



To Sway a Trickster (Tempting Thieves #8)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: She sacrificed everything for her people.

He will do whatever it takes to save himself.

Their marriage is the last hope for peace.

In a world where mortals and Olympians are at war, Hebe has only known suffering. Her fate changes completely, though, when she goes to the altar to sacrifice herself for the sake of her village. Suddenly, she is wed to a god who dislikes her almost as much as she can't stand him. However, their marriage might just be the one thing that can prove peace is possible between their peoples . . . if they don't kill each other first.

Prometheus is fighting on the wrong side. That is, the one that isn't the most beneficial to him. Before he can free himself from the one immortal campaigning for humanity, though, he finds himself bound to the most frustrating of mortals. He has no intention of making their marriage work as he plays the long game. But when they are sent to Olympus in search of a new weapon Zeus intends to release on the mortals, Prometheus sees his chance to steal a new life for himself. That is, if his new wife doesn't steal his heart first. But only the most foolish of immortals let themselves fall in love. And only complete and utter folly could drive anyone to steal from the King of Olympus himself . . .

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Canopic Jars : containers used to store organs during the mummification process and to store foods to be buried with the body

Chiton : A gender-neutral full-body garment fastened at the shoulders

Gamos: The day of the wedding ceremony where vows are exchanged

Himation : An outer garment worn over a chiton or a peplos that covers the left shoulder and ducks under the right shoulder

Nemes : An Egyptian head covering worn by men to protect one's head and neck from the sun

Kilt : Also called a schenti, it is an Egyptian skirt-like loincloth worn by men

Kopis : A forward-curving knife used for slicing through meat intended for ritualistic sacrifice

Kylix : A Greek cup made of pottery and shaped like a bowl

Panageis : Priestesses who live apart from men

Peplos : A full-body draping garment worn by women

Perizoma: A type of loincloth worn by both men and women

Proualia: The time of preparation before a wedding, usually the day before, where the

bride honors the customary rites

Stróphion : A cloth worn by women around their chest like a brazier

Terni Lapilli: Translated as "Three Little Stones," it is a precursor to Tic-Tac-Toe

Wanax : A Mycenaean tribal chief

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Chapter One

Hebe

When I was a child, I dreamed of dying nobly on the battlefield. Even when I grew into womanhood and discovered that wasn't to be my fate, I could never have imagined how I would actually perish.

Sacrificed to the gods on an altar.

At least this way, it will still be for the good of my people, as noble as if I were struck down on the battlefield. And being slain by friends rather than foes is preferable, right? To die surrounded by loved ones?

Well, most of the village remains at the base of the hill. Only a select few are accompanying me to the altar at the summit.

I glance back at my entourage, comprised of the two strongest warriors and all the elders of the village. Each wears a somber expression except the warrior holding the rope secured to my right wrist. He looks ill. As the son of my mother's sister, Puraltas is my closest kin and the most vocal opponent of this sacrifice.

But his wife and daughter are his first priority. With the harvest failing, if we do not find favor with at least one god, the entire village will perish. The elders have all agreed that it is better to lose one than all.

As for me, I would rather a meaningful death over a slow starvation. A maiden is the

price for fertility, and I am the eldest of the unwed women.

My gaze falls to the brown gown I'm wearing, crafted from the softest hides with the most colorful embroidery. If this were my gamos I was marching toward, I would not have been given such a fine garment since my father left me no inheritance. But it is essential that I look my best when I am presented to Dionysus.

It is an honor to be considered the best. All it took was a ritualistic bath, a gown fit for the wanax's daughter, and having no dowry with which to tempt one of my clansmen to seek my hand.

Now I am spared the shame of spinsterhood, which was all that awaited me. I should be honored by this new fate. I am honored.

But I'm also terrified.

Still, I keep my chin held high and refuse to tremble lest my cousin see. Puraltas, at least, shall miss me, and I do not wish to add to his sorrow.

After what seems like both an eternity and a moment, I stand on the hill that overlooks our humble village. Huts are huddled together, surrounded by withered crops and pens containing half-starved cattle.

In the distance, I can see Mount Olympus reaching toward the heavens. It is the home of the gods, who have abandoned us. Now catching their attention is our only hope.

My gaze falls on the altar that I've avoided looking at for as long as possible. It is the lone stone structure in the village, built like a table and large enough to lay a cow on for sacrifice.

Or, in this case, a maiden.

I turn slowly to face the elders as the warriors move with me. There is quite an audience below, as most of the clan have gathered below to watch. But they dare not step on the hill while it is made sacred with my blood.

“Hebe, daughter of Arisbas.”

Startling, I turn to the High Priest, who seems to have appeared out of nowhere.

The High Priest who had presided over us since before I was born departed for the Asphodel Fields last harvest. His son studies me as he clutches the sacred wooden staff he inherited though he is still young enough not to need it.

“Are you prepared to honor your people before the gods?” he asks as Helios paints the sky with vibrant colors for my final sunset.

I will not be alive when the sun rises again.

My chest feels tight as my heart pounds. “Yes.”

The High Priest flicks his fingers, and two acolytes step out from behind him, each bearing a clay pitcher filled with wine.

The women step toward me, their steps perfectly matched.

I kneel in preparation and the ropes strain from my movement.

The acolytes come to stand beside the warriors. I barely have a chance to close my eyes before I am doused with wine. I feel it drowning my intricate updo, sticking to my skin, and plastering my ceremonial dress to my body.

“Rise, Bride of Dionysus.”

My legs are shaking, but I still force them underneath me and push myself to my feet despite my sodden garments.

I wipe the wine from my eyes and force them open again.

The High Priest has looked past me, apparently finished speaking to me for the rest of my life. His focus is instead on my cousin. “Prepare the sacrifice and set her up on the altar.”

Both Puraltas and the other warrior walk around me with the rope, further binding my arms to my sides. Then they squeeze my legs together so tightly I lose my balance.

I topple backward before Puraltas grabs hold of my shoulders, just barely keeping me from hitting the altar. The other warrior grasps my legs, and then they lift me into the air.

A moment later, I am stretched out across the stone altar.

Forcing my lips closed, I refrain from screaming and adding shame to my terror.

Puraltas’ gaze catches mine one last time before he forces himself to look away. He looks as ashamed as I would feel if I let my scream escape.

Then his face is replaced by the High Priest staring down at me, his dark gaze as devoid of emotion as it is sharp. “This is the last moment of the bride in the home of her father’s kin. Now she shall forever belong to her husband.”

With that grim announcement, he lifts his staff. Except, it is no longer just a staff. An ax has been attached to it, and the High Priest positions it over my bound body.

Beyond him, the people chant. “This is the last moment of a bride in the home of her

father's kin. Now she shall forever belong to her husband."

A cold smile stretches across the High Priest's face. "If anyone knows why this maiden, daughter of Arisbas , is not a fit sacrifice, speak now or forever refrain utterance." He braces himself for the swing.

I close my eyes.

Then one clear voice rises over the chanting. "Halt!"

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Chapter Two

Hebe

I crane my head, trying to locate the man protesting my noble sacrifice. It wasn't Puraltas or any voice I recognize.

A deep silence falls over the watching crowd, and then the elders part.

My heart pounds. Who could be so great that even the elders move aside for them?

Three of the most beautiful men I have ever step into view.

The man at the forefront reminds me of an Egyptian slave who once fled to our village for mercy he did not find. This man wears a green mask over his face with a nemes headdress covering any hair he has. His chest, a shade darker than my skin, is bare and adorned only by a golden ankh hanging from a chain. A knee-length green kilt falls from his waist to his knees, and a pair of sandals covers his feet.

To his right is a man who matches him in height, which is nearly a head and shoulder above our tallest clansman. Startlingly purple eyes stare shrewdly from his face that is framed by shoulder-length dark hair. His skin is a few shades paler than the man at the forefront, and he wears a strange white garment that hangs from one shoulder, drapes over half his chest, and is belted at his waist before falling to his knees. A purple raiment is draped loosely around the white one, signifying his wealth.

On the other side of the green-masked man is the least striking member of the trio.

Though this man also possesses an unearthly beauty and hair the color of fire falls around a pale, sculpted face. He wears no adornments over his white garment that is secured by a rope belt, but he does not need to. His hair is striking enough on its own, and then there are his eyes. They are blue like only the soul of the hottest flame can be.

The High Priest, who I forgot was preparing to slaughter me, sets down his curved kopis blade. Then he drops to his knees before the three men.

Immediately, both warriors and all the elders follow suit. By the sound of rustling, so do the other villagers. Only my posture remains unchanged.

The masked man gestures toward me. “What is the meaning of this?”

“She is but a humble sacrifice to Dionysus,” answers the High Priest, his head still low. “A pure maiden in return for a full harvest. Is she not to your liking? Is she not pure enough?” He turns to glare at Puraltas, like he’s the one who said I should be the sacrifice and not the loudest protestor against it.

“She seems like a lovely little thing,” calls the man with purple eyes, “but I prefer my maidens alive and whole— not hacked to bits.” His sardonic smile turns into a grimace as his gaze drops to the kopis.

Puraltas swats it farther away from me.

The High Priest glares at him before bowing lower before the men. “Are we in the presence of the great Dionysus?”

“You are. You’re very honored.” The man with purple eyes— Dionysus, apparently— tosses his hair off his shoulder. “And let me introduce you to my friend Atum, the Guardian of Life. He’s not fond of dead maidens either.”

The man in the green mask steps forward. “What desperation drove you to sacrifice one of your own people so cruelly?”

The High Priest touches his temple to the dust. It’s humbler than I thought him capable. “Our people are starving, and we were desperate for divine intervention.”

“Human sacrifices are not acceptable,” Atum says. His voice is not raised, nor is his tone threatening, but his words demand obedience even so.

“I am personally not opposed to living maidens,” Dionysus offers.

Atum turns toward him, and despite the green mask, I think he is glaring at Dionysus.

But then Atum turns back to the High Priest. “Unbind the girl, and then we can discuss your harvest.”

Puraltas jumps to his feet and sets to work unbinding my wrists. Before the others can decide whether it is better to obey or to remain prostrate, the third newcomer strides toward the other end of the altar. Apparently, he does not think mortal efforts would be enough to remove me from the altar before Atum becomes truly enraged.

Having a god, or even a godlike being, unbinding my ankles seems like far too great an honor. Once my wrists are free, I sit up, rubbing the life back into them. “Thank you. I can finish.”

The flame-haired being arches an equally fiery eyebrow at me as he tugs the rope free. “I assure you, I am perfectly capable of undoing mortal bindings.” He glances down at the rope burns left on my ankles rubs a thumb over them.

I shiver, surprised by such an intimate touch.

“Though your mortal weaknesses quite flummox me.” The flame-haired being shakes his head in disgust before recoiling.

“Dionysus, are you able to prove your guardianship over the fields and make their crops prosper?”

At Atum’s commanding yet kind voice, I turn to find him facing Dionysus.

Dionysus casually surveys our fields from the hilltop, wrinkling his nose at the withered crops. Then he shakes his head. “You know all my strength must be reserved for keeping the Willow alive. Things are not as they were before Chaos and her brothers invaded— including my ability to fulfill my responsibilities in these circumstances.”

Atum sighs. “You need not wax poetic. I know what you desire, and I agree to this bargain. A day of my power exchanged for your blessing on all the crops belonging to this village.”

The flame-haired one hisses and turns to Atum. “You cannot keep pouring yourself out for those who cannot repay!”

Dionysus sniffs. “I can repay.” He tosses a handful of seed into the air, and blooms sprout wherever they land.

Atum holds up a hand without throwing any seed, and still more blooms appear.

The flame-haired one just crosses his arms and glares at Atum. “It’s not for Dionysus’ sake that you bargain, but these pathetic mortals who have nothing to offer in return.”

“We can repay!” High Priest bellows, springing up before remembering himself and

genuflecting again. “The girl on the altar— if you do not want her dead, mayhap she can be of some use to you alive?”

Puraltas grasps my shoulder.

The flame-haired man snorts. “What could we possibly need her for?”

“Pardon?” Before I can stop myself, all the emotions I didn’t let myself feel earlier boil into contempt I cannot contain. “I was willing to sacrifice myself for my village! I put away my dreams of marriage and motherhood and embraced a heroic death only for you to not only null my sacrifice, but also to scoff at it?”

“We have no need for your hubris,” counters the flame-haired man.

“Actually . . .” Atum steps forward. “You chose to sacrifice yourself for the good of your people?”

“She hardly had a choice,” Puraltas counters.

“I can speak for myself,” I snap, not because I’m frustrated with him , but because I have too many emotions to contain.

Atum steps closer to me. “Then speak now, child. Would you like a chance to help me end the war between mortals and Primordials once and for all?”

“Primordials?”

“Olympians, gods— whatever else you call our kind.”

“We’re at war?” I glance at the High Priest for confirmation.

The man remains sniveling on the ground, no help at all.

The flame-haired 'Primordial' snorts. "Mortals know nothing, not even their own enemy!"

Atum turns to him. "You speak of mortals as though they were not individuals. Just because there are mortals who have sought our overthrow doesn't mean all do. Certainly not all of us Primordials wish to destroy those we were assigned to protect."

I glance back at my cousin, who looks just as confused as I am.

When I turn back, Atum is studying me through his uncanny green mask. "Your famine began because the more we Primordials neglect to foster human flourishing, the more we lose our power. As War and his son Ares help mortals lay siege against their fellow men, people suffer and starve. It is Dionysus' responsibility to prevent starvation, so even though it is now beyond his power to prevent, his domain punishes him by weakening him."

"And then I cannot make crops flourish, so more people starve." Dionysus sniffs. "It's a vicious cycle."

"But it is one we can end if we can prove that mortals and Primordials are not so different after all," Atum adds.

I wrinkle my nose. "Aren't we?"

"In lifespans and power, yes. But if those can be shared between the two groups when they are joined, then that won't matter."

"And how would that be? By my becoming your acolyte? Surely I would not be the first mortal to swear allegiance to a god?"

“As servants, yes, but not as wives.”

I blink. “W-wives?”

Atum nods eagerly. “Dear child, you have shown your courage by submitting yourself unto death. Will you now consider a far kinder fate— becoming a living bride?”

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Chapter Three

Prometheus

Mortals are intriguing creatures. There are far more of them than Primordials, so the communities they build for themselves are much more intricate than our city on Olympus. The temples they build for us are often more extravagant than the Firstborns' homes there, too.

Unlike every single Primordial in existence, mortals act as though they need to be near each other to survive. They even like to feel our presence in the temples they build to honor the Olympians. It's strange since mortals and Primordials are each other's greatest foes, with mortals certainly being each other's second greatest threat.

Before the war began, I liked to live on the fringes of their villages. I enjoyed traveling from tribe to tribe, documenting how they lived.

My previous exposure to the mortals has prepared me for the strange way they entwine ingenuity and ignorance. However, no mortal has ever frustrated me quite as much as the maiden on the altar.

Atum waxes poetic about his absurd marriage-bonding notion— as if any Primordial knows a thing about matrimony. Such things are reserved for lesser beings, like the girl who was apparently perfectly willing to die for a people just as happy to sacrifice her.

The folly of it all boggles my mind.

“I have seen more than a few marriages between the Fae,” Atum drones. “When they wed, the power of one is transferred to the other in a way that allows them both to wield it.”

The altar girl’s face twists in confusion. Does she not know about Fae either? Granted, the Fae are more concerned with infighting than reaching out to mortal villages. But still, the primitive ignorance here is astounding.

Atum seems concerned by the confusion flashing in her dark eyes. “Don’t your people have your own type of bonding?”

The girl studies Atum cautiously like he might scold her if she gives the wrong answer— or like the mortal practically kissing Atum’s feet will, anyway. He’s the one sending her scolding looks.

“Yes,” she finally says, her voice deep for a female, yet not masculine. “We marry and give in marriage here. There is no transaction of strength, but those who are wed share possessions and position with each other.”

Atum nods almost giddily. He can be absolutely obnoxious when he thinks he’s found a way to secure peace with anything other than brute force. “Yes! I believe that a marriage between mortal and Primordial can bring the same union of power, possessions, and position as both Fae and mortal marriages within groups. And if we can prove it, then we are not so different after all, and there is no reason not to have peace.”

Except for the fact that everyone is bloodthirsty and power-hungry. Oh, and War and his son Aeres will still be running amuck. But other than those minor issues, we’ll be golden.

“You don’t just want to make her a bride . . .”

I turn to the man with a mop of dark curls clutching the shoulders of the woman on the altar. They look very similar now that they are standing next to each other. Is that what happens when mortals make so many of themselves? They start to resemble one another?

The mortal continues. “You want to make her a goddess ?”

Atum nods. “In a sense, yes.” He turns back to the mortal girl. “Do you want that?”

The damsel lifts her chin in a way I’m sure makes her feel brave. As though one needs any sort of courage when facing a bleeding heart like Atum. “Yes, for the sake of my village and all humanity, I shall be your bride.”

“Well, not my bride. My duties take up all my time, so I would have none left for you. I deplete too much of my power and do not want to risk draining your energy in the process.”

Atum doesn’t have to drain his power. He could pace himself like Dionysus does, but he chooses to do these things to himself.

The damsel wrinkles her brows. “Then who am I to wed?”

Dionysus looks up from where he’s wandered toward a passel of mortal maidens. “Don’t look at me; I’m not looking to be bound to just one woman.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Atum assures. “You’re only neutral in this war, anyway. I need someone who is loyal to both myself and to the mortals, a servant who has proven himself time and again.”

Oh, no, I do not like where this is going. Because even though “loyal” doesn’t describe me at all, I’ve done an excellent job of disguising that fact.

I am still disguising it, because Atum beams as he continues his speech. “Let me present my fellow Primordial, my second-in-command, the Entity of Ingenuity.”

No. Nonononono —

Atum turns and gestures toward me. “Prometheus shall be your future bridegroom.”

I should have betrayed him yesterday.

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Chapter Four

Hebe

I stare at the fiery-haired Prometheus as he does nothing to hide his disgust at wedding me. Then I turn back to Atum. “Can’t I just marry you instead? I promise I don’t need a lot of time, and I won’t ever get in the way.”

Prometheus sputters, as though he’s now insulted by my not wanting to marry him as much as he doesn’t want to wed me.

Well, just because I’m not god doesn’t mean I don’t have some pride. Call it hubris, but I was ready to die with dignity. Now that I have survived, I intend to live with just as much dignity.

Atum grasps Prometheus’ wrist and pulls him toward me. Then he takes my hand as gently as if it were made of butterfly wings, and places it on Prometheus’.

While Atum’s touch was featherlight, Prometheus’ hand is very warm, the heat seeming to sear through my flesh and into my psyche. It’s not unpleasant, but it’s not comfortable, either.

Being careful not to look directly at Prometheus lest I be smote for reacting as repulsed as he is, I turn to Atum.

It’s impossible to tell past the mask, but by the way he grasps his hands, he seems to be smiling down at us. “You two have matching flames in your eyes. You will make

the perfect coupling.”

“You can’t be serious!” Prometheus cries. “You have other Entities and Nymphs under your command. Order one of them to do this!”

“I do not have as many entities as before considering how many have joined with Zeus.” Atum pats our joined hands. “And an Entity’s testimonial will draw more attention from the Firstborns than a Nymph’s.”

I steal a glance at Prometheus and find him clenching his jaw as he mutters, “This isn’t something I’ve ever asked for.”

“No one did because we didn’t know we could. You would be the first of all our kind to wed. The first to prove whether or not it is possible. We could put the Tablet of Life and Love to the test.”

Prometheus’ jaw twitches, but when he meets my gaze, there’s something different in his expression. Curiosity.

What was it Atum called him? The ‘Entity of Ingenuity’?

“Very well.” Prometheus sighs. “I will take this mortal for my bride.” With that announcement, he grasps the hand he’s holding and tugs me from the altar.

Puraltas is clearly as surprised by the sudden change of heart, because he releases me without a fight. I’m even less prepared, and my legs buckle.

Prometheus is apparently as unprepared for mortal weakness as I am for Primordial forthrightness. He fails to catch my fall, though he makes an attempt to. That only proves to unbalance Prometheus though, and then he’s falling after me.

My tailbone and then my shoulders hit the ground hard. I just barely keep my head from following suit.

I don't have a moment to feel relief, though, before a heavy body crashes onto me.

Instinct has me trying to scream, but no sound leaves my throat.

"Of all the confounded mortal catastrophes . . ." Prometheus mercifully rolls off me. "Why did you have to be mine?"

Since I still can't speak, I just glare at him.

Puraltas helps me to my feet while Prometheus pushes himself up.

Atum clasps his hand over his heart. "You're already falling as one."

"They aren't wed yet," Puraltas counters, gripping my forearms.

The High Priest glares at him. Apparently, I was to be sent as is, with no actual vows or dowry to protect me.

"Tell us what your traditions are," Atum says with more excitement than I expected from such a powerful being. "We must do this correctly for the bonding to have every chance of success."

"Then I'll see that she is prepared for the ceremony." Puraltas begins to lead me away.

The High Priest grasps my shoulder like he thinks Puraltas wants to spirit me away. He just might. "We have already performed the proualia. We can move right into the gamos ."

“But—”

“She has already enjoyed her sacred bath,” the High Priest answers like that was what he wanted me to weasel out of this conversation. “And she is the sacrifice, so no further offering are needed.”

“But I need to provide the dowry.”

The High Priest scoffs. “What can you possibly have that would enrich a god?”

Puraltas purses his lips. Then he reaches down the front of his short tunic.

I whirl toward him when I realize what he’s doing. “Puraltas, don’t. Keep that for your wife.”

“She has her own dowry and has no need to fear a divorce. You, though . . .” Puraltas tugs the bronze chain encasing our family’s sacred amber free. Then he holds it out to Prometheus. “This is my kinswoman’s dowry. You cannot put her away without giving this back to her for her provision.”

Prometheus takes the chain from him and inspects it for a moment, focusing more on the intricate way it holds the amber rather than the jewel itself. Then he turns to my cousin in confusion. “Wait, what do you mean by ‘put her away’?”

“That isn’t important for this ceremony,” the High Priest says quickly. “We have the bridegroom and the guardian of the bride, so we can begin at once.”

“The sooner the better,” Dionysus calls. “I love a good celebration, but something tells me you don’t have the appropriate amount of wine and won’t until you resolve this business and I can complete my part of the bargain.”

The High Priest claps his hands together. “Then let us hurry!” He turns to Puraltas.

My cousin furrows his brows, but then he leads me toward where the High Priest and my . . . bridegroom stand. He clears his throat. “I, Puraltas — warrior of the Mycenaeans— give my kinswoman to Prometheus . . . god of ingenuity?” Puraltas wrinkles his nose, like he’s not sure he got the title right.

“Close enough,” Prometheus mutters, more out of impatience than understanding. Then he frowns at the High Priest. “Is that all?”

“Now you must verbally accept the bride.”

“Very well.” Prometheus turns back, but instead of addressing my cousin, his gaze locks on mine. For some reason, it feels as though a fire has consumed all the air between us and there is nothing left to breathe. “I accept your kinswoman . . . What was her name again? She does have one, right?”

“Hebe,” I whisper before anyone can answer for me.

Prometheus winces, like he doesn’t even approve of my name. “Yes, well, I accept Hebe— sacrifice of the Mycenaeans— as my bride.”

As I try to wrap my psyche around what those words mean, the High Priest takes my hand and places it in Prometheus’ again.

I stare at our joined hands for a long moment before forcing my gaze back to meet my . . . husband’s.

However, he’s no longer looking at me. “Is that all? Are we wed now?”

“Now we must lead the bride away from her kin and see her into the home of her

husband.”

My stomach lurches at the implication. I had not thought that far ahead— or very much at all, except that I could save my people without dying.

Dying suddenly seems like a more merciful fate.

Prometheus frowns. “That will be a bit of a journey.”

The ironsmith pushes his way through the crowd and then throws himself at Prometheus’ feet. “I dedicate my humble abode to you, O great one.”

Prometheus glances back at Atum.

His master nods. “We shall remain in this village for the night. Now go ahead with the ceremony. Dionysus and I shall attend to the fields.”

The third Primordial grumbles as he untangles himself from his new acolytes. Then Dionysus salutes us. “Blessings of fertility upon the new couple.”

I stiffen.

Everyone’s focus returns to Prometheus and me. A path clears before us in the crowd, one that will take us straight to the ironsmith’s home.

Puraltas grasps my elbow even though it’s still so sticky with wine. “I’m here.”

I have nothing to say as I descend the hill with my kinsman at my elbow and my new husband holding my other hand.

In my focus to avoid tripping and dragging Prometheus back down on me again, I

nearly walk into the building. The ironsmith's house is the third-biggest hut. I used to spend childhood days here, watching him forge spearheads.

Now my childhood ends within its walls.

The door is pushed open before us, and Puraltas squeezes my elbow. Then he releases me and I'm stumbling into the hut with Prometheus. The door slams behind us, and for the first time since we met moments ago, we are alone.

Avoiding looking at my new husband, I study the interior of the hut instead. It is two-stories, with a ladder leading to the sleeping area. There is a door that opens to the forge on one end. On the opposite side of the house, where the second floor does not extend, is the hearth with a hole in the ceiling above. In the center of the room is a table with two dining couches stretched on either side.

Prometheus steps into my line of sight, running his hand over the top of the dining couch. "Hebe . . ."

"Yes?"

"I'm just musing over your name." He shakes his head. "Such a drab, short title for a goddess."

"You serve a god called 'Atum.'"

Prometheus snorts at this, like that's not actually the case. Then he turns his intense gaze back to me. "Tell me, Hebe, what do mortals do on their wedding night?"

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Chapter Five

Prometheus

My new bride's eyes widen in surprise before narrowing.

“Do they just stare at each other silently all night?” I ask when Hebe still doesn't respond.

“We sleep on opposite sides of the house,” she snaps. “It's symbolic.”

I wait for her to add what it's symbolic of, but she doesn't seem to know either.

Since the silence is becoming suffocating, I shrug. “Well, our marriage has already met an obstacle, because I don't sleep.”

“You don't?”

“Nope.” I lean across the back of the dining couch, studying Hebe's pinched face.

“We Primordials— well, we Entities and all the Firstborns except one— are above such things. We are not confined by your mortal weaknesses.”

“You act like you are offended by such things.” Hebe drags her dark hair off her shoulder, and the smell of souring wine drifts toward me.

“There is a reason other Primordials want you exterminated. Your many vulnerabilities are obnoxious.” Of course, that's only one reason, but the last thing I

intend to tell my latest nuisance is that mortals have discovered a way to kill Primordials. Ascendancy doesn't seem to be common knowledge yet, and far be it from me to spread it around.

“You don't like how we have to fight to live, so you seek our demise?”

“ I don't.” I slide my hand over the smooth top of the dining couch as I close the distance between my new bride and myself. “Obviously, I'm on the side of the one Primordial advocating for your sake, or else I wouldn't be married to you.” For the moment, at least, I'm on the mortals' side.

Instead of shrinking away from my approach, Hebe stands her ground, even when I step close enough to be overcome by the stench of the wine souring on her skin. “I know that Atum is on the side of the mortals, and that you serve Atum, but that doesn't mean you are for the mortals— at least in your heart.”

“My heart?” I snort. “There isn't a single Primordial who has a heart except for Atum, who is the most mortal of us all.”

“No heart?” Confusion flashes across her face. “How is that possible?”

Before I can explain metaphorical speech to the savage, she presses her tiny hand against my chest. Her palm is warm through my chiton , and her fingers graze my collarbone.

“I feel a heartbeat.” Hebe looks up at me with a wrinkled brow.

“I meant that we Primordials have too much power to allow ourselves to be soft.” I step away from her touch that is certainly too soft. “You'll understand soon enough if Atum's experiment works and you inherit a portion of my Primordial birthright.”

“How will that work?”

“I have no idea. A Primordial has never taken a bride before— let alone a mortal one.”

Her mouth parts in surprise. “None of you have wed before?”

I know mortals are rumored to have duller senses than we enjoy, but this one’s hearing is terrible . “Not a one. I delight in being at the frontlines of a new discovery, even if it unfortunately includes you .”

Instead of taking offense, Hebe rolls her eyes. “I didn’t exactly get the first fruit of the field either.”

My eyebrows lift in surprise at her audacity. Mayhap she isn’t the dullest of her people after all.

Stepping forward, I grasp Hebe’s jawline.

She gasps in surprise but doesn’t pull away as I twist her face to the left and then the right.

Hebe’s brows are thick and dark, like the ringlet curls falling around her face. They contrast her bright brown eyes. The rounded nose would be more aesthetic if it were angled, but mayhap Atum’s precious bonding process will give her some of my beauty as well as my power.

Not that it matters. Once I swear fealty to Zeus, I will no longer have to tow around a mortal bride. I don’t mind seeing what may come of this marriage until then for curiosity’s sake, but everyone knows a mortal’s first vows belong to Death.

And he is a jealous husband who will return for them in the end. I'd rather not be anywhere near Hebe when he does come. Hades can have her, but he certainly cannot have me .

Distance is especially important because of the reason this war began. A mortal terrified of Death's approach sacrificed the Nymph, whose companion he had become, to Death in his stead. Now he has somehow stolen her immortality while her once-beautiful body decays.

I don't agree with Zeus' crueller methods—and his freakish menageries of strange beasts has always struck me as odd. But after the first Ascendant was forged from the death of a Primordial, we both think that mortals ought not run around slaying those meant to live forever.

Well, honestly, I just agree that Zeus shouldn't be doing anything to hurt me , which is precisely what will happen if I do not swear fealty to him. I have to give some begrudging admiration to the first Ascendant for his ingenuity.

“If none of you have wed before,” Hebe whispers, her face still caught in my fingers, “how do we know anything about how this so-called bonding is supposed to go? We have only the marriages of these ‘Fae’ to guide us?”

“And a sacred text.” My hand drops to Hebe's neck. There is a strange pulsing there, like a heartbeat. Do mortals have two heartbeats? Or are their hearts so strong it can be felt throughout their bodies? “Another Primordial— Hades— was gifted special knowledge from the Creator when he was reassigned to the newest realm— the Underworld.”

Hebe gasps and stumbles backward, out of my grip. “Surely, we're not going there .”

“Oh, I'm never going down there again if I can help it. But another Entity loyal to

Atum— Sia— is the Guardian of one of the entrances to the Underworld. He saw a very special Tablet and stole it. It's stored at one of Atum's temples. That is where we shall travel."

And once I have that information, there is nothing more for Atum to teach me. There will be no further need for me to waste my eternity with him.

Especially with Zeus growing more powerful and bloodthirsty with every decade. It won't be long before he starts directly targeting the Primordials who cross him. I do not want to be among their number when that time comes.

It's not my fault that Atum has no wrath for me to fear or that he keeps spending all his strength to save mortals. He leaves nothing of himself to protect those of us with lives long enough to be worth preserving.

"Until then, Atum would have us honor every mortal marriage tradition in case it will help the bonding process be more effective." I take several steps backward. "Thankfully, your tradition of wedding nights will not be difficult to fulfill."

Hebe says nothing as I make my way to the ladder. There is likely nothing interesting above, but I cannot help but want to look.

Especially since Hebe remains below, and I fully intend to avoid her every moment I can. Especially until . . . "May I advise, my dearest wife, that you take this time to bathe? Otherwise, I'll be forced to continue this tradition beyond our wedding night."

Chapter Six

Hebe

I glare upward all evening long. Of course, my bridegroom— who professed to not needing to sleep— took the portion of the house where the cots are.

It seems I was correct in my supposition that being Prometheus' living bride was not, in fact, a more merciful fate than becoming Dionysus' dead one.

At least sleeping on a dining couch is superior to lying beside him, so I shouldn't complain. Not that there is anyone to complain to since Prometheus took my made-up tradition seriously.

Thankfully, that gave me the opportunity to bathe in privacy. Prometheus isn't the only one aggravated by the wine sticking to my skin. To him, it was only an annoyance. To me, it was a funeral shroud.

But considering others of his kind seek to wipe out my people because we have the audacity to die, I suppose that makes sense. As much as senseless hatred can, anyway.

I doubt my clan would allow me to leave this house to bathe in the stream. So, the pitcher of water by the hearth and a rag I found is the best I can do to clean myself. I pat at my dress the best I can since it is all I have to wear. I do a better job at cleaning my skin before dousing my hair. Compared to our soldiers, I am hardly suffering.

Now I lie on the dining couch and stare up at the clay barrier between my new husband and me.

Never have I met a more infuriating man. Though, I shouldn't be surprised, since he isn't exactly a man .

After being ignored by my clansmen for my lack of dowry, I find myself wed to a greater authority than the chieftain. A god.

I don't feel honored.

The door swings open, and I nearly topple off the couch in surprise. Who would have the audacity to enter this house they have fashioned as a new altar for me to be sacrificed upon?

Atum staggers in, and my surprise subsides. There is nothing too audacious to the gods, who view hubris as their personal possession.

His strange green mask stares at me for a long moment. "Many pardons. I didn't mean to intrude, but I was told I could rest here."

Did he just . . . apologize?

Shock is followed by shock when Atum collapses onto the dirt floor.

I hurry to his side and then hesitate. When Atum grasped my hand during my gamos , I was not smote. And I suppose if any mortal may touch a god, it would be the wife of one.

Gingerly, I roll Atum to his side. "Are you injured?" But what can hurt a god?

“No . . . just weak.” Grasping the edge of his green mask, Atum pulls it free.

I brace myself for a dangerous level of beauty. However, though the face beneath is far from hideous, it isn’t remarkable either. If it weren’t for the mask or his height, I could pass Atum on the path and think nothing of him.

Come to think of it, his height seems to have diminished, too. If it weren’t for his fine Egyptian garments, there would be nothing preventing him from being mistaken for an impoverished mortal like me.

“What is happening?” I gasp.

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” Prometheus says as he suddenly kneels next to Atum. “Just the folly of self-sacrifice. Not that you would know anything about that.” He arches a sarcastic brow at me.

Atum pushes himself up on his elbows. “The mortals are my responsibility to protect. There was a blight on the harvest, and it took at least a day and a half of my power for Dionysus to reverse it.”

“Pestilence is becoming as troublesome as War,” Prometheus mutters.

“You speak of such things like they are beings and not curses. Are they ‘Entities’ too?”

Prometheus snorts. “Worse— they’re Ancients . But such things are beyond your mortal mind’s comprehension.” With that, he lifts Atum into his arms effortlessly.

Grabbing the discarded mask, I stand. “I am not as feeble as you think, and I would like to learn more of the world I’m about to see more of. As the ‘Entity’ of ingenuity, you should understand that.”

Prometheus carries Atum toward the ladder. Then he ceremoniously shifts him so he's hanging over his shoulder like a sack of barley. Atum is apparently too weak to protest.

Instead of hurrying to make his master more comfortable, my bridegroom glances over his other shoulder at me. "Oh, I do understand, little wife of mine. I just don't care."

With that, Prometheus scales the ladder as easily as if he were just carrying his own weight.

I watch them go. Then I return to my dining couch to enjoy a peaceful wedding night without my bridegroom. I will have to come up with more "traditions" to keep us apart, or being wed to the Entity of Irritation will be a fate worse than death.

Chapter Seven

Hebe

Someone shakes my shoulder.

Groaning, I roll over, ready to scold Puraltas.

It's Prometheus, though, whose hand is on me. He stares down at me with a mixture of contempt and curiosity as he tosses a sack over his shoulder. "Arise, mortal. We have much ground to travel before night finds us again."

I push myself into a sitting position. "I thought you did not slumber."

"I do not, but both you and Atum do."

At his words, I glance past him to find Atum leaning heavily against the wall. He takes a deep breath and appears to find some strength in it, because he stands up straighter and dons his mask.

Prometheus sighs. "At least for another night or so. Speaking of which, you must do nothing to betray his current weakness."

I wasn't planning to, but still I ask, "Why?"

"Your people may be pleased with him, but other mortals we encounter on our journey might know that Primordials are their enemies. If they discover he's

vulnerable, they will not hesitate to attack.”

Saying nothing, I stare at Atum, if only to avoid looking at my bridegroom. We do not receive many visitors in my village, but those who’ve come have told wild stories of the cruelties and frivolities of the gods. I had thought they were moral stories to show what those in Olympus were allowed to do and mortals could not. But were they justifications for a holy war against the gods this whole time?

“I will be fine , Prometheus,” Atum calls, his voice strained but jovial. “The Creator vowed to me as a Firstborn that I would not taste death until one of my own bloodline could inherit my throne. I have no heir, so I am still immortal.”

“And placing great faith in a Being no one has seen or heard from since He forced us to vow upon the River Styx to keep all future oaths on pain of death or suffering. He has yet to prevent the Ancients from running rampant on our side of the Veil.”

“He is not required to come running to undo the destruction we have caused by our own actions,” Atum counters. “It is perhaps a mercy that He has not. The Creator’s return could become a sentence of condemnation to our people who do not carry out the responsibilities of their domains.”

“Creator?” I ask. “Who is this Creator?”

Prometheus snorts. “Yet another thing you do not know? Why am I not surprised, little savage?”

“Is He greater than the other gods?”

“It depends on who you ask. Zeus would tell you he has become more powerful than the Creator because the latter has yet to end his tyranny.”

“And what do you say?”

A light tugging on my curls drags me out of my train of thought. Surprised, I turn to Prometheus.

He’s still staring at my hair between his fingers. “Your hair is wilder than last night.”

What an abrupt change of subject. “I did not have my oils I usually use when washing them, but I didn’t want to delay since you asked me to clean up.”

“You bathed yourself merely because I asked? Is that something wives do for their husbands?”

I snort at the absurdity of such a question. And he thinks me a savage to not understand hierarchy of gods? “It is customary for husbands to comment on their wives’ appearances and say what pleases or displeases them.”

“And what do husbands give in return for this right to comment?”

Is everything a bargain to these ‘Primordials?’ “They must listen to similar comments from their wives. Though most of the suggestions have to do with what length they prefer their menfolk’s beards to be.” My gaze drops to Prometheus’ chin, which is as bare as an infant’s. “I suppose that isn’t something you need to concern yourself with.”

Prometheus runs his hand over his jaw, his lips twisted like he isn’t sure how to take my comment. Hopefully, he realizes it was an insult.

“I am sorry to interrupt your bonding attempt,” Atum calls, earning a glare from both of us, “but we should hasten our departure before I am unable to walk to the chariot being prepared for us.”

“They’re preparing a chariot?!” I cry before realizing my folly. Of course they are, but it is on behalf of the gods, whom they sacrificed a daughter of the village to. Why not add horseflesh to the offering? It is not as though they gifted it with my comfort in mind.

Rising, I smooth out my ruined dress the best I can before combing my notably wayward curls with my fingers.

Prometheus pushes open the door as I finish sliding on my sandals. My gaze falls on the spears hanging on the wall closest to the door.

My fingers itch to hold one. I used to sneak to Puraltas’ lessons with the village boys to watch them learn how to throw them. I studied the techniques from afar until my cousin spotted me. After that, Puraltas agreed to teach me in secret to keep me from sneaking back into his lessons and embarrassing him. I’m not sure how I would have since Puraltas always said my aim was better than even the older boys’.

Then again, I’ve given my people my body to trade away for a harvest. Surely, they cannot fault me for taking a spear in exchange?

Grasping the shortest of them, I turn toward the door. I am surprised by the crowd waiting outside, although the sun is only just now rising. My clansmen and women watch in silence as I follow my new husband and his master out of the ironsmith’s home.

A hand grabs my spear, and I find the High Priest glaring at me as he tries to pull it away from me.

Another hand lands on his shoulder.

We both startle to find Prometheus frowning at him.

“Let her keep it,” he says simply. “She’s going to need it.”

Releasing me, the High Priest stumbles backward.

Prometheus smirks, grabs his own spear, and strides away. Then another hand is grasping my elbow.

I turn to find Puraltas staring down at me intently, his gaze sliding over me as if searching for an injury. “Are you well?”

Considering the stone slab I was tied down to just last eve, the dining couch I woke up on is a vast improvement. “I have fled the bad. I have found the better.”

I mean to infuse the words with a portion of the sarcasm Prometheus employs every time he opens his mouth. However, I have always been terrible with conveying emotion with my words, so the point is missed.

There is nothing I can do to prevent the relief blooming across Puraltas’ face, not that I want to tear it away.

His bride, whom I did not notice standing just behind him, leans forward. “What did she say?”

I blink, not sure why she addresses him and not me. Am I as dead in her eyes? Or have I simply ascended too high to be addressed?

My cousin turns to his wife, grasping her hands happily. “She has fled the bad and found the better!”

The same words are whispered by those nearest to us and then slowly repeated like a wave washing over my village. They transform into a chant and then a roar.

“She has fled the bad and found the better!”

The High Priest steps forward onto the path cleared by the crowd for my entourage. He lifts his staff like he didn’t seek to spill my blood just yesterday. “Those words shall be spoken by our brides on the day of their gamos for ages to come in memory of you.”

I stand in shock, not sure what to say and less sure how to feel— though that is far from unusual for me. My people are honoring me like I am the warrior I always dreamed I could be. No, wait— they treat me like I am a goddess already.

My gaze shifts to where a bronze chariot has been pulled forward. A pair of the chief’s own brown stallions have been tethered to it.

Prometheus is assisting Atum into the chariot like servants do for their masters. They expertly disguise how much Atum actually needs to be assisted up.

For a moment, I stand in the throng of the people I’ve known since birth, staring up at the gods I met mere hours ago. It is strange to finally be exalted by my clansmen, yet not belong to them any longer. Now it is the tall man with fiery hair, curious eyes, and contempt in his smirk who owns me. He is my family, my future, and my fate.

Despite how much I wish it were not so, this is just like when I passed from girlhood into womanhood. I can mourn from the past, but never return to it. Old things must be put away so I can embrace my new duties.

With all the affection in my bosom, I embrace Puraltas one final time. Then I pull away and— with my head held as high as when I walked to my death— I stride toward my husband.

Prometheus does not assist me into the chariot, as I am not his master. He doesn’t

acknowledge me as I come to stand just behind him where the chariot widens just enough for Atum and me to stand side-by-side with Prometheus at the reins. He does not need to. Whether or not Prometheus favors me does not change that he is all I have now.

Turning toward my people, I accept their final salutations and hope they never learn how impoverished I have become.

“I have fled the bad!” my clan calls as the horses carry me away from them. “I have found the better!”

I keep my chin high so I can look as regal as I can manage. They need not know the truth. I have fled being unwanted by all men to simply being unloved by my husband.

But that is just as well, because after only a night, I have found a truth to carry with me into my new life. For as much as Prometheus despises me for all that I cannot be, I shall loathe him for all that he already is.

Chapter Eight

Prometheus

Once we're out of sight of the village, I pull the horses to a halt.

Atum sags against the edge of the chariot. Then he plucks up the sack I've been lugging around for him.

"I'm going to go change into something less conspicuous," Atum announces before sliding off the chariot. He stumbles toward a cluster of trees growing by a ravine.

Hebe turns to me, her curls even more askew from our brief ride. I half expect them to summon Chaos herself. "Shouldn't you assist him?"

"No." Atum does this to himself. He can suffer the consequences. I certainly won't. Once we reach the temple and I learn what secret knowledge Sia has stolen, I can defect to Zeus.

My new bride purses her lips, making her already angular face look sharper. If she has any thoughts about my refusal, she doesn't voice them. Instead, her gaze drops.

I follow it and find that the amber around my neck has stolen her focus. "Do you want it?" Not that I care to give it to her. But if I can use it as leverage, that would be good to know.

Hebe recoils at my words like I struck her. "Absolutely not!"

“Why?” I pick it up and study it. “Is it cursed?”

“No, but your giving it to me would represent the dissolution of our marriage.”

Mortals and their strange symbolisms. “Oh, so now you desire to be wed to me?”

“Absolutely not. But I’d rather not bear the shame of my husband divorcing me after one day, either!”

I fiddle with the amber and smirk when Hebe jumps backward off the chariot. Then I slide the necklace beneath my chiton . “There, now you don’t have to concern yourself with troublesome jewels. That is, not until I assuage my curiosity about Atum’s mad scheme. Then I can decide whether or not to rid myself of your presence.”

Hebe studies me warily, like I might suddenly throw the amber at her, anyway. “You don’t intend to keep me if I don’t become divine?”

“What use have I for a mortal? Especially one who doesn’t have the good sense to either beg for mercy from her people or to grovel for favor at my feet?”

“Your kind really hates it when mine possesses even a shred of hubris.”

“Well, you don’t live long enough to do anything worthy of pride.”

Before Hebe can counter or— less likely but more preferably— acquiesce, Atum emerges from the behind the trees. He’s wearing a plain white chiton now with all the symbols of his Guardianship stashed in the sack.

Since my traveling companions are both essentially mortals, having the appearance of a Primordial will just attract enemies from both sides. Calling on the shapeshifting

abilities all Primordials share, I shrink my height several fingerbreadths so that the most noticeable thing about me is my unique eye color. But our eyes are the one thing no Primordial can change. Atum's are the same soft brown filled with far too much compassion no matter what form he wears.

Hebe watches until Atum reaches us. Then she turns back to me and frowns.

I groan. "What now?"

"I'm sorry, but are you . . . shorter than before?"

"Yes." Well, at least she can detect obvious things.

Hebe looks me up and down. "That is something that your people can do?"

"Among other things. You may discover them yourself soon enough if Atum's theory bears fruit." I'm not sure I like the thought of losing any portion of my power to a mortal, but I cannot help but be curious. Though the best outcome would be for it to come to nothing. Then I can continue focusing on the far too arduous task of keeping myself alive.

Atum grasps the edge of the chariot. "It will work. Have some faith."

I fight the grimace that would reveal I lost faith in Atum long ago.

It doesn't help when he sags against the chariot. "Sweet Hebe, do you mind riding closer to your husband? I would like to stretch out on the chariot as much as possible, if I may."

Hebe stiffens and glances at me, obviously as disgusted by the idea as I am.

However, these next few days are too important to pretend like they will last forever. There is secret knowledge to learn, experiments to explore, and my life to preserve. No time to complain about having to inhale my wife's mortal stench or to worry about breaking mortal traditions to stay separate from their spouse.

"Come," I say, taking Hebe's arm and guiding her to the front of the chariot. Then I wrap around her as I grab the reins.

Behind me, Atum enjoys my obedience for perhaps the last time as he situates himself in the chariot. He grasps an ornamental fixture to keep from rolling off when I urge the horses forward.

Hebe, however, seems to have forgotten how to breathe, which is alarming because mortals require air even more than Primordials do.

I can still breathe just fine. There is still a trace of wine, but it isn't so overpowering as to disguise all other scents— smoke, leather, and soap. The mixture isn't as repulsive as when we first met.

But she's still not breathing. Did Hebe perish in the last few moments since I saw her face? Moving the reins to one hand, I bring my other to her neck, where she showed me her second pulse.

It thrums beneath my touch right before she jumps.

I frown. "I didn't mean to startle you. I thought for a moment you might have been stolen away to Hades."

"Why? Do women often perish from your touch? Is there a tragic list of paramours who died in your arms?"

“No.” But if mortals dying in each other’s arms are a real concern, I must keep that top in mind. I do not care to become the next Primordial sacrifice to death should Hebe decide to be the one on the other side of the altar for once.

My fingers return to her pulse to monitor it. It is beating more erratically than before, which is strange since all Hebe is doing is standing stiffly before me. Her rigid stature resembles the statue I’m sure her people will craft in her honor.

That is until the chariot runs over a rock on this uneven dirt path.

Atum grunts behind me, reminding me he’s still with us. Then I all thoughts desert me when Hebe stumbles backward into me.

I keep my balance, of course, because I am becoming accustomed to her missteps. However, I find myself once again confused at the softness I feel when she is pressed against me, despite the sharp lines of her face and form. I cannot say that I am not intrigued by the secrets behind the dichotomy.

“Sorry,” Hebe mumbles, pulling away again.

“All is well. Your spear did not stab me.”

“What a tragic misfortune.”

“Your wit has also left me unscathed, I’m afraid.”

Hebe glance up at me over her shoulder. When her sharp brown gaze meets mine, I find that she has found a way to spear me at last.

I think about the amused look in her eyes long after she turns away.

Chapter Nine

Hebe

When Atum suggests we stop to give the horses a rest, relief fills me for so many reasons. I could also use a respite from this chariot, though I would never utter it. More than that, I absolutely need to be anywhere other than in Prometheus' stiff embrace.

I still do not understand how he changed form, but there is no doubt in my psyche that Prometheus' muscular frame is anything less than real and solid.

Prometheus is the only one who doesn't seem to like the thought of stopping. Still, he slows the horses and leads them off the path and toward where a sliver of the river flows through the ravine. It's only half as deep as it was this time last year.

He orders the horses to halt and finally peels away from me. I practically dive off the chariot in my desperation for distance.

"Where are you going?" Prometheus calls, his words halting my escape.

Atum, who has shifted into a sitting position, answers for me. "Likely to attend to her mortal needs. Unless you have said something that might drive her to run away?"

"I-I'm not running away," I blurt before Prometheus can think of smiting me.

"See?" Atum gestures at me and smiles warmly.

Prometheus is still scowling, like he somehow knows I desire distance from him more than anything else. “Don’t wander too far. We are in danger mortals, Primordials, and beasts alike.”

“I am fully aware of the dangers of being a mortal,” I assure him, grasping my spear. “But I know this land. The women of the village and I come here before for ceremonial bathing before marriages and—”

“And your sacrifice-turned-marriage?” Atum offers softly.

I nod, not caring to speak further.

They evidently have no further words either, and I make my departure. The only disturbance in my little quest is the pale eagle squawking above.

The trees grow more densely upstream, where a portion of the ravine breaks off into a slow-moving pool. That is where I was brought just yesterday morn for my preparations.

It is private enough for me to attend to my mortal needs that would disgust Prometheus more than sleeping. Then I wash my hands and face in the pond.

I move to the faster flowing river to satiate my thirst when I hear a thunderclap above me.

Glancing upward, I wonder if I misheard. The skies were perfectly clear only moments ago.

However, dark clouds are moving in at an alarming rate. They block out the sun, making it seem like evening rather than noon by the time I get to my feet.

“Hebe!” Prometheus calls over the howling winds.

I rush toward him just as a bolt of lightning strikes down.

Throwing myself forward, I fall on my face as I’m temporarily blinded by the flash. There is a crackling sound, and I look back as one of the trees snaps in half from the lightning.

Rolling to the side, I just barely miss being crushed by the dead limb.

The sound of the crashing tree is echoed by the loudest thunderclap I’ve ever heard. I slap my hands over my ears just as the rain begins pelting down. Something scrapes my back. When I reach back, my new spear is gone, stolen by the wind.

“Hebe!”

Dropping my hands, I push myself onto my hands and knees and lift my face.

Prometheus is running toward me, the wind whipping his flaming hair around his face.

I push myself to my feet, but the wind is blowing so violently that I can’t stand upright. Every step I take forward is unsteady, like I’m just learning to walk. It doesn’t help that chilly rain is fusing my gown to my skin and making it so much heavier. That heaviness is a mercy, though, when it feels like I am on the verge of being carried away in the storm.

Prometheus is facing similar resistance, but he is making better progress than I am. Until he has to dive to the side as our two horses suddenly gallop past him.

I desperately try to grab one of their manes so they can carry me to safety, but their

speed is too great and the wind is too violent. It's all I can do not to topple over into the horses' paths.

Lightning flashes again, illuminating the rain that is no longer just pouring downward. Is Poseidon pouring out his wrath? Surely, it's not—

Prometheus reaches me and pulls me into his arms. The embrace I wanted to escape from all morning is secure and grounding. Prometheus' garments are cold and wet, but I feel the warmth of his body beneath, calling to my frozen soul.

"This is the wrath of Zeus!" Prometheus bellows.

No. "Then we are dead."

"I'm not done with you yet." Keeping one arm wrapped around me, Prometheus uses his other hand to undo the rope around his garment. Once he tugs it free, the wind more violently yanks at the cloth, but he doesn't seem to care. Instead, he wraps the rope around my waist and then around him again before knotting it off.

Anchored to Prometheus, I no longer feel like I am on the verge of being plucked up by the wind. Still, I wrap my arms around him like a second rope. I do my best to move with him as he leads us back toward the chariot that seems too far away. Is Atum still there, or has the storm dragged him away in his weakness and condemned him to a mortal's death?

My husband and I trudge forward, apparently both intent on finding that out. Then Prometheus glances upward. "By the mortals!"

I follow his gaze and find a funnel forming out of the dark clouds above us.

Then Prometheus is practically dragging me toward the chariot. It's tipped over on its

side, and Atum is crouched beneath it.

I move to crawl underneath with him, but then Prometheus drags Atum out.

“What are you doing?!” I yell.

“This won’t shelter us from what’s coming.” Prometheus glances up at the dark funnel, which is reaching for the ground at an alarming speed.

My gut lurches, because there is no other shelter. At least not with lightning crashing down on the trees. And without horses, there is no way we can outrun the storm.

“Over here!” Prometheus keeps one arm around me along with the rope as he drags Atum with the other. He leads us to the ravine.

“Down!” Prometheus bellows over the wind that is tugging at the chariot.

Atum tries to climb down, but he is moving too slowly. I fiddle with the rope, trying to loosen it so I can assist.

Just as I release myself , my bridegroom kicks his master in the chest. Atum falls, crashing into the shallow water at the bottom of the ravine.

I dive after Atum, the water deep enough to soften my landing. Grabbing Atum, who is floundering, I roll him onto his back.

Then Prometheus splashes into the creek as the storm howls even louder.

Craning my head, I look up to see the chariot flying through the sky like it weighs little more than a blade of grass.

I gasp.

Prometheus swims between Atum and me and wraps his arms around us both. He awkwardly shelters us with his body that I believe has grown again.

“What do we do?” I gasp, barely keeping myself on the above water with so much terror flowing through me.

“Pray,” Prometheus gasps, “to any of your gods but Zeus. He hasn’t the mercy to relent from his wrath.”

Gripping my husband’s damp chiton to secure myself against the winds and waves, I bury my face into Prometheus’s shoulder. Unless there is a greater god than Zeus, I shall perish the day after my sacrifice.

Chapter Ten

Prometheus

Though I would never tell Zeus this, I think it's foolish to dismiss mortals because of their weaknesses. The tools they have devised to ease their many burdens during their brief lives are a testament to their intelligence.

However, as I curl around my terminally mortal bride and my temporarily mortal master to protect them against the windstorm, I am beginning to understand how annoyance can become anger.

Not that either make a sound. At least, not a sound that can be heard over the storm. Atum likely has nothing to say, and Hebe seems like the stoic sort.

The ravine walls protect us from the worst of the wind, but I still feel Zeus' wrath. He wants to drag us out of here and throw us around like we are playthings without sentience or will. I think that is how Zeus views mortals in general. Then again, he used to throw Primordials who displeased him off great heights where they lay for days until their bodies healed, so it might just be all life he views like that.

Finally, the winds abate and the thunder fades away. I can hear Atum's struggling gasps and Hebe's heaving sighs. It sounds as though she can barely breathe despite her desperate attempts to do so.

Is she drowning? It would be most inconvenient of her to perish in shallow water after I shielded her from raging winds.

Sitting up, I grasp Hebe's shoulder and pull her upright as well. She is soaked through and mud drips from her curls and stains her garments.

Hebe shivers violently, and I wonder if she has any control over her movements. Her brown eyes are wide, and they dart all around. "Is it . . . over?"

"It should be. Even Zeus has limited power in these dark days. I cannot imagine him having much more energy after this display.

She nods, saying nothing more as she wraps her arms around herself.

I frown. I'm too drained to deal with this. "Are you cold?"

Hebe nods again but offers no useful insight— like what it would take to make her warm again.

Not sure what to do, I tug off my tattered, muddy chiton that is already half-hanging from me. I wring it out the best I can and then offer it to her.

Instead of reaching for it, though, Hebe's wide-eyed gaze focuses on my torso.

I glance down, half-expecting some grievous injury to be causing her alarm. However, my skin is perfectly unscathed, even if I'm nearly as filthy as Hebe is. My perizoma loincloth has been muddied beyond any existing method of cleansing.

Confused, I turn back to Hebe, but her stare is still frozen on my chest.

Atum rolls onto his back. "She needs more than your sopping chiton. Mortals crave one another's body heat in moments of extreme cold."

Well, that would explain the desperation in her gaze. I don't know why she couldn't

have just said something. But I suppose the price of being saddled with a mortal who is mercifully silent most of the time is that she also doesn't speak up when I actually need her to.

It would seem mortals are frustrating no matter what choices they make.

Groaning, I discard my chiton and scoop Hebe into my arms.

She gives a startled squeal as I press her against me, cradling her in my lap despite the filth coating her skin. If I weren't so muddy myself, I would have second thoughts about this arrangement.

"I-I'm fine," Hebe's teeth chatter as she lies.

I frown at her outright deceit. Has she no shame? Not for the lie— I've been dishonest our entire marriage, pretending to be Atum's loyal lackey. But to not even try hiding her deceit? Incomprehensible. "I feel you shivering, little wife. Such a frail creature you are."

"I am not." Hebe wiggles in my arms in a vain attempt to escape. As if I do not notice the way she cannot help but lean closer against me— her body betraying her words in its need for warmth.

"And so deceitful, too." I click my tongue. Then I turn to Atum. "I'm not sure she'll survive the journey to the temple." And this storm is the first and last time I am risking myself to save her short life. Not even knowledge is worth suffering.

Hebe makes a mewling sound of protest and struggles against me. "I may not be a true warrior, but I am a fighter. I can survive this journey no matter how many storms we face."

I purse my lips as I consider the storm. “How did Zeus find us?” Atum is disguise, and I won’t be contacting Zeus again until after we reach the temple.

Atum pushes himself into a sitting position, with his back against the ravine wall. “I think I saw an eagle earlier. It may have been one of Zeus’ strange pets.”

Grimacing at the thought of just how dangerous Zeus can be, I stand. My body is weary from the strain of surviving the storm alone. But I still have the strength to keep Hebe in my arms a moment longer as I approach the ravine wall. It seems so much taller on this side.

I glance down at my wife, who is no longer shivering quite as violently. It really would be a shame to leave her behind after all this work when we are so close to discovering the secrets of the Tablet . . . “I suppose now is the time to prove you can survive what is to come and shouldn’t be sent back to your own people.”

After all, is if she is too weak, would I inherit that when we are bound while takes a portion of my strength? I cannot afford that when I am the only one looking out for my survival. If I had any less strength than I do now, my experience in the storm would have been very different.

Hebe’s eyes widen. “I am ready for whatever cruel test you have for me. Just do not put me away! Do not abandon me while I am still recovering from Zeus’ wrath.”

So this is the ‘putting away’ that Hebe’s kinsman mentioned. “Very well. My test is this—you must find your own way out.”

She opens her mouth, looking ready to protest. But then Hebe purses her lips together and nods.

I set her feet on the ground and release my hold on her.

Predictably, Hebe's knees buckle. Her hands grip my skin as she struggles to steady herself. Almost as quickly, she releases me and stumbles backward.

My shoulder and chest feel strange where she had just been touching. Not painful, like she clawed me, but warmer than I should be from such a brief interaction. The remnants of Zeus' lightning must still be in the air with the way my body tingles.

Hebe braces herself against the wall of the ravine, standing tall and steady now. She lifts her chin as her curls drip mud down her sodden left shoulder. "I accept your challenge, husband of mine. I shall prove myself worthier than abandonment."

I nod. Then I turn to the opposite ravine cliff, and find a handhold. I move quickly, relying on speed rather than strength to propel me out of the ravine. I'm not far from toppling over myself after expending so much energy to ensure her survival.

Putting some distance between myself and the weaker members of my party, I consider my next steps. I could keep running, bypass the temple, and just go straight to Olympus.

But I also want to know more about this marriage bond and all that might be possible with it. I want to be the first Primordial who unlocks the mortal potential, and I want to discover more of what Hebe hides beneath her stoic exterior.

But all the knowledge in the world will mean nothing if I'm not around to discover it. And even though there are so few ways for a Primordial to perish, I don't want that to be the last thing I discover— a new form of dying.

Worse still would be the suffering that consumes every thought and moment. What use are my elongated days if I cannot form rational thoughts and discover secret truths?

I thought I could have it all— knowledge and protection. But now Zeus has proven that the decision to join him or suffer is more imminent than I thought.

Shaking my head, I scan the area. The sky has cleared, the storm has either blown far away or faded away to nothing. Our belongings are strewn about. Our chariot is nearer to where Hebe was bathing than where we left it. The horses are nowhere to be seen.

Still, I stride toward the chariot. Mayhap there is a way to fashion it into something useful still. Or perhaps I will just keep walking and leave Atum and Hebe to their fates.

Something gold moves in the corner of my vision, and I turn toward the hills that rise to the right. But nothing is there— anymore.

I reach for a spear I no longer wear. I'm completely unarmed, wearing only a perizoma as I stand in the open.

Just as I realize how vulnerable I am, I see gold movement again. This time, when I turn toward it, it hasn't hidden behind the chariot. Instead, it prowls forward, apparently sensing my vulnerability.

The beast grumbles, lifting its voice into a roar. Then a lion three times my size prowls toward me.

Chapter Eleven

Hebe

When all my childhood friends were given in marriage in the last few years, I experienced no shortage of emotions. Bittersweet joy knowing they were secure though our time together would become limited, sorrowful jealousy that none of the marriages belonged to me, and yet also relief that I was still free.

Those emotions dulled in power every time we walked together to fetch water. That was when they shared stories of their new domestic bliss, and I realized it was a blessing I did not have a husband of my own.

My mother never had the chance to explain the responsibilities of a wife in the home before pestilence took her, and her sister did not wish to speak to me about her duties to her husband. I certainly never wanted to ask her, even while there was a chance for her to explain.

Most of what I learned was from the young wives of the village. There were the blushing brides, who couldn't speak of their bridegrooms without a smile on their face. But there were also the ones whose light had gone from their eyes. They spoke of how powerless they felt against their husbands' wrath or indifference.

None of them ever spoke of a time when their husband tested them, though.

Still, as I stand in a ravine next to a barely conscious god with only rope and a muddy chiton, I know I must not fail.

When I was a girl, my father gave me no test to prove I was a worthy daughter to him. He gave me no chance to prove that we could continue living in the same abode. Instead, I was unceremoniously deposited with the sister of his late wife while he went out hunting.

He never returned. To this day, I know not if it was his own choice or the gods', only that a monument was placed by my mother's grave in his honor.

"Prometheus means well," Atum offers as he watches me tie the chiton around the edge of the rope. "He's just never had to woo a woman before. He simply doesn't know how to."

I freeze. "Wh-what do you know about 'wooing'?"

"Not much, especially compared to Dionysus. But I've learned of a few mortal traditions while protecting them from a distance. Though the separation of the bride and bridegroom was new to me." Atum lifts his brows in amusement.

I resist the temptation to drop my gaze.

"But your peoples have many traditions," Atum adds casually. "You do not all speak the same language. Why would you all share a bed of myrrh on your wedding night?"

The rope tumbles from my fingers. I have to stomp on it to prevent it from washing downriver.

Atum doesn't seem to notice, as he leans back and closes his eyes. "Of course, even if that were one of your people's traditions, it wouldn't make sense for you and Prometheus. He doesn't sleep, after all, so beds mean nothing to him."

A bed will never mean a thing to Prometheus.

Grunting, I stoop to reclaim my rope.

“He’s eager to learn your traditions, though.”

I nearly drop the rope again.

Atum’s eyes are still mercifully closed. “He may seem gruff, but it’s only from weariness over this war. It takes a toll on all of us, but I am the only Primordial—other than Nymphs—who can sleep and escape the troubles for a moment.”

“‘Can’ sleep? You say that like your weakness isn’t a burden.”

“My need to sleep has nothing to do with my current weakness. The Creator gave me a portion of His power over life as well as a portion of mortal vulnerability. This way I will always have compassion on my charges.”

“Your charges?” I finally turn from Atum to the surface above. The tip of my spear is just within sight with its shaft sticking up and the head embedded into the soil. It is like the storm picked it up and then hurled it back down.

Hopefully, the spear is deep enough in the soil to support my weight.

“The mortals.” Atum finally peels his eyes open again and watches as I twirl the rope over my head. “All Primordials are to protect mortals by tending to their respective domains, be it land, air, or sea. And all Entities are supposed to help mortals by being a beacon of the virtue they were born to promote.”

Does that mean that Atum didn’t wed me not because I was too human for his tastes—but because he was too human for our marriage to prove a point?

I finally throw my rope, and watch as the knot I fashioned from Prometheus’ chiton

loops around the spear. Then I turn back to Atum, longing to learn more about these things. “You speak like all Primordials were assigned by this Creator to protect mortals. Yet you act like you were singled out for this duty.”

“Both are true. The mortals are the jewel of His creation, and we Primordials are all meant to protect them. Our powers exist to fulfill our duties— and as my compatriots are discovering, if we actively defy that calling, our power diminishes.”

Tugging on the rope, I decide it’s secure enough, but I don’t climb yet. “That still doesn’t explain why you must be like a mortal when it is the rest of your people who struggle with compassion.”

Atum smiles sadly. “I have been directly appointed as the protector of mortals— the Guardian of Life. Zeus, Poseidon, Dionysus, the Entities, the Nymphs, and even Hades have their parts to play to keep order and maintain life— or to keep it separate from the dead, like in Hades’ case. But I am uniquely charged with responsibility over life itself.”

“But that almost sounds like you are the greatest of all Primordials.”

His sad smile grows. “Yes. And also the weakest. Even we must keep our hubris in check.”

I stumble away from the rope as everything I thought I knew is called into question. “If you are the greatest then why does Zeus claim to be the king of the gods?”

“Because he wishes to be.”

“But then, this isn’t a war— it’s a rebellion!”

“It is, but not against me . The rebellion is against the One Who created this order to

begin with.”

I purse my lips. “This Creator . . . will He intervene?”

“He already has, making us swear on the River Styx so we are bound to our word. There are now consequences for our actions. Soon Chaos will be contained along with her brothers War, Pestilence, and Death.”

“Oh.” I’m not sure what else to say to the thought that Death is a person to be avoided. “So, do you aim to be our deliverer, then?”

He sighs sadly. “I wish I could be, but it seems I am only capable of being an intercessor since I understand both the strength of a Primordial and the weakness of a mortal. But maybe a deliverer will rise to work alongside me until the Creator sends One Who will be intercessor, deliverer, and so much more.”

“More?”

“He is the all-knowing, all-powerful provider, the epitome of beauty, and the promised victor. Yet somehow, He will also be the suffering servant.”

“How?”

Atum shrugs. “I only know what has been promised. I will understand more fully when all is fulfilled.”

“Will mortals survive until then?”

“Of course you will.” Atum claps his hands together. “Now, enough about things that cannot be resolved here and now. Climb out of this ravine and prove to your husband how clever you are.”

“What about you?”

“Prometheus already knows I’m clever. But if you leave the rope in place, I’ll make my way up in a moment.”

Nodding, I turn to face the ravine. Hoping I’m as clever as Atum believes, I test my rope and tentatively find a foothold.

Several footholds later, I make it to the top. Leaving everything in its place for Atum, I scan the area.

Prometheus’ spear is embedded into the ground several cubits away. Farther still, I see the chariot.

Well, it’s a good thing Prometheus urged us into the ravine.

I see movement by the chariot. My husband. Of course, he still hasn’t properly covered himself. Though, if he brought spare garments, they could be anywhere after the storm.

Prometheus moves quickly around the chariot, the sight almost comical— until I see why he’s running.

A giant lion prowls toward him— larger than anything the village hunters ever brought back. This is no ordinary lion. And by the way it prowls, I think it intends to widow me.

No.

Chapter Twelve

The Newlyweds

Prometheus:

“N ice kitty,” I murmur, backing away slowly.

The lion disregards my compliment and prowls closer. By the shape of a lightning bolt shaved into its fur, I would wager this is no ordinary lion. In fact, if the entire purpose of this storm was to somehow transport this lion here, I wouldn't be surprised.

Zeus always had a flare for dramatics.

Since the lion clearly isn't listening, I decide to address its master instead. I wish I knew Zeus' Ren , so I could summon him like Hebe's village summoned Dionysus—who then called upon Atum. The rifts opened automatically with the uses of True Names. It takes much more energy to open rifts without them. Though, considering the storm and now this lion, mayhap it is good that I cannot summon Zeus. He is obviously playing dirty.

But just in case he can hear me from wherever he is, I say, “I told you I was considering an alliance.”

The lion takes this personally and lunges.

I fall backward, just barely escaping my face being gored by its claws. However, my prone position makes it easy for the lion to land on me.

It hurts far more than when Hebe fell on me.

If I still had any air in me, I'd groan. As it is, I can't even breathe. All I feel is crushing weight threatening to break all my bones.

So, I suppose I'll just become something without bones . . .

Hebe:

I'm running as fast as I can, but instead of wrenching Prometheus' spear out in passing, I have to stop and tug. The winds threw it deep, and I need to be careful not to lose the spearhead in the extraction.

As I tug, I lift my gaze to the lion. Just in time to watch it fall onto my husband.

"No!" I scream. Suddenly, the cruelest words I ever heard return to my memory. It was something my childhood tormenter whispered to her friends a little too loudly when I passed by once.

"How repulsive must you be to drive a man to choose death over kinship with you?"

What would the wanax's daughter say now that the husband who threatened divorce after one day of marriage has now widowed me?

A guttural yell escapes me as I tug the spear free. Then I charge at the lion.

It lifts its head and stares at me with something akin to confusion. I'm confounded, too. What in Olympus' name am I doing?!

I stop in my tracks, suddenly second-guessing every decision that brought me to this point.

A serpent slithers out from beneath the lion, and for a moment I wonder if I'm facing a chimera. But the lion has a golden tuft on its tail rather than a serpent.

The lion rises, and I realize it's too late to turn back now. My two fates are avenging my husband or dying with the attempt.

With that certainty, I call upon Puraltas' training. Staggering my feet, I pull back the spear, and then thrust it forward.

My aim is true, and the spear reaches the lion's hide. I expect it to slow the lion at the very least. But then the spear merely bounces off the lion's hide.

I stare in horror, trying to make sense of what I just saw. Then I see the mark of a lightning bolt on its hide.

So I shall die in the hunt, just as my father before me.

Before I can turn and try to flee, the serpent grows in size.

Suddenly, my husband, larger than life— and still wearing little more than a loincloth— pounces on the lion. At his current size, he is nearly as tall as the lion is long, though the lion is still greater in girth.

I stare in profound bewilderment at the man who came from the form of a serpent.
“What have I married?”

Prometheus:

What have I married?

The last thing I was expecting to see when I slithered out from beneath the lion was my brand-new wife screaming at a creature that could swallow her whole. Yet, instead of running the other direction, she stands her ground.

“Why?” I ask aloud, as though the lion I am wrestling will respond. Now that Hebe’s demonstration has proven that its hide is impenetrable, I’m attempting to strangle it. Unfortunately, the lion tries to bite at any part of me that strays too close to its maw.

Its ears are twisted toward me, so I take advantage of a creature actually listening to me. I may very well still die in this fight. Shapeshifting, which was once an effortless act, draws far too much energy. I don’t know if I have the strength to outlast this lion.

But if it is my final act while enjoying any semblance of life, I will discover this last piece of knowledge. It seems too unfathomable to be true, yet I saw it with my own eyes. Why is the mortal bride who was so reluctant to wed me risking her life for mine?

“Just because mortals are doomed to die doesn’t mean they enthusiastically embrace it,” I inform the lion as I twist so that I’m on its back. This gets me farther away from its snapping teeth, so I can focus on wrapping my arms back around its neck. “Quite the opposite, in fact. Half of what they’ve invented was to help delay their inevitable demises.”

So, what under Olympus could drive a mortal to run toward danger to save my skin?

The lion moves to roll over, and since I don’t have the strength to turn serpentine again, I jump off its back. Then I take off running, knowing full well that it’s giving chase.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Hebe rushing to reclaim the discarded spear.

“Its hide is impenetrable!” I call, though she should have figured that out by now. But I suppose it’s too much to ask for a bride who is both bold and bright.

“What about inside its hide?” she calls.

I freeze, and then have to jump when the lion lunges, grabbing onto its fur before I slide past it.

It’s a miracle— my new wife is clever after all. “Aye, that might work.”

Then my focus is torn away from my brilliant bride as I cling to the lion. It bucks beneath me and gives up trying to bite me. It extends its claws instead.

However, I have just discovered a possibility of deliverance from a particularly cruel form of torment. I’m not going to let that slip away.

Ignoring all potential consequences, I release my grip on the beast and lunge forward. I grab hold of its snout, desperately holding onto just the very top and very bottom so my fingers don’t get caught between its jagged teeth. Healing takes much longer since the war began. Eternity is a very long time to risk living without all my appendages.

Hebe comes running, keeping some distance between the lion and herself. She frowns, and I know by how close my hands are that its mouth isn’t open enough for her to risk a spear throw.

The lion shakes violently, trying to throw me off. Any moment now, it will try rolling again, and I’ll have to use what strength I have left to flee.

I won't be getting very far.

Since this is my final option, I channel all my remaining strength into prying the lion's jaw open.

The lion is surprised by this tactic and mercifully doesn't fight me. But any moment it could clamp its jaws back down—

Hebe throws her spear, and I brace myself while keeping the lion in position.

The spear finds its mark, disappearing into the lion's maw.

The beast convulses and then drops. I roll off its body since I have any strength left to cling to it.

It's fear that drives me to my feet and has me staggering backward. However, the lion doesn't rise.

Cautiously, I round the beast's still form and look into its eyes. There is no light left in them.

I nearly double over from relief but remain upright as I turn to face my Hebe.

My bride stares back at me, the breeze blowing her muddied curls around her face. But they can't disguise her shining eyes or the victorious lift of her lips.

Though I have seen Aphrodite in her finest silks, there is something about the maiden wearing mud and rags that steals my breath. I did not know that mortals could possess such beauty, but my bride wears victory well.

Despite my bone-weary exhaustion, a strange sort of excitement moves through me

as I realize that I am victorious as well. I am alive and whole. I have also discovered that my bride is brave, clever, and strangely striking.

I step toward Hebe, a new sensation filling me. Gratitude . It is not often that I have owed anyone for anything. My duties have always been on my shoulders alone, and my survival was my priority.

Is this what it is like to have a wife? Is it possible that she can be my helpmate rather than a burden? With Atum, it has always been me supporting him .

How does one show gratitude to one's wife? Is there a mortal tradition I can learn? Instinct drives me to do something . Should I embrace her? Pat her head? Being a trailblazer is a thrill in every way until it comes to establishing new social norms.

Hebe doesn't close the distance between us, leaving that task to me. I do not complain, though, when I reach her.

I wait a moment for her to initiate the appropriate gesture shared between spouses who survived a lion together. However, she stoically stares up at me, not saying a word. Her frail form shudders, like her body thinks it's still in danger. Are those tears glimmering in her eyes?

"You're alive."

"Indeed." Since I have to do something with my hands, I take one of her curls between my fingers. "A good aim and sharp observation skills."

She frowns.

As do I. I did not mean my words to be so caustic. Staring at the curl that is actually quite soft where it isn't coated in mud, I try again. "And you're also not as hideous as

I first believed.”

If she reacts to my compliment, I know it not. Evidently, my words exhausted the last of my strength.

In the most humiliating way possible, my legs buckle beneath me, and then I collapse into my startled bride’s arms.

Chapter Thirteen

Hebe

P rometheus is paying me back for falling on him back when we first met.

Pulled out of a daze caused by too much terror, I do my best to catch Prometheus underneath his arms and hold him. However, he doesn't even try to support his own weight. And with his current height, I'm helpless against it with no assistance from him.

My knees buckle, and then I'm crashing to the dust. Prometheus follows me down.

His head lulls at an angle, but I manage to keep his torso upright with mine. Then I lay him on the grass.

Prometheus doesn't make a sound as he stares back at me, his eyes half-lidded.

"Are you injured?" I demand.

He doesn't respond, so I look over his body, doing my best not to take note of how much of his flesh is revealed. There isn't a flaw in his unnaturally beautiful form—and there isn't a sign of an injury either, which is what I was looking for, obviously.

Prometheus' legs are twisted at strange angles. I do my best to straighten them out, though they feel as heavy as logs. And there's only the most necessary of garments covering him—

Tearing my gaze away from my husband's form, I kneel beside his face.

His eyes are almost completely closed now, but I can see Prometheus' pupils follow me.

I gingerly touch his face, directing it toward me. "Prometheus?"

"You two . . . look like you had . . . an adventure."

Turning, I find Atum about a cubit behind me, doubled over with his hands on his knees.

"Atum!" I cry, leaving my husband and rushing to his master's side.

Prometheus makes a low groaning sound. Is he in pain despite the lack of surface injuries?

I come to a halt in front of Atum and gesture back at Prometheus. "What's wrong with him? He just collapsed!"

Atum glances past me. "I don't see any blood . . . Is it possible he might have broken bones?"

"Is it?! I don't know what injuries 'Primordials' can sustain." I rush back to Prometheus' side, dropping to my knees beside him.

Considering how the lion crushed him, I check Prometheus' chest first. Ignoring the intimacy of such a touch, I run my hands low across his chest, checking for broken ribs.

Prometheus moans again, but I don't feel anything wrong. There isn't even a trace of

bruising.

Panic grips me, and I straddle him, sliding my hands beneath him the best I can. My fingers just barely brush his spine, and I run my hands up and down his back, looking for any sign of damage. Everything feels like it's in the proper place, but this is an awkward angle, so it's hard to be sure.

Prometheus' eyes have drifted close, and I lean forward, my face hovering over his lips. I heave a relieved sigh when I feel his breath against my skin.

Atum watches with an enigmatic expression. "Mayhap his arms are broken?"

Still perched in this awkward expression, I run my fingers down Prometheus' right arm. I feel no breakages, but the definition of his musculature is undeniable.

Flushing from my lack of experience in such things— I am certainly no healer— I check his left arm next. But it is the same there.

"Wait— I know what this is!"

I turn to Atum. "What?"

"He's exhausted. He overexerted his power protecting us from the storm and then fighting the lion. Once his realm restores his strength, he'll be perfectly fine again."

Glancing down at Prometheus, I note the placid expression on his face. His fiery hair is splayed around his head, and he looks so peaceful now that he is not hurling insults like spears. In fact, with Prometheus' tongue stilled and his expression serene, his beauty is even more notable. Or that might be the fact that he no longer wearing his chiton . . . "I thought you were the only one of your people who could sleep."

“Oh, I am. Prometheus is awake. He just doesn’t have the strength to keep his eyes open.”

“He’s awake?!” My words are a squeak, and I jump away from the man I had been straddling in my desperation.

“Oh, yes. He’d probably recover faster if he was capable of sleep, but merely resting will have to do.”

Standing, I smooth down my ruined dress and glance around. It’s growing dark—with dusk this time instead of a storm— and we are out in the open. There are caves nearby, but I am not so deluded to think Atum and I can carry Prometheus to them together. “How long will he be like this?”

Atum sighs, the friendly smile falling from his face for the first time since this interaction began. “It’s hard to say. I haven’t seen Prometheus driven to this state since near the beginning of the war. It might be a night, or it might be a fortnight. When it comes to those who were born with what was once limitless strength, it is hard to say how the weakness will manifest itself.”

I purse my lips at the irony of my husband, who acted like he was above such things, being so vulnerable. “But Zeus evidently knows where we are.” I glance at the dead lion.

“He has limited power as well, thanks to the war he caused. We should be safe from him until dawn, at least, while his own power replenishes.”

“But you said it could take a fortnight!”

Atum places a gentle hand on my shoulder, as he stands a little straighter than before. “My strength has returned to mortal levels at least, so I can help you. We will depart

at dawn.” He glances down at his prostrate companion. “All of us.”

I’m not sure if Atum gives that assurance to comfort Prometheus or else scold him for threatening to abandon me.

“In the meantime, see if you can skin some of that lion for supper while I look for firewood.” Atum collects the spear from inside the lion and breaks off the spearhead, which he tosses onto the ground by my feet. “Existence would be so wretched without fire, don’t you think?”

With that pronouncement, Atum ambles away, using the broken spear as a walking stick.

Frowning, I scan the area again, but there is no sign of storm, beast, or anything else that could pose an immediate threat. At least, not where I can see, but the shadows draw closer.

Hopefully Atum returns with the firewood soon.

Not sure what else to do, I collect the spearhead. I have no desire to approach the lion just in case it is very good at pretending. However, I don’t know what else to do. My thoughts blow away with the breeze, and skinning a lion is a simple enough task.

I’m too tired to be afraid anyway, so I close the distance between the lion and me. I nudge it with my foot, ready to run if it retaliates. But it doesn’t move.

Then, because I’m also too tired to stand, I collapse next to the beast. I comb my fingers through the tangled mane until I find the neck. Frowning, I try to slice through since that seems as good a place to start as any.

I take the spearhead to it— and watch it bounce away just like when I threw the

spear.

Oh, right; its hide is invulnerable. Not that it spared the lion's life.

Groaning, I stare at the useless carcass, too tired to care that I'm starving.

A different groan draws my attention back to my prostrate husband.

Prometheus' head is turned toward me, and his eyes are half-open. One hand is stretched out toward me, a finger pointing.

I trace the gesture to the lion's paw. It bears claws as long as my spearhead—but much sharper.

Tentatively, I take the paw, which is as heavy as one of Prometheus' legs, and drag it against the lion's hide.

The claws puncture the flesh.

When I glance back at Prometheus, his eyes have closed again, but there is half of a smile on his lips.

Turning back to the lion, I focus all my strength into skinning the beast like it was the prey my father never returned with.

Chapter Fourteen

Prometheus

I was created to harness power and produce creative thought. I was meant to hunt down knowledge previously hidden and learn how to wield it into usefulness. Once, it was my calling to direct the mortals in this same pursuit.

But the war stripped me of that purpose and dwindled at my power. Now I lie prostrate on my back, devoid of strength and filled with shame.

The Creator punished my kind for turning against those He assigned us to protect. Yet, Atum never raised a hand against the apple of the Creator's eye, but he suffers along with those who have. Zeus, the leader of this rebellion, should be the weakest of all, yet some secret knowledge seems to be feeding him power.

Atum always tells me that the rain falls on the just and the unjust. He says that because we all live in a world wrecked by disorder we must endure the consequences even as we try to undo them. The other option is to hope that the Creator intervenes and we all get dragged down to the Underworld and forced to make another vow on the River Styx, because apparently none of us are pure enough to escape His wrath.

I guess I'll have to settle with escaping Zeus'.

Hebe hums, drawing me out of my thoughts. I'm not sure she even realizes she's doing it. My mortal bride is quite focused on her task, skinning the lion that almost made me its meal.

Only torment awaited me if that lion consumed me. I am not so foolish to think that being broken into pieces and digested would be enough to slay me. Not with the Creator's promise that I shall not see death until I have an heir of my own bloodline.

I would have wished for death, though. Even if Atum weren't so weak, I don't think he could have called upon enough of his power over life to help heal me. That aspect of his abilities can only be fueled by another's love for the patient, and no one cares that much for me.

Except . . .

I'm a little bruised from the fight, and I feel my body already knitting itself together as much as it can with my low energy stores. But those are my only woes because a mortal risked her life to rescue mine. A mortal who, with her quiet cleverness, is restoring my strength faster than when I last suffered such depletion. Just as Atum draws upon love, I am fueled by mortal ingenuity. It has been so long since I have experienced that well of strength.

Mayhap the Creator has deigned to show me some mercy after all though I am not one of His beloved mortals. And for Him to show it through a mortal . . .

Back when mortals could pursue more than just their survival, I always thrived. But even one mortal using ingenuity is certainly helpful to my regeneration.

Opening my eyes a little more, I watch Hebe work. Though I can tell she is also exhausted from the day, she works with a precision that will allow the skin to still be useful even after she's carved out the meat we so desperately need. I may not be capable of sleep, but I do need to eat— but only ambrosia or an offering from a mortal will give me true sustenance.

“You're skilled at this,” I whisper.

Hebe glances at me over her shoulder. The encroaching shadows conceal the filth coating her. Now she is only a silhouette with a strong nose and eyes that gleam even in the darkness. “Well, an impenetrable hide might prove useful.”

I position my elbows beneath me so that I’m not completely prostrate any longer. I want to better see the woman who slew a lion for me. “Your people sacrificed the best of themselves when they put you on that altar, didn’t they?”

She turns away from me, and the dusk seems so much darker without the fire gleaming in her eyes. “I was the oldest unwed maiden. That was what made me both a worthy sacrifice and expendable.”

There is a pang of sorrow in her tone. I stare for a long moment, not how to address it. Primordials are rarely free with their emotions, and I had begun to wonder if my bride even possessed any.

“You’re not . . . you’re not expendable,” I finally manage. Because after a lifetime of pursuing knowledge, I have somehow evaded the secret of comforting a woman in pain.

Hebe still doesn’t face me. “Says the man who wanted to abandon me after only a day of marriage.”

“I am a Primordial. It is in my nature to look down on mortals. But for your people to look down on their own is wrong.”

It becomes too dark for Hebe to continue her work, so she abandons it and turns completely to me. Suddenly, the gleam in her eyes seem sharper than the claws she was just wielding. “So your people do not have their own hierarchies— both real and perceived?”

I wince. Mayhap it is not such a good thing to have a clever bride after all. “Be that as it may, despite your earlier claim, your people clearly sacrificed one of their better warriors.”

Hebe snorts at that. “Far from it. I only fought because I had nothing left to lose.”

“Well, I had everything to lose, so thank you.”

She turns to me in surprise. “I’ll admit, I was frightened while you battled this beast—” Hebe pats the hide of the downed lion. “Were you frightened? I mean, gods can’t die . . . can they?”

Well, I am absolutely not bringing the subject of Ascendants into this conversation. Zeus might think all mortals should be wiped out for their potential to become god-killers, but I think simple ignorance is the best protection against such things. “It was not death I feared, but being consumed alive by that creature. My kind cannot escape to the Underworld like yours does.”

Hebe inhales sharply. Then, to my great surprise, she places one tiny hand on mine in what I believe is meant to be a comforting gesture.

I gaze at my wife in the darkness and realize I’ve never truly seen her before this. This bond isn’t the only secret knowledge to explore. Hebe is an enigma all on her own. Her secrets are more enticing than anything I have sought before.

I open my mouth to ask so I can begin this journey of discovery, but then something crashes to the ground.

Startling, I turn as much as I can in my exhaustion.

Atum’s silhouette stands over me. “I found firewood!”

Since it's safe to do so without discovery, I scowl at my soon-to-be-former master. How dare he interrupt this chance of discovery?

I turn back to see Hebe pulling away quickly to arrange Atum's firewood.

Even though there is much left to learn, this night has made two things abundantly clear. One, I must go to Zeus. We might have enough time to get to the temple before Zeus recovers, but then I will have to leave posthaste.

The second realization of the night is that I will not go to Zeus alone. I shall be taking my bride with me.

Chapter Fifteen

Hebe

Once I'm done arranging the firewood, Atum sets it alight.

The light is a relief, and the heat is more so. Doing my best to ignore how violently I'm shivering in my sodden gown as I set the slabs of meat next to the fire.

Atum looks up from inspecting my work on the lion and frowns. "Prometheus, your bride needs your body heat again."

"What am I supposed to do about that?" he mutters.

Taking my spot by the lion, Atum sags against the carcass. "You're supposed to be the clever one between us. Figure it out."

The fire casts shadows over Prometheus' face and just barely illuminate his scowl. Then he lowers himself back on the ground and stretches out one arm. "Hebe, come to me."

I tense and glance down at the meat. "But our supper—"

"Can cook perfectly without you hovering over it," he answers. "Did you not say a husband can tell his wife what pleases him? Well, it would please me if you laid beside me and made use of my body heat."

A flush spreads up my neck, warring with the cold that has already consumed me.
“I— er—”

“I apologize if it flies in the face of mortal traditions. But just as you do not wish to be divorced on your first day, I’d prefer not to be widowed on the second night.”

Atum says nothing, but my fear that he knows more of mortal traditions than he lets on returns. What if he says something to Prometheus? It would be best not to draw attention to such things.

Stiffly, I stride around the fire. Then, ignoring Prometheus’ mostly undressed form, I lie down close enough to him to make it appear like we’re touching.

Groaning, Prometheus slides his outstretched arm beneath me and pulls me toward him so that my back is pressed against his side. His arm becomes a cushion beneath my head. “Comfortable?” Prometheus’ word is a growl, like he isn’t comfortable at all.

I should move off his arm at least. But between his warmth at my back and the fire before me, I can’t find the will to do so. The exhaustion I staved off before has returned with more ferocity than the lion.

“Tell me, wife,” Prometheus murmurs, his breath toying with my drying curls. “What is it that mortals do to strengthen the marital bond?”

My heart pounds, but I still cannot bring myself to pull away. “Well . . . they say what pleases them about the other.”

“You already told me that part.”

“But they normally don’t do it in an insulting manner. In fact, they actively seek what

delights the other.”

“My apologies if my words seem sharp. It is just difficult to find things to compliment about you.”

Stiffening, I finally find enough anger to rise.

As I shift, though, a hand presses against my shoulder.

“But I enjoy discovering hidden things. Like your courage.”

Deep down in my psyche, where the fire cannot reach, I feel warmth caused by his words, which is foolish. I have gone my entire life without pretty words; I will not lose my head over the first haphazard compliment I receive.

“And speaking of discovering hidden things, you still haven’t told me what bonding traditions you mortals have besides what is already known to me.”

I lick my chapped lips. “We pledge our hearts to each other.”

“What?”

“And we also protect each other,” I add quickly.

Prometheus’ head lulls closer so that it is resting against my curls. “We must be halfway bonded already.”

Not sure what to say to that, I watch the flames instead. Should I go flip the meat around? Except, my body feels like Prometheus’ must have when he collapsed. I am fighting a war to keep my eyelids from closing completely.

“What else?” Prometheus asks, and I wonder where he is finding the energy to be so talkative. “Do your kind also share secrets with one another?”

I give a noncommittal grunt.

The hand on my shoulder trails down my arm as if Prometheus has lost the strength to keep it in place— probably because he expended all that energy speaking. “Do you have any secrets, little warrior?”

My mind races even faster than my heart is. The question is so intimate— worse, it was meant to be. Prometheus is trying to bond with me the only way he knows how.

“I don’t have any secrets,” I whisper. “Everything about me has been known since my childhood.”

It’s true. Everyone in my village knew about my parents’ tragic fates and of my fanciful dreams. Both were used to mock me at first and to pity me for later.

“Yet I know nothing about you.” Prometheus’ voice is so low, I wouldn’t hear him if I weren’t pressed against him. “I want to learn you, Hebe.”

My breath hitches. “What has changed since your threats of abandonment?”

“You felled a lion.”

“And you saved me from a storm.”

“It would seem like the bonding process is already drawing us closer.”

I grunt. Is it possible to accidentally trick a Primordial into falling for you? No mortal man is so easily tricked— at least not without a hefty bride price.

Still, I'm too warm to move, even to satiate my thirst. With my hunger also unresolved I have no strength to fight my drooping eyelids.

Prometheus' voice drags me back from slumber. "Tell me, bride of mine, what is it you desire most in this world?"

That is the last question I expected him to ask, and one I have no answer to. I gave away every desire I had for my future when I submitted for sacrifice. Since then, I have only been sorting through how to deal with my dramatic change of fate.

I have no desire except to keep my honor—the one thing I have left after I sacrificed everything else when I laid myself upon the altar.

Since there is no way I can open my mouth to voice that, I grunt and hope that gets my point across. Then I slip into an oblivion where neither desire nor honor matters any longer.

Chapter Sixteen

Prometheus

“I think she fell asleep on me,” I whisper, not sure what to do with my arm pinned beneath her.

“Let her lie,” Atum calls helpfully from the other side of the fire. “She won’t bite. At least, not asleep, she won’t.”

I glance down at her nervously. “Do mortals bite?”

“Not ordinarily. Just when they are especially vexed.”

“What?”

Atum doesn’t respond. Instead, he sets two slabs of lion meat and a waterskin next to me. Then he settles next to the lion’s carcass.

“Do you think she has any injuries of her own after everything?” I ask. What if, despite her capability and my own attempts to protect her, I lose her anyway? Mortals are like blades of grass— here one day and gone the next. It was not always like that, but when we Primordials were made to swear on the River Styx, the mortals were ordered to drink from it. Their lifespans are much shorter now, so they cannot be perpetually wicked like they were before.

Yet, despite the fact that her lifespan might have been cut even shorter, Hebe charged

at the lion. She treated my life as more precious than her own— and I do not think it had anything to do with the fact that I will live longer. Hebe just seems to view life as precious, no matter whose it is— except her own, anyway.

“There is no need to fret over your new bride,” Atum says. “They may seem fragile, but mortals are resilient. They cling to their mortality and sometimes not even Death can pry it away from them.”

“Mmm.” I gaze down at Hebe. The shadows soften the sharper edges of her fierce face and paint it with a strange sort of beauty.

“There’s something she’s not telling you.”

I glance up, my free hand fiddling with my amber necklace. “Who?”

“Aphrodite.” Atum rolls his eyes. “You know who I’m talking about.”

“I think you’ve spent too much time around me; my sarcasm is rubbing off on you.” I fight a smile and glance back down at the mortal woman lying on my arm. Now that she has slipped into sleep, her expression is serene, like she didn’t fell a lion earlier today.

Her lips are pursed. Is she smiling in her dream or scowling? I only know what Atum tells me about dreams since I cannot have them myself. He says they can be pleasant or terrifying.

Whatever Hebe is dreaming of, she has curled into me. Which means that her filthy gown is now irritating my skin. However, it also means her strangely soft physique is also pressed against me. If I had the strength to pull away, I’m not sure I would.

“What is she not telling me?”

“Apparently, there’s a physical aspect to the mortal bonding process.”

I frown. “Well, she’s already lying on top of me. How much more physical can one get?”

Atum stabs his meat with a small blade he must have recovered after a storm. “According to Dionysus, there is a mortal tradition to press their lips against their loved one as a show of affection.”

“But you said they only bite when they’re vexed!”

“I don’t think it’s with teeth. It’s called ‘kissing.’ Dionysus says it’s a pleasant activity. But I’m not sure how he knows since he hasn’t bonded with any of them.”

Frowning, my gaze returns to those pursed lips. What would it be like to have them pressed against me? Where do mortals prefer to kiss? Where would I want Hebe’s lips on me? “I’m not sure I’ve made her happy enough for her to desire kissing me.” If I was aware of this tradition before, that might have been how I expressed my gratitude for her saving me from the lion. However . . . “Apparently, my saving her life wasn’t enough.”

Atum snorts. “It might have been if you hadn’t threatened to abandon her.”

I purse my lips. As much as I don’t want to risk being bitten, this tradition intrigues me. I’ll have to coax Hebe into teaching it to me soon. What was it she said mortals like besides protection? Saying what pleases you in them? I’ll have to do better at finding things to compliment.

Hebe inhales sharply, making a strange sniffing sound that grates on me.

If only complimenting her was not so difficult . . .

Atum evidently finishes eating and curls up on the grass. “Wake me if there’s danger.”

I snort. “I think I’ll just wake her, actually. Hebe has a better spear arm than you.” There, that’s one compliment. I’ll have to remember that when she wakes.

“That she does.” Atum’s words are slurred, indicating sleep is about to overtake him. It’s one of his more glaringly annoying habits.

But he’s the one who’s spoken to Dionysus about mortal women, so I need him awake for a moment longer. “How about gifts? Do mortal women enjoy gifts?” Primordials exchange gifts often when forging bargains. Mayhap Hebe will accept them in lieu of compliments?

“I think . . . everyone enjoys gifts. It’s one thing . . . that unites us.” Atum’s breathing grows heavier. Every now and then he makes a sound like Hebe did— but it’s even more annoying coming from him.

My gaze returns to my sleeping bride, though my ears continue to listen for danger.

I rack my mind, trying to think of more compliments to use. “You smell better after you bathe.” That probably won’t work . . . “I like when you’re silent— until I actually need to hear from you.” This is proving more difficult than I thought; I really hope compliments can be substituted with gifts.

Hebe makes a mewling sound as she curls closer against me.

I sigh. “I find your subtle softness strangely pleasant.” There. The perfect compliment. Hebe will be teaching me about this strange mortal tradition of kissing before sunset tomorrow.

Chapter Seventeen

Hebe

When I wake up, I can't decide what hurts more. Is it my throat screaming for water, my stomach demanding food, or my neck just lamenting how I lay on it?

Lying beside my husband was a worse fate than I feared.

The sun higher in the sky than I was expecting, but it's still early. A slab of roasted meat and a waterskin lie between me and the dying embers of our fire. On the other side of it, I see Prometheus upright and fiddling with the lion carcass that looks very different from how I left it. Atum is nowhere to be seen.

"Good morning."

I turn back to Prometheus and find him studying me like I'm the next puzzle he'd like to solve. Mercifully, he's wearing a fresh chiton .

For a moment, I consider asking him if he has any other spare garments I could change into. But then he nods toward the provisions. "To break your fast."

"I actually figured that bit out on my own, thank you." I uncork the waterskin and take a desperate gulp of the lukewarm water. Never has anything tasted more refreshing.

Prometheus' hands are busy piercing a lion's claw with another, but his gaze is still

on me.

Putting down my waterskin, I awkwardly wipe my chin and tear off a piece of lion meat. “I see you’re doing better.”

“Oh, you figured that out on your own, too, did you?”

I purse my lips before taking my first bite. I walked into that trap.

Prometheus flinches even though I said nothing.

“Where’s Atum?” I finally ask.

“He’s seeing if he can locate the horses.”

“Should he be doing that?”

Prometheus shrugs. “He’s still practically a mortal, but he’s no longer an invalid. If you can stand on your own two feet, my mortal bride, then so can he.” With that, my husband rises, and I realize why the lion carcass looks so different. Its skin has become a pelt that Prometheus wears as a cloak.

How long has he had his strength returned to him? It was not an easy feat, skinning that lion as much as I did, and I didn’t even begin to cure it. Though, Prometheus is the god of ingenuity, so mayhap he knows some special tricks.

My husband crouches next to me and holds out a leather band. It bears four lion claws arranged on it.

I swallow the chewy meat as quickly as possible. “What’s this?”

Prometheus arches a fiery brow. “You only slew the lion last night. Surely, you haven’t forgotten about its existence already.”

“That’s not what I meant.” I sigh. Mayhap I should have just let him get devoured and saved myself the trouble. “I mean, what is this that you have made from it?”

“A necklace. It’s a gift. For you.” Prometheus holds it up.

I blink, surprised. “Thank you.”

He gestures for me to turn, and I do. Then Prometheus reaches around me and allows the necklace to hover with the claws curving outward instead of toward my chest.

“Move your hair,” he orders. “I’d like to avoid touching it while it is so filthy.”

I lift my curls and glare back at him. “Is it my fault that my husband hasn’t taken me safely to my new home, where I can focus on my appearance rather than our survival?”

Prometheus frowns as he wraps the leather around my neck and knots it. “I didn’t mean that as an insult.”

“Then how did you mean that?”

“A simple observation of truth.” His fingers slide across the back of my neck, and my spine stiffens at his touch. “There— your gift is in place.”

I turn back to Prometheus and draw upon all my strength to again say, “Thank you.”

“Well, it seemed only right for you to have a necklace if I had one.” Prometheus pulls my family’s amber amulet up from beneath his chiton .

“You seem to have grown fond of it.”

“Fond enough to keep it around a little longer.”

I do not need him to tell me that he is speaking of more than just the amber.

Nodding, I pat the leather strap of my own necklace, careful to avoid the deadly claws. “Then I shall wear this with pride.”

A crooked smile stretches across Prometheus’ lips. “Clever pun, bride of mine.”

I blink, startled by the genuine compliment. “Thank you.”

He leans toward me slightly. “You’re very welcome.”

For a moment, we just stare at each other— with him looking like he’s waiting on me for something. When I don’t do whatever it is Prometheus desires, he leans a little closer.

Is this some kind of challenge? Should I meet his gaze until one of us has no choice but to back down? Are there consequences for losing this contest and prizes for winning? Or is this a game without stakes meant to pass the time?

“I found them!”

We both lose when we turn to find Atum grinning as he leads our two lost stallions toward us. There is a boyish glint to his eyes and a spring to his step that makes him seem younger than an immortal Primordial can be.

Strangely enough, instead of being bald like last night, he has a layer of fuzz on his scalp that grew faster than should have been possible. Then again, what do I know of

Primordial hair? Other than the fact that, despite everything, Prometheus' hair still isn't nearly as filthy as mine.

Atum's enthusiasm is infectious, and I cannot help but stand to greet him. "Excellent work!"

The Guardian of Life straightens with my praise, practically preening. Strangely enough, Prometheus slouches, glaring at his master like my attention is something to be desired.

"I thought it would probably be best if we reached the temple with no further delays," Atum says as he reaches us. "I have protections in place there so that no other Primordials can harm us there."

"I suddenly have an increased desire to reach your temple," I say.

"That excited to bond with your new bridegroom?" Atum winks at me.

He really is a different man— well, male— when he's not completely depleted of energy. I'm not sure I appreciate it.

Prometheus doesn't seem to either. "At the moment, not having to fight for our survival is more than enough encouragement for haste." With that, Prometheus wraps his arms around my waist and hoists me into the now upturned chariot like he hadn't been completely drained of strength last night.

When I glance back, Prometheus wears a shadow of a grin. He winks. "Curiosity does lend some hurry to my steps, though. Especially since the best part of discovering something new is getting to name it."

I stare in surprise at Prometheus opening up to me. Then I grip the edge of the chariot

while he loads two sacks into the chariot. One smells like it is full of lion meat now.

“We should also hurry so we can get this meat properly salted before it spoils,” I say.
“That is very time-sensitive.”

“More so than proving your union so we can forge a truce and end this inferno war?” Prometheus nods sagely. “Quite right. Very practical. I’m glad you have your priorities in place.”

I turn to my new husband in surprise. “Now you are invested with our union?”

“I’ve been curious about it the entire time.” Prometheus climbs into the chariot, wrapping his arms around me and gathering the reins like it’s the most natural thing. “It was just bonding with you specifically that I was unsure of.”

“Pardon me!” I whirl around to better face him, which I see now is a poor strategy at this proximity. Now we’re chest to chest— well, chest to lower ribcage, considering the height difference. Behind Prometheus, Atum is standing, but the space saved by his new position is now claimed by that accursed lion meat.

Prometheus’ eyes glitter with smugness as he meets my gaze. “Oh? Are you going to try to convince me that you were excited at the thought of bonding with me?” His focus drops to my lips before returning to my eyes. He arches one fiery brow, challenging me. “So much so that you wish to honor all the traditions that help you mortals bond with your spouses?”

What is he implying? What has Atum told him? What does Atum even know ?

I lift my chin, reminding myself that I faced a lion just yesterday, and Prometheus is hardly more intimidating. “We already violated one when you forced me to lie beside you last night, so what is the use?”

“You implied that was only customary of the wedding night . What about beyond that? Surely, you cannot expect me to believe that your people bond by keeping their distance forever?”

“That is the best way to keep from driving each other to violence.” I glare at Prometheus so he can feel properly threatened by what our proximity might drive me to.

He just chuckles and flicks the reins.

The horses start trotting, and I fall face-first against my husband’s chest.

The confounded man— god— whatever he is— just chuckles more.

See if I save him from the next lion.

Scowling, I whirl back around, half-hoping Zeus will send another storm so I can be frustrated at someone else for a change.

Chapter Eighteen

Hebe

Fortunately, the rest of our chariot ride is uneventful. We drive off the path, jolting over every stone until an alternative path rises. This one leads to a stone building rising in the distance.

I lean forward, both to put some distance between Prometheus and me— not that there is much of a point of it now— and to get a better view of the building. Back at the village, all our homes are built from clay, and our stone altar has no shelter from the elements we ask it to shield us from. The few travelers who have reached our village spoke of stone buildings, but this is the first I've seen of one with my own eyes.

It is a circular building with a wall curved around the entrance. The wall isn't tall enough to obscure the view of three tall statues on either side of an equally tall stone door. The two statues on the left are feminine while the one on the right is clearly a man— or, well, a masculine god. He doesn't look a thing like Atum, though, since the statue's hair flows around a face that is hard rather than kind— and not just because it is made of marble.

The building is only partially visible since the rest of it vanishes into the hill it is built next to.

Prometheus brings the chariot to a halt, and two women wearing flowing garments like Prometheus' hurry from behind the wall. They bow and then hasten to attend to

the horses.

Another woman, this one much shorter than the others, strides out next. Her garment is cut the same as the others, but it is dyed the same shade of pale green as Atum's mask was.

Atum seems to remember his mask when he sees the woman, because he touches his face. He seems flustered to not be wearing it.

The woman doesn't seem to mind as she bows before him. "Your High Priestess welcomes you."

"Rise, Klea. You know that isn't necessary."

At his words, the High Priestess stands. Her golden-brown curls are coiled high on her head, making me realize she's even shorter than she first appeared. There is a heavy scent of spices about her, and her sharp eyes are focused on Atum.

"Tell me how you would like to be served," Klea says.

"See to it that Prometheus and his new bride are well attended to. Oh, and please ensure that these are seasoned and stored properly." Atum hoists the sack of meat out of the chariot.

Klea doesn't see it, however, since her focus has finally darted to me. Her eyes widen. "She's mortal."

"Indeed," Atum says, only a hint of strain in his voice as he continues to hold up the sack of meat.

"But you said such unions between mortals and Primordials are unheard of!"

“They are, and shall continue to remain so for me .” Atum adds this part quickly in the same tone the kinder village boys used when confessing they had no plans to pursue me. “But you are witnessing the dawn of a new age, Klea.” His words would be more dramatic if he didn’t lose his grip on the sack just then.

Two more women appear to deal with that. I step off the chariot to assist, but then Prometheus grasps my hand and leads me toward the temple.

“Leave it to the priestesses,” he says. “You are of too high a station for such things.”

I purse my lips, but I’m too weary to argue. Instead, I glance toward the statues we’re approaching. “None of those look like you or Atum. In fact, if I didn’t know better, I would say this was a temple to Persephone and Demeter.”

“It is.” Prometheus nods toward the masculine statue. “There’s Hades.”

“Believe me,” Atum mutters as he walks past us, “we both hate being associated with each other.”

“Associated with each other? I don’t understand.”

A wide grin stretches across my husband’s face, and he nods toward the statue of Persephone. “That’s how Atum is represented by you Greeks.”

“Is it any wonder I prefer my Egyptian name?” Atum mutters as he disappears into the temple.

I turn to Prometheus in surprise. “I don’t understand.”

“Due to a very complicated series of misunderstandings— it’s actually a hilarious story I am unfortunately forbidden to retell— Atum is known to your people as the

god dess of spring.”

We step into the dark temple entrance that is illuminated by the open door and high windows that don’t reach the center of the room. Despite the shadows, I can still sense Atum’s glare aimed at us— well, Prometheus.

I glance between Atum and back toward where I can no longer see the feminine statue. “That must have been quite the misunderstanding.”

“It was.” Prometheus chuckles. “Mayhap when we are fully bonded, I can tell you.”

“You most certainly will not,” Atum mutters, sounding almost petulant.

Prometheus leans a little closer to me, his voice dropping low. “Unlike the rest of us, Atum is capable of dying like a mortal. But instead of staying dead, he traverses through the entire Underworld and is born again because of his authority over life.”

“So, I can see how springtime might be associated with him, but what about the godd
ess part?”

Atum turns to glare at us over his shoulder.

Giggling, I pat my husband’s arm. “Fine, just tell me this. If he’s Persephone . . . does that make you Demeter?”

Prometheus stiffens, apparently not expecting that line of reasoning.

Atum laughs in surprise.

And that is how the High Priestess finds us. She appears to have sacrificed her sense of humor long ago, because her expression remains hard in the face of our laughter.

“Should I summon Sia for you, O Reborn One?”

“Not yet. Alert him of our arrival and ensure he has everything he believes the ritual will demand. We can begin at moonrise, but there is a mortal in our company with needs to be metp.”

“And what of you?” the High Priestess asks, hurrying to keep pace with him.

“I must meditate in my chambers until dusk. Attend to the newlyweds!”

Prometheus leans toward me. “We try to keep the fact that he becomes mortal a secret even from his own acolytes. They would be who his enemies would capture and question.”

My gaze darts up to him, though he remains focused on Atum’s retreat. “There are those who would lay hands on a priestess?”

“We are at war, and both mortals and Primordials have been known to misuse those loyal to Atum.” Prometheus wrinkles his nose, and for a moment, I think it’s a display of compassion fueled by disgust. Then he turns back to me with that same disgust. “Unfortunately, Atum is waiting until his full power has returned before we begin the ritual. He’s using you as an excuse.”

I step away from Prometheus. When did we draw so close that I was leaning on him, anyway? “He isn’t wrong. It would be good to rest, dine, and— if possible— bathe before any bonding.”

“I can assist you with that, goddess.”

Startling, I turn to see that the High Priestess must have sent an acolyte to assist us instead of coming forward. “I-I’m not a goddess.” Not yet, at least.

The girl is young— barely even marriageable age. “Which need would you prefer met first?”

The lion meat and waterskins have satisfied the worst of my hunger and thirst. I am still quite weary after the journey, but the thought of lying on a bed in my current state is abhorrent. “A bath, please.”

“Oh, yes,” Prometheus agrees. “She certainly needs it.”

I glare at my husband, but then the priestess is striding deeper into the temple. Hurrying to catch up with her, I glance around the stone walls we pass. Stone columns uphold the domed ceiling.

The priestess turns to the right and pushes open a heavy door.

On the other side is a room with no light except what we let in. At least not until the priestess lights a bowl-shaped beeswax candle.

Our guide goes deeper into the darkness, touching her flames to candles only she can see until the entire room is illuminated.

Now I can see that this round, domed room has a deep cut in the center of the stone floor filed with water. There are several stones set up against the wall rounding the pool. Most bear a candle, but some uphold bottles of ointments, and at least three bear stacks of garments.

The priestess goes to one of the stones bearing ointments and pours a generous amount into the pool. “The waters have been prepared.” With that, the priestess moves to walk past us, apparently confident that we have all we need.

I narrow my eyes at the garments, trying to determine if they are masculine or

feminine. It is hard to tell with their flowing cuts. “Is this the men’s bathing house, or the women’s?”

Lips parting in surprise, the young priestess turns back to me. “Only the High Priestess and we panageis live within the temple. The priests and torchbearers live among the people and come only on the holy days. The bath house is sacred to us women, but it belongs to our Guardians when they honor us with their presence.” She casts a wide-eyed look of adoration at my husband before bowing again and backing away— apparently overwhelmed by his oh-so-honorable presence.

A moment later, the stone door is closed between us and the rest of the temple.

I turn to Prometheus. “If you desire to bathe first, I will wait outside.”

Prometheus glances at me in surprise as he removes the lion skin draped around his shoulders. “Why? You desperately need a bath now . And Atum might recover any moment now and summon us for the ritual.” Snorting, Prometheus undoes his chiton rope next. “It’ll be easier to bond with you if you didn’t smell like dirty river water.”

“Well, it would be easier to bond with you if you ever said a kind word.”

Prometheus removes the clasp on his sleeve, causing his chiton falls away. His muscular physique threatens to make me a liar. Just now, it seems like it would be quite easy to bond with him . . .

“You barely speak at all, so it seems strange that you should comment on my actually using my tongue.” Prometheus’ hands move to his perizoma .

I quickly avert my eyes. “What are you doing?!”

“Bathing, just like you ought to. Don’t tell me your people are too primitive for such

things.” The sound of swishing water accompanies his words.

“I know how to bathe perfectly well. But men and women do not do so together .”

“And I’ve never shared a pool with a mortal. But since you are my wife— and because you stink— I’ll make an exception. You can make one, too.”

“I’m sure we have enough time if I just wait until you’re finished . . .”

“ Woman ,” he growls.

I glance at Prometheus before I can stop myself and find him in the pool, leaning against the edge. His arms are braced like he’s about to climb out and come after me.

Darting to the opposite side of the room— as much as a circular room can be described as having sides— I accidentally put out a candle in my haste. The room becomes more comfortable with more shadows shielding my eyes.

“Hebe, my stubborn bride,” Prometheus calls, “it would please me if you saw to your basic needs before you force me to take matters into my own hands.”

Panicking, I put out another candle and— for lack of a better word— bathe this corner in darkness. “Can you see me?”

“No, but I can smell you just fine.” Prometheus moves as if to swim across the pool that is only about six cubits wide.

“Stay over there!” I cry, staring at the water. It is far more enticing than the muddy creek water I haven’t had the opportunity to wash off yet. I would give anything for a bath.

Anything except completely surrender to my new husband.

“ Hebe.”

“I’ll bathe.” I put out one more candle just to be safe. “But only if you stay on your side.”

Prometheus grunts like he’s not sure I’ll actually comply, but he retreats to his side. He’s also no longer looking directly at me, so I hope that means he can’t clearly see me.

I strip quickly before I can second-guess myself. Unfortunately, my speed nearly causes me to lose my balance. The last thing I need would be for Prometheus to have no choice but to rescue me while I am naked. His insults are cruel enough when I am fully clothed.

Finally, I slide into the water, feeling a little better now that it covers me. I do my best to pretend that the person on the other side of the pool is just my cousin’s wife.

Since Prometheus is has apparently dismissed me now that I’m complying with his wishes, it’s easy enough to do. The only sounds are splashes as he makes use of the oils for his hair.

I avert my eyes and focus on using the pumice on the nearest stone to scrape the filth off my skin.

Then Prometheus just has to open his mouth. “Atum tells me there is a mortal bonding tradition you haven’t shared with me yet.”

The pumice falls from my hand and splashes into the water as my gaze darts to his.

Prometheus smirks, leaning against the wall of the pool. Even if he can't see my reaction clearly, I know he heard it. "Tell me, my now less odorous bride, what do you know of kissing ?"

Chapter Nineteen

Prometheus

“What do you know of kissing?” Hebe demands from the dark side of the pool.

“Nothing.” I realize with some surprise that I’m still wearing my amulet. “That’s why I’m asking you.”

“I-I know little more than you, to be honest.”

“Well, what do you know?” Taking a handful of sand from a nearby urn, I rub it into my hair.

“Not much!” Hebe sounds more exasperated than usual, and I’m sure she wishes that didn’t delight me so. “When I asked, I was told it was the sort of thing that husbands and wives ought to discover together.”

“Ah.” Ducking under the water, I let the sand rinse out before rising in the center of the pool. Here, I can almost see the imaginary border between my side of the pool and Hebe’s shadowy waters.

Her silhouette startles. “What are you—?”

Not crossing the border, I hold out my hands. “We can discover together.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Why?”

“Because— because I don’t desire to!”

I startle, and so does she. Then I feel my smirk grow. “Ah, so my sacrificial lamb has discovered how to defend herself rather than everyone else? Finally .”

“What do you mean? You wanted me to reject you?”

“I wanted to not be the only one fighting for your survival. Help from you is certainly appreciated on that front, especially now that I know what you are capable of in a fight.” I turn away and move deeper into my side of the bath as the water flows around my waist.

“Careful, husband of mine. That almost sounded like a compliment.”

I glance back over my shoulder. “Well, Atum may have mentioned that kisses were more likely to occur when pretty words were involved . . .”

“Oh, so this is all a ploy?” Despite her accusation, Hebe’s words are lighthearted as she crosses her arms.

“Ah, but an honest ploy. Can you fault a trickster for using the truth?”

“I can when I suspect that even the truth is a trick.”

I grin at her fiery spirit. “Then you have once again uncovered my games. You see, what I truly desire is for some assistance scrubbing my back. And since you have denied my kiss, do you have it in you to help me with this small favor instead?”

Since Hebe hasn’t railed at me yet, I add, “I have to ask since possess the one and

only pumice stone in this humble bathhouse . . .”

“Very well, since you are my husband and this is a small enough favor compared to the kiss. But only on one condition.”

“Anything, Little Flame.”

Hebe stiffens at the nickname I did not mean to speak aloud. Then she clears her throat. “You must turn your head and look only forward until I say otherwise.”

Snorting, I do as she says. “Is this an attempt to entice me? You know curiosity is my strongest instinct.”

“I assure you, my brutish beau, that this is for my elevated sensibilities and not an attempt to pique your interest.” Her voice is closer, the water rippling around me from her approach.

“‘Brutish’? ‘Elevated’? My sweet burden, I think you have forgotten that you’re the savage in this relationship.”

The pumice stone scrapes my upper back. “Says the one who doesn’t even know what kissing is.”

“You claim a similar ignorance.”

Hebe offers no gentleness in her ministrations, but they feel no less relaxing despite being rough. She seems to scrub away both the filth of the journey and the tension of all that concerns me just now.

Zeus’ demand for a prompt answer. My upcoming betrayal. The bride I want to bond with, though she wants nothing to do with me.

She might change her mind when I provide for her a deliverance not offered to the rest of her kind. Or Hebe will simply resent me all the more for turning my back on a people I cannot save. It really is a toss-up since she conceals so much of herself from me.

I need to learn more about her— not only to appease my curiosity, but also to determine my next strategy. Which is difficult to do when I am not even allowed to look at her.

I've never wanted to gaze at her stoic face more than in this moment.

"Bargain with me," I murmur, hardly knowing what I'm saying. Ever since we Primordials were made to swear on the River Styx, bargains are a matter of life or death. Well, life or suffering , anyway.

Hebe lowers the pumice stone. "Pardon?"

"Surely, your people know about bargains."

"We do. We also know better than to enter into them with Olympians. That's folly."

I roll my eyes. "Says the woman who entered into a marriage bargain with one. If it soothes your worries, I cannot violate a vow without suffering greatly."

"And if I break my side? What would be my penalty?"

"You would belong to me. Since you already do . . ." I reach back, my finger brushing over skin.

Hebe gasps and darts out of reach.

“You really have nothing to lose,” I add.

“What is your bargain, then, O husband of mine?” Her tone is sterner now. I’ve apparently found a new way to upset her.

If I devoted my entire eternity to discovering all the ways I can rouse her anger, I fear I would still fail to create a sufficient record.

“Tell me what you desire more than anything else life this side of the veil offers. I am not without power, and I could be of some help in your achieving it.”

Hebe snorts. “And what do you want in return for my impossible wish?”

“A kiss.”

Chapter Twenty

Prometheus

The water laps against me from the ferocity of Hebe's retreat. "Pardon?!"

But my blood is already thrumming with the power of a bargain. We must come into agreement, or else I will find no rest. "I have heard that there are many things that a mortal might do and call a 'kiss.' Choose whichever method you prefer— or, since you claim to be a novice, whichever you are most curious about trying."

Hebe inhales sharply.

And I plunge on. "I only say this because presently we must learn to bond in the Primordial way— something no one has ever done before so we have no concept of potential danger . . . And it simply seemed wiser to be prepared as much as possible by bonding in the mortal way." I lightly splash the water. "At least for you, considering your delicate constitution. But if you are too fearful—"

"I accept your bargain."

The words make my blood warmer, sealing me irrevocably to the bargain. But it is the simple confidence of those words— spoken by a woman so sure of herself and yet with something to prove— that startles me more than the acceptance of the bargain. I glance back in surprise before I can stop myself.

Hebe hasn't retreated as far into the shadows as I thought. The darkness wraps around

her carelessly, revealing fingerbreadths of her form I have not seen before. Her arms are wrapped tightly around her, covering her chest like she is trying to embrace herself rather than her husband like she ought.

Flashing eyes draw my gaze back to Hebe's face, and the silent fury there reminds me of her condition for helping me. I pivot back around, but the sight of her has been etched into my mind with the same permanence as statues carved from marble.

Silence stretches between us, shaming me along with every thud of my heart that beats too loudly in a haven where no danger presents itself.

Finally, Hebe speaks. "I want to be a warrior— no, more than that. I want to be worthy of legends. I want a chance to do some brilliant feat of heroism that— even if it is the last thing I do— allows me to live forever in the memories of those who retell it."

I stare at the wall, frowning. What a foreign concept. "What if this bonding works and you live forever? You could tell your own stories then."

"That isn't what I want." With that, Hebe grasps both my shoulders. "Now, let's get this over with."

"That hardly seems the proper attit—"

The word escapes me, and every thought flees after it when I feel a new point of contact between my bride and me. Something so soft it must be Hebe's lips presses against the skin between my shoulder blades.

A shiver runs down my spine, and I know of only one mortal legend that could account for this level of power. A kiss .

Hebe pulls away too soon, releasing my shoulders from her grip, but not my psyche from her spell. Is it the bonding process that has enflamed my skin and set fire to my blood?

“There. That is done.” Hebe’s voice sounds impossibly cold. “Now you will help me become a warrior?”

“A legend I have made you already as my wife, but as a warrior?” It is a miracle my words are so smooth, and it must come from a power that is greater than mine. “I certainly have no intentions to go into further danger— and since your fate is tied to mine, neither shall you.”

“But you said you would help me achieve my dream!”

I hold up a finger. “No, I said I could . The power is there. Just not the desire. Consider that an allegory of our marriage, my mortal bride.”

Hebe cries out as if I’d struck her. Then water splashes violently against my back.

Chuckling, I make my way back to my side of the bath. Then, since these waters are no longer safe, I climb out.

Ignoring Hebe’s startled gasp, I take one of the linens and dry myself off. Then I help myself to one of the chitons stacked on a stone for Atum and me.

My wife doesn’t say a single word while I dress. So, while I fasten my flame-shaped pin in place to hold up my sleeve, I turn back to her.

Hebe has retreated so far into her shadows that I don’t see her at first.

“Aren’t you going to dress, wife of mine?” I drape the invincible lion skin back over

my shoulders as a cape.

“The garments are all near you.”

“So? Come get them. There is quite the selection.” I trail my fingers through the soft garments.

“Very well; I will dress after you leave.”

Scoffing, I lean against the wall, cross my arms, and arch my brows at Hebe’s shadowy form. “I’m not planning on leaving without you. Not when I need you so I can finally learn the Primordial bonding ritual.”

“Please . . .”

“‘ Please’ what, my dear?”

“Just bring me the garments so I can dress in the shadows.”

I roll my eyes as I abandon the priestess’ peplos and select one of my chitons instead. If Hebe insists on being difficult for no apparent reason, so shall I. “What have you to hide, wife of mine? You are only piquing my curiosity.”

“I’m not hiding anything that concerns you. It is only basic modesty that keeps me in these shadows. Something you evidently know nothing about.”

“Something I know nothing about?” I invade her shadowy realm and crouch by the pool. “Do tell me about this secret knowledge, little bride.”

Hebe reaches for the chiton , but I lift it just out of her reach.

Groaning, she splashes at me, but I avoid the wave.

“Since this is so important to you . . .” I smirk. “What say you to another bargain?”

“I am not giving you another kiss.”

“Of course not. I know your tradition— kisses in exchange for compliments. We can adhere to that from now on out. No, it’s something else that I desire.”

Glaring so hard, her rage almost illuminates our dark corner, Hebe crosses her arms again. “And what, pray tell, do you desire so much that you torment me in your pursuit of it?”

What I desire is for you to come out and dress by the candlelight so I can discover what your modesty so zealously protects. But I know better than to bargain for what will never be offered.

“Well?” Hebe demands.

“I want to know what you desire from me,” I ask before I know what I’m saying.

Hebe seems to understand my words less than I do, and stares at me in shock. “Wh-what?”

“That is . . .” I glance away, not sure how to salvage this. “I have never had a mortal bride— or any bride at all—as you well know. I know what you desire and see I do not factor into your previous dream. But now that a new path is before your feet with me by your side . . . what is it you want now , Hebe?”

I asked her what she wanted, knowing very well I would never be able to fulfill dreams made before she met me. But now . . . Well, I know what I desire from this

marriage. It is only prudent to learn my wife's wishes. If it is prudent to know thy enemy, it's that much wiser to know thy closest ally— especially when that ally views you as more of a foe than a friend. Yes, it was wisdom and strategy that drove me to ask that question. No other motive is necessary . . .

“I-I don't know,” Hebe finally says.

Scoffing, I hold the chiton higher. “You ‘don't know’? That sounds like the sort of answer that leaves you naked in the bath for an eternity.”

“Prometheus!”

“Think for a moment and give me your genuine answer. Then and only then shall your bargain be fulfilled.”

Hebe growls, and for a moment, I think she's gone completely feral. Until she ducks under the water.

I brace myself for another aquatic attack, but none comes. Neither does Hebe rise, though several moments pass. Mortals require more air to sustain their lives than my kind do. Has she run out yet? Is she trying to drown herself? Is my riddle truly that wretched to her?

Dropping the chiton , I reach to fish Hebe out. I did not bring her through a storm and then survive a lion just for her to expire on the brink of accessing the Tablet.

Before I can grab hold of her, though, Hebe rises on her own accord. She doesn't even choke for breath. Hebe does gasp, though, at the sensation of my suspended hands brushing over her arms that rose between them.

Her skin feels soft from the oils she rubbed into it, and I want to continue exploring

the texture. However, since I don't need my bride trying to drown herself from revulsion again, I begin to release her.

"I want . . ."

I freeze.

"I want to learn," she gasps, and I realize she's speaking the answer to my bargained question. "I want to live, to see, to explore, and to experience. In short, I want everything that I thought marriage would steal from me and spinsterhood denied me. I thought death would be my way to make a name for myself, but now that I live, I want the chance to find some other way to become a legend."

After her speech—the most I believe I've ever heard from her at once—Hebe stares up at me as water flows around her shoulders. Even in the darkness I can see the challenge glittering in her eyes.

"Then you are truly fortunate, bride of mine." Instead of coming to my side as it ought, one of my hands returns to her skin and skims over the water droplets on her face.

Hebe doesn't recoil, so I don't retreat.

"In these war-torn days, I can guarantee little," I add. "My power, though once great, has become limited, so strategy alone protects me from my many enemies. Death—or worse, suffering—may befall us at any moment. But in this one thing, I can assure you."

Hebe steps closer to my ledge like she fears she will not hear me otherwise. My hand slides into her damp locks with the movement, and my fingers immediately begin exploring her curls.

“This one thing I can promise you with no need for a bargain to keep me honest,” I add in a lower voice that draws Hebe still closer like I anticipated.

“Yes?” Hebe whispers, her hands clutching the edge of the pool as she stares up at me.

Since she can no longer draw closer, I lower my face to hers so she can hear my whispered vow. “As my wife, you will have no choice but to learn, to live, to see, to explore, and to experience. ”

Hebe’s lips part, but no words escape, which is hardly unusual. However, despite knowing her tendencies to silence, I can’t look away from her mouth for fear of missing what she may say. Mayhap she will even kiss me again . . .

My fingers wrap possessively around the base of her skull. “Hebe, my wife, your skin is softer than the choicest linens.”

I feel her gaze desperately scanning my face, as though there are secrets to be discovered there. Still, she says nothing.

Jealous, my other hand returns to Hebe. It brushes against her shoulder before trailing down her arm and under the water.

Hebe shivers but doesn’t pull away. Nor does she close the distance between her lips and my skin.

Desperate for anything from her, I rest my temple against her. “And I must confess that you, my bride, are the bravest soul I have ever met in my long life— mortal or Primordial.”

Gasping, Hebe releases her hold of the ledge and wraps her hands around my neck. I

have finally earned my kiss.

Chapter Twenty-One

Hebe

“I know your tradition— kisses in exchange for compliments.”

I’m not sure why Prometheus has suddenly decided he wants to kiss the mortal bride he finds so repulsive. I suppose this is his way of making the best of a situation he never asked for.

I ought to do the same. And since him giving me true compliments rather than thinly veiled insults is my preference, I suppose I should reward him. In the name of practicality, not desire.

Unfortunately, while I could have believed that before we entered this bath together, that is no longer something I can swear to.

Still, I shove away my foolish attraction and draw closer to my new husband. I press my lips to Prometheus’ cheek in the same manner as I would kiss Puraltas.

Before I can retreat to the safety of the bath, though, Prometheus’s touch on my arm turns into a grip. “Wait a moment— I gave you two compliments.”

Rolling my eyes, I press a kiss to the hand on my arm.

“Your kiss is wielded with the same grace as you handle a spear, yet your lips are a far more potent weapon.”

I glance up at Prometheus.

He smirks, knowing he's earned another kiss.

Leaning forward with every intention of wiping that smirk off his face, I deviate at the last moment. I kiss the corner of his mouth, hoping I wasn't too bold and dreading his disgust.

Instead of pulling away, though, Prometheus leans forward until his lips hover over my ear. "It's your turn to compliment me, my flame."

I shiver as his breath warms the droplets on my skin that isn't as covered as it ought to be. "That's not how this works. You're not supposed to ask for compliments."

"I don't do things to honor tradition, but to go where no one has ever gone before." His face rests between my neck and shoulder, which is certainly where none have gone before. "Now compliment me, my bride."

I should release him. Drop back into the water and hide from Prometheus' threatened kiss and current touch. Hide where his eyes can never find me. Flee from these strange new feelings he's aroused that have no business being directed toward a brutish male who calls me a savage.

Yet this being— this man — is also my bridegroom, my husband.

Tilting my head so my lips almost touch the top of his ear, I whisper, "Sometimes, you almost make me chuckle with your sharp humor."

He nuzzles my neck but doesn't kiss it. "Mmm, try harder."

"I would rather you be by my side than Atum when it comes to slaying lions."

Prometheus pulls away, looking horrified. “I would hope that you’d prefer me to him in all things!” The joking lilt to his tone fades as his gaze locks on mine with such intensity I feel like he’s seeing into my psyche. “Your loyalty is to me, is it not?”

Surprised by the sudden change in tone, I release him and cross my arms defensively. “Of course! You are my husband, and I am bound to you unto death.”

“Like a bargain?”

“Yes. You have no need to be jealous of your master.”

Prometheus scoffs. “Jealous? Please . Have you seen my hair?” He sits back, tossing back his fiery mane that is already almost dry yet still capable of burning me if I get too close— actually, that just might be true of all of him. “Because I know you haven’t seen his.”

I choke on a surprised laugh.

My husband smiles and gestures at me. “See? I knew you found me amusing.” Prometheus places the chiton I’d somehow forgotten about on the ledge before standing. “You should dress quickly before your precious Atum bursts in as he is wont to do. I’m not sure your modesty would appreciate that very much.”

With that announcement, he turns and strides out of the room like everything that happened before I brought up Atum meant nothing.

“Of course it meant nothing,” I whisper the moment Prometheus closes the door between us. “They weren’t even true kisses. They were barely even real compliments.”

My lips do not seem to agree with my tongue, though, as they still tingle.

Groaning, I climb out of the bath, and dry off with the linen my husband left on the floor. I take my knife to the one I would have used otherwise, slicing it in two. I make the pieces into a makeshift stróphion and perizoma . Hopefully, the priestesses don't mind, but the alterations are preferable to seeking one of theirs or returning to my filthy rags.

Since my husband selected a chiton for me, I honor him by adorning myself with it—or, at least, try to. It is one long piece of linen that I have to somehow fold into a covering with only a rope and two pins to hold it in place.

I should have paid more attention when Prometheus was dressing. But I was too busy averting my eyes like a blushing maiden . . . which is exactly what I am, but now there are consequences. Like my being unable to dress myself and the fact that my husband will be so disappointed by my ignorance.

Finally, I fasten the garment into . . . something . It certainly isn't a chiton , but with the belt in place it feels secure enough . . . even if it shows an unfortunate amount of my left side.

However, it's the best I'm going to be able to manage, so I trudge toward my sandals. On the way, I nearly trip over something left on the tiles beside Prometheus' side of the bath.

Glancing down, I find a pumice stone. But it isn't the one I used.

"The little trickster," I mutter, kicking it into the bath.

As if I'd summoned him, the door slides open and Prometheus pokes his head inside. "Are you almost finished—" His gaze lands on my handiwork, and his eyes widen. "Great Olympus! Are you so savage that you cannot even dress yourself?"

“I am not sav— hey!”

Prometheus is suddenly before me, pulling the rope free and snatching my sorry excuse for a chiton off.

“You can’t do that!” I cry, reaching to cover my undergarments that I am so grateful I created.

“What? Properly dress? Of course I can, even if it proves to be an obstacle for you.” Prometheus calmly folds the cloth before wrapping it around me.

Despite my protests, he manages to re-secure the rope and the pins, and then I’m fully covered, only without my side exposed.

Prometheus steps back and inspects his handiwork impassively before nodding. “That will do. You almost look civilized.”

If I’m almost civilized now, how did he view me when I kissed him while unadorned? I know how I view myself— foolish.

I glare at him as I snatch a comb and leather band from a nearby stone.

“Also, we have been summoned.” Prometheus strides back out of the bathhouse. “Atum’s strength has returned, and he’s eager to read the Tablet. Honestly, so am I.”

At this moment, I don’t much care what Prometheus wants. However, I swallow my frustrations, secure the leather band over my temple, and follow him out not for his sake, but for the sake of those I wedded him for.

Complete the ritual. Become a goddess. Save my people.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Prometheus

I stride deeper into the temple as quickly as possible. Once I discover the secret of the bonding ritual, there will be nothing left to do but snatch my bride and flee to Zeus. Hebe may rage at me for betraying Atum and the mortals, but she won't even be one of them anymore. And it was me she kissed in the bathhouse, not Atum.

My skin still burns in the most delightful way, and I dare a glance over my shoulder.

Hebe is following close behind me, her head ducked low, like she is avoiding my gaze. Or mayhap she is deep in thought. I certainly gave her plenty to ponder only a few moments ago . . .

“There you are!”

I wince at the booming voice of my fellow Entity in Atum's service. It's not that Sia gets under my skin specifically, but several of his forms do. As the Entity of Perception, he loves to alter how others perceive him. Unfortunately, not every perception allows for a positive reaction.

Sia strides into view, looking like an Egyptian mortal, only a little too tall. His face appears older than usual today, with what looks like wrinkles near his eyes. “And this must be your new bride.”

“Hebe,” she whispers, like she's not sure if she's permitted to speak to another

Primordial.

“It is good to meet you, Hebe. I am called Sia, the Entity of Perception.” Sia smiles sadly. “I cannot foresee the future, though. Hopefully, any kin you have will survive the coming scourge Zeus has planned for them.”

My wife stops fast. “‘Coming scourge’?”

But Sia is already halfway up the corridor where the heart of the temple lies; too far away to answer.

Hebe rushes forward, trying to chase him down.

I follow more slowly, my stomach sinking with her every step.

Her earnest kisses may have assured me she would pardon my coming betrayal of Atum, but I would be a fool to think her loyalty belongs to me alone. She will never forgive me for turning my back on her people that already forsook her.

Foolish mortal.

Clenching my fists, I stride into the largest chamber in the tunnel, which is a cave in the mountain that everything else was built around.

The cave is as open as it is large, its size comparable to the hut Hebe and I spent our wedding night in, if the upper room was set alongside the main floor and all internal walls were removed.

In the center of the cave is a large stone altar. It is large enough that Hebe and I could lie on it side by side with no danger of tumbling off. It is the only piece of furniture, though the corners of the cave are laden with stacks of clay canopic jars from Egypt

bearing dried fruits and nuts that are regularly sacrificed to Atum, Sia, and me to sustain our strength.

Atum and the High Priestess are waiting for us in the room on either side of the altar. A stone Tablet rests on it next to Atum, and curiosity draws me closer.

Hebe, on the other hand, shrinks back at the sight of the altar. Then she turns toward the entrance just as servants on the other side close the two heavy stone doors, sealing the five of us in.

“Sia discovered something else during his tenure in the Underworld besides this Tablet,” Atum says solemnly.

I reach to place a comforting hand on Hebe’s back so she knows I’m not going to let anyone spill her blood. She’s just as safe as the last time I rescued her on the altar.

“Zeus has a new weapon,” Atum adds. “The likes of which Sia has never perceived before.”

Before my hand can make contact with Hebe, she darts forward, her fear forgotten. “And he means to use it against my people as a scourge?!”

Sia nods solemnly, the usual light in his eyes dimmed. “He came to Hades boasting of the power he stole from time.”

I glance between Hebe, drawing further away from me, and the table that kept me close to her. “Can we not perform the ritual first and discuss this recent development second?” After all, I can hear about it from Zeus’ own lips momentarily. It is only the knowledge on that Tablet that keeps me bound to Atum.

“The Tablet isn’t going anywhere,” Atum assures before turning to the other Entity in

his service. “Show them what you saw. The more minds we have set to sorting out the puzzle of what to do, the better.”

Sia nods. Then he throws out his hands. Something like a rift opens with his gesture. Only, instead of an oval portal leading to a new location, it is a depiction of an event that took place in the past.

Two men are depicted in this scene. One, a man wearing a black chiton sitting on a massive throne carved from ebony bones, I recognize as Hades in his Greek form. A black and gold cobra slithers in an eternal circle on his head, eating itself yet never being consumed. That is not nearly as alarming as the expression of barely contained rage on his face, though.

The other man in the room, standing at the base of the throne, is his opposite in every way. Long golden tresses brush broad shoulders adorned in a white chiton. His expression is open and jolly. If not for the trace of madness swimming in his blue eyes, one would think he was the more merciful of the two.

Zeus most certainly is not.

Hades stands, shadows swirling at his feet in response to his barely repressed rage. “First, you dare to steal from my store of the Sands of Time——”

“It is not as though you have any duty to protect it any longer. The Creator reassigned you to oversee the dead now, did he not?”

Hades gestures violently at Zeus, and two Shadows spring at the Firstborn. However, Zeus just flicks them away, too powerful to be injured by mere essences of the Underworld.

“You are missing the most important aspect of my tidings,” Zeus says calmly, like his

host didn't just risk breaking the laws of hospitality in an attempt to injure him. "What I stole from the mortals' future is the key to destroying them today."

"Are your storms not enough?"

At this, Zeus twitches ever so slightly. No Primordial appreciates the weakening of our powers. Only Hades seems immune, since his power is no longer concerned with keeping mortals alive.

"As you well know, Hades," Zeus begins, only a hint of ice behind his words, "there are consequences when we turn our domains against the mortals."

"And do the opposite of what the Creator specifically designed you to do?" Hades snorts. "Fancy that."

"But we can't be held accountable if they destroy themselves . . ."

Hades narrows his eyes suspiciously. "How?"

Zeus sweeps back his blue himation , revealing a glowing urn filled to the brim with black powder. "Fire."

I lean forward, my interest piqued.

The Primordial who shall soon own my loyalties, takes a handful of the black powder and tosses it onto the floor. A moment later, a tiny bolt of lightning shoots from his finger to the scattered powder on the floor.

The loudest sound I've ever heard shakes the perception, and then the Underworld is on fire, just as Zeus promised.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Hebe

I watch in horror as Sia's illusion is set ablaze. Sweat beads on my temple as though I am trapped within the flames. "Wh-what is that?"

"Well, Zeus called it 'Fire,'" Sia offers.

Prometheus tears his focus away from the flames to roll his eyes at his fellow Primordial. "Yes, we all heard that. It's the part where dirt became combustible that confounds my bride."

I'm not sure which of us Prometheus is mocking more, but it doesn't matter. All I see are flames and Shadows melting in their attempts to put the fire out.

Hades purses his lips, studying the carnage. "The mortals have no defense against such power."

"Exactly." A wide grin stretches across Zeus' face. "So, if I were to gift this to a few tribes here and there, they will be able to annihilate their enemies with ease. Then they'll turn on each other, as mortals are prone to do."

"And then there won't be any mortals left to slay our kind and become Ascendants?" Hades looks bored and his tone is flat.

"Now you've got it."

Hades sniffs. “As though mortals are worth such effort or our fear. And as though I have time to deal with the slaughter you’d like to initiate.”

Zeus drops his himation back over the jar containing Fire. “Very well, brother. Remember that I gave you a chance to be on the victorious side.”

“Winners, losers, what does that matter to me?” Hades shrugs and eases back onto his throne. “Losers perish faster, but in the end they all come to the Underworld.”

“Primordials should never perish!”

“Yet you are already here in my domain for fear of it. Does that make you the losing side, then?”

Fury broils in Zeus’ eyes, but whatever his response is to that, I do not see it because the scene vanishes.

But the power of Zeus’ Fire remains etched in my mind’s eye. Over and over, I see the harmless-looking dirt instantaneously become an inferno. There was no way to detect it, no way to stifle the flames before it became a full-on blaze. Even Hades’ Shadow creatures perished because of the Fire.

We mortals are defenseless against such power, just as Zeus boasted. My people are about to be wiped out in a war my village is ignorant of. And can I really think they will be hidden away from Zeus’ wrath when he found us traveling as a company of three?

“Zeus will no doubt store the Fire in his temple residence at Olympus,” Atum says.

“Obviously he’ll store it where he’s at his strongest,” Prometheus agrees. “But why concern ourselves with that just now when we’re on the brink of uncovering our own

power?”

The memory of Zeus’ power has me slowly lowering myself to the floor before my legs can give out.

Has the scourge already begun? How many lives have been lost? Are Puraltas and his family still alive? Did I forsake them right before their greatest trial?

I should have died as one of them. Instead, I’m wrapping my arms around my knees and holding myself. Some valiant warrior I have shown myself to be.

We don’t even know what an “Ascendant” is, but now we will die for their sins.

“Peace was only an option when we were at a draw,” Atum mutters. “Now that Zeus has a superweapon, what does he care about mortals being compatible with Primordials?”

As long as he has this superweapon— this “Fire”— we’re all doomed.

“We don’t know that,” Sia offers like he hadn’t witnessed this horror directly.

“We should definitely go through with the bonding ritual just in case,” Prometheus agrees, edging toward the Tablet.

“It will be for naught while Zeus has the upper hand.” Atum sags against the altar, and the High Priestess hurries to his side. He doesn’t even notice her. “I’ll have to bargain with him.”

“For what?” Prometheus snorts. “You have nothing worth him giving up his prize.”

My entire body is shaking. Did I really survive a storm and slay a lion just the day

before? I'm too cowardly for such things.

"He still has to bargain, though." Atum's expression is grave as he turns to my husband. "And Zeus may accept sacrificing the Fire . . . If I give him my power in exchange."

"You can't do that!" Sia cries.

"Why would you do that?" Prometheus recoils in horror.

"The mortals need your power over life," Sia adds.

Atum hangs his head. "It will mean nothing to them if they're all dead."

"Zeus doesn't deserve that power," I whisper. "Not the power over life or this power over death. It should be taken from him."

Prometheus snorts as he picks up the Tablet, not glancing back. "You can let the Creator know that, little wife. Mayhap he'll listen to you better than the one He charged with the impossible task of protecting you lot."

I lower my face between my knees to hide my shame as panic overcomes me.

"Prometheus," Atum snaps. "Your wife."

My husband must finally glance back and see how wretched I have become, because his tone softens. "Hebe?"

I'm too busy trying to breathe to force myself to look at him. Prometheus doesn't seem concerned at all about my people. That's the only way he's being brave right now.

I'll take my cowardice over his heartlessness.

Suddenly, arms are reaching beneath my knees and wrapping behind my back. They yank me into the air.

I glance up just as Prometheus sets me on the altar.

My blood turns to ice. At least the last time I was set on an altar, I had a hope that my sacrifice would save my people. Now, on the verge of what I thought would deliver them, I learn it was I all for naught.

I married Prometheus in vain. I suffered his presence for no purpose. I kissed him for nothing more than a fleeting feeling of desire that has been reduced to ashes in the wake of Zeus' Fire.

Prometheus pulls my head against his chest and runs his hand up and down my back. "Zeus can't hurt you. You're mine now, and I won't let him touch you."

But I won't be soothed. Not until I know I won't out-survive the people I sacrificed myself for.

Sia and the High Priestess are both trying to calm Atum like Prometheus is attempting to soothe me. Only, the High Priest is the one rubbing his arms while Sia talks to him.

"We'll find another way," Sia says. "We just need to consider this from all angles. Zeus won't act alone, and Hades obviously did not align with him."

"But those already loyal to Zeus will be more swayed by his new Fire than a mortal-Primordial bond! After everything we've done, we're out of time."

“Zeus stole time,” I whisper, my emotions subsiding so I feel only the cold stone beneath me and the chilly countenance of my attempted comforter.

Prometheus stares down at me. “What was that?”

“Zeus stole time . . . Couldn’t we?”

My husband snorts. “There is a considerable difference between you and Zeus, my precious burden. Hades is the only Primordial more powerful than Zeus right now.”

“Then let’s steal from Zeus.”

“What?”

Pulling away from Prometheus’ touch, I turn to face him more fully. “Atum said he’ll have it in his temple on Olympus. Does Atum have a temple residence on Olympus?”

Atum nods. “All Firstborns do. It is the source of our power.”

“Then it could serve as our refuge after we flee from infiltrating Zeus’ temple. It will be safe there, won’t it?”

Rubbing his jaw, Atum continues to nod. “I have the appropriate protections in place. Dionysus will no doubt invite himself for a banquet once he realizes I’m in residence, but no other Primordial will be able to enter. He gets lonely despite all the Nymphs he has staying with him in his temple at the base of Olympus.”

Prometheus shakes his head and tries to tap my nose, like that will silence me somehow. “You forget— Zeus’ temple will be also shielded against enemy Primordials, no matter what form they take.”

“And you forget that I am not a Primordial.”

“What are you saying, child?” Atum whispers.

Looking beyond my husband, I find that Atum has come to stand beside me. He—one of the most powerful Primordials—looks upon me like I am all that he has ever hoped for. Like I am the hero he needs.

“Nothing,” Prometheus counters roughly, trying to step between Atum and me. “She’s hysterical and can’t make decisions at this time.”

But I’m no longer hysterical, nor am I shaking. I push myself to my feet, standing on top of the altar and looking down at all in attendance. My gaze finds Atum’s. “I am saying that, to save my people, I will steal Zeus’s Fire.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Prometheus

Even though I have the Tablet in my hand, I feel like it's slipping away.

Atum beams at my wife like he has any right to do so after he gave her to me . “You would really be willing to risk your life to steal Zeus’ Fire?”

Hebe begins to nod, but I grab her chin and turn her to face me instead.

“It wouldn’t just be your life you’d be risking,” I say. “While Zeus might incinerate you on sight simply for the audacity of being mortal in his presence, it depends what disposition you find him in. And if his mood is sunnier . . . he may take you hostage, which is far worse. Zeus has had centuries to determine the best ways to make a soul suffer for crossing him.”

Fear passes over Hebe’s expression as she processes the bitter truth. But then her determination shines through all the fiercer as she grabs my wrist. “Then so be it.”

My stomach drops. Why did I have to get a bride with no sense of self-preservation? “This is foolhardy. You’ll almost certainly perish.”

“But they may possibly survive.” Hebe closes her eyes in resignation, her hand still on my wrist. I’m surprised she hasn’t pushed my hand away.

Unless . . . unless she likes me touching her.

I can use that.

Ignoring the three earnest gazes on us, I lean closer to Hebe, dropping my voice to a whisper. “It wouldn’t just be your life and your suffering you’re risking . . . my heart would also be in danger.”

Her eyes fly open and lock on mine. Hebe searches my gaze frantically, as though she can find any trace of the greatest lie I ever told her.

Despite the deceit, I am fond of her, if only because she is mine. Well, that and because heroically saved my life and is the key to discovering new knowledge in more than one way.

So, it is indeed fondness she finds in my gaze. And hopefully it is my desire to return to the exploration of mortal bonding traditions that she sees rather than my grip on the Tablet.

“We’ll give you two a moment,” Atum says, breaking my focus.

I turn to find the High Priestess already hurrying toward the doors. Atum grabs Sia’s arm and drags the flabbergasted Entity behind him while the man gapes at us.

It seems that my being affectionate is not something he ever saw coming. If only Sia’s original perception of me was accurate, because I wish I did not care for my mortal bride so much.

True, I could probably take another if she died. But I’ve already grown fond of Hebe’s brand of beauty now that she’s bathed— especially now that we’ve bathed together . And my new bride would likely not be as brave as Hebe— which would be both a blessing and a curse. I doubt my new bride would be as clever. And what if she talks a too much?

“Remember that you must not bond yet,” Atum calls. “She must remain fully mortal for this to work.”

As if he has a right to dictate how I behave with my bride that he gave to me and now seeks to take away.

Fully mortal . . . If we bonded now, not only would I finally know the secrets I’ve sacrificed so much for, but might I also spare my wife?

The doors close behind our former companions, leaving my wife and me alone in the room.

“Prometheus?”

There is something in Hebe’s tone of voice I’ve never heard before. There are surprise, curiosity, and softness, which I know. But there’s something else—something that seems to match the strange burning in my blood that began the first time Hebe touched her lips against my skin.

I turn slowly to find Hebe studying me with a hooded expression. It is like she wants to trust me but can’t quite bring herself to.

She is wise, my little wife.

“Prometheus . . .” She lightly places a hand against my cheek, which shouldn’t be so startling. After all, I’m still touching her chin.

But was there a time before this that Hebe touched me for a reason other than necessity or my goading?

“Hebe,” I answer, not sure what else to say. Are we just whispering each other’s

names now? Is that another mortal bonding tradition?

“You’re kinder than I thought you’d be,” she finally says. “Maybe you’re not a good man, but you are more than I hoped for.”

I blink at her. “Thank you?”

“You’re also a survivor. That takes its own kind of courage.”

Is she trying to somehow convince me that it’s a good idea for her to try to steal from Zeus? Because that will never happen. “That may be true, but—”

“And you are clever. No one could say otherwise, friend or foe.”

I stare at her for a moment before the cleverness she just complimented finally catches up with what is going on. “Are you . . . flattering me?”

Hebe arches one eyebrow as if asking why it took me so long to realize that.

I’m not sure I know why, but I suspect it has something to do with her proximity. The fragrant oils she used remind me of our shared bath from before everything took a turn for a worse. Back when it was just her and me and nothing in between . . .

“I suppose that means I owe you something.” A slow smile stretches across my face. “Well, two and a half somethings, anyway.”

“Why a half?” Hebe leans closer.

I close the distance between us, my temple resting on hers. “The first one was only a partial compliment and you know it. You’re fortunate I’m giving you half a kiss.”

“Oh, yes. Very fortunate.”

My smile grows with her sarcastic tone, and seconds stretch by.

Hebe studies me. “Well? Are you going to repay your debt, or are you just a common trickster who is all talk and no action?”

I want to protest that I’ve never kissed before and that I need a moment, but discovering new abilities is my favorite thing. Olympus only knows why I’m stalling when Hebe has shown me clearly what must be done.

Dropping my hand, I pull away from her enough to reorient myself. Then I close the distance between us again. This time I press my lips to her cheek, just like she did for me.

Hebe’s skin is soft, and it is no struggle to hold my mouth against it.

I’m not sure how much pressure to apply, so I end that kiss and take her hand.

Her darkening gaze studies me as I draw Hebe’s wrist up to my lips, imitating her actions earlier this day.

“And . . . the half?”

Lowering her hand, I lean in again.

Hebe’s eyes widen before her eyelids begin to lower. She doesn’t move as my hand moves from hers to splay across her back. Then my lips brush over the corner of her mouth.

My free hand continues to clutch the Table that led us to this moment. It hums with

unknown knowledge.

I pull away. “There you go. Your half a kiss.”

Hebe’s eyes flutter open, but I don’t meet her gaze, directing my focus toward the Tablet instead.

“Prometheus?”

Ignoring her, I run my finger over the letters engraved onto the Tablet and let its knowledge envelop me.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Hebe

The suddenness with which Prometheus can transform from an ardent lover to an indifferent husband continues to amaze me.

Well, “amaze” isn’t quite the right word. Confounds? No— infuriates .

“ Prometheus ,” I hiss. We were in the middle of a conversation— well, more or less. But he was trying to convince me to stay, and I was seizing a beautiful moment before I went to face probable death.

But now Prometheus is bent over the stone Tablet, reading with his finger while his eyes glaze over. It’s like I’m not even in the room with him.

This is like the village boys all over again.

My husband continues to ignore me, so I grasp his wrist.

This finally causes Prometheus to look at me. The blank look in his eyes fades away, though his expression remains dazed.

“You have to see this,” he whispers. Then Prometheus takes my hand and presses it against the lettering engraved into the stone Tablet.

Suddenly, I am no longer sitting on the altar. Instead, I stand beside Prometheus, hand

in hand, in a dark void.

Then, two figures of light and color appear. One is a tall, masculine form that is entirely gold and glowing like the sun. The other is a shorter, feminine form that is reminiscent of soil.

Neither speak, nor does Prometheus, and a voice I could never describe fills the silence.

Mortal and Primordial. One doomed to die and the other bound to eternity.

The two figures glance at one another and tentatively hold out their hands. Then, suddenly, they are being dragged away from each other.

Love is impossible until mercy is offered. The mortal ceases to be mortal and escapes the curse of death. The Primordial finds a helpmate to ease their eternal labors.

Somehow, the two figures break free from the invisible forces dragging them away from each other. They almost close the distance between until the woman stumbles and falls.

The Fates can entwine two souls if an offer is made and a choice is proclaimed. The mortal shall become bone of the Primordial's bone and flesh of their flesh. One will live as long as the other, and only together shall they pass beyond the Veil.

The man catches the woman, cradling her in his arms. Though he has no expression, I can feel his despair. Until the woman weakly nods.

Fangs grow from the man's face, and he plunges them into the woman's neck.

I cling more tightly to Prometheus.

Then the gold from the man begins to flow into the woman and swirls through her form.

She stands, the gold making beautiful patterns on her skin. Then the patterns expand until she becomes as gold as the man.

Turning to each other, the pair finally embraces.

And then Prometheus and I are back in the temple and staggering away from the Tablet.

“Why did it have to be biting ?” Prometheus whispers. “Atum is going to laugh so hard when he finds out . . .”

I just stare at the Tablet that showed me a scene as clearly as one of Sia’s illusions. “What was that?!”

“That was no ordinary tablet,” Prometheus offers.

I purse my lips. “I may be a simple mortal, but even I gathered that much.”

“How can I explain such things to a mere mortal? Such concepts are beyond your understanding.”

Crossing my arms, I glare at him. “I am not a ‘mere mortal.’ I am your wife . Have I not taught you the mortal things that were once beyond your understanding?” Prometheus might think he is better than I am, but he’s the one who still has no concept of the more intimate ‘bonding rituals’ we mortals practice.

Prometheus sighs and leans against the altar. “Very well. Tablets came into being after the first war between your people and mine— all peoples, actually.”

“The mortals, Primordials, and the . . Fae?”

He continues like he hasn't heard me. “The Creator summoned all Primordials—Firstborn, Entities, and even Nymphs— to the River Styx. We vowed upon it to keep our every bargain. Death— or terrible suffering— would be the penalty for breaking our word. It curbed our once unlimited power and bound us more fully to our respective domains.”

“It sounds like an unpleasant experience.”

“It was the last I ever saw of the Creator— the last any of us did, since apparently we are unworthy to look upon Him again.” Bitterness edges his tone.

I glance up for a moment, checking to see if an avenging bolt of lightning might fall upon my husband for his sacrilegious bitterness against the Creator. But none comes. Mayhap because the Creator isn't Zeus?

“However, the Creator gave a sacred Tablet to Hades before He left.” Prometheus gestures toward the Tablet on the altar. “It's not that one. Hades keeps the Tablet of Life and Death somewhere not even Sia can find.”

“But the Tablet of Life and Death gave you hope that there might be others?”

“A hope that has been fulfilled. Before this war broke out, I spent my days scouring every domain for more Tablets. Since the Creator no longer deigns to speak directly with us, these Tablets are the only way to receive His wisdom.”

I reach for the Tablet, but don't dare touch it. “They give you a feeling of connection to Him?”

Prometheus startles. “ What ?!”

Not backing down, I return his stare.

He turns away, nodding toward the Tablet instead. “That one, the Tablet of Life and Love, has eluded me for an eon. Aphrodite swore it existed, but it was stolen from her before she could share it with me. Why Hades took it, I know not. He is the last of us who would ever take a mortal bride.”

I follow Prometheus’ gaze to the Tablet of Life and Love. “So, that is why you have been so desperate to discover the secrets of this stone? Because it has been your obsession for longer than I’ve been alive?”

When I turn back, I’m startled to find Prometheus standing right in front of me. The look on his face says I have somehow replaced that obsession.

Startled, I back into the altar. Then Prometheus plants his arms on either side of me, gripping the stone and caging me against the altar. He leans forward, his breath hot against my skin and his voice low. “What we saw from the Tablet . . . I want to try it.”

I shiver. “You heard what Atum said— we can’t risk my shedding my mortality yet. Not while my people need me to save them.”

Prometheus leans closer still, so that his face is once again resting on my shoulder by my neck. “Let me at least see what it would be like in theory . So that when the day of . . . whatever it is we should dub this comes . . . we’ll be ready.”

Gripping the altar for support, I stare straight ahead and do my best to remember every single thing Prometheus has ever said that annoyed me. “Ready for what?”

He presses his lips to my neck. “To make you legendary.”

I exhale.

Then Prometheus' teeth follow his lips.

Gasping, I pull away, clutching my neck. "What have you done?!"

Prometheus just grimaces, revealing perfectly normal white teeth. "Nothing. I have no fangs. Not even when I try alter them like I change forms."

I rub my neck. "Does that mean we cannot do this bonding even when we're ready?"

"I don't know." Prometheus looks away.

The stone doors slide open, and Atum strides in. His expression is solemn. "I am sorry to interrupt, but I have just received urgent tidings. Zeus has left his temple on Olympus. If we are going to do this, then we must do it now ."

Nodding, I step forward. "Then let us be off."

Chapter Twenty-Six

The Newlyweds

Prometheus:

I t didn't work. After years of searching and waiting, the Tablet's secret knowledge proved theoretical rather than practical. I got married for a chance to read it, and all it contains are pretty lies.

In the past, I have only ever been able to completely transform into different species, but I tried to make my teeth into fangs without altering the rest of me. That proved to be beyond the scope of my abilities. Perhaps before the war that is something Primordials could do, but now there is no hope for peace.

I glare at the discarded Tablet that is no longer of use to me. Even worse, only part of my dismay comes from the false promises of enlightenment.

My glare shifts to the Firstborn, who is opening a rift between his two temples. Atum is sending my bride to die— and worse, it will be for nothing . Because even if Hebe does somehow successfully steal from Zeus, he will just find another super weapon to wield against mortals. It's not as if we will have any way to dissuade him or his followers.

As for my disappointment, most of it centers around Hebe.

I glance down at my bride, who is watching Atum open a rift that resembles Sia's

illusion— except this one we can walk through since it reveals a new location rather than an old memory.

Hebe stares in wide-eyed wonder as her hand reaches for me.

Without the ability to bond, Hebe is no longer useful to me, but I still take her hand in mine and squeeze it.

Apparently, I wanted to bond with her more than I thought. Because now that a simple solution to ridding myself of the mortal I have no further need for has appeared, I don't want it.

I just want her .

For the first time in my long life, my desires have nothing to do with some secret knowledge I must pursue. At least, not unless it is Hebe I am discovering and exploring.

Staring down at my wife, I want nothing more than to discover all the things that make her smile . . . and become a master of them. Her past, short as it may be, is a mystery I want to unravel. I want to be the first to discover when she takes on a new dream.

I want to know what it would feel like to hold her in my arms when I'm not paralyzed and I can simply enjoy her presence. I need her to teach me all the ways a mortal can kiss. More than anything, I desire to read her body like I read that Tablet, my fingers running over her soft skin.

Hebe turns from the now operational rift to offer me a soft smile, like she means to comfort me.

Unable to do anything else, I just stare down at her and wish I never met her. Yet somehow, I also long to have crossed paths with her sooner.

Not sure what to do with this building pressure within me, I press my lips to Hebe's still damp hair. Its jasmine scent transports me once again to simpler times before this disappointment.

Mayhap we can still bond in the mortal way if we kiss enough . . .

Hebe glances up at me, confusion glittering in her eyes. After all, she didn't compliment me.

Resisting the urge to keep kissing her despite that, I draw Hebe toward the rift. "I'll keep ahold of you as we step through, so no need to fear."

"I'm not afraid."

Of course she isn't; my little wife isn't frightened of anything.

But suddenly, I'm terrified of losing her more than everything else that might come to pass.

Hebe:

Walking through a rift isn't painful, but it is certainly unpleasant.

I am as cold as if I have been pushed into the river in the dead of winter. Suddenly, we're standing in a different temple than before. I gasp for breath— not because I'm drowning but because I feel like I ought to be.

Thankfully, Prometheus' hand clutching mine grounds me.

I give him a grateful smile before scanning our new surroundings.

While the similar columns here indicate that this is also a temple, its structure is quite different from what we left behind. For one thing, the columns— and almost everything else— are comprised of marble rather than gray stone.

The walls are open between columns, displaying grounds covered in every type of foliage. Vines wrap around almost every surface, making the temple look more like a tribute to the Guardian of Life than the one hewn out of a mountain. It is certainly more fitting for the one my people call the goddess of springtime . . .

I giggle despite my exhaustion— and possibly because of it.

Prometheus turns to me, looking absolutely flummoxed to hear me make such a noise. “What is it?”

“I’m just . . . taking in the wonder of Atum’s homestead.”

For some reason, my husband scowls at this. “I have a temple, too, you know. Mayhap not on the ‘oh-so-inspiring’ Mount Olympus, but I think you’d be impressed by my devotees’ architectural prowess.”

“You really have a temple?”

“Yes.” Prometheus sniffs in disgust at my ignorance. “I’ll show you if you like—” His eyes widen, and Prometheus seizes my other hand, too. “I can take you right now— open a rift and take you there now.”

“Doesn’t that expend your energy, though?” I glance past him to see Atum walking away from his now-closed rift. Atum doesn’t look weak as before, but it’s clear he’s winded.

Prometheus sniffs again. “I am not so weak that I can’t take my wife to my own temple .”

“But can you take me back here afterwards?”

“You won’t care to see this structure again once you witness all I have to offer you.”

What has gotten into him? Has our inability to practice the secret knowledge of the Tablet driven him to partial madness? “That may be true, but let us deal with this Fire business first. I will happily visit all your temples afterwards.”

Beyond Prometheus, I see Sia, the only other person to have walked through the rift before it closed, speaking to Atum. Sia nods before transforming into a green scarab and soaring out between the pillars.

My jaw drops, and I have to take a seat on one of the large stones decorating Atum’s gardens. I knew Prometheus and Atum could change their forms, obviously, but to transform so completely . . .

Prometheus is apparently as jealous of my focus as he is about my admiration of temples. He hooks a finger beneath my chin and tilts my face back toward him.

“There might not be an ‘afterwards,’” Prometheus whispers. “If we don’t go to see my temple now, you may never get to see it.”

“I hope that won’t be the case, but what else can I do? What do you want from me?”

Prometheus’ eyes burn with intensity as he steps closer to me. “Run away with me.”

For a moment, I can only stare at the strange earnestness in Prometheus’ gaze. I’ve only seen him like this while fighting for his life against the lion and reaching for the

Tablet. How has anything to do with me become so important to him? I'm only his mortal bride.

But I'm also Hebe, and my village needs me.

Shaking my head, I step away from Prometheus' touch. "Only cowards run."

"Hebe."

Ignoring the heartbreak in my heartless husband's voice, I stride past him to Atum. "Where is Zeus' temple?"

Atum turns from studying his grounds. "I appreciate your urgency. I just sent Sia to spy on Zeus. Sia will alert me when Zeus turns homeward, but we mustn't waste time." Atum strides down marble stairs to a garden without a clear path— just flattened grass.

I begin to follow before looking back. "Prometheus, are you coming?"

"No."

My foot slips, and I stumble into Atum's startled arms. I turn back to my husband. "No ?!"

"If you want to die, bride of mine, expect no help from me."

With that, Prometheus himself takes the form of a falcon. Then he soars in the opposite direction of where Sia vanished to.

For the first time since I rescued him from the lion, Prometheus and I are separated.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Prometheus

Once upon a time, soaring as a bird was an excellent distraction from my troubles. I could enjoy my breeze, my brain racing through every possibility of gifting flight to my default form by some invention since I was not gifted with a flying chariot like Zeus was.

Now, though, all my troubles from my last form just follow me into this one. I want to keep Hebe, but I can't. Not forever. Not if we can't bond and my lifespan cannot lengthen hers.

Not if she is found out by Zeus and killed this very day.

Since Sia is monitoring Zeus, I cannot risk reaching out to the Guardian of the Firmament when I will be found out. Sia can see through any form I might take.

But I also can't do as I told Hebe I would— wash my hands of her and put distance between us. Not while she still breaths, and there is a chance to keep her doing so.

I only need to be clever enough to figure out how.

Since I am apparently tethered to Hebe even if we are not bound, I soar up Mount Olympus. Zeus' temple is positioned on the highest ledge, since his domain is the sky. That, and he enjoys looking down at all of us as he pretends to be king.

Atum has taken my bride around the exterior side of the grounds. Just because even though Zeus is out of residence doesn't mean the Entities and Nymphs who answer to him are.

In fact, from this bird's-eye view, I can see both Aeres and Aphrodite lounging in the rear gardens. I don't think Aphrodite has any allegiance to Zeus— or to any Firstborn— but she is Ares' beautiful shadow. So, like me, she can still have access to Zeus' temple as a neutral figure who may yet become a committed ally.

The gate entrance at the front is also unsafe since half a dozen men are gathered together. I sense no power from them like I would with a Primordial. Are they . . . mortals ?

They seem jolly for mortals in Zeus' clutches, but they appear to be leaving. All the better, because that's one fewer obstacle for Hebe. The son of War is quite enough.

Those mortals must be how Zeus is sustaining as much power as he is despite his war against the people he is designed to serve. He keeps a passel of them as pets. As long as he keeps order in the Firmament and has a few mortals he directly protects— if only for them to generate ambrosia from their gratitude— he will be unstoppable.

I circle the temple again— it is quite a lot to cover. There is a silver tower for the moon on one side and a gold tower for the sun on the other with a massive marble expanse between. But I return to where Atum appears to be finishing his list of dangers Hebe must be aware of. Which is ironic, since he can't even see the Nymph on the other side of the fence striding straight toward them. Not that the Nymph sees them yet; her focus is on a small creek winding near the fence.

Granted, Nymphs aren't much of a threat even to mortals— at least, when there's only one of them and they can't swarm. But this Nymph could raise an alarm that might summon Ares, and he is certainly a threat.

Swooping down, I land behind the Nymph— a naiad, considering the tinge of blue to her skin. Then I take the form of Ares despite the strain of two transformations in a row weighing on me. But I only need to take one last form today, and I have strength enough for that.

Sensing my presence, the Nymph whirls around, the lily pads sewn together into a chiton swirling around her knees. Her eyes widen, and she drops to her knees. “Great Ares.”

“Aphrodite and I require these grounds for ourselves for the rest of the day. Go play in another river.”

Nodding quickly, the naiad stands and rushes toward the front gate the mortals disappeared out of.

I watch her go before summoning all my strength and taking the last form I can before I have to revert or risk becoming paralyzed with exhaustion.

Shrinking, I smooth my now blue-tinted fingers over my lily pad skirt. It feels far too breezy now that I have transformed my chiton into it. I wonder if it was the naiad’s choice to dress so, or if it was some perverted request from Zeus.

Either way, it’s no concern of mine. I dive behind one of the thicker trees at the sound of movement on the other side of the wall.

When I peek out from behind the tree, I find the top of Hebe’s head looking out over the fence. She scans the area, and I hide again so she won’t be alarmed. Then again, that actually might work for me . . .

I step out from behind the tree just as Hebe hits the ground, her back to me.

Striding forward, I smile. “I thought Zeus sent all his mortals away for the day.”

Hebe jolts and whirls to face me, her back slamming against the wall. “I-I—”

“Your people just went that way.” I gesture toward the front grounds. “But if you climb over the wall now, you might catch them.

My wife glances back at the marble wall, like she’s considering whether she’ll accept the easy way out.

Instead of being clever, though, my bride chooses courage.

Hebe turns back to me. “Actually, I’m here for a separate task— sent by Zeus himself.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. He would like me to clean his urns.”

I scowl, wishing I had just chosen Ares’ form and scared her into submission. But since I depleted all my strength, there’s no going back now. I can’t change my course, but I can guide Hebe’s.

The only problem is, I don’t actually know where Zeus keeps the Fire, only where he keeps his traps because just having wards isn’t enough for him. So, I have no choice but to nod at Hebe. Otherwise, she might run off— and then she would most certainly perish.

Resisting the urge to reach for the amber necklace that is adorning my default form, I nod. “Follow me this way, sweet maiden. Do not turn from my path either to the right or to the left, and I shall take you safely through this. Only by following my

instructions perfectly shall you survive.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Hebe

I follow the woman— well, Nymph since she is too ethereal to be anything other than a Nymph— who has become my guide across the grounds. Doing as she says, I don't turn from the right or the left of the path she leads me on. I nearly stumble off a couple times as I scan my surroundings for others. Just because this Nymph believes me doesn't mean anyone else will.

I also have to keep glancing back at the wall where I left Atum. Since neither he nor Sia can cross over it— by land or in flight— I must rely on the stalk Atum will shoot up as a warning when he receives word from Sia that Zeus is returning.

“Only where I step, dear,” the Nymph calls in a lyrical voice.

Snapping my gaze forward again, I follow the Nymph up the marble stairs and into the open temple.

A long table fills most of the space and is surrounded by dining couches except at the head. In that space rises a throne larger than any mortal could comfortably use. It looks as though it was formed out of dark storm clouds.

My jaw drops, but I tear my gaze away before I can make a misstep.

“I can't remember which tower he keeps it in,” the Nymph calls, leading me toward the silver one. “But it's definitely in one of them.”

I chew my lip nervously. What if we choose the wrong one? I may only have enough time to search one tower . . .

The Nymph leads me into a silver corridor with multiple doors in its domed walls.

“It won’t be in that one, that one, or that one,” the Nymph announces confidently, pointing to three doors. “But it could be in any of the others.”

I tentatively open one of the doors she didn’t point to, revealing a small triangular room that appears to be a washroom. A pool takes up the entire floor, and lily pads float in the water.

“Oh, that’s my room,” the Nymph says. “It isn’t in there either.”

Since I don’t have time to groan, I simply move on to the next room. It is similar in shape and size to the last. Only this one has a solid floor, with a tree growing out of it. There’s a hammock hanging off the tree, and a woman with light green skin sleeping in it. What it does not have is an urn.

That is one thing all the rooms have in common. No matter what vastly different styles the rooms boast or how many oddities they contain, none of them contain the urn. Even the room that somehow stores the moon offers nothing of use.

“Maiden of Zeus,” the Nymph calls from the entrance of the tunnel that leads to the dining area. “Did you notice that weed before? I’ve never seen one so tall.”

Terror slices through me, and I join the Nymph outside.

Sure enough, the warning weed grows over the wall.

I glance toward the golden tower. Is there enough time to search it before Zeus

arrives?

The Nymph grasps my shoulders and turns me back toward the weed. “You can clean the urns later. First, you should cut that weed down before Zeus sees.”

“Can’t you? You’re a Nymph.”

“I’m a naiad , thank you!” She sniffs in frustration.

And there goes all the time I had left.

Pulling away, I run toward the wall. After all, if Zeus catches me with the urn, that does no good and I die in vain. If I come back later, though, I have another chance to save my people.

I scale the wall like it’s nothing, and tumble into Atum’s waiting arms. “I-I didn’t find it.”

Atum sets me down and pats my shoulder. “We’ll search again the next time Zeus leaves.”

Sia— once again wearing a mortal-like form again though with a different face from before— uproots the weed. Then the three of us rush toward the cliff face.

Seeing the clouds beneath us, I pull away. “I-I can’t fly.”

Sia glances at me before transforming. This time, he takes the form of a black horse with a still blacker mane that matches its majestic pair of feathered wings.

My jaw drops. “A Pegasus ?”

“Now you can fly.” Atum grabs my waist and sets me atop of Sia’s Pegasus form before I can think. Which is for the best, because when my thoughts catch up, this entire situation might seem become overwhelmingly peculiar.

Atum doesn’t seem to care, though, as he climbs onto the Pegasus behind me. “Hold on.”

I entwine my fingers with Sia’s mane and glance back at Atum to ask him what comes next. That is when I see the dark storm cloud moving toward Zeus’ temple.

My companions must see the same, because Sia suddenly pitches forward.

Choking down a scream, I clutch Sia’s mane so hard that I’m afraid I’ll yank it off.

Then I turn back forward in time to see us rushing toward the ground.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The Newlyweds

Prometheus:

The moment my wife is finally on the other side of the wall, I revert to my default form. Then I limp toward the dining table and collapse onto the nearest couche.

Weakly, I grasp one of the kylixes and drag it where I can see the golden liquid swirling inside. It smells sweeter than honey— because it is. Ambrosia .

The mortals are still praying to their greatest enemy. How tragically ironic, but it's good for me.

Throwing back the kylix , I drain the ambrosia dry. I feel my strength renew almost immediately. Mayhap if Atum's followers sacrificed year round to him so he could always have ambrosia available, I wouldn't have to betray him to Zeus. Of course, the way he's a little too friendly with my wife might have driven me here anyway . . .

The world outside darkens as Zeus' chariot arrives with its usual entourage of thunder and lightning. And then the Primordial himself is before me.

I lift my chin to better face the Guardian of the Firmament as he strides in. His hair— both what frames his face and what covers his jawline— is gold with traces of silver. His eyes are sky blue.

There is no covering over Zeus' broad, bronze chest, since he wears only a Minoan kilt made of gold and matching sandals. Oh, and a scowl that is directed toward me.

Smirking, I lift my now empty kylix toward him. "Cheers."

Zeus narrows his eyes at me. "What makes you think you are still welcome in my home?"

"The fact that I'm permitted inside, obviously."

"I had hoped the storm and the Nubian Lion might have given you the message that I have grew tired of waiting for you."

Putting the cup down, I swing around so that I'm leaning against the table. "Our mutual friend Atum had possession of a Tablet he was sure could change the tides of the war. I thought it would be foolish to leave without determining if it held information of such importance or not."

Zeus narrows his eyes as he studies me. "And do you have this Tablet?"

"No. The information turned out to be useless." I try to keep my face falling, but I know Zeus misses nothing. "So anyway, I'm done with Atum, and I'm ready to swear my allegiance to you once I retrieve something my former master stole from me."

"I hope this possession of yours isn't flammable."

I purse my lips and reach for my amber necklace. "Why would you say that?"

"Because the temple of Atum will burn at any moment."

"Hebe!" I cry as I jump up from the couch.

“Where are you going?!” Zeus demands, thunder echoing his words.

I keep running, stretching out my arms that will shortly become a wingspan now that the ambrosia has refueled me. “I’m stealing back my wife.”

Hebe:

My hair flies straight behind me, and I feel the leather holding back my curls loosen. However, I cannot spare one of my hands to secure it since they’re too busy anchoring me as we soar straight down.

Then Pegasus Sia straightens out so that we’re flying horizontally rather than falling vertically. He’s not in time to save my leather band, but I’m still properly seated on him and not falling to my doom, so I consider it a win.

Now that we’re gliding, I can take in more of my surroundings other than the ground approaching way too quickly. There’s a bite in the wind we slice through, and the garment Prometheus picked out for me offers no protection. My only sources of warmth come from the Pegasus beneath me and Atum behind me. His arms are wrapped tightly around my waist so his fingers can grip Sia’s mane.

It doesn’t seem appropriate to have another man’s arms around me. I never thought I’d feel right in Prometheus’ embrace, but now everything else feels wrong.

Does Prometheus even care to embrace me now that he knows I will never become like him? Or will our flirtatious kisses become distant memories just like I shall be one day?

“Here we are,” Atum announces, sounding more relieved to be landing than I can conjure the energy for.

Here we are . . . but without the Fire. I have failed my people.

Why didn't I just check the golden tower first ?

Sia lands, and then Atum is slipping off him. A moment later, he lifts me to the ground.

I wrap my arms around myself, still chilled even without the wind biting into me.

Atum doesn't notice as he presses his hand to Sia's long nose. "Thank you, friend."

Sia whinnies, shaking his head. Then, after his wings flap for a few moments, he takes flight. He soars away from us much faster than when he had us on his back.

"Where is he going?" I ask.

"He is low on strength from his transformations, which causes his sight to dim. He hates that more than anything, so he is seeking ambrosia to restore it before he becomes paralyzed like Prometheus was."

Well, I am certainly relieved Sia didn't lose his strength while we were riding him!

I glance back at Atum's temple, the grounds of which we stand just outside of. Sia's sight must indeed be failing if he deposited us here instead of where we would be safe.

Atum doesn't seem to care that we're outside his protections, because he continues to stare at where Sia vanished from view. "It isn't my season to receive sacrifices from the mortals, or else I'd provide for him from my store." Atum's shoulders droop. "No matter how hard I strive, I cannot protect all mortals. I cannot even return the support my closest friends offer me."

Since I have no words of encouragement after my own failure, I just place a hand on Atum's shoulder. "Let's go inside so Zeus cannot strike us." Between my near escape and then our impromptu flight, my heart feels like it's going to beat out of my chest.

I need to take a moment to just breathe. And then, I should probably try to rest. Preferably before Prometheus returns and I disgust him further with my mortality. That is, if he ever returns.

My heart pangs. If we cannot bond, is it even a marriage? Why would Prometheus return to me? To give me back my amber?

In that case, I have no choice but to return to Zeus' temple. Not only must I save my people, but I also need to wash away my shame as a discarded bride. I don't want to be remembered as the mortal who was burned for getting too close to a god. I'd rather perish trying to steal Fire and let that be my legacy.

Something flashes in the corner of my vision, and I turn to see an eagle descending from above.

Considering what I now know about the Primordials' abilities, that is no mere bird. Zeus is coming.

Panic grips me, and I rush into Atum's temple. I cannot be killed before I can save my people. For me to die now is to be remembered by my shame.

I'm not sure if the grounds are protected, so I keep running for the temple.

Then the loudest thunderclap I've ever heard knocks me from my feet, and the world is engulfed by flames.

Chapter Thirty

Prometheus

When mortals first invented plays, I was in the audience. The first story they ever wove with actions and words was disgustingly tragic. It was a tale of two mortal lovers torn cruelly apart. By the time the man could return to the other man— who was disguised as the woman in the story— the latter pretended to die in his arms out of exhaustion from the trials that had parted them.

It turns out tragedies are unfortunately realistic. Because as I soar sharply downward, I see Hebe alive and whole. But when she sees me, she plunges into the temple that Zeus warned me about.

What Hebe cannot see is the line of black dust winding through grounds just behind the temple. It culminates in a pile just within the building. Flames lick up the tail, greedily devouring the path that leads to the mound.

This is more dust here than Zeus used in Sia's vision.

I squawk because that is all I can utter in this form.

Hebe dives into the temple as the flames reach the mound.

There is a terrible roar, like a hundred lions have cried out at once. The force of it knocks me from the sky. I revert back to my default form when I hit the ground.

Warmth flares over me, and I lift my head to find Atum's temple swallowed by flames. Most of the pillars collapsed in the explosion, and the vegetation feeds the fire.

Pushing myself onto my hands and knees, I scan the rubble for any trace of Hebe. I know mortals are delicate, but surely, they won't disintegrate from a single lick of the flame? Or is she trapped beneath the rubble and shattered to death?

A desperate moan draws my gaze to a large garden stone. It is not anywhere near where Hebe had been standing when the Fire consumed the temple, and she looks like she was thrown against it. Her body drapes backwards over it limply, like she has no strength to straighten. Blood trails from her hairline and the corner of her mouth.

"Hebe!" I cry, rushing to her side.

Her eyes find me, but they are the only part of her that moves— other than her blood.

More gruesome still is the way the right side of Hebe's face is raw and red, parts of her flesh bubbling. The same is true of her right arm and the patches of her side revealed through the tattered remnants of her chiton .

"You came back." Her words are barely a croak.

"Hebe," I whisper.

Whatever I was going to say next is cut off by another explosion.

Warmth flows over me again as I position my body between the temple and Hebe, bracing myself against the stone. Something hits my back, but the hide of the Nubian lion protects me. Several jagged objects slice at the back of my legs. But at least no further harm befalls my broken bride.

That's what I think until Hebe gasps harshly, like her soul is trying to escape through her throat.

I desperately grasp the unburnt side of her face. "Don't leave me."

"You're the one . . . who wants to leave . . . me."

If I didn't know better, I would think Hebe had thrust her spear into my heart because of the pain her words cause. "I don't! I never want to be parted from you again, my bride, my wife, my warrior."

The corner of Hebe's lips on the unburnt side of her mouth trembles like she would smile if she were still capable of it despite the blood flowing from her lips. Lips that should either be pursed in disappointment at me or else pressing kisses to my skin. Lips that belong to me, not Hades. Yet Zeus would happily sacrifice my wife to his fellow Firstborn like the legends claim he did with "Persephone."

No. In all my eons of life, I have owned nothing material that mattered beyond representing a piece of knowledge. Since wedding Hebe, I have been gifted a necklace I've become fond of and the useful hide of the Nubian Lion. Yet both treasures are meaningless compared to the thought of losing my most precious belonging—the one who almost feels like part of my soul though we never even bonded.

"No!" I roar, louder than the destruction behind me.

Wrapping my arms around my wife, I scoop her into my arms. Hebe cries out in pain, her screams competing with the sound of collapsing stone behind me. A wave of dust washes over us as I carry Hebe out of the wreckage.

Atum rushes toward me, meeting me at the edge of his grounds. Apparently, he's decided to do something useful with his pathetic existence.

I drop to my knees before him. “Heal her! You’re the Guardian of Life. You must restore it to her!”

Atum drops to his knees on Hebe’s other side, his gaze trailing over her burned side. “Her injuries are grave and many. I’ve never seen—”

Keeping one arm wrapped around Hebe, I grab Atum’s shoulder. “ Heal. Her. ”

“You know my healing abilities draw upon love .” His words sound like an excuse, but his tone is a request.

Nodding erratically, I grip him tighter. “Then draw upon my love for her! Smite it all, you’re the one who gave her to me. Don’t let her be taken now that I’ve rearranged my entire life around her existence!”

Atum says nothing, simply placing both hands on Hebe’s shoulders. Her chest barely rises with her breaths, and pain flashes across Hebe’s face every time it does.

Then Atum’s eyes close while Hebe’s flies open. The courage and cleverness normally found in her gaze are gone, replaced by pain and panic.

My hand not offering my love as a sacrifice to Atum’s power slides under Hebe’s head. “I’m here, Little Flame. We’re healing you—”

Hebe’s back arches, and there is a terrible crackling sound as her bones are woven back together.

Her scream slices through the air and into my very soul before falling suddenly silent.

I grip her more tightly. “Hebe, stay with me. I still have your necklace, so legally can’t leave—”

A new pair of sandals comes into view, but I don't dare look away from Hebe. If her soul tries to escape, I will catch it and find a way to return it to her.

“What in the name of all the Firstborns is this?!” Dionysus cries, a basket and several sheets falling to the ground. Then he rushes past us, toward the collapsing temple and burning plants.

I finally glance back to see that the flames have spread across the grass to surround the stone I plucked Hebe from. Dionysus stands between the flames and us, as if daring them to come any closer.

Blood no longer flows between my fingers pressed against Hebe's temple wound. Is she healing? Hope blooms in my chest. Mayhap I won't lose her after all! “You're doing it!”

In response, Atum collapses just as the earth begins to shake— no doubt Dionysus' doing.

I yell at Dionysus to stop causing the dirt to rise and smother the flames. But he doesn't seem to hear me past his own cacophony.

When I turn back, Atum has placed one hand back onto Hebe. Blood stops trickling from her mouth, but then Atum collapses again, this time beyond my reach.

“No!” Frantically, I reach for him. “You're not done yet!”

Atum doesn't stir.

Chapter Thirty-One

Prometheus

I turn back to Hebe, her skin still bubbling from the horrors Zeus' trap inflicted on her. It would still be whole if I had thought to give her the Nubian hide before this. At least her injuries would have been mitigated . Atum would have been able to her completely—

“He's in no condition to exercise his abilities until his temple has rebuilt itself.”

Glancing up, I find Dionysus stepping back around us. He glances at Hebe and winces. “I have no healing abilities of my own. But you'll find wine in my basket. It'll dull the pain at least.” With that, he pulls Atum's limp body into his arms.

If it didn't mean abandoning my hold on Hebe, I would lunge for Dionysus. “Where are you going with him?!”

“Atum is no good to you like this.” Dionysus frowns at his friend hanging awkwardly from his arms. “I am also out of season, but I have some ambrosia left. It might help. But even then . . .” He glances past me to the temple. “Without that temple anchoring Atum to his domain, he's as helpless as your mortal.”

I glance back at the rubble that was once Atum's seat of power— and his source of it.

The ceiling is caved in on one side. One column stubbornly holds up the other side, but the vines that once adorned it are gone. All the plants are ash now; the symbols of

life now indiscernible from the seeds of Zeus' fire. I have never seen a temple— let alone an Olympian temple— brought so low.

Atum will not be able to finish healing Hebe for some time. Will she even survive long enough for him to recover and finish healing her?

“Hebe?” I whisper.

I want to draw her so close that not even Death can separation between us. I wish we could be one flesh so I could give her my wholeness. I would bargain anything to spare her this pain.

Never in all the eons I spent protecting my own skin did I think another's life could become as valuable to me as my own.

“You both may shelter yourselves in my temple when you're ready,” Dionysus whispers, his voice wretchedly gentle before fading away.

“Prometheus?” a softer voice whispers.

When I turn back to Hebe, her eyes are still closed. I place my hand over her chest, searching for a heartbeat in case I imagined my name. “It would please me, wife of mine, if you didn't die.”

“I . . . don't want to die . . . either.” Hebe's eyes squeeze together in a horrid grimace.

I lean closer so I don't miss a single word.

My teeth throb with the new proximity. Confused, I run my tongue over them. I puncture it on canines that are far sharper than before.

“The Fates can entwine two souls if an offer is made and a choice is proclaimed.”

“But . . . the pain.” A tear leaks from Hebe’s eye, trailing down her unburnt face.

“The pain is too much.”

Still clutching Hebe with one arm, I desperately reach for the basket. Bread and grapes spill out, but I only care for the wineskin.

I lift her head before drawing the wineskin to her lips.

Another tear flows down Hebe’s face, and no blade has ever cut me deeper.

Still holding her steady, I bend over, my lips brushing her smoke-scented hair.

My canine teeth scrape my lips.

“They cling to their mortality and sometimes not even Death can pry it away from them.”

I pull away, my fingers touching my teeth, though my mouth is mostly closed. “I think I know why we couldn’t bond.”

“Because I wasn’t . . . your equal?” Hebe convulses. “You’ll be free soon.”

“No!” I pull Hebe onto my lap. “Because it wasn’t what you wanted. You have to surrender willingly .”

Hebe doesn’t respond.

I fight every instinct to hold her more tightly and possibly aggravate an injury. “Hebe, do you want to be my bride forever?”

“I don’t want to die . . . like this.”

“I’m not asking how you want to die. Do you want to live ?”

Hebe’s head lulls back, and her left eye peels open. “Yes.”

All strength seems to leave her with that word. Her eye closes again and her neck goes limp. But she’s done what she’s needed to do.

Closing the distance between her exposed neck and me, I pierce her skin with my newfound fangs.

It’s disconcerting, since I’ve done nothing like this— at least, not in my current form. I once found myself in an unfortunate feeding situation as a vampire bat while searching for a particularly remote Tablet.

But this isn’t anything like that experience beyond the initial puncture of flesh. I’m not drinking her blood or drawing anything out of her. Instead, I feel something from me flowing into her . My power? My soul? Whatever it is, I can only hope it can sustain her life.

Hebe goes completely still. I cannot even hear her raspy breaths.

Does my heart still beat?

Please, Creator, You know I never come to You for anything. But for this one time, please grant my request. Let my little warrior live to fight another day . . .

Chapter Thirty-Two

Hebe

I am on fire. No — I am already consumed.

If I were still alive, I would feel my other injuries as well. They're gone now, leaving me with only the burning.

I am no longer Hebe, wife of Prometheus. I am only smoldering ashes. Is there anything left of me to bury?

“Hebe, I’m here.”

Suddenly, Prometheus is kneeling beside me. There is compassion in his voice that I’ve never heard before and desperation in his gaze.

I want to tell him to turn away so he doesn’t look upon me in my nothingness. But ashes don’t have a voice.

Prometheus places his hands on either side of what was once my neck. “I’m here with you. I won’t leave you. Please don’t leave me.”

But I have no choice. I’m already gone. He must bury me, because that is the only way my soul will find rest. That is just how life is among us mortals— it always leads to death.

“I won’t let you leave me,” Prometheus hisses desperately. There are tears in his voice.

My poor, dear Prometheus. I made him the first husband of his kind. Now I have forced him to become the first widower. The only knowledge I could teach him, mortal that I am, is the pain of grief.

“I won’t let you go,” Prometheus adds, even though he has no choice but to do so. Then he molds the ashes that were once my neck.

And . . . it actually feels right. The burning is gone— from my throat, at least.

I gasp, startled to breathe freely again.

Prometheus’ hands move lower, molding my shoulders, my arms, and my hands.

Lifting one hand, I marvel to see flesh instead of ashes. Power like I’ve never felt before courses through it. If the rest of me weren’t still ashes, I would think I could do anything.

I almost think I might survive.

Prometheus’ hands move up to my face, his fingers running over what were once my lips, my nose, and my eyes. They curve over my ears, and then I feel my face again.

“You may be the warrior,” Prometheus murmurs, “but I’ll fight for you.”

I stare at him, too stunned to speak as his hands move lower, forming my torso out of the ashes next. Power courses everywhere Prometheus touches, and then he moves onto my legs.

“What are you doing?” I finally say, trying to ignore the intimacy of this moment.

Prometheus doesn’t look up from his work. “I’m making you like me.”

My eyes fly open as I breathe desperate, smokeless breaths.

Prometheus kneels beside me with his head bowed. Instead of touching my legs like I dreamed, he’s holding my hand so tightly not even one of Zeus’ storms could tear me away from him. But my skin still burns everywhere I imagined his touch.

Lifting my head, I discover that my chiton has become a collection of rags. The skin I can see between the tatters is whole and unburnt, but it isn’t unblemished. That is, if what I see can even be considered a blemish . . .

Instead of blisters and burns, there is a river of bright orange flowing beneath my skin. It makes lovely swirling patterns up and down my arms, my legs, my torso—and, by the strange but pleasant sensation on my face, it’s there, too.

“This looks like the vision the Tablet revealed,” I whisper.

Prometheus’ gaze snaps to mine. “Hebe? You’re awake?”

“Are we . . .” I gesture at the strangely beautiful swirls. “Are we bonded?”

He doesn’t seem to hear me as he brushes his hand tenderly over my face. “You’re alive.”

“Not just alive.” Sitting up, I feel none of the injuries I know I sustained when Zeus’ Fire was unleashed. I’m not completely without pain, though. I feel an ache throughout my body, not unlike the growing pains I experienced as a child.

Excitement like I've never felt before fills me. I push myself to my feet before Prometheus can reach for me again.

Rather than the weakness I expected after all the trials of the day, energy surges through me. I feel like I could wrestle a lion and win with no aid whatsoever.

Prometheus doesn't trust my newfound strength. He stands quickly and holds out his hands as though he expects me to collapse into his arms. "How do you feel?"

"How do I feel?" I stare down at myself. Though I should feel embarrassed to be wearing charred rags in the presence of my divine husband, all I see is my smooth skin marked by ethereal light. "I feel beautiful."

"You were always beautiful."

I glance up in confusion to find Prometheus looking equally confounded. But then his eyes climb me to meet my gaze, and his expression softens. "I don't know why I didn't realize it sooner, but you are the truth I could never tire of discovering."

For a moment, I just gape at my husband, discovering something new myself. What it feels to be desired.

Barely knowing what I'm doing in my reborn body, I close the distance between us. I throw my arms around Prometheus' neck and draw his lips down to mine.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Hebe

P rometheus stiffens at my touch, clearly startled, but he doesn't pull away. And I have enough passion to make up for his passivity. Not that I have the experience necessary to compensate, but I'm devoted to learning every single thing I can—starting with what my husband tastes like.

I pull away when I cannot go without breathing a moment longer. But I still cling to Prometheus— because I wish to and not because I need to, since the power in my limbs has only grown stronger.

My husband gapes at me. “That was . . . different from the other kisses.”

Giggling, I run my fingers through his hair, finding it silkier than I imagined. “There is so much I have yet to teach you about our mortal bonding traditions.”

Prometheus smiles, but it's softer than I expected, with none of his usual eagerness to learn. Instead, he cradles my face with one hand, tracing a finger down my jawline—likely following the path of his glowing power flowing through me..

“What should we call this process?” I ask, restlessness making me want to rush off to the next discovery since apparently Prometheus isn't as excited to learn new skills as I am. But it would also be a great sin to pull away from my husband while he gazes at me like I am the one treasure he'd never give up. “Since no one's ever bonded like this before, that means we get to name it, right?”

“Right.” Prometheus ducks his head, pressing a kiss on my neck where he bit me to begin the process. “I want to call it a ‘Kiss.’”

“But that’s already a mortal term.”

Prometheus proves my point by pressing another kiss to my throat. “But the Primordials should have their own kind of kiss, too. And it’s not like the two are incompatible . . .”

Giggling, I pull away from him and twirl, all the new power surging in me turning into nervous energy. “Primordials . . . Tell me, how do you take on other forms?”

My husband frowns, looking confused. Then understanding dawns and he nods. “My Kiss must have bestowed my innate curiosity.”

“I want to know everything!”

“And I want to give you everything.” Prometheus takes my hands in his and grins like we aren’t standing in temple ruins.

Temple ruins . . . “Where’s Atum? How is he?”

Prometheus scowls. “Atum is with Dionysus. He will recover after the temple rebuilds itself, but that doesn’t matter.”

“Rebuilds itself?” I glance at the half-collapsed structure that hasn’t changed since last I gazed upon it.

“Olympian temples weren’t built by man and cannot be destroyed by them.”

I turn back to Prometheus. “Mortals did this?”

He pulls me back into his arms, tucking me beneath his chin. “Zeus apparently had the same idea we did to bypass temple protections by using mortal servants. I tried to warn you, but I wasn’t swift enough.” Prometheus’ fingers claw into my back, like he’s frightened the mortals will return for me.

The horror of the experience washes over me, and I forget my new power for a moment as I tremble in my husband’s arms.

Prometheus kisses my temple. “But enough about that. They are no longer important, and neither is Atum. We are all that matters now, and didn’t you ask to know how to shapeshift?” He pulls away enough to grin at me. “Let’s see what this bond is capable of now that you’re . . .”

“Bonded to you?”

Shaking his head, Prometheus gently caresses my face as darkness hovers in his gaze. It’s clear that he’s remembering when I was like a corpse in his arms before I—
“Awoken,” Prometheus whispers. “You’re Awoken now.”

“Am I . . . immortal?”

“According to the Tablet, your life is now bound to mine, and I intend to live forever, so . . .”

I stagger away as I consider the consequences.

I’ll outlive Puraltas. I’ll outlive his daughter and his daughter’s daughter who isn’t even born yet. Everyone I’ve ever known will fade away.

Or they will be wiped out because I failed to steal Zeus’ Fire before Prometheus had no choice but to Kiss me. Am I now barred from Zeus’ temple? Have I proven to be

an unworthy sacrifice for my people, and now their lives will be forfeit?

My legs buckle, and I crash to my knees.

There has to be another way. I have new power surging within me. Mayhap if I can discover how to manipulate it, I can find another way to steal the fire. And, failing that, I can defend my village, at least.

“Hebe, look at me.” Prometheus stoops down to cup my face and force me to gaze up at him. “Whatever haunts you, banish it from your mind. All that matters is you and me. I’ll keep us safe. I’ll keep you safe forever.”

I stare up at him, desperation to help warring with my desire to learn. But the last hope of the former is the latter. “Your ability to change forms . . . I want to know if I can do that now, too.”

It won’t change my being part-Primordial now. But if I can find another mortal to steal the fire, I can aid them better if I can take on other forms. It will also make it easier to check if I truly am barred from Zeus’ temple.

More than anything, I must know.

Prometheus must sense my desperation, or else he’s just relieved I’ve moved on from my failure. “We can only take forms of animals or people that we have seen; our abilities are limited to our existing knowledge.”

“It is a good thing you are always seeking it.”

He grins. “Yes. Though I suppose it’s true that you can take the form of something you have only imagined. Just don’t expect it to match something else if you were trying to blend in. Oh, and we don’t just take on forms— we take on properties

associated with those forms. Well, to an extent. If I take any other Primordial form, I still have only my abilities, not theirs. The new skills are available only when becoming new species.”

“So, when you are a bird, you can fly.”

“Exactly! And I instinctively know how to do so as well.”

I move to a crouching position and lean forward. “How do I turn into a bird?” Birds are certainly useful forms to be able to take.

“Let’s start with something simpler first.”

“Well, I wasn’t saying I had to transform into a falcon .”

Prometheus pats my hand. “Let’s start with a mouse, and if you have the ability and the energy, we’ll work up to a bird.”

Biting my lip, I nod. With the strength flowing through me, I doubt that will be an issue. It’s possessing the ability at all that’s my concern.

I must know for certain. “Tell me how.”

Nodding, Prometheus releases my hand and stands back. “Close your eyes and imagine a mouse.”

Obedying, I think of one of the little pests I’ve had to chase out of the hut.

“Once you have a clear mental picture, imagine yourself shrinking into a matching form.”

I do, and my skin tingles. Air rushes past me, and then I'm on my hands and feet on the ground.

Opening my eyes, I find myself in semi-darkness, something pressing against me. Panicking, I duck away, scurrying toward the light.

The moment I can see, everything around me looks much larger. Except for my hands, which are ridiculously small and pink.

I wiggle my nose in confusion until my giant of a husband kneels in front of me, far larger than I've ever seen him before. He scoops me into his hands and draws me up to his eye-level.

Prometheus beams at me. "Congratulations, my Awoken bride. You have taken your first form."

Chapter Thirty-Four

The Newlyweds

Hebe:

I wiggle my excitement over learning something new— namely that I possess Primordial power. Which means there is so much more I must learn.

That is, unless I remain a mouse forever. How do I transform back?

Panicked, I begin to run in circles on my husband's palms.

“Peace, Hebe.” Chuckling, Prometheus sets me on the ground. “Do you think I'd let you turn into a rodent if I couldn't teach you to revert to your lovelier form?”

I dance around his ankles, waiting for him to spit it out already.

Prometheus takes a step away from me. “It's far easier to revert to your default form than it is to take any other. Just imagine yourself as you in the same position and you'll be back.”

Ceasing my nervous circling, I close my eyes and imagine the woman I used to be curled in on herself in panic.

I feel dizzy, like I've stood up too quickly. When I open my eyes, I see my human hands again— and a lot more of myself than I was expecting.

“Oy!” I cry, curling more tightly into myself. “Where are my clothes?!”

Prometheus nods toward a heap of rags on the ground where I first transformed.

“There.”

“Why are they not on me ? You all shifted with your garments!”

He shrugs like there is absolutely nothing wrong with me being disrobed. “That is an additional skill. I’ll teach you once you’ve mastered a few more transformations.”

“ Prometheus. ”

Chuckling, he takes a long linen cloth from a discarded basket I don’t recognize and wraps it around my shoulders. “There. Better?”

I glare at Prometheus as I clasp the two ends of the cloth together while he continues to hover over me. “You could have warned me. We’re out in the open!” I glance around, half-terrified to find a bird that is actually a Primordial— whether friend or foe—hovering nearby. I don’t see any, but that doesn’t mean that there aren’t any Primordial insects —

“Would it make you feel better to practice somewhere more private?”

“I’d rather you just teach me how to shift with my garments.”

“So eager to learn. You really are flesh of my flesh now.” Prometheus swirls his arm. Some of his good humor is replaced by exhaustion as a rift opens right next to me.

Startling, I jump to my feet and stumble to the side away from the rift.

“I told you I’d take you to my temple.” Prometheus tosses the basket of goods

through the rift and then reaches for me.

I shake my head. “We have to stay here. I haven’t stolen the Fire yet, and if there is any chance—”

Prometheus pulls me into his arms. “There isn’t.”

With my hands trapped under my cloth, I’m unable to prevent Prometheus from carrying me through the rift and away from the Fire.

Prometheus:

I’m rarely nervous. Terrified for my life? Obviously. Devastated at the thought of losing my wife? Apparently. But flustered at the thought of showing my one temple to the only person’s opinion who matters besides my own? That’s new. And it’s not even a good new.

Especially since I’ve only just discovered how beautiful she is. And not just because her skin now glows with my power. Everything else is unchanged. Her nose is still too round for her face, yet also perfect. She smells like smoke, but I don’t care.

I almost lost her before I realized how precious she was to me. Now she’s about to see everything else I found special before she burst into my life, and I’m not sure I’m ready.

The rift closes behind us, and Hebe ceases to struggle against me. I sense her doing the same as I am— scanning the room. Only, she is likely doing so from simple curiosity. I, on the other hand, wish I had a chance to come ahead and put things to sorts.

This particular room isn’t too cluttered, I suppose. It’s my map room. Every map I’ve

ever come across— as well as several I’ve sketched myself— draped on the walls that square us in. All the rooms in my temple are square-shaped, each one containing a different collection of treasures.

The room next to us is my armory, filled with every type of weapon I’ve ever seen a mortal wielding. I suspect that collection will fascinate the most.

I set Hebe down, unable to resist tracing the fiery vein drawing my magic down her nose.

She studies me warily. “You really think that there’s no hope of my stealing the Fire from Zeus’ temple?”

“I didn’t think there was a chance before , but now . . . ?” I trace the swirling magic across her jawline to the edge of her lips that I desperately want to kiss again now that my fear of losing her has faded. “Definitely not.”

Hebe doesn’t need to know that there are no protections against the strain of Primordial powers we now share. She could prance back into the temple if she so wished, but I do not desire her to go anywhere near Zeus ever again after what he did. If I don’t look upon him for an eon, it will still be too soon, considering what his actions almost deprived me of.

We can both of us shelter from Zeus’ foolish war and his wretched wrath in my temple. It’s the only option left to survive without submitting to the wielder of widowing flames.

My wife shivers as she starts to process all that has just come to pass.

I pull her into my embrace. “I’m sorry for your people, but you and I will be safe here.” The protections on my temple are against every Primordial except me— and

now her— after all. And mortals long ago abandoned this incomplete ziggurat I've refashioned into my temple.

Mayhap I don't have the army of acolytes I deserve after all I've done for the mortals under Atum's orders, but it's just as well. I am clever enough to find us sustenance even without sacrificial offerings or ambrosia. This way, no one will ever hurt Hebe and me again. I don't need anyone other than her, anyway.

"But my cousin and his family . . ." Hebe looks away from me.

"I will fetch them for you."

Hebe faces me again, her eyes wide. "You will?"

I run my fingers through her hair. Several patches of curls were burned away, but they are already growing back. "I brought you back from the brink of death. Do you really think there is anything I wouldn't do for you?"

Her jaw drops in surprise, and I believe mine is equally slack. The last thing either of us expected was such a confession from my lips. For once in my life, though, there is no falseness in my intent. It is as though my heart decided at this moment to reveal that Hebe is not the only one to be completely changed by this marriage.

Closing her mouth, Hebe steps closer to me. "Even taking me back to Zeus' temple? Just in case there is another way in that we might discover—"

"Anything but that."

Hebe's expression hardens, and she looks away again. This time, I have no words—not even surprise outbursts.

So, my wife breaks the silence instead, turning back to me with determination, hope, and something I've yet to identify. "Then you'll at least continue to teach me of my new powers, so my mind is too busy to think— to grieve?"

"Of course!"

"And you'll teach me how to transform with my clothes?"

I pat her cheek. "Eventually . First, let's see how you do with the easier prompts."

Chapter Thirty-Five

Hebe

I don't know if it's the overwhelming passion for discovery surging through me or if it's just the love for my people that will never change. Either way, I'm not appeased with Prometheus' assurances that there's nothing more I can do. And despite what I am told, I need to try crossing over Zeus' threshold before I accept that it will not be me who steals the Fire.

But since I will never get my husband's blessing to run my test, I require his lessons.

It takes four more "prompts," for Prometheus to finally let me become a bird—specifically, a turtle dove. Every time before this when I reverted, he looked at me like he expected me to collapse from exhaustion— especially after the lynx form. However, I still have as much energy as I began and I feel like it will never let me rest.

Who needs rest though when one can fly. Honestly, I could flap around this room for the eternity ahead of me and never become bored.

Prometheus seems to sense that, because he pushes away from the wall he was leaning against. "You can revert now, Hebe."

I fly another lap around the room.

"You've already been a bird longer than any of your other forms, which is quite

impressive. But don't you want to move onto your next lesson?"

And become something else furry, four-legged, and completely useless to my mission? I want to learn anything Prometheus has to teach, but all my lessons before this one were getting repetitive. There is so much more I can be. There is so much more I must be.

"Hebe . I miss your masterful skills of conversation."

I shake one of my feathers on his head for that before flying another lap.

Prometheus tries to grab me the next time I fly over him, but I easily remain out of his reach. His half-lidded eyes tell me he will not risk turning into something better equipped to chase me down. He hasn't the energy.

"Hebe, my bride beyond death, my love for life—"

I forget to flap for a moment and nearly plummet.

Prometheus notices, of course, and goes back to leaning against the wall as he smirks up at me.

He has a right to be smug. Flight isn't as engrossing after my husband just confessed to loving me . Never in my life has someone admitted to such a thing. I assumed my kin cared me, but I was never confident considering my father who should have loved me most of all abandoned me.

Everything in me— from my once delicate mortal heart to my Primordial power surging through me— wants to do exactly what Prometheus wants. I could happily revert, disregard my linen garment and all my responsibilities, and teach us both more about kissing.

But if I dream of becoming a warrior, I must not be strong only during trials; I must also defy temptation.

Prometheus huffs, blowing his hair back out of his eyes. “ Fine. If you revert and show me your pretty face again, I’ll teach you how to shift with your clothes.”

Chirping happily, I dive toward my discarded linen cloth and grasp it between my tiny claws. Then I flap into the adjoining room filled with spears, bows, swords, and other beauties I would love to learn about. If I weren’t so overwhelmed with discovering my new powers, I’d be dragging Prometheus in here for explanations and histories on all of them.

But I must focus on the most important lessons, like shifting with clothes and opening a rift. Not that I can see Prometheus giving me a lesson in the latter willingly considering how long it took him to teach me how to fly. It’s like he’s terrified that if I leave his temple, I will face another gruesome fate. I understand his fear after the horror he must have witnessed, but I have never been as powerful as I am now.

I revert with barely a thought. Then I wrap the linen around me so that my arms are on the outside before hurrying back into the map room.

Prometheus beams when he sees me, his eyes gleaming as brightly as the amber around his neck. “There’s your face! I was beginning to miss it.”

“Oh, yes, it was my face you missed.” I shift my linen a little higher.

“It was your face I missed the most .” His gaze drops to my neck and shoulders. “But I am hardly displeased with any glimpse of my power flowing through you.”

Rolling my eyes, I stride toward him. Prometheus seems to find his wall quite comfortable now that he’s gotten his way and doesn’t help close the distance.

By the time I reach my husband, I can no longer fight my grin. “You said something a moment ago . . .”

“I did?” He smirks. “I suppose I did. Something along the lines ‘Of all the confounded mortal catastrophes, I’m so glad you’re mine.’”

“You really love me?”

Prometheus gazes down at me. “More than I’ve ever loved anyone else— except myself, of course.”

I suppose that’s poetic. I’ve never been loved except by the one who’s never loved. He’d probably choose someone else to adore if he had the experience to know better.

Prometheus snakes an arm around my waist to tug me closer to himself and his precious wall. “And you?”

I lean against his shoulder, which is as firm as the wall, but warmer and much more pleasant. “I’m waiting for my promised lesson.”

“You’re ruthless in pursuit of knowledge. I wonder where you get that from?” Prometheus kisses my temple— where one of my veins glows with his magic, I’m sure.

Shaking my head, I wrap my arms around his broad torso. I did my best to avoid noticing before, but my husband truly is a gorgeous man. And now my beauty almost matches his. “ You complimented me. I think that means I’m supposed to kiss you .”

“If you insist.” Grasping my arms, he breaks my embrace. Then he crouches so that we’re eye-level. “Anywhere you wish.” Prometheus puckers his lips.

I can't help the giggle that escapes, and he can't stop his grin— though he quickly resumes his puckering.

With another roll of my eyes, I comb my fingers through Prometheus' hair, trying not to ignore the lingering stench of smoke. Then I kiss the tip of his nose. "There you go, exactly as you deserve—"

Growling, Prometheus presses his lips to mine.

After his passivity before, I am not prepared for passion— especially considering how exhausted he's been acting.

I hurry to follow his lead, surprised by the skill of a novice. My husband is a fast learner.

Everything in me burns to learn more, too. I cannot imagine how much more the need burns in Prometheus since he is fully consumed by the Primordial magic my body has only just discovered.

Despite it, Prometheus is the first to break away, resting his temple against mine. "Now say you love me."

I shiver at his husky voice. "What if I don't?"

He traces a finger down one of the veins that moves all the way down my arm. "Then lie to me, Little Flame." He grasps my wrist and runs his finger across a glowing vein. "And I'll make every word ring true."

"H-how?"

Prometheus draws my wrist up to his lips and kisses where he was just rubbing.

“We’ll discover together.” He tugs me closer, so that his breath wafts over my skin.
“And it will certainly please you.”

My eyes drift close. Fighting Zeus’ lion was not as difficult as resisting this man.

But my people need me, and I will sacrifice whatever it takes to save them— even this moment. “You agreed to teach me how to shift with my garments.”

Prometheus groans. “You are a determined woman.”

I kiss his cheek and rub his smooth jaw that I have grown strangely fond of. “For the compliment.” Then I pull away. “But no more until you honor your bargain.”

“And you’re a cruel.”

“You bargained .”

Prometheus leans toward me. “But I didn’t say when .”

I press a finger to his lips. “I don’t want to scandalize one of your acolytes.”

“I have no acolytes in residence.”

Startled, I step back. “Shouldn’t you call them in? To protect them from what is coming?”

Prometheus turns from me.

I frown. “You don’t have any acolytes, do you?”

“None have chosen me. You might think I’m selfish, my eternal flame, for not

fighting harder for mortals. But the truth is, I have served mortals for centuries—leading them toward the light and teaching them how to improve their lives. Yet they’ve found new ways to destroy one another, so I wash my hands of those who care more about slaying their enemies than protecting themselves.” Ire laces every word.

“I see now.”

He turns back to me. “You do?”

“They turned their backs on you long before you did the same to them.”

“They turned on you , too! They sentenced you to death . Why do you still fight for them?”

Because my whole life has been dedicated to contributing to a community that did not have a place for me. It is a habit. I barely had a choice. Yet I did choose, because despite it all . . . “I love them. For better or for worse, I love them. I don’t expect you to understand.”

“I think I do,” Prometheus whispers as he studies me. “It’s one thing I wish I didn’t discover, but I have.”

Swallowing hard, I look away. A husband’s adoration is more than I ever dared to hope for.

But it would be selfish in me to relish in it while the world burns for my failure.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Hebe

“When you imagine shrinking or growing into an animal, imagine doing so wearing clothes.” Prometheus’ voice is cool as when we first wed.

“I already do that.”

“Not just your default form— you also have to imagine the animal wearing the same outfit. It won’t be, but you will be. This will drain more energy than a regular transformation, so be aware.”

I nod casually. “Are all Primordial powers based on what you know or can imagine? Like, for rifts, do you have to have visited the location before it opens?”

Prometheus purses his lips. “I wouldn’t say it applies to all Primordial power— there are individual giftings based on domain responsibilities and Entity callings. But, yes, for rifts, you have to know where you are going before you can open a rift. That is why it is so much easier for us to travel between our temples.”

Still nodding, I lean closer, trying to look interested but not too interested.

“There are two exceptions. One is if you sense a rift opened by another Primordial in the recent past; in that case it is almost effortless to re-open it. The second exception is when someone summons us by our Ren . Then a rift opens for us. That’s the easiest way to travel, and it’s the only way Nymphs can travel through rifts not made by

another.”

“ Ren ?”

“Our True Name. Your people uttered Dionysus’ when sacrificing you. It’s how he was able to reach you in time to halt your slaughter.” My husband scowls at the memory. “I only know Hades’ Ren because Atum uses it to banish Hades back into the Underworld when necessary.”

“What’s your Ren ?”

“That’s not what I bargained to tell you.”

I purse my lips. “But I’m your wife .”

Prometheus’ gaze takes me in as melancholy saturates his words. “So, you are.” A long moment passes in silence before he nods. “Now, which form should you take next?”

All of them. I never want to stop exploring my abilities. “Actually, flying took a lot more out of me than I thought it would.” I lean heavily against the wall, my eyes drooping like his were.

“You’re fatigued?”

My eyes drift closed. “Terribly.” Well, he did tell me to lie to him.

Arms wrap around my knees and shoulders. Then I’m suddenly suspended in the air, my head falling against Prometheus’ shoulder.

“You’ve had an eventful day,” he murmurs, carrying me out of the map room. “And

you expended a considerable amount of power.”

I mumble in agreement, though my day is far from finished and my power isn’t even close to spent.

Prometheus carries me up a flight of stairs to a smaller square room. This one has garments hung from the walls and draped over tables. There are chitons , Egyptian kilts, and clothes I have no name for. The only thing not covered in garments is the massive brass mirror taking up half of a wall.

“I have no bed,” Prometheus mutters, slinging me over his shoulder like that is an appropriate replacement for a cot. Then he gathers an armful of linens and piles them onto the floor like a nest. He sets me in the center.

I hastily adjust my linen so it doesn’t abandon me.

Prometheus gestures toward a tanned hide dress similar to what I wore when we wed. “That’s yours if you want it. It’s all yours.”

“But isn’t this your collection?”

“It’s yours now. And so is this.” Prometheus unclasps the lion’s hide from his back and lays it over me like a blanket. “To protect my most precious treasure.”

I stare at him, speechless.

Then Prometheus draws his hand through my curls. “Sleep well, wife. And know that once I have recovered my strength, I shall retrieve your kinfolk as you have requested.”

My lips part in surprise. I had thought he would try to delay honoring his promise as

long as possible.

Prometheus takes that as an invitation to crouch down and press his lips to mine. “You will be happy here with me, even if there are no heroics to perform. You’ll see.”

The thought of someone concerned with my happiness is entirely foreign to me. It is such a strange concept that I cannot help pulling Prometheus closer and deepening the kiss.

He doesn’t break that kiss as I try to give myself distance to think. Instead, he follows me onto the nest of garments he made.

I want nothing more than to keep him here beside me all night. We could discover so much more about kissing and bonding traditions together. His prophecy about me finding happiness here with him could become true.

Except, I did not wed Prometheus for the sake of my pleasure. I did it to save my people, and save them I shall.

For all the power surging through me, it seems to take more strength than I possess to push at his chest until we break apart.

Prometheus stares down at me in hazy-eyed confusion. “Hebe, when this is all over and Zeus has used all his Fire, so there is none left to burn you ever again . . .”

I gaze up at him.

Prometheus clears his throat and glances away. “Then we can pursue Atum’s original strategy. We will go to Olympus and reveal our bond to spare the surviving mortals.”

“You would do that for me?”

“Yes.” He kisses the corner of my left eye.

My heart warms because I know how much Prometheus is risking to offer that.

But it’s not enough.

I close my eyes. “As I said before, I am fatigued. And so are you.”

“I’m not that fatigued.”

Daring to look at him again, I scowl.

Sighing, Prometheus pulls away and retreats to the stairs. At the doorway, he glances back. “I love you, Hebe?”

His words aren’t a question because he’s unsure, but because he wants me to answer him.

But I cannot. Not until I have fulfilled the true reason that I wed him. Then we will be free to explore our marriage and bond together. Until then, though, a warrior must not be swayed by temptations to turn away from trials.

I lie still, listening to his footsteps as he descends. Then I wait several moments more to ensure Prometheus doesn’t change his mind and return to my side.

He does not.

Springing to my feet, I hurry to the dress made in the style of my people and don it quickly. It is loose on me, but fits better than a linen I have to keep adjusting. The

lion's skin is a heavy weight on my shoulders, but a comforting one, too, knowing its power.

Properly dressed, I hurry to face the mirror and close my eyes. My heart is pounding in fear that I prove incapable of mastering the lessons Prometheus didn't teach directly. Everything depends on them.

I remember the Nymph I met in Zeus' temple. Except, I imagine her wearing the dress I now wear as I think myself into her shape.

When I open my eyes, it is not my reflection I see. Instead, the Nymph stares back at me.

Twirling, I see that I am here all the way through, just like with any of my animal forms. Nor do I feel any strain maintaining the disguise.

Still, I revert to my default form and smile to see that the Nymph's strange lily pad dress has transformed back into my gown. That took no mental strain whatsoever, and I feel no depletion in my energy.

I have yet to find a limit to my newfound strength. Whether that is just a benefit of being newly Awoken or because of my still unbroken connection to the mortals I seek to serve, I know not. But I hope it continues long enough to do what I must.

Turning from the mirror, I close my eyes. Then I hold out my right arm and twirl it just like I saw Prometheus do before taking us here. I focus on the memory of Atum's temple.

My skin tingles with power. When I open my eyes, I see a rift. On the other side of it, I can clearly make out Atum's collapsed temple.

A sudden wave of panic washes over me as I remember when the ruins before me were engulfed by smoke and flames. I was prepared to be frightened when I faced Zeus' temple, but this is far worse than anything I was anticipating— especially since is supposed to be my haven. This is terror engrained so deeply into my psyche that no rational thought can drive it from my mind.

I step through the rift anyway.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Prometheus

I recline on one of my mismatched dining couches and stare at the clay ceiling above me. Is my strength even regenerating? Will it ever fully recover, or did I put too much of it into Hebe? I cannot tell.

I cannot tell anything beyond the vague premonition that something is not right.

Zeus cannot harm us here with my protections in place. Beyond my temple . . . well, Zeus won't be happy about my rushing off before vowing fealty. However, after what happened to Hebe, I can no longer delude myself that she will follow me into Zeus' service.

I'm not certain I could even look at Zeus again after the destruction he caused. It's better that I don't— because if I did, I might try to do something that will make me the focal point of Zeus' wrath.

No, it's best that Hebe and I remain in my one temple. Zeus will eventually forget about me, and Hebe will no longer remember her people— except for the ones I've agreed to let wander around my home.

Eventually she'll forget even those in the years after they pass. Mortals have such short lifespans because of their curse. It's a shame their lives will be cut even shorter now because of Zeus, but it is not my concern.

When all is said and done, and the Fire is used up, then Hebe and I can revert to Atum's original plan. We'll show the Primordials that mortals can become Awoken, not just Ascendant, and that we can live together. The Primordials will have already sated their bloodlust by then and might even be glad for an excuse to let the remaining mortals live.

And that will please Hebe. Mayhap then she will even return my love.

Folding my hands, I let my eyes close so I can recover faster.

But something still doesn't feel right.

Groaning, I swing my legs off the couch and check the entrance. The doors are still closed with no trace of tampering.

Mayhap Hebe needs something? We're still discovering which mortal needs she still has.

I climb the stairs to the room I left Hebe in and peer inside. It is hard to see through the shadows, but the nest of linens I made for her looks . . . empty.

"Hebe?" I call.

She doesn't respond, so I step inside.

Hebe isn't not there.

I charge back out of the room. Did she take a form she can't revert from? Surely, she didn't run fly out or something foolhardy like that. "Hebe!"

There is no response, but I feel a strange energy in the air like a rift.

Charging back into the room, I reach out my arm and I feel it. I reach out and rip open a rift I didn't create.

On the other side is Atum's temple. So this wasn't an abduction.

It's a second heist attempt.

"You are a determined woman," I mutter. Clenching my fists, I step through the rift.

If I could die, that woman would most certainly be the cause.

Hebe isn't in Atum's temple. I didn't think she would be, but I had hoped she would remain in safety until she determined whether or not Zeus was in residence. Unfortunately, my Hebe is no planner. Courage took all the place of strategy in her soul.

And so that is how I find myself flying into Zeus' temple for the second time in as many days.

Unfortunately, I do not have as much energy as the last time, and end up reverting to my default form mid-flight. I crash onto the stone steps leading to the temple.

Groaning, I push myself to my feet and glance around, terrified I've caught Ares' attention.

Worse, Aphrodite glances at me from the dining couch I sat in before. Up close, her beauty is almost overwhelming. Not like Hebe, who may not seem lovely at first glance. But on closer inspection, she has an understated beauty for anyone who cares enough to discover it.

There is no escaping Aphrodite's comeliness, though. Silver ornaments adorn golden

curls that brush across the ground every time she moves. Everything about her is feminine in a way I cannot quite put to words. It is almost obnoxious.

“Well, hello there.” Aphrodite purses her very full lips. “Have you come to join us at last, knowledge seeker?”

“Yes, actually.” I stand even though I feel like collapsing. “I had to delay for . . . reasons.”

Aphrodite sits up, the jewels draping from her wrists jingling with the movement. “You fell in love.”

I stumble in surprise. Is it that obvious? It’s bad enough that Hebe knows when she doesn’t requite me. But my enemies knowing is even worse.

When I lift my gaze, Aphrodite is holding a kylix toward me. “I can offer no relief, but take some ambrosia.”

“Thank you.” I throw it back, my power surging with the hope of it renewing.

When I place the empty kylix on the table, I find Aphrodite standing next to me. Her expression is uncharacteristically somber as she studies me.

“You understand now,” she whispers, placing graceful fingers on my forearm. “War may force us to fight, but love directs us to the cause we will champion.”

With that, she strides past me, moving toward the back gardens she frequents so often. Her pink peplos flutters with her graceful movements and cloud of floral perfumes lingers in her wake.

“You have come to join us?”

At the thundering voice, I whirl around to find Zeus standing before me at the entrance of the golden tower. His signature blue himation is draped over a golden chiton.

I nearly choke on the ambrosia I just drank, and then lean against the table, hoping I look casual. “I told you I was returning after I retrieved my property from Atum.”

Zeus narrows his eyes that seem strangely brown in this lighting.

“It barely survived your Fire demonstration,” I add, somehow keeping the bitterness out of my voice. “Quite a remarkable weapon you have. If I had not already set my heart on allying with you, I would have decided to do so the moment the world was engulfed by flames at your command.”

“Well, I am glad that you have come to your senses and chose my side after all this time.”

I pretend to be nonchalant, like I’m not terrified that Zeus will lash out for wasting his time like he doesn’t have an eternity ahead of him. I also have to act like I’m not worried that Hebe will come stumbling out with the urn of Fire. Where is she, anyway? Has she gotten caught in one of the traps without me to guide her?

“As I have told you before,” I say, rolling my eyes as an excuse to scan the perimeter, “I was just biding my time until I could ensure Atum’s Tablet of knowledge was useless in this fight.”

Except, it no longer is. It is the key to uniting Primordials and mortals forever. Hebe and I will be an eternal reminder of Atum’s dream realized too late.

“Very well.” Zeus doesn’t look convinced, but he gestures toward his table. “I have no time to play host to a mere Entity. There are more important concerns that I must

address. Help yourself to the ambrosia and leave me in peace.”

“Happily,” I call, reaching for another kylix as Zeus turns away.

Instead of responding, he just strides into the golden tower.

I drain another kylix of ambrosia and then make my way to the silver tower. Surely, Hebe is clever enough not to have gone into one of the rooms I warned her against while I was disguised as the Nymph. But I can only hope that she’s in the silver tower and not the golden one.

My fear intensifies with every empty room I check and every trap I find still set. Where could Hebe be? Surely, she didn’t take an insect form that I might have stomped on by mistake—

“What do you think you are doing?!”

At Zeus’ booming voice, I whirl around just as a bolt of lightning illuminates his looming form. It’s bigger than a moment before, and his eyes are brighter. Power radiates from him.

Has something enraged him since last we spoke? Am I about to become the scapegoat for his anger?

Despite my terror, I casually lean against the doorway. “I was just trying to guess which chamber would be mine now.”

“Now?” Zeus arches one golden brow. “Have you finally decided that all your accounts with Atum are closed so you can belong solely to me?”

I open my mouth to point out that I already said as much, if not in so many words.

But then a realization strikes me like one of Zeus' thunderbolts.

Primordials can't change their eyes, and Zeus' are blue.

I know exactly where my wife is. And not only is she in grave danger, but also, she knows exactly what sort of man she wed.

Even if we both survive these next few moments, Hebe will never love me.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

The Newlyweds

Hebe:

A trickster. I am wed to a trickster.

My hands shake as I open door after door in the golden tower. I barely see anything in each glorious room. I only long enough to process that the urn I seek is not within.

I am far more aware of what my husband said to my Zeus disguise. His words echo in my psyche over and over.

A traitor. I've been kissing a traitor.

The third door triggers a spear to shoot at me. I sidestep it far more easily than I did the trap Prometheus set for me.

A monster. I've been falling for a monster.

I've always known that Atum was more compassionate toward the mortals than Prometheus. It was also obvious that my husband was ready to turn his back on my people the moment when true peace seemed impossible. But to know that Prometheus meant to ally himself with the enemy of mankind throughout the entirety of our marriage . . . I see now that his actions and in action alike sprouted from deceit rather than cowardice.

I storm toward the door opposite from the entrance of the tower and swing it open. I'm half-hoping that Zeus is on the other side to give me someone to direct my wrath toward.

He isn't inside, though. What is present are velvet couches arranged parallel to each other and a balcony across the room from me. There is a glass roof that reveals an empty room above. If it houses the sun like the silver tower contains the moon, I suppose it would be empty during the day.

None of that matters though, because in the center of the room is a short marble column turned table. Sitting on the table is the glowing urn I've been seeking.

Rushing forward, I scan the depictions of war and torment painted on the dark urn for any hint of a trap. Some of Prometheus' caution must have rubbed off on me . . .

No wonder Prometheus despised me at the beginning. I represent everything he is opposed to.

Gritting my teeth, I take hold of the urn. It's still too full despite how much must have been used to destroy the temple.

With the cursed urn in hand, I dive to the side.

I hold my breath, bracing for a volley of spears to fly at me. However, the only consequence of my theft is the marble pillar disintegrates with the absence of the urn.

Just like my marriage.

Prometheus said he loved me. He probably does like me— as his “possession.” I suppose I can forgive him for that. I was given to him, after all, and he was not given to me in return.

What I will never forgive, though, is that he tried to trick me into turning my back on my people. I thought mayhap I wasn't fully Awoken yet, and that is why Zeus' protections did not work on me. It turns out, they did not work because they did not need to—Prometheus was not one of Zeus' enemies. Prometheus is perfectly willing to stand back and let the world burn.

And here I am fretting over one selfish wretch instead of focusing on all of humanity—just like Prometheus would have wanted.

Hissing, I imagine myself as a bird, one wearing my gown and clutching this urn within its claws.

A moment later, I am a turtle dove. The urn is nowhere to be seen, absorbed along with my clothes and waiting for me to revert. At least, I need it to be so because there are footsteps just on the other side of the door.

I dive toward the balcony and soar away from every Primordial who has made themselves my enemy.

Prometheus:

“I had already decided to join you, as you well know. I merely went to retrieve what little Atum let me have to my name.” My bitter scoff isn't faked.

Zeus looms above me, far taller than necessary when the threat of lightning fills the air. My hand must be standing on end. “And the so-called treasure you were most adamant about. Did you salvage it?”

“No.” I close my eyes, thinking of Hebe somewhere in the gold tower and risking both our lives. “I'm afraid she was lost to me forever.”

I need to make my excuses and leave. Hebe is clever, but she is too bold to be cautious. Any moment now, she will alert Zeus to her presence, and he will probably strike me down in his rage before he even realizes we're bound. And when he does find out. . .

My fingers flex, desperate to open a rift to my temple. I need to go before Zeus tortures me. Before he makes me suffer Hebe's screams. Will my temple even be safe if Zeus possesses the portion of my Primordial power in Hebe? Will going home without her even be bearable when I will be haunted by the one time I wasn't alone?

Suddenly, Zeus stiffens. Then he turns and storms into his golden tower, leaving a mighty gust in his wake.

This is my chance, and yet I find myself shadowing him.

Zeus strides into the farthest room of the Golden Tower—the one that houses the sun by night. In the center of the room is a pile of dust. And in the distance I see a turtle dove against the sky.

Hebe.

“Who has done this?!” Zeus thunders, the entire temple shaking in fear of his wrath.

My wife. The mortal I bonded with. The woman I love.

The sacrifice I must make to spare myself. Any moment now, Zeus will see Hebe flying away and pursue her as an enemy Primordial. If I point her out now, I can spare myself his inevitable wrath.

Hebe will suffer. Her people will burn. But I will survive.

I will be alone.

My stomach lurches like that is the worst suffering I could face, when in fact it is the one I am most used to. It's comfortable at this point— or used to be. Either way, it is inevitable because no matter what I choose, I will be alone.

But . . . Hebe might not be alone. Her people may still be spared. She might not have to suffer.

Power surges through the room as Zeus levitates off the ground. "Who. Has. Done. This?"

Hebe is still not out of view. But I can ensure that he never sees her all the same.

"I'll keep us safe. I'll keep you safe forever."

I step forward. "It was me! I stole the Fire."

I'm expecting a demand for an explanation. What I receive is a lightning bolt to the chest throwing me backwards. All the power I just restored focuses on healing me, leaving me helpless to defend myself against further attacks. Or mayhap it's the pain itself disarming. I can't feel my torso, and I wish I could feel nothing else. The stench of burned flesh fills the air, making me ill. It reminds me too much of when Hebe lay dying.

I suppose mortals and Primordials burn the same. Atum would love to know that connection. Personally, that is knowledge I wish I never discovered because the price of suffering is too great.

But I fear knowing the cost of loving a mortal will be even greater.

Zeus hovers toward me. Barely contained wrath flashing in his eyes as he stares down at my pathetic form lying flat on my back. And then he looks . . . confused.

So am I. Never in all my lifetime have I purposefully put myself in harm's way, and Zeus knows that.

“Who are you?” Zeus demands, like I might be another Primordial in disguise.

I suppose that makes more sense than a man taking the fall for a wife who hates him and a people who abandoned him. Yet, here we are.

“As my wife, you will have no choice but to learn, to live, to see, to explore, and to experience.”

And so she shall. Just . . . without me.

Using the last of my strength, I lift my head from the ground. “I told you. I am the thief . . . of Fire.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The Newlyweds

Hebe:

I dive toward the base of the mountain. Atum's temple will never feel safe to me again, but surely Dionysus keeps his temple protected. I just need to find it before Zeus finds me .

My tiny bird heart beats faster than I think it's supposed to. But if there is anyone capable of ending my newfound immortality, it would be the ones who cut short my mortality— Zeus and Prometheus.

Did Prometheus know about the trap at Atum's temple? Is that why he hurried back? Just in time to be too late to save me as a mortal?

Searing pain tears through my tiny heart, and I flounder for a moment before spotting a temple on the base of the mountain. At least, I hope it's a temple. It looks like a giant willow tree with a marble wall surrounding it.

I pull back before diving into the temple and circle it instead, searching for a sign that Dionysus resides within.

Music fills my ears that is far too merry for my mood. When I round the tree, I find a host of Nymphs with purple skin. Some play instruments while others dance. Still others are passed out beneath trees next to overturned kylixes .

Yes, this is definitely Dionysus' temple.

Landing in the center of the lawn, I revert to my once mortal form. My hands clutch the stolen urn filled with Fire.

"Dionysus!" I scream.

"I'm right here, almost-bride." Dionysus steps out from between the drooping willow branches. His eyes widen when he sees Prometheus' power flowing through me like a brand.

I hold up the urn. "Where's Atum?"

Dionysus glances past me. Then he gestures for me to follow him into the willow.

Beds of braided rope droop from the high willow branches, including one that is currently occupied by Atum.

My husband's former master turns to me, his expression pained but his eyes bright. "Sweet Hebe." His gaze trails over me, and the weakest of smiles stretches across his face. "You survived. Prometheus did it. He bonded with you. Now there can be peace." Atum slumps back into his bed, and a cushion falls out.

As Dionysus hurries to retrieve it, I hold up my urn. "That won't be what brings peace. Zeus not having his Fire will."

Dionysus drops the cushion. "You brought it here ?!"

Atum sits up, clutching the edge of his strange bed to steady himself. "You are brilliant, Hebe, goddess of ingenuity . . . Wait, where is your husband?" Atum glances past me.

I drop my gaze, ashamed to be married to a trickster— an uncommonly good one despite my earlier accusations. “He betrayed us.”

“Yes, but where is Prometheus ?”

Prometheus:

“Where am I?” I peel my eyes open to take in whatever location Zeus’ rift took us to.

“A place of torment.” Zeus tosses me onto a jagged cliff.

I lift my head with what little strength I have while my body is still desperately trying to heal my charred torso. However, I don’t recognize any of the landscape below. It looks to be a desert, with no green to be seen in the sea of sand below. I dare to feel a drop of relief. “This isn’t Tartarus.”

Zeus chuckles. “Hades has his realm of torment for those who no longer live. It seems only fitting for me to have one for those cannot die.”

“It actually doesn’t seem fitting at all. Hades was given his realm by the Creator. But this isn’t a part of the Firmament you were assigned.”

Gesturing to sky that seems so close because of the height of the cliff, Zeus grins while the wind whips around us. “It’s close enough.” He grabs me by my hair and drags me to my feet.

I desperately try to find my footing to relieve the tension on my scalp, but my knees refuse to support my weight.

Zeus tosses me against an upright slab of stone. Before I can react, charged metal wraps around my waist and ribs. Lightning flows through the chains and jolts through

my body as the chains tighten around me.

“Now that you understand how little power you have here . . .” Zeus strides in front of me and grins. “Where did you hide my Fire?”

“Hide it?” I sniff. “I destroyed it. There is no trace left.”

The chains constrict so tightly, I’m terrified for a moment I’m going to be snapped in two. But then the chains loosen, and I can feel other pains again— namely, the burning agony of my gut. I have no strength to lift my head any longer, so I can see only the red, bubbling skin of my exposed stomach where my chiton has been mostly burned away.

I fight the urge to throw up. That will only cause more pain, and I don’t think Zeus has any plans to give me sustenance in the near future.

Zeus strides toward me, something I don’t like the glistening in his blue eyes that match the clear sky. “If you stole my Fire and destroyed it already, why under Olympus would you return ? I am not known for my kindness to traitors.”

“That is all the kindness you’re known for actually— it’s offered to those who betray the mortals they were charged to protect.”

The hand striking my face stings, but it’s not another lightning bolt, so it’s practically a mercy.

Zeus steps back, his hair beginning to float around him like a cloud. “Maybe I am feeling merciful today after all, because I’m going to ask you again. Where’s my Fire? ”

I stare back at him, calculating how much power still courses through him and how

much pain he can yet inflict. Zeus hitting me is a good sign that he's running out of energy, but the chains still buzz with too much power. Not that Zeus needs to do much to aggravate the injuries I have already sustained.

And Hebe is probably in the safety of a temple by now. If I told Zeus the truth, he could waste his time chasing her, and I'd have a moment of peace.

But Zeus won't give up, so Hebe will never have a moment of peace again.

I have sacrificed this much for Hebe's life that she has always been so quick to discard. And I have sacrificed along with her to protect all the mortal lives she views as priceless and has made precious to me with her love. What I have given this far shall not be in vain— even if protecting the sanctity of my sacrifice destroys what's left of me.

Incapable of doing anything else, I just stare at my sandals suspended above the ground. "I told you— it's destroyed. I came back because I still wanted to ally myself with you. I just didn't want to risk the Creator's ire by taking such direct action against the mortals. It was simple strategy."

"Oh, so you fear the Creator more than me, do you?"

"Well, obviously." Last I checked, it was the Creator who made Zeus swear on the River Styx.

Zeus narrows his eyes. "Yet He sends none to deliver the apple of His eye from my wrath? Nor will He help you. You'll know the meaning of true fear when I'm done with you." Zeus steps to the side, revealing a bird so massive it cannot be a Primordial. It would take too much power to take such a form.

The bird stands nearly as tall as Zeus, and its curved beak at least as long as both my

hands. With alternating gold and white feathers, it could be considered beautiful if not for the bloodlust in its eyes.

Smirking, Zeus pets the bird's feathery head. The creature seems to enjoy the affection, and presses harder against Zeus' hand. "You've met my Nubian Lion—may it rest in peace. The Caucasian Eagle will avenge it, show you who you ought to fear, and convince you to tell me the location of the Fire all in one fell swoop."

"If I slew your lion, why would I fear a bird?"

"Because this magnificent beast is a creature of habit." Zeus pets its head one last time before stepping back. "She'll get her fill of you for the morning and return with the sunrise. That is, until you bargain something suitable for your release."

The bird prowls toward me, hunger emanating from each step. But I force my gaze on Zeus. "I will bar—"

Thunder claps, cutting me off.

"I will release you only for the true whereabouts of my Fire. And if you try to deceive me, the River Styx will make it known you have not honored your bargain."

The eagle lurches to a halt in front of me, blocking my view of Zeus. Its crazed eyes down to my raw stomach.

For a moment, I try to take a form that will allow me to escape these chains. But all the power I have is still focused on healing my grievous injury.

My grievous injury that the eagle is still eyeing.

"No," I hiss at it.

“I’ll see how you feel about negotiating tomorrow,” Zeus calls. Then he’s cut off, like he just stepped through a rift.

I turn back to the eagle. “Well, you’re better company than him any—”

The eagle squawks. Then it lunges toward me, its beak tearing into my injury.

My screams fill the air as suffering beyond anything I could have ever imagined consumes me.

Chapter Forty

The Newlyweds

Hebe:

“He betrayed us all!” I wail, wishing I could stop sobbing. The lion skin cloak and claw necklace my traitorous husband gifted me are both discarded on the ground.

Atum and Dionysus glance at each other, looking like they also wish I could stop crying.

I knew I wasn’t marrying the best of the Primordials, but Prometheus wasn’t getting the comeliest maiden, so it seemed like a fair exchange. But then it was better than fair— it was better than I could ever have imagined. Prometheus stopped looking at me like a burden he wished he wasn’t saddled with. Instead of trying to escape like my father, he drew closer.

He told me he loved me. I taught him how to kiss. Yet none of that was worth him becoming a better man and sparing my people.

“More than I’ve ever loved anyone else— except myself, of course.”

I suppose his first love won out.

“I instructed the Nysiades to be on the lookout should Prometheus show his face here,” Dionysus offers. “I’d put up a ward against his magic, but, well . . .” He

glances at me.

Following his gaze, I see that Prometheus' magic swirling through me is no longer as vibrant. It is almost like my veins are fading back to match my skin. Has Prometheus somehow broken our bond with his betrayal? I suppose I should be relieved to not be bound to such a trickster any longer. But, strangely enough, the pulsing power within me hasn't faded with the glow in my skin. I haven't even inherited the weakness that seems to belong to all other Primordials yet. Why?

Could it be that I am meant to protect the mortals with this power, just like Atum is sympathetic to mortals because his weakness? Am I the lesser deliverer Atum has hoped for? One who shares his compassion for mortals but without vulnerabilities?

After all, just because Prometheus has abandoned me doesn't mean the Creator has forsaken the mortals.

"I hope Prometheus is well," Atum murmurs, like he has heard nothing that I've just told him.

I snort. "That's the one thing you can be sure of— Prometheus will protect himself. In the meantime, we must protect the urn." I stare down at the cursed substance that brought an end to both my mortality and my marriage. "No matter the cost."

Prometheus:

The cost was too great.

I stare downward even though that's the last place I want to look. Fleshy pieces of me I never wanted to see dangle out of my stomach that has been both burned and gnawed upon. I'd be sick if I hadn't emptied the contents of my stomach long ago.

The eagle is finally gone, and I've had no choice but to watch my body slowly weave itself back together.

Zeus has taken the eagle's place. He seems to relish my pain, though my silence isn't what he wanted.

I'm not even trying to be obstinate after learning that the cost of defying Zeus is far worse than I ever feared. I simply do not have any voice left after my screams.

When Hebe lay sleeping in my arms, I mused over the strangeness of mortal slumber. Then, when she drifted away after Zeus' Fire consumed her, I feared she'd never wake.

Now I know that deep sleep in the face of exhaustion and pain is a mercy gifted to the mortals. It is a mercy I do not possess. I am continually bound to my body no matter what torment it faces. There is no escape— not even death.

"I told you I would give you another chance," Zeus calls.

I should turn my head to look at him so I can try to brace myself for the coming blows. However, I only sag lower.

Something slips out from beneath my chiton and dangles from my neck. It takes me several moments to recognize it.

The amber amulet symbolizing my marriage to Hebe. The woman I made Awoken, yet who made me the same as the Ascendant's victim. I am bearing the death meant for her.

How ironic that I once condemned Atum for making himself weak for the sake of his love for mortals. Now here I am making myself nothing for the love of one pesky

mortal.

Zeus moves closer, and I would recoil if I could. “Tell me where the Fire is and I will free you from these chains.”

I open my mouth because of my weakness, but I use the last of my strength to stop myself.

“Remain stubborn, though, and know you won’t be without company long. The Caucasian Eagle will be pleased to see you healed up in time for her next feast.”

“The Fire . . . isn’t destroyed.” The words are out before I can think them over.

“Oh? And where can I find it?”

The amber swinging from my neck catches the light. For a moment, I think I see Hebe in that light. There’s the barest hint of a smile on her face.

She’d never smile again if Zeus finds her.

“Well?” Zeus demands.

“I gave it away.”

“To who?”

I try to smirk, but I don’t think I’m very successful. “Your Caucasian Eagle.”

Zeus strikes me so hard the world spins and I think a tooth goes flying.

Great. Now my body will be focused on healing that and forget about the more

important things— like my entrails.

“If that’s the case,” Zeus hisses, “you can ask for it back when she returns in the morning.”

Horror consumes me. To my shame, what little breath I have left begs for mercy.

Ignoring me, Zeus steps through a rift and leaves me alone. Alone until morning, that is.

For a moment, all I do is hang where I am. Then I lift my eyes heavenward as much as I can.

“Please,” I whisper to the last Being Who might hear me as blood dribbles down my chin. That is, if He cares to . . . “Rescind your promise and just let me die .”

Hebe:

“I’m not asking how you want to die. Do you want to live?”

“Why?” I hiss. “So I can continue to be your pet to come home to after you finish betraying my people.”

“No.” The brokenness in my husband’s voice has me turning toward him despite my best intentions.

Prometheus stares blearily back at me. Blood drips from the corner of his mouth. It gushes from his chest. In fact, everywhere I look, he’s either bleeding or stained by blood.

“Wh-what is this?” I demand. “The blood of my people that you tried to shed with

your cowardice?"

He arches a brow at me as blood drips from his hairline. "That doesn't explain why it is coming out of me, Hebe. Come now; you're cleverer than that."

"Then what . . . what is this?" I keep walking backward, like his answer is something I must escape.

Prometheus yells it for me to hear anyway. "This is the blood of your husband that you shed with your courage!"

Gasping, I sit bolt upright. It takes me several moments before I realize I'm not talking to Prometheus and drowning in his blood. Instead, I am alone in an underground chamber of Dionysus' temple and lying on a bed Dionysus had at the ready even though he doesn't sleep.

Desperately, I grasp the urn of Fire to ensure it has not been stolen.

But I still feel like something precious to me has been taken.

My lion skin lies on the foot of the bed and the claws are on the floor next to it. If not those, then what could I have lost?

Prometheus . . .

He may be my husband, but he was never truly mine. Not when he's a trickster and a traitor who was plotting against my people from the very beginning. And yet . . .

I smooth down my dress with one hand and clutch the urn with the other. Then I stride up dirt stairs to the main part of the temple beneath the willow tree.

Dionysus and Atum are speaking while Atum leans heavily against a barrel of wine to remain upright. Oh, and Sia has joined them. At least, I assume it's Sia, since he wears the same kilt as before, but this version of him has braided hair that falls to his waist.

But if he is Sia, then I need his perception. "Have you seen my husband?"

All three Primordials startle and turn to me.

Dionysus offers a charming smile. "Not to worry, almost-bride. I have ensured that your husband has not breached my defenses."

"That's not what I mean." My gaze falls on Sia. "Have you seen him? My husband? How does he fare?"

Sia blinks. "I have not seen your husband since he was arguing with you."

"But you were watching Zeus, were you not? I know Prometheus was in Zeus' temple, but I don't where he is now."

Atum straightens before slumping again. "Do you think Prometheus is in danger?"

"I-I don't know." I turn back to Sia expectantly.

Sia purses his lips. "I haven't perceived anything since your attempted heist. I only just now recovered my strength after that escape."

"Since your strength is renewed, can you seek out Prometheus and return with a report?"

Sia turns to Atum.

He nods eagerly. “Yes, please check in on Prometheus so we can know he is alive and well.”

“And perhaps planning something against us,” Dionysus offers dryly.

“Yes, check for that, too,” I agree.

Sia nods, turns, and transforms into a beetle again. He buzzes away.

Atum and Dionysus both turn expectantly to me.

I drop my gaze and notice that Prometheus’ power flowing through me has become much duller. In comparison, the rest of my skin looks like it’s glowing.

“You’re worried about him?” Atum asks softly.

Now that I’ve been awake for a few moments, the horror of my nightmare has subsided and I feel foolish. “I’m worried about everything and shall continue to fret until this Fire is somewhere Zeus can never find it!”

With that, I storm away before they can see my tears returning for no reason.

Chapter Forty-One

The Newlyweds

Prometheus:

Despite my desperate prayers, I survive to see the dawn. And just as Zeus promised, the Caucasian Eagle rises with the sun.

I stare down at my tender stomach. It's still not fully healed, but at least I'm not spilling everywhere. However, that will soon change.

Drawing upon every ounce of strength that regenerated last night, I struggle against the chains. If I can only slip out of them, I have a fighting chance. But my Primordial power doesn't respond to my attempts to become something too small to be chained. And every time my skin brushes the lightning-charged metal I lose a little more of my fight.

Finally, I hang my head so I don't have to see the approaching bird. Instead, I notice the amber hanging from my neck, symbolizing my marriage to a woman who likely despises me. How ironic, to know I've sacrificed everything for her, but she will only remember the trickster I was before she transformed me into someone a little more like her.

Despite Hebe's insistence that I keep my amber necklace, she'll likely rejoice when the Eagle inevitably snatches it away along with half my entrails.

Hebe is the real winner here. She has her life, the Fire, and her people's safety as well as my powers from our bond. I have the chains, the pain, and the mere memory of our marriage that led to this tragedy.

But if that memory is all I have, then 's what I will fight for. That memory, that marriage, and the girl I chose suffering to save.

Desperately, I lean forward, doing my best to reach the dangling necklace without the use of hands. I toss my head back several times until the amber bounces high enough. Then I catch it in my teeth, closing my mouth around it to protect it from the Eagle's beak.

There's nothing to be done to save my tender, barely healed flesh, though.

This time, my screams are muffled by my trembling lips, which I will keep closed no matter what.

Hebe:

Neither Atum nor I are paying any attention to our game of Terni Lapilli . We both abandon it gladly when Sia materializes before us, reverting from a beetle to the mortal-like form he wore earlier today.

I scramble to my feet, but Atum remains on the ground since he still cannot stand on his own.

"Did you see him?" Atum calls.

Sia shakes his head, looking utterly perplexed. "I saw no trace of Prometheus in Zeus' temple. Not in any of them."

“What about Prometheus’ temple?” I ask, like I haven’t opened a rift there twice already to check.

“He’s not there either.” Sia clasps his hands. “I could not see him anywhere I went.”

“What . . .” I lick my dry lips and tug on the necklace Prometheus gave me. Both it and the lionskin have been re-secured around my throat where I can ensure I don’t lose them, too. “What does that mean?”

“It means, I’m afraid, that even I cannot see what has become of Prometheus.”

Prometheus:

The pain is worse this time because I remember how agonizing it was yesterday. Now I can properly dread each slice the Caucasian Eagle makes into my gut.

Tears stream down my face until I have none left. My muffled cries become whimpers as I become steadily weaker.

Through it all, it isn’t until the Eagle has had its fill and flown away that I let my amber fall from my mouth. It dangles off me along with my shredded entails.

I finally scream. Long and hard. But the pain persists. When I am done, I am still chained to a rock, my blood still pouring out of me and my strength nonexistent. I still cannot transform into something that can save me while my body fights so hard to sustain itself.

Atum says the rain falls on the just and the unjust, but the lightning seems to disproportionately strike the innocence. Do I count as innocent? Mayhap if I do, I can at least hope for deliverance. But the Creator counted me as unworthy of His direct presence after He punished us at the River Styx for our joint rebellion.

For a while, the Tablets the Creator left were a comfort to me. At least there was some form of communication between us— or so it seemed. But the Creator still has not answered my prayer— possibly because I am not one of His precious mortals. Therefore He will not give me deliverance even through death.

There is one other name I could call. One that knows no mercy but must bargain. One who may be able to kill a Primordial because he is, in fact, the Guardian of the Dead.

I cannot lift my head, but I use what little voice I have left to cry out anyway. “Am-Heh, I summon thee.”

Hebe:

“We could summon him,” I whisper before bounding to my feet with fresh energy. “Then Prometheus will have no choice but to come to us!”

Dionysus looks up from his kylix and scowls. “Summon the Primordial who betrayed you into the temple where you brought the Fire? Yes, that sounds like a legendary idea.”

I bite my lip and glance down at the urn that hasn’t left my side.

“I still think it’s worth a shot,” Atum offers.

Dionysus grunts.

But Atum just turns to me, his expression soft. “Do you know Prometheus’ Ren?”

My stomach clenches. “No, he never told me.” Considering he was plotting throughout our marriage, I don’t think he ever intended to. “Don’t you know? You were his master.”

“Prometheus was always a guarded soul.” Atum sighs. “A Ren is an intimate thing gifted to few. I’m afraid if he didn’t give it to his wife, none of us know it.”

I turn to Sia desperately.

Sia shakes his head.

So, I turn to Dionysus next.

Dionysus grunts again. “Why would I know it?”

“I don’t know. Many seem to know your Ren , so I wondered if you collected such names in return.”

“ ‘ Many ’ know my Ren ?” Dionysus scoffs. “Mayhap a few fair maidens here and there—”

“But my people’s High Priest— the one who summoned you— was a man.”

“I didn’t say my Ren was known exclusively to fair maidens . . .”

I slump against the trunk of the willow tree, not sure what to do with my disappointment.

“Well, isn’t this a pretty picture?”

Startling at the new voice, I turn to see a Primordial I have never seen in person. Yet fear turns my blood cold because I know exactly who he is thanks to Sia’s perception.

The Primordial is tall and dark— both in complexion and because of the shadows that seem to cling to him. A savagely beautiful smile stretches across his face as he

glances from me to the rest of my company. “A widow consoled by her husband’s friend. If this isn’t a story as old as death.”

“Hades,” Atum hisses behind me.

But I care not for this creature’s identity or mockery. All I want is an explanation.

“Did you say . . . ‘widow’?”

Chapter Forty-Two

Hebe

“H -Hades . . .” I stare in horror at the god of the dead, not because of his presence—though it is fearsome— but because of his words.

Surely Prometheus has not entered Hades’ realm. Surely not . . .

“Stay away from her,” Atum hisses, edging toward Hades despite his weakness.

Hades rolls his eyes. “I am not here to hurt anyone, Repeller. And you cannot banish me back to the Underworld until I have what I came for. Not even you are powerful enough to intervene in a bargain between two Primordials.” He takes in the limp that makes it obvious Atum has no power at all anymore. Hades smirks.

“You speak of a bargain between two Primordials,” I whisper. “Is the other Primordial my husband?”

“Apparently.” Wrinkling his nose, Hades turns back to me. “Why our kind would wed creatures who are only a step above corpses is beyond me, though. Evidently, all manner of degeneracy has been released upon the surface since my new appointment.”

“Well, what else did you expect after we had to do without your stringent moral compass?” Atum asks dryly.

“Exactly.” Hades’ gaze falls to the urn.

I reach for it, but it’s already gone. Smoke has wrapped around the urn and carried it into Hades’ hand.

“No!” I scream, lunging for it.

Hades simply side-steps me. “This is my bargained prize, little mortal. Your husband promised this to me.”

I whirl around to face him again. “For what?”

A smirk stretches on the corner of his lips. “His death.”

“No!” I scream despite myself.

Dionysus glances at me with a raised brow.

Atum staggers forward. “Say you didn’t. Tell me honestly—”

“Of course, I didn’t.” Hades stares at us like he doesn’t know how to utilize his face to properly convey his expressions. “You were there when the Creator gave His vow, same as me. Since Prometheus has no heir to his bloodline, he cannot perish. Even if he breaks a vow, he will merely suffer until he has an heir. Prometheus is already in enough agony, so I will ensure his vow is kept.” Hades pats the urn.

“He’s suffering?” I whisper. Prometheus avoided that more than anything. Have his schemes have somehow backfired on him? But how? Prometheus is too clever for that.

Hades turns to me, his smirk still in place. Because he is amused or because he

doesn't know how to retire smiles he's finished with? "He is suffering— more any soul in Tartarus. Zeus was always . . . creative ."

" Zeus ? What has he done to Prometheus?" I charge forward, hoping Hades won't realize I'm coming for the urn as well as for answers. " Why would Zeus do anything to him? Prometheus chose Zeus over me!"

"What a ridiculous decision. As disgusting as you are, mortal maid, you are much preferable to my fellow Firstborn." Hades shakes his head. "My so-called brother has your wretch of a husband chained to some mountain where he is slowly being devoured by animals."

I do my best to muffle my horrified scream.

Dionysus must think I am ready to faint, because he is suddenly behind me, steadying me by my shoulders.

Atum takes several stumbling steps toward Hades before straightening. "A bargain. You mentioned a bargain. What was it for, and how do you have the ability to honor it?"

"He gave me this back, of course." Hades gestures to the urn.

Sia frowns. "How can he give you what isn't his?"

I also want to know, but I'm still screaming into my hands, so I can't add to his question.

"It was in the possession of his wife. I understand enough about marriage customs to know that makes it his ." Hades spins the urn. "Not to worry; neither Zeus nor any other living soul ever touch this. All trace of what that annoyance thought he could

steal from me shall be consumed by the greater fires of Tartarus.”

“Very well,” Atum says, like he can speak for the stolen urn. Perhaps I ought to let him, since I apparently can’t. “But what did you give Prometheus in return? You said yourself that you cannot kill him despite his request.”

My knees give out, and only Dionysus keeps me from collapsing.

Hades runs strangely long fingers over the urn. “We negotiated until the bargain could be resolved, as is standard. Your former servant’s next request was his freedom from his chains, but I also could not grant it.”

“Wh-why not?” I gasp.

“Because those chains are spelled. To touch them is to take on the agony of their captive.”

“So, you could have freed him, but you didn’t.”

Hades narrows his eyes at me like he can tell I’m unhappy with him and doesn’t approve of the audacity. “Suffering might be part and parcel of your miserable mortal lifespan, but Primordials are removed from such things. Pain is . . . unnatural to us. So, Prometheus and I negotiated until we found more acceptable terms.”

“And what mercy could your offer, Hades, that Prometheus would accept?” Atum demands.

“Escape. Not in death or in freedom, but in delirium.”

“Delirium?” Dionysus purses his lips. “Did you give him wine?”

“No, I gave him the ability to dream despite the pain. It is a mortal trait— you can ask the woman in your arms, or else the only Firstborn who understands their weaknesses.” He nods toward Atum.

Atum frowns. “How do you have the ability to grant such a thing?”

“You will find that you haven’t stolen all the Tablets in my possession, old foe.” The other corner of Hades’ lips lifts. “I have learned a process to temporarily transfer abilities from one soul to another. Some of my citizens must face the reality of their fate for a time, but Prometheus can no something other than his pain.”

“I can rescue him completely,” I announce, pulling away from Dionysus.

Instead of collapsing, I stumble toward where Hades first appeared. I feel the pulsing power of a closed rift. “I’ll go to him!”

“That will lead back to my realm, little mortal.” Hades cocks his head in exaggerated amusement. “Mine was not a straightforward journey.”

“But how will I find him?” I whirl to face Hades. “Did you see where he was?”

“Yes, on a mountain, like I said. I couldn’t say which one since topography has changed considerably since my reassignment. And someone likes to ensure my visits here are few and far between.”

“And I will continue to do so,” Atum counters.

Hades shakes his head. “As though I am the threat and not the one who visits Prometheus to delight in his suffering.”

With that, Hades steps into a new rift so quickly, it is like he vanishes in an instant,

Fire and all.

“We have to rescue him,” Atum whispers.

I nod. Prometheus is suffering, and even if he betrayed us, I cannot allow his agony to continue.

My husband, imperfect as he is, is all I truly have in this world. I was wealthy with his company and now I’m impoverished without it. And even if we can never truly reunite, I will deliver him from his greatest nightmare for the sake of our vows.

“Why?” Dionysus asks as he glances between Atum and me. “Did you forget the part where he betrayed you?”

“Well, you never fully allied yourself to my cause, either.”

Dionysus tosses his hands into the air. “Are you, or are you not, sheltering in my temple right now?”

“And I appreciate it, but I would love it even more if you provided sweet Hebe with a pair of spears.”

My “almost” bridegroom’s eyebrows nearly levitate off his head.

Sia turns to Atum. “If you wish, my master, I will again take to the skies to seek out Prometheus.”

Atum nods. “Thank you.”

“That will take too long,” I whisper. “Prometheus is already in too much pain.”

Dionysus winces. “Well, yes. But you heard the King of the Underworld—Prometheus can’t die.”

“But he wishes he could.” I close my eyes, trying to make sense of the gruesome picture Hades painted. “It’s because I stole the Fire, isn’t it? That’s why Zeus is punishing him.” First I drove my father to his death, and now I have condemned my husband to suffering.

“We can’t know for sure,” Atum offers softly.

I drag my fingers through my hair as I slowly lower myself to the ground. “When I went to steal that Fire, I knew I was likely sacrificing myself. But Prometheus wasn’t a price I was willing to pay.”

Dionysus gapes at him. “Even though he betrayed you, too?”

“That’s still not a fate I would wish on my worst enemy— especially since he’s my husband.” Except Prometheus isn’t my worst enemy. That role belongs to the monster Prometheus sacrificed everything to only to be consumed by his wrath anyway. The monster who even now may be visiting Prometheus for the sole purpose of tormenting him, if Hades is to be believed.

But if Zeus is paying visits to his prisoner . . .

I lift my head. “If I am to defy Zeus, I need you to teach me how to pray to the only God you all fear— the Creator.”

Dionysus gapes at me in horror. “You’re going to defy Zeus?”

Atum just grins. “What are you planning, sweet Hebe?”

Clenching my fists, I stand. “I’m stealing back my husband.”

Chapter Forty-Three

The Newlyweds

Hebe:

“Are you sure you want to do this? You know the consequences if you fail.”

Atum’s concerned words rattle in my head as Sia and I crouch outside of Zeus’ temple because I am sure. All my life, I’ve accepted every fate laid before me because I was the least of my tribe and desperate to do the most good. I was married because of this mindset.

I won’t be widowed because of it.

Sia once again takes his scarab form and flies upward, soaring out of sight. I’m left with only the sound of my pounding heart as I consider every decision that led me to this point.

The last time I came to Zeus’ temple, it was to steal his Fire. Now I’ve returned to take back what was stolen from me.

Despite my new power and the spears from Dionysus, I still feel so small— like I’m an imposter trying to play a game meant only for Olympians. And I am an imposter. But I’m also Hebe, and my husband needs me.

Once, I fought to save him because I had nothing to lose. Now, I fight because

everything is at risk.

Sia materializes beside me, and I nearly jump.

“Zeus is in residence,” he whispers. “He’s in the silver tower. Ares and Aphrodite are in the back gardens. The only soul I could find near the wall was a Nymph.”

“A Nymph?”

“Yes. Hopefully she won’t linger—”

But I’m already lunging over the wall.

I finally have a reason to fight for myself. Mayhap it’s not much of a reason, considering every kiss from Prometheus was a precursor to betrayal. But did my village really deserve all my goodwill either?

I land right in front of the Nymph who helped me before.

“Hello again,” I whisper.

Her eyes bulge without a hint of recognition. Then she yells, “Ares!”

Panicking, I open a rift to Prometheus’ temple. It’s the first thing that comes to mind.

Then I push her through and close the rift before transforming into her.

I take a moment to acclimate to this new form. It’s a slightly shorter height than I’m used to, but it’s definitely not as strange as so many other forms I’ve taken.

Suddenly, a shadow falls over the garden. Ares?

It isn't Ares.

Fear almost sends me leaping back over the wall. However, I hold my ground and force a smile at the Primordial approaching me.

Zeus beams back at me. "Juventas, I've been looking for you."

Prometheus:

A shadow falls over me, and I lift my head as the eagle lands. However, something far more beautiful steals my focus.

Hoping I don't look too macabre, I force a smile. "Hebe. I've been hoping to see you again."

Hebe offers me one of her tiny smiles in return as the Eagle squawks.

They reach me at the same time.

"I've missed you," I tell Hebe. Unlike the eagle, who I haven't missed the eagle at all .

The eagle takes offense, and its beak tears back into the tender flesh of my stomach.

Crying out, I almost forget about my amber. I bite it before the Eagle can reach it.

The amber brings reality to my trance, grounding me like I don't want to be. Hebe isn't here. All I have of her is this necklace. I can't protect myself; all I can salvage is this pendant. I am still caught in the wretched purgatory of waiting to see whether the Creator or Zeus will show me any mercy.

Hands grasp my face and turn me to face Hebe.

I blink, glad to see her again and desperate to fall into this dream of her. Anything to escape the sensation of all that should be within me being pulled out.

“Such a frail creature you are,” she murmurs. “And so deceitful, too.” Hebe rubs my face gently. “But mercy is coming yet. Your suffering shall have an end.”

Tears flow down my face at the beauty of her lies— and because of the agony the eagle continues to cause.

Caressing my face again, the vision of Hebe presses her temple to mine. “Just as you laid down your life for your beloved, so will the Creator. But first, long before that time, another deliverer will come to you. The greatest mercies will be found in the greatest sufferings. You just need to wait a little longer . . .”

Hebe:

Not sure what else to do, I follow Zeus into his temple. Hopefully, Juventas is not a big talker since I cannot think of a single word to say.

My tongue has always failed me. That is why I depend on spears.

Thankfully, Zeus doesn't seem to be looking for conversation as he collapses onto his throne.

I stand awkwardly by the table, unsure what Juventas would do in this situation.

Zeus gestures toward the table. “I thirst.”

Rushing forward, I grasp the first kylix and then kneel before him, hoping it's

something he finds worthy. Is this the pose Juventas would normally take?

Zeus's brows rise, and something dances in his eyes that I dislike. "I have to say, my favorite little cup bearer, that I like this new level of service."

Forcing a smile, I press the kylix to his lips and hope it silences him.

It does until Zeus drains it dry. Then his hand wraps around my wrist and draws that to his lips next.

I resist the urge to recoil. Instead, I tentatively reach behind me with my untainted hand and grasp another kylix. Then I swing it forward, replacing my wrist with the cup.

Zeus makes a surprised sound that turns into something I hate far more as he gulps down this kylix.

Pulling it away the moment it's empty, I demurely lower my gaze. "Is there anything else you desire?"

"Yes, actually." Zeus runs his hand through the mossy green tresses my curls transformed into. "I wish you were truly my daughter."

I nearly choke. "Your . . . daughter?"

Zeus nods lazily before leaning further against the couch. "I actually have a gift for you in the sun's locker. Why don't you go see if you can find it? While it's still just you and me. Unfortunately, I had to summon the foolish mortals and the wiser Entities for a speech later today."

Swallowing hard, I nod and rise. Then I stride toward the golden tower as calmly as

possible. Zeus doesn't follow, apparently wanting to give me a moment with the gift I am to find.

This is my chance to look for rifts.

I step into the large tower room, my gaze falling on where the Fire was stored. All the dust of the disintegrated column has been cleared away.

There is a large reclining couch to the side of the room laden with several flowers. Is that the gift? Even though Juventas is a naiad, not a dryad?

Stepping toward it, I hurry out of any angle where Zeus could see me from the banquet hall.

And that's when I feel it. The pulsing power of what must be a recently opened rift.

Hopefully, when Juventas doesn't return, Zeus assumes I went out the window as a nymph and doesn't realize a Primordial was in his presence who used his rift. The risks don't matter, though.

I open the rift before I can stop myself.

On the other side is the most grotesque scene I've ever seen. A man is chained to a stone. Blood coats the ground in front of him as the largest, palest eagle I have ever seen tears into his stomach.

I press a hand over my mouth to muffle my cries of horror. This is far worse than any nightmare could have prepared me for. A weak part of me wants to close the rift and pretend like such inhumanity cannot exist.

But then the man on the stone lifts his face. Prometheus. He does not scream, his

mouth biting down on something. Tears stream freely down his face and sweat flattens his fiery hair to his head.

Worst of all, though, are Prometheus' eyes. They are still the color of the hottest fire, yet, the light in them has dulled from pain. It is like he is being extinguished from the inside out.

Without another thought, I step through the rift and let it close behind me.

Chapter Forty-Four

Prometheus

Confused, I gape at the Nymph. Why am I imagining here instead of Hebe? Why is she even here? I think I took her form once, but that feels like a lifetime ago.

As if sensing my desires, my delusion shifts from the Nymph to my wife. She is wearing one of the dresses of her people, and the skin of the Nubian Lion is draped from her shoulders. Her skin no longer bears the trace of my power flowing through it. She looks like she did when I first wed her, only her skin is glowing.

How could I have ever thought Hebe was anything other than beautiful? Her heartbroken expression is both fierce and kind, just like her heart. She is everything I ought to have desired in a bride, yet could never deserve.

Smiling around the amber in my mouth, I let my head roll to the side. In a moment, I will have enough strength to look back upon her fierce beauty. In a moment, I can pretend that it is just her and me on this cliff and that all my blood is still within me. In a moment . . .

The Eagle squawks suddenly and its beak stops tearing into my flesh.

I watch in confusion as it jerks backward, a spear protruding from its stomach. Then another spearhead joins it.

Suddenly, Hebe is right behind it, grabbing hold of both the spears embedded into the

bird and using them to lift the Caucasian Eagle. She hoists it to the side, throwing it like her rage gives her strength.

The Eagle lands several cubits away and goes still. I can't help but notice that Hebe didn't throw it off the cliff. Likely, she intends to retrieve her spears and a few tokens from the corpse. Ever practical, my wife.

Even though this is only another blessed delusion from Hades, I cannot help but grin. For once, I don't feel the eagle tearing into me. My stomach still aches because though the eagle is dead in my dream, it is still devouring me. Still, I'm gazing at my little warrior again . . .

"You are magnificent," I murmur, the necklace falling out of my mouth before I can catch it again.

Hebe's gaze follows it. "What's that?"

I frown. Why doesn't my delusion of Hebe remember her own cousin's gift? "The token of our marriage."

"I know that, but why was it in your mouth?" Hebe's soft hands press gently against my stomach like she's trying to staunch my bleeding. It stings and I can think of a dozen other places I'd prefer her touch.

"To protect it."

"You really are fond of it."

"I love it, actually, and intend to keep it forever."

Hebe's beautiful, tear-filled eyes dart up to meet my gaze. "Why?"

“Because, as you well know by now, I am a selfish creature. If I was to be bound to a life of eternal agony, I wanted every moment of that to also be bound to you, my wife.”

Her lips part in surprise, her hands still splayed over my stomach. Hebe leans closer to increase the pressure.

I stare at her lips. If only she could lean a little closer . . .

“Why are you here?” Hebe whispers. “Why did Zeus do this to you?”

“Because I stole his Fire.” Strangely enough, my stomach is aching less now. Almost like it is knitting back together rather than being torn to shreds.

“I-I don’t understand.” Hebe furrows her brows. “I stole the Fire—”

My lips brush over hers. I’m desperate for more than this imaginary taste, but it is all I can reach— and may be all I can bear. “ Shh , Little Flame. I am the thief and must always be so in Zeus’ eyes.”

“But why ?”

“So curious. You truly have become flesh of my flesh.” I let my temple rest on hers since I haven’t the strength or will to pull away. “Don’t you understand? I certainly don’t. And yet . . . I will die a little every day if that’s what it takes to give you a chance at a better life.”

Hebe inhales sharply.

“I brought you back from the brink of death. Do you really think there is anything I wouldn’t do for you?” My eyes drift closed despite how much as I wish I could

continue to gaze at her. “My suffering is too little a price to spare you and save those you love, don’t you think?”

“No.”

“No?” Pure surprise gives me the strength to open my eyes again.

“No.” Hebe lifts her chin. “Because I love you most of all.”

Then her lips are fully on mine.

For a delusion, this is the realest experience I’ve ever felt. Hebe is holding me while I heal and her mouth confirms her confession of love without words . . .

I gasp when she pulls away. “You’re— you’re actually here, aren’t you?”

“Of course.” Her gaze falls to my stomach and her eyes widen.

But I can’t look away from her. “But you knew the truth. I’m a trickster.”

“Even so, have I ever proven myself a coward?” Hebe’s hands move across my stomach, her words laced with awe. “How could I turn my back on the husband I bound myself to?”

“Easily enough, I should think.”

“No. Just as you don’t despise me for all that I’m not, I love you for all that you are—trickster and all.”

Joy like I never thought I’d experience again shines through me. If my hands were free, I’d embrace Hebe. But since they’re not . . . “You asked me once what I desired

most in this world. It's you. A life with you. ”

Hebe beams back at me and caresses my face like I wish I could do in return. “I told you once what I wanted was to be a legend renown to the ages.”

“And I stole your glory, didn't I?”

“You paid the price, so you get to be the legend. I am just honored to be your hero. And . . . Prometheus, I think you're healed.”

Startled, I glance down at my stomach and see . . . flesh. Just flesh. Well, mostly. There are a few rags and several jagged scars where my skin was torn apart and pieced back together. But I'm whole again.

I didn't think I'd ever be whole again. “Hebe— how?!”

“You infused your power into me. I've just given a little back.”

Grinning, I wish more than anything to throw my arms around her and kiss her. But since I'm still chained, I have to settle for her peck on my mouth.

“Run away with me,” she murmurs against me.

“I thought only cowards run.”

“You've been brave enough.” She pulls away far too quickly. “Let me see about freeing you now.”

The smile falls off my face. “Hebe, wait—”

“Yes, Hebe, listen to your husband .”

The intruding voice causes me to lift my gaze from Hebe. I find Zeus watching us with a grim smile. His gaze falls on the dead Eagle before turning back to us. “It looks like I have two pets to avenge. And two souls are here to pay the price.”

Chapter Forty-Five

Hebe

I whirl around to face the monster who tormented my husband smirking at us like he expects me to cower.

My hands, still stained with Prometheus' blood, clench into fists.

Oh, no, it is him who should beg for mercy. "Actually, O great Zeus , you will be releasing my husband and calling off your war."

" Hebe, " Prometheus hisses.

Zeus just arches both his golden brows. "No, little mortal, I think not." Then he lifts his hands, sparks charging in the air. "It seems only fitting to avenge my beasts by first slaughtering Prometheus' pet."

Prometheus tugs at his chains. "Hebe, run!"

"No." With that announcement, I tug the lion skin off my back and whirl to face Prometheus. I nearly fall against him as I hold the skin up so that it shields both of us just as the onslaught begins.

Powerful pressure bursts against me, no doubt bruising my back. But I do not feel sparks nor do I smell burning. The lion skin is invulnerable to even Zeus' lightning, it would seem.

After several tense moments, the onslaught finally dissipates into nothing.

Slowly, I lower the lion skin and turn to find Zeus where he stood before. Except now he is leaning slightly, like he is too tired to stand upright. He doesn't even seem to have the energy to open his eyes all the way.

Yet his gaze is focused on me anyway. "Who are you?"

"I am the wife of Prometheus, and I've come to reclaim him."

Since Zeus doesn't look like he plans on pouring out more of his wrath— or like he even could— I slowly edge around the stone. I inspect the chain binding Prometheus and search for vulnerabilities.

"Hebe, I appreciate everything you've done," Prometheus says. "But there's nothing else you can do— these chains are cursed."

I touch them and a lesser form of lightning courses through me. "Cursed how?"

"To bring suffering upon whomever seeks to break them." A sick grin returns to Zeus' face. "For every moment you struggle against those chains, you shall bear the pain of the one they bind."

"It's not worth it, Hebe," Prometheus calls. "You delivered me from the Eagle. Nothing more is required of you, my love."

"You really love me?" I whisper.

"More than anything."

I finish rounding the stone, finding no obvious vulnerability in the chain. I cannot

even see where it begins or ends. Whatever this it, it's not mortal-made.

But the claws at my throat are powerful enough to slice through the hide that shielded me from Zeus' wrath. They must be capable of slicing through these as well.

Undoing the leather necklace, I take the claws to the topmost chain.

Lightning surges from the claws and into me. I drop to my knees in surprise.

"Hebe!" Prometheus cries as Zeus chuckles darkly.

I push myself to my feet. The power Prometheus gave me still flows through me despite my mortal vulnerability to pain. Focusing on the power, I aim my hand so that when I slice at the chain again, some of my strength carries through.

The first chain snaps apart as I fall back to my knees.

"Hebe, please ," Prometheus whispers.

I turn to him. "I am willing to endure suffering for a little while to enjoy eternity with you." With that, I snap the second chain.

This time, I can't help but scream.

Zeus falls strangely silent while Prometheus calls out to me again. I can't hear his words exactly, though, because my ears are ringing. But my vision returns, and I count four more chains.

Pushing myself back to my feet, I give a war cry. Then I shatter the third chain.

I fall to my knees so hard I nearly collapse. Tears stream down my face.

It takes a moment, but I drag myself back to my feet and slice the fourth chain.

In the next moment, I'm on the ground being sick. My dress clings to my sweat-drenched body.

Behind me, Prometheus struggles to escape the final chain, but it continues to restrain him.

Wiping off my mouth, I stagger back to my feet. Then I stumble back to the rock. I take a deep breath, and then I slice through the last chain.

Prometheus catches me before I can collapse into the pool of his blood.

I smile weakly up at him as he stares down at me in concern.

As abused as my mortal body feels, the Primordial magic in my bloodline still surges with power. I push away and stand on my own.

Prometheus stares at me before his eyes widen. He glances around before turning back to me. "Hebe, you freed me!"

"Well, I said I would. And we both know you're the trickster in our marriage, not me."

Grinning, Prometheus pulls me into his arms, embracing me tightly.

"I don't understand."

Lifting my face, I find Zeus gaping at us. I had forgotten about him.

Zeus glances between the broken chains and us. "A mortal shouldn't have survived

breaking those bonds.”

Prometheus holds me more tightly. “She is no mere mortal. She is like us now.”

The hostile Primordial stumbles backward. “An Ascendant ?!”

“No, an Awoken .” Prometheus turns so that we can both better face Zeus. “I willingly gave her a share of my powers. And in return, she has both healed and freed me.”

Zeus’ gaze falls to Prometheus’ stomach before turning back to me. “Were your powers fading without him? Is that why you returned to him?”

“No, I retained my full strength when we were parted.” I lean my head on Prometheus’ shoulder.

“Then why did you return? Why did you choose to suffer ?”

“The same reason he suffered for me.” Pulling away, I beam up at Prometheus as I wrap the lion skin cloak around his shoulders, since there isn’t much left of his chiton . “Love.”

Prometheus smiles down at me before turning back to Zeus. “Your war is over nothing, Guardian of the Firmament. You have driven us all to weakness because you fear those we were charged to protect.”

This speech seems wasted on Zeus alone, so I twirl my arms.

A new rift opens behind Zeus. A large one that has us hovering over his temple.

There’s a small army of mortals inside his courtyard now. Are these the men who laid

the trap in Atum's temple that ended my life?

Standing as far from them as possible are half a dozen of beautiful beings who must be Primordials. Mortal and immortal alike stare up at our rift in confusion.

Zeus doesn't seem to notice the rift behind him, though, as he glares at Prometheus. "The mortals are capable of killing us."

Prometheus straightens more as some of his own strength returns. "And you have seen with your own eyes that they can also heal us."

"They can steal our power."

"We can give them the power freely so both parties flourish."

Zeus snorts. "Why should we trust such a hateful species?"

"You saw with your own eyes what my wife suffered to save me." Prometheus tugs me close and presses his lips to mine.

When we pull away, Zeus is staring at me hungrily, like he wants a mortal bride of his own.

With a flick of my wrist, I expand my portal so that Zeus falls through.

As he plummets— not to death like he deserves, but to pain and humiliation, at least— Prometheus and I step closer to our audience. Though Prometheus is looking at me rather than at them, a wide grin on his face.

"What?" I ask.

“You are radiant when you’re victorious.”

Biting my lip to keep from smiling too wide, I open another rift. Together, we step onto the top of Zeus’ temple.

Everyone watches in stunned silence.

It’s up to me to fill it. Except, I loathe speaking.

I glance at Prometheus and he nods. Then he turns to those listening. “You have followed Zeus into war, which has caused an ambrosia drought.”

Turning to the mortals, I add as loudly as I dare, “And for us, it has caused both drought and famine.”

“Our suffering has multiplied the more we struggled against each other,” Prometheus adds. “But you have witnessed the power my bride— born a mortal— possesses. She humbled the one you made your king with a flick of her hand!”

I glance back to see Zeus struggling to pick himself off the ground. Will his rage give him power?

Prometheus follows my gaze. “His body will be too busy healing itself to feed his wrath for some time.”

“How do you possess this power?” demands a frightening male Primordial standing beside the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen.

My husband turns to me.

Sighing, I lift my voice. “Because the Creator assigned your kind to be guardians

over my people, but you have disobeyed Him and suffered the consequences. However, I have always served my people, and I have yet to fail them. That is why my strength is great— and yours can be, too.”

The Primordials whisper excitedly amongst themselves.

“A mortal has become a goddess!” someone yells.

Turning, I see that the cry has come from the mortals. One drops to his knees, and the rest hurry to follow. “Goddess of youth. Goddess of immortality!”

I hold up my hands. “No, no— none of that. I was born a mortal, just like you. I seek only to learn and to teach. To discover knowledge and to pass it on. Do not worship me; just follow me as I seek the path the Creator laid out for us.”

Prometheus’ grip on my waist tightens, his gaze on me like I am the only one here. “I like the sound of that, wife.”

“Enough to open up your temple to the public so we can share your collections with learners?”

He sucks in his breath, but he doesn’t say no.

When I turn back to the Primordials, they are all tossing aside their kylixes filled with Zeus’ ambrosia. All except the first Primordial who spoke— until the beautiful Primordial snatches it out of his hand and tosses it aside.

Prometheus smirks as he watches the exchange. “It looks like love overcomes war this time.”

“Speaking of which . . .” I lean toward him. “Remind me, when we get back to our

temple—”

“‘Our’ temple?”

“Yes. Our temple. Anyway, there’s another mortal bonding ritual I haven’t shared with you yet.”

His eyes widen. “Then let’s be off posthaste!”

I gesture toward our audience. “We should probably secure peace in the form of vows while the Primordials favor still us.”

Prometheus groans. “And then we’ll go straight to the temple?”

“Of course— after we should inform Atum that you are free, that his scheme for peace worked, and that Zeus has been removed from his false throne.”

“I’m sure Sia is flying around here and can pass that on.”

I pat Prometheus on his chest and adjust the lion skin. “In person would be polite. Oh, and you’ll also need to set up protections on the temple against Zeus in case you haven’t already.”

“And then ?”

“Then you promised to bring my cousin and his family there.”

Prometheus scowls. “That was before you secured their safety. It would please me to enjoy the temple with just you and me for a moment at least.”

“Well, there’s already a Nymph running around the temple who we should probably

send home.”

“ What ?”

I press a lingering kiss to Prometheus’ lips and then tug him through another rift that deposits us in the courtyard where the Primordials are waiting. Prometheus and I have an eternity ahead of us . But first, we have a peace treaty to draw up between our peoples.

Prometheus sniffs, indignant. “Well, don’t expect me to share my Ren with you anytime soon with that attitude.”

Despite his words, I can’t help but grin. We have so much to share with each other the moment we are alone.

When I was a mortal, I believed the best way I could serve my people was to sacrifice my otherwise inconsequential life. Even when I transformed into an immortal and death became elusive, I never imagined how I would actually live.

Bringing an end to the bloodshed I once hoped to take part in alongside the husband I loved.

We may not be remembered for the peace that shall be forged from this day onward, since only fallen heroes’ names are worth repeating. Yet . . .

I squeeze Prometheus’ hand and share another smile and steal another kiss.

Yet, I wouldn’t exchange this fate for any other.

Chapter Forty-Six

Prometheus

I am still new to such things, but I never could have dreamed that my life could turn out like this after everything. Apparently, suffering isn't the end.

“How are you feeling?” Hebe asks as she traces the jagged scars on my stomach where my new flesh doesn't quite match the rest of me.

Like Hebe has somehow transformed my humble ziggurat into an Olympian-level temple that contains every possible pleasure. “I just hope Hades' bargain wears off soon, or else I might endure a nightmare after all my sufferings.”

Gasping, Hebe recoils, forcing me to open my eyes to ensure she is still nearby. I like the idea of parting from my wife even less than the thought of having a nightmare.

However, Hebe hasn't withdrawn completely. She still stands next to the dining couch I'm reclining on in my washroom containing half a dozen different types of pools. The chiton she put on— incorrectly— in an attempt to please me is soaked after both my baths. That's my fault since I insisted that I was too weak to use the pumice stone, so she had no choice but to take care of me.

“What would make you feel better?” Hebe asks, adjusting the linen towel wrapped around my waist and then rubbing my shoulders.

Since this is doing the trick nicely, I let it continue a few moments longer. Then I

glance at the Egyptian-style pool we haven't used yet and wonder if I can get a third bath out of this arrangement. Not that there's any dried blood left to remove, but the baths are close to causing Hebe to finally confess the secret mortal bonding tradition she continues to withhold from me.

But mayhap telling the truth will prove more effective? "I would recover much more quickly if you could stop playing coy and finally tell me what that tradition is. I would love to discover it alongside you."

"I'm sure you would." Laughing, Hebe presses her lips to the top of my head. " Soon . But first, you must be starving."

I groan, but she's not wrong. Even if she were, Hebe rushes out of the washroom before I can put my protests into words.

A moment later, Hebe returns balancing a platter with leftovers from Dionysus' picnic arrayed on it in one hand and a kylix in the other.

Hebe places the platter on my lab, and I take the kylix directly and throw it back. Wine isn't perfect, but it's better than nothing.

Except, it isn't wine.

I choke as powerful ambrosia flows through me instead. "Wh-where did you get this?"

"From your storeroom." Hebe purses her lips together. "Was that your emergency stash?" She furrows her brows like she isn't sure what constitutes as an emergency if not my suffering.

"I don't have an emergency stash," I whisper, staring at the amber liquid in shock. "I don't have any ."

“What?”

I throw back the rest of the ambrosia, feeling its healing power further soothe me. Then I set the platter aside and spring from the dining couch.

“Prometheus?!” Hebe cries, sounding alarmed that I’m abandoning my facade of weakness.

Ignoring her, I rush into my storeroom that was empty except for Dionysus’ picnic and some herbs that I can never seem to use up. All my clay containers are empty. All except the largest one, which is nearly as tall as me and kept in the coolest corner of the room. That one is filled to the brim with ambrosia.

“I can’t believe it,” I whisper.

Hebe comes running into the kitchens. “Prometheus, please explain what’s going on.”

I consider holding it over her to get information about the bonding tradition sooner, but I’m too stunned to be cunning. “The mortals hold you in reverence now. Their gratitude manifests as ambrosia.”

Coming up behind me, Hebe wraps one arm around my shoulders. “Are you sure this isn’t because you have risen in their esteem? You are the thief of fire, after all.”

Snorting at the misnomer, I press a kiss to Hebe’s curls. “They don’t care about that. It’s the goddess of immortality that they are excited about. And that’s just as well; you deserve to be a legend.”

“But you deserve their favor after all the suffering you endured on their behalf.”

I wrap both arms around Hebe, my fingers tracing with the skin she couldn’t properly cover when she put on her chiton . “I only care about one mortal’s favor now.”

“Whose?” Hebe narrows her eyes at me. “I’m not a mortal any longer, or have you forgotten?”

“Oh, yes, that’s right.” Leaning down, I press my lips where I Kissed her.

“Uh, pardon me.”

Hebe jumps out of my embrace and then slides between me and the Nymph standing in the doorway.

Juventas ducks her head. “I just wanted to say that I found an unclaimed ravine nearby, and I was going to make it my new domain. But I think I’ll come back later with my announcement.”

With that, the Nymph turns and strides quickly away, mumbling something about us being as bad as Aphrodite and Ares. And is Juventas wearing one of the gowns from my— well, Hebe’s— garment collection?

I turn slowly to Hebe, who seems relieved that we’re alone again. Except we should have been alone the entire time. “I thought you said you would take care of her?”

“And I have. I gave her some supplies and told her she could stay as long as she wanted—”

“ Hebe .”

“She didn’t want to go back to Zeus.” Hebe crosses her arms and glares at me like this is a fight she refuses to surrender. “And I certainly couldn’t blame her. Now you have your first acolyte.”

“That’s not how this works . . .”

“Then we’ve discovered a new way of doing things.” Hebe beams at me before striding into the room I keep my furniture collection. “Besides, she helped me when I first visited Zeus’ temple.”

I press my lips together. “Yes, right . . .”

“What do you mean?” Hebe turns to face me in the center of the room with crossed arms. She’s gotten very good at telling when I’m not being completely forthright.

“I’ll explain after you share the bonding tradition,” I offer as I lean against the doorpost. I don’t care to make it an official bargain, but if she makes me wait much longer, I may not be able to help myself.

“I think you’ll explain now, Ithax .”

Hebe’s use of my Ren draws me several steps closer to her. It also reminds me that even though I was close to discovering her secret in the washroom, she extracted mine with a single caress. My Little Flame is using ingenuity against me.

And she is continuing to do so.

Hebe’s sharp gaze glances between the doorpost she knows I wouldn’t abandon easily and me. “What was that?”

“You used my Secret Name. Even if the distance between us doesn’t require a rift to draw me to you, I am still compelled to move closer.”

“Interesting .” Hebe looks far too smug about learning that information. “Thank you for sharing, Ithax.”

Groaning like closing the distance between us is somehow the last thing I want, I come to stand next to the bed Hebe is standing beside. “Is this close enough for you?”

“No, Ithax, it isn’t.”

I can’t disguise my smirk as I come to stand toe-to-toe with my wife. Then I wrap one arm around her waist and pull her against me. “How about now?”

Instead of responding directly, Hebe reaches up to caress my face. “Your personality may be absolutely boorish at times, but you have the prettiest eyes.”

“That is barely even half a compliment.” Despite my words, I wrap my other arm around her waist and hoist her into the air, if only to prove that I am now strong enough to learn all her secrets.

Hebe rests both her hands on my shoulders and wraps her legs around my waist. Then she arches her brows as she frowns down at me. “Someone seems to have recovered very quickly despite not being able to hold a pumice stone a few moments ago.”

“Your ministrations aided in my quick recovery.”

She just rolls her eyes, and I’m lost in the way they sparkle.

I sigh. “You may not want to give away all your secrets yet, but I’m ready to give you all mine. Starting with this one . . .”

Hebe leans closer, her hands on my shoulders moving to grip my neck so her fingers can tangle into my hair. “Yes?”

“You have the second prettiest eyes.”

She throws back her head and laughs. Then, even though it was even less of a compliment than the one she gave me, Hebe presses her lips to mine.

I kiss her back, utilizing every technique Hebe has taught me.

My grip tightens around her. No one will ever be able to tear us apart from each other again. I won't allow it, and neither will Hebe. We belong to each other . . . forever .