diomedes..." He spoke the name with a palpable hatred. "You were in that room. You saw the statues. He told me Tenthus was a monster, and then he told me he'd have me put to death if I didn't cooperate. I didn't want to die like that. Like this." He waved a feeble hand at his surroundings.

That wasn't the answer Aristes had hoped for. "I'll give you one more chance to prove that you're not the selfish bastard you made us think you were. What stopped you from killing Tenthus?"

Phaedrus wouldn't meet his eyes. "I-I couldn't."

Aristes waited.

Humiliated, Phaedrus told him what had happened during their lovemaking and after, when Tenthus had woken. "And I let him do it, because I knew if I told him the truth, he'd stay, and Diomedes would still find a way to kill him."

"Because you love him."

"Yes, damn you! Is that what you've been waiting to hear? I do." His voice cracked. "So much that I'd do anything to keep him safe, even if it means turning him against me. Even if it means lying to Diomedes and praying to whatever gods are listening that I might live until morning!" His chest heaved with emotion. Tears glittered in the corners of his eyes.

"Germaius. Help me."

The bigger hetairos balked.

"*Now*," Aristes said. "You're stronger than I am. He kept our secret. We owe him."

Still grumbling, Germaius went to lift Phaedrus as if he were as lifeless as a sack of grain.

"Careful!" Aristes said and punched his lover in the arm.

One last epithet and Germaius gathered Phaedruss into his arms as gently as he could. Phaedruss went pale, and aside from a few choked whimpers, he kept quiet.

“I’m sorry, Phaedruss. We’re trying.” Aristes held Phaedruss’s leg as steady as he could. “Easy, now. Good. There.” They set Phaedruss down lengthwise on the couch with his back resting against the lyre-shaped backrest. Aristes managed to find a few pillows that hadn’t been ripped to shreds to tuck beneath him.

“Thank you.”

“Are you comfortable?” Aristes brought the remains of a blanket and draped it over him. Phaedruss shrugged.

The two hetairo studied him for several moments. Aristes chuckled. “What do you know, Germaius? Our angry, stuck-up fellow hetairos has finally learned to love something other than himself.”

Phaedruss gritted his teeth, likely wishing he were well enough to punch Aristes.

“Enough to take a beating from him,” Aristes continued. “And enough to die for him, because there’s no chance of Diomedes letting you live. We both know that.”

“Then I’ll die with dignity, knowing that Tenthus is safe.”

Germaius snorted. “If you believe that, you’re still a fool. Come on, Aristes. We’ve wasted enough time here.”

Aristes leaned over to kiss Phaedruss on the forehead. He felt oddly sad. “Good luck. A pity you learned to love too late.”

The two lovers turned to go. “Aristes. Wait.”

The hetairos looked back.

“Why did you break into the records room?”

Aristes reached under his cloak. Germaius put a hand on his arm. “Don’t. We need to leave.”

“And he deserves to know.” He pulled out the scroll and unrolled it to show to Phaedrus. “Germaius and I were looking for a way out of being hetairo so we could stay together. We’d found out that Diomedes meant to send us to different houses as soon as Tenthus was ki -- went to ground.”

“You mean after I murdered him.”

The bluntness made Aristes uncomfortable. “Yes. Anyway. These are the records of where Diomedes found this batch of hetairo. He bought Germaius, so Germaius is technically a slave. But me, I’m a noble’s bastard son. My mother left me here to hide her shame, yet she left me funds when I reach my majority. I’ll be a free man then, and I’ll be able to buy Germaius.” He frowned. “Not that that bastard Diomedes would have told me anything of the sort. He would have sent me to one of the brothels, ignorant of my heritage.”

Phaedrus scanned the scroll. “What about me?”

Aristes pointed to a section. “There. It’s just as he’s told you. Born in a prison. Son of a thief and a murderer. Worth only a few bronze coins.”

If Phaedrus was disappointed, he didn’t show it. “How did you know I was meant to kill Tenthus? More scrolls? Diomedes told me he kept records, but I didn’t get to read them.”

Aristes nodded. “He did. I saw them. Those, we didn’t take for fear that he’d notice, but I remember every word that lying bastard wrote.”

“Good. Tell someone what happened. Don’t let Tenthus’s memory die.” He reached out to clench Aristes’s hand. “Promise me that.”

“I promise,” Aristes said. “We won’t forget you, either.”

Phaedrus nodded. “Go, then. Be with each other. Be happy.” The words caught in his throat. “I envy you. You have a lifetime of happiness ahead of you. I had an hour with Tenthus. A wonderful, glorious hour that I wouldn’t trade for anything.”

“Phaedrus.” Aristes hesitated. He tucked the scroll back under his cloak for safekeeping. “We’ll take you with us. There’s got to be a way --”

Phaedrus answered before Germaius could protest. “No. I’m going to do whatever I can to keep Diomedes away from Tenthus.”

This time, Aristes shivered. “If, by chance, one wanted to find Tenthus, where would one look?”

“Nowhere!” Germaius said. “Come on. This is our only chance to leave.”

Aristes gestured at his lover to be quiet. “Where, Phaedrus?”

“I don’t want you to look,” Phaedrus said. “Leave him be. I don’t want him to know about this. I want him to stay safe.”

“Exactly. There’s no way to track down an immortal, anyway. Why not just ask Zeus himself where they are?” Germaius said.

The idea had merit, but Aristes kept that to himself. “May the gods be merciful to you, Phaedrus.”

A look of fear crossed his features, quickly covered by the determination Aristes was so used to seeing. “I don’t care what happens to me as long as Tenthus is safe.”

There seemed to be nothing else to say. Aristes let Germaius lead him back out into the rain. By the time they reached the base of the cliff, it had lightened to a bearable drizzle. Under his breath, he murmured a prayer. “Mighty Zeus, lives hang in the balance tonight. I am but a humble mortal asking for your aid for those who have been treated unjustly this past month. Show me where Tenthus is. Take me to him, so that love, not hate, might prevail this day.”

Rain continued to fall. Aristes waited, as if pausing to catch his breath so Germaius didn’t get impatient. And there, in the east, came a bolt of lightning. The subsequent crash of thunder rattled him to his bones.

That way.

“Aristes? Mykenae is this way.” Germaius pointed west.

He was already walking, following the bolts of lightning. “Go, then. I have to make a stop first.”

Germaius ran to catch up with him. “Which is?”

“Keeping my promise to Phaedrus. I’m going to tell someone the truth.”

Chapter Twelve

The gray light of morning found Phaedrus still lying on the couch, aching and sore, the blanket still tucked around him. His leg hurt badly enough that he hadn't slept at all.

Diomedes came, as he'd expected. Seeing his student's condition, the priest hurried over and sat next to him on the bed. "Well?" he asked, unable to hide the quiver of excitement. "Your pendant is missing. It's done, then?"

"It's done. Tenthus is gone." Whether he was actually dead, Phaedrus didn't know, but he still loved the immortal enough not to let Diomedes think anything to the contrary.

The smile on Diomedes's face took ten years from his features. "Wonderful." As he spoke, he moved the blanket to take a better look at Phaedrus's injuries. The smile turned cold and cruel. "What is this?" He yanked the blanket the rest of the way off. "What has he done to you, my student?"

Loved me, Phaedrus thought, but dared not say it aloud. He gritted his teeth.

Diomedes touched the bruises. Phaedrus trembled at the roughness of his fingers, especially when they drifted down to stroke his broken leg. He tried to jerk away, but Diomedes grabbed his hair and forced his head back. "You vile, disgusting creature, letting

him do this to you for the sake of your pleasure! I put up with you and your despicable acts for seventeen years. No more.”

Diomedes went around behind the backrest of the couch and pinned Phaedrus’s head there. And then, to Phaedrus’s horror, Diomedes grabbed a pillow and used it to blot out Phaedrus’s sight and his air.

Unable to breathe, Phaedrus flailed his arms, trying desperately to dislodge his mentor’s deadly grip. Diomedes’s gleeful laughter burned his ears. Finally, one wayward hand managed to connect with Diomedes’s face. Phaedrus swiped at him, satisfied to feel his nails tear into his mentor’s skin.

Diomedes yelled in fury and loosed his hold just enough so Phaedrus could tilt his head to the side and take in a lungful of air.

“*Murderer!*” Phaedrus knew his only hope was to attract the attention of other priests or hetairo. “I know what you did to Tenthus’s consorts. Liar! Murderer!”

The pillow quickly covered his cries, but not soon enough. Two of the other priests came at a run. One of them gasped. Phaedrus flailed, but weakly. The lack of air was getting to him.

“Get me a rope,” Diomedes told them. “And prepare a draught of hemlock. He’s confessed to murdering blessed Tenthus.”

They ran off. Phaedrus’s vision sparkled. His heartbeat thudded in his ears. Diomedes kept the pillow in place until the hetairos had grown too weak to fight back. When he removed it, finally, Phaedrus gasped and coughed.

“You will suffer,” Diomedes told him, “as I have suffered these many years. You will know the meaning of pain and find no pleasure in it.” A heavy slap and Phaedrus’s world spun again.

The priests appeared again moments later, one with rope in his hands, the other holding a clay bowl filled with liquid. Diomedes held Phaedrus down while his fellow priest

bound Phaedrus's wrists. As an added touch of cruelty, Diomedes looped a length of rope around Phaedrus's neck.

Once again, he couldn't get enough air to speak.

"Get up," Diomedes said and used the lead to yank Phaedrus to his feet. "Outside."

Phaedrus collapsed as soon as his injured leg touched the floor. Diomedes didn't care. He settled for dragging his student, not looking back while Phaedrus struggled to stay on his back so as not to scrape his most tender parts on the ground. He managed it for half the way, but his mentor's rough handling made it hard to stay steady. One particularly bumpy patch of ground flipped him over.

Diomedes continued to spew epithets loud enough so that by the time they'd gone outside and around the side of the temple to the sacred grove, more priests, along with several of the hetairo, gathered around the edges of the grove. The sun was just beginning to rise at the edge of the sea, turning the sky bright hues of pink and orange. The air was still, the only sounds the harsh breathing of the men and the crashing of the waves far below. Even the morning calls of the birds had ceased, as if they had fled in anticipation of the impending violence.

Diomedes didn't stop until they reached the altar. Once they halted, Phaedrus clawed at the wretched rope around his neck. It burned. His fingers came away sticky with blood. His leg hurt so badly he could hardly think.

Diomedes addressed his audience. "Look upon this...creature, a murderer who desired to take Tenthus's place for himself! There can only be one cicada-man at a time, and abominable Phaedrus has done away with him! Tenthus, our blessed immortal, is no longer. Our way of life has ended, all thanks to this wretched youth, whom I raised and trained as my own!"

A vicious kick sent Phaedrus sprawling across the ground. The ensuing shouts of derision sounded tinny in his ears.

“Out of kindness, I rescued this creature from the pits of misery in which he was born. Son of a murderer and a thief, he’s followed in his lowborn father’s footsteps. How has he repaid my generosity? By murdering he who is most dear to us. Tenthus.” Another kick caught Phaedrus in the small of his back. Pain blazed from his neck to his legs. Diomedes held his hands wide. “What do we do with murderers and usurpers?”

“Kill him!” one of the hetairo shouted. The cry was taken up by another and another until the entire circle of onlookers cried out, “*Kill him!*”

Diomedes held out his hand. One of the priests handed him a bowl of hemlock.

Phaedrus coughed, tasting blood. *Stay away*, he prayed to Tenthus. *Stay safe. Don’t come back*. He raised himself on shaky elbows.

“Liar,” he tried to scream, but it came out a hoarse whisper. “Tell them what you’ve done.”

Bowl in hand, Diomedes knelt beside him. He spoke quietly enough for only Phaedrus to hear. “I never liked you, vicious cuckoo. I raised you to serve a purpose, and you’ve served it well. Thank you. But now you are a risk I cannot have.”

His mentor had gone mad, completely mad, eyes wide, grin leering. “You loved me once,” Phaedrus said, with no real hope that his words would have any effect. “You cared for me. Brought me back from madness. Raised me, taught me... There’s no need for this.”

“I could never love a creature such as you.” Diomedes held the clay bowl to Phaedrus’s lips. “Though I thank you for showing me the depths of my own faith and strength. I endured every day with you, every lesson, put up with your taunting and incorrigible, lewd behavior. I am stronger for it. And now...now I have succeeded in ridding the world of two that should never have been born. I am the victor now. I wear the laurel.”

Phaedrus closed his eyes and clamped his mouth shut. *Tenthus. I love you.*

They beat him then, using sticks and stones. Diomedes used his fists and feet. Still, Phaedrus would not give in. Pain meant nothing. Pain meant he was alive.

But he could not endure forever. They managed to get him sitting upright and tilted back his head. Sticks jabbed at his mouth. Phaedrus tasted blood and felt teeth loosen as his attackers finally managed to pry his jaws apart. Splinters stung the roof of his mouth and the tender underside of his tongue. They didn't care what happened to him now, as long as he, the supposed murderer of Tenthus, died.

With a stick still in Phaedrus's mouth to keep it open, Diomedes poured the hemlock down Phaedrus's throat. It stung, causing an involuntary whimper from the younger man. He coughed and choked, but Diomedes kept at it until the bowl was empty.

Done, Diomedes gestured to the others. "Leave him. He'll die soon enough. Let the buzzards have him. He has shamed our temple; he is not worthy of being entombed with the other hetairo."

Without support, Phaedrus slumped to his side on the chill stone of the altar. A hard cough dislodged both the stick and a tooth from his mouth. Speckles of blood colored the dirt.

"Tenthus," he said. It hurt to talk.

The priests left without looking back. Still bound and helpless, a tear trickled down Phaedrus's face.

"Tenthus."

* * * * *

Dawn found Tenthus on an isolated eastern beach, shivering in the aftermath of the night's storm. His aulos hung at his belt, untouched. The poison-filled pendant was heavy in his palm. He felt old, sore, and ready to break, all signs that it would be time for him to go to ground, but it was too early. He kicked at the sand, wondering, hoping that he could revert to his larval stage here where no one saw him and where no one was bound to look. It would be easy to drink the hemlock meant for him, and if it wasn't enough, perhaps the encroaching tide would drown him. Death at last.

Water lapped around his ankles. The sun had risen but was behind a wall of gray clouds, giving the world a sullen, depressed look. He found color up the rocky hillside where tufts of bright red poppies grew in the crevices. As symbols of death and of Hypnos, the god who brought sleep, they were fitting.

He splashed along the shore, feeling oddly childlike at his enjoyment of the water. He wondered if Phaedrus had ever been to the sea, or if he'd spent his entire life trapped within the temple and its grounds.

Phaedrus. Tenthus's hand clenched around the bronze cicada. The hetairos had meant to murder him, but why? *Why?* They'd been so close. He'd almost loved Tenthus, almost given himself freely and completely. But almost wasn't enough.

And this time, Tenthus had been the one to go mad, screaming nonsense at his consort, and hurting him. How badly, Tenthus didn't know, and he half wished he'd stayed to find out.

Glancing down the shore, he saw two figures walking toward him at speed. He had no wish to speak to anyone, but his feet remained rooted in place as if a greater force kept them there. So he waited and recognized two of the temple's hetairo, Aristes and Germaius.

When they reached him, both groveled in the sand. "Phaedrus sent us," Aristes said.

"I don't want anything from him." He turned away to watch the foaming waves.

"Please, blessed Tenthus. He bade me promise to tell someone the truth."

"I've had enough truths for one night." Phaedrus didn't, couldn't, love him. Tenthus's one chance at a normal life had vanished, and he didn't want these two to taunt him with it. "Go away."

"A month ago, Germaius and I broke into the records room. We were looking for the documents of our sale. We found them, but we found other scrolls, documents of great import that you must hear."

Unbidden, Aristes began to recite from memory. “I am, as my successors have before me, describing the events that have transpired over the latest visit from Tenthus. I have witnessed terrible things, but this goes beyond. From my beginnings as a humble consort to these later years as high priest, I have sought to uphold the ethics of the temple and to provide blessed Tenthus with the best consorts available. My attempts so far have proved fruitless. My priests are losing faith in Tenthus and in me. The immortal has grown cold and cruel with no thought to his consort’s wishes. His ideas of what is permissible are so far outside the realm of what is morally acceptable that I fear for the future of the temple and its inhabitants. I have done my best to alter Tenthus’s sensibilities by training hetairo, each purer than the last, in an attempt to sway his mind. I am writing this to admit that, yet again, I have failed.

“Poor Aramedes was the latest in my failed attempts. Sweet, obedient, and chaste, we staked him out for Tenthus, never thinking that the foul beast could harm a hetairos of such obvious purity. We were, regretfully, wrong. By the time the month was up, Tenthus had abused him to such an extent that Aramedes was no longer coherent. He ceaselessly uttered prayers to the gods to release him from his torment. As head priest, I believed it was in his best interest to assist him. I took him to the southern cliffs and there committed him to the rocks below. I wept; who would not, after losing eighteen years worth of efforts?

“That was yesterday. Today, I have but one hope left, one last chance to redeem my name and that of the temple before I die. If purity will not subdue Tenthus’s evil ways, then perhaps a creature as base and lowborn as the fiend himself will make the difference. The prisons are teeming with unfortunates; I cannot think of a filthier, more desperate place to find a future hetairos, one I might train to fulfill a single purpose: to rid the world of Tenthus.

“By my hand, Diomedes, High Priest of the Temple of Tenthus.”

By the end, Tenthus was frozen, paralyzed with shock and disbelief. “That...that *bastard*. Aramedes was an ignorant, sheltered *child* despite being eighteen. He had no

concept of love except in the spiritual sense. Diomedes knew it, and he left the boy there, thinking it would change my mind?”

In the distance, a yellow-green butterfly landed on one of the poppies, briefly flicking its wings apart to reveal a glimpse of orange and black. A common enough butterfly in this land, but the sight of it unnerved Tenthus. Butterflies were a symbol for souls and life, and often accompanied Hypnos’s twin, the death-bringer, Thanatos.

Aristes and Germaius’s gaze followed. A sudden, heavy dread filled Tenthus. “Phaedrus.” Forgetting his own melancholy, he ran. The hetairo followed, but they could not keep up with the immortal and quickly fell behind.

“Stupid, stupid,” Tenthus muttered to himself between breaths. If his own obstinacy brought his consort’s death, Tenthus would never forgive himself.

He ran until his lungs burned, feeling weaker by the moment. His own time was nearly up, but he had to get to Phaedrus before it was too late. Panting heavily, he crested a hill and caught sight of his temple, high on a rock-strewn plateau. Driving himself hard, Tenthus poured every last bit of energy he had into his run and charged up the slope.

At the top of the hill, on the altar, lay a bound, bloody figure. Tenthus ran, sending chunks of earth flying beneath his heels. “Phaedrus!”

Chapter Thirteen

Too late. Tenthus could tell by the light fading from his lover's eyes. He tore at the ropes that kept Phaedrus bound. The younger man's face and body were marred with blood and bruises.

"No." Tenthus held the limp body in his arms. From the clamminess of Phaedrus's arms and legs, it wouldn't be long now.

"Go...away," Phaedrus said. "They'll...kill you."

"Hush. No, they won't." Tenthus wiped at the filth covering his lover's face. Phaedrus was dying. He knew it in his gut, but there had to be something, anything he could do to ease his consort's pain. "Rest now. I'll play for you." With Phaedrus's head in his lap, he brought out the aulos. His fingers trembled as they covered the holes. The song that emerged was more mournful than he meant it to be, but he'd always played from his heart, and nothing but sorrow remained there now. This was all his fault. If only he hadn't departed in a rage and left Phaedrus alone.

Phaedrus barely had the strength to mouth "I love you" before his eyes closed. Choked, Tenthus continued to play, pouring all of his regret and grief into the fragile instrument. Phaedrus wasn't the only one to hear.

“Stop. Please.” Euterpius spoke in little more than a whisper, but it was hoarse with emotion. “Every god in the heavens can hear your pain.”

Tenthus lowered his aulos to see the naked muse kneeling beside him. “But will they do anything to stop it?”

“You said you did not want the meddling of the gods,” Euterpius reminded him. “They have stayed their hands. Including my father.”

Tenthus cursed. “I did not want them to force love where it should not have been. I wanted Phaedrus to make his own choices. He chose to live and was robbed of that choice. Do not let him be punished because of me. He is not destined for the underworld.” Only the faintest wisp of life stayed within Phaedrus. They had only moments left together. “Do something. I beg you.”

Euterpius, maddeningly, didn’t move.

“I failed. I know that! But don’t let Phaedrus suffer because of me!”

Euterpius stroked the chill flesh of dying Phaedrus. He raised his head to peer into the darkness of the grove. Tenthus followed his gaze, horrified to see the two figures that meant Phaedrus’s fate was inevitable: Hypnos, bringer of sleep, and his twin, Thanatos, he of the peaceful death. Hypnos, beardless, carried with him a horn of opium. The wings, far more like a bird’s than Tenthus’s, flexed gently. Thanatos, in contrast, wore a beard and a sword strapped around his waist. He too had wings. Both gods wore serious, though not frightening, expressions.

Tenthus used his body to cover Phaedrus’s. “You will not take him!”

“It is unfair of you to thwart our privileges,” Hypnos said. Neither brother showed anything like pity. Tenthus knew they were both too used to fetching the dying to be moved by such displays. “This is our duty. You may not interfere.” He took a few steps closer to bring the horn close to Phaedrus’s lips.

"You will not take him!" Tenthus repeated. He looked at Hypnos and said beseechingly, "You loved, once, or still. Endymion, who sleeps with his eyes open, so you might gaze on his beauty forever."

Hypnos flinched but was not deterred from his task. "He sleeps at Zeus's request. Not at my pleasure."

"Yet you reap the benefits of seeing him rest, unchanging. He will not die."

"Perhaps I do," Hypnos said, without any indication of what Endymion truly meant to him. "Is this what you wish for your lover? An everlasting sleep?"

"I want him to live, to have the life he should."

"His life is over. It ends now," Thanatos said. "Move aside." He withdrew his sword, ready to cut the traditional lock of hair for consecration, a preparation to devote Phaedrus to the gods below.

"Come on." Euterpius spoke in Tenthus's ear. "There's nothing you can do now." The muse clasped Tenthus's shoulders, but Tenthus jerked away.

"I will not let him go." Tears streamed down Tenthus's cheeks as he bent to kiss his lover's split and bloody lips. "Is there no way to alter this so that Phaedrus may live out his years in peace?"

"There is not," Thanatos said. "I must insist upon my rights too."

"Then take my life instead." He doubted it would work, and it didn't.

"You cannot always have what you desire," Thanatos said implacably. "You are not mine to take. Besides, I would rather take them young. My privilege means more to me that way."

The last comment chilled Tenthus. "What if he admitted he truly loved me?" he asked, looking beseechingly at Euterpius. "If he grew wings, couldn't he, too, be reborn?"

The muse would not return his gaze. "It's too late. He cannot change with death so near. If he could, it might aid his wounds, but the poison would still kill him."

Worse and worse. “A bet, then,” Tenthus said. Anything to stall Thanatos and his brother. Hypnos, at least, looked a little apologetic.

Thanatos shook his head. “I do not like bets. Death cannot be cheated or gambled away.”

“A song,” Tenthus said, desperate. “Let me play for him one last time. Or are you so heartless that you would deny a fellow immortal a boon?”

Thanatos gazed coldly at him. His dark wings flexed, suddenly menacing. “Your reputation precedes you, cicada-man. I will not fall to the trick of your music, which can make even the mighty Zeus weep. It is more dangerous than any weapon.”

“Then take it! Remove the danger to you, to everyone. Take the gift that a muse has given me in exchange for Phaedrus’s life.”

At last, a look of temptation on Thanatos’s face. Hypnos leaned in to whisper something in his brother’s ear.

“Please,” Tenthus begged. “You and I are alike, are we not? Hated by mankind, loathed by the gods. Take my gift. Fear it no longer.”

“No.” Euterpius, eyes intense, grabbed his shoulder. “You don’t know what you’re asking.”

“I must.” He clasped Euterpius’s hand. “I love him.”

The muse bowed his head, eyes closed as if he’d just received a longed-for blessing. At the same time, Tenthus felt his fear and desperation vanish, leaving him with a sense of peace and rightness. Euterpius squeezed his hand. “May the gods be with you. I will love you always, my mortal shepherd.”

Before Tenthus could quite take in what Euterpius had just said, the twins left the earnest conversation. “We accept,” Thanatos said. “Play. It will be done.” He jerked his head at Euterpius. “Stand away, muse.”

Euterpius backed away, his expression a mixture of affection and sadness. Hands steady, Tenthus brought out his aulos. He played. Notes caught in the wind, carried away out of Tenthus's reach. The gift that had so long been his bane became his only chance to save the man he loved.

He put his entire being into the music, pouring out his love for Phaedrus. It wasn't a lament but a song of hope and joy, one that drew an image of what the hetairos's life could be if he would be given the chance to live it. And then he moved on to passion, of the give-and-take of their brief relationship, and what it had been like for Phaedrus to overcome his fear and distrust and learn what true intimacy could be.

For effect, Tenthus added a touch of madness, a fast, crazy rhythm that melted into Phaedrus's anger and the reasons for it. And then Tenthus added his own part, his fearfulness, his desire, his realization that he must take this one chance at real love or lose everything.

Tenthus dared a glance at his audience. Even the nearby dryads had left their trees to listen. Thanatos, as always, remained aloof, expressionless. Hypnos pursed his lips. He blinked often, as if trying not to weep. And Euterpius...the muse wore a look of serene pride. It gave Tenthus the courage to keep playing.

As it continued, it became harder and harder to articulate each note. He was losing breath, struggling to remember where to place the next phrase, where before it had come so easily. His tone wavered, went flat. Tenthus pressed on, using the rest of his strength to end the song.

The last note died. Wood cracked and split beneath his fingers as the aulos fell to pieces.

He didn't have time to mourn the loss of his instrument. He couldn't breathe. He'd given everything to the song, and now he was hollow, broken. Freezing.

Human.

Euterpius clutched the fallen Tenthus to him, wrapped his arms around the immortal, and dragged him into the sunlight in an attempt to warm him.

“It’s over,” the muse said, but Tenthus paid him no attention. His teeth chattered. Blue tinged his lips. “Breathe.” Euterpius put his mouth to Tenthus’s and blew gently. It was as if Tenthus’s body had forgotten its most basic functions and had to be reminded. Again, the muse breathed for him. Again. At last, Tenthus took a shallow breath, and another.

“There,” Euterpius said. He stroked Tenthus’s face. “Better. Everything will be fine. You’ve won.”

Still, Tenthus said nothing. He watched Euterpius with a confused, fearful expression. His mouth moved, but no sound emerged.

“And,” Euterpius said sadly, “you’ve lost.”

Chapter Fourteen

Euterpius's comforting arms surrounded Tenthus, warmed him, but he didn't need the muse's touch. Phaedrus. Where was Phaedrus?

He opened his mouth to ask only to find that he couldn't speak. Panicked, he put his hands around his throat, trying to beg Euterpius to do something. The muse turned his head away, dismay on his face.

Tenthus pawed at him and then realized that he should have been able to hear his hands against Euterpius's skin. He should have been able to hear the wind that blew against his cheek and the waves crashing against the shore down below.

Tenthus clapped his hands, over and over, unwilling to believe he'd gone deaf as well as mute.

Nothing.

This wasn't supposed to happen. No sound, no speech. The twin gods had done more than take his music; they'd taken one of his senses as well. Again and again, he struck his hands together hoping that somehow it was only temporary, that if he made a loud enough noise he would be able to hear *something*.

Soft hands clasped his and held them together. Tenthus looked up to see Euterpius give a slight shake of his head. Permanent, then. He would never hear Euterpius sing again, nor the greetings of morning birdsong, nor Phaedrus's sweet, seductive voice.

Phaedrus. Momentarily forgetting his shock. Tenthus scoured the grove, desperate to find his lover. He couldn't see him anywhere. Gods, if Thanatos had lied to him and had taken Phaedrus to the underworld after all...

Euterpius wrenched Tenthus's head around and pointed. There. Bloody, but mercifully still alive, lay Phaedrus. His eyes were open but unfocused. White blossoms drifted down. Almond blossoms. It took a butterfly, fluttering a little before landing on one of the fallen blooms, for Phaedrus to blink and regain his senses.

He'd drunk poison, and he was still *alive*. Tenthus's heart skipped a beat. Thank the gods. The bargain had worked. Thanatos and his twin had vanished.

Phaedrus's mouth moved. *Tenthus?* he seemed to say. Confusion colored his expression. *Tenthus, say something!* he mouthed, more urgently, and looked to Euterpius for explanation. Euterpius said something in return, too much for Tenthus to understand by watching his lips. Phaedrus's confusion turned to pity and horror.

Phaedrus tried to move, but Tenthus saved him the effort. He darted to his consort's side and embraced him, careful of his injuries. Thanatos's deal had not included healing; Phaedrus's leg was still swollen, his body broken and bruised. Tenthus knew that he'd caused his lover some of that pain and wanted desperately to make up for it. Without words, it was touch alone that he had to use to apologize. They kissed, long and passionately, even as Tenthus ran his fingers over Phaedrus's skin. It hurt to see and feel. His love had been tested, his body shattered, yet Phaedrus's soul was whole.

I love you, Phaedrus said. Those words Tenthus could recognize. In return, the former immortal placed a palm over Phaedrus's heart. The steady rhythm reassured him. He might never hear music again, but he had this, and it would be enough.

I love you too, Tenthus mouthed, hoping Phaedrus would understand.

Phaedrus must have. He smiled. Tenthus's heart pounded at the sight of him, brave and handsome. Unable to resist any longer, he bent down and pressed his lips to his lover's. One feeble arm reached around to grab his neck and hold him there. Tenthus longed to crush Phaedrus to him, to make love with abandon no matter who or what watched. A kiss was all they could do, would be able to do for some months while Phaedrus healed. Tenthus could wait. It would be worth it.

And then Phaedrus jerked in pain. His chin hit Tenthus's hard enough to bruise. The grass beneath him darkened with something cold and wet.

Tenthus panicked. Not now. He couldn't be dying now, not moments after Tenthus had made his bargain. Everyone knew Thanatos was a cold, unforgiving god, but he was fair. A cry for help rose to Tenthus's throat, but he could not utter it.

Euterpius heard anyway. In a moment, he crouched beside Tenthus. He carefully rolled Phaedrus over, and there, Tenthus saw that he had no reason to worry. Black, sodden lumps emerged from Phaedrus's back on either side of his spine. Wings. Phaedrus had earned his wings. And the only way he could have gotten them was to love another with the entirety of his being. Tenthus felt both honored and humbled.

Phaedrus trembled, looking from Tenthus to Euterpius and back again for an explanation. The muse told him while Tenthus held Phaedrus's hand for reassurance. Inside, Tenthus quailed with fright. It was utterly terrifying to know someone could love and trust him so deeply. Phaedrus moved against him to pillow his head on Tenthus's naked thigh, the new, damp wings slowly stretching into fullness. He was even more beautiful now than he had been, now that light penetrated his shadowed soul.

The sight didn't last nearly as long as Tenthus would have wished. The golden liquid spread into a puddle that surrounded the three of them, and it kept coming. Rivulets ran down Phaedrus's arms, legs, and chest. It spread as if it were alive. Reluctantly, Tenthus

removed Phaedrus's head from his leg so the stuff didn't cover him as well, but he held on to Phaedrus's hand as long as he could.

Soon, Phaedrus was encased in the stuff as Tenthus had been when he'd earned his own wings. His face was the last to disappear. Phaedrus didn't look frightened. Rather, the pain had left his features, leaving him to appear like the innocent young man he should have been.

I'll come for you, Tenthus mouthed and prayed he was understood. You'll be reborn. Like me.

Phaedrus's eyes closed. The liquid hardened, encasing his love in the safety of a cocoon. Tenthus sat there a moment, drained, somewhat in shock. Phaedrus was safe. No one could hurt him now, not even Diomedes.

Thinking of the old priest lit a fire in Tenthus's belly. He gestured from Euterpius to Phaedrus's cocoon. *Stay here.* The muse nodded.

Tenthus picked up the bloody rope he'd taken from around Phaedrus's neck. Time to pay a visit to one of his old consorts.

* * * * *

Priests and hetairo alike stared at Tenthus as he strode through the columned hallways. They might have said things; Tenthus would never know. Whether it was out of habit or because they saw the fury in his motions, none dared touch him.

Diomedes was right where Tenthus had predicted, in the records room, updating his entries. Tenthus had never been inside; the place had never concerned him. The statues shocked him. Each one had been made to portray Tenthus as a monster, cruel and unfeeling, going after his consorts as if they were nothing more than objects to be used.

He grabbed the nearest statue and sent it hurtling across the room where it crashed against the wall just over Diomedes's shoulder. When the priest looked up to see who dared to do such a thing, the color drained from his face.

Tenthus. His lips clearly formed that word, but the rest Tenthus did not understand. Nor did he care. Two strides brought him close enough to loop the noose around Diomedes's neck. The priest's eyes bulged. His mouth moved. Likely he was screaming something, or trying to, but Tenthus had no idea what it might be. Neither did he care. It would be easy to strangle the old priest, but that end wasn't fitting for a fanatic and a murderer.

Instead, Tenthus took out the cicada pendant that had slipped below his chiton and slammed it down onto the desk within Diomedes's reach. The priest shook his head, begging, but Tenthus gave him no mercy. Tenthus slammed the priest's head onto the table next to the pendant. Tenthus pried the pendant apart to reveal the vial of hemlock within. Diomedes scratched at the table until Tenthus jerked the rope again. The priest's mouth hung open as he gasped for breath.

Just as Diomedes had shown Phaedrus no mercy, neither did Tenthus spare the priest. He poured the contents of the vial down Diomedes's throat and then, for good measure, slammed him against the table twice more. Papyrus blew off of the table. Ink splattered over the priest's blue chiton. Tenthus appreciated his deafness then, so he didn't have to listen to Diomedes beg for his life or spout more vile epithets about Tenthus and his lover.

Finally, Diomedes stopped struggling. His back and shoulders jerked from rapid, heavy breaths. Satisfied, Tenthus stood back to admire his handiwork. He felt no remorse or guilt at Diomedes's death.

For the second time that day, Tenthus found himself standing within arm's reach of winged Thanatos and his brother, Hypnos. Thanatos's gaze lingered on the dying priest. His gesture, along with an ironic smile, made his meaning clear. *I trust I have your approval to take this one?*

Tenthus made to wave him away, but he thought of something. The silver pectoral still curved around Diomedes's neck. No traitor to the temple should have the honor of wearing it into the underworld. Tenthus removed it. As soon as he did, Thanatos used his sword to cut a lock of the priest's hair for consecration.

Diomedes's body heaved one last time. His final breath left with a shudder. With his brother's help, Thanatos shouldered the body. He paused long enough to give Tenthus a nod of respect before they disappeared into the shadows.

The priest might be gone, but the evidence of his madness was not. Statue after statue went flying from Tenthus's hand in a show of fury that rivaled any of Phaedrus's fits. Bronze figures lost heads and arms and legs. Tiles chipped and cracked from the onslaught. Papers and dust choked the air. With it all went Tenthus's anger at Euterpius, at Diomedes, at himself. One last final purging before he could consider himself whole enough to claim Phaedrus.

One last papyrus drifted to the floor. Tenthus picked it up.

Today, I have accomplished my lifelong task. I have rid the world of the monster Tenthus, along with the consort called Phaedrus, the cuckoo in my nest of perfect, pure hetairo. With the monster gone, we shall be able to focus on training the best hetairo for the nobles and other wealthy citizens. We will worship the memory of Tenthus as he once was, beloved and kind, worthy of our love and adoration. Our temple will thrive and bring honor to those within.

I say again, with joy in my heart, Tenthus is dead.

Tenthus, still very much alive, tore the papyrus into tiny shreds.

Tenthus went outside to find a crowd gathered around Euterpius and the cocoon he protected. Aristes and Germaius, winded and flushed, had joined them. Both looked relieved to see Tenthus. The rest wore varied expressions of disbelief and relief.

Pectoral in hand, Tenthus walked toward the men gathered in the grove. With great ceremony, he lowered it over Aristes's head. The hetairos gazed at him for a moment in shock before he dropped to his knees and prostrated himself before Tenthus. Euterpius must have explained the situation, because Aristes did not try to speak, but made gestures to declare his honor and obedience toward Tenthus. Germaius did the same. Around them, the other priests and hetairo followed suit. Soon, nearly everyone knelt. The few who did not threw down their chains of office and walked away. Tenthus did not see them again.

He wavered on his feet, exhausted from the heat and excitement of the day. Euterpius caught his arm. *Go. Rest. There is no danger. Phaedrus will be here when you return.*

Phaedrus. Tenthus turned to gaze longingly at the cocoon. Dark and solid, he could see nothing of what was inside. Soon. He would call for his beloved soon.

Chapter Fifteen

Various priests and hetairo had formed a sort of honor guard around Phaedrus's cocoon to watch over him, letting Euterpius see to Tenthus's needs. The muse, too, was the only one able to understand the depth of his loss. Waking to a world gone silent had been terrible and frightening, but losing the music, which had been both Euterpius's gift and a vital part of Tenthus's identity, cut him to the core. Knowing Phaedrus was out there, waiting patiently, kept Tenthus going and gave him the strength to continue despite his grief.

Tenthus gave in to his exhaustion and slept for two days straight. He kept to his bed for two more while Euterpius brought him food and helped him figure out ways to communicate. Between lip-reading and signing, Tenthus managed to learn enough to make himself understood. At dusk on the fifth day, he rose on shaky legs and went to visit his encased consort.

The two priests standing guard bowed to Tenthus and the muse when they appeared in the grove, then walked discreetly away. Tenthus knelt beside the cocoon. It had a warmth of its own, and was smooth to the touch. Tenthus gestured to Euterpius. *When?*

Euterpius shrugged and signed back. *Whenever you like. The bond between you is strong; there should be no reason to wait years.*

Good, because Tenthus didn't want to wait years. He hardly wanted to wait a few days, but he told himself to give Phaedrus a little time to heal. He'd needed it himself. *Will he go to ground again?*

No. This time only. After he is reborn, he will not change again. Thus do the gods answer prayers.

Tenthus was relieved. He didn't want Phaedrus to have to go through what he had. For the first time since he was a shepherd, he hadn't gone to ground. It was strange and disconcerting to realize that he'd be able to live a normal, human life, albeit with wings.

Tenthus pointed to them and signed a query.

And why would you lose your wings? You love with everything you are. Those are a symbol of that love.

He nodded. Phaedrus's casing was still too dark to be able to see inside, but with both hands upon it, Tenthus imagined he could feel the lifeblood of his lover within, the heart beating strongly, waiting patiently to be called back to life.

Now? he asked Euterpius. He felt childish, to be so anxious, but long days of worrying about Phaedrus had taxed his patience. He wanted his lover back.

In response, Euterpius knelt by the cocoon, both hands flat against the smooth surface. A moment or two of thought, and he gestured to Tenthus. *I sense no pain. Call to him in the traditional way, and he should come.* The muse patted Tenthus's arm. A sly grin crossed his face. *Do you wish me to assist you?*

Tenthus knew the ritual well enough, though he'd never seen it. Usually a priest would accompany the offering to collect his seed, but not tonight. Tenthus turned Euterpius down, even though he knew the muse would make the experience pleasurable. Tonight was for him and Phaedrus alone.

Euterpius inclined his head in acknowledgment. *Be well, then. Be with the one you love.* He walked toward the trees and disappeared into the shadows.

Alone, Tenthus pulled the brooches loose from his chiton and let the fabric drop to the ground. The night air, cool but not uncomfortable, tickled his bare skin. He knelt on the altar with his legs spread. No bowl tonight; he hadn't bothered to bring one, and anyway, he didn't need it.

It had been some time since he'd pleased himself. Every time he'd been reborn, there had always been a hetairos here to see to his every need or even Euterpius for an occasional tryst.

Hands cupped together, he dribbled the sticky whiteness along the length of the cocoon. He rubbed it in, polishing the cocoon with his own seed. He tried not to be impatient, knowing such things took time, but all he could think about was holding Phaedrus safe in his arms.

So he waited. The moon continued to drift overhead. The hard shell shone in the white light. Everything seemed to pass far more slowly now that there was no sound. No birdcalls, no crickets, no cicadas.

At the first twitch, Tenthus thought he'd imagined it, but by the third, he had no doubt. Phaedrus was returning to him. His belly -- and his manhood -- quivered with excitement.

Come back, my love, he mouthed. *Come to me*.

It took a long time. Tenthus watched, fascinated by the wriggling movements. The shell split, leaking golden fluid along the seam. Four fingers appeared, shiny and slimy. An arm followed, all the way up to the shoulder. As far as he could tell in the dim light, the arm was intact, the skin unmarred. The transformation had worked.

Tenthus resisted the urge to reach out and touch him. One didn't help chicks escape from eggs lest they be harmed in the process. He pulled his knees up to his chest, rocking back and forth, wishing Phaedrus could return to the world just a little bit faster.

A shoulder emerged. His head, with tendrils of hair clinging to his neck and shoulders. Phaedrus stared at some unseen point while blinking back fluid that threatened to drip into his eyes. The bruising on his face had gone. He looked ethereal, a creature out of myth instead of the antagonistic human youth he'd been.

A second arm. Hands tangled in the grass, Phaedrus pulled to free the lower half of his body from the casing. The effort weakened him. Once, twice, thrice he heaved, stopping after each try to rest on the ground and pant. Tenthus encouraged him silently, remembering just how arduous this task was. Being born into the world as an infant was no simple feat; being born a second time came no easier.

Another undulation and Phaedrus's glistening buttocks cleared the edge of the cocoon. He kicked viciously, as if he were treading water, and the shell slid away behind him. Fluid sparkled on the ground like a snail's slimy trail. Phaedrus lay facedown, body heaving, free of his prison.

Tenthus could wait no longer. He swept up the sticky golden body into his arms. Phaedrus. *Phaedrus*. The dim light made it hard to see, but Tenthus did what he could do assure himself that this was his lover, that Phaedrus was whole and unhurt just as Euterpius said he would be. Not a bruise, not a cut, not a broken bone, and two damp, wrinkled wings on his back. Perfect.

Exhausted, Phaedrus could do little more than lift a feeble hand toward Tenthus's face. When that attempt failed, he settled for patting his belly.

Hungry. Of *course* he was hungry. But first Tenthus had to clean the ooze from his skin before he grew chilled. He grabbed his chiton and used it like a towel to rub briskly over Phaedrus's chest and arms. Phaedrus's skin quickly dried. The friction brought color and life back to his limbs. The hetairos, still leaning against Tenthus, smiled to see his lover. Tenthus leaned down to kiss him. Phaedrus kissed back. His mouth still tasted sweet from the golden fluid.

I love you, Tenthus mouthed. Phaedrus did likewise. He trailed his fingers along Tenthus's jaw.

The touch made Tenthus hungry too. He sucked at Phaedrus's sugary skin. Nipples hardened beneath his tongue. Phaedrus arched back, mouth slightly open in pleasure.

And then wicked Phaedrus wrapped his fist around Tenthus's phallos. He laughed; Tenthus saw the sparkle of merriment in his eyes and felt the lithe body shake. The warm hand twisted back and forth, lighting a fire deep inside.

Whatever Pan had taught him had been *good*. Phaedrus's tongue ran along the underside of his phallos and stopped to swirl around the tip. Tenthus would have groaned, had he been able to, at the tingling in his groin. One hand cupped his testes and gently tugged at them while his mouth lowered to swallow him as deeply as possible.

Phaedrus -- lovely, fiendish Phaedrus -- nearly made Tenthus explode with his next trick. His finger rubbed the soft spot beneath Tenthus's phallos, then pressed down, which made stars sparkle behind Tenthus's eyes. And then another slick finger massaged Tenthus's rear entrance until he was relaxed enough to admit it.

A few little tickles and Tenthus could no longer hold back. Climax roiled up, and he loosed his seed into Phaedrus's waiting mouth.

Warm and sated, Phaedrus lay stretched across his lover's body with his head resting against Tenthus's chest. He longed to hear Tenthus's voice once more, but knew he never would. Poor Tenthus, deafened in the bargain to save Phaedrus's life. No one else would have done such a thing for him, certainly not Diomedes, who would sooner have seen Phaedrus dead.

The thought sent a chill of fear down Phaedrus's spine. "Diomedes. Where is he?"

Tenthus's expression grew unhappy. He made a strangling motion.

"Good." He didn't want to face the old priest. "Thank you."

The smile returned. Phaedrus traced it with a fingertip. "I dreamed of you as a shepherd, naked and sleeping in the sun. I wanted to make love to you, so I kissed you."

He didn't know if Tenthus had understood everything, but the older man at least pretended he did. Tenthus grinned, as if to say, *How?*

"Like this."

Phaedrus lowered his mouth over Tenthus's. Tongue toyed with tongue. Tenthus stroked his wings, which had dried out and extended to their full length. They felt strange, fragile and strong at the same time, as if he'd grown another set of arms in his back. He hadn't yet figured out how to maneuver them, so for now, they rested askew.

"Where do we go from here?" Phaedrus looked over at the temple. The white columns had caught the first rays of morning light. "I don't want to stay here."

Tenthus's face went thoughtful. He curved his palms with the fingers outstretched, then bounced them across Phaedrus's chest.

Phaedrus grinned. "I like that idea. I like it very much."

* * * * *

On the day of their departure, Aristes gave them gifts, new, brightly colored chitons trimmed with gold cicadas and modified to go around their wings. Jewelry, much of it bronze, made after the horrific statues Diomedes had collected were melted down and recast. Fine bedding and furniture adorned their room. Slaves brought them the choicest, freshest bits of food.

"You will always be welcome," Aristes said. He clasped Phaedrus's hands and kissed him on both cheeks. "Take care of yourself, and take care of blessed Tenthus." He let go and gave a final honorific bow to Tenthus, who returned it.

Aristes went inside, leaving them alone with Euterpius. The muse gazed upon them both with a warm, happy smile. He was still handsome enough, and naked enough, to make Phaedruss's blood heat up. "At last, my lovely shepherd boy has everything he desired."

Tenthus gestured. *Thanks to you.*

"Where will you go?" Phaedruss asked.

"I am a muse, the giver of music and delight. I will find others in need of me, although," he said wryly, "I hope that I have learned in my time with Tenthus, and my gifts will not go so awry."

"Gods, I hope not!" Phaedruss said. He asked aloud the question Tenthus asked with his hands. "Will we see you again?"

"From time to time. I will watch over you both. I will sing your elegies when Thanatos will not be swayed from his course; may it be many years from now."

"We'll miss you," Phaedruss said.

The muse smiled sadly. "And I, you." He bent to kiss Phaedruss on the cheek. "Take care of him."

"I will."

His good-bye with Tenthus took much longer.

Euterpius's embrace spoke more than words or music ever did.

I love you, Euterpius said, although Tenthus could only see his lips move. *Be free. Be happy, my handsome shepherd.*

Tenthus nodded. *Thank you*, he mouthed back. These gifts of Phaedruss and freedom were far more dear to him than the music. The loss would always be there, and he would grieve, but he had other things to occupy his mind.

Do you still hate me? Euterpius asked.

Tenthus shook his head. He inclined it toward Phaedrus, who, as he stood with his newly healed wings glinting in the sunlight, was everything he could have desired and more. How could he hate the muse that had brought him his perfect love?

You should, Euterpius said, obviously amused by Tenthus's infatuation. *I wronged you.*

Tenthus didn't have the means of saying what he wanted. Euterpius *had* wronged him, by taking advantage of a naive shepherd, but he'd also made it right, adapting the world to fit Tenthus's unique needs and ensuring, finally, that Tenthus could regain his humanity and be the better for it. Tenthus loved Phaedrus wholly and deeply, but what he felt for Euterpius was something different, deep as the wine-dark sea and just as vast. They would never be lovers again, but there was no reason to be. Their friendship was far better.

Euterpius didn't need words to know what Tenthus wanted to say. He took Tenthus's palm and placed it on his neck. He sang then, a tune of hope and farewell. Tenthus smiled as he felt the vibrations in Euterpius's neck. All song was not lost. Just...muted.

It was over too soon. Tenthus blinked and Euterpius was gone, vanished into whatever realm muses went to when they left. Phaedrus came to him, filling him with a happiness that he'd never felt with Euterpius.

Everything was as it should be.

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On his way home, Euterpius spied a handsome, naked youth asleep in the sun among his sheep. This time, the muse passed him by.

 THE END 

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