







# Strawberries to Share: Ares' Story (The Gods Made Me Do It #16)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** "I am one of the few gods in the pantheon who wasn't even given a wife in fiction because I was so horrible."

Ares, ancient God of War and Courage, felt as if his life was in limbo. Nothing had changed in eons. His kin still hated him, he was still despised by anyone he interacted with except for Hermes, but then he was friendly with everyone. But Ares was just marking each day with nothing to look forward to, or to enjoy. Until he got a text from his security company that was monitoring the cameras at his Boston house. What he saw on the feed was intriguing enough to have him thinking a spot of time on earth was a good idea.

If I worried about things like that, I'd be sleeping under a rock and I'd never stick my nose out, even at nighttime in case the moon laughed at me."

Marty, racoon shifter and eternal optimist had found a stash of strawberries. He knew he was taking a risk, he knew there could always be a chance he'd be run off from his little encampment, but those strawberries were too tempting to ignore. He didn't take them all. Marty believed in always leaving enough for others, but little did he know that those stolen strawberries would change his life in every way.

How on earth did I get friend-zoned when we're supposed to be mates?

These two were a mismatch from the start, but the Fates always know what they are doing. Ares had a lot to learn about changing his attitude, and Marty was the perfect person to help with that. But even Marty had his limits. Would Ares drive his mate away like he had everyone else, or was Marty worth changing for? Maybe those strawberries were magical after all.

Strawberries to Share: Ares Story, is an MM Paranormal Fated Mates Story which includes mpreg. Although it is part of The Gods Made Me Do It series, it can be read as a standalone. If you're in the mood for a low angst story with a guaranteed HEA, then perhaps

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:10 am*

“I suppose I should be grateful Olympus is so quiet. In theory, that would give me time to relax.” Ares, the ancient Greek God of War and Courage, and one of the twelve original Olympians, let out along breath as he looked out of his window overlooking the giant meeting hall, that always used to be filled with life and now stood empty.

He was confident no one was around to hear him – most notable figures from the Pantheon lived life on Earth, and those few who remained wanted nothing to do with Ares. They hadn’t done before, either, so it’s not like anything was different.

Unfortunately, even if Olympus was starting to resemble a ghost town in places, nothing would shake the low-grade anxiety Ares had lived with for most of his existence. Maybe it was the echoes of people’s hate in the marble columns, or maybe it was knowing Ares would never find approval from either of his parents. Maybe it was simply that Ares hated the pretentiousness of Olympus, forever conscious that he didn’t fit in. Or maybe... Cut it out.

Striding across his large office space, something he’d modeled on Zeus’s set up, although he’d never mention that to anyone, Ares ran his palm about an inch from the surface of a huge table that dominated one side of the room.

In response to his magic, the surface of the tabletop morphed from its dark wood grain into a swirl of silver and blue smoke. As the smoke cleared, Ares swiped his hand to the right, flicking through the various “tabs” he had for places of interest.

The various war zones, he flicked through with no interest. When gods were forbidden to interfere in the affairs of mortals, Ares had privately thought that the

desire for warfare would die out completely. It's not like he'd been worshipped much back in the day. His biggest claim to fame, according to ancient mortal writers had been his affair with Aphrodite. That didn't stop various members of his family from blaming him for the strife the world had seen through the ages. As if any of that was my fault. Ares had never started an altercation in his life.

But no, war didn't die out. The mortals who quickly spread across the land masses still found reasons to fight. Whether fueled by greed, desperation, or a desire for more power, the number of wars ebbed and flowed over time, but never completely disappeared for long. Ares shook his head at the waste and destruction he saw through his lens, a scowl marring his face. The poor fight for their right to exist while the rich stay safe in their castles.

Forcing the depressive thoughts from his brain, Ares quickly flicked through more tabs. He lingered for a moment on the scene of his mother, Hera. She was dressed in a sharp tailored suit, her hair immaculate, using a long stick to point to something on a whiteboard as she addressed a group of men and women similarly dressed.

Flicking his fingers apart, Ares zoomed in, squinting to read the words on the whiteboard. He could pick out the words "Home," and "Family," but then there was something about corporate life, blah, blah. Proving you haven't changed your ways, Hera. Paulie believed living on Earth would teach you lessons about home and family bonds, but you just found a way to manipulate those around you.

Ares quickly flicked to the next scene, his memory of his visit to Hera on Earth causing his cheeks to heat. Her capacity for caring for her children hadn't changed either, especially when it came to Ares. He'd gone to visit, to ensure she was all right after her temporary banishment. He believed she'd appreciate a visit from a friendly face.

He should've known better. The moment Hera saw him, she'd dragged him off to a

tiny closet, insulted him and then demanded that he do something, anything, to convince Zeus and Paulie to rescind her temporary banishment. At least she acknowledged that Paulie was Zeus's mate now, but that was only because she thought Paulie would be a soft touch and easier to manipulate in comparison to Zeus.

Moving right along. The next scene was Zeus – he was sitting in a large rocker on the porch of the Montana home Ares knew he shared with Paulie, apparently reading to his son, Egan. How domesticated, Ares sneered. In all his eons of existence, Zeus had never given a damn about any of his family members – which numbered in the hundreds. Apparently, it took a tiger shifter getting pregnant for Zeus to remember what the father part of his “Father of All” title meant.

With depression pressing heavily on his shoulders, Ares quickly flicked onto Demetra's new life on Earth life. He blinked and instinctively reared back from the table at what he saw. Taking a second to recover, Ares quickly flicked to the next tab. There was no way he needed to see that woman's naked ass, especially when she had company.

I didn't know you had it in you, he thought as he checked the hive that was Persephone's home for the foreseeable future. That tiny crown was a cute touch. He gave a thumbs up at the scene, aware that it was Paulie's influence, not Zeus's.

Sighing, Ares checked on more of his kin – Poseidon was busy with his wolf. Artemas, Hades, Lasse, and even Baby - all with mates. Even Thanatos had a mate... but not me. It was easy for Ares to feel bad for being overlooked.

His hand hovered above the table as the last image came into view. Hephaestus. Out of all of his kin, Hephaestus was the only one who actually had good reason to hate him. Ares had been sleeping with Aphrodite for most of her marriage to the God of the Forge. Although, after they'd been caught and shamed before everyone on Olympus, Aphrodite refused to have anything to do with him anymore.

“I’m glad you’re happy, old man,” he murmured, watching as Hephaestus greeted his smiling mate, his belly swollen with new life. “If anyone deserves it, it’s you.”

Feeling decidedly maudlin, Ares swiped the smoky scenes away, returning the tabletop to its wooden form. Making his way back to the window, he thought a large black coffee into existence, sipping it slowly as he looked at the deserted area below.

Not quite deserted. Ares moved back out of sight as Athena glided through the marble columns and stone benches before disappearing in the direction of Zeus’s computer offices. I wonder what that schemer’s up to now. With Demetra, Persephone, and Hera all temporarily banished from Olympus, Athena was one of the few women left. And with Zeus away...?

Ares wasn’t silly enough to wander down that mental path. Admittedly, Zeus spent barely any time on Olympus anymore. If the rumors were true, apparently, Paulie didn’t like the place, and frankly Ares couldn’t blame him. Olympus was the sight of some of his biggest embarrassments.

But Olympus was still Zeus’s realm, and Zeus had a very loyal staff. Nothing went on at Olympus without him knowing about it. It was one of the reasons Ares was anxious all the time. Every time he scratched his ass, Ares wondered how long it would take for Zeus to think he had the shits.

I need a break from this place – I need to be somewhere else. Going back to his table, Ares thought of his homes, swirling the wood away so he could see what was happening at the four houses he owned on Earth. Each one was picked for different attributes, and Ares had lived in them all for varying periods of time, depending on what he needed at the time.

His house in Hawaii was for when he was in the mood for sunshine and socializing, surfing and swimming. Ares never stayed there for long because there was a limit to

how long he could walk around with a smile on his face. But it was fun in short doses, and it always served to remind him of why he typically avoided people.

His house in France was perfect for that. Ares lived in a large old chateau, and rarely went to the village. The cautious nature of the people who lived there made him laugh when he was alone. They didn't mess with him, but they weren't interested in his day, either, which was perfect as far as Ares was concerned.

Ares was just thinking France would be a good idea when he got a notification on his phone. Picking it up with a frown, because no one messaged Ares just to say hi, he saw it was an automatic alert from the security company who managed the cameras in his house in Westwood on the outskirts of Boston. When Ares chose his US home, he was determined to be as far away from Zeus's little clan in Montana as possible, and the home he found was isolated enough for his needs.

Usually. Typically. But according to the notification Ares had just received, someone had been caught lurking in his back garden by one of his cameras at the rear of his house. Ignoring the camera picture attached to the notification, Ares used his table, zooming in on the area behind his house.

There was a lot of it. One of the things that attracted Ares to his address was the twenty-plus acres the house was set in. He did have neighbors across the road, but his house couldn't be seen from the road as it was set back down a long driveway. The entire area around the driveway was covered in trees, and Ares even removed the silly mailbox on the roadside so no one would know a house was there.

Another positive point for the property was that there was no foot traffic. His street didn't even have a sidewalk, and the road itself was narrow and typically only used by locals and delivery people. Ares scanned the area around the back of the house, frowning as he saw a sudden flash of light disappear into the trees.



What the fuck? It was the middle of the night in Boston. It was also the middle of winter. In January and February, the temperatures could get quite chilly. Fuck it, I'll go and see for myself. Ares set his tabletop back to wood and disappeared. The person, whoever it was, had clearly left, but Ares wanted to get out of Olympus anyway, so using the excuse that he needed to do a spot of investigation at one of his properties was as good as any.

It'll give me something to do. For any god who felt he'd lived too long already, that was a gift in itself.

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“That was a close call, Marty, old man. Those camera lights coming on was a shit-yourself moment, for sure. You need to take more care.”

Marty was used to talking to himself and could agree with the statement. “But I got strawberries.” He was used to arguing with himself as well. Sometimes he thought the other side of the argument was his grumpy responsible self, whereas he tended to live on the wild side. “I mean who grows strawberries in the middle of winter? Even in a hot house, that’s wild. I’m sure that garden is magical, absolutely magical.” He made a kissing noise with his lips, his mouth already salivating at the thought of sampling that juicy sweetness.

His responsible side didn’t reply, so Marty knew he was right. Of course, you’re right. You’re both sides of the argument. His raccoon didn’t always understand the way Marty’s mind worked, but that was okay, too. Not many people did, which was why Marty was camping out at the back of a huge house that had been empty for months.

Walking through the trees at night wasn’t an issue – his raccoon was really useful in that regard. Marty hummed quietly, making sure to move silently but quickly. One of the reasons Marty liked the little corner of the world he’d found was because most of the houses were lived in by people who paid so little attention to what went on outside of their houses. Or the houses were empty and appeared to have been for ages. And yet they have such amazing gardens. For Marty, it was like wandering around his own personal supermarket filled with his favorite goodies.

He smiled as he reached his little encampment. It was tucked between three older trees that had sturdy trunks. Depending on which way the wind was blowing, Marty

could usually be sheltered from the worst of it. He'd fashioned a small shelter out of branches. There was just enough room for him to curl up underneath it when he was sleeping. No one would consider it grand or particularly sturdy, but it kept most of the rain and snow off him. Mostly.

Marty's prized possession was still warm. He hurried over, setting his supplies down on the plank he used for a plate, holding one hand and then the other as close to the large cauldron as he dared, while he grabbed his hoodie and pants and pulled them on, slipping on his worn sneakers. His little butt was going numb.

Marty didn't use the cauldron to cook in, he used it to keep his fire contained and hidden. It wasn't easy starting a fire without a match or a lighter, but when he did get one started, the trees around his tiny encampment provided plenty of fuel to keep one going.

"Ooh, I am doubly blessed this fine night." Marty shivered happily as he dropped a few more twigs into his fire, before brushing off a few flakes of snow from the log round he'd rolled over to his spot from a neighboring yard and sitting on it. He reached down, picked up one of the six strawberries he'd scored for the night, bit into it and stared up at the beauty that was the night sky.

These strawberries are worth almost getting my ass caught, Marty thought happily. He was nearly always happy. He fixed his eyes on a glistening star. "You don't blame me, right?" He held up his half-eaten strawberry. "This poor thing was saved. Some of his kin were rotting on the strawberry beds. Rotting. Such a waste." Marty didn't like waste of any kind. He quickly popped the second half of the strawberry in his mouth, savoring the sweetness.

The issue, Marty decided, was that he had needed thumbs to open the door to the hot house. His raccoon was very clever and had crazy flexible little paws, but there was something about that darn door that his animal side couldn't open. Marty had been

watching those strawberries blossom and grow for weeks.

He always visited private gardens in his animal form. Most security cameras didn't pick up on animals, so he could wander around to his little heart's content. The garden attached to his current abode was his best place for staying by far. Marty had no idea how the house owner did it, but the garden never had any weeds, and the plants all grew straight and beautiful.

"It's magic." Marty was determined it had to be. He had no idea what type of magic, but there were little things he noticed on his nightly forays for food that weren't common in places he'd camped at before.

"Did you know," he told the star as he reached for another strawberry. "There's no bird poop on the walls of that house, not a speck of dust on the windows, no spiders' webs around the door frames. In case you didn't know, that's not natural."

Although, chewing on his strawberry, Marty thought about the slight buzz he felt anytime he got close to the walls of the house. I like it, his raccoon said quickly, and he did. Marty liked it, too, because it made his fur stand up from his body, which was kinda fun. He wasn't as sure why his raccoon liked rubbing against the walls of the house – sometimes a full body rub – but Marty was a go-with-the-flow type of shifter.

"You have to wonder what type of person would ward their house against spider webs." Marty thought as he chewed, imagining a handsome man with a loving wife who spent so much time looking after their three picture-perfect children that her husband set up wards, so she didn't have to damage her beautifully soft hands by wielding a broom, fighting the spider war.

Marty knew a lot about spiders. He had one living in the corner of his shelter. In his head, they'd come to an agreement – the spider wouldn't spread their web too close to where Marty slept, and Marty would share his space.

Sighing, Marty quickly worked his way through the last of his strawberries. Six pieces of fruit weren't going to keep his stomach happy for long, but in the cold, he took what he could get. Tomorrow, we will stay away from the strawberries so we can eat other things. A good idea in theory, but Marty wouldn't hold himself to it.

He did miss sharing his space with someone else. Marty glanced over the second log sitting on the other side of his cauldron fire. I was clearly feeling optimistic when I dragged that there. But Marty knew if he had anyone in his space, the moment they had a conversation, that person would realize Marty saw things in a unique way... and they would leave me.

"No point in thinking about that now." Marty stood up, dusting off the few flecks of snow from his pants. It was definitely chilly, and while his temperature typically ran warmer than most, he was feeling it in his hands and toes. "Let's stock up the fire and then shift to sleep, I think. That blanket of mine is getting a little thin. But it works, and that's the main thing. Who knows what impossible things might happen when I wake up. The opportunities are endless."

Five minutes later, with the cauldron fire quietly feeding on a wider log, and Marty's threadbare clothes folded and put into a plastic bag to stop them getting damp, Marty shifted, and his raccoon spent a bit of time sniffing the blanket before curling up to sleep. Maybe tomorrow will be the day the Fates send someone who is as much of a misfit as me. Then we can be misfits together. The raccoon was smiling as he closed his eyes against the snow.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:10 am*

Mortals wrote that it was Athena who had the intelligence to strategize during wartime, while Ares was the bloodthirsty one who thrived on blood and chaos. A being who was cruel and cowardly, a god with no heart. Ares wasn't going to comment on fiction either way, but being so roundly hated gave Ares an advantage very few considered. He watched and listened to the people around him, and while he usually kept his opinions to himself, he did have them and often acted accordingly.

Back when Hera and her merry crones had decided to confront Zeus in his private enclave created for privacy with his mate Paulie, Ares had been dragged into it by Hera. Hera, in her arrogance, seemed to believe she had the votes – which still stunned Ares because Olympus was hardly a democracy – but Hera believed she had the votes to insist that no gods be allowed to take mortals as mates.

Ares had been rude to Zeus that day. That was a normal interaction between father and son, but when Zeus hit back and Paulie declared his status as the mate of Zeus, then Ares disappeared. Hera had called him a coward because of it. Ares saw it as a strategic retreat. He already knew Hera didn't have a leg to stand on and saw no point in hanging around. His father had finally found someone he was prepared to fight for, and that was unusual enough for Ares to step out of the situation completely.

But he did know about strategy, and it was strategy he was relying on in his current situation. Arriving at his house in Westwood, Ares went over the whole house, noting nothing had been disturbed. The entire house was warded, and not even dust dared settle on the pristine surfaces as he walked through the many reception rooms and, later, upstairs to the numerous bedrooms and bathrooms.

He was tempted to go outside and check his back garden, but there'd be no need. It

was doubtful the intruder would come back that night, and if the person was spending the night outside somewhere...well, he was welcome to. Ares didn't see the point in getting cold chasing someone who wasn't there.

Adjusting his wards so it still looked as if the house was empty from the exterior, Ares lit fires in all of the fireplaces in the house before moving into the kitchen and stocking the pantry shelves and refrigerator with another wave of his hand.

Zapping up a bowl of his favorite pasta, Ares went through to the smaller living room, choosing a book from his extensive collection. As he sat down, he added a glass of brandy to sit on the wide arm of his chair. The anxious knots in his belly quietly disappeared under the peace and comfort of a home Ares knew no one would disturb him in. This is exactly what I needed. Thank you for giving me a reason. Ares silently toasted his intruder as he settled in for a quiet night.

/~/~/~/~/

The next morning, Ares felt more refreshed than he had in a while. As he made himself a hearty breakfast – sausages, bacon, and eggs were frowned on in Olympus because of the smell the cooking caused – he pondered on why he persisted in staying on Olympus at all.

Daddy issues? Ares had them by the bucketload, but daddy Zeus didn't live on his realm anymore. He preferred living as a family man in Montana. Ares didn't blame him for that.

Mommy issues then? Hera wasn't living there, either, and wouldn't be for a while. In fact, thanks to Paulie, Ares didn't have to have anything to do with Hera at all.

Ares stuffed some bacon into his mouth. You'd think I'd be over that parental shit by now anyway. The situation is never going to change – they are always going to hate

me because they hate each other. It's about time I had a fucking life of my own.

That was the main issue, the way Ares saw it. He really didn't have a purpose. Zeus still ran his online network that allowed all godly figures to stay connected and maintain a presence on Earth. Hades and Poseidon still ruled their domains and were raising new families of their own.

Baby had the right idea. Ares paused eating to consider that random thought. After years of traveling around, and apparently sleeping around as well, Baby, who was Poseidon's son, had bought an old house to renovate by hand. Poseidon had been heard bragging that Baby was using no magical powers at all. Yeah, but then he met his mate, had kids, and now they are all living happily ever after, as well.

Finishing his meal, which in Ares' opinion was cooked damn well considering it had been a while since he'd cooked anything, he rinsed off his cutlery and pots and pans, stacking them all in the dishwasher. His mind was still mulling over the "what can I do with the rest of my eternity" issue, but as he wasn't coming up with any answers, he decided to focus on his more immediate problem – who had been intruding in his back garden and why?

Was it a big deal? No. Truly, Ares didn't care that much. There was a good chance the intruder would never return, but Ares was still curious as to why the person was there in the first place. It could hardly be opportunistic because there was no foot traffic in the area. Hopefully, he'd get some clues when he went outside.

That involved another glamor. If someone was watching the house, then Ares didn't want to be seen, and being a god had its uses. It was definitely chilly, although it was already after eight in the morning. Ares grinned as he shivered. Olympus never had seasons. Being out in genuine fresh air instantly lifted his mood.

The immediate garden out the back of the kitchen was laid out in a grid system with a



number of raised beds. Ares didn't have anything to do with the planning – that was the way it had been when he bought the house. He'd infused the ground with magic so that he didn't have to worry about hiring a gardener to mow the lawns, pull weeds, or trim plants. They were all neat and tidy, which was all Ares worried about. If a house appeared untidy or empty, then it was like putting out a sign for any rogue elements looking for somewhere to hide.

I'm not sure those vegetables are supposed to be growing in winter. Ares bent slightly to get a better look. He had beans, peas, corn, broccoli, and cauliflower growing in one bed, with cucumbers, lettuce, pumpkins, and watermelon all growing in another.

Yeah, that's not right. Ares went to change it and then remembered he was actually on a quest to find out what an intruder was interested in, so he made a mental note to tweak the garden magic before he left. As he paid more attention to the stalks of some of the plants, he noticed someone had been harvesting his vegetables. Is this a need-for-food situation?

That bothered Ares more than he expected, and as he kept walking around, he noticed a few more signs of vegetables being removed. The flower beds hadn't been touched.

He got his second clue at the door of the hothouse, which sat to the right side of the house. There was a partial footprint in a patch of slush next to the door. Not unusual in itself, Ares already knew he'd had an intruder, but the footprint had toes...the intruder had been barefoot.

Frowning, Ares pulled out his phone and clicked on the original notification he'd gotten. All he'd seen in his tabletop was a light disappearing into the trees. Clicking on the picture attached to the message, Ares' eyes narrowed as he studied the blob captured by night vision cameras.

Naked? The image of the individual didn't show a lot of details. Ares knew he could

get someone on Zeus's staff to enhance it for him, but he could already imagine how that would go. The staff would do it. Ares was still a god, even if he was a hated one. However, if the person in the image was naked, then Ares could already hear the gossip sweeping Olympus about how Ares needed help seeing his porn pictures.

Putting his phone away, Ares stepped inside the hothouse, which was climate controlled, again all due to his magic. The air smelled sweet and was hot and heavy with humidity – something else that wasn't found on Olympus. Moving slowly through the rows of plants and flowers, Ares stopped at the raised bed of strawberries that had definitely flourished since his last visit.

Strawberries were one of Ares secret pleasures. It reminded him of happier times with Aphrodite when they'd share strawberries and wine, along with their bodies. Even after the shame and Aphrodite's refusal to ever speak to him again, he still had a love of the fruit that reminded him of happier times.

Frowning, Ares noticed that quite a few of the fruits were rotting on the plants. While death was a natural part of life, it just didn't look right to him. Moving closer, he noticed a few stalks with missing fruit. Have they rotted already? But no, when Ares moved the leaves, there was no sign of decomposition under them.

So, my little intruder likes sweet fruit, too. Ares grinned as he waved his hand. The rotten fruit disappeared, and fresh fruit was instantly dotted over the healthy plants. A very tempting display in other words.

I've set the bait, and now all I have to do is wait. Ares left the hot house, making sure he didn't lock it after him – he even disconnected the cameras at the back of the house. He didn't know for sure if the intruder would be back, but he had a feeling.

If he doesn't come snooping, then I'll have strawberries for breakfast tomorrow. He headed into the house. He rather fancied cooking a roast beef, he had plenty of books

to read, and if he put on some music, he could have a perfectly relaxing time, waiting for night to fall.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:10 am*

You don't need any more strawberries. His raccoon seemed very adamant about it, but the problem was, Marty thought that he did. Strawberries were seasonal – it was unheard of getting them in the middle of winter – so to Marty, they were a treat that should be enjoyed while he could.

“I'll get some vegetables that I can roast as well.” The fire had been out when Marty had woken up, and he'd spent the better part of an hour getting it going again. “Hot veggies followed by delicious fresh strawberries. It will be a meal fit for a king, or at least for me. I promise we'll get the vegetables first.”

Stripping off his hoodie, Marty shivered with the sudden chill on his skin as he dropped his pants and kicked off his sneakers. His raccoon was quick to come through, thank goodness, stopping to sniff and rub himself against the bottom of the nearest tree.

Food. We need food, Marty urged his furry half. Those strawberries were a full day behind him, and while he knew from experience it was possible to live on one tiny meal a day, keeping a positive mood was easier with a full belly. He could get water – the house he was camping behind had a pool, complete with an outside tap, which was handy - but food was a constant need, and Marty couldn't remember the last time he had felt full.

The raccoon hurried to the tree line and then hesitated. Is someone there? Marty got a sinking sensation, seeing his strawberries fading out of reach. But no, it seemed the cameras from the night before had made the raccoon wary. Within a minute, his furry half hurried to the nearest vegetable garden, using his claws to climb up the wooden slabs containing the garden.

Marty had always been proud of his animal spirit. The slightly larger than average animal worked hard when he had a focus. Three trips were made between the vegetable garden and their small camp – it's not like the raccoon had a shopping cart, although Marty amused himself imagining a small cart with red wheels that the raccoon could push between the garden and their camp.

On the third trip back to the camp, the raccoon sat down by the fire cauldron.

No, no, no, no, Marty pleaded. Can we at least go back and make sure none of the other strawberries are dying? We'll just look. Just a little peek.

The raccoon held his front paws up to the cauldron.

You can't be cold. You have all that fur. Look at how rich and lustrous your coat is.

The raccoon turned his head, looking over one shoulder and then the other. It was true. He had a lovely coat.

Come on. Marty knew he sounded desperate. Just take me to the hot house. If I do take anymore strawberries, I won't be doing it as a raccoon. I'll need my hands. But you're such a super sneaky shifter, you can get me there without us being seen. See how amazing you are.

Okay, the raccoon not only had a lovely coat, and yes, he was super sneaky, which was his secret superpower, but he was also susceptible to flattery, which his human half knew only too well. If we get caught...

We'll be really quick. Lightning fast. You got us such a wonderful haul of lovely, healthy vegetables, we have to have something for dessert.

Dropping his paws back down to the ground, the raccoon turned around. He was

hungry, too. He could hunt for insects or even grab the odd mouse or two if he was lucky, but his human half got really squeamish about that sort of thing. Strawberries would be a delicious treat.

Running back along the familiar trail, the raccoon hesitated by the tree line again. There was something different in the air, and he couldn't work out what it was. But he didn't scent any threat in the immediate area.

Keeping his body low to the ground, the raccoon ran toward the nearest garden bed frame. From there, he sprinted to the next one, stopping to ensure he was hidden from the house and those scary cameras before sprinting again.

The longest run was from the edge of the raised garden and the hothouse itself. His fur rose around his neck, and the raccoon stopped, sure he was being watched. But as he stood up on his hind legs, peering and scenting the air, he couldn't pick up anything unfamiliar.

Those strawberries could be rotting. Hurry. Sprinting as fast as he could, the raccoon ran for the side of the hothouse where the door was. Standing up again, he could see a whole heap of new strawberries arranged as if they were left just for him.

This doesn't feel right. But Marty was already pushing through, and the raccoon huddled inside of his human half, terrified they were going to be caught.

"This place has to be magic. Look at all those strawberries."

Don't take them all, the raccoon warned. We only need a few.

"I'm always careful, just like you are," Marty said happily as he quickly picked over the fruit. He deliberately left the bigger ones, taking the smaller and sweeter fruit that wouldn't be missed as readily as the bigger ones. Then, with his little haul in his

hand, Marty hurried out of the hothouse, making sure to close the door behind him. Oh, my goodness, it's chilly tonight, he thought as he sprinted for the tree line.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:10 am*

Ares was frozen and it had nothing to do with the chilly night air. For the first time in his life, he genuinely wasn't sure what he was going to do. Originally, when he sat down by a large window that overlooked his entire back garden, he expected to be amused by the sight of some intruder sneaking in and thinking that he could steal from Ares, completely unobserved.

When the little raccoon came into view, Ares' amusement increased. The little animal was definitely cute, with his diamond-shaped face, and the black rings around his eyes like he was wearing a mask of some kind, the type cartoon gangsters wore to hide their identity. That made Ares laugh out loud.

The raccoon was definitely industrious, clever, and understandably cautious. The way he checked from the tree line to make sure he wasn't being observed and then zipped over to the nearest garden bed, climbing the wooden planks on the side, and then sniffed among the different vegetables, clearly looking for ones that it both enjoyed and that were ripe enough to pick. Ares silently agreed that it was a good idea, and he appreciated the care the raccoon was taking with the other plants.

Each time, when the little critter found himself a piece of fruit or vegetable that he obviously wanted to eat, instead of sitting there like a natural animal would have done, the raccoon took it carefully in his claws, rolling it to the edge of the garden, pushing it onto the ground below. Then Ares would get a flash of furry butt as the raccoon climbed down after it, picking it up in his teeth or a teeth/paw combination as he disappeared with his prize into the trees.

Ares watched him do that three times before there was a bit of a break. Ares was starting to think of recipes he could use his strawberries in for breakfast when the



raccoon came back.

This time Ares could tell just from the way the raccoon was holding himself that he was doing his best to be doubly stealthy. The way he crouched down, the way he ran from one garden bed to the other trying to remain hidden. Of course, Ares had a bird's eye view - one of the joys of being a god - but the raccoon couldn't have known that.

Sure enough, he went round to the edge of the bed closest to the hothouse and then scampered across the clearing between the garden and the hot house as if his fluffy little ass was on fire.

This is it. Ares paid close attention. There wasn't even a second's hesitation on the part of the raccoon. As they got to the door by the hothouse, the raccoon morphed into a scruffy young man who immediately opened the door and went scurrying into the hothouse, going straight for the strawberries.

Ares kept watching. He had laid out a tempting display of the fruit, and he was keen to see if the man would take them all or be more selective. But no, after showing so much delight over the display, the young man only took six little strawberries before going back out the door again. The strawberries were cupped in his hand, and the man made a point of closing the door behind him firmly, before racing for the tree line, but it was his definitely-not-furry bare butt flashing in the light that had Ares stuck to his seat.

That damned light. Ares knew what that meant. He had heard enough tales of the way other gods had found their mates or realized who they were to them at the time. There was no other artificial light in the backyard. Ares had turned off the cameras, and there were no security lights. The raccoon came with a light of his own, and that could only mean one thing.

And that was why Ares didn't get out of his seat, storm outside, and frighten the young man with his haul of strawberries or even the vegetables the raccoon had collected before that. Because as much as Ares had been primed all day for such an encounter and had even set up the tempting display for that purpose, when the raccoon shifted, Ares noticed things about the man that hurt his heart in a way he didn't expect.

The slender – too slender to be healthy – frame. The lack of a hair cut – the dark hair sticking up all over the place. The fact that Ares could count every one of the man's ribs because they were so visible. It was as if he could feel how chilled the man's skin must've been, as if it was his own. Ares felt a deep sense of responsibility for the man in that moment. Even if he wasn't prepared to take a mate, the man the Fates determined was perfect for him and the one he should care for forevermore, had been placed in his path.

I could ignore him, he thought, his gaze still riveted to the window. I could just ignore the fact I've seen him, ignore his existence. I could go back to Olympus or one of my other houses and just forget I ever saw him. If I forget I've seen him, he could keep living here as he has been, and we never have to actually meet.

That was the easiest thing to do - nothing. But Ares knew that was one of his biggest problems. He had not done anything for a long time. He shook his head as he remembered he'd been thinking just that morning that he needed to find something to do with his life. But look after a shifter? Invite that man into my home and into my life? That wasn't the sort of hobby or life purpose Ares had even considered and yet that was what the Fates had pushed into his life.

When it was clear that neither the young man nor the raccoon were coming back, Ares allowed himself to become translucent, walking through his walls and carefully stepping out to the night air. It was chillier than the night before, and Ares quickly thought up a large coat to keep himself warm. But then he wondered about the young

man with the skinny frame. The guy didn't have any fat on him to keep him warm, yet he had to have been camping outside.

I'll just check on him , Ares thought as he looked around. I'll just check and see where he is and make sure that he's okay. Then I can go somewhere else and leave him alone. Deciding that was a good idea, Ares made his way to the tree line, searching for the source of the Fates' light.

First, he checked down by his pool. It crossed his mind that the young man might have helped himself to the pool house as that was well out of sight of the main house. But no, there was no light down there. Instead, Ares' instincts were driving him through the trees to a denser part of the woodland area he had on his small estate. And it was there, tucked between three large trees, that Ares caught a glimpse of the light that had been in his garden.

The man was dressed, although the clothes did not look warm enough compared to the chill of the air. Ares glanced down at his own big coat and actually felt embarrassed that he had it. But he was determined not to let the man know he was there. As he moved around the trees, staying silent, making sure that no trace, not a scent, not a sound, not anything of him could be heard or seen by anyone else, Ares watched as the man appeared to be chatting. But there was no one else there.

Ares checked the area again. Nope, the man was alone. He crept closer. Ares had to hear what the man was saying.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:10 am*

“Ouch, ouch, ouch, ouch, ouch, that’s hot! But, woo hoo, this idea is working. This is so cool. I can’t remember the last time I ate something that was cooked. And, mmm, can you smell it? It’s so delicious. Oh, this is a meal fit for a king for sure.” Marty gave a happy little shiver as he set up his array of twigs that he had used to spear his vegetables with so that he could cook them over the fire in his cauldron without burning his fingers.

The vegetables were succulent, crispy, and with that little hint of charring that gave the vegetables the caramelized taste that Marty had always enjoyed. Better than that, they were hot, and from his first mouthful, Marty felt warm all over. “We should have done this yesterday, or the day before, or even the week before,” he said happily. “I had so much fun with this, and you, my furry little friend, did so well. Look at this corncob. It’s just at the right point of ripeness. I could barely get the twig in it.”

He picked up the cob of corn and merrily munched on the now warm and slightly sooty kernels, savoring every mouthful. Admittedly, there was more soot on that cob than on some of the other vegetables – the cob was heavy and had fallen off the twig Marty had pushed into the stalk end. But Marty quickly fished it out of the flames. Three of his fingertips were only slightly blistered and he knew he would heal quickly. The food was saved, and that was the most important thing.

Dressed in his hoodie and his jeans again, his feet slipped into his sneakers, and his belly starting to fill, Marty was determined to be positive. He never lied about his circumstances, not even to himself, but he wasn’t going to dwell on the negatives, either. He had hot food and a quiet spot to eat. The fire was throwing off enough heat to take the edge off the chill, and the stars above him glistened brilliantly in the clear

night sky which meant it wasn't going to rain. All bonuses in Marty's book.

He quickly polished off the two cobs of corn and a pile of beans, which didn't taste that nice, but they had a lot of nutrients. The peas he had to eat uncooked because he knew from experience the pods would burst if he tried heating them over a flame. Broccoli and cauliflower tasted so wonderful with char marks, and his clever raccoon had also found a large bell pepper, which browned beautifully and yet had a sweet taste when Marty bit into it.

"Look at that," he said, sitting back on his log, rubbing his belly with a satisfied smile. "Just by taking that extra five minutes to cook the food before I eat it, it just adds something, yes it does. A real positive something."

Now that his vegetables had gone, Marty reached for the plate of strawberries. Yes, technically, it wasn't a plate, it was a plank. But for Marty, the plank worked as a way to keep the strawberries off the ground before they were eaten, and in his head, that made the plank a plate. To him, those things mattered.

He picked one up, holding it up even though he couldn't see that well. There was a faint glimmer of the moon, and combined with his raccoon's excellent eyesight, that was enough for him to see how perfectly formed the strawberry was. "This has to be a magical fruit," he said to the stars twinkling above him. "I don't see how else anything could be formed this perfectly, a generous bounty to be sure. Maybe one of those plants in there is one of those that as soon as the fruit is picked, it just bloomed another one."

As he chewed, Marty thought about it. "No," he decided. "That can't be the case because there was a definite gap when I took one. But I only took six. I didn't take them all because I do know that's wrong." Marty pointed his finger at the sky. "You can't go taking everything, otherwise you're not leaving anything for anyone else."

Chuckling, Marty couldn't get over the idea that the fruit was magical. "Wouldn't it be amazing if this strawberry had magical properties – like a true magical piece of fruit. And how it would work, oh...oh."

Marty wiggled on his seat as another idea hit him. "What if I bit into it, then suddenly my life would change, and I would be living inside a house and not outside of one, and there would be somebody in my life who actually cared for me the way I was, instead of trying to make me be different. That would be so incredible. And a pipe dream, so I've heard. At least, that's what my friends used to say on the streets. But then they were smoking pipes, so maybe that's why they called it that."

Marty popped another strawberry in his mouth and moaned at the sweet taste. "I don't know if this tastes any different from the ones from yesterday. It could be the anticipation of hoping to have another one of these today that makes it taste so sweet. Thank you so much," he said to the stars. "For whoever this benefactor was, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to share in the sweetness of that gorgeous strawberry."

He quickly ate the last ones, moaning each time because the sweetness seemed to be intensified somehow. "There's definitely something in these magical strawberries, but they haven't suddenly magically restored on my plate, so I'm guessing it's time for sleep."

Marty sat by the fire for a little while longer, before finding himself some twigs and a slightly larger piece of root that would hopefully keep the cauldron going till morning. Trying to get the fire to go with that wood whittling effect wasn't an easy thing to do on an empty stomach. But Marty would just accept that if that's what happened. "That's tomorrow's problem," he muttered, as he crawled under his shelter. "I have somewhere to sleep, an almost full belly, and at least when I'm alone, I can dream impossible dreams about having a real home."

Closing his eyes, Marty started to imagine what it might be like to live in a house as grand as the one attached to where he was camping, or to even live in a house at all. A tiny one-bedroom studio apartment would seem like a castle to him if it was his. He tried to stop shivering – there was a definite bite in the air. As much as I'd love a house, I'd settle for a thicker blanket, he thought as he tried to force his shivering limbs to relax. I won't feel it when I'm asleep, he reminded himself, as he finally dozed off.

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Ares could barely breathe. He also couldn't drag himself away. Every cell in his body was yelling at him to translocate somewhere else. It didn't matter where, but just leave. The vulnerability, the abject poverty, the absolute happiness...

There was nothing in the man's camp at all except two log rounds that seemed to serve as seats, a small shelter the man had clearly built himself and what looked like one stiff wind would blow over, and an old, rusted iron pot that was serving as a fireplace. Ares scanned the area repeatedly for a bag, trunk, box, small cupboard, even, indicating other possessions, but apart from the clothes currently on his back, that young man appeared to have nothing.

How did this happen? As the God of War, Ares was well aware of how strife and trauma could impact people in truly negative and horrific ways – it was one of the reasons he hated his designation.

But the man chatting to the stars had been happy. He had chatted about magical strawberries and how he dreamed of a house. But what had tugged at Ares' long-dead heart was the way the man had thanked his benefactor for the stolen strawberries and then made a point of saying how important it was to leave food for others, when you're clearly starving yourself!

All Ares had done was wave his hand, and strawberries appeared. Throughout the eons of his existence, he'd used his powers or his own skills interchangeably. He never gave it a thought. If he burned his bacon, for example, cooking for himself, he just waved away the mess and thought up a fresh plate of food.

The one thing Ares was certain of was that he'd personally never struggled for anything in his life – and yet, I'm the world's grumpiest bastard. True fact. Ares had taken the hatred thrown at him by both parents and solidified it like a shield around him, refusing to show by word or deed he was anything more than the bastard he'd been painted as.

Until now.

I can't leave him there. I have to do something. Ares looked back in the direction of the main house and quickly discounted it. He wasn't ready to meet the man the Fates thought perfect for him, and wasn't sure he ever would be, and besides he told himself, suddenly waking up in the main house could be really disconcerting for someone used to sleeping outside.

But the pool house...that could be an option. Ares quickly zapped himself inside the smaller one-bedroom house that had probably been built for guests or to provide somewhere for people to rest after a day by the pool. Ares had never been in it.

With one wave of his hand and the place was clean. Another wave filled the cupboards by the small kitchenette and the refrigerator with food. There were already plates, pots, cutlery, and a coffee machine so that should be sufficient.

A quick check in the bedroom showed there was a bed, so Ares added blankets, pillows, and fresh sheets, and then towels and toiletries in the bathroom.

Wandering back into the living space, Ares scowled. It was very plain and there was



no heating. What the hell do people need to be comfortable? Using his own comfort as reference, Ares added a bigger and more plush couch, more cushions, another couple of throw rugs, a large rug on the floor, and some books for the shelves. Then he threw in a television over the fireplace and got the fire going – he made sure it would not go out.

Clothes. He's going to need warm clothes. Another flick of his fingers in the direction of the bedroom, and Ares felt he'd done all he could.

But still he hesitated, trying to imagine how the little shifter would feel, waking up in a strange place. Finally, he clicked up a bowl of fresh strawberries, which he placed on the small table in the kitchen area. Then he added a note which he propped up next to the bowl, so it could be clearly seen as soon as the man came out of the bedroom.

He dreamed of magical strawberries so let him believe that's exactly what happened. With one more click of his fingers, Ares transported the man and his raggedy blanket, so he was lying, still sleeping, on the new bed. Waiting for a moment, Ares reached over the mattress and carefully eased off the sneakers and put them on the floor. Then he flicked his finger, covering him with another blanket before moving away.

I have to go, I can't let him find me here. And yet Ares was strangely reluctant. There was something wholesome in the slender man with his mop of brown and black hair, causing Ares to think of things he'd never entertained before, such as hugging the man, keeping him safe, learning what else made him laugh...and moan. The man eating those strawberries did things to Ares' body no one had done before.

With a groan and a swirl of cells, Ares translocated back to the main house. He wouldn't go far – he didn't think that he could, but Ares had some serious thinking to do. At least for now, he knew the shifter was safe and warm.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:10 am*

“Goodness, it’s hot!” Marty woke up sweating, flinging back his blanket and remembering just in time not to sit up fully or he’d hit his head on a branch... Which was when he realized he wasn’t in his shelter.

“O-kay,” Marty said slowly, looking around what was a very nice room. “I must be still asleep.” Dropping his blanket, he pinched his arm. “Ouch. Not sleeping. Hey, fluffy butt,” he called to his animal side who was still asleep. “What happened last night?”

His raccoon had been busy the night before and wasn’t a morning being at the best of times. Marty decided to start with the basics.

Clothes on and I have my blanket... That was it. There was a new, fluffy blanket over the top of the one he already had. “That’s why I was so hot.” But the shelter, the trees, his cauldron, and even his little log seats were all gone. Someone had replaced them with a proper room, one would assume in a house.

“Was it the strawberries? Were they magic after all?” Scrambling off the bed, Marty opened and poked his head around one door. “A real live bathroom... Oh, oh, I will be using you in a minute, hang on.” He quickly shut the door and went over to the other one.

“More house?” Marty’s eyes widened as he took in a beautiful sitting room, an actual kitchen sink and a pantry, and a fireplace that had wood in it was burning happily. “No wonder it’s hot.”

Marty saw his cauldron placed next to the fireplace. Hurrying over, he poked at the

ashes in there. That had gone out. “Never mind, my friend,” he said, patting the cauldron. “You did your best with what I gave you.”

Swirling around, Marty could barely take it all in. Then, he noticed the view out of the window and hurried over to the large French doors. They weren’t locked. Stepping outside, Marty stood on a concrete patio, getting his bearings. “I’m on the same land, just in a different place. How did that happen?” If Marty looked to the left, he could see the trees where his camp had been over in the distance. The swimming pool he’d admired from his camp was now outside the door of where he’d been sleeping.

“Did I sleepwalk here?” That didn’t seem likely. Marty was sure he wasn’t the type of person to break into a building while he was awake, let alone asleep.

What about the hothouse? His raccoon was finally awake, although he didn’t seem bothered by their change of circumstances.

“I didn’t break into the hothouse, the door was unlocked.” Peering over his shoulder, Marty looked back inside the house, searching for clues. He shivered, the sudden change from warm to chilly was something he hadn’t felt for a while. Hurrying back inside, Marty closed the door, keeping the warmth inside for now.

There’s a note on the little table. At least his raccoon was checking out the details of the living area.

“Note?” Marty turned, noticing the bowl of strawberries, and next to it was a piece of what looked like very elegant paper. “What does it say?”

You could try reading it.

“You woke up with attitude this morning, didn’t you?” Crossing the room to retrieve

the note, Marty worried for a moment. Reading wasn't one of his better skills. But the note wasn't very long.

"This is your new home. You will be safe and warm here." Marty sounded out the words slowly, tracing over the letters. "Treat e-ver-y...everything in this house as yours." Marty's arms dropped to his side. "Mine? Mine!?" He realized he was screeching and quickly dropped his voice.

"Does that mean this is mine?" he slapped the table. "Or this is mine?" Another hand on the couch. "Mine? Mine? Is this a strawberry thing? Is this because I ate the magical strawberry? Or...or...or is this because I didn't eat all the strawberries and left some for someone else? Is it the strawberry? Is it?"

Did someone sign the note? His raccoon was sounding far too calm about everything, but then, he was probably glad to be indoors for a while. I understand that's what people do when they leave someone a message.

Marty quickly looked at the paper still in his hand. "There's just a large A at the bottom. I don't know anyone who has a name that starts with A ." He lifted the paper up to his nose, sniffing. "I can smell magic." He moved the paper away from his nose and sniffed the air. "The same magic that's in here – just traces of it, but it's the same."

I think you should sniff your sneakers.

"Eww... I don't think so. I mean, you know I do my best to keep them clean, but things happen, and they're old..." Marty looked down at his feet. They were bare. "Where're my shoes?"

You almost stepped on them when you jumped off the bed.

Marty hurried to the bedroom, and sure enough, his shoes had been placed on the floor at the bottom of the bed. “Did you see who took these off my feet? You had to have done, to know they were put on the floor.” He reached down and picked up his shoes.

Maybe. Marty got the impression his raccoon was being sneaky.

“I thought when I was asleep, then so were you.”

I can’t keep us safe if I’m sleeping.

That made Marty stop for a moment. “You do that, don’t you? That is so sweet of you. Thank you for doing that.”

Sniff the sneaker. It’s the only thing I saw him touch.

“Him? What him? A magical him?”

Sniff!

Marty wrinkled his nose. His sneakers were well past their best. But he moved them up to his nose, sniffing and then pulling his head away.

No. That’s not enough. Sniff again. On the sides.

“I really need to pee.” Marty leaned his head closer to the sneakers again, sniffing along the sides of his shoes. At first, all he could smell was more magic, but he felt his raccoon come forward as he sniffed again, and this time, he smelled something not magic, nor the residue of his smell in shoes he’d worn every day for at least two years.

Metals was Marty's first impression. Iron, steel, gold, and silver, with undertones of well-worn leather and magic. But it wasn't the smell so much that caught Marty's attention, it was the way that scent made him feel.

He suddenly felt flush, as if someone had poured warm water into every vein in his body. His skin tingled all over, and Marty was sure if he looked in the mirror, his hair would be standing up on end. "What is that smell? What's happening to me?"

Mate! His raccoon was jumping up and down. Our mate saved us and gave us a home. Our mate!

Unwilling to rain on his animal spirit's parade, Marty dropped his sneakers on the floor and went through to the pristine bathroom. All Marty could think when he heard the word mate was that the "him" wasn't there, and on the scale of rejections from one to a hundred, that had to rank at one thousand and three.

That sucked and no amount of optimism was going to hide that.

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Marty had showered. He'd turned the water as hot as he could stand and stayed under the water for at least half an hour. The shampoos and soaps were appreciated, as were the thick towels he dried himself with when he finally turned the shower tap off. He even found a comb in one of the drawers of the bathroom counter and tugged that through his wet waves.

The clothes left for him in the closet were only slightly too big. Marty picked a pair of jeans, a muscle shirt, and a clean hoodie and slid his feet into a pair of sheepskin boots that had a sturdy sole on them.

He found the food – lots of food. Marty hadn't seen that much food outside of the

grocery store. Unsure whether he could hold his brain together long enough to cook anything without burning it, Marty made a pile of sandwiches with various toppings, and after finding some orange juice, he went and sat at a small table on the patio to eat them. He sent a mental thanks to his benefactor when the plate and glass were empty and went back inside to check the fire. The wood on the fire didn't look any more burned down than it had that morning.

Curled up on the couch, Marty tried to count his blessings. There were so many of them. It was peaceful not trying to find a place where he wasn't buffeted by the wind. Being warm was a blessing usually reserved for summer, which was still months away. He'd eaten breads, and deli meats, and he even found a jar of pickles in the small refrigerator. His original clothes were in the washer-dryer combination he found in a small utility room, along with his original blanket. Being clean, having a full belly, and having a roof over his head were things Marty never took for granted, and yet in that moment, he had them all.

"And I am grateful. Genuinely grateful." Marty looked up at the bookshelves. Most of the shelves were full of big thick books that Marty doubted he could read even if he wanted to. In his head, big books had big words, and Marty's brain was already tired. On one of the shelves, Marty noticed what looked like a drawing pad, and there was a cup with pencils and pens beside it. Getting up, he went and collected a pencil and the paper and went back to the couch again.

"Tell me about him." Marty kept his voice low. He knew his raccoon was keeping an eye on him, and Marty could only try to do the same. He had felt it, like a physical pain, when his raccoon realized why Marty felt so dejected.

It wasn't easy to see him, and I only caught a glimpse. His raccoon sounded so apologetic. I believe he used his magic to block anyone from sensing him – sight, sound, and scent. He must be very powerful.

“But you know he’s a him,” Marty coaxed gently. “Tall, short, big, small?”

Tall, big, an ancient being.

Marty took note of the impressions his raccoon was sending him, his pencil moving quickly across the page.

Long silver hair tied back off his face, big coat. Hard jaw, straight nose.

Filling in the details, Marty added shading to the facial details, the impression of stubble, and dark eyebrows.

His eyes were intense, like they could look into your soul and know what you did twenty years before on a Tuesday.

“Why a Tuesday?” Marty was diverted from his drawing to ask.

You told me nothing ever happens on a Tuesday.

Chuckling, Marty found something else to be grateful for in that moment. His sweet raccoon was usually his responsible side, but every now and again, he said something random that reminded Marty of how in tune with each other they were. “I don’t even know what day of the week it is now,” he said, adding some darkness to the eyes. “Is this similar to our translucent mate? Have I captured his likeness?”

That’s him. Marty felt his raccoon’s sorrow because it mirrored his own.

“Well, it’s been fun drawing again,” he said with determined cheer. “I haven’t been able to do that for the longest time.”

Tearing the page off the pad, Marty got up, taking it over to the bookshelves and



propping it up against a stack of books. “Sitting around moping isn’t going to do us any good. Let’s go for a walk through the woodland area, get some fresh air.”

He glanced at the fire. The wood still looked like it had the morning before. “I guess that won’t go out, but if we don’t have to worry about basic necessities for a bit, I’m going to have to find something else to do.” Because sitting around and thinking is just going to remind me of all that I’ve lost, including my mate, and that’s not healthy for anyone.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:10 am*

Ares found Hermes sitting atop a skyscraper overlooking Manhattan. The Messenger God was fond of high places and Ares often wondered why. Did Hermes prefer not to have anything to do with the people who dwelled below, or did he prefer his privacy so much he found it relaxing to sit in most places people would find terrifying.

“I didn’t expect to see you around here.” Hermes was sitting on the edge of the building, his legs dangling over the edge. “Not the sort of place to grab a coffee.”

“I brought my own.” Ares sat down and thought up his favorite brew. “What do you think about this Fated Mates business?”

“You were never one for small talk.” Hermes chuckled. “Has this got to do with that business with Zeus, Paulie, and Hera?”

“No. Zeus and Paulie seem happy with their new son and Hera appears to be adapting to life on Earth. As none of them think about me, I don’t see the point in worrying about them.” Ares took a sip from his coffee. “I was thinking about mates in a more general sense. For example, why are the Fates giving mates to the gods now, when we’ve all been alone for eons? I’ve never heard any god complain about not having a significant other.”

“It’s not like the Fates confide in me,” Hermes said, leaning over and sniffing Ares’ coffee. “Hmm, that smells good.” Seconds later he had a cup in his hand. “I do know Hades was someone who was actively mate hunting until his consort came along. Personally, I think it’s got to do with that lot.” He pointed his cup in the direction of the population below.

“Mortals?” Ares frowned.

“Beings other than gods,” Hermes corrected. “Think about it. Back in the day when our father was worshipped and all that rubbish, the known population was tiny compared to now. The Fates wove their threads of life, and that was a natural order of things.

“It’s my opinion, and just an opinion mind, that when people started to improve their quality of life and lived longer, they had more children and surprise, surprise those children lived, then the weave the Fates manage just got too big.

“It’s quite ironic, what’s happening now. The women of the Pantheons all had their children, but the men were all off fighting wars and making dicks of themselves.” Hermes winked at Ares and chuckled again. “Have you noticed all of the gods who’ve found their mates are male, and their mates are all men as well?”

Ares took a swig of his coffee, thinking about what Hermes had said. He wouldn’t call them active friends, but Hermes had been surprisingly helpful to Ares over the years. He was one of the few in the Greek Pantheon who didn’t actively hate him. “I believe Frigg, from the Norse Pantheon is actively seeking her mate on Earth. After Odin found his, she was very supportive.”

“Frigg is one in a hundred. She at least values life on Earth unlike others we won’t mention.”

Ares thought about what he’d seen in his tabletop, but decided some things were best not mentioned. “What did you mean about how male gods finding male mates was ironic?”

“They’re looking after children, aren’t they?” Hermes swung around, tucking one leg under him as he waved his coffee mug around. “Thor, Hades, Poseidon, even Zeus

himself are playing happy families with their mates, and actively looking after their new offspring. I think it's hilarious."

Children? Ares hadn't even considered that angle with a new mate. He already had plenty of them, and like most other people in his life, they didn't have anything to do with him, nor did he with them. "I wonder why the Fates did that. I know they needed children to provide more permanent threads in their weave, but why not children to female mates?"

"Because society – that down there – is changing." Hermes waved at the streets below. "And yet the gods have been stuck in the good old days, which you and I both know were never that good. You imagine if someone like Zeus, for example, was gifted a female mate. He'd impregnate her, the way he used to do with anyone else, but you wouldn't catch him changing a diaper or reading his kid a bedtime story. If the Fates gave him a female mate, his behavior wouldn't be any different than it was with any of the other women he's had and left over history."

"Are you sure?" Ares thought Hermes might be generalizing just a bit too much. "I was sure that when a god mated with a shifter, they couldn't be unfaithful."

"That's definitely true. You only need to see Poseidon as an example of that. But simply not being able to stick your dick in other people is hardly an indicator of changed values or behavior. Zeus would still be living with the idea of patriarchy, as would Poseidon. Now, Zeus reads bedtime stories to his son, and both Poseidon and Hades went and got themselves pregnant." Hermes's lips twisted into a wicked grin. "That was fun to watch, especially with Poseidon. And look – Hades loved it so much he's doing it again. That little chipmunk shifter of his has got hidden depths."

"You were spying on Poseidon when he was pregnant?" Ares wasn't sure if he should be horrified or laugh.

“I didn’t need to spy on him. His complaining could be heard on Olympus.” Hermes nudged his shoulder. “Why all the questions about Fated Mates? Are you hoping you’ll find one of your own?”

“No, I’m not worried about that,” Ares said, suddenly feeling distracted. He needed to get back to Boston. “I’m just not sure what I’d do with one if I claimed that person. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m not exactly likable.”

“That’s only on Olympus.” Hermes snorted. “Who cares about the opinions of people who should’ve been allowed to die out when they stopped being worshipped.”

Sometimes, following Hermes’s train of thought was like walking through a labyrinth. “Barely anyone worshipped me in the first place.”

“Exactly. So, you’ve got nothing to live up to. In case you haven’t noticed, the only gods who have mated with another god so far have been Baby and Owen, Silvanus and Artemas, oh, and Loki and Anubis, but they are all exceptions. Silvanus and Owen are older than Zeus, and Anubis was a Death God, so maybe that’s why he got Loki. Who knows? But everyone else so far has found themselves with shifters...”

“Ra has got a shifter and a vampire, and Zeus’s mate Paulie is a demi-god.”

“Ra still has a shifter as well, and if you think about it, it was Paulie’s tiger that claimed Zeus first when he was being a dick.”

Ares chuckled. In his opinion Zeus was still a dick. “Fair enough. So, your answer to a mating problem is just don’t be a dick.”

“Pretty much. From what I hear, shifters are very forgiving, and so long as you don’t pull a Zeus and leave your mate alone for months, you should be fine. I still can’t believe he was so phobic about being bitten, and look what happened to him. He was

lucky Paulie was a demi-god, or that tiger could've gotten very sick, knowing he had a mate and not being with him. He should've known the Fates don't make mistakes."

"That's what I've heard." Ares stood up and blinked away his now cold coffee. That urgency to get back to Boston was increasing, but he did understand how a conversation worked. "What about you, Hermes? Are you seeking your mate as you zip around the world and between the realms?"

"I'm open to the opportunity." Hermes shrugged. "It would curtail my lifestyle big time, but the thing I keep remembering is that the Fates give us mates as a gift. It's like, I think it was Seth, the Egyptian God of Desserts and Storms, who said that being given a mate meant he hadn't been forsaken, and that's a pretty potent idea when you think about it."

A gift? That did have a nice ring to it. "Yeah, I think you're right. Thanks for the chat, Hermes, I'll see you around."

"Say hi to your mate for me," Hermes said as Ares disappeared off the roof.

I didn't tell him I had one, did I? Deciding it wasn't worth worrying about, Ares spread out his essence so he could have a bird's eye view of the pool house.

But the raccoon wasn't in the house, where it was warm and safe. He was outside...in the pool...with a scrubbing brush...and from what Ares could see, he was wearing barely any clothes. What on Earth are you doing?

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“I’m not taking stuff for nothing.” Marty panted as he scrubbed along the already bright tiles. “Taking a few pieces of fruit or vegetables from a neglected garden is one thing. But no, my mate is apparently that...that...” Marty couldn’t think of a word to describe someone he didn’t know. “That whatever, he can just give out houses, and food, and fireplaces that don’t need wood added to it, and then just wander off, wiping his hands of his little mate problem. Well, I don’t have to take it.”

We’re not leaving our new house, are we? His raccoon sounded genuinely alarmed. Please tell me we’re not going to go back to living under a pile of twigs. Not that. Anything but that.

Marty blew a raspberry. “I’m not silly enough to do that. I’m talking about the principle of the thing. That’s why I’m scrubbing tiles that are clearly cleaned by magic, the same as the rest of the estate. Besides, giving back a gift is rude.” Marty straightened, brushing his hair out of his face with his forearm. His hands were still dripping. “But you tell me. When have you known me to be the type of person to just sit down on my skinny ass and expect everything to be handed to me? When have I done that?”

It might have been nice if you had done that once in a while. Marty got an image of his raccoon resplendent on his back in a pile of cushions, munching on grapes fed to him by a male hand. I don’t mind being pampered.

“You’d be bored in a week.” Marty went to attack the tiles again, but his fingers slipped, and the brush flew out of his hand and sank into the water. “Darn it. I hate getting my face wet.”

Inhaling deeply, Marty held his breath as he ducked under the chilly water. He had to open his eyes so he could see where the brush went, but even so, his lungs felt as though they were bursting as he grabbed hold of it and pushed his head above the water.

“That was not fun.” Marty gasped in fresh air, hurriedly wiping the water off his face with his free hand. Deciding he’d had enough of cleaning tiles that were already sparkly clean, he hoisted himself up onto the edge of the pool, dangling his legs in the water. “It’s invigorating weather, I’ll say that much.”

It's the middle of winter. What did you expect? Get your butt inside.

Marty knew his animal side was right. Inside the pool house the air was warm, he could relax on the couch, and...and... That was the problem. Marty had been in survival mode for so long his down time was reduced to snatched moments under the moon or when he stopped for a breather during the day. Not whole days stretching out in front of him with nothing to do. “Have you ever thought about how long a day is when we don’t have any chores or the need to find food?”

I think you should go inside and get warm. Your brain is freezing up. One day is always as long as the next one.

“No, no. I mean, I know you’re right.” Marty waved his brush around for emphasis and flicked his face with water again. “I do hate doing that.” He quickly swiped the drips off his cheeks. “But I think I’m onto something. I never felt as if the hours dragged when we were busy trying to keep body and soul together. There were always places to go and things to see...”

We were always looking for food because we were perpetually hungry. Go inside, or I’ll shift and take us into the house myself. Your toes are going blue.



“You can’t open the door to get inside. That’s why you have me.” Marty sighed. “Maybe I should just stay here and become a block of ice and then... No. That’s ridiculous. Just because our mate doesn’t want us, that’s no reason to suffer. If the man doesn’t care, it’s a waste of time, really, and I’m not one for playing emotional games anyway. Answer me one thing,” he said as he sensed his raccoon was getting pushy. “Just one thing, and I’ll take us inside. Why do you think our mate rejected us when we didn’t even have a chance to say hello? Most people wait for that before they reject me.”

I don’t know. Perhaps he has devils of his own, and technically, he hasn’t rejected us because he hasn’t talked to us yet. He’s just not here right now.

Marty hadn’t thought of things that way, and while he knew his raccoon was trying to make the best of a bad situation – he’d been rejected as often as Marty had been – Marty could go with that for now.

“Okay. We’ll go inside. I’ll cook something yummy. Oh, or maybe I’ll make a cake. That’s something we haven’t done for ages.” Resting his hand on the side of the pool, Marty pulled his legs out of the water, putting his heels on the edge of the tile. “Ouch, I’ve got cramp,” he said as one of his heels slipped off the tile. “I do not want to fall in.”

The chill didn’t make moving any easier – it was as if it had seeped into his bones - but Marty managed to straighten up slowly. He was just about to turn around when a loud, deep voice yelled behind him. “What in Zeus’s name are you doing out here without clothes on?”

“Hey, what? My bits are covered.” Marty went to turn, but his left calf muscle spasmed, and his foot slipped off the tile again. Before he knew what was happening, he had fallen back into the water with a huge splash.

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“Shit!” I should never have yelled. Ares blamed the fact that as he crested over the hill from the main house, determined to actually talk to the man the Fates deemed perfect for him, his eyes were riveted to a very skimpily clad ass poked in his direction as his mate was standing up.

It was a shock – not seeing the ass as such, but Ares was overwhelmed by his own body’s reaction to seeing it. His cock hardened as if it was on a spring, and Ares’ whole body heated. No time to think about that now.

With a wave of his arm, his mate was plucked from the water by invisible hands, swaddled in a blanket, and deposited into his arms. Without looking at his mate’s face, Ares stormed toward the pool house.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were a penguin shifter,” he grumbled as he fumbled with the door. “Have you no sense of preservation? It’s winter and that water is damned cold. Running around with nothing on...”

“Excuse me. I had pants on.”

“White pants that leave nothing to the imagination when that material gets wet.”

“Oops. I didn’t think about that.” His mate actually giggled. “Thank goodness you don’t have close neighbors. Are you going to put me down now we’re inside?”

“No, I don’t think I’m inclined to.” Ares closed the door behind them and made his way to the corner of the couch closest to the fire. “Knowing my luck, you’d just sprint outside again and freeze to death. Let’s get you warm.”

Sitting down, Ares rubbed up and down his mate’s arm, which was covered with a

blanket. He thought that was something someone would do to a cold person. Apparently, it stimulated blood flow, not that Ares knew. Looking up, because if he looked at his mate's face he might kiss him, Ares was shocked for a second time in five minutes, seeing his image staring back at him.

"That wasn't there before." He pointed at the picture.

"No, it wasn't. I drew that this morning." His mate yawned, covering his mouth with his hand. "My raccoon told me what you looked like – he saw you when you dropped us off in this house of yours. Are you going to tell me your name, or is that a secret?"

"They call me Ares." Ares was still stunned by the picture. It was incredibly detailed and looked almost as if the face could just come away from the page and speak.

"Ares? That's a nice name. I'm Marty. Hmm. I'm feeling much warmer now, thank you. Oh, I must've scrubbed those tiles harder than I thought." Marty yawned again. "I'll just have a little nap, then I'll make us something to eat."

Ares froze as Marty snuggled into his chest, and before he had time to blink, his mate was asleep.

What in Hades' Garden just happened? He peered down at Marty's sleeping form. Even asleep, Marty's nose was twitching and that gave Ares his lightbulb moment. Shifters relied on scent, and clearly, his scent made Marty feel safe enough to sleep.

The problem was Ares hadn't exactly planned on staying. His only plan had been to talk to his mate to find out if there was something lacking from the house – why else would the man be outside when he didn't have to be?

But now Marty was in his arms. His mate had a name, and Ares now knew the feel of the man against his body. I can't disturb his sleep. Yeah, that was the excuse Ares

was going for, not just dumping Marty on the couch and making a speedy exit. With a flick of his finger, the coffee table moved so he could rest his feet on it, and with a sigh, Ares kept one arm around Marty, while he leaned back and closed his eyes. He really hadn't had a lot of sleep recently, either.

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We can't keep sleeping on our mate when we're not asleep.

Behind his closed eyelids, Marty rolled his eyes. Of course we can. You felt his energy. He was going to run off again. By pretending to be asleep, I don't have to talk. I can't fuck things up that way.

He's our mate. He won't run off.

Not at the moment. He's actually gone to sleep. Do we know anything about an Ares? He has a lot of magic. You'd think people would know about him.

He's a god. One of the old ones. The God of War and Courage, I think. One of the twelve original Olympians.

Marty proved eyes could widen under closed eyelids. How did we end up with a god?

Just lucky, I guess. Personally, I think he's lucky to have us. The raccoon always had high self-esteem. What you're failing to remember is that he can't claim us if he's sleeping, and we can't claim him if we're pretending to nap, either.

He didn't come here to claim us. He came here to yell at me for showing my ass cheeks to the neighbors. Marty sighed, and then, remembering he was supposed to be asleep, added a snort at the end so it could be mistaken for a snore. I have enough trouble keeping ordinary people around me. They think I'm weird and that I talk weird, and that I'm just plain weird, and then they leave me, or kick me out, or...

STOP! Red Sign! Red Sign! STOP!

Marty's eyes flew open, and he let go of the breath he'd been holding. Thank you. Phew, that was close. Thank you so much.

He and his raccoon had a system born out of necessity. While Marty strived to be positive all the time, he wasn't always successful. When things got bleak, it was easy for his brain to spiral downward, making it almost impossible to climb out of the hole he imagined his soul sinking into. If his raccoon ever noticed it happening, he would yell, which would break Marty's train of thought.

Go and bake a cake. Our mate's scent is making my teeth itch. Get up, put actual clothes on, then go and make that cake you promised us. Maybe our god will be wowed by your baking skills.

Won't I wake him up?

No. He probably watched us all night, making sure we were safe. He'll sleep provided you don't make a ridiculous amount of noise.

Doing something positive was another way to get out of the doldrums, so Marty carefully unwrapped himself from the blanket Ares' magic had swamped him with, taking care not to wiggle too much as he slipped off his mate's lap and tiptoed to the bedroom.

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"Ouch, ouch, ouch. Why do I always burn myself?" Marty loved baking, and others had told him in the past that he was good at it. But trying to make a cake with a sleeping person not more than twenty feet away wasn't easy.

He wrapped the outside of his mixing bowl with a dishcloth to muffle the mixing sounds. He opened the cupboard doors carefully and then deliberately closed them

slowly as well. Getting a mixing spoon out of a drawer full of other utensils took some real skill – and more than ten minutes on its own.

Unsure what sort of cake Ares might like, Marty went with an old favorite of his – carrot cake with a cream cheese icing and walnut decorations. He quickly got into the swing of things, despite it being many years since he'd done any baking in a proper kitchen. It was helpful that the cupboards seemed to automatically provide the ingredients he needed.

At one point, he was looking for baking powder, and he mentioned that out loud – quietly - as he was studying the contents of the cupboard. A box of baking powder just appeared. Same with the walnut pieces. Fascinating.

The cake went into the oven, super quietly. Marty watched it through the glass door – all ovens had variations in their temperature, and he wanted the cake to be perfect.

His raccoon was excellent at judging the right point of “done,” and when the smells started wafting around the room, Marty carefully opened the oven door and removed the cake tin. But he was so excited to see how the cake had turned out, Marty forgot to grab something to protect his hands from the hot tin, and he couldn't resist the “Ouch, ouch, ouch” as he moved faster than he thought possible to put the tin on the kitchen counter. “Why do I always burn myself?”

“You're hurt? What happened?”

Oh, my goodness, he's awake. “Go back to sleep. The cake's not iced yet.” Marty didn't have a chance to look at his mate. He was running his blistered fingers under the cold tap.

“Did you make me a cake?” Ares was there by his side as if he'd flown, and as he was a god, that was highly possible. Marty had no idea what gods could or could not

do. “Here, let me help.”

Marty just stood, his mouth open, as Ares removed his hands from the running water and gently swiped his larger fingers over Marty’s. “There. All better now.”

“Wow. That’s impressive.” Any of the pain from the burns had disappeared. “I need to ice the cake, but it has to cool first.”

“It smells lovely.” Ares was still holding his hands. “What type of cake is it?”

“Carrot cake with cream cheese icing and walnut decorations.” Marty was looking at where their hands were joined.

“How did you know that was my favorite?”

That made Marty look up, and he grinned. “It’s my favorite, too. We match.”

Ares seemed to be blushing – his cheeks were pink, which looked very fetching with his silver hair. Clearing his throat, Ares asked, “So what do we have to do with this cake before we can eat it? I’ve never baked before, but that cake smells delicious.”



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Ares laughed more that afternoon than he ever had. Marty, in his role as bakery tutor, alternated between a bossy teacher role, and then the next minute he was cackling at Ares' efforts as if the whole world was laughing along with him.

While Ares could and did cook quite often for himself, especially when he was living on the Earth realm, he found doing it with somebody else in the kitchen was a lot more fun than he'd imagined. He had never baked anything before – he hadn't seen the point – but Marty apparently loved baking. He also had a very definite way of doing things.

“You can't leave lumps in the icing sugar,” he said firmly when Ares was about to put their freshly made icing onto the now-cooled cake. “You have to cream it until it's all the same consistency.”

Keeping his grin at the officious tone to himself, Ares beat the icing a little bit more before Marty covered the cake with it. It was the same when it came to the decoration part of the process. Ares carefully took out each walnut and went to imprint each piece onto the top of the cake, planning to make a uniform pattern.

Marty shook his head. “You're doing good, babe, but where's the originality in that?” He took the packet from Ares and shook out a handful of the walnut bits. “If you hold them above the cake like this and then just sprinkle, look at all the amazing unique designs that the walnut pieces make in the icing. That's what makes the cake unique, because every time I do this on a cake, the pattern comes out differently. Can't you see it?”

Ares had to agree it looked a little eclectic. But he pointed to the pieces of walnut that

hadn't made it to the cake. "What do we do with these? Just sweep them up and throw them in the trash?"

"Goodness, no. We don't waste anything in this place."

Marty's fingers darted out, quickly picking them all up. Scooping them all in his palm, he chucked them into his mouth. "See? No waste. That's another perk that I love when I'm cooking something. Hmm, now, what else can we have with cake?"

"Coffee?" Ares suggested. He thought that was the most logical thing.

But Marty was shaking his head again. "No, no. There are rules. We need to have something savory before we dive into the sweet stuff. That's the way it goes."

Ares hadn't heard of that before, but he wasn't going to object. Marty was so cute, taking charge of the kitchen. "I could click us up something. Anything you like, I can just snap my fingers, and it would be here."

"That's very sweet, but no, that's defeating the point," Marty said. "In the time it takes for us to make sandwiches, the cake is tempting us. We're anticipating it, so that when we finish our savory food, we'll doubly appreciate the sweet stuff. Can't you see how that makes perfect sense?"

Again, Ares had absolutely no idea what Marty was talking about, but he had to admit that the way Marty smiled, chuckled, giggled, and the lightning-fast way he moved around the kitchen was really, really entrancing in more ways than one. "Could I zap some sandwiches?" he suggested, because that cake did look really tasty and so did Marty.

But there was the Marty headshake again. "Part of the process is to go through each step so that you know what's in your meal. You don't want any bugs or anything

getting in between the bread slices.”

Leaning on the counter, Ares chuckled. “I can assure you I know everything that goes into my food when I zap things up to eat. In fact, I’d go so far as to guarantee absolutely not one bug’s toe lands on my sandwiches. How would they do that if the food is made with magic?”

Tilting his head, Marty was clearly considering what he’d said. It was an unusual feeling, being heard, but Ares liked it. “You’re probably right, but it’s fun making your own sandwiches, don’t you think? Like when you think of zapping up a sandwich, do you imagine big thick sandwiches or tiny little skinny ones? Do you imagine them rough cut, or do you conjure them up with slices of bread that are all exactly the same size? A sandwich is more than two slices of bread and a filling. It’s a statement you make to address your hunger needs.”

Is this guy for real? But Marty was completely serious, and as Ares really wanted a slice of that...cake...he made the sandwiches under Marty’s watchful eye. Apparently, butter needed to go right up to the edges of the bread slice, otherwise, crusts can end up dry and boring. Ares found out as well that Aioli helped increase the flavor of the butter if it was spread right over it. Ares admitted he’d never done that before.

“See, you’re learning to enjoy new tastes because you’re making the sandwiches yourself. How can you try anything different when you use your magical powers to create your food? You can only create the food you see in your head. You’ve never had butter and Aioli until now because you never thought of it. Shaved roast beef and some crispy lettuce is going to taste amazing with that combination.”

Ares could probably have debated that logic, but Marty seemed so thrilled that he was showing Ares new things, that he wasn’t going to argue. “Did you want me to wave up a coffee?” He wasn’t sure how Marty could come up with a unique combination

for coffee, but anything was possible.

Marty surprised him this time by agreeing to the zap. “I tried making coffee this morning, but it had a strange taste. I’m not sure how to use that machine yet, but I’ll learn.”

Sitting around the table enjoying a simple meal of sandwiches with the promise of cake to come was the best meal Ares had ever had. As they ate, Marty chatted about all sorts of inconsequential things. It was like his brain zipped and zapped from one topic to another, which Ares found fascinating.

He was also conscious of the fact that he was going to have to explain to his little raccoon why he hadn't claimed him...yet. He knew that for shifters, that was a big deal. There was a part of him that thought he needed someone to slap him around the head. Why did I think I could just set him up in a house and then never see him again? Ares knew from spending a mere hour in his mate’s company that it was definitely not enough.

“Do you know anything about me?” Ares tried to keep his tone casual, as if it was no big deal. “You know, anything about me as Ares, the God of War and Courage in the Greek Pantheon?”

“Gosh, you’ve lived such a long time,” Marty said. “Didn't gods appear before people? That’s so mind-blowing. You've seen everything that people have gotten up to over the years. Although I think that would be quite difficult too, because how on Earth could you remember everything? I think my brain would explode with all that information.”

“Most gods don't bother with things happening on Earth much anymore. We’re under a non-intervention rule. We can’t change anything for anyone in life anymore – except mates,” Ares added quickly. “So, gods went off and forged lives of their own.”

“I’m glad.” Marty nodded. “Gods probably get lonely the same as everyone else. They deserve lives and families and fun times.”

I really want to believe that. “The issue, and something that I’m worried about with regard to us, is that there were a lot of stories written about the gods, and most of them weren’t true. Certain ancient scholars wanted to create order among the gods people worshipped, but it’s not like they interviewed anyone before publishing their stories.”

“Oh wow, wouldn’t that be funny.” Marty tapped the table and did an enticing jiggle. “Just imagine someone shoving a microphone in your face and saying, ‘Excuse me, Mr. Ares, but where were you when life was created?’ I mean, what could you say?”

“There’s a reason people don’t know about our true existence,” Ares agreed. “Some things are meant to be a mystery.” I’m going to have to tell him. “The thing is, a lot of these stories talked about siblings getting married and a lot of relationships between gods, assigning them personalities when they really didn’t know us at all.” Ares looked down at his plate, toying with the last of his crusts. “The stories written about me are not very complimentary.”

“You do seem really worried about that. My raccoon is telling me so.” Marty laughed. “I really don’t think that stories written by someone else, especially if they’re not remotely true, would impact the way I thought about you. Why would you think that? Don’t you treat people the way they treat you?”

Ares had to stop and think about that for a moment. “I have a feeling that, yes, I probably do, but the issue with that is that most people don’t treat me very well at all, so therefore...”

“Ooh, you’re one of those grumpy bastards then.” Marty burst out laughing all over again. “Tell me that’s true.”

“It’s probably true.” Ares tried to explain. “The problem with the Pantheons, the group of the gods, is that they’re like a dysfunctional family.”

“Goodness, you don’t want to get me started on dysfunctional families,” Marty said. And then he quickly stopped himself and added, “Sorry. Go on. You’re explaining about your family.”

“Actually, I think I’d rather hear about yours.” Ares tried to think how to put it. “My parents had, have always had a very volatile relationship. They are not married, obviously. However, my parents are considered the Father and Mother of the Greek Pantheon. Zeus impregnated my mother, who may or may not have been Hera. But Hera was Zeus’s wife, or she was known as Zeus’s wife, again, with the fictional stuff, but Hera is the Mother of the Greek Gods.

“Anyway, Hera has also had children without Zeus, and Zeus has many other children, but then I think because Hera hated Zeus, I was always hated by Hera. By the same token, I was also hated by Zeus, which may or may not have had anything to do with Hera. To be honest, I can’t think why that happened. I don’t remember any specific incident, but it might have been because of Athena, although, again, I’m not sure. It’s just that...”

Marty cut him off, reaching over and patting his hand. “You don’t have to explain any of that stuff to me. I have seen people hating another person simply because they’ve got a hair out of place,” he said softly. “It really doesn’t matter why people feel the way they do – that’s on them. What’s important is how that makes you feel.”

“Yes, well, you see, that was part of the problem,” Ares admitted. He actually found Marty really easy to talk to, perhaps because Marty didn’t appear to have any preconceived notions about the way he was supposed to be.

Ares thought about what Hermes had said, about how he really hadn’t been

worshipped and therefore, very few people had misconceptions about him or any perceptions at all. Emboldened by that idea, he continued, “The problem is that the issues between Zeus and Hera caused a lot of problems throughout the Pantheon.

“If Zeus was on one person's side, then Hera hated them. If Hera liked somebody, Zeus hated them. It was very petty, it was because of that, though, that when I saw you in the garden helping yourself to some vegetables which I now realized was for food that you really needed, I knew you were my mate because you carry a light with you...”

When he saw Marty's look of confusion, he added, “All gods recognize their mates when they see them, almost immediately, because that person carries their own personal light show – a light show that only that specific god can see. Night or dark room, day or in a brightly lit room, it doesn't matter. That special person is lit up for the god to find. I saw you in your raccoon form the garden, surrounded by that light, and knew you were my mate.”

“Wow, my own light show,” Marty said, giggling his cute heart out. “I can't imagine what that must've looked like. And my raccoon was being so stealthy as well, totally not realizing he was lit up like a disco ball. I was terrified when I saw your camera lights come on, but you already knew I was there.”

“I did turn those camera lights off the second night, but yes, you could still be seen.”

“Oh no. Don't say things like that. My raccoon is super proud of his sneaking skills.” But Marty was still chuckling. “As far as my raccoon and I are concerned, the lights didn't come on because I was moving lightning fast across the garden.”

“Hmm. While you were naked. I did notice.” It was Ares' turn to chuckle, although he sobered up fast because he knew he still had so much more to say. “The thing is, most people in the Pantheon hate me, and some have had good reason.”

He swallowed the lump when he thought about Aphrodite. “Others not necessarily so much. For many, it's just a habit or their way of showing an allegiance or whatever else. But I've gone through a few horrific things through my time because of that hate, although I will say nowadays most of the gods just ignore me.”

Pushing his plate aside, Ares picked up his coffee mug, staring into the dark brown liquid. “I didn’t want to consider a world where my mate might hate me, too. I doubt I could handle that.”

“Sugar snaps and corn cobs. Oh, my goodness,” Marty said. “Me, too.”

“What the fuck? The gods hate you, too? Why?”

“Not the gods, well, I don’t think they do. I’m sure gods don’t know me at all. But people. I really, really, really wanted to find my mate, but then what if that mate rejects me the same way everybody else has done? I mean, you talk about dysfunctional families. You've seen nothing unless you've lived in a family of raccoons where you've got twelve siblings and they're all freaking fighting and carrying on, and you're made to be the scapegoat just because you think about things a bit differently. Like maybe I wanted to be kind one time or maybe I wanted to share food instead of grabbing it all to myself and everything else, but my gods, I was hated so badly.”

Ares felt his heart ache at the passion in his mate’s words. But Marty hadn’t finished.

“It was worse when I was driven out of my family home, and I had to make my way in the world. I couldn’t find a boss who would understand me. They had rules that they thought I knew when they hadn’t even told me what they were. And then, this one time I tried to rent a room...”

Marty shook his head. “That was awful, so I ended up sleeping outside. And in the



end, it was easier to live by myself in some private little place and not interact with anybody at all because it hurts right here.” Marty thumped his chest. “I know how you feel because it hurts when you're shunned, you're pushed away, and you never know why.”

Ares covered his mouth with his hand. “Hades’s Garden. That’s what I did to you when I stuck you in this house and left you. I am so sorry. Will you ever forgive me? I’m truly sorry. I didn’t know.”

“You didn’t reject me. We can call it” - Marty thought for a moment – “it was you being considerate, letting me sleep, and then getting caught up with something else, but you arrived back here eventually. Does that sound right?”

“I appreciate you reframing things that way. Thank you.”

“You’re not off the hook yet,” Marty warned. “The outcome of this debate will depend on if there are any lumps in the icing before we talk about forgiveness.” Marty's eyes were twinkling as he reached for a knife to cut the cake, but Ares knew he had to stop him.

Putting his hand on Marty’s, he said softly, “I hate to do this, especially when you and that cake have been tempting me for what feels like hours. But I have to tell you about Aphrodite before we go any further. I don’t want you to hear the story from anyone else, and you deserve to know.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:10 am*

Aphrodite? Do we know an Aphrodite? Marty was momentarily stunned. His mind had been on cake and being with his mate. He thought Ares would feel better if he had some sugary goodness inside of him. It always worked for him. But now Ares wanted to talk about someone who had a fancy name. Marty didn't think he knew the person personally and couldn't see why they were important.

Aphrodite is one of the most beautiful goddesses in the Greek Pantheon. She's the Goddess of Love and Desire, I think.

How do you know that? You're a raccoon. I didn't know that.

You would've done if you'd listened to your cousin Ronny more often when you were growing up. He loved ancient mythology, and the Greek Pantheon was one of his favorites. He would talk about it for hours. According to the stories our mate mentioned, Aphrodite and he had an affair that went on for a very long time, even after Aphrodite was married to Hephaestus.

Heph...who?

Heff-fee-stus, Hephaestus. He's the God of Volcanoes, Metallurgy, and Forges, and all sorts of things like that.

Wow. That sounds like a powerful god. I wonder...

"Hey, hey." Ares' hand tightened on his, pulling Marty out of his musing. "Have I upset you by mentioning her? Did you want me to leave?"

“No!” Marty shook his head, trying to clear his brain. “My raccoon was just updating me on who Aphrodite was because I’d never heard of her. But apparently, my cousin, Ronny...” He put his free hand up, stopping himself. “Sorry, you don’t need to hear about him. Anyway, so you had a long time affair with one of the most beautiful goddesses in existence, is that right?”

“Yes.”

“And she was married during that time to...to... some guy’s name I can’t pronounce, but she was still having an affair with you?”

“Hephaestus, and yes. He found out because the Sun God Helios saw us together. Hephaestus made this net out of tiny gold threads, captured me and Aphrodite in the web together and dragged us, still naked, in front of the other Olympians to embarrass us.”

“Hmm, that’s a conundrum. You see, I don’t agree with cheating by anyone, but then you weren’t cheating because you weren’t the one who was married. Aphrodite was. Didn’t she want to see you anymore after that scene on Olympus?”

Ares shook his head, and he did look sad.

“Well, her loss is my gain,” Marty said firmly. “That’s all I can say about that. She might be the most beautiful goddess in existence, but did she ever make you carrot cake with cream cheese icing, and artistically arranged walnuts?”

“No, she never did.” Ares’ lips were twitching. “Incidentally, Hephaestus is happy now, too. He and his mate, Landyn, are living in Montana, and they even have a child on the way.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful news.” Marty grinned widely. “We must send them a gift when

the baby arrives. Won't that be fun?"

Ares didn't look so sure. "Hephaestus is one of the few gods who has a genuine reason to hate me."

But Marty wasn't having any of that defeatist talk. "You'd be amazed at how effective a gift can be, especially when they have a new baby. I bet that man with the name I can't pronounce doesn't even think about Aphrodite anymore – not now that he has his mate. He and his mate will love the gift, you'll see. Now, shall we have cake, or have you got more lovers from the ancient past you want to drag up in your effort to be honest and transparent with me?"

"None in the past couple of hundred years, at least." Ares' lips were definitely twitching upward now.

"There you go. Not important, then. Anyone you were with before I was born doesn't count in my head. True?"

"That sounds good. Thank you. I should probably mention that I do have numerous children, too. But again, all born so far back in history that wouldn't count, either, right? Nobody is going to be popping in and calling me daddy."

"Well before I was born, so yep, that doesn't count, either. I don't have any children." Marty curled his finger around Ares' pinky finger as they cut the cake together. "My very few and definitely blah sexy times have been nothing to go into raptures about, but apparently with mates it's supposed to be amazing, isn't it? That's if you're interested in that sort of thing, of course."

"Hmm, I definitely could be. In fact, being totally honest, if I could find a way to have sex with you and eat this cake at the same time, I'd do it." Ares was wearing a full smile now, and Marty shivered under the heat in his eyes.

“Challenge accepted, for another time, though. When we’re more used to each other. For now...ta-da!” Marty pulled a big slice free of the cake, balancing it on the knife. “Look at that beauty. It makes you want to just smush your face into it, doesn’t it?”

“It makes me want to smush my face into something.” Ares waggled his eyebrows as a dessert plate appeared in his free hand. He held it under the cake slice. “Let’s get this eaten and see where the rest of the afternoon takes us.”

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“Are you going to claim me, or is this just a trial run to see if you like it?” Marty hopped from one foot to the other. He was naked, standing by the bed where Ares was sprawled out in his full naked splendor. If Marty wasn’t so concerned, he’d be drooling, but he owed it to his raccoon to make sure of Ares’ intentions before he joined him on the bed. His raccoon was itching to get his teeth out.

“You are not a trial run.” Ares held out his hand. “You, my wonderfully unique mate, are the real deal. My real deal, if you’ll have me. If your animal side has any reservations...”

“No doubts on this end. Geronimo.” Marty leaped on the bed, his arms spread wide, his cock bouncing against his abs just before he landed on the mattress. He managed to miss most of Ares when he landed, although he winced as his cock hit the mattress at an angle. “Darn it.” Marty rolled to his side, cupping his dick. “That went so much better in my head.”

“Here, let me look.” Ares curled around his back, gently moving Marty’s hands away, and holding Marty’s cock in his own firm hand. “Nothing broken. This part of you still seems eager to spend time with me.”

“It is. We are. I am.” Marty half turned, pushing out his lips. “Kiss me,” he said as he

lifted his head. Of course, the words came out smooshed. Apparently, lips were necessary for clear speech, but Ares was a god, and he seemed to understand the actions if not the words.

Emitting a deep groan that covered Marty's body like a blanket, slapping his cells into the on position, Ares didn't hesitate. The god tasted of power and magic, with a hint of desperation, all mixed in with carrot cake. He truly wants me.

Marty had always thrown himself into everything he'd ever done in his life, and being with Ares was no exception. What he lacked in experience, he made up for with enthusiasm, and there was so much of Ares to explore.

His lips were being consumed, and Marty was all for it, but simply because his mouth was busy didn't mean his hands should be flapping around with nothing to do. Ares wasn't bulky, he was just tall, and everything else was in proportion.

Sleek lines mapped out abs that Marty was desperate to poke. Are they truly as firm as they look? But poking was probably not a sexy move. The nipples, though... Marty wished he had his mouth free in that moment because he wanted to tickle those flat disks with his tongue to see what would happen.

Legs. Yes, a lot of people had them, but Marty had never had such strong or long lines of legs under his fingers. He rubbed one hand up and down as much of Ares' leg as he could reach. He might have rubbed the other one, too, but he realized he was rubbing his cock up against that one – it all felt so delicious.

“I could live on your lips forever.” Ares must've finally guessed Marty needed to breathe, although Marty hadn't realized he was getting lightheaded. “Your skin...so warm. So giving.”

Giving? Marty wanted to discuss that, but as Ares' hands were roaming all over his

body, he decided to stick a pin in that idea, and get back to it...later.

“Lie back,” Ares urged, his low voice a caress all of its own. “Let me see what makes you moan.”

All I’m missing is the grapes, Marty thought, remembering what his raccoon had said about being pampered just a few hours before. He lay back, spreading his arms and legs, still enamored by the idea of being on a mattress at all.

Ares didn’t leave him musing over having a mattress against his back for long. Moving over him, his hands alternating between soft tickles and firm strokes across Marty’s skin, it was as if Ares was mapping Marty’s body, looking for his hot spots.

Closing his eyes, Marty leaned into the hands as they moved. His nipples beaded from just a single whoosh of Ares’ breath. He discovered his torso loved being stroked, and his hips bounced seeking more touches as Ares bypassed them on his way down Marty’s legs.

You can just keep doing that, Marty thought dreamily as Ares moved down his ankles and then started back up his legs again.

Marty’s whole body shivered as Ares’ mouth joined the mapping process. A tongue ran over his knee, and then lips sucked up marks on the inside of Marty’s thigh. Marty flailed his hand around, looking for Ares’ head with his eyes still closed. When he found it, a sense of connection rang through Marty’s soul. This is a man who wants to care for me.

“Roll over, my mate,” Ares said, his husky tones impossibly deeper.

Flinging himself onto his belly, Marty rested his head on his hands, spreading his legs, and then, realizing his dick was in the way, he reached down, pushing his cock

and balls out between his thighs. “Like this?”

“So sexy.” The words might have been a growl, but Marty didn’t think that was possible because Ares wasn’t a shifter, but oh...

“Do that again.” Nibbles down his spine made Marty shiver. When Ares spread his butt cheeks, massaging the muscles there, Marty groaned. When Marty felt a brush of air from Ares’ mouth blowing across his hole, he squealed and then groaned because that air wasn’t the main event, but he quickly learned Ares had a very talented tongue.

“I just found out I love ass play, yes!” Pressing his shoulders down on the mattress, Marty lifted his butt up spreading his legs as wide as they would go. There were two big hands holding his butt cheeks apart, and Ares’ mouth was over his hole, his tongue probing into Marty’s most intimate place, sending Marty’s arousal through the roof.

“Oh, gods, oh, gods.” Marty wiggled from side to side, his ass desperate for the attention Ares was delivering. He felt a wash of magic over his skin, and then Ares’ fingers were in his hole, stretching him, opening him up. Marty could hear the slurp of lube and saliva as those fingers moved inside of him.

“More. More.” Marty was panting so hard he was seeing stars behind his eyelids. “Put your cock in there. Fill me up!”

There was a shuffle on the mattress, and then Marty felt the blunt head of Ares’ cock against his hole. “Yes. Yes. Do it. Do it.” Marty’s skin didn’t fit. He felt as though he wouldn’t be whole until Ares filled his hole and while the process seemed excruciatingly slow, Ares was easing his cock into Marty’s hole.

Marty blew out once...twice...and then again as he felt his body adjust to Ares’ girth.



Moaning, he rocked in small increments – Ares’ hands on his hips stopped him going far, but Marty had never believed feeling someone slowly split him open could feel so empowering.

“Made for me,” Ares groaned. “Your body just takes me in and oooh...so good.”

“Move!” Marty yelled. His whole body was trembling, his balls were tight, and he knew just a brush of Ares’s finger against his shaft would tip him over the edge of the orgasm cliff.

Ares could follow directions. Marty’s hands gripped the covers, his body rocking harder and faster as Ares found his rhythm. His ears filled with the sound of skin slapping skin, and his jaw clenched as he reached for and strove for the orgasm that was just out of reach. Ares started to grunt in time with his thrusts, but it wasn’t until he heard Ares yell, “I take Marty as my mate,” to whoever was listening, Marty fell over the orgasm cliff, his body flooded with endorphins and all that good stuff, and not a touch of Ares’ hand on his dick.

“My gods, my gods, oh, my fucking gods.” Marty was wrecked, his face sweaty, his hands aching from the way he’d been gripping his mattress so hard.

But before he had the time to catch his breath, there was another whoosh of magic and Marty was suddenly sitting on Ares’ lap, still impaled with his cock. “Bite me,” Ares said, his eyes flashing as though reflecting lightning. “Claim me as yours.”

Oh yes, we’re ready for this. Lurching forward, Marty opened his mouth, letting his raccoon guide his way. Seconds later, he felt the snap in his soul and the taste of his mate on his tongue. The claim was made.

As soon as Marty’s teeth were free from Ares’ neck, his mate hooked his arms under Marty’s knees, and he found himself flat on his back again. “Ready for round two?”

Brushing some sweat-soaked hair off his face, Marty could only nod as Ares started moving again.

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“So, I was thinking that after we finished eating this, we could go up to the big house if you like, and I could show you around.”

Marty, who had been in the middle of taking a mouthful of scone, looked at Ares in shock. “The big house? You mean the one up there?” He pointed in the general direction of where the vegetable gardens were.

Ares laughed. He seemed in a very relaxed mood, even though they’d woken up late. “Mates share everything we have from the moment of claiming. This house is one of four that we have. We’ll go and visit them all over time, if you like, give you a chance to see more of the world.”

“Four houses?” Marty put down his scone. That was shocking enough news to distract him from his food. “Are you telling me I’m rich now?”

Ares grinned at him. “Yep. Anything your little heart desires can be yours, and believe me, I want to spoil you. There has to be some perks to being a god. That’s pretty cool, don’t you think?”

“I actually think it’s a little overwhelming.” Four houses? Who needs that many? Then Marty had a thought. “Ooh, but if I’m rich, just like you, then there are a few things I wouldn’t mind getting for myself.”

“Don’t tell me. You’ve got a list of things that you’ve always dreamed of having.” Ares still had a happy look on his face, so he wasn’t annoyed.

“Not a list,” Marty said in a bit of a huff, and then he chuckled to show he was

teasing. “Two things. There’s just two things I would love to buy, and I know you can get them in the town close to here, because I’ve seen them there when I was walking through to make my way out here. I was looking for somewhere quiet where I could camp. But anyway, I did do a bit of window shopping as I went past the shops, and there are two things that really caught my eye.”

“What things?” Ares picked up his coffee cup, taking a big sip. “If you saw them in a shop, they can’t be too expensive.”

“I want an electric scooter and a phone.”

Ares looked at him over the rim of his coffee mug. “What on Earth is an electric scooter?”

Marty’s eyes lit up. “Oh, my goodness, haven’t you seen them? They’re this incredible vehicle but not a car. It’s like...it’s like...you know, like a scooter that kids play on. But these are for grown-ups, and you don’t have to pedal them or push them along with your feet, only to get them started. They’ve got a motor, and they go all by themselves - you just have to hang on, and they go. I’ve never seen anything so incredible.” He sighed. “I stared in that shop window for the longest time when I saw it. It was on a stand all by itself right at the front of the store. It was bright green, and it just looked so awesome.”

Then Marty huffed. “It’s probably sold by now, though, but it was really, really cool. I probably wouldn’t have to have the green one if it was gone. I know they had other colors, which wouldn’t be so bad if I had to have one of them instead. Maybe we could paint it.”

“All right, so we need to get you a scooter.” Ares was nodding, which was a good sign. “Is there a reason you need a phone? Do you have family or friends you miss and want to talk to?”

Marty picked up through their bond that Ares didn't seem as happy about that idea, but he quickly shook his head. "No one wants to be friends with me – I'm far too weird for regular people."

"Unique, my mate, not weird."

"Unique, then." Marty's smile split his face so wide his cheeks ached – his facial ones, not his butt this time. "Thank you. But no, what I was thinking is that when you have to go and do your godly things, then I'll be able to text you and send you cheery messages throughout the day."

"I saw so much of that when I was going through the city and dossing down in the streets, looking for places to set up camp. It seemed that every single person had a phone. They could be walking next to each other, and they didn't even talk to each other. They would be sitting on their phones, or walking along with their phones, or they'd have those wires going into their ears. So, I assumed they were listening to stuff on their phone."

"It was strange because I didn't know what they were listening to. They weren't talking, so they couldn't have been having a conversation, but they were listening to something, and they had it attached to their phone. So, I figure those phones must be super exciting if they come with music and everything else. It would be so cool, because it means that when you're off doing your thing and I'm at home, I can text you and say, 'Hey babe, how you doing?'"

"You want to text me while I'm off doing my godly things?" Ares burst out laughing. "You do realize I'm the God of War? I don't have any godly things to do because people stopped believing in me centuries ago."

"Phew. That's a relief because when I found out you were the God of War, I was a little bit worried you'd be super busy all the time. There're a lot of wars happening all

over the world, and some of it's just horrible." Marty thought about what he said and shook his head. "It's all horrible, and I mean, it's not like I keep up with the news – oh, maybe I could do that on a phone as well - but you could just hear it in the gossip on the streets, so phew, that's a good thing.

"But wouldn't it be fun if we could text each other anyway, even if we're both in the house. I could be in the bath, and you were out here reading a paper or something, and then I could text you to come in and scrub my back." Marty wiggled in his seat just thinking about it. His butt cheeks were still aching from the night before. Ares was a very thorough claimer, but that didn't mean he wasn't keen to go again.

Ares was nodding. "All right. We can go and get you a phone and a bright green scooter if that's what you want. Did you say you saw that in town in the shopping center not far from here?"

"Yes, yes," Marty said. "I had to walk through that place on my way to this place. I don't know why I wanted to come here, but I just felt that I did. And look what happened when I did." He smiled to show Ares that he was really happy. He wasn't a hundred percent certain how good Ares might be at picking up things through the bond. He didn't have the advantages that Marty had through being a shifter.

"You sound like you were thinking you and I could walk to town?" Ares quirked his eyebrow.

"I don't think it took that long. A couple of hours, maybe? Probably not even that." It had been a while ago, and Marty's timekeeping wasn't the best.

"You do realize there's a car in the garage here, don't you? There's a garage out the side of the main house."

"A car?"

“Our car – it’s half yours.”

Marty quickly shook his head. “Ares, babe, I can’t even drive. Do not let me have half of your cars. I thought a scooter would be fun because I’ve seen people whizzing along on them, but I don’t know how to drive or ride a motorbike or do any of those things. I’ve not even been on a horse.”

“Then we have a lot of things you can learn then,” Ares said, “but don’t you think it would be easier if we drove to town instead of walking?”

“It would probably save the soles on these new boots you gave me. I’ve never been in a car before, so that will be exciting, too. Such a happy day.”

A strange look passed over Ares’ face, but Marty didn’t mind because he was just telling his truth. Not everyone understood his way of thinking until they got to know him. He just hoped he didn’t get car sick. He had seen a couple of cases like that on the sides of the road sometimes – cars pulled over and little kids usually bent over, emptying their stomach contents into the nearest ditch.

If Marty had ever stopped, offering any assistance, he’d usually be told something like, “He’s just car sick. Our Jimmy can’t stomach long car trips.” Marty would always take that as the dismissal it was, but he would still wander away thinking, if you knew your little one was going to be sick because of the car, why did you take them on a long trip in the first place? Marty was doubly determined it wasn’t going to happen to him.

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By the time they had gone into town and Ares had found a place to park, Marty was bubbling with excitement. Just before they got out of the car, Ares had clicked his fingers and handed him a card. “This is a credit card. It has an unlimited balance and a special chip in it that means it can only be used by you. You can buy whatever you like with it.”

“I don’t need much,” Marty said, taking the card and looking at both sides of it. It was a shiny jet black, and just had a number on it and a symbol that looked a lot like his mating mark. “I simply thought having a scooter and a phone would be fun.”

“We won’t buy the phone from town,” Ares explained. “I will click you up one of those because if you want to keep track of me, you have to be on the Zeus network.”

Apparently, Ares’ father owned the computer network that all the gods were on. Considering Ares said none of the other gods liked him, Marty didn’t think he’d be making any friends in the godly community any time soon. But the idea of having a phone on a super-secret godly network did make him feel like a bit of a super-hero.

They wandered along the street. Marty was trying to remember where he’d seen the store when suddenly he saw it, like a vision just waiting for him to arrive. Right there in front of a big plate glass window was the gorgeous green scooter.

“It’s still there. Look. That one,” he said, wanting to dance and clap his hands with excitement. He didn’t because he didn’t want to embarrass Ares, but it was a close thing. “That’s exactly the one I wanted.”

Ares didn’t look as excited as Marty was. “Marty, that doesn’t look like a very safe



mode of transport. Do you know how fast they go?”

“I’ve got no idea,” Marty said happily. “That’s part of the excitement, isn’t it? Just think, I’ll be able to race it down the driveway at the house.”

Sighing, Ares said, “Let’s go and have a closer look. I need to have a chat with the salesman first and find out how fast this thing is supposed to go and if it has basic things like brakes.”

Marty didn’t care, he was so excited. The last time he’d seen the scooter, he had been in his threadbare clothes and didn’t even dare walk into the store. Now, he was dressed in his lovely clean clothes, all brand new, all courtesy of his lovely mate. His jacket was warm and comfortable, and his jeans actually fit. He had a lovely pair of boots on instead of the worn-out sneakers that he was used to wearing. He felt warm and cherished, and above all, he felt like the sort of person that could walk into a shop and say, “I want to buy that scooter.”

He couldn’t do that immediately, he decided, as he followed Ares inside the shop. Ares wanted to show that he was being protective, so Marty would let him talk to whoever he needed to so he could be reassured about how fast it would go, and all the safety features, and everything else.

Marty didn’t care. It was green. Not just any green, but a beautiful, bright lime green, and Marty had dreamed of that scooter so many times when he lived in his camp or had been walking the streets.

He loitered by the stand where the scooter was sitting, just in case Ares got it into his head that maybe he’d want another one, like a sensible black one or a pale gray or something equally responsible looking. Marty wanted the green one. So, he loitered by it, looking at it, wandering around the stand, making out that he was a regular browsing customer, who was secretly excited about how soon he could have a go on

it.

One of the other salesmen, not the one talking to Ares, because that would've been rude, but one of the other ones, came up and stood beside him. He was young, taller than Marty by about a foot, and had tight clothes and a mop of white-blond hair. "You look like you're having a lot of fun with your sugar daddy."

Marty looked up. "Do you mean Ares? He's not my sugar daddy. He and I are not related."

"Ooooh." The man arched a perfectly shaped eyebrow. "So, he's not your sugar daddy. Well damn, he can be my daddy then. That could be a lot of fun."

"Your daddy?"

"He sure looks like the type of man who could handle being my daddy."

Marty wondered if there was something wrong with his ears. Did I hear that right? But the man had specifically said Ares could be his daddy. Ares, who had said only the night before that he did have a lot of children, but that no one was likely to pop in and call him daddy. And yet, just the very next day, Marty was standing with a man who said Ares could be his daddy. Marty wasn't sure about the sugar reference, but then Ares was rather sweet.

"Hey, Ares," he yelled across the shop. "Ares, babe. I found one of your children. This guy says that you're his sugar daddy."

"I said I wanted to be," the young blond said quickly as Ares came striding over, his face looking like thunder. "I wanted him to be my sugar daddy, not that he was."

"That is no child of mine," Ares said to Marty, who was looking between them, really

confused.

“He used the word daddy.” Marty couldn’t work it out. “I heard him distinctly use the word daddy, and you said yesterday that none of your kids call you daddy because they’re all too old. Is this one you forgot about? What’s a sugar daddy?”

“A sugar daddy?” Ares said as his face cleared. Marty nodded. “Hmm. That’s a different situation altogether.” He fixed his renewed glare on the young man. “I am not Marty’s sugar daddy, I’m his husband. Piss off.”

The young man scuttled away, and Ares put his arm around Marty’s shoulder, right there in the store. “We’ll talk about sugar daddies later,” he said. “But if anyone calls me that again or refers to you as a sugar baby, just tell them we’re married, and it’s none of their business. Now, about the scooter. The salesperson told me that this thing can go thirty miles an hour, which means if you’re going to ride it, you’re going to need a helmet and pads for your elbows and your knees. They will help keep you safe if you fall off.”

Marty looked at his knees and elbows. “Are you sure I need all that stuff?” he whispered. “I know I’m skinny, but I’m durable and that all sounds very expensive.”

“If you want the scooter, then you’re having the helmet and the elbow pads and the knee pads,” Ares said firmly. “It would make me feel better about you riding that thing.”

Aww, he’s caring about me. Marty felt a shiver of excitement run right down his spine. “That sounds wonderful. Thank you so much. Can we take this one now?” Marty was ready to wheel it out of the shop.

“They’ve got one in a box, it requires minimal assembly, apparently.”

“Oh.” Marty looked at his treasured beauty. “Are you sure? I really wanted this one.”

“I promise you, the one in the box is the same color and the same style. We just have to tighten a few bolts. They put them in the boxes because it makes them easier to put in the trunk of the car.”

Okay, that made sense, and in truth, that wasn’t something Marty had even considered. All he cared about in that moment was owning the scooter. But when he went up to the counter with Ares, ready to hand over his card, Ares handed over his instead. Marty tucked his one in his pocket, determined not to lose it.

“Did you want this delivered, sir?” the salesman asked.

“Nope. We’ve got it, thanks.” Ares handed Marty a bag that had a helmet and some funny foam bits in it before picking up a large, long box and slinging it on his shoulder.

“If you need any further help, sir, please come back anytime, or you have my number. It’s on the receipt.”

Ares just waved as they stalked out of the store, although he reserved an extra glare for the younger salesman who had been talking about daddies. “Sugar daddy,” he snarled. “I should’ve fucking known. How dare that guy call me a sugar daddy.”

“Well, you are sweet,” Marty said with a big grin. “You did buy me a scooter.”

Ares groaned. “I should have also bought a lifetime supply of bandages, too, apparently. Do you know how unsafe these things are?”

“Not yet, but I’ll guess we’ll find out together.”

“An entire truckload of bandages.” Ares sighed. “I’m sure we’re going to need them before the day’s over.”

Marty really wasn’t worried about that, either, if it was Ares wrapping them around his body. That could be fun as well.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:10 am*

It wasn't easy finding the time to take a breath, swept along as he was by the new mating and Marty's excitement for everything, but Ares knew he needed to. He had a number of things to address, process, and fit into his new reality. For a god who'd lived a relatively boring life for the past century at least, that took time.

Driving them back to the house, Ares mused that there were a lot more positives than he'd initially thought, back when mating was an abstract concept, something someone else did. Marty was an excellent baker. He was a fun and interesting tutor with some very definite ideas that Ares found charming. In bed, he didn't have an ounce of skill, but he was so enthusiastic and so responsive that Ares, who hadn't thought a lot would come of it, had gone back for more, for hours. His experience with Marty was so different from anyone he'd been with before, and in his opinion, far better.

Then there was the list of wishes – if two items could be considered a list, and that was debatable. Ares had expected that once Marty had seen the inside of the main house, he would understand that his financial circumstances had now changed for the better, and Ares was happily preparing to give him all he wanted.

I want to spoil you, and Ares had meant that sincerely. He wasn't the best company, most effective lover, or even a great person to be around, but he could give Marty anything he wanted within reason. Things like pulling the moon or the stars from the sky were frowned on by other gods, but most things material Ares could supply. Along with companionship for as long as Marty wanted him around.

“Your house is so grand, looking at it from this angle, isn't it?” Marty hadn't stopped grinning since they'd left the store. “Coming down the driveway, the impact really

hits you.”

“You haven’t seen the house from this angle before?” Ares drove around the house and parked in the garage that opened as he came close.

“No.” Marty giggled. “I came through the trees. I didn’t want to be seen by your lovely wife, who might be looking out the window.”

“My wife? I swear I don’t have a wife.” Turning off the engine, Ares looked at his mate in shock. “I am one of the few gods in the Pantheon who wasn’t even given a wife in fiction because I was so horrible.”

“Unique, not horrible.” Marty’s hand was warm on Ares’ leg. “If I’m not weird, then you’re not horrible.”

“I’m not sure that’s how it works,” Ares said but he was quietly pleased with his mate’s support. If anyone else had said that to him, he wouldn’t have believed it and would’ve been wondering about that person’s agenda – what they ultimately wanted. But Marty wasn’t like that. “How did I end up with a wife?”

“The lack of spiders,” Marty said, as though that explained everything. Ares quirked an eyebrow, and Marty rushed to explain. “Me and my canny raccoon knew the house was warded when we arrived. There’re never any bird poop on the windows or the walls, and no spider webs on any of the door frames. I guessed the house was owned by a very handsome and powerful magic user, who had a beautiful wife and possibly children, too.”

He sighed. “I used to imagine you were so in love with your lovely lady that you made sure the house never got dirty, so her hands wouldn’t be sullied by cleaning. I was partially right. You are powerful, and I think you’re very handsome, so I wasn’t wrong, just about the wife bit.”

Ares wondered if he'd ever tire of the way Marty's brain worked. "Definitely no wife. You and I are mates. I know how a shifter bite works. We'll be with each other for the rest of eternity."

Marty's eyes narrowed. "How does that work? I'm not old, but I will die eventually. That's what happens to living people."

Ares reached out, stroking down the edge of the mating mark Marty had on his neck – his mark. Marty shivered, and his eyes widened. "You'll never die, my precious mate. Our life threads are bound together by the Fates when we claimed each other. Welcome to immortality."

"Not die?" It was like Ares could see imaginary cogs whirling in Marty's brain, and then, to his surprise, Marty looked indignant. "If I can't die, then why did you buy me a helmet and those pad thingies and insist I have to wear them when I try out the scooter? I told you I didn't need them."

"You can't die, but you can get hurt." Ares wasn't backing down from the protective elements. He wasn't sure a god could have a heart attack, but it was highly possible seeing Marty learning to use an electric scooter might cause one. "Did you want to see the big house and eat first?" he suggested hopefully.

But Marty was already shaking his head. "We had a huge brunch, and you said the scooter needs assembly. Did the salesman tell you how to put it together?"

"There are full instructions in the box." Leaning over, Ares brushed a kiss on Marty's nose. "Let's get the thing put together." Hopefully, it would take hours, and Ares could put off the inevitable ride until tomorrow.

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The assembly process took ten minutes. Ares spent eight of those minutes reading every single word on the pamphlet of instructions that had been included in the box. By the time he knew he'd stretched that out as long as possible, he'd dropped the pamphlet and said, "I guess I need to find some tools," Marty was already beaming with excitement.

"It came with a tool in the box. Look." He spread his arms wide, indicating a scooter that looked exactly like the one displayed in the shop. "Isn't it beautiful? I even found the start button."

Start. Start. "Er...the pamphlet says that the battery has to be charged for four hours before it can be used. That's what powers the scooter motor." Ares looked hopefully at his mate. "We could find the charging cord, plug it in, and have something to eat in the meantime?"

"Can't you just zap the battery?" Marty wiggled his two forefingers at the battery case. "Just a teeny hint of your amazing powers to give it a boost?"

I can't lie to my mate. There were times when rules sucked. But then, Ares knew he was only prolonging the inevitable. "Fine. Get your helmet and padding on," he warned as he went over, testing the bolts Marty had already tightened, checking that the brakes appeared to be working, and then, blowing out a long sigh, he allowed a trickle of power to feed into the battery. Reaching up, he pressed the start button and heard it click over, and then there was a low humming sound as the motor started.

"Yes! Yes! Now I can try it." Marty clapped his hands in excitement. He had the helmet perched on his head, and the pads were around the wrong way.

"Hang on a minute." Standing up, Ares went over, tugging on the two straps flapping around Marty's neck. "These need to be joined together for them to work."

“Just like us.” Marty beamed at him, and it was impossible for Ares not to be moved. He clicked the two ends of the strap together and adjusted them so they fit snugly.

“And these, my precious poppet, are meant to cover your elbows and your kneecaps.” Ares quickly moved them to where they were meant to be and tightened the straps there as well. Marty was still malnourished, and Ares vowed to change that as quickly as he could.

“All right,” he said when he couldn’t avoid the inevitable anymore. “This is the brake. If you pull that, the scooter will stop. If you want it to move along, then you turn this handle here – slowly,” he added. “You’re not racing anyone. These are the wheels, and this is where you stand with both feet.”

“I know, I know. Thank you for caring.” Marty stretched up on his toes, kissed Ares’ chin and smacked him on the nose with the cap on the helmet. “Oops. Sorry. This is so exciting. Move out of the way. I’m doing this.”

Rubbing the bridge of his nose, Ares stepped back. He’d heard the expression “heart in the mouth” but he’d never understood what that meant until he watched Marty grab hold of the scooter and start to move with it.

Marty pushed off with one foot on the platform and one pushing against the ground first. That looked safe enough. But Ares shoved his fist against his mouth as he watched Marty wrench the accelerator, and the scooter lurched forward.

“I almost ran over my foot.” Marty laughed as he turned the scooter and zoomed up the driveway.

Is this what it’s like having kids in the modern age? Marty was all man, closer to thirty than twenty-five in Ares’ estimation, and the scooter he was on was designed for adults. But watching Marty’s happy face as he zoomed back down the driveway

again, Ares felt...

“Can’t stop. Can’t stop.” Marty yelled as he got closer. “Move out the way.”

“Let go of the accelerator,” Ares yelled back as he jumped out of the way. “Use the damn brakes!”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Marty squealed as he yanked the scooter around, barely missing the grass verge of the front lawn as he zoomed off again. “This is the best fun ever.”

It does look like fun. Ares wondered when the last time was that he had fun with another person, outside of sex. What does it say about me that I can’t remember? Maybe he was being impulsive, or maybe Marty was rubbing off on him, but before he second-guessed himself, Ares clicked himself up a larger but identical scooter, and seconds later, he was chasing after his mate as Marty zoomed out onto the road.

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“Tell me that was fun. Go on, tell me. You’ve got to admit, that was a heck of a lot of fun, wasn’t it?” Marty’s hair was still windswept on the ends and showing the imprint of the helmet he’d been wearing as he’d enjoyed his scooter adventures, as he called them.

Ares managed to avoid the helmet imprint because a god had to have standards, but he wasn’t going to deny that playing around with Marty, outside on scooters, was definitely more fun than he’d ever experienced before.

“I’ll have to take you to Hawaii with me,” he said, so relieved that they’d gotten through their play and Marty was unscathed – that was a happiness boost in itself. “I’ve got a house there, and I like to surf. Is that something you’ve tried before?”

Marty quickly shook his head. “No, that’s in the sea, isn’t it? I don’t think I’ve ever been on an actual beach before, let alone in the sea – there always seems to be a lot of it.”

“You’ll be safe with me, and that will be perfect, another new experience for you.” Ares was pleased he could have something else that he could add to his mate’s bucket list. Picking at a bread stick he’d added to the table when he’d zapped up an early dinner, he said, “Have you given any more thought to that sugar daddy comment from earlier?” Hopefully, he sounded casual about it.

It might be an old god thing, or perhaps in his case an ancient god issue, but Ares had been edgy and unsettled about the comments that were made, despite having fun on the scooters. Going to buy Marty’s new favorite thing had technically been their first outing. While Ares was aware of the differences between him and Marty in

physicality and age, he'd forgotten that in public, other people ascribed values, morals, and judgments - which was even worse - to the things that they saw but didn't necessarily understand.

Marty shrugged. "I still don't know what a sugar daddy is. It sounds like someone who controls all the sugar, but I imagine it's a term for something I don't understand. Do I need to know what one is?"

"Technically no, because we're mates, and it doesn't apply to us. But being seen with me might cause that comment to come up again in the future." Ares wondered how best to explain. "A sugar daddy is somebody who will go out with a much younger man – showering that person with gifts and giving them money.

"Society's perception is that the younger, and usually hotter-looking person wouldn't be with the older person unless that man had money. For some people, it's a badge of honor. Older men don't have an issue flaunting their wealth, and for some younger people, they get a lot of benefit from having someone help them with expenses for whatever reason. But it really doesn't apply to us at all," he added quickly. "I just don't want you to feel insulted if anyone made that assumption about our relationship."

Marty peered up from his plate, his eyes twinkling. "Are you sure it doesn't apply to us? I mean, when we were out today, you bought me a scooter that I could never afford. I can also guess that most people who would look at us as a couple and perceive you as the older being." He collapsed into giggles. "Of course, they've got no idea how much older you are than me," he added, "but that's none of their business. But yes, now you've explained, I can see why people might think that about us, and that's all right."

Ares resisted sighing. Societal norms and expectations were still something he struggled with at times. "You're not my sugar baby. I am not a sugar daddy. I have

never been a sugar daddy. I never wanted to be, and I never will be,” he said firmly. “My issue, and the only reason I’m bringing this up, is because some people, like that man who spoke to you in the scooter shop today, aren’t very respectful of relationships they believe are based on financial transactions.” Ares wasn’t quite sure how to phrase the next bit, but it was nagging at him, and he felt it had to be asked. “Would you feel more comfortable being out with me if I looked younger or less like I do now – more normal, perhaps?”

Marty pushed aside his plate and as it still had food on it, Ares guessed his mate was that shocked at his question. I had to ask, can’t you see? I don’t want you to be uncomfortable with me in public.

It was as if Marty was reading his mind. “Why would you think for a single second that I wanted you to look any different than you do now? People don’t do that sort of thing.”

Ares had a feeling he might be swimming in uncharted waters. “Gods can change the way they look – not their godly image, but their human one. This persona you see here,” he waved his hand at his hair and face. “This is the look that I chose for myself when I first walked among mortals, eons ago. Back in those days, especially being the God of War, I couldn’t afford to look young and pretty like Athena or Apollo, for example.

“I needed to look like I was a man of substance - that when I was on the battlefield, I was somebody who would be respected. Young, fresh-faced warriors don’t command any respect on the field. They’re pretty much treated as battle fodder. And so, I needed to have a look that commanded respect when I was in those situations.”

“And?” Marty raised his hands. “I don’t see anything wrong with the way you look. I would probably prefer not to see you in a battle situation because I’m likely to faint at the sight of blood, which could be embarrassing for you. But dressed in casual clothes

rocking your man-about-town look, you give the impression of being a super-confident man of an uncertain age, who knows what he likes and goes after it. I think it's awesome because if I'm with you, then it's clear the thing you wanted to go after was me. Does that make me a superstar, too?"

"You're definitely the superstar in this mating." Ares chuckled. "I suppose that's the point, or maybe I've lost the point. The thing is, I don't want people to get the wrong idea about our relationship when we're out in public together. I don't want you hurt by anyone being rude or saying horrible things, and with me looking the way I do, that might happen."

"But why is it any of their business what our relationship is like between us?" Marty grabbed the last breadstick out of the basket, and Ares quickly refilled it with a flick of his finger.

"I've always known that as a shifter, I'm always going to look younger than I am until I'm super old. I didn't know until now that you chose your look, but how cool is that. You'll have to show me your godly form sometime, but then I imagine that's just a bigger, fiercer version of who you are now."

Ares nodded because that was true.

"I don't understand why you're worried about what other people think, though," Marty said. "I wasn't living under a pile of twigs in your back yard because I worried people would be rude to me – they often were, and that's on them, not on me. I lived that way because I chose to. It's not easy being unhoused, especially when I just wanted to carve out a little space of my own, where I wouldn't be moved on."

"There was my raccoon to consider as well. He needs a chance to stretch his legs sometimes, and camping semi-rural like we have been, was ideal for that. But I don't worry about what people will think of me, because most of the time, I already know."

He grinned. “When we go out, we’ll go out together. The only person whose opinion should matter to you is mine, and for me, it’s yours, isn’t that right?”

“So, you seriously don’t mind what other people think of you?” Now, Ares was curious – he had genuinely never come across an attitude like that before. He wore his worry like a cloak – but that was because no one liked him. On Olympus, everyone worried about their status and their looks and were always comparing themselves with others, constantly fretting that someone was suddenly going to be elevated to a status higher than theirs.

It wasn’t just gods, either. Every other person Ares came across - male, female, or anything in between - had always cared about how they were perceived by others. Marty genuinely didn’t seem to care.

“I haven’t had a person understand me or even want to spend any length of time with me for as long as I could remember. If I worried about things like that, I’d be sleeping under a rock, and I’d never stick my nose out, even at nighttime in case the moon laughed at me.”

“Why would the moon laugh at you?”

“Exactly. Why would the moon laugh at me? Why would anybody else? But more importantly, why would I care if they did?” Marty sat up straighter, the expression on his face sort of looking to one side, his head slightly tilted, which gave Ares the impression he was thinking. And then without saying anything at all, Marty hopped off his chair and came around the table, patting Ares’ knee.

Ares pushed his chair back from the table, and Marty climbed onto his lap and settled in. “Look at us together,” Marty said seriously. “You’re so much bigger than me. You appear so much older than me. Guess what? Both of those things are true. I am younger than you by heaps ,” he flung his arms wide, almost slapping Ares in the



face.

“But I’m an adult. And personally, I really, really, really love the silver look you’ve got going on. It’s so unusual, and it makes me smile inside every time I look at you. Why would I want you to change that? Have people really been so horrible to you over the years that hate is all you can see?”

“On Olympus, yes, and before you say anything,” Ares added quickly because it was as if he could see the words forming on Marty’s tongue, “We don’t have to go to Olympus, you’re right. We don’t have to, and I wouldn’t want to take you there, because people will be mean to you simply because you’re with me.

“But it’s not just on Olympus. What happened in the store today showed that. If we go out socializing or frequent clubs and places like that, then more and more people are going to think that you’re with me because I’m looking after you. They’ll get the impression I’m some rich person who is paying you to be by my side, and that’s a rude thing to think about you. I don’t want that to happen.”

“You could dress in raggy clothes like I was when we met.” Marty hooked his arms around Ares’ neck.

“We can’t do that.” Ares wouldn’t consider it in a month of Sundays. He liked dressing respectably. “I want to take you to restaurants, and clubs, hotels and places like that.”

“Then you’ll dress smart, and I’ll dress smart, and people will think you’ve bought my clothes for me, and the joke will be on them, won’t it?” Marty started chuckling. “No money changed hands. Because they don’t know about your flicky fingers.”

Either Ares had lost the ability to make himself understood, or maybe he should just accept that Marty truly, genuinely, and with every ounce of his beautiful soul, did not

care. “I just don’t want people being mean to you,” he said softly.

“And I think you’re poking a dead horse,” Marty said. Then his brow wrinkled. “I don’t think that came out right. What is it with horses?”

“I think it’s flogging a dead horse,” Ares said, although he wasn’t sure, either.

“That doesn’t matter, either. Let’s leave the poor horses alone. We both understand what I’m trying to say. The only thing that matters is that we’re mates. I wouldn’t care if you looked as if you were a hundred and twenty and had lost all your teeth. We’re bonded on a soul level, and if people don’t like it, then that’s their problem. What we do, how our relationship works, and everything else like that is no one’s business but ours. Honestly, if you are going to keep worrying, I think you should just shut up and kiss me. That would be a lot more fun. Admit it. I know about fun. I was right about the scooters.”

Ares chuckled as he bent his head to meet Marty’s eager lips. He had no problem with his mate being right, especially when he had such good ideas.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:10 am*

“Are you ready to catch me?” Marty yelled down the stairs. He wasn’t a huge fan of the main house in Boston. If he’d ever been asked his opinion, he’d have said that he thought the pool house was more comfortable. The main house was very grand, filled with things Marty was terrified he would break, and it always felt cold, even with the fires going.

There were too many rooms – big rooms with high ceilings that would echo if it wasn’t for the furniture and window coverings. And bathrooms – way too many bathrooms for two people to use. Marty worked out that if he used a different one every day of the week, it would still take longer than a week to use them all.

In truth, Marty thought most of the space in the house was a waste for just the two of them. But Ares liked it, and so Marty kept his opinions to himself and looked for ways to enjoy the house the way it was. Three weeks into his mating, Marty had found a number of ways to have fun, with Ares and on his own.

Like the fun offered by the staircase for example. The moment Ares led him in through the front doors, Marty fell in love with the staircase. It was huge, like everything else in the house, with white marble steps winding up to the next floor. But what Marty loved was the banister. It was smooth, highly polished, and made of wood. It followed the stairs down in a swooping curve. More importantly for Marty’s purposes, it did not have one of those huge balls of wood at the end of the banister that could bring a prospective slider to a sudden and painful halt.

The first time Marty had slid down it, he had been on his bum, and he hadn’t counted on how steep the bottom half actually was. It was deceptive. He’d been happy – the rush was incredible – and when he’d fallen on his butt, cackling with laughter as he

thumped on the floor, Marty was buzzing with how much fun he'd had.

Ares, who had been in the kitchen at the time, wasn't so pleased, suddenly appearing beside him and picking him up, concern all over his handsome face. Perhaps realizing that Marty was going to do what Marty wanted to do, Ares pointed out it would be more fun if he could catch Marty when he came flying down the banisters, and then proceeded to prove to Marty why. After a long panting session up against the wall, and then later on the bed, Marty was now a convert of being caught.

"Coming, ready or not," he yelled. He couldn't see the bottom half of the staircase – there was a wide column in the way. But he hopped up onto the banister – shall I sit or stand? Standing was a bit riskier, but that was part of the fun. Kicking off his shoes, pleased he'd put socks on that morning, Marty managed to stand on the banister slowly sliding his right foot forward and back again, making sure his socks wouldn't catch on the wood.

"And, we're off." With a whoop, Marty started to move, letting gravity and the smooth polish of the wood help him build up speed. His arms were wide, waving in the air as he struggled to keep his balance, but he felt the rush as the silliness of what he was doing hit his brain. Laughing loudly, Marty swept around the corner without falling. He was on the downhill stretch when he suddenly realized Ares was waiting in the entrance hall, but he wasn't alone.

Oops. Marty tried to stop, but gravity was a powerful force. He tried to lean back, thinking he could stop his progress with his hands – but his fingers wouldn't reach the wood. He'd forgotten – as he was reaching for the wood – that he'd been using his arms for balance. Five steps from the bottom of the stairs, Marty fell into a heap, hitting his head on one of the marble steps.

"Ouch." Marty rubbed his head. "Well, that didn't go as expected." Standing up, he noticed Ares' disapproving expression. "You didn't tell me you were busy."

“Who on Earth is this urchin?” The woman was extremely beautiful. She looked like a younger version of Ares, tall, slender, and very beautiful. “You do have the strangest playmates, Ares.”

I’m not a playmate. Tell her we’re mates!

Marty watched as Ares shook his head. “Marty is a friend of mine. He is just visiting for a short while.”

Friend? I’ve been friend-zoned? Marty was fairly sure that couldn’t happen with a mate, but then it wasn’t like he professed to know everything. But he did know how to take a giant fucking hint. “And clearly, I’ve overstayed my welcome. Have a lovely day, beautiful lady, and Ares...”

Marty couldn’t think of anything to say to him, so he didn’t bother. He barely managed to walk to the front door. The socks against the marble floor were very slippery, but he got there without falling, opening the door and quickly ducking outside. I do wish I was wearing a coat, he thought as he softly closed the door behind him.

Looking around and then down at his socks, Marty considered his options. Ares did tell me the pool house was mine. That was before he claimed me so that must still be true. The pool house it is.

Straightening his spine, Marty walked across the front parking area, heading for the lawn. His socks would be grubby before he made it to the pool house, but that was the least of Marty’s problems. How on Earth did I get friend-zoned when we’re supposed to be mates? It made Marty cry just thinking about it.

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Ares knew he'd said the wrong thing the moment the words left his mouth. Marty hadn't needed to say anything. The slump of his shoulders, the way he almost sneaked out of the front door as if he'd been trespassing... Fuck, he's never going to forgive me for this. And that was without Ares watching Marty fall and hit his head and not doing anything about it. I'm a fucking dickhead.

Which meant he wasn't in the best mood with his sister. "What do you want, Athena? You never visit. So, what's possessed you to bother me now?"

"It looks like I've arrived just in time. Consider it a mission of mercy if you will." Athena wandered from the entrance hall into the nearest sitting room. "This house is quaint enough, if you like this sort of thing, but your little pets leave a lot to be desired."

"I'm sure you didn't come here to talk about anyone I spend time with." Ares had no choice but to follow her, even as every cell in his body was screaming at him to find Marty and make things right. "Just tell me what you want and make it quick. I have things to do."

"Yes, well, I'm not here because I've been missing your titillating conversation." Athena arranged herself on the chair Ares and Marty had been cozied up in the night before. Ares felt himself bristle as if Athena was overstepping and encroaching on something precious he had with his mate. "I fear I need your support in a matter concerning Olympus. I had expected to find you skulking around there, like you're prone to do, but you've been absent almost a month. That's not like you."

Her gaze was sharp even if her expression would appear neutral to anyone who didn't know his sister the way Ares did. "Olympus is like a ghost town most days. There's more to see and do on Earth." Ares leaned against the side of the wide arch that marked the division between the entrance hall and the sitting area. He definitely wasn't going to sit down and click up some tea and scones if that's what his sister

was expecting.

“Olympus is definitely changing,” Athena agreed. “I believe it needs changing even more – that the Pantheon would benefit from new leadership, for example.”

Ares snorted. “You are known as the Goddess of Wisdom. Didn’t recent events concerning Hera, Demetra, and Persephone teach you anything?”

“I saw it as an opportunity.” Athena waved an elegant hand. “I have no issue with our father spending time with his new mate and son. If it keeps him happy and away from Olympus, then I wish him well. However, Olympus needs a ruler who is focused on the realm instead of mortal affairs. As you so rightly pointed out, there are very few options left for suitably qualified people to fill that position now – people who are willing to live on Olympus and serve the realm as it serves us all. You supported Hera in her bid to take over from Zeus.”

Holding up a finger, Ares shook his head. “Correction, I was coerced into confronting Zeus alongside Hera. Hera lied to me. Nothing new about that. She told me that Zeus was attempting to give a mortal a position among the Olympians. She never mentioned that Paulie was Zeus’s Fated Mate, or that she was actually seeking to change the decision of the Fates with regards to gods finding Fated Ones of their own. She wanted to ban mortals from Olympus and prevent gods from finding mates among mortals, regardless of who they were. I didn’t know about any of that until afterward.

“With regard to my own position on that day, if you had heard the story correctly – and you had to have heard the news secondhand because you weren’t there – then you will know I left as soon as it was proven Paulie was Zeus’s Fated One. I have no issues with Zeus having a mate, or leading the Pantheon and the Olympians the way he always has.”

Athena's eyes narrowed. "Those are words I never expected to hear out of your mouth. You hate our father. You always have."

"And yet you, on the other hand, are known as being his favorite daughter." Ares sneered. "How long will it take Zeus to find out his favored one seeks to depose him, and can you imagine how he will take the news? Don't make the mistake of thinking that Zeus having a new mate and child has made him soft. I thought you had more sense than Hera."

"Hera was seeking to ruin Zeus's fun – she's been doing that since she came into existence." Athena tilted her nose. "The episode that led her to be permanently banished, however..."

"Temporarily banished," Ares warned. "Get your facts right. Zeus assured Paulie, after his mate was so distressed at what had happened, that he planned on letting all of the punished back in about ten years or so. For an ancient being, ten years is barely a blink. I wouldn't get comfortable with those absences if I was you."

Athena clearly didn't expect Ares' attitude. "I felt for sure you'd jump on this and lend me your support. Olympus needs a ruler who is present, wise, and who genuinely cares for the people they rule."

"You mean Zeus's office personnel, the hairdressers, and staff?" Ares laughed. "Athena, get with the times. No one wants to live on Olympus anymore, including Zeus. That's because it's not a fun place, but then from memory, for me, it never was. What I do know, is that the moment you threaten the realm that is highly tuned to every one of Zeus's moods, you'll find yourself homeless or running a beehive like Persephone. I can't see any of the Olympians supporting another harebrained scheme to take over from Zeus any time soon."

"I would've thought with Zeus's absence, you'd be aiming to take over Olympus



yourself.” Athena got to her feet. “You are the God of War, or so I heard, not that I’ve seen you do much lately.”

“I am the God of War, the same as you’re still the Goddess of War, Wisdom, and Crafts.” Ares found Athena’s barbs didn’t bother him the way they usually did. “I’ve had a lot of time to think over the centuries, and I decided a long time ago that when it was ruled that the gods were no longer allowed to influence the lives of mortals, it was a relief to the likes of me.

“Because of what I supposedly did, I was repeatedly shunned and hated by the others, much like Hades was. You were one of those people who considered me as cruel as fiction depicted me. I fail to see why you think for a second, I would support you now. Use your wisdom and go back to your crafts, not because I think that’s all a female Olympian is capable of, but because going up against Zeus is not going to work out for you or anyone else who tries it.”

“You always were a disappointment.” Ares wondered if Athena knew her sneer was a mirror image of his own. “You’d think the God of War would welcome change brought through chaos and still you hide like a mortal down here, playing with your scruffy friends. Where’s your drive for the fight – the need to take up arms for a worthy cause?”

“Your cause, you mean?” Ares laughed. “I’ve not heard one word that suggests there’s anything worthy about what you want to do. If you’ve got the sense you’re supposed to have in your position within the Pantheon, then retain your position as Zeus’s favorite daughter. Visit him and Paulie in their home in Montana. Take a gift for their new son. You’d have far more influence over Zeus if you did something like that instead of threatening his rule. Zeus will never give up his position as Father of All.

“And I’ll tell you something for nothing.” Ares fixed his glare on his sister. “If

anyone, and I mean anyone, threatens Zeus's position in any way, then I will be standing by his side, not yours. I'm not stupid enough to think that will suddenly cause Zeus to love me as his son, but I'm sick and tired of always being on the losing side. At least, siding with him, I'd be in the winner's circle for once."

"Living on Earth has warped your brain – what little you had of it." Athena had disdain down to a fine art. "Fine. You play with your no-account friends and leave the serious issues to people who can think for themselves. I mean, what was the story with that scruffy shifter? What possible benefit can you get from being with him?"

Love. Acceptance. A warm heart. A soft embrace. But Ares didn't say any of those things even though each one of them was true. "He teaches me how to have fun, sis. Do you remember what fun is? That thing where you do things for no other reason than to laugh and enjoy yourself. I'm finding that quite addictive."

"You're an idiot, that's what you are." Athena disappeared with barely a wisp of smoke, leaving nothing but her disdain behind her.

"She has no idea how right she is," Ares mused grimly as he headed for the front door. "Just not for the reasons she was thinking."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:10 am*

Let me out! Marty's raccoon was livid and beyond insulted at the words the Ares had said in the entrance hall of the main house. Let me out right now! The moment he dares to show his grotty face, I'm going to scratch out his ice-blue eyes and scraggle his hair into so many knots he'll have to shave it all off to get them out. Let me out!

Marty sighed. Tears were streaking down his face, and he didn't seem to be able to stop them. He understood why his raccoon was angry. Despite everything they'd been through in their life, Marty did not cry. It wasn't because he was too macho for tears – he just didn't see the point in them. Tears just drained a person and made them feel bad, and what was the point of feeling worse over things that he couldn't change.

But maybe there was something about tears after all, because now Marty had leaky eyes, and he couldn't seem to get them to stop. So, his raccoon's upset was understandable, but it wasn't helping.

"I think we might need to use our words if...when Ares comes to find us," he said calmly, as he let himself into the pool house, closing the door firmly and drawing the curtain across the glass so nobody could look in. Then, to make doubly sure nobody could see inside the place at all, Marty went around and closed every curtain and blind in the house so that there was no window left bare, before curling up on in a despondent heap on the couch.

"I'm upset, too," Marty said softly, "but we could no more hurt our mate than fly to the moon. I just don't understand why he said such a thing. I'm trying to think of a sensible reason, but...friend-zoned? A friend who was just visiting? Not even somebody allowed in the house except as a visitor? None of that makes sense."

Well, if that tall streak of godliness thinks he's going to be able to get it on with that snotty Susan up there, his raccoon said, it's not going to happen, is it? He's wearing our scar, he's been bitten and claimed. That mighty dick of his, that's he's so keen on flopping out at every opportunity, isn't going to get hard for anybody except you. I hope he tries. I hope he mortifies himself by trying and then...

"Don't be like that," Marty said quickly. "That was obviously one of Ares' family members. And I suppose if you look at it logically, there're probably very good reasons why he wouldn't introduce me to any of his family. Face it, would you introduce him to any of ours?"

At least that had the raccoon thinking. Marty's family was rambunctious and loud, and they were also conniving thieves, the lot of them. If they knew how well Marty had landed on his feet, or how well he thought he'd landed on his feet with his mate, then they'd have moved into the main house and taken it over, finding ways of tricking Ares out of every cent he had, just because they could.

Marty shuddered to think what would happen if they ever caught wind that he actually had a mate with substance. Fortunately, he hadn't seen any of them in years and had no plans to visit them anytime soon.

It doesn't make any difference, his raccoon said staunchly. He hurt you, he made you cry. And because he made you cry, I reserve the right to scratch his eyes out.

"He's a god," Marty said. "Chances are they'd just grow back. I'm more worried about what we're going to do now. What are we going to do with ourselves? I didn't even like that house, but I really tried to make it feel like home because Ares wanted to be there. How could he do that to us? I just don't understand."

The raccoon was quiet. There was a good chance he didn't understand, either. "You know," Marty mused out loud, "sometimes our life was a lot easier when we lived

under that pile of twigs, and the highlight of our day was stealing vegetables and strawberries from the hot house.”

You haven’t had a strawberry since we moved into the big house , the raccoon reminded him.

“I know. That’s weird in itself. I can’t even tell you why I haven’t gone and got any. I figure, or should I say, I thought, I was allowed to have them now that Ares and I are supposed to share everything, but he always seemed to want to eat proper foods instead of snacking. I bet they don’t taste as good now, anyway. Being a rare treat adds a special sweetness to them. Being allowed to eat them just isn’t the same.

“We could eat them. We could go and eat some right now. Mates share everything, don’t they?” Marty slapped his hand on the couch as a sudden thought hit him. “Mates do share everything. Remember, Ares told me on the day we went to buy the scooter, and he agreed that being his mate made me rich now, too.” But his burst of energy left him as fast as it had arrived. “I don’t feel very rich at the moment. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever felt a loss so...so...so big. It hurts.”

Sighing, Marty thought of his bright green scooter sitting in the garage. “I had so much fun on that scooter, but we only played on them once, as well. And I never got the phone I asked for. I guess I’m too scruffy for the godly network as well. And now it seems our mate tends to get bored easily, and maybe that’s what’s happened here. Maybe he’s bored with me. What are we going to do with ourselves if he doesn’t want us around anymore?”

We could try getting a job again. We have nicer clothes now , the raccoon suggested, although Marty knew he was only being kind and trying to make Marty feel better.

“We’d be no good in a job,” Marty said. “You remember what happened all the last times we tried. And maybe that’s it. Maybe Ares didn’t want to introduce me to his

family because he's ashamed of me. She called us a scruffy urchin. Can you really blame her?"

He peeked over the back of the couch where he could see into the mirror that was in the hallway wall before the bedroom. It was one of those long floor-to-ceiling mirrors so a person could see their entire self. Marty couldn't see that from where he was sitting, so he jumped up and ran over to the mirror, standing in front of it. The clothes were new – they came from Ares. The problem was Marty wasn't sure what happened to his old ones. He was sure he'd put them in the closet but the last time he looked, he couldn't find them. So, it's not like he could give the new ones back.

"I suppose my hair could do with a cut, but Ares has never complained about it." He flicked his fingers through his wild mop of hair. He liked it. It gave him that shaggy look that shifters seem to appreciate, and it reminded him of his raccoon, with the grey and black flecks through it, and even the occasional flash of white among the dark brown strands. It was cute. It suited his face shape.

It wasn't styled, but not everybody can look picture-perfect. "Face it," he said to his reflection in the mirror, "If everybody looked picture perfect, the whole world would be boring. I offer a flash of uniqueness to a boring world. I always have."

His shoulders slumped in his reflection. Unfortunately, his little self-help speech wasn't as helpful now he was mated. He wasn't sure he even had a self-help quip that would banish the friend-zone blues. Marty wandered over to the couch and plopped down onto it, grabbing a cushion to cuddle as he stared into the fire that never went out.

"I wonder what he's doing up there. Do you think he's just catching up on family gossip? I wonder what that's like. I can't say for certain, because Ares didn't even tell me who the visitor was. Do you know who that beautiful lady was?"

Thank goodness his raccoon listened to their cousin Ronny, otherwise Marty would be completely clueless. It's not like Ares told him anything about his family except they all hated him.

It seemed his raccoon wasn't sure, either. It could be one of a few women from the Greek Pantheon, he said, although it's probably Athena, the Goddess of War, Wisdom and Crafts.

"What makes you say that?" Marty asked.

I thought they looked alike. Ares is the God of War and she's the Goddess of War, making her Ares' sister. But unlike Ares who was hated by everybody, Athena was favored by Zeus and considered his favorite daughter.

"It would make you wonder, if Ares is so hated by his family, and she is so loved, why she would suddenly visit now? And I mean, if he has a shitty family, and he just doesn't want them knowing about our life together – that could be why he friend-zoned me..."

Marty stopped himself, snapping his jaw shut. He realized he was going out of his way to justify what was really shitty behavior on Ares' part.

"We're not going to do that," he said fiercely. "We're not going to make his excuses for him. Let him fucking explain himself. And if he thinks I'm going back to the main house again, he's got another thing coming. This place is mine." He tapped the couch. "He promised this was my place, along with everything in it. I'm not going to live up there anymore, not if I can be turned out with a simple, 'oh, he's just a friend, he's visiting.' I won't do it."

Marty's eyes started leaking all over again as the pain of Ares' words hit him again. "I might not have had much," he sobbed. "All right, we never had barely anything,

but at least I wasn't just a visitor when I was living under my pile of twigs. According to Ares, I'm not a visitor in this pool house, either, so he can live in the main house all by himself and have as many godly visitors as he likes."

None of that was making Marty feel better. The tears kept coming, making the front of his shirt wet, and no matter how many times he wiped his cheeks with his hands, they still came away wet. It wasn't just Ares' careless words, it was the threat to their mating and Marty's way of life that terrified him. For the first time in his life, Marty and his raccoon had gotten comfortable. He finally felt he had a home where he wasn't going to get pushed out just because he said the wrong thing.

"I trusted him, and my head still hurts." Marty rubbed at the egg-shaped lump on the back of his head. "I know it'll go down shortly, but I trusted him to catch me, because he told me that's what he wanted to do, and then he didn't...and how can I be with a mate who I can't trust to catch me?"

Matings are for life, his raccoon said, and he sounded just as depressed as Marty felt. We can't be without him. I did get the impression that Ares knew he'd made a mistake the moment the words came out of his mouth.

"Are you being truthful, or are you just trying to make me feel better?" Marty wasn't even sure a triple-layered chocolate cake with whipped cream and nuts would make him feel better, although it was worth a try.

Getting off the couch, he went over to the kitchen cupboard, the one that made walnuts appear. Opening it, he said, "It would be really nice to find a triple-layered chocolate cake with whipped cream and nuts," to the cupboard. A plate appeared with a slice of cake exactly as he described. "There are some perks to living in this house then, I suppose."

Marty grabbed the plate and a spoon and went back over to the couch. He wasn't



going to be sitting at any dining table by himself. He'd far rather pig out on the couch and stare at the stupid fire that never went out. "What is it with a fire that never goes out? What's gonna happen in the summer? Are we all going to die of heat stroke?" He took a mouthful of the chocolate cake, but it really didn't feel good. As soon as the first mouthful hit his stomach. He felt like he wanted to be sick.

"Oh no, I can't even eat this. What is wrong with me?" Marty wouldn't throw it away, but he couldn't take another bite. He put the plate and the spoon on the coffee table, making sure it wasn't anywhere near the edge, so he didn't knock it over. Grabbing the cushion again, he hugged it to his chest. "Everything hurts. I need someone to make sense of all this. I just want everything to be all right again."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:10 am*

Oh shit, this is worse than I thought. How the hell am I going to dig myself out of this fucking hole? Ares expected Marty to be feeling a bit deflated. He felt much the same way, and he'd been the one who created the mess in the first place. Ares had even expected Marty to show signs he'd been crying – which he clearly had been. If Marty had spoken to him the same way Ares had, casually reduced their relationship to nothing, Ares probably would have cried as well, although not where anybody could see him. Ares was fairly sure he'd never cried, but he felt that he might do, if Marty turned on him like that.

But it hadn't been Marty who'd been so cruel. It was Marty who'd been affected by what Ares had said. The sight of Marty curled up on the couch, cuddling a cushion, looking like his whole world had collapsed, was kind of what Ares expected. What he didn't expect to see was the slice of three-tier chocolate cake on a plate on the coffee table with just one bite taken out of it. That one solitary bite from a pristine slice hit Ares harder than anything ever could.

Marty would never turn down anything sweet, even if it meant every one of his teeth would rot and fall out. Marty adored sweet foods with a passion, and to see that...to know that his little mate was so upset that he couldn't even eat cake...Ares was suddenly hit with a lead ball in his stomach. What if this can't be fixed?

"I'm guessing I fucked up in a major way," he said, letting himself into the pool house, noting how every curtain and blind were drawn. It gave the small house a depressive air. Ares really wanted to take Marty back to the main house, but he couldn't assume Marty was keen to go. Especially when Marty didn't even jump up and hug him the way he always did, even if Ares had spent longer in the bathroom than usual.

Marty just looked at him, then went back to staring at the fire. “I don’t know what you expect me to say,” Marty said.

“You could yell at me,” Ares suggested. “Tell me how much of an asshole I was back at the house.”

He was well used to having people yell at him. He was sure he could handle it for Marty, for a short while, if it meant that his little mate got all his upset out of his system and into the open. Then they could work on the forgiveness side of things and Ares would work on not being such a dickhead the next time he put his foot in his mouth, or more to the point, took his foot out, letting shit come out that should never have been said.

“I just don’t understand what happened,” Marty said. “I’m thinking and thinking, and I don’t understand. The only thing I can think is that you’re not proud of me.”

Ares, who had been about to sit on the couch, had to stop and consider that. He perched himself on the edge, seeing as hovering above it was just going to make him look more of an idiot than he already felt. “I never questioned whether I am proud of you or not. It’s not something I’ve ever considered.”

Marty just stared at the fire.

“I only told Athena you were a visitor because I didn’t want her to know how special you are to me.”

“So that’s how it’s going to be? If any member of your family comes around, I’ve got a slink off like a raccoon caught among the trashcans and pretend I live somewhere else? No, that’s not going to happen.” Marty went back to staring at the flames. “I’m not living like that.”

Panic started creeping from Ares' guts, moving into his lungs and spreading fast. Marty was always the happy one, always the one who could make everything right. But this time, it didn't seem like he even wanted to try. "Look, I know I did the wrong thing by saying that you were just a friend. But you have to believe me. I was genuinely trying to protect you. The gods are so snotty about mortal mates."

Marty flicked his eyes to the ceiling and Ares got the impression he was talking to his raccoon side. Then Marty said flatly, "You're making a generalization that's not true. You said yourself that Zeus has a mortal mate, Hades has a mortal mate, and Poseidon has a mortal mate. My raccoon tells me there are other gods from other Pantheons who have mortal mates. That doesn't sound like they're snotty about mortals at all."

"Yes, that's true, but that's not all of them." The panic was making it impossible for Ares to think now. He realized in that moment he had expected Marty to make things right, for Marty to want to fix things between them, but clearly the hurt Ares had caused had struck far deeper than he'd originally thought. "Tell me what's upsetting you exactly," he said, trying not to let that panic seep into his voice. "Tell me, and I'll do my best not to do it again."

"It wasn't just that you said I was a visitor in a house I thought we shared together." Marty finally looked at him. His eyes were flashing, and Ares could see his raccoon behind them. "I wouldn't have even minded the deception so much if you'd warned me beforehand that I was never going to meet any members of your family."

"That's fine. I mean it. That's absolutely fine. I never wanted you to meet any of mine, either. I haven't had anything to do with my family for the longest time, since I was a youngster, because they're all horrible thieves, and they would see you as an easy mark and steal from you for the rest of our existence, and I didn't want that for you."

“But you never told me that there was family that still visited you. You never said anything about family that was still talking to you. You made it sound like your family was the same as my family. That they were horrible people who didn’t want to be around you, so they never visited you.

“I understood that. I thought we were in a bubble of you and me, and yes, that’s probably silly of me, but I liked having that bubble of you and me. But then that person comes – Athena, who apparently is your sister – and I didn’t even get the option of getting to know her. You didn’t tell me who she was. No, all you said is that’s just Marty. He’s just visiting.

“A visitor - when I believed we were living together as mates. I’ve been living in that house for three weeks. In that one moment, you took away the security of my home as well. You showed me you weren’t proud of me. You dismissed me as if I was the scruffy urchin that Athena said I was. That’s just not fair.”

Marty looked down at the cushion he was holding. “It’s not fair, and I don’t understand, and I don’t like that big house and I’m not going to go there anymore. If you want to see me, you’re going to have to come here because you told me this was my house. You’re not going to take that away, too, are you?”

“No, I would never do that. Marty, mate, we share half of everything. I told you that when we claimed each other. Half that big house is yours, too.” Ares hadn’t even considered that Marty would feel insecure about the house as well. That’s probably because you’ve never been without a home. You dick!

“Yeah, well sharing half of everything includes snotty family members. What did you think was going to happen if you told that woman that I was your mate? Was she going to blast me off the face of the Earth? Was she going to blow me into a million pieces? What would be so bad if she knew?”

Ares shook his head. “No, Athena doesn’t have to fight with weapons. She’s got a sharp enough tongue as it is.”

“So what? Was she going to talk me to death? Or is this another example of you thinking that people were going to hurt me by the things that they say? The only person who hurt me today was you. You didn’t even catch me.” Marty’s voice caught on a sob and Ares felt his hope of being forgiven slipping away.

“You were the one who told me you didn’t want me sliding down the banister on my own. You told me that you wanted to be there at the bottom to catch me. I yelled at you that I was coming. You didn’t yell for me to stop. You didn’t tell me we had company. I didn’t even know she was there until I was halfway down that banister and then I did fall – something I hadn’t done before. And that was the one time you weren’t there to catch me. As my mate, you told me that’s what you wanted to do, and then you didn’t do it. You let me down.”

Ares wanted to hug Marty so bad he ached with it, but he hesitated, unsure if his touch would be welcome. The problem was he really hadn’t had the time to let Marty know Athena was coming. He felt the tingle letting him know a god was coming through his wards just as he was getting ready to catch his mate – as Marty had expected him to.

When the tingle came, Ares’ mind had gone blank. He’d panicked then as well, his only thought was to get rid of Athena in the time it took for Marty to get down the banister. In hindsight, that was a stupid hope because Athena would never have visited without an agenda, as she’d proven, but none of that excused what he’d done to Marty. “I’ll introduce you to my family if that’s what you want,” he said.

“I don’t care about meeting your family,” Marty said. “I hate that they hurt you and hated you and apparently you hate them back and that’s all fine because we don’t have to have anything to do with them. I totally respect that because I don’t want

anything to do with my family, either.

“I truly believed that was something we had in common, another point that proved we were perfect for each other. Just you and me against the world. Woohoo! That’s what I thought. I thought I had a mate I could trust to catch me. I thought I had a mate who was proud of me. I thought I had a mate who thought it was fun to be with me.

“But now I’m thinking about it, and I’m not so sure. I don’t have strawberries anymore. I never got that phone. You don’t play on the scooters with me anymore, either. All you want to do is have sex, read your books, and eat, and while I love doing those things, what happened to us going out to clubs and pubs and wherever else it was you said you wanted to take me?

“Surfing.” Marty pointed his finger at Ares. “That’s what it was. You said you would take me surfing, but you’ve done none of those things. How can I believe that you’re happy to be with me, when the moment we come across someone else, I’m suddenly a friend who’s just visiting?”

“We can go surfing.” Ares had totally forgotten he’d even mentioned it. “We can go right now if you want.”

“Why, if I’m just going to be your friend who has to disappear anytime you meet someone you know. Remember, you said you couldn’t wear ragged clothing like I had when we met, even though I wouldn’t have cared, because you wanted to take me to nice places? But all we’ve done is stay in that house. I love being with you, that’s not the problem at all, but now when I look back on it, I realize you never wanted to take me out because you didn’t want to be seen out with me.

“Didn’t you trust me?” Marty was on a roll, and Ares hated what he was hearing because it was all true. “Did you think I didn’t know how to behave in public? Or were you just ashamed to be seen with me? You know, maybe back when we bought

those scooters, it wasn't that you were upset because that man thought that you were my sugar daddy, and you thought that might upset me.

“You said you didn't want people to hurt me. But maybe all along, it's that you didn't want them hurting you, and that maybe you felt insulted because that's what that man thought - that I was the best you could do, and he thought he was a better fit for you. I don't know anymore.”

Staring back off into the fire again, Marty said, “I think that's one of the things that hurts me most, apart from the fact that I have a headache because my mate didn't catch me, but also that you've never even given me a chance to show that I can be the mate that you deserve. You've never wanted to take me out. You've never said anything about it since that first day.

“And then dismissing me as a friend so quickly, the moment somebody from your past zaps into your life, apparently, all of a sudden I'm nothing. That's telling me I'm not important to you. What's worse, is that you think you can say things like that, and dismiss me so rudely, and then expect me to make this right, for you.”

“It was one statement, made in a thoughtless moment,” Ares said, his words and tone sounding as bleak as he felt. “I just wasn't thinking. I didn't realize until you went out the door, how badly I'd hurt you. I was horrified when you fell, but I knew that if I showed you one ounce of kindness, one ounce of affection, then Athena would use that against me.”

“Why does everything have to be about you?” Marty yelled. “What about the hurt you caused me? Is that okay, just so that Athena doesn't get her hooks into me for whatever reason? For goodness' sake, Ares, people say bad things. They think they're being clever, but they're not. When people say bad things, especially when they say them to your face, they are simply showing you who they are. Those words have nothing to do with who you are inside.



“I thought we’d solved this problem. I thought that was enough – that I was enough. Are you telling me now that I’m not? Are you telling me that you want to go back to your godly realm, where everyone looks amazing and has nothing else to do with scruffy urchins like me? Is that what you want?”

“NO!” Ares exploded, his fear shooting up like a volcano, his yell bouncing off the walls in the little cottage. “No, gods, please no. If you left me now, I would cease to exist, I would wither away and die. Even though gods are not supposed to be able to do that, I would plead with the Fates to take me out of the weave. I could not live without you, don’t you understand? With all the hate there is in the world, you’re the one bright light of sunshine in my life – the only wonderful reason for living I have. To lose you would be to lose everything. I couldn’t go on. I couldn’t live without you by my side.”

To Ares’ shock, tears started to fall down his face. “By the Fates, I’ve never cried before, I’m sure I haven’t. Not even when Aphrodite dumped me and my father told me he hated me. Not even the countless times my mother cursed my name. But for you, the tears fall – I don’t know how to stop them. That’s what you mean to me.” Ares quickly covered his face with his hands and sobbed as if his heart was broken because, in that moment, it truly felt as if it was.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:10 am*

Let me out, his raccoon hissed urgently.

You can't scratch his eyes out, our mate is crying. Marty's tears started all over again. He hated seeing his mate look so broken and knowing his words had caused it.

He's going to be embarrassed. Let me out. I'll cuddle him. It always works best when an animal does it, and I'm cute. It'll work.

Considering Marty was all talked out and just felt hollow inside, he was happy to shift. He wasn't sure how cuddly his raccoon could be – it's not like his furry side had much experience in that side of things, but he whipped off his shirt, knowing his raccoon would easily get free of the clothing on his lower half.

The raccoon came through, shaking himself, making sure his fur was all going the way it was meant to, and then scurried over the couch cushions, sticking his nose under Ares' elbow.

“What the...? Oh, hello. What are you doing?” Ares' cheeks were damp, although the raccoon noticed his eyes didn't go red-rimmed the way Marty's did. Must be a god thing. “Did you want to come onto my lap?”

As if the raccoon needed an invitation. He climbed onto Ares' lap, taking care with his claws because they could be a little sharp, reaching up with his front half so he could sniff around Ares' neck.

“You have lovely fur,” Ares said quietly, running a tentative hand down the raccoon's back. “I feel like you're giving me a cuddle. Is that what you're doing?”

I don't get this close to just anyone. But the raccoon reasoned Ares wasn't used to his quirks and rubbed his cheek against Ares' neck.

"I've been such a shit to you both." Ares still seemed sad, but the raccoon could sense the feeling wasn't as oppressive as before. Raccoon super-powers. "I'm so proud of Marty sticking up for himself, telling me where I went wrong. It wasn't easy to hear, but it was the right thing to do."

That was Marty speaking. You had no idea what I was thinking, although the raccoon figured that was probably a good thing. Marty was the nice one in their partnership.

"Is it possible I'm just stuck in a rut? Personality wise, I mean?"

The raccoon gave the best approximation of a shrug he could manage.

"Marty was right. I'm so used to expecting people to be hateful toward me - people like my family - that I never give them a chance to be anything else. I'm horrid back. The cycle continues..."

Noooo, not the cycle of life shit again. Marty was very fond of talking about that rubbish, especially when he was hungry, hadn't eaten properly for days, and it was pissing down with rain.

"Marty always seems so positive."

Not when it's raining and he's hungry...

"It's incredible. He really doesn't care what people think, and I bet you don't, either." Ooh, Ares was getting bold. The raccoon found he liked having that spot between his ears scratched.

Don't expect me to say anything. I don't even want to think. Oh, yeah, right there...

"Did you want to go to Olympus?"

Damn. My Zen just flew out the window. The raccoon pulled his head out of Ares' neck and looked up at the one eye he could see from his angle.

"It would only be for a visit."

Was that redness on Ares' cheeks? The raccoon wanted to tap one to see if it was as hot as it looked.

"I thought, if we just went for a short while, I could show you around the main amphitheater and my quarters, where I was living up there."

Ares seemed to be asking his opinion. But the raccoon could feel Marty's hesitation as well.

"If we bump into anyone, and I don't know if we will or not, but I promise I will introduce you as my mate. I want you and Marty to know I am proud of you."

Which was sweet. And hell, the raccoon reasoned, what have we got to lose? I can be cute and keep my teeth and claws to myself for the most part.

Marty didn't seem as sure, but the raccoon got some leverage on the top of Ares' chest, pushing up with his back legs so he was perched with all four feet on Ares' shoulder. A quick swirl around, his tail brushing under Ares' nose, and the raccoon laid down again, making himself comfortable. Ares' shoulder was more than wide enough to take his weight and length, and the raccoon could tickle his whiskers against Ares' ear if he felt inclined.

“I’m going to take that as a yes to Olympus.” Ares smiled. It wasn’t a laugh, but it was an improvement on crying. Resting his hand on the raccoon’s back, Ares said, “Don’t let go, my cute little mate,” and the raccoon felt that disorientating feeling of being translocated.

Beam me up, Scotty. We’re off on our next adventure.

Yes, the raccoon was a television freak when Marty had lived at home, if anyone was asking.

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You can do this. You can absolutely do this , Ares told himself as he swept himself and his raccoon mate to Olympus. He landed, intentionally, in the middle of his living area, part of a larger suite of rooms that he had.

Translocating to his own space was prudent. Ares did that mostly because he didn't want to run the risk of translocating into somebody else or even appearing in front of someone else before he'd taken the breath needed to adjust. And while Olympus was filled with mostly staff, with very few actual gods around, Ares had no way of knowing if he'd translocated anywhere else, if he might bump into someone, before he was ready.

Ares was desperate to prove to Marty that he'd been heard and understood, and that he was going to make a difference in his behavior going forward. Marty had made a good point in that Ares did imagine everyone hated him. Actually, it wasn't imagined – he had proof. In turn, he wasn't a nice person to them, either.

But Athena's sudden drop in, which was so unexpected, had rattled Ares' calm, and he realized he had to be more proactive, rather than wanting to hide anytime someone from the Pantheon came near him and his mate. By walking into the lion's den, so to

Speak, he could show off his mate, instead of hoping no one would find out by other means how important Marty was.

As for the gossip – what did that matter? Marty had been right about that, too. His kin had been gossiping about him – and others – for as long as time had existed. Ares had no wish to live on Olympus anymore. Far too many of his kin were still single and most had few morals. If Marty met someone like Apollo, for instance – the epitome of beauty in a male... Ares didn't need that hassle.

“So, this is my living space on Olympus,” he said to the curious raccoon who was busy sniffing the air. “One thing you'll notice as we wander around here is that the temperature never changes, it never rains, and the only time there's any wind around here is if Zeus is throwing a tantrum. He's not here right now,” Ares added quickly as the raccoon sat up.

“If you wanted to know where I first caught sight of you, I was in this room.” He wandered over to his big table. “I got a notification from the company that monitors my security cameras for the house in Boston, and as I was here, I waved my hand at the table and caught a glimpse of you disappearing into the trees. I'd been thinking of going to France because I have a house there as well, but suddenly Boston looked more interesting.”

He could see the raccoon looking down at the view of the garden. It was empty, of course, because Marty was with him. “All I saw was your light – just a flicker in the trees, but it was enough for me to come.”

Ares chuckled. “When I saw that light that first time, I thought it was some quirk of my table. It wasn't until I stayed in the house and saw you the next night that I realized you'd been lit up by the Fates for me to find. The happiest and scariest moment of my life.”

He got a nose in his ear for his confession and chuckled as one of the raccoon's whiskers tickled his nose. "So, this is like my viewing table. All gods have some way of keeping an eye on scenes, places, or people that are important to them. A lot of mortals assume that gods can see everything all the time, but can you imagine what a mind fuck that would be?"

The raccoon nodded, his eyes bright.

"So we all have our different ways. Zeus has computers, but he used to use the clouds a lot as well. Hades is so in tune with his realm that he knows things as they happen, but he's not too interested in the world above the Underworld. Poseidon is the same – he's focused on the sea and his mate, and I'm not sure which one is more important, but I did watch his wedding to Claude through this table. He said he would give up the sea for his mate, so there's that."

The raccoon tapped him on the side of his face and then his own chest. The message was clear, and Ares grinned. "I can't give up war for you because I gave up on that a long, long, long time ago. But I'm going to do my best to give up being an asshole just for you. Aw, is that raccoon kisses on my cheek? Thank you. Did you want to look at anything else on here before we move on?"

Feeling unbelievably pleased at how he and the raccoon were communicating, Ares flicked a couple of tabs, making sure to stay away from Demetra's. He did not want Marty thinking he watched porn, and he had no idea what that woman was doing. He stopped at a scene showing a woman hosting another meeting – the outfit was extremely well put together for someone who was homeless.

"This is my mother, Hera." He pointed at the table. "She's currently banished from Olympus for ten years by Paulie and was supposed to be homeless, but... As you can see Zeus was right when he told his mate she would be running the shelter before long. It looks like she's on the fundraising committee as well, and that's not

suspicious at all.”

The raccoon made a chittering noise. “Yes, I was being sarcastic. She definitely didn’t stay homeless for long, by the looks of things. But oh, look at this one. This is Persephone.” Ares flicked his table again, opening the scene of the former Dread Queen in her hive.

“If you look closely, you can see she’s still got her crown. That was absolutely hilarious.” He zoomed in so the raccoon could see. “See there, the little cartoon crown on that bee’s head. I’m not sure if you know the story about Persephone. Hades stole her from a field a gazillion years ago and took her down below to be his bride. When Demetra, Persephone’s mother, plunged the world into winter because of her grief, Zeus made Persephone Hades’ queen, even though she refused to have anything to do with Hades at all.

“Unfortunately, she really liked being queen, though. She made Hades’s life miserable for so long – clinging to her title but spending very little time with the man who made that possible. Anyway, Hades eventually found his mate, a chipmunk shifter called Ali, and he’s blissfully happy. Persephone did not take that well, especially when the realm of the dead shut Persephone out – or it might have been Ali, but anyway, she had been petitioning Zeus for absolutely ages, insisting that Hades take her back as queen.

“He didn’t – thank goodness, but when Paulie learned how badly she wanted to be a queen, he suggested the beehive. Apparently, he told Zeus, Persephone would be useful that way, but when he was imagining the scene, Persephone had a crown, and the crown remains. Are you laughing?” Ares looked at his cute raccoon, whose shoulders were shaking. “I do believe you are. I agree, I thought it was funny, too.”

“So, we have a rest from her nonsense for ten years. Zeus told Paulie he’d let them back on Olympus after ten years, because they were so rude to Paulie, and they tried



to bring Zeus down.”

Ares paused and then added, “That was the only reason Athena came to visit me today. Now she’s got it into her head to try and take over from Zeus, but hopefully I gave her enough warnings so she would back off. I told her if there was a fight over who rules Olympus, I was siding with Zeus this time.”

“So anyway, this is my table. This one is Zeus” - he quickly flicked on Zeus’s tab - “and then this one is Hephaestus. He’s still pregnant, so no baby to buy for yet, and yeah. Anytime you want to look at something or someone, you can do it through this table. I imagine it works for you, too, now that we’re mated, but perhaps not in your furry form.”

The raccoon hissed and shook his head. “You can try,” Ares suggested. “Wave your little paw over the table – you don’t need to touch it – and think about where or who you want to see.”

For a moment, Ares didn’t think the raccoon would try, but he should’ve known Marty would try anything at least once. Sure enough, the raccoon looked at the table and then leaned over so far that, Ares put up his hand to help him balance. A front paw came out, waving over the table, and the scene in the table changed.

Ares frowned as he studied the scene. It wasn’t a place he remembered seeing before, which meant the raccoon could indeed operate his table. But it was the picture showing that hurt his heart.

The house looked like any other on a housing estate in a rough part of any city. It needed painting, the porch was sagging in one corner, and the lawn hadn’t been mown in what looked like a long time. There were children’s toys strewn in among the long grass, but as Ares looked closer, he could see most of them were muddy or broken.

There was a group of people – mostly men, but a few women - sitting around on wooden chairs on the porch. They appeared to be having a party, or at least a lot of drinks. Although the sound was muted, Ares could see people laughing, and there were drinks in everyone's hands.

“Babe, is this your family home?”

To his surprise, the raccoon buried his face in Ares' neck, waving one paw frantically side to side, as if he wanted to wipe the picture away.

“It's gone, precious. It's gone.” Ares swiped a little more precisely, and the regular tabletop returned. “Hey, it's okay. It's understandable to want to look, but you don't ever have to do that again unless you want to.” He wasn't sure what to do, but he stroked down the raccoon's back in what he hoped was a comforting gesture. After a few moments, the raccoon sat up again, giving himself a shake before Ares got a brush of his raccoon's nose against his cheek.

“More raccoon kisses. I like that. So, we've seen this place – these are my rooms, but if we go and look out the window over here, you can see down into the grand amphitheater where all the Olympians and their companions used to congregate. You won't believe it to look at the place now, but this place used to be party central.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:10 am*

Why did we do that? Why? Safe inside his raccoon's form, Marty knew exactly why he'd encouraged his animal side to test the magic table that let them see anything they wanted. He hadn't been near his family in so long, and for all his happy face and cheery attitude, there was always a part of Marty that wished... He wished a lot of things, but when it came to his family, he wished that things could have been different.

So, when provided with an opportunity that could only come from being the mate of a god, Marty and the raccoon were in agreement. They wanted to check on their family home. But Marty quickly realized that absolutely nothing had changed. The house still hadn't been painted, the yard still hadn't been tidied, and the drinking party on the front porch was still in full swing, just like it had been the day their taunting had sent him packing.

It was heartbreaking but expected, nonetheless. At least we know they're still there, he sent to his raccoon. If they're still there, they are nowhere near us, and that's a positive.

Ares was being so sweet, and while a part of Marty thought he should shift back so he could at least comment on the things Ares was saying, it was also nice listening to him talk – sharing parts of his life that Marty never thought he would. Just being on Olympus – well, it wasn't a dream come true because Marty didn't have dreams like that – but it was a special adventure.

“So, what do you think?” Ares asked as they stood by the window. “It's hard to imagine now, but back when so many of the gods were worshipped – not me, but others – this place was always so busy. People wanted to be close to Zeus, hoping to

have his favor. There were beautiful companions flitting around the columns, hoping to catch Zeus's eyes. They weren't there for me, my cute raccoon," he added. "Don't get your fur in a knot. I was never in Zeus's favor, so I wasn't someone worth flirting with."

I would've flirted with you if I had known how. Marty tried to imagine the scene as Ares described, seen through his raccoon's eyes, but it all looked like an abandoned movie set to him, and that was rather sad.

"We can go down there. In fact, you should know there isn't anywhere on Olympus you can't go, except personal suites that belong to other gods. But unless you see a big door lock, assume you have access. You're my mate so you have the same rights as I do, even though you will never be an Olympian."

I don't remember saying I wanted to be. Marty had no idea what made Olympians different from other gods, but it wasn't anything he aspired to. He was happy that Ares wasn't just keeping him in his room, that he wanted to show Marty, or rather the raccoon, around. Marty just hoped no one was mean to his mate. Ares was trying to make things right between them, which meant no one else needed to interfere.

"There are a number of staff here," Ares said. "If you see anyone in a short white robe, or white pants and a white shirt, then they are most likely staff and they will help you or direct you to where you want to go. We have some people that have been here for decades and others who seem to change regularly. I don't know if Zeus is responsible for that or the realm itself, but just remember everyone in a short robe will treat you with respect."

Do they respect you, too? But Ares was off on another topic and through his raccoon's eyes, Marty could see why.

"I can see you looking at that banister," Ares chuckled. "I think we'd need to make

sure no one was around if you wanted to slide down there, and it probably wouldn't be a good idea to do that in your furry form. I don't think your claws would be good for sliding."

Marty made a mental note to tell Ares he wouldn't want to slide down a banister on Olympus. The place didn't have the right vibe for fun activities.

When Ares got to the bottom of the stairs, he wandered out and around through one of the many arches that led into the main amphitheater. "This is it," he said, spreading his arms wide and turning around slowly, making sure not to dislodge the raccoon. "If you look up, you can see the whole universe depicted there in the ceiling."

Look up. Look up. I want to see.

The raccoon looked up and started chittering. That can't be real. There is no way that's real.

We're not on Earth anymore, Marty reminded his furry half. It could be real for here.

This whole place looks fake.

It wasn't likely that Ares understood raccoon chatter which was probably fortunate. "Yes, I know. It looks like a painting from the Renaissance period, doesn't it? But then, isn't that where all the world came from? It was art, and dreams, and ideas."

Ares indicated the columns and marble benches. Everything was white except for tasteful displays of dark green vines, which didn't look real, either. "This is where everybody used to meet up. We'd sit on the benches, eat, drink wine, and dance. Music would be playing..."

Ares heaved a big sigh, and the raccoon made sure he still had his balance. "Back

when we were worshipped, it was party central here all the time. But oh, ho, ho, if these walls could talk. There were so many arguments, petty fights, and shouting, as well. Gods used to get upset over the silliest of things – all in the name of honor, of course. I used to wonder sometimes how anything got done at all.”

For a moment, Marty worried that Ares was sad again, but then his mate deliberately smiled – close to a fake smile, but with just enough genuine smile behind it to make it believable. “So, this is where I originally came into being. I wasn’t born in the traditional sense, I was just here one day. But as I look around here now, all I can see...”

“What is it you see, brother?”

Ares stiffened as Marty thought I know that voice. Twice in one day? What were the odds? But rather than translocate, which Marty expected Ares to do, his mate turned around, facing Athena with a half-smile.

“I’m showing my new mate around Olympus,” he said, and Marty hoped he was the only one who heard the slight tightness in his mate’s words. “Don’t be alarmed, we don’t plan on living here together, but Olympians do have the right to visit, and I simply felt that Marty would enjoy seeing where I used to spend so much of my time.”

Marty, Ares, and his raccoon all froze as Athena glided closer. It wasn’t a regular walk, it was more like she was on one of those elevators that moved a person across the floor. Marty, through his raccoon’s eyes, kept looking to see if her feet moved, but she was wearing a long robe made up of about a dozen layers of gauze, and he couldn’t see them. She still looked incredibly beautiful, but instead of being angry, Marty got the impression she was intrigued.

“Marty, you say? Is this the shifter I insulted by calling him a scruffy urchin? And

that man was your mate all along?”

“It’s only been about a month since Marty and I claimed each other.” Ares seemed embarrassed but determined not to show it. “I misspoke when I told you he was visiting, unsure of your reaction and surprised by your visit. Marty was understandably upset by my treating him so badly, but we talked about it, and he has forgiven me. I felt it would be nice for him to visit here, even if it is just the once. I wanted him to see where I spent so much of my existence.”

The raccoon got a long pat down his shoulder. “Marty fancied to shift for a while, and as Olympus was a safe place, I didn’t see the harm. We’re just taking in a few sights, and then we’ll be gone.”

Ooh, he’s warning her not to start anything. That’s adorable. But the raccoon was watching Athena, who had a huge smile on her face. It wasn’t fake.

“You are so lucky, Ares. Seriously, congratulations to you both. Can I just say you are the most charming little creature I’ve ever seen? Look at you. You have such a cute furry face, and your little mask around your eyes gives you such a unique character.” She reached out her hand, and Marty and the raccoon felt the tension in Ares’ body, but the raccoon reached out his front paw, and Athena shook it, letting out a delightful chuckle.

“You are too adorable for words. I am so sorry I insulted you when you first saw me, Marty. I had a lot on my mind, and I was fortunate my brother was around to remind me of a few things I should’ve considered before leaping into actions that could’ve been very problematic for the Pantheon. I do hope you forgive me.”

Yeah, well, don’t do it again, lady, or I won’t be so nice next time. But of course, that was conveyed in raccoon chatter, and clearly, Athena didn’t understand that, either, as she laughed again.

“I just love your fluffy coat, it has so many colors in it,” she said brightly. “Have you met Aphrodite yet? You really should.”

“Aphrodite.” The sudden increase in tension in Ares’ body almost knocked the raccoon off his perch on Ares’ shoulder. “I didn’t know Aphrodite was here. It’s not like she visits very often. I know she prefers to spend most of her time in her own glade.”

Marty could almost taste Ares’ panic in the air, and he encouraged his raccoon to nestle into Ares’ neck, in the hopes he’d feel better.

“She’s here to see Coda.” If Athena was aware of the tension she wasn’t showing any signs of it. “She wants her glade to be connected to the Zeus network, but because it’s not technically part of this realm, but it is...it all sounds very complicated, and there’s been some delays. I think the only reason she wants the connection at all is so she can keep tabs on Baby and his children. She’s become a very devoted grandmother, would you believe. Oh, there she is. Aphrodite, you have to come and see Ares’ new mate. He is too adorable for words.”

Marty thought Athena was stunning, and she was, but when Aphrodite came into the room, it was as if Marty could see bird song and feel the warmth of the sunshine entering the sterile room. But unlike Athena, who was encased in the long white flowing gown that seemed to float at the edges all on their own, Aphrodite was wearing blue jeans and a well-fitted pink t-shirt.

She laughed as she came closer, patting at her legs. “What do you think of these new pants? Baby suggested that I try wearing them, and honestly, I never realized women could have so much freedom wearing jeans and a top like this. I think I really suit them. Ares, is what Athena said true? Is this your shifter mate? Isn’t he the cutest wee animal?”



Don't get a big head, Marty warned his raccoon as his animal half sat up and held out his paw again like he was the queen graciously granting someone an audience. Aphrodite clearly thought it was funny, taking the paw and shaking it carefully, just like Athena had done.

"I can see why you're enchanted, Ares," Aphrodite said warmly. "Your mate has the most darling animal spirit I have ever seen, and full of feisty energy, too. I am sure your human half is just as cute."

"He is, definitely, and the kindest person I know," Ares said with a nod, but Marty could sense his mate really didn't know what to say.

"Ares said Marty's been teaching him to have fun," Athena said, showing her teeth. "Long overdue, in my opinion."

"I am so happy for you Ares," Aphrodite said. "I truly am. I hope now you'll find so many more reasons to smile going forward as you build a new life and possibly have a family of your own. You so deserve some happiness and I'm so, so proud of you. Congratulations to both of you." Turning to Athena, she added, "Did you want to go and get some coffee or something before I have to go? It seems like this network business is far more confusing than I thought it would be."

"We can chat about it," Athena said, taking Aphrodite's arm. "I'm not sure if I can help, but I'll try if I can. Ares, Marty, so lovely to see you. I'm sure we'll see you again real soon."

Marty watched them wander off, still through his raccoon's eyes. Ares seemed to be frozen, as if he wasn't sure what to say or do.

Do something, Marty insisted. Poke his face or tickle his nose or something. I'm not sure he's breathing.

The raccoon pushed his nose into Ares' cheek and then gently nibbled his chin. "I'm fine, I'm fine," Ares said, although he still sounded dazed. "So, yeah. That was Aphrodite and Athena. They seem to think you're very cute, which of course you are in both forms."

Ahh, he's trying. The raccoon snuffled the edge of Ares' hair, where it was swept over his ears. "We'll go for a bit more of a wander if you like. I can show you the giant communication network that Zeus has built. It really is quite fascinating. And then perhaps we can have something to eat for ourselves. What do you think?"

Marty thought about his triple chocolate cake slice, still waiting for him back at the pool house. His stomach rumbled, but at least Ares thought it was his raccoon. "We'll make it a quick wander," he said with a laugh. "All in all, it's been an emotional sort of day, and I'd like to get some cuddle time in later, if you're agreeable."

He was talking to me, Marty said to his raccoon, who decided to start purring.

He was talking to both of us.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:10 am*

It was a week after their visit to Olympus. Ares and Marty were getting on well, although Marty still quietly and in his own persistent way refused to go back to the main house.

“I said I wasn’t going to go back there, and I meant it. I never felt like that was half my house, and that was before I was called a visitor. It’s too big, the floor is too cold on my feet, and I just don’t like it. The vibe is off in that house. Not even your sexy presence is enough to change my mind.”

That was that. Nothing Ares said was enough to convince Marty to change his mind.

Reconciling the fact that they would be staying in the pool house for the time being, Ares focused on making his mate feel cherished and cared for. His skills were decidedly rusty in that area, but he looked at how Marty reacted to various things as his guide.

Ares zapped up foods and learned to cook different dishes with Marty as his tutor. They played outside on the scooters together and on days when it was too cold and wet to be outside, Ares would read in the living room while Marty sat beside him drawing incredible scenes on the art pad Ares had found for him. His mate was incredibly talented.

Ares had also clicked up Marty a phone, and that created one way Marty was happy to make use of the main house – sort of. One afternoon, Marty insisted that Ares go up to the main house while he stayed behind in the pool house. He wanted them to try out texting each other, to see what the fuss was about.

Their texts had quickly turned raunchy and before long Ares was so damn horny, he translocated back to the pool house before Marty had had time to formulate a reply to the cheeky dick pic he'd sent. Another fun afternoon.

One thing Ares was very conscious of, and tried to be mindful of, was that Marty hadn't had the chance to do much living in his time on Earth. Ares didn't think there was much he hadn't done in his existence, but the same couldn't be said for Marty.

Although Marty rarely talked about it, Ares couldn't forget where his mate had come from, or where he had found him. Marty had spent all his energies surviving. So, Ares made a point of introducing Marty to new ideas – theme parks, trips to locations all over the world. For now, they had only talked about it, but Ares made it clear he was happy to take Marty wherever he wanted, on a moment's notice.

In the meantime, the hate he had lived with for most of his existence was starting to ease, and Ares found himself laughing over the silliest things, like when he stubbed his toe in his rush to get to Marty on the bed, or when Marty bopped his nose with a spoon that still had cake batter on it, causing it to splat onto his eyebrows.

Laughing was so much easier to do when he had someone to laugh with, rather than having anyone laugh at him. Marty had such an open way about him, it was impossible to do anything else but laugh, and Ares knew the Fates had been kind in their choice of his mate.

There was a part of him that still couldn't get over the way Athena, and in particular Aphrodite, had been so welcoming with his mate on Olympus. He had checked in with Marty afterward, once they'd got back to the pool house and Marty had shifted, to make sure his raccoon hadn't picked up any deceit. But Marty had said that their congratulations and the things they said were perfectly genuine.

That had Ares second-guessing every other relationship he had with anybody else in

the Pantheon. Hermes had been the only one who'd given him the time of day, and Ares made a mental note to introduce Hermes to Marty really soon.

But the others... Gods, we'll be having lunch dates with Zeus and Paulie if Marty has his way. Or, knowing Marty, Hephaestus and Landyn. What's next? Taking afternoon tea and scones with Athena and Aphrodite?

Despite all the fun times, baking, playing, and the numerous loving moments they shared, Ares couldn't shake the thought that something – aside from the main house – was bothering Marty.

Originally, he put that feeling down to his old ways – always seeing something negative that wasn't there. But Marty wasn't capable of stringing him along, so Ares dismissed that line of thinking. But he couldn't dismiss the lingering concern.

Thinking they just needed a change of scenery, Ares waited until after breakfast one morning and said, "I was thinking we could go to Hawaii today, if you felt up to it. I did promise to take you surfing, and the weather will be a lot warmer than here."

For a moment, there was a flash of excitement on Marty's face, but then it quickly disappeared, and he shook his head. "I'm happy if you just wanted to read today and perhaps we can do some baking later."

But you... Surfing was something you wanted to do. Ares didn't say that, but that feeling of "not right" increased. He and Marty had a quiet morning reading and drawing, and then after lunch, Marty helped him make another cake. Ares liked to think he was getting quite good at baking. Not quite as good as Marty, of course, but their stuff was definitely edible.

Ares put some music on from his phone while they were working in the kitchen. Watching Marty dance around as he gathered ingredients had Ares thinking of

turning the oven off and creating some heat somewhere else. The cake came out beautifully, and Ares privately congratulated himself that he and Marty had shared another really enjoyable afternoon. He still wasn't taking that feeling for granted.

That feeling lasted until they were eating the cake. Marty was half-way through his slice when his face went white and he excused himself, running for the bathroom. Even with the door closed, Ares could hear the sound of retching coming from behind the closed door. When Marty came out, five minutes later, his teeth cleaned, his face washed, Ares was concerned. "Is everything all right?"

Laughing, Marty sat down. "I think I've just had one too many pieces of cake." Ares didn't think it was a good idea to mention that the slice Marty had been eating was his first for the day. He was equally concerned when Marty pushed the half-eaten slice aside and reached for his water glass instead.

Ares finished off his slice and put the rest in the pantry. Maybe Marty might get peckish and want it later. Marty still had an appetite for every other kind of food, so maybe there was some truth into simply having had too much cake recently.

Caught up in his thoughts about his relationships with others in the Pantheon, and what he was going to do with the main house, because as much as Marty didn't want to live there, Ares wasn't keen on spending the rest of their eternity in the pool house either, he was caught off guard when Marty came in from a short walk outside and said, "I think we need to talk."

Ares' reflex reaction was to shut down and armor himself mentally for any barb that was to come. But there was nothing through their bond that suggested he had anything to be concerned about and Ares forced himself to nod and smile as he joined Marty on the couch.

"What is it, hon? Have you thought of somewhere else you'd like to go? Is there a

new rollercoaster you want to try, perhaps or another fun activity you've found on the internet?"

Not that that was likely. Ares had introduced Marty to the internet, but Marty found it all too confusing navigating between pages and clicking on links. So, Ares modified his table from Olympus to act as their coffee table in the pool house, and while Marty wouldn't use it himself, he was happy to sit with Ares, when Ares was showing him the different places in the world he had never seen before.

"Er...hello? Marty? Babe, is something wrong?" Ares asked when Marty didn't say anything. "You do know you can tell me anything, don't you?"

"I do. At least, I hope I can. Remember when we were back on Olympus," Marty said quietly.

Ares nodded. He thought about it a lot, at least once a day, but more in relation to Athena and Aphrodite than anything else.

"Do you remember one of the scenes on the tables you showed me?"

Thinking back, Ares tried to work out which scene Marty was talking about. "You mean things like Persephone with her little crown and my mother, people like that."

"I was thinking more about Hefe...Hefe... You know that Hefe guy whose name I can't pronounce."

"Hephaestus," Ares said. "I remember – we didn't stay on that scene too long because it's not nice to spy on other gods with their mates. I'd be horrified if somebody did that to us."

"They might pick up some baking tips," Marty said, but his smile seemed forced.

“What did you mean when you said that Hefe hadn't had the baby yet?”

Ares didn't understand the reason behind the question – in fact, he didn't understand the question period. Surely, that was self-explanatory. “I meant exactly that,” Ares said. “Hephaestus is the one that got pregnant between him and his mate, and as far as I'm aware, he hasn't given birth yet. We can check if you want to, or I can ask the Paulie app because he will know.

“I know you had this idea you wanted to send them a gift when the baby comes. I'm not sure how appreciative he will be, but then I didn't expect Aphrodite to speak kindly in my presence, either, so maybe your magical smile will make miracles happen.”

He smiled at his mate and then waggled his eyebrows for extra points, but Marty still looked concerned.

“Did Hefe...did he just get pregnant because he's a god?” Marty was tracing patterns on the couch cushion with his fingers, which was apparently so fascinating to him that he didn't look up at Ares' attempts to make him smile with silly expressions.

Why is he concerned about Hephaestus? I'm more worried about you. “Male gods can get pregnant, yes. Hephaestus is the third, or is that the fourth male god who has done it so far. Goodness, no, it's more than that. Hephaestus is one, Hades from the Underworld, Poseidon, and oh, there was Thor from the Norse Pantheon. He was the one who got pregnant there. Baby and Paulie were both pregnant with their kids, but they were half gods. But Ra and Loki got pregnant, too – again, other Pantheons.” Ares chuckled. “There's been a whole lot of them in the past five years or so, yes.”

“But it's just male gods, right? I mean, you have children, but you didn't give birth to them.”



“No, it was my partners who got pregnant – all female – and as I told you at the time, it was a very long time ago.” Ares was sure Marty had been all right with that when he first told him.

“All right.” Marty didn’t look any happier. “So, it is male gods who can get pregnant, or females even if they’re not gods, but that’s all, isn’t it? Like non-god mates of gods can’t get pregnant because that would be silly, wouldn’t it?”

“No, all male mates of gods can get pregnant.” Ares frowned. “I was sure I told you. Many male gods are finding same sex mates, and the Fates wanted more permanent threads for the weave because of the increase in population. So, all male mates, god or not, if mated to a god, can get pregnant, too. But they have to have intent to get pregnant,” Ares added quickly. “It doesn’t just happen randomly, although, Poseidon seemed to think that it did. But he was a god, and he didn’t know his mate Claude was from the god line, too. That was hilarious because Poseidon did not handle pregnancy very well. But anyway, does this answer your question?”

“Sort of.” Marty frowned and wrinkled his nose – a clear sign he was thinking. “Have there been cases where gods have got pregnant, or the mate got pregnant, and they didn’t intend for it to happen – like they both didn’t have the intent to have a baby?”

Ares burst out laughing. “Poseidon was a classic example – there was no way he intended on having any more children, let alone being the one who got pregnant. But Claude is a wolf shifter, even though he’s also the son of Fenrir, so it could’ve been his intent that did it.

“And Thor – there is no way anyone can tell me Thor intended on being the one who got pregnant, either, but he did. He and his mate had twins. No one seems to have been harmed by it, although don’t ask me about the birth process because I wouldn’t have a clue. I’m more interested in why you’re suddenly so interested in other male gods and their children.”

“What happens if only one party in the mating might accidentally have the intent without even thinking about what they were doing, and the other party doesn't even know about it? Does that even work then?”

“Babe, I have absolutely no idea,” Ares said. “I suppose, in theory it could happen. It might have been Seth who got his mate pregnant, and I don’t think he intended to do that, but again, I’m not sure... It’s not like I have a lot to do with any of them.

“I know you and I haven’t had a chance to chat about having children yet. We talked about me already having them, and you said then you didn’t have any children, but we can talk about it if you want to. You know I would give you anything you wanted, and I guess that includes children if you wanted them at some point.” Ares wasn’t against the idea. “Honestly, you just have to ask.”

“I just have to ask? Are you kidding me right now?” To Ares’ shock, Marty burst into tears. “I have been worried sick about this for what feels like ages .”

What the hell? “Marty, babe, what's going on? Why are you crying? Did you honestly want children that badly?” Ares pulled Marty into his arms, making sure Marty’s nose was pointed in the direction of his throat. Apparently, Marty took comfort from his scent in that particular spot, and Ares wasn’t going to complain. “Please, babe. You have to be a bit clearer about this. What has got you so upset? Tell me what or how I can help.”

“You've already done it,” Marty gasped in between sobs. “I think I’m pregnant. My raccoon knows we’re pregnant. But I didn’t think it was possible, and then I haven’t got a relationship with my parents, and you said your parents didn’t like you, either, so neither of us know how to even be a decent parent, but we might become daddies.

“But then I remembered you said no one calls you daddy, so does that mean you become Poppa and I’m the daddy – I’m so confused. And then...and then...you

hadn't said having babies was even possible, and I didn't want you to be cross with me, or leave me because that would break me, and I don't want to live without you, but I most of all I didn't understand how I ended up pregnant...and cake..." Marty wailed. "I really miss my cake, but it makes me feel sick every time I have some."

"Our babies can call me daddy if you prefer it," Ares said in a low voice, completely stunned by what Marty had said. But as soon as Marty had explained, so many things all fell into place – the cake, being sick in the bathroom, suddenly not wanting to surf. Marty was clearly scared about what might happen, and also of Ares' reaction. The problem with that is I'm freaking terrified, too, and it's not like I can tell Marty that.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:10 am*

Marty's tears were of absolute relief. Although his raccoon had been so very definite that they were expecting at least one child, in Marty's head, that sort of thing just wasn't possible. Yes, he had caught the briefest glimpse of a large burly man who had a very rotund stomach, but even when Ares said words that associated that bulk with carrying a child, there was a disconnect in Marty's brain that couldn't comprehend it.

There was even one point when he wondered if the lovely Athena or beautiful Aphrodite had somehow infected him with pregnancy dust when they touched his raccoon's paw. His mind was whirling in so many circles that he thought anything was possible with gods. I'm so glad I didn't mention that to Ares.

There was still just one tiny issue. While Marty was glad that he had told his mate, because he definitely didn't think getting pregnant was even possible, and he'd now confirmed it was and he wasn't going crazy, he also felt more than a little responsible, because it might have been him with that accidental intent.

Be fair, his raccoon warned.

All right, there was no might about it. It was very definitely him who might have been thinking about adorable little raccoon pups at one point when Ares was being particularly thorough checking that his dick and Marty's ass still fit with each other - something he liked to do at least once a day.

Marty could feel Ares' shock. Through their bond, it resounded like a huge bell. But Marty was overwhelmingly happy. He had the answers he wanted. Now it was up to him to help Ares feel the same way.

“It won’t be so bad having a baby, will it?” he asked when Ares really didn’t seem to want to say anything else.

“No, hon,” Ares said quickly, but when Marty glanced up he could see Ares was just staring at a point on the wall. “I was just thinking about where we can find some resources about how to be parents.”

Oh, no, poor Ares. There was a definite quiver in those words, but his mate was doing his best to hide it.

“It won’t be a problem, I’m sure. There’s the internet, and there are lots of other gods who have had children and will be able to help us in coping with kiddies in these modern times.”

Marty wasn’t sure if Ares was trying to convince him or himself. “Didn’t you have anything to do with your children at all when they were growing up? Your last lot?” Marty asked. He had hoped that Ares would have some experience, but Ares was shaking his head.

“I was the God of War. I was always out...warring. It was up to the people that I left behind to raise the children. That was never seen as men’s work. But...it’s so weird. I remember chatting with Hermes, the messenger god, about male gods finding male mates, just after I’d seen you for the first time. It was him that said the reason it was happening is because of the children.” Ares was encouraging him closer, and Marty figured his mate needed a hug, which he was happy to give.

“It’s quite strange thinking about it,” Ares said as Marty heard his heart rate start to slow down. “I mean all the regular things like feeding and clothing and teaching them to walk and what have you. Babies can’t walk when they’re born, can they?”

Oh, no. Marty suppressed his giggle. “No,” he said quickly. Marty’s experiences with

little ones were limited to when he still lived at home, but he did remember how dependent babies were on their parents. “Most don’t start to take their first steps until they are about a year old, but then ours will be half god, so it might be different for them.”

“You know so much more than I do already,” Ares said. “But it’s like baking, right? I can learn.”

“We’ll learn together.” Marty was determined Ares wasn’t going off warring again, leaving Marty at home alone with their newborn. Speaking of which...

“Babe.” Buoyed by his success at being able to tell Ares his problem in the first place, Marty was aiming for the next step. Babies needed love, food, clothing, and warmth, not necessarily in that order, but they were all equally important. The pool house wasn’t going to be suitable, especially with that darn fire that still hadn’t gone out.

“Babe, I think we need a new house. The main house has floors that are too cold, and that house is just too big. We could easily lose a baby in there once they start moving around on their own. And I know you wanted to go to Hawaii for the surfing, and you said you had a house in France, but I need somewhere where the people speak the same language as me, and I need a house that’s not the big one over there. So, how do we go about getting another house suitable for little ones?”

Ares’ smile was beautiful. It was like the sun came out when he truly smiled. “Can you hear yourself? I’m so proud of you,” Ares said. “Apart from the scooter and then when you were telling me off because I had done you wrong, this is the first time you have asked for a big-ticket item and been so confident about it as well. Where do you want to live where people speak English? There’re a lot of countries where English is the main language.”

“Can’t we stay in this country?” Marty asked. “What if those other countries have different rules and different laws and customs that we don’t know about?”

“I’m sure they do, although that won’t bother us much,” Ares said.

“No, no, it will bother us because we’re not going to stay in the house all the time. I don’t want to get confused about things when I go out, and what about our little one? They could get confused as well, and that’s not fair to a baby. I just want things nice and easy, like here. I understand life here. It’s not always an easy life, but I understand it.”

“That’s fine,” Ares nodded. “We can have another house here. I don’t even have to sell this one to buy another one. We’ll just have three houses here in this country.”

“Woah, woah, woah. You can’t sell this place anyway.” Marty sat up and gave Ares his best glare. “You gave me the pool house. This is my house, and you’re not selling it because I like it here. But it only has one bedroom, and we need at least two.”

Ares was laughing, and there was a bit of hysteria in that laugh as well, but given the weighty news Marty had given him, Marty knew it would take a bit of time for his mate to process things. He just patted his mate’s shoulder until Ares could speak again.

“Babe, we don’t have to sell this house. We’re in Boston. How about we move somewhere in the hills or by the beach or somewhere south where it’s warmer? What do you want to do? Where do you want to go? Where do you want to be?”

“Oh, my goodness. Now you’re asking all these questions and I haven’t got a clue. It all suddenly sounds very confusing.” Marty was also suddenly hungry. “We don’t have to decide right this minute, do we?”

Ares grabbed hold of his hands. “I need to find out about this birth business first, okay? Humor me, all right, but I think that’s important. I can go and buy us a house any day of the week. That’s not a problem. I promise you that’s not a problem. You’ll have your house and the nursery for a baby and everything we need whenever you want because I can click those things up - well, not the house because someone would notice a house just appearing where there wasn’t one – but anything else I can click.

“But babe, this is important. I know all these other gods have had babies, but I don’t actually know how they’ve done it, and I’m not sure who to ask. Can’t you see? We have to know that first.”

Marty wasn’t so sure. He always thought anything to do with childbirth, especially among shifters, was mostly instinctive. His body wouldn’t have gotten pregnant if there wasn’t any way for him to get the baby out.

But Ares had been good about everything else so far. “It shouldn’t be too difficult to find out, should it? Can’t you just ask that app of yours? The Paulie app?”

Tilting his head to one side, Marty saw it, the moment Ares had an epiphany. “Paulie gave birth. He was the one who carried Zeus’s son. Yes, yes! I’ll do that. I’ll ask Paulie, and we’ll find out what’s needed for this birth business. I know that once we’ve got that worked out, anything else I can take care of with my clicky fingers. You’re a genius, thank you.”

Marty got a kiss on his head, which was sweet, but when Ares reached for his phone, he quickly grabbed Ares’ hands.

“I’m not giving birth right now, so before you start talking to Paulie, can you use those magical fingers for good and click me up something that’s not cake – I’m hungry.” Marty huffed. “I do hope this sickness business doesn’t last forever because I seriously miss my cake, but for now, I’d settle for a huge hamburger, the biggest



one you can imagine with piles of extra bacon... double cheese... oh, and three pickles on the side. Big ones. Can you do that first?"

Ares screwed up his nose, but a plate appeared in front of Marty with the burger and pickles just as he imagined it. "You can talk to Paulie now," Marty said happily, picking up the burger. "Just don't talk about squeamish stuff. I really want to enjoy this burger."

Grabbing his phone, Ares said, "Please brush your teeth when you've finished. I'm truly not a fan of pickles."

Marty gave him a happy thumbs up. His mouth was too full of all that decadent goodness to answer.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:10 am*

Ares was going insane. He was doing it quietly and he was making sure that Marty didn't know about it. But in his quest to find out who assisted in the birth of godly babies, not even Paulie could come up with a solid, single answer.

Paulie, the app that was supposed to be tied into the Zeus network that knew everything there was to know about anything to do with anything, was being deliberately vague. Ares was sure of it. In fact, he would lay money on the fact that the Paulie app was laughing at him, even though the app itself would never be that rude.

As far as Ares was concerned, he had asked a very simple question that, in his mind, would have a very simple answer. Male bodies did not have the biological equipment necessary to give birth, so therefore, somebody, preferably with a gazillion years of experience, would be there to assist when Marty gave birth.

Talking to the app, Ares had wondered out loud if the child simply arrived by magical means. "Is there a spell or a ritual necessary, or could a baby be born with a simple use of godly powers?"

Paulie said, "No. The god Thor tried that, and it didn't work."

Ares tried again. "I'm not a doctor, I'm the God of War – helping people give birth is not among my skill sets. Am I meant to call someone when Marty says he's ready for the baby to come?"

"Anecdotally, every god's situation has been different," Paulie had said, sounding decidedly vague about something so important. The app rattled off names such as

Bastet from the Egyptian Pantheon, and Silvanus and Artemas, who were tied to the Mother of All, who had helped in some cases. “There have been a few occasions where the Fates themselves have been present at the birth, so no definitive answer can be given in the case of your mate.”

All Ares wanted was one plain answer, one person, one thing, one method that he could stick a pin in, so that he knew whatever or whoever that thing was, it was going to happen when Marty was ready to give birth, and that Marty and the baby would be all right.

“That’s not how it happens, Lord Ares,” Paulie said. “I will, with your permission, advise the god Silvanus that Marty is expecting. I am sure that someone will attend to your mate when it’s time.”

But who? Goddamn it, am I meant to cut my mate open myself? Ares felt the nausea in his throat just thinking about it. But then, just as Ares was prepared to end the conversation until he didn’t feel like he was going to lose his lunch, Paulie said the most ridiculous thing Ares had ever heard.

“You should know, Lord Ares, that in that time when your mate gives birth, you are not allowed to be with him until after the baby has arrived.”

Ares stared at his screen in shock. “Can you repeat that for me, if you don’t mind, Paulie. I seem to have misheard you.” He was doing his best to keep his tone even and calm. “Did you just say I will not be allowed to be with my mate while he is bringing our child into this world?”

“You heard correctly, Lord Ares,” Paulie said gravely. “Not even Lord Zeus was allowed in his blessed mate’s presence when their son Egan was born. That is simply the way it is when males mated to gods, or male gods themselves, give birth.”

Ares hit the roof. He had to go outside, passing his blissfully happy mate who was still eating those damn pickles, on his way out the door. He was ready to rain thunder and lightning on a pesky app, and that was Zeus's power, not his. He was livid.

“What do you mean I have to leave Marty alone when he's birthing our child?” he had screamed at his phone. In that moment, he wished Paulie was a real person and not an app, because he would use his damn godly powers and reach through the damn screen of his phone and wring that person's neck.

Of course, he wasn't stupid enough to translocate to Zeus's house and actually attack the real Paulie. Ares liked his head where it was, and he had no wish to end up at the bottom of the sea with a cartoon crown on his head, or worse. It was vitally important not to cause Marty any distress, which was why Ares was searching for answers. He could not believe that he wasn't even going to be allowed to be in the room, when Marty was doing all the hard work involved in giving birth to their child.

But Paulie was adamant, and no matter how much Ares yelled at him, his answers didn't change. So, Ares was going insane with even more things to worry about.

Meanwhile Marty had apparently regained all of his good humor, now that he had shared the life-changing news. And as the days passed into weeks, Ares watched as his little mate's belly got bigger, along with his smile.

Marty still tried to eat cake at least twice a week because Ares had been able to tell him that getting sick from certain foods during pregnancy didn't necessarily last the entire time. So, Marty kept trying, and he kept getting sick, but he still made cakes with Ares, and he was still perfectly happy to watch Ares eat them.

“Oh, oh. Quick, put your hand on my belly,” Marty yelled one afternoon when Ares was pretending to read a book. Putting his book down, Ares spread his palm over his mate's bulge – the one in his middle, not in his pants.

“What am I doing this for?”

“Feel.” Marty spread his two hands over Ares’ one. “The baby is moving. Can you feel it? Isn’t it just incredible?”

Tilting his head to one side because Ares was sure his mate was joking, his eyes widened as he felt a gentle but definite movement under Marty’s skin. “That’s the baby? Are you sure it’s not just your stomach ready to explode from all the pickles you had at lunch?”

Ares couldn’t understand Marty’s sudden and intense love of pickles and hoped that was just part of a pregnancy phase. He really couldn’t handle the smell of them, but he was hardly going to refuse when Marty asked for them.

“It’s the baby. I know it’s the baby. They’re moving around my belly – it feels like butterflies on my insides.”

Ares and Marty probably sat like that for half an hour before Marty had to go to the bathroom. But the moment Marty was out of sight, Ares was outside again, jabbing the button for the Paulie app.

“Paulie. Paulie,” he whispered, looking back at the pool house. He didn’t want Marty to worry. “How long is a male god’s pregnancy? I thought having a baby took ages. This one is moving already – enough so we can feel it.”

“A typical human pregnancy is, on average, two hundred and eighty days, Lord Ares,” Paulie said. “However, with regards to male gods and their mates, the length of gestation depends on the species of both parties.”

“Raccoons,” Ares said urgently. “You know my Marty is a raccoon shifter. How long will his pregnancy be?”

“A female raccoon in the wild will be pregnant for sixty-three to sixty-five days,” Paulie said.

“Right. Right.” That didn’t sound long at all. Ares tried to work out how long it’d been since Marty told him his news. But then, Marty said he knew he’d been pregnant before he told Ares, so that wasn’t any good. “If we work out an average between the human gestation period and the raccoon gestation period, that would be about a hundred and seventy-four days, thereabouts?”

“Your math is correct, Lord Ares,” Paulie said, and again Ares was damn sure that app was laughing at him, and that wasn’t his paranoia about being hated talking. It was the tone of voice the app was using.

“However, the gestation period for mixed species matings is determined on a number of factors. For example, if it was you who were carrying your child, then the pregnancy would be closer to the two hundred and eighty days. In the case of your mate being the one who is pregnant, he could give birth a lot sooner than your hundred and seventy-four day estimate.

“You have to remember your mate is physically smaller, his shifter spirit animal is also considered small in terms of shifter sizes. Smaller creatures give birth a lot sooner than larger animal types, because to do otherwise would be uncomfortable for them.

“There is also the case that you personally are physically bigger than your mate, and you have contributed half of the genetics for your child. If the baby tends more toward your genetics than your mate’s, they are likely to get large very quickly, necessitating a birth sooner rather than later.”

“Paulie, when is Marty going to give birth? Just give me one straight answer.”

“Being a seer is not part of this app’s coding,” Paulie said smoothly. “I am sure you will know when the time comes. All hail Lord Zeus and his wonderful mate, Paulie.”

“I’ll fucking all hail on your ass, you no-good piece-of-shit app,” Ares hissed as the screen went black and he heard the French doors open.

“Ares?” Marty stepped outside, smiling widely as he rubbed his belly. “Were you waiting for me so we could go for a walk? Perhaps we could check and see how the strawberry plants are doing?”

Strawberries. My mate wants strawberries. At least I know how to do that. Ares hurried over, and Marty slipped his hand around Ares’ elbow. He was sure his whole body would crack into a million pieces if Marty slipped, or worse, fell over.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:10 am*

With all the hassle Ares was going through, trying to find out when Marty would give birth and what was actually going to happen on the day, Ares had thought that finding a house that Marty liked would be something he could act on in a decisive manner. Something else to tick off the growing list Ares had running in his head as Marty's belly got steadily bigger.

Ares was mistaken. Big time.

Marty, his wonderful and cherished mate, said he really didn't have a preference for where he wanted to live. Marty felt that they needed a house surrounded by land where they didn't have immediate neighbors. Marty wanted somewhere safe for him to shift, and trees would make life enjoyable for his raccoon side, plus provide more privacy for their little family.

He did insist they needed at least two bedrooms, and that two bathrooms would be handy, but having a huge place with lots of bedrooms was a waste of space they didn't need. All very good and fine. But then Marty said the most infuriating thing Ares thought he'd ever heard come out of his mate's delightful mouth. "I'll know it when I see it."

Did his mate not understand how many millions of houses there were?

Ares tried showing Marty all the places that were available for sale on his all-seeing table. He went into real estate apps and showed Marty the offerings there.

Marty would nod, smile, and say things like, "Oh, yes, that does look nice, but I'm not going to know I like it until I actually step inside the place myself."



There was one afternoon when Marty actually laughed when Ares suggested that they couldn't possibly visit every house that was available for sale in the entire of the United States. "I'm not going to have you buy a house I haven't gotten a feel for. I thought the big main house here was lovely when I first came to this place," he said. "It looked beautiful on the outside, but I really didn't like the feeling I got when I was on the inside. It wasn't suitable at all."

It wasn't that Ares didn't try and understand because he was trying. He liked the main house. That was why he bought it. It was elegant, sophisticated, and really easy to keep clean, thanks to the wards that he'd put up around the house and inside of it. That was a real bonus with the historic collectibles he'd gathered over the years. Ares liked having tangible reminders of history around him, and the big rooms meant he could appreciate them without feeling the place was cluttered.

Marty didn't see things the same way. He didn't want to pick a house based on how many bedrooms or bathrooms it had. He wasn't interested in whether the place had a swimming pool or not. When Ares asked his mate if he had an idea on how much land Marty would like at least, so he could eliminate anything too small off his growing list of possible houses, Marty simply said he just needed enough.

Enough? How much is enough? That's like asking how long a piece of string is. Ares was close to going bald with all the hair tugging he'd been doing, frustrated at not being able to even secure a suitable house for his mate before the baby came.

Which was why, on a late afternoon, Ares was out walking, again. Ostensibly it was so he wouldn't disturb Marty while his mate was taking a nap. Ares had too much frustration to rest beside his mate, and Marty was looking tired. So, he walked the boundaries of his Boston estate, his mind going around in circles.

Marty wasn't being difficult on purpose. Ares knew that. He was just a person who prized comfort over elegance, and he wanted to feel a sense of permanence in the

home he was in. Ares wanted that for them, too.

In the meantime, Marty's belly was getting bigger, and Ares didn't need to have a hand on his mate's belly to see the skin moving thanks to the baby underneath. They needed to make a firm decision and fast.

Striding back to the pool house, Ares was determined that today was going to be the day. He grabbed his phone and clicked on the Paulie app, bypassing all the real estate apps he had. Typing quickly he wrote, based on my previous selections, summarize which three homes would be most agreeable to my mate, Marty.

Leaving the app to do whatever it did to get answers, he let himself into the pool house. He found Marty resting on the couch with a blanket on his knees. The room wasn't cold, but Marty loved the softness of the blanket and seemed to take comfort from it when Ares was out on his walks.

Putting his phone on the coffee table, Ares went into the kitchen and looked at the coffee machine before clicking himself up a cup of coffee. Using the machine would make too much noise and Ares knew Marty needed his rest. He wasn't blind. The circles under his mate's eyes were starting to resemble those of his raccoon.

But when he went back into the living area, Marty was wrinkling his little nose and sniffing as Ares perched on the end of the couch.

"Ooh, you have that caramel coffee. It smells yum. A hot chocolate would be lovely, thank you, if you're making it," Marty said, rubbing his eyes and yawning as he straightened up a bit. "This growing another person business takes it out of me. Did you enjoy your walk?"

See, that was the other thing Ares was really struggling with. Marty was always in such a good mood, and while Ares felt that as Marty's mate it was his duty to worry

enough for both of them – and he was doing that easily - Ares was really struggling with finding any answers to the worries he had, which made Marty's happiness harder to accept.

"I did enjoy my walk, thank you, yes." Ares moved closer, handing over a clicked up hot chocolate, before putting his hand on Marty's knee. "We desperately need to decide about the house situation. We have looked at so many websites, and so many places on the table, and I know you keep saying that you want to be able to feel it.

"But the thing is, my precious mate, you are getting bigger all the time, and you're not going to be able to go and see these places soon if we don't pick one.

"I asked Paulie to pick the three best suggestions from all the places we've looked at listings for. If you like, we can check them out, by using the table, and then if you're interested in any one of them, we can go and have a look around the house in person."

Preferably at night, with no one else there, Ares thought although he didn't say that. Marty was too visibly pregnant already to be seen out in public.

"You can see inside people's houses with this thing?" Marty wiggled so he could lean over, peering over at the tabletop that still looked like a table. "Is that even legal?"

Ares grinned. "I don't think it's a question of legalities, babe. It's got to do with the fact we're gods, and we can see everything and do everything, but unfortunately, my precious mate, the one thing I can't do is read your mind. I don't know what house you're looking for. And I have to confess, it's making me a little stressed. More than a little stressed."

Marty looked at him. At first, his face showed all the concern Ares had come to expect from his mate. That touched his heart, and in that moment all the stress was

worth it because Marty genuinely cared about him.

But then Marty burst out laughing, even slapping his knee with it, because whatever thought he had was clearly hilarious to him. “You just said in one breath that gods can see everything, but then you said you can’t read my mind, so you see. You don’t know what my favorite type of house would be, because you can’t see into my mind. Reading is seeing. So you really can’t see everything at all.”

Rubbing his face with his hands, Ares groaned. “You’re right. I know you’re right, my wonderful mate. But gods, I would give all my powers to see what makes the perfect house in your mind... Oh.” He sat up and grinned at his mate.

“You’ve got an idea?”

“A great idea. But I need for you to come with me to the main house.”

Marty immediately shook his head. “I know you love that house, Ares, but it doesn’t have the right feeling for me. I’ve already said that.”

“I know. I know. But please, babe. I’m going nuts trying to work out this birthing business, and how and when that’s going to happen, and then the house situation on top of all that. We haven’t even got a nursery prepared yet. Can you trust me for just half an hour? I want to try an experiment so we can at least get this house issue worked out. Please?”

After a long moment, Marty nodded, holding out his hand. “You’ll have to translocate me, hon. This baby is resting heavy on my hips, and my back aches like crazy. Translocate me and show me how this experiment of yours works.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:10 am*

Marty always knew he was a go-with-the-flow type of guy, but he wasn't silly. He had also seen how much stress Ares was under and felt his mate's frustration through their bond.

Unfortunately, Marty didn't have the answers Ares was looking for. Instead, he worked on staying positive, smiling when he could, and agreeing with pretty much anything Ares said, purely and simply because he didn't want to add to his mate's stress.

In all the years that he had spent wandering around, never having a home, he had learned that if life kept taking the things away that he had worked to gain for himself, it was easier sometimes not to attach any permanence to anything he did have.

Having a baby did change that line of thinking to a point. Marty was determined that his child, the one he shared with Ares, was going to have the comfort and stability that he had never enjoyed growing up.

But that in itself was really awkward for him, because he didn't want to set any absolutes on where that might be, because what if he chose wrong? Marty had done that so many times in his past, and he didn't want to make the same sort of mistakes when it affected his mate as well.

In truth, he had hoped that Ares would just decide for them both. He just didn't think the main house on the Boston estate was the decision that he'd wanted Ares to make.

And maybe my brain is just getting fluffy because all I can think of is the fact that this baby's not going to be inside of me much longer.

Marty was actively not worrying about giving birth. He was mated to a god, and he had an amazing animal side as well. Everything was going to be fine in that department. Marty didn't need to know the details, he just needed to know their baby would be all right.

Ares, apparently, seemed to be more detail oriented, wanting to know the how, what, where, and when. Marty didn't need that. The baby would come when they were ready. But if he could help his mate by making a house decision, then Marty could see the bonus in that, too. He really wanted them to have a wonderful nursery to be able to bring their baby into, too.

And that has to be soon , he thought, as he rubbed his back the moment they arrived at the main house.

“Can we sit down for this experiment of yours?” he asked.

“You can sit on my knee if you like. I need to touch you for this to work.”

That was fine, Marty could do that. Ares got them arranged in a big chair, and then he rubbed his hands gently on either side of Marty's temples.

“I want you to close your eyes, babe,” Ares said quietly. “You know this house, you know the layout of this house and everything in it. I know you do. So, close your eyes and instead of seeing and feeling all the things you don't like about this house, I want you to focus on what you would change and how this space could look like the house you wanted it to be. I'm trying to get a picture of what your house, your ideal house, looks and feels like. I'm using this house, if you like, as a canvas to make that happen.”

Marty frowned, although his eyes were closed, because that's what Ares had told him to do. “I'm not sure how that works, but all right, we're sitting in the living room,

aren't we?"

"That's good, babe," Ares said gently. "I want you to imagine what this room would look like in your ideal house. Think about it, with as many details as you want to add, in your mind."

Oh, Marty had so many ideas. For a start, the floors wouldn't be tiled, there would be thick, plush carpet that was warm on his feet and on a crawling baby's knees. He imagined a fireplace with a never-ending fire, yes, but this one had a security screen around it, so that no little babies could fall into it or touch it because they were fascinated by the flames.

Instead of the stark shelves with the historical pieces on them, Marty imagined big bookcases that were filled with books at the top, but at the bottom, there were cupboards where the toys and games could go. He even imagined a large toy box over in the corner under the window, where all the other baby toys could be. In his mind, there were countless toys, all new, and loved, and not a spot of mud on any of them.

"You are doing really great, babe," Ares said, breaking into his thoughts. "I'm loving the details. Now, I want you to move your focus around to the dining room. What would that look like? And the kitchen, too. See that picture in your mind's eye of what it would see and feel like."

"This is fun." Marty was warming to the idea. He had often thought about the things that he would have changed in the main house, although he had never thought he had the right to, and after he got kicked out of it, he didn't really care.

But resting on Ares' lap, with his mate's arms around him and his baby moving in his belly beneath his heart, Marty imagined all the different rooms in the house and what they would look like.

There wouldn't be a formal dining area that currently housed a long rectangular table. He would have a big round table there instead. The kitchen would be widened. Marty always thought it was too skinny as a room and tucked away as though the house owners were trying to hide it. Marty wanted an open space, with plenty of room for a highchair, and lots of counter tops for him and Ares to use when they cook their amazing cakes.

As he went near the staircase, guided by Ares' voice, he said, "We have to keep the staircase and the banister because every child has to learn how to slide down one. It's one of life's basic skills." But Marty imagined extra thick rugs at the bottom of the steps and a big gate that was a childproof for along the bottom of the steps – and then he added one at the top, too, in case their little one was crawling around upstairs.

Mentally moving upstairs, his eyes still closed, Marty did away with half of the bedrooms and the bathrooms and added the same thick carpet running across the floors. He made some of the rooms bigger and some of them he got rid of altogether.

He created a big open studio that would have been perfect for any aspiring artist. And in that moment, because he could, and it was just in his mind, Marty imagined a big easel and canvases, and shelves with rows of paints and brushes - all those things he used to wish he could explore his art with but never had the supplies.

In another room, he created a big office where Ares could do whatever it was that Ares needed to do. Marty wasn't sure because he hadn't actually seen Ares in an office, but he did feel that every man should have one, and having it across the hallway from his new studio would be perfect.

And then there was the nursery. Marty's mind lingered there the longest. A beautiful room with colorful murals on the walls, depicting scenes of nature and the wonders of the world that he'd seen mostly in Ares' coffee table. He imagined a big crib with a gorgeous drape over it to keep any sneaky insects out.



He imagined the toys and an entire closet full of drawers that had every little knick-knack a baby would require. There were probably some things he was missing, but it didn't matter. He put a big rocker in the room so that there was something there to sit on when their little one got disturbed at night. He could see him and Ares, either together or alone with the baby, cuddling their little one close, soothing the baby when they got fretful.

The last place was the master bedroom, and Marty let his imagination go wild in there. The original room Marty remembered as being bland, functional and not at all welcoming or even that comfortable.

For a start, Marty believed they needed a lot bigger bed, so he imagined one twice the size of the one that had been in there. In his head, he smiled at the idea of a four poster with lovely velvet curtains for each side that were in a brilliant shade of blue.

There was still more carpet, and then there was a big dressing table where all Marty's new clothes were and a huge closet where Ares could hang his jackets and coats. He put a stereo in the corner because it was always nice to listen to music, and then he imagined the big television that Ares liked to watch sometimes when they were curled up in bed together – that went nicely on the wall above the fireplace.

A couple of bedside cabinets and some extra pillows and cushions, and Marty thought he was set. Then he had another thought and added a pair of fluffy slippers on the floor by his side of the bed, just waiting for him to step out into them in the morning.

The ensuite also got a makeover. The bath was big, but it didn't have jets, and Marty thought that was the height of luxury. Double sinks and child locks on the bathroom cabinet were added along with thick, huge towels – the sort of towel Marty could get lost in.

“I think that's it,” he said with a happy sigh. “Did you see all that? My perfect

house.”

“How does it feel?” Ares asked. “How does this perfect house of yours make you feel inside? What does that feel like?”

Draping his arm around Ares’ neck, Marty said, “It feels like home. Warm, comfortable, safe. It genuinely feels like home in my mind.”

“I can see that, babe, I truly can,” Ares said, his voice low. “Now I want you to open your eyes and tell me if it still feels the same way.”

“What do you mean?” Marty's eyes flew open. Looking around, he gasped. Everything he'd seen in his mind's eye was there in front of them.

They were sitting on the chair he'd imagined in the living room. The fireplace had a security screen around it. Marty quickly turned around and looked over his shoulder. The big, long table in the dining room was gone, replaced by the round table with the comfy chairs that he'd imagined.

“Is it all like this?” Marty struggled to get up, but he needed Ares help to get to his feet. They wandered around the house that now looked exactly as he’d imagined.

His eyes filling with tears, Marty said, “You’ve done it. I don’t know how, but you’ve done it. You have created the home I have seen in my mind's eye for most of my life. It's just beautiful.”

“But how does it make you feel now that you can see it?” Ares sounded a bit choked up as well.

“It feels like home,” Marty said. “I never thought it was possible, especially in this house, but you’ve made this feel like home for me. I can’t believe you did this. Do

you have any idea how much I love you right now? You've created our home, and you didn't even have to buy another house." He reached up, touching Ares' cheek and then tracing a path with his finger to his mate's lips. "I think I need you to take me to bed."

"Are you still tired?" Ares asked.

Marty shook his head. "No, no, I'm not tired. I just want you to take me to bed."

Ares hesitated, even though his eyes heated. "Bed here, or at the pool house?"

"Here, of course." Leaning close, Marty brushed his hand across the front of Ares' pants. "We've got to check out the brand-new bed that I imagined for us."

Marty could still hear Ares laughing as their cells broke down and he was translocated to the bed. Somehow, his clothes had gotten lost along the way, but Ares was touching his temple again. "What did you imagine happening when we got here?"

A picture flashed up in Marty's mind and seconds later, Ares was bent over, his lips circling Marty's hardened cock. "Oh, my gods, you are truly clever. You really can read my mind."

Ares' head popped up. "I might not know everything," he said with one of the first true grins Marty had seen in weeks. "But I do like to think I know how to please the man I love more than anything."

"And you're really, really good at it," Marty reached for Ares head, gently nudging him back in the direction of his cock again. He couldn't see it, but he could definitely feel what Ares was doing.

A home and a love declaration all in one day. How lucky can a raccoon shifter get?

“Yes, yes, just like that. Do it again.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:10 am*

Marty was struggling to sleep. In the week since the massive house transformation, he truly appreciated getting an extra-large bed for the master bedroom. It meant that when he tossed and turned or tried to move so he could get comfortable for five minutes, he wasn't disturbing Ares, who was snoring gently beside him.

His backache had been going on for longer than a week, and it seemed to Marty that every time he closed his eyes, he had a foot under his ribs, or one against his hip, or then his little one would decide to bounce on his bladder. Every time that happened, Marty had to extract himself from the bed, again trying so hard not to disturb his mate, before waddling to the bathroom to make use of the facilities.

After roughly ten days of the same thing happening over and over, Marty was so exhausted that he finally managed to drop into a dream state. It wasn't a fun one. The scene was dark and full of tangled woods and creepy forests, and Marty was aware he was twitching, but he also didn't want to wake up. I have to be at my best when the birth happens and I'm looking after the baby.

Not that Marty had any idea how the birth was going to happen. He and Ares were no closer to finding that out than they were when Ares first started asking about it. It'll happen when it does, Marty reminded himself for the twentieth time. I just need to sleep in the meantime.

You can't sleep his raccoon hissed through their bond urgently. You have to go to the pool house.

What on Earth are you talking about? Marty blearily opened his eyes, checking the light in the room. It's the middle of the night. Why would I be at the pool house?

You have to go to the pool house , the raccoon insisted. Do not wake our mate. But you have to get there now.

Marty had trusted his raccoon his whole life, but he was really questioning his judgment as he pondered the idea that he was meant to get out of bed, go out into what was still a chilly night, and traipse all the way across the lawn to the pool house with no good reason.

Do it. Our baby's life depends on it. Get to the pool house now, and absolutely do not wake Ares. You have to do it.

Realizing he wasn't going to get any more sleep, Marty managed to turn himself over with a sigh. He shuffled his butt to the edge of the bed, letting his legs dangle over until he felt awake enough to be able to plant two feet on the floor and be able to keep his balance. Slipping his feet into the slippers that were still resting there every day for him to put his feet into, Marty glanced down at his pajamas. They'll have to do.

He grabbed a robe from the back of the bedroom door on his way out. Hopefully, Ares would notice it missing if he woke up and he'd think that Marty had gone down to the kitchen for a pickle snack or something similar. Marty did that quite often, so Ares would just think it was another regular night.

It was a bit more difficult at the front door because the door itself was double-sized, made of solid wood, and was heavy. It took Marty at least five minutes to close it carefully so it wouldn't make a noise.

Turning around on the front steps, Marty shivered as he looked across the lawn. There was a light glowing from the pool house.

Have we got intruders? Is that why you woke me up? Why didn't you wake Ares? he sent to his raccoon

Just get there. They're here for you. Go now, our baby's life depends on it!

Shivering with the cold, Marty traipsed across the lawn. It wasn't like he could move very fast on a good day. But his raccoon's insistence worried him.

Was this the birth about to happen?

Was somebody out to kidnap him and had somehow conned his raccoon into their scheme?

Had somebody from his family finally tracked him down and broken into the pool house?

Marty had no idea, and his brain really wasn't helpful because the lack of sleep was making him imagine things that just weren't there. Maybe the pool house lights weren't even on.

But no, the light was still on when he finally made it to the pool house door, puffing like crazy as if he'd run a marathon as he opened the French doors and slid inside.

There were two men already there. They had kindly smiles, but they were big men, and Marty hesitated.

"Hi there, Marty," said the older looking one, moving forward with a smile. "My name is Silvanus. I am the right hand of the Mother of All. This is my mate, Artemas. He's slightly related to you, actually, as he's the son of Poseidon. But anyway, we've come to help you give birth to your baby."

"My baby?" Marty covered his belly with his arms.

"I'm sorry we haven't had a chance to meet before," Silvanus seemed to understand

his reluctance. “Ares is such a private god, and while we respected his privacy, we’d hoped he would spend at least ten minutes away from you at one point so your baby could come out. I apologize for using your raccoon against you, but we were running out of options. Honestly, we’ve been hovering for the best part of a week, hoping to catch you alone. But your devoted mate doesn’t leave you alone for a second.”

Artemas, beside him, laughed. “Even when he’s in the bathroom, he’s got the door open so he can keep an eye on you. I don’t think I’ve ever known a mate that dedicated, but that made things tricky for us.”

“Ares is very good to me.” Marty felt his cheeks heat.

“We know,” Silvanus said, “but with your mate’s lack of trust in so many from his Pantheon, and even gods from other Pantheons, we could not risk any upset to you if we appeared before Ares and told him he had to leave you with us. I don’t think he’d have been very happy about it.”

Marty giggled. “Ares cursed at the godly network app when he was told I had to give birth without him there.”

“We’d heard that, too,” Artemas smiled. “It was easier, or so we thought at the time, to get you alone, help you bring a new life into this world, and with luck, disappear before he wakes up. Are you ready?”

“How are we meant to do this?” Marty pressed his hand into his lower back. “My back’s been so sore for ages, and I don’t know why. The baby’s not trying to come out through my backside, is he?”

Silvanus laughed. “No, but your little one has been trying to give you a nudge for at least a week. Come through into the bedroom, as I need you to lie down and get comfortable. Artemas is keeping an eye on Ares, but we can’t take long.”



“I don’t understand why Ares isn’t allowed to be here,” Marty said as he followed the two men into the bedroom. “Is there a special reason why godly fathers can’t watch their children being born? It seems strange to me.”

“The ruling was determined between the Mother of All and the Fates,” Artemas explained as Silvanus helped Marty up onto the bed, propping his head with pillows. “I think it’s just one of those little quirks that the Mother of All decided. Between you and me, I believe she thought that male gods should spend a bit of time worrying about the whole birthing process.”

“Ares was frantic, not knowing what was going to happen.” Marty felt he could trust the two gods with his confidences. They were about to deliver his greatest gift aside from his mate.

“It truly is a quirk, but the Mother gets a real kick out of it when she sees the male gods get so upset about it.” Silvanus chuckled as he quickly undid Marty’s robe and pajama top.

“Quirk it might be,” Artemas agreed, “but that’s how every male godly birth is done – in absolute secrecy. It helps, too, that the person carrying the baby does at least get time to enjoy the first moment they see their child by themselves. It’s a bonding moment from what I’ve seen. Besides,” he winked at Marty, “even the strongest of alpha males have been known to get a bit squeamish when they see a live human baby being pulled from their mate’s stomach. Imagine what it would do to Ares if he fainted at the wrong moment?”

“It’s me who’s likely to faint,” Marty said. “I do not like the sight of blood, either.”

“Just lie back and relax,” Silvanus added. “You’re not going to feel a thing, I promise. But we do have to make an incision, otherwise your little one has got no way of coming out. Just keep looking at my mate, and it’ll be over before you know

it.”

“I feel like he’s been trying to kick his way out,” Marty said, leaning his head back even farther so he couldn’t directly see what Silvanus was doing. He wasn’t going to feel awkward about Silvanus exposing his belly. He had his pajama pants on, he was covered, and he was sure that that was all Ares would be worried about.

“That was just your baby’s way of letting you know he was ready,” Artemas said, moving closer to the bed. It was like he was trying to continue the conversation so Marty wouldn’t feel concerned, and Marty liked that. He got the feeling that Artemas wasn’t the type who got out much. He seemed quite shy and reserved, but he was genuinely trying to make Marty feel at ease.

“Ares just wanted a straight answer to how I was going to give birth at all,” Marty said. “It stressed him out so badly.”

“A bit of stress doesn’t do a god any harm,” Artemas chuckled. “The gods of old were actually a callous lot, and they genuinely disregarded the needs of the women in their lives, and the children who were born, usually while they were absent. It doesn’t hurt for them to worry about things now. You know, gods can be quite an arrogant bunch.”

Marty laughed – Ares could be like that too at times, although he was also really sweet. He felt Silvanus’s fingers touching his lower belly and tensed.

“It’s all right, this is only going to take a moment,” Silvanus said. “When Ares asks about my experience, please feel free to let him know I have assisted in the birth of many godly children, including quite a few male gods, so I do know what I’m doing, and as always, my hands are guided by the Mother. You should have seen the trouble I had with Thor, the Norse God of the Storms. He was so determined that I wasn’t allowed near him with a knife.”

Marty refused to look as Silvanus produced a silver-edged knife from thin air and carried on talking. “Thor was adamant he wasn’t going to let me cut him open.”

Artemas laughed as well. “It was fine, we were there, and we knew we had to stay handy as the babies were getting very impatient. We just clicked up chairs and made ourselves comfortable, had a cup of coffee, that sort of thing. Thor was getting more and more irate. He was lying on the bed saying things like, ‘No, my magic is going to be able to do this. You know, I’m a powerful god. My babies are just going to come out through will alone, and it’s going to be all clean and lovely, and that is that. I don’t need you here.’”

“The problem was,” Silvanus added, “that his babies were desperate to come out. He was carrying twins, and they were well overcooked, they needed to be out of the womb.” Marty felt a slight pinch, but he kept his eyes on Artemas, who wasn’t watching what his mate was doing, either.

“Eventually, it was Orin, Thor’s mate, who convinced him to let Silvanus go near him. It’s one of the issues that my lovely Silvanus has.” Artemas shrugged. “We can’t touch a person without their permission, and as much as Thor was ready for his babies to be born, he wasn’t ready for anybody to go near him with a knife.”

Marty groaned. “With the way my back’s been playing up, I would have welcomed this knife a week ago.”

“I know. That was because your baby was supposed to be born a week ago,” Silvanus said kindly. “You have been blessed with a very dedicated mate, and I’m sure once this birth business is done, his stress levels will go down considerably.”

“Not if the baby’s like me.” Marty chuckled and winced and pressed down just under his ribcage. “I probably shouldn’t have laughed.”

“That’s all right,” Silvanus said. “Your baby is fine and healthy. You have only got the one, which is a blessing in your slender frame. Carrying two might have been a bit problematic. But look what we have here.”

It was in that moment that Marty fell in love all over again as Silvanus lifted up a small human. He was covered in something slimy, and his eyes were closed, but his color was only a bit red. “He’s perfect,” Silvanus’s smile widened. “And this is where we can use a bit of godly magic.” As if with a thought, the baby was suddenly wrapped in a gorgeous cream blanket that looked as though it was made from spun air. It was so light and fluffy.

“Here you go, Marty. You and Ares have a son. Congratulations.” Marty’s arms were already reaching for him as Silvanus handed over the precious bundle. “I just need you to lay still for a minute, so I can fix things up down here. You’ll be left with the smallest of scars across your belly, but you shouldn’t feel any pain.”

“He’s beautiful.” Marty could barely breathe, his heart was pounding so wildly. “Our son is absolutely beautiful. I do wish Ares was here.” Tears blurred his eyes.

“I’m just about finished, and then I’ll transport you back to your bed with magic. That way, your lovely slippers won’t get any more ruined than they already are.”

“I think they’re beyond repair.” Marty barely looked at them, he was so entranced by his peaceful son. It meant the world that he was able to cuddle his child properly instead of moaning about his aching back.

“The slippers will be fixed and dry again by the time you get back to your bed,” Artemas promised as Silvanus closed Marty’s pajama top and wrapped his robe around his belly.

“I’m really glad we could be here for you,” Silvanus said as he straightened. “It might

be an idea to encourage Ares to renew some family ties in the meantime. Your little one will have godly ties, and that makes playdates with non-pa children an issue at times. And for future reference, if you're heavily pregnant and your back starts aching, that's the time to get Ares to leave you alone for half an hour so we can pop back and help you deliver that baby, too."

"You expect me to do this again?" Marty looked up in shock. "I think once is enough."

"We'll see how you feel in a few years, but in case you were worried, you are fine to resume normal sex with your mate. The Mother of All won't be allowing you to get pregnant again for at least another two to five years, and only then if that's what you really want. Enjoy this little one and give them the life that you had always wished for because I know you and Ares together can do it. Now hold on tight to your son, and good luck."

Marty felt a whoosh and then all of a sudden, he was back on the mattress that he'd been sharing with Ares. Ares didn't appear to have stirred. A quick peek over his side of the bed and Marty saw his fluffy slippers were back where they were meant to be, all dried with no evidence of his trek across the grass.

Heaving a happy sigh, Marty looked into the face of his newborn son, the little one that he and Ares had created, because we love each other, he told himself. And Marty knew they did.

Ares wasn't always easy to be with, he had down moods, and often times he was quiet, or it seemed like he didn't know what to do with himself. But with every passing week, Ares was relaxing and enjoying himself more. He laughed more often, was quick to suggest things that they could do, and he'd never stopped being attentive to Marty in every way. Marty knew how happy he was and how very grateful that Ares had come into his life when he did.

I've got plenty of time to help Ares reconcile with his family . Marty gently traced his son's cheeks. Ares will learn that people will love him eventually, and yeah, it'll probably happen with the baby in tow. I might be the one with the miracle smile, as he calls it, but I bet this little one will have one, too.

His new son had gray hair – not as dark as Ares' hair, but a gorgeous silver-frosted blond. And as the little one opened his eyes, Marty could see the brilliant ice blue that belonged to Ares.

But the little button nose, the shape of his full lips, and the sharpness of the chin were definitely Marty's features. "You're a perfect blend of both of us, little one. Welcome to the world," Marty whispered. He gently touched the baby on the nose, and all of a sudden, his son opened his mouth and started to cry.

The effect on Ares was electric. There was a mad scramble on the bed as the god jumped up and fell off the bed, and then there was a scrambling on the floor as Ares tried to get a hold of the mattress edge. Finally, out of breath, kneeling on the floor, and peering over the edge of the bed, Ares pointed at the baby, his eyes wide with shock. "How the hell did that happen?" he asked, pointing to the bundle in Marty's arms and looking between their son and Marty's belly. "More importantly how do we stop them crying?"

"It's time to meet our son," Marty said with a smile. "It's also time for you to pull on those godly powers of yours as we need a diaper, clean clothes, and a warm bottle of formula. You can hold him and do the first feeding if you like. I really need to use the bathroom."

Marty thought Ares might hesitate. Having a baby in the bed wasn't what Ares had expected when he'd gone to sleep hours before. But about ten minutes later, with their son safe in Ares' arms, quietly slurping on a freshly clicked bottle, Marty made his way to the bathroom. He quietly admitted to himself that he had never seen his

mate get on the bed so fast.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:10 am*

It was the next night. Ares was sitting in the rocker in their son's nursery, gently rubbing their son's back after he'd just finished a bottle. He could hear the soft sounds of Marty's snoring in the other room. Marty had wanted to be up, but Ares insisted he get some rest. His mate had an awful lot of sleep to catch up on. It warmed his heart that Marty didn't make much of a fuss about it. He trusts me with our baby. Ares couldn't think of anyone who had done that before.

Marty had explained to him about Silvanus and Artemas, and Ares was quietly pleased. Silvanus was a very old god, older than Zeus, and he had the blessing of the Mother. All he'd said to Marty was, "At least we have the answers now," and he made sure to kiss the thin, silver scar on the bottom of Marty's belly when they'd snatched a quick nap and a cuddle in the middle of the afternoon.

Rocking them both gently in the chair, Ares thought back, trying to remember if he'd ever even been home when any of his other children were born. He doubted it.

Sometimes, in the wars of old, he could be away for years at a time, and when his battles led him close to any of the many places he could get a bed for the night, there might be a new child or two running around.

The woman concerned would usually say something like, "that one's yours," and Ares would shrug, sleep, and head back out on campaigns again.

It's what happened to so many men back then. They were away for years, sometimes decades, and without all the modern conveniences of telephones, the internet, or communication devices like that, a lot of the women must've felt like they'd been abandoned. Ares had never kept in touch with his numerous partners and many times



didn't realize his children had been born until he'd got home many years later.

Not this time, he thought, keeping the rocking motions gentle. This time, I'll be around to see you grow up. Their son was almost asleep. Marty had insisted that Ares pick the name. He said that because he'd been the one who decided to have their child in the first place, Ares should at least have the honor of choosing the name their son would be known by.

How am I meant to pick a name that conveys all the love, the strength, the commitment, the hope, and the dreams I have for you?

The raccoon had suggested Bob, which Ares had dismissed out of hand. But now, as he was studying his son's face, he thought, you could be a Bob, you could be a Charles, you could be something exotic, but maybe you're just ours.

"Ours" wasn't a name, and picking anything wasn't easy. Ares was aware that the weight and connotations of the name given would follow their little one into eternity. He had thought about one of two names – Teegan and Hunter.

But the name Teegan sounded like Ares was copying Zeus's son Egan's name. And Hunter... I want more for you than spending eternity hunting things down. If their child wanted to do that, then that would be a choice they made later in life, not because it was destined in a name.

Marty had suggested, weeks ago, when the pregnancy news was still new. "What about Ari?" he'd said at the time. "A combination of you and me. The 'A-R' is for you in Ares, and the 'I' is for me – Ari – Marty. See, our names would rhyme."

Ares had dismissed it at the time, wanting a name with more meaning. But later, he had asked the Paulie app about the name, and learned that not only was it an accepted derivative of his own name, Ares, but it also meant a variety of different things across

multiple languages. Lion, eagle, and sun-like were common meanings given.

I don't want you growing up like me, little one, but even as he thought it, Ares knew that wasn't going to be possible. He couldn't believe the love he already felt for the tiny being who had already pissed on his hand and slopped sick down his shirt through an eventful day. Even if Ares struggled with being a parent, Marty was wholeheartedly invested, and with his open heart, Ares knew their son was going to be all right.

"Are you an Ari, little one?" Twisting his head, Ares could just see his son's face nestled into his neck by his mating mark. Ari burped, and Ares froze. The last time Ari had done that, Ares ended up wearing half the contents of a formula bottle. But this time, it was just a burp.

I think that's a good omen . Ares' thoughts meandered to thinking about Hephaestus' baby. Paulie had let him know that Hephaestus and Landyn now had a new daughter. When he heard, Marty had been very keen to go and visit, to take them a gift.

"It's the right thing to do," he insisted. But Ares pointed out that by that stage, Marty was already showing, and if there was any chance they might be seen by somebody who was not from the godly realm, then that could raise awkward questions.

But in truth, Ares knew he'd just been putting it off. Barely a week went by when Marty didn't mention it, even as his own birth got closer and closer.

"Hephaestus will be the hardest nut to crack," Ares murmured to his new son. "But if we can do that, then maybe that would be the push I need to start socializing more with the other gods. You deserve an extended family. They're a real dysfunctional bunch," he warned, keeping his voice low. "But you deserve to be recognized as part of that family, and maybe, it's time I changed my ways."

Ari was asleep. His cute mouth slackened, his eyelids flickering as he dreamed whatever babies dreamed of. Ares wondered what it was like to be in the mind of a baby. Thinking about what he'd done for Marty during the house renovation, Ares gently rested his middle finger very lightly on the side of Ari's head. Closing his eyes, Ares got an impression of the stars, the night sky, white clouds and light. In the distance there was a beautifully radiant rainbow.

"Keep dreaming sweet things, my son," he said as he carefully got up and put Ari in his crib. Making sure the night light was on and leaving the door open, Ares went through into the master bedroom where Marty was sprawled out across the mattress fast asleep.

I've been blessed , Ares decided. It's about time I started building some bridges, renewing some connections, and creating an extended family that will help keep Ari and Marty safe.

Filled with a renewed purpose, he took off his shirt, dropped it on the floor, and climbed into bed with his mate, pulling Marty close. Marty mumbled something and then snuggled closer, but he kept sleeping. Ares felt his own eyelids get heavy.

We can think of a gift for Hephaestus in the morning, Ares decided. Ari was going to be awake again in a few hours, and one thing Ares had learned from his son in just one day was that their son had powerful lungs. He and Marty were both going to have to nap when they could.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:10 am*

“You’re here. You must be Marty, I’m so happy to meet you.”

Ares was a bit taken aback by the effusive meeting the young man gave his mate at the door of Hephaestus’ home in Montana. Marty, tired of Ares’ dithering, finally asked the Paulie app to connect him with Landyn, Hephaestus’ mate, introducing himself and sharing congratulations to their new daughter while mentioning he’d just given birth to a son of his own.

Apparently, numerous messages were exchanged – Landyn and Marty forging their own friendship outside of their godly mates over pictures of their children and giggles about their mates. By the time Marty informed him they’d been invited for dinner, Ares could hardly refuse.

“Come in, come in. Don’t mind the dogs. They are perfectly safe around little ones. Ares, it’s a pleasure. Hephaestus is down the hall – second door on the left – putting our little Jasmine down for her nap. There’s an extra crib in there if you’d like to put Ari down for a bit. My gods, isn’t he adorable? Marty, come on with me into the kitchen.”

I want to hang onto my adorable son and go home, taking Marty with me. But as Marty was already walking with Landyn deeper into the house, Ares inhaled slowly, resting his hand on Ari’s back. His son was strapped to his chest in a front pack. I’m doing this for you.

It was easy to find Hephaestus. The god’s power thrummed through the house, and almost everywhere he looked, Ares could see examples of the god’s incredible workmanship. Even the dogs, who’d accompanied Landyn to the front door, were

made of gold. You haven't lost your touch, old man.

Another one of Hephaestus' automatons was present in the nursery, standing motionless by the door. "Don't mind, Chloe," Hephaestus said, bending over a cot as he put his daughter down gently. "She keeps an eye on our little Jasmine and alerts us the moment Jasmine wakes up again."

"She?" Ares moved slowly into the room. "I didn't realize your machines had gender."

"They didn't until Landyn came along." Hephaestus chuckled as he straightened again. "Now I have six automatons – three with male names and three with female names - who have their own leisure room which includes plenty of seating, a table for them to play cards, and a television, would you believe. And don't get me started about the dogs – I built two of them when we moved here to guard the front door. Landyn worries they'll get cold, lets them in the house and on the furniture, and plays fetch with them in the yard. What can you do?" He looked Ares in the eyes.

"Love them, I guess." Ares wanted to fidget. "Er...Landyn suggested I could put Ari down for a bit?"

"Landyn set the crib up with fresh linen this morning." Hephaestus moved aside, and Ares saw another crib. "Do we have to talk about the past at all? Only if we do, I'd prefer we did it where Landyn can't hear us. As far as he's concerned, the past is in the past."

"Marty feels the same way." Moving across the room, loosening the straps that kept the front pack secure, Ares thought about it. "I do feel I owe you an apology about that business with Aphrodite," he said, keeping his focus on his son as he gently eased the sleeping baby from the front pack. "That was a shitty thing to do."

"Bah. If it hadn't been you, it would've been someone else. I hate to say it, pretty

boy, but you weren't anyone special to her."

Shocked, Ares burst out laughing. "I know," he said as he carefully laid Ari down. "She dumped me soon enough after that Olympus embarrassment. Still a dick move on my part, though."

"Meh, I was hardly Mr. Agreeable back then, either. Landyn's been a blessing, he really has, and now we have Jasmine..."

Hephaestus trailed off, but Ares understood what he meant. "I feel the same about Marty. He...er...this was his idea. Coming here, I mean. I've always wanted to reach out, but what was I going to say?"

"It was all a long time ago," Hephaestus agreed. "Hell, we had Zeus and Paulie here for dinner at one point. Zeus was actually nice, can you believe it?"

"Mating changed him, too?" Ares turned to his fellow Olympian.

Hephaestus nodded. "It seems like it. You could've blown me over with a feather when he turned up, sitting at our table, behaving as though he hadn't thrown me down a mountain."

"Strange times." Ares wasn't sure he was ready for that just yet. "Have you seen Aphrodite recently?"

"Once, and that wasn't by choice." Hephaestus huffed. "The cyclops complained to her about Landyn, said I was neglecting my craft and a whole bunch of other shit. She sent Eros to summon me to her glade. I sent her a summons to get her ass down to my house, because I wasn't jumping just because she said so. You know..." He wagged his finger in Ares' direction.

"There was a moment there when I actually felt sorry for her. Landyn hadn't known

I'd been married, so he was already upset, but she spoke to him, and then she genuinely congratulated us on our mating. She seemed sad when she said she'd never feel a bond like Landyn and I share. Can you believe that?"

"I wonder if that is the case." Ares hadn't considered that before. "She's the Goddess of Love and Desire, but it's not like she's ever been in love before. I took Marty to Olympus for a quick visit – long story, don't ask – and I didn't realize she'd be there. But we bumped into Athena, Marty was in his raccoon form, and she called to Aphrodite to come and meet him. She was really nice to us as well. I have to say I was stunned speechless."

"Times are definitely changing. That's why, instead of trying to stuff you into my fire pit to see how long you can burn, we're going to go and have a friendly dinner with our mates with the past put firmly to bed. Agreed."

Ares' eyes widened. Hephaestus was offering him a gift and he wouldn't refuse. "Thank you. So long as you don't suggest we hug or do anything like that. I think I'm embarrassed enough as it is. But thank you. I know Marty and Landyn are already fast friends."

"Speaking of which, we should probably go and find them." Hephaestus patted him on the shoulder as he moved past. "This trying to act like a civilized extended family isn't always easy with our history, but the rewards are well worth it. You'll see that for yourself over time."

"I think you're right." Ares followed Hephaestus out of the door. "Hey, what are the chances of me commissioning one of those dogs from you? I know Marty would absolutely love it."

"You'd have to commission two of them together, and they won't be cheap." Hephaestus grinned. "Landyn claims they'd get lonely if there was only one of them."

“Automatons get lonely?” Ares asked slowly.

“Apparently. According to Landyn. Are you going to be the one who tells him that he’s wrong?”

“I’ll take two.” Ares chuckled as he had another thought. “Can I bring them here for playdates with your two?”

“Landyn and Marty will have already organized that for us,” Hephaestus pushed open a door to the living area. “You just wait and see. They’ll be ready next week. Good luck in keeping them off the couches. I had no chance.”

“I wouldn’t even try.” Ares smiled as he saw Landyn and Marty huddled together on a large couch. They were pouring over their phones, sharing pictures, and giggling. “Marty has never had a lot of luck making friends, but then he spent most of his life living on the streets.”

“Then he and Landyn have something in common,” Hephaestus said. “Let’s head out to the forge and leave them to it for a bit. Landyn will have Marty on a mate’s group chat before the night is over, you’ll see. And don’t worry about Ari,” he added as Ares looked down the hall. “Chloe will let us know when the babies wake up. It’s not like she’ll get distracted or fall asleep on the job.”

“I still can’t believe they have name tags and genders,” Ares chuckled as he followed Hephaestus through the house and outside to the forge.

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“If you could have absolutely anything you wanted, what would it be?” Ares asked Marty. It was many hours later. They were home, and Ari was fed, changed, and sleeping soundly. Marty and Ares were curled up on the bed, but buoyed by the success of the evening, Ares was finding it difficult to fall asleep.



“I already have everything I’ve ever wanted.” Marty rolled over, looping his arms around Ares’ neck. “I have you and little Ari. I have my ideal house and apparently two gold dogs on order from Hefe.” Marty still struggled with the proper name, which Landyn and Hephaestus thought was hilarious. “Why are you asking?”

Ares chose his words carefully. “You...you have given me a life I never imagined. If someone had told me a year ago that I would be in love, that Athena and Aphrodite would speak kindly to me, that Hephaestus and I would be sitting across the table from each other with not a sword in sight...seriously, I would’ve wanted to know what that person had been drinking.

“I have this urge, this need...I feel I should give you an amazing gift, but anything I think of doing seems so inadequate in comparison to what you’ve given me. My whole world has changed because of you – for the better. I want to say thank you.”

“You just did.” Marty chuckled, pressing closer. “Don’t you see, you’ve already given me just as much. I’m not talking about the material things. Clicky fingers are really helpful, and I’m grateful for all that you’ve done. But what’s important, the reason why I love you is because you opened your heart to me. That’s special. I understand how much of a gift that is, and I hug that to my heart more than anything else.”

Ares could feel the truth of Marty’s words, and something settled deep inside his gut. “Before you came along, I wore my hate like a suit of armor,” he admitted quietly. “Everyone I knew seemed to have a reason to hate me. But somehow, a very stealthy and extremely clever raccoon came along, sniffed at my strawberries, and ended up stealing my heart as well.”

“Are you sure that wasn’t my bare ass gleaming in the security camera lights that attracted your attention?” Marty’s lips were like butterflies along Ares’ jaw.

“Hmm, there might have been a bit of that, too.” Ares groaned softly, running his

hands down Marty's back. "I'm just so eternally grateful for you. I love you."

"I love you, too." Marty hummed, tilting his face up. "Now, kiss me quick. Ari doesn't care what we're doing when he's hungry. If you're wanting..."

"Oh, I am definitely wanting you, and I always will." Ares took the kiss offered as he sent his thanks to the Fates.

The End.