



Apollo's Courtesan (Lovers of the Gods)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: COURTED BY THE DIVINE

Dax was always second best among the acolytes of Aphrodite, destined to remain in the shadow of his friend and rival, Aikos, when the time came for them to ascend as courtesans. But while Aikos sought freedom to serve many and no one through his favored tenet of their goddess—desire—Dax seeks another domain.

Love.

The god Apollo is broken and lonely after countless losses of mortal lovers, thinking his heart beyond repair. Or he did, until Aikos led him to a prophecy of a possibly mended future.

Where Aikos indulged in divine desires, Dax and Apollo choose courtship. Can they beat the odds against them of attaining love between mortal and god, or will the pasts that haunt them define their forever after?

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“Aikos... I think I might faint.”

“If you do, I’ll catch you,” he said, but even as he did, he gave the small of my back a tiny push.

Toward Apollo, god of the sun.

Radiant could not begin to describe him, as I had not so long ago described my newly deified friend, Aikos. All the gods around me, up here in some masterful salon on Mount Olympus, were equally radiant, but Apollo was the beauty of the dawn itself.

He was as youthful as me in visage, though slighter of height and build. To be larger than a god seemed a strange anomaly, but he was everything I could have conjured in my mind of perfection personified.

He could have been carved from gold rather than Galatea’s ivory. His tanned skin was almost as golden as his hair, and his eyes glowed just as luminously. His fair face and the subtle smile that touched his lips stole my breath away and made me teeter as I tried to walk forward.

Most of the gods wore white or singular colors that evoked their domains. Since Apollo’s domain was the sky, it made sense that his tunic was the ever-changing colors of a sunset. The sunbursts that adorned his ensemble were made of true glimmering gold, with one such bracer attached by way of a gold chain to a ring on the finger reserved for wedding bands.

That was the hand that reached for me now. Apollo was one of the few gods who had

never wed, and that ring, tethered as it was to the sun, seemed a sad testament to a destiny alone, wed instead to his duties.

What a wonder to be worthy of changing that fate.

But was I?

Apollo's hand remained outstretched, and mine trembled when I finally placed it in his. He kissed my fingertips like a courter.

“What new Olympian flower is this?” he asked.

Words failed me, except a soft, foolishly uttered, “My god... you are beautiful.”

I was orphaned at eight, taken in initially by a temple to Hera. I could have chosen any path from there: become a farmer, had a family, stayed to serve that temple, but what little memories I had of my parents were of a deep and enviable love between them. War had taken them from me, not even one I could name. With them gone, what mattered most to me was finding a love like theirs, one strong enough to transcend all else.

What better way to achieve that than through the goddess of love herself?

When I turned twelve, I asked to be given to the temple of Aphrodite. There, I met Aikos, the fellow acolyte destined to become my friend.

I hated him bitterly. He was already so beautiful at that age and better than everyone at everything he attempted. Those first years, our lessons were focused on education of the mind, performance in music, poetry, and dance, and molding our bodies to be fit but supple and as elegant as the statues of the gods in our salon.

Over the years, some acolytes were deemed unworthy to become courtesans, but I had my sights on that ascension from day one and would let nothing deter me. My hatred of Aikos and his seeming perfection, his ease with everything, fueled me further toward my goal of ascending at the top of our year and serving one of the highest-ranking priests in body and mind and soul. But all too quickly hatred turned to rivalry and, despite all my resistances, a friendship greater than kin.

In another life, Aikos might have been the man I would have loved with all my being, but even once we were older and began our training with physical pleasures, I knew better than to fall for him, for he was ever out of reach from me and meant for something greater. I never could have imagined that what he was meant for was godhood, blessed by Aphrodite herself, and fated to ascend far beyond a mere courtesan after teaching the major male pantheon gods about a form a love each needed but had forgotten.

“No, Dax. Like this.” Years ago, when learning to seduce with a look, with a mere glance that would show our future masters that we were theirs and ready for them, I first realized the futility in trying to catch up to Aikos. It needed to be such a powerful expression that Eros himself would set our masters’ loins aflame and they would pounce upon us to take us like we were made for.

An exaggeration, surely, pure poetry, but when Aikos demonstrated how I was failing, I saw that poetry made real.

A flutter of long lashes. A shuddery breath that left his lips parted. A flush summoned to his cheeks as if he had willed the blood to rush there. A look in his eyes, both innocence and depravity, that was want personified. Then his eyes flicked from mine to my mouth and back again, and when his tongue flitted out to lick at his lips, I felt myself throb.

Aikos finished with a wink and a maddening grin, knowing he’d beaten me yet again.

He always beat me. I was a consummate acolyte, meant for my greatness too, but Aikos was better. When he vanished upon the moment of his ascension, we all guessed what had happened. Only the gods could be responsible for such sorcery, and we praised Aphrodite for her wisdom in Aikos being her chosen and whichever of the gods might have claimed him.

It left me dumbstruck when I was called to the pedestal next. Would I too be whisked away? I did not think so, and indeed, I was not, but first and greatest among the high priests chose me as his courtesan when he would have chosen Aikos if the option remained.

I love my friend but in that moment some of my old bitterness returned, not because I wished Aikos ill or thought him unworthy of being blessed, but because, surely, I was a disappointment compared to what my new master might have had.

From the moment I went to him, that colored our time together. He was beautiful, skilled, a great courtesan himself before becoming a priest. He was everything I thought I wanted, kind, passionate, and the temple of Acrocorinth that he resided over was incredible to live in those few days I spent there. Yet Aikos was right when he told me later that I hadn't been happy.

The moment I realized I could not find love with my new master broke my heart. It was Aikos, my dear friend, who pieced it back together again by saving me from a listless future. Our reunion was one of all Aphrodite's tenets, passion foremost among them, and prepared me for what it would be like to bed a god.

But to love a god and be loved in return, I don't think anything could have prepared me for that.

"My apologies!" I sputtered, though there were worse things than calling the god I had always favored beautiful. I bowed my head and finally managed a more sensible,

“I am Dax, lord Apollo.”

Gentle fingers alighted beneath my chin and lifted it. I could have had his warm skin on mine for the rest of eternity, but he drew his hand back as he said, “One needn’t look away from the sun unless it shines too brightly.”

He did, but to be allowed to look on him was a gift.

“Tell me, which of your patron goddess’ tenets do you hold most dear, young Dax?”

If any other god had asked me that, I might have feared a trap, but I sensed he wanted an earnest answer. “Between beauty, desire, and love, there is one I hold dearest and have hoped to obtain most since boyhood: to find someone whose heart would be mine and who would take mine in return. Love.”

Apollo’s smile made the suns in his eyes shine even brighter. “Then if I might, I would ask not to have a courtesan but to court. Would you walk with me, Dax?”

I looked back to seek Aikos, to curse or praise him, I wasn’t sure. Here I was, being courted by the divine like I had once only longed for in daydreams, and Aikos, my friend and newly anointed god of courtesans, and in his own words, “multiple orgasms,” was nowhere to be seen.

I was terrified, but I had no intention of denying Apollo his request.

“Y-yes, my lord Apollo. I would like that very much.”

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I found Dax in the mortal courtyard, as it was sometimes called, since surrounding it were many quarters for favored mortals chosen by the gods. It was as beautiful as any other courtyard on Olympus, with marble pillars surrounding it, lush greenery, intricately carved statues, and benches with plush pillows where our guests might lounge and enjoy the perfect weather. It only ever rained on Olympus if a god was in mourning.

I had caused a downpour or two myself.

I did not make my presence known right away. I hovered, hiding behind one of the pillars, to watch Dax in the company of others. He was beautiful of course, as any who ascended from acolyte to courtesan would be, tall and strong and bronzed tanner than even I. A lover of my domain and more beautiful for it but never burned. Auburn hair spilled about his shoulders, and dark, deep brown eyes kept the attention of all mortals—and gods—who looked upon them.

Just as those eyes had kept my attention last night.

We'd walked through the salon first, enjoying food and wine, but eventually tread to the edges of it and beyond, where we could be alone. Clever Aikos had dressed Dax in a one-shoulder chiton dyed similarly to my own robes. We were a match in more ways than one, but as full of hope as I felt in Dax's presence, something I had not known in ages until I glimpsed a possible future with him through Aikos's eyes, I still had doubts.

My frigid heart could scarcely remember what it was like to be set aflame without eventually having its embers smothered. I wanted my doubts to be proven wrong, and

so I started with learning about the bronze beauty beside me.

“Tell me, Dax, about your life before Aphrodite’s temple, about what brought you there, and about your time there too, so I might begin to know you.”

He was slow to find his tongue, something I assumed he usually had no trouble with, as courtesans were well-versed in how to use them. I found his stumbles charming, however, because it proved his heart was genuine.

And I did not like liars.

Dax recounted his childhood and all I had asked of him, including meeting Aikos and their fierce friendship. But when he reached his ascension and his time with the high priest who’d chosen him, he admitted disappointment that the love he’d longed for hadn’t been found.

“Because love is what you seek most in life?” I’d asked, reaffirming his admittance.

We had paused on a balcony overlooking the world below. The sun, my sun, had finished its trek across the sky some time ago, and the stars above were a canopy of diamonds. Tears of the gods, some mortals called both stars and their gemstone cousins.

But there was no need for godly tears tonight.

“Y-yes?” The word wasn’t really a question but trembled from Dax’s lips. Then he laughed with a lovely timbre. “Forgive my nervousness, lord Apollo. I never imagined I would explain all that directly to a god and not simply in mortal prayer. Do you... hear our prayers?” His dark eyes sprung wide.

“Aikos wondered the same,” I said, lowering my voice to a whisper, “and was just as

concerned when Zeus confirmed that, yes, we do.”

The darkening of Dax’s cheeks told me which of his prayers he must have been thinking about, for many mortals, when they did not truly believe the gods were listening, could get quite creative in their requests of us.

Like when Dax had prayed for a lover with the heat of the sun god in his touch—while fondling himself beneath the gaze of my statue.

“B-being in my lord Apollo’s presence has set my face aflame.” Dax pressed a palm to one of his rosy cheeks. “I hope there is no offense in anything you have ever heard from me. Before or now. This is all a bit overwhelming, talking to the god I most admire. Aside from my patron!” he corrected, as if fearing Aphrodite might appear that moment to throw him from Olympus for choosing another.

She might have, but not when Dax’s love and loins clearly led him toward men.

“I fear I am spurning all my teachings and making a fool of myself,” Dax said.

“You are not. Many mortals become overwhelmed in the presence of gods. Aikos dropped to his knees on several occasions.”

“So he said.” Dax’s cheeks darkened again after muttering that, clearly knowing the reason for some of those knee scuffs. “I mean—”

“Aikos told you of his time with each of us?”

“Yes.” He cringed.

“And what did he tell you of his time with me?”

Dax hid his face by looking to the sky. “That... your coupling was heat and cold colliding high above where Atlas holds the world.”

“He spoke only of that?”

“Yes?” This yes was spoken with questioning, as if Dax wondered if I might tell him more. There was more to tell. There was the chaos of my mind and my mourning from all my mortal loves lost, and the moment when I’d pushed Aikos from my chariot to enact a rescue of Icarus that I had failed at the first time.

I could tell Dax that, but I did not want to worry him that I was some mad god to be feared. Perhaps I was, but I did not wish to be. So, instead, what I told him was, “I recounted my best-known stories to Aikos to see which he knew and to remind myself of some of my losses. He knew my stories well.”

“As do I,” Dax said with a touch of reflection. “I feel like I know so much about you, but those are stories, as you said, legends. Your valiant slaying of Python. Your time as a mortal to repent for that slaying. The curse of Casandra. The arrow loosed that claimed Achilles. The loss of, um...” He did not trail off because of forgetfulness but the realization that he named my greatest loss of all.

“Hyacinth,” I finished. There were other losses, other failures, but his I felt to this day.

“Yes,” Dax said. “It all feels so much grander and greater than me.”

“I began my life as a mortal, as you said, but I never took it for punishment. It made me... love you.” I used the grand you, meaning all mankind, but I assumed he didn’t know I had never and feared I would never say those words directly to a mortal or fellow god. “It made me love you in a way not all my brethren can understand.”

His worry softened, and though he had venerated me above other gods before, in that moment, finally, he saw I could be an equal. That was all I ever wanted, and why I sought potential love with mortals more than my own kind. With another god, I would always be reaching. If set above, I would always be reached after. I wanted to reach outward, meet my love in the middle, and embrace them like only equals could.

“Let us get to know each other as men, Dax, not as courtesan and god. Tomorrow, after I bring the dawn, I will seek you again.”

He looked disappointed. Given Aikos’s experiences here, Dax had likely assumed the evening would end with him stripped and ravaged by a god with the same searing touch that Aikos had told him about. But I could not risk ruining my chance at love again, not when success was so tenuous, regardless of the prophecy I’d seen. Prophecies could be thwarted, and this time, I would take great care with how things progressed.

If my heart thawed only to freeze once more, it would crack and shatter, never to feel warmth again.

“My lord Apollo, um... if we are to part for the evening, what do I... do?” Dax asked with a furtive look around our balcony and its steep drop-off toward the distant earth in one direction, and the maze of unfathomable Olympian architecture in the other. “What about my priest? I was not happy with him, but he was by no means a poor master. He will find me gone when he wakes and wonder.”

“Aphrodite will handle that,” I assured him. “And for as long as you wish to remain on Olympus, Dax, you shall, in your own quarters.”

I’d showed him to them, prepared in advance by Aikos, who’d crafted the rooms especially for his friend. When we parted, I kissed his hand like when we met, but nothing more.

Yet.

In the mortal courtyard, today Dax was wearing white with a violet sash. He looked just as striking as the night before, more so, for while talking to fellow mortals, he was at ease. He lounged upon one of the pillowed benches with an eruption of his captivating laugh and a shake of his auburn hair like a cascade of deep, dark crimson.

There were muses among the mortals. I wondered if Dax realized. Included was Calliope, their chief and muse of epic poetry. 'Twas her who'd made Dax laugh, and I heard her ask him to recite something, a favored poem of his, for it seemed she and her brethren were as taken with Dax as everyone else.

Beauteous courtesan who I so desired to know, to understand the heart of before I discovered what lay beneath the layers of his tunic, recited from Theocritus the "Death of Adonis."

When he neared its conclusion, his voice drew me out of hiding.

““As on a carven statue

Men gaze, I gazed on him;

I seemed on fire with mad desire

To kiss that offered limb:

My ruin, Aphrodite,

Thus followed from my whim.

Now therefore take and punish

And fairly cut away

These all unruly tusks of mine;

For to what end serve they?

And if thine indignation

Be not content with this,

Cut off the mouth that ventured

To offer him a kiss’.”

Dax readied the final lines but spotted me and lost his breath to a gasp.

To not leave his audience wanting, I finished the poem for him, for while he might have been among muses, I was the god of poetry.

“But Aphrodite pitied

And bade them loose his chain.

The boar from that day forward

Still followed in her train;

Nor ever to the wildwood

Attempted to return,

But in the focus of Desire

Preferred to burn and burn.”

Like Dax, the other mortals gasped upon noticing me and bowed their heads, but Calliope and her muses applauded, both for me and Dax’s beginning.

“Forgive me, friends,” I said to muses and mortals alike, “but I seek the company of young Dax for myself, if I might borrow him.”

The gathering parted, scurrying in different directions to leave me and Dax alone. No one would question a god, but it was still polite to ask.

Dax sat up taller from how he’d been lounging, as if yet unsure if he should fall to the ground in supplication. I was glad he did not and sat beside him.

“It should be no surprise coming from a courtesan, but your eloquence in reciting one of the great poems was quite compelling.”

“As was your ending of it,” Dax said. “I do usually prefer happier tales.”

“It was happy for the boar. At least in that iteration. Although, as I am sure you know, the real boar—”

“Was Ares,” Dax finished, smiling, and seeming to relax out of his stupor at my appearance. “We were taught many disciplines along our path toward becoming courtesans. One favorite of mine was always storytelling, especially stories of the gods and their mortal entanglements.”

“Entanglements,” I repeated. “A kinder word for it than how it ended for some.”

Dax's smile drooped, and I thought perhaps he understood I was issuing a warning. I did not intend for any harm to come to him, but I could not promise that none would.

To be courted by the divine, as he called it, was a path filled with more perilous trials than courtesan ascension.

"Hence why I prefer happier tales," Dax said. "There are happy ends for some, and to discover such an end for oneself is a worthy pursuit. Love worthiest of all."

And so, I had his answer. "You might make a fine poet yourself, you know. I would be interested in hearing that eloquence recite something composed of your own words."

"I have dabbled," Dax admitted, "but never found the right inspiration to create something that moved me as much as my favorites. Perhaps inspiration is close at hand now." He shifted upon his pillows, arching back to lounge again in a way that was... familiar. A remnant from his training to always be beautiful beneath an admirer's gaze. To always be engaging. Always be... seducing.

He and Aikos had grown up as rivals, after all.

I wondered if it was purposeful or subconscious the way Dax's neck lengthened to create the most attractive line down his body. It invited my eyes to trail from the fetching unevenness of his jawline, just enough to add character and uniqueness to him, down his long neck, and further to the one-shoulder fall of his tunic that revealed a nipple, which grew pert the moment my eyes fell upon it.

If purposeful and planned, what a miraculous control he must have over his body. That too invited me—invited me to lose all control over mine and my insistence to court him instead of claim.

“Poetry is one of your domains,” Dax said, drawing my eyes back to his with a twinkle in them that I might have taken for calculating. But he was not Aikos, nor was he in a desperate fight for his life. He did wish to seduce me, but as a man might woo another man.

I had to believe that.

“You have many domains,” Dax continued, “all equally vital. Do you have a favorite?”

I had to believe he wanted me and not just what boons I might grant, because he also wanted to know me, as I wanted to know him. “Normally, I would say no, I love them all, from archery to music to seeing through the span of possible futures. But there is one domain that brings me a rare joy. And well-timed, it seems.” I tilted my head, for at that moment I caught the words of a mortal in prayer. “I believe I can show you.”

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Apollo led me out of the courtyard that, for a time, had almost made me forget where I was. That courtyard could have been one in my old temple, and those who gathered to meet me and share stories, beautiful as they all were as other chosen mortals of the gods, could have been my former fellows.

But to see the god of the dawn approaching like a sudden sunrise, I had once again been reminded that I was in the presence of the divine. And oh, how divine it was to hear Apollo finish the “Death of Adonis” for me. To hear poetry from the god who reigned over it! I was struck as dumb as when my tongue had failed me again and again last night.

Now, today, Apollo brought me to a shallow bowl on a pedestal at the very edge of the salon where I had first walked among the gods. Within its waters, I was surprised to see a man, a healer, tending to someone who had been injured and who was clearly growing more ill.

The water rippled, and the man was in a glade, searching for something. It rippled again, and though he was still in the glade, he was now kneeling, lips rapidly moving, with his eyes closed.

“May I?” Apollo held up a hand, and despite now knowing what he intended, I nodded.

He touched two fingers to just behind my ear, and suddenly, I could hear the prayer falling from the healer’s lips. He hoped the right mix of herbs might help his dying friend, but he was getting desperate and prayed for guidance from Apollo, god of healing himself.

Apollo removed his fingers, and I heard the man no more.

“Are you going to answer his prayer and heal his friend?” I asked.

“No,” Apollo said plainly. “If gods answered every prayer with a miracle, you would never learn to better yourselves. I know that might sound cold, but there are times when we might allow a... nudge. The healer asked for guidance, didn’t he? Shall we go?” He nodded at the water.

“Um... yes? But how?”

Apollo touched my shoulder, and Olympus spun around me like I was toppling from its heights. I was, I came to realize, for a moment later, I felt a jolt as we landed. No longer were we in the home of the gods but on the earth, in a lush glade.

The very glade where the healer knelt in prayer before continuing his search for herbs in his next attempt to create something that might save his friend.

My tunic had become plainer, less pristine, longer too, unlike the more revealing garment I had chosen from the multitude within the chest in my new quarters. I was as confused as I was amazed and turned to Apollo—only to see a stranger beside me.

He was and was not the same man. His face was similar, but his hair was not quite so golden, his eyes a humble brown, his features weathered, and he too wore a garment that was plain, like that of a shepherd.

“Hail, friend!” Apollo called ahead to the healer, who had yet to notice us.

The man straightened, surprised, but raised a hand aloft in greeting from where he knelt among the greenery. He was not much older than I was, at most a decade, but like the guise Apollo had draped himself in, he seemed weathered and weary. I did

not think anyone else was out here.

“Be you travelers, friends?” the healer asked.

“Indeed, just passing through.” Apollo approached the man. I followed. “What are you doing there? Gardening in the open woodland?”

“Seeking medicinal herbs,” the man said gravely. “Perhaps the most frustrating truth of medicine is that not every patient reacts the same way to every remedy. I have a friend with a recently broken leg. While it is healing, the redness and swelling, his fever, none of it is lessening, and I fear he is not long for this world if I cannot temper it.

“The right salve, the right tea, the right decision might save him, but it is like a riddle. I am moments from solving it, yet the final details elude me.”

“I am very sorry to hear that.” Apollo knelt beside the man. “I have some knowledge of herbology. May I ask what you have tried so far?”

The man told him of the various herbal concoctions he had attempted, some even I was familiar with. I had rarely been ill as a child, but I broke a bone after a tumble during a footrace once, a silly thing, where I pivoted my ankle, but my foot betrayed me and chose to stay in place. The bone snapped. I was lucky, I had been told, for less clean breaks caused more trouble, were rarer to heal right, and were far more painful. Once realigned, mine healed with little complication.

Another acolyte with a similar break died in the throes of a terrible fever only a year later. Bodies were fickle, and at the time, I believed so were the gods.

“Ah, difficult then that you have tried many trusted remedies, but your friend remains in peril,” Apollo said. “You have my sympathies. Perhaps it is the doctor now who

needs to rest.”

“No, not until I solve this—” The man reached toward the herbs around them, sage I thought, but Apollo caught his wrist.

“Friend, trust me, a weary healer can do no healing at all. Your mind is overtaxed, sluggish. Your efforts are noble, but you would think clearer after a break and some thyme and honey tea.”

“No.” The man wrenched his hand away. I wondered if he would be so fierce if he knew he defied a god. His anger was not directed at Apollo though, but internally, and his expression immediately softened. “I appreciate your concerns, but I cannot rest. I cannot risk that his condition might worsen until I... I...” His eyes widened like the high-noon sun. “Thyme. Yes! I recall an instance of thyme aiding similar symptoms. I haven’t tried thyme!”

The man leapt to his feet. The glade was in some high elevation of the hills and not far from a small settlement, in the perfect conditions for a patch of thyme to be growing nearby.

“Please, will you help me gather some?” the man asked of us as he ran to it. “The more the better, so I might add it to both tea and a salve to speed the process. Please.”

“You needn’t ask twice, friend. Of course we will aid you,” Apollo said.

I didn’t hesitate to follow his lead as we gathered thyme alongside the healer. When he deemed it enough, he led us to his home in the settlement. The abode was modest but had two bedrooms, one he used as his own, and one as his healing room, where his friend lay on the bed in a fitful sleep.

The leg did look inflamed, especially around a sewn-shut wound where I assumed the

bone must have protruded when he broke it.

We helped the healer prepare the herbs, mixed with others, along with honey, and oils. When all was done, the salve applied, and his friend fed the tea, though he barely roused to full consciousness even as he drank it, we sat with the man at his sitting room table.

“Please, stay for a meal and some of that tea, while I pray to Apollo that this time my efforts are enough.” He said the last almost under his breath, but I knew even if he’d prayed in thought alone, Apollo would have heard him.

Again, I had to wonder, what would this man think, what would he do, if he knew the very god he prayed to was in his home? I could still hardly believe I was in his company myself.

“You’re a courtesan?” the healer questioned when we had finally conversed enough to better know each other. Although as far as he knew, Apollo was the very shepherd he’d guised himself as.

“Former courtesan,” I corrected.

“It was not the life for you?” he asked.

“I loved it, but something was missing, and the gods had better plans for me.” I slid my eyes to Apollo, and he seemed content with that answer.

“Might there be any bread and olives left for me?” a tired, croaking voice drew our attention to the room’s entrance. The friend was up, standing with a walking stick that had been placed beside his bed. His forehead was sheened with sweat, but the red, swollen, and angry wound was less so now. “I’ll take wine too, if you have it.”

“Theo!” the healer raced to his friend, nearly toppling his own chair back in his haste to leave it. “More tea is what you’ll take. You shouldn’t be out of bed yet!”

“Ah, but with my fever broken, I feel like I could climb a mountain.” He hobbled closer, and his friend kept him steady with a tender and careful embrace. Theo wrapped his free arm around the healer’s back and sagged against him. Whether only friends or lovers, their reunion made my heart feel full.

“You really, really should still be in bed.” The healer sniffled. “I can bring you something—”

“Let me stay,” Theo insisted. “Just for a little while, so I might sit with you and eat something in good company. The conversation I woke to has been riveting.” His eyes turned to the table as their embrace ended, with the healer keeping an arm around him, lessening reliance on the crutch. “A courtesan of Aphrodite in our midst? We have never had anyone in this settlement more elevated in the gods” eyes. A pleasure, even if you were reduced to picking herbs.”

Apollo and I both laughed.

“I didn’t mind,” I said. “To see you roused, friend, it was an honest honor.”

He joined us for the remainder of the meal, but while the worst seemed to be over, he still had much recovery ahead and more of the medicine would be needed to keep his fever and the inflammation at bay.

“Thank you both so much,” the healer said, teary-eyed and even more exhausted than when we’d found him, especially now that he knew he could rest. “I truly feared he might never rouse again. Apollo be praised.”

The actual Apollo, still in disguise, rested his hand on the man’s shoulder. “As was

said, it was our honest honor to help. But it was you who saved your friend.”

We took our leave, being only travelers after all, just passing through. When we reached an area out of view of anyone from the settlement, Apollo touched my shoulder like he had on Olympus, and the world tumbled like the mountain had as we returned to its heights.

Beside me was the god of the dawn once more, golden, and gleaming. I only realized that I had grown as weepy as the healer when I felt a tear slide down my cheek. Apollo wiped it away, and his touch was warm enough that the moisture instantly evaporated.

“Thank you for showing me that,” I said. “It was a beautiful thing to witness, to partake in. Rather than perform a miracle, you gave him the means, the inspiration to perform one himself.”

Apollo’s smile was more radiant to me than ever. “I am glad you understand. Shall I see you again tomorrow?”

I felt the same stir of disappointment at our impending parting as I had last night. I had never experienced courtship. I was trained to serve, to please and pleasure. In recent years, I had not gone a single day without some lesson or endeavor toward providing and taking physical enjoyment with another.

Aikos had tasted this very god already. It seemed unfair that I was being made to wait, especially after beginning to know Apollo and looking on him with greater awe because of it.

Damn Aikos, you sweet, glorious bastard. You beat me again. I was following a step behind him again. And yet, I knew now that my reward at the end of this if I could only be patient would be, for me at least if not what Aikos would have wanted, a far

greater gift than any physical pleasures or even godhood.

Before Apollo could try taking my hand to kiss it in farewell like last time, I took his. I kissed the back of his fingers gently and said, “Yes. Tomorrow.”

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:11 am

The next day, like the first, I found Dax in the mortal courtyard. This time, although there were others nearby, he sat alone, leaning forward on his bench, writing on a parchment in furious concentration. When he noticed my approach, he rolled the parchment up like a secret to be kept.

“My lord,” he greeted.

“Trying your hand at poetry?” I asked.

“Perhaps.” He tucked the parchment behind him, clearly not ready to share it yet.

I looked forward to when he did. “Would you like to experience one of my other tenets today?” I held out my hand, and he accepted it with no tremble or hesitation today.

“Melitta!” Dax called to a young woman lounging in the grass. “Would you return my parchment to my rooms for me when you get the chance?”

“Certainly,” she said, and then sat up when she saw me and spoke with reverence. “My lord.”

I bowed my head in thanks and led Dax from the courtyard for today’s excursion. We were not going quite as far as yesterday, for there would be no trek to the earth below.

The home of the gods had many different halls, quarters, and open courtyards for our dalliances of choice. The largest of our music halls could host dozens, which was

where I took Dax now. I saw the wonder on his face when he realized that, despite there being several groups of revelers, from singers to musicians to those dancing, no sound traveled to where we stood at the entrance.

“Come,” I said, taking his hand again and keeping it this time, cool in mine and holding firm. “You will understand as we walk.”

We went left toward a quartet of string instruments. The music they played could only be heard once we walked close enough to the edge of those gathered to enjoy their song. The entirety of the hall was set up this way, so that performers could be as loud and varied as they pleased and never clash with their neighbors.

Music was one of my domains, so my presence did not draw much attention here, for whether muse, mortal, or otherwise, the frequenters of this hall were used to my presence. We listened for a while, and then I led Dax to the other side to hear a chorus of singers. Then we circled to the next group, where two talented flute players were performing a duet. Another was composed of strings, flutes, and percussion and had the largest gathering of dancers, though merrymakers danced in every corner of this hall.

Lastly, I led Dax to an unoccupied spot with a collection of waiting instruments.

“Tell me, are there any of these you have an inclination toward?” I asked.

“Oh, um... I suppose I am fair enough on the pan flute. Would you like me to play something for you?” He retrieved one and sat on one of the area’s stools.

“If you are not one who succumbs to stage fright,” I teased.

His laugh, as always, was lovely to my ears. “Having been trained to become a courtesan, my lord, that would be unacceptable.” He puckered his plump lips and

began to blow. It came as no surprise that his chosen song was the First Delphic Hymn, one written in praise to me. I would have thought it flattery if not for the impishness in his eyes, the proof that he too was teasing.

I summoned my lyre, first of its kind and invented by Hermes. He gifted it to me in exchange for the cattle he'd already stolen from me on the day he was born, the knave. He often stole the lyre back, like a game between us, but either of us could summon it and play it with near equal talent. Naturally, while Hermes had created it, I was the superior musician, something even he would never deny.

The first strums of my hymn to accompany Dax made his eyes widen and his breath stutter upon the flute. He collected himself and continued, though he watched me fervently, as I sat upon a stool beside him and together, we played.

Although made from the shell of a tortoise, the lyre had been painted with liquified gold and gleamed brilliantly. It remained to this day my favorite of instrumental sounds, and yet, alongside the pan flute was my favorite accompaniment for it. Dax could not have known that, for it was not part of any stories passed among mortals. We were naturally harmonious, Dax and I, like the woven threads of fate.

He paused in his playing and said, "I don't suppose I could have the great blessing of also hearing the god Apollo sing?"

"I do enjoy giving those who are worthy my blessing," I answered. Without ceasing my own playing, I added my voice to the next verse, and as Dax listened, he continued on his flute, even more fixated on me.

It struck me quite pleasantly that it was not worship in his eyes but a very mortal want.

My singing added to our impromptu performance brought a few of the nearby

revelers to listen, and they applauded when we finished.

“Another!” a member of the audience called.

“Perhaps something new,” I said. And then asked of Dax, “Can you follow an unknown song, courtesan?”

Dax smiled at the tender ribbing, but looked panicked when I began to compose on the spot, strumming slow enough at first for him to join in once he caught the melody. He did. He mimicked my notes and even harmonized, following my lead, but as I added tempo and key changes and other complex shifts he couldn’t predict, he stumbled.

His laughter was a better sound to my ears, and our audience laughed with him.

“I am afraid I cannot keep up with the patron god of music,” Dax said.

I brought my composition to a close at that. Again, the audience applauded, but my attention was on Dax. “You lasted longer than most might have. But there are times when music should be but a backdrop to other pursuits.”

I flung my lyre into the air, and instead of thudding to the ground, it floated, beginning to play a lively tune on its own. So too did Dax’s pan flute, leaping from his fingers, and flute and lyre danced in the air as they played, the same as we were about to.

I sprang up to take Dax’s hand and pulled him from his stool. Dance we did. We twirled and leapt and spun one another as the music dictated, sometimes separately, sometimes with hands clasped, sometimes with arms about each other’s waists to lead one another in a particular set of motions. It was all unrehearsed and yet so naturally symbiotic, so much so that our fellow revelers were inclined to watch rather than join

us as the music reached a crescendo, and then shifted into a new song. A softer, slower song that allowed me to draw Dax close.

Our audience knew then to leave us. We danced, leisurely now, entwined together, with all sound outside our cocoon muted, leaving only the self-playing instruments hovering above us. Even with that godly trick, Dax looked at me within our embrace—down at me since he was taller—with a strength in his gaze, no longer afraid or too amazed to hold me tight. He raised one of my hands with his own, so they held suspended, palm against palm, and slowly laced our fingers, sending a shiver through me.

“You ask to know each other as men, but to know you, Apollo, is to know the god in you too. Lest you think men capable of magical instruments and disguises for treks to the earth.” Dax grinned. He didn’t mean it cruelly, as if I was incapable of humanity, only that my godhood was as intrinsic as my domains.

Dax wasn’t only taller but broader and more visibly muscled than this world-weary god, one who’d started my existence mortal and small and never desired to be as hulking as some of my fellows. Dax was contrastingly solid and strong, yet still a fragile, precious thing that I feared I might break. It had been a very long time since I held a mortal not in intimate coupling, the last time being...

When I held Hyacinth as he died.

“Apollo? You look sad,” Dax said softly, slowing our swaying and drawing the hand he held between us. He reached with his other hand to touch my cheek. I did not think I had shed a tear, but I felt its wetness when he brushed it away. His dark brown eyes were two beautiful voids.

“Dax, have you ever felt the kind of love you so admire of your patron goddess?” I asked.

“No,” he admitted. “I have known great love in my life, from the parents I lost, to many kind and encouraging mentors, to dear friends, like Aikos, who I consider kin. But I have never felt the soul-shattering love worthy of an epic poem. I know I have not because I have questioned it, and if one has to question it, one has not loved.”

How wise for one so young. “I can assure you that you do know when you love, because with that enlightenment, that completeness, also comes the greatest fear you have ever known, because you realize that to lose it would unmake you.”

I watched the bulb of his throat bob as he swallowed. “You experienced that more than once,” he said.

“Many times now, and each time, it has further unmade me. So much so that I fear not enough of me is left to try again. I want to. I so want to try despite my fears and to know once more that great tenet of Aphrodite without also knowing its loss.”

“I am so sorry you have known those losses, Apollo,” Dax whispered, “but it only takes one right time to be worthy of an epic.”

He did not remove his hand from my cheek, but shifted it to touch more of me, until his large palm cupped the curve of my jaw. The music had stopped, the instruments lowering and then landing with a faint clatter, as my mind was too muddled to maintain the trick amidst such utter entrancement with Dax’s daring.

I had said I wanted to know each other as men, and he was treating me like one. He leaned closer with that same want in his eyes and, as if having become an avatar of Hermes, meant to steal something from me no one ever had.

A kiss.

A second tear spilled down my cheek as I allowed Dax to press his lips to mine. I

feared I began to clutch his clasped hand too tightly, to grip his waist too tightly too, tangling fingers into his tunic. I was almost always warm and sometimes burned too hot. Dax was cool, like a night breeze at the commencement of sunset. I fought to not scorch him as my temperature rose with the gentle tease of his tongue between my lips, flicking lightly, lightly, lightly, so that I whimpered at the plunge he finally gifted me.

A courtesan through and through, for with only a kiss, he made a god whine.

“I hope I have not caused offense, my lord Apollo,” Dax whispered upon my dampened lips.

I knew I burned quite hot indeed when I saw him watch my tears steam away, but it was not so hot that he recoiled. “None at all. Shall we play a bit more music together, young Dax?”

I expected the usual disappointment at my sluggish pacing of our courtship, but he smiled and kissed our clasped fingers before releasing me. He once again retrieved the pan flute. “Perhaps you will allow me to try keeping up with your new composition again. It was lovely.”

“Thank you. And perhaps.” I retrieved my instrument, but rather than sit on a stool again to play, I held it toward Dax. “Or perhaps you would like to try it on the lyre this time.”

Dax looked more flushed than at the onset of our kiss. I might want our courtship to mostly be as equals, but being a god, I did still enjoy causing the occasional wonderment. He accepted my offer and, in turn, handed me the flute.

As came as no surprise, Dax proved just as talented with his fingers as he was his lips.

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When Apollo and I finished in the music hall, I was pleased he didn't immediately dismiss me. Instead, he led me somewhere new. When I asked where we were going, and he answered, "Toward my quarters," I was elated, but we did not enter his rooms directly.

We followed a railing back behind what I took for his rooms until we stood on a great balcony, massive, and with a space in the middle with no railing at all. I needn't guess why because his chariot was parked on that balcony. This was where he took off with it into the sky each morning.

It was gold and glorious and vaster than I would have guessed. It had a lounging sofa within it as large as a bed. My excitement grew again, but although Apollo allowed me to admire the chariot up close, he quickly led me in through the balcony doors to what I discovered was his private courtyard, where something even grander than instruments that could play themselves awaited us.

Apollo's horses.

I gasped to see them grazing within touching distance, should I dare touch.

"Since the sun has set, I knew they had returned," Apollo said. "They do not need me to guide the chariot, you see, but I do still start them on their path each morning. Would you like to meet them?"

The horses were a marvel. I had to wonder how they didn't set on fire the very grass they fed on, for each of them was aflame. They were identical in build, but the coloring of the fire that emanated from them and made up their manes and tails were

each a different hue.

Blue, white, orangey-yellow, and burning red.

“Can I even go near them without—”

“Burning?” Apollo asked. He once again took my hand. “Keep in contact with me, and no flames of Olympus, the earth below, or the deepest depths of Tartarus can ever harm you.”

Now there was a poetic promise, one I was afraid to test, but with my fingers lacing with Apollo’s once more, my fear ebbed. “Which one is which?” I asked, as we neared the amber-colored horse first.

“That is Aethon, one of the stallions.”

Its silken coat was warm, like playfully hovering fingers over a burning candle, but without sting or harm to my skin. Aethon nickered and flicked his tail in response to my pets upon his neck.

“Pyrois is the red mare.” Apollo led me to the next one.

She turned for me to pet her nose and bucked against my hand.

“Phlegon is my other mare,” he said of the white horse.

She seemed the most serene and did not even turn at my stroke along her back.

“And Eous the final stallion,” Apollo said of the blue.

He was the most unique looking, although I suppose I had seen all four colors in the

twinkle of stars. He preened the most too, turning this way and that, following my pets, but also as if to show off his beauty from different angles.

He reminded me of Aikos in that. I would have to tease my friend that he was no different than a vain stallion, though he'd likely take that as a compliment. More the reason to envy Aikos, for even something to chide him over, he could take in stride and embrace like a blessing.

That I could learn from him—to be less unforgiving of my faults.

“Have any of them produced a foal?” I asked.

“Many. When grown, they take to the skies and tend to stay there.” Apollo tilted his head up, and since we were in a courtyard, it was open sky above us, night sky, all a twinkle. “They are visible from time to time, and I do visit them. Have you ever seen the blazing skies on a cold night, when it seems alive with dancing lights?”

“Oh, yes.” I recalled such spectacle vividly, like shimmering, iridescent silk fluttering in the heavens. “A truly wondrous thing to witness.”

“That is them. But there is one young foal not ready to join her kin.” Apollo whistled, and I wondered if he had a different tone for each of the horses, for none of the others responded.

Instead, a small foal whinnied and made her appearance, galloping out from behind a pillar, where she must have been dozing. She was as fiery as her parents, Pyrois and Eous I'd guess, given she was a vibrant violet color.

“I named her Espera,” Apollo said, “for she is the color of the horizon just before the last of the sun sets into evening.”

“How lovely.” In my excitement to pet her as she leapt around us, like a pup at play, I didn’t realize I moved too quickly for Apollo’s hand to stay in mine.

“Wait!” He pulled me against him with a shocking strength before my unthinking act meant a scorched palm—or worse. “Please, be more careful.” Apollo’s voice shook, spoken beneath my ear with breath on my neck due to his slighter height. The feel of him holding me so desperately from behind made me more aware of just how blessed I was.

A god had his arms around me, had allowed a kiss from me, and was so worried for my sake, his voice trembled while scolding me. I leaned my weight against him, knowing there was no threat of unbalancing us.

Apollo might be slight, but he was a marble pillar as strong as the dawn was certain.

“Forgive me,” I said. “I forgot myself. She is lovely. And lively.” I chuckled, when it seemed Espera was indeed like a young pup, for she leapt up toward us as if jealous we were embraced, and she was not part of it.

With one hand holding tight to Apollo’s arm around my waist, I reached with the other to pet the foal’s nose. Apollo relaxed and reached to pet her too. Our hands bypassed each other at first, but I was soon drawn to brush Apollo’s fingers and tangled them with mine.

His firm body, and his firmer cock twitching from within his tunic behind me, confirmed that my advances were not unwanted. And yet, when I brought our linked hands to my lips and began to lick one of his tan digits, he jerked away from me.

“Perhaps we should call it a night,” he said, voice still a tremble, though no longer out of fear, I thought. Espera had trotted away from us to leap around her parents’ feet, and I was no longer in danger of an accidental touch.

That did not mean I felt relief. With the chill left from Apollo no longer being molded against me, I felt an uncertainty that, as an acolyte nearly unparalleled in skill and seduction, I had only ever felt when competing with Aikos.

I faced Apollo. His erection was evident. His want. His blush even. But he would not meet my gaze. Perhaps there was fear in how he shuddered. All was not lost, but I had to be patient. Truly epic romances were rarely achieved in a few days.

“Of course, my lord.” I bowed. “I can find my way back. Thank you for gifting me the meeting of your fine steeds. Will I see you again tomorrow?”

Apollo’s golden eyes returned to mine at last. His tension waned, and he offered a strangely warning smirk. “Yes. But be warned, it might be a more harrowing excursion for you than our previous encounters.”

“O-oh?” A stir of dread filled me. “May I ask why?”

“Because,” he said, “my sister has asked to meet you.”

I was as nervous as I’d been those first few moments in the Olympian salon. Today, I was to meet Apollo’s sister, down upon the earth, where he led me to a field with an obvious archery range. Which meant she’d be armed, though I doubted she ever wasn’t. She was the goddess of the hunt, after all.

Artemis, also goddess of wildlife, the moon, and... possibly ruthlessness, given some of her more vengeful stories. One notable example being Acteon. The poor doomed man had accidentally discovered her bathing and was turned into a deer to be eviscerated by his own hunting dogs.

And here I was trying to court her beloved twin.

“Should I be prepared for anything?” I asked of Apollo as we neared the archery range. It was in a small clearing but with thick forest around it. There were no obvious signs of people or animals. Even the birds and ambient noises of the forest seemed to have gone quiet in expectation.

“Be you. Be honest,” Apollo said. “And you needn’t fear a thing.”

An arrow shot across the entirety of the clearing and wedged with an audible thunk into the center of the middle target. I startled with my heart in my throat but saw no one. Then, from the branches of the tallest tree on the farthest side of the clearing from where the arrow had struck, dropped down a graceful wisp of a woman, who landed with no sound and as if the distance she’d fallen was no feat at all.

I must have stopped moving because Apollo took hold of my elbow to lead me forward. As we neared his sister, there was no question she was beautiful. She looked just like him. Same height, similar build, given her defined muscles, just a slightly more feminine curve to her jaw.

The greatest difference from Apollo was her coloring, like silvery moonlight in contrast to his sunshine. Her skin was pale, hair and eyes true silver, and she wore her silvery-white, waist-length hair tied back in one long, thick braid, with a few curls framing her face. Her simple tunic seemed purely white at first, with occasional crescent moon-shaped embellishments like Apollo’s sunbursts, but upon closer inspection, when the fabric shifted in the light, it showed silver embroidery in the shape of animals, weapons, and constellations.

Artemis bore no smile as she looked at me, her eyes as sharp as the point on her already nocked next arrow. “He seems fit enough,” she said, scanning my form with detachment.

“Be nice, sister,” Apollo scolded. “He is more than fit. You need only get to know

one another to see that. Shall we make a contest of it?" He released my elbow now that we had reached her and proceeded to summon a bow out of nothing like he'd summoned his lyre yesterday. Apollo's had a bit more character to it than Artemis's, and like his lyre, was painted in gold. I admired the simplicity of hers, unadorned for pure function.

"A contest between me and him?" Artemis sneered.

The thought of Apollo handing me his bow chilled the blood in my veins worse than her stare.

"Between you and me," he said. "We each take a shot. If my aim is truer, Dax may ask you a question. If yours is, you may ask something of him."

My terror abated. It seemed Apollo already knew me well. Questions I could ask and answer, but I would have been no match against Artemis in a battle of bows. He also must have known she would ask for such a contest herself if he hadn't stepped in.

Still, she seemed skeptical.

"That is hardly a fair test of him. Does he need your protection?"

"No. Neither do I need his." Apollo squared off against her, and their paralleled complementary appearances was like being witness to an eclipse—in mid-sibling banter. "I do not require a companion who rivals me with weapons. I am the master bowman, after all."

"And I the master archer, neither man nor woman being of consequence," she spat back.

I chuckled, and although Artemis cast her eyes on me like a blade strike, I steeled

myself. “Forgive me. The pair of you makes me envious. I did not have siblings as a babe. Although my fellow acolytes became as such, and it was in similar exchanges that I felt the most among kin.”

Apollo’s sunny expression melted me, much as Artemis’s continued to chill.

She manhandled Apollo into position, facing the distant targets.

“I have already made my first shot, brother. Beat that.”

He nocked an arrow that manifested like fire and took but a single breath before releasing it.

The flames licked Artemis’s silvery arrow as it struck the central target nearly overlapping. It seemed so close to my eyes, the shots may have been identical.

“My win,” Artemis said.

“Indeed,” Apollo conceded.

I trusted the eagle-eyed vision of gods. “Ask away,” I said to Artemis.

“How many partners have you been with in accordance with your patron’s tenets?”

Straight to the point then. “I gave myself fully to the priest who claimed me as courtesan. Before him, I was with all my year’s acolytes at one point or another. Unlike Aikos, I did dally with both female and male acolytes, although as I aged, my preference became clearer to me.”

“So, many, would you say?” she pressed.

“Yes, most in youthful teasing and exper—”

“Many,” she reiterated and raised her bow to fire again.

Her shot was as equally impressive as the first.

As was Apollo’s.

“My win,” he said.

“Yes.”

Again, I took them at their word.

“Tell me the story of Orion,” I prompted, noting that both twins straightened at the name. “I mean no offense, but it is my experience that not all tales of the gods are completely accurate in how mortals pass them down.”

“And how has that tale been passed down?” Artemis asked.

“As I heard it, Apollo tricked you into killing Orion, someone you might have loved, simply because he didn’t like him and was jealous of his affections for you. But I believe there must be something missing from that version.”

“And why do you think that?” Apollo asked with a calm smile.

“Because you love her, and she you. It would have to be more than you not liking a possible partner to go to such extremes. You would put your sister’s happiness first, as I believe the same is true for her.” I dared return my eyes to Artemis with nary a blink.

The twitch at her lips said she was at least mildly impressed. “You’re not wrong. I thought I loved Orion and wanted Apollo’s blessing. He knew Orion to be one with many partners, the untrustworthy, insatiable type.” She made no attempt to hide her meaning with that comparison. “Apollo did not trick me so much as made certain that I caught Orion in the act of bedding another. Now, he adorns my tunic and the skies, forever out of reach of any woman’s touch.”

She looked up, and although no stars were visible, I caught the shimmer of the constellation she meant on her dress—the three points of Orion’s belt, which he would never remove to philander again.

Vengeful? Undeniably. But earned.

The twins fired at the third target, of which there were a total of five.

This win went to Artemis.

“You gave yourself fully to your priest, you said,” she began before even lowering her weapon. “Yet you abandoned him without thought?”

“I was taken,” I said. “Brought to Olympus without my say.”

“So, you’ve asked to be returned?”

“No—”

“Then you abandoned him.”

“I was unhappy!”

“You abandoned him because you were unhappy,” she made it sound so thoughtless

and harsh in her repetition, “when you once believed you would stay with him and only him. Did you not?”

“I... I did.”

“You abandoned him without looking back because it suits your desires now.”

“All fair,” I said, and she looked smug in her seemingly second win of our questioning. “I did ask what would become of my priest, what he would think after discovering me missing, and when Apollo said all would be handled, I didn’t question it.

“Until after that day on the earth with you.” I turned my eyes to Apollo. “We parted a little earlier that day, and I found myself feeling... overrun with guilt. Having witnessed in the waters that man who wished to heal his friend, I went back to the bowl and asked to see my priest. He honestly looked relieved. I think he knew we were not a good fit. He had been granted a vision from Aphrodite of my fate and is happy for me. He will get first pick of next year’s ascended.

“But even knowing all that is not enough. I have been writing a letter to him. I wish to explain myself, so that any wounds my parting caused him might be healed. The god of healing was very inspirational for me that day.”

The suns of Apollo’s eyes flared. “That was what you were writing the next morning?”

“That. And other things.” I was not yet ready to tell him all I had been writing. “Does that better answer your question, my lady?” I returned to Artemis.

“Hn,” she huffed, which I took for a win to my side again.

The fourth loosed arrows announced Apollo as victor.

I had a simple question this time, one with only a one-word answer.

“Tell me, my lady, if you truly believed your brother to have found a worthy partner, would you accept it and wish them well?”

A moment of fury passed over her features, but she eventually said, “Yes.”

Vengeful, but a good sister.

They moved to the fifth and final target. Artemis shot first, superbly centered like all the rest, but knowing she had at least one more question she ached to ask of me, I joined Apollo when he readied his bow.

“My lord, I believe your stance might be a bit tilted.” I took hold of either side of his hips, bringing my own up close behind him as if to mold against his back.

The arrow loosed wildly, missing the target by such a wide margin, its high arch shot it into the woods.

“Oops. Perhaps I was wrong.” I stepped back.

Apollo turned to me with a curious expression. The god of prophecy did not know all, but surely, he could read the signs of what was in front of him. “Or perhaps I am out of practice. Allow me a moment to retrieve my arrow. We wouldn’t want my mistake to have unjustly skewered a nursing doe.”

Fire erupted from Apollo’s back, outlining the air with wing-shaped flames like rays from the sun. As if a mirage, they rippled in and out of existence as they took him airborne to chase after the arrow I had caused him to misfire.

He was breathtaking. But my objective was not to admire.

“Why go and do that?” Artemis stepped in front of me to block my view of her brother. Like Apollo, and I was certain any of the slighter framed gods, her diminutive figure did nothing to quell my mortal terror.

But Apollo was brilliance who wanted to bask me in his light—me. Whether worthy of that or not, I could not let fear be what stumbled me upon my path to earn it. “Perhaps there is a question you would ask me that you would rather not ask in front of him.”

The air cut as if with the swing of a sword, and while I tried to register the sound, everything else happened too fast for me to defend myself. I stood tall, and then, in a blink, I was against a tree trunk at the clearing’s edge, with Artemis’s bow on the ground, and one of her arrow points at my throat.

To be handedly overpowered by one so much smaller than oneself is truly humbling.

“So clever, aren’t you? Then you think you know my question already, do you?” she asked.

“I do.” I dared not move or even breathe or swallow too heavily, for the sharpness of the arrow could mean my death with barely a press. “What are my intentions with Apollo, and can I truly be the one who mends instead of breaks his so deeply wounded heart?”

A furrow of her brow was the only sign that she was surprised her derisive demand of me was something I could answer with the question she had yet to ask. “Mortals like you and even supposed friends among the gods have hurt my brother too many times.” Her voice shook with a mixture of love and rage that could only be expressed by one who had felt their kin’s pain as deeply as if they had experienced its causes

themselves.

“I know.” I kept my own voice steady. “And I cannot promise I will not be another point of pain for him. I cannot. Because I cannot see the future like he can. But what I can promise you is that I desire nothing more than the chance to be part of what makes him shine so luminously. To be worthy of his love, not as a worshiper receiving a god’s blessing, but as a man loves another man.”

The pause as I awaited her response seemed endless. Then, before I realized she’d released me without leaving even a scratch to spill a drop of my blood, Artemis was several meters away, walking back to where we’d been.

I caught up to her, allowing the silence she’d chosen, for it was better than an arrow point or a cursed existence among the stars, just as Apollo returned.

His sunbeam wings were beautiful when they flared at his landing and then vanished again. “Well, sister? Are you satisfied yet?” he asked.

“Almost.” When the full force of the moon faces you, believe me, friend, it is as daunting as the sun. “You do not need to compete with me, Dax, but I would still see you shoot.” She handed me her bow and an arrow to fire.

I stood breathless at first. I was trained in many things, but archery had never been my forte. A wrestling match would have been preferable. Even a sword fight. “If it... pleases my lady. But I hope I am not too much of a disappointment.”

“Just hit the target.”

Artemis’s arrow in the center of the fifth target remained, as I squared my stance to attempt to at least not wildly miss the way Apollo had.

Whether as retribution for my act or simply to be near me again, Apollo moved in behind me. “Allow me to assist,” he said.

The gentle nudging of his feet between mine to alter my stance, his hands turning my hips just so, and then adjusting my elbows, were all a more delicate endeavor than how I’d boldly gripped him. No less intimate or purposeful, for it relaxed and elated me to have the god I adored touch me at all. My attentions on Apollo might have caused him to miss, but his emboldened me.

My arrow loosed and struck center—between the actual center and the outermost ring. Better than I’d ever done though!

“You show promise!” Apollo praised, squeezing my shoulder.

“More like uselessness,” Artemis grumbled. But when I handed back her bow, rather than fury or disapproval, her face showed a passive acceptance. “Maybe not entirely without merit.” She nodded, first at me, then at Apollo.

Foregoing any proper farewells, Artemis turned to the line of trees behind us and leapt up into their branches with the agility of an Aegean cat. A few soundless bounds later, she was gone.

Apollo patted and squeezed my shoulder again.

“Well done, Dax.”

“That was me having done well?” I’d hoped so, but if Apollo was cryptic, then Artemis was an unequaled enigma.

“Believe me,” Apollo chuckled, “if you had not done well, you’d know.”

I did not doubt that at all.

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We left the archery clearing, but as it was such a lovely day upon the earth, we decided to not yet return to Olympus, and strolled instead through this favored wilderness of my sister's.

Far from where any of her hunting arrows might strike, mind you.

“She is a good sister and loves you dearly,” Dax said, hand entwined with mine as we neared a bubbling brook that filled the forest around us with a natural hypnotic calm.

It was beautiful here. One of the reasons Artemis liked its nearby areas for hunting was because it was far from any settlements, which meant fewer opportunities for another Acteon to discover her bathing. It was also a favored spot for us to meet when we wanted company only with each other.

That she had given her blessing, in her own way, for Dax to be here too, meant a great deal.

“I love her dearly too,” I said. “As two halves made more whole together, we are often of the same mind. Not to say we have never disagreed or fought. We are in that way like neighboring city-states, sometimes too alike to not devolve into disagreement and—”

A rapid-fire vision assaulted my senses, taking over all I could see. The calm forest and its brook became neighboring city-states, just as I had thoughtlessly conjured, prompting a prophecy of one such disagreement about to erupt.

I saw them squabbling over trade, a misunderstanding, an accidental death that

escalates into war, and that war spills over into other city-states, other nations, and—

“Apollo!”

All triggered by something as trivial as a traveling merchant setting up shop in a local’s stall.

Mortals.

“Is everything all right?” Dax pulled me from my vision with a squeeze of my hand, and his other hand wrapped around the back of my neck in preparation to embrace me should I need something more to ground my footing.

I did not need protection. I did not need a warrior at my side or a shield in front of me. It did not matter if Dax could hit the center of an archery target to rival me and my sister’s talents. Yet he acted as protector of me purely on instinct, as anyone would for a treasured companion. “Being the god of prophecy has its drawbacks,” I explained. “I see the potential for war. I must intervene. Now.” I pried his fingers from my neck with delicate care and brought both his hands in front of me to lift them to my lips.

“Is it serious?” he asked.

“No more than usual. If only you knew how frequently your cities and nations are on the brink of war that could rival the decimation of the Trojans.”

“I think I would prefer to not know that,” Dax said. “And I am sorry you do.”

“Someone must, for if such devastation can be avoided with the smallest... nudge, I must act. Easier before things escalate, and my fellow gods and I start picking sides again. Shall I return you to Olympus?” I asked, lowering his hands between us, but

still holding them, still content to be in contact.

“Will you be long?”

“I do not think so. I will be finished before the sun sets.” I nodded toward where it hung in the sky, pulled by my driverless chariot.

“Then let me stay,” Dax beseeched. “Return to me here. It is lovely, and I do not mind waiting for you with such breathtaking views as my company.”

His handsome face, warm eyes, long locks of chestnut brown, and the figure of him so striking in his short, one-shoulder tunic, made me certain that Dax was the more breathtaking view.

“Then that is what I shall do. Await my return.”

I flew off, disguising myself once I reached my destination, and sought to simply guide the wayward merchant to a different stall. A simple thing, but one that would affect the ripples of devastation that could have followed.

Afterward, I had a new vision of the same city-states in peaceful accord. Content that I had succeeded, I returned to the forest. As guessed, the sun was low but not yet set.

I landed a ways off so I could approach Dax from afar and enjoy watching him. He had traveled a bit from where I’d left him, down the bank of the brook, skipping stones and balancing on larger rocks and tree stumps, as he basked in the beauty of a summer eve.

Again, I thought, he was more the beauty than the scenery. His strong limbs and broad shoulders. The curves of his calves and breadth of his thighs. His one visible nipple from how he wore his chiton over one shoulder, showing how pert it was from

the coming coolness of night, how ripe to be brushed against with the pad of a finger and brought to further hardness.

My loins ached for him, but more importantly, my heart did. I had to listen to my heart. I had to take my time. If something was to stand between us and any lasting bliss, let it not this time be me.

Dax leapt from one rock to another along the bank, but the second one proved loose. He teetered, pitching precariously forward to plummet into the brook's waters—

Only for a strong wind to blow through the trees. Dax's teetering forward became a topple backward instead, and he stumbled off the rock onto solid ground. He laughed as if he had never been in danger.

But I knew that wind, coming as it had... from the west.

"Show yourself, Zephyrus," I commanded, keeping hidden from Dax behind a nearby tree.

The winged god of the West Wind materialized out of the air with a gentle drop upon sandaled feet. His spread wings tucked in at his sides as he settled.

Zephyrus was beautiful, as all gods are. Yes, all. I too knew the beauty of Hephaestus that some scorned, perhaps because I saw the beauty in mortals that many of my brethren did not. But Zephyrus was beautiful in the way poets praise—or at least half of him was.

The other half I had burned by holding him to Helios's flaming surface from one long dawn until dusk.

He wore a black tunic, simple, unadorned. His hair was black as well, long, and

wavy, to hide that scarred side of his face. He had one silver eye, while the hidden one was milky and blind.

“‘Twas my intention to save, my lord god, not harm,” Zephyrus said, as he took a knee before me and bowed. The gentlest of the wind gods, I remember once thinking. Perhaps others still did. Zephyrus was a tender spring breeze. Until you loved the same mortal as him, and he would rather see that mortal dead than allow him to be with someone else.

“You think it wise to be in the vicinity of any mortal I court,” I seethed, “once fairest of the Anemoi, son of the dawn?”

“Perhaps not, my lord, but I swear,” he spoke to the earth beneath him, not daring to meet my gaze, “my intent is only absolution.”

More, I assumed, that he recognized the perils present should I lose a beloved again.

Surely, I would scorch all the world and everyone on Olympus to ashes until I too was slain. Not prophecy, simply truth. After bearing my rage once all on his own, Zephyrus knew the fragility of my heart.

“Rise,” I said, “or I fear I might stomp you into the dirt until your other half is unrecognizable too. And I do not wish to.”

He glanced up at last, slowly stood, and while he held his head high, his wings quivered from being in my presence. Part of me was glad, vindicated, but I could not keep living inside the shell of my wallowing.

“I believe you that your intentions were good, that you seek only forgiveness. Understand, I cannot forgive you.”

Zephyrus's wings quivered again, pulling tighter to his back, perhaps in readiness to flee should I lash out like before.

"I also recognize that you might never be able to forgive me for how I chose to retaliate. But I wish you no further harm. I wish for you to heal... in body and heart."

He flinched as I reached for his cheek but did not attempt to flee or pull away. Even the gods cannot heal all. There are exceptions, as one like Hephaestus knows well. But because I caused this damage with the power of my domain, I too could clear it away.

A gasp left Zephyrus at what was no doubt a soothing warmth, as the spot where I touched him glowed like an auburn sunset. The light, the healing, traveled all down the side of him where the burns continued beneath his tunic. But one spot remained a visible scar—in the same place at Zephyrus's temple to match where Hyacinth had borne his death blow.

I tapped there as the glow faded, upon the scar that remained, and Zephyrus reached up to feel it. Because he too had loved Hyacinth, and Hyacinth chose me, he dared take that sweet mortal from this earth with an errant wind that struck a fatal blow with a discus, something I now loathed, when once I had greatly enjoyed the sport.

Zephyrus had worn the scars of my vengeance ever since, but the recognition in his eyes of the scar he would yet have to bear was enough.

Let it be enough now.

"Thank you," he said. He hesitated, as if unsure whether there was more to say between us. When he finally shifted to leave, there was more, I realized, as one question came to me.

“Have you ever... visited him? In Elysian?”

Zephyrus stood still, half turned away, like he still had scars to hide. “Once.”

“And did he forgive you?”

A somber smile twitched at Zephyrus’s lips. “He did. And in his forgiveness, I felt only grief.”

“As did I,” I said, recalling when I last saw Hyacinth, and he chose a mortal afterlife over rebirth with me. “I wish only for you to find a love that is returned to you, Zephyrus, not with the force and brutality of a discus, but with the tenderness of your own once gentle breeze.”

There at last did I see his wings flutter with a sense of peace. “Thank you,” he said again. “I wish the same for you.”

He winged away, vanishing just as his feet left the ground. My heart felt... lighter, and with that ease, I peered around the tree to seek out Dax.

Who was gone!

“That was a kind thing you did.” He stepped out from behind the tree before further panic could set in, or for me to have foolishly raced down the bank in search of him. He was a remarkable mortal to have eavesdropped on two gods.

But that meant he’d heard.

He knew.

“Zephyrus saved you,” I tried to explain.

Dax nodded, leaning against the tree now. “Saved me from a tumble into a shallow brook? Maybe a stubbed toe? Much as I appreciate it, truly, I think I would have survived.”

The danger had been minimal, yes, and I felt foolish for not having a response. I’d still feared, and Zephyrus had still intervened.

“The scars he had...” Dax continued. “You did that to him? Because of what he did to Hyacinth?”

I had hoped this conversation would never come, but I couldn’t avoid it now. “Isn’t it often said by mortals that the gods are cruel? And loving them or being loved by them is a curse more than any blessing.”

Dax pushed from the tree. “Apollo, I do not think what you did was cruel. I think it very... human to feel rage with loss. To want retribution when wronged.”

“Hyacinth felt otherwise.”

“You said Hyacinth might have been reborn to be with you but spurned you for your reaction to losing him.”

“Yes. He was afraid of me.” I felt the heat in my eyes starting to boil over and tried to turn my head.

Dax caught the side of my face and turned it to make me look at him. “Then he did not love you as you deserve to be loved. True love means accepting all of someone, at their best and worst.”

“True love also means wanting to be the best of oneself for one’s partner,” I countered, “and striving with everything in you to be better.”

“Yes,” Dax agreed, but then added, “while the other is forgiving when you fail.”

It was then that the dam of boiling water broke, spilling forth the tears from my eyes like lava fissures down my cheeks. Would that they could burn me—but no. No. Their heat filled not the endless chasm of my grief, but my heart. My heart and my yearning and all my wasted desires that I had scorned for so long felt... full. Scorn that had caused me to look away from Icarus and fail to save him when he fell. Scorn that had made me punishing and irrational with Aikos, when all I wanted was to have what Dax offered me now.

I swept him into my arms with all my godly strength and crashed my lips upon his. I delved my tongue between his teeth with abandon, pushing him back until the trunk of the tree was our bracing point. I was running too hot, enough that I heard Dax hiss despite the seal of our mouths. The boiling within me was not only my tears spilling but all I had been denying myself needing some means of escape, and I... wanted Dax desperately.

I kissed him harder, too hot, too fierce, too filled with unbridled passion to hold back. Though Dax held me, reciprocated, moaned even, and pressed into the firm crowding of my body against his, he made no attempt to lead. He followed. He let me set the pace, and my pace was a meteor shooting across the sky, blinking in and out of existence in its haste.

I could feel Dax’s cock through his tunic and reached up beneath it. His thighs were warm, powerful, and eager to part for me, urging me to continue my trek between them.

I wanted to. I did. I tried. But as my hand began to shake, and my mouth’s urgency stilled on his, I found myself unable to reach farther.

“I-I... I’m sorry,” I said, feeling the cool stickiness of my tears, slowly turning to

steam, and rising from my skin. I needed to collect myself, to either push for more or to remove my hands from him and cease this awful inadequacy. I could feel Dax's panted breaths on my lips, but as much as I wanted him, I could not cross the breach. Surely, he would be even more disappointed than before, and knowing that, I dared not look up but needed to pull away first—

“Shall we return then?” he said, steady, breathless though he was. He tilted my chin up, and his cheeks were flushed and lips kiss-bitten, but his eyes held only bliss. He leaned forward to kiss my lips, lighter than I had kissed his, and then took my hand from beneath his tunic, from the taut surface of his thigh, and brought my fingers to his lips to kiss them next. “To Olympus,” he affirmed, “to part ways until you seek me again tomorrow?”

Oh, how I loved him already.

I kissed Dax with the same tenderness he had shown me.

My heart said thank you, while my lips simply answered, “Yes.”

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”Yet mortal heart, in humble plight,

Is drawn to him in day or night,

For love’s sweet flame cannot be bound,

Where...”

“Where... something,” I muttered aloud.

“Where what?”

My eyes sprang up from the parchment at the sound of that voice, for it could belong to no other. “Aikos!”

My friend stood before me in the mortal courtyard, no longer a mortal himself, for Aikos was a god, and he very much looked it.

It was expected that Apollo would glow—he was god of the sun, after all—but a glow emanated from all the gods, truly making them ethereal. For Aikos, his beauty was amplified by that radiance, his pale hair, blue eyes, flawless skin, and symmetrical features, almost more pretty than handsome. All while wearing the unabashedly sheer tunic from our ascension day.

Already having been trimmed in gold, the tunic seemed grander than before, for it now included rainbow sashes and precious adornments, like gold cuffs at his wrists, undying flowers weaved into his laurels, and even gold and silk-woven sandals.

Showoff. Only thing missing were his rainbow wings that I imagined he could summon with a thought.

“Here I worried you were too delighted in your godhood to check on your friend,” I joked as he sat beside me. I set aside my reed pen and parchment, flipping the parchment over as I did so to hide its contents.

Aikos noticed but didn’t press about it. “Never! Well, definitely delighted, but not too much to not miss you, dear friend. I thought it best to give you space these first few days as you adjusted. I hope you are not angry with me for absconding with you?”

“Hardly.” I chuckled. “And it has been... I can’t even describe most of it, but it has been truly wonderful.”

Aikos knocked his shoulder against mine with a lascivious grin. “So... how many times has the former courtesan been plucked by the divine?”

“Courted by,” I corrected. “And courting means no plucking yet.”

“After days?” Aikos looked shocked, and possibly disgusted by our chastity. “I’m impressed by you both! And more than a little confused.”

“We’re going slow. I was disappointed at first, but I understand the wait. Apollo has been, well, for lack of better phrasing, burned too many times by the fires of love. And burned others.”

“You met Zephyrus, I take it?”

“More like witnessed an encounter. Apollo healed him. Mostly.”

“So that’s what happened!” Aikos exclaimed. “I caught sight of Zephyrus earlier and

wondered. Not that he needed the return of smooth skin to be sought after, but I believe his metamorphosis might mean a future love for him awaits as well.”

“Are you the new god of prophecy?” I teased. “Or just a divine matchmaker?”

Aikos looked truly thoughtful at the prospect. “Divine matchmaker, you say? I may have to add that to my ever-growing list of domains.”

“Starting with god of multiple orgasms?”

“Naturally.” He winked.

He always could make me laugh, and there was a special comfort in laughing with him now. He might have ascended to reaches I dared not dream, but he was still the insufferable friend I loved as rival and kin.

“Speaking of...” Aikos’s eyes drifted over my head to the far left of the courtyard. “I believe my skills are needed.”

I turned, and somewhat hidden behind one of the pillars leading to an exit into the Olympian halls was a tall, broad, bronze-skinned man with short brown hair and a trim beard. His amber eyes burned almost as fiery as Apollo’s, but it was his scars, the dent in his nose, and the brace on one leg that gave away his identity.

“Is that...?”

“It is.”

“He’s handsome.”

“Isn’t he? Took him too long to see it. Many with supposed flaws fail to see their

beauty.” Aikos drew my attention back to him by brushing some of the hair from my shoulder, revealing more of my uneven jawline that my longer locks helped hide.

I did not think he meant my perceived flaws though. He was unfairly insightful, like so much of him was unfair. He could perhaps add minister to mental and emotional health to his godly domains. Apollo still needed to see past his flaws and learn to forgive himself as much as others.

And blast Aikos for so concisely being the one to remind me of that.

“Your perfection is truly irritating. Do you know that?”

“Such insolence before a god?” He laughed, but the softer smile he afforded me was uncharacteristically sweet. “Do not forget, Dax, there are several things you best me at. Fare thee well. I am sure we will see each other again soon.”

Several? I thought as Aikos left me to join Hephaestus, and I followed their retreat with my eyes. I wondered what he meant and said aloud, “I certainly wouldn’t have the gall to openly fuck our goddess’s husband.”

“I don’t really mind.”

I whirled in my seat, yet again caught unawares after an unthinking declaration, and nearly tumbled off the bench.

Aphrodite sat beside me where Aikos had vacated.

When she joined me, I had no idea. I was so utterly frozen, so captivated and in awe of her, I couldn’t move to properly fall to my knees and bow.

“M-my goddess!” I managed.

“My child,” she said and cupped my cheek with an elegant hand.

She was without a doubt the goddess of beauty. Though I had long since left behind intimate thoughts of women, my loins stirred just from her proximity.

She had long blond hair, luxurious and flowing, with flowers weaved into it. A reddish pink like passion itself colored her eyes, her lips were plump and rosy, and an ample figure filled her gown and girdle with enviable curves.

“How beautiful you are,” she said to me, while I was struck dumb by the beauty of her. “Clever too. As much a point of pride for me as my own flesh. Eros has faltered in pursuit of love too, you know. But like you, he will find it again, and a lasting one this time, I am sure of it.” She drew her hand away, but where she had touched grew a warmth within me very different from Apollo’s, like a mother’s tender kiss.

“Th-thank you,” I sputtered, for I did not doubt she meant what she said. To be compared to Eros in her favor of me was humbling to a degree that could not be measured.

Aphrodite leaned back on her hands upon the bench as if we were two friends merely chatting, just as Aikos and I had been. “Do you know why I had at times resented my union with Hephaestus? I’ll save you the trouble of fearing you might offend your goddess by answering.” She giggled when my eyes no doubt became the size of sundials. “It is because he thought himself ugly. Because for ages, he had been so self-deprecating, both jealous when I was with others, yet condemning of himself as unworthy of me. I was not accustomed to how to help him move past that internal loathing, and so we drifted and dallied elsewhere than with each other and were generally quite unhappy.”

“Until Aikos,” I said.

“Until Aikos. He gives my husband something I could not, and because of that, when we are together, it is a more beautiful union too.” She sighed in contentment, gazing toward where Hephaestus and Aikos had gone. “Not an arrangement that could work for all beloveds. Apollo will not want to share you, and once you have him, I know you will not share either.”

I wondered just how well she knew me. How many of my prayers she might have heard. How many she might have answered. Though only one mattered now, and I was in the midst of it coming to fruition in the very halls of heaven. “It was always my plan to give myself fully to only one love once I found him,” I concurred.

Her loveliness as she turned her attention and alluring smile on me was magnificent. “And that is a beautiful union for you. Aikos may be one of my greatest achievements. A true masterpiece in the arts of carnality. But you are my masterpiece too, Dax. For you are destined for something Aikos is incapable of. Something he would never seek because it is not meant for him. You are on the right path.”

As much as Aikos’s words had bolstered me, to hear such reinforcement from our goddess emboldened me even more. “Thank you,” I said again.

“My true pleasure.” She winked—and I had to wonder, honestly wonder, if she was mother to Aikos in the flesh as much as she was to Eros, for they were very similar. “If you will excuse me.” She stood and headed off in the same direction as Hephaestus and Aikos.

“You seek to follow them?” I found myself compelled to call after her.

Aphrodite responded with a devious grin thrown over her shoulder. “My husband is particularly virile after an encounter with Aikos, and one can never have too many beautiful unions.”

I laughed. Definitely similar to Aikos.

As she too left me, the courtyard oddly empty today, as if my visitors had planned it as such to catch me alone, it was then that I spotted Apollo entering from the north. I wondered how long he had been watching before making himself known, for the timing was too apt to be coincidence.

I made sure my parchment was further tucked out of sight. I believed I had plenty of inspiration now to finish my poem.

“You have had visitors ahead of me,” Apollo said when he reached me.

“I have. Welcome ones.” I patted the once again vacant spot beside me. “Though you are the most welcome. Always. If it pleases you, my dear Apollo,” I continued before he suggested what we might do today, “unless you object, I know how I would like us to spend our time together.”

“Oh?” He sat, collected and calmer from the turmoil that had seized him yesterday.

More was needed though. I was on the right track. We were. But I knew why Apollo faltered to seek something deeper with me, and not only for a proper courtship.

He still feared himself unworthy of the love he so dearly sought, just as Hephaestus had feared himself unworthy of the goddess of love.

“I am grateful to know more about what truly happened between you and Hyacinth,” I said, knowing the utterance of the name would darken his otherwise hopeful expression. “More than legend now, but truth. It is in understanding that we fully know someone, and in knowing them, that we can love.

“But also, I believe it would be good for you to speak those stories more, to speak

honestly of your trials and heartbreaks, so you might learn to forgive the one person you still haven't. Well, I suppose you didn't forgive Zephyrus, but I do hope you can forgive yourself."

The sadness in Apollo's stare was thankfully quick to brighten again. "Wise Dax, it is a difficult thing you ask after all the wrongs I have done and the wounds I have suffered."

"Then tell me of those wrongs and wounds too deep to avoid scars, so you might continue to heal."

Moisture pooled in the corners of Apollo's eyes. He had spilled many tears in my presence, but that they were so close to the surface spoke of how much he still needed to shed. "When I was with Aikos, I told him my stories, but it was the barebones history of it all, not how each tragedy had made me feel. Not how they changed me and broke me." Apollo reached across the bench to take my hand. "I think you are right and that perhaps, finally, I should."

And then he did.

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It was far more difficult for me to speak my stories with the raw honesty that had been missing when I recounted them for Aikos.

My unrequited love for the mortal king Admetus.

My forced love of Daphne, pricked by Eros's arrow, only for her to be "saved" from me by becoming a tree, and for real mourning to follow even as my false love faded.

Cassandra's betrayal, only pretending to love me to receive the boon of prophecy.

The love and loss of Hyacinth.

And the would-be but wasn't love for the ill-fated Icarus.

Dax listened without interruption to each tale, each memory, each story of woe and regret. And through it all, he held my hand.

I'd cried with Aikos. I'd shed tears already with Dax. Yet again, tears fell, turning to steam on my cheeks, as the intensity of sharing my pain made me run as hot as passion did. As any strong emotion did. If I became too hot to touch, Dax showed no signs of it, but held my hand tighter still.

We did not remain in the mortal courtyard for all of it. We walked, paused to eat, or share a drink. Eventually, I even told Dax how I had reenacted the loss of Icarus with Aikos.

"You pushed Aikos out of your chariot?"

“I caught him!” I defended, bracing myself for terror to fill Dax’s eyes, but was further amazed when all he did was laugh.

“Oh, I would have loved to see his face!”

I laughed then too, and it felt surreal after sharing so much pain to feel mirth in its wake. It felt good and made me feel... lighter, like how healing Zephyrus had made me lighter.

Somehow, with my tales done, we had quite unconsciously ended up at my chamber doors. The whole day had passed by but not a moment felt wasted. I wanted to hang on to the joy between us, though some somberness remained, as it always did when one thinks back on loss.

“The worst of my stories, I suppose,” I said, “is that I never saw any of it coming.”

“As the god of prophecy, that must have been terrifying.”

“It was. I cannot see my own future. Even when I see something through another’s eyes, there is no guarantee the tides won’t change.”

“Then isn’t there also no guarantee that the tides will?”

“I hope so.” I clung to Dax’s hand. I wanted to bring him into my rooms, to bring him into my bed so badly, but I... faltered, unsure what to say or if I was ready.

“Tomorrow, my dear Apollo?” Dax said.

Whenever it was that he had ceased calling me “my lord” or “my god,” I could not say, but I adored hearing “my dear” in their place, while also yearning for what it might be like to have that endearment become “my love.”

“Tomorrow,” he said when I failed to answer, and as was often the case between us, he kissed my hand.

“Here,” I said, clinging tighter when he tried to depart. “Meet me here, before dawn. I would like to bring a new day to fruition with you at my side, dear, beautiful, wonderous Dax.”

Dax smiled and squeezed my fingers. “Then here I shall be.”

“Hush, Pyrois. We will leave soon enough.” I patted the red mare’s nose, and she snorted in impatience with tiny licks of flames escaping her snout.

The horses grew restless when dawn approached.

Today, the same was true for me.

My left hand that continued to pet Pyrois was the one that bore a sunburst cuff connected to a ring. Why save it for a wedding band, I’d thought after losing Hyacinth, when there was no hope of me ever giving my heart to another? There was no heart left in me to give, only a husk.

I felt my heart struggling to beat again now, cracking the ice that had frozen around it, not to shatter all that was left of it, but to burst forth from its prison with new life.

Almost. Almost, it beat for me in rhythm.

“Your sunset tunic,” I heard from behind me and looked to see Dax approaching. “Or sunrise, I should say. I never tire of seeing it on you.” He, in contrast, wore a deep blue tunic with shimmers of celestial black, as if dotted with stars, like the sky before the sunrise began.

“Thank you. And you, dear Dax, look lovely.” I patted Pyrois’s nose again, and then met Dax and took his hand to lead him onto the chariot.

The horses were hitched, with Helios ever at the ready, currently out of sight. The tethers of my chariot to his brilliant mass were unseen by mortal eyes, but once we took flight, they would pull the great burning sun behind us as easily as a chariot on earth pulled a wagon.

It was a far larger vehicle than would be feasible for a mortal driver, and Dax marveled at being upon it, as I guided him to sit on the bed. Leaving him to lounge, beautiful as ever as he sprawled upon its pillows, I moved to the small platform up front, taking the reins to begin our trek.

“Onward, Aethon, Pyrois, Phlegon, and Eous!” I urged my steeds. “Let us light the dawn!”

Full pelt forward, they galloped us off the edge of the balcony. My horses had no wings, but they took flight as if they did, and for a moment, my wings were visible, propelling us with an added boost. I glanced back to see the widening of Dax’s eyes at the outline of their sunbeam spectacle, which he very rarely got to glimpse.

But I looked not to gauge his wonderment of me. I nodded behind us so Dax might turn and witness as Helios appeared, rising from beneath the horizon to join us in the sky.

Dax gasped when he saw and crawled up the bed to better peer over the chariot’s edge. With him crouched on his knees and bent forward, the view was... encouraging.

I released the reins, for once set on their path, my horses knew the way.

Dax turned to face me, sensing my approach, and sprawled again in wait. He offered a hand as I neared him and yanked me onto the cushions. I laughed from the tumble. He was very different from Aikos. More genuine. More open. Although I knew Aikos had never lied to me, and in fact, had shown me the sweetest truth that led me here.

A truth I hoped to see made real.

I turned my attention to the center of the chariot, and with a wave of my hand, my lyre was summoned, along with a pan flute, and they hung in the air, playing the same music that Dax and I had played together.

Dax giggled, moving closer to me across the bed, and reached for my face. But he hesitated, hand hovering between us.

“You can touch me, if you’d like,” I encouraged.

“I would like that very much,” he said, fingertips near my lips but still not touching them. “I would like to offer you the heights of what my training taught me, to make the sun god whine and writhe and whimper for release that I would... eventually grant you.”

Courtesan training indeed.

“But,” Dax continued, “if we are two men, not man and god, what do you want of a mortal coupling, Apollo? If any coupling at all?”

“If any?” I stammered, not having expected an offer of celibacy.

“I yearn for more of your kiss, your hands on me, your body pressed to mine,” Dax so intimately professed that it made my heart race like in the midst of a hunt right before my arrow loosed. “I yearn for any touch you might grant me, but it is not only the

promise of pleasure that keeps me with you. I want you, Apollo. All of you. Your heart most of all. I can wait to know the wonders of your body entwined with mine if you need more time—”

“No.” I said it swiftly and, like some eager boy just reaching adulthood, kissed his hovering fingers, desperate to not be denied my first taste. “Please. No more waiting. I want to believe that happiness does not have to be fleeting.”

At last, he touched my lips, and I parted them at his press. I licked their tips, and he expelled another laugh. Then he slid his hand to my cheek and pulled me to him.

“Wait. Understand that I do not wish for you to worship me, courtesan, talented though you may be. Today, let me worship you.”

Dax blinked amazement but nodded his assent.

I rolled on top of him, flattening him to our skyborne bed. My warmth could get away from me, I knew, but I also knew the pleasure it could cause when used right. Slowly, I ran heated fingers down his cheek, kissed him once at the corner of his mouth, once centered, and then slid my tongue between his lips and claimed him with a lick.

Dax moved beneath me the way any courtesan would, should, must have in the past, but there was a vulnerability, an honesty in how he let me lead, like he had since our beginning. I needed that assurance, that I was trusted to guide, the same way I led the sun across the sky.

“A truly beautiful garment,” I whispered, slipping a hand up Dax’s thigh beneath it. There would be no tremors today, no doubts. He dropped his thighs open for me, and I reached between them to feel his ripening prick.

Dax grunted and arched his neck, bucking into my grasp.

“So beautiful. I almost hesitate to disrobe you. Almost,” I spoke against his lips before kissing him again. “Where did you find such a rare gem?”

“The tunic?” Dax furrowed his brow as he looked at me. “It wasn’t from you?”

I paused my first stroke down his length. “No.”

Dax laughed. “I only assumed. It was waiting in my rooms when I woke. Aikos perhaps? Or Aphrodite?”

Or Zeus. It was his meddling that started us down this path when he plucked Aikos from the earth. But whoever the benefactor, the tunic was almost as soft as Dax’s thighs or his tender sac and velvety cock.

Almost.

I lifted the tunic to his waist and rocked his hips back. Such uncut beauty, growing harder and larger and peeking its head out of the tempting pocket of its flesh. The domes of his cheeks were alluring enough to want to sink in teeth. I contented myself with exploring by hand. I caressed their curves, the crease between them, the yawning entrance at their center. I poured more heat into my hands as I traced over its bud.

Dax panted, watching me with the faintest squint. The hotter I ran, the brighter I glowed, my eyes, and very being. Yet Dax didn’t look away.

“You are as worthy of worship as any god.” I tilted Dax’s hips further, folding him to better access the glory of him bare. With tongue as heated as my fingers, I licked up the length of him and caught the first spills of pre-release from his tip.

He gasped, and I made sure he was watching when I licked back down, lower, and lower, until I licked where my fingers had teased his puckered skin. “Ohhh.” He

rocked against the press of my tongue.

I grinned over the bob of his cock. “You once prayed for a lover with the heat of the sun god in his touch.”

For a moment, the wonder and fear that had filled Dax when we first met was in him again.

“Would you have the heat of the real thing in you, Dax?” I blew cool air upon the wetness I had left. “To fill you and know you as much inside as out? To hold and t-to... have...” I bent to lick his hole again.

To protect from all harm.

Please, let him come to no harm, not from me, no folly of mine nor another’s, nor even the threads of fate dare try.

Some quaking seized my hands after all. I sought purchase on the backs of Dax’s thighs to still them and licked my tongue inside him.

“Ah!” Dax yelped.

Too hot, too hot, I chided and said, “Forgive me. You spring me to such passion, I forget myself.”

I thought of the frigidness of the skies around us. Let me be cool, I pleaded, and as I had learned from my time with Aikos, I summoned heaven’s chill.

One hand remained heated, while the other froze over with frost. I sought to tease Dax open in circling tandem with hot and cold. A swipe of the sun. Then the cooling skies where the sun dwelled. Again. Again. One after the other, swipe after swipe,

until my hot and cold thumbs pressed inside Dax at once.

“Ah-ahhh!” No pain or flinch now, but a desperate thrust upon where I breached him.

I rotated my thumbs in and out of Dax, with fingers splayed to massage his cheeks. I pried him apart, wider and wider, with my now steaming digits and bent to lick between them.

“My... god!”

“Apollo,” I beseeched. “Only ever Apollo, dear Dax.”

“My Apollo,” he amended, and with his eyes locked on mine, I needed to see all of him and to hurry us on to our rapture.

The removal of a single pin spilled open his tunic, and I unwrapped the rest of him. Twilight blue was now a backdrop to frame his loveliness, from bare chest, to stomach, to hips, and cock.

“Let me see you as well, my Apollo,” Dax begged, tugging at the hem of my tunic. The arch of his body was all courtesan, but all only for me.

“Tap... here.” I indicated the sunbeam at my belt.

Still so wonderfully sprung beneath my gaze, Dax tilted his head at me. A smile played on his face as he did as I’d said, and with that simple tap of a finger, my tunic unraveled as if disappearing inside my adornments, until likewise, the adornments vanished too. Only the cuff at my wrist with its ring remained.

My promise to remain unbound to another, until the risk again seemed worth it.

Dax reached to touch me, at first seeking my chest. I caught his hand and guided it there for him. If I was the one doing the worshiping, let me remain the guide. I drew his palm and fingers down my stomach, down my hips and prick, then wrapped his hold around me, and together, we stroked.

“Oh... you are marvelous,” Dax said.

“You are marvelous,” I echoed, “and shall be treated as such.”

I stilled his hand from touching my more, for my cock had better things to pump inside than a hand. Summoning heat and cold into parallel fingers, a natural balm to my fire, I reached beneath Dax again.

“I only wish... that I had been the first to breach you.” I breached him then, deeper than my thumbs had gone, and twisted my fingers up inside him.

“Mmm-oh!” He rocked against them.

“I can see the past at times as easily as the future you know. Your priest fucked you slow... and deep... didn’t he?”

“Y-yes.” Dax shuddered at the equally slow and deep thrust of my fingers.

“He was gentle, allowed you the time you needed to adjust.” I pulled my fingers free to replace them with my tip but did not yet press inside. “Then, when he believed you could handle him, he made certain you felt every... buck... inside.”

“Apollo!”

The shallow dips inside him now as I slowly canted my hips made my leaking tip feel like it must be searing him, but his only utterances were of bliss.

“Every slow... slide, every filling pulse, as he grew harder from your exquisiteness.”
My head popped in him at last.

“Yes.”

“And still, you were unsatisfied?”

Dax’s head had dropped back, his eyes closed as he writhed in attempts to pull me deeper, but at that, he looked at me. “Yes.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because he wasn’t you. And I do not need to be treated gently.”

I thrust in halfway, and Dax’s back arched off the bed.

“Oh!”

Again.

“Ahh!”

Again.

“Apollo!”

Further, and further, until I felt Dax swallow me whole, I thrust. Then I held there, buried inside him, and waited.

Sweat glistened on Dax’s skin, and he peered at me from beneath heavier lids. He took my hand, the one still steaming with hot and cold fingers. Despite them last

being inside him, he sucked them into his mouth and left them sopping. “Please, my dear Apollo... can you apply this wonder to your cock as well?”

It twitched in response inside him. “Shall we see?”

With my first true backstroke, I unleashed the whole of heaven into his sheath.

“Ye-esss!” he cried as I fucked him, moving him up the bed with each slam, with hot and cold mixing inside him. His head nearly crossed its edge, and his long hair spilled out of the chariot.

Dax was so beautiful to witness, arching into me, moaning for me, displayed for me upon the dark blue sky of his tunic. How easy it was to worship him like this.

But to truly worship meant claiming something as yours.

“A-pollo!”

My wings erupted to lift us from the bed, enough that when I thrust downward again, I drove even deeper inside him.

“Ohh... yes! Yes!”

While carrying us airborne and down upon the surface of the bed, again and again, I trailed my fingers across Dax’s skin. Both burning and healing in my touch, no hiss from his lips was ever one of pain, but at a precipice near pain that made him whimper. Wherever I drew, laurels or instruments, my bow, even sunbeams, a darker tan remained, keeping Dax marked as mine.

“I-is this... worship, my Apollo?” he asked, gazing at an arrow shaft up his arm with a smile that made me want to cover every remaining inch of him with my symbols.

“Almost,” I said, for I was close—so close to claiming him completely. “But no worship is complete without anointment.”

I thrust harder, lifting us off the bed again with a flap of my wings. As I fucked Dax back onto the bed, I took his cock in hand and began to pump. I pumped and thrust and let him feel the heat and cold I could command like a tidal wave of elements. All the while, I prayed, to who or whatever answers the prayers of the gods, I prayed...

Let our anointments overlap.

They did, for the next pump of my hand shot Dax’s seed over my fingers and onto his chest. He clenched so tightly around me in his release that I released too, coating his insides with the hottest part of me yet. Still, it was cooled enough, calmed, tempered enough, that Dax’s moans as it filled him harmonized with the continuing tune of my lyre and the flute playing behind us.

I collapsed onto him, wings fading like bonfire sparks, and held him, while my cock pulsed with aftershocks inside his spent hole.

“Ohhh...” he moaned again, wriggling his hips, as if to further enjoy me and how stuffed I had made him. “Your heat, Apollo... your icy touch too, but your wonderful heat, is like nothing I could ever have imagined.”

“Enjoyable then?”

“Thoroughly.” He wriggled again and curled his ankles up around my hips. “I could hold your cock and the warmth of your release inside me forever. But, if we are to bed each other as men, then this man is not yet done with you.”

Dax had a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

“I have enjoyed being worshiped,” he continued, “but I am inclined to worship too. Not the sun god, mind you, but my Apollo. My courtier. My...” He smiled, and like only a courtesan with torturous teasing in their seduction could, he kissed me without finishing the phase.

Oh, that he would call me his beloved.

He dislodged me from him, but within our kiss, reached between us to find my yet hardened prick. He pumped me slowly, then moved his hand to my sac to pull and fondle. He moved lower to my entrance and twirled slick fingers around my pucker.

Dax paused, pulled his hand away, and when it returned, his fingers were slicker still, and I knew he’d reached up inside himself to gather some of my own spillage to use on me.

I grinned at him, admiring his fortitude, boldness, and capable fingers, as he thrust them inside me.

“Tell me then... dear Dax.” I shuddered from how leisurely he twisted them, while enjoying how I tightened around his thrusts. “What do you want now?”

Dax grinned back at me. His eyes sparkled with flecks of gold that seemed brighter with the light from my eyes reflected in them. “To be inside you, as I’m sure you surmised. But only if you trust me.”

“Of course I—ah!” Slow and careful as Dax was being, he was not holding back either. He had touched that wonderful place inside me that made all the world below seem as glittered with stars as the sky.

“Good,” Dax said. “And I... trust you.”

Then he rolled us to the edge of the bed and out of the chariot.

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We plummeted. A saner man might have panicked.

But a courtesan needed to take risks.

“Dax!” Apollo clung to me, and his wings erupted from his back again to slow our descent—like I knew they would.

The terror in Apollo’s eyes made me feel admittedly guilty for the act, but it had to be done. In my assurance that he had me, that we were safe, as he allowed us to slowly drift toward the earth, I touched a finger to his lips. I pressed there, like at the start of our trek, urging them to open, and dragged my finger along his tongue. When he licked after it, I met that tongue with mine.

It was strange to be falling, while in the arms of one who could keep you aloft.

“Why did you do that?” Apollo demanded when our lips parted.

“Because some things are beyond your control,” I said. “Some always will be. You need to trust, not only in a partner, but in you.” I gathered him closer, much as I could with him having to hold me tight and us descending, gliding slowly downward. “Whatever happens, whatever may come from this point on, you will not lose me. If I somehow perish from something out of your control, no matter how you react to my death, you will not lose me.

“Not like Hyacinth, who feared you. Not like Cassandra, who betrayed you. Not like Admetus who chose another. I am for you, Apollo, and I would have you be mine too.”

I pulled him further to me, up the sprawl of my floating body, to sit upon my cock, and thrust inside him where I had wetted and stretched him.

His wings and eyes burned brighter with a burst of golden fire. “D-Dax!”

He was fire too, enough to make me sweat, to make my cock swell, and my mind melt, but none of it was pain. The heat faded to a morning frost that heightened the next surge of the sunrise even more.

Thrusting up into Apollo was not so easy without leverage, but he had no trouble thrusting down. The chariot was out of sight now, Helios far in the distance, as we dropped and dropped, beyond the heights that had shown me the curves of the earth. Now, if I peered beneath us, I could see the approaching lands with trees and valleys and mountains and streams. Yet I feared not the fall, nor the landing, for Apollo’s wings had us, as he rode atop me with their fiery splendor unfurled.

I reached for his neck to draw his face closer, and though the edges of his wings licked flames along my fingertips, I feared no burn either. I fucked my Apollo, as he had fucked me, worshipped him, as he worshipped me, and whispered to him as the wind sang past us.

”Beneath his trek, the laurels bloom,

And east winds blow his lyre’s tune,

As chariot pulls sun ablaze,

For heav’n and earth to sing his praise.

Yet mortal heart, in humble plight,

Is drawn to him in day or night,

For love's sweet flame cannot be bound,

Where equal courtship might be found.

And if I might earn lover's place,

Forever I'd be blessed by grace,

For in his love, I find my art,

A symphony that fills my heart."

We danced in our slow descent, a twirl, a lunge, a dip, all culminating in a final bow—and another release for us both—as we landed softly upon the very grassy bank of the brook where we'd strolled the other day.

The slide of Apollo's tongue was as searing as every other part of him, but hotter as we lay in the grass, for his tears fell upon my face. Joyous tears, this time, I hoped, for my poem had been from the heart, my own composition from its words to its gentle melody, in praise of the god who would be my lover.

"Thank you," Apollo whispered, and as he lifted from me, the suns of his eyes dulled more than I had ever seen. Still radiant, still glowing, but I could see the amber irises behind their light. He was not the god of the sun with fire at his fingertips, but a man looking upon another.

The added mess between us could be washed away soon enough. For now, I held Apollo's hips, held him atop me, and enjoyed still being sheathed in his warmth.

“Thank you,” he said again, “for being patient with me through our courtship.”

“This is not the end of our courtship,” I countered, gazing at how Helios was somehow perfectly framed behind Apollo’s head, “but simply one part of many. I want to continue discovering everything about you. To spend days and nights in your company. To learn, truly learn, the tenet of my patron goddess that I hold most dearly.

“Do you wish the same with me?”

Never in my life up to this point could I have imagined that a god, my god, the one I had longed for in frivolous fantasies, would look at me as if I was the one guiding part of the cosmos across the sky. “Yes,” Apollo said and kissed me fiercely.

Even in that perfect embrace, this perfect moment with the only partner I ever wanted to know again, a third party entered my mind, just long enough for me to send a silent prayer of thanks to my other patron god.

Thank you, Aikos.

My cock, which had begun to dwindle, sprang to life again inside Apollo, and his upon my stomach gave a telling twitch too. It seemed the god of multiple orgasms was feeling generous.

I bucked up inside Apollo, and he gasped from our kiss. We were a mess, and I was fucking into a squelch of release I had already given him. But to spill inside Apollo again while my first—well, second—spillage was still cooling within him, was a gift worthy of offering another prayer.

Showoff, I thought.

I would swear I heard Aikos laugh in response.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:11 am

As more days passed with Dax on Olympus, and our courtship having ascended to an intimacy that demanded encores daily, Dax became like a different man in the company of my fellows. No longer did he stare in awe at any of the twelve true Olympians or my other powerful contemporaries. He'd smile and briefly bow his head before continuing on his way like he belonged, for belong he did—even in the salon of the gods with our many revelers making merry around us.

I had gone to fetch us some wine, leaving Dax and Aikos to lounge upon my platform. My mortal worshipers were absent, having gone too long neglected. However much they were my favorites for their talents in my domains, none held my heart like Dax, and so they had sought revelry elsewhere or returned to the earth.

My mother, Leto, was chatting with Dax now. Just in passing, but she liked him very much. He had won her over easier than Artemis. Once seeing Mother's approval had been given, Artemis began to show more liking of Dax too. She had even taken to trying to teach Dax to be better with a bow.

She had her work cut out for her there, but he was improving.

Dax was still quite terrified any time my father approached him, which I tended to help him avoid. Zeus did have a reputation for defiling anything beautiful he happened upon, but he would have to content himself with Aikos.

And Ganymede.

And my mother.

And Hera.

And all his other lovers he had once again regained the virility to bed.

But Dax was mine. Mine, and I wanted our bliss to last forever. Gods can indeed feel dread and nervousness when the stakes are high and the outcome uncertain. I was still working up the courage to ask if Dax wanted forever too, for it was a commitment far greater than courtship.

I did not know how Aikos contended with all of us and won, but Olympus was a better place now because of him, with the surliest or more mournful of my kin in better spirits than perhaps ever before. I couldn't help but pause my steps in my return to my dais to look around at the others.

Hephaestus and Poseidon, both happier with their wives. Hades and Persephone, as happy as ever with each other and occasionally adding a third to their bed. Zeus more or less behaving himself. Ares no longer hiding that he very much enjoyed having his young warrior bedmate to dominate him. Even Dionysus allowing himself to revel as much as providing revelry to others.

Eros was the one who made me pause in my perusal, for he was not alone with fawning mortals, but sat upon his dais with Zephyrus.

A vision struck me of the pair in Eros's chambers, on his bed, slowly disrobing each other with Zephyrus touching the rarely seen burn scar on Eros's side where Psyche had spilled oil after seeing his face. Then Eros just as tenderly touched the scar I had left near Zephyrus's temple.

I returned to the present, unsure if what I had seen had already happened or would happen tonight. Either way, I was... happy for them. Some of us bore scars from what others had done to us, some from what we did to ourselves. Scars fade even if not gone forever, even if not gifted away by a capable god, and wounds heal. Hearts

mend too. They do. They do, for mine finally had as well.

Just like Aikos had mended us all.

But one was missing, I realized. Where was he? Where was—

“Hermes,” I hissed upon traveling my gaze from his empty platform to my full one, where instead of Dax talking to my mother, he was now being accosted by Olympus’s trickster.

I hastened my pace to return and tuned my ear to the vibrations in the air, picking up their voices as effortlessly as I could understand all sound as the god of music.

“Yes, naturally, I am the closest of my brethren to our dear Apollo,” Hermes was saying, lying between Dax and Aikos, with full attention on the former. “We have so much in common, you know. Ingenuity. The petite but powerful packages we present. Our tastes in bed partners.” He lowered his voice as he said that and dared begin walking his fingertips up Dax’s thigh.

I would roast him alive for—

“Really?” Dax purred, writhing as if to encourage the touch, which stuttered my pace to still again. “And do you know what my tastes are, my lord Hermes?”

“Do. Tell.” Hermes grinned.

Dax’s eyes flicked to Aikos, who resisted a laugh and nodded, as if some secret message had passed between them. Dax took hold of Hermes’s hand, almost as if to lead it higher up his thigh, only to expertly flip him backward with that leverage like in a wrestling match, landing him atop Aikos, who seized him and hauled him into his lap.

“My tastes are to not always follow on the heels of my friend,” Dax said, all seduction gone, “however adequate his tastes may be.”

“Did he just call me adequate?” Hermes tilted his head back to look at Aikos.

“I was about to call you eunuch,” I warned, finally finishing my trek through the crowd to join them and handed Dax and Aikos their fresh goblets of wine. “We might share the lyre, Hermes, but I have limits.”

“I was only testing him!” Hermes defended, righting himself upon Aikos and settling into his new seat. “Clearly, young Dax is as loyal as our Aikos is versatile.”

“No truer words.” Aikos chuckled.

“I believe there may be one set that is truer.” Dax set aside his wine, shifted to the end of the dais, and took my hand to pull me closer. “My guiding light, my morning star, my beloved, for now and always, I will never stray or leave your side as is in my power to promise. I love you, Apollo, and all that you are.”

The tears came so quickly, I couldn’t respond at first or yet lean down to kiss Dax as I desperately wanted to. I first glanced at Aikos, for the view he had of us and those words... I knew them. I knew all of it.

Because I had seen this moment through Aikos’s eyes.

“Apollo?” Dax drew me back to him with a quiver and worry in his voice.

“Tears of joy, I assure you!” I pulled his hand close to my heart. “For this moment I did see coming. Forgive me for ever doubting I could be so lucky or at all worthy enough to have it come true. I love you, Dax,” I said, and then, finally, did I lean down to taste his lips.

“Urg,” I heard from Hermes like the most petulant of taunts. “Thank goodness you are not like that, Aikos.”

Aikos laughed. “But thank goodness some are, or we would have far fewer epics to write about. Come along, Hermes.”

“Come, shall I—”

“And help me find our good friend with his golden cup. I think it might be needed.”

Aikos was ahead of me, but I had seen that too through his eyes. A drink from Ganymede’s cup. Still, first I had to ask, and even feeling confident in the answer, nerves stirred in my belly, as I pulled my tongue from tangling with Dax’s and our lips parted.

“Should I worry about those two?” Dax asked, tugging me forward to join him on the dais.

“Always,” I said as I snuggled in close.

He chuckled. We might have been in a salon surrounded by others, revelers of all kinds, both mortals and gods, but with Dax, on my platform, we also could have been alone in the heavens or in my chambers.

I kissed his fingertips, my beloved’s fingertips, and prepared to ask him to spend eternity as a god by my side. “Dax?”

“Yes, my love?”

Finally.

Finally.

I unclasped my wrist cuff and slid off the ring it attached to. I placed both on Dax's left hand, with the ring on the same wedding-band finger.

“Dear Dax, I have a question for you.”