



Take Two (Valleywood: Season Three)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: There's never been a better time to make a second first impression.

Phobos has always played the role of son, brother, friend—not to mention god—but just when he finally thought he'd found his place in the world, it all came crashing down around him. Now he is nothing more than a heartbroken has-been, rebuilding his life from scratch. If only he can set his ego aside and accept a little help.

Omega wolf shifter Declan moved to Valleywood with the intention of carving out a life of his own. He opened a bar, made new friends, living the life he'd always dreamed of, but he can never truly outrun his past. His father is pack Alpha, and it was always expected that Declan would make a politically beneficial match for the good of the pack, but is it so wrong for him to want more—maybe even love?

When Phobos wanders into Declan's bar, though, it is anything but love at first sight. They clash in the worst way, and it would be ideal if they never had to see each other again. Too bad fate has decided they're perfect for each other.

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Chapter 1

Phobos

The snow had begun to soak through the seams of my leather dress shoes, my socks getting soggy and clinging around my toes, but I couldn't bring myself to care. I was in full-on wallow mode, and the squish in my shoes seemed to fit the mood.

I'd just bombed yet another audition, this time at XYZ Studios, for a secondary character on *The Blazing Inferno*, this cheesy soap opera that had been around for forever—well, no, not forever in the strictest sense. “Forever” held a different meaning for a god, but it had been a long-ass time compared to other soaps. It wasn't like I'd had my heart set on the role or anything, but it would've been an in with the network, at least. And once I had my foot in the door, it was only a matter of time before I landed a starring role.

I could see it now, my name in the top spot on the marquee...

A snowplow drove by with a growl, honking at me to get out of the way. I hopped back with just enough time to avoid the rolling wave of snow that pushed up over the curb. I sighed. The city crews were out in droves, cleaning up after the “blizzard of the century” as the weather network had dubbed it, but it was going to take days to get things back to normal. It had been several days of heavy snow, enough to shut the whole city down. People had gotten stranded when their cars got stuck, and emergency crews couldn't get out. I'd helped out where I could, but honestly, I'd given up trying to play the hero. Nobody even missed me.

My father was Ares, the god of war, so it had made sense for me and my twin brother, Deimos, to be his apprentices. Honestly, we hadn't exactly been consulted on the matter. Deimos and I were both born with an innate ability to manipulate fear, and to say that Dad had been delighted was an understatement. We used to ride into battle with him, instilling panic and dread into the armies, creating chaos. But after a couple thousand years, that shit started to get old.

More recently, I'd taken on the role of Valleywood's own superhero, saving people from muggings and bank robberies, flying in with my rippling cape, long golden hair flowing in the breeze. I'd even had my own sidekick, Cameron, and for a short while, I thought everything was perfect. I was so sure the people would love me and Cameron was going to become my lover, and it was going to be awesome!

But then Cameron chose my brother over me. Deimos, the villain, my kinda, sorta nemesis. It made zero sense to me. Why go for the bad guy when you could have a literal hero? Wasn't that what omegas wanted? Someone kind who would be sweet to them? Someone strong, capable, loyal? But no. Deimos was all snark and sarcasm, and I was pretty sure they'd had sex in our parents' bathroom in the middle of family night.

So, when my sidekick chose the morally-gray side and the hero business started to suck, I'd figured it was time for a new job. I was already rich, so I had options. I liked being adored, and in the end, it was an easy choice. Actors seemed to have it all—love, fame, wealth—so I figured why not? How hard could it be?

As it turned out, very .

I cut my hair short, wore the best designer brands, and my buddy Azazel hooked me up with an agent, Denny Clement, from his recently acquired talent agency, Abandon Entertainment. Getting auditions wasn't the problem, though. Valleywood Studios was always busy, lots of movies and TV shows in production, and I started going to

every open audition they had, whether I was a good fit for the part or not. I wanted my name on casting directors' lips every time they thought about actors.

"I don't think you're quite what we're looking for."

"We decided to go in a different direction."

"What did you say your name was again?"

I'd heard every rejection you could think of. But then the blizzard hit, and I'd kind of assumed that since it had kept most people at home, I would have a better chance at landing a role, but nope . "We'll call you," the director had said. Yeah, right. I knew what that meant. I wasn't born yesterday. Pfft! Not even close! I was thousands of years old, and yet, I was still searching for where I fit.

Growling, I stomped down the sidewalk with a squish, squish, buzz . Huh?

I paused to reach into my pocket and pull out my vibrating phone. The screen lit up with a call from my sister, Harmonia.

I thought about ignoring it, letting it go to voicemail, but she was like a dog with a bone when it came to mending rifts in our family. She wouldn't let it go.

Sighing, I answered the call. "What?"

"Is that any way to address your favorite sister?" she said sweetly, her voice a tinkling trill that usually soothed even the most savage beast. The fact that I was still scowling said something about my mood.

"You're my only sister," I huffed into the phone, my breath a silver cloud in front of my face. "Did you want something, besides to annoy me?"

She made a little squeak of protest. “Wow, what bug crawled up your ass and died?” I knew she wouldn’t push for an answer, because she knew exactly what—or rather who—had gotten under my skin. “I’m just calling to remind you about family dinner on Sunday. You’re coming, right?”

“Um...” I began, trying to come up with yet another reason to skip family dinner. I’d been dodging them for months.

“Because you know Cameron just had the baby, right? Right in the middle of the blizzard! He’s just the cutest thing. Don’t you want to meet your nephew?”

“Uh...” Shit, now I really didn’t want to go. I’d been doing my best to avoid my brother and his new mate. I didn’t need to see them being all lovey dovey, reminding me of everything I didn’t have. Love, sex, and a new baby. Because as if stealing my sidekick wasn’t bad enough, they had to go and start a family. What did a guy have to do to catch a break around here?

“I love you, Phobos. I miss my brother.”

“Then it’s a good thing you have another one,” I muttered before I could stop myself.

Harmonia’s sigh was like a butterfly farting rainbows, all delicate and sparkling light, and still somehow made me feel ashamed for disappointing her. “You know, I’m not supposed to pick favorites, and I’ll deny it if you tell Deimos, but you’re totally my favorite brother. Please, come.”

“I’ll... try.” It was the best I could offer, and even then, I already knew I wouldn’t be going. How could I when I had nothing to show for my life? No job, no love life, no prospects of any kind.

I made some fake staticky sounds into the phone. “Wha—can’t hear—you’re breaking

up—must be another blizz—” Then I got off the call before she could force promises out of me I couldn’t keep. Pressing the end-call button, I squeezed my phone hard enough to crack the screen before I shoved it into my pocket with a growl.

Movement caught my eye. There was a man up ahead, shovel in hand, clearing snow off the sidewalk outside his shop. He wasn’t wearing a jacket, as if the cold didn’t bother him, and he had the sleeves of his plaid shirt rolled up, exposing his toned forearms that flexed with each scoop of snow. He had a beard, with his dark blond hair trimmed on the sides and styled longer on top. As he bent down, a piece of hair fell forward over his eyes, and I wondered what color they were.

I didn’t know why he bothered shoveling. It wasn’t like anyone was out shopping this afternoon. They were all cuddled up with their loved ones at home, enjoying the unexpected time off work that the blizzard had afforded them. If I were smart, I would quit slogging through this snow and just duck into the alley and take off, using my godly powers to fly home, where I could then loaf around watching Golden Girls reruns for the rest of the day.

I was about to do just that, but instead, I found my feet rooted to the ground, my eyes glued to the man ahead. There was something about him... I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. He wasn’t a god, that was for sure. And though I could admit he was damn sexy, he also wasn’t what I would’ve considered my type. Too... burly.

I probably would’ve ignored the tingling draw I felt toward him if he hadn’t turned and gone back inside, and my eyes flicked up to the name of his business: The Wolf’s Den.

A bar? Hm, it was early for a drink, not even 4pm yet, but that yawning depression that had been carving a hole in me for the past few decades—longer if I was being honest—made me feel hollow and aching. Maybe it could be dulled with a little alcohol. My great-nephew Dionysus would certainly agree.

And it was with that thought that I found my feet moving, pulling me toward the bar and perhaps a sexy lumberjack. At the very least, I deserved the distraction.

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Chapter 2

Declan

The phone in my pocket dinged.

A distinctive sound assigned to that particular messaging app. I should have deleted it because only one person contacted me on it. But I couldn't because he was the pack Alpha—and my father.

I was aware of his routine, and he would have shifted and done a perimeter run at dawn. Not that he didn't have Betas for that. He had an array of them, and he kept them in line with his ferocious temper, combined with promises of assigning them a position with more power.

But there was only one job—his—that they coveted. And unless they ignored the obvious, they understood they weren't in line. The position of heir had been filled but was temporarily vacant while said heir got his head together.

Father's words not mine.

In reality the heir had taken off, never to return, because he didn't want his life mapped out for him until he took his last breath.

And that person was me!

But Father never gave up hope that I'd reconsider, and the familial strings of love and

guilt were so intertwined and knotted, I'd never been able to cut contact completely.

So, here I was at the bar, ready to start my day while my father sat at his desk, coffee in hand, and contemplated ways of bringing me home.

But I had a home, and it was here in Valleywood.

Taking a deep breath, I scanned the message.

I'm free. Will call in five .

A text I could deal with. It didn't twist the knife in my belly, reminding me of our family tradition, stretching back centuries. How I was messing with our heritage and breaking the chain of command. Part of the pack's strength was that the eldest son followed his father as Alpha, and if I didn't assume my rightful place, it could destroy what our family had built.

It was BS. Maybe in the past when packs warred against one another for territory, but not in the twenty-first century.

I twisted my head and checked the clock behind me above the bar. Silly, really, when I was holding the phone and had a watch on my wrist. But I'd found that clock in a secondhand store a day before I left the pack. The frame was chipped and the wood tarnished, but it worked, the loud tick-tock punctuating the day with its reassuring sound.

The clock reminded me... of me. A little broken, but I'd built a new life for myself, and I still got up every day and thanked the sun for rising with me.

The phone rang, shattering my thoughts, and I slid the button to the side.

Be nice. Don't shout . My wolf, while loyal to me, cringed at speaking to our father and Alpha in less than a deferential tone.

I'll try .

"Declan."

"Yes, Father. How are you?"

"Hoping today is the day you come to your senses."

I bit back a response, that I'd had a moment of clarity when I made the decision to leave the pack. But if I blurted it out, we'd go through the same routine, arguing and eventually one of us would end the call. Usually me. And I'd fume the rest of the day until the sun came up the following morning.

"Are the snowdrops blooming in the field near the lake?" I pictured them dotting the snow-covered land around the water, and stretching toward the woods.

"They are. I was there earlier and they are magnificent this year. You should be here to pick a bunch."

I did miss aspects of living in a group with my family and neighbors I'd known all my life. My old school friends, most of whom still lived on the land, worked in the nearest town and not for Father. They were given the freedom that wasn't afforded to me.

"There are wildflowers near me, outside town." There were a number of shrubs that bloomed in the snow, though they might have been obliterated during the blizzard.

Father scoffed and spat out, "Witch hazel, with its pitiful yellow blooms and spicy

aroma. That doesn't count."

Thinking flowers were a safe topic, I crossed them off my mental discussion list. Father always brought the subject around to my behavior and how Valleywood could never compete with pack land.

We swerved and detoured through a range of conversation topics before I told him I had to start work.

"Work!" The venom in his voice was undeniable. He didn't agree with selling or drinking alcohol, when it was my lifestyle choice, though during my childhood, he'd often sipped on a late-night whiskey before retiring to bed.

"Goodbye, Father," I said tightly, hanging up. I tossed the phone aside and took a step back, extending my hands and gripping the bar. Pushing on the sturdy oak, I breathed in and out while staring at my scuffed boots. My belly churned and bile rose up my throat.

When I left the pack, I'd dreamed of making a success of my life and showing Father I could succeed without his backing. Much as he antagonized me, I did love him, and part of me always sought his approval, even when he pointed out how my business was failing.

Not that I'd told him about my financial situation, but he wasn't stupid. From the tidbits I'd let slip, he'd sussed out the bar was in danger of going under and me with it.

When I'd bought the business, I had huge dreams of it being the favored watering hole for the rich and famous who frequented the movie studio down the block. And for a while that was the reality. The bar was kinda out of place in this neighborhood. It wasn't modern with lots of gleaming metal surfaces and clean lines. The opposite.

It was more like the places I'd grown up around, with wood, wrought iron, a log fire, and the feel of a cabin in the woods that gave you a hug when you walked in.

I guessed it appealed to those movie types, looking for something different.

But success always came with a price.

Many of my customers were wannabe actors who didn't earn much, but they were no better than their well-off colleagues who believed the media hype about themselves.

And they often stiffed me regarding the bill.

I stood up to them, told them to stop treating one another with drinks they didn't pay for. Said if they didn't pay up, not to come back.

And they did exactly that. They no longer frequented my place.

Fine! I could survive without them. That was my attitude, while my wolf who understood little of finances whispered that I'd need to find a new clientele.

That proved to be difficult when word was spread on the actors' grapevine that everyone should avoid my bar. Instead of being filled with laughter, clinking glasses, and high fives, The Wolf's Den was reduced to a handful of regular customers trickling in, mainly from craft services on the movie lot and the security guys I said hello to when I passed the lot entrance.

I could accept failure, sell the bar and my apartment on the second floor for a loss, and move on. But I'd have to admit to Father I hadn't succeeded on my own.

But there was a more pressing reason I stayed: my mate.

Not the man Father had chosen for me from a neighboring pack. No, my mate was someone I hadn't met but not an arranged mating.

I'd caught a whiff of his scent around town and near the movie lot, and I refused to leave the love of my life before meeting and marking him. We could go anywhere together, and even if we had little money and I worked in someone else's bar or drove a forklift, we'd be together and in love.

My wolf reminded me our mate had a vote as to where and how we lived.

Of course. I was giddy thinking of the future . But I'd do anything to save the bar and my home .

Anything? my wolf queried.

Almost anything . I wouldn't crawl and grovel in order to get the small-time actors back. I had principles.

I was torn between selling and running away to a different life, and proving to my father I could stand on my own. But it was my mate that kept me grounded and hopeful that life might change when he walked into it.

To let off some steam after the phone call with Father, I quickly shoveled the sidewalk out front. Not that it would help bring in customers after the blizzard, but I figured it couldn't hurt.

And as I greeted one of our regular customers who popped in for a drink after his shift, a tantalizing scent announced a tall delicious snack who'd wandered in. He had startling violet eyes and short-cropped blond hair.

He scented of mate, my mate.

Not a wolf. Not even a shifter. My beast wanted to get closer to sniff out the guy's lineage.

He's not human either .

I imagined Father's reaction when I told him my mate might be fae. Not that I'd pinpointed who or what he was.

But I refused to let my father dictate my fate and studied the man I hoped to mark as he hovered in the doorway.

Would he scent me?

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Chapter 3

Phobos

I stood in the doorway to The Wolf's Den, letting my eyes adjust to the gloom. It was familiar. I remembered being here once before, and the memory overlapped with reality.

The flickering flames of the fire in the grate, Cameron sitting on a stool at the bar, dazed... My brother had called to tell me I could have my sidekick back, that he would be mine. Cameron was supposed to be mine!

My stomach twisted, and I swallowed hard against the acid crawling up my throat. Nothing had worked out as planned. Cameron wasn't mine—to be honest, he never had been, but tell that to my stupid heart.

I closed my eyes in a long blink, inhaling a deep breath of the smoky air. There was another scent there, something I couldn't quite put my finger on. Whatever it was, it was delicious, making my mouth water and soothing a little of the heartbreak.

Sighing, I headed deeper into the bar. There were only a couple other people here. One, a man who'd come in just before me, stomping snow off his boots and settling in at a table close to the fire. The other... the man from outside, the bartender.

He was staring right at me, his intense gray eyes like steel. I let my gaze wander down his body—what I could see above the bar, anyway. Broad shoulders, hands gripping the edge of the bar as if his life depended on it.

I decided then and there, who cared if he wasn't my usual type? For one night, he could be. I deserved a little escape, a little taste of something different. I let a smile play on my lips, the kind of smirk I'd seen on my twin brother's face. It worked so well for him, so why not me? Then I sauntered across the room, letting my hips move in what I hoped was a seductive sway, leaving a trail of melting snow in my wake. The bartender held my gaze the whole time.

Oh yeah, he was into me.

Leaning my forearms onto the counter, I drawled, "Hey there, handsome. Come here often?"

His left eyebrow arched, and he scoffed. "Seriously? That's what you're going with?"

Had I done it wrong? I should've paid more attention to how Deimos picked up omegas.

Clearing my throat, I tried again. "Did it hurt?"

The bartender sighed. "No, it didn't hurt when I fell from Heaven." He shook his head as if he was disappointed in me. "Look, I've been bartending a while. I promise I've heard all the pickup lines. Just... tell me what you want to drink."

My confidence tanked hard. I couldn't even do this right. I dropped myself onto one of the stools, letting my smile slip straight off. "It doesn't matter. Something strong."

The man nodded and turned to grab a bottle from the wall behind him. It gave me a clear view of his muscular back, obvious even through the flannel plaid, down to his trim waist and tight ass. And then he turned around and I found myself staring at his equally delectable crotch.

He cleared his throat, forcing my gaze back to his face. He did not look pleased at being objectified. “Sorry,” I muttered, shoulders hunching.

He didn’t say anything else as he poured me a double of some amber-colored alcohol. He dropped one ice cube into the glass then slid it across the bar. “You’d better be able to pay for that.”

Grumbling, I took out my wallet and pushed a few bills across the counter at him. “Keep ‘em coming. I’ve got some forgetting to do.”

I lost track of time after that. The drinks kept coming, and soon, I stopped noticing the burn. My insides turned warm, and my brain began to slosh around inside my head. I had to hand it to him. The bar knew how to stock some seriously hard stuff, hard enough to get a god this drunk.

“I can’t believe you don’t recognize me,” I slurred, my eyelids at half-mast. “I’m famous!”

While the bartender pretended he wasn’t interested, he had to be, because he hadn’t left. “Oh yeah? Are you an actor or something?”

“Pfft! Nah, not yet. No, I was a superhero. You must’ve heard of me. Here, maybe if I stand like this?” I pushed up to standing and tried to stand up straight on wobbling legs, setting my fists on my hips, my chin held high. I tried to rustle up some magical wind, but as drunk as I was, I fumbled it, and it was barely more than a puff of air that died quickly. Not like I was wearing a cape to ripple anyway. “This is my superhero pose. What d’ya think?”

It was hard to tell behind the beard, but I thought he looked skeptical, his arms crossed over his chest as he leaned against the counter behind him. “Uh-huh. You’re really something,” he said, totally deadpan.

Groaning, I dropped back onto the stool. “I swear, it’s more impressive when I’m sober. Cause I’m a god, you know. A god of fear. Aren’t you afraid of me?”

“Nope,” he said, popping the P. He picked up a cloth and started wiping down the counter.

I should let out some of my power, that’d show him. Some good old-fashioned panic and terror to... woo an omega? Not likely.

Scrubbing a hand over my face, I tried to think clearly. This wasn’t me. “What’s your name?”

He shook his head. “I’m not telling you my name,” he gritted out.

“Why not? We’re friends, aren’t we?” I propped my chin in my hand, gazing up at him. He was so... pretty. No, that wasn’t the right word. Sexy? Alluring.

Even his scowl was kinda hot. “No, we are not friends.” He pinched the bridge of his nose, breathing deeply, and his lips moved soundlessly, as if he were having an argument with himself inside his head.

“Oh, come on,” I purred, reaching out to trail a fingertip over the back of his hand where it was splayed palm down on the counter. A spark snapped between us, and no matter how numb I felt right now, I certainly felt that. The current seemed to course all the way up my arm.

The bartender gasped and pulled his hand away, clutching it to his chest like he’d been burned, but then he said, “Declan. My name... it’s Declan.” That was all he gave me before he said, “It’s time for you to leave.”

“What? But I’m not—”

“You’re cut off. Get out!” he snapped, suddenly furious with me for no reason I could grasp. Then he pivoted and stormed into the back room, telling his co-worker who’d shown up about an hour ago, “He’s done. Please escort him out.”

I blinked owlishly, then shared a stunned look with the tiny, tattooed woman behind the bar. He expected her to “escort me out”?

When she made a move to come around to get me, I waved a hand at her. “Don’t bother. I can see myself out.”

The room swayed and swelled around me as I staggered to the door. Outside, the winter air didn’t seem so cold anymore, though night seemed to have fallen while I was inside. I stopped to lean heavily on the wall. Being drunk had officially stopped being fun. Without the flirting, all that was left was the depression. My eyes stung with tears, my face burning with shame. Why did I feel so... rejected? I didn’t know the bartender—Declan, I reminded myself—but for some reason, when he walked away, it felt like I’d lost something important, a piece of myself.

I shoved off the wall and walked blindly for a while, trying to clear my head, but I couldn’t stop thinking about all my failures. I’d failed at being a superhero, an actor, a boss, a friend, even a son and a brother. I was nothing... no one.

“I wish I wasn’t even a stupid god,” I muttered.

The still night air was broken by a laugh. More like a cackle, really, and it had a strange ethereal quality to it. I looked up, and there was a light coming from the alley ahead. I stumbled, slipping in the snow. “Hello?” I called, peeking around the corner.

There was an open door halfway down the alley, and flickering light spilled out. I found myself drawn closer, curious. When I looked through the door, I was stunned. It wasn’t the inside of a building. It was more like... a cave. The light came from

torches lining a pathway leading down into the ground. The air was damp, warm, and when I stepped inside, the door swung slowly closed behind me.

I should've stopped, should've turned and walked straight back out, but inside... I heard a woman singing. It sounded like a lullaby, but it wasn't in English. Was that... Enochian? It was an ancient language, and certainly no human would know it.

I reached the bottom of the cave, the ceiling, lined with stalactites, vaulting high above me. This existed beneath the city streets? The woman I'd heard was sitting on a rock throne, her face hidden beneath a black veil. Her gown was black too, layers of voluminous lace, along with black gloves, and she was... knitting?

"Hello?" I said again, and she tilted her head, I assumed to look at me.

"Phobos, I wondered when you would come to see me." It was impossible to tell her age by her voice alone, but I had no doubt she was a goddess of some kind. What was she doing hiding here?

"You know my name?"

She tsked. "Everyone knows the god of panic... afraid of his own fate."

Anger tried to take root, but the alcohol let it slip from my fingers, leaving only the awareness of truth. She was right, I was afraid of my fate. "W-what do you know about it?" I asked.

She chuckled as she set aside her knitting. "I am Apate, one of the first goddesses that ever was. I know that I helped your brother find his mate, and I can help you too. You could become a great actor, find love, live out all your dreams."

It felt like the floor gave way beneath my feet, and I found myself dropping to my

knees. “What?” I gasped. Deimos hadn’t won Cameron fairly? He’d cheated!

“Oh yes, I know all about your desires. It could all be yours, but...” She trailed off, and I held my breath, waiting for her to finish her sentence.

“But?” I coaxed.

“But what you crave is a human future, not a god’s. Your powers have done nothing but get in your way. You must choose one or the other—either go back to your father and aid him with war like you are destined... or forfeit your powers and live as a human, set free from the constraints of your fate. Then you could be anything your heart desires.”

Hope bloomed in my chest. I’d always felt shackled by my responsibilities, but without my powers... I could be free. No pressure, no expectations. “Please,” I whispered, shuffling forward on my knees. “Please, I want that. How can I have it?”

She stood from her throne, her skirts brushing along the stone floor as she approached. “You’re certain? You will no longer have access to your godly powers.”

“Yes, yes, please !” I begged. “Help me like you helped my brother.”

“As you wish.” She pulled off her right glove, her skin beneath pitch-black like the night sky, swirling like oil in a puddle. Her touch was gentle as she brushed her fingers across my temple. Then a searing pain lanced through my skull, and everything went black.

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Chapter 4

Declan

Tearing out back into the cold, I slammed a fist on my brow.

“Why?” I asked the universe. “Why can’t something go right for me?”

There was no answer from above.

My dreams were dashed, or that drunken asshat had crushed them in his trembling fingers. I pictured him as a kid on his birthday, dressed in the superhero suit he’d begged for from his parents. At his party, when playing football, the other children were more interested in tackling, hoping to take possession of the ball. Or challenging one another to a new game on a pair of tablets.

Not being the center of attention, my mate’s behavior had become more outrageous than shouting, from elbowing to jumping off the top of the swing set, and finally, to crushing a tablet and tossing the football into the neighbor’s yard. Cue the end of the party and him not having any friends for the remainder of the school year.

That’s a lot. My wolf wasn’t impressed by the guy, but he was guided by the mating instinct.

Sure, I’d made up a life story for my mate based on him trying to chat me up. He was the sort of alpha who’d drag an omega into the back room for a quick fuck. Or when he’d had too much to drink like today, he might have hurdled the counter and had sex

behind the bar.

I was in pity-me mode. My life sucked before I left the pack, and now it was falling down around my ears, drowning me in depression and debt. I could have dealt with Father's anger and the failing business if I'd been mated to my one true love. If the universe hadn't given up on me and granted me a mate I could admire, I would have been okay.

Instead, whether I looked forward or back, my life was shit.

You shouldn't have kicked him out . My beast was longing to mate because that was his purpose in life. He enjoyed hunting, but if we didn't mate, his life would have no meaning. Or that was how he perceived it.

Maybe . But if he'd stayed, I'd have been subjected to more tales of his supposed bravado. I sniggered, thinking of my mate in a red cape jumping off the counter and spraining his ankle. He might have had redeeming qualities, but like ancient pirate treasure, they were buried so deep inside him, they might be impossible to find. Or they didn't exist.

I was wrong and Father was right.

Huh? What brought that on? I sensed my wolf had hope we'd return to pack life and find a wolf mate.

I can't see the way forward. Perhaps I was always destined to follow my father's wishes and to mate with an Alpha of his choosing for the good of the pack—one who would ensure an ancient treaty was upheld—forfeiting my own happiness.

No. That Alpha wasn't our one and only. You'd never be happy .

Like human princes and princesses of old, I'd be used to ensure the safety of the pack, forging relationships and loyalty by intermarriage—or in the case of shifters, inter-pack mating. And I'd be the stranger, mated to the Alpha but never fitting in, viewed with suspicion and expected to produce pups.

Few Alphas in the twenty-first century used their children like that. But when my omega dad died giving birth to me, Father held me responsible. Me, a newborn, who'd just taken his first breath. But I took away my father's beloved mate, and he'd never forgiven me. I was brought up by pack aunties, passed around from house to house like secondhand baby clothes. If he could have adopted me out as a child, he would have. Seeing me reminded him of what he'd lost.

I shivered, despite the inner shifter heat that humans lacked. It was freezing out here, and I strode inside, brushing snow off my shoulders and stamping my feet in the doorway.

As the bar was so quiet, I pulled out the zippered file that contained my unpaid bills. My usual routine was to shuffle them around, putting them into piles of 1) urgent, 2) ignore, hoping they'd go away, and 3) pretend they didn't exist. I had to pay Wren at the end of the month, not that I had a physical bill for that. And it was necessary to pay the electricity. I tried to economize and used the fireplace as much as possible, but the middle of winter wasn't the best time to be reducing how much power we used.

The door opened, and I glanced up, hoping a group of movie extras were in a good mood, having been paid for a day's work, but they did nothing other than nap because of the shitty weather.

But it was him, the guy whose mate had given birth in here. A first for The Wolf's Den. There'd been no way to capitalize on it. Advertising that the bar was the perfect place to give birth during a blizzard wouldn't tempt any pregnant omega to say,

“Goody. Book me in for a C-section on the 25 th .”

“Back so soon?”

The guy, Deimos, was an ass, but his mate had had nowhere else to bring their little one into the world. I’d left them to it, keeping out of their way, but stayed close enough in case they needed something. Not that I kept a supply of diapers or onesies, but I’d provided hot water and a stack of towels as they did in the movies.

“Can’t keep me away.”

I glanced over his broad shoulder. “Your mate not with you today?”

“Home with the baby.”

I studied his face and a memory flickered. Not of the birth, but he reminded me of someone. And his scent had a hint of the familiar. Had he been around my mate? It was possible they’d passed one another in the street, but instead of enticing, his aroma was repellant.

“What can I get you?” The guy had bought a celebratory bottle of champagne after the birth.

“This place.” He leered at me, and his lips curved in a sneer.

I reeled away, not wanting to scent his breath in case it was sour, much like his demeanor. “Planning another celebration?” He didn’t strike me as the party type, rather he was the kinda guy who enjoyed causing discomfort and pain. Maybe he was so flush with cash that he wanted to rent the bar because his child had been born here. A little memento.

“Nope. Or should I say, not until after I buy The Wolf’s Den.” His eyes slid right and then left. “After I change the name, the decor, and fire the staff.”

My wolf seethed inside me. Not that he loved that his shifter was a bartender. But like me, he sensed this man, who was neither human nor shifter, wanted to hurt me. Or at least crush my resistance until I agreed to a deal that favored only him.

“It’s not for sale.” I busied myself cleaning a non-existent water stain off the spotless counter.

“Oh, please.” He pulled out his phone, tapped it, and flipped it around me to show a figure with so many zeros, my breath caught in my throat.

“Nope.”

“You drive a hard bargain.” He adjusted the price. Upward.

Shit! With that kind of money, I could go somewhere, a beach maybe where the sun always shone and decide what I wanted to do next. I’d be beholden to no one, especially not my Father. If I gave up on my mate, I was designated to be alone anyway. Better to be single with a healthy bank balance than living from paycheck to paycheck.

And yet I loved The Wolf’s Den and refused his offer again.

“Look.” He waved the phone under my nose. “Forget your stupid pride. With a healthy bank balance, you could buy another bar, not this shithole.”

Maybe Deimos was used to people being charmed by him and agreeing to whatever he offered. But that wasn’t going to work on me, especially when he maligned what I’d created here. I was determined not to be dazzled by the zeros, and I stood firm.

“I’m not selling. To you or anyone else.”

He waved his hand around the almost empty space. “The bar should be full at this time of day and yet look around. It's a dump. A failing dump.”

Deimos’s hand shot out and grabbed a pile of my bills. He was quick, and my shifter reflexes were no match for his. He crushed them before uncurling his fingers and allowing them to flutter onto the counter.

“You’re a fool.”

“That may be, but I’m not selling.”

“Come on,” he scoffed and wagged a finger. “You’ll lose it if you don’t sell to me.”

“Not going to happen.” If he didn’t shut up and walk away, he’d be the second person I’d tossed out today. One more and it’d be a record.

“Look at these bills. What happens when you don’t pay them?” Deimos sideswiped them, and the tiny pieces of scrunched-up paper fell to the floor. “The bank forecloses.”

He folded his arms, a self-satisfied smile on his face and leaned in close. His breath wasn’t foul, more numbing cold that reminded me of icicles.

“And then I’ll get it for a steal.”

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Chapter 5

Phobos

I dropped onto a bus bench, the weight of it all too much. I'd thought things would be different now. They had to be! Apate promised!

At first, when I'd woken up after visiting the dark goddess in her secret cave, it had felt like the entire thing had been some kind of dream, though whether it was good or bad, I couldn't decide. I'd been groggy, the image of a sexy lumberjack flitting through my mind, nursing a doozy of a hangover. I hadn't even known it was possible for gods to get hangovers!

I'd stared at myself in the mirror, the sallow skin, bags under my eyes. Something was different... But it wasn't until I'd tried to fly down to the café on the corner for coffee and a donut that I realized I didn't have access to my god powers. I couldn't even get an inch off the ground.

It wasn't a dream! And that meant... I was free.

The realization had filled me with such buoyant hope. I'd immediately booked as many auditions as I could—for commercials, as extras in TV shows, even one looking for a hand model for a watch ad—whatever it was, I was trying out for it. I'd felt so confident that I'd even forced myself to go to a family dinner at my parents' house. Things had been a little strained, certainly awkward, but it had been me taking the first step toward my new life. I'd smiled, hugged my brother, cuddled his new baby like I was fine. I shoved all my personal shit deep down and smiled like I meant

it.

Except... I wasn't fine.

And I was even less fine now.

"She promised," I whined, propping my elbows on my knees and bowing forward, struggling to regain some kind of composure. They were lucky I didn't have my powers, or I would be tempted to raze the entire studio to the ground. The thought seemed to kindle a warmth in my chest, like the dying embers of a fire, but without anywhere for it to go, it resulted in a sting I assumed was acid reflux. I rubbed at the spot, sagging lower on the bench.

Another audition and yet another rejection. The casting directors didn't seem any more impressed than they had any other time. I got the same bored smiles, the same distracted nods, before they thanked me for my time and sent me on my way. What was wrong with me? Why wasn't I landing any roles?

I shoved to my feet and trudged down the street, intentionally heading in the opposite direction of The Wolf's Den. I couldn't stand for Declan to see me like this—still a failure.

I figured... well, I figured if I could get a role, then maybe I could head back into the bar with something to brag about. Something that might make me worth his time... He hadn't been impressed by my superhero role or my status as god of fear, but there was a good chance he hadn't believed me. But if I were an actor, that had to be enough, right?

The snow after the blizzard had long been cleared, and when the wind blew now, I swore I could feel the hope of spring on the current. I wished it was carrying with it a little hope for me, too.

Staring down at the sidewalk like I was, I wasn't paying attention to where I was going. It wasn't until I heard my name being called that my head jerked up, bringing me face to face with Deimos and Cameron.

"Hey, Phobos! It's good to see you." Damn Cameron, looking so sweet and earnest. He really was happy to see me. It reminded me of why I'd fallen for him in the first place.

I wrestled my lips into a smile. "Yeah, you too. What are you guys doing downtown?"

"It's date night," Deimos said, and it irked me how he said it so casually, as if he didn't know how lucky he was to have a date to start with.

"Uh-huh. Well, I should... go," I began, trying to inch past them. "I've got to be up early for filming in the morning. You know how it is, the life of an actor." I had no excuse for the lie, except that I wanted to stick it to my twin.

I felt guilty the second Cameron's eyes lit up in genuine happiness for me. "You're acting now? That's awesome! What is it?"

"Um, no big deal, just some movie. I can't really say anything about it yet, until the PR team makes their announcements. You understand, I'm sure."

Cameron's lip stuck out in a pout. "Aw, yeah, it's okay. Maybe you can tell us more about it tomorrow."

My brain hitched, my stomach dipping like I'd missed a step. "Tomorrow?"

Deimos arched a brow. "Yeah, dinner. You promised Mom you'd be there." He smirked, as though issuing a dare. "You're not backing out, are you?" My twin

brother and I had always been each other's competition growing up, and it was still the same now.

"Oh, I'll be there, and you can tell Mom to set an extra plate, because I'll be bringing a date." Fuck. Why did I say that? "A-a super-hot date, with muscles a-and a beard."

Cam clutched his hands at his chest, making goo-goo eyes. "Aww, you're seeing someone? That makes me so happy!"

"Totally. W-we're super serious." I tried to control the tell-tale blush that was creeping up my cheeks, but Deimos wasn't buying it.

He narrowed his eyes at me. "Can't wait to meet him," he said darkly with the full weight of his skepticism.

"Yep. Sure." This time when I moved to walk away, it was to turn around and head back the way I'd come. "I, uh, forgot something at the studio. Catch ya later."

My legs didn't move as fast as they used to as a god, and I found my breath sawing in and out of my chest by the time I came to a stop in front of the rustic bar. I leaned over, struggling to catch my breath, before I straightened up, shoved my shoulders back, and marched into that bar like I wasn't about to beg—on my knees, if I had to.

Ignoring the two men seated in the corner, bickering over a pitcher of beer, I kept my eyes focused on the bartender. That damn burly omega, with his beard I found myself itching to run my fingers through, and his steely eyes that saw everything. He froze when he saw me, his whole body going rigid, his nostrils flaring, pupils blowing wide. I told myself he wasn't as unaffected as he would have me believe.

I came to a stop in front of the counter. I hadn't seen him in weeks, and it seemed my drunken memory of him hadn't done him justice. If anything, he'd just gotten hotter.

His shirt was blue plaid today, making his eyes closer to ice than steel, and I caught the faint whiff of something, maybe his beard oil. Whatever it was, it was tasty. “Come to dinner with me tomorrow,” I blurted before I could second-guess myself.

Declan spluttered. Whatever he’d expected me to say, this wasn’t it. “Forget it,” he managed to choke out, before he made a point of turning his back on me.

“Please,” I urged, trying to suppress the whine I felt bubbling up. Something in my voice—maybe my sheer desperation—seemed to get his attention, and he peeked back at me. Not one to ignore an opening when I had it, I pushed my luck. “I wanted to apologize for my behavior the last time I was here. It was... inappropriate. I’d been having a bad day and had too much to drink. Not that I’m making excuses, but I would really like the chance to make it up to you.”

Declan softened, just the teeniest amount, but I saw it in the way his face relaxed. “I don’t think that’s a good—”

“It doesn’t have to mean anything. It can just be two men hanging out, sharing some food, some wine. I’ll be a perfect gentleman the entire time, no pressure for anything.” Declan’s mouth had smoothed out, like his resolve was wearing thin, but he wasn’t quite there yet. “All I ask is that you give me a chance. I’ll do anything.”

That last word seemed to catch his attention. He narrowed his eyes, raking his gaze down my designer suit. “Anything?”

“Yes, that’s what I said. Name your price.”

He huffed a laugh. “Funny you should say that... What if I told you it’d cost you... a hundred thousand dollars?”

Was that all? The man was worth far more than that, in my opinion, and what did I

care about money? I'd had hundreds of lifetimes to compile my wealth. "Deal," I said without giving it another thought.

Declan blinked a few times. "W-what? Did you say—"

"Deal, yes. Give me your phone number and I'll text you my address. Be there at 5pm sharp." Resorting to bribery was not my finest moment, but if he didn't have a problem with it, neither did I.

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Chapter 6

Declan

As I got ready for my date, I studied myself in the mirror.

Who the heck was this person who'd agreed to a date on the condition that the guy give me money? I'd compromised my principles, morals, ethics, and whatever else there was to save the bar.

But it was more complicated than that because the same guy I was meeting later was my mate, the one and the same who was the president of the Worldwide Asshats Society, or WAS for short. He'd begged, and I'd agreed on the condition that he fork over a hunk of cash.

This wasn't me. I was the guy who did things by the book—apart from not agreeing to be my father's patsy and do his bidding for the rest of my life. I'd worked hard, saved, and created what should've been a thriving business. That it was failing was kinda my fault 'cause I'd refused to bend the knee to people who treated me and Wren like shit.

I ran my fingers through my hair. It wouldn't sit how it was supposed to and no amount of brushing or water would convince it otherwise. I wasn't one for fancy hair products, so I shrugged and turned away. If my date refused to hand over the money because my hair was a tangled mess, he'd confirm he was president for life of WAS.

Before sliding into the driver's seat, I checked the address. Was he kidding me? That

area was known for its huge estates, rolling lawns, large mansions with home theaters and pantries where the hired help put every ingredient into clear storage containers and labeled them.

I'd watched videos late at night of the owners arranging the pantry contents. They were magnificent, but I doubted anyone ever went into the pantries. They were too beautiful to mess up.

Had my supposed date been jerking my chain when he gave me this address? I half expected to pull up and have the house owner deny knowing the guy.

But as I followed the instructions given by the GPS's tinny voice, I marveled at the homes set far back from the road. On arriving at the address in my phone, I paused at the huge metal gates, and considered reversing and leaving.

This had to be a dream. No one, not even a mate who didn't respond as a mate would by shoving his tongue down my throat and declaring we'd be together forever, pleaded with me for a date and followed it with, "Yes, I'll give you heaps of money."

I pressed the intercom, expecting a voice telling me to piss off, but there was none. Instead, the gates opened, and with butterflies flitting around my belly and my wolf in my ear telling me to be cool, I drove up the long circular driveway, sandwiched between rolling lawns, and parked in front of the house.

The garage door was open, and it housed a white Porsche. If I was in the wrong place, I was waiting for the owner to call the police or their private security firm.

I half expected a valet to take my keys and park the car, but the massive mahogany front door opened, and Phobos stood at the entrance wearing socks but no shoes and a snug pair of jeans. Expensive because the fit was perfection, and it showed off his assets. Goosebumps prickled over my skin as I gazed at his shirt, partly buttoned and

displaying skin I wished I could fondle, squeeze, and nibble.

“Come in.”

His scent filled my nostrils, a signal to my hole to produce copious amounts of slick. As he wasn't a shifter, I doubted he would pick up the aroma.

When I strode in, Phobos jerked his head at an open cupboard, housing shelves of shoes. I took the hint and removed mine, placing them next to shiny leather ones. He might be an ass, but I agreed outside shoes that had trodden in who knew what, shouldn't be traipsed into the house.

My head fell back as I gazed at the high ceiling and the circular staircase, anchored by the hard marble flooring under my feet.

“This is stunning.”

Phobos shrugged, seemingly not impressed by the luxury, but perhaps that was just for show, his attempt at being nonchalant.

“Is it yours?”

He snorted and rolled his eyes. “Yeah. I'm not squatting, if that's what you think.”

We wandered from the entryway into a huge living space with a wall of glass doors, looking out onto a pool and extensive grounds. But the beauty was marred by how untidy the house was. Leftovers were on the table, there were books strewn around the floor, a wastebasket was overflowing with crumpled-up paper, the multiple sofas needed vacuuming, and stuffing was spilling out from the cushions. Not to mention the glass was streaked with finger marks.

Ewww!

It was so gross, I scratched the skin on my wrist. If I didn't get out of here, I'd be covered in a red itchy rash, which was odd because shifters didn't typically suffer from minor human ailments.

Our mate needs help . My wolf was as turned off as I was by the mess, but he sensed Phobos was troubled.

Then he can get himself some.

I resisted the urge to clean up, though if I had to stay here much longer, I'd have a full-blown panic attack.

Phobos followed my gaze. "The untidiness upsets you." He popped a grape from a bowl with a brown apple core into his mouth.

Gods, please don't get sick. I wasn't good with vomit.

"Not sure that's the right word, but you have a beautiful home that's spoiled with crap."

"Doesn't bother me."

I wondered if left without any intervention whether Phobos would become a hoarder. When I'd driven up the driveway, I'd thought of the ice cube vids I watched late at night where rich people put flowers and vegetables into ice cube trays because they had nothing better to do with their day.

But no ice cube would survive in this grimy environment, not that I'd seen the inside of his fridge. I shuddered, thinking of what lay hidden at the back of his freezer.

“But it’s a breeding ground for germs.” I sidestepped a banana skin. “And maybe rodents.” If my wolf caught sight of a rat, he’d shift and eat the damned thing in one bite.

“I have a strong immune system, so I’m not concerned.” He offered me a drink of whatever was in his fridge, but after he cast a glance at my face, his expression changed. I refused but immediately felt bad because he was trying to be a good host, so I mumbled a “Sorry.”

“No worries.”

I couldn’t resist the urge to say something. “You obviously have enough money to hire a maid.”

Mentioning someone’s assets—whether that was a house or the very obvious bulge in his jeans—was something I usually avoided. But he was so indifferent to the display of wealth, I plowed ahead, because this wasn’t normal behavior. He didn’t have to be a clean freak, but this was no way to live.

“I have one, but it’s their day off.”

All of this was done in 24 hours? Maybe a swarm of people had descended on the house. That was a possible explanation, because it was difficult to figure out how one man could cause this much destruction in a day.

I’d come here berating myself for becoming a person I didn’t recognize, and the state of the house had thrown me off. But I would be damned if I didn’t get what he said he’d give me.

“You made a promise.”

His head jerked up from the glass of liquid he was inspecting. “I did?”

I let out a long breath. He didn’t get me here under false pretenses unless his aim was to have me clean up.

“Ummm... the money.” Was this real? Who agreed to hand over money with a lot of zeros when asked? Other than Deimos who’d been trying to buy the business, no one—except Phobos!

I rubbed a hand over my eyes, wondering if when I opened them, a bunch of people would jump out yelling, “Gotcha!” And I’d be the star of a reality show called, “What a Gullible Fool!”

“Of course. A deal is a deal. I’ll transfer the money into your account.”

With our heads together and after me sharing my details, the funds were magically mine a minute later. I stared at the phone, not willing to believe what had happened.

“Let’s go.”

His words pulled me out of my trance. “This isn’t where we’re eating?” Part of me was relieved. I couldn’t wait to get out of this place. But would we take separate cars so afterward, I’d go home alone? If I drove, I’d have to drop him off, and there’d be that awkward moment where we might kiss and there’d be longing looks and sighs before we either both got out or I drove off.

But no way could I spend the night in this house. Maybe tomorrow after the maid had cleaned up.

“No. The dinner’s elsewhere.” He opened the front door. “After you.”

He reminded me of my pack uncles, brought up in a different era where alphas pulled out a chair for their omega.

“We’ll take my car if that’s okay with you.”

Riding in a Porsche with my mate, sitting in the confined space where his scent would overpower me? Was I okay with that?

I was.

Chapter 7

Phobos

I should've thought this through.

The ride to my parents' mansion was... interesting. Though we didn't really speak much, the space was filled instead with his cologne. I'd never smelled anything like it before, musky and earthy but also crisp, like walking through a forest in the winter. It wasn't what I would've described as sexy, but my body sure reacted, my pants tightening around my crotch.

I opened my mouth to start a conversation a dozen times, but every time, I remembered the look on his face when he'd said my house was filled with germs. He was disgusted by me, which kinda made me disgusted with myself. I made a silent vow to try harder. Ever since Cameron left, I hadn't been able to find the motivation to bother, but I'd clearly let my self-pity get the better of me.

We pulled up in front of my parents' mansion, and Declan's jaw dropped a little lower. "How is this real?" he muttered under his breath.

I got out of the car and rushed around to open his door for him. He seemed startled, as if no one had shown him the courtesy before. "Oh, uh... thanks."

"Of course." I waffled on whether to offer him my elbow or not, but his gaze was angled away from me, so I passed on it. "Um, so, I didn't tell my parents much about you, but—"

Declan's head whipped around. "I'm meeting your parents ?!" he blurted out, eyes widening.

I frowned. "Yes, and also my siblings, but—"

"Gods, fate must've been drunk when they sent you." What was that supposed to mean? He took a long, slow breath, pinching the bridge of his nose, his eyes closed. "You invited me to meet your family as a first date?" He was speaking slowly, like I was a child or something.

"Y-yes?" Was that wrong? I was kinda new to the whole human dating thing.

"Was a little heads-up too much to ask for?" He shook his head, frowning. "Let's just get this over with. I should've asked for more money." He stomped toward the front door ahead of me, and I raced to catch up. Damn this new human body of mine, I was so slow. How was he so fast? He'd already rung the doorbell by the time I got there.

"Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to spring this on you. It's just that my brother—" That was all the explanation I managed to get out before the door opened to my mother's beaming face.

My mother, of course, gushed over Declan, taking him by the hand and leading him into the dining room. I trailed behind them, hating the way Declan's shoulders tensed, inching up toward his ears.

I hadn't meant to put him in an awkward situation. My foremost thought had been impressing my family, and who was more impressive as a date than Declan? It was two birds with one stone, dinner with my family and spending more time with the hot lumberjack. But now, I realized that I hadn't spent nearly enough time thinking about what Declan would want.

Shit. I screwed up.

“There he is,” Deimos said, rising from his chair, smiling widely at me before his gaze slid over to Declan, and his grin slipped a little. “And this must be... your date?”

But then Declan froze, and I swore the hair at the back of his neck rose, his upper lip curling in a feral snarl. “ You ,” he seethed between gritted teeth. “ You’re his brother?”

I looked back and forth between them. Was I missing something? “You two know each other?”

Cameron was the one to answer, though, as he pushed his chair back and came over, carrying my nephew, Damon. “Oh my gods! It’s you, from the bar! Seeing you again must be fate.”

I started putting two and two together. Right, the bar. The Wolf’s Den must’ve been where Cameron ended up giving birth during the blizzard. Huh, that was... quite the coincidence.

“Here, you want to hold him?” Cameron shoved the baby toward Declan, who looked stunned over the whole experience.

“Uhh, okay?” He looked a little uncomfortable holding a baby. At least he didn’t seem angry at Deimos anymore. Why was he mad at my brother, anyway?

As I watched him get more comfortable with Damon, though, a strange warmth crawled through me. He looked good with a baby. Like, really good. The strangest image popped into my head, of him pregnant with my baby.

After Harmonia led us through some stilted conversation, Declan passed the baby

back to Cameron, and we all settled in at the table.

“So, how long have you two been dating?” my dad asked, plopping himself down in his seat and reaching for the platter of meat.

“A few months,” I blurted, panicked gaze flicking over to Declan, pleading silently with him to go along with it.

He glared back with narrowed eyes but thankfully didn’t dispute my claim.

“Months, hmm?” Deimos said smoothly. “Strange that this is the first we’re hearing of him.”

I chuckled tightly. “Oh, you know how new love is. I wanted to keep him all to myself.”

Declan choked on his sip of water and set his glass down, reaching for a napkin. “Went down the wrong way.”

“Are you okay, pookie?” I asked, patting him on the back.

His glare turned murderous. “I’m just fine, shnookums .”

I should’ve made our excuses and left, but I couldn’t seem to stop myself. With every little tidbit my brother dropped about his perfect life with his perfect family, I felt this uncontrollable urge to one-up him. To prove that I was okay, that my life was sunshine and roses, that my future was bright. I bragged about this secret movie I was filming, called Declan pet names, and just when I thought things couldn’t get worse... we reached the dessert course.

“Zeek’s baby food business is really taking off,” Deimos said, draping his arm across

the back of Cameron's chair. "Who'd have thought a low-level, uh... employee could do so well for himself." He'd almost said the word "demon" instead of employee, but he didn't know how much he could say around my date. Zeek was his butler of sorts, but now even his demonic lackey was doing better than me?!

This weird fluttery panic made my anxiety surge. Without thinking about it, I burst out with, "Declan and I are thinking of starting a family!"

My dad dropped his fork with a clatter, and all heads turned to me wearing matching shocked expressions—including Declan. It was like I'd dropped a bomb onto the center of the table next to the soufflé. My parents shared a knowing look, before my mom said, "That's wonderful, dear." Her words didn't match the guarded look on her face.

With a screech across the floor, Declan shoved his chair back and stood up. "Thank you for dinner. It was delicious," he said tightly, dropping his napkin onto the table. "Sorry, I think I should be going."

Without looking at me, he headed toward the front door, and I raced after him. "Declan, wait, I can explain," I called.

"Don't bother," he called over his shoulder on his way out the door. Before it could slam shut, I pulled it back open, running down the stone steps.

"At least let me give you a ride home," I tried, but he turned around so fast that I nearly slammed into him.

His eyes flashed dangerously. "Look, you seem like a nice-enough guy—most of the time—and trust me when I say I understand family drama, but I do not take kindly to being used. That's what you did in there, you used me as some kind of prop for this weird image you're trying to build. And if there's one person you don't treat like that,

it's your m—" He cleared his throat, his cheeks blushing. "It's me. I deserve better."

"You do," I agreed, but it was too little, too late. He'd already turned away, walking around my car and heading for the street.

"I'm sorry! Please, Declan," I called, trailing after him slowly.

"Don't call me," he said with a sense of finality that hit me right in the chest.

My eyes followed him as he walked away, an unfamiliar ache blooming inside me. It was hot and squirming, and I didn't like it one bit. Was this... guilt? I was supposed to be the good guy! I was the god who turned his back on war, who chose to be a hero and save lives! But this... this felt...

My eyes burned as Declan disappeared around the corner, and I held a hand to my abdomen, dinner turning to a stone in my stomach.

Maybe if I sent him a tip, it would make this awful feeling go away. Another fifty thousand should do it.

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Chapter 8

Declan

I clicked a button, and somewhere in cyberspace, computers shared information and the bill was paid. I was on a high as I downloaded a receipt. Having been in such debt, I kept every receipt and screenshotted the text that said I owed nothing more to that particular company.

“Magic!”

Alan, a Wolf’s Den regular, raised his glass of beer. “Send some my way!”

“I’ll do my best.”

Gods, I could get used to this. Glancing at my trusty zippered folder that contained fewer bills than it had in months, I wondered if I could pay the remaining balances today. If so, I’d celebrate.

Yippee! Other than mating, there was only one way my beast celebrated and that was by running and hunting.

We’ll see .

The bar hummed with customers talking and laughing, while a couple argued about which song to play on the jukebox. People leaned on the counter chatting up someone they were interested in.

There were so many clients that I could no longer conduct my business on the counter, so I was tucked into a corner at a tiny desk. I could have used the shoebox-sized room that was technically my office, but I liked being in the crowd, and besides, that space was full of cases of beer.

Wren and the new guy I'd hired were serving up a storm, and I took this moment to breathe and welcome the sensation which embraced me that I wasn't about to lose everything.

But I couldn't take all the credit for this new influx of customers. A few weeks ago Wren had held her phone in front of me. A video played that included scenes from the bar with a voiceover making a punny expression.

"Huh? What am I looking at?" She was a sweetheart, but if she'd created that ad to drum up business for The Wolf's Den, I had to tell her it wouldn't work. It was cringeworthy.

"Did you do this, and if so, where did the money come from? It feels expensive," she asked.

What? That crap? People were drawn to stuff like that? I blocked all ads on social media and muted the TV when they came on. I hadn't told Wren about my windfall, just said she wasn't to worry about whether I could pay her.

I held my hands up in surrender mode. "Not me. I'm innocent of that crime."

But an hour later, new customers arrived, and one mentioned the ad. He filmed the inside of the bar, telling people how cool it was. Over the next week, people streamed in, and every night, the room was packed. I'd had inquiries about booking the place for parties, and there wasn't a moment where someone wasn't videoing their friends or the old-fashioned signs I'd found in a secondhand store, or hugging Wren.

It had to be him: Phobos. Not his damned brother, because it was in Deimos's interest to see me fail. Was Phobos trying to redeem himself? It wouldn't work. He'd used me, put me in an impossible position with his lies. I tried not to think about how my mate was lost to me. There was no way I was mating with that jackass.

But we'll be alone until we die . My wolf had urged me to call Phobos, but I refused to allow him to walk all over me and treat me like shit. With his monied background, he'd probably done that to everyone his entire life. I pitied his poor maid, but perhaps she'd run off and that was why his house was like a bomb site.

A burst of laughter from the table closest to me brought me back to the present. The group had ordered champagne. We didn't get many requests for bubbly, but I'd bought a few bottles ages ago, thinking I'd open one when the bar's earnings reached a certain point. They never did, though they were close to that magical number now.

Those guys—three men and a woman—reminded me of Deimos, Phobos, and their parents. Not that they were related but the way they moved and held themselves, their self-assuredness, even their scent made me think of my mate and his family.

The phone vibrated in my pocket. My father had taken to calling me at night as well as when he drank his morning coffee.

“What's all that noise?”

Hello to you too, Father . “Customers. They're enjoying themselves.”

“Pfft. Selling alcohol isn't an honest living. You need to connect with the land.”

For a wolf shifter who hunted animals and killed them, I wasn't fond of dirt, blood, and gore, so being on the land didn't entice me.

“The bar is doing well, Father.” He should’ve been proud of me.

“Declan, can you lend a hand?”

Wren and Astor, the new barman, needed my help, so I apologized to Father and ended the call. The next hour I was too busy serving drinks and engaging in idle chatter to think about pack life or Phobos.

Until in the midst of the crowded bar I caught a familiar scent. My head shot up as he made his way through the throng. The way he moved and how the crowd parted before him reminded me of a warm knife slicing through butter.

“Declan, I’m—”

I cut him off with, “There’s nothing you can say that will make up for what you did.” That caught the attention of customers on either side of Phobos. He steered me toward my desk in the corner and asked if there was somewhere more private we could speak.

“No.” I turned my back. “Go away. You’re not welcome here.”

Putting his hands on my shoulders, he twisted me to face him. I drew in a sharp breath at being so close to him, his icy breath mingling with my warm one and creating a little patch of fog between us.

“I need help.” His anguished expression tugged at my heart, but I crossed my arms and told my heart to ignore him.

“You mean therapy? I can recommend someone, and a cleaning service.”

“Ouch! I suppose I deserved that.”

“And more.” I pushed past him but made the mistake of heading for my former office, and he followed me.

He inspected the boxes of beer. “Love what you’ve done with the place.”

I rolled my eyes ‘cause he thought he was so damned funny. “There’s little storage here, so we make do. Unlike some people who have oodles of space and fill it with trash and clutter.”

His shoulders sagged. My heart flip-flopped, and my wolf begged me to reconsider. He’s not a bad guy .

My beast’s review was not enough to have me forgive Phobos and mate him.

“I’m inadequate.” He covered both hands with his face.

Shoot. Now we were getting into his sexual prowess or lack of it. I placed a hand on his arm. “Perhaps you should see a doctor. There are so many medical options. I’m sure they can help.”

He removed his hands. “Doctor?”

“Ummm, aren’t there little blue pills?”

“What? I... No. That’s not my problem. I’ve always been able to perform in bed.”

Not what I wanted to hear, but I’d opened the door to that subject, as lawyers called it.

“Great.” This was awkward. His cock was working fine, and so why were we here?

“I’m the mirror opposite of my brother. Where he succeeds, I fail. So I perform ridiculous stunts to try and outwit and outplay him.” He nodded at me. “Hence me pretending you and I were a thing.” He chewed his bottom lip which kindled a small fire in my belly. My body was betraying me today, and I wished I could escape.

“I fail at everything, but my world could collapse and I wouldn’t care as long as you were with me.”

Yikes, he was laying it on thick. “Did you steal that from a greeting card?”

“No. I made it up. Greeting cards? Never heard of them.”

Oh no. No, no, no. The little smile tugging at the corner of his mouth, his hands on his hips, the light glinting in his eyes were trying to sway me. And my wolf was jabbering on about giving Phobos another chance.

And there was that need inside me, no matter how awful my mate was, to mate him. That instinct that had guided my kind since time began was pulling me to forgive this man who lived in and created chaos.

He didn’t have a wolf telling him to mate, but was there a niggling sensation inside him that he didn’t understand? He just knew that he had to be close to me.

I pictured my life with Phobos, wondering if I could cope with the turmoil that followed him like a shadow. But I did understand family drama and trauma. Maybe I could cut him some slack.

“Okay, what do you propose?”

“A second chance. A date.”

I drew back in horror as I dredged up the memories of the night at his folks.

“If I agree, it’s just us two. No family allowed.”

He put a hand over his heart. “I can’t wait to be alone with you.”

“And not in your house.”

He made a face “But it’s clean, and I had it redecorated so it’s more warm and less like a museum.

“Museum, huh?” I couldn’t get into a discussion about the characteristics of a museum. “Somewhere casual.”

“Hmmm, a nudist colony?”

“Phobos!” I giggled. “We’d freeze our bits in this weather.”

“Can’t have that.” He opened the door. “I’ll text you, and it’ll be perfect.”

I didn’t move, but as my wolf squeed, I told him this was Phobos’s last chance.

If he fucks up, that’s it. He’s dead to me .

Chapter 9

Phobos

Declan refused to let me pick him up, and I didn't blame him. He wanted an escape route. But I was a pretty old-fashioned guy. I mean, it was only natural considering my age. I didn't want this date as merely an apology for my inappropriate behavior. I wanted to wine and dine him. To get to know him better, make him laugh. I wanted Declan to have a good time, and ultimately, I wanted to see him again.

I wanted to date him.

The realization surprised me more than I was willing to admit. It had me willing to bend my old-fashioned habits to meet him halfway. If driving himself made him feel more comfortable, then so be it.

We texted a few times leading up to the date, and we ended up settling on going to a movie. There was no pressure to hold a conversation, no awkward eye contact that way. It was Sunday, the only day his bar was closed to patrons, though the theater parking lot was packed.

I stood outside the theater, welcoming the chill. My body felt a little feverish. I hoped I wasn't coming down with something. I'd never been human, had never had to deal with a cold or flu before, but maybe when Apate took my powers, it had also left me vulnerable to illness.

So far, my life hadn't changed all that much with the loss of power. I mean, I had to

drive everywhere since I couldn't fly, and I no longer had extra-strong senses. Just as well I wasn't overwhelmed at the smell when I burned my dinner. I'd even picked up a pair of magnifying glasses from the pharmacy because I couldn't see as clearly when I read a book, but likewise, my acting abilities apparently hadn't gotten any better either.

I'd just become weaker. More human . And I was really starting to think this deal I'd made was a sham.

A prickling sensation down my spine had me standing taller. My eyes tracked a rusty car pulling into the lot, and even though I couldn't see the driver clearly, I knew with absolute certainty that it was Declan. There was something about him that snagged on my insides, making it impossible to let him go.

His eyes found me straight away when he got out of the car, and he made his way over to me slowly, hands tucked into his pockets, shoulders hunched. He looked good and smelled even better, his scent wrapping around me as he stepped up in front of me. Even as built as he was, he was still a few inches shorter than me, and he tipped his chin back to look up at me.

“Hey, have you been waiting long?” he asked, his eyes skittering away then back, as if he couldn't help himself.

I preened a little under his scrutiny. I knew I looked good, in my tight jeans that hugged my ass and muscular thighs just right. “No, just a few minutes. Shall we go in?”

I let him pick what movie we saw, and while I'd been expecting a typical date-night movie, some rom-com I would promptly forget, he'd surprised me by picking an action film I was excited to see. “Is that okay?” he asked, watching my face carefully.

“Yeah, it’s perfect. Am I allowed to buy your ticket?” Since he was a modern omega, I felt like I had to ask. I didn’t want him thinking I was going to hold it over him later, expecting him to pay me back in sexual favors.

He smirked. “Yeah, I think you can afford it. I might even let you splurge on a large popcorn for us to share.”

“Okay, but only if we can get extra butter.”

“Is there any other way?” he said, grinning wide. His smile, sudden and blinding, left me stunned. It wasn’t until I started to get a little lightheaded that I even remembered to breathe again.

I found myself relaxing as we stood in line for tickets, then snacks. While we might’ve started off on the wrong foot, I soon found that we had a lot of common ground. We had the same taste in movies and food, then while we were watching the trailers, the conversation flowed from one topic to the next. By the time the lights dimmed, I felt confident enough to prop my arm on the armrest between us, hoping he might want to take my hand.

The movie was full of explosions and gunfire, and while I’d been really excited to see it, I found myself more enthralled by watching Declan instead. His face was so expressive, his eyes lit up from the screen.

A few times, our fingers brushed together when we both reached for popcorn at the same time, our skin greasy with butter and salt, and the touches began to linger. When I licked my fingers, I imagined I could taste him. By the end of the film, my cock was aching. I wondered, was he at all affected by me?

The lights came up, and we shared a look, and maybe I was imagining things, but it almost seemed like he was reluctant for the date to be over. Hoping that was the case,

I said, “Can I treat you to a cup of coffee?”

He pursed his lips. “It’s awfully late for coffee, but... maybe some pie?”

My stomach gave a dangerous flip, making me feel borderline queasy. “Yeah, that sounds great.”

There was a small 24-hour diner just down the street from his place called Nellie’s, so we drove our separate cars there and met inside. It was your typical diner, with Formica tabletops, vinyl benches, a checkerboard floor, and a row of stools at an eat-at counter. There were old black-and-white pictures framed on the walls, of a bygone era in Valleywood history. I wasn’t even a little surprised that the woman behind the counter with her graying blond hair in a bun knew Declan by name.

“Come here often?” I teased with an arched brow.

He just shrugged. “What can I say? They have great pie.”

To prove that fact, he ordered a slice of four different kinds for us to share. Cherry, apple pecan, spiced raisin, and strawberry rhubarb.

We settled into a booth at the back and slid all the way in, leaving him the choice of a spot beside me. While I was disappointed at first that he sat across from me, I quickly enjoyed it all the more because not only could I stare into his beautiful eyes, but also because I felt one of his legs bump against mine beneath the table, and he didn’t pull away.

“So... have you been to any more auditions?” he asked, digging his fork into the cherry pie first.

I couldn’t help the burn of my blush. “No...” I nibbled on my bottom lip, struggling

with the urge to tell him all my secrets. I wanted him to like me, and I figured that meant impressing him, but also... that was an important part of being in a relationship, right? Making yourself vulnerable to someone? “Can I tell you something?” I finally asked, trying some strawberry rhubarb pie, letting the sweet-tart combination be my main focus.

His gray eyes flashed with something I couldn’t discern, but he said, “Of course. I wish you would.” His lips tipped up at the corner. “You’re a bit of a mystery to me.”

I smiled, but it was strained. “I’m not very good at acting. And honestly, I don’t think I like it very much. The constant rejections are a bit disheartening.”

Declan seemed surprised and propped his elbow on the table beside one of the plates, his chin in his hand. “Then why would you do it?”

I cringed. “You’re going to think I’m stupid.”

He huffed a laugh. “So far, I’ve seen you get fall-down drunk, witnessed your disaster of a house, followed by watching you embarrass yourself in front of your family. If I was going to think you’re stupid, I already would.”

His honesty made me laugh. “Okay, fair enough. Well, I like the way it makes me feel when people adore me. I guess I figured if I got famous as an actor...” I shrugged, embarrassed. When I said it out loud, it sounded really shallow.

Declan, though, didn’t laugh at me. He nodded, and after a moment of thought said, “Unpopular opinion, but I don’t think actors have earned that level of adoration. Entertaining people is great, but there are more altruistic ways you could earn it. It’s obvious you don’t need the money, so why not find something you enjoy instead? Why not try volunteering at the children’s hospital? I’d bet you could dress up in those superhero tights and cape of yours and go help out, and they will never reject

you. Plus, the kids would absolutely adore you.”

“Huh.” I thought that over, and I didn’t hate the idea. Kids were a special kind of human, innocent and pure, and the thought of being the target of their devotion made me warm. “I think that’s a great job for me to try.”

Declan graced me with another of those beaming smiles that made my insides heat.

We finished our pie and mugs of tea, but the closer we got to the end of our date, the more my nerves seemed to fray. My stomach twisted, my skin flushed warmer. I’d never felt this nervous in my life.

Since he lived so close, he’d simply parked his car behind the bar and walked over. And even though my car was right out front of the diner, I fell into step beside him on the sidewalk, opting to walk him home.

As a god of fear, everyone had been afraid of me, imbuing me with unbelievable power, but this... as understated as it was, it was so much better. Being able to get close to someone, to Declan specifically.

“I had a really nice time,” he said as we arrived at the front door of The Wolf’s Den. His apartment was upstairs, through a door at the back of the bar.

“Try not to sound so surprised,” I teased. “Would you say you had such a good time that you could stand to see me again?”

He fought to keep his smile down and lost. “Yeah, I think that would be all right.”

This was the moment of decision. Should I kiss him good night? Did he want me to? Before the pause between us could get awkward, Declan muttered, “Fuck it,” and gripped me by the front of my shirt and dragged me down with surprising force.

I allowed him to pull me in, my lips colliding with his in a clash of lips, tongue, and teeth. What should've been a chaste first kiss escalated quickly into make-out territory. He dug his fingers into my hair, moaning into my mouth, and I swept my tongue through his, getting my first true taste of him. It was intoxicating.

“Your skin is so warm,” he murmured, pressing kisses along my jaw, his beard adding a new level of texture as it tickled my neck.

My hands seemed to have a mind of their own as I pulled the shirt out from the back of his pants, searching for skin. I could've gone up, tracing the muscles of his back, but instead, I opted to go down, under the denim of his jeans, inside the elastic waistband of his underwear, to grab a handful of his ass. Gods, he was slick along the crease of his cheeks, teasing me with the promise of his tight entrance. He bucked his hips against me, pressing his hard length to mine.

“Come inside with me,” he panted against my throat as he nipped his way across the sensitive skin.

Nice, proper old-fashioned men would wait for the third date at the very least before sex, but my brain was going through some serious calculations. The first night we met could've been classified as going out for drinks, and dinner with my parents, disaster though it was, was absolutely a date. That would make this the third!

I found myself nodding hard. “Yeah, okay. Please.”

We stumbled through the front door to the bar, intending to head upstairs to his apartment, but before we could get that far, a deep, angry voice interrupted us.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?”

Declan's whole body went rigid, and even with my weakened hearing, I caught the

sound of his teeth grinding together. “Hello, Father.”

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Chapter 10

Declan

“I can’t believe I had to witness that disgusting display of... of...” His voice faltered, and I completed the sentence.

“Affection? Something you wouldn’t understand, Father.”

Phobos draped an arm around my shoulder as though he was protecting me. Maybe he was, and that was sweet, but it would infuriate Father. And while my father barked, snarled, and growled, he wouldn’t physically hurt me. Or he never had. With me, it was a show of bravado, like dogs who snapped when strangers crossed their territory

Not that I could say that about his underlings in the pack. He treated them badly for the slightest blunder.

“I need you to come home.”

I pointed to the stairs. “I am, or I will be when I get up there. Convenient, right? Living above the bar.” I kept my voice light, though my father’s wolf was in the forefront of his gaze. He was just as much an ass as Father because he’d lost his wolf mate when my omega dad died.

While it was awkward having Phobos witness our dysfunctional relationship, I refused to agree to any of Father’s demands, just because he’d a) interrupted us about

to get naked and b) I was embarrassed in front of my soon-to-be lover.

“You belong with me and the pack.”

I tilted my head as if I was considering what he’d said, instead of it being more of the same old, same old.

“But that’s not true, is it, Father of mine, because I wouldn’t be staying with you.”

Phobos chose that moment to enter the conversation. “Why not? Surely if your son comes for a vacation, he’ll stay with you. Unless you have a guest house.”

“Stay out of this.” Father got in Phobos’s face, his wolf’s eyes having swapped with Father’s. Spittle gathered on his lips, but if he was grossed out, Phobos didn’t show it, and he didn’t back down. My father’s body hummed with indignation that anyone would interfere in his and his son’s relationship.

I elbowed Phobos out of the way, not wanting Father to slam a fist into my date’s face.

“I’m busy this evening, but I can meet you at a diner down the street for breakfast. It’s next to L’Hotel Valeur, go get yourself a room.”

Father grunted and averted his gaze from my date to me. “I didn’t come here to spend a night in some cheap hotel.” He grabbed my arm, but my wolf funneled his strength to me and combined it with my own, and I jerked out of his grasp. There was an audible gasp from Father.

“How dare you? I’m your father and Alpha. You will do as I say.”

“I’m a grown-ass man and not a pup for you to bully, ignore, and hand off to other

pack members to look after and raise.”

“Sounds like you’re a real peach.” Phobos put a protective hand on my arm.

Gods, not now. I might not have been handling my father, but I was holding my own in the conversation, and Phobos was antagonizing him. It would get ugly, and my father might shift. My date was no match for that mean-ass wolf inside the man who was ordering me to do as he said.

My father’s chest heaved, and a sprinkling of fur appeared on his forearms. Phobos didn’t appear to notice or he would have held his hands up in surrender and scuttled away.

“What did I tell you?” Father spat out.

Oh, this wasn’t good. His body was trembling with fury, and if his beast lashed out at my date, he might sever Phobos’s jugular.

“Please, Phobos.” I put a hand to his chest, his heart pounding under my palm, skin scalding even through his shirt. “Stay out of it. I can deal with this. Trust me.”

“No, I refuse to allow you to be bullied by a man who calls himself your father.” With his index finger, he prodded Father’s chest.

Yikes. He touched the Alpha, and not by accidentally brushing against him or shaking his hand. Instead, it was an aggressive finger poke.

Father growled, the sound coming from deep in his belly as his canines elongated, dripping with saliva. Phobos raised a hand, as if he were holding a sword and was going to anoint Father or knight him. Father and I both stared at the odd gesture, and I hoped my date would combine it with an apology.

But he grunted and brought his hand close to his face and shook it. I wondered if he was experiencing an episode of some kind and whether I should call the paramedics or search his pockets for medication.

“What the—” His voice was filled with frustration.

I pushed him away, hoping he'd take the hint and shut his mouth, but he glanced at me and trailed a finger over my cheek before shoving himself between Father and me.

Why? Oh gods, why?

“I told you and you didn't listen. More fool you.” Father didn't shift, but he pushed me aside while he confronted my date. He was a little taller than Phobos who didn't appear to be intimidated. He stood his ground.

Either my date was foolhardy or he genuinely believed he would win a fight against an Alpha wolf. If he was doing this to protect me and not some macho alpha BS, I was touched. But he'd be touched by my father—or rather punched, walloped, beaten, and bloodied—if he didn't back down.

Father didn't do as expected which was to flatten my date. Instead, he clenched his fists and enacted the stare-down. I'd been the recipient of those growing up, and I'd been terrified at the intensity of his gaze.

“No one puts his filthy finger that's been gods know where on me.

My face burned, and I studied my boots because I was aware of exactly where Phobos's fingers had been. And Father had witnessed it.

I looked up as Father brushed off some lint from my date's coat before grabbing the

lapels and bringing Phobos's face within an inch of his own.

"On the other hand, I can manhandle you because I don't like you and you had your hands on my beloved son."

"Beloved?" I scoffed, but neither man paid me any attention.

I sniffed the air that crackled not just with the mingling scents of my father and my date, but with simmering tension and fury. Father's jaw tightened, and he snarled.

Phobos had been remarkably calm during this exhibition of shifter anger, but when he told my father to cool it, I winced. "We can discuss this, or if you prefer, we can go outside and go ten rounds. Your choice."

Gods, he wouldn't last one round. What was he thinking?

Father's hand curled into a fist, but he didn't land a punch. He snapped his head forward, headbutting his brow on Phobos's. I yelped and held both hands over my ears, the crack of bone hitting bone making me shiver and bile slide up my throat.

Phobos grunted and staggered back as blood spurted from his forehead.

"What the fuck have you done, you foolish old man? Holding on to your resentment for decades and allowing it to fester and deny me any chance of happiness."

I grabbed Phobos and steadied him as he wiped the blood trickling over his cheeks with his hand. He studied it, rolling it between his fingers as if he'd never seen it before.

"There's a first-aid kit behind the bar."

“I’m fine.” Phobos grinned, but the smile didn’t reach his eyes. He pulled himself up to his full height, his body pulsing with energy and what I swore was light. I blinked as he was surrounded by an aura of heat and his eyes glowed.

But it was my mind playing tricks, it had to be. The stress of Father appearing, ordering me back to the pack, besting my date, and beating him up was threatening to overwhelm me. The weight of it was heavy on my shoulders

Phobos bared his teeth at Father and coiled his hands as he stood toe to toe. This was a different man than a moment ago when he’d been knocked about by Father. My chest tightened and each breath whistled. There was a sour taste in my mouth that mirrored the nausea in my belly. I grimaced at the pain that panic produced because Father wasn’t to be messed with. He was a warrior Alpha and didn’t bend to anyone’s will.

But my mate was standing tall, his spine ramrod straight, and I worried he was going to turn into a twisting ball of light and wipe Father from the planet. I giggle-snorted because I was conjuring up an epic battle that existed only in my head.

Impossibly, the wolf retreated from my father’s gaze and his shoulders slumped, appearing to be a bit disoriented. He pushed hair back from his face with shaking hands and adjusted his cufflinks. The fury that had been evident moments earlier disappeared, and Father appeared to be who he was, a middle-aged Alpha who was propelled only by resentment.

“This is not the end, Declan. Your destiny has been mapped out since you were born and you killed your omega father.”

He couldn’t resist putting the blame on me for fate taking his mate away from him.

“I will be back.” He pushed past me and slammed the door behind him.

“Did he steal that line from the movie?”

I rolled my eyes at how my date was making light of what happened.

But I needed an explanation.

Chapter 11

Phobos

I stood there stunned for a moment after Declan's father stormed out. I couldn't wrap my head around everything that had happened in the past five minutes. From first kiss to physical assault, all in the blink of an eye. My heart pounded hard in my chest, echoing in my head where he'd headbutted me. I lifted a hand to the source of the throbbing.

"Don't touch it," Declan scolded, taking me by the hand. "Come on, let's get you cleaned up."

I followed blindly, unaware of my surroundings as he unlocked a door behind the bar beside his office, grabbing the first-aid kit from behind the counter. We headed up a dark narrow stairwell, single-file, the wood creaking under our feet, his fingers still entwined with mine like he didn't want to let go. I could feel the trickle of blood down the bridge of my nose and my cheek. We shucked our jackets quickly, leaving them on hooks at the door, before I let him lead me through his shadowy apartment. I didn't have a chance to check it out before I was being ushered into a tiny bathroom.

Declan flicked the single bulb on overhead, the yellow light glaring off the pale blue tiles. "Sit," he instructed, pointing at the closed toilet seat. The plastic groaned a little at my weight, but if I broke it, I would buy him a new one. Hell, I would buy him a whole new apartment. This one was too small, too dark and old, the grout around the tub cracked and gray, though spotlessly clean.

Sighing, Declan set the first-aid kit on the narrow counter and flipped it open. “I’m sorry about my father. He’s...” He didn’t seem to know how to finish that sentence. “But you shouldn’t have antagonized him. I know how to take care of myself.”

He wouldn’t meet my eyes, so I reached out and took his hand, pulling him over until he was standing between my knees. “I don’t doubt your abilities for a second, but you shouldn’t have to protect yourself from your own father. You know that, right?”

I hated how sad his eyes were, how exhaustion seemed to weigh him down. “In an ideal world, maybe, but that’s not the kind of father he is.”

My own father was the literal god of war, and as hard as he’d been on me and Deimos, never once had he threatened us or tried to force us to do his bidding. This was messed up.

From his spot between my legs, Declan grabbed a packet of sterile gauze and a small bottle of rubbing alcohol. The scent of it seared my nostrils as he soaked the gauze pad in it and brought it to my forehead.

He took my face gently in his strong hand and tipped it up, dabbing at the wound. “You were such a fool to go head to head with him—literally,” he said, snorting at his accidental joke.

I hissed and tried to draw back from the stinging pain. “Ow, that hurts,” I blurted, surprised.

Declan arched a brow at me. “Seriously? This is barely more than a scratch. I’ve had worse from shaving. You’d think you’ve never been injured before.”

“Well... I haven’t,” I admitted reluctantly.

“How is that possible?” His eyes crinkled at the corners, his hair falling forward over his face as he shook his head. “Does this have to do with the whole... glowing-eyes thing? You want to explain what that was? I thought for sure my dad was going to beat you to a pulp, but then he just seemed to give up. What did you do?”

Gods weren’t really supposed to go around telling mortals about us, but technically, I’d already revealed it all when I was drunk. And since I wasn’t exactly one of them anymore—not to mention there was something a little extra about him too—I decided to throw caution to the wind.

I winced again as he held me firmly in place and went back to tending to my injury, my skin feeling tender and cool as the alcohol dried. “Remember that night I was first here and had a little too much to drink?”

He huffed a laugh. “You mean the time you got trashed, bragged about wearing tights, and then hit on me, and I had to throw you out? Nope, doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Smartass,” I mumbled. “As I was saying, that night, everything I told you, well, it was all true. I was literally a superhero, like flying in to save the day, super strength, the whole shebang. I am a god of fear—or was , rather. That’s a whole other story, involving me trading my powers for freedom, but that doesn’t really matter except to say I’m not sure how well it’s sticking. The glowing eyes, the creeping, spine-tingling terror... yeah, that was just a small taste of what my powers used to be. And so yeah, I’ve never actually bled before. Can’t say I’m a fan.”

Declan’s hand had stilled, hovering in the air between us. He was frowning in thought. “Huh. I thought that was just drunk rambling.” Wow, he’d accepted that pretty easily. “Your brother and sister?”

“Gods,” I confirmed, nodding.

“Your parents too? When you introduced them as Ares and Aphrodite, those weren’t just hippie names from the sixties?”

“Also gods.” I nodded, though I’d thought the answer was pretty obvious.

“That actually explains a lot. Like that couple I’d overheard talking about their new baby, calling him their little demigod.” His eyes widened. “Wait, so what about those actors, Anubis or Horus Ahket? Holy shit, or Apollo Kesios?!”

“Okay, okay, no need to make me feel worse about my failed attempt at acting,” I said with a grimace. “Some gods can make it work.”

“Sorry, I guess I’m just trying to wrap my head around the fact that the gods are real and they live among us.” I reached for my forehead, since he seemed to be done with it, but he swatted my hand aside. “I said don’t touch. If you’re not a god anymore, who knows if you can get an infection.”

“And what about you?” I asked, setting my hands tentatively on his hips. “What was with the growling and the flashing eyes, your dad’s strength? There’s no way you’re entirely human either.”

He pursed his lips but didn’t immediately brush me off. “I’m not really supposed to tell people either, but you’re actually... kind of a special case. So, I can turn into a wolf.”

“Oh, you’re a shifter. Sure, that makes sense.”

“Y-you—you’ve heard of shifters? Oh. I mean, of course you have, because you’re sort of a part of the paranormal community already.”

I laughed at his reaction. “Sorry, I didn’t mean for the big reveal to be so

anticlimactic. Should I act more awed?" I widened my eyes to comical size, my mouth a wide O. "Woooooow! That's so cool!" I gushed with as much fake enthusiasm as I could.

Declan laughed, a rich throaty sound that had my cock perking up, a reminder of where we'd been before his dad had so rudely interrupted us. He slapped my chest lightly. "It's no wonder you're not getting any acting jobs. You're horrible!"

I let out a little playful growl and wrapped my arms around him to grab handfuls of his ass cheeks, bringing his flush with me, my face landing squarely in his chest. "Don't tease the former god. I might not be able to fly anymore, but I still have the power to torture you mercilessly." I punctuated my point by nipping at his nipple that was poking out from his t-shirt, sucking on him through the fabric.

Now it was his turn to hiss, and his fingers carded through my hair, holding me in place. "It's not nice to tease," he said, his voice containing both an invitation and a promise for more if I should choose to accept. "You don't have a concussion, right?"

Honestly, I had no idea. I did feel a little off, kind of overheated and off-center, but it wasn't anything that would stop me from having some fun. "I'm so good," I promised, grabbing a fistful of his shirt and dragging him back down for a kiss. Maybe it was the knock to my head, but it seemed like this kiss was even better this time around. Part of my brain was still lingering on something he'd said about me being a special case for being let in on his shifter secret, but I wasn't about to stop what we were doing to ask. Not when we'd already been interrupted once. With my luck, his dad would come knocking for round two.

I stood off the toilet—because yeah, the bathroom was not a good place for sexy times, especially not our first—and grabbed Declan by the backs of the thighs to hoist him off his feet. Unfortunately, I'd forgotten the whole lack of godly strength thing, and instead of the swoonworthy act of sweeping him off his feet, I staggered under

his solid weight and nearly toppled us both off our feet and straight into the towel rack.

“Oops, sorry,” I mumbled, catching him with an arm around the waist.

“It’s okay, I can walk,” he said, laughing.

“No, I got this,” I promised, trying again. This time, he helped out by wrapping his arms and legs around me like a koala, and with my legs quivering, I carried Declan toward the bed.

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Chapter 12

Declan

The mattress creaked, and I sank into the middle as Phobos placed me on the bed. Not the most romantic setting.

He quirked a brow, and I pulled him close, whispering in his ear to forget about it. I nibbled his earlobe to distract him, hoping he wouldn't ask why I hadn't bought a new mattress with some of the money he gave me. If us having sexy times became a regular activity, I'd buy the most comfortable one on the market.

Phobos stood back, studying me, and his gaze swiveled to the closet, dresser, and the window.

"You're really tidy."

"Really? Your purpose in bringing me to the bedroom wasn't to have sex but to compare my housekeeping skills to yours?" I glowered at him, and he replied with a smirk.

"Who said anything about sex? I heard there was an excellent soap opera on now."

I tossed a cushion at his head, and he ducked and chuckled, a joyful sound that had me joining in. But I was eager to get to the naked stage, so I yanked off my sweater and shirt before reaching for my belt.

“Stop!” His voice boomed around the small bedroom. It did sound very godlike, and I froze, expecting thunder and lightning to follow.

My fingers were paralyzed as they curled around the belt buckle, and Phobos put one knee on the bed. It protested, and he muttered he was buying me a new bed and mattress.

“Get to the good stuff.” I didn’t give a shit about the bed. I wanted this god of a man, a literal freaking god, to put his cock in me. I stared at his crotch, wondering how big it was. I’d never fucked a god before.

But the man leaning over me stripped my belt away and undid the button. He pursed his lips, trying to hide another smirk. “What’s under here, I wonder?”

I stifled the urge to yell, “Hurry the fuck up before I come in my pants!” But my date appeared to be in no mood to hurry. Was he going to torture me? He was a god of fear, so perhaps he was going to shout, “Boo!” just as I was about to come.

Phobos tucked his fingers in my belt loops, and I lifted my hips as he slid them down to my knees. He eyed the bulge in my briefs, and I was thankful I’d worn a new pair and not ones that were threadbare.

“You need some color in your life, my little wolf.”

During foreplay and sex, my beast tucked himself around my heart and went into a deep sleep, otherwise he would have protested about the word little.

“Oh yeah?” I did a little shoulder shimmy. “And are you going to show me how?” I nibbled my lower lip as my breathing sped up.

“Perhaps.” Bending over, his face was so close to the ridge in my underwear. I raised

my hips, thinking he was going to rip them off and devour my length. But he rubbed his chin over my cock, sending ripples of desire cascading over me. Tiny goosebumps spiked over my skin, and I shivered while slick streamed from my hole. I hoped Phobos scented how turned on I was.

“Mmmm.” Phobos continued gliding his chin, followed by his cheeks, over my swollen dick. And just as I was about to pull out my cock and brush the tip over his lips, he snapped the fabric between his teeth and peeled it back. Slowly, so damn slowly. For a god, he sure took his time.

When my cock appeared, it glowed pink from all the attention, and my date stuck out his tongue. As it connected with my shaft, I moaned, the warmth spreading from my length to my groin and from there to my torso and limbs. My eyes slid shut as pleasure washed over me, reminding me of swaying in a hammock on a lazy Sunday afternoon.

But my eyes snapped open as Phobos pulled the fabric lower and licked from the base of the shaft to the tip.

“Yes. More like that, please.”

He stuck his tongue in the slit and smacked his lips. But I was greedy, wanting a taste of my pre-cum too, and I pulled his mouth to mine, savoring his unique taste with that of my own.

“Mmmm. More of that, please,” he said, echoing my words. His eyes danced as he shimmied lower, swirling his tongue around my nipple. I tensed as my body tingled, and he flicked before biting the nipple gently.

As a shifter, one of the strongest emotions was that place that teetered precariously between pleasure and pain. My body trembled, and I yanked Phobos’s hair, wanting

him to experience it too.

He grunted as he tugged at my pants, and I lifted my butt so he could wriggle them off, along with my briefs.

His eyes narrowed to half mast when he gazed at my naked body, and maybe it was lust infiltrating my brain, but his eyes kinda glowed again.

Needing to watch Phobos undress, I got up on both elbows, desire threading through my veins as if I'd had a strong cocktail. His body transitioned from clothed to bare chested in seconds, and his pants disappeared soon after.

His briefs were something else. Now I understood his comment about needing more color. I shoved a hand over my mouth to muffle a laugh in case he got the wrong impression. The fabric that stretched over his huge bulge was emblazoned with dragons and unicorns. I was jealous, wanting a pair just like them.

But it was what lay under the stretchy material that now held my attention. As I suspected his cock was huge, godlike even, and I was anxious to see it and have it plunge into my hole. My mouth watered, and my hole was slippery with copious amounts of slick.

“What are you waiting for?” Lust made my lids heavy, and my head swayed, waiting for him to reveal all.

Uncertainty flashed across his face. “I didn’t want to disappoint you.”

“What?” I rolled on my side, angling my ass toward him. “Can you see how aroused I am? Nothing about your body would ever disappoint me.”

In one jerky movement he rid himself of his briefs, and I gazed in wonder, my mouth

a huge O, at his magnificent cock. “Wow!” was all I could manage.

He crawled onto the bed, wincing at each squeak, and shuffled between my outstretched legs. I wanted to be facing him when he pushed inside me, so I flung my arms around his neck and drew him closer.

His dick brushed against my thigh, and we both gasped. Gods, I almost came.

“I need you inside me right now. Please,” I begged.

With one hand on the bed beside me and the other holding his cock, he guided the tip to my hole and paused. Pushing in the head, I panted because he was huge and I wasn’t, and it was something else to have a dick that big in my channel. And that was only the head.

His gaze was fixed on me as I did the hee-hee-hoo breathing, and gradually, I adjusted to his girth. Maybe slow was better after all.

“Okay?”

“Yeah. Fine.” I stroked his cheek, enjoying the smooth texture of his skin. “But I want more of you.”

“You can have all of me.”

“Just one inch at a time, please.”

He pursed his lips. “Might take a while. There are a lot of inches.”

I smacked his arm and giggled, and it was Phobos’s turn to breathe deeply. “I felt that. So good.”

With both hands on the mattress, he penetrated me. It was a snug fit as he stretched my channel, and I felt every bit of him as he slipped into me.

“You are so tight.”

“But I’m perfect for you.”

A ghost of a smile appeared on his lips. He pulled out and slid inside me again as desire surged through my veins.

“Now I want to go faster. Just a tad.” I wasn’t ready for his thick cock to slam into me, but I needed more fucking.

He withdrew and glided inside me, repeating the fucking three more times. So good, I was floating on a little pink cloud, but then he slammed into me. I groaned! It was good, so good, and I wanted more.

Squeezing around him, I enjoyed his startled expression followed by one I recognized: lust. His eyes sent a signal that he wanted to possess me. Now he sped up, and my hips bucked as I matched his rhythm.

We moved as one, and the tiny mewls escaped my lips as I clung to Phobos, and sweat dripped from his chin onto my chest. His length plowed into me, and I angled my hips so he could go deeper.

“Oh, yes. Just like that,” he panted. “I’ve never—”

I put a finger to his lips. The past was another country, and we were the now.

Lifting my legs, I wrapped them around his hips, holding him tight, never wanting to let him go. As he thrust inside, sweat sprayed off our bodies, catching the light as

though fireworks were exploding. Something similar was happening inside me as I grunted and moaned, holding tight onto Phobos.

His lips found the delicate skin at the base of my throat, and he suckled and nibbled while I raked my nails over his back. We rocked back and forth, no longer talking, just whimpering and breathing heavily.

I couldn't contain the raging desire inside me. A knot of excitement stirred in my belly, and the squeaking mattress formed a backdrop to our lovemaking. A horn blared outside just as I was powerless to contain the orgasm speeding toward me.

My body trembled while I held Phobos tight and relished that moment just before my climax. Cum exploded between us from my cock when Phobos's teeth grazed my flesh as he stilled. His cum spurted inside me as his knot swelled, filled, and claimed me.

We panted as one, and he rested his head on my chest.

"That was something else," he said, his voice ragged with emotion.

A good something I hoped as my eyes slid shut.

Chapter 13

Phobos

After going three rounds with Declan, exploring each other's bodies until early morning, I should've been exhausted. Every muscle ached in a way I'd never experienced before, and Declan sure wasn't having any trouble sleeping. I was a little jealous of the way he slipped easily into a deep coma-like sleep. He was draped over me, his leg hooked over mine, arm across my stomach, his breath ghosting over my chest as he breathed slow and even.

Me? I was stuck in an uncomfortable limbo, caught somewhere between awake and asleep.

It wasn't the muscle ache that was bothering me. In fact, I kind of liked that part of this human experience, but my body didn't feel entirely like my own. There was a pounding deep in my skull, throbbing with my pulse, and my skin felt like it was stretched too tight. With every blink, my lids scraped over my eyes like sandpaper. When I did manage to get some sleep, I was plagued by these vivid dreams filled with fire and menacing shadows.

I jolted awake to the sound of echoing screams. It took me a few seconds to realize it was all in my head, fading as my brain cleared and reality sharpened around me. My chest was heaving as I struggled to catch my breath.

Just a dream, I assured myself, my hands shaking. It was just a dream. I refused to believe that the lingering burn I felt inside my chest was anything but a lasting

hallucination.

Declan sighed in his sleep, rolling away from me. Though my body felt overheated, my skin damp with sweat, I missed the contact immediately. I had a feeling the honeymoon stage of this budding relationship was going to last for a while. I couldn't get enough of touching him.

There was a faint light coming from around the curtains. I was an early riser by nature, and quite frankly, I'd had enough of trying to sleep. Besides, I had something I wanted to do today before Declan had to open the bar later this afternoon.

I hopped out of bed and grabbed my briefs off the floor, tugging them up before I ran to the bathroom for a little freshening up. I didn't think Declan would want to share his toothbrush with me, no matter where else our mouths had been last night, so I squeezed some toothpaste on my finger instead. Then I headed back out to make some breakfast. Except...

"There's no kitchen," I muttered, looking around the small space. Why hadn't I noticed that last night? Probably because I'd been a little distracted.

I heard the bedsprings creak loudly as Declan rolled over. "Sure there is," he murmured sleepily. "It's right there." He pointed toward the dresser in the corner, his eyes still closed.

I scowled at the appliance in question. "That's a toaster, not a kitchen."

He shrugged, yawning widely as he blinked his eyes open, giving me the first glimpse of his gray eyes, like storm clouds in the morning light. "Good enough for some toaster pastries."

My groan came out as half growl. Was his wolf already rubbing off on me? "Please

don't tell me that's what you usually have for breakfast. Don't you know it's the most important meal of the day? What about protein?"

He propped himself up on one elbow, his hair in total disarray, and offered me this adorable sleepy smile. "So, you're a slob, but you can cook?"

"I love to cook, but... not so much the cleaning afterward." My cheeks heated with a blush, but he didn't seem to be poking fun at me. Just curious to learn more about me.

"I'll make you a deal. Anytime you want to cook for me, I'll do the dishes."

I found my smile widening. "That sounds suspiciously like an invitation for another date."

His gravelly chuckle did naughty things to me. "Maybe even more than one," he said, tossing the blanket off his hips.

And just like that, my eyes zeroed in on his morning wood and my mouth went dry. The sound I made was inhuman.

He smirked, knowing exactly what he was doing to me as he sauntered toward the bathroom, bypassing underwear entirely. "Hold that thought," he said.

As the bathroom door clicked shut, another wave of heat passed through me, hot enough to sear my skin, but when I looked down at my hands, I saw nothing out of the ordinary. Was this what humans felt when they were attracted to someone? When they were... falling in love?

I shivered at the possibility. I didn't want to compare Declan to Cameron, but it was impossible not to when I'd thought Cameron was the love of my life. The way I was falling for Declan, though, cleared that notion straight out of my head. This was far

more intense than anything I'd ever felt before. They were nothing alike, of course, not physically, nor their personalities. I hadn't done more than kiss Cameron once, but he'd felt almost... passive. I had a feeling he wouldn't have fought me for dominance in bed like Declan had. It had been thrilling, the push and pull between us.

I knew now that Cameron hadn't been Mr. Right. He'd been Mr. Good Enough, and if we'd continued dating, it would've been settling—for the both of us. I couldn't blame Cam or my brother for their relationship if this was anything like what they felt for each other.

But there was a part of Declan I still hadn't explored, and I was dying to know every inch of him—even the parts I couldn't see.

I made a conscious effort to clean up our mess from last night, even making the bed. I had every intention of showing him that my slovenly ways were a thing of the past.

“Hey, Declan?” I called through the closed door as I started gathering our clothes off the floor. His still reeked like his arousal, and my cock thickened, knowing I'd caused that, but I knew he wouldn't want to wear them a second day just to appease my alpha need to claim ownership of him. Instead, I dropped them into the laundry hamper then tugged on my jeans and shirt.

The bathroom door opened, and he sauntered out, engorged dick bobbing, looking entirely too edible. “You called?” he purred, leaning against the doorframe in an alluring pose.

I groaned, slapping a hand over my eyes so he wouldn't sway me with his omega wiles. “I know what you're doing, and it's not going to work.”

“What am I doing, exactly?” he asked with fake innocence I didn't buy for a second. “And why are you dressed?” Even without looking, I could hear his pout.

“You’re trying to seduce me, but I have something else in mind.”

He paused directly in front of me. “I’m listening,” he said, and I risked peeking through my fingers to see him standing too close, but he looked curious at least.

“First, I want to take you out for breakfast, because we burned far too many calories last night, and toaster pastries don’t count as food.”

He smirked but nodded. “Fair enough. What’s next?”

“I thought we could drive out to the woods and I could meet your wolf?” I hadn’t meant for it to sound like a question, but I wasn’t sure how his beast felt about me. Maybe he hated me. I needed to know where I stood with him, because I couldn’t have a relationship with only half of Declan.

Declan’s smirk softened into a gentle smile. “That sounds perfect.”

“Yeah?” I relaxed, though my stomach was still churning with nerves.

“Absolutely. Let me just get dressed.” Even though he was doing exactly what I’d asked, I was still sorry to see his delectable ass disappear beneath a fresh pair of underwear.

I went to grab my jacket, and Declan paused, looking at the made bed. He smiled, his eyes twinkling. “Thank you, Phobos.”

Blushing, I shrugged. Such a tiny act as tidying up had made me feel more accomplished than stopping a bank robbery ever had. If that was all it took to make my boyfriend smile at me like that, I would very gladly spend the rest of my life making the bed, just so we could dive in and unmake it all over again.

We ended up getting breakfast to go so we could beat the rush of tourists who liked to hike up near the Valleywood sign. When we got out of the car, the air was still crisp enough to hold our breath in clouds of misty vapor. The sun was still behind the ridge, but the sky was clear, promising a beautiful day.

We didn't wander far into the trees, just enough that no one in the parking lot could catch a glimpse of what we were up to. Then Declan stopped and turned to face me. "Hold my coat?" he asked, peeling it off. His hands were shaking. Was he nervous too?

I took his coat, then his shirt, pants, and finally underwear. He left his socks tucked into his boots until he stood before me, his skin raised with goosebumps. "I-I've never shown my wolf to a non-shifter before," he admitted.

Wasn't there a rule about who they could show their beasts to? I was about to assure him that I felt honored to be the first, but before I could say anything, he'd allowed the shift to take him. Fur sprouted, his joints popped into place as he dropped down to all fours, now paws instead of fingers and toes. His face lengthened to a snout, ears stretching. And then, after mere seconds, a wolf stood where my lover had been.

Reminding myself not to drop his clothes into the melting snow, I dropped to my knees instead. "You're... beautiful," I whispered in awe, reaching out with my free hand.

I didn't know if it was safe to touch him, had never bothered to learn shifter etiquette. I remained there, hand outstretched, until his wolf closed the distance. He settled his head beneath my palm and closed his eyes, as if savoring the contact. His fur was softer than I'd expected as I laced my fingers through it.

"It's nice to meet you," I said when I came up short on what to say. I was fairly sure he understood what I was saying.

Declan's wolf let out a low whine then stepped straight up to me and licked my face, from chin to forehead. It was better than a handshake. He was happy to meet me too.

Chapter 14

Declan

Please let me run .

You want to show off your skills to our m— friend . Geez, we'd swapped fluids and he'd been inside me. He was more than a friend, and I latched onto a hope that he wasn't just a fuck buddy. But I couldn't claim him as my mate. No, I could, but sleeping together and making one another come wasn't the basis for a lifetime mateship.

That was a lot of thinking .

Phobos was ungodlike, or maybe he retained some of his godly powers—half a god?—but he might not be able to keep up with a wolf. It'd have to be more of a trot or a lope.

Fine. But go slowly . If my beast spied a fox or a deer, any agreement would be trampled on and instinct would take over until he'd made the kill.

My wolf jerked his head toward a thicket of trees, clumped close together, and he padded over the earth, scattered with remnants of snow. He glanced behind to make sure Phobos was following. He was, but I guessed he wasn't about to break into a gallop.

As my beast was low to the ground, he avoided branches that smacked Phobos in the

face, and our walk was accompanied by groans and “Shit,” and “Fuck.” Occasionally he matched my wolf’s pace, appearing at his shoulder, eyes glowing, before falling back and complaining about the great outdoors.

I picked up the scent of a rabbit as my wolf did, and while I begged him to ignore it, my request was futile. Instinct ruled and in this moment was stronger than the mating bond. He scrambled through the brush, weaving through the trees and leaping over logs. In the distance Phobos grunted and panted while yelling he wasn’t dressed for this.

The rabbit was heading for his burrow when my wolf gained on him, the fluffy tail bobbing just out of reach. The animal scrambled for safety, but my wolf snared his back leg and sank his teeth into the soft flesh.

This was the signal for me to withdraw deeper into my wolf, just as he did when I had sex. The skin and blood, the cracking of the bones, the sinew and the meat and tissue overwhelmed me. And I worried how Phobos would react. He was or had been a god of fear. He must have witnessed blood and gore during his long life.

A thought struck me. His long life. Did he live forever? Had he mentioned it? I trawled through my memories, but I didn't recall having that conversation.

There was a loud thunk on the ground as Phobos threw himself down and panted. He said nothing as my wolf finished eating but tried to catch his breath. He no longer held my clothes.

Enough. I’ll take my skin now. I’d have to return to my clothes naked—wherever they were—but I wanted to gauge Phobos’s reaction.

Maybe not the best idea to shift before my beast cleaned himself. There were twigs in my hair and blood streaked over my cheeks and chest.

“Now who’s the messy one.” Phobos removed a leaf from behind my ear.

“Not a fair comparison.”

He removed his coat and put it around my shoulders as we meandered back to where he’d dumped my clothes.

“You’re not grossed out? You know, by the killing?”

Phobos paused, and with his hands on my shoulders, turned me to face him. “Life is messy.” Using one finger, he bopped my nose. “Don’t say it. We’re not talking about my housekeeping skills.” He grinned. “As a god, I’d caused people to react in ways which led to a negative outcome. I can’t judge what the universe and evolution deem appropriate for a shifter’s beast. Besides, I’ve accompanied my dad into countless battles.”

Despite my superior shifter warmth, I was shivering, and Phobos put his hand in mine. His was so soft, as if he’d never done a day’s work. I guessed he hadn’t, according to what humans and shifters considered work.

Him witnessing me shift and my beast’s hunt had gone better than expected, so that was one item checked off the list of “things my mate should know about me.”

I hummed a favorite tune as we drove back to the bar, but Phobos rolled his eyes, saying I shouldn’t consider a career as a singer. Ouch!

Traipsing into The Wolf’s Den, our fingers entwined, Wren approached us. Her gaze went to our hands, and she gave an almost imperceptible nod.

“Someone was looking for you while you were gone.”

From which side of the family, I wondered. Was Deimos trying to stir up trouble even though it was obvious the business hadn't gone under and was instead thriving? Or was it my father, back to try and guilt me into returning to the wolf shifter way of life and doing his bidding?

But when Wren described him, a ball of fury churned in my belly. I knew he'd return, but I'd wrongly assumed he would wait and come at me with a different argument.

I left Wren and Astor to manage the customers and fled upstairs, Phobos at my heels. I flung myself onto the bed, the mattress squeaking in sympathy.

"What can I do?"

"About me being the only son of an Alpha, and him wanting me to return to the traditional way of life where he gives me to an Alpha of another pack?" My voice was decibels higher than usual, and any shifters in the bar would hear it over the thump thump thump of the music blasting from the jukebox.

"Sorry." I winced and pulled him onto the bed beside me. "The snark wasn't directed at you." It was, but it was Father who had my belly coiled in frustration and fear.

Phobos wrapped his arms around me, and I flung a leg over his hip, hoping I could forget the rest of the world existed and it was just us two. He rested his chin on my head, and we lay in silence, apart from the pulsating beat on the floor below. A giggle burst out of me because any pulsating last night and this morning had originated from us.

"Glad you can laugh about the situation."

I didn't have the energy to explain, so I held him tight.

“We can’t go on like this.” Phobos searched my eyes.

The words struck fear in my heart, and I gulped, hoping Phobos wasn’t going to disappear from my life. It was a lot having a serious relationship with a wolf shifter whose powerful father refused to accept that his son could make his own choices. And until I gave in to Father’s demands, the situation would never change.

“I don’t blame you if you want to leave.”

He tilted my chin so we were looking into one another’s eyes. Mine were filled with tears, but I was determined not to cry.

“Never.”

“Huh?” I was prepared to hear the words, “I’m sorry.” I must have been mistaken. “Not what I was expecting.”

He peppered my lips with kisses. “Me and my messy ass are not going anywhere.”

“Your ass is perfect.”

“Glad we got that settled. So, how do we solve this issue with your dad?”

I cringed. He wasn’t a dad. That suggested kindness, love, and protectiveness. Father had none of those qualities.

“There is a way, but it’s pretty drastic.”

Phobos’s mouth fell open, and he shook me, terror evident in his expression. “No. We are not doing that. There will be no jumping over a cliff, taking pills, or slumping in a carbon monoxide-filled garage.”

That was a huge leap, like the jumping over a precipice he described.

“I’m not suggesting that !” Though perhaps when I explained mating, he might reconsider. “You are my mate, the one fate chose for me.” I took a deep breath, trying to gauge his expression. “If we mark one another, Father cannot override that bond.”

No, there was one way. “Unless he killed you.” Shit, I said that out loud.

“You’re willing to be attached to my sorry ass for the rest of our lives?”

“Messy butt, sorry butt, saggy butt when you get old? Absolutely.” That sparked the question I’d asked myself earlier. Was he immortal? I had to ask, because if so, I would be a distant memory in centuries to come. Being dead, it wouldn’t matter to me, but he would be alone. Unless he was able to mate again.

“Your life span... is it similar to humans and shifters?” I couldn’t bring myself to ask if he’d live forever.

“Longer, much longer.” He put a hand on either side of my head. “As my partner and soulmate, your life will extend to match mine.”

There was a lot to unpack in that statement, thinking of me outliving my friends and neighbors. But he’d settled the issue enough for now. Knowing I’d live alongside him was a comfort. We’d discuss it in detail later.

“Wait!” He slid off the bed and complained that was the mattress's last squeak. “I’m buying a new bed today. Or you come live with me. But hold that thought.”

He knelt on the floor, and I rolled to the side of the bed and hung my head over the edge. “What are you doing? Is this a god ritual?”

“It’s what humans do? I’ve tried to scare many of them so they don’t go through with it, but they’re a tenacious lot.”

That was true.

He took both my hands. “Declan, owner of The Wolf’s Den, son of an asshole Alpha, wolf shifter extraordinaire whose beast catches and kills wild animals, will you be my forever mate?”

“Of course I will.” I was giddy like a kid on their birthday. We kissed, and I got a tongue stuck in my mouth to celebrate.

“Is that it? Are we good?” He crawled over the floor. “If this had been my place before it was clean, I’d have found something to fashion into a ring.”

“Shame cereal boxes no longer contain toys.”

Phobos’s eyes lit up. “For sure, I would have found a ring in one twenty years ago.”

I didn’t need a ring or a piece of paper. “Mating is more involved than saying a few words. It’s not like a human wedding ceremony.”

“Tell me what to do and I’ll do it.”

I pursed my lips because I was in line for some afternoon delight.

“I need your cock.”

Chapter 15

Phobos

I wasn't surprised to hear him say we were mates. It was such a simple explanation for the way I'd felt about him since the first time I laid eyes on him. This curiosity, a longing I couldn't explain, a desperation to have him in my life, no matter how much I might've pissed him off. It felt right—no, he felt right. He was the missing piece to what would make me whole. It wasn't becoming a superhero or an actor. The only role I needed was as Decan's mate.

"I need your cock," he said bluntly, his eyes flashing with need.

My eyebrows shot up. "Wow, no foreplay? You're really just going for it, huh."

Declan chuckled, nibbling on his lower lip, and whether he was trying to turn me on intentionally or not, it was working. "Well, I mean, I won't say no to some foreplay, but it's not a requirement to mating."

Technically, cock wasn't necessary to the mating process either, but I wasn't about to point that out. I'd known my share of shifters in my very long life, so I knew the important bit about biting. Gods, too, were known to mark their mates, though they weren't always known for their steadfast devotion. Case in point, Zeus and his many affairs.

I crawled up onto that squeaky, lumpy bed on all fours. What should've been a sexy prowl to take my mate lost some of its heat when a broken spring stabbed into my

knee. “Ow, shit. Never mind! I’m fine!” I would not be deterred.

Declan lay back, and I grabbed the waistband of his pants and underwear and peeled them off as quickly as I could, screw being graceful. Meanwhile, he fumbled with my belt, getting frustrated when I didn’t get naked fast enough. “Here, let me,” I offered, hopping off the bed to shuck the rest.

I descended on him with a growl, and we fell together on the bed in a tangle of limbs and flushed skin, the bed frame creaking dangerously. I kissed him for all I was worth, trying to tell him with my lips and tongue that I would love him and honor him forever. I licked and sucked across his broad chest and stomach, sucking up bruises that I knew wouldn’t last nearly long enough, but I was eager to mark him as my own.

Sucking his length into my mouth, I savored his salty precum, moaning around his smooth shaft as I laved along the veins from root to tip. When I slipped a finger into his slick channel, he bucked his hips straight off the mattress with a squeak of springs, the crown of his cock hitting the back of my throat. I hollowed my cheeks and swallowed, adding a second finger, and Declan tried to grab a fistful of my hair, crying out. Right about now, I was regretting cutting it so short.

“Phobos, I need you,” he panted, grabbing at my shoulders. If I’d had all my god strength, I might’ve fought him so I could prolong this, but as it was, he was stronger than I was. He practically dragged me up the length of his body. I had to admit, it was kind of sexy the way he was manhandling me.

I settled in between his thighs. Taking my shaft in his fist, he stroked me once, twice, just enough to drive me mad, then lined me up with his hole. I pressed forward slowly, intending to be gentle at first, but the moment I felt his heat engulfing me, there was no hope. I surged forward, burying myself inside him, and we both groaned—along with an echoed groan from the bed. I mentally cursed the damn

thing, but it was hard to be angry when it felt so good!

I drove deep, deeper still, until my hips were flush against him, and even then, I grabbed him by the waist and pulled him closer, managing to lodge myself just that tiny bit deeper. I wanted to reach a piece of him that no one had ever touched before, and then I wanted to make him mine.

Pulling back, I paused with just the head inside, then thrust hard enough inside him to move him across the mattress. With each piston of my hips, we inched our way across the bed until we were nearly up against the headboard. Declan reached up and put his palms against the flimsy wood, using it as leverage to push back, meeting me on every thrust.

“Holy shit, yes,” I cursed in praise. My entire body felt like it was on fire.

Declan mewled in frustration. “I need more,” he whined. If I’d still been a god, I could’ve pounded him through the floor, but as it was, I was giving it to him as hard as I could. Would this mostly human body give out on me? Could I have a heart attack?

Apparently, my best wasn’t good enough, so with a snarl, Declan flipped us so he was on top. Oh hell yes, this was amazing! Bracing himself with his palms flat on my chest, he slammed himself down onto my cock again and again, the sound of wet flesh and smell of sex filling my senses until I thought I might drown in it. I watched, mesmerized, as his dick bobbed in time with his movement, until I couldn’t help reaching out and wrapping my hand around it, pumping him until precum dripped over my fingers.

“Tell me you’re close,” he panted. “Please .”

“So close,” I moaned, my balls drawing tight.

It was all too much! The heat, the pressure, the promise of forever with this man. I couldn't have held back if I tried.

He cried out with his release, his cum spilling across my stomach and chest. Just as I felt the telltale swell of my knot at the base of my cock, Declan fell forward and placed his mouth at the arch of my throat, the prick of his teeth the only warning I had. He sank his teeth deep, and the sudden shock of it tipped me straight over that cliff. I pumped my hips just once more, knot expanding and swelling as I unleashed my cum deep inside him at that place where no one else could touch.

I felt Declan sucking lightly as my blood spilled into his mouth, and though it didn't come naturally to me, I placed my own mouth at his throat and bit down, the coppery tang of his blood on my tongue.

There was no mistaking the bond as it snapped tight between us, connecting us in a way I never could have imagined. I swore I heard his voice inside my head, whispering mine .

Our moans were cut off by an almighty crack! that echoed in the room. Declan pulled back, and we shared a wide-eyed look of dread, before the entire bed finally gave way, dropping us hard onto the floor.

"We so had that coming," I groaned, rubbing the back of my head where it had knocked into the broken frame. At least we'd been able to finish before it happened. "We were tempting fate. We should've just bought a new bed."

Declan snorted, trying to contain his laugh, but that just set me off too. "Stop laughing!" I scolded as his muscles contracted around my knot.

"You first!" he said, hissing when my knot caught against his tight rim.

Regardless, both of us had tears streaming down our faces, and we didn't stop until my knot softened enough to slip from his hole, and I groaned, feeling the flood of my released seed drip down my shaft. So hot.

I wiped away the tears on the back of my hand and cradled Declan against my chest. We could clean up in a minute. First, I wanted to bask in the glow of our new bond. "Why didn't you ever buy a new bed? I certainly paid you enough for that first date," I asked.

He tried to shrug, but his smile slipped off his face. "My business was failing. Every single penny went toward my overdue bills. I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but I didn't want to admit that I couldn't make it on my own."

I held him closer, pressing a kiss to his new mark, already healing into a beautiful scar. "Well, with me as your mate, you never have to worry about that again. I have enough money for a hundred lifetimes, and you can keep the bar you love."

He frowned, opening his mouth to argue with me, no doubt.

I held up a hand to forestall the bickering. "Let's not spoil the mood. I promise you can scold the hell out of me later. For now, though..." I leaned across the floor and reached for my pants, fishing my phone out of the pocket. "Our first priority is buying a new bed, because I'm going to want you again soon, and I refuse to use this one again."

Before I could place the order, though, a searing-hot pain lanced straight through my head, like someone had jammed an icepick into my eye. I saw stars, and I heard Declan calling my name.

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Chapter 16

Declan

“I’m fine. Really.”

Maybe he was. He was a god, after all, but from the little I knew about gods—which was zilch—they didn’t experience blinding pain that rendered them helpless.

I dampened a cloth and poured a glass of water. Waiting until he guzzled the liquid, I removed the glass and placed a hand on his brow. He was slightly warm, so I put the cloth on his forehead. He complained about having a soggy wet piece of fabric resting on his body, but I ignored him.

Phobos lay back on the pillows I’d bunched up behind him, and he muttered we’d need more pillows along with the new bed. He closed his eyes and we sat in silence, me holding his hand until he sat up, saying he felt better.

“You sure?” I doubted gods had doctors, but what did I know? He nodded, so I plowed on. “We need to have the talk.”

Phobos guffawed. “Is that similar to humans talking about the birds and the bees?”

I furrowed my brow, because despite marking and bonding with one another, my mate and I were on a different wavelength.

I rubbed my forehead, my mind working furiously as I tried to fathom what he was

referring to. “You said humans, but birds and bees suggests you’re talking about shifters.”

“You’re adorable.” He grabbed my hand and kissed from the palm to the wrist and from there to under my arm. I giggled and yanked my hand away, as I was ticklish—or my wolf was. Weird, but my beast was very sensitive, and he felt uncomfortable when someone tickled me.

Phobos flicked his hand. “It’s too hard to explain, but it’s when parents have the first sex talk with their kids.”

“Okay.” I didn’t understand ‘cause I was pretty certain bees didn’t have sex with birds. “Where was I? Right, your and now my long life. I’m going to ask you rapid-fire questions.”

He twisted his head and scanned the room. It was obvious there were gaps in his knowledge of human expressions and mine too. “Are you going to shoot me?”

“No. I toss questions at you and you answer quickly. Mortal or immortal, yes or no?”

“Maybe one or the other.”

Gods, how can you not know whether you would ever die or not?

“As a god of fear, I was essentially immortal. Now? Meh, I’m not so sure.”

Glad we cleared that up. I might be run over by a bus tomorrow and die or get up and be unaffected by the collision. Not that I was going to experiment with vehicles hurtling along the road.

I pondered what it would be like to live forever and wondered if I’d get bored. Not

with my mate but reliving events such as wars and hurricanes, watching civilizations rise and fall, humans destroying themselves and the planet. And while it would be sad seeing my friends pass away, that was likely to happen even if I lived a shifter lifespan.

“Perhaps we can change the world.” We have to be able to bring about huge changes if we’d never die.

“Nah. That’s been tried and always ended in failure.”

I leaped up and straddled him. “Then we have to approach it in a different way. Failure isn’t the end, it’s just a setback or detour.”

“When you have forever, you can become rich, but money doesn’t bring happiness.” He pointed to himself. “I’m the perfect example of that.”

“I don’t want to accrue riches.” I pictured myself sitting on a pile of jewels and gold coins while being served food by a person on bended knee. “We could make real change. Alleviate poverty, mediate between warring countries, provide medical facilities everywhere.” Ideas were zinging around my head, though I wasn’t certain how my mate being a god of fear would fit into my scenarios.

“You’re an optimist.” He sighed. “But I assure you, humans, shifters, fae, and gods will find a way to F things up.”

I flopped onto the bed, images of a transformed world destroyed.

“You’re disappointed, my love.” He slung an arm around my shoulder. “But we can make small steps to improve the lives of others. I’m not sure what those are yet, but we’ll come up with something.”

Maybe he was right.

“I’ve never witnessed you with full powers.” That first night in the bar didn’t count. “But it’s obvious you can summon some of them, or a percentage.” Scaring the crap out of Father didn’t happen because my mate blew a raspberry at him. “And when my wolf was hunting, you were lagging behind before surging so we were shoulder to shoulder.”

He shrugged. “True, but I can’t predict the future. Sadly, that isn’t one of my powers. Any semblance of them might vanish over the coming days and weeks.”

“But you have them. They weren’t taken away as promised.”

“You don’t know that.” He rubbed his chin. “What remains might be... like a fragrance, a reminder of what I had.”

I took hold of his face and made him look at me. “We’re mated, so I can sense what you have in here.” I tapped his skull.

He drew back. “You can read my mind?” He scrunched up his eyes. “I’m trying to copy you. But it’s not working. All I get is a big blank.”

“No, silly.” I ran my hand over the mating mark on his throat. “Because of this, I can sense your powers. They’re not gone gone.”

“They were supposed to be.”

I could allow the conversation to derail and get into a discussion about how he expected his life to improve after the removal of his powers. Or we could get to the bottom of the spell he agreed to.

Placing my palms on top of his, I experienced an upswing in my mate's powers, resulting in his eyes glowing and his skin prickling with heat. But as we clasped hands, they receded and his head flopped to the side as if the changes had exhausted him.

"I think that goddess shortchanged you."

He drew back, his eyes open wide. "Never. She wouldn't. That would go against her... hmmm, well, I suppose it's possible. Gods have failings, just as people do."

"Tell me what she promised."

He waxed on about her saying she'd helped Deimos find his mate and how his powers hadn't helped his acting skills, and in fact, maybe they'd hindered them.

"Removing them would make me the finest actor of my generation." We shared a glance, and spots of pink appeared and dotted his cheeks. He made a face. "That might be a slight exaggeration, but she did say I'd succeed as an actor."

Hmmm, unless I could prove she'd bamboozled him with words, we'd never get to the truth.

"Can you remember her exact words?"

"Yes. She told me that if I lived as a human, I could be anything my heart desires, and she said, 'You'll no longer have access to your godly powers.'"

Oh, Phobos. He'd been conned, by a goddess no less. If she'd been doing this since time began, there must have been a lot of humans, shifters, and gods pissed off at her.

"You'll no longer have access to your godly powers." I repeated the sentence, hoping

my mate would pay attention.

“Yes. But the spell isn’t working.” He shook his head from side to side and then collapsed on the lumpy bed, as if he’d been felled by the pain. “Ouch!” He flopped on his back, complaining for the last time about the mattress and saying nothing he did reversed his godly skills completely.

“Do you have access to your clothes at this moment?” I asked.

“Are we planning on going somewhere? Not another wolf hunt, please. That combined with vigorous sex and mating has worn me out.”

I pointed to his pants and shirt on the floor. “No, I mean, you aren’t wearing them, so you’re naked.” I slapped his bare ass and was almost waylaid about how sexy he was. “But they’re close by, so you have access to them.”

It wasn’t a perfect comparison, so I added, “Or we could visit the woods again, so we both have access to the flowers and the trees.”

“What do my clothes and the woods have in common? Oh, you want me to get naked in the forest just as you did?”

I planted a kiss on his lips. “You are so cute, but we’re getting off track.”

“There’s a track in the—”

“Phobos.” I giggled. We could do this all day and never get anywhere. “Apate said you’d no longer have access to your powers. She didn’t say they were gone forever.”

I studied his face as he went from confusion with narrowed eyes and tapping a finger on his lips, to his eyes and mouth widening. “Well, shit. She messed with me.”

Brushing my hand over his very fine butt and tweaking it, I whispered in his ear, “Nope. I’m the only one allowed to mess with you.”

“I can’t fathom how this will affect my future.” Phobos slid his other hand over the mattress and grimaced. “I hate this thing and don’t understand how you could sleep on it.”

The truth was I’d done very little sleeping. Worrying, yes. Sleeping, no.

“We can’t even donate it.”

I leaped up and kneeled beside him. “Maybe we are on the same wavelength.”

“How so?” He studied my semi-hard cock. “I’d be up for more sex, especially if you’re on top.” He smacked my ass, and gods, I liked it. Perhaps we could role play after the new bed was delivered.

“No.”

“What?” He slid a finger along my shaft, and I shivered as my length engorged. “You don’t want to have more sex?” He tutted as though he was disappointed, but he wasn’t very convincing.

“No. You said the mattress was so shit we couldn’t donate it. That shows you care for others.”

He tilted his head to the side, and I imagined his brain whirring as he processed what I’d said. “I do? Go, me. But I have no clue how you reached that assumption.”

“That you would consider giving something we no longer wanted to someone less fortunate, shows your... not humanity, because you’re not human... but your...

umm...”

“Compassion?”

“There you go!”

“Not sure how far my so-called compassion will stretch if I don’t get that new bed ordered.”

Chapter 17

Phobos

Ever since my discussion with Declan about my powers still existing inside me, I'd started to put two and two together—though the math equation involved seemed a lot more complicated than some simple addition. It made so much sense now, the way I'd been feeling feverish, the headaches. And it had been getting increasingly worse with time.

Gods had nearly unlimited power at their fingertips, but what would happen to a god if he didn't use those powers? I was a simmering pot on the stove, with the lid on too tight. A bottle of Diet Coke and a whole roll of Mentos with the cap screwed on. It almost felt like my outer shell had a few cracks, and the more that pressure built up, the more seemed to seep through the seams.

The new mattress and bedframe I'd ordered had arrived at Declan's apartment, and he'd waggled his eyebrows at me, suggesting we could break it in, but I was suddenly scared to touch him. He'd commented on how my skin heated, so what happened if it got hot enough to scald him? What if one of these little bursts of energy was more than I could handle and I hurt him by accident? I couldn't live with myself if that happened.

So, I'd made some lame excuse about needing to feed my cat before bolting for the door. Declan's eyebrows had jumped in surprise and more than a little doubt, with a side of hurt feelings. Could he tell I was lying through his mind reading mate mojo? Because I didn't have a cat, but I would have to get one now.

I was currently holed up in my mansion, pacing from room to room as I debated what I could do to fix my little problem. I could go back to Apate and ask her to put me back to the way I was. It didn't matter if I was a god anymore. Since I'd found my mate and decided not to act anymore, I didn't mind if I was still a god. An eternity with Declan sounded pretty perfect.

But a horrible thought occurred to me on my third pass through the kitchen, rounding through the formal dining room. Why had Apate done this in the first place? What if she'd done it on purpose? What if her wording was intentionally vague, luring me to accept her deal, with the promise of making my dreams come true? If she did know what would happen to me, then what motivation could she have possibly had to block my access to my powers?

My rising panic was interrupted by the doorbell, the chime echoing through the house. I paused in my pacing, straining my ears to listen. Was it Declan, come to see proof of my cat?

But no, a moment later, the pounding of a fist on the front door made it abundantly clear who it was. "Open the damn door, Brother!"

Sighing, I dragged my feet toward the entryway, sagging in defeat. Deimos had all his powers, so if he wanted in, he could just break the door down, and I wasn't in the mood for the cleanup.

When I opened the door, though, I winced when I saw who he'd brought with him. "Hi, Dad."

"Son," was all he said as he shoved past me into the house.

"Got any snacks?" Deimos asked, already headed for the kitchen.

I was left standing in the open doorway, dreading whatever they had to say. I'd been avoiding them ever since that disastrous fake-date dinner. I didn't want to have to answer for my immature actions.

Giving the door a shove closed, I turned and trailed after them. I found Deimos halfway inside the fridge as he dug around for something good. He passed lettuce, tomato, cheese, and turkey out to our father, who started slicing it up for sandwiches.

Deimos stood up holding a jar of mayo and slammed the fridge shut. If I'd thought for a second this was a casual hangout with the boys, the flashing of his eyes would have set me straight. He was pissed .

I slid onto a stool at the island and waited for them to get to the point for their visit. Neither of them even looked at me until there were three sandwiches, and Ares slid a plate in front of me. The other two remained standing, glowering down at me.

Deimos shoved his sandwich into his mouth, chewing and swallowing, then blurted, "This is an intervention."

"W-What?" I sputtered. "For what? I'm no ambrosia addict."

Dad held a hand up and tried on a soothing voice that was an odd fit for the god of war. I guess he was playing good cop. "Look, we know you're going through a hard time lately, trying to find where you fit into this modern world, but that's no reason to hide from your family. We don't care if you're not a famous actor or if you're actually single—"

I yanked down the collar of my shirt to show off Declan's bite.

"Nice mating mark you've got there," Deimos observed, his eyes on the healing scar, eyebrow arched. "Does that mean Declan forgave you for being such an ass?"

I groaned, slapping a hand over my eyes. “I’m sorry, okay? No, I’m not an actor. I lied. And yes, Declan is my mate. I should’ve called to tell you, but we had some things to work out.”

“I’ll say,” Dad muttered around a mouthful of sandwich. “Though it looks like you’re not out of the woods yet. Where is he?”

“He... has to work?” You’d think with millenia to practice, I would’ve learned how to lie better by now.

“Try again,” Deimos said, shaking his head.

“Things with Declan are... amazing. He’s perfect. He’s got some family drama, but beyond that, I couldn’t ask for a better mate.”

Dad cocked his head as though waiting for me to finish. “And he is not here because...?”

I clenched my teeth hard. It was hard enough to admit my faults, but this one was a doozy. I was too naïve and gullible for my own good. “I... screwed up.”

The two of them exchanged a dark look. “Screwed up how?” Deimos said.

“It’s okay, Son, I’m sure he’ll forgive you. You’re forever mates. Whatever you did, it can’t be that bad.”

I covered my face so I didn’t have to look at them as I blurted the whole thing out. “I was all sad and drunk and stumbled into this secret back alley underground cave, and there was this goddess, Apate, who promised she could give me the future I wanted, but that I had to be human to escape my fate, and I thought she made me mortal, but really, she tricked me and just blocked access to my powers, and now I think I might

literally be a ticking time bomb.”

The silence that followed my admission was deafening. I held my breath as I waited, but when nobody said anything, I peeled my hands back to look. They were both staring at me with blank expressions.

The silence went on for so long, I halfway wondered if Chronos had paused time, but then suddenly, my father the “good cop” erupted, his eyes blazing. “What the hell were you thinking?!”

“You moron!” Deimos yelled, slamming his fist so hard into the counter that he cracked the marble. “Don’t you have any clue who Apate is?”

“N-No,” I stuttered. “She said she was a super old goddess, one of the first, so she knew a lot of stuff.”

“She’s one of the first, all right,” Dad scoffed, shaking his head, “but to describe her as a goddess isn’t quite accurate. Self-proclaimed, maybe. She was one of the evils that was let out of Pandora’s box!”

“Oh.” What else could I say? I’d screwed up, all right.

“Oh? That’s all you have to say?” Deimos shouted, leaning in close enough that his spittle hit my cheeks, until Dad put a hand on his chest, pushing him back.

“Hey, go easy on your brother.”

“Why the hell should I?!” he raved, and I could feel the frisson of his dread brush over me. As if I wasn’t scared enough as it was. “If he explodes, he could take half this city with him!”

Could that be true? I thought I was protecting my mate by putting some distance between us, but if what my brother was saying was true, then I would need to go a lot farther.

My vision blurred with tears, and I slumped onto the counter. “She said she helped you find Cameron,” I whispered, grief taking over. “I just wanted what you had...”

“Oh, Brother,” Deimos muttered, coming around the island to put his arm over my shoulders and dragging me in for a side hug. “She manipulates, twisting her words in a way that will get you to believe her. She thrives on chaos and misery.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to see that...” I hung my head, feeling helpless and overwhelmed.

Dad told me not to do anything rash, that he would ask around and see what he could do to get me out of this. But if the pulsing heat I felt deep in my core was anything to judge by, I didn’t think we had much time.

Chapter 18

Declan

I hadn't been able to sleep since Phobos dashed off.

The number of times I'd considered calling, texting, or driving over there I couldn't count.

The new bed and bedding arrived, and as Phobos had paid extra to have it assembled, I spent a sleepless night in luxury, my head on a pillow so fluffy the fae word gossamer was the perfect description. Sheets with a high thread count surrounded me like a hug while I snuggled into a quilt cocooning me.

But none of those qualities soothed my mind as I lay awake, worried about my mate.

Unable to sleep, I went downstairs to the bar, still clad in my PJs and robe. I shivered because I always turned the heat off here at the end of the night to save money.

Should have brought a blanket. Or that quilt. My wolf had slept all night, unconcerned about my mate because we were mated and he was a god.

I stumbled around, unsure of what I was doing. There were a few empty boxes in the office where the cases of beer were stored, so I trudged out back to the recycling bin. It was still dark and so damned cold, but it was only a few steps from the back door to the container.

But a scent assaulted me. Father's! It was too strong to be a remnant of when he was last here. I steeled myself with one hand on the door. A shadow loomed in the darkness, and my belly twisted, not in fear but irritation. Rage wasn't too strong a word. He never gave me agency to live my own life. It was his version or nothing.

We could stay outside and freeze or I could let him in. If I raced inside and locked the door, his wolf could break it down. May as well avoid damaging the building.

"If you thought arriving in the dark would give you an advantage, you're wrong." I walked behind the counter, wanting to keep a distance from him, and flicked on a light.

He'd grown older which wasn't a surprise. That was how life was supposed to be, though when the universe planned it, age was supposed to be accompanied by wisdom. Father had not learned a thing about me and was as stubborn and full of hate as the day I killed my omega dad.

"What do you want?" I took out two cans of soda water and shoved one at him. He sat on a stool and pulled the tab, the sharp pop more distinct than usual in the empty room.

I gulped half my can, droplets plopping onto my robe. The temperature was the same as when I came downstairs because I hadn't turned on the heat, but perhaps my resentment was fueling the warmth inside me. If so, it was about to ignite and combust in an inferno.

"I came to talk sense into you." He studied the writing on the can and twisted it in his hand.

"You can't. Your reign over me is dunzo. I've removed myself from your clutches and you have no more power."

“Declan.”

Yanking at my robe and PJ top, I leaned forward, ensuring he couldn't miss identifying the mating mark at the base of my throat. “Mated. To the one the universe put on this earth for me.”

While I didn't understand the repercussions of whatever Apaté had done to my mate, it didn't void our mating. Unless he died, but that wasn't happening because I'd track down the goddess myself and have her reverse her spell.

My wolf piped up. I'll do it for you .

“I've failed in my duty to you.” His shoulders slumped, and the small bags under his eyes became more prominent and grayish. I swore he aged ten years in those few seconds.

“No. I've chosen the path that the universe laid out.” I could have swerved and chosen a different direction, which I'd been considering when Phobos was being an ass.

“You're my son, my only child, and yet you're a fool, Declan.” He crumpled the empty can, the cracking reminding me of our fractured relationship.

“For believing in and trusting love?” He'd never recovered from my omega dad's death. My whole life, a veil had been pulled over his eyes, blinding him to beauty, happiness, and his son's love.

“I mated the love of my life.” He had a faraway look in his eyes as if he was dredging up memories of when he had allowed happiness into his heart. “Your dad was the kindest man I've ever known, and we were so looking forward to your birth. He would have been an amazing father.”

“He was. He carried me for nine months and brought me into the world.” Perhaps in those last moments, he’d begged Father to take care of me. If he was sitting beside the gods and goddesses looking down at us, he must despair at Father’s hostility toward me.

“Don’t you see? Love makes you weak and vulnerable. It pretends the world is good and fair and kind. And then it snatches that happiness away, leaving a hole inside you that will never be filled.”

I’d always viewed his attitude to life as one that focused on me because I was the cause of his terrible loss. I was the one responsible for Dad’s death. But his speech gave me an inkling of how he couldn’t overcome his despair and was unable to get past it and shower me with love.

For the first time, I experienced a stab of regret. Yes, Father was the adult and it was his responsibility to look after me despite his loss. Some people could do that, but Father hadn’t. My dad must have been the center of his world.

“Do you understand why I wanted you mated to someone you could never love? Or at least he wasn’t your fate?”

I never had until now, and I kinda knew what he was about to say.

“Because if love wasn’t present, you would never experience the blinding pain of losing him. Your heart would remain intact when he died, and if you had children, you’d be able to continue living and also loving them as a devoted father should.”

He put his head in his hands and sobbed.

What’s he doing? My wolf had never witnessed Father crying.

Unsure how to respond, I edged my fingers toward him and brushed them over his arm. He grabbed them so tightly, he cut off the flow of blood. We stayed like that until he loosened his grip, and I removed my hand and gave him a napkin to wipe away the tears.

We weren't buddies. Him breaking down didn't undo the hurt, but it gave me a glimpse of the hell he'd been in, and now that the wall he'd erected around himself had crumbled just a tad, maybe there was hope for a better relationship going forward. Not that I was expecting miracles.

"My mate's a god."

A flicker of a smile appeared on Father's face as he raised his head. "All newly mated couples think that, Son."

Typical of Father to think like that, but after running the sentence over in my head, it occurred to me he was right.

"No, he's a literal god." I waved my arms around, soaring and dipping and acting more like a bird or a dragon shifter than a god. Having never seen my mate flitting yards above the ground, I had no clue what he looked like. But my father had never met a god previously. Or perhaps he had and he'd asked them to bring my dad back from the dead. Just as well he'd never encountered Apate or she might have promised him something and fallen short. I shivered, imagining Dad returning as a zombie.

I'd held back that my mate was a god of fear because that would bring up awkward questions about our relationship and whether Phobos would be the cause of the next world war.

"A god. Hmmm, I guess he won't disappear on you, being, you know, godlike and ever-present." He glanced around. "So where is he? Please don't tell me he's agreed

to live above a bar.”

“He had an emergency, as gods do.”

“Let’s hope the world isn’t ending, just as we’ve made a small breakthrough.”

Did Father make a joke? I refused to be drawn into a trap of forgiving him. He’d treated me abominably. But not having the hatred nestled inside me, ready to flare up the next time we met or spoke, would perhaps alter my outlook on life.

Now if only Phobos could recover from whatever Apate had inflicted on him, we could look forward to the future.

Father got off the stool, saying he had to be going. “There’s a shifter council meeting I’m chairing this afternoon.” I offered to make him coffee, and he said he’d take one for the road.

After he left, I went upstairs, phone in hand, hoping my mate hadn’t disappeared for good while Father and I were bonding.

Chapter 19

Phobos

The pain was excruciating, nearly unbearable, but when I thought of all the lives I'd taken through war, the families I'd torn in two, the hearts and minds I'd broken, I decided it was no more than what I deserved. This was karma, payback for a lifetime of doling out fear and darkness.

My father had told me to wait until he came back with an answer for me, not to do anything he deemed rash, but I knew I was running out of time—and that meant all of Valleywood was too...

As I stumbled down the sidewalk, my body felt heavier with each passing moment. One foot after the other, I dragged myself from where I'd parked my car, half up on the curb. A couple walking home stopped and stared, their faces twisting into masks of horror as some of my dammed powers slipped free, and I wondered what they saw when they looked at me. Outwardly, I was nothing more than a man, as mortal as I'd been in the weeks since making a deal with Apate. Perhaps I looked tired, heartbroken. On the inside, though... My skin felt blackened and blistered from the fiery heat that filled me. What had begun as tiny fissures had expanded to canyons, my power spilling out of me in waves of terror that would be impossible to ignore. If only it were enough to vent the mounting pressure.

I'd waited until the bar was closed. I didn't want to see the way people's faces changed when they saw me, didn't want to explain. I used the key Declan had given me. I could hear Wren in the back room, restacking cases of empties as she cleaned

up after the long night. Looked like it had been busy, judging by the mess.

Wren came out, singing off-key, but she choked on the tune, clutching her hand to her chest when she caught sight of me. “Oh! Holy shit, Phobos, you scared the hell out of me. I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Yeah, sorry. I should’ve called out and told you it was me.”

At that point, she should’ve been able to relax after learning it was me, but she couldn’t, not when being hit with a constant barrage of panic. I watched as beads of sweat formed on her forehead, her breath stuttering, and she took an unsteady step back. I tried to hunch down, make myself smaller and less threatening, but she was a tiny thing. I hated that I was putting her through this.

“Is Declan here?”

Her throat bobbed with a hard swallow. “Um, he’s upstairs, but... maybe you shouldn’t...” She blinked her dark eyes a few times, her features tightening, and I appreciated that her first instinct was not to flee but to protect her boss from me. Because every alarm must’ve been going off in her head, telling her I was a threat.

“It’s okay. I just have to talk to him for a minute, then I’ll be gone. I promise.”

She didn’t look like she believed me entirely, but her bravery could only extend so far.

I passed through the bar and headed upstairs, opening the door to his apartment quietly. The room was dark except for city lights shining through the window. I knocked on the door frame gently, seeing Declan’s hunched form under the covers. “Declan?” I whispered. “Are you awake?”

He rolled over instantly, sitting up in bed, the blanket falling to pool around his waist and exposing his bare chest. “Phobos?” He reached for me, and I was helpless to deny him. I left the door open, hoping to avoid making him feel trapped, and closed the distance. Perching on the edge of the bed, I noticed with some satisfaction that there was no twang of a broken spring this time. I only wished I’d had a chance to spend a night in the bed beside him.

“Where have you been?” he asked. “I’ve been so worried! I texted, I called.” He moved to grip my face between his hands but pulled back with a hiss. “Your skin... you’re on fire!”

“I’m so, so sorry,” I said in a rough whisper, my throat tightening. “I thought I could control it. I thought with my father’s help that we could reverse the damage, but it’s too late for that now.”

“What do you mean it’s too late?” His eyes were too wide, his heart beating too fast to keep up with his panting breath, but as much as I frightened him, he refused to let go. He tangled his fingers into my shirt, drawing me closer. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“You were right all along. Apate, she’s a trickster, using manipulation to wreak havoc. She went so far as to help me find my mate, giving me the future I wanted and making good on her end of the bargain, but she never had any intention of letting me keep you. She sealed me up tight, and now all this power inside me is spilling out. I can’t break the deal we had, it’s written in stone, and now... I need to make sure you’re safe.”

“Of course I’m safe. With you.” Declan moved to climb into my lap, and I knew I should stop him, should leave now before I no longer had the strength, but I was a weak man. Instead, I closed my eyes and clung to him.

The mating bond between us seemed to vibrate with his emotions, reflecting the fear he felt back at me, and I reveled in it because it told me how brave my omega was. I knew he would be strong enough to go on without me.

“Phobos, please,” he begged, settling his legs on either side of my hips. When I tried to turn away, he gripped my hair tightly and forced my face back so he could look into my eyes. “Whatever you think you need to do, don’t. We can figure this out together. That’s what being mates means. Don’t you get it? You never have to be alone again.”

He gritted his teeth against the onslaught of terror that battered at his defenses. He couldn’t help the whimper that escaped, and my heart split in two, tears slipping down my cheeks.

“I’m so sorry, Declan. I never meant to hurt you. Please know that I will always love you... right up until the very end.” I tried to move him off me, prying his arms and legs from around me.

The panic that he felt now was more genuine as he fought me. “No! Stop it, Phobos! You have to stay here with me. We’ll call your dad. Maybe he’s heard something! W-We can find a cure, surely. Gods are immortal, everyone knows that!”

I closed my eyes and breathed him in one last time. “It’s okay, Declan. I’m not afraid to die.”

With my eyes shut, I didn’t see him as he leaned in and kissed me, smashing his lips to mine in a desperate plea to make me stay. He whimpered at the pain, my flesh scalding, even as he moved to deepen the kiss, his tongue delving between my lips.

I let him have this for just a moment. He was a shifter, he would heal, and he knew how much he could handle. I memorized the way he felt in my arms, his taste on my

tongue. I was selfishly glad that I'd had the chance to feel what it was like to be this blissfully happy with someone.

But now I had to let him go.

Breaking away from the kiss, Declan gasped for breath, his lips red and swollen. "You have to let me go," I said firmly. I stood and used the last of my strength to wrench away from his grasp.

I turned for the door, refusing to look back. I didn't have the strength to resist the look of utter devastation on his face.

"Phobos!" he called after me, but it was too late.

I bolted down the stairs, through the bar, and out into the night. The cool air did nothing to break my fever, but it didn't even matter anymore. Nothing did. I was already dead.

I needed to get the hell out of the city. When I detonated, I needed to be as far away from everyone as I could get. Taking even one innocent life would be too many. And in my opinion, there was only one place that fit the bill—Lake Erie.

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Chapter 20

Declan

No time to get fully dressed, I raced after my mate while tripping over the pants I was trying to haul up. But he'd vanished.

What remained was his singed scent, reminiscent of a fire flaring plus the stench of rotten eggs, combined with an overly sweet smell.

Tears streamed over my cheeks as huge choking sobs wracked my body. I fell to my knees on the sidewalk, the cold penetrating my bones, the iciness similar to what surrounded my heart when I contemplated a life without my mate.

I'd never find him in the dark unless he started glowing, which was a possibility considering the heat his body was generating. If he didn't want to be found, he'd hide somewhere I couldn't go. A dark cave, perhaps, that protected gods and refused entry to humans and shifters.

Is there such a place? My wolf was curious, not cognisant of the danger we and Valleywood were in if Phobos didn't find a solution to Apate's spell.

I don't know . I shouldn't have snapped at him, but I wasn't familiar with the world of gods. Maybe they had a secret meeting place in the heavens, but my mate was denied access because he could no longer transport himself through space.

Despite the fear crawling over my skin and into my bones, and the desire to find

Phobos, I was exhausted and put off looking for him until it was light, assuming he had that much time. I dragged myself up the stairs, my stomach complaining and nausea making me grip the banister as I battled a wave of dizziness.

For sure I'd been working hard, but being so tired was because of the trauma brought on by Apate fucking with my mate and him not accepting any help from me. His actions were for my benefit. I got it. He wanted to keep me safe, but perhaps he hadn't had a good role model growing up. We'd spoken little of his family dynamics except for his and Deimos's relationship.

Not that Father had set a good example of how to engage in conflict resolution.

Collapsing into bed, I hugged one of the new pillows to my belly. I'd never be able to sleep, but I'd read once that lying in a darkened room with your eyes closed was the second-best option to sleeping. But any small sound had my eyes snapping open as I checked the phone for a message.

I finally gave up and turned on the bedside lamp, wishing the dawn would come early so I could be on my way. My mind raced as I made a list of places to look for Phobos. His house, his parents', and his brother's that we'd driven past on the way to me shifting in the woods.

Unlikely he'd be at any of them, but they might have an idea of where he might flee. He said his father was trying to solve the fiasco that Apate had initiated so we could begin our mated lives. Nothing had been easy since we marked one another, between Father's interference and Phobos's looming combustion, but we could get past this.

I pulled a pillow over my head, hoping to block out my problems and get some sleep. My dreams were the only escape from reality, and up until now, they were filled with pink fluffy clouds, rainbows, and unicorns. Such a cliché, but my life was a shitshow, so I welcomed any and all stereotypes if they blocked out the fear my mate might

blow himself up along with the rest of Valleywood.

When my bladder insisted I pee, I shuffled to the bathroom before boiling water for a shot of caffeine. But as I spooned instant coffee into the cup, I poured it back into the jar and grabbed a tea bag instead.

No coffee? That's not like you. My wolf couldn't figure me out today.

Phobos being in trouble has my tummy all jumbly. I ripped a nail with my teeth and grimaced as it peeled off down to the quick. Damn. I wrapped a band-aid around the affected finger and returned to bed with my hot drink. It'd be unnoticeable in a few hours thanks to my shifter healing abilities.

It was getting light, so I should leave, but I was paralyzed with indecision. I didn't expect to find him. He was a god and a wily one, so he would have numerous places to hide. In that case, going to his parents' place would be the sensible option because his father understood the predicament my mate was in.

But when I put my tea down and stood up, the room swirled around me and I fell backward onto the bed.

Eat. You need your strength .

Shame you can't make it for me.

When I first met my beast in my teens and I was hungry, he'd offered to take his fur, hunt down a rabbit, then shift back so I could eat it. Such a kind gesture, but raw rabbit wasn't my thing.

You could have cooked it.

True .

Once the room stopped spinning, I staggered to the cupboard and slapped peanut butter on two slices of bread. That would have to do for sustenance. After pulling on my clothes from last night, I brushed my teeth and chewed some gum I found in the pocket of my hoodie because my mouth was still gross.

Right. I could do this—this being me getting in the car and driving to my in-laws. If they weren't early risers, I'd raise hell beating down the door until someone answered.

I should have gone there when Phobos left. Why didn't I? The answer popped into my head. Because I didn't want to hear there was nothing I could do and that he was lost to me. Added to that, my life and everyone else's in Valleywood could end, and that wasn't what I was prepared to hear.

But there was a loud noise downstairs, and my head jerked toward the door. He was back, the problem was solved, and we could continue our life together. I fumbled with the door handle and clutched the railing because the lightheadedness I'd experienced earlier had returned.

Falling face down on the bar floor wasn't an option, though if I injured myself, shifting should repair the wounds.

"Phobos! You're here." My shifter eyesight couldn't pick him out in the early-morning light.

"Boss?" The voice behind me wasn't my mate.

"Wren." I swung around and glanced over her shoulder, assuming she'd found my mate and brought him home. "Where is he?"

“Phobos?” She shrugged. “Isn’t he with you?”

I leaned on the counter as hope faded. “No. He left.”

“Your mate was pretty agitated last night, and he was feverish. He kinda glowed.”

“Mmmm. He’s not well.”

She poured a glass of water and shoved it over the counter. “Drink. You don’t look so well yourself.”

“I’m fine. Not much sleep is all.” I chugged the water and remembered my tea untouched upstairs. “What are you doing here so early?”

“Stocktake, remember? Astor should be here soon.”

“Right.” I didn’t recall that but pretended I did.

“Boss, do you have some news for me?”

Shit. Had I promised Wren a raise? I’d have to fudge it. “Ummm, I might, but I need to get Phobos to a doctor first.” I stood up. “Don’t worry, I haven’t forgotten.”

She giggled and slapped a hand over her mouth. “You don’t know what I’m talking about, do you? Unless you’re the one going to the doctor.”

Damn, she’d caught me, and I’d have to admit she was right. “It’s possible. Things have been a little crazy lately.” But I was confused on why I’d go to the doctor.

“Sit. Phobos can wait a little longer. Besides, you have some happy news for him.”

I did? I perked up, making the leap that my employee understood my mate's predicament. Taking both her hands in mine, I said, "You've made me so happy, Wren. But how did you find out?"

"Your scent."

Hmmm, there was an information gap between what she'd said about the good news and how I smelled. I sniffed under one arm. Yes, I hadn't showered, but when the world might blow up, you don't pay attention to hygiene.

"Sorry, I forgot to put on deodorant."

"Boss, you're so adorable." She patted my midsection. But she recoiled, and combined with her slack-jawed expression, it suggested something was wrong.

"Sorry. Too familiar? Apologies for touching you."

My head was spinning again but not from being dizzy. I was bewildered and talking to Wren was similar to trudging through thick syrup. Or how I imagined it to be.

"Ummm, I don't know." I placed a hand on my belly. "You've lost me. What's going on?"

"Your scent has changed. Hasn't your wolf noticed?"

Have you?

No. She's mistaken. You're the same as you always were .

Wren beamed. "You're pregnant."

"No!" I blurted that out without thinking. No. The universe wouldn't do that to us.

Not with us being wrapped up in chaos. Not possible.

“Yes. I’m a shifter too, remember, and my sparrow tells me you’re going to have a baby.”

My knees buckled, and I slammed onto the wooden stool. “Are you sure?” Being mated could have changed my scent, and stress definitely also could have caused it. My mind couldn’t grasp that I might have a baby inside me.

“My beast is never wrong. She’s scented when anyone in my family was pregnant. Knew it before they did.”

“Oh!”

“Congratulations!”

There wasn’t much to celebrate if the baby didn’t have an alpha father or... I ran a hand over my eyes to hide the tears.

Or Valleywood and everyone in it ceased to exist.

Chapter 21

Phobos

I might not have taken any high school physics classes—or attended what humans considered school in any way, shape, or form—but Father had hired us a tutor when Deimos and I were young. I'd also been around a while, and experience had to count for something. I knew that deep water was my best chance of minimizing the destruction, since flying into the atmosphere was now out of the question. But I would have to somehow get deep enough into Lake Erie and time it just right. Would I die without oxygen? Even gods needed to breathe.

I stood on the rocky shore and watched the sun begin to rise, transitioning slowly from black to navy blue and eventually shades of purple and pink. It reminded me of the way Declan's skin grew rosy when he blushed. I sighed, feeling heavier than I ever had in my very long life. Even if I spent the rest of eternity floating on the River Styx, I would hold my mate's love in my heart and know that I'd been so lucky to have met him. He had made it all worth it.

The searing pain seemed to crest, and I groaned at the agony, clenching my teeth and balling my hands into tight fists. I felt like I was coming apart at the seams.

It was time...

Peeling off my clothes, I folded them neatly and stacked them on a bench, thinking of how my tidy mate would be so proud of me for the effort. Maybe someone could use them after I was gone.

Stepping lightly over the rocky shore, I waded into the lake. The water hissed and spit around my ankles, coming to a rolling boil as I moved farther in, lapping at my thighs. The water provided temporary relief, and I sighed, eyes closed, as I pushed forward.

“Hey!” I heard someone shouting distantly. I put it out of my mind, though, because they likely weren’t talking to me. The voice got louder, though, accompanied by a splash. “Hey, you! What the hell are you doing?”

Frowning, I peeled my eyes open and saw a man swimming toward me—not from the shore but the middle of the lake, and he was making good speed. As I watched, he dipped underwater, and I swore I saw the flash of a fin behind him, before he re-emerged just a dozen yards away.

I blinked hard. Was I seeing things? Had I already died? The pain pulsing behind my eyes told me I had not.

When the man—or... fishman? Whatever he was—was closer, he emerged from the water, glaring at me. “I said, what do you think you’re doing?” He had reddish hair, brown eyes, and a broad torso of chiseled muscles. And then there was the tail, of course, blue-green scales merging with flesh around his waist.

“I—” My jaw clamped shut with a click of my teeth. I wasn’t entirely sure what to say. If he was just some guy out for a leisurely morning swim, he at least deserved to be warned. Would he believe me if I said I was an ex-god timebomb? “Are you a mermaid?”

“Siren, actually. Name’s Lucas.”

“Phobos,” I said. I almost offered him my hand, but I was just as likely to sear the skin off his palm. “Um... so, it’s actually not a great day for a swim, Lucas. You

should just skedaddle on back home. I'm, uh... gonna blow up?"

"Not here you're not," he scolded, though he didn't seem to question the exploding part. Either I looked worse than I thought or he could sense it, but either way, I was glad to skip the lengthy explanation.

"Well, no, not here exactly. I was planning on swimming down to the bottom of the lake and—"

"No, I mean the lake is out of the question. There's a whole city down there, full of innocents. You'll have to take your explosion elsewhere."

I blinked a few times. "I'm sorry, did you say there's a city at the bottom of Lake Erie?" He nodded. Why hadn't I heard of it?

Well, shit, that kind of ruined those plans.

Maybe if I rented a helicopter, I thought, scrambling to pull my pants back on, but the fabric clung to my wet skin. Luckily, I was hot enough that it evaporated fairly quickly. By the time I was running back toward the city, I had come up with half a dozen backup plans and ruled them out just as quickly. Rocketship? That seemed like something that required extensive planning. Driving to the least populated area I could find? There would still be farmers and their crops or livestock, maybe some tourists. Private jet over the ocean and leaping out the door? That one had some potential, but time was running out.

In the end, I decided there was only one possible solution. I ran, jogged, stumbled, and finally crawled all the way to the alleyway where I'd first found Apaté.

Deimos had explained that when I stepped through this door, I was actually entering a pocket dimension—and an illegal one at that. He'd threatened Apaté with tattling to

Loki about her little hideaway if she didn't help Cameron with a problem, so maybe that would work for me too.

"Apate?" I called as I closed the alley door tight behind me. My voice echoed through the cave. I couldn't know for sure, but I had a feeling that an explosion here in a different dimension might save Valleywood from destruction. I hoped it wouldn't come to that, though.

I halfway tumbled down the path of slick rock, and when I finally came to a stop, I found myself at the foot of her throne. Instead of knitting, this time she seemed to be in the middle of high tea. "Phobos," she said simply, and even from behind her veil, I could feel her beady gaze on me.

"Apate, you must undo this curse," I demanded, pushing myself up using a stalagmite for balance, chest heaving as I tried to catch my breath. My vision had begun to tunnel, the edges turning a fiery red that eclipsed all else.

She let out this little wheezy squeak, what passed as a chuckle. "Must I?" she asked, cheekily.

Through the pain-infused haze, I reminded myself that this crone was immeasurably older than I was. She'd stood not just against time but also the likes of Odin and Ra. She would not bend because I demanded it.

"Please?" I tried, wincing at how it sounded.

It had her cackling much louder this time, slapping a hand on her knee as she bent over in her throne.

"So glad I could amuse you while on my deathbed," I mumbled, slumping against the stone pillar as my legs threatened to give out. "Tell me what I can do. What if we

struck a new deal?”

She leaned back, arms crossed over her chest. “You have nothing I want.”

“Well then,” I said, tipping my chin up defiantly. I swore the cave walls were reflecting light back at me, my body emitting a bright orange glow. “If I’m going to explode, you can be damn sure I’ll be doing it right here next to you. I wonder, can you die? Or maybe you’ll just be exploded into a million tiny sentient pieces. I wonder what Loki will say when he puts all your pieces back together in the wrong order...”

For a second, she actually seemed to consider the possibility of death, and it almost felt like she might welcome it. A god’s life was unending, and sometimes, even we craved death.

I held my breath, my lungs burning as I waited for her to decide. Steam rose from the cave floor, leaving the stone bone-dry. I closed my eyes tight, starburst patterns painted on the inside of my eyelids. I’m sorry, Declan. I tried. I love you.

“Well?” she snapped. “Are you dying or are you tattling to Loki, you can’t have both.”

“M-Maybe we don’t have to d-do either,” I suggested through gritted teeth, from my spot kneeling on the floor. I wrapped my arms around my middle, trying to hold myself together.

Finally, when I thought for sure we were both about to be vaporized, she leaned forward. “You will name your first child after me.”

“Done!” I burst out, and just like that, a new deal was struck.

Again, she peeled off one of her black lace gloves and reached out, poking me sharply in the center of my forehead. It was the equivalent of sticking a pin in an overinflated balloon.

I screamed with the release of the pressure, back bowing, head tipped back to the vaulted ceiling as I howled. Even with the floodgates wide open, it was too much. Too... much... The walls shook, rock fell with a noisy clatter, but when I found myself at last lying on the floor in a trembling heap, panting to catch my breath, it seemed we had both survived.

I couldn't ask for anything else.

Apate gave a tsk as she surveyed the damage. "And I'd just redecorated."

Pushing up shakily to my feet and trudging my way out, I was eager to get home to my mate, though I wasn't looking forward to explaining to him that we would have to name our firstborn after this trickster goddess.

Who knows, maybe we would never even have children...

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Chapter 22

Declan

“The color reminds me of... something, but I can’t quite put my finger on it.” I tapped my lips and wandered around the perimeter of the room that was to be our nursery.

“Maybe just don’t put your finger in it.” Phobos came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my sizable bump.

A chuckle burst out of me and blossomed into a full-on belly laugh. “Stop. You’ll wake the baby.” Our little one already had a sleep schedule, but it was nap and snooze during the day, and rumble around, kicking dad’s ribs at night.

“Fine, it is shit, isn’t it?”

Phobos saying that set off more hysterical laughter.

“Oh my gods, it’s awful, and it really is shit.” I turned and kissed him. “Don’t give up your day job, babe.”

“Not sure what that is exactly, but yeah, I’ll redo it.”

Since regaining his powers and not exploding and taking everyone in Valleywood with him, Phobos had been the most attentive mate, especially after I told him the news.

“I wasn’t sure I would ever have kids,” he kept saying as we lay in our new bed, and he rested his hand on my tummy. But we’d agreed we didn’t want to bring our child up above the bar.

My mate hadn’t insisted I give up my work. Some alphas were all “my mate isn’t going to work ‘cause I can provide for them and our little ones.” Instead, he’d created a playground out back of his place, now our home, with a treehouse, a maze, and a jungle of different plants and trees. It was magical, and I often climbed into the treehouse and imagined the adventures I could have had with Dad and Father.

When we chose the room for the nursery and discussed colors, he offered to paint the walls. I’d told him to surprise me but to avoid anything garish. And he’d followed my instructions, even mixed two colors to get the effect he wanted.

But once on the walls, it was the color of baby poop. When he’d done the big reveal and removed his hands from eyes, I’d wanted to like it. So much. In those seconds as I gazed at the walls, my mind scrambled to say something that wouldn’t damage his confidence.

Having almost obliterated a city and its population, including his mate and unborn child, he’d struggled to find a purpose. I’d assured him there was no hurry, as we weren’t in need of money. But telling him the color he swept over the nursery walls was shit, literally the color of poop, might have damaged his fragile ego.

It was horrid thinking a god of fear could have a damaged ego, but few gods, if any, had experienced what my mate had.

But thank all the gods he’d reacted as I did regarding the walls.

“Where are those paint swatch cards?” I strolled out of the room and sank onto a sofa.

“I’m so sorry, love.” He handed me the cards.

“It’s not a big deal. You can redo it. It’s not as though you started a war.”

“Hmmm, been there, done that.”

Okay, best not to get into that discussion.

“But I’d read that brown is this year’s color of the year.”

“I think that was a rich shade of brown, and it’s too heavy for a newborn's nursery.” Picking up the green swatches, I tapped an olive one. “What about this? Not the whole room but one wall.” It reminded me of the forest at dusk, and our little one would be an autumn baby. And maybe a shifter.

“I’ll get right on it.”

But I tugged his jacket and said the pooppy color could stay where it was until tomorrow. “Though if you’re going out, I’ve finished most of my snacks.” I counted off the items on my fingers. “Orange juice, avocado, syrup, ice cream, and marmalade.

Poor Phobos! Blood drained from his face, but he agreed to drive to the store. He twisted his head away from me.

“I can see you.” I couldn’t, but I knew what he was doing.

“Can’t.” He refused to look at me because he was trying to arrange his face to get rid of the nauseated expression.

“You can hide in the baby poop room while I eat.”

“Nah.” He raced to the closet under the stairs and returned with a package that had been delivered earlier. “This will help so I can be with you and not be affected by whatever you’re eating.”

He ripped open the box as only a god did—if I wasn’t starving I’d have jumped him because he was sexy as fuck when he used his superhuman strength.

“Is that a—”

“Gas mask!” He held it up before slipping it over his face.

“That’s a tad over the top.” My food combination cravings may have been a little out of the ordinary, but they were food. I wasn’t stuffing dirt in my mouth. “Scoot. Off to the store you go.”

He made for the door, grabbing his keys on the way.

“Take off the gas mask or you’ll frighten the cashiers and the other customers.”

I didn’t move from the couch while he was gone. I wasn’t working today, as Monday was my usual day off. But as my pregnancy progressed, I took two days off each week, and that had slid to three now that I had swollen ankles and needed regular naps.

But Wren along with Astor and Magnolia, a new hire, were managing without me, and I was considering making Wren the manager and pursuing something else after the baby arrived.

I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I was aware of was Phobos waving a plate under my nose. And yes, his latest toy was attached to his face.

“Yum.” My mate helped me sit up and tucked cushions behind my back.

He mumbled behind the mask, and I caught the words, “Just for you.”

I attacked the eggs and syrup. The yolks were runny like I preferred, and I stirred in the maple syrup. Even wearing that ridiculous mask, my mate hid his face behind a pillow.

“So good.” I wiped my lips with a napkin and attacked the avocados with chocolate syrup. Of course I dripped the chocolate on my paternity shirt, but that was what washing machines were for. As I couldn’t get the remnants from the bowl, I licked it.

My mate mumbled something as he dabbed at my face.

“I know what you’re saying even though I can’t hear you.” It had to be something like, “I hope you don’t teach our child to do that.” They’d do it anyway, without assistance from me, because that was what kids did.

I tucked into the cereal but with orange juice instead of milk. So good. Everyone should eat cereal like this.

Ewww! Dried brown stuff with orange liquid. I’d rather eat dead leaves. My wolf also wasn’t a fan of what was in front of me. The baby will be born demanding a weird combination of foods .

They’ll be perfect. If they ask for pickled eggs drowning in a milkshake, I’ll agree I was wrong. Though a sweet milky drink with vinegary eggs sounded pretty inventive. I’d give my kid a thumbs-up.

“Perhaps I’ll eat the marmalade straight out of the jar, babe.” I beckoned Phobos to give me a spoon.

When I was done, the baby awoke, and I placed my mate's hand on my belly but told him to remove the mask. We sat in silence while our little one did in-utero aerobics, and my mate's face lit up, saying he appeared very godlike.

“Our child is trying to fly.”

There was barely any wriggle room in my belly, but good that the baby was ambitious.

We discussed whether our child would be a god, but Phobos, having consulted his father, said the baby might have some godlike powers.

“We'll have to wait and see.”

But I was impatient, wanting to map out our child's future. Being mated to a god must come with privileges, other than pots of money, I reasoned, until Phobos pointed out that other than a king or queen with a predetermined role, most humans didn't get to see their child's future.

“I have the urge to paint.” He reached behind the sofa and held up a tin of olive paint.

“Now?” After eating, I was ready to fall asleep in bed watching my favorite TV program.

“Wanna watch while I slap paint on the wall? I can drag a couch into the nursery.”

That was kinda watching paint dry.

“Ummm...” How did I explain that yes, I wanted to be lying down but not to have sex.

“I’ll be naked,” he offered.

“What? Isn’t that a little dangerous with paint and your cock flapping around?”

Phobos shrugged and smirked. “If I can’t get it off, I’ll roll around in some baby oil. I’ll be slippery, shiny, and oh so sweet-smelling.”

“Are you angling for sex?”

He hauled me to my feet. “Sex? Come to think of it, I can skip the painting and oiling my body and jump straight to—”

“Pushing your cock in my hole?”

He stroked my cheek. “No. You’re tired. But perhaps I could give you a blow job.”
He tapped my nose. “But if you’re not up for it...”

I couldn’t see my length, but I was definitely up for it.

Chapter 23

Phobos

“Are you sure about this?” I trusted my mate with my life, but this was... out there. Especially for him.

He speared me with a sharp glare from where he was doubled over, hands braced on his knees. “Are you seriously going to question me on this? Now of all times?”

“Nope. Not even a little. No questions here.” I shook my head hard enough that my hair flopped over my forehead. I didn’t have a death wish. Whatever Declan wanted, he got. He was literally about to push a whole human being out of his body. “You are so wise, my love. Have I ever told you that? And handsome and kind and—”

“Enough with the ass-kissing,” he snapped, straightening up as the contraction passed. He blew out a long breath, and when he was no longer being squeezed so hard, his expression shifted to being a little sheepish. “Sorry about that. I’m not myself today.”

While I wasn’t sure who else he would be—or why he thought I would ever want anyone else—I did my best to try and be understanding. “You don’t have to apologize. I’m sure you’ve conferred with your wolf, and if you tell me this is safe, then I will 100% respect your decision.”

“Right...” His gaze skittered away from mine, and he quickly turned and started hiking away from where I’d parked the car, headed into the woods.

I knew that look. It was his guilty look, like when he'd accidentally munched his way through an entire case of snack-size chip bags in one sitting.

Narrowing my eyes, I grabbed the bag out of the trunk then started walking along behind him. It was much easier to keep up with him now that I had my powers back. No more puffing and wheezing up the incline from lack of cardio in my workout schedule. It also didn't hurt that he was waddling. "Declan," I called after him. "You did check in with your wolf, right?"

He pretended he didn't hear me, which was such utter bullshit. That shifter could hear a pin drop from a mile away.

"Declan..." I drawled again, now catching up with him.

He rounded on me, eyes blazing with a strange mix of manic fear. "My beast thinks it's a terrible idea too, okay? He would much prefer I be in a nice cushy hospital right now, instead of the middle of the forest far from any emergency medical attention. Is that what you want to hear? Are you happy now?"

"Hey, shh," I soothed, drawing him gently into my arms, his round stomach between us, and rubbed a hand over his back in slow circles. He dropped his head to my chest and started sobbing, his tears soaking into my shirt. "Tell me what's going on."

Declan turned his tear-filled eyes up to me. "I just... wanted to be closer to my roots, you know? I was so mad at my father for trying to control me that I turned my back on everything to move to the city. No family, no pack. And then I met you, and I figured, sure, we can start our own pack, but something was still missing. I guess I thought this would... fix it. My ancestors have been doing this for generations, but now that I'm out here, I'm starting to realize this was a stupid idea. I mean, my dad died in childbirth. What the fuck was I thinking?!" He dug his fingers into my shirt, tugging desperately.

My heart ached for him. I'd had no idea he was going through this whole identity crisis. He and his dad had been slowly working toward building some kind of relationship, but I figured there would always be this rift between them. A gap that could only have been filled by a childhood shared.

"Hey, look up," I coaxed, tipping his gaze up with a finger under his chin. "What do you see?"

"What?" Declan sniffled, his eyes bloodshot and puffy, but he did as I asked. "Um, trees? Sky?"

"Mm-hm. I love the way the leaves are changing color, all red and gold. And what do you hear?"

He heaved a shuddery breath then quietened down to listen. "The wind, a few sparrows, a squirrel." He'd already begun to calm down, but I wasn't quite done.

"What do you smell?"

Declan drew in another long, slow breath, parsing the scents from the air. "Rich soil, rain falling over the ridge, a doe about a hundred yards off to the east."

"Good. Now tell me, do you want to give birth out here in the woods, or do you want to be in a hospital?"

He shook his head, his lower lip trembling. "I-It's too late for the hospital anyway. Ready or not, this baby is coming."

Cradling his cheeks in my palms, I said, "Look who you're talking to. I can fly you straight to a hospital in under five minutes—if that's what you want."

He blinked a few times, and I recognized the inward shift to his gaze when I knew he was having a conversation with his wolf. Finally, he said, “Can we try here, and if anything goes wrong, you can get us to the hospital?”

“Absolutely.” I didn’t tell him that I already had Dr. Banner, a friend of mine at the hospital who specialized in shifter births, on standby in case we needed him.

While Declan panted his way through another contraction, I quickly unloaded the massive bag I’d packed for the occasion. There was a sleeping bag, pillows, and blankets to wrap the baby in, plus some ice packs, water bottles, and a cooler of food. I hadn’t known how long this would take, but I was starting to bet we wouldn’t have time for a snack, let alone the entire meal I’d prepared.

I helped Declan undress then tried to make him comfortable, lying down, walking, crouching, but as the contractions quickly intensified, until they were practically overlapping on top of each other, there was simply no comfort to be found.

“I-I think I need to push,” he said, his face scrunched in doubt as he made another pass of the little clearing where we’d set up.

“You think?” I asked, outwardly calm, even as every instinct I had was screaming to fly my mate to the hospital right this second.

Declan, usually so careful with his appearance, was the most disheveled I’d ever seen him. His sweaty hair hung over his face, his beard matted down on one side from all the rolling around he’d done. But in my mind, he’d never been more beautiful. He chewed on his lower lip for a second before nodding. “Yeah, definitely time to push.”

He flapped a hand at me. “Help,” he asked, and although I had no idea what kind of help he needed, I took his hand, and he lowered himself to his knees on the sleeping bag. He let out a guttural moan, and I quickly dropped down behind him, holding my

hands out as if the baby would just fall out into them.

Unfortunately, it was nothing quite so simple or easy. It was not over with one push, nor a dozen. Declan's back bowed with the effort, and I offered him words of praise and encouragement.

"I can see the head," I gasped, enthralled by the magic of childbirth. It might not have been magic in the godly sense, flying or super strength or speed, but I thought this was even better.

Declan bore down, and our child was brought into this world. I'd done some research beforehand, because I'd needed to know everything before even attempting this, but nothing could've prepared me for what happened next.

I held our daughter in my hands, so tiny, so perfect, so...

Declan, exhausted, had collapsed onto the sleeping bag, but he lifted his head off the pillow to gawk. "Um... is she—?"

"Glowing? Yeah, she totally is."

"Is that normal?" Declan asked, his voice tight as if deciding whether or not he needed to panic.

"Totally, goddesses glow all the time when they're born," I assured him, even though I had no idea if that was true or not. Pretty sure not. Luckily, the initial brilliance began to fade. It was safe to say that our beautiful baby girl had a little bit of her alpha daddy's DNA, but I swore I caught a bit of a shifter's flicker in her eyes too.

I had no idea what kind of incredible things our daughter would achieve, but I was so excited to find out. I pressed a kiss to her forehead before placing her carefully on

Declan's chest for her first feed.

"Our perfect little Apate," I whispered lovingly.

"Oh, you were serious about the name? I thought it was a joke!" We both knew better than to toy with the goddess's deal a second time.

Declan

While Apate wasn't my first, second, or even last choice, I'd agreed to the name because the goddess had made Phobos whole again, and you know, avoided the whole blowing-my-mate-to-smithereens thing.

And I'd grown to like it. Love it, actually.

Our little Apate was active when she was in my belly, and from the time of her birth, she was energetic. Her eyes flicked around, taking in her surroundings and the people in it. She was never still unless she was asleep. She kicked, shook her fists, gurgled and cried with what I'd described as "the intensity of a thousand suns."

I'd worried about her future until Phobos explained little gods, goddesses, and even those with a smidgen of godlike powers, were frustrated in those early months, not being able to move around. Once she could walk or crawl, she'd be more content. I hoped he was right.

He suggested entertaining her by flitting about, both inside the house and out. And she was transfixed as I held her up. Apate squealed and kicked her chubby baby legs—the same ones I smothered with kisses every day.

Not wanting to be left out, my wolf shifted for our daughter. She stared at him, unblinking, as he nuzzled her tummy with his snout. And at my beast's insistence, we dressed Apate in plenty of layers and a puffy coat and set off into the woods. I'd warned him not to hunt, or if he did, they wouldn't follow. Whether our daughter was a shifter, a goddess, or a combination of both, she was too young to witness the

mauling of an animal.

As the months passed and we settled into a family routine, I took a step back from the bar and handed over the day-to-day running of the business to Wren. She was more suited to that position than I ever was.

After brainstorming ideas for months and rejecting most of them, we came up with the idea of a wellness spa. At first when Phobos suggested it, I thought he was kidding. Me, a wolf shifter, involved in what I'd referred to as woo-woo, pretending drinking tea and being mindful would alter someone's health and wealth.

I poo-pooed the suggestion even as he designed a concept and printed out reams of proposals and images.

"You start this venture. You're more creative than me." Though I worried that as a god of fear, he might create chaos.

But he said he needed my shifter skills to succeed.

And gradually, he'd convinced me, and the Celestial Spa and Wellness Center was born. Phobos channeled the skills he used to create fear into the opposite, relaxation.

My mate designed the building and the grounds—no baby-poop yellow on the walls here—using an online room generator that allowed him to experiment with paint color, furniture, and plants.

I foraged in the woods for seeds, plants, moss, and bark that my ancestors had used to treat wounds and relax aching muscles. We created the products used in the center according to ancient methods, thanks to Father whose great-grandparents kept meticulous records. And Phobos infused them with some of his essence.

My mate was the face of the business, while I was more behind the scenes, though I

did lead full-moon walks in the woods, telling our clients about the celestial body's healing qualities.

The center was open to anyone, humans included. And as Phobos never advertised he was a god and shifters weren't allowed to tell the general public we had a beast inside us, there was no mention of our other personas.

Apate came with us, as we had a daycare center at the spa. Our staff didn't have to worry about finding and paying for someone to look after their little ones.

Our daughter was now walking. She hadn't crawled and never toddled. People often commented how her skin had a gentle glow and asked which spa products we used. She was stronger than other children her age, and if she fell—which wasn't often—she'd bounce straight up, unbothered, with no bruises or scrapes.

“How will our daughter mingle with humans and also other shifters as she grows? People will ask questions.” I worried she'd never have friends because other kids her age might be scared of her, and I refused to expect her to tamp down who she really was.

Phobos didn't see the problem. “Let her be who she is.”

“I agree. But I want Apate to mingle with kids who are not gods or shifters.”

“Our daughter is born to be a leader. With our qualities combined in her, she'll never be a follower.”

I ran different scenarios in my head. Some people would gravitate to her and others would avoid her, just as they would for any human or shifter child. She might cry in frustration at some kids not liking her, but Phobos and I would teach her love, compassion, kindness, and empathy and eventually send her into the adult world.

“Why are you crying, love?” Phobos took me in his arms.

“I don’t want our daughter to grow up and leave home.” I wiped my tears on his sweater and sniffed.

“She’s 18 months old.” He pressed his lips against my head. “It won’t happen for a while. And I predict it won’t be a problem.”

I leaned back and studied his expression. “How can you say that? Also, you can’t predict the future. You told me that.”

“I can say with absolute confidence that if Apate, and any siblings we give her, leaves Valleywood, we’ll be right behind her.”

Rolling my eyes, I responded with, “We have to give her the freedom we enjoy.”

“And we will.” He paused and pursed his lips. “But we’ll be lurking in the bushes ready to leap out and protect her if something goes wrong.”

“We’ll see about that.” I lay my head against him again, hoping we’d muddle through and Apate would thrive both growing up and after her coming of age.

“That reminds me, I’ve invited my family and your father for tea this afternoon.”

I shot up, thinking of the food I had to prepare, but Phobos was a step ahead of me and had ordered everything we needed and more. Gods never did anything by halves. We’d end up donating most of the food to a charity because my mate would have ordered enough for a hundred people.

“That’s nice you want everyone to get along.”

Father had taken a while to warm up to my in-laws, but he was trying to make up for

the past and accepted every invitation. He and I had come to an agreement that I'd attend more pack events and sit on the council. And in years to come when he was ready to retire, I would take over as Alpha.

“Yes to that, but it's a special occasion.”

“Someone's birthday? Did you order a cake?” Gods celebrated mementos like “First Tooth Day,” and “First Time Their Feet Left the Ground.” I couldn't keep up, and it occurred to me it was any excuse for a party. But I was grateful Apate was surrounded by a loving family, something that had been missing from my own childhood.

“They'll be here in 30 minutes.”

Ahhh, and I was still in my PJs, while Apate was building a house with blocks. Every time it collapsed, her cry of frustration had me wanting to build it for her. But I held back, proud that she never gave up, simply started again. The parenting gig was hard.

When I emerged with wet hair—no time to dry it—everyone had arrived, even Father. “I thought you said 30 minutes,” I hissed to Phobos.

“That's gods for you.”

I bit my tongue, not pointing out my father wasn't a god. After hugs and kisses and pouring of tea and sampling of goodies my mate had bought, Phobos stood and asked for everyone's attention.

“Thank you for coming.”

Deimos held up a cupcake slathered in cream cheese frosting. “This is food for the gods. I wouldn't miss it.”

“Good, because tomorrow is the anniversary of your father’s and my first kiss,” his mom announced.

“Apate has a little surprise.”

My heart constricted. I didn’t want her to levitate or bring about a change in the weather. She was sitting on my lap looking at a picture book, but when she heard her name, she held out her arms to Phobos.

He picked her up, and I hugged a cushion because there was no going back. Perhaps I’d remember this time, the moment before her enhanced abilities changed our lives forever.

“This is something for Declan because our little one exhibits so many godlike qualities, and we’ve been nurturing this very special skill.”

Are we going to see Apate’s wolf? My beast was intrigued but grappling with meeting our daughter’s wolf years before other shifter children.

No time to wonder, because whatever it was, it was about to happen.

Apate strolled toward me, and I got off the sofa and squatted so I was close to her height.

“What do you want to show me, my darling?”

My heart hammered with such force against my chest, the pain spread throughout my body.

“Look closely,” Phobos instructed.

We stared at one another, my little one and I. Her eyes grew dark, and a wolf

appeared in the forefront of her gaze.

“My sweetheart. You have a companion.”

Phobos picked up our daughter and the three of us hugged.

“Maybe you can stop worrying about her future because she has a friend and a bodyguard.”

As a parent I would always worry. Our daughter was unique, and she would find her way through life, with our guidance.

And yes, some of that assistance might come from us hiding in those bushes.

Check out Deimos and Cameron's story, *The Chosen Son* .

No one can resist their fate—but they can sure try.

Omega human Cameron used to be a Chosen One?, just one of many children throughout time who'd been selected by fate to save the world. He should've died in the process like the others before him—heck, maybe he did—but he didn't, and there was no protocol for what to do with these chosen saviors after everything was said and done. Ten years later, when Cameron begins to get sick, his lingering powers wild and unpredictable, the government doctors don't have the first clue how to help him. Deimos, however, might have a few ideas...

Alpha Deimos is a Greek god of fear. He and his twin brother Phobos were born and raised to be their father's sidekicks, riding into battle with Ares, the god of war, to instill dread into the clashing armies—but the times have changed and so have they. Now Phobos has donned tights and a cape and has hired a sidekick of his own, a sweet young omega by the name of Cameron, and Deimos wants him for himself—not just in his bed but also for the power that simmers within him. The

brothers stand on either side of a bitter dispute, and Cameron is stuck between them. But which of the alphas has his best interests at heart?

And what does fate have to say about it?

The Chosen Son is a slow-burn mpreg romance featuring a morally gray alpha with a broken heart driven to extremes in the name of revenge, an omega who will do anything to overcome his illness (even if it means making a deal with the devil himself), and a standoff between hero and villain—and the man they both want.