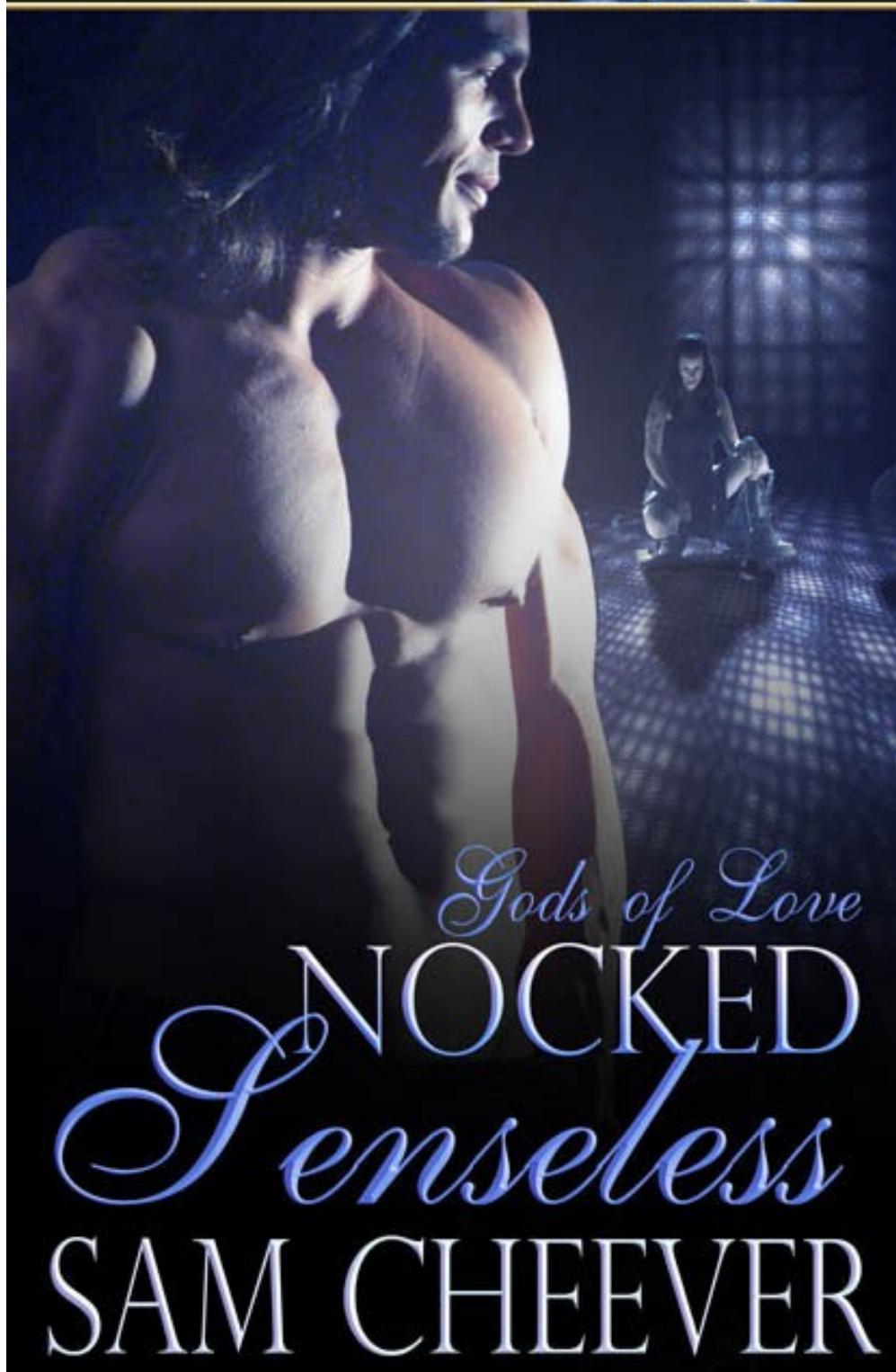


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



Gods of Love
NOCKED
Senseless
SAM CHEEVER

Nocked Senseless

Sam Cheever

Book 3 in the Gods of Love series.

Hermes Adonis has a broken heart and an attitude problem. When the Fates send him on a forced sabbatical from Cupid's Arrow, he's not a happy Cupid. Hermes spends his days sucking Brimstone and anticipating his total destruction. But when a dark-haired beauty throws him to the ground and puts a knife to his throat, he feels an unexpected spark in his dead heart.

Nidras is a cursed demon princess. She's pretty tapped out just trying to kill the wizard who holds her curse. The last thing she needs is a man, especially one whose sexy head is fuzzy from sucking Brimstone all day. But Hermes is funny and determined, and Nidras is lonely and scared. And when they get together in a room, the heat they create nearly melts the paint from the walls.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Nocked Senseless

ISBN 9781419927539

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Nocked Senseless Copyright © 2010 Sam Cheever

Edited by Helen Woodall

Cover art by Syneca

Electronic book publication February 2010

The terms Romantica® and Quickies® are registered trademarks of Ellora's Cave Publishing.

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, this book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. (<http://www.fbi.gov/ipr/>). Please purchase only authorized electronic or print editions and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted material. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the author's imagination and used fictitiously.

NOCKED SENSELESS

Sam Cheever

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Google: Google Inc.

Porsche: Dr. Ing. h. c. f. Porsche Aktiengesellschaft Corporation

Prologue

Ousted!

My name is Hermes and I am Cupid.

I'm not a chubby little guy flying around with a skein of arrows. And, right at the moment at least, I'm not very good at finding love for people.

I can't even find love for myself.

But I am Cupid.

For millennia Cupids weren't allowed to fall in love. The gods and the Fates conspired against us to make sure we stayed loveless.

And it was only recently that one of us managed to find a way to beat the Fates and release us from this curse.

So I haven't had a lot of experience finding love for myself. But I have had a lot of experience getting my heart pounded into bent, little pieces because of the curse.

I can't give you any excuses about my failures as a Cupid. Except that I've been functioning for a while under a severely broken heart. I think my spirit got a little cracked alongside my heart.

I've had a bit of a...I guess you'd call it 'tude...for a few years now. And the gods have been a bit put off by me recently. I should have known it was coming.

I should have seen the signs.

But I didn't.

I was way too immersed in my emotional turmoil to notice that everybody had started to avoid me. And that my customer list had grown increasingly smaller, until I was only getting the few clients nobody else wanted.

The lost causes. Like me.

But I have to admit I was shocked when the Fates showed up in my office and told me I was being sent on temporary hiatus until I got my head together.

What does that even mean anyway? That sounds like something a chick would say. It wasn't my head that was in pieces. It was my heart. And my spirit.

Anyway, the Fates told me I was worthless as a Cupid in my present state.

Now I ask you? Was that a nice thing to say?

Unfortunately, they were right. Which was why I set out to destroy myself completely. Just get it over with. Not strictly logical, I know but...well...it's a guy thing.

It didn't quite work out the way I'd planned though. You see, there was this woman...

Chapter One

You're Owwwwttt!

"You're kidding me right?"

Clotho pursed soft, well-shaped lips and frowned at me. "I don't know what would make you think that, Hermes Adonis. I thought we'd been very direct and clear."

I slammed a hand down on top of my desk, making Atropos and Lachesis jump and shimmer with power as their sister fate, Clotho grew an inch and started to float off the floor.

Realizing that if I sent the Fates into their angry alter egos, the Furies, it probably wouldn't help me win my argument, I lifted my hands and inclined my head. "Sorry." I turned away and walked toward the window, looking down at the everyday antics of the people driving, walking and cycling along below me. Not for the first time I wished I could be like they were. Oblivious to magic and gods and imminent destruction.

And able to love when and whom I wanted.

Behind me, the air thickened with power, spitting and smoking like a backyard barbecue. I kept my back turned, giving them time to rein in the fury and return to a calm, Fate-like state.

It took them a while.

Finally I turned and tried a pleading tone. "Look, Your Graces, I know I've been a bit...prickly...the last few months."

Clotho snorted in a most unladylike way.

I lifted an eyebrow at her and went on. "But I've been trying really hard lately and I think I'm doing better."

"You told a client to kiss your narrow, Greek ass last week," Atropos told me with a wry smile.

I shrugged. "Well, yes but he was being unreasonable."

"He just wanted you to schedule his arrow ceremony," Lachesis responded.

I scowled at them. "I was in the middle of something."

"What?" Clotho demanded.

"Thinking. I was thinking about how to improve my disposition." I topped this declaration off with a grin.

I knew the power of the Hermes smile. It was a legendary creature that had gotten me nothing but trouble over the centuries. But there was nothing like it for turning the hostile female heart to mush. The ladies' eyes softened briefly when I smiled at them. But it didn't last long. "You're out, Hermes."

I swore softly. "For how long?"

Atropos shrugged. "Until we think you can handle the work again. In the meantime, try to enjoy yourself."

"Maybe you should have lots of sex," Clotho offered.

I lifted my eyebrows at her in surprise.

She shrugged. "It works for us when we're in danger of reverting to our hag forms. It might work for you too."

I grimaced. I'd seen them in their hag forms. The thought of anybody having sex with them when they're on the edge of that particular state was scary.

I started to shuffle the folders on my desk and then realized there was nothing there that needed my attention and flung them down again.

Grabbing my jacket from the back of my chair, I stalked toward the door.

"I hear the Succubus Sisters have a new girl. She might put a smile on your face," Lachesis said, obviously trying to make me smile. I just glared at her.

"I don't do demons."

I closed the door, shutting off the sound of their collective gasp at this politically incorrect statement.

Ignoring the well-wishes of my fellow Cupids, I stalked angrily to the elevator and out of the building.

If they wanted me gone I'd give them what they wanted.

Nobody could get as gone as I could.

* * * * *

I lay on my back, staring up at the haze of smoke wafting by over my head. The sharp tang of it stung my nose, making it quiver with annoyance. I narrowed my eyes and examined the smoke more carefully.

It looked suspiciously like a woman's breast.

Of course, lately, everything was starting to look like a woman's breast to me.

Somebody stuck a long, glass object with a rounded bottom in front of my face and I took a pull from it, sending a new stream of smoke into the air in front of me. A fresh batch of breasts danced and slithered across the room, taunting me with their wispy perkiness.

I frowned at the demon bong and gave it a shake. "Doesn't this thing do anything but boobs?"

I turned to the green-faced, red-eyed demon beside me and his wide, scaly face folded into a frown. "Huh?"

Shaking my head in disgust, I murmured, "Brimstone head," and passed the bong to the next sap in the circle. I lay back onto the soft mountain of pillows behind me, crossing my hands beneath my head and continued to stare up at the smoke, waiting. Maybe the next guy could eke out a nice, pert ass or two with his exhalation. On this happy thought, I must have drifted off to sleep.

Something woke me up. I don't know how long I'd dozed in a Brimstone stupor but I thought it must have been several hours because, when I looked around the circle, the faces of my companions were different.

I pushed myself upright, scrubbing at my gritty eyes with both hands. The room was so smoky at that point that I could barely see the blinking red light over the exits. As I sat there trying to decide whether to get up and leave or take another hit of Brimstone, I heard the sound that must have jarred me awake.

The bong appeared in front of my face and I looked at it longingly, licking my dry lips as I considered forgetting what I'd heard and just letting the drug carry me away again. But somebody was crying and I couldn't ignore that. No matter how much I wanted to.

I shoved the bong away and stood up. My legs felt like newly made rubber, all bendy and unstable. I locked my knees and stood there, wavering dangerously on my feet. The demons on either side of me cocked their heads and said, "huh?" as I wobbled unsteadily above them.

I don't know how long I would have stood there trying to clear the fog from my brain but a shrill scream pierced the silence and adrenaline kicked in. I found myself leaping over drugged demons and running full tilt toward the sound of that scream.

I ran into the smoke-free outer room and stood looking around. The foyer of the Pleasure Palace was built as a large octagonal, with doors leading off each of the eight walls. Dead center of the foyer was a coiling, stone staircase that lead to the upper rooms, where the Succubi took care of their customers.

I was pretty sure the sounds I'd been hearing had come from the main level. That meant I had seven doors to choose from, since I already knew what was going on in the smoke-filled room I'd just left.

I started with Simone's office. She was one of the Succubus Sisters who owned the wonderful establishment where I'd been spending much of my time lately. Simone was currently off on some adventure with her favorite client and hadn't been in residence for a few weeks. The room looked as if a bomb had gone off inside it. But that was pretty normal for Simone's office so, after making sure there were no bodies nestled among the clutter and velvet covered furniture in the room, I closed the door and went to the next door.

In complete contrast to her sister's hovel of an office, Sidra's office was almost painfully tidy. No pictures, knickknacks, or memorabilia cluttered the pristine surfaces of Sidra's office. It was all business in there. Hard furniture with clean, contemporary lines was arranged in an unimaginative and perfunctory fashion around the room. Papers were stacked with rigid perfection on top of her dust-free desk and any personal items in the room had a place to be and were perfectly situated in that assigned place.

There were no bleeding bodies staining her hard, lint-free rug.

Next I opened the door to the bathhouse. Although, in reality, the bathhouse consisted of a single room within the pleasure house, it had been magicked to look and feel as if it were a separate entity and had always been referred to as the bathhouse.

As soon as I opened the door I knew something wasn't right.

Steam wafted out in such a thick blanket it made me sneeze. The air in the bathhouse was always thick and moist, covering its inhabitants with an almost oppressive blanket of dense heat. It felt good when you were immersed in one of the dozens of large, claw footed tubs in the room but the thick, wet air tended to make you feel like somebody had grabbed your lungs in a tight grip and squeezed hard if you entered the room fully dressed.

Combined with a truly astounding level of Brimstone in my system, the clogging heat and moisture made my existence in that room nothing short of torture. But my senses were screaming that something wasn't right there, so I kept sliding one foot in front of the other, moving more deeply into the sweltering, cavernous room.

My eyes scanned the dim light, seeing nothing but dozens of steaming, empty tubs. That, in itself, was unusual. Generally the room was one of the busier spots at the pleasure house.

But the air in there was more than hot, it felt ominous. Almost as if somebody had put a repelling spell of some kind on it. Shaking my head I gave a nervous little laugh.

I'd been doing Brimstone for too long. It had apparently rotted my brain and made me melodramatic.

At the furthest corner of the room, I slid my gaze over the last line of tubs and, seeing nothing, prepared to turn around and leave. But something red caught my eye, nestled in the shadows just behind the last tub in the line.

I took a step forward, suddenly reluctant to find what I'd been looking for.

A wisp of flower-scented air touched my skin and I turned just as a long, deadly looking knife arced through the air toward my head.

I ducked and kicked out, my instincts reverting automatically to the decades of martial arts training I'd undergone in an effort to stay in shape and manage vast levels of sexual frustration.

The figure with the knife was small, agile and quick. He dodged my first kick and came at me again with the knife. I countered the blow with an outstretched fist and spun, levering my leg outward with the force of my spin.

The figure easily jumped the kick and countered with one of his own, catching me just under the jaw as I completed my spin.

I went down hard and felt my black-clad attacker slamming into my chest as I hit the ground.

Something long and metallic settled against my throat. When I moved the knife bit into my skin, causing me to gasp and settle immediately into an unnatural stillness.

I squinted through the steam and drug haze in my mind in an effort to see the face of my assailant.

If I was gonna die I wanted to know who was killing me. And maybe even find out why.

The face above me was black and featureless. It had no hair and its skin looked shiny, impossibly smooth.

I figured it was some kind of new demon I'd never seen before. Whatever it was it smelled like sun-drenched flowers.

But then the thing reached toward its head and pulled. Its skin started to separate with a soft thwucking sound. I grimaced. "Eieww!" I exclaimed.

The slick, black skin came away easily in the demon's hand and a bright, oval face with peach-tinted cheeks was looking down at me. The creature had wide lavender eyes with the longest, thickest black lashes I'd ever seen and spiky, black hair. Its lips were full and peach colored. They looked incredibly soft.

I found myself staring at those lips, licking my own in anticipation of kissing them. "You're a girl."

The lips parted slightly, allowing a husky laugh to escape. "And you're a Brimstone-headed bum."

I shrugged. What could I say? She was right.

She jerked her head toward the splotch of red I'd spotted in the corner. "Did you have anything to do with that?"

Her voice was as husky as her laugh. It sounded like she'd spent hours puffing on a Brimstone pipe, except the edges of it were smooth and rich.

My cock stirred and came to life just from the sound of it.

I turned my head. From where I was sprawled, I could now see the contorted form of one of the Succubi. She was slouched against the wall, her long, slim arms flung across her body and her shapely legs crossed and bent like a child's stuffed doll.

She was excessively pale.

That might have had something to do with the large hole in her chest and the growing puddle of rich, red blood spreading out from underneath her nude body.

I grimaced. I hadn't been one of the beautiful demon's clients but I had seen her around the pleasure house. In fact we'd spoken a few words earlier that day.

Or the day before. My mind was Brimstone befuddled.

"I heard a scream and came to investigate. Is she dead?"

The knife twisted more tightly against my skin and I grunted from the pain. "Look. You can kill me if you want. It wouldn't be that great a loss to anybody if you did. But for the gods' sake, just get on with it if you're going to do it. It's a little hard to breathe with you crouching on my chest."

The lavender eyes held a cynicism that seemed out of place on the flawless, unlined face. She cocked her head. "So let me see if I get this straight. You don't mind if I kill you, you just don't want me to make you uncomfortable."

I thought about this for a moment and then nodded, licking my dry lips. "That sounds about right." I grinned at her and she blinked as if I'd struck her.

The knife slid away from my throat and she stood up, sliding it into a sheath she wore crossed over her chest. I noticed she had a second sheath crossing the other shoulder. That knife appeared to be missing.

I glanced again at the body in the corner. Nope. No knife sticking out from her chest.

I climbed to my feet. "Who the hell are you anyway?"

"Don't worry about that, as far as you're concerned you never saw me."

It was my turn to blink. "Hey, I'm buzzed but I'm not stupid." I rubbed my neck and my fingers came away covered in blood. "You're definitely not a figment of my drugged imagination."

She walked over to the body and crouched down beside it. Placing her hand over the demon's chest she emitted some type of power from her palm. The shimmering, white power spread over the Succubus' body until she was completely encompassed in it. I squinted as the body became less substantial, thinking at first that it was just my imagination. But then it began to fade until it disappeared all together.

She turned to look at me, still crouched over the spot where the body had been. "I'll be watching you." Then she disappeared too.

I stood there for several moments too shocked to move. My thoughts were a jumble. I tried to think of creatures who could do what I'd just witnessed. Most likely not a goddess. Or a fairy. Maybe a guardian angel. I shook my head and laughed at that one. The fact that she'd been dark and hostile didn't completely remove all chances that she was a guardian. But the rampant sexuality she exuded definitely did.

Finally, I turned and left the pleasure house. I didn't know where I was going but I knew one thing for sure. No more drugs for me. It was time to get my act together. My shriveled heart had felt a spark of something for the first time in decades. And I wasn't going to let it slide away.

I wasn't going to let *her* get away.

But I'd have to get my shit together if I was going to find her. Because I had a strong suspicion that, once I found her, I'd have my hands full dealing with and keeping her.

Chapter Two

Intrigued

Until I started visiting them all on a regular basis, I'd never realized there were so many demon hotspots in Olympus. And when I started hanging out with the demons, I realized two things pretty quickly. One, the woman I was looking for wasn't in any of places I visited and two, something bad was going on in the world of demons.

In my new role as a fly on the wall, I overheard many conversations about demons being attacked and killed and I noticed, as the weeks slid past, that the demons I watched and occasionally spoke to were becoming increasingly more tense and watchful.

They tended to travel in groups and leave the bars and restaurants I frequented shortly after midnight. I started talking to bartenders and restaurant hostesses in an effort to find out what was going on but as soon as I asked about the fear I was witnessing in the eyes of their patrons, they'd clam up and walk away from me, obviously more afraid of delving too deeply into the problem than they were of the problem itself.

I had to wonder why.

It was on one of these extremely frustrating nights that I finally decided to go home early. The bar where I was lurking had been emptying out steadily all night and the last group was getting ready to head out the door.

I fell into step behind them and tried to eavesdrop on their conversation.

The group of two male and three female demons was heading to the Pleasure Palace for some fun of the decidedly erotic kind.

I soon found my body heating uncomfortably at the language they used to describe orgies they'd attended there in the past and was considering stepping away from them when something staggered out from between two buildings and dropped at my feet.

The women screamed and the men raised their hands defensively. But when they realized the dying demon on the ground wasn't going to attack them they turned nervous faces toward the dark alley it had staggered from.

"Let's get the hell out of here!" the biggest male said. I was bending over the demon on the ground and barely registered the sound of their feet running away.

The demon was nearly seven feet tall and covered in dark green, nearly black scales. Its face was wide and craggy, with a short, thick snout and sharply chiseled cheekbones. Two small horns stood out from the sides of its huge head.

The eyes that looked up at me imploringly were a deep, dull red, the life already ebbing out of them. The demon's mouth opened just enough to show me double

rows of sharp, yellow teeth. One thick, three-fingered claw hit my chest hard, nearly knocking me out of my crouch. It clutched my shirt and pulled me down.

I reached out and grabbed the scaled wrist to keep the thing from pulling me any closer to those teeth.

"I..." Its mouth flapped a couple of times. "I saw..."

Despite my keen awareness of those teeth, I leaned closer, realizing it was trying to speak to me.

But death claimed the demon before it could express whatever thought it was trying to share. The eyes rolled and the massive head fell back, slamming against the stone of the road beneath it.

My eyes skimmed the demon's distorted body, taking in the massive hole in its wide, scaly chest that spilled blood in a growing puddle onto the stones beside the body.

The stocky body ended in two oddly bent legs, like the hind legs of a dog, that had cloven hooves where the creature's feet would have been if it were in its human form.

Unlike the demons of human legend, most true demons wore human faces and walked around in human-shaped bodies. They were neither extremely ugly nor excessively attractive in their human forms.

In fact they looked just like humans, making them seem unattractive in a place like Olympus, where most inhabitants were god- or goddess-like and therefore unnaturally beautiful. But on Earth, where demons were gaining an ever growing stronghold, they looked just like your neighbor down the street or the clerk at the corner store.

Most of them did, however, revert to their demonic forms if their souls were removed from their bodies. The only exceptions were the royal demons and the Succubi and Incubi.

My eyes slid again to the bleeding hole in the monster's chest.

I swallowed hard, realizing that I'd figured out what was making the demons so nervous.

There was a soul sucker loose on Olympus. And, for whatever reason, it was targeting demons.

It was as if my thought had brought the creature forth. I sensed its presence in the shadows just before it slammed into me. I flew sideways into the brick wall of the building that enclosed the alleyway on one side.

I tucked to take the blow on my back and shoulders rather than my head, saving myself from a serious blow to my brain.

Before I could push myself off the ground it was on me and I felt pain like I'd never experienced before in the center of my chest. Reaching up, I encountered bonelike fingers, tipped with claws that felt like metal tearing through my skin. With excruciating pain, the bones of my ribs gave way as the monster worked its way to my heart. The soul sucker apparently didn't have a firm grasp on Cupid anatomy.

Unlike demons, Cupids' souls are not located in their hearts, so the soul sucker was destined to be disappointed.

But since I'd be dead anyway, my day wasn't looking too bright either.

In desperation, I kicked the thing as hard as I could. A sound like air escaping from a balloon emerged from the formless thing when I kicked out and it fell away. Pushing myself upright I found my feet before the world started spinning on its axis.

A dark shape flew past, followed by a horrific screeching sound as I felt myself pitching sideways. My face connected hard with the brick wall and pain jolted through me, bright and jagged, as I slid downward. My knees gave out and I crumpled toward the ground, the world graying completely to black.

The first thing I was aware of as I climbed back toward consciousness was a soft, warm hand on my chest. I pried my eyes open just as a flash of light exploded over me and I clamped them shut again.

Heat came with the light, starting at the wound on my chest and spreading outward, until it suffused my entire body and created some very nice sensations in my cock.

I smiled and wished I could move, so I could do something about the warm tingles that were making my balls tighten with growing desire. With the heat came the smell of flowers baking in the sun.

The perfume swirling in the air around me reminded me of something, or someone but my muzzy brain couldn't quite place the origin of that memory. Without my even realizing I'd moved, the ground was suddenly gone and I felt weightless.

I hovered in a place of warmth and light for an indeterminate amount of time. My chest burned and my taut muscles stung under the heat. When it finally slid away my body softened gratefully into its resting place, totally relaxed and relishing the cool air wafting over me.

The soft hand that had sent heat into my chest now slid down my stomach, away from the wound on my chest and tugged at the belt on my jeans.

My grin widened. *Now that's what I'm talkin' about!*

The invading hand slid into my jeans and around my twitching cock. My head rolled and I groaned, trying to arch up into that sweetly invasive touch. The soft hand slid close to the fat head of my cock but didn't touch it. Instead it skimmed over the sensitized skin of my belly and around it, tickling me with the nails at the end of the questing fingers.

Like a dream, the heat slid away and the smell of flowers was replaced by the spicy smell of something cooking.

As I struggled to open my eyes, I realized I wasn't weightless anymore. Something firm but soft supported the entire length of my body.

I finally managed to drag my eyes open. At first I thought I'd gone blind. The room where I lay was cast in such darkness I could barely make out the bed I lay upon or the tiny edge of light around the door across the room.

I lay there for a moment trying to get my bearings and realized the sounds were familiar. Pushing myself upright, I swung my legs over the side of the bed. It was as far as I could make myself go. I was panting just from that amount of effort.

Reaching up, I felt for the wound the soul sucker had made in my chest. It was slightly warm to the touch but smooth.

There was no pain.

Something had healed me.

On the tail end of that thought the door swung open and a dim light flickered on.

I squinted against the light and saw a small, darkly clad figure standing in front of the door. Her curvy form was backlit by the light coming into the room from the outside, which looked much brighter than the light she'd turned on in the room.

"Hello again," the husky voice greeted me.

I inclined my head, trying not to show her how happy I was to have finally found her. Then I remembered the soul sucker.

How was it she was there with me in that room, when the last thing I remembered was defending myself against the monster?

"Who the hell are you? And why did you bring me to Sidra and Simone's?"

She stepped away from the door and closed it. As she approached I became aware of her flowery scent. I remembered that scent.

My gaze slid down to my jeans and found them all buttoned up. Nevertheless, my gaze on hers was speculative as she stepped close.

When she reached a hand toward my chest I grabbed it, holding it in an iron grip that brooked no argument.

I remembered how easily she'd dispatched me at our first meeting.

Wide, lavender eyes stared mockingly at me. The full, soft mouth twisted with matching derision. "I just wanted to see how your chest looked."

I thought about this for a minute and then nodded, letting go of her slim, white wrist. "Were you the one who healed me?"

As she dropped her gaze to examine the healing wound, her startlingly beautiful eyes were lost behind the thickest set of black lashes I'd ever seen. She flicked her gaze upward briefly but didn't respond to my question.

I was getting used to her evading my questions. But that didn't mean I liked it.

She probed the wound carefully with gentle fingertips and I shivered. When I lifted my eyes from her hand I found myself looking into the low, loose neckline of her black blouse. Her breasts were pale mounds of perfection under the scooped neckline. They jiggled happily as she pressed on my wound. A diamond sword, about two inches long, dangled from a gold chain around her neck and nestled between her delectable breasts.

I never wanted to be a piece of jewelry so badly in all my life.

My cock stirred to instant life and my pulse picked up.

I took a deep breath in an attempt to calm down but that only drew her intoxicating scent more deeply into my body. Just like that, my cock surged into a full-blown hard-on.

I spread my knees in an attempt to give my rigid flesh some room in my jeans, praying she didn't look down.

Finally she stepped away and straightened. "The bones beneath are still fragile. You'll want to avoid anything too physical for a while. But the wound itself is healing very nicely."

"You didn't answer my questions."

Her full, peach-colored lips curved upward and her eyes flashed. "No. I didn't." She turned and started toward the door. "I'll bring you a dinner tray shortly."

I stood up and reached for her arm to stop her. In a flash she turned on me and I found myself on my back on the bed, gasping under the pain in my chest.

She moved to the door. "I told you not to get physical. You'll find that things are much easier for you if you do what I tell you to do."

I just stared at her until the door closed behind her pert, black-clad little butt. I couldn't believe I'd let that tiny little thing get the best of me—again—and fling me onto the bed.

I'd be damned if I'd let it happen again. I started to sit up, fully intending to go after her and set a few things straight.

Pain jolted me and I sucked in a breath, rubbing the tender spot on my chest until it abated.

"Okay, I'll set her straight later...maybe tomorrow. I'll just rest a bit longer first."

Settling back on the soft bed I tried to ignore the niggling thought that I was a limp-dicked wimp. I told myself I was a gentleman, trying to deal with her in a reasonable fashion. But my heart knew the truth.

The woman had me—in more ways than one—and it was gonna take some serious maneuvering on my part to get the upper hand.

If that was even possible.

* * * * *

Soft velvet slid over my skin, feathering across my torso and settling against my aching nipples. A warm, wet suction tugged at each nipple, causing the skin of my cock to tighten painfully.

Soft weight settled onto my hard cock, pressing it into my belly and writhing sensually against it.

I groaned, reaching for the narrow hips above my thighs. A soft giggle preceded the playful evasion of my reaching hands and teeth grasped a rigid nipple, pulling the taut nub hard, just on the edge of pain.

I opened my eyes and looked into lavender arcs lined with thick, black velvet lashes. My hand reached up and found the back of a silken neck, pulling her down to meet my hungry lips.

The kiss was fire and light, exploding into full sensual assault as my lips opened and my tongue slid in to tangle with hers. Her breath was sweet musk that made my head swim with lust.

I reached down and lifted her hips, centering her over my throbbing cock. A soft hand grasped me, tucking the fat head of my cock against a hot, wet entrance. I lifted my hips to aid her...and...to my extreme dismay...met only cool, empty air.

I swam toward consciousness to the sound of heavy breathing. My shaft throbbed in painful need, my balls pulled tight against my body in desperation. I opened my eyes and saw the Succubus, Sidra standing beside the bed.

Her unnaturally beautiful face was filled with pain. When she jerked suddenly sideways I realized why. One small, pale hand held the back of her neck and the other held a knife against her side, the point digging into the Succubus's tender, naked skin.

From where I lay I could see a drop of deep, red blood welling up from the knife's tip.

I pushed myself upright. "What's going on?"

Her gaze slid in my direction. "Did you invite this creature into your bed?"

I blinked and looked into Sidra's face. She obviously feared for her life. I was concerned that, if I said I hadn't invited her, the woman standing behind her would slide the knife into her side and kill her.

But I wasn't sure I could bear to see the disgust in her eyes if I said yes. I decided decisive action was necessary. Concentrating hard, I visualized myself behind the woman and disappeared off the bed.

She gasped slightly as I appeared behind her and grabbed the wrist holding the knife, twisting it hard. I wrapped an arm around my captor's neck and pulled her against my body.

The knife came away from Sidra's flesh and the grip on her neck loosened.

"Sidra, please leave us."

The Succubus didn't hesitate. She was out of that room almost before I could blink. The woman in my arms vibrated silently. Though I knew it wasn't from fear.

She was just plain pissed off that I'd gotten the best of her.

"How dare you!"

I pulled the slender wrist forward and across her body, so that my arm wrapped around her waist and her arm was trapped beneath it. This pulled the lower half of her body close to mine and her quick intake of air reminded me I was exposed and slightly firmer than usual.

Rather than jerk away from her, I grinned against her small, fragrant ear and nestled my hard shaft into her soft buttocks. "Succubi enter unannounced when a man sleeps. It's what they do. They don't deserve to be skewered for it."

She arched her back, trying to create space between my hard-as-a-rock cock and her enticingly round backside. I allowed my lips to touch her ear and travel down the side of her throat.

Though the vibrations in her small body had increased to the point where I expected to hear her teeth clanking together at any moment, her body softened slightly under my hands and her head dropped back against my shoulder.

I felt the soft touch of an expelled breath against my forearm.

My lips stopped at the fragrant juncture of her neck and her shoulder. I sucked on the impossibly soft skin there, following the pull of my tongue and lips with a tender bite to the sensitive skin.

She moaned low in her throat and pressed against me. I loosened my hold on her, thinking I had her in my sensual grip. A heartbeat later I lay blinking from the bed, my body sprawled unattractively beneath hers and a knife at my throat.

I sighed. "I've always hated that *déjà vu* thing."

Her smile was not a nice one. "You'd better get used to it because apparently you're stupid."

Grinning, I arched my back, driving my still hard cock up into her belly. She jerked away from me as if burned by lava and strode toward the door. "Your dinner is on that table. See if you can stay out of trouble until morning."

"Wait!"

She stopped with her hand on the doorknob but didn't look back at me.

"At least tell me your name."

She hesitated for a long moment. So long in fact that I didn't think she was going to tell me. She turned the knob and pulled the door just slightly ajar. A single word, "Nidras," drifted across the empty space in a husky whisper that was so soft I wasn't completely sure I'd heard the name at all.

"Nidras," I repeated as the door closed quietly behind her. "The legendary Demon Princess." I pushed myself up onto my elbows and swore. I had the hots for a member of the royal demon family.

Son of a bitch.

Chapter Three

Roadkill

"I thought she was just a myth." Christian Kairos and I had worked together at Cupid's Arrow, our matchmaking service on Earth. We'd reconnected once I'd cleared the last of the Brimstone from my brain. He'd left Earth to live in Olympus when he found the love of his life in the famed city.

Christian had been one of my best friends at Cupid's Arrow, before I'd joined the dark side and started shunning all my well-meaning friends there.

"Apparently not."

Christian sipped his beer and thought about this for a minute. "Are you sure it's her?"

I walked over to the computer I'd smuggled into Olympus when I'd discovered that Zeus still enforced the use of magical scrolls in the famous city and did a Google search for Nidras.

My lady's stunning face appeared on screen.

Christian whistled. "She's a beauty."

"Yup. But don't be fooled by her delicate good looks, she could fling you halfway across Olympus with just a thought."

Christian's face split in a slow smile. "Mmm, beautiful *and* strong. Makes me hard just thinking about it."

I laughed. "Down boy, or I'll tattle to Arion."

Christian lifted both hands in a peace offering. "I'm just sayin'."

I dropped down beside Christian on the couch and tipped my frosty mug back, enjoying the cold bite of the golden brew as it slid down my throat. We sat in silence for a moment, both of us staring at the face on my computer screen.

I rubbed absently at my chest. It had been fully healed for a week. But there was a sensation about it. Something I couldn't explain. It was as if a small piece of something had been left behind when it was healed.

It had been nearly a week since I'd woken up at the Pleasure Palace and encountered Nidras. When I'd come out of my room the next morning she'd been gone. I'd asked around the pleasure house but nobody seemed to know who I was talking about. Even Sidra claimed never to have met Nidras.

I'd finally given up and come home. But I'd been trying to get underneath the whole soul sucker thing ever since.

I turned to Christian. "Have you found out anything more about these attacks on the demons?"

He shook his head. "Arion went through all the scrolls she could find in Zeus' library about the royal demons but there's no mention of that particular monster."

There was something vague about a plague that would overtake the race if Princess Nidras didn't fulfill her destiny. But we couldn't even find a clear reference to what that destiny was." He shrugged, taking a large swig of beer from his mug.

"Where else can we look?"

Christian thought about this a few moments. He grinned. "If you get desperate you can always ask the Fates."

I swore. I hadn't spoken to the three Graces since they'd banished me from Cupid's Arrow. I wasn't anxious to see them again.

Ironically, my reasons for not wanting to see them had changed. I was worried they'd pull me back to Earth. Back to Cupid's Arrow. And I wasn't ready for that yet. Every fiber in my body was screaming that I needed to find Nidras. She was in trouble and I had convinced myself she needed my help. And, if I needed to settle myself directly in the path of the soul sucker to do it, so be it. That's what I would do.

Rubbing my chest again, I realized the Fates would have the information I needed about the royal demons. "I guess that's what I need to do."

Christian set his beer down and stood, clapping me on the shoulder before he turned toward the door. "Sux to be you, my man."

I nodded. "It most certainly does."

* * * * *

The three Graces were strolling in the Garden of Life. I approached them, fully expecting to be rejected as soon as I explained my mission. Surprisingly, they smiled at me as I approached and gave every appearance of being glad to see me.

I stopped before them, bowing slightly. "Your Graces."

They inclined their heads regally. I noticed Clotho had a suspicious sparkle in her gray eyes. "You are in love, Hermes Adonis."

I jerked and my head started to move from side to side in instant denial.

Lachesis flicked a delicate, white hand in my direction. "Do not bother trying to deny it. It is written all over your handsome face."

My mouth dropped open but the denial sitting on my tongue wouldn't extract itself.

Atropos took a step nearer and reached a hand to cup my cheek. "Such a beautiful boy, isn't he sisters? Those beautiful dark brown eyes..."

"Those thick lashes..." Clotho added.

"And all of that gorgeous brown hair." Atropos ran her finger down my nose. "You have a Greek nose, Hermes." The soft finger touched the long scar running along my jawline. I reached up to grab the invasive digit, avoiding the look of pity I knew would be in her golden eyes. That scar served as a constant reminder to me of just how fragile my heart actually was.

It was given to me by the last woman I'd loved when, because of the curse of lovelessness all Cupids used to be under, her memory of me faded at the height of

an extremely passionate affair. In desperation, I'd tried to reintroduce myself to her. I didn't really blame her for trying to kill me, she'd thought I was a stranger trying to accost her but that didn't make the loss of what we'd had any easier to take.

Atropos pulled her hand from my grasp and smiled. "You deserve love, Hermes. Though you've been a total ass for the last several years."

Clotho snorted in agreement.

Brutally pushing aside the memories engendered by the scar, I looked hopefully toward the three goddesses before me. "Then you'll help me?"

Lachesis bent down and picked a fat, white flower from a bush at her feet. She placed the enormous blossom over her nose and inhaled deeply. "Help you with what, dear boy?"

I realized then that they didn't know *who* had captured my heart. I took a deep breath and dived off the metaphorical cliff. "I need you to tell me everything you know about the royal demons. Most particularly about Princess Nidras."

All I heard for a long moment was the sound of horrified choking.

Finally, Lachesis reached out and smacked me upside the head. "You always were a stupid boy, Hermes Adonis."

"So you won't help me?"

Lachesis shook her head and dropped her butt onto a nearby, concrete bench. "What is it with you Cupids? Why can't you just fall in love with the harmless, sweet goddess down the street? Real love isn't difficult enough? You have to fall in love with a cursed demon princess?"

I just stared at her. What could I say?

Finally she sighed, her slender form deflating visibly. "What do you need, boy?"

"Tell me what's up with this soul sucker. How do I kill it?"

Clotho spoke up finally. "The only way to destroy the soul sucker is for Princess Nidras to fulfill her destiny."

"What does that mean? What *is* her destiny?"

Atropos settled onto the bench next to her sister Fate. "Prophecy is unclear on what exactly her destiny entails. Only the royal family knows the details. But this curse was placed on Nidras centuries ago, when her great, great grandmother rejected a powerful sorcerer's suit. Whatever she's supposed to do, it's ugly and will cause her much pain."

"The monster was released to punish her for resisting her fate."

I looked at Lachesis. "So it will keep killing her people until she gives in and accepts her fate?"

Clotho nodded. "Unfortunately, yes."

I felt sick. I dropped to my butt in the lush grass, propping my arms on my knees. "There has to be another way."

The three Fates shook their heads. Clotho reached out to touch my arm. "I'm sorry, Hermes. Maybe if you tried some sex, you might get poor Nidras out of your mind."

I took her hand and kissed the back of it. "Always with the sex, Clotho."

She giggled. "It works for me."

I stood up. "Thank you for the information, Graces. I would ask just one more thing from you."

Lachesis inclined her head. "Name it."

"Tell me how I might find Nidras."

The three goddesses shared a look.

Atropos shook her head. "She has gone rogue. It is believed she avoids her father because, as king, it is his duty to see that she accepts her fate. It is the only way to stop his people from being slaughtered. But forcing her to succumb to the curse would kill him. He loves his only child very much."

Clotho chimed in. "Nidras doesn't want to put her father in that position, so she avoids him except for public appearances, where she pretends she is doing what is required of her to appease their people. But she has determined to fight the monster rather than succumb."

"I fully support that decision. In fact, if possible, I intend to find her and help."

Lachesis sighed. "As I said before, you always were a stupid boy, Hermes Adonis."

* * * * *

I tested the trigger on my weapon to make sure I'd unlocked it and checked my grip. The gun was an Olympian special, which emitted laser beams built on Olympian magic that was supposed to kill anything.

I'd been practicing with it for several days and found that the weapon disintegrated anything I placed between its sights, including one unfortunate gargoyle buck that had wandered haplessly across my path as I was shooting a concrete pillar on an ancient ruin.

Nasty creatures, gargoyles. But still. I felt bad about turning it into atmospheric gas.

The gun was one of many weapons I'd gotten from a truly seedy contact Christian and Arial had found for me in the dark bowels of the City of Gods. Thick bodied, full of warts and smelly, Bleark was the embodiment of all the worst traits a gnome can harbor. But he was the only creature on Olympus who could provide the type of weapons I needed. Weapons that would kill anything in their path.

My hand drifted to the handle of the long sword resting against my hip.

Part of my Cupid training had, of course, included fencing. But this sword was different from anything I'd ever used before. Its double edges were sharp enough to slice iron or steel. It could cut a man in half at the waist with a single, moderately hard swing. And if being cut in half didn't provide sufficient damage, the blade

burned its target from the inside out, so that even the slightest cut would spread to disintegrate the victim.

I also had several round objects clipped onto a leather sash I'd laid across my chest. They were hell-fire bombs. Filled with flame and ash from the lowest circle of Hell, those little goodies would annihilate anything I threw them at, leaving not a trace behind of the object they ate.

I was Rambo on steroids. I was super Cupid...hear me roar. And I was more than ready to face the soul sucker and save my lady love.

All I needed to do was find the monster.

Or...for that matter...my lady love.

The shadows rolled softly around me, thick with silence and the smell of overflowing garbage bins. It was well after midnight and the demons I'd been watching had scattered home hours ago. All except a large, tough looking female, who'd staggered from the demon club where I'd been keeping watch just moments earlier, a long, deadly looking knife clutched in her thick fist.

I'd followed her out of the bar and watched her disappear into the alley. But her footsteps had stopped a moment earlier and I hadn't been able to catch so much as a gasped breath of sound since I'd entered the alley behind her.

I stopped, the gun held out in front of me and my hand still on the hilt of the sword and listened carefully. I narrowed my eyes in an effort to pierce the thick fleece of the shadows closing around me.

Finally I heard her. The sound was soft as a sigh. Like a final scrape of breath from between her thick lips. And then the shadows rolled and something long and black boiled out of them.

I could barely make out its form. Either it had pulled the shadows around it or they were part of its makeup.

I stared in horror at its featureless face and formless shape. It rolled and shimmered underneath a fall of black mist.

It didn't breathe but somehow I could hear it standing there.

Then the shadows closed and it disappeared. I fired the gun, blinking at the satisfactory sound of the brick wall smashing into bits behind it.

Blackness rolled toward me and hit me with the force of a train, throwing me the full length of the alley. I hit the stone wall of the alley and slid downward, crumpling like a broken doll on its filthy floor. My eyes lifted and saw the blackness rolling toward me again.

I grabbed a hell-fire bomb and launched it into the center of that deadly blackness. The thing pulled in on itself and the bomb sailed harmlessly past, lighting up the other end of the alley as it turned a large part of the building next door into ash.

In the light of the bomb, I saw a crumpled pile of something that looked like dead demon at the far end of the alleyway.

I jumped to my feet and pulled the sword. Lunging a bit wildly, I plunged its tip through the roiling blackness and found, surprisingly, that the shadows had density. The monster split around my thrust and I could see residual light from the burning wall through the opening.

I experienced a moment of joy as I realized I'd damaged the soul sucker.

It was short-lived. The shadows lengthened and reached out to slam against me. I went down on one knee, still swinging the sword. I actually even connected a few times. But still the shadows pounded against my head, chest and shoulders.

The slimy floor of the alleyway reached up and grabbed the side of my head and the sword clattered to the ground beside me. I lay there, drooling blood, as something heavy landed on the center of my back.

Somewhere in my enfeebled brain I knew pain was imminent. I tried to lift my head and speak. But nothing would move.

I was like furry roadkill on the bottom of a large tire. All flat and spread-eagled, waiting for the next bulldozer to run over me.

I wished I'd listened more closely to the Fates. Turns out they were right. I always was a stupid boy.

Pain, like jolts of fire, spread across my back. Stars burst before my glazed, unblinking eyes. I wondered how long it would take for me to die.

The shadows flew sideways and the weight on my back disappeared. I heard the distinct sound of fighting nearby and wished I could scrape myself off the pavement and help.

I managed to get myself into a seated position after several moments of hard work but I was panting from the effort. Leaning against the wall behind me I tried to see what was going on.

Pure black fought against a slightly lighter charcoal in a seemingly formless mass in the center of the alley. I was glad someone had come to help me and I wanted to jump in and do my part but I couldn't tell the bad guys from the good guys at that point.

So I sat and panted for a minute longer.

I had just managed to stumble to my feet when a high-pitched, keening sound made me cringe and hold my ears. The air in front of me flashed into brightness. Instinctively, I closed my eyes against the burning light. But as the squealing continued I risked opening them to see what was dying.

The light shot in twin beams from the outstretched palms of a very small, nicely shaped creature standing several feet away, facing the monster. She held herself rigid and upright, with military correctness, unbending in the face of the writhing, lunging and very pissed off monster before her.

I watched in awe as she brought the thing to its metaphorical knees and finally sent it screaming into oblivion as it disappeared with a final, ear-splitting shriek.

Nidras stood, unmoving for a long moment, her small hands still outstretched but no longer spitting deadly fire. I took a step toward her and the sound of my boot scraping against the ground made her turn abruptly.

Her small, beautiful face was purple with rage. She lifted her palms toward me.

My hands shot up defensively. "Whoa, girl! I come in peace."

She stared at me for a long moment and then snorted. "You're lucky you don't come in pieces. What is it with you and this monster? You're like a soul sucker magnet."

I shrugged, grinning. "I've been searching for it."

She dropped her hands. "Why in the name of all that's evil and deadly would you do that? Are you completely stupid?"

This made me laugh. "Some would say that I am."

"Some would be right, I think." She turned away and started toward the street. I fell into step beside her. Her soft, flowery scent wafted over me, making my knees weaken with sudden, unexpected lust.

"At least the monster's dead."

"It's not dead."

I jerked to a stop. "It's not?"

She ignored me, apparently figuring I was too ignorant for a response.

I hurried to catch up again. "Then the curse still holds?"

This time she jerked to a stop. I almost ran into her. Her beautiful eyes fixed me with unmasked hostility. "What do you know about that?"

I shrugged. "Only what the Fates could tell me. Not all that much."

Her hand shot toward my throat but I caught it before it connected. She looked surprised that I had stopped her. Jerking her hand from my grasp she turned away. "Stay out of my affairs, Cupid."

I fell into step beside her again. "Nope. I'm going to help you get rid of it."

She laughed and the sound was filled with bitterness. "Yeah, because you've been so successful against it to this point."

I ignored the stomp on my metaphorical balls and plowed onward. "I wounded it. I'm getting better." I grabbed her slender arm and felt the steel beneath the softness. Pulling her around to face me, I lowered my face close to hers. My intention had been only to enforce my point by getting into her space but instead I'd succeeded in stirring the ever ready embers of my lust by yanking her lush body into mine. My cock stirred and thickened uncomfortably beneath my jeans.

"I'm going to help you, Nidras, whether you want my help or not. I'm thinking we'll be more effective if we work together, rather than fighting each other as well as the monster."

The thick lashes over her beautiful eyes fluttered in surprise. She stared at my mouth for a moment and then licked her lips. I nearly groaned as her pearly whites came out and closed on the peach lushness of her lower lip. I strongly suspected I was being played like a Stradavarius but it felt damn good nonetheless.

"Why?"

My mouth moved a fraction closer. "Why what?"

Her tongue swept out and slid over the tiny indents her teeth had made on that lush lip. "Why do you want to help me?"

It was a reasonable question. And I had what I'd thought was a reasonable response. But suddenly it didn't seem so reasonable. *Because you turn me on? Because my formerly dead heart finally feels something when you're near?* Stupid, stupid, stupid. "Because the gods asked me to help you. This curse thing is rubbing them the wrong way."

I nearly held my breath while waiting to see if she'd buy it. To me, knowing the gods pretty well, it sounded weak and almost as stupid as the truth. But after a moment she inclined her head slightly.

"Okay. I'll let you help me." She pulled away and started walking.

Biting back a retort I hurried to catch up with her. Again.

Chapter Four

Partners?

"So what do we do first?"

She swore softly.

"What's wrong?" I glanced around, my hand going to the sword at my waist.

"I forgot to print out my agenda for the night." Those lush, peach tinted lips tipped upward.

I chuckled. "Okay, okay. But I don't like being in the dark."

This time she turned and a small finger jabbed at my chest. "Then you should only come out during daylight. Didn't your mommy explain to you that bad things prowl the darkness? Things that go bump in the night?"

I grabbed her finger and yanked her hard, up against my body. Using the powers the gods gave me, I sensed the beginning of the energy surge that would put me on my ass if I wasn't paying attention.

I grabbed her other wrist and twisted it behind her back. "Not so fast, demon woman."

Rage danced quickly across her features before she could tamp it down. Her lips parted slightly as she tried to pull away.

I held on tight, trying to ignore the way her soft belly rubbed against my growing erection. "I'm not a fan of sarcasm," I informed her. "Especially when it's directed at me."

She shrugged. "That's unfortunate. Sarcasm is one of my better things."

I lowered my lips until her soft breath touched them. "I'm sure you have other talents you could fall back on."

The corners of her mouth tipped upward. "I already tried kicking your ass."

My head dipped lower. We were so close we shared the same air, our lips just a whisper apart. "Then maybe you should try kissing it instead."

I closed the splinter of space between our lips and groaned with pleasure as her soft sweetness enveloped me. My hands slid around her waist and tugged, pulling her against the spot where I ached and pulsed. A small corner of my brain was sending me warning bells that I chose to ignore. All I could think about was burying myself deeply within her body and staying there for a very long time.

Nidras moaned and grabbed my ass in both hands. She ground herself against my raging hardness and kneaded the flesh of my butt cheeks roughly. Her mouth opened in sensual invitation and, without thinking, I plunged my tongue between her sweet lips.

Her teeth clamped onto my tongue.

She bit down. Hard.

Pain jolted through me. I stilled and my eyes flew open. "Lebged gbo."

She shook her head.

She bit down harder. I could taste blood in my mouth. I frowned. "DNidrabs!"

Warm, soft breath bathed my face as she laughed.

There was a tiny flash and the pain on my tongue disappeared...along with Nidras.

I reached up and touched my tongue. My fingertips came away covered in blood. "Bitch!" I screamed into the night.

Soft laughter floated back to me on the wind.

Then I realized the worst of it. I'd finally found my demon princess, only to lose her again because I'd been stupid and impulsive.

I threw back my head and growled my frustration to the night air. This time only silence met my cries.

* * * * *

The tones of Bach's *Sonata da chiesa* formed a lively backdrop for the gentle tinkle and scrape of silver against china and carefully muted conversation in the grand dining hall of Zeus' castle.

Across the table from me sat Arion and Christian, their heads pushed together intimately for much of the meal, lost in their own little world. Next to me was the goddess Aphrodite. She was a beautiful woman to be sure, with her thick, auburn hair, worn in long, gentle curls sliding like fine silk over her shoulders and dipping into the flawless, white vee of her cleavage. But her hungry gaze and pouting, cherry colored lips were a bit much for me.

So far, just during the soup and cheese courses, I'd had to remove her hand from my thigh three times and once from my crotch. I was doing my best to ignore her constant attempts to catch my gaze, which meant I had my head turned away from her, toward the opposite end of the table.

That was the end where Zeus held court. It was always interesting to watch the body language around Zeus. The Court of Gods was never at a loss for intrigue and sizzling passion. Though Zeus had held his spot at the head of all this intrigue through millennia, it had been a rocky path at best.

Over the centuries, he'd been forced at times to rule through strength, force and sometimes even base brutality. But he was known as a fair and, when possible, even kind ruler.

That didn't stop those beneath his rule from existing in a state of near constant jealousy and bitterness. Everybody thought he or she would make a better ruler.

Personally, knowing the whole lot of them much better than I cared to, I highly doubted that.

The cheese course was removed and a plate of fish was settled in front of me. I grimaced at the dish. In my opinion, there was only one thing worse than fish on a plate and that was fish that still had its eyes in its head lying on a plate.

Since I had no intention of eating the nasty stuff, I focused on Poseidon, across the table and just two gods up from Zeus, for a few minutes. With his violent temper and atmosphere-altering outbursts, Poseidon was always good entertainment.

At the moment he was having a rather calm conversation with Adonis but I was hopeful something would piss him off soon. The last time he'd gotten irritated at one of these dinners there'd been a full-on rain storm inside the hall and the fish course had been returned to its natural element.

Looking down at the glassy-eyed monster on my plate I couldn't help feeling that would be a vast improvement. "Bring it," I murmured hopefully.

Unfortunately, Aphrodite took this as verbal encouragement and grabbed my thigh again. Leaning close, she placed her cherry lips close to my ear. I jerked as her breath washed delicately over the ticklish organ. "I've been waiting all night for you to say that, Cupid. I must say, you're the yummiest dish this party has served up yet."

I fought a full-out eye roll. Fortunately the goddess and I were both distracted by a slight commotion at the door.

A man and a woman entered the room, arm in arm. The man was enormous, easily seven feet tall and broad-shouldered, with arms that were as big around as my thighs and legs that spanned the width of my waist. He looked like a human king of old, wearing deep red velvet robes, trimmed in white fur, probably ermine, flecked with gold beads. His brow was wide and deeply lined, his jaw square. He wore a jewel-encrusted crown atop his long, mahogany colored hair.

The woman on his arm wore a skin-hugging velvet gown, its low, wide décolletage, sleeves and hem trimmed in ermine. The gown was simple and elegant and clung tightly to her perfect form.

Her face was a pale oval beneath glistening black hair and seemed vaguely familiar. When the couple moved into the room, after being greeted warmly by Zeus, I realized why.

A second couple entered the doorway. A much younger couple. The man was tall, slender and blond, dwarfing the woman on his arm with his height. But nothing about him could possibly dwarf the woman's presence.

Nidras fairly shone with power and purpose. Her small body was rigid with evidence of royal birth and training. But her eyes flashed with her force of will and her expression dared all who faced her to get in her way. I felt the tension level in the room change just from her appearance there.

Amazing.

The room filled immediately with murmurs as she swept it with her haughty gaze. I jumped to my feet when her gaze landed on me. But a slight shake of her head kept me from striding across the room to her.

"What in Hades is she doing here with him?" Aphrodite murmured into my ear. I realized then that she'd stood too. In fact the whole table had stood up when I did. I looked around the room in shock. Showing homage to a demon king and his family. What was that all about?

Zeus led the king and queen to a spot just down from where I sat. Nidras and her “date” took places on the opposite side of the table.

I glared at the man who’d been lucky enough to enter the room on her arm. He didn’t even notice.

Nidras pointedly avoided my gaze, focusing instead on her parents, the man beside her and Zeus.

The only good thing that happened over the next few minutes was that the fish was taken away and replaced with a fine hunk of beef.

Unfortunately I’d lost my appetite.

Aphrodite didn’t seem to want her beef either. She appeared to be more interested in inserting her tongue into my ear.

Damn. I hated these dinners.

* * * * *

“So why do you come?”

I lowered my head. Having finally managed to isolate Nidras in a curtained alcove after hours of watching the tall blond man fawn all over her, the last thing I wanted to do was talk. My lips found her cheek and I placed a whisper soft kiss there.

“Remember what happened the last time you accosted me? You’d think you’d learn.” Even the smile in her husky voice couldn’t dampen the roiling lust that made my court breeches bulge noticeably as I inhaled her scent.

“I’m a slow learner.”

She let her head drop back, exposing her slender neck to my travelling lips. She placed a small hand on my chest as if to hold me back but I pushed against it and she didn’t throw me across the room, so I figured I was doing okay. “Won’t Aphrodite be mad if she finds you here?”

“She left. I think she’s having sex with a vaguely man-shaped lamp in the next room.”

Nidras pretended my attentions didn’t affect her. But I noticed her voice was getting ever more breathless. My tongue came out and touched the delicate skin just below her ear. She smelled of musk and the finest royal roses. I licked a path along her perfect jawline, pausing briefly to gently suck her chin.

She gasped and my skin tingled.

I recognized that tingle. Grabbing hold of her waist with both arms I held on tight. “Oh no you don’t.”

Her eyes flashed angrily. “I’ll not be seduced in some dark corner like a common trollop.”

My nose nestled in her fragrant hair. The spikes were gone and it was long again, shaped in a very mature chignon with a diamond clip. “What happened to your hair?”

She struggled to remove herself from my grip. “I grew it back. Now let me go!”

"Not a chance. Not until you tell me about the buffoon you came here with."

She stopped struggling and sighed against my neck. My lips touched the pulse at the base of her neck. Every beat sent a wave of her incredible scent into the air. I felt as if I'd burst the buttons of my breeches at any moment.

I fought an urge to pull her hip against my cock and grind into her. If I didn't get inside her very soon I was pretty sure I'd go mad.

"He's my fate. And my worst nightmare."

My lips stilled on her throat. I straightened, fixing her with a purely incredulous look. "*That* is the nightmare you're working so hard to avoid? *That* is your curse? *That* is the creature you'll let your people die to avoid?"

She grabbed my hands and pried them off her narrow waist. But instead of running away mad, she took a menacing step toward me, fire flashing in her lavender gaze. Leaning close she spoke in low but angry tones. The tiny finger was back in the center of my chest, poking me backward, toward the wall behind. "*You* don't know what the hell you're talking about. *You* don't know anything. *You* have no idea what's in store for me. And *you* have no damn right to judge!"

I opened my mouth but she plowed right over me.

"*You* can't even face your own tiny demons in life. I believe the first time I saw you *you* were living in a whorehouse sucking Brimstone twenty-four hours a day. Don't *you* ever judge me!"

She turned and walked out of the alcove, leaving me hurt, unsure and just pure pissed off. She was right. Who was I to judge? I had let a simple broken heart bring my world crashing down around my ears.

I had no idea who the blond guy was or what he intended for her. But I knew one thing. I was definitely going to find out.

Sooner rather than later.

I stepped out of the alcove just in time to see her leave on the blond man's arm. Hurrying across the enormous room, I knew I had to follow them.

I was going to learn what I could about them both. And then I was going to figure out how to cut him totally out of the picture.

Oh yeah. Then I had the soul sucker to deal with before she could be mine.

I grimaced. One problem at a time.

Chapter Five

The Other Guy

I stayed in the shadows and watched them walk down the golden streets of Olympus. Away from the speculative gazes of the hierarchy in the City of Gods, they spoke little and touched even less. Their body language looked much less like the language of love and more like a conclave of enemies looking for common ground.

Though, as a Cupid I had decades of training in reading mannerisms and body language, in this case I had a strong suspicion that my perception included a strong dose of wishful thinking.

They arrived at an extremely tall, narrow castle with sparkling white walls. The building's face held a series of four large windows on each level, each window sporting a balcony whose rails overflowed with flowers and greenery. The scent of flowers filled the street beneath the beautiful castle.

Four turrets rounded the corners of the building and stretched high into the sky, rimmed by archer notches at the top and showing arrow slits at each of the castle's six visible floors.

It was a beautiful castle, the diamond-like flash of its walls sparkling into the night like millions of twinkling stars. If I were going to pick the demon king's castle from all the castles lining the streets of Olympus, the elegant building before me would have been the last pick on the list.

I would have expected something in basic black.

I stood in the shadows of the buildings across the street and watched Nidras climb the circular stairs to the castle's front doors. The doors opened as she approached and a servant stepped to the side so she could enter.

Nidras stopped just inside the door and lifted a hand, palm outward toward her date. He stopped and his body went rigid and still with obvious anger. She spoke a few words to him and then turned, going into the castle and leaving him standing on the steps.

The doors closed and still the young man stood, glaring at the door with a rigid posture that told me he was mightily pissed. Then he turned, lifted his hands to the sky and screamed his rage. A flash of light exploded around him and intense heat rolled through the street, causing me to close my eyes and turn away, using the wall of the alley where I stood as a shield against the inferno.

When I looked again he was gone, only a dusty mist remained. In the distance I could hear the heavy beat of wings on the air.

I stepped out of the alley and started across the street. As I reached the circular steps, the wide double doors started to swing open. I panicked and slipped into the alley next to the demon king's castle.

I listened as the doors slid quietly closed and soft footsteps came down the steps. Some instinct told me to stay where I was and watch.

A small form, dressed all in black, walked past, keeping to the shadows of the buildings. I could see the spark of jewels from the two deadly knives across her chest.

She was heading toward the demon clubs where I'd been spending my nights watching for her. I wondered that the two of us could haunt the same spots night after night and I could never find her.

The answer suddenly came to me and it was ridiculously simple. I'd been lurking within the establishments, while she'd stayed in the shadows of the streets, watching and waiting for the soul sucker to appear and attempt to grab a victim.

Nidras moved quickly and stealthily down the quiet streets of Olympus. I kept her within sight but it wasn't always easy. She was very good at staying invisible.

A well-dressed couple emerged from a building across the street. The door they emerged from emitted the sound of laughter and music and spread a fan of bright light across the street as Nidras passed.

She stepped into the deep shadows just as the light found the spot where she'd been.

As the door shut behind the couple, closing off the light and festivity, they turned toward each other and kissed. The woman's hands rested on her partner's hips as he pulled her close. Their lips met and crushed, passion flaring immediately in the warm, Olympian night.

The woman's hand slid to cup the man's tight, round butt cheeks as his slid upward, to bury itself in the thick fall of her light brown hair.

Very soon moaning sounds travelled across the street toward me.

I rolled my eyes, murmuring, "Get a room, people." Stepping out of the alcove, I moved in the direction I'd last seen Nidras. After a few moments of searching for her in the shadows, I realized I'd lost her.

"Damnation!"

I ranted for a few minutes and then, taking several deep breaths to calm myself, headed toward the demon clubs. I was pretty sure I'd find her there.

I didn't make it to the clubs.

Two streets over I heard sounds of a violent altercation. It was a street that catered to business and it was dark and closed down at night. Nothing and no one moved on those empty streets and the pavement was lit only by the light of a stingy moon above. I could hear the sound of cries and the impact of flesh against flesh somewhere down the narrow street but the lack of real light hampered my vision. I pulled my sword and my gun and blinked, trying to adjust my vision. Finally, I could just make out Nidras, rolling and leaping and fighting a larger, formless shadow several blocks down the street.

I started running.

I fired into the black mass as I approached and was happy to see the creature jerk and turn toward me, momentarily forgetting Nidras.

I was less happy when it shot toward me.

A less than manly scream of surprise emerged unbidden from my throat. I hadn't been expecting the monster to turn on me that quickly. Lifting the sword clumsily, I lunged at the thing as it approached. The sword's blade sliced through thick, wet flesh, twisting my wrist painfully as my feet left the ground.

I flew backward and hit the street, sliding several yards across the sharp stone and feeling it rip the skin of my back.

Nidras sent a jolt of power into the monster and it turned from me to address her. She quickly sent another jolt into it and leapt onto its writhing form before it could recover enough to retaliate.

I forced my battered body off the street and lumbered back toward them. I was sick of messing with the thing. It was time for me to bring out my big guns. I pulled my Cupid's bow from my pocket and sent power into it, growing it into a full-blown weapon.

After discussing the monster with Bleark, I'd tipped the arrows with angel's blood specifically for this purpose. It made sense to me that, to counteract something that stole souls, I would use the life force of a creature that protects them.

I looked up from prepping my bow and found Nidras lying on the street, on her back and the soul sucker settled on top of her. As I lifted the bow, the thing reached for her chest and clamped on.

Nidras screamed and I saw stars. It was a horrible, desperate sound.

Her screams filled with terror as the thing wrenched a hole in her chest.

I loosed my arrow and it hit true, directly in the center of the mass. I quickly followed with one to the area I believed would be its head and then, for good measure sent another into its chest.

Nidras' screams died to a wet gurgle. I flew at the thing, roaring my rage and swung the sword with all the strength I owned. A large chunk of the monster flew off and fell to the street with a heavy thud.

Its shriek filled the night and it finally released Nidras, rising to its full height and turning to me. I noticed that the arrows I'd shot into it still bobbed from its shadowy form.

As I watched, a deep, orange glow spread from the tip of each one. The angel's blood appeared to be working.

The monster took a step toward me and then stopped with a grunt, looking down at the quickly growing orange stain.

It shrieked again and I could finally see its mouth, filled with orange light from the arrow I'd shot into its head. The monster's form started to wobble and shimmer. The orange stain continued to spread until the entire thing glowed with orange light. The shaking increased until chunks of it started to break off and fly away.

I ducked a particularly large section of monster and deflected a couple more chunks with my sword.

With a final, jaw-jarring shriek the thing exploded into a million tiny, orange pieces. I threw myself over Nidras, gritting my teeth against the burn and sting of fiery, little monster pieces hitting my back and legs.

Finally the night settled into silence.

The soul sucker was gone. But as I reared back and looked into my demon princess' beautiful face I realized.

So was Nidras.

"Nooooo!!!" I reached for her and gave her a little shake. She couldn't be dead, I wouldn't accept it. She remained completely still and her pale, perfect face had taken on a marble-like quality. Cool and smooth and impossibly white.

My heart contracted with pain. My mind swirled with questions. Nidras had saved me once, when I was in a similar state. Why couldn't I have been imbued with a similar, healing skill?

Why were my skills all so damned useless?

Tears flowed down my cheeks as I came to grips with the fact that Nidras was dead. I'd thought my previous broken heart would kill me. This was fifty times worse than that.

I reached down and lifted Nidras off the ground, not sure where I was going to go with her but feeling the need to move her off the street. Moments later I realized my mind had a destination, though I'd been so wrapped up in my broken heart I hadn't noticed.

I knew, suddenly, where I was going. I didn't have the power to heal Nidras. But another royal demon might. I would take her to her parents.

Maybe they could bring her back to me.

As I ran toward the doors of the castle with a limp Nidras draped across my arms, they opened wide and the queen ran toward me. Her beautiful lavender eyes, so like her daughter's, were wide with fear as she touched Nidras' cold, white face. "What happened?"

Then she saw the hole in her daughter's chest. "The soul monster." The lavender gaze lifted. "Bring her, quickly."

I followed the queen into the castle and up a wide, curving set of marble stairs that rose high into the castle's interior, disappearing into shadows as they climbed toward the third and fourth levels.

We ascended to the second level and turned right, hurrying down a long, densely carpeted hallway to the end, where a set of double doors stood open to accept us.

"Lay her on the bed. Quickly."

I settled Nidras gently on a wide bed, covered with golden bedding, under a canopy of rich black velvet. I leaned down and kissed her cool forehead and grabbed a cold hand, stepping back to make way for the queen as she hurried to her daughter's side.

The queen held a vial of something green and foaming in her hand. She lifted Nidras' head and tipped the vial against her lips, saying something in a soft, chanting voice as she forced the liquid between her daughter's lips and into her mouth. "Swallow, girl."

As if by magic, Nidras' throat convulsed around the liquid.

The queen handed the empty vial to me and set her hands on her daughter's chest, over the gaping wound.

A soft light sparked from her fingertips and Nidras' body lifted from the bed, her chest arching upward and her beautiful mouth opened as if she would scream.

I placed a hand on her forehead and pushed the heavy silk of her black hair away from her eyes. Leaning down, I spoke to her in soothing tones, praying she hadn't gone beyond a place where she could hear me.

The queen chanted as she worked. Her very life force seemed to ebb as she sent her healing power into Nidras' horrible wound.

"Where are they?" The king's booming voice preceded him into the room. When he entered, his wild, black eyes fixed on me and the anger radiating from his body made me briefly consider pulling a weapon.

But those cold, black eyes turned instead to his wife and daughter and he hurried forward. He stopped behind his wife and knelt, wrapping himself around her from behind and laying his massive head against her shoulder.

The light beneath her fingers brightened visibly and Nidras' back arched higher as she gasped and her beautiful eyes shot open.

The wound was healed.

The queen pulled her hands back and collapsed. She'd have fallen forward onto the bed if her husband hadn't been there to catch her.

The king reached down and slid his wife into his arms. "I'll be back when I have the queen settled. Stay with her."

I didn't bother to tell him that nothing could drag me from her side. I simply nodded.

I watched the king stroll out of the room with his wife draped in his arms. When I turned back to Nidras I saw that her eyes were closed.

I settled into the chair beside her bed and watched her sleep, thinking about the future now that the soul sucker was dead. It looked a little brighter from my perspective. But we still had the blond dude to deal with.

I dozed off.

"My father?"

My eyes shot open and I wondered how long I'd been asleep. Nidras had lifted herself up, leaning on one elbow and her too-white face was filled with worry. I started to stand. "I'll go get him."

"No!" Her hand fell on my forearm, holding me in the chair. She climbed from the bed and started toward the window.

"Where are you going?" I was right behind her.

"Out of here. I have to get out of here. Before my father returns."

As if on cue, the king's booming voice could be heard in the hallway outside Nidras' door.

She gasped and reached for me, her small hand clamping down on my arm. I opened my mouth and reached for her, fully intending to soothe her irrational fear but found myself thrown into a world of light with no sound.

We popped into a room covered in red velvets and black silks. The smallish room contained not much more than a large bed, a small table and chairs and what looked like a bath area off to one side.

It looked like one of the rooms in the Pleasure Palace.

Nidras dropped my arm and started pacing.

I watched her for a moment before speaking. "Your father is going to kill me. He left me in charge of you."

The intense, lavender gaze swung to me, filled with heat. "No one is in charge of me."

I smiled. I believed that. "Where are we?"

"My lair."

I laughed, thinking she was joking. She fixed that intense gaze on me again and my smile died. Apparently she wasn't kidding. "Your lair?"

Nidras nodded. "The Succubus Sisters let me stay here."

"You live among Succubi?" Lust shot through me like an electric shock and my cock shifted in my breeches.

In the blink of an eye the tension in that room changed course. Her lips parted and her rigid stance softened as her tongue came out to slide across her soft lower lip. "I do."

I took a step toward her, my body tightening with expectation. Her scent enveloped me, drawing me in, imprinting me. "Hasn't that been...difficult for you?"

Her eyes widened. One small hand fluttered up to clutch her throat. She gave me a single jerk of her head in negative response. "I've managed."

I took another step. I was close enough now to reach out and touch her. "Have you?" I reached up and encircled the front of her throat with my hand. My thumb rubbed the tender skin beneath her ear in gentle strokes. "You're a beautiful woman, Nidras. Surely they've made your life miserable."

She sucked in a soft breath.

I took this as a yes.

Lowering my head I touched my lips to her forehead, her nose, her chin. "Do they slip into your room at night, Nidras? Do they touch your body and make you writhe with need?"

Soft breath slid across my face as she groaned. It was nearly inaudible but wrung from her body like a cry.

She softened toward me. "They..." She swallowed, licked her lips. "They touch me."

I wrapped my arm around her waist and pulled her up against my body. I cupped a small, round buttock in one hand and dragged her up against my aching cock, groaning as her body imprisoned my hard shaft in softness.

Her supple breasts hit me just below my ribs. I could feel the hard peaks of her nipples through our clothing.

I took her delectable bottom lip between my teeth, biting gently on the incredibly soft flesh. "Do they touch you like this?" I slid my hand from her throat down to one lush breast, pulling gently on the rigid nipple.

She cried out, her head dropping back in sheer pleasure.

"Do they, Nidras?"

"Yes. Oh gods, yes."

The hand slid lower, pressing warm circles over her slightly rounded belly, taunting her with the promise of its destination. I pulled the sweet flesh of her lip into my mouth, sucking gently.

My hand slid lower. "Do they touch you here?"

She gasped and pressed hard against my questing fingers. I turned my hand, cupping it and slid it over the heated mound at the juncture of her legs. I could feel her pussy weeping through the thin cloth of her breeches.

"Oh my gods!" Nidras quivered from head to toe. She widened her stance, giving me easy access to her eager flesh. I rubbed gently across the pulsing mound, reveling in the way her body softened and throbbed under my touch.

I took her hand and pulled it to my crotch, pressing it against my painfully hard shaft. "Do you touch them, Nidras? Do you touch them here?"

"No." Her head swung back and forth but her fingers closed around my cock through my breeches. She matched the tempo I was creating on her body as she milked my shaft.

I gasped, terrified she'd end the moment before it had really begun. Pulling away from her, I tugged on her shirt. "Let's get these clothes off."

Nidras nodded, her beautiful eyes clouded with lust. I watched her peel the soft, clingy fabric of her battle wear off her tiny body, my poor, tortured cock growing thicker and harder as each section of flawless, white flesh was revealed to my starving gaze.

She pulled her shirt over her head and dropped it. The perfect mounds of her breasts called to me. I bent and captured each perky, brown nipple between my lips, sucking hard on the fragrant flesh.

Nidras' knees buckled and I caught her, settling her gently on the bed.

I quickly divested myself of the rest of my clothes and reached for her soft slacks, pulling them from her slender hips and legs. Tossing them aside, I settled myself between her thighs.

Her warm, musky scent touched my senses and my cock throbbed painfully in response. Pressing my shaft into the mattress, I gritted my teeth against the need to

end my sensual pain. I settled my lips over the rigid peak of her clitoris and sucked. Gently at first but then building the pressure until she writhed helpless on the bed and screamed my name into the room.

Nidras clamped her legs around my head and vibrated in release. When her muscles softened again, I slid my tongue deep into her dripping heat, plunging it in and drawing it back in imitation of what I was going to do with my cock.

Nidras grabbed my hair and held on as the sensations rolled over her again. Her head thrashed from side to side and her legs tightened on my shoulders. I could feel her building toward another knee-melting release and I suddenly longed to go there with her. I closed my mouth over her dripping mound and sucked hard. Nidras bucked one final time as the orgasm swamped her.

The upper half of her body came off the bed and her hands tightened in my hair. She cried out, her eyes rolling closed as her body rocked with pleasure.

Before she reached the end of the final wave, I slid up to cover her body and drove my aching cock into her welcoming heat, plunging it deep, all the way to my balls.

Nidras' eyes flew open and she screamed as my body filled hers. I covered her mouth with my own and moved my hips, dragging the engorged length of my cock slowly against the still convulsing walls of her pussy. She shuddered and gasped with each inward stroke, whimpering on each outward stroke.

Blood boiled in my balls. They were pulled so tight that the skin ached and itched with need. Each drag of my cock through her moist, clutching heat sent jolts of fire and ice through my body, to the point where I thought there was more pain than pleasure in our mating.

I couldn't wait to release a hot jet of cum into her grasping pussy. And yet I couldn't bear the thought that it would end. So I soldiered on, driving in and out of her welcoming body until the very nerve endings in my skin fired and wept for relief.

I increased my tempo, knowing that the end was near. Nidras responded by wrapping her slender legs around my waist and thrusting with me. Her soft mouth covered my lips, drawing air from my lungs and sending her own sweet offering back to fill me.

In those last, powerful moments, we shared the same breath, the same heartbeat and the same throbbing, uncontrollable passion. And when she fell screaming over that bright edge, we shared the same mind-shattering release. I screamed her name as I fell over with her. And Nidras captured my lip between tiny, sharp teeth and bit down, hard enough to draw blood.

The bright pain drew another shuddering wave of pleasure from my body and I reveled in the jets of hot cum my body sent into hers.

It felt right. It felt perfect. It felt like fate.

I collapsed over her, my body beyond weary and sated and nuzzled her soft neck. Nidras whimpered slightly and then laughed, the vibrations traveling down her body to pull against my softening cock.

I laughed too.

It seemed right. Something as powerful as what we'd just shared had to be celebrated, enjoyed to its full measure.

Then she sighed against my chest and the rhythmic touch of her breath danced against my skin. I rolled to my side, pulling her close.

And followed her into healing sleep.

Chapter Six

Tights Spots

Soft hands slid down my thighs, over my knees and along my calves. My lower legs were pillowed in something soft and heavy, as warm wetness slid over my toes. My cock rose expectantly, oblivious to the cause of the sensual assault but ready and willing to act on it nonetheless.

I groaned and lifted my hands. "Go away, Sidra."

Soft, husky laughter met my rejection.

Warmth encompassed my cock and gentle rubbing created a delectable sensation on the exquisitely tender underside of the engorged shaft. I tossed my head on my pillow and tried to open my eyes but I felt as if I were covered in smothering clouds of sleep and I couldn't seem to claw my way out.

"No." My hands shoved ineffectually at the unseen Succubus, only to be met by more giggling. The heavy warmth lifted from my cock and I felt the loss like a physical pang but the separation didn't last long. A velvet hand grabbed my hungry shaft and guided it to heaven.

My sensual assailant slowly lowered her weight onto my body and embedded my cock deep, all the way to my taut, aching balls. Despite myself I groaned and grabbed at a lush pair of hips, urging them to move.

Guilt swept over me. Something felt wrong about letting Sidra take me in my sleep. Something wasn't quite...right...

My mind cleared suddenly and my eyes shot open in panic. "Nidras!"

The wanton creature riding my dick turned her dark head and grinned. "Yes?"

Relief flooded me and I laughed. "Oh my gods, you scared the shit out of me."

Nidras slid her legs behind her and bent toward my toes, keeping my shaft safely embedded in her clutching pussy. She pulled the big toe of my right foot into her mouth, sucking softly.

My shaft thickened and bucked with surprised pleasure.

Nidras gasped from the movement inside her body. Letting my toe slide free of her lips she turned her head toward me. Her eyes flashed with devilish delight. "You don't feel scared." Then she captured the big toe of my other foot, sucking hard while her lithe body rode my delighted cock.

She sat up straight again and I grabbed her shoulders, pulling her backward so I could give her lush breasts the attention they so richly deserved. Nidras placed her hands on the bed on either side of me and leaned back, giving me full access to the tender mounds. Her lush fall of midnight-black hair fell against my chest, the strands now grown so long they draped my body and puddled on the sheets to either side.

I realized I needed to have her underneath me. Sitting upright, I displaced her handholds on the bed and rolled until she lay on her belly beneath me. Reaching down, I pulled her hips off the bed, holding them while I drove my cock more deeply into her velvet wetness.

Nidras cried out as the engorged head of my cock speared deep inside her body. I slowed, thinking at first that I'd hurt her. But she whimpered for me to continue, pushing her soft butt higher to allow me even better access. I happily complied.

Nidras groaned huskily. She lowered her head to the bed and her muscles tightened in ecstasy beneath me. I wrapped my fingers in silken waves of hair, rubbing the cool strands along her back and sides as her body spasmed around my painfully hard dick in the first waves of orgasm, milking it relentlessly and pulling me toward that razor edge of release with her.

The pleasure built until it couldn't go any higher. My body stilled, waiting for that final intense surge of delight to pull release from my body. When it hit I threw back my head and growled under the intensity. Every muscle in my body clamped down on the fiery wave, savoring it, pulling strength and energy from its dazzling power and then softened as it slid into soothing aftershocks that curled my toes with their brilliance.

I hadn't thought last night's experience could get any better.

I'd been so wrong.

I pulled on my boots and sat up, watching Nidras dress with a feeling of regret. It was a shame to hide even an inch of that delectable flesh under clothes. Moments earlier, I'd lain naked in bed and watched her ruthlessly snip the silken length of her hair, leaving it in the short, spiky style she'd worn when I'd first seen her.

She tucked the diamond sword necklace inside a black turtleneck sweater and slipped into black, form fitting slacks.

"What's the story on the necklace?"

Nidras reached up and touched it through the turtleneck. "My father gave it to me on my eighteenth birthday. It's a reminder of my destiny."

I frowned. "Your destiny?"

She pulled on short, black leather boots and slipped a knife into each one, tucking them beneath the narrow hem of her slacks.

"I come from a warrior family. We've always fought against one type of curse or another. We've known since I was very small that I would face the wizard. I must defeat him."

"The wizard?"

She glanced at me as she slid a knife sash over one shoulder. "My 'date' from last night."

Suddenly it all came clear. "Ah. That would explain your reluctance to bond with him. I assume he's not a nice wizard?"

She laughed. "Have you ever met a nice wizard?"

I stood up and grabbed my shirt. "I can't really say I've met *any* wizards personally. I don't know much about them."

She nodded.

"Why do you need to defeat him? Aside from the obvious reasons that is."

Nidras' perfect face folded into a scowl. "It's the only way to remove my curse... and save my family." She settled her knives into the sash on her chest and checked to make sure they slid free when she grabbed them.

"What do you mean, save your family?"

She continued sliding weapons into hidden niches in her clothing. "If I fail my family falls under a centuries-old curse that they will struggle mightily to overcome. Failing is not an option. We need to get to the wizard and make him remove the curse."

"Will he do that?"

She lifted a well-shaped, dark eyebrow at me. "Not likely. We're probably going to have to kill him."

She headed for the door and pulled it open. Turning back she gave me a challenging look. "You coming? Or have you changed your mind now that you know what we're dealing with?"

I grabbed my weapons off the bed and hurried after her. That was becoming a habit for me...hurrying after Nidras. I walked past her, smacking her on the ass as I passed. "Hurry up, woman. I'm tired of waiting for you."

I'm pretty sure I heard her growl softly as she pulled the door closed.

I sat astride the enormous horse Nidras had filched for me from her father's stable. I was pretty sure she'd gotten me the biggest horse she could find. Generally speaking, I'm not fond of sitting astride things that have a fight or flight mentality. I've found they make very unpredictable transportation.

They were incredibly uncomfortable too.

Give me a plush, leather car seat any time.

As I squirmed uncomfortably, the beast turned a large, brown eye in my direction and flapped its lip derisively. "You could have a little more padding, you know. Then I wouldn't feel as if my butt was going to fall off."

The creature nickered as if laughing at me.

"You know if you keep talking to that horse people are going to think you're simple."

I put my weight into the stirrups and stood up. "Fairies must have iron butts. This saddle is about as thick as my jeans."

Nidras shook her head. "You'll need to man up before we face off with the wizard." When I made an indignant sound she just grinned at me.

Puffing my chest, I vowed to present a strong, silent front from there on out.

A small scrub bush exploded from the ground just to the left of us. My horse bolted with a shriek of terror. I grabbed its mane and screamed like a girl.

So much for strong and silent.

Nidras' horse came up beside mine just as I remembered I was carrying a set of testicles and pulled myself out of the fetal position. I forced a neutral look onto my face, nodding sternly as she caught my eye.

"The wizard knows we're here."

I grimaced. "You think?"

Nidras kicked her dainty, white horse in the ribs. "Come on, we need to move fast and unpredictably. Just follow my lead."

I wish I could say I kicked my horse in the ribs and took off after her. Alas, my horse took the initiative and I barely stayed with it. Happily, though, the result was the same.

Though ground continued to explode all around us, the wizard wasn't able to lay a magical finger on us as we climbed the steep incline toward a castle that looked like something out of a human, gothic movie.

The sky above us had darkened threateningly as we traversed the peaks and valleys around Olympus. The mountain peak the wizard lived on looked as if it existed in permanent darkness. Heavy clouds hung like beacons of trouble above the castle and bolts of lightning speared the thick air above our heads, the accompanying rumble of thunder muted by the heavy atmosphere.

As we neared the high walls surrounding the castle, a thick fog settled around us, obscuring most of the landscape and dulling all sound.

My hearing was muffled within thick cotton. Only the distant sound of the horses' hooves on the rocky ground and the sound of my heavy breathing disturbed the silence. My vision fogged over and I found myself blinking rapidly in an effort to keep Nidras in my sights.

Despite the visibility issue, her stark, white horse continued forward at breakneck speed, plowing through the thick, gray air without apparent concern for what lay ahead.

I'd been keeping my eyes firmly on the horse's wide, white rump. When it disappeared from view, it took me a minute to grasp what had happened. By the time I realized she was gone I'd broken through the fog and saw her up ahead again. The air was clear and the castle loomed overhead, much closer than I'd thought.

I now realized that the fog had been a distortion, meant to keep us away.

Nidras rode her horse into a dense copse of trees and I followed. I found her sliding from the horse's back, pulling off the bridle. "We'll leave the horses here. Hopefully they'll still be here when we come out."

I pulled on the reins and put my weight into my left stirrup. As I tried to lift my right leg over the horse my sword got caught on the saddle and I almost fell off the other side, onto my head. Swearing softly, I disengaged myself and slid to the ground. My knees wobbled a bit when my feet hit the ground.

The beast I'd been riding cast a gimlet gaze in my direction and nickered softly. I glared at him, certain he was laughing at me.

Nidras glanced at me. "You okay?" Her lips quivered in a repressed smile.

I squared my shoulders and grabbed the hilt of my sword. "Just point me at the wizard and stand back, woman."

She chuckled. "Shall I hide behind the furniture?"

"That might be wise. I occasionally lose control of my sword."

Laughing softly, she turned toward the castle.

By unspoken agreement, we didn't converse as we neared the castle wall. Nidras motioned for me to stand back and then disappeared into a thick shadow at the base of the wall. I heard a thump and a groan and pulled my sword, stepping forward.

A sliver of dull light pierced the shadows and Nidras' small form was outlined in the light as she slipped through the door she'd opened. "Watch out for the gremlin."

A small mound of what looked like a dirty pile of rags lay on the ground in front of the door. I stepped over the fallen creature and grabbed the edge of the door, slipping through behind Nidras.

The door opened into what looked like a marketplace. In deep contrast to the other side of the wall, the interior was loud, colorful and filled with activity. Row after row of merchants displayed a wide array of bright, interesting items and myriad scrumptious-smelling foodstuffs.

The sounds alone were overwhelming. Merchants hawked their wares loudly and insistently. Jesters danced among the crowd, playing some kind of string instrument and singing bawdy songs at the top of their lungs. Livestock bellowed its disapproval of being handled. And the milling crowd laughed and talked and shouted enthusiastically at one another. All in all it seemed a fun and festive place.

I leaned toward Nidras. "You did say *evil* wizard right?"

She frowned at me, jerking her head toward a couple of Jesters standing slightly apart from the crowd. "Follow my lead." She took off toward the Jesters.

I shrugged, figuring she was looking for a few good jokes to distract the wizard with, so we could kill him.

Nidras stopped in front of the Jesters and placed her hands on her hips, glaring at them. When she opened her mouth a woman I didn't know emerged.

"'Ello buffoons. And which one o' ye slackjaws would be Malcolm?"

The Jesters took one look at her hostile face and shook their heads, stepping away from her.

Nidras lifted a poking digit toward the nearest one's brightly clad chest. "Now, now, don't ye lie to me or ye'll be sorry." She fondled a knife with her non-poking finger. "Me sis tol' me 'twas one o' you clowns what spoiled her and now she's wiff child. Ye need to come clean or I'll just have to castrate ever' last one o' you."

Both men dropped a hand toward their crotches and stumbled backward, right into the shadows caused by the exterior wall.

She placed a hand on each man's shoulder and sparks flew. Their eyes rolled, showing white in the dim light and they buckled toward the ground. She grabbed the string instruments as they fell.

Nidras knelt beside the smaller one and began stripping him.

I frowned. "Please tell me you aren't planning what I think you're planning, woman."

Her teeth flashed white in the shadows. "I hope you can sing, Cupid."

I groaned. "Real men don't wear tights, Nidras."

She stood up and held something long, wrinkled and bright red in front of my nose. "If I have to wear these so do you."

I looked down at the other Jester. "But *his* tights are lime green."

She snickered. "Come on, Hermes. We're running out of time."

I hurried through the crowd, head down, hoping nobody would notice me. Not likely, I was pretty sure my tights glowed in the dark.

"Hey you, Jester. How about a song?"

I looked up in horror, just in time to see Nidras step neatly behind a display of tall feathers. I called her names under my breath and glared at the slit of a face I could see grinning at me from between the feathers. Then I decided to suck it up. After all, I was standing in the midst of a crowd of people wearing a tri-colored, multi-coned hat and lime green tights. My shoes curled up at the toes and jingled when I walked. It wasn't as if I had any pride left.

"I'd be happy to sing for you, good people." I spoke loudly, figuring I might as well make the most of it. All around me people stopped shopping and conversing and turned to enjoy the show.

I strummed the instrument. Fortunately for me I knew how to play a guitar. I assumed the principles were about the same for the instrument I now held.

I was wrong.

My first notes twanged painfully across the nearly silent courtyard. In the distance a dog howled in pain.

I tried again. The notes sounded marginally better. Still, I decided a capella was the way to go.

I strummed the strings one more time and started singing –

*I came to the castle dread, Sir,
To bonk the wizard on the head, Sir,
The market was full,
And the shoppers so dull,
That I hoped I'd soon drop dead, Sir.*

Silence.

The entire courtyard seemed locked into a rigid state of shock. I opened my mouth to spout a second verse...something about the stupidity of people who hung around with evil wizards...I didn't get more than a couple of strums out before Nidras grabbed my arm.

"Okay, break it up folks. I'm taking this man to the infirmary. He's obviously touched in the head." Nidras grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the gaping

group. Shoving me toward the castle doors none too gently. "Have you lost your flippin' mind, Cupid?"

I frowned at her. "I couldn't help myself. Tights make me cranky. My balls are in spandex hell."

Nidras shook her head. "We'll be lucky if the soldiers don't descend on us."

My eyes widened. "There are soldiers?"

"Have you forgotten the gremlin already?"

I snorted. "Gremlins are just giant teddy bears."

"You'll eat those words, Hermes."

Inside the castle, we kept to the walls and shadows down a maze of long, stone hallways. My inner compass told me we were heading toward the back of the castle, deep into the bowels of the unwelcome place. The air was cold, damp and smelled like mildew. The stone walls we scraped against were covered in green slime. The floor was slick with the same green stain.

My curly toed shoes didn't have much traction against the slime. It was all I could do to stay upright.

The only light in the halls came from the occasional torch, sending smelly, black oil smoke into the air to mix with the mildew.

All around us the skitter of little critter feet danced across the stone floor. Probably rats.

"I like what he's done with the place."

"Shh!"

I lowered my voice. "This place is like a bad cliché."

She glared at me but didn't respond.

We climbed several sets of stone stairs and emerged into a larger, slightly better lit area. The large, wooden door opposite the stairwell was guarded.

I looked at Nidras and sneered.

The two gremlins were about three feet tall. They had soft, dark brown fur covering their bodies and a lighter, golden fur on their faces.

Their brown eyes were enormous and soft, giving them a decidedly squeezable look.

Nidras shook her head and stepped out, knives in hand.

The gremlins blinked once, twice and then were suddenly airborne. They hit us in a wash of fur and froth, their tiny little fur faces transformed in the blink of an eye into gaping maws filled with razor-sharp teeth.

My rabid teddy bear clamped its teeth over the forearm I'd instinctively thrown up to protect my face and worked it with surprising strength. I swung my arm hard in an attempt to dislodge it but the thing held on, its teeth ripping through skin, muscle and even bone as I tried to shake it off me.

In my panic I momentarily forgot to use my sword.

Nidras had flung her gremlin to the ground and was plunging a knife into its tiny chest. I couldn't get my teddy bear off me.

Finally, in desperation, I grabbed my sword and pulled it free with my left hand, arcing it through the air toward the furry little body.

The gremlin swung its back legs up and wrapped them around my arm, making itself too small a target for me to reach with my sword. Unless I wanted to lop my own arm off.

Pain radiated from my torn and bleeding arm. I was pretty sure I'd have a big scar.

I looked up and saw Nidras standing with her arms crossed, one dark eyebrow lifted in a definite "I told you so" expression. Her knives were back in their sheaths.

"You *could* help me here."

She shrugged. "It's just an oversized teddy bear."

Okay, I probably deserved that.

I swung around and slammed the gremlin up against the wall. My elbow screamed from the impact but the thing stopped chewing on my arm and blinked. I slammed it a second and then third time, finally managing to drop it to the ground at my feet.

Blood ran from my arm as I jammed my sword into the gremlin's chest, finishing it off.

I motioned toward the door. "After you."

Nidras' face softened as she looked at my torn arm. "Let me heal that for you."

I shook my head. "I'm wearing it as a reminder that I'm an ass."

Her perfect, peach tinted lips tipped up slightly at the corners. "How about if I just heal it mostly and leave a little scar as a reminder."

I thought about this for a minute. My hand was already going numb and I figured it would be hard to use my sword soon. "Okay."

"Watch the door while I work." Nidras placed exquisitely soft hands over my forearm and closed her eyes.

Energy and light flooded the area around and under her hands and I gasped as intense heat infused tender, torn flesh. Gritting my teeth against the pain, I kept one eye on the door as pain seared up my arm and made my pulse pound in my temples.

Finally the pain and heat slid away and Nidras stepped back.

I looked at my arm. "There's no scar."

She shrugged, pulling her knives. "So I lied. I'm pretty sure you'll have lots more reminders that you're an ass."

"Demon woman."

Nidras tried the doorknob and it was locked. She looked at me and jerked her head toward the door. I reared back and kicked it hard, just inside the knob. To my great satisfaction it swung inward and slammed against the wall behind it.

Nidras was in the room, both knives drawn, almost before the door hit the wall.

I drew my sword and had a hell-fire bomb in one hand.

The room we'd entered was cavernous, with forty-foot-high ceilings. I couldn't see the walls from where I stood, just inside the door. It was as if the room went on and on, *ad infinitum*. I knew it had to be an illusion. But it was a powerful one.

A man in long, brown robes stood with his back to us, his hands lifted over some type of orb. His hair was long, straggly and iron gray. Within the orb I could see a swirling motion, like the ebb and flow of frothy water against a beach.

He turned slowly and I saw Nidras jerk in surprise. His face was seamed with age and his nose was long, crooked and slightly hooked on the end. It was Greek nasal geography gone bad. His eyes were black, piercing and spun with silver streaks that mirrored the action within his orb. "Nidras. What a pleasant surprise."

I watched her stiffen but her grip on the knives never wavered. "Grimsbar. I hardly recognized you."

"If I'd known you were coming I'd have put on my pretty face." The wizard lifted his long, gnarled hands and a flash of light, followed by a cloud of smoke, engulfed him. I stepped forward, sword drawn, ready to protect Nidras if she needed it.

"It's okay," she murmured.

When the smoke cleared the blond man from the other night was standing there. I leaned down and whispered in Nidras' ear, "Just so you know, my extreme good looks don't poof away. What you see is what I got."

She widened her eyes in warning. I grinned and turned back to the wizard. His eyes no longer swirled but they were still cold and black. Looking into them was like looking at my own death.

Death was fixed directly on me at that moment.

"I see you have a new toy, Nidras."

My grip tightened on my sword and I stepped forward. She stopped me with a hand on my arm.

"He's playful, Grimsbar. But I wouldn't recommend trying to play with him. That Jester-like exterior hides a true warrior's heart."

I frowned, oh yeah, the tights. I'd forgotten I was dressed like an idiot. I had my work cut out making the wizard afraid of me.

In fact I'd already been dismissed by the wizard. "I'm happy to see you, Nidras. I hope you've come to stay."

Nidras gave the knives she still held ready a meaningful look. "Do I look like I came to snuggle, Grimsbar?"

The cold, black gaze flashed angrily for just a beat and then softened with amusement. "You look scrumptious as always."

My fist tightened around the sword and, before I realized what I was doing I was striding toward him with blood in my eye.

The wizard spared me a brief glance and lifted a hand negligently. Something that felt like a train hit me in the chest and I flew backward with an undignified "oomph", the sword clattering to the stone floor a few feet away.

I hit the wall and slid downward. My stupid hat slid over my eyes.

"It seems very possessive, Nidras. I'd advise that you rid yourself of it as soon as possible, or I'll do it for you."

"If you harm Hermes you'll be dealing with me."

I pushed myself to my feet, flinging the stupid hat away and kicking off the even more ridiculous shoes. I couldn't do anything about the tights but I vowed I'd make the evil creature standing across the room recognize the menace beneath the spandex.

Even if it meant dying in the stupid things.

I picked up the sword again, deciding it was time to assert myself. "Remove the curse on Nidras, wizard, or I'll kill you."

The man turned shocked, black eyes in my direction. He stared at me for a beat and then chuckled. "It's not very smart is it?"

I flew toward him with a growl of outrage. The wizard's hand came up again but I was ready for him this time. I swung the sword as I lunged toward him and caught the tips of three of his fingers, lopping them off at the first knuckle.

The wizard screamed in outraged pain and lifted his arms above his head. Silver swirls of power roiled violently in his eyes. The black spread to consume the whites of his eyes, so that he no longer gave even the smallest impression of being human.

Nidras threw one of her knives and embedded it into his chest.

The power I'd felt building around him sputtered as the knife hit and he doubled over in pain.

I stepped in, fully intending to lop his head off with the sword I still held. But, amazingly, he stood straight again and looked me full in the eye.

The power redoubled in strength and Nidras' knife flew out of his chest, narrowly missing me as it flew past and clanged against the wall thirty feet away.

The wizard's head dropped back. The power grew into a physical thing between us.

Nidras grabbed my hand. "Let's go!"

I hesitated. I knew we'd probably never get another shot at killing him. I shook my head and brought the sword up again. "I need to kill him."

Nidras swore, grabbed the sword and swung it toward the wizard. It clanged against an invisible wall and bounced back hard. She winced against the jarring pain it had probably caused in her shoulder. "Okay? Now let's go!"

We turned and ran, just as the power exploded outward, shattering the door we'd just run through and sending it out in a cloud of splinters.

We took the stairs at a dead run. Behind us, a wall of fire burned through the stairwell with the force of a runaway train. I could smell the rock melting.

Whatever was chasing us was as deadly as hell and even hotter.

We burst from the stairwell and almost impaled ourselves on the sword points from two guards. I parried hard, knocking the nearest guard's sword from his fist and hitting him with my shoulder as I continued past, sending him to the ground.

Nidras dispatched her guard just as quickly and we shot through the exterior door back out into the marketplace.

Behind us, the unearthly screams of the two guards told us the fire had found them.

We didn't slow until we were beyond the courtyard and headed back toward our horses.

"What was that stuff?"

"Wizard's fire. It's extremely deadly, hotter than the lowest circle of Hell and like a heat-seeking missile. Once it is set after you it will burn through anything until it finds you."

That would explain the terrified shrieking we'd heard in the courtyard behind us. We turned back to the castle and, sure enough, the fire was visible all along the stone, outer wall.

"It'll eat through the wall and come at us if we don't get out of here. Hopefully, once we've cleared the magic barrier Grimsbar put around the castle it will stop."

We leapt onto the horses and kicked their sides hard, sending them into a ground-eating gallop that carried us quickly away from the castle.

Clutching my horse's mane in sweaty palms, I immediately discovered yet another negative to tights.

They are as slippery as hell on horseback.

Chapter Seven

Monsters

We hurtled through the dense, white fog. This time, due to Nidras' bright Jester's costume, I could still see her bobbing along ahead of me when her horse disappeared. Since I glowed too, I figured anything that was pursuing us could see both of us.

That was bad.

Sound was muted in the thick fog. The dense air bore down on us, taking its toll on our ability to breathe and think. My horse's thick sides labored beyond what you'd expect given the level of energy he was expending. And the cold, heavy air worked on my emotions as well. Terror built in my chest as we travelled farther and farther into the stuff.

I didn't remember it taking so long on the way in. I started to worry that we'd lost our direction and were actually riding in circles in the fog. Behind us, orange light flickered in the near distance.

The fire was gaining on us.

It seemed even more terrifying under the silence of its approach in the fog. I took deep breaths and forced myself to ride harder, faster, though everything inside me was screaming for me to stop and fight.

Sweat slid into my eyes, stinging them. I swiped my brow with a sleeve and glanced over my shoulder. The fire looked as if it were only a few yards behind us at that point and the heat had been steadily building for the last several moments.

My horse glanced around and screamed, picking up speed without my urging him forward. The smell hit me next. Held captive in the thick capsule of fog, the stark stench of evil preceded the fire in a thick rush of sulfurous air.

My horse's eyes rolled huge with terror as the fire licked at his heels. The smell of burning hair brought my own terror-filled gaze around. The tip of my horse's tail was burnt and smoking.

I kicked his ribs again and prayed he didn't drop dead beneath me. I knew from his widely flared nostrils and heaving sides that the poor beast was close to dropping.

The fire was close enough that I could hear it, even beneath the dampening effects of the fog. It moaned and cried and let off a constant keening sound that made the hair all over my body stand on end.

Heat seared the back of my neck. I risked a glance and saw an arm of fire reaching toward me. In desperation, I grabbed my sword and swung. As the blade hit the wizard's fire, heat travelled up the sword, through the hilt and into my hand. I swore and dropped the sword, feeling the barest touch of the deadly fire against my neck.

Intense pain shot through me. My skin melted beneath the featherlight touch, the pain so horrific I couldn't even draw breath to scream.

Throwing myself downward, to hover close to my horse's lathered crest, I kicked him into a final spurt of speed, praying it would be enough.

Ahead of me, Nidras and her horse disappeared and, seconds later, I shot free of the clogging fog and into clean, fresh air and a soft dusk. The fire's muted sounds exploded out of the fog behind us. Followed by a burst of sulfurous air.

Full throated screams assailed us, making our exhausted mounts tremble helplessly too exhausted to run from the terrible sound.

For the briefest moment in time I panicked, thinking the thing was coming out after us. But nothing burst from the fog.

It looked as if we'd made it.

"The fire holds the screams of its victims." Nidras' face was pale and covered with a fine sheen of sweat. Glancing at her for the first time since we'd cleared the fog, I could see terror in her beautiful eyes that mirrored mine. She was shivering violently.

I reached over and grasped her hand. "Let's keep moving. I need to put some distance between me and that castle."

She nodded and we turned away, allowing our poor horses to walk off some of the adrenaline and slow their raging heartbeats.

We didn't speak for several moments, content just to have survived. But as the sun dipped farther below the distant horizon, more practical concerns returned. We were tired, cold and hungry. We'd need to find a place to spend the night.

"There's a small town not far from here," Nidras offered. "I think there's a tavern there that offers rooms."

I nodded. "I'd kill for a shower and a hot meal."

"Dressed like that you might have to."

I looked down and groaned. "Gods I hate spandex."

Nidras' husky laugh *almost* made it feel all better. Almost.

Getting a room over the tavern required only minimal bloodletting. A few of the men in the tavern took exception to my tights and, although I agreed wholeheartedly with them, I'd just faced off with something much worse than their meager little human forms and I had very little of my sense of humor left. Nidras' knives and I made a very persuasive argument against further abuse.

Nidras grabbed my arm as we climbed the dark, narrow stairs to our dubious quarters on the second floor. "I think I'm starting to like the tights. They're making me kind of hot." She grabbed one spandex-clad bun to reinforce her point.

I groaned. "I'm not sure I could wear them again, even for you, demon princess. Do you know how hard it is to hide my bow and arrows in these?"

She slid her hand around to the front of the lime green torture devices, cupping my easily reached cock and balls through the thin fabric. A jolt of pure delight swept through me at her heated touch. "Then again..."

Nidras gave me a gentle squeeze. "We'll continue this inside, Cupid."

I pulled on the tights to ease pressure on my expanded cock. "I'm looking forward to it."

The bath we'd requested was sitting in front of a roaring fireplace. It looked like an oversized wine barrel. But fragrant steam rose from its top and I almost came on the spot from the thought of immersing myself in its steaming depths.

I suddenly realized I ached all over.

Nidras was already stripping off her jester costume.

"Why didn't anybody tease *you* about the little flippy jacket and tights. Not to mention those shoes."

Nidras kicked off said shoes, sending them jingling across the room. "I have the legs for tights."

I watched, transfixed, as she peeled the red fabric from those leanly muscular legs. My mouth went dry. She bent over to pull them off her toes, giving me a libido-stimulating view of her luscious, white buns and the hot, moist vee at the juncture of her pale thighs. My cock jumped into readiness and my balls pulled up tight against my body. I licked my lips. "You're not wearing underwear."

She straightened, looking at me as if I were nuts. "They gave me panty lines."

"But the other guy's stuff was in there."

"Don't be such a girl, Hermes. He was wearing tighty-whities under them. I checked." Nidras pulled her jester jacket off over her head. "Are you going to take those clothes off?"

I licked my lips as the last of her incredible flesh emerged from under the horrible outfit. The soft, white orbs of her voluptuous breasts jiggled happily as the jacket joined the tights and terrible shoes on the floor.

I reached for her. "I need to do this first." I yanked her into my arms and lowered my hungry lips to her succulent, peach tinted mouth.

Her fiery essence swamped me. She tasted of danger and excitement and rowdy sex. I cupped her soft butt cheeks and pulled her into my aching cock, grinding myself into her.

Nidras tried to slide her hand between us to clasp my cock. I grabbed her wrist. I wasn't going to let her steal control. Not this time. "Stay still." Reaching down, I lifted her up and carried her to the wooden tub, settling her inside.

She moaned happily as she sank into the hot water.

Keeping my gaze firmly on Nidras' small, oval face, I stripped quickly. My engorged cock sprang free and bounced in happy anticipation as I released it from its spandex prison. Nidras licked her lips.

I stepped close, settling my bouncing cock before her face. "Suck it, Nidras."

She reached toward me and I grabbed her slim wrists. "No. Suck."

She shivered and her gaze slid to my cock. Her eyes were filled with hunger, dark with desire. My body was rigid with need. A bead of pre-cum glistened on the tip of my raging hard-on. I held my breath as she leaned slowly toward me, her soft mouth opening slightly in anticipation.

She stopped a fraction of an inch from the fat head of my dick and her pink tongue slid from between her lips. She flicked it at the tender underside of the head and ran it upward, slowly and deliberately, until that single bead of pre-cum glistened on the tip of her tongue. The lavender gaze slid upward, capturing me in its sphere and holding me transfixed as she slowly pulled the tongue back between her lips and closed her eyes, savoring it visibly.

I groaned, dropping my head back and closing my eyes too. If I had to watch her for one more second my cock was going to erupt before she even touched me.

Soft heat enveloped the head of my cock and my eyes shot open. Nidras sucked hard on the tip of my cock and then softened her lips, allowing it to slide full into her mouth and throat.

Increasing the pressure of her mouth and tongue, she let my shaft slide out of her mouth quickly and then sucked it back more slowly, until my tight, hard balls rested against her lips. As she slid my cock back out of her mouth, she let her teeth scrape gently along the entire surface.

Sharp fissures of delight tore through me. My fists clenched against the need to grab her head and drive hard and fast into her heated mouth. Seemingly oblivious to my struggle, Nidras tightened her lips and slowly sucked my dick back inside, opening her throat so that she could take the entire length into her mouth. When I was seated as deeply as I could go, Nidras squeezed my balls and flicked the sensitive underside of my shaft with her tongue.

Her throat tightened around the head of my cock and I groaned, tangling my fingers in her hair. I clenched my buttocks against a need to ram myself deeper.

Lust was a painful pressure that I wanted so badly to release.

Every fiber of my being wanted me to let go.

I was so close to succumbing.

But then she set her teeth against my flesh again and I smiled, knowing how delightful the slow exodus from her mouth was going to be.

She continued this way until my balls were so tight with need I thought I'd lose it completely.

In desperation, I pulled out of her mouth and stepped into the tub with her. Dragging her to her feet, I slid around behind her and sat down. Nidras started to sit on my lap but I held her upright with my hands on her firm, little buns. "Not yet."

I nudged her forward and she placed her hands on the rim of the tub. "Spread your legs." She complied, pulling them as far apart as the constrictions of the tub would allow.

I leaned forward and kissed one wet, heat-reddened butt cheek tenderly. She sighed. My tongue swept out and licked the underside of the tender roundness, sliding toward the moist vee of her pussy. I stopped just short of my goal, feeling her body tense with expectation, and then plunged my tongue deep.

Nidras gasped and pushed her butt into my face as I tongue fucked her hard and fast, flicking the swollen nub of her clit on every third stroke through her musky heat.

Nidras was lying across the side of the tub at that point, panting as I increased the speed and pressure of my strokes.

Her orgasm built rapidly under my ministrations. Her clit was swollen and she jerked with delight each time I stroked it with my tongue. As I pulled away on the end of a stroke, she pushed her pussy toward my face, begging me with her body to bring her over.

Finally, when I thought she might go mad if I didn't put her out of her misery, I grabbed her hips, pulled her close, and wrapped my lips around her clit, sucking hard until she stiffened and screamed, rolling over into violent release.

I wrapped my arms around her narrow hips, holding on tight until she softened into the last, gentle waves of her orgasm. Then I slid my hands to her hips and pulled her down onto my cock.

I groaned as her tight heat slid over me, sending brittle shards of pleasure-pain through my body. I held her completely still for a long moment, taking deep breaths to calm my body before I dared let her move.

When I thought I could survive the pleasure of her stroking body I pulled her hips upward, allowing my cock to slide almost all the way out. Only the tender head stayed inside the clenching heat of her pussy.

I stopped her there, nearly panting with need, and a moment later slid her down over my full length again. I slowly increased the tempo of my strokes until water was slopping over the sides of the tub onto the scarred wooden floor beneath.

Nidras held onto the side of the tub with one hand, and reached down to cup my balls with the other. She squeezed them gently, stroking a finger down the sensitive flesh running from my testicles to my anus. I shivered under this unaccustomed caress.

I tucked my hips to make it easier for her to stroke the area, gasping in surprise when her finger probed gently on the puckered flesh of a place no one else had ever touched. She pressed gently on the spot and, when I opened my knees wider to give her better access, she slid a fingertip inside.

I groaned loudly and she stopped, unsure. But my cock had grown even harder inside her body and my thrusts had reached a fever pitch. Nidras finger-fucked my ass slowly, several times. Her slender finger slipped more deeply into my tender ass each time. The sensation was nearly painful, but pleasure laced the pain so tightly that I didn't want her to stop. When she finally slid her fingertip back out I moaned from the release of pressure on the tight flesh. Nidras slid the finger across my skin and cupped my balls again.

My anus tightened and pulsed with pleasure in the aftermath of Nidras' breech. The sensation sent shock waves of pleasure into my cock, making it even harder when I thought that wasn't possible.

I was on the razor edge of coming. Nidras' body was building toward release too, her sleek muscles tightening in expectation.

My hands slipped from Nidras' hips to her breasts and closed over the rigid peaks, pulling gently on her nipples until she gasped out, "Harder!"

I happily complied, pulling and twisting the rigid nubs until Nidras screamed my name and slid over into orgasm again. Her body pulled on mine as it contracted in release. I groaned, stiffened and bit down on her soft shoulder as I rolled over into the bright sharpness of release with her, my aching balls finally finding relief as I shot everything I owned into Nidras' pulsing pussy.

The first wave of pleasure was almost pain. The second was pure delight. And the third jolted through me and pulled my toes up against the soles of my feet, locking them there, taut with sheer ecstasy.

I sagged into what was left of the cooling water and gasped against Nidras' soft back.

Nidras lifted one of my hands and pulled a finger into her mouth, sucking it gently and sending a new wave of pleasure sliding through my lax muscles. "That was nice."

I laughed, kissing the silken skin between her shoulder blades. "Yeah, that was very nice."

"Let's do it again."

I swung a shocked look in her direction. She stood up and turned around, settling her pussy back over my quickly hardening shaft, I knew my mind might be shocked at her suggestion but my body was quickly growing to appreciate the idea.

Emphasis on growing.

So I laughed and captured her spicy lips in a kiss. "Great idea, can I wear your tights on my head this time?"

Nidras shook her head in disgust, her lush lips quivering on the smile she wouldn't give me. "Pig."

"Oink, oink." Then I grabbed her lower lip between my teeth and chewed gently on it, as her body moved insistently on my newly awakened flesh. I settled in to enjoy it.

Life was flippin' beautiful.

* * * * *

Sunshine slanted across the foot of the narrow bed, warming my feet and calves, which were bared to the air due to the fact that Nidras had stolen all the covers. I turned to look at her and smiled. She was wrapped like a burrito and tucked up against me as if she needed even more heat. All I could see was a dark fluff of silken hair and one tiny, pink ear.

Leaning over, I placed a tender kiss on that ear.

Nidras murmured and pushed her body closer to mine, like a heat-seeking missile.

I wrapped an arm around her waist and tucked her against my morning hard-on, enjoying her blanket-padded softness against the tender shaft.

Nidras yawned and her eyes popped open. Her head turned toward me. "Mornin'"

I kissed her soft lips. "Good morning, sunshine. Wanna play?"

The full, peach lips tipped into a grin and she tried to stretch like a cat. However, her burrito casing didn't allow much in the way of stretching.

I started to peel her out of the blankets. "I just want you to know you're a blanket hog."

Nidras leaned over and bit my shoulder in a not so gentle way. "It was self-defense for the snoring."

I tugged on a blanket edge I'd managed to uncover but nothing unraveled when I pulled on it. "I don't snore."

"Really? Then someone must have been dissecting the furniture in our room with a buzz saw last night."

I shrugged, noncommittal, tugging harder on the blanket edge. Still nothing.

Nidras started to squirm. "What are you waiting for? I thought you wanted to play."

Frowning, I tugged a little harder and she rolled a few inches sideways. "Did you glue yourself into this thing?"

She giggled.

Standing up on the bed, I grabbed the exposed edge. "This might hurt a little."

Nidras shrieked as she realized what I had in mind but it was too late. I reached down, grabbed the blanket edge and pulled...hard. Nidras flew out of the blankets, hit the side of the bed and bounced, flying off the bed and onto the floor on a giggle-filled scream.

I heard her hit the rug beside the bed and ran over to look down at her. She lay in a sprawled, naked tangle of discarded spandex. I grinned. "Now that's what I'm talkin' about."

Nidras glared at me but laughter filled her eyes so the glare didn't come off very well. "I think I broke my girl parts."

Jumping down from the bed I dropped to my knees and crawled toward her, waggling my tongue suggestively. "I can fix them."

Nidras giggled and scrambled backward, toward the cold fireplace. I scuttled after her, growling. Reaching out, I grabbed her ankle, stopping her retreat. I used my grip on her ankle to reel her in and climbed over her, dropping my weight against her exquisitely soft body.

Nidras gasped as I pressed my hard shaft into her belly.

My lips found hers and I tucked my cock into the warm, moist nest between her legs. "Let's play." I drove into her, deep and hard.

Nidras' head dropped back on a throaty moan. She wrapped her legs around my hips and arched her hips, allowing my cock to settle even more deeply into her hungry flesh. Need exploded through me as her tight vagina hugged my stroking shaft, driving flashes of pure ecstasy through my body with each rasping stroke.

I pulled her soft bottom lip into my mouth, sucking gently as my body travelled toward the bright culmination of pleasure ahead. My cock throbbed with suppressed

need, my balls itched with it. I increased the speed and force of my thrusts until I felt Nidras' velvet flesh closing around my cock in the first wave of release.

She screamed as I pounded into her, her eyes rolling back in unrestrained bliss. I slid my hands down her arms, clasped her soft hands in mine and pulled her arms over her head as I pounded the last handful of times into her willing body.

As I fell over that edge, Nidras' body stiffened in yet another orgasm, leaping over the edge with me. I rained kisses over her face and sucked on her tiny chin. My muscles softened and I gave a shaky sigh of happiness. Nuzzling her fragrant neck I told her, "I like to play with you."

Nidras sighed. "Me too."

We lay there a moment longer, immersed in the warm aftershocks of successful lovemaking, until a soft clicking sound worked itself into our awareness. My head came up just as I felt Nidras stiffen beneath me. "What's that?"

Her eyes were on the window behind me. She pushed on my chest. "Get up, Hermes. Now!"

I shoved myself off the floor and turned as something large and dark in the window caught my peripheral vision. What I saw outside that window made me want to scream like a girl.

I grabbed my single remaining possession from the bedside table and clasped Nidras' hand, yanking her to her feet.

As the enormous, winged creature hovering outside our window reached a huge, gnarled claw toward the glass, we ran toward the door and yanked it open, running out into the dark hallway in nothing but our skin.

The crash of glass sounded behind us and we ran faster. "This way!" Nidras pulled on my hand as we hit the bottom of the stairs and ran through the tavern. Thankfully, only a couple of people sat at the scarred, wooden tables in the tavern. Their eyes widened in shock and delight as two naked people sprinted from the stairwell and toward the back of the tavern.

Their smiles faded quickly as crashing sounds emerged from the stairwell and a huge, black monster with flashing red eyes hopped out.

We winced at the sounds of screaming behind us and I silently prayed that, whatever it was, it either killed those poor people quickly, or overlooked them completely in its hurry to get to us.

A heavyset woman wearing rough clothing was reaching into a laundry basket as we flew out the back door. Nidras grabbed some things from the laundry line as we flew past. I grabbed a couple of things that looked vaguely man-like. I looked at the woman. "Get out of here, now!"

The woman's small, brown eyes widened but she didn't hesitate. She'd probably heard the screaming too. She dropped the soggy item she'd been holding and ran around the side of the building, toward the street.

Pulling on clothes as we ran, we headed toward the stables. Bursting through the door, our eyes searched the dark, quiet building for the horses we'd ridden in on the night before. We found them and located our tack, hanging just outside the stalls.

I also found a battered old sword leaning against the wall and snatched it up.

I approached my monstrous beast and quickly tacked it up. "Sorry, pal. I'm afraid we have new horrors in store for you." He nickered softly and nuzzled my arm. I decided the beast wasn't too bad after all.

Something heavy hit the roof and Nidras and I exchanged looks. "We'll never get away unless we can distract it somehow."

Nidras nodded. Our gazes swept the building and slid together again. We nodded in silent agreement.

A moment later, the front door of the stable burst open and several horses, a few goats and one, large cow shot out into the street. We didn't wait to see if the thing on the roof took the bait.

We jumped on our horses and shot out the back door, heading toward the dense forest we could see in the near distance. The sound of bird-like screeching and human screams filled the area we were quickly leaving behind.

We didn't slow or look back. Our window of opportunity for escape was small and closing fast. Even as I had that thought the sound of heavy wings pounding the air behind us filled my consciousness.

It grew closer until I realized we wouldn't be able to outrun it. The thing was preceded by a horrible stench that made my lungs clench and my eyes water. It smelled like evil and death. Sulfurous and sickeningly sweet, like decay.

The enormous bird was close enough now that I could feel the downdraft from its huge wings, wafting its horrible smell over me. I turned briefly and saw fire-red eyes, flashing with hate and violence and a wide, gray beak. The edges of the huge beak were jagged and coated in blood and gore.

I shuddered, not wanting to think too carefully on where the gore had come from. I spurred my horse faster but the poor beast was already running full-out, froth coating his wide muzzle and his large, brown eyes rolling in terror.

We gained on Nidras and her mount, just close enough that I could reach out with my sword and touch the back end of her horse.

I swung hard and created a shallow slash on her horse's rump. The beast screamed and surged forward, galloping in a mindless panic toward the safety of the tree line.

Nidras turned and screamed my name but her horse was beyond control. It would carry her safely away while I dealt with the nightmare in the sky as best I could.

At least I could buy her some time.

I yanked the reins, turning my horse away from the tree line. As I'd hoped, the monster in the sky followed me rather than Nidras. I reined my horse to a stop and whipped it around to face the huge bird.

It hovered several yards away, just above my head. The monster's terrifying red eyes fixed on me with the expected malevolence. But there was something else in them too. They snapped with intelligence that felt eerily human.

The body was man-sized and vaguely human shaped, with dense, charcoal gray feathers that glistened to purple in the sunshine. Its body was longer than a regular bird's and had long, oddly bent back legs that ended in six-inch-long, curved, red talons. The monster's wings undulated firmly on the air, holding the much smaller body easily above the ground. The thing's wingspan was easily thirty feet.

In addition to the massive claws on its back feet, the creature had razor-like growths on the tips of its wings, so that it could slice a victim with a single swipe of a massive wing.

Dark gray, wet-looking spots mottled the creature's wings and body. Probably blood.

I held the sword above my horse's head, pointing it directly at the bird monster's chest. My left hand was tucked behind my back and I was concentrating my power into the object it held.

My horse danced, terrified, beneath me. I did the best I could to hold it still but I could feel the flight response vibrating beneath my legs. "What are you and what do you want?"

The thing cocked its head and the red eyes sparked with something that looked like humor. A voice filled my mind, causing me to jerk in surprise. *Why, Hermes, don't you recognize me?*

I narrowed my eyes. The voice was vaguely familiar but I couldn't quite place it. However, the sound of hooves pounding the hard ground in the distance told me I had only a few seconds to deal with the monster hovering before me.

"Will you leave us alone?"

The thing's response was a high-pitched giggle in my mind. It was an oily, repulsive sound.

"Then die!" I screamed as I kicked my poor mount into action, urging it to run full-on toward the waiting monster.

The thing gave a terrible shriek and lifted into the air, placing its deadly back claws at shoulder height as I charged it. When I got within ten feet of the monster I pulled my arm back and sent the sword, dagger-like, flying through the air toward its left wing.

The creature hadn't been expecting that and I was lucky. The sword embedded itself in the place where the wing met the monster's body and the wing went limp.

With a surprised shriek the monster fell to the ground, slamming hard, its injured wing crumpling painfully under it. I kicked my horse's ribs and we sailed over the downed beast.

We'd nearly cleared it when the monster swiped its healthy wing upward and carved a deep wound across my chest with the razors on its edge. Bright, icy pain sliced through me. My breath clenched in my lungs and, for a moment, I worried that a lung had been severed.

Then my horse hit the ground on the other side of the monster and I jolted forward, sliding off the side of the terrified mount. I hit the ground and grunted as the fleeing horse landed on one thigh with a pounding hoof. *That* pain was a dull agony underneath the vivid pain of my open chest.

I lay on the ground, vaguely aware that hoofbeats seemed to be pounding all around me, as if an army of riders had come to my rescue. Somebody screamed my name and I frowned. I knew that voice.

A scuffling, dragging sound preceded the wafting of a horrible stench across my senses. My hand clenched around the object within it. I forced my eyes open and saw the huge, dark outline of the bird creature standing over me, one wing drooping worthlessly at its side.

I raised my hand as the thing's good wing started to lift. With my other hand I fed the string of my Cupid's bow with a deadly arrow and, before the monster could complete the arc of its razor-tipped wing, I sent it sailing toward the monster's throat.

The wing completed its arc and agony sliced through me again.

Hoofbeats pounded past my head, the monster gave a startled, *ugh*, sound and went down with a thud, rocking the ground beneath me.

I tried to get up but my limbs were cold and numb, useless. I lay there and prayed to the gods that I'd wounded the creature enough to give Nidras a chance with it. As I slid toward the gray fuzz of unconsciousness, the sound of struggling stopped and voices came to me.

You won't defeat me, Nidras. I will kill your very brave and exceedingly stupid young man...come to me willingly.

That will...happen. You will die... I'm going to finish...Hermes...

The responding, high-pitched giggle was shrill and slightly hysterical. I finally recognized the voice. It was the wizard, Grimsbar. *Stupid girl...he will die. You have no power over me.*

I'll get...power.

I doubt...pay the price.

I'll pay it.

The voices drifted away from me. I struggled to remain conscious so I could hear what they were saying. But my life's blood was seeping into the dirt below my body and I was so cold. So numb.

My mind screamed helplessly but my body was dying and there was nothing I could do to help Nidras.

Warmth covered me and I think I finally moved my lips. I pushed her name between them and it fell hopeless and unheard into the void. A distant light exploded within my consciousness and suddenly I was moving toward it. In my mind I flailed helplessly. I didn't want to die. I wanted to stay and help Nidras break her curse.

But I was moving inexorably toward that light.

For a moment Nidras was there with me. Her pale, oval face was filled with the light of love.

"It's okay, Hermes. You're going to a good place."

I shook my head, reaching for her sweet face, cupping her small chin in one hand. "I don't want to leave you."

A shadow fell over those beautiful eyes. "You must leave me. It's the only way I can save you. And break this gods-forsaken curse."

She started to drift away, pulling her soft warmth away with her. I screamed. "No!" She disappeared with a pop. All I had left was that bright light. I hated that damn light.

But on some level I knew it was making me whole again. Whole and healthy.

So I could live alone again. Without my demon princess. Trudging aimlessly through life with a broken heart.

Not a damn chance! The Fates would be hearing from me.

As soon as I could get my rubber legs under me again.

Bring on the light.

Damn you, give me more light!

Chapter Eight

The Fates

Cool hands touched my brow. Images swam across my mind, vibrant in their effects but decidedly fuzzy on detail. Nidras, leaning over me, the pale oval of her face filled with worry. Behind her, an older, still beautiful copy of her face hovered.

Pain sliced through my body along with heat and light. My limp limbs twitched but lacked the strength to lift from the soft surface beneath me.

In the distance, light moved past a window, chased by velvet darkness and then the window filled with soft light again as the sun recaptured the sky. Fevered dreams of horrific flying creatures with cold, red eyes filled my mind, making me shiver uncontrollably.

The worst of these nightmares included Nidras' death. Ripped to shreds by those horrible, curved claws. I thrashed and fought against this image, my weakened body flailing helplessly under the horror of my dreams.

Sweat poured from my body one moment, drenching the fabric beneath me, followed by bone-shattering chills and shaking. Soft hands bathed the sweat from my body with warm, fragrant water and covered me with heated blankets to chase the chill.

I slept on but didn't rest. Something tugged at me...called to me...and I had no respite. I needed to climb out of the muzzy unconsciousness that held me tight. I needed to return to the land of the living. I had work to do.

Finally, against my will, my body slipped into rest. Blessed blackness swamped my mind and my body relaxed into true sleep.

As soon as I slept, Nidras came to me. Her body was soft and warm, scented with her need.

"Hello, Hermes."

I grinned, happy to see her. "Nidras. Finally. I thought you'd left."

She shook her dark head but she didn't smile back. "I know I should have but I needed to see you one more time." She slid a cool hand over my chest, tugging gently on each nipple before sliding it across my stomach. My skin quivered pleasantly under her gentle touch.

"I'm glad you came back." I reached for her but she pulled away from my touch. I tried to push myself to a sitting position but my body refused to move. I felt weighted down, helpless and immobile. But I didn't mind being helpless to Nidras' soothing touch.

She stroked her hand over my rock-hard cock, sliding it down to cup my taut balls. "I love your cock, Hermes. It's always so hard, so ready for me."

I closed my eyes as she lowered her lips toward my aching shaft. "Taste me, Nidras. Suck me hard and then let me fuck you. I need you so much."

I gasped as her soft lips touched the beaded tip of my cock. Her tongue tasted me, sending arrows of fire into the painfully hard shaft beneath her lips. My cock jerked under

her touch and I groaned. Nidras opened her lips and allowed my aching flesh to slide between them. I arched my hips, burying myself deeply within the heat of her mouth. It felt like heaven, sensual nirvana. My hands found her soft hair, which had grown down her back again, curling against her narrow hips. I wrapped the silken strands around my hands and tugged gently, urging her to greater depths on my cock.

My balls climbed higher and tighter against my body, boiling with need.

Nidras tightened her lips on my shaft and let it slide back out of her mouth. I rubbed the satiny curls around my fingers over my belly and waited, blissfully anticipating the return of heat and delicious pressure to my taut skin. Nidras didn't disappoint. She cupped my tender balls in one hand and slid her soft mouth down my shaft again, taking my entire length into her mouth and throat, until I could feel the softness of her lips against my belly.

Her throat worked over my cock and I cried out, sure I was going to die from pleasure.

She increased the tempo of her strokes until my toes curled and I groaned helplessly, feeling the lava-like boil of cum in my balls threatening to erupt.

I tugged gently on her hair. "Ride me, Nidras. Bury me inside your pussy."

She dragged her lips up my cock one last time, stroking her tongue over the tender head of my shaft as it popped free and then climbed astride my thighs.

I watched her eyes as her body lowered slowly over mine. As the engorged head of my cock slid inside her tight pussy, her beautiful eyes widened with pleasure. She slowly dropped her weight over me, the tight silk of her inner muscles dragging delightfully over my inflamed flesh.

My toes curled tightly against the soles of my feet. "Oh my gods, Nidras."

With my cock buried deep within her body, her head dropped back on a moan of sheer pleasure. Silken strands of her hair bathed my thighs and a jolt of pleasure speared my belly. I wrapped my hands around her hips and encouraged her upward.

Nidras happily complied. I closed my eyes and rode the waves of delight as her heated flesh milked my painfully hard dick. She rode me relentlessly, increasing the tempo of her strokes until sweat beaded on her upper lip and gave a tender sheen to her breasts.

I reached up and cupped the heavy globes swaying above me, pulling the rigid peaks between my thumbs and forefingers and tugging gently.

"More!" she demanded and I pulled her nipples harder, then harder still when she placed her hands over mine and pressed, panting, "Twist them harder, Hermes, gods...please!"

My balls were so tight I thought they would burst. And still my cock pulled on them, trying to gain more room for the massive amount of blood pouring to the area.

With a husky cry, Nidras' body stiffened and her inner muscles clamped hard around me, making me groan in helpless delight.

Nidras' orgasm rolled her eyes back in her head and pulled against my flesh. "Hermes!" she screamed before collapsing over me.

My mouth found her delightful lips, pulling the sweet breath from between them. My tongue tangled with hers. Her mouth was a feast to a starving man. The sweet musk of her breath bathed my face as our tongues danced hungrily.

My body tightened and my knees locked, pulling my legs rigid as release swept over me. Fiery jolts of sensual shock made my muscles go taut and my cock jerked hard, sending volcanic emissions of cum into her hungry pussy.

She panted lightly as I softened within her body. Her hair enveloped us in a soft, fragrant curtain, creating a cocoon of sensuality that I never wanted to leave.

"Hermes." Her lips touched my cheek and I shuddered.

I opened my mouth to tell her I loved her. But she was gone, just as suddenly as she'd appeared.

My sleep no longer felt restful. The bed was cold and empty and I no longer wanted to lie in it. I started the long journey toward wakefulness, fighting my way to awareness. I don't know how long I slept. But when I awoke, it was to a true nightmare.

I blinked, dragging my eyes open. My surroundings were only vaguely familiar. It was a well-appointed room, decorated with feminine sensibilities in mind. Large, airy and richly adorned. My eyes found the double French doors on the far side of the room. Filmy, white curtains fluttered gently in a soft, warm breeze. Through the billowing gauze I could see a balcony.

Standing on that balcony was a small, shapely form with glossy black hair. She wore fine silks, which skimmed her slim body elegantly. "Nidras?"

The form turned and my fuzzy mind rebelled. If it was Nidras, she'd aged about twenty years. How long had I been asleep?

The woman on the balcony strode through the doors and toward the bed, a soft smile on her pale, beautiful face. "Feeling better?"

I swallowed hard, scrubbing a hand over my eyes. My brain finally clicked and I recognized Nidras' mother. The demon queen.

A cool hand touched my brow. "Fever's finally broken. I think you got some rest at least."

I tried to sit up and pain jolted through me. My chest and side felt as if someone held a firebrand to them. Gasping, I flopped back.

"The wounds are healed but you'll be sore for a bit."

"Where's Nidras?"

The woman's gaze slid away. She reached for a glass on the table beside the bed. Holding the water under my nose she said, "Drink this."

I complied, feeling each swallow like a needle in my chest. The mere act of drinking used up the small stores of energy I had available. My body melted heavily into the mattress and my eyes slipped closed. "I need to see Nidras."

Cool fingers slid across my cheek, pushing hair from my face. "Sleep, Hermes. Just sleep."

Like a magic incantation, her words plunged me black into the velvet black of unconsciousness. When I woke again the open door was dusky with late afternoon. The room was empty. I was alone.

I shoved the blankets back and sat up, waiting while the room danced around me and stars burst before my eyes. My wounds ached slightly but they were much better than they'd been earlier in the day. When the room stopped moving I stood up. Walking on wobbly legs, I headed into the bathroom.

A half-hour later I emerged feeling much better. I'd managed to shower and shave and dressed in some clothing that had been left for me. The cotton shirt and jeans fit me as if they'd been made for me. Just like magic.

Demon magic.

I headed out of the room, having no idea where I was going and soon found myself descending a wide, curving stairwell toward the foyer I'd glimpsed briefly when I'd carried Nidras through those broad double doors.

A soft voice drew me toward the room closest to the bottom of the stairs. The door was open. I stopped just inside, glancing around. The queen stood in front of a huge, roaring fire, holding a large goblet filled with burgundy liquid that sparked in the flames from the fire. "Hello, Hermes." She turned her beautiful face to the other side of the room. "Will you get Hermes some wine, darling?"

My eyes shot in the direction she looked, expecting to find Nidras. I blinked in disappointment when I saw only the king. He lounged against the back of a long, golden divan, a matching goblet in one enormous hand.

"Come in, sit down," the queen offered.

I entered the room, moving to stand beside her at the fire. The heat felt incredible against my chilled body. Despite the fact that I was determined to shake it off, I was still suffering the aftereffects of my terrible wounds. "I just need to see Nidras. Then I'll go."

The queen's beautiful gaze found her husband's. Their eyes were filled with pain.

Horror swamped me. "She's all right!" It was less a question than a demand. I simply would not accept that the wizard had killed her.

The queen placed a hand on my arm. "She's fine."

I nodded, accepting the wine from the demon king gratefully and taking a large drink from the fine crystal glass.

"She doesn't want to see you, Hermes."

I swallowed hard. "Bullshit!"

The demon king lifted a dark, bushy eyebrow in surprise. "I know you didn't just call bullshit on me."

My whole body tensed with anger. I took a step toward him. "I did. Where is she? I demand that you tell me right now!"

The other eyebrow went north to join the first one.

A soft hand fell on my forearm and I shook it off. The deep black of the king's gaze flashed with anger. "If you do violence to the queen again, Cupid, you will feel the effects of my wrath. I don't care how feeble you are."

Realizing that I would get nowhere with them if I let my anger rule my good sense, I took a deep breath and turned to the queen, bowing slightly. "I apologize, Your Majesty. I deeply appreciate your help and hospitality. But Nidras is in grave danger and I must be with her. To help her."

The queen's beautiful face softened and tears filled her eyes. "You love our daughter very much, Hermes." Her voice was barely more than a whisper.

I nodded. My throat had constricted as I realized she was right. I did love Nidras. I wasn't sure when or how it had happened. Lust had turned to love.

She patted my arm. "She has asked us to tell you that she cannot see you again. She has gone to meet her fate..." The queen's voice broke on these words and her husband moved to her side, placing a huge arm around her slim shoulders. "She said..." Her lavender gaze slid upward.

The king squeezed her shoulders and pinned me with a cold, black gaze. "She said she doesn't want or need you around anymore, Hermes. You just get in her way."

Pain crashed through my chest again but this time it wasn't from any physical wound. My knees weakened but I locked them, determined to stay upright. "I don't believe it."

The king's black eyes flashed with anger again. His wife placed a small hand on his chest. "It is true, Hermes. I'm so sorry." Tears flowed freely down her pale cheeks. I believed her. She really was sorry.

I turned and stared into the fire for several beats and then made my decision. I downed the rest of the wine, feeling it burst into warmth in my icy chest and then settled the glass on a nearby table and turned to the royal couple.

Bowing slightly I said, "I don't believe Nidras has rejected me."

The king stiffened and I lifted a hand in placation. "I do believe she asked you to tell me that...but I don't believe she meant it. She's trying to protect me. I won't allow that. She needs my help and I'm going to find a way to give it to her." Bowing again I turned to go.

An enormous hand covered my arm, stopping me. Adrenaline swamped me and I reached for the sword I no longer carried. Turns out I didn't need it.

"You are a worthy match for my daughter, Hermes. If there is anything I can do to aid you...anything at all..." He let the words drift away and I nodded. I knew exactly what he was telling me. I was right. Nidras had been trying to protect me. And just as she had pushed my help away she was keeping her parents at arm's length too. Probably for the same reason. She didn't want to risk their safety in helping her.

But I had no such compunction. I'd take all the help I could get.

Starting with the Fates.

* * * * *

They were in the Building of Justice, speaking to the Council of Gods about something too top secret for a mere Cupid to know about. I didn't really care. I just wanted to talk to them.

I paced the huge entry hall for an interminable amount of time, glancing frequently at the closed golden doors. The two guards watched in silent amusement as I grew increasingly agitated.

I was just about to burst through the doors when they finally opened and Clotho glided through, followed by her two sister Fates, Aphrodite, Zeus and Poseidon.

Atropos had her arm linked through the ocean god's arm and was laughing at something he'd said.

I hurried forward, stopping before Clotho and halting her forward progress. "I need to speak with you."

She frowned at me. "We were just going to a banquet."

"And an orgy," added Lachesis. She tossed her long, auburn mane of hair and winked at Zeus.

"This is important!"

They all blinked at me. I was fairly vibrating with intensity and I had inadvertently shouted at them.

One does not shout at gods.

Forcing myself to take a deep breath I bowed to Zeus. "My sincerest apologies, Your Majesty. I'm distraught. I need the Fates' help."

Zeus inspected me for a long moment as if I were a particularly disgusting bug and then inclined his head slightly. "You may accompany us, Cupid."

"To an orgy?" My voice squeaked in a less than manly way. I cleared my throat and shook my head, bowing again for good measure. I'm sure I looked like an idiot. "Sire, the woman I love is in grave danger. Time is of the essence. I must help her."

Zeus thought about this. Love was the grease that kept Olympus running smoothly on its golden tracks. Actually it was lust but the gods liked to call it love. So a man with love on his mind was always to be taken seriously.

This seemed to put him in a quandary.

Finally, he glanced at Lachesis. "Go and help this poor creature with his problem, Sissy, I'll meet you at the megron later."

The megron in Zeus' castle was famous for its symposiums, which in ancient Greece, as well as modern day Olympus, were actually sensual feasts, catering to the intellectual, physical and sexual needs of the participants.

The Fates all scowled at me, as the gods and goddesses left the Building of Justice without them. I would have my hands full trying to get their full attention back. Inspiration struck. "How about a walk in the garden, ladies? I promise I won't keep you any longer than necessary."

They reluctantly agreed and we left the Building of Justice, heading for the Garden of Life beyond its doors. As soon as their soft slippers stepped into the magic of the Garden I could sense and feel them relaxing and letting go of their peevishness.

Clotho even linked her arm in mine and pecked me on the cheek. Her soft, blonde curls bounced becomingly as she walked along beside me. "This is about Nidras."

It wasn't a question. "You've spoken to her?"

Atropos took my other arm. Her pretty face was intent. "Hermes, you must let her go. She has made her decision."

My heart skipped a beat and I sucked in a silent breath. I'd been telling myself Nidras hadn't meant what she'd told her parents. What if I was wrong? I shook my head, determined upon my path. "I don't believe she means it."

"Oh she means it," Lachesis offered. She tucked a strand of silky, auburn hair behind a small, pink ear and pursed her soft lips. "She's taken steps that preclude her turning back now, Hermes. You might as well accept it."

I stopped, pulling my arms from their grasp. "What do you mean, she's taken steps?"

Atropos fixed her startling golden eyes on my face. "She came before the Council of Gods this very morn, Hermes."

Clotho touched my arm. "She bargained for the power to defeat the wizard Grimsbar."

I shook my head, not understanding. "If she could do that, why didn't she do it before?"

"She didn't have anything to bargain with before." Lachesis' heart-shaped face was filled with pity. I knew I had to ask the question but I was just as certain I wouldn't like the response.

"What was the bargain?"

The Fates shared a look filled with meaning. I lost my temper. "Tell me!"

As if they were marionettes sharing a single pole, the three Graces straightened their spines and glared at me, power built from the anger shimmering around them. Standing side by side, the three goddesses created a united front that was sending nearly visible waves of hostility in my direction.

For the second time in moments, I had to take a deep breath and apologize. Lifting my hands I said, "Look, I'm sorry. But I'm nearly crazy with worry about Nidras. She could be facing off with Grimsbar right now and I'm stuck in this bad reverb, running in circles and banging my head against the same brick wall. I need to get to her. And I need you to tell me where I can find her."

Clotho shook her head. "It isn't possible, Hermes."

Her sister Graces shook their heads too. The three of them looked at me with pity. That just pissed me off.

I turned and stalked away, swearing colorfully. There had to be a way to help Nidras and keep her for my own. I just had to find her first. How hard could that be? She'd probably returned to the wizard's castle. Dread, like ice water, slid down my spine at the thought of returning to that castle. But I knew I would do it. I had to.

Pacing the lush grass of the Garden with my fists clenched in frustration, I almost forgot the Fates were there. So when Lachesis finally spoke I jerked to a surprised stop.

"For the power to kill Grimsbar and free herself from the curse, she bargained away her chance for love ever after."

All the blood ran from my face and my knees buckled. I dropped onto a nearby concrete bench. Nausea swamped me. She'd bargained away our future. Everything I'd hoped for was gone.

I felt a soft hand on my shoulder but couldn't find the strength to look up. Clotho's voice was soft with pity. "I'm sorry, Hermes. But once she kills the wizard you will no longer exist for her."

As this unhappy thought burrowed its way into my shattered thoughts I jumped, finally looking up into the goddess's huge, gray eyes. "Then I must stop her from killing him."

Clotho's pretty, narrow face clearly showed her surprise. Her sister Graces made small, sounds of shock. Lachesis' hand covered her mouth and Atropos' mouth hung open.

I stood up. That was good. If I could do something to surprise the Fates, I realized, nothing was set in stone. I still had a chance to alter fate. "I'm off to the wizard's lair."

Almost as one, the three Fates groaned. Lachesis shook her head, sending auburn curls spiraling around her face. "But that's insane, Hermes. She'll hate you for helping keep her shackled under the curse."

I realized I was being selfish. But I had a plan. And if I managed it, I might be able to accomplish removal of Nidras' curse and still get the girl. Doubt whirled in my chest, along with terror that something might go horribly wrong and I would lose it all but I couldn't bend under either emotion. "One thing at a time, ladies. One thing at a time."

I began to pull my power together to leave.

Atropos grabbed my wrist to stop me. I tried to jerk away, knowing that I was surely running out of time. But her grip was like an iron band on my skin. I looked into her face and she gave me a crooked smile.

I blinked in surprise.

Turning my hand over, she slid something into it. "You might be able to use this."

I frowned down at the vial in my hand. "What is it?"

"A Cupid's strength."

I frowned. "Can you be more specific?"

Her grin widened as she stepped back. "Stay safe, Hermes. I wish you well."

I pulled my power forward and felt the ground softening under my feet as I started to shift away. The last thing I heard as my physical form left the Garden of Life behind was Clotho's strident voice yelling, "Get weapons! You'll need them."

I realized it was a good suggestion and mentally changed the destination of my shift. It was time for another visit to the gnome, Bleark.

* * * * *

He was still smelly and warty. And he still had the best arsenal in all of Olympus. I stood in the center of Bleark's cluttered shop and looked around, not sure where to start.

A stubby, green hand with a wart on each knuckle appeared in front of my face holding a stick.

I frowned at the stick, which was about eighteen inches long, bark free and polished to an unnatural shine. "Birch wand, from the magic mountains in Peru."

I slid my gaze from the stick to the gnome's smashed, fleshy face. "I'm *chasing* a wizard, Bleark... I'm not a wizard myself."

Bleark's wide face folded into what I assumed to be a frown. "You got no magic?"

"I *do* have magic..."

Bleark nodded. "This wand can be tuned to *your* magic."

I shook my head. "I'm looking for something a bit more deadly. I don't want to love the man to death."

Bleark stared hard at me for a long moment, holding my gaze with his watery, blue eyes. I'd noticed he did this a lot. As if he could see my intentions written on the surface of my eyes. Maybe he could. I squirmed a little under his gaze, not at all sure I wanted the gnome to see what I intended. I knew it had to be done but I wasn't proud of it.

Finally he blinked and threw the wand over his shoulder without even looking where it landed. "I got new bombs."

"Bombs. Now that's what *I'm* talkin' about."

I followed the gnome's shuffling waddle toward the back of the shop. He opened a small door and disappeared inside, leaving it open for me. The tiny room smelled of gunpowder and other, more magical explosives. All four walls were covered in shelves, from floor to ceiling and the shelves bulged and sagged under the weight of all shapes and sizes of explosive devices. Bleark's watery gaze slid from shelf to shelf, apparently searching for a specific type of explosive, while my fingers danced toward the bulging shelves of their own accord.

The seemingly endless supply of metal, stone and plastic devices called to me from the shelves, promising sweet things and hope for the future with their deadly forms. All I needed to achieve the satisfaction dancing on the periphery of my life was something to blow up with the devices.

Something ugly that needed to go bye bye.

I'd learned something about myself since beginning the quest to help Nidras against the wizard.

Something I wasn't exactly proud of.

I'd learned that, like every testosterone-laden action figure from classic human thrillers and cartoon heroes, I liked to wreak havoc and blow shit up.

It was a little humiliating, to know that I hadn't evolved any further than that.

Bleark made a small sound of discovery and, reaching into a tangle of incendiary devices on the shelf in front of him, pulled out a small, pink object that looked like a rubber pig. As he held it toward me, the thing morphed into a fluffy stuffed toy shaped like a bear, then a cup of tea, a book, a feather, a shoe and was working toward becoming a boat in a bottle when I reached for it.

"Morph bomb," Bleark said with a knowing grin. "Your mind controls its form."

The thing in my palm turned into an arrow. Logical.

I grinned. "It's perfect."

Bleark grinned too. "Yes."

"How deadly is it?"

Bleark clapped his fleshy, green hands, rubbing them together with glee. "It kill large monsters easily. Gorgon, harpy, gargyle..."

"Large, flying birds?"

Bleark made a dismissive noise. "Nothin' left but da feathers."

I thought the bomb into a coin and slid it into my pocket. "Thanks, Bleark. Now I need something I can fight with. A sword? Knives?"

"Chains."

I blinked. "Huh?"

Bleark lifted a finger and nodded. I followed him back to the main shop. Bleark went behind the counter and opened a drawer, rummaging around inside for a full minute before finding what he needed. He came away with a long, skeleton key and turned to a small door, only about four feet high in the wall behind the counter, inserting the key into the lock.

He disappeared inside and I could hear a lot of clanking and clanging inside. I bent over the counter and peered through the door. All I could see on either side of Bleark's wide, fleshy back, were piles and piles of shiny metal links. It looked like a hopeless tangle.

I fought back a surge of impatience. The visit to Bleark was taking way too long. There was no telling what Nidras was going through at that very moment. I opened my mouth to tell him I'd just take the morph bomb and go but he turned toward me at that moment and came out of the room.

He had about a five-foot length of chain around his neck, drooping over his shoulders and down his sides like a large, shiny scarf.

Bleark locked the door and returned the key to its overstuffed drawer before looking up at me. "You pay now?"

I glanced meaningfully at the chain around his neck, lifting an eyebrow in question.

Bleark removed the chain from his neck and whipped it across the counter, toward me.

I gasped as the chain lengthened, coiling in the air like a metal snake and wrapped itself around my shoulders, pinning my arms to my sides.

Bleark poked a button on his old-fashioned cash register and the door popped open with a ding. "That be 200 drachma."

I jerked against the chain, trying to release my arms but it only tightened around me, python-like. I looked at Bleark but he just stared back at me, unblinking.

"If you want to get paid you'll need to release me."

Bleark blinked and grinned. "Oh. Sorry." Reaching out, he slid a thick finger under the chain and gave it a little jerk. The chain came away and crashed to the countertop, shattering the glass of the case beneath.

Bleark didn't seem to notice the destruction.

He held his fleshy palm out to accept the money for the chain and the bomb. I paid him, then took my chain and my bomb and left.

I wasn't sure what I was going to do with a magical chain. But the sword and knives hadn't worked very well so I was willing to try something different at that point.

Emerging from the gnome's shop into the cool, evening air of a perfect Olympus night, I started noodling my next problem. I would need transportation to the wizard's castle.

Shuddering, I decided I could go by horseback as Nidras and I had done. But that would take several hours and I'd have to go through that fog again. I wasn't sure I could find my way through it as easily as Nidras had.

There had to be a better option.

A flash of white caught my eye and my gaze slid upward. I grinned. "Oh yeah. That should do nicely."

Chapter Nine

Kissing the Clouds

So...she definitely wasn't Pegasus. The man I'd rented her from insisted she was a distant relative of the great horse. But I was thinking the distance was too great to be relative.

Her white coat was spotted and mottled with brown. The flying horse had bulging, brown eyes and a sparse mane and forelock. Her tail looked like something had chewed on it. Her name was Ashtov.

I shifted in the thin saddle, trying to get the bony ridge of the creature's sway back situated in a less vulnerable area. It was piercing my balls big-time. Glancing back, I wondered why some of the creature's enormous butt couldn't have distributed itself over her back to soften my ride.

Sighing, I forced my attention back to the ground below. I'd give the decrepit creature credit for one thing. Her huge wings had carried us quickly and smoothly toward the wizard's castle.

I was getting close. As I scanned the ground below, I recognized the small town where Nidras and I had spent the night passing beneath my mount's small, chipped hooves. Casting my eyes ahead, I saw the dark, jagged peak of the wizard's mountain. Hovering over the surrounding landscape, all around the mountain, a thick, gray fog obscured the ground.

I eyed the fog, hoping my plan to fly over it rather than through it would hold. I was a little disconcerted by the fact that nothing moved in the air above the fog or around the castle as far as I could see.

If I were looking for confirmation of this observation, the creature beneath my thighs seemed eager to give it to me. Ashtov appeared to be slowing measurably as we neared the fog. Her bulging, brown eyes rolled in her head and her flat sides heaved noticeably.

I patted the silky fur of her long, mottled neck. "Easy girl. We're going to stay above it. Just don't look down."

She snorted derisively and I frowned. I got no respect.

As the edge of the roiling gray moved beneath us, Ashtov threw on her brakes and we jerked to a stop, hovering on that edge. She snorted with fear, her mouth frothing. I kicked the horse's heaving sides and screamed at her but she refused to move forward.

Finally, in desperation, I did what I'd vowed never to do. I pulled my Cupid's bow from my pocket and, leaning forward to capture the creature's rolling gaze, I shot an arrow into her sweat foamed neck.

Under my love spell, the horse's brown eye lost its wild terror and softened. I patted her neck and spoke soothing encouragement into her flickering, white ear. "That's a good girl. Let's keep moving now, shall we?"

Ashtov nickered softly and lifted her wings. Finally, we started over the terrifying fog below. I struggled with the practical and ethical problems of what I'd done for several moments. The effect of my magic should only be temporary. But I'd forced a creature to do something it perceived as dangerous to its well-being through my magic. Ethically speaking it was a huge no-no.

But I had a demon princess to save and protect. I was a desperate man. And I was prepared to break much larger rules than that one to save the woman I loved. Besides, I reasoned, the magicked horse was blissfully unaware of the danger roiling beneath her hooves. In a way I'd done her a service.

I only wished I could be so unaware.

I squinted at the cold horror beneath us, wondering if it had moved closer to the horse's hooves.

It certainly looked closer.

Was it my imagination or did it feel as if the fog were sucking us downward? I gave Ashtov a nudge in her sides and she lifted her wings again, pushing hard to carry us higher in the sky.

Almost immediately we started to slide downward, closer to the sucking fog.

It wasn't my imagination.

The fog was pulling us in.

I kicked her again and she pounded her wings to lift us higher in the sky. We gained a few feet and for a moment I thought we'd broken loose but then we started to slide downward again, toward the roiling gray and white mass beneath us.

As the fog touched Ashtov's hooves, her eyes widened and she screamed. Large, brown eyes rolling in her head with terror, she pounded her huge wings in an effort to stay above the mist.

I grabbed mane and held on, praying Ashtov would be strong enough to keep us out of the fog. Inexorably, however, we started sliding toward the ground again.

The horse was slick with sweat, her flat sides heaving with fear and effort and her nostrils flared widely as she struggled against a constant downward pull.

Frigid air assailed us as we drew closer to the mist. From its dense, roiling midst I could hear sounds of pain and suffering that made my stomach twist in fear. I remembered the melting heat of wizard's fire and wondered if it still lurked in the fog.

If it did I was dead. I had nothing in my arsenal to fight that type of magic.

I watched in horror as Ashtov's hooves dipped beneath the roiling mass. A blast of frigid air burst from the fog and consumed us, turning our muscles into steel bands that fought against movement.

Something snapped at the horse's hooves and she screamed, pounding her wings hard against the air. I looked down and saw a long, deep wound gouged out of her right, rear hock.

Blood dripped into the mist below, sizzling as it hit the magicked air.

The horse's frantic pounding bought us another couple of inches of clear air but we could only hold the distance if she kept flying hard. And I knew she was quickly reaching the end of her strength.

I had to do something.

I took stock of my weapons. The chain was worthless. I doubted the contents of the vial Atropos had given me would do much against the massive wall of magic beneath my feet. My Cupid's bow wouldn't help. That left only the bomb.

I pulled it from my pocket and stared at it, considering.

Another scream from the horse brought my gaze downward. More blood sizzled against the fog and, as it roiled and shifted, I could see a wide face with red eyes and enormous teeth.

Something followed us in the mist.

Something that wanted to tear us into bitty pieces and swallow our flesh.

I shivered.

If I couldn't kill the mist, maybe I could kill the horrors hiding within it.

I knew the dangers of setting the bomb into play so close beneath our feet. But I didn't seem to have a choice.

Thinking quickly, I opened my palm and sent my thoughts into the coin I'd conjured before. The bomb started to glow and pulse with light. It burned my palm but I gritted my teeth, trying to ignore the building pain.

Smoke rose from my skin as the bomb formed and shaped itself there. When the light from the thing was so hot and so bright I could no longer retain it, I flung it hard and high into the air above the mist, knowing it would be sucked down into it.

Then I jerked the reins to the side, away from the bomb and kicked the horse's sides hard, several times, praying we could get enough distance between us and the explosion to survive.

We climbed hard to the left, gaining several feet fairly quickly. It was as if the mist were focusing on the bomb and had temporarily forgotten us.

This was good.

Maybe we would be okay.

I watched as the bomb hovered for a moment in the sky, caught between its upward momentum and the sucking pull of the fog below. For just a heartbeat in time it hung there and I held my breath.

Then the fog won the tug-of-war and the bomb plunged downward, disappearing quickly and silently into the roiling mist.

I kicked the horse several more times and she strained upward, her nostrils wide with the effort. Just as I felt her go limp with exhaustion the bomb exploded inside the fog.

There was no sound. Only light.

Massive, intense waves of light.

The light spread outward in an ever expanding circle that ate a hole in the mist as it went. I watched in delight as the mist disappeared under the burning light, leaving behind only dead vegetation and clean air where hell had once reigned.

I didn't have time to enjoy it for long.

The exhausted horse beneath my thighs had passed out and we were plunging at a deadly speed toward the ground. Then the blast hit the edges of the mist and the concussion exploded outward, bringing with it a sonic boom of sound and releasing a backwash of explosive air that pounded into us, sending us rocketing sideways, helpless against its immense power.

Our plunge sideways didn't stop until we crashed into something moderately malleable and crumpled toward the ground.

My prickly but somewhat padded landing was followed by a decidedly unpadded set down in the hard dirt. My left shoulder crunched as I hit, followed by an excruciating slam to my left hip and then finally, my head bounced against what felt like rock, barely covered with dirt.

I lay there for several minutes, trying not to breathe too deeply. I was pretty sure everything inside my body was broken. The nostalgic scent of pine tickled my nose. High in the sky, the sun shone brightly and birds started to sing. Other than the sound of happy birds, the area was quiet...and still.

Turning my head, I could just barely make out the sharp, black peak of the wizard's castle. It was the tower, where I could envision him standing, looking out over the world and contemplating the horrors he could inflict on the rest of us.

I pulled air into my lungs and shoved myself into a sitting position. Pain made my eyes water but not as much as I'd expected. Cranking my head around I looked up to see what we'd hit.

A tall, fat pine tree towered above me. One of its massive branches was bent, hanging downward at an odd angle. A soft groan drew my eyes to Ashtov, who had somehow managed not to land on me when we fell. She was kicking her legs in an effort to stand up. One of her wings was crushed underneath her.

I'd be surprised if she could fly.

I stood up and moved away from the flailing hooves. She managed to get her legs underneath her and shoved painfully to a standing position. Sure enough, one of her wings looked broken. She held it tenderly against her side, her ears flicking backward in response to the pain.

I walked over and stroked her soft neck. "Sorry, girl. We'll see what Nidras can do to help you with that."

Once I was mounted again, we headed up the mountain. Toward the castle looming darkly ahead. The ground beneath us was covered in dead, brown vegetation. The clogging mist had killed everything it covered.

Massive trees reached skeletal arms toward a bright blue sky, their bark hanging off in sad ribbons. The grass was long and brown but it looked as if it had been trampled flat by several thousand enormous creatures. The only thing left of bushes and flowers were some scraggly, dead sticks protruding from the ground.

I wondered if the magic's poison would stain the ground for the foreseeable future, or if Mother Nature would kick it off and return quickly to normal. I was learning the hard way that magic had a price.

Thinking of what Nidras was willing to give up to gain her freedom, I knew the price could be steep.

We picked our way carefully up the mountain. Even without the choking fog the going was slow. Jagged rocks toughened the terrain and forced us to take a circuitous route to the top.

As we rounded one particularly huge boulder and searched for the narrow path, Ashtov stiffened and gave an alarmed snort.

"What is it, girl?"

She flicked her wings, her nostrils flaring with alarm.

I looked around, expecting to see the wizard, or an army of gremlins waiting for us on the ridge above our heads. I didn't see anything.

The horse screamed and spun in a tight circle. One of her hooves slid from the narrow path and I grabbed mane as we tilted dangerously. Throwing my weight into the mountain, I gave the mare the help she needed to pull herself back.

As soon as she regained her feet she bunched her muscles and took off.

We careened down the rocky path at a suicidal rate, the mare's gaze wild with a fear so great I was pretty sure she'd plunge right off the side of the mountain without even knowing or caring.

I dragged ceaselessly on the reins in an effort to slow our forward momentum. But she'd gotten the bit in her teeth and was gone, completely ignoring my feeble efforts to stop her.

We barely managed to navigate a sharp turn, the mare's outside hooves scrabbling for purchase in the dry dirt. I held my breath as she struggled to stay on the path. Finally, her hooves gained enough purchase to propel her forward again.

I was relieved to see a wide, green ridge in front of us as we completed the turn. We'd reached the level where Nidras and I had tethered our horses the first time we'd visited the castle.

I renewed my efforts to stop Ashtov but, rolling her wild brown gaze upward, she held the bit and plunged onward. I looked at the sky above our heads and still saw nothing. Though, as I returned my gaze forward, my peripheral vision caught a slight shimmering in the sky just above us.

Even as I had the thought I was hit in the shoulder by something with enough force to send me flying off the horse. I landed in soft grass covering hard ground, the impact knocking the wind from my lungs.

I lay there for a moment, trying to fill my lungs with air and cursed inwardly. I was damn sick of hitting the ground.

The ground shook and I looked up into a wall of shimmering air. As I squinted, the air thickened and gained form and color.

Until I was staring at a myth.

I forced myself to swallow. Though my mind told me to be a man and fight, my body scrambled backward in terror.

The thing towered over me, its wide, reptilian snout barely closing around several rows of razor sharp teeth.

Smoke wafted from the jaws with every breath and the smell of sulfur stung my nose, making me want to sneeze.

The enormous body was covered in silver scales, which reflected the colors of the vibrant ridge like polished glass. The back feet, perched on the end of legs the size of giant redwood trees, had three-inch-long, curved claws that could probably slide through my flesh like knives through butter. The front legs were smaller than the back but the claws on them looked just as deadly.

It had tiny ears, which twitched constantly at the side of its head and large, purple eyes filled with intelligence.

Rising to the sides and above the silver dragon, enormous wings fluttered gently before folding back against the huge body.

I noticed a shiny bauble dangling from one of the creature's forearms like a bracelet.

"Where did you get that?"

The dragon cocked its head.

I shoved myself to my feet, my fists clenching as I strode toward the giant lizard. "Answer me! Where did you get that necklace?"

A soft chuckle drifted across my mind. *Stupid Cupid. I will show you myself.*

The dragon took a step forward and I suddenly found myself standing way too close to that sulfurous mouth.

The creature's mouth opened wide and several rows of huge jagged teeth headed my way. I reached for the chain around my shoulders just as the dragon exhaled. Blinking, I expected a fiery, excruciating death. Instead I was encompassed by overheated, foul-smelling dragon breath. I tried to open my mouth to ask the dragon if that was all it had but my lips wouldn't move.

In fact nothing would move. I was completely paralyzed.

I could only watch helplessly as the massive jaws wrapped around my body.

Chapter Ten

Kissing the Girl

The dragon spat me out on the floor of a cave that smelled like a barnyard. Rubbing at several puncture wounds on my sides, I sat up and looked around. Nidras was chained to a wall at the back of the dragon's cave. Her head was resting on her chest and she was covered in bruises and blood.

I jumped to my feet and hurried toward her. Only to be stopped by a huge, spiked tail, slammed to the ground between us. I turned to the dragon. "Get the hell out of my way reptile or die."

The dragon's musical laughter filled my head. *Puny creature.*

The thing was seriously pissing me off with its attitude.

She lives, Cupid. She only sleeps.

I scowled at the dragon for a long moment. It blinked long, vibrantly hued eyes at me and opened its snout in a horrible parody of a smile.

In desperation, I cast my mind back to my classical Greek studies. There'd been quite an extensive section on dragons, I remembered. Unfortunately I'd been about as good a student as I'd been a Cupid. I'd been too busy trying out my winning smile on the goddesses to pay much attention to my studies. Particularly Greek monster legends. Knowing I was destined for Earth, I hadn't expected to interact much with the sharp tooth and deadly claw circle.

I did remember something that I might be able to turn to my advantage. The pure white of the dragon's wide, scaled belly told me it was a female. Males had gray bellies and, if I remembered correctly, black eyes.

The necklace dangling from the dragon's foreleg was probably another clue to its gender. Unless of course dragons celebrated sexuality in all its forms.

I tried a smile, deciding seduction might be just the thing. "I've never met a dragon before. Especially such a beautiful one."

The dragon's long eyes narrowed slightly and she snorted. I jumped away from the fire streaming from her nostrils.

Apparently she wouldn't be easy to seduce.

Trying another tack, I looked at the pile of sticks and feathers in the corner, closer to where Nidras hung unconscious. "I'm tired from my journey. Would it be all right if I rested for a while in your nest?"

The dragon moved its tail to scoop me farther away from the nest and unfortunately, Nidras.

All righty then. That wasn't going to work.

I shrugged and went to sit against the wall. As I lowered my aching body toward the rocky dirt of the cave floor I groaned. It wasn't an act. I'd never been so sore. My whole body was beaten and bruised.

I briefly wondered what had happened to Ashtov. I hoped she'd found refuge in the woods beside the castle.

Nidras gave a little gasp and jerked in her chains. My gaze flew to her and sharpened with anxiety. But I forced myself to relax and smile at the dragon. If she thought I cared about Nidras she might kill her just to spite me.

Dragons were very emotional creatures. Especially the females.

The giant reptile was watching me very carefully, no doubt judging my every expression.

"So. What are you going to do with u-um me."

The dragon curled her tail around her massive body and sank onto her haunches. She lifted the tiny front leg with the diamond sword on it and cocked her head as the gems caught the sun and shot sparks of color around the room.

I realized then that the dragon sat in the only pool of light in the cave. She became transfixed by the necklace, her large eyes looking almost glazed as she stared at it.

"Hello?"

She ignored me. Or didn't hear me.

"She won't answer you while the sun catches the diamonds."

My head jerked around. Nidras' lavender eyes peered at me, filled with pain. I wasn't sure if it was physical or emotional.

"Hey, demon princess."

She offered me a small smile. "Hey yourself. Imagine my surprise at waking up to find *you* here."

I stood up slowly, watching the dragon as I gained my feet. "I'm not easy to get rid of."

I thought I heard her sigh. But she didn't respond.

I slid along the wall until I'd passed the dragon's deadly tail. The patch of sun softened as a cloud passed by outside and the dragon stirred.

I stopped moving and pressed myself against the wall.

When the sun returned I moved quickly toward Nidras.

"The sun will be going down soon. We don't have much time."

I pulled on the chains, trying to ignore the bloody skin beneath them. Nidras had obviously been trying to escape for quite some time. I pushed away feelings of guilt for not having arrived sooner. It wouldn't help.

After several moments of both of us tugging on the chains to no avail I stepped back, sweaty and panting. "Where's the key?"

Nidras shook her head. "I was unconscious when she hung me here. To tell you the truth I don't know how she managed it. I think she must have had some help from Grimsbar."

I glanced toward the nest. I'd already decided that most of the barnyard stench was emanating from it. "Maybe it's in there."

"Be really careful, Hermes. She has eggs."

I swore softly. Even I knew there was nothing more deadly than a dragon protecting her young.

I walked over and looked down at the huge nest.

The intricately woven mass of sticks and feathers appeared to be held together by something brown and stinky. Probably manure.

Thus the smell.

Nestled together in the center of the nest were three enormous eggs. They were silver with white, irregularly shaped spots and seemed to glisten in the warmth of the sun. The nest had been built to capture the single sunray that entered the cave.

I stepped into the nest and stopped as an enormous crunching sound met my first step. I held my breath but the dragon didn't move.

I took another step, waited and then another. Kneeling down, I forced myself to feel around in the feathers surrounding the eggs. I figured, if I were a wizard trying to hide a key, I would put it under the cranky dragon's eggs.

My hand had just touched something small and metal when Nidras screamed my name and I heard a soft growl behind me.

I grabbed one of the eggs and threw myself out of the nest, rolling sideways while protecting the egg with my arms. The dragon roared and fire shot past me. I held the egg up in front of my body.

The thing weighed about fifty pounds and I knew I wouldn't be able to hold it up for long. Leaning my weight against the wall, I wrapped an arm around the egg and let go with my other arm long enough to toss Nidras the key.

She caught it with the tips of her fingers and I returned my attention to the dragon. She was advancing on me, her jaws wide and fire dancing on her massive, black tongue. *You will die, puny Cupid.*

"If you kill me I'll drop your egg."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Nidras dropping into a crouch on the floor.

The dragon sprayed fire in my direction again. It hit the rock wall behind me and tore tiny chunks of heated rock off to rip into my skin. I ignored the pain and screamed at Nidras, "Get out of here!"

"I'm not leaving you."

"Trust me, I'm right behind you."

The dragon started to turn as Nidras skidded by. "Hey, ugly!" I held the egg out from my body as if I would drop it.

The dragon shot another furnace blast into the wall.

Dozens of tiny, white-hot missiles pierced my skin. "This is no damn fun!" I screamed and, seeing that Nidras had reached the cave's entrance, I tossed the egg toward the dragon and ran past, bumping against her wide body as she reached to

catch the egg. I shoved an elbow into her fleshy middle and leapt over the razor sharp tail, which swung toward me as I passed.

"Go, go, go!"

Nidras plunged through the cave entrance and I was right behind her.

The dragon's enraged roars followed us as we ran toward the only shelter we could see ahead. The woods where we'd prepared for our last visit to the wizard Grimsbar.

I only hoped this visit would turn out better.

We ran full out toward the trees.

Seconds later the sound of enormous wings pounding the sky above our heads spurred us to run even faster. I wanted to look around, to see how close she was but I couldn't. I kept my eyes on Nidras, who was covering the ground with rapid strides directly in front of me.

Flames shot toward my back and I gritted my teeth against the blinding pain. The fire had barely touched my skin but the smell of burning cloth told me she'd charred my shirt. Reaching for the chain around my neck, I turned and stopped, flinging it toward the shimmering air above my head.

I smelled sulfurous breath as the chain whipped upward and wrapped around an all but invisible neck. As soon as the chain found her neck, the dragon became fully visible. She roared and pounded her wings, lifting me off the ground a couple of feet.

I didn't let go of the chain. First, because I'd forgotten to ask Bleark how to do it. And second, because if I let her go I might not get another chance at her. So I jerked my body hard in an effort to tighten the chain and break the dragon's thick neck.

Her massive jaws gaped open and her tongue slid out. Flames danced down the chain, burning my hands. I screamed in pain but held on.

Whipping past my head, one of Nidras' knives embedded itself into the dragon's chest. She shrieked and jerked backward.

A second knife flew past me and landed in her thick throat.

The dragon pounded her wings harder, carrying me backward with her. I flicked my wrist and the chain came free. The dragon lifted into the air and disappeared in soft shimmer of air. The fading sound of her wings told us she'd turned back toward her cave.

Nidras' knives dropped toward the ground. I walked over and grabbed them, wiping dragon blood off on the thick grass beneath my feet.

I sagged to my knees, panting hard. I could hear Nidras sucking wind behind me. Soft hands slid around me and plunged into the front of my shirt, healing light flared. Pain jolted through me as Nidras sent healing magics into my body. I stiffened under the surge of power and tried to pull away.

I knew she didn't have the energy to heal me.

But she held on tight. I couldn't jar her loose.

As the healing heat faded, Nidras hit her knees behind me, leaning heavily against my back.

I turned and caught her before she sagged to the ground. Sliding my arms under her shoulders and knees, I stood up and carried her toward the woods.

I travelled deep into the center of the wood, where the trees were the densest and light trickled gently through the thick canopy of green high above our heads. I lay her on a deep pile of leaves and pine needles and sat back on my heels, wishing there was something I could do to revive her.

My mind raced over the few options I had and I came up with nothing all that helpful. I finally decided upon practical issues. She'd need water. I could handle that. I left her to go in search of a water source. I walked in a wide circle, reluctant to go too far from Nidras.

When my ears finally picked up the sound of falling water I headed in that direction. A creek filled with clean, blue water bubbled happily through the woods, creating a deep pool in one spot that looked inviting.

I filled my water skin with cool water, drank my fill and then refilled it for Nidras. Fighting an overwhelming urge to linger, I returned to the spot where I'd left her. She was still sleeping.

I lay down and curled myself around her, hoping my presence would carry her back to strength more quickly. Exhausted, I drifted off to asleep.

It was full dark when I woke up. Nidras was still sleeping beside me. I lay there, my eyes adjusting to the dim light of the wood. The moon was fat and bright but it streamed through the thick tree cover in thin ribbons.

A slim beam of moonlight rested on Nidras, creating blue sparks in her hair. On impulse, I buried my nose in her neck, inhaling her warm, sweet scent. I placed a soft, lingering kiss on the velvet skin of her neck.

She stirred finally and her eyes fluttered open. She turned a sleepy, lavender gaze my way. Lifting her hand, she cupped my bristly cheek. "Hey."

I turned my head and placed a kiss in her palm. "Hey yourself. How're you feeling?"

She slid her fingers into my hair and licked her lips. "I'm great. I didn't expect to see you again."

I tapped the tip of her nose with my forefinger. "I've told you before, I'm not that easy to get rid of."

Her smile was eminently sad. She dropped her gaze and hid her feelings behind thick, black lashes.

Fear slid through me. I knew what she was thinking and I wasn't going to accept it. It wasn't over between us. I would fight to my death to save what we'd managed to scrap and scavenge from the complex whirl of our existence.

No amount of magic in the world could keep me away from Nidras.

Only one thing could stop me. Nidras herself.

The pain in her face made my stomach clench in fear. In anguish, I lowered my head and captured her lips.

I pulled her close and held her tight, not willing to let her slip away from me. Nidras responded eagerly. Her kiss was filled with a soft sort of hopelessness.

I was determined to take that hopelessness and turn it into something warmer.

Wedging a knee between her legs, I rolled over her, resting my weight on my elbows as I tasted her face, neck and chest with my lips and tongue.

Nidras' mouth opened in a soft sigh. Her legs parted and she arched her back to press her velvety mound into my thigh. I slipped a hand under her sweater and found the lacy edges of her bra, tucking a finger beneath the edge to skim her breasts.

Her nipples peaked and hardened under my probing touch.

I pulled the sweater up and freed a plump breast from the restraining lace, sucking it into my mouth as Nidras pulled her head back on a moan. Her fingers fumbled with the button of my jeans.

I released her other breast and pulled it into my hungry mouth. My other hand found the heated vee between her thighs. I slid a finger through the crease, bringing a moan of delight from Nidras as I passed over the tender bud that was the seat of her desire. The soft fabric of her slacks was a thin barrier to my attentions.

She redoubled her efforts to remove my jeans. I rolled to the side just long enough to help us both undress. When she was naked and compliant beneath me I wasted no time tucking my raging cock between her thighs. With a groan of ecstasy, I slid into her welcoming pussy.

Her body pulled me into hot, moist ecstasy even as her legs wrapped around my hips to hold me there. As I settled into a slow, breath-stealing tempo, Nidras' inner muscles held me tight, creating a wonderful friction as my flesh buried itself deeply inside her heated channel and then retreated slowly, delightfully.

Nidras played her fingers softly across my buttocks. I shivered as she slid a finger toward my most vulnerable spot, breaching the deep crevice between my buttocks and pressing gently on the sensitive, puckered flesh there.

My tempo increased under her ministrations. No one had ever touched me there. Rather than being repulsed, as I would have guessed I would be, her gentle probing made my cock throb with delight and my balls tighten in anticipation.

I lifted Nidras' hips and drove myself even more deeply into her body. Nestling my face in her fragrant neck, I found the pulse beating at her throat and nibbled on the sweet flesh covering it. Nidras' body tensed as her release slid over her and she cried out, my name a sweet proclamation on her lips.

As her pussy throbbed around me Nidras inserted her finger, up to the first joint, into my tender asshole and I screamed, sliding over that bright edge into my own orgasm. My body rocked for a full minute in release. I'd never experienced anything like it. I was completely helpless under the sensual assault, as wave after wave of pleasure swamped me, tightening my muscles and making my toes curl hard against the soles of my feet.

Nidras' body convulsed a second time as cum boiled out of my balls and shot deep into her body. She jerked under the assault of each emission, the pale oval of her beautiful face showcasing her delight.

I collapsed over her body, still semi-hard inside her. I found myself completely unable to pull away. My body recognized that we were a perfect fit and I fought the irrational fear that, if we separated, she would disappear.

Nidras' eyes were closed, her chest rising and falling in the aftermath of our sensual activities. Her vagina pulsed gently around my quickly recovering cock. When I started to move inside her again her eyes popped wide and she grinned.

"Greedy Cupid."

I plunged deep and she gasped. "I have to mark you while I can."

A cloud slid across her pretty face. She opened her mouth to respond but I couldn't let her speak. I didn't want to hear what I knew she'd say. So I lowered my lips and kissed her, deeply and thoroughly and increased the tempo of my driving hips.

Nidras' eyes closed and she sighed against my lips. If I couldn't keep her forever, I'd at least enjoy this brief time with her.

For just this moment in time, she was mine.

No one...not even Nidras...could take the treasured moments away from me.

Nidras stood completely still, her back to me and watched the castle. Her hand was at her throat, fondling the chain of the necklace I'd grabbed off the dragon and returned to her after making love. Her tears as I'd pulled it out and handed it to her made me realize my instincts had been right on. The necklace meant a lot to her.

My eyes were glued to the parapet, which roiled with movement high above us.

"Gremlins."

I nodded. The small monsters's helmets were barely visible above the arrow slots. "Small but deadly."

Nidras turned to me and I grinned. "I learn. Sometimes the hard way...but I *do* learn."

Her soft laughter drove a spear of pain into my chest and made my cock twitch. I had felt her withdrawing from me as our last kiss ended. She was just as sure that this would be our final encounter as I was determined that it wouldn't be. I vowed silently to change that surety.

Nidras nodded toward the lower battlements. "He's got intuitive demons on the wall. They'll know we're out here."

I frowned. "Awesome."

Nidras expelled air. "Yeah."

"If they're demons, shouldn't they be on your side?"

She started walking toward the castle. "I wish it were that simple, Hermes."

"Yeah." I said. "The only thing simple around here appears to be me." Nidras had already been swallowed up by the dark. I hurried to catch up to her.

Chapter Eleven

Ass Kickin'

The night sky was a deep, blue-black. Not a single star sparkled above our heads as we moved silently toward the castle that rose from the ground ahead like a gaping wound against the sky. A thick layer of clouds scuttled across a narrow sliver of moon, strangling off even the reluctant offering of light provided there.

Since my vision was impaired by the lack of light, my other senses kicked into overdrive to compensate. I smelled the clean, mountain air, with just a tinge of magical residue dancing along a soft, hesitant breeze. My skin tingled under the aura of doom that permeated the dark place. My ears were attuned to the minute sounds around us, to the point where I could hear murmurs from the castle guards, still hundreds of yards away.

As we neared the high, stone walls at the base of the castle, the shadows were disturbed by occasional movement from the wizard's guards, giving us an ever-changing look into the position and number of them.

Nidras stopped and reached back, touching my arm. She squeezed it gently, five times.

Five guards.

I didn't know what kind of monsters awaited us by the castle wall but I would be ready.

I used both hands to pull the chain from my neck, keeping it taut so the links wouldn't clank together and give away our position. Nidras nodded her head toward the left and silently drew both knives. She stepped forward, moving to the right.

She took off running and, a moment later I heard the wet sound of her knives sliding through flesh and the muffled groan of dying guards.

As I was sure she'd planned, the guards on my side were already looking toward the sound of her attack and taking steps toward her when I arrived.

The first two didn't even know I was there as I whipped the chain around their necks and jerked hard, easily breaking the fragile bones of their spines.

As the second guard dropped, a sword split the air beside my head and a burning sensation across the top of my ear told me it had been a close call. A warm trickle of blood ran down my face and neck as I turned, lifting the chain to catch the sword before the guard had time to strike again.

The chain encircled the razor-sharp metal and I jerked my arm, yanking it from my attacker's grip and flinging it several yards away into the black night. The guard flung himself at me, grabbing me around the neck with thick, enormously strong fingers.

I looked into small, black eyes, overscored by thick, spiky black eyebrows. He looked like a human but had the strength of a large grizzly bear.

The guard was too close for me to swing the chain. As he closed off my wind and my lungs clenched in panic, my instincts were screaming at me to drop my chain and try to push him off me.

I fought that urge and instead lifted the chain and wrapped it around the front of his throat. I was limited in my range of movement by his arms. Stars burst before my eyes as his grip tightened around my throat. I couldn't get as much pressure on his neck as I needed to but I gave it everything I had, pressing the thick metal against his windpipe for all I was worth.

I knew I was getting to him when he started trying to shake me off. His black eyes widened against the pain I was inflicting.

His fingers twitched on my throat and I managed to gasp a breath, giving me renewed strength to press the chain.

He coughed, choking against the pressure at his throat. I jerked upward, hard, knocking his arms away to remove his hands from my throat and ramming the chain up into the soft tissue under his chin.

He fell backward, grabbing at his throat and I swung the chain toward his legs, jerking him off his feet.

He went down hard, exposing Nidras, who was standing behind him with a blood-coated knife.

I looked down at the dead guard. His human form morphed and thickened into something vaguely reptilian, with greenish skin and claws at the end of twisted, bent limbs. His head lengthened and flattened, like an alligator's.

"I was just getting around to killing him, you know."

She grinned at me and cocked an eyebrow. "We don't have all night."

We stepped over the bodies Nidras had created and moved silently through the door in the wall. Unlike the last time we were there, the courtyard was dark and silent. Empty.

The aura around the castle was thick with menace. I held the chain in my hands in front of me, ready to use at any moment. A bitter, unnatural cold permeated the space. My skin numbed under its assault and I fought against its anesthetizing effects.

My eyes scanned the shadowed edges of the space, which, in my adrenaline-charged imagination, seemed to spin and roil with threat. My head whipped toward the soft sound of movement in the shadows near the castle door. A flash of flame colored red danced across my vision and disappeared in a blink. A wisp of ethereal gray floated from the shadows and vanished in the stingy light of the moon.

Icy cold settled over me and something touched my cheek, like a cold breath from the grave. I jumped sideways with a gasp.

Nidras turned toward me, her eyes glistening briefly in the low light. "What's wrong?"

"You don't feel it?"

"Feel what?"

I just shook my head. Apparently I was imagining things.

We entered the castle and traversed the maze of hallways before stepping onto the dark, winding staircase that would take us to the wizard's lair.

The lack of guards along the way was strangely disconcerting.

A single, weak oil light illuminated each level of the twisting staircase, providing a barely adequate light to navigate the rough stairwell.

The toe of my boot caught in an invisible crack on the stair and I fell sideways, touching the wall with the side of my fist to keep from falling. My hand sank into a thick layer of slime which burned like fire. I cried out and yanked my fist away, stumbling toward the opposite wall.

My shoulder sank into slime on the other side and smoke rose from my shirt. I jerked away with a gasp and fell into Nidras. She looked up at me and lifted an eyebrow.

I straightened away from her and said, "You okay? You looked a little nervous."

She just shook her head and started back up the stairs.

Rubbing my arm I glared at the wall and started after her, taking care to stay in the center of the stairwell.

The wizard's door was suspiciously free of guards. Nidras and I stopped at the top of the stairs and shared a glance. With our weapons drawn and ready, we slowly moved toward the closed door, our eyes sliding over the area in search of traps.

Nothing came out of the shadows.

Nothing dropped onto our heads.

When we stood in front of the door and nothing happened, Nidras nodded at me and I stepped back to give myself room to kick. I put all my strength into a single kick to the side of the door knob and the door flew open.

It was an attempt to give us the element of surprise.

It had been a wasted effort.

Nothing was inside that room.

I mean nothing.

A vast, black nothingness filled the space beyond the door. Nidras grabbed my shirt as the impetus of my kick nearly carried me over and into the abyss.

A small pebble from the threshold arced out over the black nothingness and Nidras and I watched it disappear, then waited to hear it land.

It never landed.

The seemingly endless black mass was complete and utter stillness.

I dropped the chain back around my neck, figuring it wasn't going to help me with what was inside that room.

Whatever was in that room, nothingness didn't accurately describe it. It wasn't corporeal but it *was* a living, breathing presence that pulled at me, drawing me in.

I shook my head and stepped backward.

As Nidras wavered on the threshold, her shoulders tipping inward in response to the pull of the black mass, I grabbed her hand and yanked her back with me. She stumbled back with a cry and blinked up at me.

She'd been falling under the spell of whatever was in that room. I turned her and looked into her eyes. "There's something there. It's not just a black hole."

Licking her lips, she nodded. "It was calling to me."

"Is the wizard in there?"

"I don't know." Her voice was little more than a husky whisper. For just the barest moment in time, I saw naked fear in her beautiful lavender eyes.

I pulled her close, feeling the weight she carried around on her slim shoulders... had carried for years. I kissed the top of her head. "It's going to be all right, Nidras."

She shook her head. "No. It's never going to be all right."

Her slender body shivered violently in my arms. My heart broke for her. In an effort to distract and soothe, I lifted her chin with a finger and touched my lips to hers. Her body melted into mine and her arms rose to twine around my neck. I could feel the cold point of one of her knives against the nape of my neck but I forced myself to ignore it.

My body reacted immediately and violently to her nearness. My cock jumped to life and stiffened, straining against the inflexible denim of my jeans. My hands slid from her waist to her pert, little buttocks and I pulled her into my raging erection.

She sighed against my lips, her sweet tongue dancing erotically with mine. I could feel the expectant peaks of her nipples against my ribs and taste her lust on my tongue. My brain shut down as hunger built. I slipped my hands under her soft sweater and slid them up her back.

Her skin was like warm silk under my palms. I wrapped my hands over her shoulders and dragged her up hard against my body, grinding my painful erection into her soft belly. Nidras' knives clattered to the floor behind me and her fingers slipped under the waistband of my jeans at the small of my back. They slid around to the front, creating a warm trail of need in their wake.

Before I even realized what she was doing, she'd tugged the button open and slid her hand down inside. I nearly came when her silken fingers encompassed my cock.

She pulled me free and dropped to her knees before me.

I groaned and my head dropped back in delighted expectation.

Something tugged at my lust-soaked brain.

Something was wrong.

Nidras' soft mouth closed over my rigid flesh, sending shock waves of delight through my body. My knees threatened to buckle under me.

I forced them straight and reveled in the wonder of her heated mouth on my aching cock. Dragging my fingers through her soft, spiky hair, I growled with building need.

Beyond the feelings of wonder her mouth engendered. Beyond the fierce joy of her touch. Something tugged at me.

Something warned me.

I tried to wrap my mind around the nagging thought waiting just outside my reach but I couldn't grasp it. It kept getting washed away under the delightful drag of her hungry tongue against my needy flesh.

The first thing I noticed was heat. Even still, it didn't work its way into my fevered brain until my entire left side was nearly on fire.

The pain of blistering skin finally cleared my mind. My eyes jerked open and I pulled away from Nidras. I grabbed her shoulders and dragged her to her feet.

She made a pitiful mew of protest but didn't meet my gaze. I realized her eyes were glazed and blank. I shook her until her eyes cleared slightly. By that time the room was so hot we were covered in sweat. "We need to get out of here."

She blinked.

A deep, rumbling sound emerged from the black mass and flames licked outward, shooting toward us from the doorway and nearly touching our skin.

Reaching down, I grabbed her knives from the floor and slid them into my waistband. I captured her wrist and ran toward the stairs. Flames licked up at us from the narrow stairwell.

We turned away and ran as far from the flames as possible, toward the only exit available to us.

The window.

I leaned out of the rough rectangle cut in stone and looked down. The ground beneath the window sloped dramatically away, falling in a rocky plunge toward a raging river far below. The nearest point of land was at least ten stories down and there were no ridges or ledges along the wall to use as footholds.

I swore silently and pulled my head back inside. Nidras stood silent beside me, her gaze focused on the approaching flames. She had no expression on her beautiful face. Her eyes were soft and blank.

Whatever was in that room had captured her mind. I only hoped it would lose its influence over her once I got her away.

If I was able to get her away.

Nidras' face suddenly split in a delighted smile. I followed her gaze to see the black mass within the wizard's lair roiling and thickening, spilling outward. My gaze locked on the terrible sight and I seemed unable to drag it away.

About ten feet off the floor, two bright yellow orbs suddenly appeared, hanging in the midst of the mass.

Eyes.

Cold malevolence spilled from the disembodied orbs.

Despite the heat I shivered violently.

Something screamed outside the window and broke the spell the thing had cast over me. I jerked away, dragging Nidras away from the new threat. But what I saw outside made me smile.

Ashtov hovered a few feet away from the window, her bulging, brown eyes wide with fear.

Her damaged wing stuttered fitfully on the air but she was apparently still able to use it to fly. Her tattered and blotchy, white form was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

I pulled Nidras to the window and shoved her up, onto the wide ledge. An enraged roar shook the stone walls hard. I stumbled, barely keeping my feet and when I looked back toward the window Nidras was gone.

I screamed her name and poked my head out, gasping in relief when I saw her sprawled over Ashtov. "Go! Get her out of here. Take her to the tavern down below! I'll join you there." Ashtov snorted, tossed her head in understanding and took off.

The deafening roar grew until I had to cover my ears or lose my hearing entirely. The stone floor beneath me rolled and buckled, throwing me to the ground several feet away from the window. Clogging heat moved over me, pressing me down and sucking air from the room, until breathing became torture. The air I pulled into my lungs was like glowing embers from a raging fire.

It seared my nostrils and burned holes in my lungs. I thanked the gods for my month-long Brimstone habit. Hopefully I'd formed protective calluses on my lungs from that.

My vision darkened from the lack of air and I realized I would soon pass out. If I was going to get the hell out of there I'd have to do it quickly. But my body didn't have the will to move. I was as close to dead as I could get with a beating heart. So I did the only thing I could to survive. I rolled to my side, curled into a fetal position to minimize the monster's touch on my vulnerable parts and closed my eyes. Concentrating hard, I forced my mind away from pain and terror and fought to pull my power forward.

It was nearly impossible under the stress of my current situation.

At first nothing happened. But after a moment of concentrated effort I felt the power dragging reluctantly from its warm bed at the center of my mind. It spiraled upward in a lazy ribbon. As it climbed it grew until, at last, I felt the power take hold and pulse, awaiting my command, just at the surface of my mind.

I thought of the tavern where I'd sent Nidras and prayed that I didn't screw it up. Finally, I felt the hard stone beneath my body soften and slip away.

I landed, hard, on the filthy cobblestones of the street in front of the tavern. A muffled shout warned me just before a heavy hoof, clad in an iron shoe, stomped on my head. Still dazed from the magic inferno I'd narrowly escaped, I managed to roll out of the way before I was trampled.

The driver of the carriage that had nearly run me over swore colorfully and spat in my direction. The lugy missile hit the cobblestones by my shoulder, just missing me. Glad to have dodged that bullet, I pushed to my feet. My nose twitched at an offensive odor. Glancing down with a grimace, I realized the nearest source of the stench was me. I'd rolled into a fresh, green pile of horse shit.

Heading into the tavern, I experienced a sudden jolt of nostalgia for Earth and the magic of sleek metal and clean rubber tires. I opened the door and was nearly barreled over by a small, dark-haired firecracker.

"Hermes! Oh my gods!" Nidras flung her arms around my neck. "I was coming to find you. I feared you'd be dead." She recoiled from me almost immediately. "Bleurg! You smell worse than death!"

I grabbed her arms. "You're okay? Where's the horse?"

"I'm fine. What horse?"

"The horse who showed up just in time to rescue you. The horse I flew in on." That sounded like the title of a bad movie.

She just shook her head. "I woke up outside, on the sidewalk. I didn't see any horse." She grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the stairs. "Come on, we still have our room. Nobody would stay in it after Grimsbar burst through the window the last time." She turned toward the bar and called out to the gruff looking man behind it. "I need a bath poured. Immediately!"

The man scowled at her but nodded.

The tattered stairwell was a brutal reminder of our previous stay. I wondered how many people Grimsbar had killed on his way through the tavern. Other than scorch marks and a few damaged boards, the tavern showed no permanent signs of the horrifying incident.

I was surprised the owner would let us stay there again. I said as much to Nidras.

She grinned. "I didn't ask for a room. I just gave him a look and he threw the key at me."

Nidras pulled me into the same room we'd shared before and started tugging on my clothes. "We'll need to wash these too."

The shirt came off and was quickly discarded in a far corner of the room. When she reached for my jeans I stopped her. "Whoa, girl. I'll hold onto these until the bath is filled, thank you."

She grinned widely. "Prude."

A knock sounded on the door and two young women opened it without being invited in. Each woman was carrying two buckets of steaming water. They both skimmed me with hungry gazes, lingering on my naked chest and unbuttoned jeans. One of them winked at me, sliding a small, red tongue over full lips. I fought the urge to cross my arms over my chest, lifting my eyebrows meaningfully at Nidras.

She just laughed. I suddenly wondered if she had Succubus in her family tree.

Several buckets later Nidras closed and bolted the door behind the two eager-eyed young women. I finished stripping and sank gratefully into the hot water. "Oh my gods, this feels good."

I leaned back, closing my eyes and gave myself over to the pleasure of being immersed in hot, clean water. Something soft and wispy landed on my face and my eyes shot open.

Nidras' panties were pale yellow silk, with lace insets and carried her spicy scent on them. My shaft stiffened happily as I lifted the wisp of cloth off my face, grinning as Nidras stepped into the tub with me. "You looked lonely."

"Oh, I was." I stuck the panties into my mouth, making Nidras giggle and reached out to grab her hips, lowering her onto my rigid cock.

Nidras twisted my nipples between her fingers and began a slow, sensual glide up and down on my hard shaft.

Reaching between our bodies, I found the tiny, hard bud of her clitoris, catching it in a gentle grip between my thumb and forefinger and squeezing it gently.

In response, Nidras moaned huskily and increased the tempo of her ride on my throbbing cock. I leaned forward, pulling a long, hard nipple into my mouth and sucking hard while milking the sensitive bud of flesh between my fingers.

Nidras' head whipped back and forth as her pleasure built and she twisted my nipples to the point of pain. In response, I bit down on the nipple in my mouth and then washed away the sting with a swipe of my hungry tongue.

Nidras was nearly frantic with building lust. She increased her tempo on my cock until my balls pulled up tight against my body, boiling with a need for relief.

I watched her beautiful face, savoring each perfect feature, every soft angle. Her lips were parted slightly, her eyes closed. Her tongue slipped out and stroked along her top lip, as if savoring the fine taste of a precious delicacy.

Thick with need, my shaft pulled even more taut, engorged and painfully tender. Incredibly, watching her made me even harder. Her writhing body and gently contorted face was like an expensive aphrodisiac, building an almost intolerable hunger in my body that I longed to quench.

Nidras' breasts bounced perkily as she increased the tempo of her dance on my cock. She reached up and cupped them in her hands, tweaking her nipples and moaning from the pleasure her touch engendered.

My balls were like rocks as I watched a soft, pink flush rising into her face. Her lips opened and sharp, white teeth covered her soft bottom lip.

I licked my own lips, starving for a taste of her.

Nidras' lavender gaze lost its focus. Her muscles tightened and her eyes fluttered as her release built to the breaking point. As the pleasure finally swamped her, she flung back her head and screamed, her body going rigid as waves of pleasure slid over her. I felt the shock waves in the way her body pulsed around mine, pulling me toward the edge right along with her.

Dancing on that razor edge of release, I sucked in a breath and stilled her hips with my hands. For a heartbeat in time, ecstasy danced just out of my reach, taunting me, drawing me in. My hungry cock stretched her sweet channel, expanding impossibly under my aching need for her. I hung in that sweet torture for a heartbeat of time and then Nidras' body pulled helpfully on mine and I fell over the razor-sharp edge with a growl of ecstasy.

Sitting upright in the tub, I buried myself deep and, for what felt like a full minute, filled her hungry pussy with the hot result of my release. Nidras' body responded by taking her over with me again. I clenched my teeth as her pussy

clamped around me again, pulling the last tender waves of pleasure out of my softening flesh.

We collapsed into a soft, rubbery pile in the cooling water.

Nidras peppered my face with tender kisses that had the flavor of regret.

I put a finger under her chin and lifted it, seeing evidence of her feelings in the pain infusing her beautiful gaze. "This isn't the end for us, Nidras. I won't let you go."

A single tear slid down her cheek. Shaking her head, she stood up and stepped out of the tub.

My body cringed from the loss.

I stood up and grabbed for her. Her skin was slippery and she easily pulled away. She stood like a beautiful statue in front of the fire, her long, elegant back toward me and her head dropped forward.

The picture of Greek tragedy.

When she spoke, her voice was husky with regret. "I need to find Grimsbar."

I stepped out of the tub and reached for a towel. It was warm from the fire. Coming up behind Nidras, I dropped a gentle kiss on the sweet-smelling spot between her neck and her shoulder and draped the warm towel over her.

She shivered.

"We'll fix this together, Nidras. I won't let you push me away."

She shook her head. "You can't be part of this, Hermes. I gave you up for the power I need to slay Grimsbar."

"We'll find a way around that." Grabbing a second towel, I started to dry myself off. When Nidras left that room I was going with her. I'd go naked if I had to, I'd certainly done it before but this time I hoped to leave the more traditional way, dressed and through the front door.

Nidras sighed and reached for the towel I'd draped over her shoulders. She dried herself off as I pulled on my ripped and soiled clothes with a grimace.

Dropping the towel, she looked around for the clothing she'd discarded. Our eyes fell to the small wisp of pale yellow floating in the tub. Her smile sent desire pooling in my gut. "I guess I'm going commando."

I laughed. "That visual will get me through anything the damned wizard can throw at us."

Shaking her head, her smile slid away and she reached for her clothes.

Chapter Twelve

High Stakes

A knock sounded on the door as I was pulling my sneakers on. I reached for my chain. Nidras calmly walked to the door as if she'd known we were going to get a visitor.

The person standing outside the door was distraught and looked as if he'd ridden through the night on a bumpy, bad-tempered horse. His clothes were filthy. His oily, brown hair stuck up in clumps, as if the wind had pulled sticky fingers through it and locked it upright. Blood had dried in streams down a filthy but well muscled forearm.

He dropped to one knee before Nidras. At first, I thought he'd collapsed. Nidras touched his head. "Rise, Caleb."

The man got shakily to his feet. "Your Highness. The wizard has taken your parents prisoner. We fought as hard as we could but..." His voice choked off under a wave of emotion.

I stepped closer to Nidras and placed a supportive hand in the small of her back.

Nidras didn't make a sound. She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. When she spoke her voice was strong. "Where has he taken them?"

The man shook his head. "Into the castle dungeons. He awaits you there."

"Are they...harmed?"

A single tear slid from the man's eye. "The queen was unharmed. She was exceedingly brave, Princess. But your father..." His gaze slid away. Reluctance shaped the man's entire demeanor. It was obvious that he didn't want to tell Nidras what had happened to her father. "It would be best if you hurried, Princess."

Nidras nodded. "You may go. Return to the castle and see that everyone is evacuated safely. Take them to the summer castle in the mountains and await our arrival. I will bring the king and queen there to recuperate once I've released them."

I was filled with a sense of pride at her poise in the face of great personal anguish. Despite the horror of the news she'd just received, she looked every bit the queen she would one day be. It made me love her all the more.

When the man left, Nidras finally turned and met my gaze. Her lavender gaze was cold, emotionless. Only the barest quiver in her chin betrayed her emotions.

I touched her face and the mask fell away. She allowed a single tear to slide down her cheek. She grabbed my shirtfront in two small hands and pulled me close. Standing on her toes, she placed her soft lips against mine and rent my world in half with a kiss that was filled with goodbyes.

When she pulled away her eyes and cheeks were wet. "Take care of yourself, Hermes. I'll think of you always."

I reached out for her but she was gone.

"Shitttt!" I stormed out the door and ran down the stairs, into the street. The man who'd come to Nidras, apparently her servant, was just kicking his exhausted horse in the ribs in front of the tavern.

I barreled into the street, grabbing for the horse's reins. The creature reared up with a shriek of alarm but I managed to hold on.

"Wait! Please stop!"

The man looked down at me with dead eyes. I got the feeling it had taken almost everything he had within him to get to Nidras and give her the news.

"Where is she going?"

He frowned. "Who, Sire?"

"Nidras! The Princess. She disappeared just after you left. Where is she going?"

"Why, to the castle, Sire. Just like I told ye up there..." He jerked his head toward the tavern. "The dark one holds her parents in the dungeons."

"In her own castle?"

The man nodded. "'Tis a message to the Princess. That castle was warded against evil centuries ago and has never been breached by such as he. It is a very bad sign that he was able to breach its magic now. He will kill her parents if she doesn't do as he's demanded."

Although I was pretty sure I already knew the answer, I asked the obvious question anyway. "What exactly does he want her to do?"

The man's scruffy eyebrows went north on his filthy face. "Why, marry him of course. Their mating will fulfill the dark prophecy. It will signify the beginning of the end for Olympus." The messenger sagged in his saddle, sadness evident in the despondent curve of his spine.

"Dark prophecy?"

Gloomy brown eyes found mine. Any light the man had carried in his soul throughout his life was gone. He'd already given up. He believed all was lost. He apparently felt that Nidras would fail.

I couldn't believe that.

It would kill everything inside me to believe it.

"The dark prophecy portends the rise of one so powerful and so evil, that he will overtake and rule nearly every power in the universe. He would be more powerful even than the Council of Gods, more commanding than Zeus himself."

"And he'd gain this power just from marrying Nidras?"

The man shook his head. "Nay. The mating would be just the start of it. But with the mating he would gain a vast source of power from which he could feed for decades to come."

I frowned, feeling a cold horror sprouting in my gut. "Feed?"

The man drooped even lower in the saddle. "Aye. The Princess. An enormous legacy of power, passed down from royal family to royal family over millennia, is her dowry. When she is wed, that power will go to her. It is her birthright."

"But if she's to gain all that power, why can't she use it against the wizard?"

He shook his head. "The power is safeguarded. It cannot be used against her mate. The magic won't flow that way. But if the wizard has control over her, which he would under the marriage contract, he can drain the power from her as much and for as long as he would wish." The man's eyes grew wet and the icy ball of horror in my stomach threatened to take me to my knees. "Until he drains her dry."

Against my will, my mind formed a horrible picture of Nidras quivering in a corner, drawn and sunken from the wizard's cruel work, her flawless white skin shriveled and blotched and her beautiful lavender gaze glazed with weakness.

It was unacceptable. I had to do something.

I realized at that moment that I no longer cared if Nidras was mine to keep. I only cared that she live, free and safe in this world.

I would die to save her. My last breath would be a happy one, if only she was free.

I grabbed the man's thigh and leaned toward him, my gaze fierce on his in an effort to draw him out of his hopeless funk. Caleb tried tugging on the horse's reins to move away from me but I still held one of them in my grip.

I knew I must look like a madman to him but I didn't care. I needed to get through to him. I needed his help.

"This isn't over! Do you hear me? Nidras needs our help and we won't let her down. Do you understand?"

The man shook his head. "There is nothing one such as I can do, Sire."

"Yes, there is. You can get me to her. So I can help her slay the wizard."

He blinked at me. Slowly a smile split his filthy face. "I can do that, Sire. Yes I can."

"Yes. You can. Now how can I get into those dungeons without the wizard knowing?"

He frowned. "It won't be easy, Sire. The wizard isn't alone. He's brought many of his guards with him. They swamp the palace. Many of the servants and friends of the family have already been killed." He started to slump in the saddle again.

"So I won't go in the front door. There has to be another way into the castle. In particular, the dungeons."

The man started to shake his head and then stopped. He turned to me and it was as if someone flipped a light on behind his eyes. "Why yes, Sire. There is a way."

"Good." I slapped the man's thigh. "Now bring this poor nag to the stables. She won't make it a mile, let alone the dozens of miles we need to travel to get back to Olympus. I have another way."

I turned toward the stables, trusting the man to follow and prayed Ashtov was still in residence there. I was counting on the fact that she would be fed and well rested.

She'd need every ounce of strength she had to carry Caleb and me back to Olympus.

* * * * *

I left Caleb on the street in front of the Building of Justice and followed his careful instructions to locate the back way into Nidras' family castle. The moat at the back of the castle was fed from a sparkling river located about half a mile away. Called Aphrodite's Tears, after the thousands of romances the goddess created and discarded throughout millennia, the river cut a wide, sparkling swath across the mountain's face for several miles and then disappeared underground. Rumor had it as the source of Lover's Fall, the waterfall and pool in the Garden of Love, deep within Mount Olympus. The Garden of Love was known to hold deep magics for those who were lucky enough to discover it.

According to Caleb, over the centuries, the river had chiseled itself deeply into the rock on the side of the mountain and a warren of caves and passageways had been uncovered as the water dropped away. Though Caleb had never seen it, supposedly one of the passageways led to the dungeons of the demons' castle.

Ashtov and I flew along the edge of the river, scanning the rocky bluffs on the City side for signs of a cave or passageway.

I fought against despair during the entire exercise. Hours had already passed since Nidras had popped away from me to take on Grimsbar. If I were standing with her at that very moment, I might already be too late. But I still had to find the right entrance, follow it and make it into the dungeons before I could even begin to help her.

My mind kept telling me I'd be too late.

My heart kept telling my mind to go fuck itself.

I couldn't be too late.

I wouldn't accept that.

Though the challenges before me were innumerable, I told myself I had a warrior's heart. And warriors didn't let a little thing like low odds for success defeat them.

Right.

My cynical side was telling both my heart and mind they were spongy from Brimstone abuse.

Ashtov let out a squawk of alarm, jolting me from my musings. A dark shadow fell over us and I looked up. A huge black bird, with a thick, sharply curved golden beak dived toward us from the pewter clouds over our heads. It wasn't Grimsbar but it looked deadly enough that it didn't matter. Its bright, black eyes were cold, emotionless and reflected like a mirror. I saw a quick, excruciating death reflected on the surface of them.

My death.

I swore and dragged the chain from around my neck. "I don't have time for this shit!"

As the monster's wings pounded the moisture-filled air above the raging river, my gaze scanned our surroundings in search of a place to take a stand. Nothing but water and jagged rocks met my search. I knew Ashtov would never be able to outmaneuver the thing, she was bulky and relatively slow compared to the bird-shaped monster coming at us.

I made a sudden decision. "Fly straight and true, Ashtov!"

Gritting my teeth, I jumped to my feet and pushed myself upright on her back. Wobbling dangerously, I held the chain in one hand and began to swing it in deadly circles above Ashtov's head.

She rolled her terrified, brown gaze upward but flew straight and steady as I'd asked.

The monster in the air was a mere fifteen feet away at that point and was pounding its wings to slow its descent. As it slowed, dropping toward my head, its massive legs slid forward and its deadly claws opened, ready to snatch me from Ashtov's back.

I forced back panic and held my position, waiting for the monster to get within chaining distance. My goal was to get the chain around the thing's neck. I knew if I captured a leg it would just take me for a ride.

I'd never been one for thrill rides. Especially ones that culminated in me being smashed into bitty pieces against a rocky wall.

Unfortunately, my plan had one, teensy, tiny flaw in it. The creature's vulnerable throat wouldn't be within range until its claws had hold of me.

Sighing, I watched the jagged, ice-pick sized things slide into my shirt.

The bright, edge of excruciating pain pierced me and I screamed, both because it hurt like hell and pissed me off and because I was hoping my girlish shrieks would distract the monster from the fact that I'd jerked my arm to send the chain spinning around its scrawny neck.

As the chain closed and began to tighten, my feet left Ashtov's back and I found myself dangling in the air without a horse.

The claws in my shirt dug deeper in an effort to keep their grip and pierced deep, heading for bone. Warm blood poured down my sides and I almost lost my grip on the chain. But the thing was weakening from my grip, sliding sideways as it lost its sense of the currents holding it aloft.

The deadly black gaze began to dull from pain and loss of air. I knew I could finish the monster off with a healthy jerk of my wrist but the pain in my body was too great. I was having trouble breathing as I felt my flesh tearing away underneath those claws. The weight of my own body was killing me.

Ashtov returned. I felt her bony back beneath my flailing feet and relief flooded me as the tearing pain in my chest lessened. I grabbed a claw with my free hand and wrenched it away, jerking the hand with the chain hard enough to break the massive bird's neck.

I felt bone give way with a very satisfying crack and managed to pull the other claw free of my chest before the monster started to plummet toward the ground.

The thing pitched sideways as it fell, sending a giant wing slamming into me and knocking me off Ashtov again. I plummeted off her back and into nothing but air.

The river raged beneath me, not all that far away and I prayed I'd remember how to swim.

Unable to get my feet underneath me before I hit, I slammed chest first into the unforgiving surface of the icy water. The impact knocked the wind from my body and slammed my head backward. As I struggled to climb back toward the surface, my limbs quickly grew numb from the intense cold of the water and I discovered the current was every bit as strong as it had looked from above.

My arms and legs were heavy from the cold. Trying to do anything with them was like attempting to swing a bat under water. It was nearly impossible.

Finally, I was reduced to just keeping my face above water so I didn't drown. The river carried me inexorably downward, toward what, I had no idea.

After a couple of minutes I realized I was getting woozy.

I was jolted awake once by water in my nose as my head slid downward.

This spurred me to try swimming again but my limbs were too numb to work. The next time my head slid under I knew I didn't have the strength to rise above the water again. As my lungs screamed from lack of air, a strange, unexpected warmth came over me. At first I thought I'd swum through a warmer stream of water, like when you swim through a pee spot in the pool. Grimacing at the thought, I finally slammed into something large that seemed to be anchored in the midst of the raging water and was able to pull my head out of water.

It was a huge rock, jutting out from the shore into the river. I pulled my arms out of the water and let the sun warm them until I could move them again. Then I dragged myself out of the water and lay there, panting and exhausted, until the sun performed its magic on me.

After a few moments' rest, I pushed myself to my feet and looked around. The only good thing about having been immersed in frigid water for several minutes was the fact that my wounds seemed to have been cauterized by cold. They only ached a bit and had stopped bleeding.

The rock wall jutted sharply inward, away from the river. It created a small, protected inlet with a sandy floor. Almost hidden from view.

A deeper shadow in the rock looked promising and I started toward it. The sand in the area was smooth, all except for a narrow band of footprints, heading toward the shadowed space in the back.

My heart rate picked up. I was pretty sure I'd found the cave.

I followed the footprints toward the shadow and entered the mouth of the cave. I noticed two things as soon as I entered, leaving behind the roaring sounds of moving water. First, much to my surprise, the space flickered with some kind of light. And second, I could hear voices not too far away.

* * * * *

Clotho looked up as I rounded the passageway about a dozen yards in from the cave mouth. "Well finally! We thought you'd never get here."

Nidras swung around, knives at the ready. "Hermes!" Her beautiful face was dark with anger and worry. "Are you responsible for this?"

I smiled. I couldn't help myself. Nidras was safe.

Unfortunately she took this to mean I *was* responsible, for whatever I was looking at.

"Dammit, Hermes! If my parents are dead..." Her throat closed around the words and she couldn't go on. That was when I noticed the tracks from spent tears on her pale cheeks.

I was at a total loss, turning to the Fates, I lifted a questioning eyebrow.

They had the good grace to look slightly ashamed. Atropos waved a hand in the air in front of her face and something popped.

Nidras shot forward, knives drawn and the air in the chamber where we stood suddenly thickened with magic and menace. Lachesis' long, auburn-colored hair floated around her head as she rapidly gained size. "I wouldn't do that were I you, girl."

I flung myself at Nidras, pulling her to the ground. We rolled across the floor, with me grimacing and gasping as the wounds on my sides came alive again.

Nidras struggled against me, cursing soundly.

When one of her bony, little elbows connected with the largest of my wounds I lost my temper. "Stop struggling woman!"

Much to my surprise she stopped.

"Hermes knew nothing of this," Clotho informed us.

Nidras' intense lavender gaze settled on my face searchingly. "Is it true?"

"I don't even know what *this* is."

"*This*," Atropos informed me, "is us trying to help."

"We couldn't just let her fly off and face Grimsbar alone. It would seal everyone's fates prematurely." Lachesis and Clotho smiled. They seemed proud of themselves over something.

Some of the angry tension left Nidras' body and I risked loosening my hold on her.

"We shouldn't have," Atropos added in a sulky voice. "If it became known that we interfered, our subjects would be pestering us unmercifully to change their fates for them." I looked over at the dark-haired beauty and read from the expression on her face that she hadn't been exactly enthused about the idea of "helping".

Nidras and I climbed to our feet. I looked at Clotho. "Thanks for helping me out there too, with the river."

She inclined her head, sending a soft cascade of blonde curls into her pretty, narrow face. "We had to do something. Nidras was growing old waiting for you to show up."

I opened my mouth to argue but decided it wasn't worth it. "Whatever. I appreciate it anyway."

"Now, off with you. Your destiny awaits."

I grabbed Nidras' arm and we started down the passageway, heading into the mountain's core. I stopped beside Atropos and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you for protecting us."

She shrugged, looking decidedly uncomfortable. "Our work is done. The rest is up to you. And I'll warn you, the outcome looks dubious. You are up against a powerful enemy. And you have very few resources."

I glanced at Nidras. "You might be surprised at the resources we have, Your Grace."

A small smile played across her lips. "May the gods go with you, Hermes."

I touched her velvet cheek with a fingertip. "They already have, Your Grace."

Chapter Thirteen

Destiny Awaits

The gentle, flickering light in the passageway stayed with us as we navigated the twists and turns of the narrow, rough-hewn space. I accepted the existence of the light, which had no visible source, as a final gift from the Fates.

Where, at first, our feet slogged through damp mud and sand, as the passageway climbed higher into the mountain the ground beneath our feet dried and hardened, until it was more rock than dirt.

Nidras didn't speak for the first several moments. When she finally broke the silence, her voice was thick with emotion. "I didn't want you involved."

I threw a quick glance over my shoulder. "I know."

Nidras was silent for a long moment before she spoke again. "Your presence is pure torture for me."

I stopped, turning to her. Reaching out, I cupped her soft cheek in my hand. "I know. I'm sorry."

She turned her head and placed a tender kiss in my palm. "Despite it all, I'm glad you're here."

I expelled the breath I didn't realize I'd been holding and nodded. We shared a smile and turned back to the task at hand.

Ahead of us, the passage widened out suddenly. A wide, black door was set into the rock at the end of the passage. A deep, orange light pulsed through the cracks around the door.

"Do you smell that?"

I nodded. "Black magic. The place is thick with it."

The sulfurous stench made it hard to breathe.

I could feel Nidras' tension rising with the knowledge that her parents had most likely been subjected to some horrible type of magical torture. "We'll get them out, Nidras."

Her eyes, when she looked up at me, were hard and emotionless. Someone who didn't know her as well as I did might believe she had no feelings. I recognized the brittle gaze for what it was, a need to step outside her emotions so she would be able to do what needed to be done. The impossible.

"Stand back, Hermes."

I opened my mouth to argue but Nidras lifted her hands and power vibrated from her like heat.

Although I moved back and away several feet, the concussion from the blast still threw me to my ass and sent splinters from the door into my skin.

By the time I'd pushed myself to my feet and run through the choking dust in the passageway, Nidras was already facing off with Grimsbar. The cavernous dungeons throbbed with power.

She stood with her back to the door, her small arms outstretched and globes of power and light dancing at her fingertips. Her shape wavered in the magic-drenched atmosphere and I was having trouble keeping her in my sight.

Squinting against the thickened, smoky air, I tried to make my way to her.

The ground beneath our feet rumbled and started to roll and crack under the combined pressure of the wizard's and Nidras' magics.

In the game of black magic chicken, Grimsbar blinked first and threw the first bolt of power.

A fat arrow of wizard's fire sizzled past and tore into the wall behind us like a laser through skin, easily melting a human being-sized hole in the rocky surface. Nidras dived to the side and rolled, shooting an arrow of her own type of power toward the wizard even before she'd fully gained her feet again. She spared me a quick glance. "Get my parents out of here!"

My eyes searched the smoky space for signs of the king and queen. I finally found them, hanging upside down from metal rings set into the ceiling. Cursing, I realized I'd never be able to reach them.

I had a few handy skills but flying unfortunately wasn't one of them.

Our only hope was to stop Grimsbar before he destroyed the dungeon and Nidras' parents with it.

With this goal in mind, I reached for my chain, only to discover that it was gone. "Shit!" It was still wrapped around the throat of the bird monster outside. My eyes frantically scanned the room looking for weapons.

A sword and a pair of knives, encrusted with jewels and forged from hard jet, were piled in a corner below the dangling forms of the king and queen. I figured they'd belonged to the royal couple.

Grabbing the knives first, I slid them through the belt loops on my jeans and grabbed the sword. Then, closing my eyes, I said a quick prayer for accuracy and shifted to a spot behind the wizard.

My feet hit the floor again just as Nidras sent a power arrow smashing into the wall behind the wizard. I threw myself sideways, losing the sword as I hit the ground and slid across the stone floor.

The sword clattered loudly away, briefly drawing the wizard's attention. The distraction was enough to give Nidras an opening and her power arrow hit Grimsbar, ripping into one shoulder and pretty much tearing his arm from his torso.

He barely staggered under the blow. I realized then that he was so infused with power he could feel no pain.

Grimsbar smiled at me, showing bloody teeth and lifted his uninjured arm toward me. I rolled to the side and the power missed me by a hair. The place where I'd been lying was a giant hole in the rock.

I pulled a knife loose and flung it, embedding it in the front of the wizard's thigh. The leg buckled and I used the brief opening it gave me to pull the second knife, flinging it toward him.

I didn't see if the second knife connected. The door opened and the room was suddenly filled with Grimsbar's guards. I dived away from another power arrow and came up holding the sword. The guards ran toward me in numbers too large to fight. But I had no choice. I slashed and fought like a madman, taking off heads and limbs and sliding the exquisitely sharp blade deep into chests. The pile of dead around me grew until I could barely lift my arms. But I gritted my teeth and fought on, the sounds of magical battle raging at the back of my consciousness.

I slashed the sword across the throat of a gremlin, separating its ugly little head from its body. Before I could turn to meet my next adversary, my left shoulder exploded with pain.

I looked up and saw a huge demon standing in front of me, his human form shed for the battle. He stood at least ten feet tall, with hard, leathery skin that showed signs of damage but which had served him well as armor in the fight.

He held a huge, bloody sword in one hand. As my shoulder throbbed and started to grow numb, I knew some of that blood was from me. The demon's face was wide and flat, with small, orange eyes and slanted holes for a nose, like a snake. Two enormous, curved horns curled from the sides of his head to either side of his snout. Spittle ran in thick ribbons from the inhuman mouth.

I stared at him for a long moment, realizing I was outgunned and under-fueled for the fight ahead. Sighing, I lifted the sword and saluted him with it. "Here's to achieving the impossible."

With a roar I dived toward the demon and drove the sword into his middle. The thing's skin was so hard the sword only pierced a few inches of flesh, not enough to take him to the ground.

He grabbed my shoulders and pulled me off my feet, holding me high above the ground as he opened the soggy maw of his snout. I grimaced at the snake-like, purple tongue writhing within his mouth. "That's nasty, man."

My eyes fell on Nidras, still fighting gamely on against the wizard and several of his guards. She was covered in blood and looked exhausted. I figured her chances weren't good for success.

I struggled against the demon's iron grip. Nidras needed my help and I wasn't going to let her down.

But it was no use. The demon was huge and incredibly strong.

Suddenly, magic in the form of light and heat smashed into me, throwing me out of the demon's hands and into the wall. I lay there writhing under the powerful stream of it, feeling as if my organs were melting inside my body.

I was vaguely aware of a shrill screaming that disturbed me, especially when I realized it was coming from me. My body twitched uncontrollably on the ground for what felt like several minutes and I lost track of what was going on around me.

When the pain gradually slid away, I realized my body was strong again. I felt invincible and whole. Jumping to my feet, I threw myself at the demon with a roar.

Grabbing the thing's horns in my two hands, I wrenched them sideways, feeling the bones of his neck break beneath my hands.

I landed softly beside the dead demon and looked across the room just in time to see Nidras leap twenty feet in the air and land on the wizard, taking him down to the ground.

They struggled for a moment as I rushed toward them. I watched in horror as Grimsbar shoved a hand into her chest and threw her backward on the end of a bright orange stream of power.

Nidras landed in a crumpled pile across the room.

"No!" I ran at the wizard, intending to run him through with the sword but, as I approached, he lifted his good hand and my sword flew away from me.

Empty-handed, I looked into the black gaze of a truly evil madman and saw my death in his eyes. In desperation, I reached for the only weapon I had left, the vial Atropos had pressed into my hand in the Garden of Life and slammed it into his teeth.

The vial broke and the liquid inside trickled down his throat, choking him. He spat glass toward my face and I rolled away, shooting to my feet and bracing myself for his attack.

The wizard flew off the ground and hung, suspended high above my head. His gown danced around him on a breeze created from sheer power.

I watched his face carefully for signs that the potion was affecting him. I didn't know what to expect, Atropos had said it contained a Cupid's power. I grimaced at the thought. The last thing I wanted was for the wizard to fall in love with anybody in that room. Particularly me.

But when I finally witnessed the change I was waiting for, it wasn't love I saw in his face. It was submission.

That's when it hit me. A Cupid's real power lies not in the power to give love but in the power to coerce others to accept it.

She'd given me a vial of coercion.

The wizard's black gaze dropped to me and his face was a mask of terror. He realized what I'd done. His will had been magically commandeered by the potion. It now belonged to me.

He had to do my bidding.

And he knew what that would be.

"What would you ask of me, Cupid?" The words were visibly forced from his throat.

I glanced at Nidras, unmoving, a small, terrifyingly still form on the floor. I feared she was dead. My heart broke and my knees threatened to buckle beneath me. My gaze slid across the limp, unmoving bodies of her parents, hanging upside down from the rough-hewn ceiling of that death-filled chamber.

The room smelled like a meat locker. The blood of dozens of the wizard's guards stained the floor in puddles and dried in crusted streaks on my hands and arms.

The evil creature hovering on the air above me had caused all of it. All the pain and terror and loss in that room was a direct result of his lust for power.

My gaze lifted toward Grimsbar and he gasped, seeing the end of his existence in its depths. It took only a single word to end it all.

"Die."

The wizard shuddered once and cried out. His evil, black gaze slid to his one, good hand as it started a slow, jerky trip toward his chest, power building in his palm to form a black, swirling ball of wizard's fire. As the hand landed on his chest, directly over his black heart, he opened his mouth and screamed, the horrific sound vibrating against the rock walls of the dungeon until his heart disintegrated and his mind shut down.

I turned away with a heavy heart, intending to gather up Nidras and get her out of that horrible place.

Unfortunately I wasn't able to carry through on that particular plan.

Nidras was gone.

* * * * *

"You once offered me your help if I ever needed it."

Nidras' father lifted sad, black eyes to me and nodded, sighing. "I gave you my strength in the dungeons, when you fought the demon."

"I appreciated that, believe me. But I need to ask one more thing of you."

Nidras' mother joined us in the drawing room, tucking her arm through her husband's and leaning against him as if she hadn't the strength to stand alone. "Nidras is gone, Hermes. You must accept it."

I shook my head. "Nidras didn't need to leave. The payment was due only if she slew the wizard herself. She didn't slay Grimsbar. I did."

The queen's beautiful lavender eyes widened in surprise. "Are you certain of this?"

I nodded. "I've been pestering the Council of Gods unmercifully for weeks, trying to get a ruling on it. The decision finally came through today." I handed them the proclamation and stepped toward the fire, leaning gratefully into the heat it emitted. I'd had trouble getting warm ever since the day Nidras disappeared and no one would tell me where she'd gone.

I could have told the king and queen that Nidras' release from her obligation had been accomplished with considerable help from the Fates, as well as Christian and Arion, who, as his granddaughter, fortunately had a lot of influence on Zeus. But I didn't care about any of that now. All that mattered was finding Nidras and telling her I loved her.

When I turned back, a shadow had lifted from the queen's beautiful face. "This changes everything."

But the king shook his head. "My daughter is very stubborn, Hermes. If she even guesses that you might be searching for her she will disappear and we'll never see her again."

"She won't disappear, Your Majesty. You have my word on that."

"How can you be sure?"

I smiled. "My entire happiness in this world depends upon it. I could have no greater incentive."

He stared hard at me for a long moment before finally nodding. "I would risk losing her forever, if it meant a chance to gain my beautiful girl her happiness. For she is truly miserable without you, Cupid."

"I plan on fixing that, Sire. As soon as I can."

Chapter Fourteen

Together...at Last!

Nidras grabbed another handful of jeans from the rack and slid them into place on the wall display. Her hands lingered on the softly bleached denim, her mind sliding traitorously to Hermes before she was even aware of it.

Hermes had loved his jeans. He'd worn them wherever he'd gone, whether fighting wizards or exploring the demon nightclubs of Olympus. The soft denim had hugged his perfect, round butt so wonderfully. She licked her lips as a wave of pure lust swamped her, locking her breath in her lungs.

"You can leave now." Nidras' new boss was a tall, prickly woman who wasted no time on warm fuzzies. Nidras glanced at the woman, nodded and turned away. She could feel her boss' speculative gaze as she left. But the woman never asked the questions she obviously harbored about her new employee.

The woman's standoffishness suited Nidras just fine. She didn't know how long she'd be able to stay there anyway, hidden among the cheap and garish clothing of the human teenager. If Hermes tried to find her again she'd have to run.

No sense getting attached to anyone.

She shuddered and went to get her things from the backroom. She didn't have much, just a small purse to carry makeup, money and keys for her new apartment and car. Thoughts of the car at least made her smile.

She'd cheated a bit on the car. Though she was trying to keep a low profile, she'd needed something that would make her feel better about losing the love of her life.

The Porsche definitely helped.

Whenever her mind started obsessing over Hermes, leaving her panties dripping with need and her nipples straining against the thin t-shirts she wore in her attempt to look like everyone else on Earth, she'd get into the Porsche and hit the highway, driving as fast and as far as she could before exhaustion overtook her.

Then she had at least a chance of being able to sleep without dreaming of him. A very small chance. Usually she woke up sweaty and breathless, with his name on her lips and need for him pulsing painfully in her drenched pussy.

She slid into the car and inhaled deeply, enjoying as always the rich smell of expensive leather. The car started right up, purring huskily.

Nidras decided it was a highway night.

She drove conservatively until she hit Highway 70 and then she pressed the accelerator to the floor, using her demon senses to shield her from the human police.

Luckily for her it was late and the roads were mostly empty.

She drove for several minutes, until the tautness of her muscles started to relax and she could breathe again without her chest clenching in pain. She turned the

radio up so that it throbbed all the way through her body and leaned her head back on the seat rest.

Nidras was growing very fond of human music. She especially liked this Nickleback minstrel. He had a sexy, husky voice...like Hermes. She decided she'd take some of his shiny round music discs back to Olympus with her if she ever returned.

The music was so loud that Nidras almost didn't hear the piercing sound of a siren coming up behind her. When she finally did, she ignored it for a few miles, figuring they'd just fly past her as they always did.

But somehow the police cruiser had gotten a fix on her.

How was that possible? Had her magics failed?

Unsure what to do, Nidras finally decided she'd better pull over. Getting thrown into jail was not exactly conducive to keeping a low profile.

The cop who pulled up behind her and got out of the cruiser was a woman. She was very tall and shapely for a cop but she wore her uniform well and had her hat pulled down to cover her eyes. Nidras rolled her window down and smiled at the cop as she approached. "Is something wrong, Officer?"

The cop stopped a few feet away from the car door and motioned for Nidras to get out of the car. "Put your hands on the side of the car and spread your legs."

Nidras frowned, panicking. "I don't think that will be necess..."

"Just do it!" The cop's voice was deep and she spoke with a slight lisp but the pretty mouth below the hat was tight with anger so Nidras did as she was told.

"I'll need to pat you down for weapons."

Nidras opened her mouth to argue but decided against it. Arguing would just draw the whole thing out. And the last thing she wanted was to antagonize the cop.

She felt soft hands patting her waist and hips and then sliding down her thighs. Nidras bit her lip with discomfort. She wasn't used to being touched against her will and she didn't like it. Not one bit. She fought against the urge to lash out at the over-familiar treatment.

When the soft fingers strayed into her crotch she jumped and tried to turn around. "Hey!"

"Sidra!"

Nidras jumped at the familiar sound of his deep voice. *Hermes! It couldn't be!*

Husky, unrepentant laughter met his stern tone.

Nidras gave an outraged cry. "Sidra! How dare you touch me so?"

The Succubus pushed her hat back to show startling, navy eyes. "You never seemed to mind before, Princess."

Nidras felt blood rushing to her cheeks and risked a glance at Hermes.

Damn him to the fiery pits of Hell he was grinning. "What are you doing here, Cupid. I don't want to see you. I thought I'd made that very clear."

Hermes glanced at the Succubus and jerked his head toward the idling cop car. "Return the car to the station, Sidra and you can go home. Thank you for your help. I owe you one."

Nidras bristled at this too. The last thing she wanted was for Hermes to owe the nasty Succubi a favor. There was only one thing they'd ask in return. And Nidras didn't want to even think about Hermes doing *that* with the oversexed demons.

Sidra blew her a kiss and sauntered back to the car, swinging her perfect, heart-shaped ass the entire way, just because she could.

Nidras glared at Hermes. "I should just pop away from you right now."

His grin dropped away. "Please don't."

Nidras caught her breath. His beautiful brown eyes were filled with such pain.

"I'll leave if you want me to," he told her. "But first I want you to read this."

Hermes handed her an Olympian scroll.

"Once you've read it, if you still want me to go, I will."

But he didn't look happy about it.

Nidras sighed and unrolled the creamy parchment. The words were written in large, old-fashioned cursive in velvety black ink. The gods really knew how to make a presentation.

At first she didn't understand what she was reading. It wasn't possible. She'd been told she'd have to give up the thing that was dearest to her heart in order to have the power to destroy Grimsbar. She'd done what she'd been told. But the proclamation in her hands was saying that she hadn't needed to give Hermes up. She'd gotten it all wrong.

Was it possible? Joy surged through her, only to be ruthlessly quashed. No. Something was wrong.

Nidras glared at him. "You falsified this."

He simply shook his head. "Speak with Zeus if you wish. It's real. It was pure hell to wring out of the Council but it's real."

Nidras turned away, terrified to hope.

After all the lonely days and horrible nights... Tears filled her eyes and she found she couldn't hold them back. She began to shake.

Strong arms slid around her waist from behind.

Nidras gasped, afraid to give in to the wonder of his touch. "Please, Hermes. Don't tease or lie. It would kill me."

Soft lips touched her hair. "I would never do that to you, Nidras. I love you. I want us to be together always."

She took a shaky breath and closed her eyes. Slowly, she allowed herself to lean into him. Hesitantly, she softened into his arms. Gradually, she allowed her lungs to fill with his scent and her body to react to his touch. "Oh gods, Hermes. I love you. I've waited so long for you."

"I know." Strong hands turned her so that he could claim her lips with his own. "Gods, Nidras, I know."

Sobbing and laughing at once, she met his kiss hungrily, frantic with need. After weeks of loneliness and pain, she finally had her heart and soul back.

About the Author

Award-winning author Sam Cheever mixes in a little fun, a little magic and a little real-life spice to create her sexy fantasy characters. Sam's fun-loving creations fight their way through a dizzying array of dangerous challenges without letting little things like the end of the world, angry, manipulative gods, evil dark-world denizens, or killing Furies dampen their zest for life and hot love!

The author loves to chat with readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by Sam Cheever

Gods of Love 1: Nocked Over

Gods of Love 2: Nocked Asunder

Gods of Love: Nocked for a Loop

*Also check out Sam's other books at Cerridwen Press
(www.cerridwenpress.com):*

Dancin' With the Devil 1: 'Tween Heaven and Hell

Dancin' With the Devil 2: 'Tween a Devil and His Hard Place

Dancin' With the Devil 3: 'Tween Heart's Fire and Devil's Delight

Dancin' With the Devil: 'Tween Hopeful and Hopeless



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com