



FOR
LOVE OF
WAR
KIERNAN KELLY

Chapter One

ARES sat bent over a cigarette burn-scarred table in a shadowed corner of a rundown, roach-infested bar, and tossed back another shot of rotgut that burned like the very fires of Hades.

The bar was small and crowded, the sort favored by beefy men in biker's leather and painted women in barely anything at all. Harsh laughter and coarse language floated along with cigarette smoke through air that felt heavy and greasy, kept moving by slowly turning, rickety ceiling fans. Tinny country music twanged from an old jukebox at the rear of the dull and boot-scuffed dance floor. Half of the machine's neon lights were long burnt out, the other half flickering in a last ditch effort to stay lit, sputtering but refusing to die.

The place seemed made to order for Ares. It was the type of establishment known for nurturing ill tempers, and giving birth to drunken furies. Every so often, a fist would fly or a blade flash, spilling blood. It didn't happen regularly, certainly not frequently enough to suit Ares, but often enough to keep him from losing his mind completely to boredom.

There were those rare times when some drunken asshole would aim his anger directly—if misguidedly—at Ares. He *lived* for those moments. Those times, few and far between though they be, were what kept him coming back to

this little bungle of a bar night after night. They were what made living in the human realm tolerable. It was during those times, when a rock-hard fist or silver blade would swing in his direction that Ares enjoyed the luxury to let loose and be himself. They never lasted long, of course... just a moment, a single movement, before the owner of the fist or the blade would be lying on the floor in pool of his own blood, gasping for air like a dying trout.

Ah, good times.

Sadly, tonight didn't seem to be one of those nights. There hadn't been any fights at all, not even a loud disagreement. Everyone made nice-nice with everyone else, looking to get drunk or laid, preferably both, and all those warm fuzzies floating around the room were enough to make Ares want to puke.

Ares wondered—not for the first time—how he'd managed to sink so low. There'd been a time when being the god of War *meant* something, demanded respect. When the very mention of his name struck fear into the eyes and hearts of all within hearing distance.

He disliked thinking about just *how* long ago it had been since last a warrior quaked in his sandals over hearing Ares's name.

Today, he was relegated to sitting in the shadows, and considered himself lucky if he got to break a nose or two in a mismatched bar fight with a couple of inebriated bikers.

He put the blame for his plight squarely at the feet of technology. Modern warfare sucked the big fat one, in his opinion. It eliminated any need for his specialized talents.

How could he compete in an age where men fought battles with smart bombs and chemical agents? He couldn't very well ride into battle on the back of a Minuteman III missile, now could he?

Sometimes he thought he'd willingly give his left nut for just one go-round with a Spartan. Hell, a one-armed Thracian with a bum leg and a bad ticker would've put up a better fight than anyone Ares had gone up against in the last couple of hundred years.

Humans had gone soft. They were nothing but button-pushers now. Point a gun and call it war... where was the glory, the *honor* in that? *Sun Tzu must be spinning in his grave*, he thought. *That war was an art form was the only thing we ever agreed on.*

Sighing, Ares caught the waitress's eye and signaled for her to bring him another shot. If he couldn't fight, at least he could get drunk.

"How did I know I'd find you here?"

Ares glanced up at the sound of the familiar voice. Hermes perched on the edge of a chair at the opposite side of the table, sitting stiffly, uncomfortably, as if loathe for any part of his anatomy to touch anything in the bar. He wore an expertly tailored, dark blue, Savile Row suit, a crisp, white shirt open at the throat, and a pair of dark Armani shades. There wasn't a single strand of his stylishly cut, blond hair out of place. He looked like he'd just stepped off a runway in Milan.

Knowing Hermes's penchant for *haute couture*, Ares figured his guess might be right on the money. "Slumming,

Herm?” he asked sarcastically, arching one sleek, black eyebrow.

Hermes made a rude noise. “Puh-lease. If I were out to have a good time, I wouldn’t pick a shithole like this to have it in. I’m more of a five-star, linen napkin and crystal wineglass sort of guy.” He slipped his sunglasses down with one finger, eyeing the waitress in her cheek-revealing Daisy Dukes with barely veiled disgust as she set a fresh drink in front of Ares.

“Anything for your friend?” she asked. Her eyes raked Hermes, returning his look with one of obvious disdain. “Something purple with an umbrella and fruit in it, maybe?”

“I should think something in a nice antibiotic would be more appropriate for this place,” Hermes retorted without missing a beat.

Ares chuckled, although Hermes didn’t look very amused. “I think he’ll pass.”

The waitress hesitated. “You know he’s asking for trouble coming in here dressed like that, right?”

“I only wish,” Ares replied, earning himself a glare from Hermes.

She shrugged, shook her head, and moved on to the next table.

“She’s right, you know. The humans are probably chomping at the bit to see how far up your silk-suited rear they can shove their boots,” Ares said, lifting the shot glass of amber liquid. He couldn’t quite squelch the eager smile tilting his lips at the thought.

Hermes looked offended. “I’m a god, too, in case you’ve forgotten. If any of these leather-trussed monkeys dares so much as *breathe* on me, they’re toast.” He eyed the shot glass. “Tell me you’re not going to allow that filthy thing to touch your lips. I know you’re less than diligent about things like hygiene, but even *you* can’t be *that* disgusting.”

Ares flipped him the finger, tossed the shot back, and then deliberately tongued the rim of the glass, just to see Hermes squirm, clearly revolted.

“Ugh! You realize you’ve probably just given yourself the plague, right?”

“Last time I checked, I’m immortal. I can’t even catch a cold.” He leaned forward over the table and stared hard at Hermes. “What do you want, anyway? I know you didn’t pop in here just to shoot the shit with me.”

“Good-looking, lethal, *and* quick on the uptake. I always liked that about you, Ares,” Hermes said. He looked down at his hands, examining his perfectly manicured nails. “I have a message for you from Zeus.”

Ares sat back abruptly and slammed the shot glass down on the table. “I’m not interested.”

Hermes’s head snapped up. “Well, you’d better *get* interested, no, you’d better get positively *fascinated*, and quickly, or daddy dearest is likely to use your ass for target practice. Do you *want* a thunderbolt zapped up your sphincter?”

“I’ve had worse things shoved up my ass.”

Hermes put his hands up. “Please, I can do without the mental images, thank you. Listen, Ares, you and I have

always been friends, right? Well... maybe not *friends*, per se, but we were never enemies. I even got you out of the jam you were in with the Alodae giants, didn't I?"

Ares rolled his eyes. "Is it really necessary to bring them up *again*? I get *one* helping hand from Olympus in all of my sorry existence, and none of you ever let me live it down."

"Hey, saving your butt wasn't my idea of a good time. If it wasn't for me, you'd still be rotting in the jar the giants trapped you in. As far as I'm concerned, you owe me. Look, if you just keep your yap shut long enough for me to deliver my message, I can get out of this cesspit and delouse myself."

"Fine. What has Zeus's toga in a twist this time? What does he want from me?"

"A small favor. Nothing of consequence. *Très petit*."

Ares was instantly suspicious. Those words raised a red flag, if any ever did. "Zeus never asks for *small* favors. They're always gigantic, humungous, *colossal* favors, and equally large pains in the ass," he retorted.

Hermes lifted his hand, his forefinger and thumb barely touching. "All he needs you to do this time is kill one puny, insignificant human. The means are completely up to you... beating, strangling, draw-and-quartering.... You should be thrilled."

Ares stiffened, feeling insulted. "I'm the god of *War*, not murder. I don't find pleasure in dishonorable deaths. Why can't he do it himself? Killing humans never caused Zeus to bat an eyelash before. Why ask me to do it?" Ares asked, his eyes narrowing. Zeus would never ingratiate himself to Ares

over something so trivial. One word, one flick of his finger would be all it took for Zeus to do the deed himself. What gave him such pause about killing this one particular human that he would risk involving Ares?

Hermes suddenly seemed to find his diamond cuff link incredibly interesting, refusing to meet Ares's eyes. He fussed with the large stone and mumbled something under his breath.

"Herm, I'm losing patience here. Plus, you're taking up my valuable drinking time. Spit it out," Ares snapped.

Hermes sighed and continued to fidget with his cuff link. "Okay, okay. The target isn't exactly human. He's a son of Aphrodite."

Ares sat back in his chair, blinking in shock. Now, there was a name Ares hoped he'd never hear again. His affair with Aphrodite eons ago was one of the few times he'd bedded a female, back when he still thought he had something to prove to Zeus and the rest of Olympus, and it had brought him nothing but ridicule and pain. Since then he'd jumped the fence for good, and never looked back. "I want nothing to do with that bitch. You remember what happened the last time we were together."

"Yeah, whenever Hephaestus ties one on with Dionysus and that bunch, he tells the story. If I'm forced to hear one more time how he caught you and Aphrodite mid-coitus, I'm going to shoot myself in the head with one of Eros's arrows."

"I reiterate... why doesn't Zeus whack this half-breed himself?"

Hermes rolled his eyes. “You’ve been down here for far too long. You’re out of the loop, Ares. All right, listen up; I’ll give you the *Reader’s Digest* Abridged version. After the last time Hera kicked Zeus’s ass over the latest illegitimate Zeus-ling he sired, she forced him to issue an edict forbidding us from having sex with humans. I believe Hera’s words to Zeus were, ‘No more screwing with the lower life forms, or I’ll rip off your balls and use them as earmuffs.’ This is going back, oh, a thousand years ago or so, but you get the drift.”

“I guess I missed the memo,” Ares said flippantly. “That *still* doesn’t answer my question.”

“You know Zeus was never big on self-denial. Since Hera only *expressly* forbid him from fucking *humans*, he’s started banging the goddesses. These last few centuries he’s been amusing himself with Aphrodite.”

Ares curled his lip. “Typical. He could never keep it in his toga, and she’s a born slut. Hephaestus must be spitting kittens, but I’ll bet he’s too much of a pussy to call Zeus out for screwing his wife. So, let me guess... Aphrodite decided to step out on Zeus with a human despite the new law?”

Hermes dropped his gaze again. “You know her. She’s so self-centered I’m surprised she doesn’t walk in circles. She must’ve finally gotten bored with Zeus twenty-one years or so ago. Next thing we know, she’s got a demigod baking in her oven.”

Ares barked a sardonic laugh. “Yeah, that sounds like Aphrodite. She was always into instant self-gratification, and damn the consequences.”

Hermes shrugged. “What do you expect? She’s the goddess of Procreation, and likes to practice what she preaches.” He placed his hands flat on the table, and then realized he had touched something, and pulled them off as if they were on fire, flapping them as if he could shake loose whatever human cooties he’d picked up. He opted for leaning in, and lowered his voice to a whisper, as if he were afraid of eavesdroppers. “Hera knew about Zeus’s affairs with the goddesses, of course. She *always* knows. She has more spies on Olympus than the CIA. Word has it she’s been dying for the opportunity to put a major hurt on Zeus for sleeping with them, but since she technically only forbade him from fucking humans, she’d couldn’t. He is the King of Olympus, after all. She can’t nail him for keeping to the letter of the law.

“Zeus harbors a soft spot for Aphrodite. He covered for her while she was pregnant and helped hide the baby, but now the brat has reached his majority. The kid is coming into his powers, and that’s going to alert Hera to his existence. If Hera finds out Aphrodite broke the law and Zeus protected her and her spawn, it will give Hera an excuse to go gunning for them both. She’ll demand retribution, up to and including pickling Zeus’s dangly bits in a jar. Zeus needs the human dead, but he can’t kill Aphrodite’s son without pissing Aphrodite off. You know Aphrodite... if she gets angry, she’ll give Zeus up to Hera no matter the cost to herself, and Hera will be wearing his dick as a necktie by supertime.”

“Why me? Why not you, or Apollo, or Hades? Hades is god of the Underworld. Taking out one scrawny half-human should be a snap for him.”

“One,” Hermes said, holding up a slender finger. “I’m only the messenger boy, not an assassin. Two, Apollo is a nitwit who can barely tie his own sandals without help. He’d only fuck it up, and Zeus would have more of a mess to clean. Three, Hades would snitch to Hera in an instant... you know he’s always been jealous of Zeus for getting Olympus while he got stuck with the Underworld.”

Ares smirked. “Okay, I’ll give you that much, but what’s in it for me? I’ve never exactly been the golden child on Olympus, and they completely turned their backs on me after the Troy debacle. Why should I bother helping?”

Hermes snorted. “You mean aside from avoiding the aforementioned thunderbolt up your rectum?” His expression grew sober. “Zeus said to name your price.”

The magnitude of the offer took Ares aback and told him just how badly Zeus needed his help. In short, Ares could ask for the throne of Olympus and Zeus would be honor-bound to relinquish it to him. Olympus would no doubt erupt into civil war should that happen, and that prospect alone was enough to give Ares a hard-on. “How long do I have to decide?”

“The human is showing signs of his powers unleashing as we speak. It’s only Zeus’s power keeping him hidden from Hera, and he can only keep a lid on it for so long. When Aphrodite’s brat comes fully into his own, all of Olympus will know about it. You need to move fast on this, Ares.”

Ares rubbed a hand over the scruff on his jaw, thinking. It had always been his experience that if it sounded too good to be true, it usually was, but he found the possibility of a

war on Olympus too tempting to pass up without careful consideration. “Where is this human?”

“Not far from here. He lives in an apartment nearby.”

“Well, that’s convenient.”

“Blame the Fates. The Moirae live for the shits and giggles of meddling in our lives, you know. I’m almost surprised they haven’t dumped him in your lap.” He stood up, tugging lightly on his cuffs, straightening them. “So, what’s your answer?”

Was that guilt Ares caught flashing in Hermes’s eyes? No, it couldn’t be. Hermes wouldn’t dare evoke the Fates in a lie, would he? He dismissed it as his imagination and propensity for disbelieving everyone and everything. Ares’s lips curled into a feral smile. “Tell Zeus I’ll do it, and to start packing his bags. My price for this little favor is his throne.”

Hermes gasped, his skin bleaching white. “Are you crazy? The whole of Olympus will go to war if you force Zeus to give up his throne!”

Ares’s wicked smile widened and his dark eyes sparkled. “I know. I’m looking forward to it.”

Chapter Two

DION KORINTHOS flinched, jerking his hand away from the light switch. It was the fifth time in the last hour he'd gotten shocked by an electrical appliance. For some reason, his body was acting like a lightning rod for static electricity, and it seemed to be getting worse. He could swear he saw a tiny blue bolt sizzle between his finger and the switch this last time.

It was weird.

Not that he supposed he should be surprised. *Weird* was a commonplace condition in his life. Freaky stuff always happened to him, had been for as long he could remember. Flowers bloomed outside his bedroom window in the middle of winter. Animals followed him around as if he was the freaking Pied Piper. Once, when he was nine, he woke up to find all his G.I. Joe action figures outfitted in Grecian armor, complete with tiny swords and shields. As a kid, he'd never once needed stitches, broken a bone, or suffered from any of the usual childhood illnesses. No mumps, no measles, no chicken pox. He couldn't even remember having a cold or sore throat. His foster father used to tell Dion he was special, unique; personally, Dion thought himself a freak of nature.

Weird seemed to be a perpetual state of being for him, but ever since his twenty-first birthday, the normal level of weirdness had skyrocketed into full-on, all-out *bizarre*. First of all, men and women both refused to leave him alone. He

couldn't walk down the street without someone following him, trying to get his phone number, or begging him for a date. They gathered on the sidewalk outside his house; fist fights often erupted between his many admirers. Strangers sent him flowers, candy, jewelry, and stuffed their business cards, photos, and sometimes their underwear into his mailbox. He didn't understand it, and quite frankly, it made him extremely uncomfortable.

He didn't consider himself a sex magnet. Oh, he wasn't grotesque—no one would mistake him for Quasimodo any time soon—but he wasn't Abercrombie and Fitch material, either. He had blond hair and blue eyes, but that was nothing special. A lot of men shared the same coloring. When Dion looked in the mirror, nothing but *ordinary* looked back.

No one else with a pulse seemed to think so, though. The dog sniffed at his crotch and tried to hump his leg all the time, and he could swear even the fucking goldfish gave him the eye when he passed their tank.

His decision to move to Daytona Beach a scant three months ago was just as odd, to say the least. He had no job waiting there, knew not a single soul in the area. He'd never even *visited* there before. All he knew was that he woke up one morning with an irresistible urge to pack up and catch the next Greyhound southbound for Florida.

"Never question the Fates, son," Ryan Aeneas told Dion when he told his foster father about his urge to move to Daytona. "If an inner voice tells you to move, then you do it."

The Fates were his foster dad's answer for every weird occurrence in Dion's life. Sometimes, Dion thought Ryan

knew something about Dion that he wasn't telling, like Dion was actually an alien, or the product of some twisted, government science experiment gone horribly wrong.

Dion didn't remember his birth parents, since they'd died shortly after he was born. There weren't even any pictures of them. All they'd left him was a surname, Korinthos, which spoke of Greek ancestry. Dion had lived at the Sisters of Fate Children's Home until Ryan took him in when he was twelve years old. He knew nothing of his birth family and often wondered if the weirdness he experienced on a daily basis was genetic. Had one of his birth parents ever put a dollar in their wallet only to find it had changed into a hundred when they weren't looking? It happened to Dion all the time—not that he was complaining about *that* particular peculiarity.

Still, he knew, just *knew* there had to be some other viable explanation for the odd events other than merely fate. What the true reason could possibly be, though, he had no idea.

So here he was, safely ensconced in a small apartment of his very own, two blocks from the beach in Daytona, electrocuting himself every time he tried to turn on the lights, the television, or the Mr. Coffee.

He gave up trying and made his way in the dark to his bedroom, undressed, and lay down on the bed. Sleep was slow in coming; he laid awake, eyes open, staring into the blackness. He allowed his stream of consciousness free rein, hoping it might lead him to an answer for his current electrifying condition... or at least, bore him into sleep.

Static electrical discharges occur when the levels of negative and positive electricity in the body aren't equal. Okay, hooray for sixth grade science class. Weren't there cases of people who stored up charges? Electric people, I think they're called. Maybe. I can't remember. I just wish I could turn the fucking lights on without setting my fingers on fire. He grunted in frustration and rolled over, jamming the pillow under his head with his fist.

Suddenly all the lights, the television, and his computer flicked on simultaneously, nearly scaring him out of his BVDs.

"Son of a bitch!" he gasped, sitting bolt upright, his heart beating wildly. "This freaky shit is going to fucking kill me yet!"

"Aphrodite is a bitch, and you *are* her son, but this 'freaky shit' isn't going to kill you. I am."

Dion twisted his head toward the source of the deep voice, feeling an icy chill dart down his spine. He stared bug-eyed and frozen with fear at the tall, menacing, dark-haired stranger standing in his doorway.

ARES had found his target easily. Once alerted to the demigod's presence, he'd known what to look for—the telltale scent left by burgeoning new god powers. It smelled a bit like ozone after a lightning strike, and once he picked it up, he simply followed his nose.

It led him to a nondescript, four-story apartment building near the beach, up two flights of stairs to apartment

215, and directly into the bedroom of one newly awakening demigod.

“Who are you?” the young man rasped, scrambling backwards off the bed to escape Ares’s reach. An impossibility, to be sure, but Ares gave the guy credit for trying. “You’ve got the wrong apartment. I don’t know anybody named Aphrodite!”

“I’m not surprised. You don’t know her because the moment she popped you out into this world, she forgot you existed. She went back to Olympus, and left you here to fend for yourself, hence the ‘bitch’ description.” Ares really had no idea if it was true, but he suspected it might be. She might not be cold-hearted enough to allow Zeus to harm the baby, but that didn’t mean she wanted a rugrat cramping her style on Olympus. He wouldn’t put it past Aphrodite to distance herself from the proof of her crime. That would be in keeping with her sense of self-preservation.

He also didn’t know why he bothered to hold a conversation when he’d be killing the man shortly, but he sort of liked the sound of the guy’s voice. It was low and husky, like a lover’s whisper. “What’s your name?”

“D-Dion Korinthos. You’ve got the wrong guy. My parents both died when I was a baby,” Dion retorted.

Ares cocked an eyebrow. *Had Zeus killed Aphrodite’s lover?* Ares didn’t for an instant doubt it was possible. Zeus did not take lightly to being cuckolded, even when he was guilty of the same charge.

Dion’s big blue eyes, so much like his mother’s, blinked up at Ares in fear and confusion. There was an innocence in them that struck a chord somewhere deep inside Ares that

he'd thought he'd buried long ago, making him feel uncharacteristically sympathetic. He grimaced and tried to shrug off the alien feeling. "Your mother didn't die, Dion. She deserted you. Unfortunately, her current lover is Zeus, and he thinks of half-breed offspring as the equivalent of human Kleenex, completely disposable, particularly when they're not of his blood. Your existence is troublesome for him, so he's decided it's time to wad you up and trash you."

"That's ridiculous! I never hurt anybody!" Dion exclaimed. Anger began to tinge his fear. Ares could tell from the tiny blue lightning bolts sizzling in the air around Dion that his newly awakening powers were launching into protection mode, even as he pressed his back to the wall. Oddly enough, Dion didn't seem to notice. "*Zeus?* As in Greek King of the gods Zeus? Please, give me a little credit, will you? This is total bullshit! What sort of scam are you trying to pull? Get out!"

Ares felt his lips quirk in a sardonic grin. "This isn't a joke, kid. Your very existence is problematic for Zeus, and he's the sort of guy to dismember first and question the pieces later. I'm Ares, the god of War. Trust me, Zeus wouldn't have sent me in after you unless he meant business."

"This is insane! Zeus, Aphrodite, Ares... those Greek gods are myths! Who are you, really? Who sent you? What do you want from me?" Dion's panicky gaze darted around the room. "Look, my wallet is on the table. There's a couple of hundred dollars in it. Take it. Take anything you want, but leave me alone!"

Ares bared his teeth in a lethal smile. “Oh kid, I’m no myth.” He manifested his armor, blood red and gleaming. “I’m the real deal. I don’t want your money. Zeus really did send me, and you’re about to die.”

Panic and confusion warred in Dion’s eyes. Ares could tell from his expression that he was trying to process everything, perhaps come up with a plausible explanation for what was happening to him, for what he saw, and was coming up abysmally short. He looked around wildly, as if searching for something to use as a weapon.

Not that it would do him any good, even if he found one. Even if Dion’s powers were fully unleashed, he was still merely a demigod, while Ares possessed all the benefits of full godhood. For him to fight Ares would be like a housecat trying to best a lion. Ares flashed himself to Dion’s side, fully intending to finish it and put Dion out of his misery.

He didn’t bother with his sword. It wasn’t worth the effort to conjure it in order to kill one puny, weak half-breed.

But when Ares wrapped his hands around Dion’s throat, something he never expected happened. A cavalcade of sensations inundated his entire body the instant his fingers touched Dion’s skin. It was like grabbing a live wire; the hairs on Ares’s arms stood straight up, and he felt an electricity of sorts sizzling through him. The shock brought his attack to a screeching halt, and he gasped, his senses completely overwhelmed.

Dion’s angelic face, framed by sleep-tousled blond hair, and his guileless, frightened blue eyes transfixed Ares. Despite Ares’s armor, his skin warmed with the heat of Dion’s naked body, lean and firm, mere inches from his.

A feeling of claustrophobia overtook Ares. He pushed away from Dion, ripped off his helmet, and flung it across the room, gasping for air. Dion's scent filled his nostrils, the sweetness sharply spiced with fear. Ares was taken wholly by surprise as his body reacted forcibly to the scent, hardening instantly.

Unable to resist, he turned back to Dion, wanting to know if what he'd felt was a fluke. Ares slid his hands over Dion's shoulders and ducked his head to nuzzle the crook of Dion's neck, breathing in the scent, savoring it. He couldn't remember ever wanting someone as badly as he did Dion at that moment. His mind filled with flickering images of Dion naked, writhing on the bed underneath Ares as Ares took his full pleasure in him. Ghostly moans and cries of passion filled his mind, his heartbeat thudding loudly in his ears.

He mentally shook himself. *This is crazy. I'm supposed to kill Dion, not have sex with him. What the fuck is going on?*

The answer came to him like a light flicking on in the darkness, and he realized the *true* reason Zeus hadn't come to kill Dion himself, and why none of the other gods would, or *could* do it. Why Zeus had condescended to beg the favor from Ares even though they hated each other, tempting him with the promise of war, the one thing Zeus knew would earn Ares's cooperation.

Dion *was* a child of Aphrodite, the son of the goddess of Love and Seduction. His powers were Lust and Pleasure, a formidable combination to be sure, but since Dion was supposedly only a demigod, they should not have the effect they were having on Ares. Yet Dion's powers were so strong,

Ares doubted even Zeus himself could withstand them, and therein lay the truth of things.

Either Zeus had lied to Hermes, or Hermes had kept the full truth from Ares. Dion was not the child of Aphrodite and a mortal male. His parents were *both* gods, and Ares would bet his sword arm that Dion's father was none other than Zeus.

That was the secret Zeus wished so desperately to keep from Hera—that he'd sired another illegitimate god despite her decree to the contrary.

Why hadn't Zeus killed Dion at his birth? It certainly wouldn't have been the first time he'd murdered one of his offspring. Aphrodite must've intervened on the infant's behalf. She was selfish and narcissistic but not necessarily cruel, especially to her children.

Alone, Aphrodite would not have been able to stop Zeus. Perhaps Zeus hoped Dion would not inherit full power from his parents. It happened that way sometimes, resulting in progeny who were minor gods, insignificant in the godhood pecking order. Or, more likely, Aphrodite blackmailed Zeus to keep Dion alive. She might have threatened to tell Hera everything if Zeus hurt the baby. It made sense.

Zeus may have hoped Dion would be able to live his life under the Olympus radar, but as Dion's powers began to manifest, Zeus must've realized he'd been wrong.

Dion was a full god, and given his strength as a fledgling, his power might very well rival Zeus's someday. Since everyone on Olympus—including Zeus—thought Ares heartless, Zeus no doubt figured Ares would be the only one who could resist Dion's allure and take him out.

That Zeus was willing to risk all-out war on Olympus indicated how much he feared his wife finding out he'd sired another bastard. Zeus was overly fond of his testicles, and Hera would no doubt rip them out by the root if she knew. Ares had wondered if William Congreve had Hera in mind when he wrote: "Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned" in *The Mourning Bride*.

Zeus had probably already begun securing the support of the other gods in case Ares was stupid enough to try to claim the throne. Ares would find himself in a war with no army to back him, and eventually be cast into Tartarus for the rest of eternity when he inevitably lost the fight. Zeus would rid himself of two headaches in one stroke—Dion and Ares, both.

Ares felt Dion's newly awakening powers, and as they surged again, Ares found he couldn't keep his mind focused on Zeus's treachery. All he could think of, all he could feel, was Dion.

Ares moaned as his head swam with Dion's alluring scent. Ares was War personified, yet had no idea of how to fight this. The very thought of doing harm to Dion made him sick to his stomach. He began to quiver with protective anger instead, and a lust burning so hot he was almost shocked he didn't burst into flame. For the first time in his existence, he felt his indomitable self-control slip. His lips parted, his tongue darting out to taste the salty skin at Dion's throat. The taste of ambrosia filled his mouth, seasoned by salt and fear.

“W-what are you doing?” Dion arched his neck, trying to pull away from Ares, but Ares used his power to hold him firm.

“Tasting you. I can’t help it. Damn, you taste good. Smell good. *Feel* good,” Ares rasped, trying to press his erection against Dion’s hip. Ares’s armor, diamond hard and impenetrable, made it impossible. The armor melted from his body with only a half-formed thought, leaving nothing between them but air. He felt his control slip another notch. His hand skimmed over the silken flesh of Dion’s flat belly, to brush against Dion’s cock.

His *erect* cock.

Ah, Ares thought as his lips curled in a smile. *Good. His power must work both ways.* “You get your powers from your mother,” he whispered. “Seduction. Lust. You can make anyone who comes near you hunger for you. Like me. Now.” He curled his fingers around Dion’s cock, stroking him slowly. He groaned at how good Dion’s body felt against his bare skin.

“This is nuts.” Dion’s voice held no conviction; it was soft and breathy, a mere whisper. His hips pumped into Ares’s hand, as Ares continued to rub his erection along the deep crease between Dion’s hip and groin.

“Touch me.” It sounded like an order and plea, both. Ordinarily, Ares would’ve cringed to hear the desperation in his voice, but at the moment, all he could think of was his need, spiking and painful, the nearness of Dion’s hand, and that incredibly addictive scent. He felt punch-drunk, completely consumed by the growing ache, and the

imperative that he take what he needed. Now, right now. Five minutes ago.

He growled low in his throat as Dion instantly obeyed, wrapping his slender fingers around Ares's erection. He sought Dion's lips, crushing their mouths together, his tongue demanding entrance, and then plundered it ruthlessly when Dion's lips parted for him. Dion's mouth tasted every bit as sweet as nectar—no, even more so. It left Ares hungrier than ever, starving, compelled by a burning need to lose himself inside Dion's body until neither one of them could be distinguished from the other, until he was completely, utterly spent. He wanted to sear his scent into Dion's flesh so deeply and completely that everyone who came in contact with Dion would know instantly that Dion belonged to Ares alone.

"Ares...." The ache in Dion's throaty voice sent Ares spiraling over the edge of sanity. He used his powers to flash them both atop the covers of the bed. Dion stared up at him, eyes wide, as Ares relaxed his full weight on him.

Ares hissed, teeth nipping at the delicate flesh under Dion's jaw. He sucked hard, marking Dion, then drew back to watch with pleasure as the skin darkened with a red bloom. He felt a primal satisfaction on seeing his mark on Dion's neck. *Mine*, the mark said, no less clearly than if Ares had burned his initials in Dion's flesh.

Dion's legs wrapped around Ares's hips, squeezing, as his hands ran over the muscles in Ares's back. "Fuck, you feel good," he groaned. "More. Want more."

More, Ares could do. He began by licking a slow, leisurely path from Dion's neck to his chest, teeth teasing at

one flat, golden nipple and then the other. Lower still, Ares's tongue traced Dion's ribs, and then the contours of his stomach, following the thin line of pale hair leading from navel to groin, until Dion mewled.

Despite the ache in his balls, Ares, ever true to his nature, looked up at Dion from under his dark lashes. "Beg," he whispered hoarsely. "Beg me to suck your cock."

"Please!" Dion gasped at once, his fingers threading into Ares's hair. "Do it!"

"Do *what*? I want to hear the words," Ares countered, although it took every ounce of the remaining shreds of his self-control to keep from devouring Dion whole.

"Suck me. Please! Suck my cock!"

Ares bared his teeth in a victorious grin and closed his lips over Dion's erection. The taste of primordial loam, rich and earthy, and the bitter salt of ancient seas filled his mouth as his tongue flicked over the smooth, round head. He took Dion in deep, until the head of Dion's prick kissed the back of Ares's throat.

Dion swore and his hips began to pump, feeding Ares as much of his length as Ares would allow. Ares happily took it all, every inch.

The world outside the window, with all its mortal woes and immortal rivalries, disappeared, the universe shrinking until it included only the two of them. Nothing else mattered to Ares, nothing but the incredibly potent sensations roiling through him, and the overpowering urge to claim Dion as his.

Licking along the underside of Dion's shaft to his balls, heavy and full, Ares mouthed them each in their turn. Dion's cries seemed far away to Ares; he could barely hear them over the thudding of his heart and the pulsing of blood in his ears.

Nosing Dion's heavy sac aside, he teased the thin strip of flesh between Dion's balls and asshole with light flicks of his tongue before returning to Dion's cock. He swallowed Dion whole again, to the root, until the sweetness of precome flavored his mouth. Only when his body's screams for release grew too intense for him to ignore any longer did he stop. He backed off, panting. He needed, needed *now*, and urged Dion to roll over onto his hands and knees.

Dion's ass was pale and plump, a perfectly shaped inverted heart. As difficult as Ares found it to hold back, he forced himself to take the time to appreciate it, to pay homage to it as he had Dion's cock. After all, it was an ass worthy of his utmost adoration.

He knelt behind Dion, kneading the firm flesh of Dion's ass in his hands, separating them to gaze at the tiny, puckered bit of pink heaven between them. He paused only long enough to conjure a small glass vial of oil. When he tipped the bottle, directing a stream of thick liquid to dribble along the crack of Dion's rear, the room filled with the smells of rare, exotic spices worth many times a man's weight in gold. The aroma still paled in comparison with the scent of Dion himself.

Dion lowered his head to rest on his folded arms, wiggling his ass. He looked over his shoulder at Ares, his eyes dilated with lust. "Come on, Ares! Fuck me!" he pleaded.

Ares groaned low and long as his body fought for him to do just that, to immerse himself fully in the pleasure of Dion's body, even as his mind argued for him to slow down and savor every moment. Traditionally a man of the moment, it was a fight to keep from ramming himself into Dion, burying himself inside until he could release the agonizing pressure building inside him.

It took a Herculean effort to pace himself, to put Dion's comfort before his. That he would even consider it was shocking; Ares's usual style wasn't to be so sensitive or accommodating, but the need to see to Dion's pleasure before his own overwhelmed him. His fingers worked the oil carefully into Dion's hole, rewarded with small sounds of pleasure from Dion. Only then did he slick himself. He was so hard that the touch of his hand on his cock felt nearly unbearable.

He forced himself to go slowly, to work his cock into Dion's body inch by delicious inch. His eyes squeezed shut against the pleasure raising gooseflesh on his skin, and drops of sweat on his brow. He hissed through his teeth when he was finally, fully seated within Dion.

Nothing in all the eons of his life had prepared him for the sensations rocketing through him now. In a small part of his mind, Ares knew it was only a manifestation of Dion's power, but that didn't lessen the impact. Silken heat wrapped around him, contracting, squeezing in exquisite torture. He cried out against the sharpness of the pleasure, fingers digging into Dion's slender hips as he withdrew, and then slammed himself deeply inside again.

“Sweet fuck!” he cried, settling into a punishing rhythm, hips slapping against Dion’s flesh in an age-old symphony. His balls tingled and swelled; he clenched his teeth, trying to keep his orgasm at bay.

He felt movement and realized Dion was stroking himself. He heard a voice cry out Ares’s name, and smelled an even sweeter scent when Dion’s come splattered the comforter. Then Ares knew nothing but sheer ecstasy as his climax finally broke free of his control, sweeping over him in a maddening rush. He threw his head back, unaware that the tendons in his neck were bulging like ripcords, every muscle straining with the intensity of his release.

By the time the last shudder rippled through him, he felt as boneless as a jellyfish. His rapidly softening cock slid free of Dion’s body, and he collapsed on the bed, panting for breath, one arm thrown possessively over Dion’s waist. He couldn’t help smiling at the small sounds of satisfaction Dion made, or at the fact he scooted backwards to spoon up fully against Ares.

“Jesus, what was *that?*” Dion finally asked after several minutes. “I’ve never felt anything like it!”

“What can I say?” Ares replied, his grin widening. “I’m talented.” He knew the truth lay in Dion’s powers, but he wanted a few minutes of basking in the afterglow—not to mention Dion’s admiration—before telling Dion the truth.

Dion looked over his shoulder at him, snorting. “I *was* the other half of the team, wasn’t I? You sound as if you were the only one on the field when we scored that touchdown.”

Ares chuckled at the football reference. *Typical American male*, he thought, *relating everything to sports, even sex*. “Is this the part where I’m supposed to make reference to your tight end?”

“It couldn’t hurt.”

“I could say you’re a wide receiver, you know.”

“Oh now, that’s just plain hurtful,” Dion replied, laughing and elbowing Ares playfully in the stomach.

Ares’s smile slipped a little as a new and utterly alien feeling swept over him. He realized he’d never experienced this before, this easy bantering after sex. It felt odd, yet strangely satisfying.

In the old days, after battle, he’d take whatever warm body was closest to sate the arousal caused by bloodlust. On Olympus, he’d taken whatever servant caught his fancy, or whichever god showed an interest. Later, after his self-imposed exile, he’d fucked blindly, usually drunkenly, and never even asked for a name.

This easy closeness was a different experience for him, strange, and exciting in its own way. He realized he’d be content to close his eyes and fall asleep with Dion in his arms, something he’d never been tempted to do with a lover before.

When Dion laid his head down on the pillow and sighed softly, Ares played idly with a soft blond curl that felt like silk between his fingers. Contentment was an unfamiliar feeling, yet it suffused every cell of his body. *Another byproduct of Dion’s powers*, he told himself, although that made his decision no easier. *What am I going to do now? I*

should kill him. Now, while his powers are slightly drained, and he's off guard. Definitely before they grow any stronger.

He lifted himself up on one elbow, watching Dion slip into sleep, so peaceful, so trusting. As if sharing a bed with the god of War was the most natural thing in the world for him to do. To Dion, he realized, Ares wasn't a god, of War or otherwise. To Dion, Ares was just a man, a stranger, in fact. Surely, Dion's burgeoning powers were responsible for Dion consenting to have sex with Ares at all. Ares felt sure that when Dion awoke, he'd be defensive; for now, his powers overwhelmed his reason, allowing him to fall asleep in the arms of a man he'd just met.

It made no difference in the end. Ares quickly realized he could not, *would* not harm a single blond hair on the sleeping angel's head, and what's more, he would obliterate anyone else who tried.

No matter that he knew it was only a manifestation of Dion's power, the fact of the matter was Ares *liked* feeling content. He liked it a lot. For the first time in his entire life, he felt wanted for something other than his knack for war. He didn't care why, only that he did.

Zeus can bite my ass if he thinks I'm going to destroy Dion. For once in my miserable existence, I've found something worth holding on to. I'm not going to fuck it up because Zeus is a pussy and afraid of his wife.

The answer to Ares's problem came close on the heels of that thought, and he knew exactly what his next course of action must be.

It was time to go to war.

Chapter Three

THUNDER rolled and lightning flashed, although neither had anything to do with the weather. The storm raged *inside* Zeus's temple, a reflection of its owner's mood. Zeus was in a full fury, striking out blindly at everyone and everything within sight. A bolt sizzled alarmingly close to Hermes's right ear, blasting an alabaster sculpture of the three Moirae into a pile of smoking marble dust.

Oh, the Fates are not going to look kindly on that faux pas, Hermes thought, eyeing the rubble. *Zeus has been baiting them enough lately, and I didn't help invoking their names when I fibbed to Ares. Destroying their statue is going to send the three of them into instant PMS mode.* He took a couple of discreet steps to the right, hoping to distance himself from guilt by association. When the Fates decided to strike back at Zeus for his blasphemy, Hermes didn't want to be within the blast zone.

"What do you mean, 'Ares didn't kill him'?" Zeus roared, sending another bolt at Hermes that nearly parted his hair. "The little bastard should be dead by now, but I can still feel his powers growing!"

"The new god's powers must be stronger than you'd anticipated, my lord," Hermes said, much more calmly than he felt. Truthfully, after so many eons of serving as Zeus's personal message-slash-whipping boy, one might think he'd be used to Zeus's tantrums, but no, each one was a new

exercise in terror. Hermes admitted he'd gotten much better at covering his fear, though. At least he usually didn't soil himself anymore. "It's the only explanation. Ares fell under his spell."

"Impossible! I know my son better than anyone. Ares is the most hardhearted asshole ever granted breath! He's cold and cruel and lives for nothing but the kill," Zeus blustered, waving a dismissive hand. "Something else must have happened. Someone must be helping the boy, boosting his powers."

"No, my lord. No one knows the godling exists, save for you, me, and Aphrodite. I've made inquiries—discreetly, of course. Not one god or goddess I spoke with knows anything about him. They're not even aware of a burgeoning godhood in the mortal realm, not yet, anyway. Aphrodite isn't helping him, either. I would have sensed a lie; you know that, my lord. I can say with complete confidence that no one is helping him. No one but Ares, that is."

Zeus railed again, sending yet another bolt slicing through the air at Hermes. This time, Hermes had to duck to avoid it impaling him directly through the center of his forehead. "I want Ares sent to Tartarus, and that little bastard dead, do you hear me? Dead!"

"Which bastard might that be, dear?"

Hermes bit back a grin at the stricken look on Zeus's face when Hera chose that moment to glide into the throne room. She was the last person Zeus would want to overhear his tirade. It would be exceedingly interesting to see how Zeus would manage to worm his way out of this one. Hermes

turned toward Hera with a courtly bow. “My lady, you look stunning, as always.”

Hera’s beauty was second only to Aphrodite’s. Statuesque, with tumbling red curls that reached past her waist, a lush figure, and porcelain skin, she had sharp green eyes that missed nothing. Her wardrobe was always simple yet elegant, and she favored traditional rather than trendy styles. Today she wore a diaphanous, white chiton, a golden girdle and filet, and delicate sandals. Unfortunately, her beauty masked the personality of a rabid hedgehog; her tongue could flay the very flesh from living bone when she put her mind to it. She chose to ignore Hermes for the moment—to his everlasting relief—and focused her attention on Zeus. “Husband? I believe I asked you a question.”

“Oh, uh, Ares’s bastard son,” Zeus stammered. His previous fury visibly leached out of him as quickly as water through a sieve, replaced by a simpering cowardice that was an embarrassment to witness. He seemed to deflate right before Hermes’s eyes. “He’s, uh... sired a child. Flaunted the law and impregnated a mortal. I ordered him to kill his bastard, but he refuses.”

Hermes gaped at the temerity of the lie. Zeus truly tempted the Fates. Hera would be twice as enraged when the truth came out—and it *would* come out eventually, of that, Hermes had no doubt, since Zeus certainly had to be on the Moirae’s shit list by now—and she found out the real story. A pissed off Hera was *not* someone Hermes wanted to be in the same universe with, never mind the same room. When she found out Zeus was the father of the child, and Aphrodite, the mother, and that Zeus tried to pin the blame on Ares, Hera’s son, Hera would go Titan on all their asses. He figured

the time had come to vacate the premises and cleared his throat. "If that's all you wish of me, my lord, I have things to attend to...."

Hera pinned Hermes in place with a withering glare. "You stay put." She turned back to Zeus, and her eyes narrowed. "I've been feeling the undercurrent of an awakening godhood. Is it Ares's child who's sending out those signals? How long have you known about the birth and done nothing?"

Hermes winced. It was a Catch-22 question. For Zeus to say he had no prior knowledge of an illegitimate son of Ares would be admitting his fallibility, leaving him open to attack by anyone looking to make a coup on the throne of Olympus. To say he knew, and did nothing, would surely bring Hera's wrath down on his head. To tell her the truth, that it was Zeus's child with Aphrodite... well, the outcome of *that* possibility was too horrible for Hermes to contemplate. There wouldn't be enough left of Zeus to fill a thimble.

"Of course I knew," Zeus said, acting affronted. "I'd hoped Ares would act like a god for once in his bloody life and take care of the problem himself. Once I realized Ares let the bastard live long enough to come into his powers, I sent word ordering Ares to kill it."

Whew. What a save, Hermes thought, barely refraining from wiping his brow in relief. He risked a glance at Hera, to see if she bought it.

She seemed satisfied, but she wasn't finished with Zeus. "The powers feel too strong to be from a mere demigod."

“Perhaps Ares is helping his spawn, supplementing the half-breed’s powers. Ares has never been completely right in the head, as you well know, not even as a child. All those millennia of war and bloodlust have left him completely unstable.”

Surprisingly, she seemed satisfied with Zeus’s answer. “I gather from the mess you’ve made of the throne room that Ares has not complied with your order?”

“No. He flatly refuses to see to his responsibility,” Zeus answered. “He has defied me for the last time.”

Hermes noticed Zeus’s eyes cut toward him with a silent warning for Hermes to keep his tongue behind his teeth, or find himself soon lacking both. Hermes clamped his lips shut, pressing them into a thin, white line.

“Then I think you should go and do it yourself, and bring Ares back to Olympus for judgment,” Hera said, giving a curt nod. “It saddens me to say it, but our son has overstepped his bounds yet again. Ares must be punished. It will show the other gods that we mean business about the new law.”

Hermes could swear he heard Zeus gulp. “I was thinking I’d send Thanatos after Ares, my dear. He’s very effective, being the Embodiment of Death and all, and we haven’t let him out in quite a while. He’s due for some exercise. Besides, you know how much I hate going among the mortals in this day and age. Everything is so dirty, loud, and crowded....”

“Have you gone deaf in the last thirty seconds, or did you simply not pay attention? I don’t want Ares *harmed*. I want him brought here in one piece. You know what

Thanatos is like! The last time you freed him, he was sent to kill a single human. Instead, he nearly decimated all of Europe with the Black Death. No, you'll go yourself. Take Hermes with you, if you need someone to hold your hand," Hera snapped.

Zeus seemed to regain a little of his former bluster. "Now, see here, woman! Watch your tongue when you speak to me, or I'll—"

Hera stepped closer until her nose was mere inches from Zeus, and when she spoke, her voice sounded low and ominous. "Or you'll do *what*, exactly? I'll remind you that I'm your wife, not one of your minions or whores. Do *not* take that tone with me, or I'll send for the Cousins."

Hermes knew exactly to which relatives Hera referred, and judging from the way the blood leached out of Zeus's face, he did too. A shiver raced down Hermes's spine at the thought of the three crones, Tisiphone, Megaera, and Alecto. Nobody—not even Zeus or Hades—did pain like the Furies. They brought suffering to an entirely new level, and what's more, they would know at a single glance that Zeus lied, and wouldn't hesitate to punish him—and anyone who'd helped him in his transgression—accordingly. It was a threat Hermes was sure Zeus would heed.

He breathed a sigh of relief when Zeus proved him right.

Zeus took a step back from Hera, shaking his head, holding his hands up in a placating gesture. "Please, my dear, let's not be hasty. You know the Cousins hate being disturbed for trivial issues. We all lose our tempers now and then, don't we?"

“Then it’s safe for me to assume you’ll take care of this matter personally?” Hera asked in an icy voice.

“Oh, certainly, if it means so much to you, my love,” Zeus replied with a big, fake smile plastered on his face.

Hermes barely refrained from rolling his eyes. It looked as if Zeus might escape Hera’s wrath with his skin intact yet again. For once, he felt grateful, since the Furies would no doubt damn Hermes for helping Zeus, even though he’d had little choice in the matter, but he wondered how long Zeus’s luck would continue to hold out. He had the awful feeling that when the inevitable shitstorm hit, he’d be treading sewage right alongside Zeus. “Shall we depart now, my lord?”

Zeus immediately nodded, relief washing over his features. “Yes, now would be good.” They flashed out of the throne room with Hera’s final warning still ringing shrilly in their ears.

“Don’t fail, or else.”

Chapter Four

“SO, YOU’RE really Ares? The god of War? The same bloodthirsty, lives-for-the-kill Ares who wreaked havoc in Greek mythology?” Dion asked. A spread of pancakes, eggs, bacon, and sausage sat on the table between them, along with IHOP’s infamous bottomless coffee pot.

He’d awoken that morning with Ares’s erection pressing against his ass. Oddly enough, while Dion knew he should be appalled at his behavior—taking a stranger, and a threatening one at that, to his bed wasn’t something he’d ever thought he would do—he didn’t feel any of the things he would’ve thought he should after doing such a thing. He didn’t feel shocked, or scared, or disgusted with himself. Instead, he only felt an overpowering sense of comfort and safety, and a swift spike of lust.

He looked into Ares’s dark eyes and accepted the truth he saw in their depths. As incredulous as it appeared, Ares *was* the god of War. He was also Dion’s lover, protector, and quite possibly, given a little time, his friend. Although Dion didn’t put it into words, he had a vague feeling Ares might eventually come to be more than a friend. Ares might be *The One*.

“Yup, that’d be me,” Ares answered, pouring maple syrup over a large stack of flapjacks—his second order. He’d eaten the first one while barely taking a breath between bites, much to Dion’s amusement. “Are you going to eat

that?” he asked, pointing toward a lonely sausage link lying on Dion’s plate.

Dion passed it over to him, grinning as it disappeared between Ares’s lips in a single bite. “How is it you can shovel food into your stomach as if it were a bottomless pit and still look as good as you do?”

“It’s one of the benefits of being a god. Eat all you want, no weight gain, no worries over triglycerides or high cholesterol. It’s the same for you, you know,” Ares replied. “Go on, have another stack of pancakes. Pour on the butter and syrup. Feel free to indulge yourself. You won’t even get a stomachache.”

Dion was still extremely skeptical about the whole “god” thing, particularly the part about him being one. He didn’t feel very godlike. He admitted the earnest look on Ares’s face when Ares told him about it was difficult to dismiss, and it would explain the weirdness that had been part of Dion’s life for as long as he could remember, but the story sounded so utterly ridiculous that he felt hard-pressed to believe it.

“You’ve inherited your powers from your mother, Aphrodite, and the strength of those powers from your father, Zeus. When your powers are fully matured, you’re going to be a god to be reckoned with, Dion. Whenever you choose to turn on the charm, no man or woman—human, god, or otherwise—will be able to resist you. They’ll do anything and everything to get inside your pants, up to and including murder and worse. With powers like yours, you could conquer nations... or bring Olympus to its knees.”

Dion looked toward the busy street outside the window of the restaurant and saw his ghostly reflection in the glass.

He didn't think himself handsome—he never had. He thought his pale hair, skin, and eyes made him look washed out, like the dim image gazing back at him from the window. He looked like a perpetual teenager, no matter how he tried to change his appearance. He couldn't grow a decent mustache and only managed a sort of sparse, wooly peach fuzz on his cheeks if he didn't shave. He was skinny and barely stood five foot ten in his stocking feet.

God-powers explained why someone like Ares could look at him like a starving man drooling over a platter of rare roast beef, and why all manner of people over the years had fought to get close to him, begged for his phone number, and sent him gifts.

It depressed him to think Ares's attraction to him had nothing to do with *Dion*, himself, but was the result of something he had no control over, some funky magical inheritance from his birth parents. He already felt something very close to affection for Ares, which only served to confuse Dion. Ares said it was a sort of backwash from Dion's powers, but it felt so *real* to him. Knowing Ares might only return the sentiment because of Dion's powers sucked even more and disappointed Dion in a way he didn't want to explore at the moment.

"If Zeus is my father, then doesn't that make you my big brother, or half-brother, or something? Please say 'no', because after the crazy monkey sex we had last night and this morning, being related would send this whole relationship—which is weird enough to begin with—into places I'd rather not think about," Dion asked, holding his breath for the answer. He wasn't kidding. It would be the last straw and totally freak him out.

Ares laughed. “Then you’ll be glad to learn that the whole family bloodline thing isn’t the same with gods as it is with mortals. Although Zeus could sire a million children—and believe me, that’s not outside the realm of possibility considering he is, and always has been, a horndog of cosmic proportions—no two of them would share an identical familial genetic code, even those born of the same mother. You’re no more related to me than you are to that waiter over there who’s been giving you the eye all night and whom I very well may need to kill if he doesn’t stop staring at you with lust in his eyes.”

Dion glanced over in time to see a cute waiter wink at him. He felt his cheeks heat up and averted his eyes. “Leave the waiter alone. If what you say is true, then he can’t help himself.” Dion shook his head. “Look, this whole thing just doesn’t ring true for me. I don’t feel like there’s anything special about me.”

Ares belched loudly and set his fork down, drawing Dion’s attention back to him. Ares’s smile faded as he leaned forward. “I’m a lot of things, Dion, but I’ve never been a liar. You can believe me when I tell you that you *are* special. Listen, Dion, there’s more I have to tell you.” He looked away for a moment, looking uncomfortable, which made Dion extremely nervous. “Your dad is afraid of you.”

Dion laughed. “Yeah, right. Zeus, the almighty King of the gods, is afraid of *me*. Good one, Ares.”

Ares’s smoky gaze bore into his, unwavering, unflinching, and completely sincere. “I’m not kidding. He *does* fear you. So much so that he wants you dead, and it’s

supposed to be *my* job to kill you. Remember? I told you so when I first walked into your bedroom last night.”

Dion felt his mouth fall open. His chest constricted; suddenly, he couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. He’d forgotten! How could he forget something like that? “*Aphrodite is a bitch, and you are her son, but this freaky shit isn’t going to kill you. I am.*” Those were Ares very first words to him. Somehow, in the midst of being fucked senseless by a man who had the body of a god—who, in fact, *was* one—he’d forgotten. He remembered thinking Ares had the wrong apartment. Now, he knew differently. It was real, all of it. Dion was a god, his father was *Zeus*, who wanted him dead, and his new lover was an Olympian hitman.

Panic suddenly clawed at his throat with acid-dipped fingers. His stomach, so recently filled with food, lurched violently. “You’re going to *kill* me? After we... I thought you... oh my God.” He felt suddenly lightheaded and shifted around on his chair so he could bend over and put his head between his knees. “I’m going to be sick.”

He felt Ares’s hand on the back of his neck and cringed, waiting for Ares to snap it like an old, dried-out chicken bone. Instead, he felt Ares gently massaging the tension-strained muscles.

“Relax, Dion. I’m not in the habit of fucking my enemies into the mattress and then taking them out to breakfast before I kill them. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“You only slept with me because of my powers. You said so yourself.”

“Yes, you’re right. I wish it were otherwise, but as I said before, I don’t lie.”

Dion gasped as Ares's words hit him like a physical blow. Somehow, in some tiny part of his mind, he'd still hoped it wasn't true. "You couldn't come up with a little white lie, even this once? I mean, I didn't expect you to declare your undying love, or anything, but that was harsh, dude. God, how pathetic am I that it takes *magic* to get somebody to sleep with me?"

"Look at me, Dion," Ares ordered. His fingers slipped under Dion's chin, urging him to pick up his head. "Yes, your powers made us drunk with lust, but they faded as soon as we climaxed. That's the nature of lust and pleasure—wham, bam, thank you, sir, don't let the door hit you in the ass on your way out. What happened after we finished... that was all us, baby."

Dion somehow found the courage to look into Ares's eyes. "What do you mean?"

"We spent the night together, Dion. Actual *sleeping* was involved, not just fucking like rabid bunnies. I've *never* done that with anyone before. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"So, we caught a few Zs together. What's the big deal about that?"

Ares sighed, cupping Dion's cheek with his hand. It felt warm and comforting. "It's a huge deal! You felt safe enough with me to fall asleep, and I trusted you enough to do the same. I never felt that sort of trust before, not with anyone. In my world, everyone is the enemy or has the potential to be the enemy. Closing your eyes in your enemy's presence is a tactical error I would never be foolish enough to make. The warmth I felt holding you last night, watching you sleep, and

then waking with you at my side... it was unprecedented. I've been around long enough to understand what a rarity it is. I'm not going to kill you, Dion, and I'm not going to let anyone else hurt you, either."

"But Zeus is your father, too, isn't he? You've only known me for a single night. You've known him... well, close enough to forever to make it actually be forever. Why are you picking me over him?"

Ares smirked. "There's no love lost between me and Zeus. I only agreed to do the job because he offered me the throne to Olympus."

Dion felt ill all over again. "The throne? He wants me dead so bad he was willing to give up the throne?"

"No. I have no doubt he would've reneged or tried to have my ass thrown in Tartarus as soon as it touched his precious golden throne. It would've been war, and that's what tempted me. He knew it, too, the bastard."

"Yeah? Well, what's to stop Zeus from killing you too?" he asked, wanting to believe Ares, but as yet unable to allow himself the luxury. "He is the head honcho, isn't he?"

Ares laughed, and his eyes glittered menacingly. "I'm a full god, Dion, with all the rights and privileges thereof. He *can't* kill me. Believe me, if he could, he would have done it eons ago. The worst he can do is strip me of my powers and throw my ass in Tartarus, and that's only if I lose a fight between us. Mind you, I haven't lost a battle yet and don't intend to start now."

"What about me? He can kill me, right?"

“He could while you’re still a fledgling, but he’d have to get past me, first. For now, while your powers are just blossoming, you’re susceptible to attack. In a week, maybe two at the most, you’ll be at full strength, and then you won’t need me to protect you anymore. You’ll be immortal, like me. Ol’ Zeus had better duck and cover then.”

“Why? What’s he got to be afraid of?”

“When your powers are fully matured, you’re going to be at least as powerful as he is, if not more so. You could rule Olympus, if you so desired.”

Dion’s jaw dropped for the second time. His first reaction was to deny it, to say that Ares made a mistake, that it couldn’t possibly be true, but he bit the words back. Ares hadn’t lied to him yet. Maybe there was a way out of this mess for him.

For the first time since remembering Zeus wanted him dead, the fist squeezing Dion’s chest loosened, allowing him to take a deep breath. “What do we do in the meantime? While my powers are incubating, or cooking, or whatever it is new powers do, I mean?”

“We gather our army, and plan our strategy.”

“Army? *What* army? Strategy for what?”

Ares’s lips spread in a cold, dangerous smile that sent a shiver dancing down Dion’s spine. “Zeus is going to try to take you, and I’m not going to let him. That means only one thing: we’re going to war after all, and I have the perfect place to bunker down.”

ZEUS and Hermes stood in the center of a pile of wreckage that, up until five minutes ago, had been an International House of Pancakes.

“They were here. This place reeks of their powers. We must have missed them by seconds!” Zeus bellowed, sending another lightning bolt zinging into the remains of the deep fryer. Oil bubbled up and flamed, spreading and adding to the fires already burning in the ruins of the kitchen.

“Perhaps we should go back to Olympus, my lord, and rethink our plans,” Hermes suggested. *Honestly, Zeus in a rage is worse than a toddler*, he thought, as he brushed at the ashes coating his silk suit. *Somebody needs to give him a time out*. He began to wonder whether he should consider switching loyalties. Zeus had been a god since time immemorial, but he’d never matured past the terrible twos. Plus, Hermes seriously started to doubt Zeus’s ability to come out on top in this one. If Hermes wanted to be a part of the new order (and not a permanent resident of Tartarus in a cell next to Zeus), he might need to reconsider which side he should back in this coming war.

They’d tracked Ares’s scent to Dion’s apartment, only to find that Ares had doubly betrayed Zeus by not only failing to kill the fledgling god, but by taking the godling elsewhere. The smell of sex clung to the sheets on the bed, and it wasn’t difficult to surmise that the godling, true to his mother’s side of the family, had Ares caught by the cock.

While Zeus busied himself throwing a tantrum and laying waste to the apartment building, Hermes managed to save a few of Zeus’s bastard’s personal papers, which at least gave them his name. Dion Korinthos.

They'd followed the olfactory trail to the restaurant, only to find they'd missed Ares and Dion by minutes again. This time, the trail stopped cold at a table laden with empty plates and pools of congealing maple syrup.

Zeus had done what he always did when thwarted—he took out his frustration by leveling the place, while Hermes sidestepped and tried to stay out of blast range.

“Ares is a traitorous piece of scum! I can't believe he came from my loins. So help me, I'll have him strung up by his dick before this is over!” Zeus bellowed. “Where could he have taken the brat?”

Hermes resisted rolling his eyes at Zeus's lack of foresight. He should have realized what level of power a son of Aphrodite and Zeus would possess, and as Ares's father, he should know where his son would take the fledgling—to Ares's iron fortress, of course. The fortress's defenses were impenetrable. Not even Zeus could get past them, which brought them to the more difficult question. *How* they would get to Dion before his godhood was completely released, and before Hera realized Zeus was his sire?

He waited until Zeus's towering rage blew itself out before speaking. “My lord, I would suggest calling a meeting with Hephaestus. Ares's fortress is solid iron and bronze. Hephaestus helped Ares build it, forging the metal. Nobody knows metalwork better than Heph. If there's any way to breach the fortress's defenses, Heph will know about it.”

“Can he be trusted?”

Hermes shrugged. “He's never forgiven Ares for cuckolding him with Aphrodite. He'd jump at the chance to, pardon the expression, fuck Ares over.” He bit his tongue

and refrained from mentioning that Heph held no fondness for Zeus either, and for the same reason.

Hermes watched Zeus's eyes narrow with cunning. "Of course! A perfect choice, Hermes. Remind me to reward you later."

Hermes bit his tongue. Zeus's idea of a reward entailed allowing Hermes to join him at the baths, and Hermes had no inclination to watch Zeus clip his godly toenails. "No reward is necessary, my lord. Simply doing my duty, you know."

"Go to Hephaestus at once and arrange a discreet meeting. I want my spawn dead, and Ares's hide pinned to a wall in Tartarus before sunset tomorrow!"

ARES'S fortress was much the same as it'd been the last time he'd visited it, nearly five hundred years ago. Looming up in the fog-sheathed foothills of Mt. Olympus, it comprised an impressive arrangement of shining iron-and-bronze towers and buttresses. Coming here never failed to both bolster and prick his ego. He prided himself on the sheer splendor of the fortress, but on the opposite side of the coin, the insult of not having been allowed to build it on Mt. Olympus proper still stung. He'd been relegated to the foothills, always the outcast, the red-haired stepchild, so to speak.

He'd designed the fortress for functionality, strength, and endurance, not comfort, but he'd specifically built one set of rooms for decadent luxury—Ares's master bedroom

suite. He smiled at the awe coloring Dion's face when he brought Dion there.

The king-size bed wasn't only massive; it was a work of art. A master artisan had carved scenes depicting Ares in battle into the marble head-and-foot boards, as well as the matching armoire and chest of drawers. The warm gleam of golden vases softened the austerity of the room; the scent of the black roses they held filled the air. Platters of fresh fruit and sweetmeats lay on a table set beneath a life-size portrait of Ares in full battle armor. Beneath their feet were hand-woven carpets in deep jewel tones.

This was Ares's cloister, his refuge from the world. He'd never before brought anyone here, and he was interested in seeing Dion's reaction to his private retreat. He wasn't disappointed.

"Holy shit! You *live* here?"

"Well, I haven't been here in about five hundred years, give or take a decade, but... yeah. It's mine. Home, sweet home."

He laughed as Dion flung himself backwards on the soft bed, bouncing a few times. "This is incredible! Who takes care of this place for you?"

"You mean, who guards it? My army."

"You have an *army*?"

Ares smirked. "I *am* the god of War, remember? Of course I have an army. The Amazons fight for me, along with the griffins, the centaurs, hydra, gorgons, and a few others species, and a couple of demigods who've had issues with Zeus in the past. He would like nothing more than to banish

them all to Tartarus. I give them refuge here, and in return, they stand with me in battle.” He neglected to mention how long it had been since last the battle horn sounded. His minions were probably just as eager as he was to see combat again.

He hoped.

“Sorry, but I can’t quite picture the Amazons running around here with feather-dusters.”

Ares laughed. “They don’t, and I wouldn’t let them hear you suggest they do. Amazonians have very little in the way of a sense of humor, particularly when it comes to males. They don’t clean the castle—they guard it. The fortress is self-cleaning, like any god’s home.”

“So, what you’re saying is, when I’m a god, I’ll never have to scrub a toilet again?”

Ares laughed. “Think of it as a perk of the job. You’ll not only never have to clean it, you’ll never have to use it again, either.” He eyed Dion lying spread-eagled on his bed. *He looks like he belongs there, but there’s something missing,* Ares mused. The answer came to him, and he smiled wickedly. *Yes, he belongs on my bed, but he needs to be naked, wearing nothing but my scent on his skin.* The lascivious smile grew wider as he allowed their clothing to dissolve into nothingness. *Better. Much better.*

For the briefest of moments, Ares considered his sudden surge of lust to be instigated by Dion’s growing powers. It certainly felt strong enough to be bolstered by magic.

Then he realized it really didn’t matter. He’d want Dion anyway, god-powers or no.

“Hey!” Dion gasped, obviously startled by their instant nudity. “You need to stop doing stuff like this. Give a guy a heads up, at least, will ya?”

“Fine, then consider this fair warning: I’m about to fuck you six ways from Sunday.”

Dion gaped at him but made no effort to move away. His cock spoke his agreement instead by lengthening and thickening, and the magical scent of his sex, musky and heady, drew a likewise reaction from Ares’s body. The air around Dion sizzled with blue lightning, testament to both his awakening powers and burgeoning arousal. Curiously, Dion seemed oblivious to them; his attention seemed focused solely on Ares, a welcoming smile tilting his lips. When he opened his arms to Ares, Ares gladly fell into them and the promise of pleasure they held.

“I’m doing this to you, aren’t I?” Dion asked softly as he nuzzled Ares’s neck.

“Yes, but it has nothing to do with your powers. Your very *existence* arouses me.” *It isn’t really a lie... more a stretching of the truth*, Ares conceded. For the first time in his life, he felt a powerful need to protect someone else’s feelings. The pseudo-truth fell from his lips before he barely realized he was speaking it.

Then he thought about nothing else but the feel of Dion’s lithe body, the warm wetness of his mouth, and the cleverness of his fingers.

Their tongues met head on, but not even in a kiss would Ares concede dominance. Dion’s powers might be facilitating the act, but Ares refused to simply lie back and be taken. It was in his nature to claim, not be claimed. His kiss was

hard, if not brutal, determined, and let Dion know in no uncertain terms who was in charge.

Dion's hands slipped between them, smoothing over Ares's chest, teasing at his nipples. Ares growled low in his throat, a predatory sound, before slapping Dion's hands away. He wouldn't be rushed or led in any manner, not now. This was his bed, his fortress, and the first time he'd brought a lover to it. He would conquer Dion as he had countless nations, on his terms. Taking Dion's hands, he pushed them over Dion's head and held them there.

His lips traced a lazy pattern over Dion's jaw, Dion's light scruff tickling them, and then down Dion's throat. He could feel the pulse of Dion's blood under them, a steady beat that seemed in sync with Ares's heart.

Ares felt as if his entire body was thrumming in time to the beat, a familiar ache growing, pounding, consuming him from the inside out. He rose and knelt, placing one knee on either side of Dion's head, gripping the headboard.

When he felt Dion's warm, wet mouth suck gently on his balls, he groaned. His ass clenched in response to the pleasure that shot through him. He grit his teeth against it, refusing to come. Not yet. Soon, but not yet.

He shifted his weight, inching lower on the bed until his cock touched Dion's lips. When Dion eagerly opened for him, he slipped his length into Dion's mouth. Wet, hot silk enveloped him; his head fell back and his eyes closed as he surrendered himself to it.

The music of Dion's mouth on his cock sent shivers racing over Ares's skin. He knew it wouldn't take much longer for him to reach his climax. If he released even an iota

of his control over himself it would be over. How tempting the thought was, to shoot his release, to let his climax take him, but he found it even sweeter to resist, to hold back, to anticipate the even greater pleasure of releasing inside Dion's body.

Grunting, he used his powers to release Dion's hands, and flip them over, letting Dion straddle his hips. Ares produced a vial of oil from thin air, and handed it Dion. There was no need to speak; he could tell from the lust in Dion's eyes that Dion knew exactly what Ares wanted.

Ares's breath grew ragged as Dion took the oil, spilled some on his fingers, and reached around his hip.

Ares could imagine, could see in his mind's eye Dion's finger slipping between Dion's alabaster cheeks, circling the tight hole within, and then slowly breaching the ring of muscle. The thought of Dion finger-fucking himself almost did Ares in. He had to exert his control again to keep from spilling.

He placed his hands on Dion's slender hips, urging Dion to mount him. He needed to be inside Dion now, five minutes ago. His self-control in tatters, he held on only by a thread.

Dion's body slipped around him, tight, hot, and soft. Ares tightened his hold on Dion's hips, tilting his upward, driving himself deeper into Dion's ass. "Play with yourself," he ordered. "I want to watch you come while I fuck you."

"Fuck, yeah," Dion moaned. The oil on his fingers made wet sounds as he fisted his cock. It didn't take long for Dion. He came, hot, wet spurts burning abstract designs on Ares's stomach.

As Dion's body clenched around his cock, Ares finally relinquished his control. He came seeing Dion's expression of ecstasy, and it matched perfectly the exquisite pleasure rocketing through him.

Ares felt quite certain he'd never grow tired of releasing inside Dion's body. It was too sensual, too exhilarating, and too intimate an act. He cherished the feeling, just as he held dear the sleepy, sated look on Dion's face.

Ares pulled Dion down, spooning up behind him. "Sleep, now. We can begin your instruction tomorrow."

"Instruction?" Dion sounded half-asleep, his eyes already fluttering closed. "What instruction?"

"You need to learn how to use your powers, lover. Tomorrow is soon enough, though. Tonight, sleep, and know I protect you."

"Protect... me...."

Within moments, Ares heard Dion's soft snores and knew he slept. Whatever the next day brought, Ares would face it head-on as he always did, but tonight, he would allow himself the unique luxury of sleeping once again in Dion's arms.

Chapter Five

THE sound of metal striking metal was the only music allowed within Hephaestus's hearing, aside from the *whoosh* of the bellows feeding the fires in his forge. The sound of his hammer against molten iron was far more melodious than any music he had ever heard. In fact, he held the opinion that no one had written any halfway decent music since Athenaeus, and he refused to listen to *anything* dated later than the fifth century, even when he *wasn't* working.

Chamber music? Bah. Jazz? Blech. Rock and Roll? A travesty. Hip Hop? Hephaestus would rather drive red-hot poker into his ears than listen to any of it.

Then again, there wasn't much in life that Hephaestus found enjoyable anymore.

Not even Aphrodite.

Especially not Aphrodite.

"Hephaestus, Zeus is here to see you," she trilled from the doorway. Ethereally beautiful, Aphrodite was the antithesis of Hephaestus, and he knew it. Where she was clear-skinned and lovely, he was warty and lumpy. Her slender and straight-limbed form incited lust; his short and bowlegged body inspired nothing but pity. Where she was grace personified, he was clumsy and uncouth. Their disparity had never really bothered him before, not when he thought she'd loved him for who he was on the inside.

He should have known better. After all, his “inside” wasn’t all that much different from his “outside.” Even his personality had warts.

Still, he’d mistakenly believed she truly loved him once upon a time, but that was before he discovered that Aphrodite was incapable of loving anyone other than herself. Hephaestus wasted many years hating Ares for his affair with Aphrodite, only to find out much later while sharing a bottle of Dionysus’s potent brew with Hermes, that Aphrodite was the one who instigated their liaison. She’d used her powers of love and attraction to lure Ares into it because she wanted to shame Hephaestus before the rest of Olympus, thinking it would earn her a quick divorce from her less-than-aesthetically-pleasing husband.

Fat chance.

Since then, it had been all he could do to look at her without using one of his swords to try to lop off her two-faced head, but he steadfastly refused to divorce her. Having Aphrodite and hating her was still infinitely better than not having her at all, and at least if he stayed married to the bitch, he could make sure she felt just as miserable as he did every minute of every day.

He tossed his hammer aside and wiped his hands on his leather apron as he nodded and made his way toward the house from his workshop, his clubfoot dragging a thin furrow through the grass.

“By the way, dear heart, that gown makes your ass look hugely fat,” he said as he slipped by her. “Are fat asses in vogue this season?” It was a little dig, one that he’d used many times before. He tried to get in at least a half dozen of

them every few hours. The venomous look in her eyes gave him a brief taste of satisfaction, as it always did.

Zeus waited for him in the *andron*, along with Hermes. Zeus paced the length of the room, looking tense and twitchy, an unusual combination to be sure, particularly for the father of the gods. Hephaestus looked to Hermes and caught a warning flashing in Hermes's eyes. Whatever ailed Zeus was serious.

Good. I hope he has parasites. I hope his parasites have parasites. I hope his dick turns green and rots off. I hope he develops hemorrhoids the size of boulders. I hope his parasites get hemorrhoids.

Aphrodite wasn't the only person Hephaestus hated. Zeus ranked right up there on his list of people Hephaestus wouldn't piss on if they were on fire. Several millennia ago, when Aphrodite had wanted to seduce someone in order to shame Hephaestus in the misguided hope of securing a divorce, it'd been *Zeus* who'd suggested Ares. Everyone knew Ares was a thorn in Zeus's side almost from the moment of Ares's birth. If anyone existed there who could ever hope to best Zeus and take the throne of Olympus, it was Ares. Zeus knew it all too well, and he had been looking for a way to rid himself of Ares since the moment Ares drew his first breath. He'd hoped Hephaestus would try to best Ares in a fit of jealousy. After all, if anyone were to be punished for sending a god to Tartarus, few would weep if it was the blacksmith who got tossed into Hades on his ugly ass right alongside Ares.

Hera had filled Hephaestus in on that particular bit of trivia, a favor for which he still owed. Her information

allowed Hephaestus to expose the treacherous couple, effectively turning the tables on them, and saving both his pride and hide.

But Hephaestus knew something else, and the knowledge ate at him. Aphrodite had many affairs over the centuries, but the latest one, the one that burned Heph's ass more than any other, was the one she'd carried on with Zeus. He couldn't confront Zeus head-on as he had Ares, since Zeus could easily turn Heph into blacksmith flambé, roasting in Tartarus until the end of time.

He made Aphrodite pay in many small ways every day. Ares had been all but banned from Olympus for his part in the affair, but Zeus had suffered no comeuppance at all for his sins as of yet, and it grated on Hephaestus each and every day.

Because of Zeus's treachery, being in Zeus's presence had all the attraction of chewing glass to Hephaestus. He'd been forced to let Zeus's duplicity go unchallenged at the time since one simply didn't take on the king of the gods and expect to come out unscathed, but that didn't mean it didn't rankle. Hephaestus was ugly, not stupid. The knowledge ate at him. Still, he knew that all challenging Zeus would've gotten Hephaestus was a one-way ticket to Tartarus, and probably in small, manageable pieces. He'd held his tongue, but had never forgotten.

He dodged Zeus whenever possible, but since Mt. Olympus—while certainly an opulent and worthy residence for the gods—comprised a relatively small area, complete avoidance was impossible. No matter how infrequently he saw Zeus, whenever he did, the wounds reopened.

Grudges weigh nothing, and I can carry mine forever, he'd thought at the time. Sooner or later, you'll need something from me. When you do, then we'll see how deeply I can cut you.

It looked like the time for his revenge had finally dawned. Whatever Zeus needed from him must be important, he could see it clearly in the way Zeus nervously paced back and forth across the marble tiles and in the tension knotting the muscles of Zeus's shoulders and back.

He wants my help, huh? Yeah, well, people in Tartarus want ice water too. Doesn't mean Hades is going to install a Frigidaire any time soon, though, he thought smugly. He plastered a fake smile on his face and executed a bow far more facetious than courtly. "My lord, to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"I need your help, Hephaestus," Zeus said, without looking up or pausing in his pacing.

Seriously, Hephaestus thought, *if he keeps this up, I'm going to need to replace the flooring because he's going to wear a rut in the marble.* "Of course, my lord. What can I do for you?"

"You helped Ares build his iron fortress, didn't you? I need to know how to get inside, without setting off his alarms."

Hephaestus nearly bit his tongue in surprise. Never had he thought he'd be forced to choose between Zeus and Ares. *Oh, decisions, decisions! What should I do? Help Zeus and screw Ares, or protect Ares and fuck Zeus?*

When he thought about it, he realized there really was no question. He detested Ares, but he positively *loathed* Zeus with every fiber in his being. While Ares might be a lecher, an owner of a low sense of ethics, and a less-than-discriminating dick, Hephaestus knew in his heart it was true Aphrodite had been the seducer in their affair. And if Aphrodite had chosen to spread her legs like a common whore, then Zeus was her pimp. Even worse, Zeus had taken up where Ares left off. “Might I ask *why* you need to get into Ares’s fortress?”

“No, you may not ask. It’s none of your business, blacksmith. Just tell me how to do it,” Zeus snapped.

Nice attitude from someone who wants a favor, Hephaestus thought wryly. *How typically Zeus to treat people like unworthy dogs, and then expect them to lick his hand instead of biting it.* “There is a back door, my lord. Ares never struck me as a trustworthy sort even before he slept with my wife... well, I don’t have to tell you why. You know his reputation even better than I. I put it in without telling him on the off chance someone from Olympus might need to get inside someday. You could use it to enter the fortress.”

“Ares does not know of this secret entrance?”

“I never told him of it, my lord.”

“Excellent! Draw us a map, immediately.”

Hephaestus turned away, biting back a grin as he rummaged in a nearby desk for parchment and a quill. He quickly sketched out the perimeters of Ares’s fortress from memory and marked the secret entrance. He rolled up the

scroll, tied it with a thin leather thong, and handed it to Zeus. “Here you are, my lord.”

“Good work, Heph,” Zeus said, taking the scroll. His temper seemed to have lightened considerably (no doubt at the possibility of destroying Ares with little or no danger to his own precious hide), and he smiled. “Remind me to reward you later.”

Hephaestus and Hermes exchanged a brief, knowing look. Hephaestus knew Hermes was sharp and would’ve read between the lines of the story Hephaestus told Zeus. Hermes would know Hephaestus set Zeus up and would act accordingly to save his own ass. At least, Hephaestus hoped so. He bore no grudge against Hermes and believed the feeling was mutual.

Hephaestus smiled and bowed to Zeus. “It is my pleasure, my lord. Anytime I can be of service, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

He meant it too. He welcomed any opportunity to stick a big fat one up Zeus’s pompous ass and give it a solid twist.

Hephaestus’s smile remained long after Zeus and Hermes left, and with good reason. He’d been able to exact his revenge without even uttering the smallest lie. After all, the door *had* been a secret when he’d helped Ares build his fortress, and he’d never breathed a word about it to Ares, not once in all the ensuing years.

That didn’t mean it was *still* a secret. Everyone knew Ares was positively anal about security. After all the millennia that had passed since the fortress’s construction, Heph was certain Ares would’ve gone over every inch with a

fine-tooth comb several times over. He surely would've found the door by now.

Furthermore, Ares was no fool. Having found a secret door, he would've immediately realized its purpose, and either sealed it or had it very well guarded. The moment Zeus tried to gain entry, Hephaestus felt sure an alarm would be raised. Zeus would have no problem overcoming a single enemy, but standing against Ares's army without one of his own at his back?

Never.

Good luck, Zeus, old boy, he thought as he returned to his workshop. *You're going to need it*. Hephaestus picked up his hammer and began to force iron to bend to his will, loosing a spray of red-hot sparks with every strike, his grin as bright as any spark flying from his forge.

DION sat at the massive table in Ares's War Room, staring intently at a small, white feather. The feather was from a goose, and it lay unmoving on the burnished mahogany tabletop. They'd originally begun with a harpy feather, a huge, ragged plume the color of a bruise. One of the winged hags who were a part of Ares's air division donated it to the cause, but its gods-awful smell proved to be too much for Dion to bear. Frequent bouts of gagging continually interrupted his concentration, forcing Ares to substitute the much more innocuous, smaller, goose feather.

Fat lot of good the difference in size and aroma had done him. Dion hadn't been able to move the feather a single

centimeter. Every time he tried he felt like he'd just rammed his head face first into a brick wall.

"This isn't working, Ares," Dion said. He massaged the bridge of his nose, hoping to ease the throbbing pain behind his eyes. "It's hopeless. I can't do it."

"Of course you can. It just takes practice. Don't forget, your powers aren't quite mature yet. Try again."

"Oh come on! Give me a break. I've got a headache, Ares."

"You'll have worse than that if you have to face Zeus without full control of all of your god-powers."

"Well, it doesn't seem like I have this particular *sort* of power. I can't move things with my mind, Ares. I've tried and tried, but I can't. What say we try something else, or don't you care if my head explodes?" Dion knew he was whining, but he was past caring. He'd been at it for hours, and his head really hurt. He started to stand up, but Ares pushed him back into his seat.

"Of course I would care if your head exploded. That would be messy and incredibly difficult to put back together."

Dion blinked up at Ares. Ares wore an impish grin. "Oh sure. Go on. Make fun of the untalented godling."

"You can do it, Dion. Telekinesis is one of the simplest manifestations of our powers we have. Any toddler-god can do it!"

Dion huffed a stray hair out of his eyes. "Maybe I need the remedial godhood class, then. Speaking of which, why

does my head hurt, anyway? I thought you told me gods were immortal!”

Ares snorted, and amusement momentarily sparkled in his eyes, but it was gone just as swiftly. “I did. We’re immortal, not impervious to pain. There’s a distinct difference. Believe me, a headache is nothing compared to the hurt Zeus can put on you.” He stabbed his forefinger at the feather. “Try again!”

“You’re not the boss of me,” Dion pouted. He folded his arms across his chest and stuck his tongue out at Ares.

“Keep showing me your tongue, and I’ll gladly put it to work,” Ares said. A dark tone in Ares’s voice raised the hair on Dion’s arms and made his cock fill. Ares was damned sexy when he used his deep, authoritative voice. It felt to Dion as though he could hear Ares with his entire body, not just his ears.

“I’ll happily suck you inside out if you’ll just let me quit this feather-thing,” Dion replied. He tried for a seductive smile and felt a prickle of hope for a nanosecond that he’d succeeded, until Ares pointed to the feather again and told him to get back to work. *Damn, this must be important if Ares is saying no to a blow job*, he thought. “Wait a minute. I thought you told me that my strongest power was seduction,” he growled, resuming his pout. “How come it didn’t work on you just now?”

“Don’t assume it didn’t work. You’ll never know how difficult... no, how *painful* it is for me to refuse you.”

Dion glanced up at Ares again and was shocked to see that Ares indeed looked pale, his expression strained. Gone

was his playful smile, replaced by a grimace. Diamond bright beads of sweat glittered on his forehead. The look of abject longing in Ares's dark eyes seared Dion to his core, and made him ashamed both for his attempt at seduction, and his complaining. "Okay, okay. I'm sorry. I'd turn it off if I knew how."

Ares waved a dismissive hand at Dion, although Dion could tell how much the gesture cost him. "Don't worry about me. I'm as tough as they come, and I've suffered far worse. Just get back to work."

Dion sighed and decided it was easier—and much less cruel for Ares—for him to stare at the feather than to continue arguing. He returned to his task but his headache immediately intensified, making him wince.

He closed his eyes and counted to ten, and then he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Just as he opened his eyes and prepared to send everything he had spiraling into the feather even if it made his head explode, a thunderous gong sounded in the hallway outside the War Room. He yelped and jumped to his feet, his gaze automatically turning to Ares.

Ares stiffened visibly and held his hand up to Dion, signaling for silence. His head cocked slightly as if listening for something.

"Someone is trying to breach my fortress," he said. For all that Ares spoke in a calm monotone, steel laced his voice. "Stay here," he ordered. Dion watched as Ares manifested his blood-red armor, and a very large, very sharp sword.

Then Ares disappeared, leaving Dion alone in the War Room.

It was only then, as Dion's gaze wandered to the table that he noticed the goose feather was gone. It took him a few minutes to find it, and when he did, he gasped.

Embedded in the far wall, the point of the feathers' quill pushed halfway into the solid, iron plate.

Chapter Six

ZEUS'S chariot, a golden, ornate affair was pulled by four snow white Pegasi, the winged descendants of the mighty Pegasus. The original Pegasus, put out to stud a millennium ago, was as horny as he was beautiful and happily impregnated every mare that came within spitting distance, including his daughters and granddaughters. The resulting inbred generations of Pegasi were as stunning as their sire, but as dull as mud.

The chariot hovered outside of the towering, intimidating black walls of Ares's iron fortress. The horses' wings beat like hummingbirds' as they neighed and pawed nervously at the clouds, their eyes rolling up white in their terror.

Nobody, not even the vapid, slow-witted Pegasi, liked being anywhere in the immediate vicinity of Ares's fortress. It ranked right up there with Tartarus on everyone's list of places best avoided. Zeus had to tighten his grip on the reins to keep the Pegasi from bolting and dragging his chariot along with them.

"Where is it?" Zeus thundered, sending another lightning bolt slamming into the solid, black surface of the fortress. The bolt hit and flared briefly, a shower of sparks sizzling in a falling arc, and then sputtered out. The wall, as in all of Zeus's previous attempts, remained unmarked. At this rate, he'd soon need to return to Olympus to restock his

supply of lightning bolts. He wondered absently whether Hephaestus had forged a supply of new ones, and he made a mental note to shove one up Hephaestus's ugly ass at the earliest opportunity for Heph's incompetence. "Where's the damn backdoor Hephaestus was talking about?" He turned his malevolent glare toward Hermes. "Did you get the directions right? Maybe this is the wrong wall."

"Do I look like the Olympian OnStar to you?" Hermes growled, hissing as a stray spark hit his skin. "This is the south wall, where Heph said he built the backdoor. It's not my fault if it's not here anymore."

Zeus roared and sent a lightning bolt crackling close enough to singe Hermes's nose hair. "I'm in no mood for your facetiousness, Hermes! Find that fucking backdoor, and find it now!"

Hermes yelped and dove for the black wall, running his hands over the smooth, cold surface. "I don't feel anything—no cracks, crevices, hinges... nothing! It's simply not here, my lord."

"I'll have Hephaestus's balls as earrings for this," Zeus growled through gritted teeth.

"Good. They'll match the set Hera will make of yours."

Zeus's head snapped back, and his gaze shot in one direction then another, searching for the source of the voice. "Ares! Where are you? Show yourself, you coward!" He finally spotted Ares in his blood-red armor standing atop one of the high towers.

Ares's laughter further infuriated Zeus. "You have some gall to call *me* a coward, when *you're* the one skulking

around my fortress, looking for a back way in instead of coming through the front gates and meeting me face to face as a warrior should.”

“So there *is* a backdoor. Heph didn’t lie. Ares just found it and got rid of it or camouflaged it,” Hermes said with a trace of admiration in his voice.

“Shut up!” Zeus thundered as he sent another lightning bolt streaking in Hermes’s direction, knocking Hermes’s winged helmet off his head. He ignored Hermes’s dive to catch it.

He turned his attention back to Ares, struggling to keep his temper under control. He pointed a thick finger at his son. “I sent you to do a job for me, and you failed. You know how I feel about those who fail me, Ares. I should blast you into oblivion, but you’re of my blood and I’m feeling magnanimous today. Give yourself up now, turn over that misbegotten bastard you’re protecting to me, and I might see my way clear to allowing you to live.”

Ares’s response was slightly less than Zeus anticipated. In fact, it was exactly the opposite of what he’d hoped Ares would say. “Fuck you, Dad. Your threats are worthless. The worst you can do to me is send me to Tartarus. You want Dion? Come and get him. But be warned: you won’t win.”

Suddenly, the air filled with a horrendously loud, flapping sound, drowning out Zeus’s reply. He looked up and felt his heart freeze in his chest at the sight of thousands of harpies flying overhead, darkening the skies. Their screeches sounded like needles in his ears.

A new noise drew his attention to the highest point of the keep, where he spotted centaur archers lining the walls, their deadly arrows fixed on him.

Zeus knew he was badly outnumbered. He couldn't be killed, but he had no ambition to cool his heels in Tartarus. Hades would *never* let him out if that happened. It only took a split second for him to make his decision. He needed to think, to regroup, to plan. Obviously, he wasn't going to get inside the fortress without a lot of help. The chariot lurched wildly as he yanked hard on the reins and turned it away from Ares's fortress, the Pegasi throwing their chests against the rigging, leaving the harpies—and Hermes—far behind.

Swearing an oath, Zeus returned to Olympus to begin recruiting his army. *So be it*, he thought. *Like it or not, Olympus is going to war.*

ARES stood on the top of the southern tower, his sword drawn, staring at the receding chariot. He'd half-hoped Zeus would be foolish enough to engage him, just so he could get the fight over with, but not even Zeus was foolish enough to attack him on his own turf.

Not with only Hermes to fight for him, anyway. He'd be back, Ares knew, and next time Zeus would have more than just a clothes-conscious, fleet-footed errand boy for back up. Next time, Zeus would bring an army.

So be it.

Ares had an army of his own, and every last one of Ares's soldiers had a bone to pick with Zeus.

A bit of white fluttering in the darkness caught his eye. He squinted and then smiled.

Far below him, Hermes's back was against the wall, the wings on his feet and helmet beating furiously as he zigged and zagged, trying to keep out of gutting range of the harpies' talons.

At first, Ares was tempted to let the harpies have the smarmy little bastard, but after thinking it over, he relented. After all, Hermes was just the messenger, and now, after being abandoned by Zeus to the harpies, he might be willing to hop the fence to Ares's side. *Having Hermes fighting for me might be useful*, he thought. *Nobody knows Olympus or the gods as well as he does. He's heard all the gossip, knows their weaknesses.*

Ares let out a long, piercing whistle. As one, the harpies screeched in reply, and the flock reeled, heading back to their nests on the fortress's east side. One lone harpy, carrying something wriggling in its talons, veered off and flew over Ares's head. The harpy released her cargo as she flew by, and it landed at Ares's feet with a thud and a curse.

"Nice, Ares. Next time, why don't you simply toss me in a cesspool? It'd smell better," Hermes said. He stood up, and tried to brush off the tattered remains of his suit, but it was of no use. He reeked of harpy.

"Be nice to me, Hermes. I'm a heartbeat and a half away from calling her back and making you a present for her."

A visible shiver wracked Hermes. "The idea is too disgusting to even joke about, Ares."

Ares cocked an eyebrow at Hermes. “Do I look like I’m joking? You knew all about Dion, and lied to me about him. Then, to make matters worse, you aided and abetted Zeus in trying to attack my fortress.”

“*I had* to do it. You know Zeus’s temper! If I didn’t do as Zeus ordered, my butt would be parked in the coldest corner of Tartarus right now.”

“You may be wishing for Tartarus before I’m through with you.” He reached out and grabbed a fistful of Hermes’s silk suit jacket, pulling Hermes close, until their noses practically touched. “Listen up, Hermes. Zeus ran to save his own ass and left you for dead. The only reason you’re not being flayed by the harpies right now is because I called them off. You owe me, big time.”

“I know, I know!” Hermes said. He pulled away from Ares and looked down at himself. “Gods, this suit is ruined.” He pulled off his golden helm and pointed to a jagged crease that ran over the top. “And look at my helmet! Courtesy of your father, the bastard. These helmets aren’t a dime a dozen, you know. Heph made this one for me.” He replaced it on his head and tugged on his coat, pulling at his cuffs. “I was stupid to stay with Zeus as long as I did. I know what he’s capable of, and where his loyalties lie. He’s a paranoid, sociopathic megalomaniac, without the slightest trace of decency. The only person he cares for is himself, and the only thing he treasures is the throne.” Hermes looked Ares in the eye. “You’re in big trouble, my friend. Why don’t you just give him the kid? You can avoid all this trouble. Yeah, Zeus is pissed, but given a few centuries, he’ll cool off and things will go back to normal.”

Ares's lip curled. "My reasons are my own. Besides, maybe I don't want things to 'go back to normal'. It seems to me that 'normal' sucked. Maybe it's time for a change." He narrowed his eyes at Hermes. "Why didn't you tell me Dion was Aphrodite and Zeus's son?"

"You *know* why. Zeus swore me to secrecy. I couldn't tell you the truth. Not the *whole* truth, anyway." Hermes's eyes narrowed for a moment and then opened wide. "Oh no... the godling seduced you! *That's* why you won't give him up. I can't believe you'd let yourself get suckered in again, not after what happened with you and Aphrodite. And with her son, no less—"

"You know, I think I should call the harpies back again," Ares said. He stuck his fingers in his mouth as if to whistle.

Hermes jumped, tugging Ares's hands down. "No, no, that's not necessary! I apologize." He huffed out a long sigh that screamed of relief when Ares relented. "Look, I was thinking of switching camps before this. Really!" he cried, seeing Ares's look of disbelief. "I swear it on the Fates! Zeus has been frolicking blithely along on a downward spiral for the last millennium. He alienated the humans, and most of the demigods. Even the gods harbor resentment for him. I mean, look what's happened to us! Our temples are tourist attractions, and our names relegated to mere myths! Even Apollo grunts whenever the name 'Zeus' is mentioned in his company, and *he's* barely bright enough to not drown looking up at the rain with his mouth open."

"How do I know I can I trust you?" Ares asked. "A viper is a viper, no matter where it makes its nest."

Hermes gulped as Ares ran a thumb over the gleaming blade of his sword. The fear in his eyes showed plainly, and he shivered visibly. “Call the Cousins, Ares. I’ll swear my allegiance to you by the Furies.”

It would be a pledge never to be broken. Should Hermes swear an oath in front of the three crones and later renege, they would punish Hermes until he begged for death. Since gods can’t be killed, Hermes would be doomed to spend eternity in Tartarus having his flesh scourged from the bone by the Furies. Not even Zeus commanded such a promise from his allies (although Ares believed the reason was because Zeus harbored a deep-seated fear of the Furies, and not because of any altruistic tendencies on Zeus’s part. After all, Zeus was guilty of more sins than all the other gods combined. He would be the first to feel the lash should he draw the Furies’ attention to him.).

Ares arched an eyebrow. “You would swear fealty to me before the Furies?”

Hermes swallowed hard again and nodded, trying to straighten his back, but couldn’t hide a shudder. “I will. Call them.”

Ares smirked. “Do you think I’m stupid, Hermes? I’m the god of War, not some innocent. The Furies would surely have issue with me.”

Hermes’s eyes widened. “That’s not why I suggested it, Ares. I swear! I—”

“Calm down before you piss yourself. If I thought you did, your helmet would be crammed up your narrow ass by now.” Ares suddenly pulled Hermes closer and the look in

Hermes's eyes turned to abject horror. "But know this, *brother*... betray me to Zeus, or raise a finger against Dion, and I'll show you such agony you'll be *wishing* for the Furies long before I'm done with you."

There was no doubt Hermes believed every word of it. "I swear it, Ares!"

When Ares finally let him go, Hermes tugged down his shirt and jacket and tried unsuccessfully to pretend Ares hadn't nearly scared him out of his little winged booties, as if Ares didn't know better. He cleared his throat. "Good. Glad we got that hammered out. Now, about Zeus's godling—"

"*Dion*. His name is Dion, and he's *mine*."

The menace was back in Ares's voice, and Hermes obviously didn't like it one bit. He backpedaled so quickly, Ares was almost surprised his tongue didn't leave skid marks across his lips. "Right, Dion. Yours. Isn't that what I said? I think that's what I said. It's what I meant. Really. Cross my heart and hope to... well, cross my heart."

"What about Dion?"

"I... well, is he worth losing everything? Your fortress, your powers, your freedom? Is he worth eternity spent in the deepest, darkest, coldest hole in Tartarus Zeus can find? Ares, all kidding aside, you've just declared open war on Olympus. Everyone is going to be gunning for you."

"Not everyone." Ares gave him a meaningful look.

"Okay, not *everyone*. I'm here, I get it. But everyone *else* will. Artemis, Hades, Poseidon, Athena, Apollo, Dionysus, Eros... the list goes on and on. Sure, nobody's really overly fond of Zeus, but they like the status quo on Olympus, Ares."

They won't give it up easily. Hell, they won't give it up *at all*. Zeus is probably amassing his army as we speak, and when he gets here, there won't be iron walls thick enough to keep him out. He took down the *Titans*, Ares. He'll take you down too."

"When Zeus won over the Titans, he was fit to be king of the gods. Shit, he castrated his own father! He's not the same person anymore. He's grown soft, too sure of himself and his powers. If he wasn't, why would he have hidden Dion? He's afraid of *Hera*, that's why. And now he's afraid of Dion, of Dion's power. He didn't used to be afraid of anyone or anything."

Ares's lips slid into a grin that frightened Hermes even more than his earlier icy glare had. "Besides, Zeus isn't going to bring his army here. He won't have enough time, because *my* army is going to Olympus before he can. I'm going to kick his scrawny ass on his own turf."

Chapter Seven

ZEUS paced the length of the throne room in a near panic, and he was ill equipped to deal with it. Nothing had gone the way he intended.

Ares had not killed the whelp; in fact, Ares now protected Dion.

He and Hermes had not caught up to Ares as Zeus hoped, missing them not once, but *twice* on the mortal plane. He was equally unsuccessful in breaking into Ares's iron fortress, despite Hephaestus's assurance that a back door existed. Indeed, Ares now knew Zeus was after him, and had practically declared war on Olympus as a result.

To make matters worse, Hermes had not returned to the palace. Zeus felt it was a safe bet that Ares had sent Hermes to Tartarus. Zeus would've done the same had he been in Ares's sandals. He was at first tempted to leave Hermes there to rot, and good riddance, but finally had second thoughts.

While he held no affection for Hermes—there'd always been something about Hermes that rubbed Zeus the wrong way, a hint of derision in Hermes's attitude that Hermes never quite successfully hid—Zeus privately admitted Hermes had never let him down before. Hermes possessed a quick mind, and quicker feet. Hermes also knew all the gossip on Olympus, and knew whose allegiance lay with whom.

No, Zeus could punish Hermes later for not returning as expected. For now, Zeus needed someone at his back that he could trust. He needed Hermes. Although it would put Zeus in debt to his younger brother, Hades, Zeus had no choice. He had to beg a favor from Hades, and it was just about killing him. He added it to the mental tally of pounds of flesh to be exacted from Hermes's and Ares's hides.

"Hades!" Zeus bellowed. He sat on his throne, tapping his fingers anxiously on the arm of the chair as he waited for Hades to answer his call. Fucking bastard was taking his sweet-ass time. Rubbing it in. Making Zeus sweat.

Minutes ticked by before Hades finally deigned to appear. By the time he did, Zeus was ready to snap his neck like a chicken bone.

"You know, I have a kingdom to run too. You're not the only one with a crown, brother," Hades said haughtily. "You can't imagine how pissy souls can be. I'm busy—"

Zeus reached out with his powers and slammed Hades against the wall hard enough to make Hades's teeth clack together. "I don't give a righteous shit about your troubles. When I call, you come. That's the way it works, little brother. Next time you keep me waiting, I'll feast on your fucking liver."

Hades shook Zeus's hold off and snarled at him. "Keep pushing me, *big* brother, and you'll find I have teeth too."

Zeus growled but stepped away, swallowing his temper. Although it would no doubt make Zeus feel better, roughing Hades up wouldn't get Hermes back. It would only serve to make Hades shove Hermes into a deeper hole in Tartarus

where Zeus might never find him. “My apologies. My nerves are stretched a bit thin. This is important, Hades. Ares has finally flipped his helm. He’s coming after Olympus. I need you to send Hermes back to me.”

Hades was surprised, and he didn’t hesitate showing it. His eyebrows lifted until they nearly touched his scalp. “Ares? Well, that’s interesting. I thought he was cooling his jets on the mortal plane. What did you do to piss him off?”

Zeus bared his teeth. “Me? I did nothing. *He* broke a law and *I* went to call him on it. That’s all. He’s become unstable and declared war on Olympus. Now, send Hermes back to me immediately!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t have Hermes.”

“What?”

“I don’t have him. I haven’t seen him in, oh, a couple of centuries. He’s not in Tartarus, not in the Elysian Fields or the Asphodel Meadows. Not taking a swim in the Styx, or chatting up Charon, either. I would know if a god entered my demesnes.”

“That’s impossible! I don’t have the time or patience for games, Hades. Hermes *must* be there. There’s nowhere else he could possibly be. He didn’t return from the iron fortress—”

Hades eyes flashed open. Zeus didn’t believe the surprise in them could be faked—Hades simply wasn’t that good an actor. “Ares’s iron fortress? What was he doing there?”

“I just *told* you we went after Ares.”

“To his *fortress*? Why bother? It’s impenetrable.”

“I had it on good authority there was a way in.”

The look of incredulity on Hades face was unmistakable, and incredibly irritating. “So, let me guess: you tried to break into Ares’s fortress, and he sent you scrambling back to Olympus with your tail tucked between your legs. You left Hermes to his own devices when you ran, and now he’s among the missing? That’s priceless, big brother. Absolutely priceless.”

“I don’t appreciate your sarcasm, Hades,” Zeus spat. “I need to find Hermes!”

Hades shrugged a shoulder, still smiling, and walked to a table laden with fruit. He helped himself to a grape, popping it into his mouth. “Well, if he’s not on Olympus, and *I* don’t have him, then perhaps he’s hiding on the mortal plane.”

“No. I would know if he were there. The mortal realm is part of my territory.”

“Then there’s only one other explanation.”

“Which is?”

“He’s cozying up to Ares in the fortress.”

The blood drained from Zeus’s face only to rush back with a vengeance as fury boiled within him. “That traitorous bastard! You think Hermes switched sides? After all I’ve done for him?”

Hades’s smile mocked him and only served to ratchet Zeus’s temper up another notch. “Oh, I can’t *imagine* why he’d do such a thing... just because he’s been your whipping

boy for millennia. Why would using him to vent your considerable frustrations over the centuries not endear him to you?”

“No. I refuse to believe it. Ares must be holding him by force. It’s the only rational explanation,” Zeus countered. “He must think he’ll be able to trade Hermes for my leniency.”

Hades threw his head back and laughed. “You keep telling yourself that,” he said. “Eventually, maybe you’ll even believe it. Well, if there’s nothing else, I have souls to process. Thanks for the laugh.”

“Don’t you *dare* step foot out of this room,” Zeus snarled. “I need every god I can get if I’m going to storm Ares’s fortress.”

Hades laughed. “Are you kidding? You try to take the fortress, and he’ll paint the walls with your entrails. I believe I’d pay money to see it too.” His expression grew ugly as he gestured around. “This should’ve all been mine. You know it, and I know it. You got Olympus, nectar, and ambrosia. I got to wade hip-deep in dead things for all eternity. You cheated me, screwed me. I haven’t forgotten. Sorry, big brother. You’re on your own. Something tells me I’ll be seeing your ass in Tartarus soon. I look forward to it.”

Before Zeus could react and use his powers to tether Hades to Olympus, Hades disappeared. He threw his head back and roared his frustration at the ceiling. Lightning bolts zapped the rococo molding and incinerated a sculpture of himself, showering the marble floor with white marble dust.

He collapsed onto his throne, legs and arms splayed, staring up at the remains of the destroyed ceiling. Bits of

blue sky and wispy clouds could be seen through the gaping holes he'd zapped through it. Ares would never let the matter rest. If Zeus didn't attack first, he believed Ares would bring the war to him. He wondered how long it would take Ares to break through the defenses marking the boundary between Olympus and the foothills and storm the palace.

Not long, he guessed.

And what of Hera? Zeus hadn't forgotten she was the reason he found himself balls to the wall. Zeus quailed, considering her wrath should she find out Zeus, not Ares, had broken the law. No, he couldn't allow her to find out. Not under any circumstances.

But how could he keep it from her if he did nothing and Ares stormed Olympus? Ares certainly wouldn't keep his big, fat mouth shut. Zeus knew Ares would love nothing better than to tell Hera all about Dion's parentage.

If it were anyone else, Zeus would have laughed off their threat to overthrow Olympus, but not Ares. No, Ares was the only god who would dare, and the only one who might actually succeed.

Particularly if Ares had Hermes working for him. Hermes had spent too much time at Zeus's elbow, knew everything there was to know about Olympus and the gods who lived there. Hermes knew every nook, cranny, and hiding place, every god who might be swayed to support Ares because of a grudge against Zeus, or through cupidity.

Cupidity....

Zeus sat bolt upright as connections were made and an idea burst into his head. *Cupid! Of course!* Cupid, otherwise

known as Eros, was another son of Aphrodite. Eros had inherited the powers of lust and love from her as well. If Eros could sink one of his special love arrows into Ares's thick hide, he might be able to counteract Dion's hold on Ares!

His mind raced as he hammered out his battle plan. *I need something to subdue Ares too. The arrow may sever any hold Dion has over Ares, but it won't do squat to keep Ares from my throat. Artemis's net should immobilize him nicely. All I need to do is set an ambush with Eros and Artemis, and the battle will be over before Ares even gets a chance to swing his sword. It's perfect! I can blast Ares to Tartarus, and the whelp with him. And what a show of force it'll be. All of Olympus will witness my victory. My position will be stronger than it ever was before! I don't need Hades after all. He can sit in the Underworld and rot.*

Convinced he'd found a way out of the current mess he'd made of things with both his hide and throne intact, Zeus called for a runner to bring Eros and Artemis to him at once.

Chapter Eight

DION was in a dither, something he'd never before considered himself capable of having. Dithers were the specialty of Scarlett O'Hara types, women in hoop skirts prone to vapors, who held lace fans and drank mint juleps, not someone who was supposedly a new god of the Greek variety. Gods didn't get flustered or rendered speechless by anger. They certainly didn't stamp their feet in frustration, but Dion did all of the above, and all at once.

A *dither*. A tantrum. That's what becoming a god had done to him. It was demeaning, and knowing it only added to his anger.

"I'm not a child, Ares! Stop treating me like one."

"Then stop behaving like one," Ares replied calmly.

Ares was dressed in his full battle regalia. His blood-red armor gleamed, without a nick or scratch visible anywhere on his helm, cuirass, or greaves. It looked brand new, not ages old. He wore it well, too, although Dion tried very hard not to notice how drop dead sexy Ares looked in it.

In addition to the armor, Ares wore only a short, gladiator-style skirt of leather strips, sandals, and nothing else. The glimpses of firm, tanned flesh Dion caught whenever Ares moved made it difficult for Dion to keep his mind on the argument. All he wanted to do was get Ares out

of the armor, even if he had to resort to using a can opener to do it.

“I’m not! Be reasonable, Ares. This war is all because of me. I’m a *god*. You said so yourself. I have powers, but you want me to stay behind while you fight.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, *what?*”

“Yes, you’re a god, yes, you have powers, and yes, you’re staying put.”

“Ares—”

“Dion, enough! There’s no sense in continuing this argument. You won’t win it. I will not risk your safety out there. You’ve never gone to battle before, but the gods we’re going up against have millennia of experience. They know every fighting style, every trick in the war handbook, every sneak attack. You’ve never been to Tartarus, but trust me when I say that’s exactly where you’ll find your ass if you get anywhere near Olympus.” Ares lifted his sword and swung in a figure eight, as if testing its weight. “Still as perfectly balanced as it was the day Hephaestus forged it. Now, give us a kiss. I’ve got Hermes outside, trying to organize my army. I need to get out there before he tries color-coordinating the units.”

Dion’s frown deepened as he wracked his brain trying to think of an argument to change Ares’s mind. He couldn’t think of anything except....

Well, he thought, desperate times call for desperate measures, right? He’d sworn to himself he’d never do it, but

he simply couldn't think of any other way. Catching Ares's eyes, he purposely thought about seducing Ares.

Ares blinked and looked stunned for a moment. Dion noticed with satisfaction that the leather flap lying vertically across Ares's crotch had begun to rise. "What... oh, you didn't! That's not fighting fairly, Dion. Gods, I want you. Come here."

Dion went to him willingly, if guiltily. Ares tossed his sword to the floor and swept Dion in his arms for a punishing kiss. He found being squished against an armor breastplate wasn't the most comfortable of positions but refused to complain. He'd started this, after all. "I want to suck you off," Dion whispered when Ares finally let him up for air.

Ares moaned as if he could already feel Dion's mouth on him. Dion dropped to his knees and pushed aside the leather flaps of Ares's skirt. They were heavier than he'd expected, probably because they were studded with metal. One swung back and hit him on the side of the face, hard enough to leave a mark. He ignored it, concentrating on the job at hand.

He took Ares's engorged cock in his mouth without preamble. He didn't want to talk anyway; this was a war of another kind, and he was determined to win it. Ares's taste flooded his mouth, ancient and somehow new, and definitely addictive. *Like a drug*, he thought as he sucked harder. *Olympian coke, maybe.*

His hand cupped Ares's balls, fondling the stones in his palm. A drop of wetness on his tongue told him he was on

the right track. His lips left Ares's dick and went in search of the sac he held in his hand.

Ares's had big balls, no pun intended, too big for a single mouthful, at any rate. Dion had to take them in one at a time, sucking lightly, rolling each one around with his tongue, then taking the other. Above him, Ares's moans grew deeper and louder.

He grasped Ares's cock with his free hand, stroking it as he continued to suck Ares's balls. He found it took some coordination to keep a rhythm going, but he managed.

"Oh fuck. Gonna come, lover," Ares breathed from overhead.

Dion nodded, his mouth too full of testicle to reply. It was what he wanted, after all, why he'd started this business in the first place. Get Ares off, and perhaps he'd be too relaxed to argue about Dion tagging along to Olympus.

He felt Ares's finger under his chin, tipping his face up. Ares's sac left his mouth as Ares pulled away and jerked off, covering Dion's face with hot spurts.

"Oh fuck, that was good," Ares said. "You're good. No, you're *excellent*."

Dion smiled. "Glad to be of service. Now, do you have any armor I can borrow?"

"What for?"

"I'm going to Olympus with you. I figure I'll need armor of some kind."

"No, you don't need any, because you're not going." Ares smiled at him and pulled him in for a kiss. "Did you think I

fell off the olive cart yesterday? You have to do better than sexing me up to get me to change my mind. Not that you sexing me up isn't phenomenal, because it is."

Dion did the foot-stomping thing again and turned his back on Ares in a snit. He was furious. No, beyond furious... he was outraged, incensed, livid, fuming, and felt as if he were going to explode under the force of his anger, reduced to a mere splat of Dion-matter staining the thick Persian rugs covering the floor of Ares's bedroom suite. Making it all worse was the guilt of knowing he'd deviated from his sense of right and wrong by using his powers to try to get Ares to change his mind.

Icy terror laced Dion's anger like veining in fine marble. Logically, he knew Ares couldn't be killed, in battle or otherwise, but to Dion, eternity in Tartarus sounded the same as death. He wouldn't be able to see Ares, to touch him, to taste Ares's lips, or feel Ares's rock hard body curled around him at night. The thought gave Dion a sharp pain in the vicinity of his heart.

He couldn't do it. He didn't care what Ares said. He wasn't staying behind, not knowing, not able to help. "I might not be a legendary warrior like you, but I'm not helpless either!" he said. He turned around and found himself staring at an empty room.

Ares was gone.

Dion ran to the door and found it locked. He rattled the doorknob, pounded on the iron door until his fists ached, but all he heard was the dull sound of flesh striking metal. Ares had gone, taking his army with him and had left Dion behind.

He threw his head back and howled his frustration to the ceiling.

Wait... Ares claimed Dion had the power of telekinesis, didn't he? Hadn't Dion imbedded the goose feather into the iron wall? True, it hadn't been on purpose, but... *If I did it once, I can do it again*, he thought. He crouched down, staring at the lock on the door.

His head began to throb with a familiar dull ache that grew stronger and more painful with every passing second, but Dion refused to give up. He would get the lock open, find his way out of the fortress and to Olympus—wherever it might be—if it was the last thing he did.

ARES led his army through the foothills surrounding Olympus, but it was slow going over the craggy peaks and deep crevices of rock. The harpies circled overhead, enough in number to cast their land-bound fellows in shadow. He cursed the necessity of traveling by foot, but it was impossible for anyone but a full god to teleport into Olympus proper. He could be there in an instant, but the harpies, centaurs, dragons, and various demigods and half-breeds comprising his army couldn't follow. They would go on foot, or he would go alone, and he wisely, if grudgingly, chose the former.

He was finding himself distracted, thinking about Dion, and it was driving him crazy. He knew his fortress was impenetrable, yet Ares couldn't stop worrying. It was so unlike him. He was usually pathologically single-minded.

Whenever he'd marched into battle before, his thoughts were only on one thing—winning. Even in the bar fights he'd gotten into lately, he could think only of pounding the other man into a quivering blob of human goo. Whenever he donned his armor, he was always professional, completely focused.

Not this time. He wondered if he'd finally lost his edge.

A small smile played at his lips as he remembered Dion's temper, and how sexy Dion had been, pouting and stamping his foot because Ares refused to let him come along on the march. If Ares had the time, he would've thrown Dion over his knee and paddled that sweet, plump ass until it pinked under his hand and Dion begged for mercy.

And then fucked him until Dion screamed Ares's name.

He frowned. He'd done it again, let his thoughts wander in directions that had nothing to do with the upcoming battle. Gritting his teeth, he forced his mind to focus.

It was none too soon.

He found he'd come to a narrow pass between two particularly sheer rock faces. The drop was sharp, the edge falling away into blackness. The path widened only enough for two or three soldiers to walk abreast. He recognized it as a perfect place for an ambush, should Zeus know Ares was coming and have the foresight to arrange one.

Zeus's ego wouldn't allow him to believe I'd take the fight to him. He'd never believe I'd dare desecrate Olympus by marching my army on its ground. He thinks I'm holed up in my fortress, counting on the iron walls to keep my enemies

out. Big mistake, he thought smugly. He stepped forward on the path, his chin lifted in defiance.

The arrow sang through the air, embedding itself in Ares's neck. He grunted and pulled it out, looking at it, not able to process what he was seeing at first. It wasn't a full arrow, more like a dart, seemingly innocuous. Six-inches long, fashioned from a warm, smooth wood and fletched with swan feathers, its tip a gleaming, golden point. It was a tiny thing, hadn't even hurt him, except for his pride.

There was something about it, though, something familiar, and with a start it came to him. *Eros!* It was one of Eros's arrows, imbued with his magic. Once he realized what he held in his hand, Ares had no doubt why he'd been shot with it. Love and hate were two sides of the same coin. Zeus hoped to counteract Dion's power over Ares with it.

He raised his arm to smash the dart into the ground, but before he could, a silvery net of gossamer fibers enveloped him, dropping him like a stone. He knew immediately that he had seriously underestimated Zeus; it was indeed an ambush, and Ares grudgingly admitted it was a brilliant one. Not only had Zeus managed to take Ares by surprise, but the strategy employed was perfectly executed. Distracted by Eros's arrow, Ares had given Artemis time to cast one of her fishing nets over him.

Ares struggled mightily against the filmy strands of the net, but to no avail. Behind him, he could hear his army milling about in confusion. He'd never been taken down before, never, unless one counted the time he'd been trapped in a jar by the Alodae giants, which hardly counted since Ares had been blind drunk at the time.

Worse, the one time he'd been captured had taken an intercession from Olympus to free him, something he surely couldn't count on now.

His proverbial goose wasn't just cooked, it was about to be turned into Olympian pâté.

"Fuck!" he bellowed. He twisted his head as far as it would go. He didn't see Hermes anywhere. *If that rotten bastard has gone back on his oath....* "Hermes! Protect Dion!" He didn't hear an answer but prayed with all his heart that Hermes would be true to his word and not run back to Zeus at the first sign of trouble.

There was no one else to keep Dion safe. Zeus would get Hephaestus to disarm Ares's defenses at the fortress once Ares was sent to Tartarus and then take great pleasure in tossing Dion into the darkest, coldest pit Hades had to offer. Ares let himself sink to the ground, despair washing over him in waves.

He and Dion were good and truly fucked.

Eros and Artemis eventually appeared, both smiling grimly at Ares. He spat a few curses that ordinarily would've stripped flesh from bone, but that had no effect on the gods.

"Sorry, Ares," Eros said. He toed the remaining splinters of the arrow Ares had destroyed and tossed to the dirt. "No hard feelings, right? We're just following orders. You know how it is."

Artemis didn't say anything, but then, she didn't have to. The smirk curving her lips said it all. Her expression and the hard kick she delivered to his ribs told Ares that, unlike Eros, *she* didn't have any problem with their orders. In fact,

she obviously delighted in being the god to trap Ares under her net.

It was no secret Ares wasn't one of her favorite people, and Ares knew her dislike for him stemmed from jealousy. After Ares's brief, torrid affair with Aphrodite terminated, Artemis had wanted him to warm her bed next. He was through with women and rebuffed her. He'd wounded her pride, and she'd nursed the hurt of being rejected by him for a thousand years. It was payback time, and he could see she enjoyed every moment of it.

Ares bared his teeth at her in disgust and redoubled his efforts at trying to disentangle himself from the net. One purpose and one only consumed him—to get free and rip Olympus and Zeus a new one.

He became so involved in struggling futilely with the net that he didn't notice a shadow slip across the rock face behind him, or hear the soft flutter of winged boots and helmet as Hermes raced back the way they'd come, toward the fortress.

Chapter Nine

DION'S head ached fiercely. He'd been staring at the locked door for what felt like hours, before he finally felt something move. Then the resistance he'd been pushing against suddenly disappeared like a rusty bolt sliding free, and he nearly fell over.

He recovered quickly, pulled the door open, and stepped out into the hallway, nearly colliding with Hermes, who stood just on the other side. Hermes grabbed his elbow to steady him. He looked over Hermes's shoulder, scanning the wide hallway. "What are you doing here, Hermes? Where's Ares?"

Hermes didn't reply, but tried to urge Dion back into the bedroom. A baldly sexual smile tilted Hermes's lips, and his eyes were darkened with a look Dion knew very well. He hadn't been trying to rein in his power. Indeed, he'd let it run free in his effort to get the door open, and it obviously worked on Hermes. Dion groaned, not having the patience to be pawed at. He yanked his arm free from Hermes's grip. "I asked you a question. Where's Ares?"

"Oh, forget Ares," Hermes crooned in a breathy voice. "I can show you things Ares has never dreamed of... have you ever had sex on the wing?" The white feathers on his helmet fluttered. "There's nothing like it. Come on. Let me show you, pretty boy. I promise you won't regret it."

Dion frowned and concentrated, trying to pull back his powers. "Just tell me where Ares is. What happened?"

It seemed to work. Hermes huffed and pouted, but he stopped trying to push Dion into the bedroom. “He’s been captured. Zeus set up Eros and Artemis in an ambush. Eros’s arrow counteracted your power over Ares, and Artemis’s net took him down. He’s probably getting his ass reamed by Zeus’s thunderbolts as we speak.”

A wave of fear washed over Dion, followed swiftly by a rush of anger. He’d had it up to the eyeballs with these gods, especially Zeus, meddling in other people’s lives! What had Dion ever done to any of them? Nothing except being born, something he certainly had no control over, yet Zeus had seen fit to turn Dion’s life upside down and inside out.

Well, Dion was a god now, wasn’t he? He wasn’t going to stand by and let Zeus take the best thing that had ever happened to him and destroy it. He would get Ares back. Had Eros’s arrow really killed the feelings Ares had for Dion? He didn’t know and didn’t want to think about it either. He pushed the thought to the back of his mind. He had more urgent matters to think about now. “Ares said you know everything about Olympus and the gods. Tell me Zeus’s weakness.”

Hermes laughed incredulously. “Zeus doesn’t *have* a weakness. He’s the king, remember?”

“*Everyone* has a weakness,” Dion insisted. He forced his lips into a smile, hoping it didn’t look as much like a grimace as it felt. He gave a little push with his power, not enough to inspire lust, but enough to make Hermes feel disposed toward him—he hoped.

It seemed to work. Hermes’s eyes grew cloudy for a heartbeat but swiftly cleared. “Well, there is one thing....”

Hermes bit his lip, looking at Dion from under his lashes. “Kiss me, and I’ll tell you.”

“Tell me, and I’ll kiss you,” Dion countered.

“Oh fine,” Hermes said. He sounded huffy and hurt, but Dion could really care less. “There are six creatures in this world that Zeus fears. The three Fates and the three Furies. Either of them would have Zeus pissing his toga in a matter of moments. If you’re thinking about appealing for help, I definitely *wouldn’t* suggest the Furies. They don’t care much about politics, and they’re just as likely to zero in on the petitioner as they are the person you’re complaining about.”

“Good to know. So, it’ll have to be the Fates, then. Where do I find them? Can you take me to them?”

“Gods, you’re beautiful. Where’s my kiss?” Hermes asked. The dreamy look returned to his eyes, and he leaned in, pursing his lips.

Dion smacked Hermes upside his head, knocking his helmet off center. “Focus, Hermes. The Fates. Where are they?”

“Ow!” Hermes yelped. He rubbed the side of his head and straightened his helmet. “Watch the merchandise. I bruise easily.”

Dion remained unmoved. “The Fates.”

Hermes sighed, long and deep. “Hades, although why they prefer the Underworld to Olympus is beyond me. All those wailing souls... they give me the heebie-jeebies.”

Dion narrowed his eyes at Hermes. “Take me there.”

“To Hades? Are you crazy? Nobody goes there on *purpose*! I’m still waiting for my kiss. I gave you the information you asked for. Well, where’s my payment? A deal is a deal,” Hermes pursed his lips again and made kissy sounds.

Damn these powers! Dion rolled his eyes and ducked in, pecking Hermes lightly on the lips. He danced out of the way before Hermes could grab him for a deeper kiss. “Back off, Fed Ex.”

“You call that a kiss? My mother kisses better than that.”

“Ew. Spare me the incestuous references, please. Now, take me to Hades!” Dion roared. His powers escaped his control for a moment, and the effect literally brought Hermes to his knees.

Hermes stiffened, his eyes rolling back in his head as he moaned. He grabbed his crotch, looking stunned. A wet patch began to spread under his hand, darkening the fabric of his pants. He stared up at Dion with his mouth hanging open. The smell of recently spent sex wafted up.

Dion winced. “Sorry. I don’t know my own strength yet, I guess.”

Hermes stood up and looked down at his crotch, picking at the wet fabric. “Damn it! Why does everyone I know seem determined to annihilate my wardrobe? This suit was Versace!”

“Look, Hermes, I *have* to help Ares. Please, take me to Hades. I have to talk to the Fates. I’ll kiss you... I’ll do anything you want, but please, take me there!”

Hermes waved his hands at Dion and took a step back. “No! No, thank you. Keep your powers, your lips, your hands, and every other part of your anatomy away from me. That little power surge you just had nearly blew my cock clean off my body! I don’t even want to *know* what would happen if you put your mind to it.” He removed a neatly folded silk square from his jacket pocket, unfolded it, and held it up. “I can’t touch you. I just can’t. Hold on to this.”

Dion took one corner of the handkerchief between two fingers, while Hermes held the opposite corner.

He felt a moment of vertigo before the fortress disappeared, and Dion found himself standing in a large, unfamiliar room. The ceiling was high-domed, and the floor black marble. Alabaster statues lined the walls, and a large fountain bubbled in the center. On the other side of the fountain stood an old-fashioned loom surrounded by spools of thread in more colors than Dion could count, and surprisingly, a ratty old sofa, and a large, flat-screen television.

Three elderly women were the only people in the room. All were white-haired, but there was something about them that told Dion at a glance that none of them were feeble.

One sat at the loom. Her hands moved with incredible speed over the multi-colored threads, and the shuttle bounced and clacked. The other two women sat on the sofa watching a movie. From where Dion stood, it looked like *Troy*.

“Will one of you *please* press the pause button? I have to finish this new life. The poor mother’s been in labor for sixteen hours already,” the woman at the loom said.

One of the other two women aimed a remote at the television. The action on the screen paused. “Oh, hurry up, Clotho! Brad Pitt is in the tent, and he’s *naked*.”

“Good grief, will you just *look* at that bum?” the third woman said. “You did a fabulous job weaving this one, Clotho.”

“Yeah, he was one of my better ones,” the woman at the loom answered. Her concentration remained on the rapidly moving shuttle. Finally it zipped across the loom one last time and then stopped. “There, all done. One bouncing baby girl, all woven and delivered.” She rose, but when she turned around, she froze. She frowned. “Hermes? Is that you? What are *you* doing here, and who’s the godling?” She squinted at Dion. “Oh wait... I remember you. I wove you. Let’s see... must’ve been twenty years ago or so. You’re one of Zeus’s spawn, the one with Aphrodite, right?”

“Er... yes, ma’am,” Dion answered.

“Aw, he called you ‘ma’am’. What a perfectly polite little godling,” one of the seated women said. The two of them stood up from the sofa. Together, the three women stared at him. “Are you sure he’s the spawn of Zeus and Aphrodite? I don’t remember either of *them* being particularly gracious. Insufferable, contentious, and arrogant, but not very courteous. He couldn’t have learned it at home. Of course, it’s been a while since we last visited Olympus. Maybe things have changed.”

“Oh, he’s the son of Zeus, alright. Look at the bone structure! A little small for a god, though. Must be the runt of the litter. Come here, little godling,” Clotho said, beckoning to Dion. “Let Aunties get a closer look at you.”

He felt Hermes give him a little shove in their direction. He stood still as the three women walked in a small circle around him, and he felt their gazes flitting over him like little, hot fingers. He didn't know exactly what they were looking for and only hoped he measured up to whatever it was. He half expected one of them to pry open his mouth to check his teeth.

The women stopped in front of him. "Very nice, if slightly undersized. I'm your Auntie Clotho, dear. This is your Auntie Lachesis, and your Auntie Atropos. Have you found Ares, yet?"

Dion blinked. Aunties? Wow. His family tree, virtually nonexistent a few days ago, continued to grow, and wasn't too shabby in its members, either. How did she know about Ares, though? "Well, that's sort of what I—"

Clotho suddenly dashed to a set of shelves on the far wall. The shelves were filled with tightly rolled tapestries. She picked one and gave it a hard shake, unfurling it. She scanned the intricate pattern on it for a moment, and then brightened. "Of course! Here it is," she said, pointing to a couple of threads. "I can tell you I was quite surprised when I wove your threads together."

Atropos clapped her hands, laughing. "Ares! Who'd have thunk it? He deserves somebody, though. Had a rough life, that one. Don't you worry, little nephew. I'll keep my shears far away from those two threads."

Lachesis suddenly seemed to notice Hermes standing behind Dion. "Hermes! You didn't have an invitation, but we'll overlook it this time since you brought our nephew to

meet us. Very nice of you, Herm. I have to say, I'm a little annoyed at Ares for not thinking of us."

"Uh, it's not Ares's fault," Dion said quickly. "He's been taken prisoner—"

"Prisoner?" Clotho's laughter bubbled like water trickling over stones. "Oh goodness, don't tell me he got drunk again! After the last time he got loaded with the Alodae giants and ended up in that jar, he swore he'd never get that inebriated again."

"He wasn't drunk!" Dion exclaimed. "Honest. He was trying to protect me from Zeus, but Hermes said—"

"Zeus?" Lachesis repeated. The three Fates glanced at each other. "Why would you need protection from your own father?" They fell silent, looking confused, watching him as if waiting for an answer to a puzzling question.

He quickly told the story, his tongue tripping over itself in his hurry to get it out. He told them all of it, from his birth right up to the ambush involving Eros's arrow and Artemis's net.

Atropos spat out a curse that made Dion blush. "That rat bastard! I told him what would happen if he ever tried to circumvent me again and kill off one of his progeny."

"Calm down, sister," Clotho said. "We'll go pay good ol' daddy a little visit, shall we? It seems it's been far too long since we last set foot on Olympus. The natives are running wild, as they say."

"If you please, would you mind keeping the carnage to a minimum? The last time you 'paid a visit' to Olympus, it took

me years to clean up the mess,” Hermes said. “Leave a *few* stones standing this time, eh?”

Atropos sniffed. “You’ll be lucky if we leave the *mountain* standing. I won’t be superseded by that pompous windbag, Zeus. Cutting the threads of life is *my* job!” she whined.

“Of course it is, dear,” Clotho said, patting Atropos’s arm. “We’ll take care of this right now.”

Dion cleared his throat. “Um, er... Aunties? Do you think you can leave Ares unscathed? I’ve sort of grown attached to him.” He bit his lip. “Please?”

“Oh, sweet boy, so polite, so well-mannered!” Clotho exclaimed. Her smile returned. “We won’t harm a hair on his lovely head.”

“Not even one?” Atropos asked, looking decidedly disappointed.

“No, not one,” Lachesis said firmly. She shook her head at her sister. “We just met the boy, Atro. It wouldn’t be nice to kill his lover so soon.”

“But the others?”

“The others are fair game, dear.”

Dion cringed at the deadly smile that lifted Atropos’s lips. Somehow, he didn’t think his three new aunts got their shits and giggles playing bingo and knitting doilies. He almost felt sorry for Zeus and the rest of Olympus.

Almost.

Chapter Ten

“ENOUGH!”

Ares’s eyes opened wide as Zeus was suddenly flung across the room into his golden throne with such force that the entire thing rocked under the impact. Ignoring the pain caused by Artemis’s net, Ares twisted his head to the side to see the cause of Zeus’s impromptu flight.

Dion stood framed by the open doorway, a slightly built young man who nonetheless exuded such power that the scope of it nearly took Ares’s breath away. He glanced at the gathering of gods and saw desire flickering in their eyes. Even Zeus, sitting splay-legged on his throne, stared at Dion with a curious mix of hatred and unabashed longing.

“Ares! Are you okay?” Dion rushed to Ares’s side and tried to remove the net. Of course, it wouldn’t budge. The muscles in his neck and arms strained as he fought the golden weave. “What is this thing? Why won’t it come off?”

“It’s Artemis’s fishing net. Nothing caught in it can escape, and no one can remove it but her,” Ares said, pointing toward Artemis with his chin.

Dion pointed at her. “You! Get this thing off Ares, now!”

Artemis blinked and blushed. “Of course. Anything you say!” She rushed to do Dion’s bidding, although her eyes remained fixed on Dion with a lovesick expression dancing in them. She ran the net through her fingers and licked her

lips. “Why don’t you come back with me to my temple? I can show you just how much fun this net can be.”

It would’ve been laughable, had Ares not felt jealousy searing him. He hated the thought of anyone fantasizing about his Dion, yet he knew exactly what thoughts raced through the minds of everyone in the room. Dion’s powers were at full force, and they were enough to make the strongest gods weak in the knees. They all wanted him—well, almost everyone—and would do anything he asked. It was maddening. The only people in the room who seemed immune were Aphrodite and Eros. Their powers were too similar for them to be affected. The good news was that it therefore stood to reason Dion would be immune from theirs, as well.

“Dion! My baby!”

Ares had to forcibly restrain himself from reacting when Aphrodite launched herself at Dion. He wanted to see how Dion would handle his birth mother.

To Ares’s relief, Dion ducked out of Aphrodite’s embrace. “Who are you?”

“Don’t you know me? I’m Aphrodite. Your mother,” she said with a wide smile and open arms. If she expected Dion to fall into them in an ecstasy of filial love, she was to be disappointed. He sidestepped her again, frowning.

“My *mother*? You’ve got a lot of fucking nerve to try to claim the title now! Where were you when I began to walk, to talk? When I lost my first tooth? When I cried myself to sleep every night in the orphanage? Where the fuck *were* you? You didn’t care about me then. You wanted me out of sight and

out of mind.” He took a step back from her. “I guess I should be grateful that you gave me life. Okay. I am. But you were *never* my *mother*. You were nothing but an incubator.”

Even Ares, who hated Aphrodite with a passion, winced. “Ouch. That was harsh, Dion.”

“Don’t stick up for her, Ares. You’re the one who told me she conspired with Zeus to dump me in the orphanage.”

“Because it was the only way I could protect you!” Aphrodite cried. The tears in her eyes and her stricken expression looked genuine.

I guess even selfish, egotistical bitches can be hurt, Ares thought. Somehow, he still couldn’t summon up very much sympathy for her.

“Please understand, my son,” Aphrodite whimpered. “I tried, I really did. I gave you coin in your pocket when you had little, and toys to play with worthy of a son of Olympus. When you were soon to come into your powers, I handpicked the man to have the honor of raising you as his foster son. Aeneas is another of my sons, a strong warrior, a hero of the Trojan War, and completely devoted to me. I bargained with Hades to bring him from the Elysian Fields to the mortal realm, because I knew he could protect you.”

“You sheltered the brat!” Zeus roared. His face turned crimson, tendons popping in his neck like ripcords. Ares was hard pressed to remember ever seeing Zeus so furious. “You betrayed me! I should blast your skinny ass to Tartarus right now!”

Beautiful in his fury, Dion turned on Zeus. Without showing the slightest shred of fear, he stalked to Zeus’s

throne. “Don’t you dare lift a finger to punish anyone! I might have issues with her, but she’s still my mother, and if what she’s says is true, at least she *tried* to do right by me.” He shot Aphrodite a withering look. “She failed, miserably, but at least she tried.” He looked back at Zeus. “You’re supposed to be my father, but all this trouble is because of *you*. What did I ever do to you? I wasn’t even aware of your existence until you sent Ares in to kill me!”

Zeus shook himself, and tore his eyes away from Dion with what seemed to Ares to be a Herculean effort. “Silence!” he roared.

Hera stood at Zeus’s elbow. One hand toyed with a pendant hanging around her neck, and the other smoothed her hair. “Who *is* this enchanting creature, husband? My, he’s simply... stunning.” Hera’s cheeks matched the color of her hair—bright red. She blushed like a schoolgirl and batted her eyelashes at Dion in a most outrageous fashion.

If older women lusting after younger men are called cougars, Ares thought snidely, then that would make Hera a fucking sabertooth tiger, since she’s older than dirt.

Dion tossed her a derisive look. “I’m your... well, I’m not really sure *what* I am to you. After what Ares told me about Olympian bloodlines, nothing, probably. But I’m *his* son,” he said, pointing to Zeus.

The news was enough to break the hold Dion’s powers had on Hera, at least temporarily. She turned and screeched at Zeus, a totally inhuman sound. “*What?* Is this true, Zeus? Oh, you unfaithful, deceitful pile of dog shit! I should rip your balls off and stuff them down your lying throat—”

Zeus put up his hands, obviously trying to placate Hera. “Please, my love! Of course it’s not true! He’s Ares’s spawn. This is all part of Ares’s plan to steal my throne and conquer Olympus.”

“Liar!” Dion shouted.

“Why are you just sitting there?” Hera shrieked at Zeus. Ares could see she was trying to ignore Dion, but having a hard time of it. “Get rid of him! If what you say is true, then what are you waiting for? This insignificant nothing is shaming us in front of the whole of Olympus!”

It was the wrong thing to say in front of Dion. He turned on Hera. “You bitch! If you want to get down to brass tacks, the fault for this whole mess is yours! Your husband cheats on you, but instead of working it out, or divorcing him, you try to dictate who other people can love with some stupid law! If it wasn’t for your hubris, I would’ve known who and what I was from the very beginning. My entire life got fucked up because your pride got dented!”

Hera actually staggered, making Ares wonder how long it had been since anyone had dared stand up to her. *Too long, from the look on her face*, he thought. *Then again, hubris isn’t a word bandied about lightly on Olympus.*

“How *dare* you!” Hera sputtered. She looked sick, probably because she found herself attracted to Dion while at the same time, hating him. She turned and snarled at Zeus. “Are you going to let this... this bastard spawn of Ares talk to me this way? Don’t just sit there, *do something!*”

“Ares is *not* my father,” Dion said. “He’s my *lover*. Zeus is my father, and I can prove it!” He turned to look at the back of the room. “Ladies, won’t you join us?”

Ares’s eyes flashed open wide at the sight of the three figures standing side-by-side in the doorway. He whistled under his breath. *Oh man... Dion had bigger balls than I ever gave him credit for having. I sure as hell won’t ever think of Dion as needing protection again.*

He glanced back at the throne. *If fear has a name*, Ares thought, *I would bet my warmongering ass it’s either “Zeus” or “Hera.”* Their faces turned pasty white, their eyes wide, and their mouths slack-jawed as they watched the three Fates walk up the aisle toward them. Ares noticed that the rest of Olympus stepped back, giving the Moirae a wide berth.

The women were sisters, so closely resembling one another that they could’ve been mistaken for triplets, although Ares knew that wasn’t the case. They were wraithlike, pale, fragile-looking specters who nonetheless commanded the respect of everything that drew breath. They were ancient, predating most of the Olympian gods, and there was no doubt about their power. Although they appeared elderly, they walked with regal posture, backs straight and heads high, as well they should. Between them, they could command life and death for everything and everyone in the Universe.

Zeus recovered first. A large, shaky smile turned up the corners of his mouth. “My daughters, how good it is to see you again! Welcome, welcome! It’s been far too long since last you graced my halls.”

Clotho huffed a stand of white hair out of her eyes. Her arms were full; she carried a rolled length of heavily embroidered carpet that looked weighty and cumbersome. Ares knew what it was. It wasn't just *a* tapestry, but one of *the* Tapestries, capitalized, created with the threads of mortal existence. While Lachesis measured the threads of life, and Atropos cut them when each being's time reached its end, Clotho was the sister who *wove* the Tapestry. Its safety was her responsibility. He knew she would never risk letting anyone else touch it, not even for a moment, which explained why she didn't have some underling toting it for her.

That she would come to Zeus's palace on Olympus lugging one of the Tapestries of Life with her, only told Ares how angry the Fates must be. He winced, glad beyond all reason that he wasn't Zeus or Hera.

"Oh, stuff it, Dad," Clotho said. "This isn't a pleasure trip." She shifted the weight of the Tapestry in her arms.

Zeus attempted to look dismayed, but his expression seemed more irritated than distressed. "I'm wounded. Is that any way to talk to your father?"

Lachesis barked a short laugh. "*Father?* Did you think we forgot that you locked Mom up in Tartarus and threw away the proverbial key? What kind of a father does that? Well, we haven't forgotten. We don't like you, and you fear us. Don't insult us by pretending otherwise."

"Themis is a Titan. I had no choice but to send your mother to Tartarus with the rest of the Titans!" Zeus squirmed.

Ares smiled. Zeus hated being reminded of his past affairs, particularly in Hera's presence. Themis wasn't languishing in Hades because of Zeus's war with the Titans, but because of Zeus's fear of Hera. It was no secret Zeus and Themis's affair had been hot and heavy. This was getting interesting.

"Never mind that now. We're here on business," Clotho cut in. She set the Tapestry on the steps leading up to the throne's dais with a loud thump and then stretched her arms up, arching her back. Ares could hear her spine pop. The Tapestry must be extraordinarily heavy. "Do *not* piss us off."

Atropos raised her scissors and clicked them menacingly. "Yeah, or else. Snip, snip."

Ares felt certain several of the gods in attendance would need a change of underwear after watching Atropos flash those shears. Atropos's scissors could cut the thread of *any* life, even immortal ones, and that explained why the Fates were so feared by one and all. Unlike humans, there were no Elysian Fields or Tartarus for the gods when Atropos clipped their threads. It was the final death for them, consigned to nothingness for all eternity. Even Ares, who feared nothing, shuddered at the thought. Certainly, Zeus and Hera lost several shades of color at the display. While Ares couldn't think of a single instance in which a god's life thread had been cut, the possibility existed. It was what kept them all in line... usually.

Clotho unfurled the Tapestry and held it up by a corner, pointing to a small section in the weave. "Do you see this? Put on your reading glasses if you need to, you old goat, but

get a good look. This is Ares's thread. This one is Dion's. Our *nephews*," she added, tossing Hera a glare that surely loosened Hera's bladder. "The only two of whom we're actually fond."

"You tried to cut Dion's life thread without asking me first!" Atropos cut in. She sounded deeply offended. The scissors twitched in her hand.

"Shh, sister. I've got this," Clotho said. Her eyes never left Zeus and Hera. "You," she said, looking directly at Hera, "tried to implant a law that would forbid the births of gods and demigods. That's *my* domain."

Lachesis put an arm around Atropos, although Ares didn't know if the gesture was to calm Atropos, or keep her from jabbing her scissors into Zeus's nutsack.

He really wished they'd simply let Atropos at Zeus and be done with it. It would've been entertaining, at any rate.

"Now, you'll notice Ares and Dion's threads are intertwined. You know what that means don't you? They're *fated* to be together. In love, happily ever after, all that jazz. *Fated*. Fates, that's us," she said pointing to herself and her sisters. "Get it?"

Lachesis nodded. "Honestly, you two must be dimwitted. Did you really think Eros's arrow could counteract true love?" Her eyes narrowed for a moment, staring at Hera and Zeus, and then she laughed and elbowed Atropos in the ribs. "They didn't know! They thought it was Dion's power that kept Ares with him! Good grief, they're just too stupid to live. Go ahead, Atro. Cut their threads."

“No! Please! I... uh... I...” Zeus looked at Hera, but there was no help coming from that quarter. If Hera thought it would save her shapely hide, she’d throw Zeus to the wolves in an instant, and everyone knew it.

“You owe us and Ares and Dion restitution. Lachesis is right. You are too stupid to live. But because you’ve so offended my sister,” Clotho said, nodding toward Atropos, “Live or die, it’ll be her choice.”

The scissors clicked again, and this time Zeus did lose control of his bodily functions. A small pool of yellow collected at his feet. Ares noticed Hera take a step away, as if it could protect her from the Fates’ wrath.

Atropos glanced over her shoulder at Dion and Ares. “You were wronged, especially you, Dion. You’ve just come into your godhood, against all odds. Happy birthday, darling. As Aunties’ present to you, *you* can decide their fates.”

A soft whoosh swept through the room, as everyone in attendance drew in a startled breath. The offer was unprecedented and told everyone in just how high esteem the Fates held Dion. *No one, Ares thought, will ever dare fuck with Dion again after this.*

Lachesis smiled at Dion. “What will it be, sweet? Do you want the throne to Olympus? Shall Atropos snip Hera’s and Zeus’s life threads? Or shall we toss them both into Tartarus forever?”

“I... uh....” Dion looked to Ares for help, but Ares only shrugged.

“It’s your call, Dion. I can’t help you with this one,” Ares said.

“Then... look, I don’t want anybody killed,” Dion said, shaking his head. “I mean, I want to, believe me, and they’ve caused enough pain to warrant execution. Not just to me and Ares, but to a lot of other people over the millennia. But I can’t have that on my conscience. I just can’t.”

Clotho pointed her chin toward Zeus and Hera. “And that’s what makes you a better person than they’ll ever be. We’re proud of you, kid.”

Despite her words, Ares thought she looked disappointed. Truth be told, so was he.

“What will it be, then?” Atropos continued. “The throne or Tartarus?”

“Can you make it so they’ll leave me and Ares alone for good?” Dion asked. “No more interfering, no arrows or nets or any other god crap?”

Atropos looked even more disappointed than Clotho had, but she nodded. “Of course we can.” She leveled a glare at Zeus and Hera. “Can’t we?”

“Um, of course, my dears. Whatever you say,” Zeus muttered.

Gods, Ares thought. *This must be killing him, getting dressed down like this in front of all of Olympus. Good. He deserves it and a lot more.* His chest puffed up with pride for Dion for the strength, maturity, and compassion Dion showed. He put an arm around Dion’s shoulders, giving Dion a squeeze. “You done good,” he whispered.

Dion gave him a look that literally made him weak in the knees. He suddenly wished the Fates would get it done with, just so he could take Dion home and to bed.

Atropos looked at Clotho and nodded. A palpable sense of relief flooded the room when Atropos returned the scissors to her pocket.

“Very well, then,” Clotho said. She rolled up the Tapestry and hefted it into her arms. “So be it. If anyone from Olympus, or by Olympus’s hand, *ever* interferes with Ares and Dion again, the punishment will be death. You’ve got my promise that it’ll be true death, too, not eternity in Tartarus. Does everyone understand?”

“Yes, of course, of course,” Hera said. She elbowed Zeus.

“Yes. I understand,” Zeus said. Although he seemed to be trying to control his temper, it showed on his face.

Ares didn’t want to think about the tantrum Zeus would throw once the Fates left. Then again, he didn’t care. Zeus could level the place as far as Ares was concerned. He planned on leaving with Dion at the same time. He worried briefly about Zeus defying the Fates and seeking retribution against Dion but dismissed it. Surely, even Zeus wouldn’t be *that* stupid.

The Fates turned heel and walked out the way they came in, pausing by Ares and Dion. “You take care of each other, hear?” Clotho said.

“Yes, ma’am. We will.” Dion smiled at the three Fates, and Ares could see the effect of his power on them.

“Gods, you’re going to be a power to contend with in time,” Lachesis said. “Practice reining it in, boy. There’s no telling what damage you could cause if it gets away from you. Keep on top of him, Ares.” Realizing her unintended double entendre, she blushed and giggled. “*On top*. Get it?”

Atropos rolled her eyes and grabbed her sister's arm, dragging Lachesis away. "Don't be strangers, now, Dion. You and Ares come visit us anytime."

Everyone watched until the three Fates reached the doorway and disappeared. Then everyone began talking at once. Ares ignored them all, his eyes for Dion only. "Ready to go home?"

"It's over? Just like that?" Dion asked, glancing toward Zeus and Hera.

"Yup. No one will dare bother us now. Nobody fucks with the Fates and gets away with it."

Dion's eyes looked troubled. "Are you okay with all this? I mean, I didn't even ask you—"

Ares smiled. "I'm more than good with it. I love you, Dion, and now I know it's real, and not just your powers. The Fates don't lie, not ever. Not even lies by omission. If they say what we feel is true love, then... well, I guess I must've done something right somewhere along the line. Not everybody is lucky enough to find their other half."

"I love you too," Dion said simply.

The truth of it was there in Dion's eyes, and it touched something deep inside Ares that Dion's powers, for all their strength, hadn't. His heart melted, and the resulting moisture leaked from his eyes. He touched his face and looked curiously at his wet fingers. He'd never cried before. He hadn't known he was capable of it. It shocked him to his core, and yet seemed right, somehow.

"Eh hem. I hate to break up this episode of the Sickeningly Cute Show, but can we go home, now? The Fates

might've saved you two from Zeus's wrath, but my sweet little ass is still on the line," Hermes said. "And since I prefer keeping my internal organs neatly tucked away inside my body, I suggest we make haste to the fortress. Plus, I seem to remember you have an army swarming on the hills of Olympus. It might be a good idea to clue them in as well, before they do something stupid like send some unsuspecting god or goddess to Tartarus."

Ares frowned at Hermes. "Part of this is your fault, you know. Why should I offer you safe haven at my fortress?"

Dion tugged on Ares's arm. "Okay, cut him a break, Ares. He did come back for me after you were captured and brought me to Hades to see the Fates."

"Yes, by all means, cut me some slack," Hermes said. "Besides, I'm an excellent messenger and personal assistant. Got millennia of practice and a great résumé, although my previous employer may not give me the best of references." Hermes glanced toward the throne nervously. "Come on, Ares. Be a sport. Please?"

"Okay, okay. But one slip up, even the slightest *hint* that you're thinking of betraying us, and so help me, I'll shove my boot so far up your ass you'll be shitting leather for a month," Ares said. He turned to Dion. "Come on, lover. Let's go home."

"I'll go on ahead. Turn down the covers on your bed. Put a mint on your pillow," Hermes said, and he popped out of sight.

"Turn-down service, huh? Guess my life is never going to be dull again, is it?" Dion asked.

“Nope. Sorry?”

“Not a chance,” Dion answered, and he used his powers to transport them home.

Ares found himself standing stark naked in the middle of his bedroom. Dion grinned at him with a mischievous look in his eyes. “Hey, I’m the only one who’s supposed to be able to get inside my fortress,” Ares said, feigning a frown.

“I know. I used my powers to get us in. Oops. Guess your secret’s out, huh?”

“Oh man, you know what this means?” Ares asked. He used his powers to strip Dion naked.

“What?”

“This means war,” he answered with a lascivious grin, advancing on Dion.

He ended up waging war on Dion’s body until the wee hours of morning, and it was the sweetest battle Ares ever engaged in, one he hoped would never end.

KIERNAN KELLY lives in Florida among the alligators and palmetto bugs with her husband and a Shar Pei-Labrador puppy who thinks she's a person (the dog, not Kiernan. Kiernan knows she's a person. At least, she is after she's had her daily dose of caffeine). Kiernan spends most of her time writing gay erotic romance while chained to a computer in the dark recesses of her office, which her children have dubbed "The Gay Cave."

Visit her web site at <http://www.KiernanKelly.com>.

The background of the entire advertisement is a black and white photograph showing the silhouettes of two men's faces in profile, facing each other in a close, intimate pose. In the upper left corner, there is a white diamond-shaped logo containing a black spiral design.

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Published by
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Frisco, TX 75034
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

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Released in the United States of America
December 2010

eBook Edition
eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-691-0