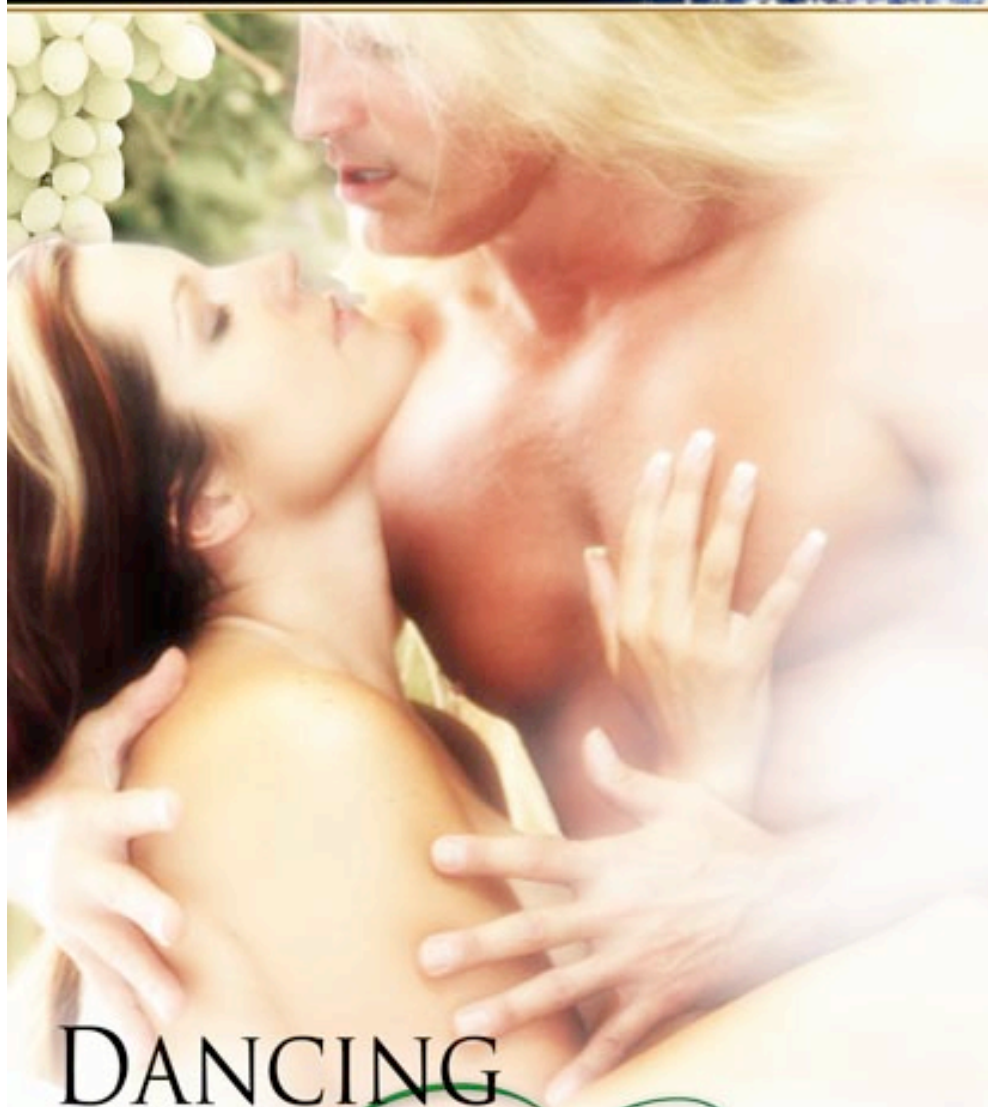


ELLORA'S CAVE XANADU



DANCING
WITH
Dionysus
JOANNA WYLDE

Dancing with Dionysus

Joanna Wylde

Once a year, the island of Naxos celebrates the Festival of Dionysus. For an entire month, nymphs, satyrs and Maenads run wild while wise humans stay locked in their homes, praying for mercy.

On the eve of the festival, a young weaver catches the eye of Sabiniano, ruler of the island and son of Dionysus. Her name is Kalliara, and together they will learn what it means to defy a god.

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Dancing with Dionysus

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DANCING WITH DIONYSUS

Joanna Wylde

Chapter One

"Faster," the nymph told Kalliaras coldly. "You need to spin *faster*, and more finely, or we'll give you to the Maenads. It's your choice."

Kalliaras felt as though a ball of fire was burning in her stomach. It took every bit of her strength just to hold her composure. She gripped her spindle tightly, and looked up into the nymph's eyes. The creature was beautiful, with pale green skin and darker, riotous green hair that hung down in waves to below her waist. Her shimmering gown was created from woven thread so perfect that not even a spider's silk could rival it. *Never in a thousand years will I be able to spin thread that delicate*, Kalliaras thought in desperation.

She was going to die here. She knew it.

"Gracious Lady," she whispered, fighting back her tears. She kept her words formal, hoping to appeal to the nymph's vanity. "I cannot do as you ask. No mere mortal will ever be able to spin thread such as that produced by you and your sisters."

The nymph's beautiful features twisted into a sneer. Around them, Kalliaras could hear the other nymphs laughing, like the sound of a thousand tiny silver bells. How could beings so beautiful be so cruel? They knew her task was impossible. They were simply playing with her before they killed her...

"Mortals are so foolish," the nymph said, shrugging. "You really should have considered that before you boasted of your skills. By challenging us, you sealed your own fate."

"I didn't challenge you," Kalliaras whispered. She could feel the tears welling up again, and she bit her lip sharply. The salty taste of her own blood filled her mouth, and the sharp pain of the bite distracted her. She took a deep breath and continued. "I have

never claimed to spin better than any of Dionysus' children. I don't know where you heard that I had, but I assure you it never happened."

"Well, some human said something about it," the nymph said, waving a hand languidly. "I can't be bothered to try and tell you apart. Once we heard such a thing, we could hardly let it stand, could we? Now spin for us, little human. Prove your skills or pay our price. And spin quickly. The waiting grows tedious."

Kalliara ducked her head, and started spinning again. Steadily she wound the coarse wool between her fingers, trying to make the thread as smooth as possible. As the spindle slowly dropped toward the floor and the length of thread grew, she couldn't help but feel some pride in her work. The thread was lovely, without lumps, strong and smooth. But it would never rival the thread spun by the nymphs of Dionysus. She was definitely going to die.

Soon they would give her to the Maenads, crazed women who would rip her apart with their bare hands. This was Dionysus' island, and tonight was his festival. The god of birth and death would show her no pity, she knew that already. She had never been one of his children.

She tried not to listen to the low, tinkling murmur of the nymphs and dryads around her. Even as they tormented her, they prepared themselves to celebrate the god's festival. Soon revelry would overtake the island. They would drink and dance with the satyrs, while the Maenads raged around them, drunk on the god's power. Wise humans kept themselves locked in their stone houses on nights like these, praying for mercy. But Kalliara's home was miles away, on the other side of the small speck of land that Dionysus had claimed as his own. Few humans lived on Naxos by choice, and those who did had learned to be cautious —

One of the nymphs gave a shriek, a combination of surprise and fear. Kalliara's head jerked up. All around her, satyrs were pouring into the wooded clearing where the nymphs held her prisoner. Enormous, standing taller than any man in the village, the satyrs terrified her. Their bodies rippled with muscle, dark and tanned from the sun.

They swept in, laughing and leaping, grabbing up the nymphs. Their hair flew in all directions, and many had bushy beards. Wild creatures, completely uncivilized, their upper halves resembled those of men, but their legs were those of goats. *Aroused goats*, she realized with a shudder.

Their penises were large and erect. Right before her eyes, one of the satyrs grabbed the cruel nymph who had tormented her. He threw her to the ground, ripping at her clothing and thrust himself between her legs. The nymph screamed, but her legs wrapped around his waist and she held him tightly as he rode her. Bile rose in Kalliara's throat.

She suddenly realized that for the first time since they'd taken her, the nymphs weren't paying attention to their captive. This was her chance to get away, if she moved quickly enough. She pulled the length of her shawl up and over her head, and ducked down. For once she was grateful that she'd never been able to afford expensive dyes for her clothing. The dun-colored wool would serve her well as camouflage while she made her way across the island at night.

She raised her spindle to her mouth, biting through the thread to free it. The silliness of her actions startled her—of all the things to worry about at a time like this, keeping her spindle should be a very low priority indeed. But in the time it took her to think it, the spindle was free and tucked in the cloth pouch that dangled from her belt. She scuttled across the clearing, ducking between satyrs and nymphs, trying not to take in what was happening around her. They were coupling wildly, gripped by the ecstasy and violence that only the god could induce. It sickened her.

At last she was on the outskirts of the clearing, scrambling through the brush. She paused to catch her breath when a new sound filled her ears. It was the high, keening shriek of the Maenads. They were near, and if they found her she would die at their hands. She had to keep moving.

She pulled herself to her feet, desperately clutching the folds of her shawl around her head.

Time to go.

* * * * *

There was something different in the air, Sabiniano thought, setting down the scroll he was reading. It was the eve of the mid-winter festival, and all around him his people were starting their revels. He could sense their every movement, smell their lust. Already they were drunk. The Maenads roved through the forests, looking for their victims and dancing in praise of the god. All of that was as it should be. But there was something else.

Slowly he walked through the temple of Dionysus, passing through the broad pillars and out onto the porch. The temple stood on the highest point on the island, and from his vantage point he could see across the wooded hills all the way to the ocean. The moon was full, casting silvery light across his domain. He sniffed the air, closing his eyes to focus on the scents around him. There was a group of satyrs and nymphs, fucking wildly. Nothing of interest. He could smell the Maenads, too. They had found a deer, and were cornering it. Soon they would rip it apart with their bare hands, drinking the blood. Once again, nothing of interest to him. There were many ways to worship the god. Sabiniano knew all too well how the smell of blood pleased Dionysus.

He turned, extending his senses further. He could feel the fear radiating from the humans who lived at the small port. They, too, existed to serve the god, providing his people with what little they desired from the outside world. The humans were locked in their small stone houses, calling on Dionysus to keep them safe. Sabiniano snorted in amusement. He knew how little Dionysus cared for these souls under his protection. The humans would live tonight, but only because they served a purpose. He had long forbidden his people to enter their village during the festival. When the god touched them with his madness, the temptation to rape and kill was too strong. Dionysus was many things, but never gentle.

There was more fear. Here and there across the island were small groups of humans. He tested each of them—some were women who had come to join the

Maenads. Their fate was out of his hands; either the god would accept them or he wouldn't. In another place he sensed two teenage boys. They had snuck out of their parents' homes, daring each other to spend a night in the forest during the festival. Sabiniano wondered idly if they would survive the night...they had found a good place to hide. He could smell their strength and vitality, and smiled. Such daring was appealing to the god. They would survive, although perhaps not with their virginity intact. The nymphs and dryads were fond of tasting human meat between their thighs.

Still further he reached out, until he found what he was looking for. Something unusual, a woman running through the trees. She smelled like fear, like the village. When would the villagers learn to stay inside at times like this? he thought in disgust. Her fear would excite the god; there would be little mercy for her if the satyrs caught her. He breathed in the air more deeply, then stopped in shock. No wonder she smelled different. This was no child of Dionysus; this woman worshipped Athena, and she had invaded their sacred rites.

Sabiniano tensed, opening his eyes and squeezing his fists in anger. She was an interloper; she would be punished. How could he have missed her presence on the island? She was a villager. How long had she been in their midst, existing beneath his notice? Sabiniano reached back into his memory, searching for the last time he had gone amongst the villagers and inspected them. With a shock, he realized it had been more than a century. He shook his head in self-disgust. He had allowed his boredom to interfere with his duty to Dionysus.

Time to go find the woman.

* * * * *

Kalliara ran through the trees, gasping for breath and clutching her dress up around her knees. She had no idea where she was, no idea how to find the village, but to stop running was to die. She burst into a clearing, uncertain of which direction to go. All around her were predators. In the distance she heard the sound of drums and pipes playing. She froze, trying to control her breathing. *More satyrs?* She wondered.

Instinctively, she ducked into the brush ringing the clearing, pulling as much of it over her body as she could. The music grew louder, and with horror she realized they were coming directly toward her. Filled with dread, she ducked her head into the ground, praying to Athena to protect her from them. The rich, loamy scent of the earth filled her nose. The drums grew louder, and the pipes wailed like living things, screaming into the night for release.

Against her will, she felt some of the god's wildness coming into her. The air itself was filled with it, and the earth felt warm and soft against her skin. Unable to control her curiosity, she opened her eyes and looked up just enough to peek through the brush at the musicians. A procession of satyrs and nymphs was entering the clearing, clutching skins of wine and drinking deeply. The satyrs were the most frightening. Their eyes were wild, and with a shock she realized that they had horns sprouting from their foreheads. They danced naked, their erect cocks jutting proudly into the night air. One threw his head back, dropping a hand to stroke himself lewdly. His hips thrust against his hand, and he howled with pleasure.

Then a nymph, her body brown and speckled, came up and rubbed herself against him. She reached up, draping her arms around his neck, and pulled him down toward her for a kiss. Sinuously wrapping one of her legs around his body, he reached down to hold her, digging his fingers into her ass. With a cry, he threw the nymph down to the ground, wrenching her legs apart. She clawed at him with her fingernails, and small rivulets of blood started running down his back. He howled again, and thrust himself into her cunt, humping at her like a maddened dog.

Kalliara realized she was holding her breath. She'd never seen anything like this before; she didn't know what to think. All around the clearing, the nymphs and dryads were flinging off their clothing. A wild dance was starting; they leapt and circled to the wail of the pipes. The beating of the drums grew louder until it filled her ears and pounded through her. It was a rhythmic pounding. The satyrs thrust their cocks against the night air, then started grappling the nymphs and pushing them to the ground.

One couple landed on the ground directly in front of her. She could smell the hot musk of the satyr, and hear the nymph shriek in pleasure and triumph. They rolled with each other, the nymph scrambling out of his reach directly into the arms of another satyr. He grasped her shoulders, pushing her to her knees until his enormous erection touched her mouth. With a sensuous smile, she made a purring noise and parted her lips. She pulled him in slowly and steadily, and he threw his head back with a growl.

The second satyr crawled up behind her. He grasped her around the waist, pulled her body back against his. Kalliara could see his enormous cock jutting against the nymph, hard and smooth. A tiny vein pulsed up along its length to the wide, flaring head. A pearl of fluid beaded up on the tip, and the satyr shuddered. He pulled the nymph's legs apart, fingering the wet hole that awaited him. In fascination, Kalliara watched as he fitted his cock head against the hole, then thrust in slowly and steadily. How could such a large object fit into the nymph's small body? She wondered. It was amazing, mesmerizing.

The satyr grunted in satisfaction, gripping the nymph's waist tightly. Then he started thrusting against her hard, slamming her head forward into the other satyr's cock. The three creatures twisted against each other in dark pleasure, the nymph a full participant in the seeming violation of her body. The earth seemed even warmer beneath Kalliara, and she felt a hot moistness growing between her legs. Dionysus' magic—thick with sex and violence—hung in the air like a tangible thing.

The threesome pounded away at each other for long moments, their movements growing more and more frantic. Finally, the satyr who was still standing pulled his hard length from the nymph's mouth, spraying her with white, ropy lengths of his seed. She cried out, and the satyr behind her pushed her upper body down into the ground. Now only her hips remained high, the satyr ramming into her again and again. She clawed at the earth, moaning and shuddering as he came into her one last time. His buttocks spasmed and he grunted, howling his pleasure. Immediately they leapt to their feet, rejoining the dance. The whole thing seemed like a dream.

She raised her eyes, looking across the clearing. Almost all the dancers were coupling now, satyrs and nymphs, even satyrs and satyrs. Every hole was filled, every hand groped at the bodies surrounding it. They squeezed and clawed in their madness for each other, and screams cut across the music as often as moans. Another grouping caught her eye. Three green nymphs had captured a satyr. One held his legs, and another his arms, while a third rode him wildly, holding the length of his beard like a bridle. He thrust up at her, struggling desperately to get free.

Three other satyrs stopped dancing and fell upon them. Two grabbed the nymphs who had been holding their brother's arms and legs, falling upon them like starving men on food. The third pushed the nymph down across the satyr she was riding. Her victim cried out in triumph, pulling her mouth to his for a brutal kiss. The creature behind her rubbed his hard cock several times then fitted it against her tight, green ass. He thrust into her with a triumphant shout, and she cried out, pushing herself up on her arms. Pinned between the two men, she could only brace herself against their thrusts, moaning with every movement. Kalliara shuddered, and a tear of terror ran down her cheek. How would she survive if they caught her?

Even as the thought formed, she felt a heavy weight come down on her. A hand came around, covering her mouth, and another pulled the shawl from her head. The body on top of her was hard and male. She could feel the tensed strength in every inch of him. He was breathing slowly and steadily, and to her horror she could feel something thick and hard pressing against her ass.

It was too late; she was caught.

She breathed deeply, trying to control her panic. Then a deep, rumbling voice spoke in her ear.

"What do you think you're doing on my island, little human?" the voice asked, its tone cruel and mocking. "You don't belong here, and now you're going to pay the price."

Chapter Two

Sabiniano all but tasted the fear coursing through her. She was like a doe cornered by Maenads. He laughed, feeling the god's power building in him. It had been far too long since he'd participated in Dionysus' worship, he thought. This little one's fear was delicious to him, and anticipation gushed through him like sweet wine. He shifted, slipping a knee between her legs and pushing them apart. His cock felt like it would explode, cradled as it was in her softness. The harsh wool still separated them, but not for long, he thought with dark satisfaction. Athena's virgin would be food for Dionysus that night...

He leaned closer to her ear, whispering, "Do you see how my people worship their god tonight, human? See how the pleasure and the pain mix, building in intensity until all becomes one with the divine? That is what I will do with you tonight. You shouldn't have come into my realm, little one, because I have no mercy in my heart this evening."

He laughed darkly, feeling the flutter of her heart within her frail body. How easy it would be to simply pull up her dress and thrust into the softness. The pipes and drums coursed through him, making his cock pulsed in response. She would be soft under him, and he would enjoy her virgin's blood. He pressed his hips down against her body, and to his surprise he moaned aloud in need. He had forgotten how exciting it could be to fuck a human.

He shivered in anticipation, then nipped lightly at her ears with his teeth. It was going to be a long night.

* * * * *

Kalliara quivered in fear. There would be no escaping this man. If he was a man...Was he a satyr? Was he the god himself? No, surely not the god. Dionysus

wouldn't trouble himself with one stray mortal. She considered biting the hand he held over her mouth. Did she dare?

He thrust himself between her legs, moving sinuously. She felt that traitorous heat rising in her again. The god's presence was powerful, but she had to resist. She focused instead on the calm, cool face of Athena, her own patroness. All her life, the goddess has been there for her. Her spinning was one of Athena's gifts, and it was out of dedication to her that Kalliara had saved her virginity all these years. She was nearly 30 years old, yet she had always refused to take a husband. The goddess required chastity of her followers...

She whispered a prayer, and Athena's coolness washed over her. The goddess was with her. She blocked out the sensation of the man on top of her, thinking only of Athena. Athena would save her. She imagined a sage smile on that stern but beautiful face, and her panic faded away. She knew what to do.

Deliberately, she let her body go limp, and gave a small, pitiful whimper. The key was convincing her captor she was helpless, she thought. Her traitorous heart whispered that she truly *was* helpless. *Not as long as the Goddess stands by me*, she told herself desperately. Athena helped those women who held true to her ideals; women who weren't afraid to be strong. It was time to be strong.

She wormed her hand down toward her waist, deliberately raising her hips to cradle the man's erection. He shuddered against her. She took a deep breath, preparing herself for escape. Even as she rubbed against him sensuously, she slipped her hand into the pouch holding her spindle, pulling it out slowly to her side. It was a simple tool, a bobbin on a stick. But the stick was strong, the end sharp and pointed. *Athena, guide my hand.*

Moving as quickly as she could, she slammed the spindle into one of his arms, using every bit of her strength to drive it into his flesh. He tensed, and in that instant she sank her teeth into his hand. Hard. A gush of hot, salty blood rushed into her mouth, and he cried out in startled pain. It threw him off balance long enough that she

was able to push him off, rolling out from under him. Viciously, she attacked him again with the spindle, plunging it into his side. Where she found the strength to do so she didn't know, but she felt as if Athena herself was there, guiding her hand. She tried to pull back, to stab him again, but the spindle stuck in his flesh. *Run*, a voice seemed to whisper in her mind. She obeyed.

She jumped to her feet and took flight into the trees. All around her the pipes and drums wailed, mixed with the howls and screams of the nymphs and satyrs. No one would have heard his cry, although she had no doubt that within seconds he would have the entire group after her. But which way should she go?

A snowy white owl swooped down before her, its soft feathers brushing against her face as it passed. Wondering if she was crazy, she followed the owl, running as fast as her legs would carry her. *Could the bird be a guide from Athena?* She wondered. There was no way to know. She certainly didn't have any better idea of where to go, though.

Branches tore at her face and clothing as she ran, and with disgust she could feel the worn leather strap of her sandal loosening. She'd needed to get it fixed forever, and now the damn thing might cost her life. It worked its way loose, and then was flopping against her foot, nearly causing her to trip. She paused for a second, trying to tie it. She could hear something crashing through the underbrush behind her. Nearby, the owl hooted urgently. Kicking off the broken sandal, she started running again, ignoring the pain as she hit a sharp stone. Adrenaline kept the pain from slowing her down, but that wasn't going to be enough. She knew she must be leaving a trail of blood. She heard a howl from her captor ringing through the woods; in the distance, a group of Maenads screamed in answer.

The owl flew ahead of her, as a roaring noise grew in her ears. At first she thought it was her own breath. She barely managed to stop in time when she came upon a cliff overlooking a waterfall that fell downwards for hundreds of feet. There was nowhere left to run. She gave out a whimper of defeat. The owl had misled her, and now she was

going to die. She sat down, holding her knees up to her chest tightly and started rocking back and forth, moaning in fear.

The owl screeched at her, sounding almost annoyed. She looked up to find it hovering over the waterfall, swooping down and flying back up to her. It was as if it wanted her to jump...

"If I jump, I'll die!" she yelled at the bird, growing hysterical with fear. "I can't survive a fall like that. I can't even swim!"

The bird screeched again and flew abruptly at her head, beating her face with its wings. A sense of calm washed over her when she realized the bird was trying to save her from something worse than death. Jumping off the cliff would be better than being gang-raped by satyrs, before being ripped apart by Maenads. At least this way she would go quickly, with her dignity and virginity still intact. Athena was giving her a choice, she thought. By jumping, she could control her own time and place of death. Whispering a prayer of thanks to the goddess, she stood and leapt off the precipice before she could change her mind. Cool air rushed by her, and for brief seconds she felt suspended in space. The water rushed up at her like a wall; then it was upon her. The owl screeched in the darkness, and consciousness ended. Her last thought was of the goddess, cool and calm, reaching out to catch her.

* * * * *

Sabiniano growled in anger, feeling that small façade of civilization he cultivated slipping away like a mask as he ran after the human woman. How dare she challenge him? He was master of this island, son of Dionysus himself. Immortal, powerful! Yet she had felled him with a spindle. It was maddening.

When he caught her she would pay for her transgressions, he thought darkly. He would rip her apart. No, he would fuck her until she screamed for mercy. *Then* he would rip her apart. He could still feel the surge of lust and triumph that throbbed through him when she'd started responding to his touch. How dare she try to escape

him? She belonged to him, as did all the humans and creatures of the island. He would teach her obedience if it was the last thing he did.

He caught a new scent as he ran—the smell of blood. He paused, picking up a delicate, worn leather sandal. She was barefoot, and something had cut her. It would slow her down, making her easier to catch. He howled in triumph, and in the distance of pack of Maenads answered. He could feel their hunger around him, and a strange possessiveness came over him. He would not share his little human with them, he decided. He didn't like the idea of them tearing at her soft flesh. She was all his and he would have to make sure the Maenads and satyrs understood that, he thought grimly.

A roaring sound grew in his ears; he realized he was coming up on a waterfall. He knew which one—the girl would be trapped on the cliff, there was no escape. He slowed his pace, allowing a smile to steal across his face. With surprise, he realized that her puny spindle was still sticking out of his side. He reached down and pulled it out, wincing slightly at the pain. He healed quickly, and the wound wasn't deep. He examined the little wooden tool, marveling at the courage it took for a woman, a mere mortal, to attack him with such a pathetic weapon. She was a feisty little thing, and he liked that. His anger faded a bit at the thought of the fun he would have with her. Without a thought, he threw the spindle away.

Out of nowhere, something flew out of the darkness at his face. He swatted at it, but it ducked away. It swooped back at him, powerful claws raking his flesh. The wound burned with a pain that he recognized at once as being unnatural. *This is no ordinary bird*, he thought grimly. It attacked again; this time he waited and struck out at it right before it reached his head. It screamed in protest as he squeezed it, then it abruptly transformed into a tall, beautiful woman with pale white skin. With a cry, he jumped away, his skin burning where he had touched her.

"Who are you to touch my child, Sabiniano?" the goddess Athena asked coldly.

Sabiniano shook his head in disbelief. How dare the goddess interfere with Dionysus' sacred rites? He had never heard of such a thing.

"I dare much, Priest," she said. Her lovely face was without expression; she seemed carved in stone. There was no compassion in those features. He could feel her power radiating across him making his skin crawl. A tiny part of his soul screamed for him to bow down before her, but he focused on resisting.

"This one was the daughter of my Priestess, and she was special to me," Athena said, her voice low and smooth. It compelled obedience. "You will pay the price for what you have done."

"Gracious Lady," he replied in a courteous but firm voice. She might be a goddess, capable of destroying him with a word, but he was the son of a god and ruler of the island. She had no right to interfere in his business. "I do not question your love for your priestesses, but this woman belongs to Dionysus. This is his island, and all that live here do so by right. Do you question his sovereignty?"

She gazed steadily at him, not answering. He schooled his features carefully, not wanting to show the triumph he felt; he had caught her. Surely the human woman wasn't worth challenging Dionysus over. Athena had great power, but on this island in the midst of Dionysus' festival, Zeus himself would have been hard pressed to overpower Sabiniano's god.

"I am not a pleasant enemy to have, Sabiniano," Athena said finally. She turned and walked slowly away from him. "Remember that."

In a flurry of white feathers, she transformed back into an owl and flew off into the night. Sabiniano grimaced. It was never good to have a goddess angry with you, but he had his duty to his god. As long as he was High Priest and ruler of the island, no one would take precedence over Dionysus.

He strode off in the direction where he knew the woman must be hiding, coming up short as he stepped on something. It was sharp, and it drove up into the pad of his foot, sending a shooting pain like fire up his leg. He stopped short, lifting his foot to discover the damned spindle he had discarded. With a shock, he realized why it had been such an effective weapon. Mere glamour made it appear to be wood. It was pure

silver, stamped with the markings of an Athenian priestess. The goddess' power within it was almost a living thing, crackling about his fingers as he pulled it from his foot.

Shaking his head, he turned to follow the trail of her blood. Strangely, his anger was all but gone. In its place was a sense of anticipation, excitement. She was a puzzle, one that tantalized and nipped at his brain. How long had it been since anything had interested him like this woman? A long time, indeed...

He loped along the trail sniffing the air for any sign of her. The roar of a waterfall grew in his ears, and a smile transformed his face. He knew the area well; she would be trapped by the cliff. He slowed his pace to a walk, reaching out with his senses to find her. *Nothing*. He stopped, forcing himself to focus solely on his target. Once again, he felt nothing. Had Athena somehow spirited her away? She would answer to Dionysus if she had, he thought darkly.

He was almost to the cliff, but there was no sign of her. The sound of the water had grown to a roar. A twinge of unease ran through him. Where was she? Finally he was at the cliff's edge. The trail of blood ended, and he examined the soft earth for her footprints. She had still been wearing one sandal, the other foot left bare and bloody. Her toes had left little hollows in the earth; several white feathers dusted the ground. Realization came over Sabiniano. She was dead; Athena had spoken of her in the past tense. She had thrown herself over the cliff rather than face him.

Some new, terrible emotion filled him. He struggled to recognize it, confused. *Grief?* Did he feel grief for this human? He had never felt anything like it before; it tore through him like a rough-edged knife, slowly slicing down the length of his chest toward his stomach. He knelt down, touching her small footprint. It was not the first time he had killed. Not even the first time he had killed a human woman. But it was the first time he had killed an innocent, he realized. She was dead, as surely as if he had slain her with his own hands. A part of him seemed to be dying with her. It was unbearable...

He raised his eyes to the heavens and howled, crying out his frustration and regret. He could still feel her trembling against him, still feel the savage pleasure her fear had brought. He felt dirty, disgusting. His howl turned to a keening moan. The Maenads howled in answer, and across the island the cry went up among his people.

Sabiniano mourns, they whispered. We must appease him.

Chapter Three

Mount Olympus

"Hello, Athena," Dionysus said languidly, leaning against the door frame. Athena looked up with a look of cool distaste from the scroll she was carefully writing. Behind him stood the figure of her High Priestess, Mercia, wringing her hands fearfully. With a sigh, Athena waved a hand at the woman in dismissal.

"And to what do I owe this pleasure, Dionysus?" she asked, setting down her stylus. "You've certainly succeeded in terrifying my staff."

"I understand you paid a visit to my son," he said, maintaining his relaxed pose. He lifted one finger, examining the nail carefully. Athena leaned back in her chair, eyeing him. He was tall and muscular, with fair skin and piercing green eyes. His face was the portrait of physical perfection. Full, sensual lips. Chiseled features. Dark, curly hair just long enough for a woman to run her fingers through...none of that impressed her, however. Beneath that façade of beauty, he was cold and heartless.

"I prefer not to be disturbed when I'm in my study," she said finally. He quirked an eyebrow at her, his expression mocking.

"Oh, really?" he asked, sauntering across the room and dropping into a chair near her desk. He leaned forward and his face grew cold and harsh. "I prefer not to be disturbed in the midst of my annual festival. I should be fucking nymphs right now, and drinking, *dearest* goddess. Instead, I find myself forced to come here and see you. Why were you on my island? Sabiniano tells me you've interfered with my people."

"Kalliaras was not yours," Athena said quietly, folding her hands in front of her. "She was mine and always has been. I saved her from your son, and took her to the underworld myself. She'll be safe there, with her mother. There's no reason to discuss the issue further."

"Is that so?" he said quietly, his voice filled with menace. "I don't appreciate your presumption, Athena. If you had come to me asking for this one, I probably would have given her to you. But you invaded my space and took what was mine. I simply can't tolerate that. I'm taking her back, and if I find out you've been bothering Sabiniano again, I won't be as polite about it as I've been today."

"Are you threatening me?" Athena asked, startled. She'd expected him to be upset, but a direct challenge was something else entirely. "Are you sure you can beat me, Dionysus? No one's bested me so far."

"There's only one way to find out," he replied lightly, his tone mocking. "I'm at the height of my power, Athena. Every time a mortal takes a drink of wine, fucks or dies, I get stronger. Don't push me, pretty virgin. I'll push back. I *like* the taste of blood...and something tells me yours would be sweeter than most."

With that, he stood and strode purposefully out of the room. Athena stared after him, filled with surprise. She'd never taken Dionysus very seriously. Perhaps she had underestimated him, she thought.

She picked up her stylus again, and turned back to her scroll. She chewed thoughtfully for a minute on the writing utensil, then placed it back on the table with carefully controlled movements. She had to do something about Dionysus. The thought of her poor little Kalliara at his mercy was unbearable...

Then an idea came to her, and a slow smile spread across her face. It might work, if she could get Aphrodite to help. That shouldn't be a problem; her sister goddess still owed her for taking Kalliara's mother. Time to call in the debt.

She stood and stretched her arms above her head. Purposefully, she forced out the tension Dionysus' visit had brought. She inhaled, willing herself calm and focusing on the feeling of her body as she stretched. She was stiff, and she wondered how long she had been sitting at her desk, writing. Three days? Four days? It was hard to keep track sometimes, she thought ruefully.

She leaned over to one side, enjoying the pull of her tight muscles as she moved. Finished with her stretch, she walked across her study to the door. She stepped out into the hallway, then started moving through her temple toward the open porch. Her priestesses scurried about, watching in awe and concern as she strode through their midst. Perhaps it had been longer than three or four days, she thought. They certainly seemed surprised to see her.

Ahead, on her right, a young woman dressed in the white robes of a novice had stopped in her tracks, staring at the goddess with an open mouth. Athena's mouth twitched in amusement.

"Who are you, child?" she asked kindly, pausing before the girl. She reached out to touch the novice's chin with her finger, raising her head so she could see into her eyes. She quickly searched through the girl's mind, drinking in her personality and spirit like fresh spring water. She was pure of mind and body, a devoted servant. Her name was Savronia, and she was 19 years old. Athena smiled in delight, patting the girl's cheek. Her skin was soft and fresh; she trembled under Athena's touch.

Savronia seemed unable to speak, and Athena laughed, her heart lifting. Savronia would be an excellent addition to the temple's staff, she thought in satisfaction.

"Don't worry, you don't have to answer," she said. "Please go to the stables and have my chariot brought around. I have a visit to make."

The novice nodded, trembling. Athena leaned forward, allowing her lips to touch the girl's cheek ever so softly. She pulled back, smiling gently. Turning away, she started walking out toward the front of the temple and porch again. Behind her, she could sense Savronia watching her, one hand pressed to her lips.

"I need my chariot today, Savronia," she said lightly, and the girls' footsteps rang through the hallway as she ran off to do her mistress' bidding.

* * * * *

Aphrodite lay on her stomach, purring like a cat. Her newest pet massaged her with strong fingers, digging into the flesh of her legs and ass deeply and rhythmically. His fingers weren't the only part of him that had delved into her deeply in the last hour; she felt sleek and satisfied. Now, if only she could find another just like him, she thought languidly. She'd always liked the thought of being pleased by a matched set...

A light tapping on the door caught her attention. Why would one of her priestesses be interrupting her? she wondered. They wouldn't bother her unless it was important.

"Come," she called, leaning up on her elbows so she could see her visitor.

"I am sorry to bother you, my Lady," her priestess said quietly, her eyes filled with awe. "But the goddess Athena is here to see you."

"Please, make her comfortable," Aphrodite said, surprised. She rolled off the bed, pulling on a filmy robe. Her pet, a well-endowed Cretan she'd found in a shipwreck, sat back on his heels, smiling. He was besotted with her, she thought in amusement. How much fun mortals were to play with...She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

"I'll be back before long, darling."

Then she walked out of the room, following her priestess into a well-appointed sitting room. Athena was standing to one side, carefully examining the mosaic floor.

"It's my son Cupid," Aphrodite said, gesturing toward the design. It showed a nymph and her human lover staring deeply into each other's eyes, while woodland animals danced around them. Athena cocked one eye in question, and Aphrodite explained further. "Cupid designed the mosaic. I think it's lovely."

Athena nodded, her face unreadable. Aphrodite burst into laughter.

"You must need something from me," she said. "Otherwise you would never agree that you like the design. Now admit it, you find it overly sentimental, even nauseating."

"You know me too well, Aphrodite," Athena said, amused. She walked across the room and allowed her sister goddess to envelop her in a warm hug. "I do find it nauseating, but I didn't want to offend you..."

"Please, sit down," Aphrodite said as they pulled away from each other. "Make yourself comfortable, and I'll ask my priestesses to bring us something cool and refreshing to drink."

"No, this won't take too long," Athena said. "I can see I interrupted you. What is he? Human?"

Aphrodite laughed again, stretching her arms up in the air like a cat.

"Cretan," she said with satisfaction. "I rescued him from a shipwreck; he's been showing me his appreciation ever since. I'm sure I'll tire of him eventually and let him return to his people, but for now? I'm certainly enjoying myself. What is it that you needed?"

"Do you remember a priestess of mine named Kalle?"

Aphrodite cocked her head, thinking. "Refresh my memory."

"It's been years, but you lured her away from me," Athena said quietly. "I was quite upset at the time. She was traveling in my service when her ship ran aground on Naxos. She fell in love with a weaver, a runty little man. I never understood her interest in him."

Aphrodite thought for a moment, and the memory came to her.

"Oh, yes," she said, her face softening. "They were very much in love, Athena. I never meant to steal her away from you, but I simply couldn't bear to separate them. They were meant for each other!"

"Really?" Athena said wryly. "If they were meant for each other, how come she died ten months later giving birth to her daughter? She regretted what she had done toward the end, you know. She called upon me to accept the girl into my service, and watch over her."

"That was the pain and fear talking," Aphrodite said gently. "She didn't mean it. Besides, true love transcends death. They're together in the underworld now, and happier than ever."

"Well, regardless of how much happiness it brought them, they left a daughter behind with no one to protect her. Her name was Kalliara," Athena said coolly. "Do you know what happened to her?"

"I have no idea," Aphrodite said lightly. "As you so gently reminded me, her mother gave her into *your* service, not mine."

"Dionysus' son, Sabiniano, tried to rape her yesterday," Athena said. "She's dead now. I saved her. But Dionysus is angry with me for interfering and he's decided to retrieve her from the underworld. He's doing it purely out of spite."

"What?" Aphrodite asked, her face twisting in disgust. "That poor child. She doesn't deserve that. Dionysus makes me so mad sometimes...He doesn't give a damn about the people under his protection."

"Yes, I know. That's why I need your help," Athena replied. "He's forbidden me to interfere. If I do, he'll consider it a direct challenge, and I'm not sure I can afford to fight that battle. But he didn't say anything about you interfering."

"You want me to go and save her?" Aphrodite asked, shocked. "You know I'm no match for Dionysus, Athena. He's so violent, and I don't even know how to fight. I could never beat him in a direct confrontation."

"You can't beat me in a direct confrontation, either," Athena said, her voice filled with bitter humor. "It didn't stop you from stealing Kalle from me. You did it right under my nose. I never saw it coming. I want you to do the same for Kalliara. It's too late to keep Sabiniano from getting her. But if he falls in love with her, he'll treat her well and she'll be spared suffering whatever Dionysus has in mind..."

"Athena, as much as I want to help, I can't make love appear where there's no feeling at all," Aphrodite said, her voice filled with concern and pity. "I can encourage it to grow, but I can't create it out of nothing. If Sabiniano doesn't have any softness in his heart to begin with, then he's beyond my touch."

"I didn't realize that," Athena said slowly. "I thought you could make anyone fall in love..."

"No, I can only encourage what's already there, sister," Aphrodite said sadly. "Otherwise I'd share the gift of love with everyone."

Athena stood slowly and walked across the room, deep in thought.

"What if there was a hint of softness in Sabiniano?" she asked finally, turning slowly toward Aphrodite. "Could you do something then?"

"Perhaps," she replied. "I've never sensed openness in his heart, though."

"When I took Kalliara away from him, he was upset," Athena said slowly. "I could hear his howling all over the island. His reaction was very strong, far stronger than losing a human woman he had just met should have evoked. Could there be something behind that anger? Aren't love and hate closely connected?"

"If he was truly as cold as he seems, then he shouldn't have cared about losing her," Aphrodite said slowly. "But are you sure his anger wasn't simply because you stepped into his father's territory? He may not have cared about the woman at all, you know."

"Yes, I know," Athena said, her voice tired. "But it's the only hope I've got for Kalliara, sister. He'll rape her and give her to his satyrs when he's done. And when they're done, the Maenads will rip her apart and drink her blood. I can't let that happen to my child, Aphrodite. If there's a way you can make Sabiniano fall in love with her, then she'll be safe."

"If she falls in love she won't be your child anymore," Aphrodite said gently. "She'll be mine. You've never willingly given me one of your daughters before."

Athena turned to her, and to Aphrodite's shock, there were tears in the goddess' eyes.

"I've failed her, Aphrodite," she said simply. "I failed her mother, and now I've failed her. I promised to keep her safe. If I have to attack Dionysus, I will, but that will mean war here on Olympus. It would be better if you could take her from me and keep her safe."

“I didn’t realize it was this important to you,” Aphrodite said softly. “Of course I’ll try to help. But I can’t make any guarantees.”

“That’s all I ask.”

Chapter Four

Sabiniano lay back in his bed, staring at the ceiling. It was made of smooth black marble, inset with thousands of tiny diamonds representing the stars.

A blue-haired nymph lay snuggled next to him, her fingers running idly over his body. He couldn't remember her name. But he could remember the feeling of her hot flesh closing over his cock.

It had bored him.

Even now, she was trying to bring him back to life, to bring him to physical pleasure yet again; but no matter how many times his body responded, it wouldn't make a difference.

Now, his little human...

A twinge of that aching sensation coursed through him for the thousandth time. It had been a full week since the human had died, and yet he was still unable to shake this feeling of sorrow at her death. Why had he allowed her to jump? If he had only paid more attention, thought more carefully about his actions, he never would have lost her. But he'd allowed the heat of the moment, the god's madness, to overcome him.

He'd almost raped her, and for what, a moment's pleasure, surrounded by pain? He truly was his father's son, he thought in disgust.

The nymph's fingers danced across his stomach, and against his will he could feel his muscles tightening in anticipation. He could feel her fingers running along the ridges of his stomach muscles...then they dipped lower, and she was running them toward his semi-flaccid penis. Gently, she touched it, taking it into the circle of her fingers and slowly moving them back and forth along its length. He sighed, closing his eyes. Maybe she could take away the memory, if only for a short time.

He flung one arm up and over his head, and dropped the other across his face. She was moving lower on his body now, kissing her way down his chest. Her mouth grazed his belly, tongue darting into the small indentation in the center. What would it have felt like to have his little human touch him this way, he wondered? A twinge ran through him, and he could feel his cock hardening. The nymph kissed down further, until her lips came into contact with hard length. He groaned, twisting his hips beneath her ministrations and imagining the human touching him...

Her hot, wet tongue came out, slowly tracing the ridge that marked his cock's head. He shuddered, and her mouth opened, sucking him in steadily. Her clever fingers massaged the base, then drifted lower to cup his balls lightly. She squeezed them gently, rolling them between her fingers within their sacs of flesh. A low groan came from between his lips.

Her mouth enveloped him, pulling him down into her throat. She swallowed, and he shuddered at the feel of her flesh surrounding him. He was rock hard now. He could feel his balls tightening in anticipation. She pulled at them again, the sensation exquisite and painful all at once.

Abruptly she was pulling away from him, her mouth sliding back up his length so slowly he thought he would scream. She pulled away from him entirely and giggled.

"You seem to have recovered your strength, my Lord," she said flirtatiously. Instantly, Sabiniano's arousal flagged, and he sighed. He didn't want to be reminded that this was simply one more nymph...

"Don't talk," he said harshly. "I don't want to hear your voice."

"Playing games, my Lord?" she asked archly. "I like games. Who am I supposed to be?"

"Don't worry about that," he replied tightly. "Either continue or leave, but don't speak again."

She gave another laugh, and he knew his unusual request would soon be the talk of the island. They feared him, structured their lives around his wishes. Yet anything he did was fuel for their gossip.

Her mouth closed over him once more, and he pictured the human again. As the nymph's mouth moved over his erection, her nimble fingers playing with his balls and massaging him, he tried to imagine how the human would have looked doing the same thing. For the thousandth time, he regretted not getting a better look at her. It had been dark, and the god's madness hadn't left him with much interest in getting to know the succulent morsel he'd found spying on his people.

He'd simply seen her tight, round little ass poking out from the underbrush and he'd wanted to thrust himself into her body. He had smelled her fear, and her virginity had waved before him like a red flag. He'd known she would be tight and hot around him. She would be afraid, but then the god's madness would have overtaken her as well, and they would have rolled through the brush and clawed at each other like wild animals. Every scratch, every orgasm, would send them screaming their pleasure for Dionysus' ears, and the night would have grown heavy with their power...

The nymph was moving faster and faster. Her mouth sucked Sabiniano down into a dark spiral, until he felt like screaming. What if he and his little human had done this? He could imagine her small, soft mouth. She wouldn't be as skilled as the nymph; she'd never had practice. But the god's madness would have made up for her inexperience with enthusiasm. Sabiniano would have spurted into her small body like a fountain, perhaps getting a child on her. He imagined her belly swollen with his child, and a wave of frustrated anger rushed through him. Such children, conceived during the god's festival, were precious in Dionysus' eyes. Her death had cost Sabiniano more than pleasure, he thought savagely. In killing herself, she denied them their child.

The pressure building in his groin was growing almost unbearable. It wound tight within him, a dark mixture of anger and desire. He forced himself to lie still beneath the nymph's touch, willing himself to maintain control. He wanted to sit up, roll her

beneath him and fuck her until she screamed. No. He wanted to fuck his human until *she* screamed. She was gone, and it was never going to happen.

He was getting close. He could feel his release almost upon him, and he silently willed the nymph to move faster. Her mouth and fingers were flying over him. He could feel his muscles tensing, to the point that he knew would be sore when it was over, but he didn't care. He simply clenched his fists against the bedclothes, and waited for it to wash over him.

Just as he was about to come, the traitorous nymph pulled away. Her fingers wrapped about his testicles like iron cuffs. He was left hanging, mind and body screaming for release. She laughed, and then spoke.

"I really think you should tell me what game we're playing, Lord Sabiniano," she said, her voice dripping with sadistic pleasure. "I don't think I should have to be doing all the work and not even know what's going on...It really isn't fair."

He roared to life, pressed beyond his endurance by her taunting. Ignoring the shaft of pain it caused him, he ripped her hands away from his body and threw her beneath him on the bed. She grunted in satisfaction, quickly wrapped her legs up around his waist and pulled him down into her body. His cock, hard as one of the stone pillars surrounding the temple, pushed into her without preparation. She was wet and slick, more than ready for his touch.

As soon as he ripped into her, she gave a howl of satisfaction and raked her fingers down his back. Around him he could feel the god's energy building, the dark passion of a deity devoted to fucking, drinking and death. He slammed into her body, reveling in her cunt's tight embrace. She screeched, then reached up and pulled his body down onto hers. He thought she meant to kiss him, and he bared his teeth in rejection. Instead, she laughed wildly, and sank her teeth into his shoulder. It was not a gentle bite, and pain whipped through his body. The twin lusts for sex and violence overwhelmed him and he lost control what little control he had left.

He pounded into her body, shaking the bed. For all he knew, he was shaking the temple. The idea of the stone pillars and walls falling down around them as they fucked made him wild with destructive joy. For that second, he *was* Dionysus; destroyer, creator, god of pain and pleasure...birth and death. It was too much, and in a rush of agonizing joy he released his seed into the nymph's body, shuddering with the intensity of his release.

She screamed beneath him, and he could feel her body spasming around his as she orgasmed again and again. Hot blood gushed from the wound in his shoulder, splashing across her body as she came. He shuddered, feeling his entire body grow shaky with the aftermath of his release, and he collapsed on top of her. They panted, exhausted.

He lay there for several minutes, hearing the rushing sound of his own blood in his ears, when a new sound intruded. A slow, steady clapping...In horror, he rolled over to see his Lord and father standing at the foot of his bed, his face filled with satisfaction and pride. The dark god wore only a light tunic, with a delicate golden chain draped across the crook of his arm.

"Sabiniano, you are truly the son of my heart as well as my body," Dionysus said, his voice dark and languid. He smiled at the nymph, who was staring in shock. In sudden realization, she scrambled off the bed and dropped to her knees before the god. Her long hair trailed across her body, mixed with spatters of Sabiniano's blood. Her eyes were glassy as she drank Dionysus' presence with hunger and awe.

"This one looks talented," Dionysus said. "Do you mind if I borrow her for a while?"

Sabiniano shook his head, still reeling from the intensity of his experience. The god's presence always had that impact, but he would never grow used to it. He should have known his father was near when he lost control like that...Reality came back to him and he rolled off the bed, bowing with as much dignity as he could under the circumstances.

"All of Naxos exists to serve you, my Lord," he said, mind racing. Why was Dionysus here? He hadn't come to visit Sabiniano in more than a century, although Sabiniano regularly reported to him in his temple on Mount Olympus.

"Of course it does," Dionysus said smoothly. "And I'm glad you remember that, despite the fact that Athena chooses not to. She's angered me a great deal, you know."

Sabiniano nodded, straightening to look his father in the face. It was a liberty few were allowed. Dionysus had been calm when he'd heard of the goddess' interference, but Sabiniano knew him well enough to realize how angry he'd been beneath that façade.

"I've already discussed the matter with her," Dionysus continued. "She won't be bothering you again, my son. And I've brought you a little present, too. It should help make up for what happened..."

Sabiniano looked at him questioningly. Dionysus gave a cold smile, and tugged on the chain. Someone gave a small, whimpering sound, and then a small woman walked slowly out from behind the god. Her long, brown hair was wild and ragged. Her clothing was tattered, offering tantalizing glimpses of soft, pink flesh. She clutched her arms across her chest, shivering in fear and confusion. Sabiniano starred in puzzlement, then realization hit. It was his little human, back from the dead. Why would Dionysus have done such a thing? Even for a god, bringing a human back from the dead cost tremendous energy and strength.

"I refuse to allow Athena to steal from me," Dionysus said, his voice emotionless. He pulled the chain again, bringing the woman closer to him. He reached out and pulled her against him. This caused her to shriek in pain and horror. The god smiled, seeming to enjoy her distress. Dionysus ran his fingers through the woman's hair lightly, and smiled as she shivered, her voice lowering to a moan.

Sabiniano felt a wave of nausea roll over him. His father had always been cruel, but this was a new low...

"She's yours," Dionysus said abruptly, tossing the chain to Sabiniano. Automatically, he reached up to catch it. The woman's eyes met his. She was like an animal before a hunter, terrified and incapable of movement.

"How long since you brought her back from the underworld?" Sabiniano asked, wondering how much she understood of what had happened to her.

"It's been about half an hour," Dionysus replied lightly. "I had to take her from her parents, and they were very troublesome. As if ghosts can fight a god," he continued, his voice filled with amusement. "I had to dispose of them."

Sabiniano shuddered, trying not to think of what might have been done to those hapless shades.

"Well, don't fall over yourself to thank me," Dionysus said wryly, turning to walk out of the room. "It's unseemly to display too much excitement when your father gives you a present."

Sabiniano clenched his teeth, biting back the sharp response he longed to give. Dionysus laughed, and the sound echoed through the temple. He turned and spoke again.

"Have fun with her, Sabiniano," he said. "And try to convince her to switch her loyalties to me, will you? I would dearly love to see Athena's face if I could tell her that her daughter has become mine."

Sabiniano nodded, trying not to look at the human. She still stood in the center of the room, holding herself tightly. Her face was blank, and the gold collar and chain holding her prisoner made her seem even more small and fragile.

"If she won't follow me, we'll let her go back to the underworld," Dionysus continued, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "But don't let her go so easily this time. If she won't give in to you, give her to the Maenads. And don't let them eat her head. I want to give that to Athena myself. Oh, and don't take off her collar. You can remove the chain, but the collar stays. It's keeping her anchored in her body."

With that, he turned away and strode out of the temple.

* * * * *

Kalliaras clutched herself tightly, wondering how she had gotten there. She had been so happy. Her mother and father had been overjoyed to see her. Athena herself had brought her to them. They had been safe together in the underworld; no one would ever hurt them again. The goddess had promised. It had been like a dream, each minute more peaceful than the next. She had been floating...

It had seemed like forever, or maybe only a few minutes, and *he* had arrived. Her parents had been screaming, trying to hold her to them, but *he* was stronger than all of them combined. He grabbed her, snapped the golden collar around her throat, and with a rush she re-entered her corporeal body. There was incredible pain; every nerve screamed in protest as it came awake. The dark one hadn't bothered to explain himself, hadn't let her adjust. He simply threw her into his chariot, and next they were flying across the sky.

She'd screamed and screamed, and he laughed at her pain. She could feel his power, and knew deep down in her heart that it was Dionysus who had come to take her. Why, she had no idea. And now she was here, with the man who had tried to rape her in the first place. Every muscle in her body hurt, and the light was too bright for her eyes. Even worse, she had just heard the god tell his priest to feed her to the Maenads. *Oh, Athena*, she whispered, her heart tearing apart. Tears welled up in her eyes, spilling down across her cheeks.

Sinking slowly to her knees, she let those hot scalding tears run down her face. It was time to suffer some more, but if she was just patient he would kill her and she could go back to her parents. She moaned, rocking back and forth, wishing it would go away. But it wasn't going away. Instead, strong arms were picking her up; she was cradled in someone's arms. She clutched her eyes tightly shut, willing reality to go away.

"Shhhhhh, little one," Sabiniano said. She could feel his voice rumbling through his body. He was naked, and his skin was wet and sticky. Blood. That creature had bit him,

she remembered after a second. He and the blue woman had been mating wildly, and Dionysus had forced her to watch. They had been covered in blood, and at first she thought he was killing the nymph...

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said, rubbing one hand gently over her hair. "I'm so sorry that I hurt you before. So sorry."

She said nothing, shivering in his arms.

"I know you don't believe me, but I never meant to hurt you," he said.

"Then why did you?" she asked, remembering how to speak. The moment was unreal, and for a second she forgot to be afraid. She straightened in his arms, pushing away from him a little. He let her sit back on the bed, and looked deeply into her eyes.

"Because I am my father's son and I wanted you," he said simply. "The madness was on me. I suppose I could have fought it if I chose, but I didn't want to. All I wanted was you on the ground underneath me."

"You're a monster," she whispered, gazing steadily into his face. His hair was rumpled, his skin covered with a sheen of sweat. Dried blood coated his chest, yet in that instant he took her breath away with his sheer physical beauty and power. She breathed in raggedly, forcing herself to see him for what he was. Immortal, son of a god and a nymph. No compassion and no humanity.

"Yes," he said simply. For a moment he seemed almost sad, but that had to be an illusion, she told herself. Silence filled the room, and they stared at each other. Finally she couldn't take it any more.

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked.

"Take you to the bathing pools," he replied simply. "We both need a bath. I'll decide what to do after that."

He stood, and held out one hand to her. She stood shakily, ignoring his offer of help. He smiled sadly, and handed her the end of her chain. She took it without speaking.

He walked out of the room without another word, and after a moment's hesitation she followed. She didn't have anywhere else to go, she realized. She was completely at his mercy. She might as well take a bath. That way she would at least be clean if he raped and killed her.

They walked in silence for several minutes, until he stopped and turned. She almost bumped into him, still dazed by all that had happened.

"I don't want to hurt you," he said quietly. She nodded, not really paying attention.

"No, you need to understand," he insisted, taking her shoulders gently into his hands. He leaned over, staring her directly in her eyes. "I don't want to hurt you. We'll find some way out of this. I promise."

"Your promises don't mean a lot to me," she said with quiet dignity.

"I know," he replied tightly. Then he turned and started walking again. Unable to do anything else, she followed him again.

Chapter Five

She hardly seemed aware of his presence.

Sabiniano had expected her to fight him when they arrived at the bathing room, located deep within the temple. It was fed by a natural hot spring, and was more cave than true bath. Glistening spears of crystallized mineral rose around the baths, and steam wafted to the ceiling. Perhaps most notably, it was all one room. There were no separate areas for men and women.

But she simply followed him without speaking. She seemed hopeless, her spirit broken. Almost as if she was still a shade in the underworld, not a living woman at all. She stood in the center of the room, waiting to be told what to do next.

"You'll need to take off your clothing," Sabiniano said quietly. "Do you need help?"

"No," she said quietly. "I don't need your help. Do I have to do this with you in here?"

"Yes, you do," he said. "I'm afraid that if I leave you in here alone you'll drown."

"I'm fine," she said, her face finally showing an emotion. Anger. He held back a smile, relieved to realize that she was still capable of experiencing strong feelings. *More than a shade*, he thought.

But as quickly as she showed her anger, it faded. In its place was a dull acceptance of her fate. Sabiniano gritted his teeth. If he was going to rescue her from the terrible fate his god had decreed, he would have to get more reaction out of her than that.

"Take of your clothes," he said roughly. She nodded and reached down to pull the drab and torn gown she wore over her head. She paused in her movements.

"Can you please turn the other way?" she asked in a soft voice. "I don't want to do this while you're watching me."

He nodded, and turned. He could hear her movements behind him, using his supernatural senses to monitor her as she pulled the gown over her head. She padded down the carved stone steps and entered the pool quickly, gasping as the hot spring water surrounded her. The heat took her by surprise.

"I can't believe how hot this is, it's burning me!" she called. He smiled. It was as if the water had awakened her from a dream. He was feeling more and more hope for the situation they found themselves in.

He turned, and she ducked down behind the rock ledge. Ignoring her discomfort, he walked along the edge of the pool until he reached the deepest area, then dove in cleanly. The heat of the water pulled him down, and he could feel the scratches the nymph had left on his back burning in pain. The pain ripped through him, anchoring him in his body as it always did. Hopefully it would do the same for her.

He swam underwater toward the woman, allowing himself a glimpse of her body as he swam. It was hard to see her through the bubbles welling up from the bottom, and he grimaced in annoyance. There were far more bubbles than usual. The naiad of the spring must be playing tricks on him, he realized.

No sooner had the thought come into his mind, than the naiad herself swam up next to him. Her long, white hair spread out between him and the human woman. She blocked his passage with her body, smiling and beckoned him to come with her. He frowned, and she spoke underwater, the sounds strange and difficult to understand.

"Come with me, Lord Sabiniano," she said, her voice caressing him like the tinkling noise of a stream. "Allow your servants to care for you and ignore this human. She is nothing to you, yet her presence causes you discomfort. If you but say the word I'll take her into the water with me, and she will never trouble you again."

He glared at her, annoyance welling up within him. Why were his people so determined to keep him from his human? And she was his, his to protect if at all possible. He may have hurt her once, but he was determined not to hurt her again. Not after what she'd been through because of his selfish desire. Poor...with a shock, he

realized he didn't even know the woman's name. What kind of monster was he? The kind who tried to rape humans, he thought in disgust.

"I want you out of here," he said coldly to the waiting naiad. A flash of displeasure washed across her face, but she bowed her head in assent. She would do as he had ordered. None of his people would dare risk his wrath, Sabiniano thought. They were far too frightened of him. She glided out of his way while he continued swimming toward the woman. He really needed to ask what her name was...

As he came closer, he could see her more clearly. She seemed agitated, bobbing up and down in the water, as if looking around the room. What was she doing?

He surfaced behind her after taking a moment to savor the sight of her tight, pink butt. She was adorable. Desire rolled through him but he tamped it down. He would have to move slowly. He didn't want to scare her. He only had a month to convert her to Dionysus' worship, or he would lose her again. She would suffer terribly if he wasn't successful, he reminded himself. He couldn't allow himself to mess this up by being too eager.

She screamed as he surfaced. He shook his head, startled. Had her experience with death made her unbalanced? What was wrong? After her abrupt shriek she grew silent, staring at him with wide eyes.

"How did you do that?" she whispered. "It seemed like you were underwater forever. I thought you must be dead."

Sabiniano started, then burst out laughing.

"I'm the son of a god, little human," he said. "I'm immortal. It would take a great deal more than water to slow me down, let alone kill me. I don't believe it's even possible, actually," he added thoughtfully. Could an immortal die? It seemed a contradiction in terms. It might be worth researching.

He turned his attention back to the woman. She was staring at him as if he were a snake.

“What’s your name?” he asked sharply, tired of thinking of her as “human.” It suddenly struck him just how different they were. She would age. What if she got old and died before he tired of her? Anger rose in him again. He wouldn’t allow it to happen.

“I’m Kalliaras,” she said, eyes wide. “Why are you doing this to me?” she asked in a rush. “Why are all of you doing this to me? I didn’t do anything to deserve this! Please let me go...” she added in a whisper. A tear welled up in one eye.

He felt his heart twist. He didn’t want her crying. He had no idea why it was so important, but it was. He had to distract her.

Not pausing to consider his actions, he reached out and pulled her against his body. Her form was warm and slippery in the water. She squirmed against him, whimpering. It wasn’t working; she was still going to cry. What would he do if she were a nymph?

He pressed his lips against hers, willing her to respond. She twisted against him, whimpering. He pressed against her more firmly, gently moving his mouth. He dropped little kisses, nipping at her lips and licking at her tears. His hands ran up and down the length of her back. She felt so good, so alive and beautiful. He wanted to pull her onto him, to drink up her essence, consume her.

He could feel himself hardening in anticipation, but he forced himself to move slowly. The last thing he needed was to scare her again. He wanted to comfort, to soothe. She was still tense in his arms, but she was responding to his touch. Her lips parted ever so slightly, and he pressed his advantage. He leaned into her, dipping into her mouth with his tongue. She seemed startled at first, but he kept up his assault.

He moved against her with inexorable purpose, refusing to give her the opportunity to breathe, to protest, to think about what was happening to her. Instead, he touched his tongue lightly to hers, reaching one hand up to cup her breast. She quivered. He pressed the advantage, teasing her tongue and daring it to join his. His fingers found her nipple, soft from the warmth of the water. He ran his fingertips across it, back and forth, and to his satisfaction he could feel it tightening under his touch.

She was now kissing him back, however shyly. Her tongue reached up tentatively toward him, and he shuddered. It would be so easy to thrust into her. So easy to push her back against the ledge and push her legs apart. A wave of hot lust gripped him, and for one moment he almost gave into the temptation. There was a roaring in his ears, and in the back of his mind he could hear his father's laughter. Dionysus would enjoy it if his son lost control.

Instead, Sabiniano thrust into her mouth. It was too much for her, but he couldn't help himself, the blood was roaring in his ears. It was all he could do not to take the tempting woman spread out before him. So he took her mouth. Took it as if he was dying and she was his only sustenance. He wanted to be inside her, to take possession of her body and make it his. Blood pounded in his brain, as he pressed his erection against her soft body.

She twisted against him, whether in pleasure or pain he couldn't tell. He forced himself to slow down. He pulled his mouth away from hers and rested his forehead against her own smaller one. Taking deep breaths, he closed his eyes and focused on her body.

She was small and sexy as she squirmed against him. Her nipples were hard points against his chest and hand, and he felt a satisfaction at that. She might still be afraid of him, but she wanted him, too. Or at least her body did. That was good enough for him, at least for now. He could use that. He squeezed her breast, then frowned as something hard pinched at his finger. It was the gold chain; he had forgotten about it. Pausing to catch his breath, he fumbled with the latch holding it to the golden collar she wore. A whispered word of Dionysian magic—his birthright—loosened the clasp, and he pulled it free of the collar. He lifted the chain, and threw it deep into the depths of the spring. Perhaps that would appease the naiad, he thought with dark amusement.

Turning his attention back to the woman in his arms, Sabiniano massaged her breasts for several minutes, plucking first at one nipple and then the other. She wiggled

against him, as a whimper escaped her. Unlike her earlier cries, this was a whimper of desire. A surge of triumph rolled through him. She was his...

He started kissing her again, moving his hands to roam up and down her back. She was soft and slippery, her skin so smooth it felt unreal. The nymphs of his island were more physically perfect, but none had ever felt this good to his touch. No human male had ever touched her this way. She was all his and he relished the feeling of ownership it gave him.

His hands dropped lower to cup her butt, and he pulled her against him tightly. In doing so, he made it impossible for her feet to touch the stone floor of the bathing pool. She bobbed up in the water, and her arms wrapped tightly around his shoulders. Her fingers dug into the muscles, and he could feel his entire body tightening in response.

He pressed his erection against her, and for a moment he thought he might explode. She was so soft, completely helpless before him. The power of it sang out to him, and he could feel the god's darkness rising. He thrust his tongue into her mouth, and reached down behind her to pull her legs apart. But she resisted, and he forced himself to slow down. He would do this his way, not his father's, he reminded himself. Force was not an option.

He allowed her to float away from him...just a bit. He brought one hand around to her front, trailing the fingers along her belly, slowly reaching down to the thatch of hair between her legs. She stiffened. He pulled his mouth away from hers and made soothing noises. But even as he did so, he pressed forward with his fingers. She shivered as he found the tiny nub between her legs for the first time. He brushed his finger across it, toying with it gently. He could feel her body stiffening, which caused her to moan again. For a moment he wondered if she would ask him to stop. Would he be able to?

But he didn't have to make that choice, because she suddenly squirmed against him, hips twisting with need. He continued to toy with her clit, allowing it to roll between his fingers as she gasped in his arms. Every time she moved, he could feel her

body brushing against his swollen flesh. He felt like exploding, but at the same time there was a sweet tension building in him that he fought to hold and savor.

Over the course of his long life, he had fucked a thousand nymphs. Humans, too, Even a witch. They had brought him to physical release in too many ways to count, but this was different. There was a softness in the way he felt now that was completely new to him. What was it about Kalliara that had the power to move him in this way?

She whimpered and dropped her head to his shoulder. He dipped one finger into the soft fold of flesh below her clit, and she clutched his shoulders more tightly.

“Do you like that?” he asked in a whisper, slipping a second finger into her hot, tight passage.

She refused to answer, and he laughed. She liked it all right.

He delved in further, exploring and finding the barrier of her virginity. Why had she denied herself the pleasures of the flesh for so long? He longed to ask her what had convinced her to give her devotion to Athena, a goddess so cold compared to his own father. But the last thing he wanted was for her to think about her actions. Nothing would break the sensual spell he was weaving between them more quickly than a discussion of religion.

So instead, he pressed his finger against the small membrane, wondering about the best way to break it without hurting her. He never wanted to cause her pain again. It hurt so much to think of what had happened to her because of his selfishness. He would save her, no matter what it took, he vowed silently. He would convince her to give up her cruel goddess. And once she was converted to Dionysus’ worship, they would live together on the island, ruling over it and showering each other with pleasure. His heart raced at the thought.

He removed his finger, and gripped both hands around her waist tightly, boosting her up in the water. She gasped, and steadied herself against his shoulder as he latched on to her breast with his mouth. The tight little nubbin of her nipple was like a small, hard berry against his tongue. He sucked deeply, wrapping one arm around her waist

to free the other hand. Her legs came around him instinctively, and she gripped him hard for balance. He took advantage of the new position to slip his fingers into her tight little cunt again, and started working the flesh between her legs in time with the suction of her breast. It was exquisite; he shivered with lust. How soon would he be able to convince her to join with him?

He could feel the tightening in her body, and her fingers clutched his shoulder spasmodically. Her breathing was loud in his ears. She was losing control; soon she would orgasm for the first time in her life. And it would happen in his arms, he thought with savage pleasure. He dragged his mouth to her other breast, suckling deeply. His fingers moved more quickly between her legs. Impatiently she twisted in his grip.

He sucked harder, twisting and thrusting his fingers up into her body. She whimpered, and started thrashing against him. He could feel the waves of pleasure building within her. Soon the orgasm would hit. He increased his efforts, and she shuddered and then suddenly screamed out, the cry echoing through the cavern. He could feel her body spasming. It was time. He thrust his finger up into her cunt, breaking through the thin barrier of her hymen. Her fingers dug once into his shoulders, and then it was done. She collapsed in his arms, limp with exhaustion and pleasure.

His own erection still throbbed fiercely, but he forced himself to keep control. Instead of pushing her against the wall of the pool and thrusting into her hot flesh, he gently wrapped his arms around her. He carried Kalliaras, legs still tight around his waist, to where stone steps led up out of the pool. Holding her gently, he strode out of the water, laying her exhausted body out on a padded stone bench. Where were the drying cloths? He found one, and wiped the moisture from her slowly. She was still breathing heavily, watching him through veiled eyes. If she objected to his touch she wasn't saying anything.

Every touch of the cloth against her body made him hotter. Her breasts were high and firm. Not too large, but definitely lovely. Her waist was thin, but she had generous

hips. The curly brown hair between her legs hid treasures he longed to explore further. His erection was heavy with need, and against his will he leaned forward, touching it against her hip.

She quivered, and a bolt of hot need shot through him. In that instant, he realized that if he touched her even once more he would take her. Fuck her without mercy. It wouldn't matter if she screamed for him to stop, it wouldn't matter if Athena herself came to Kalliara's defense. He had to get away from her. Now.

With a shudder, he stepped back and turned away from her. He strode across the room, grabbing a robe and throwing it at her without looking. He grabbed another for himself, wrapping it around his waist without bothering to dry off.

"Put that on and follow me," he said curtly. He had to get out of there; had to find a safe place for her. He didn't trust the naiad not to hurt her if he left her alone in the bath...

He could tell she wasn't moving, there was no sound.

"I said put it on and follow me," he growled, trembling in his need. "If I was going to rape you today I would have by now. I'll show you somewhere that you can sleep."

"All right," she said softly. Her voice, so soft and human, caressed his ear and his anger faded slightly. He strode out of the room shaking his head. What was it about this woman that touched him so?

* * * * *

Kalliara followed him, trying not to stumble. He was walking so quickly she could hardly keep up.

She could still feel the tingles of pleasure drifting through her body. She wanted to lie down, to savor the sensations he'd given her. Instead she was running after him through the temple, trying to keep up and not fall prey to the creatures she knew must live there. She'd had enough contact with satyrs and nymphs to last a lifetime, she thought grimly.

What an incredible feeling his touch had inspired in her. She shivered, remembering. It was part of sex, although he'd only penetrated her with his finger. She was fairly certain she was still technically a virgin. She certainly hoped so—Athena deserved more devotion than her daughter had shown that day. Guiltily, she wondered why it was that Athena forbade her followers this physical joy. It was hard to understand, but it wasn't Kalliaras's place to question a goddess, she reminded herself. Athena had cared for her since birth, and through one death, she thought wryly. It wasn't time to question the goddess' rules.

All she had to do to remain faithful to her mistress was survive the festival without succumbing to Dionysus' pleasures. It would be hard. Sabiniano, while still frightening to her, had shown her something new today, something wonderful. Something, if she were honest with herself, she enjoyed. It would be so much easier to give in to him.

If she did, she wouldn't have to die at the end of the month.

But she had already died once. It had been horrible, frightening, unpleasant. But the underworld was a good place. Her parents were there, and Athena's love for her had remained constant throughout her ordeal. As long as the price of survival was betrayal of Athena, Kalliaras vowed to remain strong. Nothing was worth betraying the goddess.

Nothing.

Chapter Six

She awoke the next morning feeling alive. Alive and wonderful.

She was in his bed, alone in his chamber. He had promised her the night before that he would stay away, and he had kept his promise.

Although she knew she must be within the temple, Kalliara could hear birds all around. They were singing in a new day, new life, and for once she imagined she could understand what they said.

They were expressing joy in life, and she felt like jumping up and dancing to their music. Whatever might happen to her at the end of the month, she was going to enjoy this last chance to experience the world.

First things first. Time to find some food...

She sat up, still wrapped in the cloth from the bathing room, and walked across the room to a cabinet. She found clothing inside, and while there were no women's dresses, one of Sabiniano's tunics was large enough to more than cover her. She could tell that nymphs had spun and woven the fabric as soon as she pulled it out. It was fine and smooth, far lighter than anything she had ever owned. She dropped the drying cloth to the floor and pulled the tunic over her head.

It was soft against her, and to her embarrassment she could feel her nipples hardening in response to its smooth and silky touch. What would it be like to wear such garments all the time, she wondered? No wonder Athena preferred coarser clothing...This was far too distracting for comfort.

There was nothing else for her to wear, however, so it would have to do. She found another strip of cloth and belted the tunic around herself tightly. Time to find something to eat, she reminded herself, and perhaps find her way out of the temple. She had no idea if Sabiniano would allow her to return to the village, but she wanted to try.

She wanted to see her friends again, and perhaps give away some of her possessions. She had one month left; she would use that time to finalize her business in life.

But the first challenge would be simply finding a way out of the chamber. There were doors at one end, but they looked vast and heavy. Enormous slabs of carved wood, they reached all the way to the ceiling, and she doubted she would be able to budge them. Assuming they weren't locked...

On the other end of the room was an archway covered by billowing drapes. A balcony? It looked like it. She could hear the birds outside and sunlight seemed to be filtering through. Perhaps there would be a staircase down into a garden. She walked over to the opening and pushed aside the fabric. Her breath caught at the beauty of the site before her.

She stepped out to the railing, marveling. Spread before her was all of Naxos. She could see the forests, the oceans, the hills. This was a view fit for a king, and for the first time she understood the breadth of Sabiniano's power. There was nowhere she could go he couldn't easily find her. She could even see the village from her viewpoint. It looked small, unprotected. There were several little fishing boats in the harbor, but nothing capable of helping her escape to another island. She was well and truly stuck here...

"Are you hungry?" Sabiniano asked, his voice low and smooth in her ear. She turned to him, startled. He was dressed in a tunic similar to the one she wore herself. But a light cloak was draped across his shoulders, colored a brilliant purple, and a thin gold circlet crowned his brow. The combination was utterly simple, yet regal at the same time. It took her breath away.

"I just returned from Mount Olympus," he said quietly. A chill ran down her spine. He radiated power; he traveled with the gods. How would she ever find the courage to stand up to him? But she had to, if she was to stay true to Athena. She shivered again.

"Good morning, Lord Sabiniano," she said respectfully. She dipped in a graceful curtsy of respect, frantically trying to figure out what to do next.

"Good morning," he replied, an amused smile playing across his lips. It was hard not to stare; he was so handsome. She blushed, remembering the way he had touched her in the pool the night before. Who would have thought such a thing possible?

No wonder so many of the villagers worried about their children being swept away by Dionysian lust, she mused. Had the nymphs and satyrs really felt like that? They had been like animals when she'd seen them in the woods...but so had she. She had had no more control over her reaction to Sabiniano than an animal. Would Athena forgive her for what she had done?

"You didn't answer me," Sabiniano said softly, breaking through her thoughts. She looked at him blankly.

"I asked if you were hungry," he repeated. "Are you?"

Her stomach rumbled loudly, and he laughed at her.

"I thought you might be," he said. "After all, it's not every day you come back from the dead."

She blushed and ducked her head. Every time he spoke he unnerved her. Of course, the sight of him was unnerving, too. There was no way she was going to win with this man...

"Yes, I would like something to eat," she said, trying to sound calm. He gestured toward the archway gallantly, waving her to walk ahead of him. She did so, and her breath caught.

Before her was a large table, spread with every kind of food she could imagine, and quite a few she had never seen or heard of before. There were fruits, pastries, delicately sliced meats...More than enough to feed the entire village, she realized, marveling.

"Where did all this come from?" she asked in a whisper. Sabiniano laughed.

"I have a pouch that produces it," he said, smiling. "I won it several hundred years ago in a dice game with Hermes. He still hasn't forgiven me."

"But there's so much!" she said. "Who will eat all of this?"

"I have no idea," Sabiniano said, shrugging lightly. "It simply appears when the bag is opened and disappears when it closes."

Kalliaras thought of all the times during her life that she and her fellow villagers had shivered with the cold while their empty bellies rumbled. Last year, three of the youngest children in the village had died of hunger...Unable to control her disgust, she burst out.

"What the hell is wrong with you? You're a terrible ruler, to have food like this and not share it with your people!"

His face darkened, and she raised her hand to her mouth in horror. How had she dared say such a thing to him? What would he do to her? Would he kill? With dark humor, she realized that if she spurred him into killing her now, it would save her a much slower death later. But instead of striking her down, he turned and strode back toward the balcony.

"Eat your fill," he said curtly before disappearing behind the curtains. She nodded and turned to the table. No matter what else happened, she would need her strength. She had to learn to keep her mouth shut. Her father had always said she talked too much for a woman, that her sharp tongue would get her in trouble.

He had been a wise man, she thought wryly. And accurate.

* * * * *

Sabiniano paced the balcony, then turned abruptly to look out over his lands. In the distance he could see smoke from the cooking fires in the village. She was right. He could have easily fed these people, yet it had never occurred to him. He hadn't worried about their lives any more than he worried about the lives of the birds and squirrels in the forest. The strong would live; it was nature's way.

But the look on her face when she saw all the food told a different story. He was cold and uncaring; his people could suffer and not only did he not care—he didn't even notice. How had he become so cold and empty?

He thought back over the course of his long life, wondering when the change had occurred. He hadn't been born uncaring. His mother, a nymph, had been kind and beautiful. He had never spent much time near human children, but she had taught him to be careful of them. She had reminded him constantly that their lives and bodies were fragile; they should no more be crushed without reason than the flowers of the field...

But that had been a long time ago. And he hadn't paid any attention to flowers recently, either, he thought wryly. His studies still brought him pleasure, but little else touched him. Even sex, drinking, the violence that was his heritage were little more than rituals to be performed this past century.

He picked up a small pebble lying on the balcony's stone railing. Without thinking, he tossed it into the distance. It flew with great force, and then he heard a screeching noise. He'd hit a bird, and now it was falling from the sky. He closed his eyes in disgust. No matter his intentions, destruction and death followed him.

Kalliara was making him think far too much, and he didn't like it. Not one little bit.

* * * * *

She had never tasted anything as good as the food on Sabiniano's table. Each grape burst in her mouth, filled with sweetness and juice. The bread was light and crispy, the cheeses rich with flavor. There were several goblets on the table; each filled with a different kind of wine. Of course she had drunk wine before, but it was usually mixed with water. This was strong, heady stuff and she questioned the wisdom of drinking even a little bit. But the first sip was so good, and then she was filled with a thirst that was impossible to ignore. She tipped the goblet, drinking deeply, and the wine sang into her veins like a drug.

She grew light-headed, and before she even realized what she was doing, she danced around the room. Jumping up on the bed, she laughed out loud. Being alive was wonderful! How little she had appreciated it before. The underworld had been safe, pleasant even. But this room was filled with bright colors and fresh air. The food was wonderful, and she felt as if she could fly.

But before she flew, she wanted another drink.

By the time Sabiniano came back, she was giggling to herself, clutching the goblet and staring at him with wide eyes. He stopped in his tracks.

"This is really good stuff," Kalliarra told him gravely, trying not to wobble. Why had she been so afraid of him before? He seemed perfectly fine now. Except he didn't have any wine...a wave of compassion washed over her. *Everyone* should have wine, she thought. She would share hers!

"You have *got* to try this," she said, standing shakily and offering him her cup. He reached out, catching her before she could fall down. She laughed, and collapsed into his arms. He lifted the cup and sniffed curiously.

"Why you doing that?" she asked, confused. Her word sounded strange, garbled. It was hard to talk. "You're supposed to drink it, not sniff it."

"I can't believe you drank this," he said, his voice tight. What was wrong with him? It was good stuff, and he should be drinking it. She reached up and tipped the goblet toward his face. It over-balanced, running down the front of his tunic and she cried out in horror.

"You shouldn't pour wine over fabric like that," she said in disgust. She looked up into his face, trying to convince him of the importance of what she was saying. If she was going to get that stain out before it set, she would have to get tunic off him and in some water right away, she thought. She pushed away from him struggling to say upright, and reached toward the edge of his tunic. Grasping the hem, she pulled the fabric up. He gave a startled gasp and tried to grasp her hands. She lost her balance; then she was on her knees before him. It was a most interesting position...

He had a big cock. Right in front of her face. It was swelling up, and she cocked her head, fascinated by it.

“You were going to stick that in me?” she asked, laughing out loud. “There’s no way it would fit in me. I think you must have made a mistake.”

Then her view was cut off as he pushed his tunic back down. His hands were grasping her upper arms, and he was flinging her over his shoulder. She squawked in protest, wiggling against him to get away, but he ignored her.

He walked across the room, pushing open the massive doors as if they weren’t even there, and started through the temple. She braced her head up against his back with her elbows, and watched in interest as they moved along. Nymphs watched them from corners, giggling and gossiping with each other. She saw groups of satyrs as well, some of them looking worse for the wear. They must have been drinking and carousing last night, she thought sagely. Too bad they didn’t have some of her wine. They wouldn’t look so unhappy if they had the good stuff, she thought in smug satisfaction. Their sickly expressions made her giggle, and she twisted, wanting to share the joke with Sabiniano, but he simply ignored her.

They walked out the front of the temple, and he headed down the broad steps. Each step bounced her against him, hard, but she didn’t care. Everything was so beautiful, and the air smelled wonderful. The grass was such a bright green, and each stalk of it seems to be completely defined to her eyes. What would it feel like to roll in it? She had to find out...

She thumped again his back, wanting him to let her go, but he ignored her. She kicked at him, and he swatted her butt. Hard. Pain cracked through her, and she got angry. Who was he to keep her from rolling in the grass?

She could feel the muscles of his back moving with every step he took, and she was struck with sudden inspiration. She would bite him!

Bracing herself, she picked the biggest, juiciest muscle she could find within reach and sank her teeth into it.

Hard.

She imagined she was a dragon taking a big bite of meat, tearing at it with her powerful jaws. Hot blood filled her mouth, and he gave a cry of anger. She dug deeper, enjoying the feeling of control. Finally, she was doing something to him.

The she was flying through the air, landing in a soft clump of grass. Overjoyed, she rolled over, letting each individual stalk touch her.

Unable to control her emotions, she whispered a little prayer of thanks to Athena.

It was good to be alive!

Chapter Seven

The grass was perfect for rolling.

Biting him had definitely been a good idea. Too bad she hadn't thought of it earlier, she mused, blowing at a tufted weed. But no sooner had she formed the thought than she could feel his arms around her again, hoisting her back up.

But this time she was cradled against his front, and one of his hands was covering her mouth. No fair.

He walked purposefully, and after a moment's struggle she realized she wasn't going to get anywhere with him. Instead, she just laid her head back against his shoulder and looked at his face. He was beautiful...

His cheekbones were high and sculpted, his eyelashes long and full...*It really wasn't fair*, she thought. Her eyelashes had never been as long and full as that. Why did he get to be immortal and beautiful? All she got was a spindle, she thought darkly. Athena could have thrown in some long, blonde hair. Bigger breasts would have been nice, too.

As soon as the thought was formed, she regretted it. But there was no calling it back, and it niggled at her. Why was Athena forcing her to choose between her life and her honor? It didn't seem very fair that she should have to die to make the goddess happy, let alone die twice. And based on what little experience she had, sex with Sabiniano wouldn't be all that unpleasant. Just thinking about his hand between her legs in the bath sent a wave of warm longing through her. Perhaps she should just —

Before the thought could fully form, he dumped her into something cold and horrible, and she screamed in protest. Fluid rushed into her mouth; cold shock took over her entire system. For an instant she wondered if she was dying again. She couldn't breathe. Water. She was surrounded by water.

He had thrown her into cold water.

She kicked out, and her legs made contact with a layer of smooth rocks. Her head burst through the surface. She was in an icy pool, formed by a rock dam someone had built across a wide stream. She coughed, spitting out water, and stood up. Her head felt suddenly clear, and while the colors around her were still bright, they didn't seem to glow in the same way that they had just moments ago. What had happened?

"You were drinking ambrosia," Sabiniano said. She looked around, and found him standing in the water to one side. He had waded in up to his knees before throwing her into the deepest part of the pool. Standing, it barely came to her waist.

She reached up and pushed the wet hair back off of her face in confusion.

"Why did you that to me?" she asked.

"Ambrosia is the wine of the gods," he replied. "Humans aren't meant to drink it. You were drunk, crazed with it. You bit me, by the way. Do you remember?"

"Yes," she replied tightly, thinking of her roll through the grass with embarrassment.

"It didn't occur to me to warn you about the wine," he said, frowning. "I've never had a human guest before."

"Why did you throw me in the water?" she asked, looking down. She realized that the thin fabric was almost transparent when wet and her nipples were tight and hard, clearly visible to him. And he was looking, too. His gaze seemed riveted to her. Blushing, she turned away, folding her hands across her chest.

"Living water breaks ambrosia's hold," he said. "This was the closest place I could think to take you."

"Thank you, I think," she said caustically, leaning over to wring out her hair. She walked slowly toward the bank, and realized she had another problem. Her tunic was fully transparent. She might as well be naked in front of him, yet she could hardly stay in the water. Her teeth were already starting to chatter. It was a warm, sunny day. If only she could lay out in the sun and allow her clothing to dry...

"Can you look the other way?" she asked. He gave a harsh bark of laughter.

"I've already seen what you have to offer," he said.

"Please?"

"All right," he replied, his tone amused, and turned. She quickly pushed through the water to the bank, and climbed out awkwardly. Barefoot, she ducked behind a bush, calling out to him; "It will take a while for my clothing to dry. If you like, you can go back to the temple and I'll meet you there later."

"Right," he said dryly. "I hardly think so. I will be happy to wait with you while your clothing—or rather, my clothing—dries. Would you like to come out into the sun?"

She hesitated, then realized how foolish she was being. Dry clothing wasn't going to magically appear...at least, not unless he had another of those bags. And he was right. He had seen her already. It wasn't like she had anything new and different on her body. There were nymphs running wild all over the island and every one of them had more to show than she did...

She stepped out, quickly walking to an open, grassy area and laying down on her stomach. The position, while far from ideal, left her feeling less vulnerable. Resting her arms in front of her, she dropped her head down and closed her eyes, trying to appear relaxed. But her facade of calm was broken seconds later. One moment she was alone, and then he was lying next to her. One of his legs touched her foot, but other than that he remained separate. It was just enough contact to keep her from blocking out his presence, she thought darkly.

They remained silent for several minutes, and then he spoke.

"Kalliaras, we need to talk," he said. "I know you are thinking of what Dionysus said when he brought you to me. If you don't convert to his worship, I'll have to give you to the Maenads. I don't want to do that."

She remained silent, wondering what he expected from her.

"Will you consider converting?" he asked finally.

"Would you consider betraying your god?"

"No," he said after a pause. "But it's not the same situation. Dionysus is also my father. I don't have a choice."

"Well, my mother died when I was born," Kalliara replied. "And Athena has taken care of me ever since. She's my mother, and I won't betray her. You can do whatever you want, you can even—" her voice broke, "rape me. But I won't betray my mother."

"I don't want to rape you, Kalliara," he said quietly. "I can understand why you might not believe me when I say that, but I give you my word it's true. I want to save your life."

"Saving my life isn't worth betraying everything I believe in," she replied tightly.

"Why is keeping yourself chaste worth death?" he asked, his voice filled with frustration. "It's ridiculous. What Athena is asking of you is unfair; it's wrong. You shouldn't be in this situation."

"It wasn't Athena who put me here, it was Dionysus," she said in a choked voice. "It's his people—your people who attacked me in the first place. And he's the one who brought me back here to die again. Athena brought me to my parents after I died. I'm grateful for what she did."

"But she killed you in the first place," he said, his voice filling with frustration. "She pushed you off that cliff. She's the reason you died! What do you owe her after that?"

"No, you idiot!" Kalliara said, leaning up on her elbows to glare at him. How could he be so dense? "*You're* the reason I died. I didn't want to get raped, so I ran. And when I got to the cliff, I jumped. Happily. Of my own free will, just to get away from you! Athena didn't force me to do that; I chose to die. At the time, it seemed like the best choice I could make."

"How could death possibly be better than sex with me?" he asked, his voice rising in frustration and confusion.

"Rape is not sex," she said tightly. "You were going to rape me. And when you were done, you were going to give me over to the satyrs and they were going to rape me. And if I was lucky enough to survive that," she continued, her voice cold and mocking, "I would have been torn apart and eaten by Maenads. Instead I died quickly and painlessly. Athena herself caught my spirit, and she took me to my parents. That's hardly unreasonable of her, now is it?"

* * * * *

He looked at her, stunned. Her face was twisted with the force of her anger, and a new emotion hit him.

Shame.

Since meeting Kalliara he had experienced so many strong feelings. Emotions he'd forgotten he still had. Lust. Anger. Regret. Grief. And now shame, the worst of them all.

"I'm so sorry," he said, realizing the words were inadequate. He looked away, unable to meet her gaze. "I wouldn't have turned you over to the satyrs. I would have kept you."

She snorted in disgust, dropping her head back down.

"That is hardly a comfort," she said coldly. "I'm not even real to you, am I? You say you would have 'kept me.' I'm not an animal, you know. Until very recently I was a free and independent woman. I have my own thoughts and my own dreams. I don't need you to make decisions for me, and I don't want you to save me. The only one I need saving from is you!"

Chapter Eight

She was right.

For the first time, Sabiniano looked at her and realized that, as a human, she had just as many thoughts and emotions as he did...if he respected her, he would have to allow her to make her own decision.

His blood ran cold. He could lose her.

Part of him screamed to stand up and howl, to proclaim his rage across the island. He wanted to tear up trees and frighten his people. He wanted Kalliara to stay with him. But she was going to have to choose him of her own free will, and that wasn't likely to happen.

He could still force her...

Force wasn't an option, he reminded himself. He refused to be that kind of creature again. He had learned; he was better than he was before.

The pain of that realization was almost unbearable.

"I don't want you to leave," he said, his voice filled with raw emotion. "Will you consider staying with me? At least for a while? I won't force you to do anything you don't want to do."

"Do I have a choice?" she asked dryly.

His heart hardened. Lust and anger welled up within him, and he fought to maintain control. He wanted to roll her under him and fuck her until she screamed. Giving her more freedom went against every instinct he had.

He took a deep breath and spoke.

"Yes, you can leave," he said tightly. "But I don't want you to leave. I want you to consider that death is not the only way out of this situation. Athena has already asked too much of you."

"Athena has never asked anything of me that I wasn't willing to give," she said, turning her face to his. He could see tears welling up in her eyes, and he longed to kiss them away. But that wouldn't solve anything.

"I will let you go," he said. "But I ask something in return. I ask that you give me the chance to convince you to join me. I won't force anything on you, but I want you to truly consider what it would be like to stay here."

"Sabiniano, it's not a question of wanting to stay," she said softly. "I don't hate sex, I'm not frigid. Don't you think I know what it is to burn in the night? I choose abstinence because my goddess asks her followers to share her discipline. It has nothing to do with refusing sex for its own sake. I need to avoid temptation to stay true to Athena."

"If Athena wants you to die for her, won't she give you the strength to stand up to temptation?" he asked. "Have you considered that maybe she doesn't want you to die? Have you considered that giving her one life is enough of a sacrifice?"

Kalliara looked confused for a moment, then laughed.

"You're just trying to confuse me," she said. She reached out and touched his face lightly. Her fingers were soft as a butterfly's wings, but they sent a chill all the way to his groin, and he shivered.

"Kalliara, let me kiss you," he said softly. "If you let me kiss you, then I'll escort you to the village and you can see your friends."

"Will you let me go alone?" she asked, testing his newfound tolerance.

"If you let me kiss you," he replied, trying not to growl.

"It's a deal," she replied, blushing slightly.

He leaned over to her, and carefully brushed her lips with his. He knew she was expecting an assault on her senses, so he kept his touch light. He kissed first her upper lip, then moved along to the corner of her mouth. His tongue darted out, tracing the line of her lips without pushing further.

He dropped his head lower, kissing along her chin. She was breathing quickly, and he could see her pulse beating in the delicate contours of her neck. He brought his mouth back up to her lips.

This time she met him, her own lips softening under his touch, and he held back a sigh of triumph. She was definitely responding to him. He nipped at her lips, laving them with his tongue.

“Open for me,” he whispered. “I need you.”

She did as he asked, and he gently probed her. Her tongue met his shyly. They danced around each other, and he could feel his arousal building. How long would he be able to keep this up? He needed to roll her under him, to plunge into her. Hard. He needed to ride her until they were both gasping for air, whimpering with need.

Instead, he pulled away, deliberately ending the kiss before he lost control.

“Go to the village,” he whispered. She nodded her head, clearly shaken.

“I’ll be back this evening,” she said. “If I choose. If I don’t come back, will you let me stay with my friends?”

“No,” he said, his face darkening. “I’m willing to give some freedom, but not that. If you’re going to make a true choice, I need the opportunity to convince you to stay here. I can’t do that if I never see you. Be back by sundown.”

“All right,” she said quietly. She raised herself slowly to her feet. The tunic she wore was dry, but she was still barefoot. He thought about that night he’d chased her through the trees, following the scent of blood from her cut feet, and guilt tore through him yet again.

“Come to the temple and I’ll find you some sandals,” he said.

"No, I'll walk from here and get new ones in the village," she replied tartly. "I can go by myself."

"What about your feet?"

"They're pretty tough," she replied, laughing. "At least when I'm not being chased. I'm a village girl, remember? I grew up running barefoot around this island."

He had the grace to look away, ashamed. But she simply laughed again.

"I'm not angry about it anymore, Sabiniano," she said, her voice growing kind. "You are who you are. I guess being dead has changed my perspective a bit. Dying doesn't take long, and the underworld is a good place. I won't be unhappy when I have to go back."

His blood chilled. How could she be so calm about the prospect of being torn apart? He wanted her to be afraid of death; to choose life. To choose him...

* * * * *

Going back to the village was harder than she could have dreamed.

Arriving alone, even if wearing only a tunic, had seemed a good idea at the time. Independence was far more important than appearances. But the looks on the faces of her former friends as she entered were horrified, filled with shock. And fear.

One child ran screaming.

They turned from her, making signs to ward off evil as she walked down the center path between stone buildings. Doors closed, and men who had lived and worked with her father held sticks threateningly. Confused and saddened, she skirted them as much as she could, making her way silently to her own home.

She had expected it to be empty. Instead, she heard a shriek as she approached. There was a blur of terrified activity. A woman—was it Mariana?—grabbed a small child and slammed the door. Kalliara could hear the bolt sliding home on the other side.

"Hello?" she called, cautiously knocking at the door. "Please, let me in! I don't want to hurt you!"

"Please go away," Mariana's voice called out in terror. Kalliaras shook her head. She had known this woman all her life; why was Mariana so frightened? "Please, I didn't mean to take anything of yours, but you're dead. You don't need this house anymore!"

"Well, I'm not dead any more," Kalliaras said, feeling somewhat bemused. Everything looked just as she had left it, yet it was all changed. "All I want is to collect some of my clothing."

"I saw you buried!" Mariana cried. Her tone rose, and a baby started crying. "I saw your body after they found it below the falls. You're dead! This is my house now! Go away!"

"But –"

"You don't need this house! Go away!"

Kalliaras stepped back, wondering what she should do now. She had expected people to be happy she was alive, not afraid. How many afternoons had she and Mariana spent visiting with each other? It hurt to think they would never laugh together again...

But Mariana was right. She didn't really need the house any more. She *was* dead. Or at least she had been, and would be again soon. And who better to have it than Mariana? The woman had been a widow for two years, living with her in-laws and barely scraping out a living. But it would still have been nice to see her home again, and collect some clothing.

With a sigh, Kalliaras gave up and started walking away from the house. None of her clothing had been that nice anyway, and her old sandals were long gone. She assumed Mariana had found her small hoard of coins behind the loose stone near the fire, or would eventually. It was just as well. She didn't need them anymore; Mariana would put them to good use.

As she walked, Kalliaras felt sad and lost. She wandered through the small village, doors barred and shutters held closed against her. She was at the center forum before someone dared speak to her. It was Clotenis, the village priest. He wore his formal

robes, and carried his staff of office before him in one hand, the entire assemblage slightly askew. Clearly, he had pulled the unusual garb on quickly. Before him, he held an amulet of Dionysus from the village temple.

“Stop, unnatural one!” he cried out dramatically, waving the amulet. “I command you in the name of Dionysus to return to the underworld. You have no place here.”

“Dionysus is the one who brought me back,” she said wryly. She stopped to face him, putting both hands firmly on her hips. This was getting out of hand. “I didn’t exactly choose this.”

He looked startled. A small crowd gathered behind him, watching the showdown intently. Kalliara had to bite back a burst of laughter. How silly they all seemed, terrified to look her in the face. Too bad they hadn’t shown her such consideration during her life—she could have used more customers for her small business. For one brief moment she was tempted to wave her arms wildly and jump about, just to scare them. But she bit back the impulse. After all, before her death she might have been afraid of someone back from the dead, too.

“I don’t want to hurt you and I’m not a ghost,” she said, trying to calm their fears. “The god brought me back for his own purposes. I won’t be here long, but I wanted to come and say goodbye. I also wanted to get some new sandals and clothing,” she added hopefully.

They stared at her as if she had gone mad, and she sighed in annoyance. Was it too much to ask that even one thing go right?

“We will give you clothing and shoes,” the priest said, trying to maintain his dignity. “But after that I will banish you.”

She burst out laughing. This was too much.

“How exactly do you plan to banish me?” she asked. “Are you planning to kill me again? Because in a way, that would be doing me a favor...”

His jaw dropped, then he pulled himself together. He looked so ridiculous that she found it hard to believe that she had held this same man in awe for so many years. He

had always seemed dignified and important. Now she saw him for what he was – a silly little man, drunk on the small portion of power that came from being priest of this village. It was pathetic. Pitiable, even.

He pulled himself together.

“I will use my powers as Priest,” he said, his voice ringing out. The people around him nodded, believing his every word. Had she ever really been one of them, she wondered? It seemed as if her old life was completely foreign. With a wave of insight, she realized that death had changed her in many ways...She was a new person now.

“I just came back to get some clothes and new sandals,” she said, sighing. “And I wanted to say goodbye. To give away my things...”

“I didn’t mean to steal your house,” Mariana said, stepping forward out of the crowd. She clutched her baby to her, refusing to meet Kalliara’s gaze. The woman was clearly feeling guilty, but Kalliara was slightly impressed she’d gained the courage to leave the house and confront her. Perhaps she wasn’t a complete ninny. “But you were dead. We buried you, you were gone. I didn’t think it would hurt anyone if I moved in.”

“No, it’s all right with me,” Kalliara said. This was getting tiresome. “Consider it yours, with blessings from Athena. But can I please have a couple of my dresses back?”

The priest cleared his throat, about to speak again. But before he could, there was a commotion. Irenia, an older woman Kalliara had known all her life, pushed forward.

“I’ll take care of the girl,” she said, boldly walking toward Kalliara. She gave a sigh of relief; at least one of her old friends would still speak with her. “She may be dead, but I was there when she was born and I washed her body after her death. I’m not afraid of her.”

With that, Irenia grabbed Kalliara’s arm and pulled her past the crowd. They started walking briskly toward the village outskirts, where the older woman made her home. A burst of startled conversation had broken out among those left behind. Irenia was going to be the target of gossip for a long time, Kalliara thought to herself.

"Thank you for being willing to help me," Kalliaras said as they moved away from the small crowd.

Irenia stopped walking, turning to look at her. The woman's wrinkled, homely face holding a strange expression.

"I don't know if it's really you or not, child," she said, her voice quiet. "I saw your body. You were pounded on the rocks something terrible. I don't see how you've come back."

"Dionysus brought me back," Kalliaras said, patting Irenia's hand gently. She suddenly felt incredibly tired. "He has his reasons, but I don't fully understand them. I believe I'm going to die again at the end of the month."

Irenia stared at her.

"How can you be so calm about this?" she whispered. "You sound as if you don't care—the dying, the coming back. And what's this about dying again? Aren't you already dead?"

"I don't feel particularly dead," Kalliaras said, shrugging. "The rest is a long story, and while I'm happy to share it with you, I'd like to sit down and rest. It's been a rough day for me."

"I'll bet it has," Irenia replied, shaking her head. Then her sense of hospitality kicked in. "We'll get you some warm tea and talk all about it. And some clothes, too. That tunic you're wearing is beautiful, but it's hardly decent for a young woman of your age."

"I think I've forgotten what 'decent' is," Kalliaras said. She laughed, startling herself. "You'd be surprised at what can seem normal after you've been to hell and back..."

* * * * *

Sabiniano paced his balcony, waiting for her to return. He had been in a foul mood all day. Why would she choose to walk to her human village barefoot, rather than accept his help? It was maddening. In his frustration he had roared at the nymphs and

satyrs who served him until they trembled in fright. Now all his people had fled into the forest. He knew they were whispering about him among themselves, that they would be watching him during the coming days for signs of weakness. Or madness. But he couldn't bring himself to care. All he could think about was Kalliara.

The sun dipped low in the sky; soon it would time to go after her. Why had he been so foolish as to believe her excuses? For all he knew she been planning to escape even as she assured him she would return. After all, there were a number of fishing boats in the village. She would be a fool to believe that she could get away him, let alone Dionysus. But that didn't change the fact that she was still gone.

It was intolerable.

The sun was almost fully set now.

He turned, walking into the temple with a heavy heart. He hardly knew why he was so disappointed. He didn't know what he had expected, after all. It wasn't as if she were with him voluntarily. How could he have been so stupid as to believe her promises? Now it was time to take her back, teach her who ruled Naxos. He stopped, forcing himself to let the disappointment go. In its place was anger, an emotion he could understand.

An emotion he knew how to express.

He strode through his room out into the main temple, his anger building with each step. How dare she defy him? This was *his* island, and she was *his* prize. He had been foolish to give her even a limited amount of freedom. And he had been foolish to think he could convince her to abandon Athena and stay with him. He would take her, and at the end of the month he would keep her. His father may have decided she should die, but Sabiniano would talk to him. He had served for thousands of years. He had earned this one boon; Dionysus could hardly deny him...

As he strode out the door, a small gathering of his people watched from the forest edges. Normally there would be music in the air. The wine would be flowing freely. The festival was barely a week old, hardly started. It was time for revelry, yet he could

hardly bear to look at them. If anything, they disgusted him. He wished he was lying between her clean, white thighs. There he would forget his boredom, his frustration. But she had left him.

The embers of anger flared to life, building within him.

Ignoring the trembling satyrs, he stalked purposefully toward the village. Time to retrieve his woman. Around him, the wind rose. The white, fluffy clouds seemed to pull together, and in their center darkness grew. Within moments the sun was shaded. The woodland creatures shivered, crawling into their burrows, and a chill fell across the island. Sabiniano continued his steady walk toward the village. There was a rushing sound in his ears. His own blood. How dare she do this to him?

In the distance the Maenads caught his mood, and raised their voices in an eerie howl.

The wind built in speed as he moved, howling across the hills. Tree branches waved wildly. The dying sun was all but gone in the clouds, no more than a fading dim glow against the horizon. He would destroy them all, he thought darkly. The villagers would die, pleading for mercy. There would be none.

Sabiniano crested a hill, and could see the village in the distance. Above it stood the tower that guarded the small harbor, beyond which were the masts of their pathetic fishing boats. His fury grew. Had she tried to take one of those boats and leave him?

With a cry of rage, he raised one hand and the sky roared in answer. Thunder crashed, and a bolt of lightning flew down at his command, striking one of the masts. It shattered into a thousand tiny pieces. *These humans would pay for stealing his woman*, he thought. Red fury swirled at the corners of his vision, and he laughed out loud. First he would destroy their homes, and then he would destroy them. No one took what belonged to Sabiniano and lived.

Chapter Nine

The wind made it hard to walk.

Her hair whipped around her face. Her clothing was soaked, and her face was scratched from the flying branches. Kalliara couldn't remember the last time she'd been in a storm so fierce, and her initial instinct had been to turn back. But she had to keep going if she was going to make it back and keep her promise—besides that, she was enjoying the storm in a way. It was so wild and free. With a startled laugh, she realized she had something in common with the outraged elements. She had nothing to lose anymore. She would live to return to the temple or the storm could kill her; either way, there were no secrets.

It had been so easy to lose track of time at Irenia's house. The small room had been filled with the warm comfort of a crackling fire. And after the first few questions, Irenia had seemed to realize that Kalliara didn't want to discuss it further, and respected her wishes.

Instead, after a few moments of awkward silence, they talked about Kalliara's mother. Irenia could remember the first day that the beautiful young priestess of Athena had arrived on the island. Her ship had dropped anchor in the harbor just ahead of a storm. Irenia was newly married at the time, but the elders asked to leave her husband and attend their guest. None of them wanted it to be said that Dionysus' people were less than hospitable.

The storm had raged for two weeks, longer than any in living memory.

At first Irenia had resented the sacrifice. After all, she had only been married a few months; she wanted to be with her husband. But that very first evening the two women from such different stations in life had become fast friends. It was Irenia who had

introduced her to her future husband. And while the resulting marriage had been short, it had been very happy.

The visit had been all Kalliara could hope for, particularly after her earlier reception. The only awkward moment had come at the end, right as she was leaving. Irenia had looked deeply into her face and asked a question Kalliara couldn't seem to shake from her mind.

"Child," Irenia had asked. "Is it really worth it? Dying again? You've been given a second chance at life. You've paid your debt to Athena. Perhaps you should consider taking a different path this time. There's a lot more to life than serving the goddess."

"Are you suggesting that I betray her trust?"

"Would it truly be a betrayal?" Irenia asked in reply. "Your mother chose to follow Aphrodite. Athena continued to love her. She took you under her wing, after all. Perhaps the goddess doesn't really want you to sacrifice yourself a second time."

"My choice isn't Aphrodite," she said. "It's Dionysus. I don't think Athena would be half so forgiving of that betrayal."

"Perhaps you're right," Irenia said, pulling her close into a hug. Biting back tears, Kalliara left the small, warm home behind. It had been a wonderful visit.

But now she regretted staying so late. The sun had gone down, and now this terrible storm was brewing. She was having trouble walking upright against the wind, and she was very late. At the same time, the sheer force of the storm filled her with energy. Every raindrop that struck her face seemed to washing away her old life. All her former hopes and fears were gone; in their place was uncertainty, and a nagging longing. What would it be like to choose life? When she was honest with herself, she had to admit the idea was intriguing.

As was the thought of Sabiniano.

She shivered, remembering how he had made her feel in the bath the day before. Every touch had been like fire touching her skin. And when he had made her explode like that, clutching her tenderly and cradling her close afterwards, she had liked it.

Despite all the reasons she knew it was a betrayal, she had like it a great deal. Resisting him was going to be very hard...

The lightning strike took her completely by surprise.

One minute she was walking along the path, clutching tightly around her shoulders the woolen shawl Irenia had given her, and the next she was flying through the air. Her first thought was that she had been hit, that she was dying again. Then pain lashed through her body, and she landed in a heap beneath a tree. Dazed, she looked around, trying to understand what had happened. Where she had been standing was a large tree, flaming against the night sky. Lightning must have struck it, she realized, and the force had thrown her nearly thirty feet. This was getting dangerous.

A thrill ran through her. For once in her life, she wasn't afraid of the danger.

She picked herself up and started back up the trail, using every bit of her strength to keep on her feet. The wind howled and she could hear the baying cries of the Maenads in the distance. The small part of her mind that still housed the old Kalliara wondered if she might die; then a laugh broke through her lips.

Of course she might die.

But she had already done that once, and the underworld wasn't such a bad place. She had nothing to lose; there was no fear.

Opening her arms wide, she embraced the storm, reveling in the power of the heavens. Her feet were light, her spirit was high. She raised her head and howled like a banshee. The sound was swallowed up, carried by the wind, and the Maenads echoed her call. For the first time in her life she felt the tugging power of Dionysus' madness on the edge of her senses, and a sense of longing washed over her.

No wonder the Maenads danced naked in the woods, screaming and chasing animals. This energy, this passion was exhilarating. Had Irenia been right? Did she really owe Athena another life?

She crested a hill, and came into an open clearing. Around her the heavens raged. Rain started spattered the ground, pelting her face, and she raised her head in another

howl of exhilaration. Another bolt of lightning struck. This time she felt the raw energy crackling through the air. She could feel her body crackling, too, and suddenly she made a decision.

It was enough. She wanted Sabiniano. She had lived one entire life without ever realizing how powerful a storm could be. She had never taken a lover, never given birth to a child. She had a second chance, and she was going to take it.

To hell with Athena.

As if in punctuation, thunder roared around her, shaking the ground with its force. She laughed out loud. Never before had she been more fully alive than right at that moment. It was time to celebrate and enjoy this life, however long or short it might be. Tomorrow could take care of itself.

* * * * *

When he first saw her, he thought she was a Maenad. Her long hair whipped around her body. Her arms reached up to the heavens, and she suddenly let loose with a howl that could curdle a mere mortal's blood. But he could hear the exhilaration in her voice.

The god's madness, he realized with a sudden burst of insight.

It was upon both of them. The storm coursed through his veins. Every breath he took corresponded to the wind, and every time he clenched his hands the seas rose. In the distance he could hear Dionysus laughing.

She turned to him, her face filled with wild pleasure.

"*Sabiniano*," she called, twirling in the rain and wind. "It's magnificent. I've never stood out in a storm like this before. I was always too afraid!"

She laughed, and came running across the meadow toward him.

As she came closer, he could feel a new emotion intruding on his anger, entwining with it and filling his heart with red and black swirls. Lust. Her breasts rose and fell

with each breath. Her rain-slicked face turned up toward him. She threw her head back, shaking her hair out with wild abandon.

Unable to control himself, he caught her up in his arms, dragging her against his body. He twisted her hair in his fist, holding her head at an angle before taking her mouth in a kiss meant to brand her as his property. It was a harsh kiss, brutal in its intensity.

She clung to him, responding as she never had before.

She was his prisoner, his captive, and this time he was going to take her.

She twisted against him, her body pulsing in a rhythm as old as time, and he clutched her impossibly closer. He wanted to squeeze into her, take every part of her being and make it his own. He wanted to fuck her in the mud, on her knees. And he wanted her to admit that they belonged together.

The storm changed around them. Where before had been confused, chaotic energy, the forces of nature took form. Lightning bolts continued to strike, taking on brilliant colors. The wind turned in a loose vortex, swirling around the island and growing more tightly controlled.

She whimpered, digging into his shoulders with her fingernails. It sent him wild.

His cock was a pillar of stone against her body. Everything in him cried out to push her down to the ground, to thrust into her again and again until she screamed out in ecstasy. She would beg for him with every thrust, pleading for his length inside of her. When he finally plunged into her hot depths she would beg for release.

Still holding her mouth prisoner with his kiss, he bore her down before him. Her small form twisted, and he pinned her with his weight. No escape. The pleasure of feeling her beneath him was almost too much to bear. For the first time in a thousand years, he wondered if he would make it inside her body before coming. She made him feel alive, like a youth again.

How could he have possibly believed he could let her go?

He raised his hand, finding the collar of her roughly woven dress, and pulled it down. He had to touch her breasts, suck the nipples into his mouth and feel her tremble against him. He dragged his mouth away from hers, lowering it to her waiting peak. Her mouth moved, and he strained to hear the thin cry of her voice over the raging wind.

"I need you," she screamed, tears running down her face and mixing with the rain. "Sabiniano, I need you so badly."

He cried out in triumph, and the storm echoed his emotions. In the distance, alarm bells rang in the village. Trees flew out of the ground, born aloft by the winds. On the far side of the island a tornado touched down.

He didn't care.

All he cared about was getting rid of his clothing, plunging into her body. He was going to fuck her until she screamed. There would be no mercy; no going back. After this night she would be his, branded by his touch for all eternity. He'd defy Zeus himself to keep her, he thought savagely.

He found her nipple with his tongue. It was small and round, a tart red berry washed in rain. He sucked it into his mouth forcefully, and she arched her body up into his. He reached down and yanked up her dress. She parted her legs for him with a gasp, and his knowing fingers found the cleft between her legs. She was hot and wet for him. Another wave of lust struck him, and in his mind's eye he saw a bolt of brilliant red lightning striking the roof of Dionysus' temple. The force of the blow echoed across the island, shaking the ground. Boulders rolled down hills; the nymphs whimpered and cried in fear.

Would the god be angry? *Not likely*, Sabiniano thought with savage pleasure. Life and death. Creation and destruction. The god's madness was a holy thing, and no building could be expected to stand in its way.

He fingered her roughly, and she panted in need. Her clit was pulsing, and unable to control himself, he slid lower on her body and dropped his head between her legs.

She bucked against him as he sucked the hot nub into his mouth. He savored the salty taste, and pictured her white, silky thighs. Soon he would be riding between them. It was all he could do not to raise his head and bite them, to mark her as his possession with his teeth.

No man would ever touch her this way but him, he vowed. Cunt, thighs, breasts...they were all his.

She twisted against him, moaning and clawing at shoulders. The time was right, now he could claim her. He moved back up her body, kneeing her legs further apart. Rising slightly, he pinned both her arms above her head and looked straight into her eyes.

"You are mine," he whispered, gazing upon her pinned, sprawled out form in satisfaction. "*Mine.*"

She looked back at him, eyes wide, and nodded.

"Yes, I am," she whispered, smiling at him. There was an emotion in her face he'd never seen before, something so tender and beautiful it made his heart ache.

And his cock.

With a growl, he ripped his tunic over up and plunged his hard length into her soft body. She screamed and bucked against him. A chorus of answering cries rose around them, and Sabiniano realized the Maenads were watching.

Good.

Let his people know that he had claimed a woman. Let them share in the madness and joy that only Dionysus could inspire. Let them fuck and sing and drink and kill in his name. This was what life on Naxos was supposed to be; it had been far too long since he abandoned himself in worship. Again and again he thrust into her. She was wild beneath him, struggling against his powerful hold. Was she trying to escape him? No, he could see in her eyes that she was just as involved in this frantic, passionate act. She fought to free her arms and clutch him more tightly to her. She wanted their flesh to be one just as he did.

He thrust again and again, each time harder, each time more deeply into her soft flesh. He wanted to slow down, to milk her to climax so many times she wouldn't be able to breathe. But when he felt her body spasm around his, when he heard her cry of ecstasy, it was too much. With a shout of triumph, he thrust into her one last time. As he did so, she looked up into his face and whispered, "Sabiniano..."

It pushed him over the edge. With a cry, he came, hips jerking against her like an untried youth.

His hot seed shot into her in burst after burst until he was empty. Exhausted, he collapsed on top of her, barely managing to push himself to one side at the last minute so as not to crush her small form. She whimpered against him, and he cradled her body close to his.

It was done.

She belonged to him now.

And he belonged to Dionysus.

* * * * *

How many times had he taken her? Six, seven? It was hard to remember, he thought in satisfaction. He could still remember the sleepy little smile on her face as he left her early that morning. Even as he kissed her, he breathed a spell of sleep over her. She wouldn't awake before he returned.

Now, dressed in one of his best tunics, he strode confidently through the halls of his father's temple on Mount Olympus. It was time to inform Dionysus of his triumph, and claim his woman permanently. She would be his consort on Naxos, reigning by his side over the people...

Thinking of people, he made a mental note to check on the villagers. None had been killed during the storm, but their homes and boats would need much repair. That would please Kalliara, he thought in satisfaction. He could afford to give the humans a boon.

The priest scuttling before him paused at a door, nodding toward it.

"The god is within, Lord Sabiniano," he said in a tremulous voice. "But he is busy, and has left orders not to be disturbed. I dare not open the door and announce your presence."

"I'll let myself in," Sabiniano said, waving his hand in dismissal. "You may go."

Nodding his head fearfully, the priest disappeared down a hallway. Such a fearful little creature, Sabiniano thought.

Knocking lightly, he pushed the door open and strode into his father's bedchamber. Dionysus didn't seem to notice his presence, his attention focused solely on the women beneath him. She was bent forward over the foot of the bed, her face buried between the legs of a naked blonde who moaned and thrashed her head. Dionysus stood behind both of them, thrusting into one woman's ass roughly as he leaned over and sucked the breasts of the woman lying on the bed. His naked buttocks flexed with each thrust, and Sabiniano was struck, not for the first time, by the god's physical perfection. Every muscle, every inch of skin, was perfect.

The woman on the bed started thrashing and moaning as her pleasure increased. Dionysus, nearing his own pleasure, raised his body and grasped the hips of the woman beneath him. He tore her away from the other woman, standing her before him, supporting her frame with his powerful arms. Her upper body dropped limply before him, yet he held her hips tight as he pummeled her ass.

The woman left on the bed moaned, then rolled to one side and started working her cunt furiously with one hand.

Sabiniano watched, mesmerized. How many times had he joined Dionysus in displays just such as this one? And how empty they seemed, compared to his time with Kalliaras.

Dionysus caught his eye, then nodded quickly toward the woman on the bed in invitation. Sabiniano shook his head, and Dionysus shrugged, turning his attention back to the woman he held, reaming her ass with powerful strokes. She whimpered and

moaned under his battering cock, her cries growing more and more shrill. The god's magic was heavy in the room. Against his will, Sabiniano felt his own erection grow. Dionysus laughed, his voice a mixture of pleasure and dark triumph. Both women screamed aloud in response, orgasms of incredible intensity ripping through their bodies.

Then Dionysus himself came, clutching the woman to his pumping hips and groaning deeply. He held her there for several seconds, then let her slide slowly to the floor. Sabiniano watched as his father turned to look at him.

"To what do I owe this honor?" he asked mockingly, making no effort to cover his still jutting cock. Sabiniano politely ignored Dionysus' nudity, just as he had on so many other occasions.

"I've come to discuss Kalliara," he said lightly.

"Oh, yes," Dionysus replied, leaning down to help the woman to her feet. Her face held a stunned expression, and he kissed her cheek gently. "Allow me to dismiss my toys," he added.

He turned to the bed and reached out to the other woman. She jumped up, kissing his hand, and he patted her cheek gently. Then he wrapped an arm around each of them, kissing first one then the other deeply on the mouth.

"Go," he said firmly, patting their asses in dismissal. "I have business to take care of. Wait for me in the bathing chamber."

They nodded, then scurried out of the chamber. Dionysus gestured politely toward a beautifully carved chair, inviting Sabiniano to take a seat.

Waiting for his father to join him before sitting, Sabiniano spoke.

"I took her last night," he said.

"I know," Dionysus replied, amusement twisting his handsome face. He pulled a length of silk around his waist and sat down, sprawling his legs comfortably. Sabiniano

joined him. "All of Olympus knows, my son. That was quite a storm you threw last night."

"I was angry," Sabiniano said.

"So I gathered," Dionysus replied dryly.

"But the result was clear," Sabiniano replied. "She gave herself to me freely. Well, mostly freely. You've proven your superiority to Athena."

"I wonder," Dionysus said thoughtfully. He stared into the distance, thinking. "Athena is still playing games with me. There is no way this woman would have given in so easily if she hadn't allowed it. Kalliara was utterly devoted to her; she changed her mind far too easily. Athena released her hold on the human's loyalty because she feels guilty. She wants the human to live, and she thinks to trick me into allowing that to happen. I want you to give her to the Maenads tonight, then bring me the head. That will teach Athena a lesson about interfering in my business."

Sabiniano stared, shocked, as Dionysus stood and started walking across the room.

"I'm going to the bathing chamber now," he said casually. "Would you like to join me?"

"No," Sabiniano replied, standing quickly. "And I won't allow the Maenads to kill Kalliara. She is mine now, and I intend to keep her."

"What?" Dionysus asked coldly, turning to stare at his son. "Sabiniano, are you defying me?"

"I ask this as a personal favor," Sabiniano said, thinking quickly. "I've served you my entire life. I have never asked you for anything, but now I am. I want this woman. She is mine, and I will not give her up. You've won. Isn't that enough?"

"I cannot believe I'm hearing this from you," Dionysus replied, enunciating each word crisply and clearly. A sign of anger Sabiniano had heard too many times... "You are my son, my priest. I have given you everything. How dare you defy me?"

"I will not give her up, father," Sabiniano said sadly, resolve hardening his expression. "I will not allow her to die again because of me."

"Because I love you, I will pretend I didn't hear that," Dionysus said. His face was beautiful in its coldness, completely without expression. "Bring her head to me tonight and I will forgive you."

"I will not," Sabiniano said quietly.

"Then you will pay my price. I'll make you suffer in ways humans can't even imagine," Dionysus replied, his voice a dark hiss of anger. "Think upon it. I expect to see you tonight."

Chapter Ten

Mount Olympus

It was done, then, Athena thought quietly. How it hurt her to give up Kalliara to Dionysus. Of all her fellow gods and goddesses, she despised none as she despised him. And now he had taken one of her most precious children as his own. It pained her to even think of it.

But it was for the best. Kalliara would live, guarded by Sabiniano and blessed by Aphrodite. Of course, she would eventually wither and die naturally. *But that was Sabiniano's problem, not Kalliara's*, Athena thought with satisfaction. Ultimately, he, too, would pay a price for hurting her child. He would be alone.

"Hello, Athena," a cool, dark voice spoke behind her.

She turned, startled out of her musings, to find Dionysus there, watching her.

"I expect you've come to gloat over your triumph," she said, keeping her tone neutral. "I didn't expect Kalliara to give in, you know. She has proven to be a less than faithful servant," she added dismissively. Dionysus laughed, but it wasn't the laugh of triumph she had expected. It was bitter and harsh.

"Don't play games with me, pretty virgin," he said tightly. He leaned in her doorway indolently, but every muscle in his body seemed tense and ready for action. Something wasn't right, she realized.

"I know what you've done," he said, pushing himself away from the doorway. He stalked toward her, his gaze filled with an intense emotion she couldn't read. This wasn't her plan at all...

"How stupid do you think I am, Athena?" he asked coldly. "I see right through your little ploy. You gave her to Sabiniano, probably even roped Aphrodite into making him fall in love with her. And you expect me to believe that I've won? I don't think so."

Athena kept her face carefully blank.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she said coldly. "I've lost my priestess' daughter. Isn't that enough for you? Why are you still troubling me?"

"Sabiniano defied me earlier," he said, moving closer. She swallowed nervously. He towered above her, every inch of him hard and male. Their powers might be equally matched, but physically he was much stronger than she. Would he actually dare attack her?

He laughed, as if reading her mind.

"Foolish, Athena," he whispered, leaning in to speak directly in her ear. She felt his hot breath against her neck and shivered. "I'll have her head yet. But I'm very angry with you right now, and it's no longer about your stupid priestess. It's about my son."

"Sabiniano?" she asked, startled. "I've done nothing to him."

"Oh really?" he asked, leaning back. He strolled back toward the door, every inch of him filled with suppressed energy. He was a giant black cat, poised to pounce at the smallest movement. Ah, but she *despised* Dionysus!

"My son defied me earlier," he said, quietly, turning back to face her. "I may have to destroy him tonight. If that happens, I will hold you personally responsible. And you *will* pay. I promise you that."

He turned and strode out of the room without another word.

"Dammit!" she cried, slamming her hand down on a table. It crashed to the floor, shattered by the force of her blow. She held her hand up and watched as a tiny trickle of blood ran down her arm.

Things had spiraled out of control.

* * * * *

Sabiniano stared down at Kalliaras, sleeping so peacefully in his bed. His heart filled with sorrow. This one day was all he would have with her, and then an eternity of torment.

But it would be worth it.

He would rather suffer for all time at his father's hands than give her over willingly to the Maenads. He would love her today, and then, before the sun set and his father came for them, he would kill her. Quickly and painlessly. He would carry her spirit to the gates of the underworld, and then he would go face his father.

There was no other way.

But in the meantime he would bring her pleasure unlike anything she'd ever experienced. It would be his final gift of love.

* * * * *

"Oh, this is horrible," Aphrodite said, dropping her face into her hands. "Are you sure, Athena? Maybe he wasn't serious."

"No, I'm sure," Athena said, unable to meet her fellow goddess' gaze. She stared at her hands, willing the problem to go away. It wouldn't.

"What are we going to do?" Aphrodite said in a quiet voice. "You have to think of some way to appease him, Athena. And how did he guess that I was part of it?"

"I don't know!" Athena said, throwing her hands up in the air. She stood abruptly and paced across the room. "We have to think of a way to save Kalliara."

"What about Sabiniano?" Aphrodite asked quietly. "We have to save him, too."

"I don't care about him at all," Athena said, her voice disgusted. "It's his fault this happened in the first place. He's the one who tried to take her."

"Well, to be fair, it's Dionysus' fault," Aphrodite said tartly. "Sabiniano was under his influence, wasn't he? Those rituals may seem like a perversion to us, but they are his duty as a priest. Not only that, Dionysus possesses his people with a special madness. I don't think we can hold him accountable for that."

"I'll hold him accountable for whatever I choose," Athena snapped. She turned and sighed. "I'm sorry, you're right. But I refuse to feel sorry for him. Kalliara is my only concern."

"Well, both of them are my concern," Aphrodite said, her voice filled with pain. "He loves her. He's defying his father to protect her. As soon as he did that, he became my child, too. I won't abandon him to Dionysus."

"What do you plan to do?" Athena asked quietly.

"I'm going to go see Dionysus and talk to him," Aphrodite said. "I won't abandon my children without a struggle. And they *both* became my children when they fell in love. She's not your problem any more, Athena."

With that Aphrodite stood and clapped her hands sharply. Several beautiful young priestesses appear out of the shadows to attend her, bowing before the two goddesses.

"Bring me my silver spider-web gown," Aphrodite said. "And prepare my bath. I have an errand to run, and I want to look my best."

"What about me?" Athena asked. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Yes," Aphrodite said. "I want you to go to Zeus and ask a favor. I want him to grant Kalliara immortality. That way, no matter what happens, the two of them will be together. He's willing to give up everything for her. Let's give her the chance to pay him back for that gift."

"I'd rather she stay mortal," Athena said tightly. "Then she can go to the underworld and exist in peace, no matter what happens."

"Well, she's not your child any more, Athena," Aphrodite said coldly. "She wouldn't have gotten into this situation if you hadn't held her to your impossible standards, denying her a family and husband. She's mine now, and she's in love. I want her to be able to stay with her man no matter what happens."

"Why should I go to Zeus?" Athena asked, disgusted.

"Because I'm the only thing that stands between you and all-out war with Dionysus," Aphrodite replied coldly. "So right now, you'd better focus your attentions on keeping me happy. Understand?"

"Yes," Athena replied softly. "I understand perfectly."

* * * * *

"Dionysus, may I speak with you?" Aphrodite said softly. She walked into his private room, careful to roll her hips as she walked, but not too much. She didn't want to appear too obvious...

He turned to her, his face expressionless.

"My attendants told me you were coming to see me," he said coolly. "Any particular reason you chose today? Usually you seem to avoid my company."

She pouted her lips, and he laughed.

"You never change, do you?"

"Would you really want me to?" she purred, lifting one arm sensuously. The silky fabric she wore was nearly transparent; she could feel it pulling tight against her nipples.

"No, not at all," he said softly. He glided across the room, and lifted one of her slender hands to his lips. "I would never want you to change a bit, Aphrodite."

Then he dropped her hand, and his expression grew mocking.

"I suppose it's entirely coincidental that you've come to see me so soon after my discussion with your bitch sister."

She laughed throatily.

"I've heard you accused of many things, Dionysus, but stupidity has never been one of them," she replied, allowing a soft smile to play across her lips. "I'm here about Sabiniano and Kalliaras, of course."

"They're really none of your concern," he said, turning away from her. He walked across the room to a window overlooking the hills, and she followed. Calculatingly, she allowed herself to stand so close behind him that her nipples grazed his back; his muscles tightened in response.

"But they *are* my concern, Dionysus," she sad softly. "They're in love, and all lovers are under my protection. What will it take for you to let them go? There are other ways for you to fight with Athena."

"That's true," he said, turning to face her. He lifted one finger and gently ran it along her face. "But this is about more than Athena. It's about my son betraying me."

"He can't help his betrayal," Aphrodite whispered. "Love is more powerful than any of us. I couldn't give him back to you if I wanted to."

"Why did you have to take him in the first place?" he asked, and for one moment she glimpsed pain in his heart. It startled her; she'd never known Dionysus to care about anyone but himself.

"I didn't have to take him," she said, willing him to believe her. "I don't create love; I merely encourage what's already there. For some reason, Sabiniano and Kalliara were meant to be together. You need to let him go."

"But I don't want to let him go," Dionysus said mockingly. All traces of emotion were gone; once again, his cool, uncaring façade took over. "I want my son back, and I want Athena's bitch human dead."

She stepped back from him, allowing her seductive mask to slip off.

"Is there anything I can do to convince you to take your fight with Athena elsewhere? She's already lost, you know. Her priestess is mine now. Kalliara will never be able to go back to her service. Isn't that enough?"

"It would be enough if I hadn't lost my son, too," Dionysus said harshly, turning to face her. "He's chosen her over me. That I cannot accept."

"What if I offered to compensate you?" Aphrodite asked, taking a deep breath.

"What kind of compensation?" he asked, his face cold.

"Me," Aphrodite said quietly. "I'm offering you me. Or rather, use of my body for the day."

"What makes you think I want you that badly?" he replied, his voice expressionless.

"Oh, you want me," she replied, pressing closer to him. She ran one hand up his chest lightly, drifting across the hard nipples beneath his tunic. He was motionless beneath her touch. Laughing throatily, she rubbed her body against his. His erection jutted against her; she purred in response.

"All men want me, Dionysus," she said. Standing on her toes, she breathed light kisses against his neck. "I'm Love incarnate, and every creature secretly wishes to have me for their own. Whether they admit it or not. I've seen the way you watch me."

"I want to fuck you, I'll admit that," he said coldly. "But I'm hardly interested in love. My realm is physical pleasure. That's all I want, and all I'll ever need."

"You can call it whatever you want," she replied, laughing. "It still comes down to the same thing. Me and you. Naked. Together. Whatever you want, for one day only."

"Let's make it more interesting," he replied smoothly. "I'll make you a bet. You claim that you—love—is more powerful than lust—me. But I'll bet you that I can make you beg for me before I'm done. If I win, I keep Sabiniano and the human. If I lose, I'll give them to you and take my fight with Athena elsewhere. Do we have a deal?"

"All I have to do is make you beg?"

"Easier than that," he replied with a dark smile. "All you have to do is hold out on me. You don't beg, you keep Sabiniano and the human."

"One night only," she said, searching his face for signs he was telling the truth. As usual, she had no idea what he was thinking.

"Yes."

"Then we have a deal," she replied.

He laughed, the sound deep and mocking. What had she done? she wondered. He didn't even seem worried that he'd lose the bet. He must have tricked her in some way...

Before she could challenge him, he thrust his hand into the carefully arranged mass of blond curls on her head, twisting it and pulling her mouth up to his.

His lips crushed against hers, and his other hand dropped to her butt, pulling her against his erect cock. His tongue invaded her mouth, and she moaned.

This bet might not be the sure thing she'd thought it was...

Chapter Eleven

He swung her up into his arms, carrying her across the room to his bed, lips locked against hers. Heat built in her body.

Why was she responding to him so quickly? He was handsome, of course, but she had had many handsome men in her lifetime. But there was something about the hard tone of his muscles under her hands that made her want to clutch him tightly to her, to open before him.

Truly, he was the god of lust...

From his first kiss she would have thought he'd be rough, yet by the time they reached the bed he laid her down tenderly, brushing the hair away from her face as if she were a fragile and precious creature. He sat next to her, trailing his hands up and down her body over the fabric of her gown, and she twisted.

"This isn't right," she said. "I need to be touching you, too. Otherwise the bet isn't fair."

"We never said anything about the bet being fair," he replied darkly, his face a mask of sensual pleasure. He leaned over her again, and kissed her deeply. He eased his body over hers, rubbing his erection against her through their clothing, and she sighed in pleasure.

Tingles were running through every inch of her skin.

She didn't even notice the silken loops he slipped over her hands until it was too late. He nibbled at her mouth, her chin and her throat. His breath against her ear made her shiver. She reached up to pull his mouth back down to hers, only to discover her wrists were tied.

He must have seen the startled, horrified look in her eyes, because he started laughing – a low, sensual laugh – at the exact moment she realized she was his prisoner. He sat back up, watching her as she struggled against the ties.

“You are far too innocent for me,” he said, his face mocking. “Do you really think I’d make it easy for you to win this bet? You’re mine, now, pretty goddess. It’s going to be a long afternoon.”

She glared at him, but her dark looks seemed to amuse him more than anything else. He stood slowly, and stretched.

“You seem upset right now, so I’ll give you a little time to think things over,” he said softly. “I have some business to take care of. I’ll be back within an hour or so. Don’t get too lonely without me...”

She growled at him, twisting against her bonds, but it was no good. Whatever they were made of, it certainly wasn’t the silk they resembled. Even with her supernatural strength she couldn’t budge them.

He laughed again, and strode out of the room. She was alone.

If she ever got out of there, she was going to *kill* him, she vowed. Bastard. How dare he treat her this way?

* * * * *

Kalliara woke slowly, finding herself in Sabiniano’s arms. What a night they had had together... She had never felt more wonderful in her life. Every muscle was tight, and she was more than a little sore between her legs, but it had all been worth it.

Of course, she had betrayed her goddess. A wave of guilt washed over her, and she moaned softly. How could she have given up her vows to Athena so lightly? What kind of woman would do such a thing?

A woman like her mother.

Her mother had given up Athena for Aphrodite, she reminded herself. And she seemed to think it was worth it. The family had only been together for a short time in

the underworld, but her parents had seemed very happy there. Irenia, too, seemed to feel that they had made the right choice.

I'm sorry, she whispered in her heart. But I've already given up one life for you. I'm going to live what time I have left here for me...

She rolled over to find Sabiniano watching her.

"How are you this morning?" he asked softly. "Any regrets?"

"No," she replied, boosting herself up to look at him. "No, last night was wonderful. I wouldn't go back and do anything differently. So, what now?"

A shadow crossed his face, but it was gone so quickly that she seemed to have imagined it.

"Now?" he replied lightly. "Now we enjoy what Naxos has to offer. I want to make this day perfect for you."

She laughed.

"But what about tomorrow?"

"Let's just worry about today for now," he said, pulling her on top of him. He tickled her, viciously, then rolled her beneath him on the bed.

"You're crazy," she said, giggling.

"Maybe," he replied, his face softening. "But I want to treasure this first day we truly have together. Because we are truly together, right?"

"Yes," she whispered, reaching up and pulling his head down to hers for a kiss. "We are together. I've given Athena one life. Let me give this one to you. That is, if you want me. This is more than just a passing fancy for you, isn't it?"

"Oh, it's more than a passing fancy," he said. He brushed his lips against hers, and she sighed. Tendrils of feeling spread through her body. As if she had been created for his touch alone. He stirred something so strong within her that she was almost frightened by it. Almost.

Once upon a time she would have been. But instead of pulling away, she closed her eyes and allowed the sensation to sweep over her. She concentrated on the smell of him, the feel of him above her. He was warm, and he had a special scent all his own. Rich, spicy. Masculine and powerful.

It made her want to touch him, and with a frisson of excitement, she realized that she could. There was nothing to be afraid of. She had been so frightened of him before, so frightened of so many things. But she was strong now — there was nothing he could ask of her body that she couldn't give. It was a wonderful type of freedom, something so new she hardly knew what to think of it.

But if she didn't know what to *think* of it, she did know what to *do* about it.

She reached up, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulled him close as they kissed. He groaned, the sound little more than a rumble in his chest, and she felt a surge of power and excitement.

He wanted her.

Even though they had made love again and again last night, Even though she knew he must have been with hundreds of other women before her, many of them beautiful and accomplished beyond her wildest dreams, this man wanted her.

She could feel it in the tension of his shoulders, in the tightening of the muscles across his back. He groaned again, and his lips pressed hers open. Unlike the night before, he was slow and cautious. His tongue hesitated at the entrance to her mouth before pressing in, delicately dancing across her own tongue.

She shivered.

Again and again, he nibbled at her opening like a bee dipping into a flower. With every touch she could feel the longing within her body growing, and a slow, steady ache was building between her legs. She shifted them restlessly, and he moaned. Intrigued by his response, she shifted again, this time pressing up with her hips.

His erection was massive, pushing urgently between her cleft. He twitched as she wiggled; a smile stole across her face. He lifted his head from hers, a mock scowl marring his face.

"You like that, don't you?" he asked, his voice smooth and silky. She nodded, trying to bite back a giggle. She lifted her hips again, and his face grew pained.

"If you keep this up, I won't have much left to give you," he said wryly.

"Oh, I think you'll have plenty to give me," she said archly. She allowed her hands to play down his back, reveling in the feel of him under her fingers. Each grazing touch made him stiffen further. A daring idea struck.

"I want to be in charge this time," she said suddenly. He gave her a questioning look.

"Every time we've been together, you've controlled the situation," she said. "I want to be in charge this time. I want to control you."

"And just how do you plan to accomplish that?" he asked, amused.

"You're going to let me," she said, smirking.

"I doubt that," he replied.

"Oh, yes, you are," she said. "And you're going to do it willingly. Because I have something to offer that you want."

"And what would that be?" he asked quietly. "Unless I'm deeply mistaken, I already have your body."

"Yes, but I haven't had yours," she said archly. "And I think you'd like it if I did. Don't you wonder what it would be like if I took you in my mouth? If I rode you as hard as you've ridden me?"

His face flushed as she spoke; there was no doubt he was aroused by her words. She decided to bring it home.

"I'm going to fuck you until you scream," she continued, her voice barely a whisper. He nodded, not speaking.

She pushed up against him, palms flat across his chest. He rolled over beside her onto the bed. She laughed. How quickly the mighty Sabiniano had fallen... She sat up, allowing the silken sheets to fall to her waist and revealing her naked breasts.

They were flushed from last night, pink where his face had scraped against him. At first she had been startled by the feel of his stubble against her most sensitive areas. It felt so strange against her flesh...But every time he took her nipples into his mouth she soared so high it made her gasp and scream with pleasure.

Now just seeing the stubble on his face made her wet.

So she kissed along his jaw line, enjoying the rough touch. As she did, she allowed one hand to drop slowly down his chest. His nipples were hard little nubs; would they respond the way hers had? She decided to find out.

She dropped her head lower, flicking her tongue. He was tight, the skin surprisingly soft. He remained completely still as she touched him, but she could hear a catch in his breathing...

Without warning she sucked him into her mouth, hard. He gasped, reaching both hands up to clutch her hair. She stopped immediately, and laid her cheek against his chest.

"Put your hands down," she whispered. "Remember? This is about me pleasuring you."

To bring home her point, she nipped him lightly on the chest with her teeth.

He obeyed.

She resumed her attentions to his nipple, flicking it back and forth with her tongue. He squirmed, and a surge of lust swept through her. She had this powerful man completely under her control. Who would have thought power could be such an aphrodisiac? She allowed one hand to brush against his cock; it leapt in response. Ignoring it, she dropped her hand lower to his scrotum, fondling the loose skin lightly. She took each ball into her hand, weighing it and rolling it about. Here was his seed, the same seed he spewed into her each time they made love.

She wondered what it tasted like.

Without stopping to think, she decided to find out. Dropping her head lower, she came face to face with the long, hard length of his penis. It was enormous—how did it manage to fit into her each time, she wondered? It stretched and filled her like nothing she could have imagined.

Experimentally, she ran her fingers up and down its length, touching only lightly. He shivered. She repeated her actions, squeezing a little this time. Every muscle in his body was tense and hard; she could see his hand forming a fist on the bed beside her. He definitely liked that.

She slowly started pumping her hand up and down the shaft, amazed at how soft and smooth the skin was. But after a few strokes her hand started to stick a bit. She needed lubrication, she thought. Time to lick him.

Starting at the base, she touched him with just the tip of her tongue. There was a large, pulsing vein running the length of his cock. She decided to follow it, tracing the path all the way up to the mushroom-shaped tip at the top. He gave an uncontrolled moan about halfway through her trip up, and his body clenched.

Once again, she paused.

“Remember, don’t move unless I tell you to,” she whispered, laughing throatily.

“I can’t believe you’re the same woman who was so afraid of me,” he gritted out.

“People change,” she said lightly. “Death will do that to you. I’m not going to be afraid anymore. Of anything.”

With that, she lifted her head and engulfed his cock with her mouth, sucking him in as deeply as she could. Impossibly, he grew harder within her mouth. A slightly salty taste filled her mouth.

She moved slowly, bobbing her head up and down as she sucked him. She used her hands to cup his balls, rolling them between her fingers. He was so sensitive down there...

Curious, she allowed her fingers to wander further, brushing the soft skin behind his scrotum. He twitched. Her fingers danced back and forth, intrigued by his response. He tensed, his thigh muscles tightly defined. Another wave of lust hit her. She wanted to fuck him so bad...

Instead, she turned her attention back to his scrotum. *He definitely liked that*, she thought. She pressed a little harder, and his legs opened a bit. He lifted one knee, and she could see the tight, puckered ring of his ass. Amazed by her bravery, she let her fingers touch it. Once, twice. She pressed against it and he cried out.

"Dammit, woman!" he said. "You're going to kill me if you keep this up. I need more. Either suck me harder or fuck me. I can't take this any longer."

She raised her head, licking her lips and smiling at him.

"Say 'please'," she said pertly. He stared in blank confusion. "Say 'please'," she repeated, keeping her tone light. She could see he was on the edge of his control. She didn't want to push too far. But it was fun pressing the limits, seeing whether he would snap. And a small part of her wondered what it would be like if he *did* snap.

"Please," he gritted out, his voice tight. She sat up, and turned to straddle him.

She positioned his cock against the moist slit between her legs, shivering. She lowered her body slowly, bracing her hands against his chest. Each inch stretched her further, and she stopped for a moment, gasping. Her internal muscles clenched him tightly; she concentrated on relaxing and allowing them to loosen up.

Slowly, steadily, she took him into her body. His cock pushed further inside her body than ever before, as if he were spearing through to the back of her throat. Then she hit bottom, moaning deeply. Each breath she took squeezed him. His face twisted, almost pained, and for a brief second she wondered if she were hurting him. Then he gasped, and spoke.

"That's so fucking good, Kalliaras," he said. "It's all worth it. It will all be worth it..."

What did he mean by that? Before she had a chance to ask, he bucked his hips up, seemingly involuntarily, and she cried out. It was so much, he must be at the mouth of her womb. She was going to die...

He gripped her hips firmly in his hands and raised her up the length of his cock, allowing her to fall back down on it. She screamed, and he gasped in agonized pleasure.

For a second, she sat there, willing her flesh to adjust to the sensation. Then she squeezed her muscles, and he groaned. The sound reminded her *she* was in charge. It was up to her to take control, or she might lose it to him.

Bracing herself against his chest, she once again raised and lowered herself experimentally. Beneath her, he gritted his teeth, eyes closed and head thrown back. She loved seeing him this way, completely at her mercy.

She moved up and down more quickly, then one hand slipped and she fell forward against his chest. Her hips, moving in a rhythm of their own, kept going and she made an incredible discovery. In this position, every time she slid up and down her clit rubbed the tight muscles of his groin and stomach.

It was amazing.

Suddenly she found herself moving faster and faster, desperate to see where this new position would take her. Within minutes, her arousal was doubling, tripling. Every nerve in her body cried out for release. She had to have more or she was going to die.

Beads of sweat formed on her forehead as she moved faster and faster. She grunted, feeling his hands sliding up to grip her waist tightly. Every stroke was a mixture of agony and pleasure. She was going to explode.

He was close, too.

She could feel it in the clutch of his fingers, in the tensing of his already-taut body. He wanted her — needed her — in a way that she understood all too well.

Then he lifted himself up slightly, and the hard wall of muscle scraping her clit tightened. She screamed as her orgasm hit, hardly able to breathe. Every fiber of her being went tight, and she clenched him so hard within her body he gasped.

Then he was spasming, too. He bucked and shuddered against her, spraying his seed into her body. They collapsed in each other's arms, sucking air deeply into their lungs. Sabiniano wrapped his arms around her, cradling her and dropping kisses on her hair. She could feel his cock within her, softening. It was so intimate, she wanted to cry.

She had never felt so safe and happy in her life. Either of her lives.

"It was all worth it," she whispered, her voice rough from crying out. "All worth it, just for this moment. I'm so glad I died, Sabiniano. Otherwise I never would have been able to come back to you like this."

He stilled beneath her, and she stiffened. He lifted one finger, touching the golden collar around her throat lightly.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing," he replied, too quickly. She leaned up on her elbows to stare intently into his face.

"You're lying to me, something is wrong."

"No," he replied. He turned his head away from her penetrating gaze.

"Whatever it is, you can tell me," she said quietly. "I have a right to know, I think."

"It's nothing to do with you," he replied. "It's between me and my god."

"Isn't he my god, too, after all this?" she asked quietly. "I've given in. I've become a wanton. I think I rather like it, actually."

"No," he said intensely, turning his gaze back to meet hers. "Dionysus is the god of lust. You follow Aphrodite now. This isn't any kind of ordinary lust, Kalliarra. Believe me, it is much, much more. What we have is far too special to call it Dionysus'."

She stared at him, stunned.

"So you love me, then?"

"Of course," he muttered, shaking his head. "And you love me. We were made for each other. Can't you see that?"

"Yes, I can," she whispered, nestling her head against his shoulder. "But until this moment, I wasn't sure if you could. I thought perhaps this was all just a game to you."

"This is no game, Kalliara," he replied, voice sounding heavy and tired. "I only wish it was..."

Chapter Twelve

Aphrodite spent the first thirty minutes of her imprisonment so angry she could hardly see. She pulled, tugged, kicked and even tried to bite her way through the restraints.

She couldn't budge them.

When that failed, she considered sending a mental message to Cupid, her son. There was nothing Dionysus could do to keep Cupid from rescuing her. But if she did that, it would all be over for Kalliara and Sabiniano. Not to mention the humiliation of trying to explain her situation. Being outsmarted by Dionysus wasn't exactly something she was proud of...

The next half-hour she weighed her options. She had agreed to do anything he asked, without putting any provisions on the deal. That was her first big mistake. She never should have trusted him to behave with the kind of implied decency she expected from other gods and goddesses.

But the deal was done, and she wouldn't let it be said she went back on her word.

Still, there were certain things she wouldn't allow, she decided. No mortals; no third parties at all. Not that she necessarily objected to sex with mortals. She simply didn't trust his judgment and taste. Zeus only knew what kind of monster he might come up with if she didn't make herself clear...

After an hour, resigned to her bargain with him, she grew bored. She stared at the ceiling, willing him to return. It had been centuries since she'd been forced to endure such solitude, such lack of entertainment in one form or another.

That's when she noticed the spider.

It was a small thing, unusually colored with pale spots. It wasn't all that large, and it seemed to be building a web in the drapes in the canopy over Dionysus' bed. She

watched as it went back and forth, each strand placed with careful precision, until the spider suddenly stopped. She got the distinct impression that the little creature had noticed her.

Of course, such a thing was absurd.

But then the spider began lowering itself toward the bed on a thin strand of silk. Closer and closer it came, and to Aphrodite's horror, it appeared as if the thing was going to land on her gown.

She hadn't realized until that moment just how little she cared for spiders.

"Get away from me," she hissed, filled with sudden disgust. How dare this-this *insect* menace a goddess? "I command you to leave me!"

The spider paused, seeming to cock its little spider head at her words. Then it continued its journey, landing on her gown. It crawled slowly up her body, moving toward her face, and she screamed.

Within seconds, Dionysus strode into the room.

"Get it off me, get it off me!" she shrieked. "Kill it!"

He looked at her quizzically.

"What are you talking about?" he asked, apparently unconcerned by her distress.

"This damn spider, it's crawling all over me," she sputtered, all dignity lost. "Get it off of me and kill it right now."

"A spider?" he asked, and for the first time he seemed truly concerned. "Calm down, be still. Tell me where it is!"

She forced herself to hold still. She couldn't see it, but she felt it. It had crawled up her neck. Now the horrible little thing was sitting right on her cheek.

He reached over and carefully allowed the tiny creature to crawl on to his fingers. She moaned in relief, her head rolling back against the pillows. Dionysus was silent. After a moment she grew curious, and turned to watch him. He had lifted the spider up

to his mouth and was whispering to it softly. The look on his face was almost tender; something she'd never seen before. What was going on here?

Then it was over. Dionysus raised his hand and deposited the spider back into the draperies.

"Aren't you going to kill it?" she asked, fascinated by his display of kindness.

"No," he said shortly. His face had taken on that smooth look of cultivated boredom she had some to expect from him.

"Why don't you at least move it away from the bed," she said quickly.

"It won't bother you again," he said, his expression impossible to read. "It lives up there, and I won't remove it from its home just for you. But enough about my spider. We have other business to address."

She watched him calculatingly, trying to fathom his motivations. He met her gaze coolly.

"I won't have sex with anything but you," she said quickly. "I want to make that clear before we start."

He looked amused.

"You must not trust me, dearest goddess," he whispered, leaning in close to her face. His voice dropped to a whisper. "I'm quite sure that you aren't adverse to a good orgy under the right circumstances..."

His hot breath tantalized her ear, and against her will she shivered. He was far too attractive for her peace of mind...

"These aren't the right circumstances," she replied, her voice taut with tension. "I like to choose my partners. I won't have them chosen for me."

"But you do choose me," he said, purring softly. He nipped at her ear with his teeth, and a frisson of pleasure zipped down her spine.

"I choose to save my children," she said.

"Ah, yes," he replied. "The brave martyr. Admit it, Aphrodite. You've always been attracted to me. I represent everything that you aren't; everything that you're secretly fascinated by."

It was hard to focus on his words. Even as he kissed her ear and neck, his fingers slid down the fabric of her gown. It was a wrap-around, bound only at the waist. Far too easily breached, she realized. Already his fingers were cupping her breast. When they fondled her nipple, she gasped.

"I prefer my sex to be bound with emotion," she said, trying to ignore the way he rolled the nipple between two fingers, then tugged gently at it. "I may not love all those I take to my bed, but I certainly care for them," she added on a gasp.

"And what do you feel for me?" he asked in a dulcet voice, bringing his lips around to the hollow of her throat. His tongue flicked out like a snake's, and she moaned.

"I feel disgust for you," she replied, almost incapable of speech. "The way you treat humans and immortals sickens me. You care nothing for them, only for your own perverse pleasures and destruction."

"So you hate me?" he asked. He nuzzled between her breasts, then kissed his way over to one, flicking at the nipple before sucking it into his mouth.

She twisted beneath him, unable to control herself. The feelings he brought out in her were far too strong.

"Yes," she muttered, trying to focus on anything but the feel of his mouth. He raised his lips, and gave her a smile that could have melted a glacier.

"Hatred and love are very closely connected emotions, Aphrodite," he said mockingly. "I find myself enjoying your hatred very much indeed..."

With that, she closed her eyes, unable to look at him any longer. It was a mistake, forcing her to focus instead on the sensations he was building in her body. His lips moved to her other breast, and she could feel his hand brushing the inside of her knee. He slipped it between the fabric of her dress, and slowly worked its way up the soft skin of her inner thigh.

She squirmed, and sensation wound its way through her. This was too much, it was moving so quickly. She usually preferred to spend leisurely hours with her lovers, getting to know them before abandoning herself to their touch. But Dionysus, while moving slowly, was attacking her body with a steady determination that made her feel weak and helpless.

Bastard.

She didn't realize she'd said the word aloud until he lifted his head and gave a mocking laugh. Her eyes snapped open again.

"Yes, I was a bastard," he said. "Zeus came to my mother and took her, much as I plan to take you. You'll scream just like she did before I'm done."

With that, he pressed his thumb against her clit, pushing it gently without moving it. She wiggled, wishing he would get on with it. She wanted to come, and knew instinctively that he was capable of bringing her to an incredible orgasm.

But to do it, he would have to press harder.

Instead, he simply left his thumb there, choosing to lave her breasts with his tongue instead. With every lick she grew more tense, more anxious. What the hell was he doing? Why wasn't he working to arouse her?

"Patience," he whispered. "Remember, if you get too excited you might beg me for release, and then you'll lose our little bet. You wouldn't want that, would you? Especially so early in the game..."

She bared her teeth at him, growling in hatred. He laughed again.

"That's what I like to see," he said. "A little enthusiasm...Now, where were we?"

She refused to answer, closing her eyes instead. It proved a mistake. He touched her lightly, caressing her over her gown. Her breasts were still exposed, but he ignored them. Instead, he brushed up and down her side, grazing the soft swells but never coming close to her nipples.

Then his hand was on her knee, rubbing softly. He trailed up and down her leg, allowing only the lightest of touches across the tops of her thighs. It was maddening. She could feel the tendrils of sensation growing, but he wasn't doing anything.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, he pulled her gown gently apart, and she felt a cool brush of air against her skin.

She waited for him to fall upon her. Of course, he had shown patience this long... But she knew he had to be aroused by the sight of her body. He had wanted her for centuries; she was love incarnate. No man or mortal had ever gazed upon her without wanting to take her. Dionysus was little more than a beast in so many ways. Against her will, she shivered. In the deepest corner of her mind, she admitted to herself that she might rather like being ravaged by a beast...

But his touch didn't come. She waited. Nothing. Finally, unable to control her curiosity, she opened her eyes. He watched her with wry amusement.

"You're lovely, Aphrodite," he drawled. "But hardly so beautiful I can't control myself."

She blushed, angry for allowing him to read her thoughts so easily. She should know better than to take anything for granted with him. He laughed again, then stood and walked around the bed. He went to a case against the wall, and slowly pulled open a drawer.

"What should I do to you?" he asked lightly. "I can't help but wonder if you've ever seen the darker side of love, Aphrodite."

"Lust," she replied tightly. "I believe you're referring to lust. Love doesn't have a dark side."

"I'd argue with that if I didn't have more important things to do right now," he said languidly. "But as it is, I'd rather spend my time playing with your body. It's so hard to decide what to do first..."

"Just get on with it," she said roughly. "These games are driving me crazy."

"Are you begging me?" he asked, his voice low and dark. "Because if you are, we've already finished with our little game, and I've won."

She turned away from him, closing her eyes again. No matter how she responded he would twist her words. She could hear him moving things around in the drawer. There was a heavy thud as he discarded something, then he moved across the room back toward the bed.

He climbed up onto it from the far side of her; she could feel it dipping under his weight. Then she felt the warmth of his body, and she turned her head back to him. As she opened her eyes, he dropped a black, silky cloth over them. She shrieked a protest as he blindfolded her, which he ignored completely. Then he spoke.

"If you don't shut up I may be forced to gag you," he said. "Of course, that would make it harder for you to beg me to make you come, but it might be worth it to stop this racket. You're a goddess. Show some dignity and act like it."

She quieted abruptly. Somehow he made her feel like an unruly child. His self-assurance was unnerving.

He rolled off the bed, and she heard more rustling. Was he removing his clothing? The mattress depressed beneath her again. He was back. Every inch of her body—splayed out before him—felt sensitized. When would he touch her, and where? He was showing far more subtlety than she'd ever realized he was capable of. It was disconcerting.

Then she felt it.

The slightest tickling sensation against her ankle. She kicked out at him, but it was gone. His laugh floated over her.

"Patience," he said in a dulcet voice.

She stilled. Everything she did was playing into his hands.

The tickling touch came again, this time along the outer side of her knee. It lingered there, then stroked over her leg to her inner thigh. Ever so slowly it moved up her leg,

closer and closer to her waiting center. Despite herself, she shivered. The light touch played with her nerve endings, making her want to moan in protest. Or scream. She could feel the moisture building between her legs and knew he could see her arousal.

Disgusting.

Mesmerizing.

Then the touch was gone. A whimper escaped her mouth. It had been so close, her clit had been so ready for it, and now it was gone.

She didn't have long to wait, though.

The light touch—what was it, a feather?—had come back. This time in the valley between her breasts. It followed the curve along the bottom of her left breast, outlining the soft mound and defining its shape. Then it did the same to the right before moving down her stomach.

Both nipples were hard and tight. She could almost feel the feather against them, but it cruelly moved away. They ached to be touched, still swollen from his suckling. The tingles raced from each tip toward her stomach, where the feather was dancing across the soft swell of her abdomen. She twisted slightly. It was too much. If he'd just touch her, ravage her body, she would be able to shut the sensations off.

Dionysus was far too devious for that, though. He was going to drive her mad.

Every touch made her quiver, and as he moved the feather lower toward her waiting clit, she moaned. Against her will, she raised her hips a little, offering her clit to his touch. When it arrived, she moaned again.

It was incredibly light, grazing her most sensitive flesh just enough to let her know it was there.

Just enough to make her want to scream.

He was doing it on purpose, the bastard. He knew what this had to feel like. Each light touch made her quiver. Her hips thrust up once, twice, trying to find something harder. Each time there was nothing...Even the feather disappeared.

Then his tongue flicked across her nipple; every muscle in her body went tight. One of his fingers found her inner thigh, and he laved her breast for the second time that afternoon, his hands moving oh-so-slowly upward toward her wet opening.

After what seemed like hours, he reached her center. She wanted him to push his fingers inside, to press against her clit and make her scream.

Instead, he touched it lightly, then allowed one finger to probe her gently.

Her aroused, dripping cunt offered no resistance.

She whimpered, bucking her hips up and wordlessly begging him to do something about her need. She almost cried out, then bit her lip to stay silent.

He thrust another finger into her body, and then his head lifted from her breast. He lowered it to her clit, sucking the tiny nub into his mouth. She bit down on her lip harder, tasting blood.

His tongue flicked back and forth across her clit, moving fast and then slowing down. Within her body, his fingers probed until he found just the right spot. She shuddered, and he lifted his head.

"I suppose it isn't fair to let you have all the fun," he said, and she felt a surge of triumph. She might be close to going crazy, but he was hardly unaffected himself. She felt him shift on the bed. He knelt between her legs, his muscular thighs pressing hers apart. He lowered himself gently, and she felt the probing of his shaft at cunt. It was huge, hot. The head felt as if it might split her apart.

Magnificent.

Slowly, steadily he pushed into her. He braced himself over her, sparing her his weight, and she whimpered. What would his chest feel like against her nipples? Was his chest hair soft or wiry? She could imagine the steady flexing of his butt, and wished her hands could cup him as he came into her.

Instead, she simply lay there, waiting for him to fill her. He didn't disappoint her. The tip of his cock bumped against her cervix as he bottomed out, and she sighed in

relief. He started moving, each thrust scraping her clit, each stroke filling her completely. Embers of arousal, sparked to life by his evil feather, grew. He moved faster: she whimpered in satisfaction.

Sensation washed over her, building each time he filled her. It was getting harder and harder not to respond openly. Then realization hit her. As long as she didn't *ask* him to make her come, she could respond all she wanted.

There was no reason not to enjoy his "punishment." Dionysus, whatever his character flaws, was a magnificent man. And there *was* love in her actions; love for Kalliaras and Sabiniano. Things were going to be all right.

Allowing herself to let go, she raised her legs and braced them against the bed, thrusting up at him and matching his stroke. He gave a groan, moving faster.

Again and again he came into her. They were silent, their breath coming in gasps, sweat building on their bodies. Aphrodite grew hot from the effort. She was coming closer and closer to orgasm; each stroke against her clit sent the agonizing spiral of arousal just a little bit higher. So close!

Clenching her muscles, she thrust against him like a madwoman. He responded by suddenly grasping her hips and raising her body, even as he rose to his knees. This new position allowed him to pound into her relentlessly, a man possessed. She screamed.

Any second, and her pleasure would wash over her. Just a little bit more...

He abruptly pulled out of her, allowing her lower body to flop to the bed.

She twisted, frustrated and confused.

"What the hell is wrong with you," she gasped. "I'm so close. You have to keep going."

"Beg me," he said, his voice cold.

"No," she gasped, twisting in desire. She tried to clench her legs together, create some kind of friction to end this terrible ache, but his hands were on her ankles.

"Beg me," he said again, his voice a chilling whisper.

"I won't beg," she gritted out, squirming madly.

He reached between her legs, tweaking her clit sharply. It sent a shockwave of need through her, and she cried out. Just as quickly, his touch was gone.

"Beg me," he said a third time. "Or I'll leave you here like this. I'll wait until you've calmed down, and then I'll come back and do the same thing to you again. Over and over and over."

She moaned, and he slapped her hip sharply. The light pain raced through her, and she whimpered. Every nerve was on fire. Every muscle begged for release. She could hardly breathe.

Then his finger tweaked her clit again. She broke, whimpering.

"Please," she cried. "You've got to have pity on me. Make me come. Please, damn you!"

He laughed, and then his lips were covering her clit. He sucked hard, fingering her cunt wildly, and she shattered into a thousand pieces. She screamed so loud they had to hear her all across Olympus. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered except the way he made her feel.

Blessedly, the tension had broken. She lay there, shattered, for ten or fifteen minutes, trying to control the gasping sobs that overtook her with the climax.

He stood. She could hear him moving around the room. Then he was untying her bonds, and lifting the blindfold off. He stepped away, leaving her sprawled on the bed.

She opened her eyes slowly, trying to focus.

"I think that went very well," he said, his voice cool and calm. She turned her head, finding him seated halfway across the room. He lounged in a chair, slowly stroking his still-rampant cock.

"You've won," she whispered, sitting up and rubbing her sore wrists. "Aren't you at least going to finish it now? You haven't come yet."

"Oh, it is finished," he said, still stroking himself lazily. "I find that I've lost interest in our little tryst. I have other things to think about. For example, I need to choose Sabiniano's punishment. And perhaps I'll supervise Kalliaras's execution myself..."

Hatred washed over Aphrodite, and she stood on the bed. She wanted to kill him; she wanted to scream. How had she allowed this to happen? She had failed her children. At that moment, something caught the corner of her eye.

It was that damn spider.

She snatched it off its web, holding it tightly in her hand. Dionysus leapt to his feet, his face white.

"Let her go," he said, his voice tight with strain. She laughed.

"I don't know why the hell you care about this creature," she hissed at him. "But you've hurt my children, and don't like that very much. Bastard. I'm going to kill it. I'm going to squash your stupid spider between my fingers, and wipe its little body right here on your bed. I'm going to enjoy every second of it."

"No," he said, holding up one hand. He started toward her, but she raised her arm.

"Stop, or I'll do it right now," she said. "You can't get over here fast enough to stop me."

He stood there, his face filling with despair. Inspiration struck her.

"How much do you care about this spider?" she asked, her voice as cold and mocking as his had been earlier. "Do you care about it enough to bargain with me?"

He watched her; a muscle in his temple twitched. She crowed in delight.

"You do care enough to bargain," she said in triumph. "You care about a damn spider, don't you? Well, it's going to cost you."

"Let her go and we can talk," he said tightly. His eyes were filled with fury, but they were filled with fear, too. Aphrodite felt a surge of pleasure so strong it was almost sexual.

"You'll give Sabiniano and Kalliaras to me," she said. "You'll give them to me, no strings attached, and I'll let your little spider go."

He nodded tightly.

"Give her to me now," he said. "And I'll let you have them."

"I don't trust you," she replied. "I think I'll just take this thing with me. When Sabiniano and Kalliaras are safely off Naxos and in my care, you'll get her back."

"You can't do that," he said, his voice filling with anguish. "She's very fragile. You could easily hurt her. She needs special food. I can't let her leave my temple."

Aphrodite laughed again, beginning to enjoy herself. How ridiculously amusing, that the mighty Dionysus might be brought low by a spider.

"You should have thought of that before you tried to take my children," she said lightly. Carefully cupping the spider in two hands, she jumped off the bed, still nude. She strode across the room, then nodded purposefully at the door.

"Why don't you open it for me, Dionysus?" she asked politely. "I think it's time for me to go home. You can keep the gown. I no longer associate it with fond memories."

He did as she said, then stood to one side, clenching his fists. She felt a momentary qualm; she was making a powerful enemy. The spider ran around the inside of her cupped hands. *Disgusting creature*, she thought, shivering.

But she didn't drop it, though the temptation was strong.

Instead, she walked through the temple, ignoring the stunned faces of Dionysus' priests.

It was time to go home, and arrange for a boat to go to Naxos.

Kalliaras and Sabiniano were about to start a new life.

Chapter Thirteen

Sabiniano kissed Kalliara lightly, then fed her another piece of sweet citrus fruit. She sighed in satisfaction, flicking her tongue out to catch the juice that rolled down her chin. His finger chased the droplet too, and she licked him. Then he touched her lip; she sucked his finger into her mouth. She was filled with languid pleasure, and for a moment she considered rolling over toward him to do more.

But they had been making love all day. She was exhausted, and she suspected he was as well. He'd been like a man possessed at first, taking her again and again. Then he began to tire. Eventually they'd wound up simply holding each other, connected through their sexes.

It was so intimate that just thinking about it made her want to cry.

Now they were lounging on low couches in a lovely dining room. Nymphs brought them light fruits and meats, as well as crusty bread and wine. Kalliara sighed. It had been such a wonderful day.

"Thank you for today," she said softly, leaning her head against Sabiniano's shoulder. "I can't tell you how much I've enjoyed this time with you. Will every day be as good as this one, do you think? If so, I might die again, only this time of happiness." She laughed a little at her joke, but Sabiniano stayed silent.

"What's wrong?" she asked, reaching up to rub his back gently. He had been quiet all evening, ever since that last time they'd made love.

"Kalliara, there's something I have to tell you," he said finally. He set down the piece of bread he'd been holding and rolled onto his side to face her.

"Dionysus has asked me to do something terrible," he said finally. "And I'm going to refuse to do it. But there are some consequences for you..."

"What?" she asked, concerned. He seemed to be having trouble meeting her gaze.

"He wants me to give you to the Maenads," he said finally. "I'm sorry, but there's no easy way to say it. He wants you dead again, and I'm supposed to do it."

"Why?" she asked, shocked. "He won, didn't he? I abandoned Athena for him! What more does he want?"

"You didn't abandon Athena for him, you left her for Aphrodite. And Dionysus suspects that Athena was a willing conspirator. He wants to hurt her and you're his best tool for doing that right now. But I won't let him."

"What do you mean?" she asked quickly. "How do you plan to stop him? He's a god!"

"I plan to stop him by taking your life tonight," he replied, his face filled with pain. Shock hit her, and she stared at him. He spoke quickly. "It's the best way, Kalliaras. We can't escape him, and if he catches you, your death will be slow and terrible. This way is better. In a few minutes you'll go to sleep, and then I'll remove the collar he used to bring you back to life. I'll take your soul to the underworld myself, and see you reunited with your family. It's the only way."

"What about you?" she asked tightly. "What happens to you when Dionysus finds out? He isn't going to be happy."

He gazed at her, a strange expression on his face.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "I guess I expected a different reaction from you. I just said I'm going to kill you. Do you understand?"

"Well, of course I understand," she said. "But I'm not particularly afraid of dying, Sabiniano. I'm sad, because I don't want to lose you, but I've known this day would come. I'm mortal; I couldn't keep you forever. I just wish I could have kept you a little longer..."

Her voice trailed off. He stayed silent, and she shivered suddenly.

"What's he going to do to you?" she asked again, her tone urgent. "He's going to be terribly angry if you kill me."

"He'll get over it," Sabiniano replied, his voice determined. "Don't worry about that. How are you feeling?"

"A little tired..." she said, swaying in her semi-prone position. She looked around, realizing objects in the room seemed to be swaying with her. The colors were strangely bright, and she laughed. Her voice seemed to be coming from far away. "Did you put something in my food?"

"Yes," he said softly. "I'm sorry, but I wanted it to be as painless as possible. It was in the wine."

"That's the second time your wine has messed me up," she said, giggling. "I don't think I should drink with you any more..."

He nodded, his face sober. He looked so silly and strange like that. And sad. Why was he sad, she wondered? She knew she should probably know the answer.

Oh yes, he was sad because he was going to kill her.

"I won't let you do it," she said abruptly. She swung her feet off the couch and stood, pointing her finger at him threateningly. He jumped up, reaching out to steady her. It was a good thing he did, because she couldn't quite remember how to stay standing up...What had she been thinking? Oh yes...

"I won't let you do it," she said again, her words slurring. "I think you're lying to me. Dionysus is going to be really mad at you; he'll punish you. I don't want that to happen."

"Kalliaras, let's not spend our last few moments together fighting," he said softly. Carefully, he lowered her back to the couch, then sat beside her, cradling her body with his protectively. "May I kiss you one more time?"

"Sure," she said. She turned suddenly; her lips bumped against his. She giggled. Then he was kissing her, exploring her mouth slowly and steadily. She let her tongue meet his, and sank into his arms.

He was wonderful, she thought. Against her will, her eyes closed. Everything was dark, but she felt safe and protected in his arms. Nothing would go wrong. Everything would be fine. Sabiniano was taking care of her now...

Her body went limp in his arms, and a wave of sorrow washed over him.

He would never hear her speak again, never be able to kiss her. She was mortal; death was her destiny. But why did it have to happen now, right after he'd found her?

He hated Dionysus.

Even if the lies he'd told her were true, even if his god would forgive him, there was no way Sabiniano would ever serve Dionysus again. The ties between them were broken.

Lifting her small body into his arms, he walked out into the main hallway of the temple. He ignored his people's curious stares. Nothing they did mattered to him now; they belonged to Dionysus. He stepped out on to the porch where the evening air was cool and crisp. The sun was fading into shadow in the distance. It was time.

He took her back to the meadow where they'd met during the storm. Laying her gently in the grass, he knelt beside her and whispered a prayer to Athena and Aphrodite to guide her spirit.

He reached down and unclasped the golden collar around her throat. Closing his eyes, he prepared himself mentally to leave his physical body and follow her soul to the underworld. Slowly he opened the golden collar and pulled it from her neck.

Nothing happened.

He opened his eyes, confused. Her soul was still present. She was breathing lightly, and when his fingers found her neck, the pulse was strong.

What was going on here? He should have felt the soul leave her body. How was she still alive?

He stood shakily, rubbing one hand through his hair. Something had changed; this was completely beyond his experience. In the distance he could hear the Maenads baying, and panic clutched his heart. He had failed her and now she was going to die at Dionysus' hands.

* * * * *

Aphrodite stood over a delicate table holding a large bowl of water. Next to it was a small glass lamp. Her priestess had removed the candle, creating a prison for Dionysus' repulsive pet spider. It had already built itself a little web inside. Now it sat watching her intently, almost as if it sensed the danger she posed.

She turned her attention back to the bowl, waving her hand over it. An image formed in the water. It was a ship, moving quickly through the water toward Naxos. She looked more closely, seeing the form of her Cretan lover.

He looked happy, clearly thrilled to be captaining his own vessel. She smiled, it had been just one of the parting gifts she'd given him before sending him back to Earth. Now he was going to rescue Sabiniano and Kalliara from Dionysus. Even though thinking of the god was enough to turn her stomach, she couldn't help but feel satisfied.

This time he wasn't going to win.

* * * * *

What the hell was he going to do now?

Kalliara was most definitely alive, despite the fact that her collar was gone.

A part of his heart sang. He didn't want to lose her. Yet he knew her death at Dionysus' hands would be terrible. He could kill her another way. His hands were powerful and strong. With one quick twist, he could break her neck.

As soon as the thought entered his head he dismissed it. He couldn't kill her like that. There had to be some reason she hadn't died when the collar was removed. If he could figure it out he might be able to figure out how to save her.

And if he couldn't figure it out, he would fight Dionysus to protect her. He would lose, of course. Their battle would unleash cataclysmic forces on the island. He spared a thought for the humans in the village and his people, the nymphs and satyrs. Could he really allow them to suffer in the resulting destruction? There was no easy answer...

Laying down beside Kalliara, he pulled her into his arms, savoring the warmth and beauty of her touch. She smelled so good. Clean and fresh. Beautiful...His lover, and he wasn't even able to protect her.

He had failed.

He closed his eyes, allowing his mind to wander...What would it have been like if they could have lived together? He would have lost her eventually. But they could have loved each other for a lifetime first. They could have had children together; long-lived half-humans blessed by the gods.

When she died of old age, he would have watched over those children, and all the generations to come. They would be loved, happy, successful. And when they died, they would join her in the underworld. He and Kalliara would always share that connection...

The night grew cooler, and the moon rose slowly over the island. He stretched out his senses, feeling for his father's presence.

Nothing.

The humans were in their homes. The nymphs and satyrs were quiet as well, despite the fact that they were in the midst of the festival. Normally the woods would be ringing with their laughter. They would be drinking, dancing, worshiping the god in a thousand small ways. Instead, they were cowering; afraid of him and what he would do next.

His entire world had turned upside down.

He opened his eyes and stared up at the stars. The sight startled him; they were so bright. The moon had set while he lay there, listening to the rhythms of the island. How much longer did he have? He had expected Dionysus at sunset. His father must be playing some new kind of twisted game with them, he thought.

The stars formed a river across the sky; how many of them were immortals like himself? He'd heard that when an immortal had so tired of life that they couldn't stand the world any longer, Zeus would occasionally set them up in the skies. He had always assumed he'd end up there, too.

Kalliara stirred next to him, mumbling in her sleep. He turned her in the crook of his arm, leaning over to kiss her. She sighed softly, then stilled. He'd never dreamed she'd live to see the morning, and yet here she was. What would the new day hold for them?

Half an hour later she stirred again. This time her eyes opened.

"What happened?" she asked softly. "I remember falling asleep over dinner...and something else."

She seemed lost in thought for a moment, and then her face went blank.

She sat up abruptly. He sat up too.

"*You bastard!*" she growled, then punched him in the face. Hard.

"What was that for?"

"For drugging me," she said coldly. "And deciding to kill me without even talking to me first. Don't you think I deserved to have a say in this little drama? You've got a lot of nerve."

He burst out laughing, filled with such joy to hear her voice that his heart wanted to burst. What a gift it was to be with the one you love, even if she was angry!

"Didn't it occur to you that maybe I didn't want to die that way?" she asked tightly. "What right did you have to make a decision like that? I'm an adult. I'm capable of determining my own fate. I thought we'd already covered this..."

"I was trying to save you pain," he said finally, rubbing his chin where she'd punched him.

"Sabiniano, look at me," she said quietly, her face serious. "And listen to what I have to say. Have you ever died? I didn't think so. I have. I know what I'm getting into. I should have been the one to make the decision. Did you even think, for one minute, that it might make far more sense to let Dionysus kill me? Being torn apart by Maenads is a horrible death, but it is relatively quick.

"Besides that," she added. "Once I'm gone, you'll be safe. A few minutes of pain for your safety is worth it to me. I love you, and I have the right to protect you."

"Then I have the right to protect you," he said. "And that's what I was trying to do."

She fell silent, thinking over what he said. A startled look came across her face, and she raised her hand to her neck.

"Where's the collar?" she asked. "You took it off, didn't you?"

He nodded.

"Then what happened?" she continued. "How is it that I'm still alive? Was Dionysus lying about the collar all along? Why would he do something like that?"

"No, he wasn't lying," Sabiniano said, sighing heavily. "You aren't the first mortal to be brought back from the dead like this. It's unusual, but it happens. And there's always a collar involved. I have no idea why you're still alive—or why Dionysus hasn't come for us, for that matter."

"It's almost morning," she said, looking to the eastern sky. He followed her gaze. The sun was still below the horizon, but a light glow touched the sky. The clouds were slowly turning a light peach color and in the distance, birds were starting to sing. She was right. Another day was beginning.

"So what now?" she asked. "I didn't die. Dionysus didn't come. What do we do now, just go back to the temple and wait for him?"

"No," Sabiniano said suddenly. He gazed into her face intently, a smile stealing across his face. "No, we don't go back. I don't know why things have happened this way, but we've been given a little more time. Let's see what we can do with it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Dionysus has spared us," Sabiniano said. "I've never known that to happen; he isn't a merciful creature. There's no place on earth he can't follow us if he chooses, but maybe he won't if he doesn't have to look at us. I think we should leave the island."

"I've never been off Naxos," she said, her voice suddenly growing faint.

He burst out laughing. "You've been to the underworld," he replied lightly. "I can't imagine that doesn't count as 'off Naxos'."

She gave him a dirty look, then started giggling.

"You're right," she said. "We don't have anything to lose. Of course, he might still get us..."

Sabiniano let himself fall back into the grass, folding his hands behind his head.

"Maybe he won't," he said after a long pause. "If we really wanted us, why didn't he take us last night? You're right; he might still hunt us down. But maybe he's decided to let us go for some reason. If so, we should get off the island before he gets angry again. He's not known for being constant in his emotions..."

"All right," she said suddenly. "We'll do it, we'll try to escape. But you have to promise me something. If he comes after us, you'll give me to him. And you'll ask him to forgive you. I won't allow you to sacrifice yourself for me."

"No," he said. "I won't do that."

"Then I'll just go up to the temple and wait for him," she replied lightly. "I'll be damned if I'll let you do this to yourself."

He ignored her, and she fell silent. The sun had risen high enough that a dim glow had come over the meadow. There was a rustling noise, and a deer bounded across the grass.

Finally, she spoke.

"I'm going to the temple now," she said. She stood, then suddenly shouted out to the sky. "Did you hear me, you nasty stupid god? Come and get me! I've had enough of your shit for both lifetimes! Come down here —"

Sabiniano abruptly leapt to his feet, tackling her and rolling her beneath him. One hand covered her mouth; he could feel cold sweat on the back of his neck.

"Are you insane?" he hissed. "What the hell are you doing? Don't you realize how foolish it is to challenge a god? Especially Dionysus?"

She bit his fingers, and he jerked them away from her mouth.

"Of course I know how foolish it is," she replied tightly. "It's almost as foolish as sacrificing yourself for a lost cause. Promise me you'll let me go if he comes after us."

He stayed silent, and she drew in a deep breath, then shouted, "Di —"

He cut her off, then closed his eyes, defeated.

"I promise," he said, lifting his hand from her mouth for the second time. "If he comes after us, I won't stand against him."

"You'll hand me over, and then you'll tell him you're sorry," she said firmly. "If things go wrong, I want to know you aren't suffering. I won't be, you know. I'll be with my family."

"Yes, I will."

"Then let's see if we can leave," she said quietly. "I don't think there are any ships in the village large enough to take us to another island, though," she added. "Can we just fly, or something? How do you go up to Olympus? Can we go like that?"

A harsh bark of laughter escaped him.

"Not likely," he said. "When I go to Olympus, I call down my father's chariot to take me. Something tells me that isn't a very good idea right now."

She giggled.

"I suppose not. So what now? The village?"

"I guess so," he said. They stood slowly, and she turned away from him, stretching like a cat. The absurdity of their situation struck him. For the first time in his centuries of life, he had no idea what he was going to do with himself. From birth, he had been fated to serve his father. Suddenly that fate had changed, and it was all due to her, his little human...

He pulled her into his arms, kissing her deeply on the mouth. She gave a startled gasp, then wrapped both arms tightly around his neck. Their bodies twisted against each other, and he felt the familiar fire of arousal in his loins.

She pulled her mouth away from his, then whispered, "I realize we should probably get going, but do you think it would really hurt anything if we took a little time for ourselves? I love you so much, and I want to be close to you..."

"I don't think it would hurt anything at all," he replied softly. He slid his hands down her body, cupping her butt lightly. She shivered, then jumped up and wrapped her legs around his waist. He cradled her, pulling her tightly against his pelvis. Already he was growing hard, and as foolish as it seemed to stay in the meadow, he couldn't have let her go if he wanted.

Instead, they kissed each other more deeply, and he slowly lowered them to the ground. Then he was sitting on his knees and she was straddling him. The sensation was almost too much to bear.

"How was I lucky enough to find you?" he asked softly.

She smiled, and replied, "I don't know. It's amazing that we could live so close to each other for so many years, and never meet. If it hadn't been for a chance remark overheard by a nymph, we never would have. I find that unbearably sad, in a way."

She pressed her lips against his again, cutting off any response he might have made. After a few moments of intense kissing, she pulled away, and raised herself up.

With his help, she pulled up her gown, and he pulled up his long tunic. Then she was sinking down on his erection, taking his hard cock into her a body with an ease that amazed him. Where once she had been so tight, it was now as if she shaped herself to

his size exactly. He thrust up at her, but she placed a finger against his mouth, as if telling him to slow down...

"We do this so fast, usually," she said. "It's always so urgent, as if we've known somewhere in our hearts that our time together would be short. I don't want to live like that any more. Maybe our time will be short, but that doesn't mean we have to rush through every moment. Let's just savor what we have right now..."

So they sat there, connected in the most intimate way possible, simply holding each other. Eventually, she shifted, and started squeezing him with her internal muscles. It was a slow, steady massage, and he let himself simply enjoy the arousal building in his body. Eventually, what had started as a comforting massage became an agonizing torture. The urge to throw her down, to thrust into her and take her, was strong.

His desire to savor the moment was stronger, however. Finally, he spoke.

"Every day from now on is a gift, something I never thought we'd have."

"Yes," she replied, stilling. She rested her head against his chest, and he felt a trickle of moisture. She was crying.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I'm just thinking about how happy I am."

"Why does being happy make you cry?" he asked, confused. She laughed, and reached up to cradle his face in her hands.

"I doubt you'll ever understand," she said. "Just believe me, I'm happy."

She kissed him again, squeezing his cock within her body, making him shiver.

"I don't think I can keep this up to much longer," he said. "I want to take you now."

She nodded, kissing him again. "I think I'd like that. It can be our way of saying goodbye to the island."

Leaning forward, he pressed her down into the grass, and starting moving in and out of her with strong, smooth strokes. She was hot and slippery beneath him, and

every time she engulfed his hard length it felt like coming home. Nothing could be more right than this moment.

Eventually, their movements grew more frantic, and she whimpered against his shoulder. He increased his pace. She was close, and if he worked her just the right way she would come right before he did. Her body would clench and massage his, kneading him until he exploded with his own pleasure.

Almost there. Again and again he plunged into her. She whimpered each time, and clutched his shoulders tightly, digging nail marks into his back. The light pain was good; it helped him keep focused on his task. He wanted it to be perfect for her, as perfect as she'd always been for him.

Finally, just as he was starting to wonder if he'd be able to hold out, she came. It started with a moan, then shivers and chills wracked her entire body. Her legs clutched his waist like a vise even as she squeezed him powerfully inside.

It was enough to send him over the edge.

Moaning, he shot his seed into her body. Every muscle, every nerve ending, every bit of his being tightened.

"I love you," he whispered as he slowly collapsed, barely able to brace himself and keep from crushing her. She nodded her head in response, too weak to speak.

It had definitely been worth it, he thought. Leaving his home, risking Dionysus' wrath. Perhaps even an eternity of torture.

Kalliara was worth it all.

* * * * *

It was another hour before they reached the village, arriving just as a ship came into the harbor. It was large and sturdy, and its Cretan captain was more than happy to take them on as passengers.

He wouldn't accept payment, although Sabiniano tried to give him some gold coins in exchange for their passage. Instead, the man simply smiled and said he was doing a favor for an old friend.

Within an hour, the ship left Naxos. The first few days Kalliara kept expecting Dionysus to hunt them down. But in the end she was able to relax, and accept the fact that somehow, despite all odds, they were free.

They never saw Dionysus again.

Epilogue

Dionysus watched from a balcony in his son's temple as the ship's mast disappeared over the horizon. They were gone. It was time to get his spider back from the bitch who had taken her.

He never paused to think why he wanted the spider so badly. He just did. There was something so terrifying, so horrible, about the thought of her delicate little frame being at someone else's mercy. Turning away from the balcony, he strode through the temple to his waiting chariot, ignoring the frightened nymphs and satyrs. With some distaste, he realized he would have to find a new ruler for Naxos.

Perhaps he should come down and rule here himself, he thought darkly. If he couldn't trust his own son with the job, who could he trust?

Only himself.

And the spider. The little creature had been his constant companion for decades. Even as he fucked and sucked and drank his way through life, she watched and spun her webs above him. He had studied her work countless nights, and the beauty of her creations never ceased to amaze him. She should have died long ago, but he fed her ambrosia—diluted, of course—and it sustained her. The very thought of losing her was too much to bear. He shook his head, forcing the thought away.

His chariot waited outside the temple. Sabiniano was gone; there was no point in thinking about him any further.

It was time to go and get his spider back.

About the Author

Joanna Wylde is a freelance writer who worked as both a journalist and a fundraiser before finding her niche in erotic romance. In April 2002, *The Price of Pleasure* was released as an ebook and quickly found a receptive audience. Jo is married and lives in north Idaho with her husband, David.

Joanna welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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