



Loved by Aphrodite (Gods and Beasts #4)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love, has spent millennia guiding hearts and nurturing relationships. But when she discovers that mortals are falling in love without her influence—all thanks to a dating app—she knows something must be wrong. Technology isn't her forte, so she's forced to turn to the one god who might understand: her ex-husband, Hephaestus, the master of innovation and invention.

Hephaestus has spent centuries avoiding Aphrodite, content in the quiet solitude of his workshop. But when she appears at his door asking for help, his carefully built walls begin to crack. He knows better than to let her back in—knows the risks of letting old feelings resurface—but how can he say no to the goddess who has always been his greatest weakness?

Thrown together in a reluctant partnership, Aphrodite and Hephaestus set out to uncover the truth behind the app that threatens to disrupt the very essence of love and society. Their search takes them from Olympus to Thessaly, forcing them to confront not only the mystery at hand but also the unresolved emotions between them. As old resentments flare and buried desires reignite, they must decide—will their past be the reason they fall apart again or the key to finally admitting that their love was never truly lost?

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:33 am

Chapter 1

Aphrodite

“Thank you for letting me find him.”

Aphrodite paused, her interest piqued by the sincerity. She could see the young woman clearly in her mind—a shy smile as she lay awake, reflecting on love just blossoming, the thrill of possibility, the sweetness of new affection.

Voices drifted through the ether, soft whispers of gratitude, each threaded with the warmth and tenderness only mortals could carry. The words were a quiet ripple in the sea of prayers.

“I can’t believe I found the one,” another voice chimed, bubbling with joy. This prayer belonged to a man who had thought his time for love was over. But then she appeared—a gentle soul with laughter like sunlight through leaves, and now his heart sang with gratitude.

A third voice, older but steady, resonated in a tone that felt like an embrace. “Thank you for keeping our love strong, even after fifty years.” She listened as the words drifted up from a woman, her hands weathered but gentle as she placed them over her heart, thinking of her partner asleep beside her. Through all the decades, the ups and downs, their love had grown richer, deeper, like wine aging to perfection.

Aphrodite closed her eyes, allowing the voices to fill her. These whispered thanks, these quiet affirmations—they were gifts, simple but precious. Though she had been

the goddess of love for millennia and had seen wars fought and kingdoms crumble for love's sake, it was these small moments of appreciation that resonated the most. She felt a surge of contentment and pride in her work, the beauty of her power not in grand displays, but in the endless, intimate ties she wove between hearts.

The goddess breathed in the gratitude of each soul, each love story playing before her mind like an old, beloved tale. Mortals might have thanked her for helping them find love, but it was she who was blessed to witness its beauty in all its forms.

She'd seen countless lovers meet and part, seen loves forged through chance encounters, bold confessions, and the smallest moments that humans cherished. But these quiet words of thanks reminded her of why she carried on—why love, despite everything, was always worth the work.

A smile tugged at the corner of her lips. Today was a good day to be a goddess, she thought, her heart swelling with the silent satisfaction of knowing her work would go on forever.

She looked around her home in Olympus and decided she needed to be closer to mortals and revel in their glow on the Upperworld.

She teleported into her apartment, and her eyes softened at the familiar view. Central Park lay sprawled out below, dappled in summer sunlight, with the lively hum of laughter and music drifting faintly through the floor-to-ceiling windows. She soaked it in for a moment, the mortal warmth, the lightness she could never find on Olympus.

A low, off-key humming drifted toward her, and she followed the sound, curiosity blooming. As she entered her jungle room, the lush foliage of her plant sanctuary greeted her, vibrant and thriving. In the center of it all stood Adonis.

And he was wearing...a dress?

Aphrodite leaned against the door, unable to hold back a grin as she took in the sight of him. “Hello, my dear,” she called out, her voice lilting with amusement.

Adonis turned, cheeks tinged pink and his tanned skin practically glowing against the frilly edges of a black and white outfit. Somehow, even in that ridiculous getup, he looked gorgeous.

“Oh, and what, exactly, are you wearing?” she teased, arching a brow.

He looked down at himself and then up at her. “You don’t recognize it? It’s a French maid’s outfit. Vintage,” he said, a little dramatically, twirling the feather duster he’d tucked into his apron.

She pressed her lips together, hiding her laughter. “Right, of course,” she said, nodding solemnly. Why would he be wearing this? “A costume—Halloween’s still a few months away. Or...is this some new twist?” She leaned in. “Something kinky, perhaps?”

He laughed, shaking his head. “Well, now that you mention it, maybe I should keep it around. Never thought about using it in the bedroom, but thanks for the idea!”

Then he leaned over, pulling up the lacy edge of his skirt to reveal frilly underwear. He struck a pose. “Does it do it for you?”

She couldn’t hold back her laugh any longer. “It would have, but not anymore.” She gave him a playful wink. “Sorry, Adonis.”

He feigned a wounded look, clapping a hand to his chest. “A woman immune to my charms? How could I let that happen?”

She smiled, the words sounding almost too close to the truth. “Oh, I don’t know,” she

replied, watching him as he reached for a watering can. “But maybe you should stick to plants. They seem to appreciate your charms just fine.”

He chuckled, letting his hand drift lovingly over a large monstera leaf. “Yeah, can you believe it? I’m low-key impressed by how well they’ve thrived here.” He looked over at her, his mouth curving with satisfaction. “And here I thought you didn’t have a green thumb.”

She stepped closer, joining him by the giant ferns and palms that nearly brushed the ceiling. “That’s the secret,” she said with a playful tilt of her lips. “I don’t. I have you.”

He laughed, slipping an arm around her shoulders and pulling her into a warm, easy hug, pressing a friendly kiss to her cheek. “Lucky for you, then. I’d hate to see these beauties wither away on you.”

Aphrodite’s heart swelled, and she let herself sink into the comfort of his embrace. Their connection was steady and calm now, as natural as breathing. She remembered the intensity of the attraction that had first drawn them together—a passion that burned hot but had quickly softened into something she hadn’t expected to find with a human: a genuine friendship.

They had met when Aphrodite stepped into Persephone’s plant shop on the Upper East Side. She had been there to snoop and find out more about the young goddess who had captured Hades’s heart.

But then she saw Adonis and knew she had to have him in her bed. And so, she proceeded to use her charms on the handsome mortal. Feigning that she needed help setting up a jungle in her apartment had proven the key. And let’s just say that no one can resist the goddess of love. Their fling had been exhilarating, and she’d loved watching his face light up with each stolen moment. But what they shared now was

richer, a warm familiarity that didn't demand anything of her. It was rare, even among gods, to find someone she could simply...be with.

Adonis let go of her, his gaze lingering as he moved to adjust a hanging plant. "You know, sometimes I can't believe you even let me stick around," he said, his voice quieter, almost as if he were musing aloud. "I mean, you've got this incredible place, this whole life I barely know about."

She felt a pang at his words, the unspoken truth tugging at her. This whole life you'll never know about, holding back the familiar urge to tell him everything.

"Adonis," she said gently, touching his arm. "You don't need to know everything about me to be here with me. Isn't that enough?"

He studied her for a moment, then let out a soft chuckle, that easy warmth she'd come to cherish shining in his eyes. "Yeah, it's enough." He gave her arm a gentle squeeze. "Besides, I like the mystery. Keeps things interesting."

She let out a soft laugh, grateful he was content with the mystery, even if a part of her longed to share everything. She wanted him to see her world, her truest self. But for now, it was enough to have him here, in her little oasis, his hands nurturing her plants, his laughter filling the room.

Because even though Adonis was best friends with Persephone, Queen of the Underworld, and Geri, a newly minted goddess, he didn't know that Greek gods actually existed. And she wasn't about to out his friends, since they thought it best to keep their true nature hidden.

She tossed him a wry look. "It's happy hour somewhere, don't you think? Shall we relax?"

“Absolutely,” he glanced down at himself, still in the frilly black and white maid outfit. “Although...maybe not like this.”

“Glad you agree,” she laughed, raising a brow. “That’s a little too much flair for lounging.”

“But it would be a good Halloween costume?” he asked as he reached for the hem and peeled off the dress, shimmying out of it right in front of her.

“Yes, it would,” she watched, amused, as he carefully folded the frilly underwear and set it aside.

“I was checking if it would be comfortable to wear.” Beneath it all, he wore simple, fitted briefs, and he nonchalantly grabbed a pair of shorts from his bag.

“There we go,” she said, nodding approvingly as he pulled on the shorts. “Much better.”

Together, they moved to the kitchen, mixing up gin and tonics with lime and a hint of mint. She handed him his drink, and they made their way out to the balcony, where the warm breeze was gently scented with fresh blooms and the distant laughter of the park below.

They sipped in silence for a few moments, watching the sun dip lower. Finally, Adonis spoke up. “Oh, by the way, Eros stopped by. Said to tell you he’s doing fine and—his words, not mine—‘still as gorgeous as his mother.’”

She laughed, rolling her eyes. “That child. Let’s hope he didn’t charm you into his bed. I wouldn’t put it past him to try.”

His eyes widened, and he nearly choked on his drink. “Wait—no!” He set down his

drink, mock-offended. “I mean, yeah, I’ve been pulled into bed by a mother and daughter by mistake before, and let me tell you, it was drama. But I wouldn’t do that to you.” He raised an eyebrow, a playful glint in his eye. “Not with your son, at least.”

She burst out laughing, nudging him with her elbow. “Well, you never know! Eros is persuasive.”

He chuckled, scratching the back of his neck. “Okay, so...Eros also mentioned someone named Hephaestus. Asked if he’d been around recently?”

Aphrodite dimmed a little, and she took a sip before answering. “Hephaestus? He’s...my ex-husband.”

“Ex-husband?” He blinked, taking in this new detail. “Is he...Eros’s dad?”

She shook her head. “No, Eros was before Hephaestus. Let’s say I had a bit of a colorful past.”

He tilted his head, his gaze curious. “Your names are something else. Aphrodite, Eros, Hephaestus. They’re not exactly...common.”

She smirked. “Well, they’re Greek.”

“Greek? Seriously?” He laughed as if it explained everything. “Your family must be really traditional—naming everyone after the ancient gods! I mean, who does that anymore?”

“Right...very traditional.”

He shrugged, chuckling. “Must’ve been hard growing up with all those ancient names

around, huh?”

She just sipped her drink, hiding a smile. You have no idea.

“How old is Eros?” He gave her a curious look. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, you and he kinda look like the same age!”

Aphrodite’s stomach did a little flip. Uh-oh, she thought, managing a laugh. “Oh, he’s twenty. And as for me...” She leaned back, sidestepping the question. “Thank you for saying I look young. You really know how to charm the ladies, don’t you?”

“Hey, I do what I can.” He reached for another handful of olives. “So, if Hephaestus isn’t Eros’s dad....”

As Adonis idly mused aloud about Eros’s dad, a familiar, bittersweet ache twisted inside her. She couldn’t help it—thoughts of her past drifted back, memories of a time far darker and more dangerous than she liked to remember.

She took a shaky breath. “Hephaestus...he isn’t Eros’s father, but he was there when we needed him most.” Her fingers fidgeted with her glass, her gaze somewhere far beyond Central Park. “Before Hephaestus, there was someone else. Someone I...Eros and I had to escape from. He helped us get away.”

A look of worry flashed across Adonis’s face. He reached over, his arm wrapping around her shoulders in a warm, solid hug. He held her close without saying a word, just letting her take a moment to gather herself, and she leaned into him, grateful for the comfort he offered.

Her mind wandered, lost in memories she’d long tried to bury. Thoughts of Cyncus resurfaced unbidden, stirring up a whirlwind of emotions she hadn’t felt in ages. They’d fallen hard for each other—intensely, passionately—and she’d been swept up

in it all. She could still remember the thrill of their early days, the way he'd looked at her, how she'd thought he was the one. Then she'd found herself pregnant, carrying his child, and the world had felt even brighter. Eros's birth should have cemented their happiness.

But everything had changed once Eros was born. Cyncus had become someone she barely recognized; his warmth turned cold, his words cutting where they'd once been sweet.

She glanced down at her drink, swirling the liquid as she sighed, almost in disbelief at how quickly things had shifted. "It's strange," she murmured, her voice barely a whisper, "how someone can turn into a stranger right in front of you."

Adonis, who'd been sitting quietly, looked down at her, his brows knitting with concern. "Do you ever think...there were signs? Things you might've missed?"

She took a deep breath, her lips pressing into a thin line. "Sometimes, yes. Other times, I think...maybe he changed, or maybe I just didn't want to see who he really was." Her fingers tightened around her glass as she looked back at Adonis. "When you're in love, you can be...blind. You tell yourself stories about someone, and you ignore the parts that don't fit."

He nodded slowly. "So...what happened? If it's okay to ask."

She forced a faint smile, though the pain was still there, just beneath the surface. "I don't know if there's one answer. He grew resentful—of Eros, of the time I spent with him. Everything I did seemed to set him off. Nothing was enough." She paused, her gaze hardening as she looked down. "And when I wanted to visit my family and bring Eros with me, he absolutely forbade it. He said Eros would never leave Vale Crossing alive."

She hated how, all these millennia later, it still hurt to think of him. “I stayed longer than I should have, believing he would come back around. But he never did.”

She could feel Adonis’s hand cover hers, a quiet, reassuring presence. “I’m sorry,” he said softly. “No one should have to go through that.”

She gave a small nod and lay her head on his shoulder. “Thank you. Sometimes I wonder how much of it was my fault. Like...if I’d paid attention, maybe I would’ve seen it coming.”

He shook his head. “Don’t do that to yourself, Aphrodite. Love’s not about second-guessing, right? It’s about trusting. And you did. That’s not something to regret.”

A warmth spread through her, a reminder that she wasn’t as alone with her memories as she sometimes felt. After a moment, she pulled back, pushing the memories of Cyncus to the edges of her mind. “It’s another reason I can’t be mad at Hephaestus. He did so much for us. He didn’t have to, but he did.”

“He sounds like a good guy. I’m glad you had him to help you both through that.”

She nodded, feeling a little lighter, though her heart still carried the weight of that past. It had been so long since she had thought about Cyncus. And then there was Hephaestus. It had been millennia since they’d crossed paths, since he never went to any of the council meetings. It wouldn’t surprise her if he’d become a hermit by now.

But then, as if sensing the need for a change, Adonis pulled away from her, his face alight with amusement. “You know what? I’ve got an idea. How about we do something crazy with your hair?”

She blinked, surprised, her hand instinctively touching her long blonde locks, which had cascaded nearly to the floor since before the Titan War. “My hair?”

“Yes!” His grin widened, clearly excited at the idea. “You’ve got this whole golden goddess vibe going on, which is awesome, but maybe you need a little shake-up. Something fresh!”

She hesitated, then, seeing the excitement in his eyes, let herself go with it. Why not? She could use a change, something lighthearted, to shift her mood. “Alright, what are you thinking, stylist?”

“Oh, I’ve got a vision,” he laughed, taking her hand. “Trust me. You won’t regret it.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:33 am

Chapter 2

Hephaestus

In the quiet solitude of his workshop, Hephaestus, God of Forges and Fire, trained a keen eye on his latest invention. Rubbing his scruffy chin, he observed the machine as it rocked back and forth.

Not quite done.

The movement was still not smooth enough, and the motor made too much noise. This simply would not do, because this had to be the perfect gift.

After a few manual adjustments to the arm to fix the torque and minor tweaks to the motor with the help of his magic, he flipped the “on” switch. The machine began to move, swinging to and fro silently and fluidly.

Finally perfect.

He'd been working for months, creating an automatic baby cradle-rocker-bouncer-carrier that could do almost anything, from soothing a crying infant with its gentle motions to transforming into an indestructible and impenetrable shell that would protect its precious cargo. It had every bell and whistle new parents would want, from a GPS tracker, 360-degree camera, retractable wheels, food warmer, to name a few. No other child would have such a device, and rightly so. After all, this machine wasn't just for any regular baby. No, this device—and the identical one he would build now that he'd perfected it—would be his gift to the

children of Artemis, Goddess of the Hunt.

Well, former Goddess of the Hunt, because she was now mated and married to an Alpha wolf shifter and had given up her immortality to be with him.

Hephaestus let out a grunt. While he had no objection to Artemis choosing to live a mortal life, part of him mourned the loss of someone he considered a sister—albeit an annoying one—to mortality. Having lived thousands of years himself, he'd experienced the lives and deaths of many of his friends and it did not get easier over time.

I hope he's worth it, Artemoula, he thought silently, as it was something he would never say aloud. Her choice of a husband was unconventional, but he could not deny she was truly happy. He'd seen it in her eyes, on her face, whenever she looked at her mate. And he could see it too, on Cade Andersen's face when he gazed upon her.

Which was a good thing because if he did hurt her, he would break the Alpha so badly, no one, not even Hephaestus himself, would be able to fix him.

Content with the final product, he gathered the materials to make a second rocker, since Artemis had announced she was pregnant with twins. Despite his workshop's messy state, he knew where every tool, every spare part, every bolt and nut were located. His mechanical leg—the one he had fashioned and improved himself over the millennia—whirred quietly as he moved about. Born with a deformed limb, magic could not heal him, but that only meant he had to find his own solution. Though The Fates may have dealt him with a misshapen appendage, they also gave him the ability to create ingenious machines and infuse them with his own magic.

So, over time, he managed to find different methods, materials, and enchantments to improve his prostheses, using technology that the mortals devised to refine each design. He was not only curious about what the humans of the Upperworld created,

but he was fascinated by it. Over the last few centuries, especially, he watched humankind develop their own technology, evolving from using crude tools to steam-powered machines to microchips and silicon. He learned from them, building on their creations, as well as making his own with his magic. With centuries of knowledge under his belt, there was no piece of tech he could not master or recreate.

The hours passed as he put together the parts and pieces for the second rocker, though he didn't notice the time. As a god, he required little rest or drink or food, so he continued through the day and night, working until he was finished with his creation. He made a few more adjustments, then set the two rockers side by side before glancing up at the clock.

Fuck!

The baby shower had already started. Artemis would be furious with him if he missed the gender reveal. He added some finishing touches to his creations, including a flourish of gold along the front of the cradles that Artemis could personalize with each child's name. With a snap of his fingers, the two cradles were boxed together and wrapped.

He then teleported to Anchorage, more specifically, to the territory of the Alaska Wolf pack. He and the precious package appeared behind the barn where the baby shower was to be held. As he circled to the front, the large box hovering behind as it followed him, he saw numerous guests milling about, which hopefully meant the festivities hadn't begun yet. He shrugged off the stares of the people around him—mostly mortals and shifters—and headed inside. While he normally didn't attend such things, he was here to support his friend. That, and Artemis had threatened to never forgive him if he didn't make an appearance for the gender reveal at the very least.

Who the hell thought of doing gender reveals? What a silly thing for mortals to

announce to the world.

He bristled at the growing crowd inside, and their gawking became difficult to ignore. To say he wasn't a people person was an understatement. He preferred his own company and that of his creations. After all, while machines required maintenance and care, they were not unreasonable or demanding.

Where was—ah. In the middle of it all was Artemis, surrounded by other guests like she was the center of the universe. Bright and cheerful, it was easy to see why mortals and gods alike flocked to her. Artemis was the type of person who could make anyone feel welcome. And if they didn't want to be welcomed? Well, they never had a choice anyway. She was determined to fill your life with rays of sunshine, whether you wanted it or not.

Slowly, he approached the group, raking his fingers through his hair. He wished he had at least run a comb through his untidy locks or trimmed his scraggly beard or maybe put something on aside from his usual grease-stained garb, but there had been no time for that. Besides, it wasn't like he cared what any of the guests here thought, mortal and immortal alike.

Creeping up behind Artemis's group, he said, "Excuse me." He gestured to the box behind him. "Where do I put this?"

"H, you came!" Artemis squealed as she bounded toward him, her face lighting up. "I didn't think I'd see you."

"Yeah, well..." He rubbed at the back of his head. "I made you something, Artemoula. For the twins."

"Of course. You can put it by the other gifts. Thank you, H."

“You’re wel—Aphrodite?”

Hephaestus’s heart leapt into his throat before it tumbled over and back down at the sight of the goddess of love herself, standing two feet away from him. Still, he could not speak or move, and his normally organized thoughts jumbled in his mind.

How long had it been since he had seen his ex-wife?

Twenty thousand, five hundred and sixty-eight years, ten months, eight weeks, and six days.

Give or take a few hours.

“Hello, Hephaestus,” she greeted.

“I...didn’t recognize you.” Instead of her usual floor-length golden locks, her hair was the color of roasted chestnuts and ended just below her shoulders. Also, she wore modern clothes—a pink sundress paired with a blue sweater—instead of her customary white robes. But, even though she’d changed her hair and clothes, he would recognize that gorgeous face and silver-blue eyes anywhere, not to mention, the melodic voice that haunted his dreams.

“Yeah, I changed my hair,” she said. “Do you like it?”

“It’s...nice.” Fuck, fuck, fuck. Everyone really was staring now, and the discomfort bled through him like a gaping wound. Plucking the box from midair, he held it in front of him as if it would protect him. “If you’ll excuse me, I should go.”

He tore his gaze away from Aphrodite and spun on his heel. While he wasn’t sure where he was headed, it didn’t matter, as long as he put as much distance between himself and her, because it was the only way he would be able to breathe again.

Outside. Air. Sun.

He marched toward the exit, taking each step one at a time, forcing himself to keep moving and not look back. When he found a quiet spot under the shade of a gigantic pine, he put the box down and braced himself against the tree. Closing his eyes, he allowed the air to slowly enter his lungs. Despite himself, the memories he had thought he'd forgotten came rushing back.

The marriage had never been his idea; it had been arranged by Zeus as a “reward” for his loyalty and help during the war with the Titans. Hephaestus had worked day and night from the start to the end of the war, building and designing weapons, chariots, shields, anything they needed to fight against the Titans, as well as the portal door that would ultimately lock them away in Tartarus forever. He gladly would have done it ten times over if it meant their victory, without any kind of reward.

Zeus, however, had insisted on recompensing him once he became the king of the gods and ruled Mount Olympus. One day, he summoned Hephaestus to his palace and declared that his reward would be the hand of the most beautiful goddess of all, Aphrodite.

It had been a different time. Zeus's victory had earned him the respect of the other gods, and being their king, his word was law. No one said no to Zeus.

Besides, when he saw Aphrodite when Zeus summoned her, he had been too stunned by her beauty to say anything in her presence. For most of his life and during the entire war, Hephaestus had stayed in his workshop, kept the forges and fire going and hardly interacted with the other gods and goddesses. This was the first time he had truly looked upon her, and he'd been awed that she would be his wife.

For a moment he allowed himself that thought, but then remembered who he was—misshapen, ugly Hephaestus with a deformed stump for a leg. It was a joke

really, and he decided that he would tell Zeus he could not accept his “gift” and leave at once.

But it was the bruises on her arms and face that made him stay.

A loud whooshing sound jolted him from his thoughts.

What the hell?

It sounded like something was flying overhead.

Or falling.

Glancing up, he saw a bright blur from the sky, hurtling downward. A large ball, a meteorite perhaps, set aflame as it descended from the atmosphere, crashed hard, shaking the earth as it made impact.

Springing into action, Hephaestus rushed toward the fiery ball, which turned out not to be a ball or meteorite. No, the faintly human-shaped outline told him this was a living thing, but the large wings protruding from the figure and the familiar bow next to it made Hephaestus’s heart stop.

“Eros!” He rushed to his ex-stepson’s side, ignoring the acrid smell of burnt skin and feathers. “Eros,” he repeated as he carefully brushed the soot and dirt from the god of love and desire’s face. “Look at me, son. Are you okay?”

Golden lashes fluttered, revealing startling silvery-blue eyes “I...Mother...”

“What happened?” Aside from the burns on his body, Eros’s face was bloody and swollen. Someone had obviously beaten him to a pulp. “Eros, wake up.”

“I want...Mother...” he groaned. “She’s near.”

Hephaestus grit his teeth. Mother and son were linked by their filial relationship as well as their magic, so they could appear at each other’s side if they wished. He’d never seen anyone beaten up this badly, especially not Eros, so he must really be hurting if he was seeking his mother. “Alright, c’mon, let’s get you to her.”

He did his best to be careful as he lifted Eros up, snaking his arm under him. Glancing at the god, he could only sigh.

How many times had he helped Eros when he got in trouble? He’d always been volatile, even as a young demi-god child, fighting with the other children who teased him. How many scrapes had Hephaestus bandaged, how many black eyes had he iced, how many bloody knuckles had he cleaned?

So, he supposed this was par for the course for them.

“You must help me, Eros...yes, that’s it...one foot in front of the other.” He led them toward the barn, dragging Eros along as best he could inside. The guests were concentrated in the middle, though the happy and relaxed atmosphere from earlier was gone, replaced by a buzz of energy that told him they had all heard the crash.

“Who the fuck is that ?” said a loud booming voice that he recognized as Cade Andersen’s. “And why is Hephaestus with him?”

Fuck me.

Where the hell was Aphrodite?

As if he had said the thought aloud, he heard a feminine cry. “Let me through!” Aphrodite pushed her way through the crowd. “Oh, my gods...” She sobbed as she

embraced her son. “Eros, what happened?” She glanced up at Hephaestus, tears streaking down her cheeks. “How did you find him?”

“I didn’t. He found me. Or rather, you.”

“What do you mean?”

“He crashed-landed here and I found him. He was calling for you. He probably transported himself here unconsciously.”

“What’s wrong with him? Did his wings stop working? Why is he burned?”

“I’m not sure.” He pressed his lips together. “But those bruises and that bloody face happened before that crash.”

“Excuse me, I need to get through!” It was Apollo. “Oh, Jeeze...” His nose wrinkled distastefully. “Artemis, where can we take him?”

“To the lodge,” she replied. “You’ll have some privacy there.”

“I know where that is.” Hephaestus took Eros’s hand into his. “Thank you, Artemoula.” With a single thought, he transported himself, Eros, and Aphrodite to the common room in the lodge.

Apollo appeared right alongside them, and then knelt by Eros’s prone body. He placed his hands over Eros to begin healing him, starting with the cuts and bruises on his face. When he was done, he instructed Hephaestus to turn him around. They all gasped when they saw the extent of the damage there. It hadn’t been obvious from the front, but his back, specifically where his white wings were attached to his body, was burned so badly that only blackened bits of skin and exposed muscle were left.

Geri—who Hephaestus had only just noticed had followed them there—gagged aloud. “What the fuck happened to him?”

Aphrodite placed her hands over the wound, a golden glow emanating from her fingers. “It’s...I can’t do it,” she cried.

“The bruises and cuts on his face were physical. But this ... this was done by magic,” Apollo said. “It’s going to take even more power to heal him completely.” He joined Aphrodite, his hands hovering over hers. “This is gonna take a while, unless...” He looked up at Hephaestus.

The god of the sun didn’t even finish the sentence when Hephaestus knelt down beside Aphrodite and planted his hand on her shoulder to share his power with her. To her credit, she didn’t even flinch, but perhaps she was too busy healing her son. His heart, however, did a flip the moment he felt the warmth of her skin.

“It’s working,” Apollo said. “A little bit more...”

The burned muscle returned to a normal healthy pink before new skin formed over it. The charred remains of the feathers sprouted into beautiful white plumes. Soon, Eros’s back and wings were back to normal.

Aphrodite’s shoulders slumped forward. “Oh, thank goodness.”

“Wow, I always thought Eros would have those cute baby wings,” Geri whispered.

“He did, when he was a baby,” Apollo explained.

“They’re beautiful,” the she-wolf said.

Aphrodite flinched at the words, which made Hephaestus drop his arm to his side. No

one else had noticed the goddess of love's reaction, but he did, and it wasn't just because his hand had lingered on her much too long. The wings, after all, were the only inheritance Eros received from his good-for-nothing biological father, Cyncus, the leader of the Geryons.

Eros's body jerked. "What the—where—wha—" The wings retracted into his body, and he flipped onto his back. "I—Mama? H-Hephaestus?" He blinked a few times. "You're here? Together?"

"That's all you have to say? After—Eros, no!" She placed a hand on his chest when he attempted to sit up, but he brushed it away.

"I'm fine, Mama." His fingers raked through his golden hair.

"Yeah, thanks to us," Apollo snorted.

Eros's head snapped up. "What are you doing here?"

"Saving your life."

"Not that you deserved it," Geri added.

Eros's silvery-blue eyes trained on her. "So, you're the new goddess of the hunt? What a delectable creature you are. My, my, haven't you done well for yourself, Apollo? I'm glad what happened with Daphne?—"

"Eros!" Hephaestus interrupted. The boy truly had a death wish, taunting the god of the sun by bringing up Daphne and hitting on his mate in the same breath.

Eros's expression turned innocent. "What?"

Apollo merely rolled his eyes. “It’s fine. It’s all in the past.” He slipped an arm around Geri. “Come on, let’s go back to the party. I wanna know if Cade and Artemis are having boys or girls.” With that, the couple disappeared, but not before Geri glared at Eros.

“Artemis?” Eros scratched his head. “I thought she left Olympus for bumfuck-nowhere, Alaska.”

“She did,” Aphrodite said. “And we’re here in her and her mate’s territory.”

“What for?”

“Their baby shower, which you managed to ruin.”

“Me? How?”

Aphrodite rarely lost patience with her son, but Hephaestus could sense her growing frustration. “You came here, or rather, crashed,” he said. “Landed outside here in a ball of flame, like you’d been shot out of a cannon. What happened to you, s—Eros?” He bit his tongue, glad he didn’t call him son aloud. He hadn’t done that in millennia, not since Eros was a young boy.

“Who hurt you?” Aphrodite added. “And why?”

Eros paused, as if trying to remember. Shrugging, he sat up. “It was nothing.”

“Those burns weren’t nothing,” his mother countered.

He let out an exasperated sigh. “You’re being dramatic, Mama. I’m sure I would have eventually been fine. It was just Drakkon fire.”

“Just Drakkon fire?” Aphrodite exclaimed. “You damned well better get down on your knees and thank Apollo for helping you. Drakkonen fire wounds would have taken decades to heal.”

Formerly servants of the gods, Drakkons were winged, serpent-like creatures who used to pull the chariots of Mount Olympus. For their loyalty and contribution to winning the war, Zeus freed them from their drudgery and gave them human forms so they could live free. Kind of human, anyway. The transformed Drakkons were all males, over twenty feet in height, covered in diamond-like scales, and could breathe a fire so intense they could raze entire cities and make them burn for years. They mated with human women over the centuries, and while their current descendants were only seven feet tall, they were still formidable and retained their ability to spew a deadly magical flame.

“Why the hell would Drakkons hurt you?” Hephaestus asked.

“They weren’t trying to hurt me,” he said dryly. “They were trying to kill me.”

His mother paled. “Wh-what?”

“I said, try, Mama. They knew they couldn’t kill me.” He got to his feet, using his bow as a crutch. “I was just messing with them. But they do get protective during their mating season, and I may have used some of my arrows on a few of the human women they were courting.”

“I don’t even want to know what you did,” Aphrodite sighed. “Whatever will I do with you?”

“I can take care of myself,” Eros said.

“Yet in your time of need you wanted your mother,” Hephaestus snorted. “You called

for her and thus transported yourself as close to her as possible.”

“Well—wait a minute.” His gaze shifted from Hephaestus to his mother and back again. “What are you both doing here, together?”

“We’re not together,” Aphrodite said quickly. “I was invited to the baby shower.”

“So was I.” And now he wished he hadn’t shown up at all. “And don’t try to change the subject.”

“I wasn’t.” He brushed his hands down himself. “Anyway, it sounds like everything’s fine. Do say hi to the happy parents-to-be.” And with that, he disappeared.

Aphrodite could only shake her head and cover her face with her hands. “I know he’s an adult. Millenia-old and a god at that but...”

“That doesn’t mean he stops being your child.” He raised a hand toward her as if to soothe her, but dropped his arm to his side when he realized what he was doing. “Besides, you wouldn’t have been able to say no to him.” And Hephaestus would know, because he himself could not say no to his ex-stepson.

As soon as the divorce was finalized, Hephaestus did everything he could to avoid Aphrodite. Eros, however, continued to come around to his workshop, mostly asking for help with improving or repairing his bow. The boy was the innocent party in this entire mess, so Hephaestus never turned him away, but he did not discourage him either.

“Th-thank you, by the way,” Aphrodite said. “For your assistance.”

He grunted. “Of course.”

Her expression softened. “Hephaestus, do you think?—”

“I should get back to my workshop,” he interrupted.

“But the party?—”

“I only came to deliver the gift. I wasn’t planning on staying.”

“I see.” A cool mask slipped over her face. “I guess I’ll see you later.”

Not likely, he wanted to say, but instead gave her a nod before he transported himself to his workshop.

He took a deep breath, but the familiar surroundings and sounds did nothing to release the tightness in his chest. Instead, it only seemed to build, closing around his body like a giant fist.

Scrubbing a hand down his face, he walked over to his work table and picked up a tool, determined to forget about the events of today.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:33 am

Chapter 3

Aphrodite

A phrodite lowered herself onto the edge of her couch, her gaze slipping past the sprawling New York skyline. The sky started to color the City in the break of day, but she barely noticed. An uneasy feeling crept into her chest, an unfamiliar gnawing that wouldn't let go.

She sat back, crossing her arms as though to hold herself together. Something was off, something she couldn't quite name.

Her mind was still swirling from seeing Hephaestus earlier that week. What happened to him? she thought, picturing his unkempt hair and scruffy beard. He'd always had that quiet strength, a presence that held steady like a mountain.

It wasn't just the way he looked. It was the way being in his presence had unearthed parts of herself she thought she'd let go of ages ago. Memories of those early days, back when she'd convinced herself she could be happy, came creeping back with an ache she didn't want to face.

"Get a grip, Aphrodite," she muttered, running a hand through her hair. "This isn't like you."

She was the goddess of love and passion, of life and beauty. She was supposed to be stronger than this—untouchable, even. Yet here she was, pulled under by memories and regrets, questioning the choices she'd made over the centuries. She could still

feel the sting of her own heartbreak, the ache of endings she'd thought she'd moved past.

The feeling haunted her, refusing to let go. Was it simply nostalgia? Regret? Or was something else—something darker—looming on the horizon?

Trying to shake off the feeling, she wandered into her jungle room. Usually, the greenery, the earthy scents, the stillness of the place calmed her down. But today, not even the lush foliage could quiet her mind.

She paced through the room, trailing her fingers over the leaves, and found herself thinking about Eros. He'd been restless lately, slipping in and out of trouble as naturally as breathing. She frowned, feeling a pang of worry. When he was acting out like this, it usually led to something bad.

How much trouble would he get into this time? she thought, rubbing her temples.

She sat quietly on a bench, her fingers lightly tracing a philodendron leaf's delicate white and green veins. Her thoughts remained troubled, circling back to Eros and that last fight.

She could still see him lying there bruised and battered, his usual fire dulled by exhaustion. Then there was the damage the Drakkon fire had done to his beautiful wings. For a short time after her separation from Cyncus, they had only reminded her of the cruel man who had hurt her. One of the reasons she had fallen in love with him was his beautiful white wings. But over time, she had learned to separate her feelings for the father from his son, and as Eros grew into a man and became immortal, his wings became a symbol of how they had overcome their past and gained their freedom.

The very image of Eros's broken and burned body brought a sharp ache to her chest,

and she closed her eyes, remembering the other gods standing around, their expressions a mix of impatience and disdain. Reckless, they'd murmured, eyes sliding to her, silently placing the blame.

Eros was wild, yes, and often unruly. But he was also passionate and loyal. He'd done everything to protect the people he loved, no matter the cost. Didn't they understand? Couldn't they see how much he was like his mother?

But Hephaestus...Hephaestus's look had stung most of all. He'd been different this time, distant. There was no worry in his gaze, only disappointment as if he'd long stopped hoping Eros would change. But, even with that look, Hephaestus had stepped forward, setting aside his own judgment to tend to Eros when her powers had been spent. She didn't have to ask; he had simply done it.

Why does it have to be so weird between us? They'd been apart for millennia, each going their own way, but he always seemed to be there, a presence she couldn't escape. There was no love between them, only the tangle of old loyalties and memories. A sigh escaped her, heavy and long, as she slumped back, her eyes drifting unfocused to the greenery in front of her.

Why do things have to be so complicated with you, Hephaestus? Maybe because some ties never truly break.

The familiar hum of mortal prayers, usually soft like a gentle breeze, suddenly swelled in Aphrodite's mind, surging into an overwhelming wave. She staggered, clutching her temples as gratitude, devotion, and love poured in from countless souls all at once. The voices overlapped, blurring together, amplifying until it felt like a roar in her head.

“Ti symvaínei?...what is happening?” she whispered, her hand gripping the edge of the seat to steady herself. She felt her magic pulse, responding erratically to the flood

of energy. Her love magic—a power as old as she was, normally calm and controlled—now throbbed in a wild, chaotic rhythm, filling the room with intense, palpable heat. The plants around her seemed to react, their leaves unfurling and twisting, stretching toward her in a strange, desperate way, like they, too, were affected by the surge of power.

She reached out, focusing her energy and trying to calm the storm raging within her. Deep breaths, steady your power, but the voices grew louder, carrying emotions so potent they seemed to burn her from the inside.

“Enough!” she cried out, channeling her power outward, willing it to stabilize. But instead, it rebounded, multiplying, as if her love magic were feeding on itself.

And then she felt it—something dark, creeping through the flood of prayers. Beneath the gratitude and joy, there was something else, something raw and heavy...an edge of desperation. Mortals pleading for love, for connection, for a cure to their loneliness.

“Not just gratitude...they’re desperate.” The realization struck her, chilling her even through the heat of her own magic. There was no balance here, no natural ebb and flow. It was as though the world was hungry, ravenous for love.

This wasn’t normal, even for her. The mortal world had always been needy, yes, but not like this. She shuddered, a tremor of dread pulsing down her spine as the thought hit her: Something must have happened to shift the balance.

Her mind raced. Was this the work of another god? Someone meddling in her domain, or worse, tampering with the mortals’ own desires? She felt a fierce surge of protectiveness—this was her realm, her power, her magic that the world thrived on, and whoever was causing this chaos had crossed a line.

“I have to find out what’s going on,” she murmured.

She closed her eyes, focusing, and let her power flow outward, searching for the source of the disturbance. Instantly, a pull dragged her toward downtown—it was so strong she could practically feel it humming in her veins. She teleported in an instant, materializing on a street buzzing with energy, and found herself in front of the Manhattan City Hall.

She blinked in shock. A line of people stretched from the courthouse steps, down the sidewalk, and wrapped around the block, disappearing into the distance. Couples stood arm-in-arm, some in sparkling gowns, others in scrubs, office attire, or even pajamas. A palpable excitement thrummed through the crowd, and as Aphrodite got closer, she could hear snippets of their conversations.

“I just... I couldn’t wait another second to marry you,” a young man was saying, his eyes bright with tears.

“It’s like I woke up and knew today had to be the day,” murmured a woman to her fiancée, clutching her hand with fierce devotion.

Aphrodite’s heart twisted as she watched them. Usually, she would be thrilled to see so much love in the air. But this felt...unnatural. She could feel the raw edges of their need, the urgency behind their desire to wed now like their love itself was a fire that would consume them if not tamed.

She scanned the crowd, looking for a sign, for something that would tell her who or what had done this. This sudden surge of desire, this almost feverish impulse to marry—she hadn’t conjured it, and that was deeply unsettling. Centering herself, she summoned her magic to calm the torrent of emotions pressing around her. Then she reached out, gently, to the love pulsing in the line, trying to trace the source.

To her surprise, it didn't lead to any single couple. Instead, it felt like a spell—like a web of magic cast over the entire city. And just beneath the surface of all that love, she could feel something else: longing, loneliness, desperation. This wasn't love in its truest form. It was love forced, twisted by need. And whatever was behind it wasn't just powerful; it was dangerous.

“Who would do this?” she murmured, her voice almost lost in the sea of voices around her. Her gaze traveled over the crowd again, catching sight of couples holding each other tightly as if they feared letting go. Her anger flowed as her thoughts turned to her fellow gods. Love and desire had many patrons, and not all were as careful as she was with mortal hearts.

She stared up at Manhattan City Hall, her arms crossed tightly, and her lips pressed into a thin, furious line. The buzz of news reporters filled the air, and she caught fragments of their excited reports. “...the City has set up express lanes for marriage licenses,” one of them was saying. “And later today, a mass marriage ceremony is planned right here on the courthouse steps. City officials estimate hundreds of couples will be taking part!”

She shook her head. Hundreds of couples? There was love, and then there was...this. Something wasn't right.

Before she could dwell on it, a couple tapped her shoulder. “Excuse us,” the woman said, holding out her phone with an apologetic smile. “Would you mind taking a picture of us?”

“Of course,” Aphrodite replied automatically, though her mind was still racing. The couple posed with radiant smiles, their arms around each other, proudly displaying matching tattoos on their wrists—a pair of stylized wings.

Her gaze lingered on the tattoos as she handed back the phone. Those wings were

unmistakable. They were the symbol associated with Eros.

“Love those tattoos,” she said, managing a friendly smile. “How’d you two meet?”

“Oh, it’s kind of amazing, actually,” the man replied, beaming as he wrapped his arm around his partner. “We matched on that app yesterday—Winged, you know?”

“The tattoo is actually the app’s logo,” the woman added with a dreamy smile. “The app uses this special algorithm to match people. It’s all about compatibility and shared goals rather than that whole ‘soulmate’ thing.”

“But when we met...” the man continued, gazing at his partner with a soft, awed look. “It felt different, you know? Like there was something bigger at play. After just a few hours, we knew. That’s why we’re here today.”

“Oh, absolutely,” his wife agreed, holding out her wrist to show off her tattoo. “We got the ink, and we’re getting married all on the same day. When you know, you know.”

Aphrodite’s eyebrows shot up. “You...knew? Just like that?”

“Yes!” they said in unison, laughing.

“It’s like we’re destined for each other,” the woman added, her eyes shining. “We’re so grateful to have finally found our one true love.”

Aphrodite forced a warm smile, nodding as they walked off. Couples were flocking to the courthouse, lining up to tie the knot after only hours or days together. Sure, love at first sight happened—but not usually with that many couples in one day.

This wasn’t love, at least not how she defined it. She could sense something pushing

these mortals, stirring their hearts into a frenzy that felt more forced than fated. She wanted to believe in what they were feeling—after all, she'd spent centuries fostering love and connection. But this? An app that bound people overnight, leading to tattoos and mass ceremonies...It was like love gone haywire, hyper-charged and superficial. It wasn't real. It was obsession masquerading as fate.

Aphrodite's thoughts sharpened. Eros, she thought, her mind churning. What in Olympus have you gotten into this time?

There was only one way to find out.

She pulled out her phone and tried to call her son, but it went straight to voicemail. Typical .

With a sigh, she scrolled through the app store, found Winged, and downloaded it herself. As the app loaded, she watched its slick, swirling welcome animation—a pair of wings unfurling against a pink and gold sky—and she felt a flicker of memory. It reminded her all too well of when Eros was learning to wield his power. The reckless way he'd shot love arrows in every direction had led to countless entanglements, including that famous drama with Apollo and Daphne, not to mention, his latest escapade with the mating Drakkons.

She didn't know why, but the memory confirmed it: this was his doing, and it was getting out of control. She focused her energy and materialized in his Olympus home.

Inside, the familiar soft marble columns and airy spaces of the god's domain were transformed into several rooms filled with the strange glow of screens, computers, and rows of servers humming in sync. LED lights pulsed, casting a dim but colorful glow around the room. Monitors displayed endless streams of data—lines connecting countless mortal couples in real-time, some showing the very courthouse line she'd just left and other places across the Upperworld, others scrolling with feedback,

success rates, and the blinking heart icons of new matches.

But Eros himself was nowhere to be found.

She paced around, her frustration rising. This was beyond a playful experiment.

Her fingers brushed one of the screens that showed a live feed of mortals getting married, oblivious to the influence over them. Her jaw clenched as her eyes roamed over the room.

“Eros!” she called, her voice echoing off the marble walls. But there was only silence.

“Not hiding, are you?” She could feel her patience slipping. “Wherever you are, I hope you’re ready to answer for this, darling, because your mother is not pleased.”

She willed herself to stay calm. But as she continued to survey the tech-filled room, she couldn’t deny the tightening knot in her stomach.

Although she could tell Eros was behind it, she didn’t even know where to begin. The screens and jumbled mess of wires were like a foreign language to her. All this mortal technology—servers, screens, and blinking lights—might as well have been an art installation for all she understood. She sighed as she looked around. The app, the deluge of prayers, the chaos—it all screamed Eros. But she needed answers, and there was only one god she knew who could untangle this mess.

Hephaestus.

She hesitated, chewing her lip. He was her best shot if she wanted to keep things under wraps. He wouldn’t talk unless he had to, and he wasn’t one for gossip. Plus, of all the gods, he was the only one who might actually understand all these mortal

objects. She glanced around the cluttered space one last time, willing herself not to get overwhelmed, and then closed her eyes to focus.

With a shimmer of golden light, she vanished, reappearing in a place she hadn't seen in ages—a place she once called home. The marble foyer felt the same, and as she walked, she saw the decor untouched since she'd redecorated during those early days, when she and Hephaestus were still...well, married. She looked around, a bittersweet pang settling in her chest as she took in the space. Some things really don't change, she thought, glancing at the perfectly arranged columns, polished statues, and golden details she'd once insisted on.

"I guess he still spends most of his time in the workshop," she muttered to herself, knowing all too well where she'd find him.

With a sigh, she strode up to the double doors leading to his workshop and pressed the door cam button. The tiny camera light blinked on, and a moment later, his voice came through the speaker, more surprised than welcoming.

"Aphrodite?" He sounded genuinely shocked. "What are you doing here?"

"Let me in," she demanded.

There was a pause. She could almost imagine him standing there, staring at the screen with that ever-thoughtful look, weighing whether to open the door.

Finally, the door clicked, unlocking with a heavy mechanical sound. She pushed it open and stepped into the dimly lit space, immediately hit with the familiar scent of metal, wood, and the faint warmth of smelting fires. Hephaestus stood a few feet away, wiping his hands on a cloth, his usually stoic face a mixture of surprise and wariness.

“Aphrodite,” he said, watching her as she closed the door behind her. “You don’t usually visit unannounced.”

“Believe me, I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t important,” she replied, her voice steadier than she felt. “I need your help, Hephaestus. It’s about Eros.”

He raised an eyebrow, folding his arms across his chest. “What has he done now?”

She let out a breath. “Something with mortals and... technology. It’s beyond me—rows of computers, screens, data flowing everywhere. He’s got mortals thinking they’re in love overnight, pushing them to marry. And I can feel the magic spiraling out of control.”

“And you want me to take a look.”

“Yes,” she admitted, meeting his gaze. “If there’s anyone who can make sense of all that tech nonsense he’s mixed with magic, it’s you.”

He watched her for a moment, his eyes searching hers. Finally, he nodded, setting the cloth aside. “Alright. Let’s go find out what your son has been up to.”

Hephaestus walked briskly down the hall, his strides purposeful, and she trailed behind him, the sound of his cybernetic lower leg echoing in the hallway with a faint, rhythmic whir and metallic click. It was a sound she hadn’t heard in millennia but still felt oddly familiar, like a memory buried deep in her mind.

Her eyes wandered over his broad shoulders and sturdy frame as they walked. He was still unmistakably Hephaestus—powerful and deliberate in his movements—but time had left its marks. His long hair was a wild tangle, and the scruff on his jaw gave him a rugged look she wasn’t used to. And he was wearing a loose, grease-stained shirt paired with worn cargo shorts, and scuffed boots. Yet, beneath it all, he was the

same—steady, resilient, a god shaped by fire and toil.

She followed him into a cavernous room she didn't remember at all. She glanced around at the space with its rows of sleek monitors, processors humming, and blue lights casting a sharp glow over the workstations.

"This wasn't here before," she muttered, still trying to make sense of it.

He gave her a wry glance over his shoulder. "Well, it's been a long time since you've been here, and mortals have been busy with their tech," he retorted, not bothering to mask his amusement. She grimaced, biting back a response and reminding herself that she needed him for this.

"Here's the app," she said, handing him her phone, which displayed Winged's home screen.

He tapped through the app quickly, his brow furrowing as he studied it. Then, without a word, he turned to one of the computers and began typing, pulling up screens full of code. Images from the app appeared on the massive wall of screens, each highlighting different parts: the algorithm, lines of code, intricate graphic designs, and even bits of location data.

She watched, a little mesmerized by how naturally he navigated the complex digital world. This realm of screens and codes was entirely foreign to her, but he moved through it with ease, uncovering layers of the app she hadn't even known existed.

After a few moments of silence, he gestured to a line of code. "It's a simple enough algorithm... but there's something else mixed in. This—" he pointed to a block of symbols interwoven with the code, "is not mortal-made. Eros has somehow fused magic and tech to mimic matchmaking, but it's...stronger."

“So, he really went all in this time,” she sighed, folding her arms.

“More than that.” Hephaestus leaned back, frowning at the screen. “It’s like he’s embedded his own power in the code. The algorithm is less about compatibility and more about igniting attachment—fast. The mortals using this app aren’t just finding each other; they’re being pulled together, like metal to a magnet.”

Her stomach twisted. “So, it’s not just their choice—he’s driving them.”

He nodded. “That’s why it feels overwhelming to you. This app is amping up your power too. But it’s out of balance, like a fire without a steady fuel.”

“Can you undo it?”

He paused, his gaze thoughtful. “Not without him.” Hephaestus’s fingers flew across the keyboard, tapping out sequences that made lines of code stream across the expanse of screens.

Then he glanced at her over his shoulder, brows knitting as he studied her. “Why are you helping him?” he asked, almost accusingly. “You know how he is. This isn’t the first time he’s messed around with mortals.”

“I don’t want him to get into trouble, especially not over something this reckless,” She turned her gaze toward him and took a steadying breath. “Thousands of mortals are involved this time. You know how the council feels about that.”

He gave a dry laugh. “Maybe he deserves a bit of trouble. Could do him some good to see there are consequences for once.”

“You can’t be like that with him. You’re one of the two beings in the world who truly understand him. And the only other one who’s cared enough to look after him.”

He paused, his fingers resting on the keys as he absorbed her words. “Fine,” he muttered, rolling his eyes. “I’ll help you.” He tapped a few more keys, and the screens flickered as he burrowed deeper into the app’s programming.

He stopped and looked up at her. “I can’t take his magic out completely without undoing the app’s core functions. It’s like...his power is fused with it.”

She frowned. “What can we do, then?”

She watched Hephaestus, his fingers flying over the keys, his brow furrowed in concentration. The screens flickered, showing data she didn’t understand, lines of code and algorithms that looked indecipherable.

He groaned, shaking his head in frustration. “This app is way more complicated than I expected,” he muttered, rubbing his temples. “I’ll try to use my magic and see if I can break into it, but I need time to process all this.”

A fresh wave of worry hit her. Eros’s impulsiveness usually amused her, but now, with mortals involved, it felt like too much. She must have let her anxiety show because Hephaestus looked over, his expression softening.

“It’ll be okay,” he said gently. “I just need a couple of hours to pull things apart and find a safe workaround.”

She let out a small, tense sigh. The tech-heavy room felt stifling, filled with the hum of machines, the glow of screens, and the faint whiff of oil and metal that clung to everything Hephaestus touched. “Well,” she said, clearing her throat and glancing away. “I’m not going to sit here looking over your shoulder. I’ll be in the garden. Text me when you’re done.”

He nodded. “I will.”

Without another word, she turned and headed down the hallway, the click of her heels loud in the silence. She glanced back once, but he was already focused again, his gaze intent on the screens.

As Aphrodite stepped into the garden, she took a slow, calming breath, letting the familiar scents of blooming jasmine and wild roses wash over her. The chaotic energy she'd felt at City Hall and then in Hephaestus's tech-filled workshop faded just a little here. She closed her eyes, focusing on the softness of the earth beneath her feet and the sun's warmth on her skin.

Despite the years and the distance between them, Hephaestus was still a steady force. No matter what stood between them, he had always been someone she could count on when things went wrong—someone who would show up, someone who would care enough to help Eros, even if it meant digging through code all night. She could sense his lingering resentment for her and their tangled past, but beneath that, she knew he still cared. Maybe not for her in the way he once did, but for Eros. That loyalty was part of what she still admired about him, whether or not she'd ever say it out loud to him.

Turning to gaze out over the garden, she sighed. Her son had a gift for pushing the limits, but somehow, they would make this right. For now, she stayed among the blooms, letting the quiet settle around her, trusting that when she went back inside, Hephaestus would have done what he always did: found a way forward.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:33 am

Chapter 4

Hephaestus

Hephaestus massaged his temple with his forefinger and thumb, then slumped back in his chair.

What the fuck did you do, Eros?

He'd been working on undoing the layers of magic and code woven through the app's systems for hours non-stop. But the program was vast and complicated, not to mention, he had to work carefully. One wrong move could trigger an alarm and cause the system to kick him out and put up stronger firewalls.

At first, he tried to do everything manually, but it was taking too much time. So, he switched tactics and instead created a separate program to automate the process. This would take even longer, but at least he didn't have to spend another couple of hours hunched over his keyboard. All he had to do now was wait.

He blew out a breath. Why was he helping Aphrodite anyway? This wasn't his problem.

But then again, since the beginning, he was making her problems his.

Initially, he hadn't noticed the bruises. As they stood in front of Zeus that day he announced they were to be married, Hephaestus had been so struck by her breathtaking beauty he couldn't even think. However, a breeze had caused one of the

gauzy sleeves on her dress to lift up, revealing purple-blue marks on her upper arms. As he looked past her dazzling presence and aura, he scrutinized her and made out the cakey white powder on her cheekbone that was meant to conceal any discoloration under it. His awe had quickly turned to rage. The thought of anyone hurting his future bride had sent him into fury, but he managed to hide it.

In the weeks leading up to the wedding, she began to disappear from Mount Olympus for long periods of time. Then, one day, she'd been late to a brunch hosted by Hestia. While he had not been thrilled about attending the engagement festivities himself, it was very rude to be tardy to a celebration thrown in one's honor by the goddess of the hearth.

So, he had confronted her, and that's when he found out about that bastard who had kept her a virtual prisoner by holding their son hostage. He'd been enraged at that odious creature for hurting her and vowed to help her in any way he could.

She had protested, of course, and refused his help, even offered to break the engagement as she didn't want him mixed up in her business. But he wouldn't hear of it and even suggested they continue with the marriage—in name only—as it would allow them to stay in Zeus's good graces while they formulated a plan to retrieve the boy and keep him safe until he was old enough to eat the golden apple of immortality. After that, they would go their separate ways. Aphrodite agreed, and they were married.

Taking Eros away from his father hadn't been simple or easy. Cyncus had placed a blood spell on the boy, which prevented him from being separated from Cyncus without causing extreme pain and eventually death. Blood spells could not be undone by anyone but the person who cast the spell, and even upon the death of the spellcaster, it moves to the next of kin, which means the only way to truly break the spell was to kill anyone related by blood to Cyncus—and their children—which they didn't want to do.

So, Hephaestus came up with a different plan. He built an enchanted pyxis that would draw out Cyncus's magic and trap it. Of course, that meant they would have to get him alone and away from his guards. So, Aphrodite devised a ruse and pretended that she needed to speak to him privately, drawing him into her personal quarters. While she kept him busy, plying him with wine and food, Hephaestus had set off the device. By the time Cyncus figured out what was going on, Hephaestus already had the boy and Aphrodite, whisking them away from his palace.

There was also the problem of where the boy would live until he became immortal. While Aphrodite could go to Mount Olympus, Eros as a demi-god could not. But Hephaestus had already thought of a solution. He knew of a sparsely inhabited island where they could stay, hidden away from Cyncus or anyone who might seek to harm him. After a decade and a half of living there, Eros finally gained his full god status after eating the golden apple.

To an immortal god, fifteen years was a mere blink of an eye. But the divorce Aphrodite obtained seemed to have come even quicker than that. While they had agreed to stay together only until Eros could live on Mount Olympus, but he didn't expect Zeus to grant their divorce so soon.

Since then, they had somehow avoided running into each other, though for Hephaestus it was more a conscious effort than not. He even skipped attending the sealing ceremony every ten thousand years, as he wasn't needed there anyway after he constructed the door that held the Titans inside their prison.

But seeing her again, it was difficult not to be caught up in her orbit once more. She was like the sun, and he had no choice but to revolve around her.

A ringing jolted him from his thoughts. Grunting, he glanced over at his phone, Artemis's name flashing on the screen. "Yes, Artemoula?" he answered.

“I need your help, H,” she said as soon as her face appeared on screen.

“What is it?” His body went on full alert. “Is it the babies? Are you having any contractions? Where’s Cade?”

“Don’t you say that name to me right now.” Artemis’s bottom lip stuck out like a pouting child’s. “I’m not speaking to him.”

He let out a sigh. “What is it? What did he do?”

A tear—an actual, honest-to-goodness tear—appeared at the corner of her eye. “He forbade me to leave the house while he’s away. Can you believe it?”

“Uh-huh.” He glanced at the clock, hoping this wasn’t going to take too long.

“I mean, come on, I’m pregnant, not an invalid.” She tsked. “I just wanted to go to town and do some shopping. How could he even....”

Tuning her out, he turned to his keyboard to check on the progress of his program, making a few adjustments here and there, and once in a while, muttering an “oh yeah” and “really?” to Artemis.

“You’d do that for me?” she squealed so loudly, the tiny speakers on his cellphone blew out. “Thanks, H, you’re the best.”

“Sure...huh?” His head whipped back toward the screen. “Do what for you?”

She laughed. “Get me some pears from Hestia’s garden. You know, since I’m craving some fruit but Cade won’t let me leave the house. Thank you for offering to bring them here for me.”

“Get you pears from...” He scrubbed a palm down his face. “What am I, DoorDash? Why can’t you just buy pears from your supermarket?”

“Because they’re not the same, and it’s the only thing I’m craving right now.” Artemis pouted. “You promised, and you can’t break a promise to a pregnant woman, or you’ll get seven years of bad luck.”

He was pretty sure that wasn’t true, but there was no reasoning with Artemis when she was like this. Besides, it wasn’t like he had anything better to do right now. “Fine, fine. I’ll get you those pears.”

“Make sure you pick the ripest ones, okay? The one from the upper part of the tree.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll see you soon.” Tapping the call off, he put the phone in his pocket, grumbling under his breath. Transporting himself to Hestia’s home, he knocked on the door, and when the goddess of the hearth answered, explained what he needed. Hestia was only too happy to let him pick some pears from her garden, as well as a few other fruits she knew were Artemis’s favorites.

“Here you go,” he announced as he popped into Artemis and Cade’s living room, next to the couch where Artemis was curled up, watching a show on the massive TV mounted on the wall. He dropped the basket of fruits on the coffee table with a loud thud.

“You got them for me! Yay!” Throwing the blankets off, she wrapped her arms around him. “Thank-you-thank-you-thank-you.”

“Alright, well, I should get going?—”

“What?” She released him and glanced up, eyeing him carefully. “So soon?”

He prayed for patience silently. “Yeah. I thought you just wanted the pears.”

“I did but...” Her shoulders dropped. “Cade had to attend an emergency meeting with a few of the West Coast Alphas, and I’m all alone until he comes back tomorrow morning. Can’t you please stay for a bit?”

“Artemoula—”

“Please?”

He expelled a breath. “Alright. Fine.” Plopping down on the couch, he looked at the TV. “What are you watching?”

“ My Instant Fiancé .”

“ My Instant Fiancé ? What is that?”

“Oh, my gods, you’ve never heard of this show before?”

“No.”

She let out a squeal as she grabbed the remote. “It’s a reality show. I know it sounds stupid, but I swear, mortals produce the most addicting stuff. It follows couples who get engaged after knowing each other for a short period of time.” Navigating through the on-screen menu, she selected the show and pressed play. “Here, we’ll watch the first episode, I don’t mind.”

Hephaestus grumbled under his breath but hunkered down anyway, turning his attention to the screen.

“On the premiere season of My Instant Fiancé,” began the narrator, “we follow five

couples as they navigate the triumphs and trials of being...My Instant Fiancé!”

“Who the hell would get engaged after two weeks of dating?” he said.

Artemis didn’t say anything, but raised a knowing eyebrow.

He crossed his arms over his chest. “That’s different and you know it.”

Before his arranged marriage and divorce, Hephaestus had never spent much time with the former goddess of the hunt. They had been cordial before then, and of course, during the war there was no opportunity to make friends. However, sometime after the divorce, Artemis had come to him for help on one of her bows. It was during this time that they had formed a bond, unlikely as it may have seemed. She was like an annoying little sister he couldn’t get rid of at first, but he found that he enjoyed her company and didn’t mind her pushy nature. Surprisingly, she never asked him about Aphrodite or what had happened, but if she had, he likely would have put an end to their friendship.

“Humans watch this trash?” he commented.

“I think they watch it because it is trash. Just keep watching, I swear it gets better. This is my favorite storyline—Tulip and Jed.”

Hephaestus turned back toward the screen, focusing his attention on the show. How anyone could be entertained watching this, he couldn’t understand. There surely were so much better things to?—

“What in the world?” he exclaimed. “He told her to shave her unibrow?”

Artemis laughed. “I know right! The nerve of this guy, it’s not like he’s a catch. Jed’s thirty-five, has no job, and still lives with his mother.”

“Tulip’s so sweet too.” Anyone would be lucky to have a fiancé like this woman, who apparently had moved halfway across the country. “I hope she leaves his ungrateful ass.”

“It gets worse.” She wrinkled her nose. “But—no wait, I won’t spoil anything.”

Hephaestus glanced at the clock. He supposed another forty-five minutes wouldn’t hurt.

“He was sending the money to his side chick back home?”

Artemis threw her hands in the air. “It’s incredible, isn’t it, after all she’s done for him?”

“She’s so blind.” Hephaestus reached into the popcorn bowl and took a handful, popping one into his mouth. “Why would she even put up with this?”

“I know, right?” she said, exasperated. “Goodness knows, she could have any man she wants. So, one more episode?”

He glanced at the clock. “Fuck, it’s been five hours?” How the hell did time pass by so fast?

“We’re only halfway done through the season,” she said. “Don’t you want to know if Steven and Lillia are gonna make it down the aisle?”

He groaned. “Don’t tell me his ex-girlfriend is going to object at the wedding.”

The corner of her mouth tugged up. “Alright, I won’t tell you. So, this trash isn’t so bad, is it? Or rather, it’s so bad, it’s good.”

Apparently, it had been good enough for him to forget that he had wasted five hours of his time watching it. “Fine,” he grumbled. “Just play the next—” The buzzing from his pocket interrupted him. Taking his phone out, he looked at the caller ID, which didn’t show any name, but rather an unfamiliar number. Who could be calling him? This was his Olympus phone, so the call was coming from someone who lived there.

Artemis pointed the remote at the TV, pausing the show. “Go ahead.”

Tapping on the green button, he answered it. “Hello?”

“Um, Hephaestus? It’s me.”

Shock jolted through him at the sound of the familiar melodic voice. “Aphrodite?”

“Yeah. I hope you don’t mind. I got your number from Apollo.”

“Is that Aphrodite?” Artemis squealed. Grabbing the phone from him, she hit the camera button. “Hey, Aphrodite! How are you?”

“Damn it, Artemoula! Give me back my phone.” He attempted to take it back, but she yanked it away from him.

“How are you? What are you doing? You should totally join us if you’re not doing anything. We’re watching this show—hey!”

He glared at her as he plucked the device from her hand. “Well, excuse you .”

“Aww, no fair, H!” She crossed her arms over her large belly. “You know what? I’m going to watch this next episode without you and I won’t share my password with you so you can’t watch it. Nyeh, nyeh , so there.”

Seeing the former goddess of the hunt pouting like a child who didn't get her way and threatening him was so ridiculous, he could barely smother his laugh. "You know, just because you're having a baby doesn't mean you can act like one." Shaking his head, he padded to the kitchen. "Sorry about that," he said to Aphrodite.

"I should be the one apologizing. Am I interrupting anything?"

Only the order in my life. "What? No, we were just watching some stupid reality show. What is it? Is everything alright? Do you need anything?"

"N-no, it's nothing." She chomped at her lower lip. "I was just checking if there was any progress on that app."

"I'm afraid not. Nothing solid anyway." He explained what he had accomplished so far, including the program he created to automate the process of unraveling Eros's work. "So, that's about it. Just a lot of waiting for now."

"I see. How could he do this?" She clucked her tongue. "I mean, how did he even know how to do this?"

Aphrodite had no idea what her son was capable of. "I may have...taught him some stuff."

"You taught him?"

He scratched at his head. "A couple of decades back he saw me learning how to code. I showed him a little bit of it. I mean, I was still using those punch cards." That had been in the seventies and that first computer had taken up an entire room. "Every now and then he comes by and we look at the latest gadget or whatever and I teach him how it works." Guilt crept into him. "Maybe I shouldn't have encouraged him to?—"

“What, oh no, no,” she protested. “Don’t feel bad about teaching him how to code or anything else. You know, I don’t resent him spending time with you after we...” She cleared her throat. “He’s an adult, he can do what he wants. And as such, he’s also responsible for his own actions.”

“True.” He rubbed his thumb at his chin. “In any case, it looks like he picked up a few things on his own. I’ve been having a heckuva time figuring it all out.”

“Do you know when your program will be done?”

“Nothing solid. Twelve hours maybe? Check in after then, and I’ll have more to tell you.”

“Alright. Thank you, Hephaestus.”

Even after she hung up, he found himself staring at the phone, as if her image was still burned on the screen. Or maybe it was in his brain. How could one woman be so beautiful that it could affect him so, even after thousands of years? Sure, he had been with other women after the divorce, many of them stunning, but none of them made him feel this way. Like he’d been empty and?—

“So, are you guys getting back together?” Artemis interrupted as she skipped over to him.

He spun around. “What did you hear?” For now, they had kept Eros’s misdeeds under wraps, but if the council found out...

“Nothing, I wasn’t eavesdropping. That’s why I waited for you to finish your call.” She grabbed onto his arm. “Well? You guys are talking again, is it a good sign?”

“Er...” Fuck, he hated lying to anyone, especially to Artemis, who had been a great

friend for the past thousands of years. But if he told her about the app and the chaos it caused, she was bound by the rules of the council to report it. No, it was best to keep her in the dark. “I mean, I don’t know how she feels, but I’ve been, uh, thinking about it.” Not exactly the truth, but not an outright lie.

“Oh. My. Gods.” She covered her mouth with her hands as if she couldn’t contain herself. “That’s so great! I mean, you don’t talk about what happened with you guys, which is totally okay, by the way, because that’s your business, but I always wondered if there was something there.”

“Er—”

“So, what are you gonna do? Will you ask her out? Do you think she knows you want to try again? Have you told her how you feel?”

“Artemoula, calm down.” He rubbed his hand down his face. “We just saw each other a few days ago after a couple millennia.”

Her jaw dropped. “My baby shower brought you together? How cool. Ah!” She hopped around like an excited child. “We need to make this happen.” Pursing her lips, she narrowed her eyes at him. “But that won’t happen if you look like that .”

“Excuse me? Look like what?”

She rolled her eyes. “Like a mountain man who hasn’t seen civilization in years. I mean, no offense, H, but when was the last time you had a haircut?”

He thought for a moment. “I chopped off a couple of pieces...three months ago?”

“You cut your own hair?” She slapped a hand to her forehead. “Of course you do. No, no, no.” She tsked. “That won’t do, not if you wanna bag a woman like

Aphrodite.” A gleam appeared in her eye, and she rubbed her hands together. “What you need is a glow up.”

“A...glow up?”

“Yeah. A makeover.” She let out an excited cry. “And I know just the place! Roberto, my hair guy in San Francisco, works wonders!”

He grunted. “I am not getting my hair cut at some girly salon. No thank you, I’m fine.”

“B-b-but...” Her eyes rimmed with tears. “I’m so bored here. You have to let me give you a makeover. Please?”

“What about Cade? Didn’t he say you can’t leave?”

“He said I couldn’t go into town to shop,” she qualified. “Besides, he’s in San Francisco right now. After your makeover, I’ll show up to his hotel room and make him forgive me for leaving the house.”

“Then why don’t you just do that and leave me out of it?”

“Because you need this.” Tapping her foot, she looked him up and down. “And maybe some new clothes. Come on, we should get going. Roberto will fit me in, no worries. Unless...”

“Unless what?”

“There’s a different reason why Aphrodite is calling you?” The former goddess’s keen blue eyes zeroed in on him. “It wouldn’t happen to have something to do with Eros crashing my party, would it?”

“You know what, my beard’s starting to itch,” he said quickly. “Do you think your guy could trim it back a bit? I don’t want it shaved, just tamed.”

Her face brightened as she smiled. “Of course he can. Roberto’s a miracle worker, he can do anything.” Artemis slipped her arm into his. “Now, let’s go.”

I hope I won’t regret this , he grumbled to himself as they disappeared from the living room.

Chapter 5

Aphrodite

A phrodite put her phone down and sighed. All this waiting was driving her crazy. She had never felt so helpless as she did now, not to mention, the prayers and emotions from everyone who had downloaded the app overwhelmed her to the point she couldn't concentrate properly. Thankfully, she'd learned to manage it before it became a deluge by putting a temporary block on the prayers. However, this was a conscious effort on her part, and if she got distracted, the block sometimes slipped.

Like when she saw Hephaestus with Artemis.

After the divorce, she'd heard a few murmurs about her ex-husband and the goddess of the hunt, about how they'd been spotted together or how she was often seen entering and leaving his home at all hours of the day. It shouldn't have bothered her. She and Hephaestus were, after all, divorced after what essentially had been a marriage in name only. Also, whenever she met with Artemis, she'd never felt anything off or awkwardness from the other goddess, nor did she have that glow of someone in lust or love, so she knew that the two were only friends.

Still, seeing the two of them looking so obviously comfortable with each other had struck a nerve in her. Hephaestus had been guarded around her this entire time, which was understandable given the circumstances. But it was obvious her call had interrupted them. When Hephaestus had laughed at something Artemis had said off-screen, a stab of jealousy pierced her right in the chest. Aphrodite could only count a handful of times she had seen him truly laugh, and usually, it was not because of

something she had said or did.

She mentally shook her head. Hephaestus owed her nothing. In fact, she was the one who owed him, not only for rescuing them from Cyncus long ago but for taking care of Eros.

And now here he was again, playing knight in shining armor.

But she couldn't just sit back and play the damsel in distress, not this time, and certainly not when the world was in peril. She was the goddess of love, after all, and she had a duty to mankind. She would locate Eros and make him fix what he broke.

But where was he?

Making a mental list of his usual haunts, she visited each one, searching for her son. There was his favorite dive bar in Paris, a private island off the east coast of Malaysia, the rooftop of St. Mark's Cathedral in San Francisco, and several other locations where Eros was known to hang out. She'd exhausted all of them, and yet there was no sign of her son.

Well, there was one place she hadn't checked. It was, unfortunately, the one place in the world she never wanted to go back to.

Vale Crossing.

Eros had never hidden the fact that he often returned to his place of birth, though that was some years after Cyncus had died. She couldn't blame him; after all, while he attained godhood and was able to retract and unfurl his wings, he was still half geryon. Perhaps that part of him longed to be around other creatures like himself.

Vale Crossing was a sanctuary for magical beings who didn't have the luxury of

being out in the open. Thousands of years ago, humans and magical beings lived together in harmony, though as time passed, people changed and as their belief in the gods and magic waned, they also turned against the creatures and condemned and cast them out.

Shifters like Geri and Cade had human forms and therefore could live out in society to some extent. However, creatures who couldn't transform, like Minotaurs, satyrs, centaurs, sirens, and of course, the winged geryons and gigantic scaly Drakkons needed a place to live, and so, they founded Vale Crossing.

Vale Crossing's location was secret, except for those who already knew where it was. Aphrodite wasn't quite sure where it was located on the Upperworld either, as the magic that protected it was older than the gods themselves. All she knew was that it was vast enough that the various creatures who lived there had staked out their own territory. For example, Cyncus had been the leader of the geryons and their city was founded atop a high plateau that only winged creatures could reach.

She thought about the last time she was in Vale Crossing, ignoring the knots in her stomach as she teleported there.

Opening her eyes, she found herself in the middle of the capital city, Alindale. It wasn't officially the capital of Vale Crossing, but it was the largest and oldest city and thus the most modern of all the places. It reminded her of a smaller London or Paris, and the River Cirdell like a cleaner Thames or Seine.

"Oops!" She felt a jostling behind her as someone bumped into her.

"Pardon me!" a feminine voice said.

"No, it was my fault." Whirling around, she faced the other person. "I just appeared out of nowhere, sorry about that."

The woman dressed in a smart suit and high heels holding a coffee cup in her hand looked like any young office worker in a big city except she had a head full of tiny serpents for hair. A gorgon, she wore dark glasses to shield others from her deadly gaze. “No, I was in a hurry and wasn’t looking where I was going. Anyway, tata, I’m late for a meeting,” she said before rushing off.

Yes, she truly was in Vale Crossing.

Glancing around, she saw she had arrived at a busy intersection. People dashed about on the sidewalk, toward what appeared to be a large underground subway station. It was rush hour, if the buses, cars, and trucks slowed to a crawl on the street were any indication.

It’s all so different.

But then again, she hadn’t been here in millennia, so of course it had all changed. Gone were the quaint little streets and winding cart-filled roads and little shops. They had been replaced by steel buildings and busy sidewalks and department stores. While she’d heard about the changes to Vale Crossing over the years from Eros, to see it herself was a marvel.

She began to walk, taking in the sights, hoping to find some trace of him. She wasn’t headed anywhere in particular as she didn’t recognize anything anymore. She was hoping to find a sign or something familiar, but as hours passed, it became more apparent to her that this was like finding a needle in a haystack. And while everything that she knew about this place was long gone, she couldn’t help but think back to the years she spent in Vale Crossing with Cyncus, when it was good, but mostly, the memories of the latter years overtook her brain.

She stopped, feeling her chest tighten.

Eros , she called silently, stirring up the magical link between them. As his mother, she could usually sense where he was and even transport herself to him in an emergency, but she rarely used that particular power. For one thing, she had caught him too many times in compromising positions. But mostly, it took so much energy that it could leave her drained for days, and she was already using most of her power to keep the prayer block in place.

Eros , she called again, but heard nothing back. Nor did she feel his presence anywhere near.

He wasn't here.

Thank goodness, because that meant she didn't have to stay. She teleported back to Mount Olympus, right outside Hephaestus's house. She had been gone so long, so surely he should be done by now? He did say to check in after twelve hours and it had been long past that.

She entered the house and headed straight to his workshop, stopping in the first room. That familiar scent of wood, metal, and the warmth of the smelting fires soothed her and eased away her anxieties and bad memories. While the next room contained all the modern contraptions Hephaestus seemingly preferred these days, she liked this place better. It was more him, at least the him she knew in those days of their marriage. This place reminded her of his other workshop, the one he had built in the home they shared.

After they had successfully taken away Cyncus's magic and whisked Eros away from Vale Crossing, they couldn't go to Mount Olympus as Eros was still a mortal demi-god. And so, the three of them lived on a remote island where no one would find them, only occasionally going to Mount Olympus when necessary. She had been surprised when Hephaestus declared that he would be living there, too, but he insisted it was only to keep up appearances in front of the other gods and Zeus. They could

not risk his wrath, not after what they had done to Cyncus, and certainly not before Eros had a chance to partake of the golden apple.

And so, they lived there, watching over and raising Eros for the next fifteen years. It had been such a short span of time compared to the thousands of years they lived that sometimes it had felt like she had imagined it. But at that time, it had been more like a sweet, lucid dream after the nightmare she had lived through. Hephaestus had been there through it all, helping with Eros, building him his first bow, and even finding an instructor to teach Eros how to shoot. He taught him things that his biological father should have done.

Her heart clenched. She hadn't thought of those days in a long while. There were pockets of happiness, yes, but the overwhelming feeling she remembered now was the guilt. Even thinking about it now made her anxiety seep back in, so she pushed it aside.

“Hello?” she called as she entered his main workshop. All the computer screens were lit up and the PCs whirred audibly, but Hephaestus was nowhere to be found. Was he still in Alaska?

A faint sound caught her attention. It sounded like water. Curious, she followed the sound until she reached a door at the other end of the workshop. She reached for the handle to open it, but instead it opened by itself.

“What— mmphh !”

A force slammed her up against the wall and a large hand clamped over the lower half of her face as a hard, muscled body pressed up against her.

“Who the hell—Aphrodite?”

She blinked up at him as his dark eyes widened. Both remained still, and a thrill ran up her spine at the feel of his chest against hers. A very naked chest.

“Sorry. I thought you were an intruder.” He dropped his hands to his side and stepped away, clutching the white towel at his waist. For some reason, disappointment filled her that he was only half naked, though she couldn’t stop staring at his wide chest, remembering how she would watch him work at the forges without his shirt on, hammering at the anvil while sweat poured down his golden skin, pounding and pounding on?—

“ Ahem . Aphrodite?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Wha—oh?” Her head snapped up to meet his gaze. “I, uh...I was wondering if that program of yours was done?” Something was different about him, but he quickly turned away before she could figure out what.

“Yeah, we can take a look. I just got back from Alaska. Let me finish getting dressed and I’ll check on the progress.”

“Uh, sure.” Backing away, she left his shower room and closed the door behind her. She pressed her palms to her cheeks, feeling the warmth there. When was the last time she’d felt embarrassed? She frankly couldn’t remember, especially not when gazing at a fine male form.

And Hephaestus truly was fine.

She swallowed hard. Despite all their years together on that island, nothing had happened between them. They were like roommates, living in the same house, but never shared a bed. Hephaestus never left the island to visit any lovers; as Goddess of Love, she would have known. For fifteen years, he remained loyal to her, to their vows, and their marriage. So had she, but that was more a response to the trauma she

experienced with Cyncus. Perhaps that's why the guilt had built more over the—

“Aphrodite?”

“Yes?” She spun around. “Have you...” Her breath caught in her throat. He was now dressed in a tight, long-sleeved henley shirt that stretched across his chest and wrapped tight around his torso and a pair of blue jeans. Back in the old days, he had never cared for dressing up, preferring comfortable outfits over whatever was in fashion. In the last couple of days, he had been dressed in clothes that had seen better days, and scuffed work-boots. The clothes he currently wore looked brand new and fit much better. However, what had truly taken her by surprise was his face—she could actually see more of it with the beard neatly trimmed now. His hair, too, was cropped short and close to his head. His tidied hair and beard allowed more of his features to shine through, like his sharp, straight nose, high cheekbones, and full lips.

“Have I what?”

She cleared her throat, her cheeks heating once more. “Nothing. I mean, can we take a look at that program?”

Wordlessly, he walked past her toward the wall of screens on the other end. Her nose detected the slightest scent of a spicy aftershave and warmth pooled in her belly at the sexy, designer smell. She grabbed onto the edge of the table as her knees buckled.

Get yourself together!

With a calming breath, she followed him as he hunched back over the keyboard, typing away as lines of code flew across the screen, hewing and humming every now and then. A few minutes later, his fingers stopped and he pushed away from the desk, muttering a curse under his breath.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, gripping the back of his chair. “Did your program work?”

“No.” He blew out a breath.

“Why not? I thought you said you could pull things apart and work around it?”

“I could...if I used the same type of magic as Eros. I can’t even get near whatever spell he’s buried deep in there because my powers simply aren’t capable of handling it. It’s like trying to use Python when a computer only speaks Java.”

“In English, please?”

He spun around to face her. “My magic and his magic simply aren’t compatible. But”—he rubbed his beard with his thumb and forefinger—“but yours might be.”

“My magic?” She shook her head. “No, that’s not how it works. Only the person who cast a spell can undo it.”

“That’s not always true,” he countered. “Only the person who cast the spell knows how it was made, which makes it easier for them to undo it. But anyone who knows how it was cast could, theoretically, undo it.”

“I’ve never used such a spell before, and certainly not on computers. How would I know how he formulated it?”

“Because he’s your son. You know him best, out of everyone in the entire universe. You also taught him everything you knew once he became God of Love and Desire.”

“H-how did you know?”

“He told me. When he comes to visit me, I would ask him about you.”

Her heart stuttered. “You asked about me?”

“I mean, his lessons with you, yes,” he said quickly.

Oh, right. “I just don’t know, Hephaestus. What if I do something wrong and trigger a counter curse instead?” That was one way that magic users prevented other people from messing with their work. “What if I make things worse?”

“And what if you don’t?” Rising from his chair, he towered over her, yet she didn’t feel cowed by his massive frame. “What if you succeed and fix everything?”

Dark eyes fixed on her, and she found herself staring up, lost in the depths of those onyx pools. “I suppose I could try.”

The corners of his mouth twitched up. “Alright, let’s do this.” Swiveling his chair around, he motioned for her to sit. “Okay, place your hands over the keyboard.”

“Like this?”

“Yes.”

She glanced up at him. “Do I have to type anything?”

“No, just use the keyboard as a conduit to access the magic within.”

“I’m not sure how to do that.” Her nose wrinkled.

Leaning down, he brought his head closer to hers so they were at eye level. “Remember how you use healing magic? How you let your powers flow through

someone and find the sick or wounded parts and fix it with your magic? Do the same. Except this time, you're doing it to a computer."

"I'll try." Calling up her magic, she allowed it to flow through her fingers and into the keyboard. The energy flowed forward, moving through the wires and to the various electronic systems. However, being unfamiliar with how computers worked, it all looked like a jumbled mess to her.

"I can't do it," she cried. "It's too much. I'm lost."

"You can do it, Aphrodite."

"How do you know? I'm just the goddess of love. What do I know about these damned things?" She clucked her tongue. "I'm just not as smart as you."

"Don't say that."

A heavy palm landed on her shoulder, the warmth of his skin penetrating the thin layer of her top. Thank goodness she was sitting down as her knees had turned to jelly at his touch.

"You're much smarter than you give yourself credit for," he whispered, his mouth so close to her ear she could feel his breath. "Love isn't frivolous or stupid. It's done so much to change the world, made so many things possible. Death can stop a heart from beating, but it will keep on loving until the end of time."

His words stirred up something inside her, something she had thought she'd buried so deep and so long ago that she would never have to think about it or face it again. She wanted to respond, but feared the words that threatened to spill from her lips. So, instead, she turned back to the computer and began to work.

She let her magic flow back into the computer. Healing magic was one of the most complex to perform because she first had to know what was wrong with someone to fix them. A broken arm or a bullet wound was easy, but internal injuries and ailments were much more difficult because it wasn't something you could see. In that case, she had to send her magic far and wide, like casting a net to catch fish, to find whatever sickness or damage was inside the body. So, she did the same here, casting her magic like a wide net, looking for something that was out of place inside the computer.

There.

She felt it—a twinge in her chest, like someone plucking a string and sending a signal back to her. It was familiar to her, calling to her, a reflection of her own being.

Love magic.

She followed it back like a beacon, finding it hidden amongst the chips and wires and lines of codes within the processor. It looked like a heart, alive and beating, powering the entire system. The magic was so beautiful and intricate that for a moment she could only watch it in awe, so proud of her son for creating such a complex spell. No wonder it had caused so much chaos.

Focusing her own magic, she wove it around the heart, covering it completely. She recognized parts of the spell, things she did, indeed, teach Eros. Bits and pieces of magic here and there that seemed disjointed, but when she saw the patterns, she found that she could undo them. One by one, she dismantled the parts, until the magic simply dissipated.

She released the breath she was holding and jolted back into the real world.

“You did it.” It was a statement, one that was full of confidence.

“I did?” Gasping, she shot up from the chair. “I did it!” Excitement flowed through her as she threw her arms around Hephaestus’s neck. “I can’t believe?—”

“I did.” Strong arms wrapped around her middle and pulled her close. “I always believed you could.”

“Thank you!” She kissed his cheek—which made his entire body stiffen. Horror filled her as she realized what she had done. “I...uh...” She let go of his neck at the same time he released her.

He pulled the chair back and sat down, then began to type on the keyboard. “Looks like it’s cleared.”

She pushed away the shock and embarrassment threatening to overwhelm her. “It is?”

“Yeah, the spell is gone...”

“Thank goodness,” she sighed in relief. “That means everything should be back to normal, right? All those couples should be coming to their senses?”

He grunted. “Should be. But only you can know for sure.”

“Right.” Clearing her mind, she opened up to the prayers once again. But instead of that soft, steady hum, that overpowering wave returned. The desperation, the chaotic energy, the intense heat swirled around her.

“No!” She slammed the block back in place. “It’s still there.”

His dark eyebrows furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“It didn’t work, whatever we did.”

“But you shut it down...wait a second.” Turning back to the screens, he began to type furiously. “Fuck!”

“What’s wrong?”

He scrubbed a hand down her face. “You managed to shut off the system that powered the magic-infused code, but only one part of it.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s like...you shut off the brain, but the heart is still pumping. But, essentially, no new users will be able to download the app, which stops it from spreading.”

“Oh, thank goodness. But what about the rest of the people who already have it? Couldn’t you, I don’t know, shut down their phones?”

“No, not all one hundred fifty million users.”

“One hundred...” She slapped a hand over her forehead. “What are we going to do?”

He cracked his knuckles. “I don’t know, but I’m going to find a way to stop all of this.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:33 am

Chapter 6

Hephaestus

If Hephaestus hadn't been so angry at Eros for what he did, he would have been so damned proud. Over the last few decades, he'd seen Eros's proficiency with computers grow, but he didn't think he could code and program at this level. The combination of technology and magic in Winged's programming was a thing of beauty.

Aphrodite's magic had done its job shutting down the main program, but the app actually functioned independently. It needed no updates, no central server, or even any type of manual intervention.

"Did you find out anything else?"

"Huh?" He looked back at the source of the voice. "Aphrodite? You're still here?" Checking the clock, he saw it had been a few hours since she arrived.

"Of course." She offered something to him—a steaming cup of tea. "I stuck around to watch you work, but you were so engrossed, I didn't want to interrupt. However, I thought you might like this."

The aromatic brew caught his attention. "Thank you." As he accepted the mug, their fingers brushed. The accidental touch sent gooseflesh up his arm, which was a strange reaction seeing as he already had her in his arms just a few hours ago.

No one ever came to visit him, so when he heard someone in his workshop, he'd acted on instinct, intending to neutralize the intruder. It was only when he felt the soft curves against him and smelled the sweet, rose perfume that he realized who the 'intruder' was. Just the memory of it made his cock twitch.

"So, did you, um, change something or do something with your hair?" Aphrodite asked.

"What? Oh." He raked his fingers through his newly-shorned hair, the length of it still a new sensation to him. "Yeah, um, about that." He explained how he used the makeover session as a distraction so Artemis wouldn't probe further into Eros's activities.

"Oh, I see." The corner of her mouth tugged up. "Thank you for thinking of Eros, even though he himself didn't give a single thought to the consequences of his actions."

"Yeah, it's not a big deal. Though I think that Roberto guy overdid it." He rubbed his newly-trimmed beard. "All I wanted was a trim, and I ended up with this." He gestured to his new haircut. "When he took out the tweezers to pluck my eyebrows, I put my foot down."

This time, the laugh she'd obviously been holding back bubbled from her lips. "I can imagine. Oh, wait. You have a cowlick." Reaching forward, she brushed her fingers on his temple as she fixed the lock of stray hair. "There you go."

"Thanks. Excuse me." He swiveled the chair back toward the computer so she wouldn't notice the growing erection in his pants and so he would stop staring at her lush curves through her flowy dress.

Damn, Artemis, insisting on these tight jeans. Not satisfied with the "glow up," she

had insisted on revising his wardrobe too, but if he didn't control his thoughts, he'd surely embarrass himself.

He let out a slow breath in an attempt to relax his body. Perhaps it had been too long since he'd been with a woman. That's the only explanation why he was acting like some teenage boy. It wasn't that he lacked female company, though the sexual act had always been more of a release for him, a one-night arrangement that suited both him and his partner. He'd just been much too busy in the last couple of years, especially with the way technology had progressed and exploded. He found more satisfaction in his work than in anything else.

"Your tea is getting cold," Aphrodite said.

Without glancing back at her, he took a sip from the cup as he continued to stare at the screen. He punched in more keys, before a large beeping sound rang through the speakers.

"Is everything alright?" Sidling up to him, she leaned down. "What does that all mean? Was it my magic? Did I set off a counter curse?"

The monitor glowed as purple lines of code rushed across the display. "I don't think so. This is something different. I traced the app's communications back to the mainframe of the company that owns Winged. It's a corporation called Philautia, headquartered in Seattle." The screen on his right lit up to reveal a company webpage.

"That seems like your normal corporate website," she remarked.

"Yeah." Clicking on the different links, he scrolled through the various pages detailing Philautia's background. "All corporate speak BS, doesn't really say much about what they do except that they're in technology."

She perched her hip against the back of his chair. “How can this all help us stop the app?”

The faintest whiff of her sweet perfume distracted him for a moment, though he managed to ignore it. “I think I know how to completely shut down Winged.”

“You do? How?”

“The central mainframe. It’s the only thing that’s keeping the app functioning for now.”

Her eyebrows knitted together. “Oh, so it’s like ... I shut off the brain, but this is the heart powering Winged.”

“Exactly. If I can get in and disassemble it, we may be able to fully shut it down.”

“Get in? Like you would have to be there physically?”

“Yes.”

“Can’t you just...I don’t know, hack your way into the mainframe?”

“That’s not quite how it works. See, at first, I was able to access Winged’s system on the cloud—that’s what you shut down. But this is different because we’re talking about hardware. I’ve been trying to get in, but it keeps shutting me out. I can’t be sure, but I think there’s something there keeping me out. Might be an extra piece of hardware that’s not connected to the network and needs a physical key. But I won’t know until I see it.”

“I see. We need to go to their headquarters to disable it then. Seattle, right?”

He rose from his chair. “You don’t have to go with me. Why don’t you stay here or go home? I’ll call you once I’m done.”

She placed her hands on her hips. “And why would I not come with you? It’s not like it’s dangerous or anything. We’re gods, we can go in and out undetected, and even if they did catch us, what would they do? We could just disappear before they arrest us.”

“It’s not that.” He searched for an excuse, because the truth was, being around her was too much. Memories and emotions he’d long buried were threatening to resurface, and he could not deal with that right now. “But I don’t want you to be bored. This could take a while. Why don’t you go home and attend to your duties?”

“This is my duty,” she retorted. “I’m the goddess of love, and this problem is within my realm, therefore, I need to fix it. Besides, what if you need my love magic again?”

Well, she had him there. “I suppose that makes sense. Give me a sec to gather my stuff, and we’ll go.” He grabbed his laptop and a couple of cables, then stuffed them into a backpack. “Ready? You know the address?” She nodded and he teleported them out of his workshop.

They appeared outside a glass and steel building in busy downtown Seattle. The corporate headquarters of Philautia rose up like a spire into the sky, the sun glinting off the shiny mirrored surface.

Hephaestus shaded his eyes with his hand as he glanced up. “Let’s head inside.”

Their magic allowed them to remain invisible as they entered the lobby. He stopped in the middle and held up a hand. The world around him quieted as he called on his powers, seeking for the hum of technology around him.

“Sixth...no, seventh floor.”

They transported themselves to the seventh floor, just outside the elevator lobby.

There was a single door on the floor, locked behind an electronic lock, which of course, did nothing to stop them from simply reappearing on the other side.

“This must be—what the fuck?” Hephaestus cursed.

Aphrodite gasped. “I don’t understand...what is that?”

The large room looked like any corporate IT mainframe server room—climate-controlled, filled with racks of servers that blinked and hummed intermittently. However, snake-like vines climbed and twisted amongst the servers. Bright purple flowers bloomed along the vines, filling the air with a strong perfume.

“Whatever it is, the humans must not be able to see it.” There was definitely strong magic coming from the vines.

She reached out and touched the flower closest to her. “I know this...” She took a sniff. “ ‘It fell upon a little western flower. Before, milk-white, now purple with love’s wound, And maidens call it ‘love-in-idleness.’ ”

“I beg your pardon?”

“It’s a quote from A Midsummer Night’s Dream by Shakespeare,” she began. “In the play, the nectar from the flower makes the characters fall in love with the first person they see. Not many humans know about it as it only grows in Mount Olympus.” She flashed him a sheepish smile. “I may have, er, inspired the bard to write about it.”

“You what?”

“I adore Shakespeare, saw every one of his plays,” she said. “But Will was having a bad case of writer’s block, and I was so impatient waiting for his next work. So, I kind of visited him in a dream and told him about the flower.” Her brow furrowed. “This must be what’s making the current users fall in love.”

“Possibly. A combination of organic magic and technology.” It was brilliant, really, if it had been used for good instead of causing chaos.

“So, can you shut it all down?”

“Let me take a look first.” He approached the mainframe, taking his laptop out of his bag. Plugging it in, he opened it and began to type. “Hmm...”

She sidled up next to him. “What is it?”

“I can’t even access it. I think my earlier theory might be true—there is some kind of hardware block.”

“Where is it? Hidden behind the vines?”

“Or it is the vines.” It was difficult to explain, but he could feel how the magic emanating from the plant, particularly the flowers, formed a shield around the servers. “It’s powering the app and protecting it at the same time.” He grabbed the vine closest to him and yanked on it, breaking it off. However, seconds later, the limb grew back, thicker and stronger. “We can forget about literally hacking away at them.”

“Maybe I can do it.” She held her hand over one section of the vines and closed her eyes. The vine directly under her palm twitched, but settled back in place. “Ack!” She clucked her tongue. “I thought I could do it since it is a kind of love magic, but not the same as mine. It’s part organic, so I don’t have full control of it.”

Damned Eros. He really was too smart for his own good. “So, we’re back to square one.”

“Wait.” She tapped a finger on her chin. “You said this was a type of hardware lock, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then shouldn’t a lock have a key?”

“That’s not how it works.” He paused. “But then again, it’s not like the things I’ve seen the past few days have been ordinary. I suppose it’s worth a try to find somewhere a key might fit.”

She gestured to her right. “I’ll look over here, you go there.”

Nodding, he put his laptop away and began to search through the tangle of vines and flowers. The sweet, heady scent of the love-in-idleness tickled his nose as he scrutinized the server trays behind it and he was glad that as a god, he was immune to its magic. He could only imagine how potent it was for humans.

“Have you found anything?” Aphrodite called out.

“Not yet. You?”

“No. But let’s keep looking.”

He wasn’t even sure what they were looking for, but he kept his mouth shut. If anything, not finding anything would at least disprove the lock and key theory, and they could move on and find another solution. Then—“Huh?” He stopped as he noticed one of the vines emitted a faint purple glow. It hadn’t been so obvious before,

but as he reached the rear of the rack where the lightbulb had burned out overhead, the glow pulsed in the darkness.

Hmm.

With a snap of his fingers, all the lights in the room turned off.

There.

“Hephaestus? What’s going on?”

“I think I have something.” Soft footsteps indicated she was behind him. “See?”

“What—oh.” She gasped, her eyes roaming over the vines. “I don’t think I’ve seen it do that before.”

“You haven’t?”

“No, and...” She glanced around her. “Look, the glow is coming from somewhere.”

Sure enough, the glowing vines did seemingly branch out from a central spot in the mainframe. Following the trail, they traced it to a corner in the back of the racks. The light pulsed brighter there, beating with a regular rhythm. The vines wrapped around one particular spot on a lower rack, swirling in a circle like a bullseye on a target. When Hephaestus reached out to push the vines aside, they slowly retracted back to reveal a small compartment inside.

“Is that it?” Aphrodite said in an excited tone.

“Could be.” He peered inside. “There’s something in there.” The soft glow bathed in the compartment in a purple light. It reminded him of a security keypad, but there

were no numbers, letters, or symbols to press. Instead, there was an indentation in the middle, shaped like a?—

No.

It couldn't be.

He wouldn't.

“What is it?” Aphrodite asked. “Did you find a lock?”

He supposed it could be a kind of lock. But there was only one key. “I...” He didn't know what to say as his chest tightened. Why the hell would Eros do this? Was this a sick game to him?

“Hephaestus, say something.” Impatient, she pushed him aside and peered inside. “I don't see a lock.” Her nose wrinkled. “But it kind of looks like...”

“A shell,” he finished. But it wasn't just any shell. He knew the exact shape and size of this particular shell well. He'd held it enough times to know that it would fit exactly inside that alarm pad.

“Are you sure,” she said. “Why would Eros use a shell? That's my symbol, not his.”

His mouth went dry as his stomach tied into a tight knot.

“I mean, I have a few shells I keep at home,” she continued. “But I don't think any of them would fit in there. Do you think he would have the key hidden somewhere? Where should we start looking?”

Should he tell her he knew exactly where the key was? Or maybe he should just feign

ignorance.

“Hephaestus?”

He looked at her, down at her beautiful face and mesmerizing silvery-blue eyes. He opened his mouth in an attempt to lie to her, but the words of denial refused to leave his mouth. “I know where the key is.”

“You do?”

“Wait here.” In a flash, he was back in his workshop. His feet were like lead as he trudged toward his desk, to the drawer on the right side. Opening it, he took out the single item inside—a pink and white seashell that was smaller than his palm. He stared at it for a moment, then mentally shook his head. He couldn’t waste any more time. Besides, it had been thousands of years since that day.

Maybe she won’t even remember it.

Transporting himself back to the server room, he reappeared in the same spot.

“Where have you been?” she asked.

Ignoring her, he reached into the compartment and placed the shell into the indentation. A perfect fit.

“What did you—” she gasped. “I think it’s working!”

Sure enough, the vines began to retract, the flowers withering as they pulled away from the mainframe, the pulsing glow fading as they disappeared.

“It worked!” Aphrodite clapped her hands together. “How did you find a key?”

How was he going to explain this? “Aphrodite, I—wait!”

Before he could stop her, she peered into the compartment. The knots in his stomach tightened as she reached inside, a line forming between her eyebrows.

“Why, this looks like one of mine.” She held the shell up on her palm, peering at it. “But why would you...” Her mouth parted, and she slowly looked up to meet his gaze. “Hephaestus? Is this?—”

A noise from the outside mercifully interrupted her. “The humans must have figured out we shut everything down.” He seized her arm. “Let’s get out of here.”

Without another thought, he transported them back to his workshop. “Well, I’m?—”

“Hephaestus.” She stood there, one hand on her hip, the other holding up the shell. “Why do you have this?”

He pressed his lips together, unable to answer.

“This is the shell I wore to our wedding, right?”

Since their wedding had been an official function, all the gods in attendance—including the bride and groom—had to wear their symbol. Hephaestus has chosen a medallion he fashioned himself, with an anvil and hammer design in the center. Aphrodite, on the other hand, had worn the seashell like a hairpin, holding up her veil. During their wedding feast, it had come loose, and she had placed it on the table next to her. As the night wore on, she had seemingly forgotten about it, and so he took it without her knowledge.

She never once searched for it or asked him if he had seen it, so he didn’t say anything. Instead, he had kept it with him, keeping it tucked away in that drawer.

Over the millennia, he kept telling himself he'd eventually toss it out but found that he couldn't part with it.

"Hephaestus? Answer me."

"We shut down the mainframe," he began, then turned to walk toward his computer desk. "You should go and check?—"

"No." She caught up to him, blocking his way. "Tell me why you have the shell."

"Are you sure you didn't leave it here?"

Crossing her arms under her breasts, she remained rooted to the spot. "I know all my jewelry, and our wedding was the only time I wore this particular shell. I thought I'd lost it. But you had it all this time? Why?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Now, if you'll excuse me..." He sidestepped her, but she gripped his forearm, her warm palm like a brand. "Aphrodite, I have work to do."

"No, nuh-uh." Her hold on him tightened. "Look at me."

He refused, keeping his eyes ahead.

"Hephaestus, tell me why you have this. I demand an explanation."

"Why do you think, Aphrodite?" His head whipped back toward her, meeting her accusing silvery-blue gaze. "Why do you think I would keep it?"

"Oh no, no, no," she said with a sardonic laugh. "You don't get to deflect, not this time. Why do you have this?"

The maelstrom of emotions swirling inside him exploded like an overflowing dam. “You want to know the real reason why I kept it?” he snarled. “Because it was yours.” Her eyes grew to the size of saucers. “Is that what you wanted to hear? It was the only thing I had left of you, and I wanted it close to me, all these thousands of years. I couldn’t let it go, couldn’t throw it away, no matter how hard I tried. I just wanted to keep some part of you because, for fifteen years, I never got to have what I wanted most.” His voice turned raspy as a thousand razor blades wrapped around his throat. “Is this the admission you want? Does this answer satisfy you?”

All the blood had seemingly drained from her face, and he feared she would faint from shock, or worse, run away after his heated and obviously unwanted confession. But to his surprise, she didn’t do either of that. Instead, she leapt up at him and pulled him down for a kiss.

The initial shock of her warm lips on his made him freeze. However, he soon responded, wrapping his arms around her waist to pull her close. As her soft body pressed against him, he half-sighed, half-moaned into her mouth from the pure pleasure of it all as the pent-up longing from over millennia was finally released.

She opened her lips to him, coaxing him to taste her. He didn’t need any further arm-twisting as he plunged his tongue inside her mouth. She tasted sweeter than he’d imagined all these millennia, a hundred times better than in his imagination. His hands remained frozen on her waist, unsure what to do, but when hers began to roam over his body—running up his chest, down his shoulders, and down to his waist to pull his shirt out of his pants—he, too, explored her soft curves. His palm slid down her waist to cup her full buttocks, pulling her to him so she could feel his growing erection.

She moaned and pushed up against him, undulating her hips invitingly. Taking his hands into hers, she moved them to cup her breasts through her clothes. Of course, he’d spent a lot of time looking at those breasts—what else was he supposed to do

when they were around each other twenty-four-seven on the island—wondering how they would feel. They were much larger than they looked, but fit his hands perfectly. She gasped when he gave them a firm squeeze, but didn't seem to mind as she continued to kiss him. In fact, she lowered her hands to his waist and slipped her hands under his shirt to run her fingers over his abs before pulling the fabric up.

They broke apart for a moment as the henley shirt went over his head, and he gave her a quick kiss before moving lower, tracing her jaw with his mouth then nuzzling at her neck. Her skin there was soft and smooth too, and her perfume teased his senses. She gasped when he licked at the spot behind her ear and melted against him, her fingers digging into his shoulders. He grazed her skin lightly with his teeth and continued to taste her.

“Bedroom,” she moaned. “Now.”

He assumed that she was asking, but no. In a split second, they were transported to his bedroom on the second floor. Thankfully it was clean, but that wouldn't have been an issue because he rarely slept there, preferring to collapse in the cot in the small room next to his workshop.

Aphrodite pushed him toward the bed, and he didn't resist. However, once the back of his knees hit the mattress, he flipped their positions around and pushed her down on the bed.

She let out a whoop of surprise, then giggled as he fell on top of her, covering her lips with his. He deepened the kiss, invading her mouth. She matched his fervor, their tongues tangling in a wild dance. Her body wriggling up at him was too much, and he had to have a taste of her now .

He bunched up the skirt of her dress and tugged up at it. Smart woman that she was, she immediately knew what he wanted and helped him, lifting her hips so he could

slip it up her body and over her head. He groaned aloud as her naked breasts popped out from under the fabric. She'd been braless the whole time and he didn't even realize it. He cupped them with his hands, testing their weight before dipping his head so he could take one hard nipple in his mouth.

Her fingers raked into the hair at the nape of his neck, tugging at the strands with desperation as he sucked on the bud. He teased her with his tongue, brushing the flat, rough side against her sensitive nipple. Her legs wrapped around his waist, and she rubbed herself against the bulge under his tight jeans. The friction sent pleasure down the back of his spine.

"Hephaestus," she moaned. "Please..."

He slipped his hand between them, his finger rubbing the front of her panties, rubbing at the already damp seam. She trembled at the contact and he continued his slow teasing of her sex until she was squirming under his touch. Hooking his thumb over the waistband, he pushed them down to her thighs. Moving lower, he kissed a path from her breasts, over her soft belly, to the curls between her legs. In one motion, he pulled her panties off and set them aside.

Returning between her knees, he pushed them apart. He planted kisses on her inner thighs, all the way to the valley of her sex. Slowly, he licked up her crevice, making her shiver. He hooked her legs over his shoulders and plunged in, growling as he licked at her again before plunging his tongue inside her.

She cried out and pushed her hips up at him. Her delicious womanly scent filled his nostrils, and his cock throbbed. He sealed his mouth over her clit, using a combination of pressure and rubbing to tease at her nub. When he felt her hips give a shudder, he continued relentlessly, until her entire body started to shake. But he wasn't done yet. He plunged a finger inside her, hooking it to find her G-spot. She screamed out, her thighs pressing hard around his head and ears as he went deaf for a

moment.

“H-Hephaestus,” she said weakly. “That was—oh!”

He didn’t let her rest as he went right back to eating her delicious pussy. This time, he switched his hand and his mouth, so that his mouth was at her slick entrance while his fingers rubbed at her clit. He stroked and licked her to another orgasm, barely letting her rest before he started again. His cock now painfully strained against the seam of his jeans, and no amount of rubbing at the mattress could ease it. Lifting his hips up, he unbuttoned the fly and eased his cock out. The pressure of his fist around his shaft eased the pain, and he began to move his hand up and down. Noticing that Aphrodite was nearing another orgasm, he moved his tongue over her clit with the same rhythm as his hand.

“Hephaestus!” Her fingers dug into his hair once more and gripped it so hard he thought she’d rip it from his scalp. That was enough to keep his own orgasm at bay, as he didn’t want to come yet. For now, he wanted to make sure she was satisfied.

As she lay on the mattress, recovering from her orgasm, he slid up behind her, pulling her limp body against his. “Are you all good?”

She gave a weak laugh. “Good doesn’t begin to describe it.” She shimmied around to face him, her cheeks flushed and eyes glazed over as a slow smile spread across her mouth. “Now it’s your turn.” Her palm wrapped around his cock.

“Aphrodite, you don’t—uh!” Every stroke sent shivers down his spine, straight down to his balls. The pressure, the speed, even the softness of her skin was perfect. If she didn’t stop, he was going to come all over her hands. “It’s too much. Just...slow down.”

Instead of slowing or stopping, however, she slid downward and without missing a

beat, wrapped her mouth around the bulbous tip.

“What—oh...fffuuck.”

Her mouth was warm and wet and everything he dreamed of. Her tongue swirled around the tip, teasing the slit and the head with soft licks before plunging him in farther into her mouth.

“Damn...oh!” Unable to help himself, he wrapped her brown locks around his fist as he gently thrust against her mouth. “I...oh, fuck, stop or I’m gonna come.”

She let him slide from her lips, but continued to pump him with her hand. “Please, Hephaestus. I need you.”

Something in his brain short-circuited at her words, because at that moment, all he could think about was getting inside her. “Lie back,” he ordered.

Their eyes remained locked together, even as he stood up and removed his jeans and she scrambled backward to the center of the mattress. The longing that had built inside him threatened to burst, and he was surprised he didn’t expire right there. After thousands of years of dreaming of this moment, it was finally here. He had no doubt this would be better than he imagined; he only hoped it could be good for her. She was the goddess of love, after all.

“Come.” She held out her hand to him, and he had no choice but to obey, crawling over toward her. Sprawled on the bed, naked body on display, he could only focus on her gorgeous face, silvery-blue eyes, and how hard his heart thumped against his chest. He couldn’t find the words to describe how beautiful she was right this moment.

Hovering over her, he leaned down to sip from her lips, drinking her in, committing

the memory to his brain for the rest of eternity. She deepened the kiss, pulling his entire body down as she parted her thighs. He pointed the tip of his cock against her slick entrance, pushing in slowly, filling her slowly until he was fully inside. They both let out a sigh of relief against each other's mouths.

"You feel so good." Her fingernails traced down his back, making him shiver and convulse. "Hephaestus...I've waited forever to have you in me."

Fuck, he was going to come right then and there. After a few deep breaths, he gave a thrust.

"Oh!" Her eyes rolled back, and she bit her lower lip. "More." She squeezed around him. "Don't...hold back."

Despite her encouragement, he moved slow at first, not for her but for him. He'd been wanting this for so long, he feared it would be over too soon. He wanted to make it last. She was, however, not making it easy. Her tight, slick walls squeezed him with each thrust, her hips lifting to meet his every time.

He changed the angle of his thrusts to better hit that spot inside her that had driven her crazy earlier. When her moans turned to needy whimpers, he kept going at it, keeping his rhythm steady until she was begging him to go harder. He did, tucking his face into her neck so he could suck at the skin behind her ear. Her body froze, then began to convulse, her pussy spasming around him as she came. He thought having her come on his fingers and mouth had been amazing, but now as she orgasmed on his cock, it sent his own pleasure into the stratosphere.

"Hephaestus. Oh, yes. Hephaestus!"

It was all over at that point. The dam holding back the lust and longing for thousands of years finally shattered, and he spilled his seed inside her. She murmured

encouraging words as he reached the heights of pleasure, her pussy pulsing and milking him, sending him soaring farther. He wasn't even sure when he was done because time had seemingly lost all meaning and his brain had stopped processing anything outside of the two of them.

Even when the sensation returned to his limbs, he couldn't think. Thankfully, Aphrodite had the presence of mind to gently push him off and roll him onto his back. He attempted to speak, but nothing came out.

Her soft curves pressed against him, and she lay an arm over his chest. She whispered something that sounded like "sleep" and then kissed his shoulder. It seemed like a good idea at the moment, so he shifted to his side, slid an arm under to pull her to him, and crushed her to him before he closed his eyes.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:33 am

Chapter 7

Hephaestus

Hephaestus woke with a start, the sharp chime of his phone cutting through the quiet room. Groaning, he reached for it blindly, his hand fumbling on the nightstand until his fingers brushed the cool metal. As he shifted back onto his pillow, his eyes fell on Aphrodite.

She lay peacefully, her hair splayed across the pillow in soft waves, her lips slightly parted. Beautiful didn't begin to describe her, though it was the first word that always came to his mind.

He let himself stare for a moment, memories of the night before flooding back. They'd finally crossed a line they'd danced around for centuries. The way she had kissed him, touched him, trusted him—it was more than he had imagined. And it had been...perfect.

But now, in the light of morning, reality crept in. He wasn't sure what this meant, what came next. They had fallen asleep wrapped around each other, exhaustion pulling them under, but now the questions lingered in the quiet. Was this a beginning or just a fleeting moment?

He sighed, raking a hand through his hair. Whatever it was, he wasn't going to be the one to ruin it with overthinking.

Not yet, anyway.

His phone beeped again and he looked at it, the glow of the screen harsh in the darkness, but when he read the message, his mind sharpened instantly.

Access established. Decryption underway.

Swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, he sat up, the hum of his cybernetic leg engaging as he stood. The workshop. He needed to get there now. With a flash of golden light, he reappeared in his domain, surrounded by the hum of his machines and the faint, acrid scent of molten metal and circuitry.

His gaze shot to the largest screen on the far wall, where the notification played out in real time. Streams of code, complex diagrams, and system layers unraveled before his eyes. This was what he'd been waiting for—the breakthrough he needed to crack the app and figure out what Eros had done.

A wave of pride surged through him. Aphrodite's magic had worked perfectly, slipping past the app's defenses, and giving him the opening he needed. Her power had always been awe-inspiring, even in its subtler forms, and he couldn't help but admire how effortlessly she wielded it.

He should call to let her know it worked but thought it was best to let her sleep. He'd tell her when he had more concrete answers—when he could offer something more than just progress.

For now, he buried himself in the work, letting the screens and the code take all of his focus. Anything to keep his thoughts from drifting to the goddess of love.

But, of course, that was a stupid goal.

He leaned back, staring at the cascading streams of data on the screens, but his mind wasn't on the app. It drifted, unbidden, to last night.

For years, he had kept what he felt for her buried beneath layers of resentment and careful detachment. But the walls had come down. It wasn't just the intensity of the moment that stayed with him; it was how she had looked at him like he was more than just the god of the forge, more than the shadow of their complicated past. It had felt like they could be something real.

He dragged a hand through his hair, hating how he felt. Frustration simmered beneath the surface, mixing with something deeper—fear, maybe? Why did he feel this way? Why did doubt cling to him after something so perfect? They should've talked last night and laid everything bare while the moment still held its clarity. Now, it was like standing on the edge of a crumbling cliff, the ground unsteady beneath him, unsure if they would fall together or find something solid to stand on.

He leaned against the workbench, absentmindedly fiddling with a small gear in his hand. His mind wandered back to Thessaly, to a time when life had been simpler but no less challenging. Back then, he and Aphrodite had been consumed with raising Eros, trying to give the boy a sense of stability despite the stormy circumstances of his early years.

The boy had been an unexpected variable. He was small, quiet, and watchful—an odd juxtaposition of cherubic innocence and the untapped potential of a godling. At first, Eros kept his distance, observing Hephaestus from the shadows of doorways or the far edges of the workshop. Hephaestus noticed but said nothing as he had no intention of forcing a bond.

One afternoon, while Hephaestus was bent over a drafting table sketching ideas for a new prosthetic leg, he heard the soft patter of small footsteps. He didn't look up, allowing the boy his space.

But this time, Eros didn't stop at the threshold. He walked up to the table, his big, curious eyes fixed on the design. "What's that?"

Hephaestus glanced up, surprised. “This?” He gestured to the blueprint. “It’s a prosthetic leg. For me.”

Eros frowned and pointed to the prosthesis, which rested nearby on the bench, detached for maintenance. “That one’s not good?”

“It’s good. Very good, actually. It’s infused with magic, so it works well. But I’m working on something different now—one that doesn’t rely so much on magic, but on pure engineering.”

Eros’s brows furrowed as he considered this. “Why? Isn’t magic easier?”

“Sometimes,” Hephaestus admitted. “But not always better. Magic fades or falters. Engineering? It’s reliable. It’s something I can improve, piece by piece.”

Eros leaned closer, his fingers tracing the drawing. “Does it hurt?”

“No,” Hephaestus said gently, setting down his tools. “I was born this way. It’s not like someone who loses a limb in battle—it’s just how I’ve always been. The prosthetic is a way to make things easier, not to fix something broken.”

Eros’s gaze lingered on the leg before he looked up at Hephaestus. From that day on, Eros began to visit more often, his initial shyness giving way to cautious curiosity. He’d tinker with metal scraps, ask questions about tools, and even attempt to sketch his own ideas.

Hephaestus remembered the first time Eros showed interest in a bow and arrow. It had been after a hunting trip, one Hephaestus had reluctantly agreed to take him on, thinking it might help channel some of the boy’s endless energy.

“Do you think I can get a rabbit next time?” Eros had asked, his young face lit with

determination despite having missed every target that day.

“You almost got one,” Hephaestus had replied, crouching to Eros’s eye level. “It’s all about focus. If you can learn that, you’ll be unstoppable.”

Eros had grinned, the kind of unguarded, toothy smile that always caught Hephaestus off guard. It reminded him that despite everything, Eros was still a kid—a kid who had seen too much but somehow hadn’t lost his spark.

Hephaestus had thrown himself into crafting a bow suitable for a child, one that was durable but lightweight. Aphrodite, meanwhile, had focused on teaching Eros to handle his emotions. She’d sit with him for hours, her voice calm but firm.

“Your feelings aren’t bad, agóri mou ,” she’d told Eros during one of his tantrums. “But you have to learn how to steer them. Otherwise, they’ll steer you.”

Their parenting styles couldn’t have been more different—her warmth balancing his practicality—but it worked. Over time, they began to see the changes in Eros.

Hephaestus had found a tutor for the boy, a mortal archer with a reputation for patience. Under his guidance, Eros began to channel not just his energy but his thoughts and emotions into his practice. He went from clumsy and frustrated to focused and determined.

One evening, as Hephaestus worked in the forge, Eros burst in, holding up a rabbit. “Look, Hephaestus! I did it!”

Hephaestus had turned, his heart swelling with pride despite himself. “You did. Nice work, son.”

Aphrodite had appeared in the doorway, her expression a mix of pride and relief.

She'd ruffled Eros's hair, her eyes meeting Hephaestus's for a brief moment. There had been something unspoken in that look—a rare moment of shared understanding between them.

As time passed, Eros improved with his aim, focus, and temperament, but his moments of recklessness still shone through like cracks in a polished surface. Those were when Hephaestus and Aphrodite came together, rallying around him, and guiding him through his struggles with steady hands and gentle words.

Hephaestus remembered one particularly wild moment when Eros, frustrated with a lesson, had thrown his bow down and stormed off to the cliffs near their home. Aphrodite had been the one to find him, her calm voice breaking through his stony silence, while Hephaestus waited nearby, giving them space but ready to step in if needed. Moments like those showed how much they both cared for the boy—and, inadvertently, brought them closer together.

Raising Eros was how they truly got to know each other. Late into the nights, when the boy was finally sleeping, they'd sit together and talk. They discussed Eros's progress, his struggles, and what to do next. But as the months turned into years, their conversations drifted to other topics. They talked about their lives before Thessaly, their hopes, and even their frustrations.

Soon enough, there were unguarded moments between them. Aphrodite would laugh at something Hephaestus said, her laughter bright and unrestrained. He'd catch her glancing at him when she thought he wasn't looking. For Hephaestus, those moments felt like small treasures, even if they were fleeting.

But guilt always shadowed his heart. He couldn't forget that their marriage was an arrangement, not a choice. Aphrodite was tied to him because of Zeus, not because she wanted to be. He often found himself questioning her motives, especially when he caught her staring out toward the horizon as if searching for something—or

someone—beyond Thessaly.

Still, he couldn't help but marvel at her. Her beauty was undeniable, but it wasn't just that. It was her resilience, her determination to stay for Eros's sake, that left him in awe. Hephaestus knew her love for her son anchored her to their home and to him. And while it stung that her reasons weren't rooted in affection for him, he couldn't fault her for it. Eros was a handful, but he was also lovable in his own chaotic way.

They were an unusual family—bound together by circumstance, held together by mutual care for a boy who deserved better than what fate had given him. And though Hephaestus sometimes had felt like an outsider in his own home, he couldn't deny that they had created something fragile but real. It wasn't perfect, but it was theirs.

Those days felt like a lifetime ago. Yet, even now, he couldn't deny the strange, bittersweet comfort they brought him.

He shook his head. There was no time to dwell on the past—whatever his feelings, whatever the tangled mess between them, there were more pressing matters to focus on. Eros had unleashed something chaotic, and Aphrodite had trusted him to fix it. He would step up and do what he could.

He leaned forward and refocused on the lines of code scrolling across his monitor. Aphrodite's magic had done its job perfectly, opening the app's inner workings like a door left ajar. Her power never ceased to amaze him. Even when she wasn't in the room, she left her mark, as undeniable as the warmth of the sun.

His fingers moved deftly over the keyboard, lines of his own counter-code seamlessly integrating into the app's framework. He was close—so close he could almost taste victory.

But just as the final layer unraveled, a new window popped up, bold and unyielding:

“Biometric Authorization Required.”

“Ti sto kaló?” He groaned. “Of course,” he muttered, combing a hand through his dark hair.

The biometric requirement wasn’t surprising, but it was infuriating. Whoever designed this app had thought ahead. He tapped a few keys, bypassing some rudimentary blocks to pull up a profile on the app’s creator. The name Matt Anchises appeared, along with a few scattered details.

He frowned. Anchises...The name pinged in the back of his mind like a distant bell, but he couldn’t quite place it. Shrugging it off for the moment, he did a quick internet search, expecting to find an ego-inflated tech genius flaunting his success. What he found instead was a missing person report.

“Matthew Anchises, 34, tech entrepreneur and founder of the matchmaking app ‘Winged,’ has been reported missing. Authorities have no leads.”

“Damn it,” he swore under his breath. Missing. This was getting more complicated by the minute.

He tapped rapidly at his keyboard, switching gears to track Anchises’s properties, real estate holdings, last known locations, financial transactions—anything that could give him a lead. A map of the City appeared, with dots representing Anchises’s known properties. Most were high-end apartments or office spaces, but one stood out: an older, seemingly abandoned building in Brooklyn.

He stared at the screen. “This guy better be there,” he muttered.

For a moment, he considered calling Aphrodite. She’d want to know, and she was probably better at dealing with people. But she was still asleep, and he was just

following a hunch, so he thought it better to let her rest.

He got ready to leave and sent her a quick text: “Cracked the app. Found a lead.” He hit send, pocketed his phone, and made his way to the address tied to Matt Anchises.

The warehouse loomed like a forgotten relic of another era. Its rusted exterior was streaked with grime, and faded lettering on the side hinted at some long-defunct shipping company. Inside, the air was heavy with the scent of oil and damp wood. Shafts of light pierced through broken windows, illuminating floating dust motes. The cavernous space was filled with the echoes of his own movements—every step, every scuff of his boots against the concrete floor reverberated as though the building itself were alive. Empty pallets and rusted metal shelving lined the walls, and in one corner, a pile of debris suggested recent disuse. He moved cautiously, his sharp eyes scanning for any sign of life or activity. The place was barren, stripped of anything valuable.

He frowned and stopped near the center of the warehouse and pulled out his phone. The lack of clues gnawed at him, and he muttered under his breath, “Where the hell are you hiding?” He scrolled through his notes, trying to piece together the next step when his phone suddenly rang.

The loud, unexpected sound startled him, and he nearly dropped it. Without thinking, he answered the video call. “Aphrodite?” he said as her image filled the screen. His heart lurched involuntarily. Even through a pixelated video feed, she looked stunning, her curls framing a furious face.

“Where are you?” she demanded, her tone sharper than a knife.

He opened his mouth to reply, but before a single word left his lips, she materialized beside him in a burst of light and power. “What the—” he managed, stumbling back slightly in surprise.

Aphrodite didn't give him a chance to recover. "You're out here, poking around in some creepy abandoned building, and you didn't think to tell me? Do you even realize how dangerous this is? What if there's a trap? Or worse—what if Eros isn't involved, and...."

Her words came out in a torrent, her frustration and worry spilling over in waves. He knew this side of her well: a mix of righteous anger and fear she rarely showed anyone. But he also knew she could spiral if left unchecked.

And he was tired of standing by.

He stepped forward and grasped her by the arms, his touch firm but careful. She stopped mid-rant, startled by the sudden contact. Her eyes widened as his face moved closer.

Then he kissed her.

Her initial surprise melted into softness as she leaned into him, her hands tentatively gripping his shirt. The kiss was gentle, telling her without words that everything would be okay. His lips moved against hers with care, steady and deliberate, and when they pulled apart, the air between them seemed to hum, their foreheads gently touched, as they shared the quiet, intimate moment.

"If you'll let me talk," he said against her lips, "I can explain everything."

She blinked, then nodded, her breath shaky. "Okay," she whispered.

He pulled back, still holding her arms gently, "The app asked for the biometric information of Matt Anchises. He's the app's creator. This building is one of his properties. I thought maybe he'd be hiding out here—or at least left a clue."

“And?” she asked, glancing around. Her voice was steadier now, though her cheeks still held the faintest flush.

He shook his head. “It’s empty. But something feels off. Anchises is missing, and I have a bad feeling it’s not by choice.”

She crossed her arms, her brow furrowing. “So, you came here alone, hoping to stumble across answers?”

“I didn’t exactly plan to stumble,” he said with a wry smile. “I’m trying to keep this quiet, remember?”

She rolled her eyes but didn’t argue. “Next time, tell me.”

He nodded, his grip on her arms loosening. “Next time.”

They stood in the warehouse’s stillness a beat longer, and he could feel the tension between them easing. She stepped back from him, her arms crossed and her expression impatient. “So, what’s next?” she asked, her sharp gaze sweeping the empty space. “He’s obviously not here.”

“Anchises has a house in Newport. I was planning on going there next.”

With a small, confident smile, she reached out and grabbed his hand. “Let’s go.”

Before he could protest or question her, the familiar jolt of divine teleportation overtook him. The warehouse vanished, replaced by the opulent, windswept solitude of a mansion perched on a bluff.

He barely glanced at the mess as they stepped into the house. Papers and mail were scattered across the counter, dishes sat unwashed in the sink, and a chair was tipped

over in the corner. It didn't scream crime scene—it screamed chaos. He sighed, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Doesn't look like much of a fight,” he muttered, scanning the room. “More like he left in a hurry or didn't care to clean up.”

As he began methodically searching for clues, Aphrodite stood by the large windows. “Wow, that's a great view.”

He grunted, still focused on the mess. “Yeah, sure,” he said, distracted.

She wandered farther in, her steps slow and deliberate. “Hang on,” she said, heading to the sliding glass doors.

He watched as she slid them open and stepped out onto the deck, the sea breeze immediately tousling her hair. He followed her, the faint scent of saltwater and the rhythmic crash of the surf filling the air.

Out in the backyard, the view stretched wide—an endless expanse of ocean sparkling under the midday sun. Aphrodite leaned on the railing, her posture graceful, as if the breeze itself was part of her; her eyes surveyed the shore below. He noticed how her expression shifted, the faint furrow of her brow signaling that she'd spotted something, her lips pressing into a thoughtful line as she looked at the water.

“What is it?” he asked, stepping closer.

She held up a small and iridescent object that caught the sunlight, glinting like a shard of polished glass. “It's a scale,” she said with certainty. “A siren's scale.”

He frowned, taking in her words as his gaze shifted from the scale in her hand to the ocean beyond. “You're saying sirens took him?”

She straightened, nodding as she brushed back her windblown hair. “It makes sense. Sirens have a habit of getting involved in situations where they shouldn’t.”

He exhaled heavily, turning his attention back to the horizon. “Great. Now we’re dealing with unpredictable sea creatures. This just keeps getting better.”

“The sirens are in Sirenum Scopuli. If they took Anchises, that’s where we should go first.”

“Sirenum Scopuli? You mean the jagged death trap surrounded by monster waves and murderous singing?”

“Yes, that one. Unless you have a better idea?” She gave him a pointed glare.

“No, no better idea. Just a strong aversion to being drowned and lured to my doom.”

“Don’t be so dramatic. You’re with me. No one’s luring anyone anywhere.”

“Fine,” he muttered. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you if this turns into a disaster.”

She stepped closer, her expression softening slightly. “It won’t,” she said, her voice quieter now. “We’ll handle this.”

He nodded, her confidence grounding him despite his apprehension. He reached out his hand, and she took it without hesitation. They disappeared, reappearing moments later on the rocky shores of Sirenum Scopuli.

The roar of the water hit them immediately, a thunderous sound that reverberated through the air. The wind whipped around them, carrying the scent of salt and danger. The rugged cliffs loomed ahead, their dark surfaces slick with seawater.

He looked around, his gaze wary. “Well, this is cheerful.”

She ignored his comment, her eyes scanning the horizon. “The leader of the sirens is here somewhere. Let’s move.”

Reluctantly, he followed her toward the cliffs, the sound of the crashing waves echoing in his ears like a constant warning.

Before he could take a second step, a lilting voice floated on the breeze. “Visitors, how rare.”

A siren emerged, her golden hair shimmering even in the overcast light. Her sea-green eyes locked onto Hephaestus, and her smile was like the first warm rays of dawn. “And such a strong, handsome visitor,” she purred, stepping closer. “What brings you to our shores, oh mighty God of the Forge?”

Hephaestus blinked, feeling a strange pull in his chest as if the siren’s voice had sunk into his very bones. He opened his mouth to respond, but a sharp pain in his arm made him whirl around.

Aphrodite’s nails dug into his bicep, her grip like iron. Her face was the picture of annoyance, her jaw tight, her lips pursed, and her gaze piercing. “I’ll talk to the sirens.” Her voice dripped with venom.

The siren’s smile dimmed slightly, her eyes flicking to Aphrodite, then back to Hephaestus, as though sizing up the situation. “Of course,” she said smoothly, stepping back with a faintly apologetic tilt of her head. “We meant no offense.”

Aphrodite released her hold on Hephaestus, brushing past him without a backward glance. “Stay here,” she ordered over her shoulder, her tone making it clear that this was not a suggestion.

Hephaestus sighed, rubbing his arm where her nails had left faint crescents in his skin. This is going to be fun.

He watched her approach the siren with the kind of authority only Aphrodite could command. Her anger was as unrelenting as the thunderous roar around them, and even the siren seemed to hesitate.

“She’ll handle it,” Hephaestus murmured, half to reassure himself. But even as he said it, he felt a pang of unease.

Aphrodite demanded to see Melodia, their leader. The siren before her smiled. “Melodia does not meet with just anyone. Perhaps you should?—”

“Spare me,” Aphrodite snapped, sharp enough to cut through the siren’s enchantment. “Your weak excuse for power doesn’t work on me. Tell Melodia to come here. Now.”

The siren blinked, her confident smile wavering. Before she could respond, a smooth, resonant voice echoed from the shadows. “Aphrodite, to what do we owe the honor?”

The siren materialized near the jagged rocks, her silvery hair shimmering under the muted light filtering through the stormy sky. She tilted her head with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

Aphrodite wasted no time. “Melodia, I don’t have the patience for games today,” she snapped, holding up the green scale between her fingers. “I found this at Matt Anchises’s home. Tell me where he is.”

Melodia’s eyes flicked to the scale, her expression unreadable. “And if I don’t?” she asked, her tone carrying a mock sweetness.

“Then I’ll make sure you regret wasting my time.”

Melodia’s smirk faltered for just a moment before she regained her composure. “You’ve always had such fire,” she mused. “Fine. If you want your answers, you’ll have to solve this.”

She straightened, her haunting eyes gleaming as she began to speak in a rhythmic tone:

“In a place where the land kisses the sea,

Where the sun once set on your family,

The truth is buried, a tangled plea,

Look to the shadows where memories flee.”

Hephaestus frowned, glancing at Aphrodite. “A riddle? Really?”

Aphrodite rolled her eyes. “You sirens love your theatrics,” she said, exasperated.

Melodia chuckled, her laughter echoing eerily off the cliffs. “Consider it a parting gift,” she said, slipping back into the shadows as if she had never been there.

Aphrodite stared after her, the tension in her shoulders obvious. “Thessaly,” she murmured. Her gaze met his. “Looks like we’re going back to where it all started.”

“Great,” he muttered, running a hand down his face. “Because nothing screams fun like revisiting the past.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:33 am

Chapter 8

Aphrodite

Aphrodite let go of Hephaestus's hand and strode toward the house, her sandals crunching the gravel path. The old structure loomed before them, its whitewashed walls and terracotta roof as pristine as the day they'd left. The enchantment she had cast had held up well, preserving the home's outer charm against the passage of time.

"Well, let's see what we've got here," she said.

Hephaestus followed her, his pace slower, eyes scanning the area. "It looks the same."

"I placed an enchantment on it before we left," she replied, tucking a strand of hair away from her face. "You haven't been back?"

He shook his head. "Have you?"

She hesitated. It was such a simple question, yet it made her heart feel heavy. "No," she admitted. "There's been...no reason."

An emotion flickered across Hephaestus's face—something between nostalgia and regret—but it was gone before she could name it. The sight of it made her stomach twist in a way she didn't like, so she pushed the feeling aside.

"Let's go," she said, heading toward the front door.

“Wait,” he said, grabbing her arm. “We don’t know what’s waiting for us.”

She arched an eyebrow at him, her patience wearing thin. “Oh, please. Only the three of us knew about this place. We’re fine.”

His grip tightened briefly. “I’m serious, Aphrodite. Anchises’s disappearance isn’t some random accident. If someone’s using him, they might know about this place too.”

“And if they do, we’ll handle it,” she shot back, shrugging off his hand. She stepped up to the door and placed her palm on the smooth wood. The enchantment she’d cast all those years ago hummed faintly beneath her touch, recognizing her magic. With a soft click, the door unlocked and swung inward.

The air inside was cool and still, carrying the faint scent of aged wood and wild thyme. She stepped inside, her heels echoing lightly on the tiled floor. She glanced around the open floor concept, taking in the familiar surroundings: the simple furniture, the shelves lined with scrolls and small keepsakes. It was like stepping back in time.

He followed her in, his broad frame filling the doorway as he paused to look around. His gaze lingered on the low worktable near the hearth, where Eros had spent hours fletching arrows under his watchful eye. Her eyes followed his, and for a moment, neither of them spoke.

“It’s like he’s still here,” he said quietly, breaking the silence.

She nodded, her throat tight. “Yeah. It is.”

She turned away abruptly, unwilling to dwell on the memories tugging at her heart. “We need to focus,” she said, her voice sharper than she intended. “If there’s

anything here that can tell us why the sirens sent us here, we need to find it.”

He gave her a long look but didn’t argue. “I’ll check the workshop,” he said finally, disappearing through a doorway at the back of the room.

She watched him go, then let out a slow breath. She tried to steady the flutter of emotions swirling inside her. The kiss earlier had been nice, better than nice, really. And last night had been incredible, the kind of connection that left her both exhilarated and vulnerable.

But as much as she cherished those moments, a knot of uncertainty tightened in her chest. They still hadn’t talked about what they were, about what any of this meant. Why was it so hard for them to just say the words? They had shared so much laughter, arguments, and history, yet when it came to defining their place in each other’s lives, the words seemed to fail them. Was it fear? Pride? Or were they both just too stubborn to risk putting their feelings out in the open? Whatever it was, the silence between them was starting to feel like a wall, and she wasn’t sure how to tear it down.

She moved to the small desk near the window, her fingers sweeping over the scattered papers and trinkets left untouched. She picked up a tiny wooden carving—a rudimentary attempt at a rabbit that Eros had made during one of their rare quiet afternoons. Her heart clenched, and she set it down carefully as if it might break under her touch.

Outside, the waves crashed on the distant cliffs, their rhythm steady and unchanging. The sound was both comforting and unsettling, a reminder that while the world moved on, some places—some memories—remained frozen in time.

Then the memory hit Aphrodite like the scent of a flower from long ago—sharp, vivid, and inescapable. She had been standing on Olympus’s gilded steps, the air

electric with anticipation. The Golden Apple ceremony was about to begin, and Eros was fidgeting, his wings fluttering erratically as he adjusted his ceremonial toga.

“You’re going to do great,” Hephaestus said, placing a large, steady hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Remember, it’s not about showing off. Be yourself. The gods aren’t looking for perfection—they’re looking for heart, and you have more of that than anyone I know.”

Eros threw his arms around Hephaestus in a quick, tight hug. “Thanks, Heph. I’ll make you proud, I promise!”

“You already do,” Hephaestus replied.

She had turned away from the tender moment, her chest tight with emotions she couldn’t name. That was when she noticed Zeus standing a few steps away, his piercing gaze fixed on her. He tilted his head slightly, motioning for her to come closer. She hesitated, then smoothed her toga and approached him.

“Aphrodite,” Zeus began, “I still need your help.”

Her stomach twisted. “What now?” she asked warily.

“The mortal princess in Crete. She’s so beautiful, young, perfect for me. But she’s proving...resistant to my charms.”

She blinked, her lips parting in disbelief. “You’re joking.”

“Do I look like I’m joking? You will ensure she feels drawn to me. A nudge, a suggestion—whatever you need to do to get her in line.”

She balked, crossing her arms. “I’m the goddess of love, Zeus, not a matchmaker for

your conquests. This isn't what I do."

"You'll do it," he said, his eyes narrowing.

Aphrodite's jaw clenched, her teeth grinding in frustration. She hated this, hated being complicit in Zeus's endless trail of broken hearts. She hoped Hera wouldn't find out about her part in this one. But she knew better than to defy him outright. Still, if she had to do this, she was going to demand something in return.

"Fine," she said, her voice cold. "But I want something, too."

His brow arched in surprise. "You? Asking me for a favor? That's rare. What do you want?"

"A divorce," she said firmly. "From Hephaestus. Grant it, no strings attached."

Zeus barely blinked. "Done."

The casual dismissal made her chest ache. He didn't even hesitate. But as she turned away, she told herself it was for the best. She had hoped—fervently, desperately—that Hephaestus would find someone he truly loved, someone who wasn't tied to him by Zeus's decree.

When she returned to Hephaestus and Eros, the boy was laughing, his nerves forgotten under Hephaestus's steady presence. She plastered on a smile, pretending she hadn't just shattered what little thread of connection they still shared.

She'd told herself it was for him. But even now, the memory left her hollow.

"What are we looking for?" Hephaestus's voice called from the other room bringing her back to the present.

“Anything that doesn’t belong,” she replied. Whatever answers this place held, they wouldn’t find them by dwelling on the past.

Aphrodite decided to go outside, but when she reached for the door, it wouldn’t budge. She frowned, pulling harder. Still nothing. “What the...”

She tried using her magic, willing the knob to turn. A golden glow spread over her hand and the door, but it remained stubbornly closed. Her frustration grew, and with a snap of her fingers, she unleashed a blast of energy meant to force the door open.

Instead, the explosion sent her flying backward, and she landed unceremoniously on her ass across the room. The impact jarred her, leaving her momentarily dazed.

The sound of heavy footsteps echoed through the house, and Hephaestus appeared, his face etched with worry. “Aphrodite!” he exclaimed, rushing to her side. He knelt before her, his hands moving over her shoulders and arms as he frantically checked for injuries.

She blinked at him. “I’m okay,” she said finally, her voice soft. “Really, I’m fine.”

He released a shaky breath, his forehead creasing. “What happened?” he asked, his hands gripped her arms.

She sat up straighter, mentally brushing off the remnants of her embarrassment. “The door,” she said, gesturing toward it with a sigh. “It wouldn’t open, so I...tried to persuade it.”

“By blasting it?” he asked, one eyebrow arching in that infuriating way of his.

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” she replied, crossing her arms defensively.

They stayed like that for a beat too long, his hands lingering on her arms, his eyes searching hers as if needing confirmation. Then she caught a whiff of his cologne—earthy and warm, with a faint metallic edge. It tugged at something deep within her.

Her gaze dipped to his lips before she caught herself, and she quickly straightened, clearing her throat. “If you’re not going to help me up, then let go of me.”

He flushed, his ears turning a telltale shade of red. “Right. Sorry,” he muttered. He stood and pulled her up with him. But instead of stepping back, they found themselves chest to chest, her hands pressed lightly on his shoulders, and his arms around her.

They froze, and Hephaestus’s eyes widened slightly, his breath catching, and she swore she saw a flicker of something—hesitation? Desire?—before he broke the moment, stepping back abruptly.

“Uh, sorry,” he said again, rubbing the back of his neck.

She took a steadying breath, smoothing her dress as though it might erase the electricity that had passed between them. “It’s fine,” she said, forcing her voice to be breezy, though her heart was still racing. “Let’s just figure out what’s going on with this house.”

He cleared his throat. “Right, let’s see about this door.” He stepped forward and gripped the knob, his strength and confidence making it seem like the lock would snap under his hand. But the door didn’t budge. He frowned, trying again with more force.

She let out a smug laugh. “Having trouble?” she taunted, crossing her arms.

He turned to glare at her, but his sudden movement brought them face-to-face—too close for comfort. She instinctively leaned back, her breath catching as she stared directly into his eyes.

“Well,” she said quickly, trying to defuse the moment, “you know what they say—brains over brawn. Maybe you should try a gentler touch.”

He frowned, stepping back as much as the space allowed. “This isn’t the time for games,” he muttered, turning away from her.

“Games? Me? Never.”

He ignored her, striding toward the nearest window. But when he tried to open it, the glass wouldn’t budge. He furrowed his brow, tugging harder. Still nothing. “What the—” He jiggled the frame again before moving to another window with the same result.

She straightened, her teasing demeanor fading as she took a cautious step toward him. “You’re kidding.”

After trying the door to his workshop, he turned back to her, his expression serious now. “I’m not.”

She walked over to the nearest window and tried herself, adding a touch of magic for good measure. Nothing. The room was sealed tight, and her earlier confidence began to waver.

They exchanged a glance. “It’s like the house doesn’t want us to leave,” he said quietly.

She nodded, her unease growing. “Or something doesn’t want us to leave.”

All of a sudden, a loud pop echoed through the room, and both Aphrodite and Hephaestus jumped. They turned toward the kitchen to find groceries neatly arranged on the counter, accompanied by a piece of paper that hovered above them before gently floating down.

She reached out and snatched the paper mid-air, her brow furrowing as she scanned the handwriting.

“What is it?” he asked, stepping closer.

She held up the note, tilting it toward him. “It’s a recipe. Looks like we’re supposed to make dinner.”

He blinked at her, then at the ingredients. “What?”

She turned the paper over, looking for some kind of explanation, but there was none. She gestured at the groceries. “You heard me. I think this house—or whatever magic is at play—wants us to cook.”

He moved beside her to get a better look at the recipe, his closeness forcing her to hold her breath. He smelled like metal and earth, a scent that always made her feel strangely grounded. But now, it also made her want to kiss him.

He sighed, his broad shoulders rising and falling. “Well, I guess we’re making dinner.”

She huffed a laugh, rolling her eyes. “Better than starving, I suppose.”

They set to work, unpacking the groceries, and laying everything out. Hephaestus busied himself chopping vegetables, his precision and strength turning the task into a smooth, rhythmic process. She mixed spices, tasting as she went and occasionally

making small, teasing comments about his overly methodical approach.

“Are you always this serious in the kitchen?” she asked, leaning over to steal a slice of carrot.

He smirked, his focus never leaving the knife. “Somebody has to keep things from burning down.”

“Funny, I don’t remember any fires when we lived here,” she said lightly, stirring the pot on the stove.

The words hung in the air, and Aphrodite stilled, the memories creeping back. Those quieter days in this house—days when they’d stood side by side in this very kitchen, raising Eros and navigating the chaos of their unconventional family—felt like a lifetime ago.

Hephaestus must have felt it, too, because his movements slowed. “It’s been a while,” he murmured.

“Yeah,” she said softly, her gaze fixed on the pot.

They worked in companionable silence, the familiarity of the moment settling over them. Every now and then, their hands would touch as they reached for the same utensil or ingredient, and each time, Aphrodite felt her pulse quicken.

By the time the cooking was finished, she glanced at him as they plated the food, catching a flicker of warmth in his expression that made her chest tighten. “I guess we still make a good team.”

He looked at her, the corner of his mouth lifting into a small, genuine smile. “Yeah. We do.”

Dinner had been unexpectedly delightful. The food was excellent, the wine rich and smooth, and the initial tension between them began to dissolve as the conversation turned light and easy. She found herself smiling more than she had in days, and even Hephaestus seemed more at ease, his laughter coming more freely than usual.

As they finished the last sips of wine, a strange sensation jolted through her chair. Before she could react, she was pushed to her feet. “What is—” she started, but her words trailed off as a soft melody began to play.

She looked over at Hephaestus, who was already on his feet, his chair nudging him forward like an impatient child.

Their eyes met, and she raised a brow. “Is this house serious?”

He chuckled. “Seems like it.” His gaze softened, and a rare, playful grin spread across his face. “So, do you want to dance?”

She blinked, momentarily thrown off by how different he seemed. He looked...relaxed, lighter than she'd seen him in ages. Something about it tugged at her. Without thinking too much, she slipped her hand into his. “Alright, let's dance.”

He held her close, one hand resting on her waist as the other held hers. The dinner table vanished, replaced by a soft glow of candles that lined the walls, casting flickering shadows.

She glanced around and let out a huff of mock indignation. “Damn, I wanted a bit more of the food.”

Hephaestus grinned, a sparkle of amusement lighting his eyes. “Yeah, it was pretty good.”

She laughed softly, shaking her head. “This house is way too dramatic for its own good.”

“Maybe it knows something we don’t,” he murmured, his gaze dipping to meet hers.

They moved slowly, swaying to the gentle rhythm of the music. She let herself relax, her head resting lightly on his shoulder as they turned in small circles. The flicker of candlelight painted warmth across his features, and she felt an odd sense of comfort and nostalgia as if they’d done this a hundred times before.

She looked up at him, catching the way the warm candlelight softened his features. “What do you think is happening here?”

He glanced around, his lips quirking into a faint smile. “I wish I could tell you. But since we’re stuck in this room, it’s not like we can search the house for clues. Whatever this is, it wants us right here.”

“You’re taking this surprisingly well,” she tilted her head, studying him. “No frustration? No attempts to tear the place apart?”

He chuckled, the sound low and rich. “Would it help if I said I’m used to unpredictability? Besides, it’s not so bad.”

“Not so bad?” she echoed, one brow arching in mock disbelief.

Hephaestus’s hand on her waist tightened slightly, a grin tugging at his lips. “I mean, good music, candles, dancing...could be worse.”

She felt her heart skip a beat, and she cursed herself for the warmth creeping up her neck. She rolled her eyes, trying to cover her reaction. “You’re ridiculous.”

His grin widened. “Maybe. But you’re still here, dancing with me.”

She opened her mouth to respond but was momentarily at a loss. The music swelled around them, and after a beat, she looked at him again. “Do you think this is connected to why the sirens sent us here?”

He hesitated, his expression turning more serious. “I don’t know. But if the house wanted us to focus on something else, it’s doing a good job of it.”

She let out a quiet laugh, shaking her head. “We can’t just stay here and?—”

“And what?” He cut in gently, his gaze steady on hers. “Sometimes, the only way forward is to stop fighting and just let things happen.”

She stared at him for a long moment. The idea of letting go felt foreign, almost impossible—but she had to admit standing there, swaying to the music, with his steady presence grounding her, it didn’t feel so bad.

“Fine,” she said at last and waited until he looked at her. “But if this house starts throwing more surprises at us, don’t expect me to handle it quietly.”

Hephaestus’s laugh was warm, the kind that made her heart ache with something unnameable. “Wouldn’t expect anything less.”

And so, they danced, the unspoken questions lingering between them, their steps guided by the unseen hand of the house, as if it, too, was waiting for them to figure out what came next.

The first rays of morning filtered through the windows, the faint light bouncing off the walls of their enchanted room. Aphrodite lay on the oversized bed the house had produced after their impromptu dance the night before, her back firmly turned toward

Hephaestus. Her body was stiff, her mind wrestling with the overwhelming sensations crashing into her like waves.

Even with the block she had cast, she could still feel the mortals' prayers this morning—a relentless deluge of gratitude and devotion. They prickled under her skin, buzzing in her ears, a persistent reminder of her divine nature and the cost of it.

A sharp pulse of pain rippled through her, and she clenched her teeth to keep a whimper from escaping. She couldn't let Hephaestus know. She needed to deal with this herself.

Her thoughts scrambled for distraction, replaying the events of the night before. The dancing, the laughter, the easy warmth that had somehow seeped into the cracks between them—it was unlike anything they'd had in a long time, maybe even ever. And now, here they were, sharing a bed, albeit separated by the space she'd intentionally kept between them. She didn't want a repeat of the other night. She couldn't stand the awkwardness after, especially now that it seemed like they had managed to get past it.

Another wave of pain struck, and this time, a small, involuntary whimper escaped her lips.

“Aphrodite?” His voice was low, tinged with concern, and she cursed under her breath.

She squeezed her eyes shut, hoping he'd let it go, but the bed shifted as he moved closer. A warm hand gently touched her shoulder, his touch both grounding and inescapable.

“What's wrong?” he asked, softer now, closer.

“It’s nothing,” she said quickly.

“It’s not nothing. Tell me what’s going on.”

She turned her head into her pillow, her jaw tightening. “It’s just...the prayers. They’re stronger than usual this morning. It’s not a big deal.”

“Stronger? I thought you blocked them.”

“I did. But it’s not enough.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

She hesitated, caught off guard by the sincerity in his tone. For a moment, she considered brushing him off again, but the weight of the prayers and the pain made her pause. “Just...stay here,” she said finally. “It helps. Somehow.”

He moved closer, his hand rubbing her back, “Is this okay?”

“Yes,” she nodded, leaning into it.

The pain didn’t vanish, but it ebbed, dulled by the strange comfort of his company. And for a while, they lay in silence, the tension of the morning giving way to an unspoken truce between her and the mortals’ prayers.

“Lucky you,” she quipped. “You don’t have mortals overwhelming you every second, begging for their soulmate or cursing their ex. Love’s the one thing they always want, so my work hasn’t stopped, not even for a breath.”

“I can’t imagine it ever would. Love’s a constant. For better or worse.”

“When’s the last time you remember getting a prayer?”

He was quiet as if trying to recall. “It’s been a while,” he admitted. “They come at random, usually when I’m in the middle of a project. Honestly, most of the time, they’re just a blip on my radar.” He paused, then added thoughtfully, “But if I really think about it, they haven’t stopped entirely. Manufacturing’s a big deal for mortals these days, so prayers come in now and then. Though a lot of them are sad. Mostly asking for help. But sometimes they’re thankful.”

“That’s all they pray for?” The prayers she was blocking felt distant, so she could finally breathe, but she found herself wanting to talk more with him.

He snickered. “Not always. Whenever there’s a volcanic eruption, I hear mortals praying to me.”

“What could possibly be amusing about that?”

“One time, someone prayed for me to ‘please stop being angry’ and promised they’d never skip church again. Another time, a farmer in Santorini swore he’d name his first goat after me if I calmed the mountain.”

She burst out laughing, her shoulders shaking. “A goat? That’s the bribe they thought would work?”

“I think I got an offer for a pizza oven once, too.”

She wiped a tear from the corner of her eye, still laughing. “That’s rich. You’re the god of fire and forge, and they think you’d settle for a goat and a pizza oven.” She giggled again, her mood lighter since she woke up.

Things were good between them now, better than they’d been in centuries, but there

was still a restlessness inside her, a lingering unease that she couldn't quite shake. She took a breath and decided to just go for it.

"Um, so, about the other night," she began, "did you like what happened?"

"Are you serious?" he scoffed. "Judging by how hard we both came, I think it's safe to say we had a great time."

She laughed nervously and was glad she wasn't facing him because she didn't think she'd have the nerve to talk about what happened with them. "Okay, fair. But..." She bit her lip, debating if she should continue.

Then, with a shrug, she decided to plunge ahead. "It's just, you know how love is my thing, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, part of love is intimacy and sex. It's how people connect, how they bond, and how they...feel better about things. So, if I'm feeling out of sorts, one way we could fix that is by having sex."

"So now you're 'love-splaining' to me?"

"Damn right," she shot back without missing a beat. "I'm an expert, and it's one area I know more about than you. So, I'm going to flex, thank you very much."

His laughter was warm and genuine, rolling through the room and filling the space between them. Her unease began to melt away, and she felt all warm inside, basking in the sound of his laugh and the easy way they fit together now.

She sighed deeply, drawing his arm around her until he was flush on her back. His

solid warmth pressed against her, the soothing cadence of his breath on her spine.

“Aphrodite,” he said with an edge of tension that made her pulse quicken.

“I need this,” she murmured, her fingers tightening around his hand as if she could anchor herself in his presence.

“This isn’t a good idea.”

She tilted her head slightly, a playful smile curving her lips despite the vulnerability she felt. “I’ve never had to work this hard to get a man, you know.”

He didn’t respond immediately, and she thought she’d pushed too far, scared him off. Her chest tightened, regret starting to creep in.

But then, his other hand moved, gently brushing her hair aside. The touch was light, almost hesitant, as if he were testing a boundary neither of them had acknowledged until now. His breath was warm on her neck, sending a shiver down her spine that she couldn’t suppress.

“Careful,” he said softly, low and rough, like gravel smoothed by fire.

She swallowed hard, her teasing facade crumbling under the intensity of his nearness. “Or what?” she asked, her voice barely more than a whisper.

He didn’t answer, but the air between them felt charged, as if the unspoken words were too heavy to voice. Instead, he stayed there, his presence overwhelming in a way that left her breathless, her body humming with an anticipation she couldn’t deny.

“Careful?” she repeated, tilting her head at him. “Why should we be careful?”

“Because this...us, whatever we’re doing—it’s not just casual. Not for me.”

She blinked, surprised by his honesty. “It’s not casual for me either,” she admitted, her voice soft. “But we’ve been skirting around each other for millennia, Hephaestus. Why were we even doing that? What were we so afraid of?”

“History, expectations, the fact that we were thrown together by Zeus instead of choosing each other. Take your pick.”

She sighed, her fingers grasping his as she closed the small gap between them. “Okay, fine. That’s all true. But that was then, and this is now. Why can’t we just...enjoy each other? Why can’t we figure out what this is without overthinking it?”

“You’re really good at this whole ‘cutting through the noise’ thing, aren’t you?”

She smirked. “I’m literally the goddess of love, darling. It’s kind of my job.”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “Fair point.”

“And besides,” she continued, “I don’t want to waste any more time being afraid of what this could be. If it’s good, and it feels really good, why not let ourselves have it?”

“You make a compelling argument,” he said finally.

“Good,” she said. “Because I don’t plan on backing down.”

“Good,” he murmured, bringing her closer, this time with more certainty, more intention. Whatever this was, they were in it together now.

She felt his fingers run up her arm and peel the thin strap of her nightgown off her shoulder. His lips pressed softly on her shoulder. Then he spread featherlight kisses on her neck to the delicate spot beneath her ear. She exhaled a shaky breath, wanting so much more.

He nibbled on her ear. “You’re sure about this?” His breath sent sparks straight to her core, lighting her up.

“How many times do I have to tell you I want sex?” she managed to huff, though it was a little breathy to really come across as annoyed.

His laugh sent a ripple of goosebumps skimming across her skin. “So impatient.”

But before she could say something, he tugged at her nightgown. The silk pulled at her nipples but not giving her the friction she needed. His hands cupped her breasts, fingers circling over the aching buds before pinching them, causing her to whimper.

“Couldn’t believe I finally got to feel these in my hands. How long they tortured me,” he said into her shoulder.

She looked over at him, and he was staring at her breasts. His fingers were slowly working her, turning her insides to molten lava. “Well, how about you working in the forge shirtless, huh,” she said, squirming and feeling his hardening arousal. “All sweaty and hammering the metal into what you wanted.”

He chuckled. “Ah, that may have been intentional,” he said, kissing her shoulder. “I noticed you would come looking for Eros. Couldn’t help but put on a show.”

“What,” she laughed. “You tease.”

“Good to know it worked.”

“Ha! Yeah, it did,” she said, setting his hand between her legs.

He hissed as soon as his fingers felt the damp silk. He lightly tapped her clit and pressed on her folds until the fabric was slick and her thighs trembling. She sighed when he took his hand away, but then he waved his fingers, and her nightgown and panties slipped down her body. The silk caressed her skin, heightening the sensations already humming through her skin.

His hand was on her stomach, settling her back to his front, the curve of her ass brushing his hard cock, and this time he let out a groan. She smiled, finally getting a reaction from him.

“I think I need a show this time,” he said, gripping her thigh before hitching her leg up and out over his.

“Oh,” she whispered, seeing how completely exposed she was. “Is that what you need?” she said, trailing her fingers down his other arm. “I need you here,” she said, grasping his hand and slowly placing it between her thighs again.

She guided him to make slow circles on her clit while her other hand grasped her breast. Hephaestus’s grip on her thigh tightened, leaving no doubt that he liked what he saw.

“Keep this here,” he murmured before his knuckles grazed her folds. She ground on his hand, her soft moan urging him on.

“I’m glad...” she began but had to bite her lip. He was barely touching her, but it felt so good.

“Hmm?” he said, pressing a knuckle into her and spreading her slickness with deliberate softness.

“I’m glad this isn’t confusing, unlike everything else between us,” she said, looking at him.

He held her gaze and smiled. “This is perfect. We belong here, wrapped up in each other. We are right where we’re meant to be.”

Then he captured her lips, his lips meeting hers with a tenderness that carried both heat and devotion. He moved, and she felt his cock slot against her, each push and pull teasing her even more.

“Hephaestus,” she whined.

“I know.”

She moved, trying to notch him into her, but then he eased into her, and she leaned into him. He wrapped his arms around her and held her close while slowly moving. She felt every inch of him, and when he hit her inner wall just right, they both moaned.

Aphrodite thought he’d lose control, but he kept on with the slow fucking, each thrust hitting her right there and bringing her closer. She couldn’t quite put it into words, but everything felt undeniably right—the rugged warmth of his scent, the solid strength of his body, how he was filling her up—and she surrendered completely. Her muscles started to shake, her thighs tensed, and when he rolled her clit between his fingers, the pleasure started crashing over her.

Hephaestus’s strokes lost their smooth rhythm, and he jerked her onto him for a last plunge deep inside her. She felt his cock pulse inside her as her orgasm squeezed him. Their moans filled the air around them, and he held her tight to him until the last tremors left their bodies. She lay back, feeling his heartbeat as they tried to catch their breath.

She turned around and kissed him, slow and tender, before resting her head on his chest.

“Feeling better?” he teased.

“Yes, very much so,” she said, sitting up. Her fingers trailed lightly down his chest, tracing some faint scars, and then down to his leg. “When did you make this version of your cybernetic leg?”

“The past year or so,” he replied, watching her closely.

She tilted her head, her fingers gliding over the polished surface. “It still makes the same sound as the one you used back when we were together.”

“Yeah,” he said with a small shrug, “I like the sound. So, I still use a lot of metal, not plastic.”

“I like the sound too,” she admitted, her voice softer now. Her fingers lingered on the mechanism, reverent in their touch. “It’s one of those things that’s just you.”

She shifted, kneeling between his legs as he adjusted himself to sit back on the headboard. She looked at the god before her, wanting to explore him, to learn him, to wallow in him. A wicked smile spread across her lips as her hands traveled up his thighs. “Time to feel good.”

Hephaestus’s eyes gleamed with a hunger that she swore she could feel on her skin before he reached for her, drawing her into a kiss that was searing and demanding.

“I know what you like,” she whispered, her lips lingering above his. “We can do whatever you want.”

He leaned back slightly, his eyes locking with hers. “No.”

“No?” she asked, brow furrowed in confusion.

He shook his head. “No, I don’t want the goddess of love.”

She stilled, her breath catching. “Then what do you want?”

“I want Aphrodite.” He took her hand in his, his thumb tracing slow circles on her palm. “Se thélo.”

Her heart gave a strange lurch as he brought her hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to it. “The woman who is fiercely protective of those she cares for.” He kissed her hand again.

“The woman who fought the Titans.” He leaned in, pressing his lips to her shoulder.

“The woman who drives me absolutely crazy,” he said, his voice dropping into a low, teasing tone.

She laughed, the sound bubbling up before she could stop it.

He smiled, his gaze warm and unflinching. “The woman whose smile and laugh are what I want to see and hear for the rest of time.”

A surge of feeling filled her, and she kissed him before he could say anything more. The kiss was soft yet consuming, a meeting of passion and something deeper, something steady and enduring. Her lips moved with his as her head went fuzzy from the dizzying way he was kissing her. His hand cupped her cheek, his touch grounding her despite the rush of emotion within her.

When they finally parted, Aphrodite's breath came in shallow gasps, her forehead resting on his. "You have me," she whispered, her voice carrying the weight of her truth. "íme dikí sou."

Hephaestus's lips curved into a slow, satisfied smile. "Good," he said, smoothing a strand of hair from her face. "Then we should make the most of it. Can't risk getting kicked out of this bed just yet."

She laughed, the sound light and unrestrained. "I like the way you think."

Before he could respond, she leaned in and kissed him again, this time with a playful urgency that made him chuckle against her lips. His arms wrapped around her, holding her closer as if to say he wasn't letting go anytime soon.

Page 9

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Chapter 9

Aphrodite

A phrodite lay against Hephaestus, her cheek pressed to his chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat beneath her. Her body was still humming, a pleasant ache from the sheer number of times he had brought her over the edge.

She stretched lazily, a satisfied smile playing on her lips. “Well, it’s official. We really were idiots for not saying how we felt. Think of all the amazing sex we could’ve been having this whole time.”

Hephaestus let out a deep, rumbling laugh that made her grin wider. He tilted his head to look down at her, his fingers brushing along her arm. “You’re not wrong,” he said, amusement glinting in his eyes. “But in my defense, I thought you’d laugh in my face if I told you how I felt. And not the kind of laughing I enjoy hearing.”

She snorted and propped herself up on her elbow to look at him. “Me? Laugh at you?” She shook her head, her hair tumbling over her shoulder. “If anything, I thought you’d think I was being dramatic and ignore me.”

Hephaestus chuckled, his hand sliding up to cup her face. “We really were idiots, weren’t we?”

“The absolute worst,” she agreed with mock seriousness.

He kissed her forehead, lingering there for a moment. “But maybe we were just

waiting for the right time.”

She smirked. “You’re just saying that to sound deep.”

“Maybe,” he said, grinning back at her. “But if it means more mornings like this, I’ll say whatever you want.”

She laughed, pressing a kiss to his jawline before settling back on the pillows. “I wonder what this house has planned for breakfast.”

He sat up and ran a hand through his tousled hair. “I think this house knows what we need.” He glanced toward the kitchen, then back at her, his grin widening. “Breakfast is served.”

She raised an eyebrow, curious, but not quite ready to leave the warmth of their bed. He stood and offered her his hand, helping her up with an ease that made her heart flutter.

She snapped her fingers, and by the time they reached the table, they were dressed and ready to face whatever the house threw at them.

The table was already set with an array of food, making her mouth water. Fresh fruit, yogurt, cheesy tiropita, and a pitcher of nectar sparkled in the morning light.

“I guess the house knows how to set a mood,” she said, sitting down and picking up a piece of fruit.

Hephaestus laughed, pouring them both a drink. “Maybe it’s not so bad being stuck here after all.”

After finishing the surprisingly delicious breakfast that the house had provided, she

leaned back in her chair, savoring the last sip of her coffee. She glanced at Hephaestus, who was busy polishing off the plate of fresh fruit and felt an odd sense of ease. The tension that had crackled between them the day before seemed to have dissipated, replaced by something softer, more natural.

“Well,” she said, standing and brushing imaginary crumbs from her hands. “I suppose I’ll check the door again. Who knows? Maybe the house has decided we’ve suffered enough and unlocked it.”

“Good luck with that,” he said, but there was a faint smile tugging at the corner of his lips. “I wouldn’t mind suffering a little more.”

She waved him off, striding toward the door with determination. “You’ll see. Maybe it’s had a change of heart.”

But just as she reached for the handle, a sharp pop echoed through the room. She spun around to see a flash of golden light near the fireplace. When it faded, a large book bound in shimmering leather sat on the mantel, its cover gleaming faintly in the sunlight.

“What is—” she started, taking a cautious step toward it.

Hephaestus was already on his feet, his chair scraping on the floor. “Looks like the house has something else in store for us.”

She eyed the book suspiciously. “Of course it does.”

Hephaestus chuckled, stopping beside her. “You going to open it, or should I?”

She glanced at him, then back at the book. “Fine. But if it spits out anything weird, I’m blaming you.”

With that, she reached for the book, its surface warm under her fingertips. The moment she touched it, the cover flipped open on its own, and the pages began to turn rapidly, glowing faintly as they did. Finally, it settled on a blank page.

Then, in elegant script, words began to appear:

“To move forward, you must reflect on the past. Recall what was once shared and lost. Write your truth, and only then will the house release its hold on you.”

She crossed her arms. “Write our truth? What is this, divine couples therapy?”

Hephaestus smirked faintly. “Seems like the house thinks we need it.”

“Fantastic,” she rolled her eyes. “Nothing like being trapped in a house that doubles as a therapist.”

But as she turned to look at him, she caught the flicker of something in his expression—hesitation, maybe even vulnerability. It made her pause, her irritation softening slightly.

She sighed, picking up the quill that had appeared beside the book. “Fine. Let’s get this over with.”

But when she tried to write, the quill wouldn’t move. The book shimmered, and new words appeared:

“Only the truth will do.”

“Well, that’s annoying,” she muttered, tossing the quill to Hephaestus. “Your turn.”

He took the quill and hesitated. His hand hovered over the page before he began to

write. Slowly, the letters formed a sentence: “I liked our time here in Thessaly.”

She blinked, her breath catching. “You did?”

He looked at her, his expression unguarded for once. “Yeah. It wasn’t easy, raising Eros, but...it felt like we were building something real. Even if it wasn’t how either of us planned.”

She stepped closer, her fingers brushing the edge of the page. “I liked it too,” she admitted softly. “It was the closest I’ve ever felt to...home.”

Hephaestus looked surprised, but he didn’t say anything. Instead, he handed her the quill.

This time, the quill moved freely in her hand. She wrote: “I miss how you made me laugh.”

He stared at the words as they appeared on the page, and his lips curved into a small, genuine smile. “You miss that?”

She shrugged, trying to play it off, but her cheeks warmed. “You’re funny when you’re not trying so hard to be serious.”

He laughed—a low, warm sound that sent a shiver through her. “I didn’t know you paid that much attention.”

The quill floated out of her hand, hovering above the book as if inviting him to write again. He took it and added: “You never gave up on Eros, even when I thought it was impossible.”

Her heart squeezed. “He’s my son. I couldn’t give up on him. And neither did you.”

They continued, trading the quill back and forth, each revealing something they had kept hidden. Memories of Thessaly, of quiet nights by the fire, of laughter and arguments, of moments when they had felt closer than they dared to admit.

When the final truth was written— “I cared more than I ever let on,” —the book glowed brightly and vanished, leaving a warmth in the air.

Aphrodite looked at Hephaestus, her chest tight with emotions she wasn't ready to name. “So...what now?”

He stepped closer, his hand brushing hers. “Maybe we stop pretending we don't care,” he said softly.

She looked up at him, her gaze locking with his. “Maybe,” she whispered, her voice trembling just slightly.

Hephaestus cupped her cheek, his thumb gently brushing her skin.

And then, as if drawn together by an unseen force, their lips met—a kiss full of all the unspoken words and lingering feelings that had been buried for so long.

It started tentative, as though it was something too fragile to be named. But then it deepened, the restraint melting away under the weight of all they'd held back. Aphrodite slid her hand up to his neck, responding with a fervor that surprised even her. There was no room for pride, no room for their usual defenses—it was raw, honest, and overwhelming. The heat between them spoke of desire, but the way their lips moved together was something more. It was a connection, a silent confession of emotions too tangled to unravel.

When they finally broke apart, their foreheads rested together, their breaths mingling. She searched his eyes, her heart thundering, and she knew he felt it too—the weight

of what had just passed between them, the years of distance finally bridged in one moment of vulnerability.

She pulled him in for another kiss, her fingers threading through his hair, intent on savoring the moment. But before she could deepen it, the floor beneath them shifted with a sudden, smooth motion.

They broke apart, startled, as the house itself seemed to come alive again, its walls humming with an unseen force.

The floor guided them with gentle but insistent nudges toward the front door. “Hey—” Hephaestus muttered, stumbling slightly as he tried to regain his footing.

“Excuse me!” she said, glaring at the ceiling as if the house could see her indignation. “We’re not done here!”

But the house didn’t care. The front door swung open with a creak, a gust of fresh air rushing in to meet them. Before either of them could protest further, the floor gave one last push, and they were shoved out onto the porch.

The door slammed shut behind them with a definitive thud.

“How rude!” she exclaimed, spinning around to glare at the house. “What about Matt Anchises? Are we supposed to just figure this out on our own?”

Before Hephaestus could reply, there was another pop, the sound sharp and echoing in the stillness. They turned to see a small, glowing orb hovering in front of them. It pulsed with light before exploding into a shower of golden sparks.

From the sparks, a folded piece of parchment materialized and floated down to Aphrodite’s waiting hand.

She unfolded it quickly, “It’s a clue,” she frowned. She glanced at Hephaestus, holding it up for him to see. “Looks familiar, doesn’t it?”

Hephaestus studied the image, recognition flickering in his eyes. Without a word, he reached for her hand, gripping it tightly. “Let’s go.”

In a blink, they materialized inside Anchises’s Newport home. The air was still and heavy, the faint scent of the sea wafting through the open windows. Everything looked exactly the same—as it had the last time they were there—right down to the dusty furniture and the old grandfather clock ticking in the corner.

But this time, they could feel it: Anchises’s presence.

They exchanged a glance and made their way upstairs. The door to one of the bedrooms was slightly ajar, and Hephaestus pushed it open cautiously. There, slumped in a chair and tied up with rope, was Anchises—unconscious but breathing.

She gasped, rushing to his side. She knelt beside him, her hands hovering over his face as she checked for injuries. Relief washed over her when she saw that he was unharmed.

“We need to wake him,” Hephaestus said from behind her. “We’ll need to scan his eyes to unlock the program.”

She frowned, brushing a strand of hair from Anchises’s face. “I don’t want to traumatize him. Let me put a spell on him first.”

With a flick of her wrist, a soft golden glow enveloped Anchises, settling over him like a warm blanket and freeing him of the rope tied around him. “Alright,” she said, stepping back. “Wake him up.”

Hephaestus leaned down, giving Anchises a gentle shake. “Matt. Wake up.”

Anchises stirred, his head lolling to the side before his eyes fluttered open. He blinked blearily, his gaze unfocused. “Did someone leave the kettle on?” he mumbled groggily. “I swear I can hear it whistling. Oh wait—no, that’s my brain.”

She stifled a laugh. “Matt, it’s us. You’re safe.”

He squinted at her, then at Hephaestus. “Aphrodite? Hephaestus? Wait...am I in trouble? Did I miss a deadline? I knew I shouldn’t have ignored that reminder...”

“You’re fine,” Hephaestus said, stepping closer and holding up his laptop. “We need your help. Can you focus for a moment?”

Anchises looked at him, wide-eyed. “Focus? Oh, sure. I’m great at focusing. Except when I’m not. Did I dream about dancing sea cucumbers, or was that real?”

“Definitely a dream,” she said, biting back a grin. “Listen, Matt, we just need you to look at the camera on the laptop.”

“Laptop?” Anchises repeated, his expression suddenly suspicious. “Wait a minute. You’re not here to delete my browser history, are you?”

Hephaestus sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “No, Matt. Just look at the screen.”

Hephaestus’s laptop was already powered on; the program they needed waiting for input. After a few seconds of staring, there was a soft beep, and the screen displayed the words Access Granted .

“Whoa,” Anchises said, leaning back in his chair. “That’s fancy. Did I just unlock the

secrets of the universe? Or at least the location of my missing socks?”

“Something like that. Thank you, Matt,” she gave him a little pat on the head.

“Anytime,” Anchises said, his head bobbing before his eyes started to close again. “You guys wouldn’t happen to have coffee, would you? Maybe with a splash of ambrosia?”

Hephaestus shot her a look. “We’d better move fast before he starts asking for snacks.”

Aphrodite gently supported Anchises as he shuffled toward the bed, muttering nonsensical phrases under his breath. Once he was tucked in, she placed her hand lightly on his forehead. “A little spell to keep you out until morning,” she murmured, golden light shimmering from her fingertips. “Sweet dreams, Matt.”

When she returned downstairs, she found Hephaestus crouched over his laptop at the kitchen table, his face illuminated by the bluish glow of the screen. The television, mounted on the wall, was tuned to a news channel, the headlines scrolling across the bottom.

A news anchor was mid-report, “As the mysterious disappearance of Matt Anchises continues, the world remains at a standstill. Reports are coming in from around the globe of widespread disruptions. Productivity has plummeted as people focus on one thing: love.”

Aphrodite paused at the foot of the stairs, her eyes narrowing at the screen. “What’s going on?”

Hephaestus glanced up briefly, his expression grim. “Mortals are completely distracted. Look at this.”

The screen shifted to show a reporter standing outside a massive corporate headquarters. “In a shocking turn, Fortune 500 companies have reported record low attendance rates,” the reporter said, gesturing to the empty parking lot behind her. “Employees are calling in sick to plan weddings, declare their love, or go on spontaneous romantic getaways. Productivity losses are estimated to be in the billions.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Even the workaholics?”

Hephaestus nodded. “Even them.”

The screen cut to an airport terminal, now eerily quiet. The reporter continued, “In the travel sector, airlines are struggling to keep up with cancellations as passengers prioritize staying close to loved ones rather than embarking on business trips or summer vacations. The industry is facing unprecedented challenges.”

Finally, the broadcast showed an aerial view of New York City, the streets filled with couples in festive attire rather than the usual chaos of pedestrians and honking cars. “And in cities across the globe, government offices and courts are overwhelmed with marriage license applications. Some municipalities have declared emergency measures to handle the influx.”

She frowned. “You’re telling me the world is falling apart because people are...in love?”

Her eyes remained glued to the television as the news anchor described the chaos unfolding across the globe. Weddings in grocery stores, love-struck CEOs abandoning boardrooms for impromptu serenades, and entire schools closing as teachers and students alike chased their crushes.

A fresh wave of worry swept over her. She turned to Hephaestus, who was still

focused on his laptop. “This is too much of a disruption. We need to stop the fake love now. People aren’t living their lives—they’re obsessed. It’s unnatural.”

Hephaestus looked up, his brow furrowing in agreement. “I think I can shut down the app in an hour. It’s not complicated once I bypass Anchises’s security measures.”

She bit her lip, considering his words. “Could you...add something to the code? Like a filter that stops the fake love matches but lets the real ones continue?”

He blinked, as if surprised by the request, but his lips quirked in a small, knowing smile. “Of course I can. But for something like that to work, we’ll need your magic. Love magic. The kind that knows the difference between infatuation and the real deal.”

“You can’t do it on your own?” Her cheeks flushed, and she folded her arms, trying to mask her sudden embarrassment.

“Aphrodite, it’s your domain. Without you, I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“It’s just...love magic is personal. Intense,” she sighed. “I’m used to weaving it for mortals, not coding it into an app.”

“I know you can do it, just let your magic flow and do what feels right.”

She met his gaze, and for a moment, the room felt charged with the quiet tension of unspoken emotions. Finally, she nodded. “Okay. Let’s do it. For the mortals.”

Hephaestus smirked. “For the mortals.”

After Hephaestus was done working on the code, they sat side by side as he explained the app’s framework. When she was ready, she closed her eyes, summoning the

subtle shimmer of her magic, feeling the pulse of true love's essence within her.

She placed her hands gently over the keyboard, closing her eyes as she concentrated. A soft golden glow emanated from her fingertips, seeping into the laptop as her magic intertwined with the framework. She could feel the pulse of the code, its mechanical rhythm shifting and adjusting as her love magic found its way through.

Beside her, Hephaestus worked steadily, his fingers flying over the keys. She followed his lead, and bit by bit, she felt the balance form—the delicate line between real love and the artificial spark created by the app.

Her breath hitched as the sensation locked into place, a perfect equilibrium between the two. “There,” she whispered, soft but confident. “That’s it. The balance.”

“Got it.” With a final flourish of keystrokes, he leaned back, a triumphant grin spreading across his face. “Done.”

Aphrodite threw her arms around him. “We did it!”

Hephaestus laughed, and his arms wrapped around her, holding her close. “I think we make a pretty good team.”

She chuckled. “I guess we do.”

“We should get?—”

A soft fluttering of wings interrupted Hephaestus. Their gazes met as they both recognized the sound.

“Hello, Aphrodite,” Hermes, Messenger of the Gods, greeted as his winged leather sandals landed on the ground. “You are—Hephaestus.” The normally humorless

god's stupefied expression was almost comical as he stared at their entwined arms.

"Yes?" Hephaestus answered, refusing to let go of Aphrodite.

Clearing his throat, Hermes continued. "Aphrodite, you are being summoned back to Mount Olympus."

A sense of foreboding came over her as she disentangled herself from Hephaestus's embrace. "By whom?"

"By the other gods of the council."

"Why?"

"I don't know, I'm just the messenger," he replied. "Poseidon said you are to come back at once. They are all waiting for you."

Aphrodite glanced up at Hephaestus. "I should go and see what they want. Why don't you go back home?"

"No." He took her hand into his, giving it a squeeze. "I'm coming with you."

"You weren't summoned," she pointed out. "Right, Hermes? They just want to talk to me?"

"Yes, just you, Aphrodite." The messenger god narrowed his eyes at Hephaestus. "Besides, how long has it been since you showed up at a council meeting?"

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Doesn't mean I've lost my seat."

Hermes shrugged. "It doesn't matter to me, one way or another, as long as Aphrodite

shows up.”

“Alright.” The anxiety in her eased as Hephaestus squeezed her hand once more. “To Mount Olympus then.”

Chapter 10

Hephaestus

In a shimmer of light, Hephaestus transported them directly into the divine hall where the Council of Olympians met. A hush fell over the room as they materialized, and much like Hermes, several of the other gods appeared dumbstruck. Whether that was due to his appearance or his and Aphrodite's linked hands, he didn't know nor did he care. The only two gods who didn't appear surprised were Hades, whose expression said he'd rather be elsewhere, and Hestia who flashed him a sly grin.

"H-Hephaestus?" Poseidon stammered, before he cleared his throat to compose himself. "What are you doing here?"

"This is a council meeting, right?" he replied. "And I'm still part of this council, last I checked."

"But you haven't attended a meeting in forever," the god of the sea said. "And you were not summoned, Aphrodite was."

Hephaestus tamped down the urge to retrieve his anvil and slam it into Poseidon's face. How dare he 'summon' Aphrodite like she was some common servant, when they all held equal power on the council now that Zeus was no longer in charge? Perhaps this was a power play on Poseidon's part or maybe his way of showing his displeasure at anyone who had previously been Zeus's ally. It was no secret, after all, that the god of lightning had favored him, even though Hephaestus considered making all the weapons, armor, and chariots as doing his part in the war, rather than

being subservient to one particular god.

Well, whatever Poseidon's deal was, Hephaestus would not play his games.

"You, summon Aphrodite? Does she bow to your will? She is a member of the council, too, like all of you." He smiled at Aphrodite, who only stared at him, her mouth agape. "Come, love." Placing a hand on her lower back, he guided her to her seat and sat on the empty chair beside her.

Poseidon muttered something under his breath. "The meeting of the Council of Olympians will come to order." He paused. "Our main agenda today is the chaos currently reigning on earth. Human society is in disarray. If you haven't heard of what's happening, then I'm sure you all can feel something is not right."

"The levels of war and conflict are dwindling," Ares began. "All the current battles playing out on the Upperworld have ceased."

"And without war, there cannot be peace," Athena added. "Not to mention, productivity and innovation have slowed."

"Crops are dying, as there has been no one to harvest them," Demeter moaned. "How will the mortals feed themselves?"

"Home life has been interrupted," Hera said. "Couples who used to be happy under one roof have broken apart. And new families are forming at an alarmingly fast rate before proper bonds can be formed."

"Music and poetry are at an all-time high, though," Apollo quipped, which earned him an elbow from his mate, Geri, the new goddess of the hunt.

"I'm sure all of us have sensed the disruption in the order of the world and our

realms, and it all stems from one source.” He trained his gaze on Aphrodite. “Why are millions of mortals falling in love all of a sudden? Why are their emotions taking precedence over everything else, to the detriment of society? This is your realm and, therefore, your responsibility.”

Hephaestus’s stomach tied up into knots. Fuck. They’d been so busy running around—and wrapped up in each other—they hadn’t thought about how a worldwide disaster would catch the attention of the other gods.

Aphrodite remained calm as a millpond under Poseidon and the others’ scrutiny. “I am the goddess of love, of course I have noticed these things, and I do not take them lightly.” Her tone sounded like that of a mother scolding a child. “As you said, this is my realm. What do you think I have been doing these past few days? Sitting around, twiddling my thumbs? Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t ignore the problem.”

“And yet you haven’t told us anything?”

“Do you tell me of all the goings-on in your realm? When was the last time you brought up the melting of the polar ice caps during our meetings? Why haven’t we summoned Athena over the effects of the advancements during the Industrial Revolution or the more recent consequences of unfettered capitalism?”

“This is different and you know it,” Athena said, defensive.

Pride burst from Hephaestus’s chest at Aphrodite’s confidence and nerves of steel.

“And for your information, I have been working to find a solution, and with Hephaestus’s assistance. I assure you that the matter is resolved and everything is back to normal or will be in a few more days. Whatever is happening now are unintended consequences.”

“Unintended consequences?” Hera scoffed. “This is a disaster.”

“I’ll be working on rectifying as much as I can in the coming days, but you can’t possibly expect to solve everything at once, especially when I’m pulled away from my work for useless meetings like this.”

“This literally could have been an email,” Apollo added.

“So, what happened?” Poseidon asked. “Why were the mortals falling in love?”

Her lips thinned. “Do I ask you how you conduct your business, Poseidon? Just trust me that the matter has been dealt with. Can you not sense it?”

“Yes,” Hestia said. “I feel the order returning. It’s slow, but steady.”

“Did you cause this, then?” Poseidon said. “Were you neglectful in your duties? Distracted?”

Aphrodite snorted. “Do you think I wanted to cause this chaos? Do you remember what it was like back in the day, when the mortals prayed to us constantly? It’s like that for me, but ten—no—a hundredfold! I was nearly going insane with all the never-ending stream of prayers reaching my ears.”

“So, who was it then? Tell us,” Poseidon insisted. “So that the guilty party may be punished.”

Aphrodite’s confident mask slipped for a moment. “There is no need for punishment when all will be normal in a matter of days.”

“There is every need for punishment,” Poseidon retorted. “There is divine magic behind this incident, and it is obvious that someone—another god, likely—has

interfered with the order of things. As the Council of Olympians, everyone looks to us to set an example. If we let the culprit get away with this, then who is to stop others from doing the same thing next time. In the wake of recent events”—he looked meaningfully at Hades, who once again, had a bored expression on his face—“we must stand together and show the other divine and magical beings that such insolence will not be tolerated.” He rubbed at his chin. “Unless you would like to bear all responsibility.”

Hephaestus could no longer stay silent. “None of this is her fault. You can’t punish her.”

“And do you know the culprit, Hephaestus? Since you have been ‘assisting’ your ex-wife,” Athena asked. “As a member of the council, you have a duty to tell us.”

He opened his mouth to speak, but Aphrodite sent him a pleading glance. Instead, he slumped back in his seat and folded his arms.

Poseidon did not look pleased. “How about we put things to a vote? Aphrodite cannot vote on the matter regarding herself, so it must be up to the rest of us.”

While he wanted to protest, he knew that he could not. This was the rule of the council after all, the very same one that voted out Zeus.

Poseidon continued. “Aphrodite must put the culprit forward or she will be deemed responsible. All those in favor?” He raised his hand, as did Athena, Ares, Hermes, Hera, and Demeter. “Six to five votes, we have a decision.”

“It’s the wrong decision,” Hephaestus protested.

“Nevertheless, we abide by the rules of the Council of the Olympians,” Poseidon said smugly. “Aphrodite, you are ordered to produce the being responsible for all this.”

With a wave of his hand, a large sand clock appeared in the middle of the table, the golden grains flowing down from the upper bulb to the lower one in a steady stream. “You must do so before the timer runs out or face judgment by the council yourself. This meeting is concluded.” Poseidon stood up. “I hope you make the right decision, Aphrodite.” With that, he disappeared, as did the members of the council who voted with him.

Aphrodite’s silvery-blue eyes met his, wanting to say something, but obviously they couldn’t discuss this. Not here, anyway.

“Thank you for your support,” he said to the other remaining gods.

“It wasn’t enough, though,” Apollo sighed.

“I’m starting to hate that guy,” Geri muttered. “Why is he in charge again?”

“He’s not,” Hades said. “But until we figure out what to do with that”—he nodded at Zeus’s empty seat—“he’ll keep thinking he is.”

“A problem for another time,” Hestia said. “Aphrodite?—”

“I know,” she said. “Thank you for your support. You didn’t have to vote with me.”

“What will you do?” Geri asked.

Aphrodite glanced up at Hephaestus. “I need to think.”

“Of course.” He placed an arm around her, then turned to the others. “Thank you once more.”

“No prob.” The god of the sun wagged his eyebrows at them. “So are you guys

like?—”

Before he could finish, Hephaestus teleported them out of the divine hall.

Chapter 11

Hephaestus

Hephaestus's living room was comfortably cluttered, with shelves of tools and gadgets vying for space with books and artifacts from his workshop. Aphrodite's presence, though, transformed the room into something else entirely. She strode across the room with nervous energy, her hands moving restlessly as though trying to grasp at thoughts she couldn't quite form.

He sat in his chair by the window, watching her. He knew they had to talk. The burden of it pressed on him, heavy and insistent. She could feel it too—he could tell from the way her steps faltered slightly every time she glanced his way, only to look away again.

"You're wearing a groove into the floor," he said, hoping to coax her into stopping.

She paused mid-step, shooting him a glare over her shoulder. "And what else am I supposed to do, Hephaestus? The council wants blood for all the chaos with Winged, but it doesn't seem like they think it has anything to do with Eros."

"Aphrodite, you and I both know Eros's actions brought this on himself. The mayhem in the Upperworld didn't happen in a vacuum. It's tied to love, so it could be connected to either of you. You can't deny that."

Her shoulders stiffened, and she turned to face him fully, her chin lifted in defiance. "I'm not denying anything. But he's my son. I'm not going to just throw him to the

wolves.”

“No one’s asking you to,” he replied evenly, though his jaw tightened. “But he’s a god, Aphrodite. He needs to face the consequences of his actions. He’s not some mortal who can’t understand responsibility. He should understand it by now.”

“Do you think I don’t know that? I’m furious with him. Furious,” she crossed her arms, her fingers tapping against her elbow as if she were holding herself together. “You don’t understand. The council won’t treat him fairly given his track record. They’ll come down harder on him because of it.”

He moved to stand next to her. “Maybe they will. But you said it yourself—he has a track record. If he doesn’t learn now, when will he? The longer you shield him, the worse it’s going to get.”

Her gaze wavered, and he could see the conflict in her eyes. She was angry—at Eros, at the situation, maybe even at him. But beneath that was a mother’s love, fierce and unwavering. He understood that. He’d seen her defend Eros countless times, even when the boy had pushed her to her limits. It wasn’t a weakness. It was who she was.

“You think I haven’t considered every possible outcome? I have a feeling they’ll go easier on me than on him. I’m...Aphrodite. But Eros? He’s reckless, impulsive, and they’ll see this as just another one of his stunts.”

He sighed, reaching out to rest a hand on her shoulder. She flinched slightly but didn’t pull away. “Maybe they will. But protecting him now might cost him more in the future. If you let him take responsibility, it might be the only way he grows into the god he’s meant to be.”

She turned to face him, her silver-blue eyes blazing. He found himself rooted in place, unable to look away. Her fierceness was magnetic, but beneath it, he could see

something else—a vulnerability she kept carefully hidden.

“I’ll deal with the council,” she said firmly, her tone brooking no argument. “Eros doesn’t need to be dragged into this. I’ll take responsibility for what happened.”

“No. You’re not doing that, Aphrodite. This isn’t all on you. Eros made the mess; he should clean it up.”

Her gaze narrowed, and her hands went to her hips. “He’s my son. It’s my job to protect him.”

“And what happens when protecting him means you take the blame for something he did? Do you think the council will go easy on you just because of who you are? They won’t.”

She scoffed, throwing her hands up. “I can handle the council, Hephaestus. I’ve been dealing with their judgment for centuries. This is nothing new.”

“They’ll want to make an example of you,” he countered; the thought of her standing alone before the council made his chest tighten. “Love magic causing chaos in the Upperworld? They’ll see it as your failure to keep control.”

Her lips pressed into a thin line, and her voice was quiet but full of fire. “I won’t abandon my son.”

“And I won’t let you sacrifice yourself for him. We’ll face the council together. If they need someone to blame, I’ll take the fall.”

Her eyes widened in shock, and for a moment, she was silent. Then she shook her head. “Why would you do that? This isn’t your fight.”

“Because it is,” he said simply. “You think I’d stand by and watch you burn for something that isn’t entirely your fault? Not a chance.”

They stood there, the silence between them charged and heavy. Her eyes searched his, and she seemed at a loss for words.

“I don’t need a savior,” she finally said, almost a whisper.

“I’m not trying to save you. I’m trying to stand beside you. That’s what we’re supposed to do, isn’t it?”

Her lips parted, but no words came out. But then she folded her arms, her eyes gleaming with stubborn determination. “I’ve already decided, Hephaestus,” she said firmly. “I’ll handle this myself. The council won’t touch you or Eros.”

“You can’t just decide that,” he snapped as he tried to rein in his frustration. “You’re not the only one involved in this.”

Her eyebrows arched in a challenge. “Oh? And what exactly would you do? Stand there and let them throw the book at you? You know they’d love to blame this on you just for being near me when it all happened.”

“Better me than you,” he shot back. “The council already sees me as an outlier. What’s one more mark on my name compared to what they’d do to you?”

She gave a humorless laugh, shaking her head. “Do you hear yourself? You’d let them exile you or worse just to save me? That’s not noble, Hephaestus—it’s stupid.”

He snatched his hand back, his emotions bubbling to the surface. “And you think it’s any less reckless for you to try and take this on alone? You’re not invincible, Aphrodite. I know you like to think you are, but even you have limits.”

“I’m perfectly capable of handling the council.” Her eyes flashed. “I’ve been doing it without anyone’s help.”

“This isn’t just about handling the council!” he yelled, his voice ringing through the room. “It’s about us. About showing them we’re stronger together. If you go in there alone, they’ll think they can divide us. And you know what happens then—they’ll come after us, one by one, until there’s nothing left.”

She froze, his words clearly striking a nerve. But then her defiance returned. “I’m not dragging you into this. You’re not part of my mess.”

“I’m not asking for your permission to stand by you. I’m doing it because I care about you, and I’m not going to let you carry this alone.”

“You think this is some romantic gesture?” her expression flickered, the conflict in her eyes betraying her resolve. “That you throwing yourself into the fire is going to fix everything?”

“It’s not about romance. It’s about doing what’s right—for you, for Eros, for all of us.”

Her jaw tightened, and she took a step back. “I’ve handled worse things on my own.” Then she turned away from him.

“You don’t have to handle this alone!” he called after her; his voice was deep and gravelly, but it carried a rawness that cut through the space between them.

She turned sharply, her expression unreadable. “Maybe I do.”

Before he could respond, the air around her shimmered, and with a wave of her hand, she vanished in a burst of golden light. The faint scent of roses lingered in her wake,

leaving Hephaestus alone in the quiet room, staring at the space where she had stood just moments before.

His hands curled into fists at his sides, frustration simmering beneath his calm exterior. The golden light of her departure still lingered faintly, mocking him with its finality.

He ran a hand through his hair, exhaling sharply. “Great,” he muttered, pacing the length of the room. “Just fucking great.”

They’d always danced around their problems, sidestepping every difficult conversation like it was a pitfall waiting to claim them. They’d ignored the cracks in their foundation, pretending everything was fine when it clearly wasn’t. But now...now it was different.

He stopped and looked back at the empty space again, a heaviness settling in him. They weren’t the same gods they had been. After everything they’d been through the past few days—working together, facing challenges, rediscovering pieces of themselves in each other—he knew better. They were better.

She wasn’t just the goddess of love to him anymore. She was Aphrodite, a woman full of contradictions—strong and vulnerable, infuriating and captivating. And he cared for her, not just in the passive, resigned way he had when they were first paired together, but in a way that made him ache to do things right this time.

“We’re better than this,” he said aloud, his voice low but resolute.

He sank into the nearest chair, his mind racing. How could he make her see that she didn’t have to do this alone? That he wasn’t trying to diminish her independence or her strength but that they could face whatever was coming together?

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and stared at the floor. His fingers itched to work, to channel his frustration into something tangible, but for once, he forced himself to sit with the discomfort. Running from it wouldn't help—not this time.

He wasn't sure how, but he was determined to find a way to reach her. Because despite everything, despite the argument and her dramatic exit, he knew that what they had now was worth fighting for. And for the first time, he was ready to fight.

“Where would she even go?” he muttered to himself, raking a hand through his hair. She had a knack for disappearing when things got heated, and it wasn't like she left a trail of glitter for him to follow.

He sat back in his chair, fishing his phone out and glaring at it as if it held all the answers. After a moment of deliberation, he scrolled through his contacts and tapped out a quick text to Eros:

“Where does your mother go when she's on the Upperworld?”

The reply came faster than he expected:

“Could be anywhere. Why?”

He narrowed his eyes at the screen and typed furiously:

“So you can answer your phone!”

Almost instantly, his phone buzzed with an incoming call. He sighed, shaking his head as he answered. “Eros.”

“Well, hello to you too, Stepdad,” Eros said. “What's so urgent that you're texting me

about Mama's whereabouts?"

"I want to talk to her," he said, skipping the pleasantries.

Eros hummed in response. "Interesting. And what would you need to talk to her about?"

"Arketá! Let's not do this, Eros," he said, pinching the bridge of his nose. "There are things we need to discuss—important things."

"Oh, important things," Eros echoed, clearly enjoying himself. "Is this about the Winged app? Isn't it crazy? Though I don't know anything about it."

Hephaestus smirked, even though Eros couldn't see it. "Of course you don't. Completely unrelated to you, I'm sure. Just like the entire mortal world losing their minds and suddenly deciding love is the only thing that matters."

"Sounds like a great world, doesn't it?" Eros quipped.

"You're not helping."

"Neither are you," Eros shot back. "And why do you even care where Mama is? You two are talking now? Like, actual talking?"

"Yes," he said through gritted teeth.

"Wow," Eros let out a low whistle. "Didn't think I'd live to see the day. What'd you do to piss her off this time?"

"I'm not having this conversation with you," he said, though the corner of his mouth twitched. "Do you know where she is or not?"

There was a pause, and then Eros said, “You should try her apartment in New York City. I just sent the address.”

Hephaestus glanced at his phone and saw the notification pop up. “Got it,” he said, already standing.

“Good. You should go now.”

Before Hephaestus could respond, the line went dead.

He stared at his phone in disbelief, then released a frustrated groan. “Mother and son, both of them impossible. I’m not sure which one of them drives me crazier.”

He materialized in Aphrodite’s apartment and took a moment to glance around the living room. The decor screamed her: tasteful but bold, with an air of effortless glamour. He noticed a soft throw draped over the couch and a faint floral scent lingering in the air. It was undeniably Aphrodite’s space, but there was something about the energy of the room that unsettled him.

He ventured farther, passing through an arched doorway into another part of the apartment. That’s when he heard it—murmured voices, low and intimate. His stomach tightened as he followed the sound, steeling himself for whatever he was about to find.

When he stepped into the next room, he froze. It was a lush, indoor sanctuary, the walls lined with racks of potted greenery of every kind, hanging plants, and blossoms bursting with vibrant colors. The air was rich with the scent of earth and flowers, warm and alive. But what truly caught his eye wasn’t the flora—it was Aphrodite.

She was in the arms of another man, a handsome mortal who held her close, his hand stroking her hair in a soothing gesture. She leaned into him, her face buried in his

shoulder. Neither of them noticed Hephaestus standing there, his heart sinking and his stomach churned, the ache spreading through him like molten iron cooling too quickly, leaving him heavy and unsteady.

He quickly backtracked into the living room, his mind spinning. Of course. Of course, she went to be comforted by one of her lovers. The bitter thought hit hard, the old insecurities rising to the surface. He couldn't stop the familiar whisper at the back of his mind, the one that had plagued him for eons. It reminded him of the days when he was mocked for his limp, for his unpolished hands, for not fitting the golden mold of a god. Aphrodite, radiant and untouchable, was everything he had always thought he couldn't deserve. Standing in her space now, surrounded by her world, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was intruding and would always be the outsider, the one who had to try too hard to belong.

Then came the deeper cut, the one tied to their history. For so long, he had been a convenience for her, someone to tolerate but not truly want. And now, seeing her with the mortal—a symbol of youth and effortless allure—it all came rushing back. What could he possibly offer her that any other wouldn't surpass? The doubt clenched at him, dragging him into the past, even as part of him desperately wanted to believe things could be different this time.

He raked his hand through his hair, and his eyes landed on something—a painting hanging on the wall. He paused, his breath catching. It was of him and Eros, the two of them hunting together in what looked like Thessaly. He recognized the moment it depicted instantly. They'd never posed for it, but the details were unmistakable. The way he held his bow, the fierce determination in Eros's expression, the unspoken bond between them as they moved in perfect synchronization.

It stirred a deep ache within him, pride and sorrow welling up inside him. Those were simpler times, weren't they? Back before everything grew so complicated. Before layers of mistrust and misunderstandings drove them apart.

Am I really going to give up so easily? he thought. I deserve better than this. She deserves better than this.

He wasn't a man who gave up easily, not in his work, not in anything he truly cared about. He wasn't going to start now.

He squared his shoulders and strode back into the sanctuary. This time, he didn't hesitate.

Clearing his throat, he announced his presence.

Aphrodite and the man turned, startled. Aphrodite stepped back quickly, her expression a mix of surprise and something he couldn't quite read. "Hephaestus?"

The young man smiled, his demeanor relaxed and friendly. "Hephaestus? Good to meet you. I'm Adonis," he said, stepping forward to extend a hand.

Hephaestus hesitated for a fraction of a second before accepting the handshake. Adonis's grip was firm but unthreatening, his confidence so effortless it was almost disarming.

"I've heard a lot about you," Adonis said with a grin. Then, glancing at Aphrodite, he added, "I'll leave you two to it."

Without another word, he turned and left the room, leaving Hephaestus and Aphrodite alone.

They stood there in silence, and Hephaestus looked at her. She looked every bit the goddess she was—untouchable, ethereal, and heartbreakingly beautiful—but her hands fidgeted at her sides before she crossed her arms, her brow furrowing slightly. She looked regal even in her discomfort, her head held high despite the tension in the

room.

He stepped closer, the solid weight of his boots echoing faintly against the polished wood floor. “So,” he said, breaking the silence, “is now a good time to talk?”

His voice carried the gravity of everything left unsaid, and Aphrodite, for once, seemed unsure of how to respond.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” she squared her shoulders. “I’m going to tell the council it was my fault—the love magic going out of control is on me.”

His eyes stayed on her, his jaw tensing as he willed himself to temper his frustration. She was beautiful, even in her defiance, but her stubbornness was as maddening as ever. “We should talk about this,” he repeated, his voice calm but firm.

“No, I don’t think so,” she retorted sharply.

“But you can talk to Adonis about it,” he grumbled under his breath.

“What did you say?” she snapped, her eyes blazing.

“You heard me,” he folded his arms, meeting her glare head-on.

Her lips pressed into a thin line. “Yes, I can talk to him,” she hissed, tossing her head in defiance before brushing past him toward the doorway.

He turned slightly as she moved. “Aphrodite.”

The word hung in the air, and she froze in front of him. For a moment, she didn’t move, didn’t breathe. Then, slowly, she looked up at him, her eyes clouded with conflict. “You can’t expect me to be okay with letting others take the fall for what’s

my responsibility. You know I can't do that."

He reached out, his hand hovering near her arm as if to stop her, but she stepped away, the distance between them widening with each heartbeat. He was left standing alone, her scent and the tension lingering behind.

He clenched his fists, willing himself to stay calm. He took a few deep breaths, his mind racing as he considered his next move. It was clear he needed a different approach. Maybe, he thought grimly, he'd have to rile her up to get through to her. Bracing himself for whatever might come, he followed her into the living room.

She stood by the window, her arms crossed, staring out into the cityscape. Her posture was tense, but there was an undercurrent of vulnerability that he couldn't ignore.

"So," he began, his voice light but pointed, "you can trust Adonis enough to cry on his shoulder, but you can't talk to me? Interesting."

She didn't whip around or snap at him as he expected. Instead, she sighed, her shoulders slumping. "He's a friend," she said softly. "We used to be lovers, but now there's none of that between us. We're good friends, Hephaestus. He doesn't even know that I'm a goddess."

Her words were calm but heavy with emotion. She finally turned to face him, and the raw hurt in her eyes struck him like a blow. Without thinking, he crossed the room in three strides and wrapped his arms around her. She didn't resist, melting into his embrace as silent tears wet his shoulder.

He held her tighter, resting his chin lightly on her head. "You know," he murmured, "we've known each other for so long. We have secrets only the two of us share, but we still can't figure out how to talk to each other."

She sniffled, letting out a small, bitter laugh against his shoulder. “Yeah, ’cause you’re such an asshole.”

He chuckled, the sound rumbling through his chest, knowing she meant the opposite. He slowly pulled back, just enough to place a finger under her chin and tilt her face toward him. “Can we talk now?” he asked softly.

Aphrodite’s eyes locked with his, searching his gaze as though she could pull the answers she needed directly from him. Her expression softened, the usual fiery edge dimmed by something gentler, something vulnerable. He held her gaze, letting her take the time she needed.

Finally, she nodded and reached for his hand. And, without a word, led him toward the couch. The tension in her movements eased slightly as they sank into the cushions together. She curled into his side, tucking herself close, her head resting just under his chin.

He wrapped his arm around her instinctively. Neither spoke, the silence stretching like a bridge between them, unspoken emotions weaving into something fragile but real.

“Okay,” he began, “hear me out.”

She shifted slightly to look up at him, her eyes wary but attentive. She gave a slight nod, signaling for him to continue.

“I’ve been thinking about this. I could tell the council it was me. I was the one working on the app, and something went wrong—mortal tech malfunctioned, and the matches went haywire.” He paused, his gaze fixed on hers. “No one would believe you had a part in it. You don’t exactly have a reputation for tinkering with tech.” His lips quirked into a wry smile, trying to lighten the moment. “Besides,” he added,

“they already know we’ve been working together. It wouldn’t be a stretch for them to believe it was my fault.”

She tensed against him, her fingers gripping the fabric of his shirt. Gently, he loosened her hold, twining his fingers with hers instead. He traced circles on her palm with his thumb, a silent reassurance as he waited for her response.

“That makes sense,” she finally said hesitantly, as though weighing every word. Relief began to creep in, and he started to smile, but then she shook her head, dashing his hope. “But I can’t agree to it.”

Her grip on his hand tightened, her knuckles white. “It’s crazy that they voted to make me talk about it. Who knows how bad the punishment will be.” She looked at him, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. “But it’s just too much. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if anything happened to you.”

He swallowed hard, his throat dry as what she said carved through him. She was always so fiercely protective, but hearing it said aloud made his chest ache, like something inside him was splintering.

She took a shaky breath. “If Zeus were still around, I wouldn’t be scared about what would happen to you or Eros. I could’ve called in a favor to him.”

He blinked in confusion. “What do you mean?”

Aphrodite’s eyes widened, and she hesitated for a moment. “Oh, you know,” she said, waving a hand as though dismissing the subject. “I was constantly doing things for him.”

Something about the way she said it set him on edge. It didn’t sit right, and his gut told him there was more to this than she let on. He leaned forward slightly, his voice

firmer, "Tell me, Aphrodite."

She sighed, the sound heavy with resignation, and looked away before meeting his gaze again. "The reason Zeus gave us a divorce so suddenly," she began, her voice low, "was because he wanted me to fix a situation he was in." She paused, deliberate now, each word measured. "He wanted me to make a mortal princess give in and fall for him."

He stiffened, his jaw tightening as her confession sank in.

"I don't even know why he needed me for it," she grumbled. "But for some reason, he wouldn't let up. He brought it up again on the day of Eros's golden apple ceremony." She let out a mirthless laugh. "I thought it was perfect timing. So, I asked him to grant us the divorce so you could be free to live your life without me and Eros. Those fifteen years were too long to be tied to us when you could've found love and been with someone you chose to be with."

She exhaled, her shoulders slumping as though she had finally set down a burden she had carried for far too long.

He stared at her, his thoughts a chaotic storm as he processed what she said. Of all the things she could have said, this revelation hadn't even crossed his mind. He tried to search her face, but she wouldn't meet his gaze, her eyes fixed on their intertwined hands as though bracing for the worst.

Finally, he found his voice, though it felt thin and unsure. "You did that?"

She nodded, her shoulders tense. "Yes. I felt bad all those years. You're such a great guy, Hephaestus. You took care of us when you didn't have to, and I thought it was the right thing to do."

He fell silent again, the echo of what she said lingering in his mind as he tried to unravel the mess of emotions threatening to overwhelm him. Betrayal, gratitude, affection—they all jumbled together, leaving him unsure of where one ended and another began. He shook his head slowly, letting out a soft breath.

“We really should be better about talking about things,” he said at last.

Her head snapped up, her eyes wide. “You’re not upset?”

He shook his head again, this time with a small smile. “No. Because I was thinking the same thing—that we were just together because Zeus arranged it. That you were trapped.” He hesitated, his voice softening. “But during that time, I came to care about you and Eros. More than I should have.

“That wasn’t something I expected when we were thrown together, but it happened. What I wrote in the book about our truths from Thessaly—those weren’t just words. I meant every one of them. We weren’t just two gods stuck in an arrangement. We were...a family. And I cared for you in ways I didn’t even know I was capable of.”

He paused, running a hand through his hair. “When Zeus granted the divorce so quickly, yeah, it surprised me. But it didn’t erase what I felt for you. It wasn’t enough to make me forget the way you loved so fiercely, the way you protected Eros, the way you carried yourself with this strength that could shatter mountains if you wanted to. How could I forget that? How could I forget you?

“I tried, you know,” his gaze met hers. “For millennia, I tried to ignore those feelings. And it worked, mostly because I avoided you like my sanity depended on it. But now—seeing you again, working together, spending time with you—it’s impossible to push it down anymore.

“Why should I? Why should I ignore what I feel? I want to be with you, Aphrodite.

Not because anyone says we have to, not because it's convenient, but because I can't imagine going through eternity pretending I can live without you."

Aphrodite's lips parted slightly, caught in a moment of pure surprise. The vulnerability in her expression was unlike anything he'd seen before. Her silver-blue eyes, usually filled with playful mischief or defiance, now held a softness that made him feel as though he were melting and constricting simultaneously. She looked so beautiful, so open, that he found himself moving closer without even realizing it.

He reached up, his calloused fingers brushing against her chin, and her breath hitched. She sighed, the sound delicate and full of something he couldn't quite name, and her lashes fluttered closed. Leaning in, he pressed his lips to hers, tasting sweetness and something distinctly Aphrodite—a flavor that was as intoxicating as it was familiar. Somehow, the kiss felt like something more than any other time.

He was happy that he could finally kiss her, the barriers that had held them apart seemingly dissolving in the warmth of the moment. As her lips moved softly against his, he made a silent vow, fierce and unyielding: he would do everything in his power to ensure this wasn't a fleeting moment. Whatever it took, he would fight for the chance to hold onto this, to hold onto her, and to kiss her like this for the rest of eternity.

Chapter 12

Aphrodite

Their lips met, and Aphrodite felt a wave of relief and happiness flood through her, grounding her in a way she hadn't realized she needed. Hephaestus wasn't mad—he understood her. The kiss felt like sunlight breaking through storm clouds, warm and certain, chasing away every doubt she'd been holding onto. It was tender and unhurried, but it carried a depth that made her heart ache in the best way, as if he was pouring every unspoken word into the connection between them.

She smiled against his lips and pulled back just enough to murmur, "If I get to have kisses like this from talking to you, then sign me up."

He laughed, a deep, warm sound that filled the room and made her heart flutter. She loved that she could make him laugh, especially like this—free of all the weight he usually carried. At that moment, he looked almost boyish, his seriousness melting away, leaving only a ridiculously handsome god gazing at her like she was the only thing that mattered.

Her thoughts tumbled over each other, chaotic and raw, but one thing stood out above the rest. She couldn't imagine Hephaestus disappearing from her life again. "I..." She took a deep breath. "I didn't expect this, Hephaestus. I didn't think you—" She stopped, shaking her head. "But the truth is, I can't imagine you not being in my life. Not again. Once was hard enough. Losing you a second time...I couldn't bear it.

"I don't know if I have the right words right now, but I know this: I don't want to go

back to pretending either. Not when you're the one who's been there, who's seen me for who I really am—even the parts I try to hide. Not when it's you."

Her lips quirked into a small, soft smile. "So, I guess what I'm saying is...you're not going anywhere. Not if I have any say in it."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him again, savoring the way his hands tightened on her waist. She could've stayed there forever, getting lost in him.

"Well, well, well," a voice drawled, breaking through the bubble of intimacy.

Aphrodite froze and pulled back to look toward the sound. Standing near them, arms crossed and wearing a smug grin, was Eros.

Her mood shifted as she turned to face her son. "Eros, do you ever think about boundaries?"

Eros grinned, completely unbothered. "Boundaries? Come on, Mama. I just had to see what's got you two all cozy these days." He gestured vaguely between her and Hephaestus.

She folded her arms. "I am not happy with you."

Hephaestus stayed silent, though his jaw tightened slightly. He didn't look particularly amused either.

"But I'm your beloved son!" Eros feigned a wounded expression, clutching his chest dramatically. "I've come to check on your well-being after all the chaos you've been dealing with. You know, being a dutiful offspring and all."

"Don't," she snapped. "Don't try to play the concerned son act with me, Eros. I know

you had something to do with Winged spiraling out of control.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” His grin widened, but his gaze shifted slightly, just enough for her to notice. He was deflecting, as always.

“Drop the act. Do you have any idea how much trouble this has caused? The council is breathing down my neck, and I’m cleaning up your mess while you stand there smirking like it’s a joke.”

Eros tilted his head. “It’s not my fault love magic is so...unpredictable. Besides, it’s not like mortals didn’t have fun, right? A little chaos now and then keeps things exciting.”

“You’re impossible.”

Hephaestus finally spoke. “Eros, enough with the games. This is serious. You need to start taking responsibility for your actions.”

“Wow, look at you”—Eros raised an eyebrow—“stepping into the parental role. How touching.”

“Don’t push me,” Hephaestus warned.

Aphrodite stood and held up a hand, silencing them both. “Eros, if you don’t start being honest with me right now, I swear?—”

“Okay, okay,” he said, cutting her off with a sigh. “Fine. I might’ve tweaked a few things in the app, but it wasn’t supposed to get this out of hand. I was trying something new, that’s all.”

She narrowed her eyes, her hands on her hips. “And you didn’t think to ask me first?”

Or consider the consequences?”

Eros shrugged. “It’s not like I expected it to blow up. Besides, you always tell me to be creative with my work.”

“This isn’t creativity, Eros,” she shot back. “This is recklessness.”

“What’s done is done,” Hephaestus said. “But now we need to focus on fixing it. Together.”

Eros glanced between them, his smirk softening slightly. “Together, huh?”

“Yes,” she said firmly. “And if you pull a stunt like this again, you’ll have more than the council to answer to.”

Eros held up his hands again, this time in genuine surrender. “Got it, Mama. No more tweaks without permission. Scout’s honor.”

She rolled her eyes. “You were never a scout.”

“Details,” he said, flashing her a cheeky grin.

“Speaking of details, how’d you get into the app? The magic infused in it was impressive.”

“Not to mention the coding,” Hephaestus added.

“Oh, that,” Eros said, nonchalantly brushing some imaginary dust off his shirt. “I built the app with Matt. When I saw that he wanted to make a dating app, I thought it would be the perfect way to make matches for mortals.”

“Ah, to be relevant,” she quipped, arching a delicate brow.

“Something like that,” Eros replied with a grin that was equal parts smug and mischievous. “But when I saw the two of you in Alaska, I knew I had to step things up a notch. You two have been avoiding the inevitable for centuries now. It was painful to watch.”

“You mean meddling, ” Hephaestus said flatly, though the corner of his mouth twitched in amusement.

Eros shrugged. “Meddling, matchmaking—semantics.”

She crossed her arms. “And you decided that manipulating an app and adding love magic was the best way to do that? So, you’re telling me this whole thing was a glorified matchmaking scheme?”

Eros sighed, throwing his hands up dramatically. “Look, you’re both so stubborn. If I didn’t intervene, you’d still be stuck in this ‘we’re fine just as we are’ limbo. Watching you pretend not to care for each other was like watching paint dry. Painful and unnecessary. And don’t even act like it didn’t work. You’re kissing now, aren’t you?”

“That’s not the point,” she snapped, her voice sharp enough to make Eros wince.

“Fine, fine. But seriously, the app malfunctioning wasn’t part of the plan. That was...collateral damage.”

“Collateral damage?” Hephaestus groaned.

“Okay, poor phrasing,” Eros quickly backtracked, a sheepish grin plastered across his face. “But come on, admit it—this was long overdue.”

“We’re going to have to fix this mess, Eros. The council is looking for a scapegoat.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Eros said, waving it off. “You’ll figure it out. You’re Aphrodite and Hephaestus, the power couple everyone’s secretly rooting for.”

She glared at Eros, watching him fidget under her scrutiny. “And what about Thessaly? How were you able to enchant the house like that? That kind of magic is way beyond your capabilities.”

Eros glanced up, his boyish smirk slipping into something more guarded. “Called in a couple of favors,” he said with a shrug.

“From whom?” she pressed.

“People,” he replied evasively, avoiding her piercing stare. “You know how it is, Mama. You scratch their back, and they scratch yours. No big deal.”

“No big deal? Eros, that house practically breathed magic. It felt ancient.”

Eros held up a hand. “Relax, okay? It’s handled. You don’t need to worry about it.”

Hephaestus, who had been quietly observing, leaned forward. “Handled or not, it would be nice to know who you dragged into this mess.”

Eros rolled his eyes dramatically. “Would you believe me if I said it was harmless?” When neither of them responded, he sighed and held out his hand where a familiar leather-bound book appeared.

“Here,” he said, handing it to his mom. “You two should have this.”

She took the book, her fingers brushing over the warm cover. It was the one where

they'd written their truths. She flipped it open, her heart skipping a beat at the sight of her elegant handwriting next to Hephaestus's precise script.

She sighed again, glancing at Hephaestus, who was watching her with a quiet intensity. Despite her frustration, she couldn't deny Eros's meddling was successful. Still, she pointed a finger at her son.

"You're lucky I love you," she said.

"And you're lucky I'm a genius," Eros shot back with a wink.

Hephaestus groaned. "I don't know how you deal with him."

"Practice," she muttered, though her lips quirked up despite herself.

As Eros turned to leave, Aphrodite flicked her fingers, her power weaving through the air like a shimmering net. Suddenly, golden vines, glowing faintly with her signature energy, coiled around Eros's ankles and wrists, rooting him in place. He stumbled slightly, his balance thrown, and looked down in disbelief.

"Really, Mama?" he complained, craning his neck to glare at her.

"You're not going anywhere," she said coolly, tilting her head with a stubborn set to her jaw. "We need to plan what to do about the council."

Hephaestus let out a rich, rumbling laugh. "That's one way to keep him in check."

Eros rolled his eyes. "Fine, fine! I promise I'll stay so we can talk, okay? Can you let me go now?"

She narrowed her eyes at him, but the faint glow of her power dimmed, and the

golden vines unraveled and disappeared into the air. Eros rubbed his wrists, as though he'd been shackled for days, and shot her an exaggerated pout.

"You're so dramatic," she muttered.

Eros flopped down onto the couch and threw an arm over the backrest. "Okay, Mama and Pops, what's the game plan?"

She exchanged a glance with Hephaestus, who shrugged. "I think we start by figuring out who on the council we can sway to our side," he suggested.

"Always thinking like a smith," Eros teased. "Forging alliances and all that."

"Better than relying on luck and charm," Hephaestus smirked.

She sighed, settling onto the couch beside Hephaestus. "We'll need to move carefully. The council's patience is wearing thin."

Eros nodded, his playful demeanor fading slightly. "Fine. I'll help figure this out. But you owe me for staying here instead of doing something fun."

"You're annoying but cute, *ángèle mou*," she said, reaching out to ruffle his hair affectionately, earning a squawk of protest.

Hermes appeared in a flash of golden light, his winged sandals brushing the floor as he surveyed the room. His gaze flickered to Aphrodite and Hephaestus, a faint smirk curling his lips. "Not surprised to find you two together," he said smoothly.

But when his eyes landed on Eros, he froze. "Eros?" Hermes gawked. "You're involved in this? I thought you'd be too busy being an asshole somewhere."

“Surprise. I’ve got layers,” he said dryly, shooting Hermes a cheeky grin.

“Kourástika,” Hephaestus groaned, rubbing a hand over his face. “You again? Why do they keep summoning us like this?”

“In case you didn’t realize it, your time is almost up,” Hermes replied, rolling his eyes. “Zeus might be gone, but bureaucracy never dies.”

Eros snorted. “Right, because nothing says divine efficiency like dragging everyone to Olympus for no reason. Tell me, Hermes, do you even know what the meeting’s about, or are you just the messenger boy?”

Hermes bristled, his smirk turning sharp. “Watch it, love god. I might be the messenger, but I can still knock that smug look off your face.”

“Boys,” Aphrodite interrupted, her voice cutting through their bickering. She gave them both a pointed glare. “We’ve got bigger things to worry about than your petty squabbling.”

With that, the group prepared to leave. Hermes opened a shimmering portal to Olympus, the familiar golden hues of the divine realm spilling into the room.

Hephaestus glanced at Aphrodite and muttered under his breath, “This better not take all day.”

“Don’t worry, Heph,” Eros flashed a grin as they stepped through. “I’ll keep things entertaining.”

“Not helping,” Hephaestus grumbled as they all disappeared into the portal, Olympus awaiting them.

Chapter 13

Hephaestus

After walking through the portal, they once again found themselves inside the divine hall. The rest of the Council of Olympians were already there, gathered around the table as the last grain of sand in the timer slid into the bottom glass bulb.

“Well, Aphrodite,” Poseidon began. “Have you come to take responsibility or bring us the culprit responsible for the chaos on the Upperworld?”

Hephaestus cursed silently. If only they hadn’t wasted so much time squabbling, they could have come up with some sort of plan or tried to persuade one of the other gods on Poseidon’s side to join them. Hera or maybe even Athena might have been amenable, if they pleaded their case properly. But now, there would be no bargaining or reasoning.

“Yes,” Aphrodite answered, her voice loud and clear. “It’s me?—”

“No,” Hephaestus interrupted. “She had nothing to do with it. It was all me.”

“Don’t.” She grabbed his arm. “You know that’s not true. It was all love magic, so it was me.”

“Which one of you was it then?” Poseidon asked. “Or was it both?”

“No—”

“You can’t—” Hephaestus said at the same time.

“It was me.” Eros stepped forward. “It was all me.”

“No!” Aphrodite protested. “You can’t?—”

“Heph is right, Mama.” He nodded at Hephaestus, the corner of his mouth tugging up. “It’s high time I took responsibility for my actions.”

“Now that’s a first,” Apollo muttered under his breath, which earned him a glare from Eros.

“Is this true?” Poseidon’s eyes narrowed at the god of love and desire. “How did you manage this?”

“It was through a phone application.” Eros explained how Winged worked and how he and Matt Anchises came up with the concept and turned it into an app, leaving out the part where he accelerated the launch just to bring his mother and Hephaestus back together. “However, it went haywire. Something went wrong with the programming, and the magic became unruly.” He gestured toward Aphrodite and Hephaestus. “Mama and Hephaestus had no idea it was me, and have spent the last few days trying to fix everything.”

“And why did you do this?” Athena asked. “What was your purpose?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Funsies?”

“I beg your pardon?” The goddess of wisdom said. “Do you have any idea how much havoc you’ve caused? The entire world ground to a halt because of your application.”

“Really?” Eros sounded bored. “I always thought they said ‘love makes the world go

‘round.’”

“Insolent child!” Athena slapped her hands on top of the table. “You must pay for what you’ve done.”

“I agree,” Hera said. “The app may now be defunct, but you’ve already destroyed many lives. Couples and families have broken apart thanks to you. You need to be punished for your crimes.”

Eros muttered something under his breath that sounded like hypocrite , but Aphrodite sent him a glare that had him pressing his mouth shut.

Poseidon raised a hand. “As I said in the previous meeting, the culprit must be made an example of, or else other divine beings will see the council as weak, which we cannot afford right now.”

“Fine.” Eros rolled his eyes. “What punishment will you mete out? A thousand years having my eyes pecked out by ravens? Or maybe you’ll give Sisyphus a break and have me roll his boulder for a couple of centuries?”

“Oh no, nothing quite that easy.” A serious expression crossed Poseidon’s face. “If you recall from your immortality ceremony, Eros, one of the tenets we emphasize for all demi-gods who wish to partake of the golden apple is that divinity is a privilege, not a right. You swore an oath to use your powers responsibly. And now that you’ve proven that you cannot do so, we have no choice but to revoke your status as a god and return you to what you were.”

“What the fuck?” Eros exclaimed. “You can’t do that.”

“Oh yes, we can.” Poseidon looked to the others. “With one vote, we can do just that. So, shall we get on with it?”

“No!” Eros turned to his mother. “Please, Mama. Hephaestus. You can’t let them do that! You can’t let them take my divinity and turn me back.”

The hollow look on Eros’s face made Hephaestus’s chest ache. For a moment, he looked like that scared, vulnerable child once more.

“Please,” Aphrodite whispered. “They can’t...you know what will happen if they do that.”

It was rare that a god or goddess was stripped of their immortality, but it did happen, usually to former demi-gods. Had it been anyone else, they would simply revert to being a mortal human. But, in Eros’s case, he would revert to being part geryon, which meant he would lose the ability to hide his wings.

“He’d have to live in Vale Crossing,” Aphrodite whispered. “He won’t have any of his powers either.” Trapping Cyncus’s magic in the pyxis made sure of that. “And if any of the geryons found him, who knows what they’d do.”

While Hephaestus believed that finally being accountable could help Eros be the god he was meant to be, he did not want the boy to die. “Wait, before we take a vote on the matter, might I suggest an alternative punishment?”

“Alternative?” Poseidon sneered. “You bargain for him now? Why would we even consider such a thing? Why should he not be held to the same standard as every other god and goddess?” His gaze flickered at Aphrodite, very briefly, but the contempt in them was unmistakable. “Had he been brought up in the right way, perhaps we could have avoided all this.”

Hephaestus took a deep breath, resisting the urge to strangle the god of the sea. “Eros is a product of his upbringing. Yes, he grew up as a mortal geryon, but he’s been a god of Olympus for thousands of years. All this time, he looked to us, his elders, as

an example of how to be and how to act. Did any of us even try to show him and the other demi-gods what it truly meant to be divine? Or were we all caught up in our own realms and petty squabbles these last thousands of years?" He looked at each and every one of the gods and goddesses who voted with Poseidon. "How have we kept up with these 'standards' we hold him against?"

An uncomfortable silence filled the room until Hades spoke. "What alternative do you suggest then, Hephaestus?"

The idea had already begun to form in his head the moment Poseidon decided to revoke Eros's immortality, though he hadn't fully formed the plan yet. Still, with everyone looking at him right now, he supposed he would have to do his best. "I agree, we should take his divinity and immortality but"—he looked at Aphrodite, sending her a silent message and hoping she would understand—"not forever. We should allow him a chance to earn it back."

"And how would he do that?" Hera asked.

"He'll..." He searched his brain for a moment and said the first thing that popped into his head. "He'll have to live with the humans on the Upperworld, as one of them."

"What?" Eros exclaimed. "You can't be— mmph !" His mouth clamped shut, his entire body going stiff.

"This is for your own good," Aphrodite soothed as she waved her hand, though Eros's eyes could not hide his fury at being silenced.

"And what purpose would this serve?" Hades asked.

"So he can fully understand how his actions have affected the lives of the people he so casually toyed with. Some say we are gods and, thus, are above all in the universe.

But when you think about it, can we really exist without the mortals? Would we even be here if it were not for their prayers, for their need to believe in something? Perhaps it is not just Eros who has forgotten this.” He paused. “By living as a human being, he will learn how to be human.”

“I think it’s a great idea,” Hestia piped in.

“Wise words,” Athena said. “But we all know Eros does as he pleases. How would you make sure he won’t just do what he wants and cause even more chaos? How would we enforce the punishment if he could just charm his way around the Upperworld into a cushy life?”

“I have an idea.” It was Geri who spoke up. “Eros can live in Alaska, with my former pack.” She cleared her throat. “A wolf pack, both shifter and animal, survives when everyone works together, equally. It is only as strong as its weakest link, which is why we all pull our weight. We must follow our Alpha, because he or she watches out for the good of the entire pack. I believe pack life will help Eros learn not just sympathy, but how his actions affect the lives of others.”

“That sounds like a wonderful idea,” Apollo quipped, sending Eros a smug look. “A good ass-whooping from Cade is exactly what you need. I vote for it.”

“Wait a minute.” Poseidon held a hand up. “We haven’t agreed to a vote. Besides, how long would we give Eros?”

“How about the span of a mortal life?” Hera suggested. “At his age, what’s that? Fifty years or so? It will be over in the blink of an eye.”

“But how will you know if he’s learned his lesson?” Aphrodite asked.

“When he’s shown us that he knows what it truly means to be human,” Hestia said

cryptically. “We will know, right?” She glanced at the other gods and goddesses, who simply nodded or hummed in agreement.

Aphrodite turned to Hephaestus. “What do you think?”

“I think it’s the best chance he has,” he replied. “But ultimately, it’s his decision.”

She bit her lower lip. “You’re right. I’ve—we’ve done all we can. But he’s an adult, and it’s time he acted like one.” She waved her hand, and Eros’s body relaxed as she released it from her invisible grip. “What do you say, Eros?”

“I don’t exactly have a choice, now do I?” he said with a caustic tone. “I suppose I could find a way to ‘be human.’”

Hephaestus hoped so, too, but he believed in the boy. He’d gone through so much in his life, and this was just another trial that would make him strong. “I vote to punish Eros for his crimes by sending him to live with the Alaska pack as a mortal.”

The same gods and goddesses from the previous meeting voted with him, and to his surprise, they were joined by Hera, Hermes, and Athena, though he suspected Demeter didn’t raise her hand because she didn’t want to be on the same side as her son-in-law. Gods were petty like that, after all.

“It seems we have a decision. Thank you, everyone.” Hephaestus didn’t even bother looking at Poseidon’s reaction, as he frankly didn’t care, and after today he wouldn’t give another brain cell to that asshole. “The council’s decision is final; thus, you are no longer a god, Eros.”

“What? Just like that?” he groused.

“Yes, I’m afraid so, son.” He turned to Geri and Apollo. “When can he come to

Alaska?”

“I’ll speak to Cade now,” the goddess of the hunt said, “and I’ll let you know. Artemis will help persuade him.”

Hephaestus agreed. “It’s settled then.”

“This is absolute bullshit.” Eros crossed his arms over his chest. “I will not stand for this.”

Worry marred Aphrodite’s beautiful face, but to her credit, she quickly replaced it with a serene expression. “Come, Eros. Let’s go and get you ready for your new home.”

He huffed. “And where are we going, exactly?”

“How about we have one last day in Thessaly?” She gave Hephaestus a weak smile and held out her hand. “What do you say?”

Warmth spread across his chest, and he took her hand. “I say yes.”

They spent the next few hours back at the house in Thessaly, as if it were an ordinary day from back when they lived there during Eros’s childhood. To his credit, Eros did not pout or protest or moan about his punishment, but rather, he seemed content to just lie on the beach and watch the ocean, play card games, and other activities they used to do when they lived there.

“We’ll take care of the dishes, love,” he said to Aphrodite as they finished the meal they all prepared together. “Why don’t you go outside and relax?”

“Are you sure?” She eyed him and Eros carefully.

“Yes.” He kissed her forehead. “Go.”

She nodded, giving his cheek a caress before she headed out of the dining room. He watched her graceful gait, his eyes lingering on her as she disappeared.

“I want you to know one thing.”

Sighing, he turned to Eros. “And what’s that?”

Folding his arms over his chest, Eros leaned his hip on the dining table casually. “Even knowing my punishment, I would do it all over again.”

Stubborn ass. For the first time that day, Hephaestus feared Eros would not learn anything during his time on earth, and he would die a mortal. “And why is that?”

He nodded toward the doorway after his mother. “Because I’ve never seen her so happy. And I could say the same for you.”

A burst of emotion startled him, coming from out of nowhere and so quick that he didn’t know what to say. His throat tightened; the words he wanted to say stuck there. “Son, I’ve always...you’re like...I lo?—”

“You don’t have to say anything, Heph. I know . I’ve always known. It’s my realm, after all.” The smallest smile appeared on his lips. “But don’t forget to tell her too, okay?”

“I—”

“Sorry for interrupting!” A shimmer of light filled the room, and Apollo and Geri appeared.

“You blinded me on purpose, asshole,” Eros complained, rubbing his eyes. “I can’t see!”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Apollo however, did not sound sorry at all. “I forgot, my powers can burn the retinas of mortal eyeballs. Your sight should come back in a couple hours. But I can heal it right now if you apologize for being such a dick.”

“I’d rather eat Hydra dung.”

Apollo smirked. “I can arrange that too.”

Geri clucked her tongue. “Just heal him, will you?”

“But—”

“Apollo...”

“Fine.” He waved his hand. “There, are you happy?”

“Immensely. I can’t exactly deliver him to Cade with burned eyeballs.”

“So, your brother agreed?” Hephaestus asked.

“Yes, believe it or not, he did,” Geri said. “But with some caveats, of course.”

“Of course. When can he go to Alaska?”

“Now, if you want him to,” the former she-wolf said.

“Great. Let me get Aphrodite, and we can all go.”

“That’s it?” Eros threw his hands up in the air. “I’m just supposed to go live in the middle of Buttfuck, Nowhere with a bunch of wolf shifters? What do they do there for fun? Chop wood?”

“Oh, I’m so gonna enjoy watching you live with the Alaska pack,” Apollo cackled.

In a shimmer of light, Hephaestus, Aphrodite, and Eros appeared in Cade Andersen’s office inside the Alaska Pack’s territory.

“You’re here!” Artemis exclaimed as they arrived. She hurried over to Hephaestus and Aphrodite and gave them both hugs. “Geri told me everything. I’m glad you’ve both come to your senses.” She winked at him. “See? Wasn’t the glow up worth it?”

“I could hardly resist him,” Aphrodite said, a twinkle in her eye.

She flashed him a smug smile. “And as always, I was right.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Hephaestus grumbled. “Anyway, Cade, this is my step—my son”—Aphrodite squeezed his hand and smiled warmly at him—“Eros. Eros, this is your new Alpha, Cade Andersen of the Alaska Pack.”

“Welcome, Eros,” Cade greeted.

“Yeah, whatever.”

Cade’s eyes narrowed. “I am your Alpha now, and you will address me with respect.”

The strangest energy filled the air, and it even sent the hair on Hephaestus’s arms rising.

Eros’s body went rigid as a board, and his eyes widened. “Y-yes, Alpha,” he

stammered, like he was fighting with his own mouth.

“I’ll be damned.” Cade scratched at the back of his head. “Apollo was right.”

“What do you mean?” Aphrodite asked.

“When Geri and Apollo asked if Eros could live with us, they said he had to obey whatever I said, as if I really was his Alpha.”

“Alphas have some control over the wolves in the pack,” Artemis explained. “Of course, not all of them exercise that power. A good Alpha, after all, doesn’t have to because he or she should command their pack’s respect enough for them to obey.”

“Wait, so I have to do everything he says?” Eros seethed. “This isn’t fair.”

“It could be worse, son,” Hephaestus reminded him. “The council could have left you to the mercy of the geryons.”

“And at least they let you keep the power to retract your wings,” Aphrodite added.

Eros’s nostrils flared. “Fine. At least I still got what I wanted.” He grinned at them. “If it wasn’t for me, you two would still be miserable and apart.”

“I’ll give you that one,” Hephaestus said with a resigned sigh.

“Why don’t I take you to your quarters and show you around?” Artemis tugged at his arm.

Eros shrugged. “I suppose I should take a tour of my new prison.”

“We’ll come visit,” Aphrodite promised him. “And you’re still allowed your

Olympus phone, but you can only use it to text or call us.” Hephaestus had made the modifications himself so that Eros could not access coding software and do more damage.

“Whatever.”

“I’ll introduce you to everyone. I think you’ll really like it here, Eros. It’ll be nice to have another god around....” She led him out of the office, chatting away as Eros looked back, mouthing ‘save me’ to Hephaestus before disappearing.

“Thank you again, Cade, for doing this,” Hephaestus said.

“You’re welcome. It’s the least I can do after you helped with Arcane,” the Alpha said.

“I suppose your mate’s persuasive arguments didn’t have anything to do with you agreeing as well?”

Cade sighed. “At least she didn’t bring out the whiteboard and markers.”

“Are you sure you’re okay with this, Alpha?” Aphrodite asked. “I know it’s a lot, and Eros...he can be unpredictable.”

“As long as he obeys me, he’ll be fine, my lady. I don’t know if I can set him straight, though.”

“I don’t expect you to.” After all, Eros had to do that all by himself. He had to want to change. “But if it becomes too much, let us know.”

“Will do.”

“We should get going.” The two men shook hands and with a wave of his hand, Hephaestus transported himself and Aphrodite back to Thessaly, where the sun was already low on the horizon, painting the sky with various shades of pink, purple, and blue.

“Beautiful,” Aphrodite sighed.

“I know. The sunset’s nice too.” He caressed her cheek, which had gone all flushed. “Are you blushing at my compliment?”

“Of course I am,” she said. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because you’re Aphrodite, Goddess of Love. The most beautiful woman of all creation. And wasn’t there something with an apple that caused a war?” he teased.

“Oh, ha ha, you know that’s a bunch of lies. I won that apple fair and square, and Hera and Athena can, as the humans say, ‘suck it.’”

“I don’t need an apple to tell me that you’re the most beautiful woman on earth.” He kissed her full on the mouth. “How did I get so lucky with you?” he murmured against her lips. “I don’t deserve?—”

“Stop. You deserve me.” Her voice shook. “Don’t ever think you don’t. Yes, you did a lot for me and Eros, but that only proves what a good, caring man you are, worthy of love.”

He blinked. “Love?”

“Yes,” she giggled, tweaking his nose playfully. “I love you, in case you didn’t know it.”

His chest swelled with emotion, and he remembered Eros's words. "Damn, I should have said it first."

She placed a hand on her hip. "You can still say it, you know. It doesn't matter who said it first."

She was right. So, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to his chest. "I love you, Aphrodite."

She sighed against his mouth as he kissed her, as if this was the moment she'd been waiting for all her life. And if he were honest, it was for him too.

"So, what are we going to do now?" she asked when their lips broke apart.

"With what?"

"Eros. Us. Everything. I mean, where are we going to live? Should I move in with you?" She sucked in a breath. "Was that presumptuous of me? I didn't mean... You don't have to move in if... I'm so sil?—"

"Shush." He silenced her with a kiss. "You want to be with me, right?"

"Of course."

"And I want to be with you. Forever." He kissed the tiny line that appeared between her eyebrows. "Then that's all that matters. We'll figure everything out. We can live anywhere. We have eternity to decide."

"But what about?—"

"No. More. Talking." He punctuated each word with a kiss. "We have to make up for

all the millennia we lost while we were apart.” By this time, the sun was barely visible on the horizon, with only the faintest bit of red and yellow staining the sky. He gestured toward the house. “Now, let’s go inside.”

And sure enough, there were no more words between them for the rest of the evening.

Aphrodite

One Year Later...

“And I promise to love you and cherish you until the end of time.”

Aphrodite had heard the words of love many times over the last year, but it never failed to make her heart flutter. And she knew with every inch of her being that Hephaestus meant every word as he said them in front of their closest friends and family as they declared their love for each other.

While they had agreed to figure everything out, Hephaestus had surprised her by proposing a few months ago. She said yes, of course, and once they made the announcement, Artemis had insisted—in her most exuberant way—on hosting it in their territory. “I’ll take care of everything,” she had said. And she made good on her promise, as aside from the dress, Aphrodite didn’t have to worry about anything. From the guest list to the cake to the reception venue, Artemis had arranged it all and made it perfect, which she did while juggling being mom to infant twins. While the outdoor ceremony was simple, attended only by a few people, the Alaskan wilderness made a spectacular backdrop.

“Thank you both, for declaring your intentions,” Hestia, who stood in front of Aphrodite and Hephaestus as the officiant, said. She lifted her hands up so her palms were between them, and a flame appeared. “The hearth is the center of the home, essential for providing food, warmth, and offerings. It must be tended to and guarded, given fuel to continue burning and never neglected.” She gave Aphrodite a smile. “You’ve spent your days answering prayers of love, and it’s only fitting that you

finally have a hearth of your own.”

Then she turned to Hephaestus. “The fires of the hearth and the forge are not so different. You already know what happens when the flames of a forge weaken—it produces weak steel. Keep that flame strong and bright, and it will serve you well.” The flames grew larger and brighter as she lifted her arms over her head. “Your vows are sealed and blessed. May your love and happiness be bountiful.” Opening up her arms, the fire shot into the sky as the guests clapped and cheered.

Hephaestus slipped his arms around her and pulled her close for a long, deep kiss, much to the delight of the attendees and Hestia, who applauded even louder.

“Hestia didn’t say you may kiss the bride,” she said as soon as they broke the kiss.

“I know. But, this is our ceremony and we can do whatever the hell we want.”

She chuckled. “True.” She looked out at the faces in the small crowd, zeroing in on one in particular—Eros.

He was the reason that they decided to hold their wedding here, because though a year had passed since he received his punishment, he was still earthbound. And unfortunately, from what she had observed and what Artemis and Cade had told her, it didn’t seem like he’d made any progress. Artemis, of course, had tried to sugarcoat the situation, but Cade did not mince words. Eros was still stubborn, refused to obey unless he was commanded, and caused much trouble in the pack.

Still, as their eyes met, Eros’s smile at this moment was genuine, if smug. There was no denying he was happy for her and Hephaestus’s union.

Hephaestus took her hand. “Come, love, let’s start the party.”

They led everyone back to the barn, where the small reception was being held. Garlands of pink, white, and gold flowers had been strung up overhead, and tables were set up with decor in the same color scheme. Soft music played over the speakers and a table was set up on one side with food and drinks.

“I’m so happy for the two of you,” Apollo said as he, Geri, and Adonis greeted them.

Adonis hugged Aphrodite. “You make a beautiful bride.” He was one of the few humans invited. “I’m still mad you didn’t make me your flower boy.”

“This is our second wedding. We didn’t want anything elaborate.”

“Thank you for coming,” Hephaestus said, reaching out to shake his outstretched hand. While it may seem strange that he was there, Hephaestus had said he didn’t mind at all.

“Aphrodite,” Apollo said. “You look gorgeous as always. And I love the hairstyle! It was a good decision to go back to blonde, and the pixie cut is such a bold choice.”

“Thanks! It feels so light and new.” It was much like her new life now, in more ways than one.

In the past year, she and Hephaestus had enjoyed their time together, not really worrying about where they would settle and live. When they were on Mount Olympus, they would mostly stay in her home, as aside from the workshop and his bedroom, the rest of his house was sparsely furnished. But whenever they could get away, they spent as much of their days in Thessaly.

“And that birdcage veil is gorgeous. I love the shell.”

She grinned up at Hephaestus. “Thanks. I wore it to our first wedding, too.” He had

insisted on giving it back to her, since, as he said, he already had the “real thing.” And while she didn’t want to dwell on the past, she did want to acknowledge that they wouldn’t be where they were now if it wasn’t for what happened before.

“Well, I’ll let you mingle with your other guests.” Adonis glanced around. “Besides, I have my own mingling to do. Who knew there were so many hot people in Alaska? It’s like they’re all hiding out here for some reason. Ta-ta, see you in a bit.”

Hephaestus tsked. “You still haven’t told him? I feel sorry for him. Glamouring him all the time can’t be healthy. Look at how dumb he is.”

“I hate to break it to you,” Geri said. “I don’t think it’s the glamouring. He was never the sharpest knife in the drawer in the first place.”

“You really can’t have everything,” Apollo said. “I mean, unless you’re a god, like me.” He waggled his eyebrows at his mate. “Aren’t you happy you’re spending eternity with me?”

She rolled her eyes. “Immensely. Now come on, there’s some people I want to say hi to.”

“Thank you for not making a fuss over inviting Adonis,” Aphrodite said to Hephaestus once they were alone.

“He was a good friend to you when you needed him,” he said. “And I don’t resent him for that.”

And she loved him more for that. While they both acknowledged that they had been with others in the past, they agreed that they wouldn’t hold it against the other. A part of her felt some jealousy, but even though they had some feelings for each other when they divorced, it wasn’t realistic to expect either of them wouldn’t have been

with other people. After all, it was more than twenty thousand years ago, and their first marriage was in name only. The only thing that mattered now was that they were together and would devote the rest of eternity to each other.

“Have you spoken to Eros?” she asked him.

“Yes.” An exasperated expression crossed his face. “And no, I don’t think he’s any closer to learning his lesson.”

“Surely there’s something we can do.” The very idea that she could lose Eros forever weighed on her. “Could we convene the council again? I can’t just stand by and do nothing.”

“I love him too.” He placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. “But this is something he needs to do on his own.”

She agreed, of course, but still could not accept that Eros would simply die an old man in about fifty years or so. “But maybe it’s my fault?—”

“No,” he said, cutting her off. “It’s not your fault and you know it. You did everything you could for him, suffered yourself to protect him.” A dark look crossed his face. “If anyone is at fault, it’s that bastard Cyncus. He’s the one who hurt you both.”

“You’re right. And let’s not talk about this now, not when this is one of the happiest days of my life.” Reaching up, she cupped his face. “I can’t believe it’s been a year. Sometimes, it seems fast, and other times, I can’t remember what it was like without you.”

Turning his head, he kissed the inside of her palm and closed his eyes. “I do. And I never want it to be like that ever again.”

“Even when I annoy you?” she teased.

Their relationship wasn’t without its ups and downs, of course. They had been independent for millennia, and even when they were married the first time, they were more like roommates and co-parents rather than a couple. There were days when she grew frustrated at him and him at her. But at the end of the day, they loved each other, and communication went a long way.

He opened his eyes. “Even when you annoy me. Besides, who’s going to remind me not to leave my towels on the floor?”

She giggled. “And who am I going to steal the duvet from in the middle of the night?”

“I bought you that second blanket for a reason, you know.”

“I know, but then I can’t cuddle up to your back while you’re sleeping. You love being the little spoon, admit it.”

His lips twisted wryly. He said nothing and kissed her instead.

“We should probably say hello to our host and hostess.” She nodded toward Cade and Artemis. They walked over to where the couple was seated at a corner table.

“Aphrodite, H!” Artemis stood up, a small child a few months old slept in her arms. “It was such a beautiful ceremony. I was crying the whole time.”

“You made it happen. Oh!” Aphrodite clapped her hands together as she peered at the dark-haired child. “Hi there...this is...”

“Phoebe,” Artemis said. “Liam is sleeping soundly. As usual.” She jerked a thumb

behind her, where another child lay inside a mechanical cradle Hephaestus had given the couple the year before.

“Oh, you’re so precious.” She touched Phoebe’s soft, smooth cheek. Long lashes fluttered open, revealing beautiful blue eyes. She looked up sleepily at her and then smiled.

“Want to hold her?” Artemis asked.

“Really? You don’t mind?”

“My arm’s getting tired anyway.” She handed her over.

“You are adorable,” she cooed as she took the child from her mother. Phoebe rubbed at her eyes and let out a yawn. “Sometimes I wish Eros was this small again. He really was the cutest baby ever.”

“I wish he was a baby again, too,” Cade said wryly.

“I’m sorry,” she said to the Alpha. “I know he’s not been the easiest person to live with.”

“It’s not your fault,” Cade said, which Hephaestus answered with a nod. “But he’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“I hope he hasn’t caused any damage around here,” Hephaestus said. “I’ll make sure he fixes anything he breaks.”

“Thank you. However, perhaps it’s the Lady Aphrodite who could repair a few things around here.”

“Me?” She placed a hand over her heart. “I’m afraid I’m not good with tools, as Hephaestus can attest to when I tried to fix a shelf back in Thessaly.” He flashed her a grin.

“The damage isn’t physical, my lady, but rather emotional.”

“What?”

Artemis spoke up. “Eros has been...let’s say, very, very popular with the ladies around here and in town. He’s caused a few fights, and some have turned physical.”

“Two girls got into a brawl at the Moosehead Tavern when they found out he was sleeping with both of them,” Cade said. “PD had to come and break it up.”

“Seems overly dramatic,” Hephaestus said.

A muscle ticked in the Alpha’s jaw. “They were sisters.”

“Oh, Eros.” She slapped a hand over her forehead. She just hoped it wouldn’t take a few decades for him to learn.

“Maybe we can—oh!” Artemis waved her hand in the air at someone behind Aphrodite. “Over here!”

Aphrodite turned to where Artemis was waving and saw a young woman walking toward them. She looked to be in her mid to late twenties, though, with her petite stature and round cheeks, it would be easy to mistake her for much younger.

“Everyone, this is Psyche,” Artemis introduced. “She’s visiting us from the Vancouver Pack and just arrived a few hours ago. Psyche, this is Aphrodite and Hephaestus. I hope you don’t mind, since she’s here anyway, I thought I’d invite her

to eat with us at the reception.”

“Of course, we don’t mind. Like I said, you can invite anyone to lunch,” Aphrodite said. “So, Psyche, you’re also a wolf shifter?”

“Yes.”

A beat passed as Aphrodite waited for the young woman to follow up with more information. Instead, her hazel eyes remained unblinking as they stared back at her.

“She’s doing research in the area,” Artemis said, cutting through the awkwardness. “For your PhD, right?”

“Yes. Is that one of the babies?” she asked Aphrodite.

“Uh, yeah.”

Psyche cocked her head to the side. “Can I hold her?”

Aphrodite glanced over at Artemis, who nodded. “Sure.” She handed Phoebe over to Psyche. “Do you have children of your own?”

“No, but I like babies.” She took the child from Aphrodite and held her up, staring into its eyes. “She’s a shifter.” Pressing her nose to Phoebe’s temple, she took a sniff. “Smells like one too.”

At that moment, Phoebe let out a wail.

“She’s crying,” Psyche said.

“Here, let me,” Aphrodite began.

“No, I got it.” Psyche held the baby close and began to rock her. “Slow, gentle motions help soothe an upset baby.”

“I think she wants her mother,” Aphrodite said, trying to be polite as Phoebe continued to cry.

“Is the baby sick? Colic? Maybe she has an upset stomach? Has she been burped?” She frowned. “I read three baby books in preparation for my stay here.”

“You did?” Artemis asked. “Why?”

“My father said I was to make myself useful while I was here, so I thought I could offer my services as a babysitter on my off days.” Of course, she had to practically shout that over the din of Phoebe’s screams.

“What in the world is that racket?” Eros said as he came up behind Psyche. “Oh, it’s you.” His lips pursed as he stared at the child. “Don’t you do anything but scream and cry?”

“It’s a baby,” Psyche said. “It’s how they communicate as they have yet to learn any language skills. They develop?—”

“Here, let me have her.” Without warning, he took Phoebe from Psyche and perched her on his hip. “Be. Quiet.” To everyone’s surprise, the child stopped crying. Her blue eyes went wide as she reached out to smack Eros’s nose.

“Yeow!” he yelped. “What did you do that for?” The child, however, seemed amused at the god’s discomfort as she let out a peal of laughter. “Oh, is that funny?”

“I didn’t think you’d be good with children,” Hephaestus remarked.

“Probably a fluke. I think something is wrong with this child.” Phoebe, however, curled up against his shoulder and began to suck on her thumb. Eros’s nostrils flared as Hephaestus covered his mouth, trying not to laugh. “Don’t think I’ll be babysitting for the two of you anytime soon.”

Aphrodite sent Hephaestus a meaningful look. Of course, they had talked of having children of their own, and they agreed they might try in the future. But for now, they were happy to be together and make up for all the lost time apart.

“So, are you the new nanny?” Eros looked Psyche up and down. “I’m no baby, but you can sit on me anytime.”

“Eros!” Aphrodite admonished. “Psyche is a guest of your Alpha.”

“He’s only my Alpha because of this stupid punishment.” He licked his lips at Psyche. “What did you do to get stuck out here, sweetcakes?”

“Did you know titanosaurs have no toes on their front feet?” she said, her voice flat and emotionless.

“Huh?”

“They evolved that way, no one knows why,” she continued. “They walk around on these stumps made of metacarpal bones.”

Eros blinked. “What are you talking about?”

“Titanosaurs,” she said flatly. “They’re a type of dinosaur.”

“Psyche is getting her PhD in paleontology,” Cade offered.

“Paleoichnology, to be exact,” Psyche said. “With a focus on paleoclimatology.”

“How interesting,” Aphrodite said. But that wasn’t the only thing she found interesting, as she couldn’t help but notice her son scowling at the she-wolf, his face a mix of confusion and perhaps, some fascination. Most women who first meet Eros were immediately enamored of him, and he turned even the sternest matrons into giggling girls. This Psyche, however, seemed immune to his charms. A first for the god of love and desire, probably.

“I think everyone’s waiting for you two to start the festivities,” Artemis said. “Right, H?”

“What does that mean?” Aphrodite lifted an eyebrow at him. “Hephaestus?”

“Look,” he began. “I know we said we wouldn’t have a fancy program or formal reception. But there was something we didn’t do at our first wedding.”

“And what’s that?”

“Dance.” A slow song began to play over the speakers. “During our first wedding, I saw your face as you watched everyone else on the dance floor. You were disappointed, and I still kick myself each time I think of it because I couldn’t give you the one thing that would have probably cheered you up that day.”

“We agreed, that’s all in the past. Besides, I didn’t think you’d want to dance.” She wouldn’t have subjected him to something he didn’t want to do.

“I didn’t,” he said. “And thank you for thinking of me at that time. But, now, let me make up for it.” He held out a hand to her. “Will you dance with me, Aphrodite?”

“Of course.”

He led her to the middle of the dance floor and placed his arms around her, holding her close. She followed his lead, swaying to the beat of the music. At one point, he even twirled her around. “Wow, did you take lessons or something?”

“Not quite. I had Apollo teach me.”

“Apollo? Really?”

“Yeah.” He turned her, then dipped her dramatically, much to the delight of the crowd. “But you’re a much prettier partner.”

She stared at him, amazed that he would go through all that trouble just to learn to dance with her. “And your leg? It doesn’t bother you.”

“Not at all. Though...” He frowned. “I’ve been trying to improve on the sound. It’s still making too much noise, especially when I pivot on my toes for the dip. I’ll fix it for the next time.”

“Next time? You want to dance with me more?”

“Of course I do. I’ll dance with you anytime, all the time.”

Her heart nearly burst from all the emotion building inside her. “You don’t have to fix the noise, Hephaestus.”

“It doesn’t bother you?”

“Nuh-uh, not one bit. There’s nothing to fix.” She reached up and cupped his jaw with her hands, peering straight up at his dark eyes. She didn’t need to use her powers to feel the love from him. “Like I said, it’s one of those things that’s just you.”

The End.

Thanks for reading!

We hope you enjoyed Loved by Aphrodite.

If you liked Aphrodite and Hephaestus's love story, please do consider leaving a review.

by Adilyn Andrews

Chapter One

In the heart of New Amsterdam University's campus, an oasis lay within the quad, surrounded by lush greenery. Towering oak trees cast intricate patterns of light and shadow upon the cobblestone pathways, where students walked engaged in animated conversations, or lost in introspective thought.

The tranquility of the scene captivated all who passed through—the meticulously manicured lawns, the stately elms standing sentinel-like, and the red brick buildings, their ivy-clad facades whispering tales of academic prestige and history. The Gothic architecture, with its ornate details, served as a silent testament to the university's enduring legacy of learning and discovery.

Ethan stood across from the imposing facade of the public affairs building, his phone pressed against his ear as he listened intently to the voice on the other end. "Yeah, I understand, Marcus," he said, wincing. "I'll make the trip to Ithaca for the meeting."

Marcus, his uncle and the alpha of their shifter wolf pack, had called requesting his presence for an important meeting. Ethan knew duty to the pack came first, but he still felt a pang of apprehension as he considered how much work he had to do. He glanced up at the towering structure before him and reflected on the increased responsibilities he had shouldered since his parents moved to Washington. Being one of the few remaining family members in the area, he often found himself balancing the demands of his PhD studies with the obligations of the Ithaca pack.

He leaned against the bench, and listened to Marcus's voice on the line. The sounds of the campus provided a backdrop to their conversation.

"How are your studies going, Ethan? I know it's a busy time for you with everything going on."

Ethan chuckled softly, running a hand through his hair. "They're going well. I can manage it. Coming to Ithaca won't be a problem."

As he spoke, his gaze wandered across the quad, his eyes catching on a woman standing nearby. She had delicate features, with jet-black hair that danced in the gentle breeze. A faint smile tugged at his lips as he watched her, admiring her from a distance.

But his reverie was interrupted when he noticed the man beside her, wrapping her in an embrace. Ethan's smile faltered as he realized they must be a couple. He tore his gaze away, refocusing on Marcus's voice on the other end of the line.

"Yeah, I'll be there," he repeated.

"That's good to hear, Ethan. And how's James? I've been trying to get in touch with him," Marcus inquired, asking about his son. "Tell him to call me."

"He's around somewhere." He and James were working on a research project together, and he would see him later. "I'll tell him when I see him."

It was funny how even outside of the pack, he and James still ended up working with each other. James was two years younger and had just started the MBA program. Then he spotted James in the distance, engrossed in his phone as he navigated through the throng of people.

Before Ethan could say more, James collided with the young Asian woman, causing her to stumble slightly. Ethan's eyebrows shot up in surprise as he watched the interaction unfold. He expected James to charm her with his usual charisma, but to his astonishment, the woman merely exchanged a polite word or two before turning back to the Asian man she had been talking to.

Ethan's curiosity piqued as he observed the woman's indifference towards James, something that almost never happened given his cousin's usual charm. Without a second thought, the woman continued on her way, disappearing alone into the public affairs building.

"He mentioned that you two have been talking to the younger members of the pack," Marcus continued, pulling him back into the conversation.

The importance of pack matters hung heavy in the air, overshadowing the picturesque scene around him. "There's been some disagreements among them," he began. "They're questioning the current leadership and seeking more autonomy."

Marcus sighed on the other end of the line. "I've noticed the tension brewing," he admitted. "But we need to ensure unity within the pack, now more than ever."

"I'll speak with them and try to address their concerns," he assured his uncle, his determination unwavering.

As they continued to discuss strategies for maintaining peace and stability within the pack, Ethan felt a surge of pride for the community he had grown up in. "We'll get through this, Marcus," he affirmed. "Together, as a pack."

Then he remembered another thing to talk about.

"Before I forget, we need to address the situation with Gracie," he urged, his lips

pursing. “She’s been spending a lot of time with that shifter from the neighboring pack, and it’s causing tension.”

There was a brief pause on the other end of the line before Marcus responded. “I know, Ethan. Gracie’s like a daughter to me,” Marcus admitted. “But we need to tread carefully. We don’t want to escalate things further.”

Gracie was not only Marcus’s niece but also deeply cherished by their pack. Her involvement with a shifter from another pack threatened to strain their fragile peace. They talked about what they could do when he suddenly realized he had completely forgotten about the meeting he was supposed to attend. “Sorry, Marcus, I’ve got to go. I just remembered I have a meeting.”

“No problem, Ethan. We’ll catch up later.”

With a quick goodbye, Ethan ended the call and hastily made his way into the public affairs building, his mind already shifting gears. James often sat in his cubicle since they were working together on a project. He wondered if James was there so he could tell him to call his dad. As he approached his workspace, his attention was drawn to a familiar voice.

He paused in the doorway, and to his surprise, James was engaged in conversation with the young Asian woman Ethan had noticed earlier. They seemed to be deep in discussion, their expressions animated and relaxed.

As he observed them, he noticed the ease with which the woman interacted with James.

“Sorry for the delay. Lost track of time,” he said, glancing between them.

She turned toward him, and he finally got a good look up close. She was stunning,

her features delicate yet captivating, and he found himself momentarily taken aback by her beauty. But it was her gaze that held his attention, a sense of depth and mystery lurking behind her eyes.

James gestured toward her. “Ethan, this is Ji-min. She’s here for a meeting with you.”

“Of course. Hi, Ji-min. James has been keeping you entertained, I assume?”

She blushed. He stared as the color spread and made her even more pretty.

“I only live to serve,” quipped James, walking toward the door. “I’ll leave you to it. Good luck with your research, Ji-min.” And with that, he disappeared through the doorway.

Ethan moved to the chair next to her and realized that sitting this close seemed like a bad idea. He looked at her, and his wolf started to stir for some reason, which was weird since his wolf never reacted to anything unless something was wrong, and he tried to remember what they were supposed to talk about.

She straightened in her chair, and when their eyes met, he felt her tense up.

“As I mentioned in my email, I’ve been doing some research on wolves in the United States,” she began. “Their historical presence and the current efforts for conservation and reintroduction. It’s a fascinating topic with so many layers to explore.”

Right, that’s what she needs information on. He crossed his arms over his chest. “Wolves, huh?” he replied. He tried to pull himself into the moment. “There’s no shortage of myths and misconceptions surrounding those creatures. Are you just looking to romanticize them, or do you genuinely want to understand the reality?”

Her brows drew down. “I assure you, I’m approaching this with genuine curiosity,”

she said, her voice firm yet earnest. “I want to dig deeper, to uncover the truth behind their history, their role in the ecosystem, and the challenges they face.”

“Well, be prepared to face the harsh realities,” he retorted and gave her a small smile. “It’s not all fairy tales and wonder. There are complexities and conflicts involved in the world of wolf conservation.”

“I’m not one to shy away from the truth,” she replied, her voice steady. “I want to explore the complexities, to shed light on the challenges and efforts to protect these incredible creatures. I believe their story deserves to be told authentically.”

“Actually, I’m quite familiar with the reintroduction efforts in places like Minnesota and other parts of the Midwest. It’s incredible to see how wolves have come back in those regions and the positive impact they’ve had on the ecosystem.”

“You’ve done your homework,” he acknowledged, a faint smile playing at the corners of his mouth. “It’s good that you’re already aware of the success stories in other areas. But remember that every region is unique, and the dynamics of wolf reintroduction can vary.”

She nodded. “Absolutely, that’s why I’m drawn to exploring the specific history and potential for wolf reintroduction here in New York.”

“New York, huh.” His wolf stirred again. What, you don’t like that she’s doing research on wolves? “I understand your interest in the history and potential of wolves in New York, but it’s worth noting that there aren’t any active conservation efforts for wolves in this state. The last confirmed sightings were decades ago, and their populations have remained scarce since then. So, why the focus on New York?”

“That’s precisely why I’m drawn to it. There’s a gap in our understanding of what happened to the wolves in this region. I believe their story deserves to be told, even if

it's a story of absence and loss. By exploring the history, documenting the sightings, and understanding the factors that led to their decline, I hope to bring attention to the significance of their presence in the past and the potential for their return."

He studied her. "It's an unconventional approach," he acknowledged cautiously. "But I suppose there's merit in uncovering forgotten narratives and connecting them to the legacy of these creatures. It won't be an easy task, though. The information is scarce, and many of the firsthand accounts have been lost to time."

She pursed her lips and stared back at him. "I'm ready for the challenge," she assured him. "I believe there's a story waiting to be unearthed, and I'm determined to find it."

She took a deep breath. "Ethan, I understand your reservations, but I truly believe there's something valuable in this research," she said, her voice earnest. "Do you think there's anyone else I could reach out to? Maybe someone who has studied wolves extensively or who has firsthand experience working with them?"

I didn't realize that I was being 'reserved.' When he finally spoke, he tried to sound less guarded. "There are a few researchers and organizations that might be worth looking into," he said, hoping he came off as friendly. "I can compile a list of recommended readings, studies, and contacts for you. But I won't sugarcoat it—you'll need to approach this with a critical eye and be ready to face opposing viewpoints."

She nodded. "Thank you, Ethan. I appreciate your help," she replied, her voice laced with sincerity. "This is my thesis we're talking about, and I want to ensure I leave no stone unturned. I want to challenge my own assumptions and delve into the complexities."

He leaned back in his chair. "If you're truly committed to going beyond the surface and exploring the nuances of wolf conservation, then I'm willing to assist," he said,

trying to come across as more optimistic. “Just promise me you won’t shy away from the less glamorous aspects. Wolves aren’t just noble creatures; they’re part of a larger ecosystem with its own set of challenges.”

Her gaze glinted. “I’ll approach this with an open mind and a commitment to uncovering the truth. I want to understand the intricate balance between human interests, conservation efforts, and the survival of these animals.”

She ran her fingers through the ponytail that was on her shoulder. He felt his eyes drawn to her hand and wondered if she was feeling self-conscious.

“I believe there’s a story to be told, one that hasn’t received as much attention,” she said. “And I want to highlight the challenges and opportunities unique to this region.”

Ethan leaned forward, his brow furrowing slightly. “I can respect that,” he admitted. “Alright, Ji-min. I’ll put together that list for you while you’re here. Otherwise, with this grant proposal I’m working on, I might completely forget.”

“Sure, that would be great.”

“Just give me a few minutes to look up the information,” he said, turning to the laptop near him.

“Thank you so much. I really appreciate you taking the time to do this.”

He nodded, his fingers already tapping on the keyboard. “No problem at all. It is a small break from my grant writing frenzy. I’ll do my best to gather the most relevant resources for your research.”

Now, who would work as a good resource? He went through his contacts, then compiled a list of researchers and included their email addresses in an email. He

looked away from the computer and glanced at her. She looked relaxed and lost in her thoughts. That's when he realized that she had been tense and uncomfortable while they were talking. Way to go, Sullivan, that's the way to make a good first impression.

"I sent the email," he said, leaning back in his chair. "It might not be exhaustive, but it should provide you with a good starting point."

She nodded. "That's fantastic. I'm looking forward to looking over those sources. Thank you."

He offered her a brief smile. "You're welcome. Just remember that research like this requires patience and persistence. Don't get discouraged if you encounter roadblocks along the way."

He could swear that she was about to roll her eyes at him.

Instead, she smiled while she stood up. "I won't give up easily, Ethan. This means a lot to me, and I'm ready to put in the work."

With a nod, he stood up and extended his hand. She reached out to clasp it, but as their palms touched, an unexpected jolt of electricity surged through him. A tingling sensation traveled up his arm, leaving a trail of warmth in its wake. She looked up at him, and her breath hitched ever so slightly. Their hands lingered for a fleeting second longer than necessary, as if time had momentarily frozen.

She withdrew her hand and mustered a smile. He could feel the energy in the air as if there was an unspoken understanding, a brief but powerful connection that defied explanation. What the hell was that?

"Good luck with your research, Ji-min," he said, sitting back down and turning to his

laptop. “Feel free to reach out if you have any questions.”

“Thanks again, Ethan,” she said. Through his wolf senses he could hear her heartbeat hammering away as she walked away.

His wolf stirred against his skin again. He stared at his laptop, though he wanted to call out to her and keep her near for a little bit longer. He looked behind him and watched her walk through the door.

Well, that was weird.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:33 am

The harsh glow of the computer screen made the words blur together into a jumble of letters and numbers. With a sigh, Ethan pushed himself away from the desk, rubbing at his tired eyes.

“Enough for now,” he muttered to himself, glancing at his watch. The runner’s meeting wasn’t for another hour, but he knew he needed a break from the monotony of work.

Deciding a change of scenery was in order, he headed out of the office, the cool air hitting him as he stepped onto campus. But before he could fully immerse himself in the surroundings, a familiar hand landed on his arm, pulling his attention.

Turning, he found Lidia standing beside him, her presence magnetic as always. She was a gorgeous woman with a mischievous glint in her eye and an air of confidence that drew people to her effortlessly.

Her style was casual yet alluring, often opting for jeans and a simple T-shirt that accentuated her natural beauty. Her tousled hair fell in waves around her face, framing her features with an effortless charm.

Despite their busy schedules as PhD students, Lidia and Ethan had a special thing going on—they were friends who also hooked up. It was built on mutual respect and understanding, plus the undeniable attraction that simmered just under the surface.

As he met her gaze, a playful smirk tugged at the corners of her lips.

“Ethan, hey!” Her voice was bright and cheerful as she greeted him, her smile

infectious. “I’m so glad I ran into you. I’m heading out to a conference, but when I get back, we should hang out.”

Ethan raised an eyebrow. “Hang out, huh?” he teased, a hint of amusement in his voice.

Lidia chuckled, a playful glint in her eyes. “You know me too well,” she admitted. “But seriously, I’ve missed spending time with you.”

He smiled. “Text me when you’re back in the City, and we’ll make plans.”

Lidia grinned. “You got it,” she replied, leaning in to press a quick kiss against his cheek before turning to leave.

As he watched her go, he knew that when she returned from her conference, there would be more than just hanging out on the agenda. He turned in the other direction and thought about their conversation. Their understanding was clear: they focused on their studies and agreed to keep their relationship casual. It was a dynamic that worked for them, at least for now.

He was undoubtedly drawn to her—she was beautiful, intelligent, and their chemistry was undeniable. But beneath the surface, a nagging sense of apprehension gnawed at him. He had been down this road before, dating humans and hiding his true nature. It always ended in heartache and disappointment, leaving him wary of opening up to anyone outside his pack.

He wondered if history would repeat itself with Lidia. Despite their connection, he couldn’t see a good time to broach the subject of his shifter identity. The thought of revealing such a deeply guarded secret filled him with dread, yet he knew it was inevitable if their relationship were to progress.

He shook his head. For now, he would enjoy her company. He appreciated her honesty and clarity about their relationship; they'd always kept it chill, no strings attached. Lidia's straightforwardness allowed him to relax, knowing they had no hidden expectations or pressures.

For Ethan, the simplicity of their dynamic was a welcome change from the complexities of his past relationships. He was content to go with the flow, as long as their arrangement continued to work for both of them, he was more than happy to embrace its ease and simplicity.

A sudden craving for caffeine hit him. "I could use a coffee," he mused and decided to go to the Coffee House. Pushing open the door, he was greeted by the warm aroma of freshly brewed coffee and the gentle hum of conversation. He made his way to the counter, placing his order with a grateful smile.

As he waited for his coffee, Ethan leaned against the counter, enjoying the break from work. The quiet chatter of the cafe patrons and the comforting scent of coffee beans filled the air, washing away the tension that had been building within him. Amidst the scattered conversations and the soft hum of espresso machines, his eyes landed on Ji-min. She sat alone at a corner table, her attention fully absorbed by the glow of her laptop screen. She is really pretty.

His order was up, so he turned around to get his coffee. When he turned back, he found Ji-min looking up from her laptop, a faint smile gracing her lips. He felt an impulse within him and walked over to her.

It had been a week since their meeting, and he hadn't heard from her. So he could conceivably use that as a reason to talk to her. Probably.

She smiled as he approached her table. "Hey, Ethan! I...How are you doing?"

“Hi, Ji-min,” he said, gesturing to the empty seat across from her. “May I?”

“Of course,” she said while putting away her laptop.

“I’m killing some time before I have to get to Central Park for a runner’s group meetup,” he said, motioning to his shirt.

“Ah, so that’s your break from PhD life?”

“Yeah, it’s a good way to not think about work,” he grinned at her. “How about you? What do you do for stress relief?”

“Well, I usually do yoga, but I haven’t looked for a studio yet,” she said, sounding like she felt guilty.

“Hmm, so maybe grad school isn’t stressful enough?” He took a sip of coffee.

She leaned back in her chair, “Oh, it’s been challenging. I’m grateful for the opportunity to sharpen my skills. And I’ve been fortunate to work with great professors who push me to think critically and explore new perspectives.”

He nodded. “Yeah, it’s always great to have PIs who are easy to work with.”

“PIs?”

“Oh, principal investigators or, I guess, for journalism, professors. Anything that has stood out so far?”

“Absolutely! One was on a multimedia storytelling project about environmental conservation in the city. It involved interviewing local activists, scientists, and community members, and bringing their stories to life was incredibly fulfilling. These

hands-on projects remind me why I'm interested in journalism."

"Sounds like an incredible project. It's great that you've combined journalism with environmental concerns."

"It's been a journey of self-discovery, finding my niche, and using storytelling as a catalyst for change." She smiled appreciatively. "But enough about me. How about you? The last time we talked, you mentioned you were working on a proposal. How's that going?"

"Finding the right words has been challenging, but it will be worth it," he said, smiling. He knew he was on the right track, and the proposal had a lot of potential.

They continued talking, and he was glad he didn't feel his wolf reacting. Maybe there was just something, a one-off thing. He remembered their meeting and asked her how her research was going.

"Sorry, what did you ask?" she said, looking across the room.

"How is your research going about wolves in New York? Did the list of people and resources I give you work out?"

She nodded, regaining her composure. "Ah, yes. I've been working on it. Have you encountered any new insights or developments since we last spoke?"

"Actually, there have been a few interesting findings. Some studies suggest that the resurgence of wolves in certain regions might impact the local ecosystem unexpectedly. It's a complex issue, and the more we uncover, the more questions arise."

"That's fascinating! I'd love to hear more about those findings and explore potential

connections with my research.”

“I must admit I had reservations about your focus on wolves in New York. It’s a challenging subject to tackle, and some researchers believe it’s not a significant enough topic to dedicate extensive research to. However, I’m open to discussing things further.”

Her lips pursed as she looked at him. “I understand your perspective, Ethan, and I respect differing opinions.” she maintained a diplomatic tone. “However, I firmly believe that exploring the resurgence of wolves in New York can shed light on the delicate balance between human activity and wildlife conservation. I’d love to discuss our viewpoints further if you’re willing.”

Damn it, why do I always come across as difficult to her? He tried to find the right words. “Perhaps that would be good. Let’s schedule a time to sit down and discuss the research in more depth.”

“Ethan, I’ve noticed that whenever we talk about wolves in New York, you seem to hold back. Is there a specific reason why you act so guarded on this topic?”

For some reason, his wolf started to press against his skin again. “It’s just a personal matter, Ji-min. Wolves and their presence in New York carry a deeper significance for me, one that I prefer to keep to myself.”

She nodded. “I respect that. If there’s ever a time when you feel comfortable sharing, know that I’m here to listen.”

A brief moment of silence passed between them, and he tried to make sense of what was happening with his wolf.

“So, I don’t know about you, but I love the coffee here,” she said, smiling. “I’m a

coffee snob and will not touch anything instant.”

He grinned. “So, how bad is this coffee addiction?” he teased her. “How many mugs and types of brewers do you have?”

“Well, I don’t have as much here in the City,” she admitted, a lovely blush covering her cheeks. “But enough to make a good cup of coffee in the morning. And sometimes I bring coffee on trips to ensure I start the day right.”

He laughed, “That’s fair.”

Their conversation continued over their cups of coffee, and he mentioned growing up in Upstate New York and being part of a close-knit community with a strong attachment to their land.

“Whereabouts are you from?” she asked.

“I grew up in the Adirondacks,” he said, sipping his coffee and setting the cup back on the saucer. His hand rested beside it.

She leaned forward slightly, her eyes sparkling with genuine interest. Her hand reached out, and her fingertips brushed against his knuckles, and for a fleeting moment, time seemed to pause. The connection was electric, a surge of energy that traveled through him from the inadvertent touch.

Their eyes locked, and he watched as her cheeks flushed with surprise and something more. The touch was accidental, yet it felt like destiny aligning their paths. In that unguarded moment, the layers that separated them melted away.

“Um...Wait, s-so you’re from the Adirondacks?” she stammered, her fingers retracting slightly.

“Yes.” He smiled gently, his gaze never leaving hers.

She smiled. “That’s interesting! I’m thinking of going there next week. What was it like growing up there?”

“It’s a place of immense natural beauty, and we have a tight-knit community. We believe in being stewards of the land, protecting and preserving it for future generations.”

“Is that why you ended up in environmental policy?”

“Growing up surrounded by such breathtaking landscapes and witnessing the delicate balance between humans and nature, I developed a deep sense of responsibility.” He paused and smiled while he thought about his journey. “I wanted to make a difference, to ensure that our land and its inhabitants are safeguarded.”

He pulled out his phone. “Here are some photos,” he said, moving closer to her. “This is Mirror Lake.”

“I’d love to see,” she replied, and reached for his phone, her fingers brushing against his for a fleeting moment. She swiped the screen, revealing a gallery of photos.

“Mirror Lake is where I spent my summers swimming and hiking with my family,” he said, pointing to a serene image of a pristine lake surrounded by towering pine trees.

Her gaze lingered on the photo. “It looks like a magical place,” she whispered.

He nodded, his voice softening with nostalgia. “It truly is.” He swiped to the next photo, revealing a snapshot of a rustic cabin nestled among tall trees. “The Adirondacks holds a special kind of magic.”

She continued to scroll through the photos on his phone, and their fingers brushed against each other again, a subtle connection that sent a shiver down his spine. It was an accidental touch, but neither seemed eager to pull away.

“There are strict regulations in place to preserve the Adirondacks,” he explained. “The region is protected by the Adirondack Park Agency, which ensures that any development or activities within the park align with its conservation goals. It’s about finding that delicate balance between allowing people to appreciate the area’s splendor and safeguarding its ecological integrity.”

“That sounds like a challenging task. How do you navigate those complexities?” she asked, looking at him.

“It’s a delicate dance, for sure. We have to consider the economic needs of the local communities, but always with an eye toward long-term sustainability. It’s about finding ways to promote responsible tourism and outdoor recreation while minimizing the impact on the ecosystem.”

He heard her breath catch as her fingers found his again, sending a rush of warmth through him. She looked up, and their eyes locked. He saw the same desire reflected in her gaze. It was a silent invitation, an unspoken understanding that this moment was something extraordinary.

Their fingers continued to bump each other’s, a magnetic pull that neither of them could deny. They seemed to be in their own world, even with the scent of freshly brewed coffee and the gentle hum of conversations around them.

They talked more about the intricacies of environmental protection and the challenges faced in upholding the Adirondacks’ beauty. His thumb traced a gentle path along the back of her hand. “I’m glad I could share this with you,” he murmured, his voice soft and genuine.

“I’m glad you did,” she whispered back, smiling. Then took a deep breath. “So, what led you from the Adirondacks to the City?”

“Well,” he began, “I’ve been in the City for quite a while now. It all started with grad school, where I focused on environmental studies. I wanted to gain a broader perspective and learn how to effect change on a larger scale.”

He paused. “I dove into research and worked on various sustainable development and conservation projects. It was a time of exploration, of finding my place in the world beyond the familiar landscapes of the Adirondacks.”

She listened attentively, and seemed to be interested, so he decided to tell her more. “And then I found myself in the realm of public policy. It became a way to translate my passion for the environment into actionable change. I’ve been fortunate to contribute to developing policies to preserve natural spaces, including the Adirondacks.”

Their fingers continued to touch, and it felt as if they were on the cusp of something magical—as enchanting and timeless as the mountains themselves.

Ethan took the last sip of his coffee and glanced at his watch. With a slight sigh, he placed the empty cup back on the table, his gaze meeting hers. “Well, it’s been great catching up with you,” he said, smiling. “I have to go now.” His thumb gently caressed her fingertips one last time. His gaze met hers, and he sighed softly.

She nodded. “It was nice talking to you.”

He glanced over at her, and their eyes locked. “I enjoyed it too,” he replied. “If you ever want to learn more or have any further questions, don’t hesitate to reach out. I’m happy to help.”

She smiled. “I’ll keep that in mind, Ethan.”

He stood with a final nod. But he couldn’t resist and reached out one more time, his fingers gently touching her hand. It was a simple gesture, but through his shifter senses he could feel her heartbeat race at his touch as she looked into his eyes.

“Bye, Ji-min,” he smiled and withdrew his hand.

Before he walked out of the coffee shop, he stole one more glance at her and it looked like she was deep in thought.

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Towering cliffs framed the entrance, their rugged faces etched with the passage of time. Lush vegetation clung to the rocky walls, casting verdant shadows that danced in the dappled sunlight. A canopy of vibrant foliage arched overhead, creating a tunnel of greenery that stretched before him. The scent of damp earth and fresh air enveloped him, invigorating his senses as he stepped into the embrace of nature.

The sound of rushing water greeted him, the gentle melody of the creek echoing off the canyon walls. A wooden sign marked the beginning of the trail, its weathered surface bearing the name Watkins Glen in bold letters.

With each step, Ethan felt the weight of the world lift from his shoulders, soothing the tension that had been building within his chest. Taking a deep breath of the crisp, forest-scented air, he was glad he went up early for his meeting with Marcus about the pack. It was a welcome break from city life, a chance to reconnect with nature and find solace in its embrace.

Watkins Glen held a special place in his heart, a sanctuary of tranquility that had been a cherished destination for his family throughout the years. He recalled fond memories of hiking along the winding trails, the laughter of his family echoing through the canyon walls.

His footsteps echoed softly against the rocky terrain, and he felt gratitude for the chance to immerse himself in the beauty of the natural world. In the embrace of Watkins Glen, he found solace and renewal, preparing him for the challenges ahead with a newfound sense of strength and clarity.

As Ethan walked through the verdant pathways, his senses heightened by the tranquil

beauty surrounding him, he suddenly felt a subtle shift in the atmosphere. A presence lingered behind him, prompting him to turn around. To his surprise, Ji-min stood before him. Ethan's lips curved into a genuine smile as a moment of disbelief passed between them.

"Ethan? What are you doing here?" she blurted out when she caught up to him.

His smile widened. "Ji-min, what a surprise! I often go on a hike when I'm in the area."

"But what brought you all the way here? It's quite a coincidence, don't you think?"

"Coincidences can be fascinating, can't they?" he chuckled softly.

"What do you mean?"

He paused and adjusted a well-worn backpack slung over his shoulders. "I grew up in these parts. These mountains hold a special place in my heart."

"Ah, yes. I remember we talked about this."

He smiled, his gaze drifting over the view before them. "So, what brings you here?"

"I'm here on a reporting trip. It's been enlightening, but I hit a dead end. I decided to take a break and get some fresh air."

"Your thesis?" he asked, motioning for them to continue on the trail. Side by side, the crunch of leaves echoed under their footsteps.

"Yes." She glanced at him.

I wonder why she is interested in wolves? His gaze drifted into the distance.

He finally spoke up, his voice tinged with curiosity and caution. “You know, Ji-min, connecting wolves to this particular area seems quite challenging. New York, and the Adirondacks in particular, have a long history of human settlement and the eradication of wolf populations. It’s rare to find any traces of their presence in this region.”

Ji-min sighed. “I’m well aware of the challenges, Ethan. The historical accounts have been scarce, and it’s been a struggle to find concrete evidence. But there are anecdotal stories and oral traditions that hint at a connection between wolves and the indigenous people of this land.”

“I won’t dismiss the possibility. History can often surprise us with hidden narratives. Sometimes, what we seek might not be what we find.”

She nodded. “You’re right. It’s crucial to maintain a balance between curiosity and skepticism. I’m going to keep digging, and hopefully, the research leads to something good.”

They continued on the Gorge trail covered in emerald and sapphire shades. Sunlight filtered through the canopy above, casting dappled patterns on the moss-covered earth beneath their feet.

“Oh, this is so pretty,” she said, looking as the water rushed by beside the trail. “I’m glad this hike is an easy one. I didn’t bring my hiking boots.”

“Yeah, you should be okay. There are some steps up ahead, but it shouldn’t be slippery today.”

“So, how many times have you hiked Watkins Glen?”

“A lot, especially when I was younger.”

They were at the foot of a stone staircase. “Couch’s Staircase,” she said, reading a marker aloud. She turned to him. “I guess we go up this way?”

“Yup. My cousin and I would come here whenever we were bored. There were plenty of times we would run down these stairs and make people mad,” he laughed.

“Running? Did you guys ever get hurt?”

“Not really. Though I do remember my cousin fell one time by the bottom of the steps.” He laughed at her horrified expression. “It was nothing; he was limping for a little bit.”

“I can’t even imagine! I’ve never broken a bone or really been in the hospital for anything.”

“Me neither. For the most part, it was mostly my cousin getting hurt.”

“Your family is super close?”

“Yes. Aside from my family, our whole community is close. I guess that’s one of the upsides of growing up in a small town. How about you?”

“I grew up in a small town, but it was just me and my parents. No extended family. But I am close to my parents.”

“Having a big family is nice, even with the drama that comes from all the personalities.”

“True. Okay, I need a moment,” she said and sounded breathless. “Oh, the view is pretty. Let’s just say I need to take a photo, and that’s why we’re stopping.”

He smiled, decided not to tease her, and stood by while she took a photo. Before

them, the Glen Creek flowed through the gorge, the stone walls shaped by the water.
“Okay, it’s posted. Shall we?”

“How into social media are you?” he asked, guiding the way through the well-marked path.

“Apparently, not as much as I should be, according to some of my professors.”

When he looked at her with a questioning look, she replied, “Social media is a whole other thing for journalism, another way to get the news out there. But I’m not into it for that. I just post photos of places or things that I like. It’s not about posting for the sake of the algorithms.”

“So, you’re not an influencer?” he teased.

“Definitely not. I don’t have thousands of followers, and I don’t post photos of myself,” she said with a big smile while looking at him.

“Well, I guess there are many ways to use social media. In your case, for the fun of posting things that interest you?”

“Yeah, I guess. But I’m the exception to the rule. Otherwise, they wouldn’t make hundreds of billions of dollars in that industry,” she said while trying to maneuver over some of the stone steps.

When he extended his hand, he noticed that she hesitated. He had involuntarily reached for her hand like it was the natural thing to do, and he was glad when she grasped his. He helped her down some steps, and then a surge pulsed from where their hands touched. Okay, this has to mean something. She seemed to pause, and he knew she felt it too.

“What else did you do here? It seems like there’s a lot more to do than just hiking?”

she asked, her eyes on the trail.

“Well, we would inevitably go camping because our parents couldn’t take any more of us. But it wasn’t a punishment. It was a lot of fun because we would try to outdo each other with cooking.”

“Ooh, that sounds interesting! Good food?”

“Yeah! We were assigned to cook different meals, and I always hoped for breakfast.”

“Oh, yum! Like pancakes, sausage, and eggs?”

“Yup. You like making breakfast too?”

“Yeah. It feels extra special to actually cook a good breakfast, right? It’s not something that you can do every day. Okay, so what are the weirdest burns that you’ve gotten?”

“Burns?” He made a face. Where is she going with this?

“Yes. Like you hit your hand against an oven grate or didn’t properly place a pot holder on a pan?”

“Oh. Hmm. It sounds like you’ve gotten a lot of burns.”

“You could say that! Well, the weirdest one was from pizza.”

“From the pan or the actual pizza?”

She stopped walking. “From the actual pizza.” She held up her right hand and pointed out a faint scar. “I was so hungry and then somehow dropped the slice. And stupidly tried to grab it as it fell. Burned right there by the cheese.”

He pulled her hand close to look at the mark. “That’s from pizza?” He looked up. “You should be more careful.”

He had no idea why, but the thought of her getting hurt didn’t sit right with him.

She pursed her lips and tried to pull her hand away, but he held onto it. “Um, I’ll try to remember that next time,” she said.

He smiled. “I mean it.” He kept his gaze on her while still holding her hand, and then she giggled. But it sounded like she was uncomfortable. Get a grip Sullivan, and don’t weird her out.

She gently pulled her hand out of his.

“I guess we’ll see, huh?” he teased and followed her down the path. She smiled at him and didn’t say anything.

They continued on in a comfortable silence. Okay, she didn’t get upset, so maybe you didn’t weird her out. The creek’s gentle whispers kept them company as they walked beside it.

He stopped. “This is Rainbow Falls.”

She looked up at the cascading water; the waterfall tumbled in shimmering tiers, kissed by the sun’s radiant embrace. “Wow,” she whispered.

“It rained a few days back, so it looks even better than usual.”

The sheer force of the falls sent a soft mist into the air, and the sunlight refracted through the mist, painting the falls in a shimmering palette of iridescent hues. A stone bridge arched gracefully over the rushing waters. Beneath it, the water pooled against the cool stone as the currents washed over polished pebbles.

He watched her reaction, pleased that she liked the view. “It’s something, isn’t it?”

She turned toward him, her eyes wide. “ Something doesn’t even begin to cover it. It’s like a living painting, a portal into another realm.

“Okay, now I really have to take a couple of pictures,” she said, fishing her phone out of her pocket.

He watched her capture the scenic beauty of Watkins Glen through her lens. Her movements were deliberate yet fluid, as she effortlessly framed each shot with precision and care. Her smooth, straight black hair cascaded down her shoulders, framing her heart-shaped face. Against the backdrop of the lush greenery and cascading waterfalls, her clear skin seemed to radiate with an ethereal glow, accentuated by the soft, diffused light filtering through the forest canopy.

As he stood by, he noticed the way her yoga pants hugged her curves in all the right places, accentuating her slender yet shapely figure. Her simple T-shirt, casually paired with a jacket tied around her waist, added to the relaxed and comfortable aura she exuded. A flicker of guilt crossed his mind as he checked her out. He felt a pang of discomfort and quickly averted his gaze. He tried to refocus his attention on the breathtaking scenery surrounding them, hoping to dispel the sense of guilt that had settled over him.