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The Song of Orpheus

By Selena Kitt

For the only man who is my god and makes my heart sing.

Chapter One

“If you spend any more time in there, you’re going to turn into a mermaid!”

Eurydice lifted her dark head from where she was reclining in the water, seeing the centaur pawing at the edge of her stream. “Chiron!” Her eyes widened in surprise and delight. She grinned. “Nymphs aren’t mermaids, horse-boy. You just want to turn everyone half-breed, don’t you?”

The centaur snorted, sounding very horse-like in spite of his human torso. “Not if they all turn out like my brothers. I swear I’m the only civilized one in the lot.”

Eurydice stood, twisting the water out of her long, dark hair, and saw Chiron’s eyes moving over her nude form appreciatively. She smiled at him as she stepped out, patting his chestnut flank as she reached for her wrap. It was the standard Greek dress for women, a long, thin strip of material she wound about her body in an intricate way. It clung to her curves. “You certainly are the best of them. What are you doing here, anyway?”

His dark eyes moved over her body before she finished pulling the material around her and closing it without any fasteners. He cleared his throat, running a hand through his long, dark hair. “Apollo insisted I come for the whole ‘Find Aristaeus a Wife’ shindig, since I was apparently responsible for his birth, or some such rot.”

“Hazards of being an oracle, huh?” Eurydice’s hand moved over the horse’s back, feeling the strong muscles there. “Didn’t you introduce Apollo to Aristaeus’ mother?”

“Not exactly. I think the exact prophecy, as I recall, was Apollo would take the nymph, Cyrene, to Libya, where she would bear him a son, named Aristaeus—he who

would become revered among men for his skills with the land and the animals.” Chiron shrugged, looking over his broad shoulder at her. “Eurydice, dear, if you don’t stop petting me like that, my baser natures may just take over.”

“Sorry.” She dropped her hand with a blush. “It’s just such a nice, shiny coat.”

“And you are a glistening star.” His rump swung around as he faced her, stunningly human completely from the waist up. “You know how I have a thing for nymphs.”

“Nymphs are nigh irresistible when we want to be.” She cleared her throat and changed the subject. “So this nymph, Cyrene—how could she travel so far from her domain?”

He gave her a sad look. “She was a Nereid, not a Naiad, like you, my dear.”

“Oh.” Eurydice’s hopeful eyes dropped, and she sat on the bank of the stream with a sigh. “So basically, as long as she was near the sea, she could travel anywhere she wanted?”

“Yes.”

“But I’m stuck here by this little creek.” She sighed, kicking at the water with her foot.

“You love your stream.”

“Yes, well...sometimes I think it does not love me.”

Chiron’s tail swished. “I’m sure there are many men—or half-men—who might settle with you here beside your waters.”

“Oh Chiron...” She reached up and patted his flank. “I love you like a brother, you know that.”

“Well, my dear, there will be plenty of men to choose from at Apollo’s son-worshipping.” He snorted at his own pun and she smiled, shaking her head. “Won’t you at least accompany me? So few give me as much pleasure with their very company as you do.”

She laughed; standing and stretching. “With all the honey you spread with your words, I’m surprised you haven’t attracted more than just flies, horse-boy!”

He grinned. “Wanna go for a ride?”

“I thought you’d never ask!” She eyed his back, long and sleek. Placing her bare foot in the stirrup he made with his hands, she swung her leg over his flank, arranging her robe and settling herself on his back.

“Love that little wiggle.” He glanced over his shoulder and waggled his eyebrows at her.

“You’re so bad!” She slapped him near the tail with her hand and his eyes widened.

“Watch it—I like that too much.”

She laughed, wrapping her arms around his waist, feeling the hard ridges of muscle in his belly as he began to trot across the stream, carrying her with him. He was a fine specimen, really, of man and equine, and while he’d made it known on several occasions he would settle by the stream with her, she doubted he could do so for long.

There was too much in him that loved liberty and the freedom of roaming. He was, by no means, the wild half-breeds his brothers had proved themselves to be—but Chiron had an undeniable love for adventure, and Eurydice couldn’t roam any further

than her stream itself did. Roaming too far from home would force her to wither and die, like a grape left off the vine in the sun.

However, a secret longing burned in her belly, and it wasn't for Chiron. It wasn't for any man she had ever met, but she just knew she would know him when she found him. She yearned to find the man she would be willing to follow, regardless of her circumstances. He existed, somewhere, she was sure of it—the man she would sacrifice everything for.

Eurydice saw something out of the corner of her eye and squeezed her thighs around Chiron's sides. He gave a distinctly whinny-like sound. "Hey!"

"I think I just saw Melina!" She urged him left, and he cantered that way, towards a clearing. Sure enough, her friend was standing in the field, her arms held up to the sky. "Wait, Chiron!" Eurydice grabbed his long, dark hair as if it were a mane, pulling back and he slowed, shaking his head and glancing over his shoulder at her.

"What was that for?"

"She's taming the bees."

"She's what?"

Eurydice dismounted, sliding to the ground. "Stay here for a moment. You'll see." She approached her friend quietly, her bare feet making no sound on the soft grass. Melina covered with a carpet of bees, the softly buzzing insects crawling over her skin from head to toe. When she had first seen Melina performing this trick a few years ago, Eurydice had panicked, running forward and waving her arms wildly, trying to make the bees scatter. She winced at the memory. She had caused her new friend several

unnecessary stings that day—but Melina had taken it in stride, and they had spent a nice afternoon doctoring her wounds and chatting in Melina’s little cottage.

“Melina?” Eurydice called softly, still keeping her distance. The woman’s eyes opened and she stared out at her friend from two blue eyes lost in a moving blanket of insects. Eurydice thought she caught the hint of her smile, and then Melina started to spin. It began slowly, her bare feet shuffling on the grass, her steps minute and perfected. The insects started to rise, a few at a time, then in larger numbers as she turned faster, her arms thrown out to her sides. Soon she was spinning like a top, her blonde hair revealed now and whirling around her face in a cloud as the bees took flight, going off again on their daily business.

Chiron came up behind Eurydice, pawing the ground. “That’s impressive!”

“She does it every day.” Eurydice shook her head, her smile bemused. “Melina, this is Chiron, the centaur. Chiron, this is my friend, Melina.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance.” Chiron bent one jointed leg and bowed his head briefly. “May I ask...what is the purpose of that daily death-defying stunt?”

“I’m just keeping them happy.” Melina smiled from where she had collapsed on the ground, still gently shaking her head free from a bee or two. They buzzed gently around her face, but she showed no sign of fear. In fact, they seemed to kiss her cheek before taking flight again with their brothers and sisters. “Angry bees don’t produce good honey. Happy bees are good workers. They love being seen for the magical beings they are.”

“Is that so?”

“Chiron is taking me over to a festival Apollo is having for his son.” Eurydice held a hand out to her friend. “Do you want to come with us?” Melina took the outstretched hand, looking askance at the half-man, half-horse. “Do I have to ride?”

“You’ll let bees crawl all over you, but you’re afraid of horses?” Eurydice laughed.

“It’s not the horse ride itself...” Melina shrugged, giving Chiron an apologetic smile. “I’m more afraid of the falling off.”

“I’ll go slowly.” He winked, making his hands into a stirrup again. Eurydice helped Melina mount first then swung herself up behind her, putting her arms around the other woman’s waist.

“You said you’d go slowly!” Melina squealed and grasped Chiron tightly around the middle as he galloped over the field. She buried her face in his back, and he rumbled laughter as he leapt nimbly across a small stream.

“But then I wouldn’t have two beautiful women clinging to me, would I?” Chiron slowed, grinning back at them with a wink.

Eurydice smacked his rear. “You are bad!”

“It’s part of my nature.” He shrugged, but his smile never faded. “And we can’t help our natures can we?”

Eurydice sighed, thinking of her attachment to her stream. “I suppose so.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Melina dared to peek around Chiron’s broad back to see where they were going. “I think people can change.”

“Spoken like a true mortal!” Chiron laughed; the sound rumbling through him. Eurydice could feel it between her thighs.

“Come on, horsie.” She squeezed her legs around him, digging her knees in.
“Play nice.”

Chiron slowed to a walk. “We’re almost there. Look ahead.”

“That wasn’t far at all.” Eurydice tried to see around both Melina and Chiron, leaning far out to the side. “Oh my goodness! You weren’t kidding about Apollo going all-out, were you?”

There were tents set up everywhere in the clearing across this stretch of Eurydice’s winding stream, and she noticed a fine new cottage built up on the hill. So that’s what all the racket has been the past few months. It made sense now. Eurydice had spent most of the summer helping Melina nurse her sick father, who had passed away just a month before. A mortal’s life certainly was distracting—it was something she truly enjoyed about being friends with Melina, even when there was inevitable mortal pain involved in the process. It took her mind off her own lonely existence.

Chiron made a decidedly horse-like snort as he started up the hill, passing tents set up along the way. “Everyone knows Apollo favors him amongst all his sons.”

“Why?” Melina nudged Eurydice, pointing to a juggler.

“Who knows?” The centaur shrugged his big shoulders. “Probably because he favors the man’s mother?”

“Cyrene...” Eurydice sighed, lamenting her own limited freedom, compared to that of the Naiad. “Well, we nymphs do have an effect, even on the gods...”

“You could have any man you wanted, Eurie.” Melina smiled back at her friend and squeezed her thigh. “You’re just too damned picky.”

“I am?” Eurydice frowned, running a hand through her still-damp dark hair. She never took care with her appearance, but she never really had to. Melina was right—many a man and even a few gods had asked for her, but none had been...quite right. *Maybe I am too picky.*

“Rightfully so, dearest.” Melina patted Eurydice’s hand wrapped around her waist. “Whoever he is, he’s worth the wait. And so are you.”

Eurydice fondly kissed the top of her friend’s blonde head, giving her a squeeze. “You are too precious.”

“Oh look!” Melina seemed to forget her fear of falling as she pointed around the centaur’s back. “Honey!”

“Oh for Zeus’ sake!” Eurydice laughed. “Don’t you get enough of your own?”

“Please!” Melina wiggled on the centaur’s back, grasping his shoulders hard enough to make him near-whinny. “Stop! I want to see!”

Eurydice dismounted so she could help Melina down and the women stopped at the booth, watching the man’s bent, blonde head as he uncapped the waxy honeycomb with a knife and began pouring it slowly into a jar. He didn’t seem to notice the two of them at all. Bees hovered around him, crawling on his hands and arms, and he didn’t seem to notice them either.

When he finished, he looked up and smiled, slipping the comb back and capping the jar. “Would either of you sweet ladies like to taste the honey of the gods?”

Melina nodded, stepping forward. “I keep my own.”

“Do you?” The blonde man stood, gently waving the few bees around him away as he put the jar on the counter of the booth. “Well, I’d gather you haven’t tasted anything as sweet as this.”

Eurydice smiled. “Somehow I doubt anyone could compete with Melina when it comes to sweetness.” The man raised an arched, light-colored eyebrow at her, his eyes sweeping down her curvaceous form, but he didn’t reply.

“Are we talking about honey?” Chiron chuckled, reaching for the jar. He opened it, dipping his finger in, and tasting. He pronounced it, “Sweet!”

“Let me see.” Melina rolled her eyes, sliding her finger around the edge and gathering some of the sticky, golden fluid. She sucked thoughtfully, her eyes closed, and Eurydice tried hard not to laugh. She knew Melina took her bees and her honey very seriously.

“Here.” The man behind the counter took another jar out and opened the lid, dipping his finger into the stickiness and holding it out to Eurydice. She hesitated, seeing his eyes dip lower again over her body as he held out the treat for her to taste. “I won’t bite.”

“What if I do?” Eurydice winked and Chiron laughed as she leaned forward to lick the honey from his fingertip. She used just the tip of her tongue, catching a slow drip, and the man watched her, his eyes dark.

“Trust me, I’ve been stung by worse than you.” The man smiled, sucking the residue off his finger as he watched Eurydice lick her lips. “Although I doubt I’d mind your bite.” He winked at her. “What do you think?”

She knew the look in his eyes well and backed away a little, smiling politely. "It's very sweet, thank you."

"Angry bees don't produce good honey." Melina opened her eyes, frowning. "Your bees are not happy, sir."

He stared at her, mouth agape. "Pardon me?"

The little blonde woman shrugged, crossing her arms, still frowning at him. "Your honey is sweet, but it has a strange aftertaste that tells me your bees are not completely happy in their work."

The man laughed. "You cannot possibly tell that from tasting my honey."

"Actually..." Eurydice smiled at her friend. "She can. She's a bee-tamer."

Chiron chuckled, as if he were enjoying some joke, looking at the stunned face of the man behind the counter, who kept opening his mouth as if he wanted to say something then closing it again. To Eurydice, he looked like a landed fish.

"And I am Aristaeus, the God of Husbandry!" The blonde man sputtered and Chiron laughed out loud then, looking delighted. "And...beekeeping, I might add."

"Demi-god," Chiron reminded him.

"Had to point that out, didn't you?" Eurydice nudged him. "You and half-breeds."

"I don't care if you're the God of Everything." Melina shrugged. "Your bees are not as happy as they could be."

Aristaeus looked to Chiron, his eyes wide. "Insufferable!"

"But true." Chiron grinned. "Trust an oracle when he tells you...the mortal is correct."

“Not possible!” Aristaeus picked up the jar, opening the lid to taste the honey again. “My bees and my honey are the best in the land!”

“You should taste mine.” Melina smiled up at him, looking proud. “I live down the way, and my bees, I assure you, are much happier creatures than these, and my honey so much sweeter, with no aftertaste.”

“Have you tasted this honey?” Aristaeus glared at Chiron.

The half-man shrugged. “No. But remember, I know things.”

“I’ve tasted it.” Eurydice looked between the two of them, Melina and Aristaeus, her eyes bright. “But I don’t know that I could judge. Perhaps you really should visit to taste for yourself, sir?”

“Call me Ari.” His eyes fell on Eurydice again and he smiled. “I will take you up on your offer, then, if you would accompany me, lady...what is your name?”

“Eurydice.” She hesitated, looking back at her friend. The glow in the woman’s eyes was unmistakable. “And this is my friend, Melina.”

Aristaeus nodded politely at the blonde woman. “Yes, the mortal whose honey is better than a god’s!”

“When would you like to visit?” Eurydice grabbed her friend’s hand, squeezing hard as Melina opened her mouth to speak.

“Well, I have this show I have to attend today...” Aristaeus sighed, waving his hand toward a large stage set up at the end of the row of tents. “My brother insists I be there. This whole thing makes me want to spend the rest of my life in seclusion, I swear.”

“They’ll all be gone soon enough, and you can have your peace.” Chiron glanced toward the stage as well, where performers were setting things up. “Let Apollo have his celebration.”

“That’s all well and good.” Aristaeus shrugged, coming out from behind the booth to join them. “I wouldn’t mind, really, if it wasn’t for the choosing.”

“The choosing?” Melina’s freckled nose wrinkled at she frowned at him.

He sighed. “My father has gathered all of the Muses together to choose me a bride.”

“Is that so?” Eurydice glanced over at Chiron. “And you will follow their suggestion?”

He sighed again. “I have agreed to do so...although, I am afraid to trust nine women, Muses or no, with the fate of my future love life.”

Chiron chuckled and shook his dark head. “You are right to be hesitant. I don’t know I would allow such.”

“Great.” Aristaeus groaned. “Now I’ve got an oracle telling me it’s not a good idea. You try telling my father no. It’s not such an easy task.”

“Not easy maybe.” Melina spoke up. “But surely not impossible.”

Aristaeus raised an eyebrow in her direction. “Is your father the God of the Sun?”

“No.” Melina smiled. “Although sometimes I think he thought he was.”

Eurydice laughed, remembering the woman’s cantankerous father. “That’s the truth.”

“It’s a little different for me.” Aristaeus’ face softened when he looked at Eurydice. “That’s all I’m saying.”

"I don't see why." Melina blinked at him.

Eurydice tried to change the subject. "So what is this show you have to attend?"

"My brother, Orpheus, has orchestrated it." Aristaeus waved towards the stage.

"It starts in about a twelfth of the sundial." He brightened, looking at Eurydice. "Would you like to accompany me?"

"I think we'd all be happy to." Eurydice patted Chiron's flank and smiled at Melina. Her friend's eyes were brighter than she'd seen them since her father's death, and Eurydice wanted to keep them that way.

"Can we look around first?" Melina nudged Eurydice and pointed to a row of booths across the field. "I want to see the artisans."

"Of course." Aristaeus nodded toward the stage. "Shall we meet back here in a twelfth?"

Eurydice smiled at him. "And tomorrow, you will come taste Melina's honey?"

"Are we sure we're still talking about honey?" Chiron snorted, starting to follow Melina as she wandered toward the colorful booth.

Aristaeus gave her a bow. "If you will be there, lady, so will I."

"Good." Eurydice hurried to catch up to her friends.

"Why didn't you tell me he was Aristaeus?" Melina's voice awed; her eyes wide as she glanced over her shoulder at him. "He's the God of Beekeeping!"

"Demi-god," Chiron corrected as he fell in step between the two women.

"So this Orpheus and Aristaeus are brothers?" Eurydice stopped to look at a colorful silk wrap, almost as blue as the water in her stream.

"Half." Chiron watched her finger the material. "That's your color, you know."

She stuck her tongue out at him. "You and halves!"

"He's the God of Beekeeping!" Melina repeated as if they hadn't heard, her voice rising enough to make Eurydice shush her.

"God-struck?" Chiron chuckled.

"Bee-stung is more like it." Eurydice shook her head, knowing the look on her friend's face well. Melina was falling head over heels for the demi-god, and it was about time too. She had turned down enough suitors in the past year as her father became more and more ill. Now it was time for her friend to have a little happiness, and that made Eurydice happy too.

"So, do you think I should buy this?" Eurydice pulled the cloth from the ring, wrapping the silk around her shoulders.

"Only if you want to attract bees." Melina smiled, giving her friend a wink and Chiron laughed.

"Very funny." Eurydice contemplated the purchase for a moment, rubbing the softness of the material against her cheek.

And then she heard him.

"Eurie?" Melina's voice sounded far away as Eurydice turned toward the incredible sound.

She had never heard anything like it before, and her body seemed to move on its own, the forgotten silken blue fabric trailing behind her like a stream. She had to find the source of the voice, the one that called her like nothing else ever had. The merchant shouted after her, and she only vaguely heard him. Even Chiron's voice didn't register.

She only heard the voice of one man, raised in incredible song—the man she had been waiting for since the beginning of her world.

Chapter Two

The light, fast sound of the kithara's strings being plucked made Eurydice's heart sing, but it was the low, deep tone of the voice which accompanied it that pulled her body forward, making her hips sway as she walked, trance-like, toward the sound. The man sat on the edge of a stage with the instrument between his knees, the seven strings vibrating again and again at the touch of his deft fingers. His throat worked as he sang, his face lifted to the sky. Her eyes moved over the thick, dark curls on his head, the chiseled chin and jaw, his half-bared chest under the chiton robe that came down to the middle of his strong, brown thighs. This could be no ordinary man—he had to be a god—the way he moved, the way he sang.

Eurydice's body swayed without her even knowing it. Her own eyes closed as she danced, as if he held her body as the instrument in his hands, playing her, making her hum and vibrate under his fingers. She moved to the sweet, lyrical sounds, slowly at first then faster as the tempo increased. The song spoke of love, the heat of passion, and the spark of attraction between lovers. She felt the words rush through her body as she whirled to the music, the blue fabric in her hands following like the wind come alive around her.

“Eurie!” Melina caught up to her friend, out of breath. “The merchant wants his—”

The music stopped and Eurydice, now breathless as well, looked at the man on the stage. His dark eyes burned into hers as the blue silk fluttered down over her shoulders and came to a gentle rest, the remnants of the song still humming between them in the air. She felt something tighten in her belly when their eyes locked, and she found herself unable to look away.

“Worry not. I paid for it.” Chiron stepped in behind them, his eyes moving over the nymph draped in blue silk. “If only so I might have a chance to see you dance with it again, Eurydice. That was...”

“Breathtaking.” The man with the kithara agreed, glancing at the centaur. “How are you, Chiron?”

“Well.” The centaur smiled. “And you, Orpheus? The show ready to go on?”

“Ready enough.” Orpheus set his kithara aside, his eyes finding Eurydice again. “Although, if I could persuade the beautiful nymph Eurydice to dance for us again, I believe no one would even hear any wrong notes I might play.” She flushed at the sound of her name on his lips, and the thought of him watching her spontaneous performance. “Might I have a formal introduction?”

“Of course.” Chiron turned to Melina with a knowing smile. “This delectable mortal is Melina, and this, as you heard, is the irresistible nymph Eurydice.”

Orpheus’ mouth smiled at Melina, but his eyes smiled as well when they fell on Eurydice. She found herself wanting to tell him it was his music which had inspired her dance, the incredible sound of his voice—but words failed her entirely. She could only stand there, twisting the blue silk in her hands.

“And this, dear ladies, is Orpheus—the esteemed God of Music and, incidentally, the brother of Aristaeus, our man of the hour.”

Melina’s eyes lit up at the sound of Aristaeus’ name, and she glanced over her shoulder, looking hopeful. The motion drew Eurydice’s eye and she saw two men approaching them, neither of them the God of Beekeeping. One was tall and dark, wearing a warrior’s garb. The other she nearly mistook for a girl, his round baby face

almost too delicate to be a man's, his short, blonde curls drawn almost as tight as his pretty rosebud mouth.

"I wish it were only an hour!" the blonde man called loudly, throwing up his hands in a warding off gesture as he approached and rolled his bright, blue eyes at Orpheus. "Please, say it's almost over, brother!" Another brother? Eurydice looked between the two, surprised at the relation.

"Hymen." Orpheus shook his head. "Ever the critic." He winked at Eurydice and it felt like a sudden, warm secret between them. "You'd think the God of Marriage would be a little less cynical."

Chiron snorted. "You have obviously never been married."

Hymen hopped up next to Orpheus on the stage, resting his curls on the man's shoulder with a dramatic sigh. "Isn't there something we can do to make it all be over?"

"Not unless you know how to bend space and time." The warrior stopped next to Eurydice and she noticed the sword at his side. Without even thinking about it, she took a step back toward Chiron. She swore she somehow felt the coolness of the blade, even through the sheath. Beside her, Melina took her hand, as if she sensed something, too.

"Jason!" Orpheus hopped down from the stage, clapping the man on the shoulder. They embraced in the rough, strong way of men, but warmth passed between them, almost palpable. Eurydice felt her unease begin to fade. Is he another brother? She looked between them in wonder. Her question answered almost immediately.

"Two of my smarter pupils." Chiron nudged Eurydice with a nod toward the smiling men. Ah, not a brother, then, but a childhood friend. "Although I have to say,

Jason paid much more attention than you did, Orpheus. You spent much too much time wandering off into the woods, singing to the birds.”

“Learning to sing like the birds, perhaps. Not an unworthy pursuit in the least.”

Eurydice heard herself defending him and flushed when they all looked at her.

“I may have played the lyre, but Jason was the one who played truant.” Orpheus winked at Eurydice and it felt again as if he were sharing something secret with her.

“There were these nymphs down by the stream, if I recall he had a thing for...”

“Didn’t we all?” Chiron sighed with a faraway look in his eyes.

“You, Chiron?” Jason choked on the water skin he had lifted to his lips.

Orpheus laughed out loud at the shocked look on his friend’s face. “You didn’t know the old sumpter had a thing for nymphs?”

Eurydice saw the centaur’s cheeks flush, and he glanced over at her, attempting to change the subject. “You just missed this exotic nymph’s dance, Jason.”

The warrior’s eyes darkened when he looked at Eurydice. “I would have loved to see it.”

“I’m hoping to persuade her to do an encore...very soon.” A wink from Orpheus again. It made her knees feel weak. Chiron stepped in behind her as if he knew, and she felt more than heard him chuckle.

“I might.” Eurydice fingered the silk material in her hands, remembering how he looked at her at the end of the dance—as if he wanted to devour her. She looked at him hopefully. “If you would play?”

“You have but to ask.” Orpheus reached behind him for his kithara and found his brother idly turning the keys at the top. “Hymen! What are you doing?”

"I'm bored." Hymen complained, putting the stringed instrument aside and sliding off the stage. "I can't wait for this whole melodrama to be over."

Orpheus groaned, beginning to turn the keys and pluck the strings, one at a time. "You just sentenced yourself to longer, brother. Now I have to re-tune this before the show!"

Hymen waved the words away. "If I thought it would end this, I'd cut the strings."

"I made this instrument with my own hands." Orpheus glowered at him. "It took me three months!"

"If I was certain you didn't have ten more just like it, I might do it." Hymen stuck his tongue out and Eurydice remembered again how young he seemed. "Maybe then our dear father might consider canceling this wasted farce."

Orpheus sighed, cocking his head to the side as he plucked another string, turning the key at the top of the kithara. "I wish nothing but happiness for all involved on this occasion."

"Occasion!" Hymen's eyes rolled so far back into his head that, for a moment, Eurydice thought he was actually going to faint. "Why would our father fabricate such a thing as this? Have you ever heard of such a thing before? The choosing of a bride for his favored son?"

"Hasn't the God of Marriage ever attended one that was arranged?" Melina raised an unbelieving eyebrow in Hymen's direction.

"Certainly, mortal." Hymen blinked at her. "But a three day festival prelude to the announcement of the decision? Talk about overkill! Our father has gone soft in his head. Apollo has finally had too much sun."

“I think it’s just his way of celebrating the occasion.” Eurydice smiled at the god.
“Not so inappropriate for the occasion.”

Hymen threw up his hands. “If you were the God of Marriage, you would understand that any such arrangement should be done for the sake of politics and land, under the guidance of men and gods—not twelve muses, however inspiring they may be. Already our father has asked Aristaeus oft for his input, and the gods know he’s too wont to give him just what he always asks for. It’s an affront to the institution of marriage!”

Melina pursed her lips. “Sounds to me like you’re jealous of your father’s attention to his other son.”

Orpheus’ head came up from tuning the strings, his eyes going between the two of them. Hymen’s mouth worked, but nothing came out of it, and Orpheus spoke as if to head off whatever trapped on the tip of his tongue. “Hymen, where is your familial loyalty? Do you not wish happiness for our brother Aristaeus?”

“That half-bred cow-herder?” Two roses bloomed on Hymen’s smooth, pale cheeks. “He is not my family. Half a brother does not count for a whole. He may share the blood of my father, but the other half is forever tainted with the blood of one of those capricious, twitty nymphs!”

Eurydice felt two matching roses blooming in her own cheeks at the young god’s words. Melina’s hand tightened so she could barely feel her fingers, and she sensed her friend fuming beside her. Behind her, Chiron stiffened, and she knew he had taken great offense to the reference to “half-breeds.”

“You arrogant little—” Jason gripped the hilt of his sword, but Orpheus held up his hand, giving a little shake of his head. The motion stayed the warrior, but barely. His fingers twitched at his belt, his jaw tight.

“Made from the God of the Sun’s seed and spat from between the legs of a Muse—is that what you think makes us both so much grander?” Orpheus leveled his eyes at his brother. “You are perhaps fortunate we gods never get judged in the Underworld. I have a feeling, based on deeds and demeanor alone, our demi-god brother, Aristaeus, would end up in the paradise of Elysium, while you, my perfectly pure-blood brother, would wind up tending a fire in Tartarus.”

Hymen began to speak, but Jason moved quickly at Orpheus’ nod, putting his hand over the young god’s pretty rosebud mouth and stopping the words. Orpheus narrowed his eyes at his brother. “Breeding gives you no permission to boast.” The knife at Hymen’s tender throat made him stop squirming. “You’ve insulted our family and more, you have shamed yourself. Go, brother—just go. Find something else to occupy your easily spent attention.”

Jason let the god loose and Hymen shook himself, straightening up. “I’m not afraid of you!” His eyes said something else as he rubbed the place where the tip of the knife had touched his skin. He glared at Jason and, as if just remembering, spat, “I’m immortal!”

“How blessed I am.” Jason slid his knife into its sheath at his ankle. “I will not have to live with your insufferable insolence for all eternity.”

Melina spoke up, not for the first time, crossing her arms in front of her. “I’m sorry, Orpheus, but your brother is a very unpleasant sort.”

“No.” The god shook his dark head, watching his brother stalk off. “I’m the one who should apologize.”

Jason watched Hymen’s retreating figure with a dark look on his face. “Perhaps I should follow him?”

Orpheus frowned and then nodded. “For a while. Keep him out of trouble.” They all turned to watch Jason disappear into the crowd. Orpheus took the opportunity to reach out and squeeze Eurydice’s fingers. It was a brief touch, but even when it was over, she felt it tingling up her arm. “What he said about nymphs was inexcusable and untrue.”

“I don’t know.” She smiled at him and winked. “I can be awfully capricious when I want to be.”

“I believe you.” He laughed, and the sound was almost as musical as his singing. “But I might attribute it to your gender rather than your particular breed.”

“Careful, sir!” Melina raised her eyebrows at him.

“I’m going to stop before I get myself any deeper into the hole my brother started digging.” Orpheus raised his hands, still laughing, backing away. “I have a show to put on.”

“At least you learned something under my tutelage.” Chiron grinned. “Escape while you can.”

Eurydice stepped forward, touching Orpheus’ arm to get his attention. His eyes moved down to her hand then up to her face, his smile warm. She felt the flush in her cheeks, but she was determined to say the words. “Thank you. And...I’m looking forward to the show.”

“I may have a surprise for you.” He smiled, picking up his kithara.

She startled, “For me?”

He leaned in, his mouth hovering just at her ear, his breath sending shivers through her as he whispered, “Just for you, beautiful.” His wink did make her knees weak that time, and she was glad the stage was there to lean on when he started to walk away.

Melina’s hand found and squeezed hers and she glanced over at her friend. The blonde’s grin stretched from ear to ear. “Star struck?”

“Me?” Eurydice could barely catch her breath. She felt as if she’d been dancing for hours—and inside, she knew she had. “What about you, Mrs. Goddess of Beekeeping?”

“You’re both spellbound.” Chiron shook his sage head and sighed. “And I haven’t even seen Cupid with his bow.”

“I saw Cupid earlier.” Aristaeus slipped up behind Eurydice, his voice in her ear making her jump. “I thought I might call in a favor, but the little trickster escaped into the crowd.”

“A favor?” She smiled up at him, stepping a little to the side so he and Melina were face to face. Her friend’s adoring big, blue eyes turned up to him and Eurydice smiled, looking between them. “I doubt you’d need to even ask him.”

Aristaeus slipped his hand in Eurydice’s and squeezed. “I hoped you might say that.” Eurydice realized her mistake, but she didn’t have time to correct him as he turned to two figures behind him she hadn’t noticed. “Father... this is Eurydice.”

“My pleasure to meet you. My son has been talking about you all afternoon.”

Apollo stood a head taller than his strapping son did, and she could see Aristaeus took after him—the full head of wavy, blonde hair, the bronze complexion, the firm jaw and dimpled chin. Orpheus looked so little like either of them their relation still surprised her. She was taking all of this in as she said hello and murmured pleasantries, but her mind buzzed with a horrible panic. “If my son has his way—and by the sun above, I say he shall—it will be your name sung out on the lips of the Muses three days hence.”

Eurydice shook her head and opened her mouth again to try to explain, to say something kind, but firm. This time interrupted by a woman—one of the most beautiful she had ever seen. Her hair was as dark as Eurydice’s own was, but hung even longer, past her slender waist. Her dark eyes—I’ve seen those eyes—smiled as she said hello and Aristaeus introduced her as Calliope, head of the Muses.

“And mother of Orpheus and Hymen,” Chiron added. Eurydice gave him a grateful look; understanding. This goddess had clearly given her dark beauty to her son, Orpheus, and her delicate features to her other son, Hymen. The latter, though, had received his father’s light coloring—a combination which would have been beautiful...on any woman.

“This is my friend, Melina.” Eurydice hooked arms with her friend, afraid to look down at her face, pulling her forward, anyway. “She tames bees.” It was all she could think to say, to somehow make an association between Melina and Aristaeus she herself didn’t have.

“Interesting.” Apollo gave the mortal a polite nod. “Although perhaps left to the realm of the immortals, considering the danger of such a pursuit, don’t you think?”

Melina opened her mouth to speak, but all that came out was a pained squeak as Eurydice pinched her friend's side. "No one wants to anger the gods—mortal or nymph."

"Wise as well as beautiful." Apollo gave Eurydice an appreciative look. "My son has made a fine choice."

"The Muses will still have their say." Calliope raised her eyebrows at Apollo and blinked coolly at him.

He scoffed. "They, too, do not wish to bring about the wrath of the Sun God. Besides, Calliope, you are head of the Muses, and they will follow your lead."

"Yes." She gave him a nod, but her eyes moved over Eurydice's stricken face. "The question is...what will I recommend?"

"I have faith in you both." Aristaeus winked, looking between them and then to Eurydice.

She felt trapped, unable to speak and bring on the wrath of Apollo. Maybe if she could get Aristaeus himself alone and explain? The way he smiled at Melina gave her a little hope—until she looked at her friend's face. She expected to see anger there, jealousy perhaps, but instead, she just saw sadness and a look of resignation, which made her heart ache.

But I don't want him! Her mind raced, wondering how she could convey that message, and when Melina's eyes met hers, Eurydice understood. Her friend knew it was Aristaeus who wanted the nymph, not the other way around—and maybe that's what hurt the most?

“The show will be starting quite soon, I believe.” Chiron kindly put his arm around Melina’s shoulder, and another around Eurydice’s, steering them toward the front of the stage. “We should find a place.”

“Oh, you can sit with us.” Apollo nodded toward a raised platform off to the side where there were several chairs placed. “I insist.”

This can’t be happening. The excitement that had been fluttering in Eurydice’s belly in anticipation of hearing Orpheus sing again had turned into a slow churn of anxiety. She tried to maneuver herself between Chiron and her friend as they went up the stairs to the platform, but Aristaeus cut her off, moving in behind Melina himself. At least he’ll be sitting next to her too. She was determined to find some way to fix her blunder and correct Aristaeus’ belief that Eurydice was interested in anything more than friendship with the god.

“She is lovely, isn’t she?” Calliope, on Eurydice’s left, leaned over to speak to Apollo on her other side. I’m sitting next to Orpheus’ mother. That thought was both startling and nerve-wracking for some reason.

“My brother really is an amazing performer.” Aristaeus touched the hand where Eurydice held the blue cloth still clutched in her fist. “I think you’re going to enjoy this.” She knew she would have enjoyed it—if Aristaeus hadn’t made the assumption she was interested in him somehow. She looked down at the cloth she had danced to Orpheus’ music with. It’s going to be in tatters by the time I get home. Home sounded like a great place to be. She thought longingly of her safe little stream and the cottage beside it. I should have stayed home. Another voice countered that one almost immediately. Yes, but—then you wouldn’t have met him.

Eurydice sat up, suddenly sensing a way out of this mess. Maybe if she told Aristaeus about meeting Orpheus earlier? “Yes, earlier today we—” The sound of drums from either side of the stage drowned out her words. Aristaeus squeezed her fingers, looking to take her hand fully in his. Eurydice sighed, crossing her arms and leaning forward, as if she were interested in the show. Of course, she was. That much was true.

She stole glances at Melina, who seemed small and sad sitting in the chair between the bulk of Aristaeus and the height of Chiron. The centaur hadn’t taken a seat, but rather stood on the platform beside Melina’s chair. Eurydice saw him touch the blonde’s hair, and she looked up at him, giving him a grateful smile. This can’t be happening. She had a feeling her friend wouldn’t even be talking to her by the end of the day.

And that, not coincidentally, was the last thought she had of the uncomfortable situation for the moment as Orpheus came out onto the stage playing his kithara.

Chapter Three

Two dancers flanked him, both women, who reminded Eurydice of the way she herself had moved when she heard his music for the first time. It seemed to be a natural response in the feminine form to his playing, although watching the two beautiful women on either side of him made her eyes burn and her throat feel tight.

His music transfixed her, but when he opened his mouth to sing, she nearly fell out of her seat. Her memory of his voice wasn't anywhere near the incredible reality, even though it had been so short a time since she first heard him. Experiencing the God of Music during a performance was clearly nothing like coming upon him in practice. His voice was deep and powerful and she knew, even if she was still back at her stream, she would have heard him,—his voice carried so far.

The sound of his voice transfixed her so much, at first; she didn't really hear the lyrics at all. It was only when she felt Aristaeus' hand squeezing her knee that she came out of it long enough to really pay attention to the details. She gave him a kind smile, but firmly placed his hand back on his own, turning her attention again to the show. Orpheus was singing about finding true love—something not inappropriate for the occasion, she supposed, although she fervently wished the words weren't so... well... obvious.

*"Many roads have I traveled, through mountain and vale,
My traveling brother the sound of my voice.
I've eyed many women o'er song and honey'd ale
Now you have I found, my heart's only choice."*

She could almost imagine Orpheus singing to her alone, but when Aristaeus gave her a long look, the meaning in it made her want to cringe away from him. The way Calliope watched them kept her from physically doing so, but she felt strangely

stuck. He was clearly taking his half brother's words to heart, but her own heart screamed out; it's not me you want! Another part of her, though, argued; it is you he wants. Look at his eyes, the way he's looking at you. It wasn't the first time she lamented the magnetic attraction of being what she was, or the first time she wished she could turn it off when she wanted. She knew it wasn't really her he wanted—he didn't really even know her—it was the idea, the exotic allure; the nymph.

*“Even if those I’d found had moved my lone heart,
Or trembled my thighs and set my breath free,
They came far too easy, too close to the start,
Only the most perilous journey could lead me to thee.”*

The words from Orpheus' mouth, as if they had been written just for her, made her a little dizzy with wishing it were true. It had always been an issue, and one of the reasons she had stayed so far away from the realm of relationship. If men and gods alike were so attracted to her, how could she ever know when a man truly wanted her, and not because she was a nymph? She saw Orpheus' eyes on her as he sang, and she felt that light, buzzing feeling in her middle again, as if there were a thousand bees trapped in her belly. She hadn't ever felt it before, nothing so strong and clear, but she doubted her own instincts, wondering if Orpheus, too, was just transfixed by her nymph charm—like Chiron, or this demi-god, Aristaeus, with his hand creeping over her knee again.

I really should just go home. The cool and calm lure of the stream drew her, and she decided to go, in spite of wanting to watch the rest of the show and talk to Orpheus afterward. She gave Melina an apologetic smile as she stood, her eyes fixed on the stairs beyond Chiron. The walk home in the fresh air would do her good, and maybe

clear her head, she decided. She ignored Chiron's whispered, "What are you doing?" as she edged by.

"And here's our brave volunteer!" Orpheus' speaking voice resounded—she hadn't even realized the song was over—and the crowd cheered. Eurydice gasped as the two women dancers came up onto the platform, accosting and flanking her on her way down the stairs. She had obviously missed something when she was lost in her own thoughts. They led her toward the large stage, holding her elbows as she stared up at Orpheus with big eyes.

"Volunteer?" Her voice was barely above a whisper as he took her hand and pulled her toward the middle of the stage. "What have I volunteered for?"

"I knew it would be you." His words hit her hard and she looked up into his smiling face. She wanted to answer him, to say the words, I knew it would be you too...but she had a feeling, in the mixed up, cross-communication of the afternoon, they weren't speaking of the same thing. He directed her to a stool with a red cushion on it in the middle of the stage. "Take a seat."

Looking out at the audience, she saw Melina's face, smiling, and Chiron beside her. Aristaeus gave her a wink as her glance skipped over him. When she turned her eyes out to the larger audience, she grabbed Orpheus without even thinking, her nails digging into his forearm. "All the people!"

"Don't pay attention to them." He pried her fingers off, one by one. "Just look at me."

It wasn't such a bad idea, and she forced her eyes away from the crowd.

"What am I doing here?"

“Just play along.” He winked, turning toward the audience again. “I am going to make up a song about this woman, right here on the spot! What’s your name, beautiful?”

She blinked at him. He didn’t remember? Then she realized—it was for show. Her voice came out clearer than she expected, but nowhere near his projection level. “Eurydice.”

Orpheus groaned, slapping his forehead. “You mean I have to find something which rhymes with Eurydice?” The crowd laughed appreciatively and she smiled.

“How about she’s a peach-ee?” Aristaeus cupped his hands around his mouth and called from the platform. The crowd laughed again and Orpheus bowed at his half-brother with a grin.

“And you are, correct me if I’m wrong, a nymph, are you not?” Orpheus went on. She just nodded in response to his question, knowing, of course, he already knew the answer. “And tell me, Eurydice...what is the one thing you love most in the world? The one thing you couldn’t live without?”

She blinked at him, stunned. The word she wanted to say wouldn’t leave her mouth. It was silly, premature, and completely irrational. Therefore, instead of saying, “You,” she gave the obvious answer. “I’m a Naiad, so I cannot wander too far from my stream. I suppose that’s the thing I must love most.” But is it? Is it the thing you love more than all?

He gave a nod, picking up a new instrument. Instead of the many stringed kithara, the lyre had almost half as many, and he strummed it differently. The sound was less rich, a little tinny, clearly just meant as a mere accompaniment to his voice.

“So the beautiful nymph Eurydice waits by the stream she loves...” He strummed the lyre, his eyes moving over her face. “Waiting for...”

She knew he didn’t want her to answer, although part of her wanted to fill in the blank. She waited for him to finish—to begin—and he did, turning halfway toward the audience as the tune began to take shape on his lyre.

*Eurydice, what you can teach me
About the cool waters of your flowing stream
Eurydice, I wish you could reach me
Carried away in love like a river’s dream*

His voice gave her chills, but his eyes, when he looked at her, made her feel like melting into a puddle in the heat of his gaze. His words flowed effortlessly, his voice a golden tone, like sunshine spilling over her.

*Flowing woman, your wet eyes plead
for the man who could turn your waters.
Dreaming woman, your red heart bleeds
for he who’s worth the loss of your rivers.*

The words forced a lump to her throat and she tried to swallow around it. He was singing to her, about her, his words digging deep. He sang as if he knew her, and somehow he did. It was impossible, completely crazy, but it didn’t matter. This man—this god—reached so far into her she felt completely seen, vulnerable and exposed before him, unable to hide her true self.

*Flowing woman, swell into my banks
stream your secrets through my riverbeds.
Dreaming woman, spill into my banks,
Let your sweet heart follow where you’re led.*

“How did you know?” It was hard to speak around the lump in her throat, and she was glad for the cheering and stomping of the crowd. The noise, though, prevented him from hearing her and he shook his head, leaning in closer, encouraging her to say it

again. She repeated the words, her lips brushing his ear, and she thought she felt him shiver.

“It was in your eyes.” His response startled her, both the words and the way they tickled the hair on her neck as he murmured them near her ear. Orpheus took her hand, helping her off the stool and took a bow. The crowd grew even louder when he waved his hand toward her, and she took a little bow too, flushing.

The dancers were back on the stage, then, whirling around them, the music in the background played offstage somewhere. She had a moment to wonder where it was coming from before Orpheus led her off the stage.

“I’m glad I had someone writing it down.” He smiled as he held his hand out for her, helping her down the stairs. “I’m good at composing on my feet, but I think that one’s a real keeper.”

“Yes.” She nodded, wondering why she felt so breathless when he was the one who had been doing the singing, and she had done nothing but listen. Am I just star struck? God struck? She glanced up at Chiron and Melina, who were still watching the show. “Thank you. It was a beautiful song.”

Orpheus squeezed her fingers. “You’re a beautiful woman.”

“I think your brother wants your attention.” Eurydice nodded toward the platform, where Aristaeus waved them up. She followed Orpheus, letting him lead her back to where his half-brother sat with his father and mother, noticing Orpheus hadn’t let go of her hand. Melina gave her a wide-eyed, lip-biting look behind his back and Eurydice smiled in spite of herself.

The show was still going on, the dancers on both ends of the stage welcoming a new singer, this one a young, smooth-faced, blonde man whose voice was a silver reed compared to Orpheus' deep, rusty bass.

"Isn't she incredible?" Aristaeus stood to embrace his half-brother, clapping him on the back. "I have to tell you, I wouldn't mind if the Muses chose the nymph Eurydice as my new bride."

Orpheus quickly dropped her hand, and Eurydice looked up at his shocked eyes. Orpheus embraced his brother warmly, but his smile strained as he let go. "Let us hope then, the Muses choose someone just as lovely and perfect."

"Yes." Aristaeus smiled, glancing over his shoulder at Calliope, who watched the exchange with sharp eyes. "Just exactly as."

"As long as the sun is shining in the sky." Apollo winked, nudging Calliope beside him. She gave him a cool look, but he didn't seem to notice. "Your wish is my command, son."

Orpheus stood back, his arms crossed as he looked between his half-brother, his mother, and his father, assessing the situation. Eurydice wished she could pull him aside and tell him what had happened, how things had been so horribly, wrongly miscommunicated this afternoon. Her worst fears realized just moments later.

"If that is so, then I hope you both have much happiness together." Orpheus gave her a nod, his eyes veiled. "I only wish I had met her first."

She felt tears pricking her eyes and blinked them back. There has to be a way to fix this! Looking desperately at Melina for help, the little mortal just shrugged; her eyes

sad. Then Orpheus' words—I only wish I had met her first—made her remember meeting Aristaeus at the honey tent.

“I don't know which is more important,” Eurydice spoke up. “First met, or best met. I believe Aristaeus and Melina and their bees have a great deal more in common than he and I.”

Everyone's eyes turned to her, the show all but forgotten. The singer on the stage was, as far as she was concerned, entirely forgettable after Orpheus' performance.

“Gods may couple with mortals,” Calliope smiled at her, speaking as if Eurydice were a child. “But they don't marry them.”

It was too much for Melina, and Eurydice watched her plan fall to pieces as her friend stood on wobbly legs, excusing herself and heading down the stairs off the platform. Chiron frowned over at her and followed the mortal, while Eurydice wondered how to clean up this ever-growing mess. Her anger began to surpass any fear of repercussion, and that frightened her.

“According to your son, gods shouldn't marry nymphs either.” Eurydice looked at Calliope as she stood, willing herself not to shrink in the Muse's stately presence. “What did Hymen say, Orpheus? That Aristaeus' blood was tainted by a capricious, twitty nymph?”

“He said what?” Apollo stood too, frowning down at her. Aristaeus looked as if he'd been hit in the stomach.

“She only speaks the truth, father.” Orpheus sighed. “Hymen was boasting about his pure blood status again this afternoon. I believe Jason and I put him back in his place, but you know how he is...”

Calliope pursed her lips, waving Apollo back into his seat. “I’ll take care of it.” She swept off the platform, presumably in search of her other son.

“I need to tend to my friend.” Eurydice looked between the two men, Aristaeus and Orpheus then glanced to Apollo, who watched with glowering attention. She wanted to say something, but didn’t dare in front of the God of the Sun. “You will come tomorrow, Aristaeus, to taste Melina’s honey, as you promised?”

His pale face was drawn. She knew his brother’s words must have hurt him, and felt sorry she had used them in such a way. He met her eyes and nodded. “Of course.”

“And will you bring your brother and his lyre, for our enjoyment?” She offered the hopeful invitation, knowing if she could get them both alone; this whole wrinkled mess would iron itself out in no time. She didn’t dare look at Orpheus, the way Apollo’s eyes watched her every move.

“If you wish it.” Aristaeus looked at his half-brother. “Will you come, as well?”

“I am glad of the invitation.” Orpheus’ voice held such warmth she nearly melted beside him, and had to will herself to say her goodbyes and turn toward the stairs, seeking out Melina and Chiron.

The show went on, and most had their attention turned toward the stage. She weaved her way through the masses, looking for a glimpse of a blonde head, a chestnut flank, but didn’t see them anywhere. Melina could easily have hidden in the crowd, but where could a one-ton horse-man go to hide? Shading her eyes against the brightness

of the sun, she called to them, ignoring the various glares and a chorus of “Shushes!” around her.

She slid around the corner of a tent, still searching, when she heard an unforgettable voice speaking from within, “Mother, I realize he’s also my father’s son, but you know as well as I do he is simply insufferable.”

The smooth, soft croon that followed was also unmistakable—Calliope. “I know, darling. The half-breeds will overrun Olympus itself, if we’re not careful.”

Eurydice stopped, breath caught, her hand gripping the tent pole. Here, the sound of the music wasn’t as loud, and their voices, even through the material of the tent, were clearly audible. She knew she should go, find Melina, and apologize, explain, but Hymen’s words held her there.

“His own mother cannot even travel here to see this fiasco.” Hymen gave a short, shrill laugh. “Nymphs and their limited location-dependency.”

Eurydice swallowed hard, her eyes burning, feeling sorry for Aristaeus’ mother, Cyrene, now, instead of envy. She, too, was bound to her locale, although it was larger than Eurydice’s own was.

“Well, darling, you are more fortunate than he.” Calliope’s voice was as soft and rich as butter when she spoke to her son. “Your mummy is here, and she loves you.”

Hymen didn’t sound very grateful for her attention. “Why does my father always give that half-breed such favor?” His petulant tone made Eurydice wince.

“Cyrene has the power of the nymph.” Calliope sighed. “They are second only to Eros and Aphrodite in making god or mortal fall in love with them.”

That's just my problem. She knew it the moment it was stated, that therein was her own quandary. She didn't want to be loved because she made someone love her, because they couldn't help themselves. What sort of love was that to have?

"It should be outlawed." Hymen sniffed. "All marriages should be arranged—by me."

Calliope's laugh broke like the high sound of a thousand tiny bells. "Well, this one shall, at the very least."

"Do you mean it?" The excitement in Hymen's voice made Eurydice's stomach plummet even further at the words.

"I trust your judgment." Calliope's smile was in her voice. "I know you will choose wisely and well for Apollo's son."

"I will, mother." Hymen sounded so pleased with himself. Eurydice rolled her eyes. You might as well let a viper tell you where to step in the tall grass. "And you will abide by my choice?"

"Of course, darling." Calliope practically purred the words, and Eurydice felt her heart sink. "And everyone else will too. You are, after all, the God of Marriage."

Chapter Four

When Melina showed up at her cottage in the dawning light of day with a basket full of fruit and fresh-baked bread to share, Eurydice sighed in relief and hugged her friend close. She had spent an hour searching the grounds the day before and had even stopped by Melina's place, but found it dark.

"Did Chiron see you home?" Eurydice sliced the bread, still warm from the oven, and handed her a piece.

"We went for a ride." Melina opened a jar of preserves and spread it thickly. "He's very insightful, your friend."

"That's his job." Eurydice smiled. "Oracle and all."

"Yes." Melina licked jelly from her fingers. "He helped me put things into perspective."

"Things like what?"

"Oh, you know... life, love, the meaning of it all."

Eurydice nodded. "Sounds deep."

"It was."

"Any conclusions?"

"No..." Melina smiled and chewed, swallowing the bite before she finished. "But we sure had fun exploring all the possibilities."

"Melina!" Eurydice's eyes widened and the knife she was using to spread preserves clattered to the table.

“Oh, he was just cheering me up.” Melina had two matching roses blooming in her cheeks. “And I’m grateful for it. I was feeling sorry for myself. Being a mortal and best friend with a nymph sometimes leaves you feeling a little invisible, you know?”

Eurydice clasped her friend’s hand. “Honey, I didn’t... I don’t—”

“You don’t have to say it.” Melina waved the words away. “I know.”

“But—”

Melina squeezed the hand in her lap. “Thanks to you, and your horsie friend, I really got some of my confidence back. I have my assets, and I know what I want. And I intend to get it—if I can.”

Eurydice grinned. “Really?”

“And if I don’t get what I want, it’s not the end of the world, right?” Melina packed their breakfast back into the basket.

“You really like him, don’t you?”

Melina’s cheeks blushed a deeper pink. “I don’t even understand it... I hardly know him.”

“Tell me about it.” Eurydice licked the knife clean with a sigh.

“You, too?” Melina smiled down at her as she put the lid on the preserves jar.

“But at least you have a chance. I saw the way Orpheus looked at you.”

“Every man looks at me that way.” Eurydice rolled her eyes, tossing the knife into the basket. “It doesn’t necessarily mean anything. Blessing and curse, you know?”

“I know. But I have a feeling about this one.” Melina leaned over, brushing Eurydice’s long, dark hair away from her cheek and kissing her there. “Let’s go back to my place. Aristaeus should be there soon and he really wanted you to be there.”

“I didn’t tell you.” Eurydice grabbed for and squeezed Melina’s hands. “Orpheus is coming, too!”

“He is?” Melina’s eyes brightened. “That should prove...interesting.”

Eurydice grinned. “I certainly hope so.”

The day was bright and they walked hand in hand down the path toward Melina’s cottage. The walk was short, just a ways up Eurydice’s winding stream. Although the morning sun was already too warm, the dappled shade of the trees gave them cool, blessed relief as they made their way down the path. With every step, Eurydice’s heart beat a little faster in anticipation.

The night had proved long and restless, and she had rolled around, looking for cool places to relieve the flushed ache of her body. Her dreams were all about the man with the golden voice—the way his eyes followed her when she danced for him, the press of his hand, his deep laugh, and warm smile. In the darkness, she watched the shadows on the ceiling in the wet moonlight and wondered if he was thinking of her, too. The thought made her stomach flip and her cheeks burn, and she buried them against the coolness of a pillow.

Toward morning, she remembered waking up breathless from a dream, her limbs tingling, with a vague recollection of him pressing her to the ground, whispering a song into her ear as he pressed the heat of his erection between her thighs. The sensation was so real the honey between her legs dripped with wanting him, and the only part of the lyrics she could remember were, “You are mine.”

Already, she felt that was true, although she didn’t understand it. No matter what happened or how things managed to unravel themselves today and in the coming

future, she was his. How it had come to be, or why, she didn't know. Eurydice gasped as Melina's fingers tightened around hers, and she looked up the path to see the two brothers standing near her friend's cottage door. They were reflections of one another, like night and day—one blonde and bright and smiling, the other dark, and deep, his mouth drawn, face a little too serious.

"There they are!" Orpheus' big voice reached them clearly and he waved, his face moving to a smile, although his eyes didn't. "I told you these fine ladies wouldn't abandon us, brother!"

"Aristaeus." Eurydice gave him a nod, trying to keep it light. His eyes moved over her, his expression warm. "Orpheus."

"Call me Ari."

Eurydice smiled over at the God of Music. "Should I call you Orphie?"

"Please don't." He made a pained face.

"Out collecting honey?" Aristaeus gave them both a nod as they approached, running a hand through his blonde curls.

"Oh, no." Melina swung the basket at her side. "I have jars and jars of it inside. Come see."

The cottage was small, there were still two beds, Melina's little one in the corner, and her father's, near the fireplace. Eurydice remembered spending long days there with Melina, trading off reading out loud or singing to the old man. He liked the sound of their voices and begged them to go on whenever they stopped. Smiling fondly at the memory, she stiffened when she felt a hand on her shoulder, sure, it would be Aristaeus, but rather it was Orpheus, his face quizzical.

“You look sad.”

She turned toward him. “Just a bittersweet memory.”

“Ah.” He gave a nod, his eyes moving over to where Melina and Aristaeus pulled honey jars off the shelves. “I’ve tasted those.”

“Have you?” Eurydice lifted her eyes to his, and saw pain there.

“A singer has to sing what he knows.” Orpheus’ smile was sad. “And life experience always brings bitter with the sweet.”

She sighed, hugging herself. “Why is that?”

Orpheus’ hand touched her shoulder again, squeezing gently. “Because without tasting bitterness, we wouldn’t know to savor the sweet.”

She felt she could have stood there forever that way, the warmth and weight of his hand on her skin, his fingers rubbing the thin material of her wrap as he looked at her. Yesterday, she had doubted, thought perhaps he was just under the spell of the nymph, but in that moment, she had no doubts. The thing she felt between them was real, and growing by the moment.

“By the gods!” Aristaeus nearly choked on the words. “This is the sweetest thing I have ever tasted!”

Orpheus smiled, his eyes skipping over, but his words were too low for them to hear. “I bet I know where to find sweeter.” His fingers slipped down her side, his hand settling and pressing into the small of her back, and the pressure made her feel faint. The meaning in his words was unmistakable, and she swallowed, edging as close to him as she dared.

Melina smiled proudly. “I hate to say I told you so...”

Aristaeus' eyes narrowed and he looked at her accusingly. "What did you add to this to make it so?"

"Nothing!" She rolled her eyes and threw up her hands. "My bees feed on wild clover and hyacinth, just as yours do. They are just happier bees."

"How do you know?" Aristaeus scoffed.

"How do you identify a happy bee?" Orpheus spoke up. "Does he laugh more? Perhaps he sings?"

Eurydice smirked, trying not to laugh. She knew Melina took her bees entirely too seriously and didn't want to mock her friend.

"He does sing." Melina gave a little sniff. "A song of sorts. And I sing to them."

"Do you?" For the first time, Orpheus appeared interested in the exchange. "You sing to the bees?"

Melina nodded. "It's how I call them."

"And they come to your song?" Orpheus appeared incredulous.

"Of course." She put the lid back on the jar, but not before Aristaeus dipped his finger in to taste some more of the sweet gold.

"Ha!" Aristaeus straightened. "You see? And you thought you were the only one who could call animals with your voice."

Orpheus frowned, adjusting the lyre strapped across his back. "I would like to see your trick."

"It's not a trick." Melina raised her chin, eyes blazing.

"It's a gift." Eurydice gave her a warm smile, putting her hand on Orpheus forearm.

“Truly, it must be.” His eyes met hers and he smiled.

“Come with me.” Melina took Aristaeus’ hand, and he didn’t object as she began to lead them all. They followed as couples, the blonde pair in the lead, diverging from the path that followed the stream to cross over it at a natural stone bridge. The rocks were slippery, and although Eurydice was usually nimble and quick, her bare foot slid on one and Orpheus caught her in his arms just in time. She smiled thanks as he set her solidly on the grassy bank, and the smile he gave her in return made her belly burn. The other two were pulling further and further ahead, and Eurydice lingered longer to dry her wet feet in the grass.

“I had hoped you would wear the blue today.” Orpheus watched her straighten her intricately wrapped shift. “I’ve never seen anything like your dance with it...”

“I’m saving it for a special occasion.” Eurydice tucked her dark hair behind her ears as they walked, slowly, keeping a long distance pace between themselves and the other two ahead. “Besides, your dancers were just as beautiful as and much more talented than I.”

“It has nothing to do with talent.” Orpheus pushed a tree branch aside, holding it so it wouldn’t snap back at her as they passed. “Nor beauty—at least not the outer kind.”

She frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

“When a woman is truly moved by my music, it shines out through her eyes.” His face was slightly red, as if it had been sun-warmed, although they walked in the cool shade of the trees. “But you... it was as if your whole body came alive. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“It moved me,” she admitted, flushing at the memory. Her own reserve made her smile to herself. Moved was an understatement, to say the least, and she knew he could tell. He smiled back at her as if they’d both been through an earthquake together and she had turned to him and replied, “Oh, gee, I guess Atlas just shrugged.”

“You were like light itself.” Orpheus took a deep breath, his head shaking back and forth at the memory. “As if the music itself was moving through you and you became each single note. I could almost see it shining from your eyes, and your fingertips, and your toes...”

She felt the heat in her cheeks and was glad they were nearing the clearing. “That’s how it felt.”

Orpheus slowed even further as they neared the open, grassy space where Melina stood, her arms held up to the sky. “I wondered if it would burn me up the moment I touched you.”

Eurydice glanced up at him and couldn’t help her words. “Only one way to find out...”

“Yes.” He smiled, his fingers brushing stray hair out of her eyes. “It’s not a fear for me, as an immortal...but if I had to die, I wouldn’t mind being consumed in the heat of passion.”

She laughed. “Not a bad way to go.”

“No, not at all.” He agreed. The sound of Melina’s voice made him cock his head and look up sharply. “Is that—?” Her voice was as clear and bright as she was, just notes, a simple melody, no words. It rose and fell in a steady rhythm, almost a melodic

heartbeat, again and again. Aristaeus stood aside watching her, his arms crossed, his brow knitted.

“That’s beautiful.” Orpheus’ face softened as they approached her, his eyes showing not a little awe at her ability. Eurydice felt something tighten in her middle when he looked at her friend that way, and she knew it must have been how Melina felt whenever Aristaeus looked Eurydice’s way. She touched Orpheus’ arm, shaking her head before he moved in any further.

“Not too far,” she murmured.

He smiled, “I’m not afraid. I’m immortal.”

“Not you.” Eurydice nudged him, smiling. “The bees. Melina won’t like you too close.”

“Don’t want to spoil their happiness?” Aristaeus chuckled, coming to stand on the other side of Eurydice, his hand brushing hers. She moved closer to Orpheus without even thinking about it, letting her shoulder touch his arm.

“Just watch.” It was magical, no matter how many times she had watched Melina do it. They heard them before they saw them, a far-off hum that began to rise in the still of the morning. The birds in the trees grew quiet at the sound, and they all did too, even their breath held as a black cloud descended from the sky and slowly enveloped her. She welcomed them as she would a lover, smiling as hundreds, perhaps thousands of them, covered every inch of her body. They buzzed around her head like an insect halo and she stood completely still, the barest movement only her breath under the carpet of bees.

“That’s incredible.” Aristaeus looked at Melina with a new respect, his eyes wide. “Even I would not...” He turned his stunned eyes to Eurydice. “She is a mortal woman! Do you realize she could be killed?”

“She knows.” Eurydice nodded.

Aristaeus took a step back as Melina began to move, her usual slow, cyclical progression until she was turning, faster and faster, in a whirling dance. The bees took flight and went back to their work.

“She’s either very brave or very stupid.” Aristaeus watched the cloud of bees forming in the sky.

“Neither.” Melina’s laughing eyes met his as she came toward them, a few bees still clinging in her hair. “I’ve been doing it since I was a little girl. My father taught me.”

“He could do what you just did?” Aristaeus shook his head in disbelief.

“No.” Eurydice felt Orpheus’ hand again in the small of her back and pressed into the weight of it. “No one can do what she does.”

“Not even the God of the Bees?” Melina teased, winking up at Aristaeus.

“If it makes bees produce honey like I tasted back in your cottage...” He shook his head again, blinking down at her. “Will you teach me?”

“Of course.” Melina took his hand and they walked toward the path. Orpheus started to follow, but Eurydice caught his arm, shaking her head. Melina talked animatedly, and Aristaeus bent his head to listen carefully to what she said.

“Let them go.” Eurydice felt a huge weight lifting off her chest as she watched them together. Yesterday she had felt as if she were in the middle of some puzzle, which wouldn’t fit together, but today all the pieces were falling effortlessly into place.

Orpheus smiled down at her, his face quiet, but his eyes watchful and deep. She turned her face up to him and asked, "Would you like to see my stream?"

He took her hand and squeezed. "I would love to."

When they passed Melina's cottage, Eurydice heard them laughing inside and her chest loosened even more. She thought she heard Orpheus breathe a sigh of relief as well, and smiled up at him. His hand still clasped hers; swinging casually as they walked and he whistled a tune. Even that was beautifully melodic, a gift to the ears.

"What song is that?"

He shrugged. "Something I made up. I make up hundreds a day in my head."

"Hundreds?"

"A gift and a curse, I suppose." He sighed. "I have enough music in my head for a hundred men."

She nodded in understanding. "I suppose we all have them."

"Gifts?"

"And curses." She sighed.

"What's yours?" He smiled down at her as they veered off the path, Eurydice leading the way.

"This is." She nodded at the stream in front of them, her little cottage on the other side.

"It's beautiful," he breathed, looking between it and her.

She sighed. "Yes, it is."

"But you can never leave it?" Orpheus unstrapped his lyre and set it aside, sitting on the bank and patting the place beside him.

“You know about Naiads?”

“Cyrene, my half-brother’s mother,” he reminded her. “She is a Nereid.”

“Oh, yes.” That made Eurydice remember overhearing Calliope and Hymen the day before, and she debated whether to tell him what she’d heard. “But she has an entire sea to span.”

He nodded sympathetically. “Still...it could be worse—you could be a Dryad.”

“A tree nymph?” She shuddered.

“This doesn’t seem like such a bad life.” He leaned back, tucking his hands behind his head and looking up through the trees.

“No...” She sighed happily, assuming the same posture. “I guess it isn’t, really.”

“There are worse places to be tied to.”

Eurydice swallowed. “It’s the being tied down, I think, that’s the sticking point.”

“For whom?” Orpheus rolled to his side to look down at her. The feel of his body next to hers made her forget the question, and it took her a moment to remember it as she tried to memorize the lines of face with her eyes.

“I guess for me...and...well...whoever I’m with?”

He chuckled, running a hand through his dark hair. “Wandering men?”

“Don’t they all have wanderlust?” She teased, nudging him with her knee.

“You’re asking the wrong man.” He shook his head, looking off into the distance. “It’s all I’ve ever done.”

“Wander?” Her heart jerked in her chest.

“It’s in the life of minstrel.” He smiled down at her. “Have lyre, must travel.”

She tried to imagine his life. Would she fit in there? A new town every week, staying in strange places...she knew she could never survive it, even if her body would allow her to go so far. "Do you get tired of it?"

"Traveling?" Even his eyes looked heavy at the question. "Yes. Very weary."

His answer relieved her, and she studied his face, the strong line of his jaw, as he watched her stream flowing over the rocks. "This is almost as beautiful as you are." His words made her smile. "This would be the perfect place to settle down."

"But what would you do?" She didn't know if she wanted to play this game. It made her stomach flip and her heart race. "A minstrel needs an audience."

"Not if he's not singing anymore."

"Orpheus!" She gasped. "You wouldn't give up singing!"

"Wouldn't I?" His eyes narrowed, and his fingers traced the line of her cheek. "Well, not singing perhaps. But performing...yes."

"Why?" she implored, frowning.

His thumb moved over her lips, rubbing there. "For the right reasons, it would be easy."

"But what would you do?" She knew he wanted to kiss her—she wanted it too—but she was scared Melina and Aristaeus might come along and find them at any moment.

"Make lyres." He grinned.

"Like that one?" She nodded toward the lyre beside him and he reached behind him to retrieve it.

“Hermes made this for me.” He half-sat, fingering the strings. “Out of a turtle shell. It’s the best lyre I’ve ever had.” The music he played on it seemed effortless, and the sound was like heaven. He glanced at her. “We’re very near the sea here, aren’t we?”

“Yes.” She nodded, longing to hear him sing. “This stream runs to it.”

He smiled dreamily, still strumming. “I could become a turtle fisherman and a lyre maker.”

“The God of Music—a turtle fisherman?” She laughed at the thought.

“Why not?” A frown creased his brow as he looked down at her.

“I don’t know why not.” Her eyes softened at the thought.

“I can’t think of one good reason.” His fingers plucked the strings, the music flowing from them. “But I can think of one to stay.”

She didn’t think she could get the words out. “You can?” His answer was a kiss, soft but not hesitant. He kissed her as if he knew she wanted kissed, confident and sure, his lips playing over hers as his fingers still strummed his lyre. It was over far too soon, and he played in earnest now, the music rising in the clearing.

*The red beauty of the rose deepens
When thorn enters flesh,
Freshness fades and fades then
Into Death’s stilling breast...*

*Each bloom in my grasp would fall
If I were to never let go
So I carry the sweetness on and on
And do not look back...road upon road to follow...*

The last note echoed, a perfectly bittersweet end.

She couldn't help it—her hand cupped his cheek, her fingers trailing there.

“That’s so sad.”

His smile was sad, too. “Story of my life.”

“Sadness?”

He nodded. “Bittersweet, remember?”

“But you must be like the sailors,” she teased. “A woman in every port.”

“Yes.” His admission made her feel as if she couldn't breathe all of a sudden.

The thought of him with another woman... “But never just one.”

“Do you want just one?”

“I do.” He put his lyre aside and slid his big body next to hers. “This one.”

“How do you know that?” It was hard to trust her feeling, her instinct, and believe he wanted her. Not because she was an irresistible nymph, not just because she was beautiful, desirable...but because she was meant to be his. It felt crazy, completely irrational, but that’s what she wanted to believe.

He touched his forehead to hers and his breath was sweet—like honey. “I just know.”

This kiss was long and lingering, and she gave herself to it completely. She didn't want to pretend anymore. All of her longing and feeling went into the kiss as she wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her body full into his. Her passion ignited his and he groaned against her mouth, his tongue slipping between her lips, exploring the soft corners of that orifice. Her body hummed with wanting him and she gasped when he rolled full onto her, pressing her down into the ground with his weight. I dreamed this. She remembered something so like this—even the sound of the stream

and the call of the colorful birds, the strange “bryitt” call of the birds they had named bee-eaters from tree to tree, were all the same.

His mouth moved down her neck, his teeth raking there, and she moaned, feeling his knee pressing between hers, the material there riding up between her legs. The heat was incredible, and she rocked with his thigh between hers, nails digging into the skin of his upper arms. He didn’t seem to mind or notice as he kissed his way down to her breasts, pulling the material down to expose them to his mouth, his hands.

She wanted to give herself to him completely right there at the edge of her stream. She wanted to give herself and be taken at once, rolling around until they were wet and filthy and arching with their lust in the wet recesses of her stream. She knew if it went much further, that’s just what was going to happen, and there would be no stopping. His lips covered her nipples, one after the other, back and forth, driving her to distraction. She couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t do anything but want him.

“Orpheus.” She gasped his name, feeling the heat of his erection between her legs, trapped through the material of their clothing. She longed to free it, feel it in her hand, her mouth, her... “Oh by the gods, please... Orpheus...”

“Yes.” His voice was low, muffled between her heavy breasts.

Her fingers tangled in his hair and she pulled his head up, her eyes meeting his. “I have to tell you something.”

“I know...” His smile was lazy, easy, but his eyes were still dark with lust. “You can’t leave here.”

“No...not that.” She sighed, pulling the cloth back up over her breasts. His gaze followed her movements, regret in his eyes. “It’s about your brother.”

He sighed then, too. “Aristaeus?”

She nodded, wiggling out from under him, rearranging. “The Muses are going to choose a bride for him.”

“He seems to have set his cap on you.” Finally, the words spoke between them. She hoped beyond hope Aristaeus and Melina were, at this very moment, doing just what she and Orpheus had been doing. “Is that what you want?”

“No.” She turned her face toward him, shocked. “I want you.”

He grinned, raising an eyebrow at her. “How do you know?”

“I just know.” She wrinkled her nose.

He chuckled, leaning over to kiss her forehead. “I know.”

She grabbed his forearm. “But I overheard Calliope saying something yesterday...”

“My mother?”

“Yes.” She swallowed, remembering. “She was talking to Hymen.” Orpheus rolled his eyes and started to say something but she cut him off. “She told him she was going to allow him to choose a bride for Aristaeus.”

His jaw dropped, his face twisting in anger. “What?”

“As the God of Marriage, she said, people would abide by his word...”

Orpheus frowned. “I can’t believe she would do such a thing...”

Eurydice didn’t want to tell him what else Calliope had said—about half-breeds on Mount Olympus—but she pressed on. “But if it’s true...maybe if you talked to Hymen yourself?”

He looked at her, his eyes widening. "And what? Suggested someone for Aristaeus?"

"Someone besides me." Eurydice shrugged. "Melina, perhaps?"

"I don't know." He rubbed his chin, his eyes distant. "The whole thing feels like a bad idea all around."

She sighed, her brief hopes dashed. "I suppose..."

Then, her hopes dashed again, hearing the sound of Melina and Aristaeus coming up the path, their voices raised. She glanced at Orpheus and saw he heard them too.

"I don't care who your father is!" Melina's voice reached them through the trees. "No man should have his bride chosen if he doesn't wish it. If it were me, I'd stand up for myself!" Oh, no! Eurydice cringed, holding her hand out as Orpheus helped her to standing.

"What do you know?" Aristaeus scoffed. "You're just a mortal." Ouch. They both came striding down the pathway, pushing their way through the trees.

"There you two are." Aristaeus frowned as he looked between them and Eurydice noticed Orpheus took another step away from her as his half-brother came into the clearing. "Come on, brother. We've got to get back for the choosing."

"That's today?" Eurydice's eyes widened. "I thought this was a three day festival?"

"It is." Orpheus sighed, seeing the way his half-brother was looking at her. "The third day is the wedding."

“Oh.” Eurydice looked between them, knowing her heart was in her eyes, and not being able to help it.

“I’m sorry we didn’t get to spend more time together.” Aristaeus stepped close to Eurydice, lifting her hand and touching his lips there. They were soft, as were his eyes. He’s not such a bad guy. She smiled fondly at him. But he’s not Orpheus. “The good news is—I’m sure we’ll be seeing a great deal more of each other. Very soon.”

Her heart lurched at that, but she didn’t have any words. The two men took their leave through the woods, Orpheus waving to her once over his shoulder as he pulled his lyre up there.

“What happened?” Eurydice wailed to her friend after they had gone. The blonde collapsed in a heap next to the stream, tears running down her cheeks.

“I don’t know.” She covered her face in her hands, her words muffled. “One minute we were laughing, and then we were kissing... and then...”

“Kissing?” Eurydice smiled at that. “Were you?”

“And then we were arguing.” Melina sniffed.

“About the choosing?”

“Yes.” Melina put her head on her friend’s shoulder and wailed. “It’s so stupid! He doesn’t want any of this!”

“I know.” Eurydice patted her, frowning.

“Why doesn’t he just stand up and say so?”

“Well...” Eurydice sighed. “Apollo does seem like a god who gets what he wants...”

“It’s not fair.”

“I know, honey.” She kissed the top of Melina’s silky blonde head. “But maybe...maybe there’s a way we can get the odds on our side.”

“What do you mean?” Melina looked up at her, wiping away tears.

“Let’s get dressed up and go to the festival.” Eurydice smiled. “I have an idea.”

Chapter Five

“Stay here.” Eurydice directed Melina to wait with Jason. He had spotted them in the crowd and waved them over, and had been happy to direct her to Hymen’s tent. The same tent she had stood outside of and overheard the conversation between him and his mother, Calliope. According to Jason, the choosing would be this afternoon. She still had time. Barely, but enough, she hoped, to convince the God of Marriage to do the right thing.

“Hymen?” There were no guards at the tent door, and she lifted the flap slightly, calling for him. He sat up on a long, wide cot, rubbing his eyes and looking for all the world like a man-child she had just woken from his afternoon nap—and she realized, with a grimace, that she had. “I’m sorry to disturb you.”

“What is it?” He pouted, stretching. “It’s not time for the damnable miscarriage of marriage already, is it?”

“Not quite.” Eurydice came into the darkened tent. It was cool inside, away from the heat of the sun. The young god frowned at her as she took a seat across from him on a stool. “I just wanted to have a brief word with you.”

“Did you?” He snorted, rolling his eyes. “Do you think I’m stupid? I know what you want.”

“You do?”

He stretched back out on the cot with a yawn. “You want to be Aristaeus’ bride, and you think I might have some influence over my mother.”

“I...no...”

“Yes, you do.” He snorted. “You have god-digger written all over you.”

Eurydice felt her cheeks burning and was glad of the dimness of the tent. “Do you know who is going to be chosen?”

His words were childish, taunting. “That’s for me to know, and you to find out.” He even stuck his tongue out at her. She considered her options for a moment, wondering how to approach him, but decided to just plow on ahead.

“You’re right.” She straightened, leaning forward a little. “I did want to make a suggestion...”

“Yourself?” His eyes rolled back as he ran a hand through his gold curls.

“No.” She shook her head vehemently. “Not me.”

He frowned, his eyes narrowing at her in the dimness. “You don’t want to marry Aristaeus?”

“No.”

“But you...” A slow realization spread across his face as he sat up. He was nude from the waist up, his chest completely devoid of hair. “Set your sights even higher, have you? A true immortal?”

“This isn’t about me,” she insisted.

“Isn’t it?”

She took a deep breath, trying to stay calm. “I’m here because I think Melina and Aristaeus are well-suited...”

“Melina?” He said the name as if it left a strange taste in his mouth. “Who?”

“My friend, Melina...” She stared at him, unable to believe he couldn’t remember. “Blonde woman...you met her just yesterday...”

“That pale mortal?” He laughed. “Hardly a match made in Elysium.”

Eurydice stiffened, reminding herself to stay focused. “They have much in common and I have reason to believe they are in love.”

“Love?” Hymen scoffed, waving her words away. “What does marriage have to do with love? Besides...he’s in love with you.”

She shook her head sadly. “He’s in love with the idea of me. He doesn’t even know me.”

“If that’s true...it’s a pity.” His smile was slow as his mouth curled up at the corners. “I’d prefer to really disappoint him.”

Relieved, she leaned forward. “Does that mean you don’t plan to choose me?”

“Who says I’m choosing anyone?” He frowned. “The Muses will choose his bride! It will be on their heads, not mine. Why is it everyone keeps interrupting my nap to ask me about this whole sullied affair?”

“What do you mean?” Eurydice glanced toward the tent door. “Who else has been here?”

“You’re the third now.” Hymen reclined again, pulling a sheet up to cover him. “First my mother, then Orpheus, and now you...” At the sound of his name, Eurydice’s head came up. “Go now and let me sleep! Tell them not to wake me until the last moment, would you?”

She had done the best she could. Slipping out of his tent, she saw Melina and Jason were standing by the honey tent—of course. But they were talking to Aristaeus, and he was smiling at her friend, and the sight made her heart feel lighter. Maybe she had planted enough of a seed...?

“Eurydice?”

“Chiron!” Her face brightened when she saw him, the distasteful business of Hymen put behind her. “I’m so glad to see you. Thank you for taking Melina home yesterday...”

“I need to talk to you...” The serious tone in his voice made her look closer at his face, his brow knitted, and his jaw tight. Something’s wrong.

“Is something wrong?”

He nodded, his lips pursing. “I’m not here as a friend.”

“Are you here as a...horse?” She teased, trying to lighten the mood.

“I’m here as an oracle.” The words made her heart skip and her mouth turn dry.

“Oh.”

Chiron took her arm, guiding her away from the festivities. “Come with me.”

“Where are we going?” She glanced back at Jason and Melina, still talking to Aristaeus.

“For a walk.”

“I don’t want to go far.” Straining to look back as they got further away, she noted she couldn’t see her friends anymore. “The choosing...”

“Yes, I know.” He sighed. “It will be soon.”

“I talked to Hymen.” Eurydice slipped her arm comfortably through his.

“Did you?” Chiron frowned, glancing down at her. “Why?”

“Well, I overheard Calliope telling him she’ll take his recommendation...” she admitted, feeling sheepish now the words were out.

“Yes, I know.” He stopped under a tall cypress tree, turning to face her.

“You know?” She looked up at him, puzzled. “How?”

“Orpheus told me.”

Her eyes widened, and the cold knot in her belly turned hot. “What?”

“He talked to Hymen before you did.”

“I know...” She could only imagine Orpheus had done as she asked the day before, and the thought made her want to smile. Poor Hymen inundated by two requests to choose Melina...

“He asked Hymen to choose you.” Chiron’s words interrupted her thoughts and she stared at him, not really comprehending.

“He...he did not!” It made no sense. Eurydice blinked at the centaur, noting his serious expression. It was very unlike the Chiron she knew.

“Yes, he did.” His fingers moved a stray hair away from her cheek. It was a tender gesture, and the words that followed filled with pain. “And I think you should marry Aristaeus.”

“What?” She brushed his hand away impatiently, shaking her head in disbelief. “Has everyone gone mad?”

Chiron closed his eyes for a moment and swallowed, looking as if the words he were about to say were trapped somewhere in his throat. They sounded that way too, coming out hoarse and strangled. “If you marry Orpheus, it will end in tragedy.”

“No.” Eurydice’s hand went to her mouth, her eyes wide.

“I’m not telling you this as a friend—I’m telling you this as an oracle.” When his eyes opened, there were tears lingering in the corners.

“No.” Her denial was muffled behind her own hand, caught somewhere in the pain of her belly.

“As a friend...” His voice trembled and he reached for her, pulling her into his arms. She let him hold her, trembling there as he stroked her hair. “As a friend, dearest, I know your heart and where it wants to lead you. However, I value your life too much to let you do this thing. Please. Listen to me. Marry Aristaeus and forget Orpheus.”

“No!” She twisted in his strong arms, but he didn’t let her go. “I won’t accept this.”

“I wouldn’t lie to you.” He pressed her cheek to his chest, kissing the top of her head. “I wouldn’t mislead you.”

“I know.” Her tears wet his skin. She hadn’t even realized she was crying.

Chiron looked down at her, wiping at her tears with his thumbs. “You know I’m telling you the truth?”

“Yes.” She nodded up at him, turning to kiss his palm. Then she smiled. “But it doesn’t matter.”

“What do you mean?” Alarmed, he lifted her chin to him, peering into her eyes.

“Orpheus is the one.” She cradled his palm against her cheek, swallowing past the lump in her throat. “This is the man I’ve been waiting for. I will sacrifice anything for this man. If it means I have to leave my stream, if it means I live a short, nearly mortal life...I don’t care...it’s enough. Any time with him will be enough.”

Chiron shook his head, opening his mouth to speak, but was interrupted.

“Do you mean that?”

Eurydice whirled at the already-familiar sound of his voice. “Orpheus!”

“Do you mean that?” He repeated. His face was dark, his eyes somber, and she wanted to run to him, throw her arms around him, but restrained herself.

“Yes,” she admitted, reaching one hand out to him. “Yes, I do. Every word.”

Orpheus took a hesitant step toward her, glancing up at Chiron. He had clearly already heard the centaur's prediction. "He doesn't know for sure what will happen..."

"No." Chiron pursed his lips, taking a step back and bowing slightly. "But I do know it will end in tragedy..."

"Then we will fill our lives with love until then." Eurydice closed the gap between her and Orpheus, taking both of his hands in hers. "Bittersweet...remember?" He pulled her close, burying his face in her hair, breathing in her scent. He held her tight, as if he never wanted to let her go, and she reveled in it.

Chiron's voice trembled. "I love you both."

Eurydice turned to look at him, her cheek against the strong beat of Orpheus' heart. She reached her hand out to her friend. "Then love us both for as long as we have."

Chiron took a step forward, clasping her hand in his. Then he took Orpheus' as well, squeezing, his eyes sad.

Orpheus gripped the centaur's hand for a moment hard then he let go, turning back to Eurydice. "We need to stop the choosing. I told Hymen to choose you."

"He's not going to choose me." She rolled her eyes. "I'm a nymph, remember? Besides, I told him to choose Melina."

"It doesn't matter." Chiron's eyes were no longer on the couple. "There's no more time."

"What do you mean?" Eurydice glanced at him.

The centaur nodded toward the festival. "They're announcing it now."

"Are you sure?"

He raised his eyebrow at her and for a moment, looked like the Chiron she knew.

“Oracle, remember?”

“Give us a ride, friend?” Orpheus put a hand on the centaur’s back, and he gave a brief nod.

“Hop on.” He made his hands into a stirrup, and gave a short grunt when Orpheus slid onto his back. Eurydice let Chiron help her up too, as Orpheus grabbed her arm and slid her onto the centaur’s back, settling her in front of him. She couldn’t help wiggling her hips in his hands as she wrapped her arms around Chiron’s waist and Orpheus did the same to Eurydice. As they rode toward the festival, she felt the press of Orpheus’ weight against her behind, the spread of his big thighs against hers, and couldn’t help wiggling back against him. She heard his gasp when she reached a hand back to grip his thigh, her nails digging into his flesh.

They weren’t that far from the stage, but being on the centaur’s back gave them a vantage point they wouldn’t have had among the crowd. People got out of Chiron’s way as he weaved his way through the masses, in a hurry to avoid his bulk. Eurydice saw the Muses, all twelve of them, standing in a row on the stage next to Apollo. Calliope held a scroll in one hand, waiting patiently for the God of the Sun to finish speaking.

“So without further ado, I give you the Muses’ choice of bride for my son, Aristaeus!”

Shading her eyes against the sun, Eurydice scanned the crowd and found Hymen standing off to the side, his smile smug as he crossed his arms across his chest, waiting for the verdict—as if he didn’t already know. Her heart beat faster as she

contemplated what might be on the scroll in Calliope's hand. What would she do if she were named? Would she defy the God of the Sun?

"I see your friend." Orpheus pointed to the other side of the stage, where Melina stood with Jason. Aristaeus, though, was up on stage, his eyes moving over the crowd. He's looking for me. She knew it was true when he spotted her, his eyes brightening when they met hers then narrowing when he saw his brother's arms around her waist.

"Please don't let it be me," she whispered, more to herself than anyone else, but both of them heard her and responded.

"It won't be what you expect." Chiron stopped short of the stage as Calliope unrolled the scroll.

Orpheus' arm tightened around her waist and he kissed her hair. "He cannot have you."

His words filled her with warmth, and she knew, no matter what was on that piece of paper—she was his. Calliope held the scroll aloft and read the words inscribed there, the crowd quiet enough to hear the soft lilt of her voice.

"We, the twelve Muses, entrusted with this task by the Great Apollo, God of the Sun, have come to a unanimous decision on the matter of a bride for Aristaeus—God of Husbandry, Hunting, Fruit Trees, Cattle, and Beekeeping."

"Not just bees?" Eurydice couldn't help asking, and Orpheus chuckled behind her.

"Jack of all trades, that's my brother."

"We have been divinely inspired in our choice, and it will not be questioned or disputed." Calliope glanced into the crowd at her youngest son and Eurydice saw

Hymen give her a brief nod, his eyes bright. He's up to something. She couldn't imagine what it might be. Melina, down in front, was hugging herself, her eyes turned up to the stage. Eurydice knew she was hoping against hope it was her name on the scroll, was counting on her best friend the nymph to have worked a miracle with her feminine charm.

"Harmonia is the goddess of marital harmony, the daughter of Aphrodite and Ares." Calliope went on.

Eurydice gripped Orpheus' arm around her. He leaned close and whispered, "It cannot be Harmonia. She's already married."

"She is married to Kadmos, King of Thebes," Calliope confirmed, her voice growing louder over the murmur of the crowd. "Harmonia and Kadmos have offered their daughter, Autonoe, as a bride to Aristaeus. She is beautiful, accomplished, the offspring of goddess and mortal—a perfect match!"

Aristaeus' face fell, his shocked eyes wide. Apollo frowned, putting his hand on his son's shoulder with a shake of his head. He's not going to have any of this. Eurydice's relief that she hadn't been chosen was overshadowed by the pain she knew Melina must be in. Her friend didn't show it, her eyes veiled, her expression blank, but the way she clenched her fists by her sides told Eurydice what she was feeling.

"That little goat head!" Orpheus' grip on her tightened until she could barely breathe.

"What?" she gasped, glancing back at him.

“Harmonia is cursed.” Chiron sighed, shaking his head. “Hephaestus gave her a necklace on the occasion of her wedding which doomed her descendents to live out lives of tragedy.”

Eurydice frowned. “Why would he do such a thing?”

“His wife is Aphrodite,” Orpheus explained. “Harmonia’s mother?”

“Oh.” Eurydice remembered Calliope saying Harmonia was the daughter of Aphrodite and Ares—clearly the result of an adulterous affair between the two, when Aphrodite was still married to Hephaestus. “How awful... Does he know?”

“Aristaeus?” Chiron shook his head. “Doubtful. Not many know the story. Orpheus and I had the occasion of talking to Hephaestus one night when he was...”

“Drunk,” Orpheus finished when the centaur hesitated in his usual reserved way. “Entirely over-wined...complete Dionysian stupor.”

“King Kadmos has offered a large dowry along with his bride, in honor of Apollo, the Great God of the Sun,” Calliope went on, speaking again now the applause of the crowd had faded. She continued to list the dowry; goats, sheep, gallons of olive oil, but Eurydice tuned her out, seeing the smile spreading across Apollo’s face. She knew the Sun God was going to accept this fruitful match without hesitation, and she was free of incurring his wrath.

But her heart couldn’t take the look on Melina’s face as the list went on. Her friend just kept getting more and paler, with two fat splotches of color showing in her cheeks. Eurydice had come here to help her friend, and had ended up getting just what she had always wanted, but leaving Melina with nothing—not even hope. Jason leaned

down to say something to the blonde, and she shook her head, turning to look up at him. When she did, Eurydice saw the tears in her eyes.

“Will he marry her?” Chiron wondered out loud, glancing back at Orpheus.

“Once he gets used to the idea, I imagine he will.”

The two men talked as if marriage was a business transaction, and Eurydice couldn't stand it. She slid down to the ground, hopping off the centaur's back. Hurrying through the crowd toward her friend, she ignored Orpheus calling after her, but by the time she reached the place where Melina had been, it was just Jason standing at the front edge of the stage.

“Where is Melina?” Eurydice tugged at his tunic, breathless. Aristaeus saw Eurydice in the crowd and he gave her a bewildered shake of his head. She ignored it, tugging again at Jason's sleeve.

Jason shrugged, looking just as bewildered as Aristaeus. “She ran off. That way.” He pointed toward home, and Eurydice knew where she had gone.

Calliope finished reading the dowry and was now explaining Aristaeus would have to travel to his bride's homeland of far-off Thebes for the wedding feast. Poor Ari, Eurydice thought, glancing up at him. He looked like a fawn in a snare. She couldn't stop to talk to him, though—she was too worried about Melina.

Orpheus was by her side when she turned to go, and he grabbed her arm, frowning. “What's the matter?”

“Melina,” was all she said, struggling through the crowd.

“Let Chiron take us,” Orpheus urged, pulling her with him. She nodded, following him back through the crowd, letting him use his big body to spread a way. The centaur turned a concerned face toward them as they reached him again.

“Melina’s!” Eurydice gasped, leaning against his flank.

“Climb on.” Chiron helped them both quickly up, turning in the crowd and the masses seemed to part like magic as he moved through as fast as he could manage without trampling anyone underfoot. When he reached the tents, he broke into a trot around the side, and when he was in the clearing, he stretched out into a full-out gallop, making Eurydice wrap her arms around him and bury her face against his back.

Please don’t let us be too late. She didn’t know how she knew—maybe some of Chiron’s oracle sense had rubbed off, or perhaps it was intuition. More likely, it was just knowing Melina, the weight which had rested on the young mortal’s shoulders—the heavy sadness of her father’s death followed by this brief glimpse of happiness stolen so quickly away.

“There!” Eurydice grasped Chiron’s long hair like reins, pulling him to the right and he went, his breath coming fast and hard as he veered toward the clearing where Melina was standing.

“What in the world—?” Orpheus gasped, seeing what they were all seeing. Melina covered in bees, as she had been a hundred times, a hundred thousand times before. Only this time was different. The cloud was darker, bigger, buzzing angrily around her, enveloping every inch of her. The sound of her song was higher than usual, wavering, and Eurydice knew she was crying.

“Wait!” Eurydice pulled Chiron up short, and he skidded to a halt in the grass, panting. It’s too late. There was nothing any of them could do to stop what she was intending. Calling to her, approaching her, would all result in the fulfillment of her original intention.

“What do we do?” Orpheus frowned, sliding off the centaur’s back.

Eurydice followed, shaking her head. “I don’t know.”

“What is she doing?” Chiron, who had seen her perform this trick before, pawed at the ground. They all knew this was different.

“I think she—”

Melina’s song stopped being a song and became a wail. Her voice rose like a siren, a sustained scream. Eurydice didn’t know which had begun first, the stinging pain of the bees, or the wail of her friend causing the bees to sting, but it didn’t matter. A chain reaction had begun which would end in the death of her friend, and she couldn’t do anything but stand by and helplessly watch.

“No!” Eurydice screamed now too, collapsing to her knees, her hands reaching out to the form in front of them which crawled with now-angry insects. “Melina, no!”

She knew her friend couldn’t hear anything but the buzzing, couldn’t feel anything but the pain. She had to do something—anything. Struggling to stand, sobs shaking her body, Eurydice headed toward her, but Orpheus grabbed her shoulders, turning her toward Chiron.

“Don’t let her near.” He shoved Eurydice’s trembling form at the centaur, which enfolded her struggling body with his strong arms.

“Help her!” Eurydice cried, straining against the circle of Chiron’s arms.

“I am.” Orpheus unstrapped his lyre and began to play, his voice rising, loud and clear. The sound was golden, long, and sustained notes, very similar to the song Melina sang to call the bees, Eurydice realized. Slowly, the hum of the bees grew steady, less frantic, and the insects began to rise into the air once again.

“Thank the gods,” Chiron breathed, holding Eurydice tight as she sobbed, still trying to get to Melina. Orpheus strummed his lyre, just a bare accompaniment to the clear boom of his voice, calling the bees. He was talking to them, she realized, just as Melina did. They were a black cloud again, hovering above her head, and they all saw the angry red welts over her skin as Melina collapsed to the ground.

“Let me go to her!” Eurydice screamed, twisting against the centaur’s hold. Orpheus glanced back, shaking his head, his song never wavering, and Chiron’s hold tightened until she could barely breathe. The bees were going—humming noisily, they were moving like a storm cloud across the sky, away from the clearing. The moment they were out of sight, Orpheus’ song stopped and he reached down to pick up Melina’s limp form.

“Please!” Eurydice sobbed, and Chiron finally let her go. She ran, catching up to Orpheus as he carried her friend toward them, Melina’s face red and swollen with tears and bee stings.

“Bring her to my stream.” Eurydice urged; her voice strangled. “Hurry!”

Orpheus glanced at Chiron, shaking his head. “I don’t know if she can survive—”

“Don’t say it.” Eurydice insisted, pulling Orpheus along, Chiron following, both men exchanging doubtful glances. “She’s going to be fine. She’s going to be fine.”

Those were the words she whispered all the way home as they went as fast as they could, carrying the inert and swollen body of Melina between them.

Chapter Six

Eurydice cradled her friend's head in her lap, letting the cool water of her stream rush over them both. Orpheus knelt over them, calling Melina's name, but there was no response. Her eyes closed, her face pale, but her heart was beating still. Her pulse was fast and irregular, but it was present, and that's all Eurydice cared about in the moment.

"Chiron, we need a doctor." Orpheus looked up at the centaur, his eyes serious.

Eurydice winced as she pulled one of the stingers from her friend's cheek. They were all over her exposed skin, and more embedded even through her shift. "She's going to be fine."

"What happened?" Aristaeus burst through the trees, startling them all. "I saw you all leaving the festival in such a hurry..."

"She was stung," Orpheus explained, his eyes meeting Eurydice's at the shallow edge of the stream.

"A few hundred times..." Chiron cleared his throat.

Aristaeus came to kneel next to them, turning Melina's chin to the side and peering at the stings on her face. "Hundreds?" His fingers fumbled with her wet wrap, pulling it down her shoulder. There were more red welts there. "How did this happen?"

"She... I think she..." Eurydice couldn't say the words, her tears stopping them in her throat.

"Never mind." Aristaeus put his arms under the woman's still body, lifting her in his arms. "I need plantain and olive leaves. Eurydice, do you know where the lobelia and comfrey grows down at the fork in the stream?"

She nodded up at him, hating the way Melina's limbs hung lifelessly, the way her head lolled back. "Where are you taking her?"

"My cottage. I have medicine there." Aristaeus looked at the centaur. "Will you give us a ride?"

"Of course." Chiron offered his hands as stirrups.

Aristaeus glanced at his brother. "Orpheus, go with her and show her the way back." His orders dispatched, he swung up on the horse-man's back, tucking Melina in front of him. Her eyelids fluttered for a moment and she moaned, and the sound made Eurydice's heart soar.

"Ari?" Melina's voice was hoarse. "Am I dead?"

He smiled down at her. "No...not yet. What silly trick were you up to this time?"

"No trick." Her eyes closed again, her head tucked under his chin. The swelling was growing worse, her face like a pink moon.

"Hurry." Aristaeus urged them, and then he and the centaur were off, galloping down the path.

"She's going to be fine," Eurydice said again as Orpheus helped her to stand. He pulled her into the circle of his arms, stroking her hair. She was shivering, from shock or cold, she wasn't sure which, and she was grateful for the warmth of his body. "You saved her."

Orpheus shook his head.

"No... but my brother has a way with healing." He pressed her closer. "If anyone can help her, he can."

“But you stopped the bees.” She lifted her face to his and kissed him, a quick, grateful kiss, full of thanks and desperation. “Help me gather what he needs to help her.” Eurydice wiped at her wet face, and they headed down the stream in search of the thick purple lobelia and white comfrey flowers. They carried armfuls back to Aristaeus’ cottage, stopping along the way to get him the olive and plantains leaves he’d asked for.

“Put them on the table.” Aristaeus directed them the moment they walked in the door. Eurydice stared around in disbelief at the extravagance of the place. She had expected a simple cottage, something like hers, but this was a palace compared to her place. Chiron, who could barely turn around in Eurydice’s living quarters, was dwarfed by a huge fireplace in the corner where he stood, stirring something in a pot over the fire. The ceiling stretched far above his head, with wooden beams running across, and the whole place felt filled with light from tall windows.

“How is she?” Orpheus glanced over at Melina as he set armfuls of flowers and leaves on the table. Eurydice approached cautiously, peering around Aristaeus’ shoulder, not sure she wanted to see. He had stripped her bare, cutting away her wrap, and Eurydice gasped at the sight of her friend’s naked body covered with red, angry welts. They were visibly swelling, and Melina moaned as Aristaeus spooned something into her mouth.

“What is it you’re giving her?” Eurydice whispered, kneeling beside him. He had a pair of pincers in his fingers and gently pulled stingers from her wounds. Thinking to help, she scraped one with her fingernail, pulling it out.

“Don’t squeeze it,” Aristaeus warned, frowning. “You’ll just inject more of the poison into her bloodstream.”

“Oh.” Eurydice sat back, watching her friend’s flushed face, the way her eyes moved back and forth under their lids. “I’m sorry.”

Aristaeus glanced over at her, his face softening. “You can strip the flowers and the leaves and add them to the pot Chiron is stirring.”

She nodded, getting up and going back to the table where Orpheus was already following his brother’s instruction. They peeled off leaves from branches, and plucked petals from flowers in silence, the only sound in the room Melina’s soft whimpers and moans as Aristaeus pulled bee stingers from her flesh.

Once they were finished, they added their quarry to the pot, and Chiron stirred it in with the other herbs. Aristaeus, finished with his work, covered her gently with a sheet and came over to inspect the boiling liquid.

“Is she...?” Orpheus swallowed, not finishing the sentence, his hand on his brother’s arm as Aristaeus took the large wooden spoon from Chiron and stirred the mixture himself.

“She’s going to be fine.” Eurydice said it again, hugging herself and looking over at Melina.

“We’ll know more in the next few hours.” Aristaeus sighed. “The human body can withstand a lot of bee venom...but she is very tiny.” He turned to Eurydice, his eyes softening. “Will you look in the cupboard over there and get the clean rags from the top shelf?”

Eurydice followed his direction, and together, they all made poultices from the cloth, soaking them in the water boiling over the stove first. Aristaeus let them cool

slightly and then began covering Melina's body with the wet cloth. The welts were growing; swelling so much her skin looked stretched and raw.

"What happened?" Aristaeus sat back on his heels, covering her again with the sheet and facing Eurydice.

She wondered what she should tell him, and then decided the truth was best. "I think she had hopes perhaps she would be the one chosen as your bride."

He shook his head, frowning. "I don't understand. You, yes...but Melina?"

"Haven't you seen the way she looks at you?" Orpheus asked.

"She told me you kissed her," Eurydice gave him a long, steady look.

"Yes, we..." Aristaeus flushed. "But my father would never approve of a mortal..."

Orpheus raised an eyebrow at his brother. "Isn't love worth standing up for...no matter what the consequences?"

"Ari?" Melina's voice was soft and raspy and he turned to her. "Water?"

"I will keep her here until she is well." Aristaeus tipped up a goblet of water, holding her head to help her drink it. "If she is to get well."

"Stop saying that." Eurydice felt tears stinging her eyes. "She will be well."

He gave her a veiled look and then his eyes met his brother's. "Orpheus, take her home, would you?"

"No!" Eurydice protested. "I'll stay here too."

Orpheus took her arm, shaking his head. "I think it might be better for you to spend the night in your own bed."

"He's right." Chiron agreed, nodding his dark mane. "There's nothing more you can do here, Eurie."

“Don’t call me that.” Eurydice blinked at him, her lip trembling. “Melina calls me that...”

Orpheus put his arm around her shoulder, steering her toward the door. “We’ll come back in the morning.”

“I’ll have Chiron come for you if...” Aristaeus let the words trail off, seeing Eurydice’s eyes filling with tears. Orpheus just nodded, closing the door behind them and leading her by the hand down the path. Her feet knew the way home, but she couldn’t remember walking the way. Her mind was lost in the memory of Melina’s bloated flesh, the tender bites covering her limbs.

“I’ll stay with you.” Orpheus led her into the cottage, sitting her on the bed.

“Thank you.” She reached for him and he slid in beside her, holding her in the fading afternoon light. His heart beat strong against her ear, and the sound of it reminded her of Melina’s faint, fluttering pulse.

Tears sprung up again and Eurydice swallowed them. “She can’t die.”

“She can.” Orpheus sighed. “She is mortal...but I hope she does not.”

The silence stretched long as they breathed together, lost in their thoughts.

“Does your brother love her?”

“I don’t know.” Orpheus stroked her hair. “He may, but I don’t think he knows it.”

“I want her to be happy.” Her tears flowed down her cheeks, unbidden.

Orpheus tilted her chin up, meeting her eyes. “I want you to be happy.”

“You make me happy.” She gave him a small smile.

“Do I?”

Eurydice blinked at him, frowning. "Will he marry that woman? The one Hymen chose?"

"Yes, I think he will."

"But Melina..."

Orpheus shook his head, wiping at her tears with his thumb. "Eurydice, do you ever think of yourself?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you ever think about your own happiness?" His eyes gleamed in the growing dimness. "Your own wants?"

"I—"

He kissed her quiet. The moment their mouths met, all thought went from her head, and she was his again, wanting nothing more than to be in his arms, to feel his warmth. She wrapped her arms around his broad neck, pulling him in closer, their mouths slanting, tongues meshing. When she hooked her heel around his thigh, pulling their bodies closer, Orpheus groaned, breaking their kiss and looking down into her face, his eyes searching.

She gave him the answer she knew he was looking for. "I want you."

"Do you?"

"Yes." She followed the word with a kiss, cupping his face in her hands.

"I want you too, Eurydice." His voice was low and trembling. "More than an immortal should want anything. I want to keep you. Forever."

"Forever?" she breathed.

"Yes..." He smiled. "Or however long nymphs live."

She laughed. “Almost as long as immortals, if we don’t leave our domain.”

“Then we won’t leave.” He touched his forehead to hers, closing his eyes.

“Do you mean it?”

He nodded, his eyes opening to meet hers. “I want to marry you.”

“Yes.” She didn’t hesitate, smiling up at him.

“Yes?”

“Yes.” She almost laughed at the surprised look on his face, but instead, she kissed his cheek, his neck, his chin, punctuating each with a, “Yes...yes...yes.”

His mouth and body covered hers, and they rolled together on the small bed as she welcomed the weight and heat of him, the ache of her desire so strong she could barely contain it. They were desperate for each other, bodies leading, thoughts blessedly vanquished.

Eurydice’s head went back as he kissed and breathed his way down her neck, edging her wrap down to expose her breasts. She gasped when his mouth found her nipples, his big hands cupping her flesh, kneading her breasts as he sucked and licked his way back and forth between them.

She squirmed her way out from under him, standing to ease her wrap down her shoulders and slip it over her hips. Orpheus watched her undress, standing to do the same, and they slipped back into bed nude, sliding under the sheet together. She thought she might be shy with him, but she was only eager, wanting more than she could say or begin to express.

Straddling him, her thighs clenching his hips, she leaned down to kiss him, teasing his lips with her tongue. His hand roamed over her back, down to her hips,

pressing her into the hard length of his erection, trapped throbbing between their writhing bodies. Eurydice wanted to lose herself in it, and she kissed her way down his chest, dipping her tongue into his navel before following the dark line of hair downward with her lips.

Orpheus groaned when she took him in her hand, nuzzling him, rubbing the fat head against her cheek. Her tongue snaked out to lick around the slick ridge, making his hand go to her hair and press her mouth down over the tip. She took him willingly enough, letting him slide to the back of her throat before she came slowly back up on him again. Taking her time, she licked and sucked him leisurely, exploring and tasting every inch of his length until he moaned for her to stop.

“Come here.” His hand in her hair pulled her up to him and they kissed; the taste of him strong in her mouth, still slick on her lips. He grabbed her hips, grinding her down against him, rubbing his length in her wetness. She whimpered at the sensation, biting at his lips, her nails digging into his shoulders.

The bed was small and hard to navigate for both of them, but he managed to slide her up and himself down. They met in the middle as she spread her thighs for his mouth, moaning and rocking against his tongue. He steadied her with his hands on her hips, the sweet sensation of his tongue exploring her flesh making Eurydice moan and tug at her own nipples. When he found her sweet spot, she shuddered and rolled her hips in his hands, making circles opposite to those he was making with his tongue.

“Oh yes,” she moaned, feeling herself nearing a sweet, delicious edge, aching for him to take her there. Orpheus moaned too, the sensation sending a wave of pleasure through her body, and she gasped when his fingers slipped inside of her, probing her

depths. Her honey dripped down his arm and she knew she was moments from flooding him with her juices. “Oh please, please...”

He worked her with his tongue, lips, and fingers, relentless, and she couldn't hold out any longer. Her climax swept through her, making her moan and clutch his hair in her fingers as she shuddered against his mouth. His tongue slipped deep into her, letting her grind herself against his face as her pleasure rolled through her, forcing her to collapse and reach out to steady herself with both hands against the wall.

Orpheus kissed her trembling thighs with his wet mouth, easing her hips down and himself up again until she was straddling his waist. She leaned, breathless, over his chest, her hair hanging his face, and she rained grateful kisses there over cheeks and chin and neck. His hand behind her neck guided her mouth to his, and she tasted herself on his lips and she sucked it gently from his tongue, making him groan and press his hips up into hers.

She reached between them, finding his hard length and rubbing it between the soft, parted flesh of her lips. Wet from his mouth and her climax, he slid easily up and down the slit as she aimed and guided him just where they both wanted him. Her eyes found his as he gripped her hips, arching up to meet her as she sank herself down onto his erection. They moaned in unison at this first joining, and Eurydice wiggled herself back and forth, trying for even more depth.

“Easy.” Orpheus groaned as she squeezed him, rocking around and around in the saddle of his hips. His breath came faster as he watched her, and she loved the way his eyes moved over her body, his hands following his gaze as she rode him in the

fading heat. The breeze from the window cooled their sweaty skin, but neither of them shivered as they coupled on her little bed.

She swayed on his erection just as she had danced for him on the first day, her hands piling her long, dark hair onto her head, her belly undulating as she moved faster and faster. His hands cupped her breasts, heavy and swaying with their motion, and she shivered when he thumbed her nipples, sending a sweet river of sensation flowing between her legs. Her fingers sought her pleasure center, rubbing herself as she sought a deeper angle, making him moan and move his hands to sink his fingers into her hips.

His thrusts met her own, the sound of their bodies coming together making sweet, wet music, their fluid movements becoming short and hard, their need growing. Eurydice felt him throbbing between her thighs, and could see his climax coming in the twist of his mouth, hear it in his short, panting breath, and feel it in the tight clutch of his fingers and the taut thrust of his thighs.

“I want you,” she panted, rubbing herself faster, wanting to meet him.

He groaned, thrusting up deep and hard. “You have me...you’ve always had me.”

She felt it too, an incredible connection, the deeper one their joining was only a reflection of, and she followed it into bliss with him. Orpheus growled and grabbed her, pushing up so hard she would have fallen if he hadn’t held her so tightly as they came together. He sang out with every last thrust, filling her again and again with white heat, and she shuddered with him, rocking the blissful moment back and forth between their legs where the pleasure went on and on.

It was only then they felt the slight chill in the air, and snuggled under the sheet together, their bodies slick with one another. Eurydice felt tears stinging her eyes and

blinked them back, not wanting him to see. The joy of the moment filled her at the same time she felt consumed by the sadness and weight of her friend's injury.

The world came rushing back in—Melina's life hanging in the balance, Chiron's prediction her marriage to Orpheus would end in tragedy, Orpheus' family's prejudice against anyone who wasn't a "pure" god. She wanted to forget about it all, to lose herself in this moment, in this man, and let the world float away like a dream. Determined, finally, that's just what she did, closing her eyes and sailing on toward morning.

* * * *

The knock that came at dawn woke them both simultaneously, and Eurydice blinked sleepily at Orpheus, sure she was still dreaming. He was quicker than she was, covering himself and crossing the cottage to answer the door.

"Melina's awake." Eurydice recognized Chiron's voice. "And she's asking for Eurydice."

"We're on our way." Orpheus glanced back over his shoulder at Eurydice and she smiled, grateful to hear the news her friend had made it through the night.

"Do you want a ride back?" Chiron offered.

Orpheus gave Eurydice a quizzical look and she shook her head. "We're coming, Chiron. Go on ahead." She thought she heard him snort a response before Orpheus shut the door. They stripped naked again and went to bathe in Eurydice's stream, the early morning chill keeping them close together for warmth, sharing their body heat. They could have used the tub in the cottage, but she didn't want to spend time boiling water.

He washed her with reverence, and she felt his stiffening erection against her behind when he turned her around, pressing into her. It made her want him again, but Melina was asking for her, and she didn't want to take too long. Besides, she thought with a smile as they pulled their clothes back on—she and Orpheus had the rest of their lives together.

When they arrived, they found Aristaeus sitting by her bedside in a chair, his head tipped back, snoring noisily. Chiron let them in, and Eurydice went straight to Melina, whose eyes were still half-swollen shut, but she was smiling.

“Chiron says he stayed awake most of the night changing these poultices.” Melina's voice came out raspy and raw, but she was talking. Eurydice took her hand, tears in her eyes.

“He knew just what to do for you.”

“He's a good man.” Melina's eyes, still swollen, turned to him sleeping in the chair by the bed. Then she smiled sadly at her friend. “He's going to marry her.”

Eurydice swallowed, shaking her head. “No.”

“Yes.” Melina shook her head. “We talked. I understand. It's his obligation. He's asked me to come with him...to help him with the bees.”

“Are you going?”

“You know me.” Melina smiled. “Would I say no to a mission with the God of the Bees?”

“I'll miss you.” Eurydice blinked back her tears. “But I have some news which might cheer you up. I'm getting married.”

“Eurie!” Melina’s eyes widened—as wide as they could with the red welts surrounding them. “When?”

Eurydice glanced up at Orpheus. “I don’t know when...”

“As soon as possible...” He smiled back at her.

“When you’re well enough to be my handmaiden at the wedding.” Eurydice decided, smoothing Melina’s hair. She winced even at the gentle touch.

“What’s this I hear about a wedding?” Aristaeus came awake with a start, giving a dazed look around the room.

“Long night?” Orpheus smiled at his brother.

“Very.” Aristaeus stretched and yawned. His eyes softened when he looked at Melina. “We’re out of the woods, now, though...”

“Thank the gods.” Eurydice breathed a long sigh.

Aristaeus cocked his head at her. “Were you talking about my wedding?”

“No...” She flushed. “Mine.”

“Yours?” He raised a quizzical eyebrow at her.

“And mine.” Orpheus put his hand on the nymph’s shoulder and she covered it with her own, smiling up at him.

“You’re getting married?” Chiron spoke up for the first time, turning away from where he was making more poultices at the table.

“I’m...I’m happy for you...both.” Aristaeus stumbled over the words, his face showing his surprise.

“Would you be my man of honor, brother?” Orpheus asked.

Aristaeus stood, embracing his brother. “I’d be honored.”

“Is this what you want to do?” Chiron frowned at Eurydice, looking between the couple with dark, foreboding eyes.

“Why wouldn’t she?” Aristaeus laughed. “My brother could have his choice of any woman.”

“Yes.” Eurydice met the centaur’s concerned eyes, knowing what he was worried about. She didn’t want to mention his prediction in front of Aristaeus and Melina—not now, not when she was still healing. “We’re sure.”

Aristaeus seemed over his shock. He beamed at them both, his blue eyes bright. “When Melina’s well again, you can have this cottage for your wedding holiday.”

“Thank you.” Eurydice stood and kissed her soon-to-be brother-in-law on the cheek.

“That’s very generous of you.”

He flushed, shaking his head. “It’s the least I can do.”

Chapter Seven

"You're the most beautiful bride Greece has ever seen." Melina adjusted Eurydice's sheer white veil over the traditional red chiton she wore, the material reaching the floor, and gathering there in fine, lovely scallops.

"I don't care about Greece." Eurydice turned back and forth, looking at herself in Aristaeus' full mirror. He had offered them the use of his cottage for the bridal preparations. She met her friend's eyes in the mirror. Melina looked beautiful as well in her white chiton, her blonde hair piled high on her head. There was hardly any evidence of her being stung at all—a few scars left on her throat and arms, and that was all. "But...I do want to be beautiful for Orpheus."

Melina smiled and kissed her cheek. "You could be wearing rags."

"Or nothing."

"Chiron!" Eurydice gasped, turning to see the centaur standing at the open window. He was tall enough to look right in and leaned on the ledge, grinning at them. "Honestly, I think he'd prefer you that way...go ahead, take off the dress."

Melina laughed. "You know...he's right."

"Probably." Eurydice felt warm all over remembering Orpheus' hands on her. They had been so busy with wedding preparations in the past few weeks that neither of them had found even a moment to sneak away together. "But I'm going to have enough problems with Apollo and Calliope welcoming a nymph into their little family circle without starting things off by getting into the bridal carriage naked."

"Oh, forget about his family." Melina frowned, adjusting her friend's veil again over her long, dark hair. "Orpheus loves you. That's all that matters."

Eurydice went over to the window where Chiron stood. "Is he as nervous as I am?"

"More." The centaur snorted. "He's like a schoolboy again...and still just as impatient to play truant and seek out his thrills elsewhere."

"I'm sure Ari's keeping him calm," Melina soothed.

"He's trying." Chiron shook his head. "But Hymen isn't helping."

Eurydice gritted her teeth. "I wish he didn't have to marry us."

"It would be horrible luck if the God of Marriage didn't preside at his own brother's wedding," Melina reminded her.

"Yes." Eurydice met Chiron's eyes and saw the concern there. She gave him a brave smile. "I guess we can use all the luck we can get."

"Agreed." Melina nodded, having heard of the oracle's prediction.

"You're still sure about this whole marriage thing?" The centaur cocked his head, raising his eyebrows.

"Chiron..." Eurydice sighed. "We've been over it and over it."

He straightened up. "I know what I know."

"I feel what I feel," she countered, blinking at him until he sighed and looked away.

Melina offered a hypothesis. "Perhaps you're wrong this time?"

"I've been an oracle since long before you were born." The centaur informed her. "Do you know how many times I've been wrong?"

"There's a first time for everything," Eurydice piped up, poking him in the arm.

"I really do hope so." He gave her a level stare, not returning her smile. A sound drew his attention, and he disappeared from the window for a moment. "They're coming for you."

"The bridal carriage!" Melina practically squealed, her eyes bright.

"How do I look?" Eurydice turned back to the mirror, suddenly feeling breathless and dizzy.

"Like a goddess," Melina murmured.

"I wish." The reflection staring back at her was a stranger, dark hair piled high. She had been biting her lips until they were so crimson they matched the blood red of her dress.

"You look like the most beautiful nymph in the world," Chiron assured her from the window. "Now hurry, before your husband-to-be dies of Priapism."

Eurydice laughed, leaning over and kissing the centaur on the cheek. "Thank you."

"You will be so happy." Melina pulled the veil over her friend's face and took her hand, leading her out the door.

Eurydice glanced behind her at the bed, made up in white silk and ready for the bridal couple's return. "I know."

Orpheus and Aristaeus waited for them in the bridal carriage, drawn by four white horses. Eurydice's eyes brightened the moment she saw him, wearing the same scarlet color she wore, his eyes dark and dancing at the sight of her. He looked as if he wanted to take her right there in the carriage, wedding party and feast be damned. She took his

hand as she sat beside him to find it cold and a little clammy. Hers was too warm but also damp.

Aristaeus and Melina sat behind them as the horses started forward, led by Hymen and his wedding torch. It burned brightly in the late afternoon and Eurydice felt its heat and smelled the distinct odor of sage. The guests who had come for the festival had stayed for the wedding, leaving their tents up in anticipation of the coming wedding feast. The carriage made its way past guests lined up on the road on either side. They waved hand cloths and threw flowers. Eurydice laughed, catching one and slipping her hand under her veil to tuck it behind her ear.

Orpheus leaned in to whisper in her ear. "I want to tear that off you."

"Soon." Her response was breathless.

"Not soon enough."

Hymen glanced back, rolling his eyes. "Can't you two wait until the ceremony is over?"

"I'm trying, brother. Believe me."

It was the same place she had met Orpheus singing. There were long tables laden with food lined along the sides, a high archway covered in roses, and asters stood where the stage had once been. Hymen stopped the carriage and Eurydice let Orpheus help her from the carriage, feeling the press of his hand against the small of her back like a memory as they followed Hymen's torch.

Her heart dropped when she saw Calliope and Apollo standing on either side of the archway, waiting for them. She knew they had both given their permission for the wedding, but she still burned at the memory of Calliope's words about half-breeds.

Hymen held his torch aloft, turning to face the crowd. Melina stood next to Eurydice, Aristaeus flanking Orpheus, as the God of Marriage began presiding over the ceremony. The guests gathered behind them, and Eurydice could hear the laughter of children and smell the roasting meat. She glanced over and saw those stealing olives from one of the long tables. People couldn't wait for the wedding feast to start and she—flushing, she swallowed trying to concentrate on what Hymen was saying, because she could only think of the wedding night to come.

Aristaeus handed Orpheus his lyre and he took it, turning to look into Eurydice's eyes. She had expected their vows, the declaration of joining, but a song from him? Her chest swelled as he began to play, the sweet notes filling the air and her heart. His eyes moved over her face under the veil, and she longed to take it off, to kiss him right here. He began to sing, his voice trembling so slightly she might have been the only one to notice.

*Eurydice, you're mine.
Your eyes are my home.
Your lips are my wine.
You have my soul.*

She had never heard this song, and it touched her to hear him sing it, to know he had written it for her. His voice carried far, and she knew the guests even at the back could hear him, and yet he sang just for her.

*Your visage enthralls,
to touch you is bliss.
So until death calls
I claim your kiss.*

It was the most beautiful song she had ever heard, and she knew she would never forget it. The last note had barely stopped vibrating when he tossed his lyre to

Aristaeus, grabbing her around the waist and pulling her close. She gasped as he threw her veil back, his eyes searching hers for just a moment before capturing her mouth with his.

The crowd cheered around them but Eurydice lost herself in the press of his body, the feel of his mouth slanting across hers, his tongue already searching. She moaned softly, putting her arms around his neck and wondering how she was going to make it until they were alone together in the cottage. She was so lost in the kiss she didn't hear the cheers turn to gasps until someone cried, "It's an omen!"

They broke apart and Orpheus looked at his brother, holding the smoking torch aloft. It gave off a horrible smell, now, like brimstone or sulphur, and its light dimmed, the smoke turning as black as night and trailing into the sky. Her wide eyes turned to her husband—my husband!—filled with fear.

"It's not an omen." Orpheus sounded doubtful, frowning, and he leaned in to whisper into her ear. "It's just another of Hymen's tricks, I'm sure of it."

Relieved, she turned to Melina, whose eyes were just as wide, understanding what such a portent meant—the bride or groom would die within the first three months of their wedding. Eurydice shook her head, rolling her eyes at Hymen and Melina breathed a sigh, leaning in to give Eurydice the customary kiss on her cheek.

When Eurydice straightened and turned for welcoming by her new parents, she saw Chiron's face, pale and drawn, but she tried to shut it out. This was her wedding day, not time to think about oracles and tragedy and omens. Calliope kissed her cheek, and Apollo hugged her tightly as the crowd clapped. Their enthusiasm seemed dampened somewhat by the smoking torch, and Eurydice glared at Hymen.

“Let the feast begin!” Apollo boomed, and the guests fell to the tables, grabbing legs of lamb and loaves of bread that had been roasting and baking for days. He smiled down at his new daughter-in-law. “At least one of my sons married you.”

She laughed. “The right one, I hope.”

“That’s one son down,” Apollo said, turning to Calliope. “Aristaeus travels to Thebes next week, and that will be two. Then it’s just you, Hymen.”

Calliope smiled, running her fingers through her youngest son’s blonde curls. “All in due time. You can’t take all my babies from me at once, now, can you?”

Orpheus held up a fat, yellow quince, handed to him by Aristaeus. Smiling down at his bride, he held it to her lips and she licked at the tender surface of the fruit, taking a deep bite of the tangy flesh. She laughed as juice ran down her chin and Orpheus grabbed her hand, using his tongue to catch it instead.

“It won’t be long before these two will be making grandchildren for you to marry off!” Melina laughed, watching them kiss. Apollo chuckled.

“Terrific.” Hymen stuck his torch into the ground with a scowl. It nearly burned out now, the smell fading. “More half-breeds to pollute the family bloodline.”

Eurydice heard him and felt Orpheus stiffen. She knew he meant to say something to his brother, but she didn’t want her wedding day spoiled, so she slid her knee between his thigh, pressing her body against his and squirming in his arms. He seemed to forget everything then, claiming her mouth, the tangy juice of the quince slippery over their lips.

“I don’t think I can wait until the feast is over.” His voice was low against her ear.

“You have to.” She grinned. “I’m hungry.”

He chased her to the table and they fed one another big, fat raspberries, and moist, flakey pieces of orange fish and raw oysters. Eurydice took every opportunity to lick his fingers clean, making him moan, his eyes bright as he watched her tongue flicker and tease back and forth.

“You’re going to kill me, woman.” He groaned, rubbing her lips with his fingers.

She laughed. “You haven’t seen anything yet.”

“I’ve seen enough to know I want more.” His eyes moved over the tight fitting chiton, cinched at her waist and accenting her curves.

Melina interrupted them, touching Eurydice’s arm. “Can I steal her away for a moment?” Orpheus sighed, raising an eyebrow at her. “Please? Before you carry her off and I can’t get in to see her for the next month?”

He laughed. “Go.”

The two women wandered off in the crowd arm in arm. They were quiet for a moment, until Melina finally spoke. “He’s leaving next week.”

“I know.” Eurydice patted her friend’s hand. “Are you still set on going?”

“Yes.” Melina sounded determined. “I’m going to go see my sister in Sparta for a month. She is ill, and has a small child who needs caring for. I’ll stay with her while...”

Her voice trailed off and her eyes followed the demi-god, who was now talking to his newly married brother. Jason stood with them, and they were talking, heads bowed, looking serious. “While Ari gets married and goes...on his wedding holiday.”

Eurydice’s heart went out to her. She couldn’t even imagine. “But then you’ll follow him to Thebes?”

“With the bees, yes.” Melina nodded, looking thoughtful.

"I'm sorry it worked out this way."

"I'm not." Melina gave her a squeeze. "You're happy...and who knows what the future will bring?"

"I suppose no one knows." Eurydice saw Chiron watching them, his eyes sad. No one knows. That wasn't entirely true, was it? They were defying all the signs of the gods. Still, somehow she knew it was right, no matter what sort of tragedy was waiting for them around the corner.

"It's time." Chiron grinned as he approached them. "They're already carrying Orpheus to the cottage."

"Are they?" Eurydice's eyes widened her face flushing. "Already?"

"Come with me!" Melina took her hand, leading her after the crowd. By the time they got to the cottage, Orpheus was nude under the sheet, waiting for her, a crowd of guests gathered in the cottage.

She knew the custom, but her heart beat fast and her cheeks flushed as Melina took off her veil, letting her dark hair spill down over her pale shoulders. Next was the chiton, untied and slipped down her body. She was completely bare underneath, and the crowd gasped at her beauty before she slipped between the sheets next to Orpheus. Melina and Aristaeus waved the guests out of the room. Most looked back over their shoulders, reluctant to go, calling out lewd suggestions as they went.

"We didn't have to wait as long as you imagined." She smiled up at him, sliding her leg over his.

He grinned. "I bribed Jason to start the procession early."

She laughed, snuggling up to him. "What did you bribe him with?"

“I promised him when he returned from his quest that I would supply him with a hundred women.”

“A hundred!” Her eyes widened. “And where will you find them?”

He shrugged. “I just have to pull out my lyre...”

She hit him in the chest. “Quest? Where is he going?”

“Jason is the rightful king of Iolcus.” Orpheus played with a strand of her hair, tickling it over her neck. “He’s going to claim his throne.”

“Jason is a king?” She blinked at him. It wasn’t too far of a jump from the big, strong warrior she knew to king, she supposed.

Orpheus’ eyes followed the trail he made with the ends of her hair, tracing it around one of her nipples. “His uncle took his throne when he was a baby. For his safety, his mother pretended Jason was dead and bundled him off. Guess who raised him?”

Eurydice shivered when his thumb brushed the tip of her nipple. “Who?”

“Chiron.” Orpheus gently squeezed her flesh, shifting his body closer to hers.

“Chiron raised a baby?” She managed to get the question out, moaning when she felt the heat of his erection against her thigh.

“Yes.” He dipped his head down and flicked his tongue over her breast, wetting it. She sighed, sliding her thigh over his. “Jason and I grew up together.”

“So he’s just going to walk in and claim his throne?” She tilted her head back with a happy sigh as his mouth trailed wet circles up and down her throat.

“Not exactly.” He kissed behind her ear; flicking his tongue there and making her arch her back. “He’s been to see the uncle who took his throne already.”

She ran her fingers through his dark hair, guiding him back down to her breasts.

“How did that go?”

“Jason is very...honorable.” Orpheus slid down to pay attention to her nipples again, wetting them with his tongue. “And sometimes I think he’s a little too naïve.”

“This doesn’t sound promising.” She gasped when he nipped at her tender flesh, pressing her hips up to his.

He smiled, kissing his way down her belly, his hands staying put, cupping her breasts. “His uncle has convinced him, in order to prove himself worthy of his own rightful throne that he needs to obtain the Golden Fleece.” Eurydice moaned when he settled himself between her thighs, kissing down each bend in her leg in turn. “So now tomorrow he’s off on his ship, the Argo, to complete the task.”

“Isn’t...” Her words drifted off as his tongue began to slip through her dark curls, his fingers working her nipples between thumb and forefinger. “Ohhh...isn’t...the Golden Fleece...guarded by a dragon?”

Orpheus’ tongue paused. “Among other things.”

“Sounds impossible.” She pressed his mouth between her legs again, opening her thighs wider for him.

“I know.” He snorted, rolling his eyes. “Heroes!” His tongue gently parted her lips, running up one side and down the other, teasing the sweet, aching bud at the top for only a moment.

She smiled; eyes half-closed in pleasure. “I’m glad I’m not married to one.”

“I guess I’m more a lover than a fighter.”

Eurydice reached her hand down and parted her swollen flesh, showing him her center. "I hope so."

He sank into her with a groan, his tongue delving deep, tasting her. The warm, late afternoon light from the window, still open from Chiron's visit, spilled onto the bed. The sound of the bees humming outside in the roses made her smile as she closed her eyes and let the sensation carry her.

His mouth hummed against her most sensitive flesh, his tongue flickering back and forth there as he slid a hand down between her thighs to probe between her lips. His fingers parted her, slipping slowly inward, exploring her, front, back, and sides, and she squeezed him with her smooth walls, making him moan. The vibration sent shivers through her, and she rocked her hips to the motion of his tongue, matching him.

His fingers caught an easy rhythm, in and out, and she moaned, cupping her own breasts in her hands and tugging at her nipples. Her whole body felt as if it were a river of fire flowing between her thighs and into his greedy mouth. The anticipation of today had been incredible, and the tension that had stretched taut between them wasn't going to last long. She couldn't help but give into it, to give him what he wanted, what he was working so hard for.

"Orpheus!" She moaned his name, bucking up and feeling her climax overtaking her. The thick, delicious pulse between her legs forced her hips toward his lapping tongue. She rolled her pelvis, shuddering in the wake of her orgasm, the soft cries leaving her throat carrying through the afternoon air.

He kissed her wet curls, her swollen lips, his hungry mouth still sucking at her lips, making her shiver and reach for him. He came to her and they kissed, their mouths

sliding slick with girlish honey. She sucked his tongue into her mouth, making him moan and press her thighs open with his. His erection was like an iron bar, riding up and down between her slit, rubbing there as they kissed.

“Oh!” She gasped when he shifted his hips, sliding the head between her swollen lips. His aim was impeccable, and he sank into her flesh with a low groan, pressing his hips in deep. They stayed there for a moment, breathing hard, hearts beating a throbbing rhythm, their bodies pressed close. Then he began to move, drawing slowly out and sinking in again, deep and fast.

Eurydice wrapped her arms around his neck, nuzzling his throat and whispering his name, hot words against his ear, again and again. Her soft cries filled the room again as they rocked, their bodies becoming slick with sweat in the afternoon heat. The slippery wetness between their thighs, where their bodies joined in mutual pleasure, gave off a musky heat that built with a delicious friction.

Orpheus let out a low groan, slowing and arching his back. The pleasure twisted on his face made her flush, and she squeezed him, using all her strength, trying to milk him of the hot seed she felt throbbing, aching for release. He panted, opening his eyes to look down at her. “Not yet.”

She gasped when he rolled her to her belly, pulling her up to her knees and parting her legs with his. Completely exposed to him, she buried her face in the softness of the covers, feeling his fingers searching between her legs. They rubbed her gently, teasing circles, and she moaned, arching her back and presenting more of her pink flesh to him. His erection throbbed, hot and wet, against her thigh.

“Please.” Her words muffled against the bed and her knees trembled. “Ohhh please!” He teased her still, his fingers rubbing as he slid the spongy head of his erection between her legs, seeking entrance. She moaned as he pressed deep, wrapping his arm around her hips and using it for leverage. His fingers sought her out again, from a different angle now, rubbing in those fast, delicious circles as he thrust deep into her from behind.

“Yes!” She gasped, going up to her hands and knees and rocking with him. The mirror she had used to dress in her bridal gown that morning stood tilted toward them, and she saw their reflection, their bodies slapping together in the growing heat. She met his eyes, seeing the look of pleasure on his face. The way he looked at her heavy breasts swaying beneath her, her hair a dark cloud around her head thrilled her and she bit her lip, working her wetness over his shaft.

“Don’t stop,” she begged, the covers fisted in her hands. “Please, oh, don’t stop!”

“No,” he agreed, breathless, groaning as she squeezed him again, involuntarily this time, her body readying itself, pushing her over a precarious edge. “I won’t...stop...until...”

“Yes!” She threw her head back, her body quaking, clamping down on his swollen shaft. “Now! Oh, now!” That deep, satisfying throb between her legs went on and on, and she buried her face against the bed, moaning loudly as he thrust and growled into her from behind. His hands grabbed her hips, shoving himself into her, onto her, and shuddering his weight over her as he filled her with his seed.

They stayed that way for a while, panting, until Eurydice finally gasped, “Can’t breathe!” Chuckling, Orpheus rolled off her and gathered her in his arms, slipping the

sheet over their damp skin. She sighed happily, closing her eyes as she rested her cheek against his chest, tucking her head under his chin. It was a perfect fit. How can this end in tragedy? The thought came, unbidden, and she shoved it away, shaking her head to make it go.

Chapter Eight

They dozed a while, but the sound of the door opening woke her, and Eurydice opened her eyes to see Melina coming in with baskets, putting them on the table. Orpheus was still asleep, snoring softly, his chest vibrating with the sensation.

"It grew quiet, and I thought you might get hungry," Melina whispered, giving her a wink before slipping out the door again. Eurydice smiled, thanking the gods for giving her such a wonderful friend. Her stomach protested as the smell of freshly baked bread, cooked meat reached her nose, and she slid out from under the heavy weight of Orpheus arm, going to inspect the baskets.

"Did they feed us?" Orpheus half-sat in bed, looking at her sitting naked on the chair, chewing happily on olives and leaving the pits on the table.

"Melina." Eurydice smiled, waving him over. "There's plenty."

"I should keep my strength up." He wandered over and inspected the baskets.

"Yes..." Eurydice's hand squeezed the now-soft appendage between his legs, feeling it twitch in her hand. "You definitely should."

"Damn, woman!" He groaned as she squeezed and released, feeling it thickening slowly in her hand. "You're going to be the death of me, I tell you."

She leaned over and kissed the tip, letting it loll fatly against his thigh as he sat in the chair beside her. "Immortals can't die."

"We can," he disagreed, putting two olives into his mouth. "If we choose it."

She frowned, breaking open a pomegranate and munching on the fruit-covered seeds. "I didn't know that."

"There are ways." He shrugged, putting two olive pits on the table with hers.

“Try the honey,” she encouraged, handing him a slice of bread spread thickly with it. “It’s Melina’s.”

“Aristaeus was right.” He gave a groan that sounded almost exactly like the one she had heard earlier when they were making love. “That’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever tasted!” She raised an eyebrow at him and he chuckled. “Almost.” He leaned back in his chair and smiled at her. “It doesn’t get any better than this...we could spend days like this.”

She licked her fingers clean of honey. “Weeks.”

Orpheus choked on his bread, his eyes watering. “I think I’d better have some meat.”

She laughed, handing over the basket and letting him rummage through. When his belly was full, Orpheus wandered over to the bed, picking up his lyre and strumming idly as he watched her clean up their meal. Eurydice loved the way his eyes roamed over her, positively wolfish, looking always as if he wanted to eat her up at any moment. The light was beginning to fade, and she stoked the fire and added wood, knowing the night would be cool. Then she packed the baskets back up, sweeping their garbage into a tin and turning to him.

“Will you play for me?”

He smiled, his eyes half-closed. “If you will dance.”

Lighting a long, wooden stick in the fire, she went around the room and lit the fat, waxy candles Melina had left around the room. The candles made from her beeswax and smelled delicious when they burned. The whole room took on a different, softer

tone in the fading light. Orpheus strummed idly as he watched her pull a long trail of blue cloth from a white silk bag in the corner.

“Remember this?” She smiled, wrapping it around her.

His eyes brightened as he began to play the song he had been singing when they first met. “I’ll never forget it.”

He played and sang—his voice rich and deep as she danced for him in the candlelight. The blue cloth shimmered around her like water, her body moving by itself to the sound of his music. Nothing had ever moved her the way he did, and she couldn’t help but respond. Her hips undulated around and around to the beat, her arms moving like snakes above her head, the blue silk wrap veiling and revealing the soft curves of her body by turns.

As his voice grew stronger, the music more insistent, she danced faster, a blue whirl, her dark hair flying out behind her. It was as if he were playing her body with his voice, his instrument, seeking to make her breathless, to make her completely his. When the song ended, she collapsed at the end of the bed, breathing hard, her eyes bright as she looked at him. His eyes filled with wonder as he set aside his lyre, capturing the two ends of the blue silk, wrapped around her waist, and using it to pull her in to him.

“You are the most beautiful woman I have ever known.” He lifted her chin, kissed her softly, and she felt a tremble in his lips. Her dance seemed to have ignited a deep lust in him. His hands roamed over her body, insistent, even greedier than they had been earlier, but she wanted it to last.

Sliding down between his thighs, she found him hard and a little wet at the tip. She tossed a pillow onto the floor, kneeling there and tugging at his hips until he situated himself at the edge of the bed, his length rising up to meet her mouth, as if asking for entrance. Pulling the blue silk from her, she wrapped it slowly around and around the base of him, making a tight knot. He gasped as she slid the material underneath his sac, pulling them up, too, and making another, looser knot.

“What—?” His question was lost as she slid her tongue around the head, enveloping it with the soft heat of her mouth, her eyes never leaving his. She sucked on the tip, just the sensitive skin of the head, working her tongue back and forth, and licking around the raised ridge until he was moaning with pleasure.

Only then did she slide her mouth further down the length, working her lips wide over the shaft, the silk wrapped around the base tickling her nose as she took all of him into her mouth. He growled deep in his throat, pressing his hips up and moaning, his hand moving in her hair. She encouraged him with her mouth, undulating her tongue, working it along the underside of him, but not moving her head. She knew it was driving him crazy and he began to thrust, using her mouth, shoving himself deep into her throat.

He went in hard and came out wet, one of his hands reaching down to cup her breast, kneading the heavy flesh in his fingers. Her nipples responded, becoming taut and hard, and she whimpered, sliding a hand between her legs. Her thighs were wet with her juices, and she found the sensitive spot at the top of her cleft with her thumb and strummed it like she'd seem him strum his lyre.

His erection throbbed in her mouth, the cloth wrapped around it turning it from flesh colored to a thick, throbbing red, the veins standing out prominently. She pulled

her head back and licked at them, up and down the shaft, tracing them like pathways with her tongue. He watched her in the dying light, the candles casting a soft glow on their skin now, his eyes half closed, his mouth slightly open.

“I want you,” he insisted, his fingers tugging at her nipples, sending heat down into her pelvis.

She smiled, teasing the head against her lips, rubbing it there, back and forth. “Not yet.”

He groaned as she stood, turning around and wiggling her hips in front of him, dancing down into his lap. His erection stood straight up between her wet thighs, but she didn’t take him into her. Instead, she danced in his lap, grinding her hips into his, rubbing her wetness over his flesh. He gasped, grabbing the flesh of her behind in his hands and trying to keep her there, snug against him, but she refused to stay still, squirming and writhing in the saddle of his hips.

He seemed to give up that goal, his hands roaming upward, pressing her breasts in his hands, rolling her nipples around in his fingers. That made her moan and rock faster, using his erection to rub between her lips, teasing that tender bud of flesh with the head of him. She used her fingers to press it there, biting her lip and rocking around and around, her thighs trembling with the effort.

“Now?” He whispered, feathering kisses along her spine. She turned around and climbed into his lap, grabbing and pumping him in her hand, making him jerk with pleasure. He wrapped his arms around her as she guided him up between her legs, sinking down onto his shaft, the blue silk still wrapped tight at the base.

She never stopped dancing on him, her hips rocking as he lifted her breasts to his mouth, sucking each nipple in turn, and making her moan. They grew fat and swollen under his tongue, and she reached down to touch herself with one hand, making fast circles between her legs with her fingers.

“Take me,” she begged, arching, and he grabbed her behind, thrusting up deep into her. He lifted her completely, then, standing with her legs wrapped around his waist, capturing her mouth and kissing her as he turned and pressed her to the wall. The night was completely dark now, and they rocked the cottage as their bodies joined again and again. She knew everyone must be able to hear her moans, the window still wide, the breeze growing cool, but she didn’t care.

“Yes!” She dug her nails into the skin of his back as he grunted and thrust, driving her against the wall. She punctuated each thrust with an affirmation, pleading for more. “Yes, yes, yes!” He drove into her relentlessly, the blue cloth between them soaked with her juices, and she reached down to touch herself, aching to send her body over the edge.

“Please!” She whimpered and bit at his shoulder, feeling the hot swelling of him between her thighs, his thick length urging her upward. She could barely hold onto him anymore, she was trembling so hard, but it didn’t matter. He had her, forcing her deeper, further, giving her exactly what she wanted in every moment. She was completely his, and she reveled in it.

“Ohhhh!” She moaned as it came, breaking over her like a wave of heat and light, her body shuddering in his arms as she writhed and bucked; her legs wrapped tight

around his waist. He didn't stop driving into her, making her cry out with the sensation, the pleasure going on and on, the feeling almost too much to bear.

He turned with her in his arms, pressing her down into the bed, but never leaving her. He continued to plunge into her depths, lifting her legs into the air and holding her by the ankles. She ran trembling hands over his hard, ridged belly, the hard planes of his chest. He groaned when her fingers brushed his nipples and she smiled, wetting her fingers and teasing them, making him growl and thrust even harder.

"I can't—" He gasped, and she smiled, reaching down between their legs, tugging at the blue silk. His eyes widened and he groaned. Her fingers worked at the loose knot, the one tying up his sac, freeing them. He shuddered, moaning softly at her touch.

"Better?" she murmured, tweaking his nipples with her fingers again. He nodded, biting his lip, his eyes closed in pleasure as he slapped into her.

"You feel so good..." He leaned in to kiss her, probing his tongue deep into her mouth. She broke the kiss, biting at his lips, wrapping her legs around his waist. Rocking her hips up to him, she snaked her hand down between them again, to where their flesh joined.

"Tell me," she whispered, tugging at the blue silk wrapped around the base of his erection. "Tell me what you want."

He groaned, sinking deep into her, hesitating there. "I don't want it to ever end."

"We can do that." She smiled, urging him to roll to his back and sitting up on him. Straddling his hips, she rocked around, feeling him moving inside of her. She pressed her hands flat on his chest, leaning in as she began to move back and forth, rubbing the

head of him somewhere deep inside. He groaned and grasped her hips, his eyes meeting hers in the candlelight. "How long can you do this?"

He gritted his teeth, shaking his head. "I don't know."

"Want to find out?" She lifted one of her breasts, sneaking her tongue out to touch it to her own nipple. He watched, wide-eyed, as she sucked it between her lips.

"Eurydice." His voice was low, strained, as she sucked the other one, still riding him, back and forth.

"Yes?" She leaned forward, her breasts swaying in his face as she began to slide up and down on his length. He grasped them, kneading her flesh, his tongue moving back and forth between her nipples, making her moan and arch against him. "Oooh yes, that's good."

He buried his face there with a groan and she felt his erection throbbing, a thick, swollen pulse pressing deep inside her. The attention to her breasts made her shiver and she slipped her hand down between them. The blue silk was wet, the knot grown tighter with their movement, and she worked it slowly with her fingers, distracted by the sensation of his greedy mouth on her nipples.

When she got the knot finally free, he gave a low growl, hips thrusting up hard. She knew it wouldn't be long now. Sliding up and off him, she gave him a smile as she turned on the bed, presenting her behind to him. He didn't hesitate. Kneeling up between her thighs, he spread her wide, driving into her so hard they both collapsed onto the bed under the force of his thrust. She lifted her hips as far as she could, edging her fingers underneath, seeking her own heat and finding it.

His breath moved hot over her ear and cheek and she rubbed herself faster and faster, their bodies slapping together hard on the mattress. The whole bed shook with their coupling, and Orpheus let out a loud cry, burying his face in her hair. She felt the length of him pulsing deep inside her, erupting again and again, the force of it shuddering him against her. The low growl of him, the heavy weight and heat of his body, sent her over too, and she went with a tremble and sigh, milking him with the slick, white-hot contractions between her legs.

“You really are going to be the death of me,” he panted, putting his hand on his chest as he rolled off her, looking at her in the candlelight. She turned her face to him in the golden glow, smiling lazily.

“We nymphs are known for these sorts of...abilities.” She pushed a wave of dark hair out of her eyes.

He grinned, putting an arm over his eyes. “I understand Chiron’s attraction now.”

She laughed. “He does have a thing for nymphs.”

“Well, he can’t have mine.” Orpheus reached for her, and she snuggled up to him, pulling the covers over their bodies. The night was, as she had predicting, quite cool, but she didn’t have the energy to get up to close the window.

“I think I was always yours.” She breathed a deep sigh, slipping her leg over his.

He stroked her hair, his eyes closed. “I knew it the moment I saw you.”

“It’s like it was meant to be.” Her thoughts turned to the Fates, to the oracle, and she tried, again, to shove them away.

But Orpheus was clearly thinking about it too. “I know he’s never been wrong, but I can’t believe Chiron’s prediction is going to come true.”

"I don't know." She swallowed hard.

He chuckled. "Maybe the tragedy will be we'll die in each other's arms, dehydrated and exhausted from our lovemaking."

"I hope that's it." She smiled, kissing his fingers and twining hers with his.

"Me, too," he murmured, already drifting.

The words "I love you" trembled on her lips but never passed them before they both slipped into sleep.

* * * *

The sound of a knock on the door at dawn made Eurydice think of their very first night together, when Melina's life hung in the balance. She smiled, knowing this knock was probably Melina herself, bringing them breakfast. Orpheus frowned in his sleep, waving the sound away and turning over, pulling the sheet with him. The sound of Chiron's voice calling for her husband made her heart drop, and she glanced over at Orpheus, who was awake and wide-eyed now, frowning as he sat up and wrapped himself in the sheet.

She covered herself with the blanket, waiting for him to open the door, knowing this couldn't be a good thing. The three men came into the room—Jason, Chiron, and Aristaeus—glancing at her in the bridal bed, still stained from the night's coupling. Something's wrong. She didn't know what it was, but somehow she knew whatever they were about to say was going to end her wedding holiday bliss.

"Orpheus, I'm sorry." Jason spoke first, hesitating, glancing over his shoulder at Chiron, who nodded at him to go on. "I hate to ask this of you. You know I wouldn't, if I didn't have to..."

“Go away.” Eurydice sat up in bed, the covers nearly dropping before she pulled them up again. “All of you! Just go!”

Chiron shook his head at her. “Eurydice, please. Let him finish.” But she didn’t want him to finish. She didn’t even want him to start.

“The oracle has spoken.” Jason sighed, sitting on one of the hard chairs, his head in his hands. “I’m leaving with the Argonauts to bring back the Golden Fleece, and if I don’t take you with me, Orpheus...we’re all going to die.”

“What?” Orpheus blinked at him. “I’m no warrior? What good am I to you?”

“It’s the strength of your lyre and your voice they need,” Aristaeus said.

“This comes from you?” Orpheus met the centaur’s eyes and he nodded briefly.

Eurydice stood, wrapping the blanket around her as she came toward them, her eyes flashing. “If I didn’t know better, I’d swear you had it in for me, horsie.”

“Eurydice...” Chiron sighed, shaking his head. “If I could spare you...”

“Oh spare me!” She rolled her eyes, reaching out and grabbing Orpheus by the arm. “You can’t go. We were married only yesterday!”

Orpheus put his hand over hers, staring at Jason. “When do you sail?”

“Today.” He didn’t look up, his head still in his hands.

“Today!” Eurydice paced the floor, back and forth. “Today?”

“I’m sorry.” Jason looked pained as he lifted his eyes to hers.

“You’re sure?” Orpheus asked Chiron.

The centaur gave him a steady look. “I’ve never been wrong.”

“It’s true.” Aristaeus agreed. They all knew it was true.

Orpheus sighed. “I know.”

“No!” Eurydice railed at him then put her arms around his waist, holding him tight.
“This can’t be happening.”

He stroked her hair, murmuring something unintelligible there, words of comfort she didn’t want to hear. She lifted her face to him, pleading. “Orpheus, no! You can’t go! Chiron said...” She took a deep, trembling breath. “The oracle said it would end in tragedy...and if you go off with warriors...”

His eyes were helpless, but his jaw was set. “I have to go.”

She knew then, she could say nothing. Turning, she drifted back to the bed—the bed they had shared their wedding holiday night in, the one she had hoped to spend at least a week making love in. She buried her face into a pillow and tried to drown out the sound of their voices—Jason apologizing, Chiron lecturing, and Aristaeus asking if there was anything he could do.

“One thing,” Orpheus asked his brother. “Would you care for her, while I’m gone?”

There was a brief silence then Aristaeus replied, “Of course. I’ll stay here and put off my wedding until you’re home safe again.”

“It’s just...the oracle didn’t say who might be in danger...”

“I’ll keep her as safe as I can.”

“Thank you, brother.”

Then they were all gone, and he was back in bed with her, pulling her close and holding her. They rocked, and she felt like crying, but the tears wouldn’t come. Her eyes felt as dry as desert stones and they burned. She wanted to love him, make love again,

but they just held each other and listened to the sound of the bees humming outside the window as the daylight wore on.

When they came for him, she didn't cry—she didn't plead and scream like her heart begged her to. She let him tilt her chin up as he told her to be brave and kissed her. She tried to memorize the lines of his face, the curl over his forehead, wondering if she would ever see it again.

"I'll come home as soon as I can." Those were his last words to her, and she didn't realize until he was gone neither of them had ever said the words, "I love you." She turned over in bed and sobbed into her pillow, sure that this was the tragedy the oracle had foretold. She had her brief moment of bliss, and now it was being taken from her—forever.

A hand on her shoulder startled her, and she glanced back to see Melina's swollen, tear-stained face. She reached for her friend, and they rocked together and cried, sharing their sorrow like only two women can, lost in the ache of men lost to the whims of fate.

Chapter Nine

Eurydice never stopped being fascinated with the bees Aristaeus and Melina kept. When he spoke about them, his voice a sweet, lazy hum, much like the drone of the bees, she was captivated. She had been visiting him for months now, since Orpheus had left on the great ship with Jason and his Argonauts, sharing her wifely woes with him as they jarred the honey of the gods and trimmed the wild oleaster in secret ways to make it bear olives. Melina had spent the first month with them, but then word her sister had taken a turn for the worse had come, and she had gone, leaving the two of them alone.

Eurydice dipped her finger into one of the honey jars before putting the lid on, glancing over at Aristaeus as he trimmed honeycomb, the waxy golden slab clutched between his strong legs as he worked. He seemed oblivious to the sticky sweetness running down his thighs.

“Ari, if he doesn’t return soon, I’m going to burst!” She laid her dark head on her arms on the table, watching the golden liquid fall in drops to the floor.

Aristaeus glanced up at her and smiled. “I know. You love him a great deal.”

Eurydice frowned, her eyes on Aristaeus’ hands wielding a large knife as he cut his way through the comb.

“Yes.” Even as the words left her mouth, she wasn’t sure. They had such a short time together before he left, and now... Of course, you love him, he’s your husband.

But the nights had been long as she rolled around, her body on fire, looking for the coolest places on the bed to sleep. She had recently found herself waking during the hot summer nights, the sheets tugged tight between her legs, still carrying confused

dreams of Orpheus singing her a lullaby—but when she turned to look at him, he was gone, and Aristaeus was in his place.

Aristaeus set the honeycomb and knife down, coming to sit by her at the table. “It must be so difficult for mortals, worrying about the possible death of a loved one.”

“Ari!” Eurydice’s eyes widening in alarm. “By the gods, don’t say such things! Orpheus isn’t going to die!”

“I’m sorry.” His hand, sticky with honey, covered hers. “I didn’t mean to worry you. We can consult Chiron if you like. It might set your mind at ease?”

“No. He’s likely to make it worse.” Eurydice pulled her now-sticky hand out from under his, licking at the honey between her fingers. “Sometimes we mortals just don’t want to know, Ari.”

“Let’s go get cleaned up, shall we?” Aristaeus smiled at her, raking a finger across his golden honey smeared thigh and bringing it to his mouth. “Then I will send you home with honey and olives and cheese to make a feast for you and my brother when he returns.”

Eurydice nodded, tears coming to her eyes. He had been so kind and generous in Orpheus’ absence. She couldn’t have asked for a better friend.

They made their way through fields of wildflowers down to her stream, the sun gleaming off the rushing water. Aristaeus stripped naked and waded in. Eurydice watched him, her breath shallow and tight in her chest. He was a god among gods, spirited away by Hermes to feed on ambrosia, raised by, and made immortal by Gaia. He was one with everything around him.

“Come in and cool off.”

Eurydice slipped her sandals off and dipped her toes into the water. She would have loved to take off her wrap off in this heat and slip into the cool relief of the stream. She glanced around the field and saw no one.

“Will you turn around?” Eurydice eyed the water glistening in the golden hair on his chest.

“Certainly.” Aristaeus dove under the water and disappeared.

Eurydice slipped her chiton from her shoulders and stepped into the stream, the water kissing her knees, her thighs, her hips, as she waded further and further out. The stream was deep towards the middle, but the current was light. It felt heavenly over her body as she leaned her head back to wet her hair.

Aristaeus popped up behind her, his hands clutching her shoulders. She gasped and whirled around, splashing at him and laughing. He splashed her back and they giggled together.

“Race?” He cocked an eyebrow at her. “From here to the log?”

“I’m a mortal.” Eurydice rolled her eyes. “And a woman!”

“I’ll give you a head start.”

She had already started, swimming hard toward the log. She heard him call out, “Hey! Not fair!”

Still, he beat her, sitting up on a log in the middle of the stream caught in some underbrush. She grasped his thigh, panting and treading water. When she looked up at him, his blue eyes had darkened, the sun gleaming in his golden, wet hair, so like his father, Apollo.

She rested her head on his thigh and she felt his hand stroking her hair. When she pulled her hand away, she discovered he was still sticky with honey in a few places on his legs. She licked her fingers and then, without thinking about it, leaned in to lick the honey off his thigh. She felt his hand tighten into a fist in her hair and she gasped, looking up and coming face to face with his erection. She looked up at him, wide-eyed.

“Do you intend to finish what you start?” His hand tangled in her long, dark hair. She shook her head, swallowing hard, the taste of honey on her tongue like a sweet lie in her mouth. “You are a tempting nymph, Eurydice.”

“I love Orpheus.” She felt tears well up in her eyes.

He nodded, slipping down off the log, and taking her into his arms. “You miss him. It’s understandable. Don’t do something you might regret.”

She let him hold her that way for a long time, the water flowing all around them and the sun warming their faces.

“Would you like to pick raspberries?” He lifted her chin.

She beamed at him. “Yes!”

He led her back to shore and down behind the hives. She realized halfway there she was still nude, her clothes left back near the stream, but she didn’t move to cover herself or return to retrieve them. They stopped and knelt at the raspberry bushes, and Aristaeus handed her a basket for her berries.

Eurydice plucked a handful of the berries, stuffing them into her mouth. The seeds were crisp and the fruit was sweet and ripe. She murmured her appreciation, putting some into her basket. She couldn’t help eating some in every handful she picked, and soon her hands and mouth were stained red from the juice.

Aristaeus was careful and quick, his basket filled in no time. He turned to her, laughing at her half-empty basket and stained face.

He rubbed his fingers over her lips, looking thoughtful. "You can take this home with you tonight. I think Orpheus is coming home to you."

Eurydice looked up at him, startled. "How do you know?"

"I don't." He took her hand and led her back toward the stream. They retrieved their clothes and put them on, making their way toward Aristaeus' home at the top of the hill.

Eurydice sat on his table, swinging her legs and singing a song Orpheus had taught her just before he left. Aristaeus packed her a basket full of cheese, olives, honey, bread, the raspberries they had picked, and various other fruit.

He kissed her forehead before she left. "A feast for you and your husband."

"Thank you." She strained up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek and started her walk down the road toward their little cottage. When she looked back, Aristaeus was still leaning in his doorway, watching her go.

* * * *

Aristaeus was wrong. Orpheus didn't return that night, or the next. The basket sat, untouched and waiting, and so did she, prowling the perimeter of their little house and garden again and again. She tried not to think of Chiron and what the oracle had said about their marriage ending in tragedy.

On the third night, she found herself longing to go to Aristaeus, to take comfort in his arms. She hadn't gone a day without seeing him in months, and she missed him.

She tried to remember her husband's face, his scent, the way his hands felt, the way he kissed her, and found she could not. It frightened her.

She opened the window over their bed, letting in a cool breeze from the direction of the sea. She tried to imagine Orpheus on Jason's ship, sailing toward her, alive and safe. She remembered Aristaeus' words about being mortal. Her husband had left with warriors, but he was no warrior. He was a singer, a minstrel, an artist—and he might never return home. She sobbed then, an aching pain in her bones, like a fever had come over her. She sobbed until she couldn't sob anymore and she fell, exhausted, into a deep sleep on her damp pillow.

Orpheus was singing. There was no sound like it in the known world. It was the opening of a flower, a cooling summer rain, the chorus of a thousand snowflakes falling to the ground.

Orpheus was singing for her. In her dreams, he made up songs for her constantly, singing them as she moved around the house, her sewing song, her cooking song, her singing song, her loving song. This was a new song, a coming home song. It was the best song.

Eurydice awoke, her head lifting from the pillow, still heavy and thick from her long night of weeping. Dawn was just creeping in through the window over the bed, and she heard the birds beginning to call to one another. Her shift was wet with the heat of the night and it clung to the fullness of her body as she rolled to her elbow, listening as hard as she could, as hard as she ever had in her life.

Was I dreaming?

Then she heard it, faint but definitely not a figment of her imagination. It was Orpheus, and he was singing.

He's home!

Eurydice scrambled out of the bed, flinging the door wide and rushing down the lane toward the distant sound of his voice. The beginning heat of the day was hovering at an almost cool edge, and the closer she got to the sea, the cooler it felt against her skin as she ran. She crested the top of the hill and she saw him, a faint figure still nearly two wheat fields away, his pack flung over his shoulder, his dark head down as he sang his way toward her, trudging like a weary warrior returning home—and he was.

The sight of him made her knees weak, and she sank to the ground, tears streaming down her face. She stayed there, collapsed in the dust of the road for a moment, eyes closed, listening to the sound of his voice. She had almost forgotten how sweet he sounded, how she longed for the caress of his song.

She lifted her face and felt rain starting to fall. The coolness of the morning was a turn in the weather, and she saw the sky, overcast, was thick, heavy, and graying. Eurydice stood, her legs feeling stronger with every step towards him, until she was running again, a stitch growing in her side.

She knew the moment he saw her—he stopped singing and began to run toward her too. The distance between them was gone within moments, and she was in his arms, their faces wet with rain and tears as they rocked and kissed and murmured to one another in the rising dawn.

He sang her the song as they walked back to the house, hand in hand. His coming home song. Her heart swelled with his presence, her eyes stung with the sight

of him. His hair was long and his beard thick—he looked disheveled and wild, even his eyes looked different, shadowed somehow, as if they had seen much more than they had ever wanted to—but she could close her eyes and listen, and knew this was Orpheus. He had returned to her.

In the cottage, they didn't speak, as if speaking might shatter the sweetness of his return. She put water on to boil for a bath, unpacking the basket of fruit, cheese, bread, and olives and laying the feast out on the table for them while the water heated. Orpheus stripped himself bare, his fingers touching things all over the cottage, wandering, as if trying to convince himself it was real. He unpacked his lyre and put it back on its hook next to the door. Eurydice felt tears burn her eyes at the sight of it there after so many months.

She drew buckets of water from the natural spring well beneath the cottage, filling the tub, and adding the boiling water to warm it. He sank into the bath with a groan and sat with his eyes closed, letting her wash his dark, curly hair, turning his face toward the warm rinse water as she poured it over his head. Her hands scrubbed months of salty seawater and filth from his neck and back.

She leaned over to wash his chest, her hands moving down toward his belly. Orpheus caught her hand and she looked up at him. His eyes were dark with lust as he looked at the sheer shift stretched over her body, soaked through and clinging to her breasts. She smiled, rubbing his belly again, moving her hand under the water and finding his erection.

He moaned as she stroked and squeezed him, leaning his head back against the tub's edge. "Eurydice," he warned her, his hand grabbing hers and squeezing it hard.

They were the first words he'd spoken since his return and the sound of her name on his lips was too much. She leaned over and kissed him, her mouth greedy, slanting across his as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

She gasped when he pulled her into the water with him, the tub threatening to overflow with the weight of them both. He deepened their kiss, his tongue finding hers as he cupped her breasts through the thin, wet material, his hand moving to feel the heat between her legs. He groaned as she shifted her weight, her thigh pressing the length of his member between them.

"Orpheus, I thought you were dead." She whispered her words against his neck as she moved to straddle him. "I thought you would never come. I thought I would never see you again."

"I'm home, Eurydice," he murmured into her hair, his arms tight around her now.

"I can't believe you're real." Tears stung her eyes as she drew back to look at his face.

He nodded then leaned into capture her mouth again, kissing her with a wild, desperate longing she felt in the pit of her stomach.

She clung to him, trembling in his arms. "Let's get you washed."

She directed him to stand, washing his lower half and rinsing him. She pulled off her soaked shift and washed herself quickly, scrubbing her hair and rinsing it before stepping out to get them bath sheets. Wrapping one around herself, she held one out for him and he let her rub him dry. Then he took her bath sheet in his hands, opening it to reveal her body to him in the early morning light.

His eyes roamed over her as if she were a dream, and he took a long time drying her off, his hands moving over her skin after he was done, tracing the same path that he had taken with the cloth. She smiled at him, taking his hand and leading him to the table. They sat across from one another, still nude, sharing the meal and listening to the sound of the rain on the roof.

The heat that had tormented them over the past few weeks had been broken in the cool rumble of a summer thunderstorm. Eurydice had closed the window over their bed, and rain was now pouring down it in sheets. She spread honey over a piece of bread and offered it to him. He ate it hungrily, picking up chunks of cheese, taking a bite of an apple. She sucked on the raspberries, watching him with a warm, happy feeling in her belly. Her man was home.

When his hunger for food was satisfied, Orpheus stood, cupping her chin in his hand and lifting it. “Your mouth is stained red from berries.” He smiled at her, his eyes soft as they roamed over her face.

“Orpheus—” It was all she could manage to get out before he had her in his arms, kissing her toward their bed. His beard was rough against the skin of her neck as he pressed her down into the mattress, spreading her legs with his thigh. The rain on the window made rippling patterns on his face and chest as he held himself above her, looking down and studying her face.

She moved to speak again, but he pressed a hand to her lips, easing himself beside her, lacing his hand with hers, as if marveling at their contact. She nuzzled in close to him, her body remembering exactly the places to curve to intertwine with his.

Perhaps they dozed, she didn't know, lost in the moment as the rain pattered the pane and their bellies found a gentle rising and falling rhythm.

It felt so new to her, almost as if this were their first night together. She remembered it well, had relived it again and again. She smiled at the memory, her hand slipping down the hard, muscled planes of his chest, the ridges of his belly. Sailing had made his body strong, hard, and deliciously bronze.

She craved his response now, and sought it, her hand slipping lower, seeking his member, a soft snake coiled in a thick nest. She looked at him, eyes closed, breathing deep and even, coaxing him awake with her fingers, watching as he grew hard in her hand. It always amazed her how it grew as if by magic.

She glanced at him again, his face still and quiet, as she slid her body down to take him into her mouth. He tasted salty, as if the sea still clung to him, and she kissed the length of his erection until her mouth was at the top of his mast. Her tongue eased around the head, her mouth soft and receptive as she traveled the distance between tip and base once more, this time pressing him as deeply into her throat as she could.

Orpheus groaned, his hands going to her hair, and she looked up to see him watching her. She worked earnestly now, alternating hand and mouth, eyes never leaving his, delighting in his expression, his sounds, the way he began to move his hips to match her rhythm.

"Stop," he directed her, his hand in her hair pulling her back. He was stiff and red and throbbing now from the attention of her mouth, and Eurydice whimpered, reaching her tongue out for it again, but he wouldn't let her advance her head any further. "I won't last long in that little mouth of yours."

“How long will you last in here?” She gave him a coy smile, kneeling up on the bed and running her hands down the length of her body to cup the heated, wet fur of her mound. Orpheus groaned as he watched her part her own lips, showing him the pink, wrinkled flesh inside, glistening with wetness.

“Let’s find out,” he growled, grabbing her by the hips and pulling her onto him. They rolled and tumbled on the bed, their kisses hungry and hands greedy for one another. Eurydice gasped when lightening flashed outside, followed by a rumble of thunder she felt vibrate the earth.

“The gods are as zealous as we are this morning.” Orpheus smiled as he suckled her breast, his tongue coaxing the dark brown bud in the center erect.

“Yes!” She moaned, touching herself between the legs, something she had done over and over the long months he was away from her, imagining just this. He kissed his way over the tender, sensitive flesh of her belly, dipping his tongue into her navel before settling himself between her thighs, splaying them wide with his hands.

“Please,” she begged, spreading herself open, showing him where, right there, with her fingers, the fat, glistening gem at the top of her crevice. Touching it sent waves of pleasure through her body, and when his tongue and mouth edged her fingers out of the way, she shuddered in response.

He drank her in like a man dying of thirst, dipping his fingers into her to find more of her juices. She called his name, her moans competing with the storm thrashing at their windows as his mouth drove her onward toward bliss. Her legs quivered as she lifted her hips, her hands gripping his now-long hair as she ground herself onto his tongue, as hungry for release, as he was to taste her.

It was over in a flash, a lightning strike illuminating the room as she pitched and rolled, her belly quivering with the force of the spasms between her legs. She collapsed, her limbs trembling, her head spinning as he moved and shifted, finding room for himself between her thighs. Even in her bemused, breathless wonder, she welcomed him, opening her arms and pulling him in to her.

His erection was the hot, hard heat of demand against her belly as he kissed her. She sucked her own sweet honey off his tongue, letting it mingle with the raspberry taste lingering in her mouth. Eurydice reached down and found his shaft, directing him toward her center, guiding him home.

He shuddered and groaned as he slid into her flesh, the sensation threatening to finish him. He waited, poised above her, and she ran her hands over his arms, his chest, his back, finding his glorious flesh alive and real under her fingers. He began to move in her, an easy, slow rhythm. She smiled, wrapping her legs around his waist and letting him rock her.

The sound of the rain was all around them, beating at the roof, the windows, the door, as if seeking a way to flood in. Orpheus looked down at her as they moved together, his eyes feeding on her as if she were ambrosia. Then his eyes closed, and his movements became faster and harder. She grasped onto him, wrapping all of her limbs around him and moving her hips to meet his.

His breath came faster in her ear, working hard now, and Eurydice arched her back, pressing on his chest with her hands. He looked down at her, wondering what it was she was trying to say with her body.

“Let me.” She pressed harder with her hands, nudging him over with her thigh. He smiled, rolling to his back and pulling her with him, their bodies never breaking their sweet connection.

“You’re my weary warrior.” She leaned over and kissed his cheeks, his eyelids, and his mouth. “Let me welcome you home.”

He groaned as she sat up on him, lifting her hair with her hands above her head and grinding her hips slowly around on his shaft. He reached for her breasts, lifting their weight, plucking at her nipples as if he could play her—and he could. She moaned in response, making smaller circles now, grinding her sweet, sensitive bud against the steel heat of him between her legs.

“I can’t last long like this,” he warned her, and she felt him throbbing, aching for release. She ground against him harder, faster, her hips moving in tight, delicious little circles, dancing on his erection to the drumming beat of the rain on the roof.

“Come home,” she whispered, her eyes half closed, her lips parted, letting her hair fall as she pressed her hands against his belly.

He groaned, grabbing her hips and thrusting up hard, spilling his seed deep within her. Eurydice kept up her pace, her hips rocking now, and aching again to reach her own sweet summit, and she found it just a moment later. Thunder rumbled through her belly, vibrating them both in the bed as they pitched and rolled with one another through the covers.

They dozed through the morning, although Eurydice found herself waking if she wasn’t touching part of him, snuggling closer, making sure it wasn’t all a dream. It was time for a meal again before they arose, the sun bright now, burning off the morning

storm. She saw a wound on the back of his thigh as he stood to dress she hadn't seen while she was bathing him.

"It's nothing," he told her when she touched it, kissed it.

"I can make a poultice," she offered. "And I want to get us some more raspberries. Let me run down to see Aristaeus. He has good healing herbs."

"It's already healing," he insisted, but he stroked her hair as she knelt at his feet, her eyes peering around at the wound, and he smiled. "Go ahead, then. I want to play something for you when you return."

She beamed, reaching for her wrap and the now-empty basket Aristaeus had made for them both. "I'll be but a moment."

She went on bare feet, the air moving with that clean and crisp feel that only comes after a hard rain. The heat would return, she knew, but for now, it was cool and beautiful.

She found Aristaeus standing in the stream, his nude body glistening in the sun. She turned away, flushed, swallowing hard. He had the body of a god, perfect in every way. She turned back to watch him, her heart hammering in her chest.

Trying to look as if she were interested in something in the sky, birds, perhaps, or the leaves blowing in the trees, she called to him. He came, wrapping himself from the waist down, his eyes finding hers as he neared her.

"Eurydice." His smiled, touching her cheek. "I've missed you."

"He's returned to me." She turned her eyes to his, showing him the empty basket. She saw in an instant he understood. "Do you have any of those special healing herbs? He is wounded."

“Of course.” Aristaeus nodded, turning toward his home. “I was going to come tell you...Melina has returned from her sisters.”

“Melina!” Eurydice brightened. “Is she well? I should go visit her.”

He cleared his throat as she followed him to the front door. “She is...sleeping...inside.”

Blinking fast, she stared up at him, incredulous, as they stepped in. Melina’s blonde head was resting on a pillow in the big bed Eurydice and Orpheus had once shared on the night of their wedding holiday. Eurydice remembered seeing her there the day she was stung by the bees, so still and lifeless. Now she was smiling in her sleep, her cheeks rosy, and her shoulders bare.

They worked quietly, talking in low murmurs. Aristaeus reached up to the shelf as she watched him gathering what she needed to heal Orpheus’ wound.

“Is it a bad wound?”

“A small thing.” She set the empty basket on the table and moved again toward the door. “A cut on his thigh.”

Aristaeus glanced at her, his face a mask. “These, then.” He put a few herbs in a small pouch, coming to give them to her. His hand brushed hers. “I’m glad he is returned to you.”

“Yes.” She glanced at Melina asleep, not sure what to say. “I’m glad she has come home...to you.”

“Do not make assumptions.” He shook his head, his voice tight. “I am committed to fulfill my obligations.”

She nodded, turning to go with a sigh, and stopped with her hand on the door.

“Maybe things...”

“No.” His hand gripped the edge of the table, his knuckles white.

Eurydice felt tears welling up in her eyes as she opened the door. “I’m sorry.”

He followed her, his eyes pained, shutting the door behind him. Before she knew it, he pulled her into his arms, embracing her tightly.

“Do you ever wish you’d married me?” He whispered the words into her hair. “I know he is my brother...but I wonder if we could have been happy, you and I.”

Eurydice sobbed, shaking her head. “Ari, I can’t—perhaps if he hadn’t returned...but he’s home. Orpheus has come home. I belong to him.”

“And I belong to a woman I do not even know.” He looked down at her, his eyes bright. “I’m doomed to love women I cannot have.”

“Don’t say that.” She shook her head, her face twisted in pain. “We’re not doomed.”

He reached for her as she hurried toward away, but she slipped out of his grasp and rushed down the steps, running through the grass toward the road. Tears streaked down her face as she ran. She could hear him calling her name, but she didn’t turn back. Chiron’s words came to her, the oracle’s prediction. Marry Aristaeus and forget Orpheus. If you marry Orpheus, it will end in tragedy.

Ahead, the sound of Orpheus singing floated toward her from their cottage, and her heart swelled. The sound of him was like the heavens opening up and raining love. She was sure in that moment she loved Orpheus, with everything she was, and she was going home to him. He was the man she was meant to be with.

That's when she felt a burning sting on her ankle. She pitched forward onto the wet grass, screaming in pain. She wondered if anyone could hear her, and she looked down and saw the snake, coiled and hidden among the green foliage, she had stepped upon. Its fangs buried in her, its eyes flat and cold.

She called for Orpheus, but Aristaeus was the one to find her, extracting the snake and killing it before picking her up and carrying her toward her home. The pain in her leg was excruciating, and it already felt three times its normal size.

Aristaeus burst into the cottage, moving to lay her on the bed.

"What's happened?" Orpheus jumped up, putting down his lyre and rushing to her side.

"Snake." Aristaeus' mouth was grim as he glanced at him. "Welcome home, brother."

Orpheus' eyes widened, his face going pale. "Poisonous?"

Aristaeus nodded, standing. "I have something that may help. I'll be back."

Orpheus kneeled over Eurydice and she looked up at him through half closed eyes. "I love you." She had to say the words. Her throat felt constricted.

"Don't talk; you're going to be well." Orpheus glanced at the door. "Aristaeus has something to fix you."

She smiled, dreamy and far-away. "I never loved anyone but you."

He leaned over to kiss her lips. "Please." His breath felt impossibly warm to her. "Please, by all the gods, please, don't let her die."

Eurydice felt his tears falling onto her cheeks. The world was slipping away and her limbs were becoming heavy. Her ankle didn't hurt at all anymore, and she wondered at it.

"I need to cut your hair." Her hands, which had been clutching his hair, fell away.

He smiled at her through his tears, his eyes roaming over her face. "When you are better, you can shave me bald if you like."

"It doesn't hurt," she whispered, her voice hoarse. Her throat felt very tight now, the darkness creeping into her vision like veils thrown over her, one after the other. Aristaeus burst back into the cottage, and she glimpsed a shadow of him near the bed, Melina behind him, carrying something.

"No, don't leave me!" She heard Orpheus say, but the darkness was upon her, and she knew no more.

Chapter Ten

Death wasn't what she expected. She had the coin to pay her passage, but she didn't know how long she wandered the banks of the River Styx, watching the other shades being carried across on the boat. The walls of the cavern around her glowed a deep red, like hot coals, illuminating a winding black river. Still she paced, hesitant to cross. He's coming for you. It was ridiculous, insane. Of course, he wasn't coming for her. Chiron's prediction had come to fruition—she was living in the land of the dead, separated from Orpheus forever.

The pain of knowing, of remembering, kept her going, back and forth. Her ankle pained her too, although there was only the faintest mark where the snake had bitten her. She rubbed it often, remembering. Still, the voice nagged at her. He's coming for you. All around her, the other shades wailed their grief. She understood the language, yet she knew it wasn't that which she had spoken her whole life. This was some other language—the language of the dead. Their tone strangely muted, like a flat echo.

Her grief came in waves, leaving her sobbing at the river's edge sometimes, or pacing the banks at others, lost in memory. She couldn't forget his face, his smile, the way he laughed, his beautiful song. He was all she could think about, and it was only when the pain of remembering grew too great to bear, she felt compelled to hand over her coin and cross over with the other shades. A hooded, shadowy figure silently held forth a skeletal palm to each of the shades as they boarded. The trip across the river was short, and once she was over on the other side, her hesitation seemed silly. She no longer felt as if Orpheus might be coming for her. The shades all crowded into a huge

cavern. Here the walls weren't red, but rather black, the only light a shimmer coming from the glow of two luminescent silver pools flanking a ghostly white cypress tree. The only thing she could hear now was the call of that bright, glistening white pool. All of the shades seemed drawn to it, but none allowed in until judged. The three judges sat up high on dark thrones, and she glimpsed Persephone, Queen of the Underworld, and her husband, the God of the Dead, up there as well, sitting side by side. Eurydice stood, awaiting her fate with the others.

"Hades!" One of the Furies flew quickly past, her black wings settling as she landed gently beside his ebony throne.

"What is it, Tisi?" The God of the Dead looked up with a sigh.

"Someone has breached the gates!" Tisi hissed, baring her fangs, her feathers ruffling, and her red eyes glowing.

"Aidon, that's not possible!" Persephone used her familiar name for her husband, putting her hand on his arm and cocking her head as if listening for something.

Eurydice watched, and for a moment, she thought she heard something too, her heart tricking her mind into believing she heard Orpheus' singing. She looked at Persephone's hand on Aidon's arm, her heart breaking at the familiar gesture. She would never touch Orpheus again. Now separated forever, she wanted nothing more than to forget how much she loved him, and she looked longingly at the pool beside her. She understood, just as the other shades did, this was the place where souls swam to forget their past so they could rest in peace. They all waited in judgment because only the innocent were allowed to swim. She longingly watched shades enter the water, their

faces twisted in pain, and then come out, their eyes clear and bright, no longer full of suffering. She had waited months for this.

“No.” Aidon stood, turning to Tisi. “Who is it?”

Her red eyes burned. “He’s crossed the river without paying passage and tamed Cerberus!”

“How?” Aidon demanded, reaching for his two-pronged, forked spear.

Persephone turned to Tisi. “Who is this man?”

“They call him Orpheusssss!” Tisi hissed, the thin black snakes on her head that served as her hair writhing and hissing with her.

Eurydice heard him then. He’s come for me! She was sure it was him, and her hands went to her mouth to cover a scream.

Eurydice, you’re mine.
Your eyes are my home.
Your lips are my wine.
I come for your soul.

It was their wedding song! He appeared at the bottom of the stairs, his lyre in hand. Eurydice stared. He was shaved completely bald, his eyes dark and sunken, but his voice was clear and strong, and a sound that filled the cavern, reverberating off the walls.

Your visage enthralls,
to touch you is bliss.
From Hades dark halls,
I’ll reclaim your kiss.

“Orpheus!” Her knees buckled beneath her. He saw her at once, but he didn’t stop singing. He came forward as he sang to her, the shades parting to let him through.

They all wept at the sound of his voice, the love shining in his heart as he sang.

Orpheus glanced from Eurydice to the two thrones above them, Aidon and Persephone watching from their perches with wide, bemused eyes.

“You came for me!” Eurydice’s heart swelled to bursting at the sight of him. He looked down at her, his eyes and face showing his confusion. She knew he couldn’t understand her words—she spoke the language of the dead, now. She sobbed, wrapping her arms around his legs, not trusting her strength to stand.

“It’s so beautiful!” Tisi wiped her eyes, staring at the bareheaded minstrel. “I’ve never heard anything so beautiful.”

“I know.” Persephone wiped her own eyes. She found a face cloth tucked up her sleeve and tore it in two, handing the other half to Tisi.

Eurydice looked up at him, her eyes filled with love and pride. All around them, there was the open sound of weeping.

“He’s pretty good,” Aidon admitted, dabbing at the corner of his eye with his finger.

“Something in your eye?” Persephone teased.

He shot her a dark look as he stepped forward. His voice boomed over them all.

“Orpheus, why have you breached the sanctity of my kingdom?”

Only then did Orpheus stop playing and singing. He bowed low. “My bride, Eurydice, was bitten by a snake three months ago. She is now here, in your kingdom, and I wish to take her home with me.”

Aidon looked over at Persephone, who still wiped tears from her cheeks.

“This is not something I can grant you.” Aidon frowned. Persephone scowled and pinched him on the arm.

Tisi blew her nose, which now looked as red as her eyes. “Let him take her! Let Eurydice go home!”

The shades took up that call, their voices rising. Eurydice heard and understood them, for she now spoke their language, “Let Orpheus have his love!”

“He’s come all this way,” Persephone turned her face up to her husband. “And he’s sung so beautifully. Can’t you let him take her home?”

Aidon scowled. “No!” Eurydice sobbed harder, holding fast to Orpheus’ legs. Tisi growled at Aidon, the snakes on her head hissing at him in unison.

“It’s just one little shade.” Persephone leaned in toward him to kiss his cheek. “For me?”

“I can’t fight all of you.” Aidon sighed and waved his hand at them. “You may take her. She will be restored to you the moment you are outside of these gates.”

Eurydice jumped up, wrapping her arms around him. Orpheus embraced her, holding her tight. The shades around them sighed in unison. Tisi blew her nose again.

“However!” Aidon went on, his voice growing louder. “She must follow you out, and you must not look back at her, not even once. If you do so, she will be lost to you forever.”

Orpheus smiled, still holding Eurydice in his arms. “Thank you.”

“Will you play us one more song?” Tisi looking hopeful, wiping at her red eyes.

Orpheus nodded and Eurydice moved aside, sitting at his feet and leaning against his knee as he sang. It was a song of gratitude made up right on the spot for

Persephone and Aidon. His voice was full of emotion and even the tremble in it did nothing to lessen the impact and power of his song. When he was finished, they were all crying again. Even Aidon had a face cloth in his hand, shoved there by Persephone.

“Take her, then!” Aidon blew his nose.

“Thank you for blessing us with your song.” Persephone smiled through her tears.

Orpheus bowed to her, taking Eurydice’s hand and beginning to lead her out.

“Remember,” Aidon called as they neared the stairs leading out of the cavern. “Don’t turn to look back at her.”

As they made their way toward the gates, Eurydice felt life beginning to return to her limbs— they tingled! She saw color seeping back into her hands—her blood was beginning to flow again!

“Orpheus?” She stepped back into the boat behind him to cross over the River Styx.

“Yes, love?” He almost turned to look at her, and she pressed her hand to his cheek, turning his face away from her.

“Do you understand me?”

“Yes.” He nodded, keeping his eyes forward. “Why couldn’t I before?”

“I was dead. I was speaking the language of the dead.” She leaned her cheek against his back. “Oh, thank the gods you came for me.”

“I couldn’t live without you.” He kept his face turned from her as he held his arm out so she could step out of the boat. He led her by the hand towards the gate. “I couldn’t eat, I couldn’t sleep. It was Aristaeus who told me to come find you.”

“Aristaeus?” Eurydice’s hand went to her throat, her eyes wide.

“Yes.” Orpheus’ voice was soft. “He told me love is worth any sacrifice.”

Eurydice felt her heart beating again, and it was beating hard. “He said that?”

They could see the gates now, high and wide. “He took Melina with him to Thebes. He’s still going to marry Autonoe...but he told me to come get you.”

“And you came for me?”

“I love you.” It was the first time she had heard the words from his mouth. He squeezed her hand.

The thought of them, talking about her, her lifeless body between them, made her feel weak and dizzy. Two men who loved her...two men who would do anything for her, and this man, who would cross the barrier between worlds to find her. She felt the world slipping sideways and her knees buckled, tears filling her eyes.

“Eurydice?” Orpheus turned, his eyes concerned as he felt her fall. The minute their eyes locked, she felt herself fading again. She saw him realize his mistake, his face a mask of horror and regret.

“No!” Something was pulling him from her. His hand left hers as some invisible force pushed him outside of the gates. He struggled against it, calling her name and reaching for her. The gates slammed shut, thick walls with no way out.

She screamed his name, but even if he could hear her, she knew he wouldn’t understand. She was once again speaking the language of the dead.

* * * *

“I’m so sorry.” Persephone put her hand on Eurydice’s arm as she led her toward the Pool of Lethe. Aidon stood beside her, his eyes sad, his mouth set in a grim line.

Eurydice had waited months again for the next judgment of the innocents, and it felt like an eternity. Her whole body ached for him, and eyes closed or open, she relived nothing but her stumble, the dawning horror in his eyes as she began to fade, the gates swinging shut and separating them forever.

“Thank you.” Eurydice smiled at Persephone, tears wetting her cheeks.

“You will feel better after this,” Persephone promised. “You will forget your mortal life, and there will be no more pain.”

Eurydice nodded, kneeling before the pool, the silver surface reflecting her grey and bloodless face. She was slipping her hand into the water when she heard him.

“No!”

She knew she must have been dreaming. It was just her memory, playing tricks on her. He was running toward her, but she couldn’t hear his footfalls. It must be a dream.

“Eurydice! Don’t forget me!” It was his voice, clear and strong, and he was upon her, pulling her away from the pool of forgetfulness. Persephone stood, looking between them both, her eyes wide.

“It can’t be!” Eurydice stared at him. He had hair again, a light growth. He grabbed her hands in his, his eyes devouring her face. “What—?”

That’s when she realized that he, too, was speaking the language of the dead.

“I couldn’t live without you.” He turned his wrists to show her. She gasped, throwing her arms around him. “We immortals can die if we choose it.”

“Oh, no!” She lifted his wrists to kiss them. “Oh, Orpheus.”

He smoothed her hair, his hands roaming over her back. "You are mine. Forever."

Persephone smiled as she glanced over at Aidon. "I think we have a place for you to spend eternity together—the Elysian Fields are beautiful, and I've never seen a couple so devoted to each other."

"Well, almost never." Aidon put his arm around Persephone's shoulders, his eyes bright as he pulled her close.

"Thank you." Orpheus looked at them both. He turned Eurydice's chin up to him, his eyes searching hers. "I'm never letting you go."

She pressed her hands against his cheeks, her eyes filling with tears.

"Welcome home, weary warrior." She lost herself in his kiss, in his arms. "I thought I'd never see you again."

"You are my home." He pressed his cheek to hers and whispered it into her ear. "You."

"Did you bring your lyre?" Aidon interrupted Orpheus hopefully.

Orpheus smiled and shook his head. "No. But my voice goes with me wherever I go."

"He can sing to us every night." Persephone smiled and leaned her head on Aidon's arm.

"For eternity," Aidon reminded them.

"Not every night." Eurydice pressed her body to Orpheus, sliding her thigh between his. "And eternity was never enough."

"Mortals always say that." Aidon rolled his eyes. "Until they're faced with eternity."

“I think we’ll enjoy it.” Eurydice took Orpheus’ hand in hers, unable to keep her eyes from his face.

Persephone smiled at them both. “I know you will.”

PRONOUNCIATION KEY:

Aristaeus (Uh-RIS-tay-us)

Aidon (AY-den)

Apollo (Uh-PAHL-oh)

Autonoe (Aut-uh-NO-ee)

Calliope (Kuh-LIE-oh-pee)

Chiron (KEER-on)

Chiton (KITE-un)

Cyrene (KY-rene)

Eurydice (Yer-uh-DEE-chee)

Hades (HAY-deez)

Harmonia (Har-MOAN-ee-uh)

Hymen (HI-mun)

Jason (JAY-sun)

Kadmos (KAD-mose)

Melina (Muh-LEE-nuh)

Orpheus (OR-fee-us)

Persephone (Per-SEH-fone-ee)

Tisi (T.C)

ABOUT SELENA KITT



Like any feline, Selena Kitt loves the things that make her purr—and wants nothing more than to make others purr right along with her! Pleasure is her middle name, whether it's a short cat nap stretched out in the sun or a long kitty bath. She makes it a priority to explore all the delightful distractions she can find, and follow her vivid and often racy imagination wherever it wants to lead her.

Her writing embodies everything from the spicy to the scandalous, but watch out—this kitty also has sharp claws and her stories often include intriguing edges and twists that take readers to new, thought-provoking depths.

When she's not pawing away at her keyboard, Selena runs an innovative publishing company (www.excessica.com) and in her spare time, she worships her devoted husband, corrals four kids and a dozen chickens, all while growing an organic garden. She also loves bellydancing and photography.

Her story, *Connections*, was one of the runners-up for the U2006 Rauxa PrizeU, given annually to an erotic short story of “exceptional literary quality,” out of over 1,000 nominees, where awards are judged by a select jury and all entries are read “blind” (without author's name available.) She has also been an EPIC Award Finalist two years in a row (2008 and 2009) with EcoErotica and The Real Mother Goose.

She can be reached on her website at www.selenakitt.com.

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THE SURRENDER OF PERSEPHONE

By Selena Kitt

Sheltered Persephone, Goddess of Spring, never gets to do anything— thanks to the suffocating love of her mother, Demeter. Sephie is being carefully groomed to follow in the footsteps of the two “virgin” goddesses, Athena and Artemis, and while they sure do have a lot of fun together, she longs for something deeper—and darker. When Aidon, the God of the Underworld—generally known as Hades—appears in his chariot to claim Persephone for his bride, the young goddess gets more than she wished for.

Held captive in the Underworld, she suddenly longs to return to the safety and security of her mother’s protection, but the dark and commanding Aidon binds her to him, claiming her bit by glorious bit as his own. Her coming of age is one of sexual awakening as she learns the bondage her new master imposes fulfills her darkest desires. Persephone finds herself submitting to and obeying Aidon’s command and discovers being taken and consumed in the heat of passion by a man—a god—is what she was truly made for. Persephone can’t deny her own nature, or her growing feelings for Aidon, as she submits to his domination and surrenders as his wife and prepares to rule as his Queen.

As she finally admits her own feelings, Persephone faces the looming specter of her history, which threatens to shatter the newly formed bonds between the couple. She must now face not only her past, but her present, and her future—no

longer only the Goddess of Spring, but also as the wife of Aidon and Queen of the Underworld—and the choices she will be forced to make will change the world forever.

Warning: This title contains graphic language and sex.

Excerpt From THE SURRENDER OF PERSEPHONE:

Consciousness returned slowly to Persephone. The bed beneath her was firm but not uncomfortable. Shaking her head to clear the fuzz, she moved to sit and found her wrists shackled above her head. She felt a strain under her arms, in her ribs.

How long have I been like this? She opened her mouth to speak, but her lips felt so dry she could barely part them.

She managed a low moan as a strange, yet familiar face bent over her. It was a dark figure, his cheeks gaunt and pale, his mouth red and smiling. She had dreamed about him. His eyes reflected like large, violet pools, and she found herself transfixed in them. Her breath slowed, her heart's murmur tamed to an easy, steady beat. He lifted a bottle full of tiny luminous crystals, like glowing sand, and began to open it.

"No, Hypnos." Aidon's voice came out of the darkness. "No more. Leave us."

The figure frowned but stepped back into the shadows and was gone. Persephone strained to see Aidon, noticing her wrists bound but her ankles free. She recalled everything—her abduction, her trip into the Underworld, her desperate run toward the Pool of Lethe to purge herself of her memory. Yet she still remembered...

"Please." Her voice was a thick croak. "Release me."

He came out of the darkness to stand beside the huge bed. "How is your head?" His fingers rubbed through her hair and she winced when he caressed a knot there that throbbed dully with her pulse under his touch.

“What happened?”

He frowned. “You fell before you reached the Pool of Lethe. Your memory is intact, although you’ve got quite a bump there. I had Hypnos give you his pain-sleep until you were healed.”

“How long have I been here?”

His fingers trailed down her cheek. “A day...no more.”

“Please, I’m begging you. Take me home to my mother.” She implored him with her eyes, but he didn’t see her pleading orbs as his gaze swept over her body, uncovered against the black velvet bedclothes.

“Do you know what you look like, lying here?” His finger traced the velvet around her body, not touching her skin. She shook her head, feeling her hair brush her cheeks with the motion.

“The brightest jewel in my kingdom.” His smile was determined, almost cruel. She shivered as he continued, “Did you know I own all of the riches below the earth? All the gold, the silver, the diamonds...they all belong to the ruler of the Underworld.”

She shook her head again, not trusting her voice. He knelt beside her and she saw he was naked. Swallowing hard, she looked up to his face. “You shine brighter than any diamond. I had to have you, Sephie.”

Persephone closed her eyes, shaking her head and feeling tears slip down her temples. Shocked by the weight of him next to her on the bed, she stiffened. His palm stroked the skin of her belly, neutral ground between two sensitive poles. The warmth of his hand was like a brand, setting her skin afire.

Persephone sought to distract him and perhaps delay the inevitable. "Water. Please, Aidon." He reached out and retrieved a chalice, lifting it to her lips. She drank greedily, the liquid spilling down her chin.

"Easy, now..." His eyes lingered over the droplets on her throat.

She tilted her head, indicating she'd had enough. "Thank you."

"Now, try this." He reached for a second chalice, this one containing an amber liquid, and held it to her lips. She took a hesitant sip, then closed her mouth and turned away. The liquid burned her throat. She made a face, coughing.

"It's an acquired taste." He chuckled.

Her thirst abated, she felt warm, though her head felt a little fuzzy again. "Can you untie me?"

"I don't think so." He shook his head, his admiring gaze running up the slope of her arms raised above her head. "Only a falconer knows when it's time to untether the falcon."

She looked at him, tears brimming. "Where can I go? I'm in Hell."

Aidon frowned and then sighed. He reached above her head and untied her arms. She groaned, rubbing her flesh to let a little feeling back. They tingled and throbbed as they came back to life.

"Thank you."

Aidon lifted her hand, kissing the marks on her wrists from the binding. Persephone watched him, his tongue flicking the inside of her wrist, making her shiver. Her skin was as soft and delicate as papyrus and she bruised very easily. Their eyes

locked and his glowed a deep, warm amber in the darkness, something she hadn't noticed before.

"It hurts..." She rubbed at her wrist. His hands swallowed her forearm as he massaged her. He bent to kiss the inside of her arm up to her elbow. Persephone's breath came faster as she observed him. He pressed himself against her, tracing her mouth with his finger, his eyes following the line of her lips.

He kissed her lightly, licking the corner of her mouth. "You taste like liquid sunshine."

She giggled and blushed. He kissed her again, his tongue pressing between her lips, tasting her more deeply. Persephone pushed against his chest with her hands, fighting his passion, but it was a useless gesture. He slid his leg over hers, the weight of him crushing her.

"No!" She turned her head and gasped for breath, twisting beneath him. Her refusal made him rougher and he took her wrists in his hand, lifting them above her head as he sucked at the tender flesh of her throat. She felt the hard heat of his manhood against the soft flesh of her thigh and she shuddered, struggling for her freedom.

She willed herself to hold still while he tongued his way to her breasts. His mouth covered her delicate pink nipple, sucking hard. She arched her back, moaning, and she felt him smile. He let her wrists go so he could fill his hands with her breasts, kneading them, pressing them together.

Persephone held her breath, her eyes scanning the perimeter of the darkened room, looking for the hint of a door. She glimpsed a large bowl brimming with fruit on a table next to the bed.

His tongue traced circles down her belly and she opened her legs for him. He looked up at her in wonder, and she smiled. Grabbing her hips, he breathed in the scent of her before leaning in to taste the sweet nectar flowing between her legs. Persephone whimpered, ignoring the thought that she didn't want this. With his tongue moving there, she forgot everything. When his finger found the entrance to her heaven, she remembered, and found her strength.

Persephone's legs had all her leverage and she used them, planting her heels against his shoulders and pushing hard. She didn't succeed in moving him, but her body launched upwards on the bed. Rolling to the side, she bolted in the direction where Hypnos had disappeared. She heard him behind her as the handle slid in her hand. Locked! She turned, breathless, frantically searching for another exit. Then Aidon was upon her, his eyes blazing the color of fire.

He caught her arm, twisting it behind her and pressing her hard against the door. "Don't move!"

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