







# Wanting to Belong: Hephaestus Story (The Gods Made Me Do It #15)

**Author:** *Lisa Oliver*

**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Hephaestus, ancient Greek God of fire, metallurgy, and volcanoes, had lived a quiet life on earth, with the three cyclops his only companions. It was a lonely life, especially for one who never felt as though he belonged with his kin, but Hephaestus believed he was content. Until one afternoon, when he got blinded by a light, and right before his eyes, the one the Fates intended for him was sprawled on the road, all thanks to his inattention. Finding out later the little shifter was homeless, all compounded the guilt he was feeling.

Landyn, a small Black Footed Ferret shifter, hadn't stopped running for two years. Every time he felt he'd found somewhere safe, a voice from the past would jump out at him and remind him all over again that safety was an illusion. Having lost the use of his bike after a random car accident, Landyn was on the point of giving up on life. He had no food, nowhere to stay, and no energy left to run. When a random man finds him at the bridge he'd been sheltering under, he truly thought his life was done.

But the Fates love it when two misfits find each other, and Landyn and Hephaestus find a connection, even when the only thing they have in common is the fact they believe their mate would be better off with someone else. Unfortunately, there are others who are not as happy with their mating, and they'll do anything to split the two apart. Can Hephaestus and Landyn overcome the odds, or will their dreams of belonging disappear into the flames of Hephaestus's forge?

Featuring a cute ferret determined to see the best in life, a grumpy artist with a secret heart of gold, cameo appearances from some of the gods you've read about in other books in this series, and giants. This story can be read as a standalone.

**Total Pages (Source):** 28

## Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:37 am*

“Not tonight, Bronte.” Hephaestus pushed the cyclops’s hand off his thigh with a sigh. “I’m not feeling it, and yes, I can sense that you and your brothers are definitely up for some fun, but not tonight, at least not with me. Why don’t you go out for a while and find some willing company?”

“Hey Big H, it’s not like you to turn down a romp or a warm mouth around your dick.” Bronte stretched, showing off his large and widely muscled physique. “You’ve barely been at the studio in days, and when we get home at nights, you’re not interested in us either. Is there something you’re not telling us, about a special someone perhaps?”

“Ooh, sire, have you found yourself a new companion?” Steropes, who had been curled up with his brother Arges on the couch opposite them, sat up, looking interested. “Did you go to the gym like Bronte suggested the other day? There’re some lovely looking brutes down there that’d probably be happy to fall at your feet and worship those inches you keep hidden so much of the time.”

“No, I haven’t been to the gym, for obvious reasons.” Huffing with annoyance, Hephaestus got to his feet, hobbling over to the bar that took up one corner of the huge living space he shared with the cyclops. “There is no new companion. I wouldn’t go into a gym if you gave me all the gold on Earth and Olympus combined. Haven’t you ever had a time in your life when you weren’t thinking about getting your rocks off?”

“No.” Arges laughed, quickly mimicked by his brothers. “Honestly, sire, since you decided to live on Earth, there are so many delightful specimens who wander in and out of our days. How can you expect us to think about anything else?”

“I’m very happy for you.” And in his own way, Hephaestus was. He busied himself making a drink – something he could’ve clicked up, but he wanted to do something with his hands and stay out of the reach of Bronte’s grabby fingers. “Why don’t you go and find some of those delightful specimens and leave me to a peaceful evening?”

“But you’d get lonely.” Bronte was sprawled across the couch where Hephaestus had been sitting, like a cat seeking a warm spot – if the cat was six foot five, and built like a tank. “Sire, I know I tease you sometimes, but what’s wrong? You haven’t wanted to share our bed for weeks, which is fine. That’s happened before. We all go through times when we want to be alone. But you’re not going into the studio either...”

“It’s not like you to not want to be creating something,” Steropes added as Bronte trailed off. “Admittedly, there might be some who think making sculptures is nothing like the treasures you’ve created in the past, but here on Earth those sculptures are truly valuable. The reviewer of the last piece you did kept going on about how lifelike it was and how the man could almost believe the woman you created was crying. He loved it.”

“He was just another asshole with more money than sense.” Hephaestus rested his elbows on the bar, so he could ease the pressure on his aching leg. “And no, I’m not saying all our customers are like that, but he was. Imagine anyone commissioning a life-sized likeness of his dead wife.”

“A lot of people like to keep a likeness of their dearly departed around them,” Bronte pointed out.

“And if that was all it was, I’d be proud of the finished piece.” Hephaestus took a long swallow of his drink. “But most people, when they want a likeness of their loved one, they want to be reminded of how happy and beautiful that person was in life. That asshole wanted tears. He wanted a depiction of his wife, deeply sad and mourning the fact she had to leave his side. She died of cancer. A terrible illness that

ravaged her features and ask me how I know? Because he had pictures. Lots and lots of pictures of his wife's suffering." Hephaestus shook his head in disgust. "I truly don't understand people sometimes."

"That was a little unusual," Bronte agreed, "but that piece went out weeks ago. In fact, I remember us all partying together when it finally left the studio. No." He twirled around, sitting up, his feet planted on the carpet as he fluffed his fingers through his dark blond hair. "This is something else. Something deeper. Tell us, sire. You've never kept secrets from us before."

Not that you know about – that's why they're secrets. But Hephaestus wouldn't say that. The three cyclops had been his companions almost since the dawn of time and indeed were older than he was. As he struggled to think about what to say, Arges jumped in first.

"Is this about that little car incident last week, sire? Are you still upset you didn't see that tiny shifter?"

"Didn't see him?" Hephaestus bit back his words that threatened to spew from his throat. Inhaling deeply he said in a calmer tone, "The mortal could've been badly hurt or even killed. What was worse was I couldn't get out of the car fast enough to ensure he was all right."

"You didn't have to because I did it," Bronte said. "I picked him up and dusted him off. Yes, his bicycle was a bit battered, but it looked like it was still functional. He could push it. It was he that said he didn't want to involve the authorities. He wouldn't even take the hundred-dollar note I tried to give him for any repairs the bicycle needed. I ended up stuffing it in his jacket pocket just before he disappeared. But he moved away fast enough. He didn't appear to be in any pain."

Putting his head on the counter, Hephaestus groaned before lifting his head again.

“You didn’t stop to think that he might have disappeared purely and simply because he was being loomed over by a giant in a muscle shirt? Or that he might’ve been intimidated by the other two equally large loons, leaning out of the car windows yelling at you to hurry up because your damn pizza was getting cold?”

“Well, it was.” Bronte looked at his brothers for support. “I don’t know how mortals can handle cold pizza. It really doesn’t taste the same once it’s lost that freshly cooked heat, even if you reheat it. The fat from the cheese congeals in the wrong places and the crust never tastes the same.”

“You could’ve at least taken the time to get the shifter’s address, so we could have done a welfare check on him.”

“Sire, I don’t believe the little shifter was hurt,” Arges said, always trying to be the voice of reason. “The car bumper barely hit his wheel and...”

“He went sprawling face first into traffic.” Hephaestus thumped the counter with his fists. He didn’t think he’d ever forget that sight for the rest of his eternal existence. And to know he caused it...

“I saw him, or should I say, I caught a glimpse of him two nights ago. I’m fairly sure it was him,” Steropes said. “Remember, Arges, when we were walking back from that club we were at that night? Bronte got lucky and we thought we’d take a walk down by the lake. I’m sure I saw that little shifter then. If it was him, he was huddled under that little overpass, the one by that building – you know...”

“Oh, yes,” Arges said. “I know where you mean. That place they call a beach but it’s a lake with sand on the edge of it. Near to where the boats are. 31 st Street Beach, I think – somewhere like that. There was a bit of a park with some trees, and that grass area. Anyhow, it looked like he was planning to sleep there. Not sure how comfortable it would be, but there you go.”

Hephaestus's blood went cold. "The shifter I hit with the car was unhoused? You didn't think to tell me?"

"That was hardly your fault," Bronte protested. "Chances are he was already living on the streets when the car nudged his bicycle. We're not allowed to interfere in mortal affairs, remember? If he was someone special, and the gods knew about him, they would send in someone to help him out."

"Yeah, Zeus and Hades do that all the time," Steropes agreed. "They have that wolf shifter, and that demon fella..."

Hephaestus hung his head, filled with guilt as he remembered the last three messages he had from Zeus, all within the last week. He knew damned well his arrogant father wouldn't be sending anyone to help the shifter because in Zeus's eyes the person who was meant to help him was already in town. And if I let my insecurities get in the way of helping him...

"So, do you want to come out with us, sire?" Bronte jumped to his feet. "I can understand if you've gotten tired of Arges' saggy ass, but now you know the shifter's going to be all right, or not, depending on what the Fates decree, but nothing to do with you," he added quickly. "Getting out for a bit and mixing with others would be the best thing for you. You know you just have to sit looking all broody and interesting and you have men and women all competing with each other to catch your eye."

Just the thought of doing that made Hephaestus feel sick. "You go," he said firmly. "Your mention of Zeus reminded me he's been trying to get in touch with me for the past few days." That wasn't a lie. "I'll contact him, and catch up with you later."

"You're going to Olympus?" Steropes' mouth dropped open in shock.

“Zeus has set up home in Montana with his mate, Paulie.” Hephaestus shook his head. Cyclops were considered intelligent and skilled, but if something didn’t involve them, information just sailed in one ear and out the other. “They even have a new kid... hmm. That would make the new one my half brother, I think, but more importantly, Zeus has a phone. Still, go, go.” He made shooing motions with his hands. “Have fun. I’ll see you when I do. Go.”

“He needs to get laid big time,” Bronte stage-whispered to his brothers as they left the house. But sex was the last thing Hephaestus was thinking about.

How on earth does someone tell their prospective mate that they hit them with a car?

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:37 am*

Landyn pulled the edges of his jacket so it fit tighter against his skinny frame. He was chilled. Water had seeped in through the holes in the bottom of his worn sneakers, and the tears in the knees of his jeans were no barrier against the brisk breeze. I should shift – at least I'd be warmer then. But the last time he'd done that someone had come along looking to steal his clothes, probably thinking they were unattended. When Landyn tried to defend his few meager possessions, still in his shifted form, the thief's dog tried to eat him. So no shifting for me.

Not that Landyn was sure he'd even have the energy to shift because he had no food, either. Landyn's stomach had gotten past the rumbling stage and just felt like an empty pit all the time. For the past two nights, Landyn had been so tempted to shift, especially when he'd spotted a mouse scuttling just a foot from where he was trying to sleep. It would be so easy. His ferret would be overjoyed to have something in their guts, but Landyn just couldn't. He really didn't have the stomach to kill anything, and the irony wasn't lost on him. Things aren't that bad yet.

The breeze whistling under the bridge he was huddled under seemed never ending. He'd wondered, originally, why none of the other seasoned rough sleepers had staked out their territory in his spot. The overpass wasn't big, or particularly tall, although Landyn was short enough he could almost stand upright in the space. It kept the rain off and gave Landyn the illusion of shelter even when there wasn't any.

It took two nights sleeping there to realize the wind was why the spot was always empty. Seasoned rough sleepers had the warm places in the city already booked out, and Landyn knew better than to try and encroach on someone else's space. It's all right, Landyn mentally chanted. Everything will be all right.

Although, when the night was cold, and the yells of youths roaming the streets having their parties on the sand or in the parking lots made him cringe and wish he could be invisible, it was getting more and more difficult to hold onto a positive attitude.

It hadn't been so bad when he had his bike. Landyn had been able to make a few dollars running deliveries all over town. An entrepreneurial rough sleeper had alerted him to that possibility on one of his first days in town, and Landyn had been grateful for the help. The money wasn't enough to give him somewhere to stay, but he could eat regularly, and for his type of animal spirit that was important.

But one moment of inattentiveness had ruined all that. Landyn blamed himself entirely. He had been daydreaming about the food he could buy when he'd finished the delivery he was making.

He wouldn't have been able to get much – he never seemed to be able to earn enough to buy foods that would sustain him, but it would've been something. He'd been hungry for what felt like months, and so he was rushing, trying to deliver a package just two blocks over from where he was hit.

He hadn't seen the car – he didn't even think he'd been in the line of traffic, but clearly he had been because one minute he was sure he could smell pizza and the next minute he was face first on the asphalt.

Thinking back on the scene now, Landyn felt it was possible the big guy who jumped out of the huge car was probably trying to help. Landyn didn't get the sense the guy was particularly caring, but the man hadn't hurt him. Unfortunately, history had taught Landyn to fear anyone big and all he could see were the ham fists and a wide chest. Every instinct in him was telling him he had to leave. He got away as quick as he could, pushing his bike out of the way of other cars.

It wasn't until he was on the footpath that he realized the front wheel of his bike was

buckled in two places and there was no way he could afford to get a new one. He got five dollars from the guy at the bike shop who bought his only mode of transport for scrap metal. Without it, Landyn couldn't offer the few companies that did use him for local deliveries a speedy service. He'd been as careful as he could be with the hundred dollars the big guy had thought he was being sneaky about, stuffing it in his jacket pocket, but that, like any hope of a hot meal, was history.

I just wish it wasn't so cold. Landyn knew he was on the point of giving up, although there might be some who'd think he had nothing left to give. Looking out between the concrete pillars at the water lapping gently on the shore, Landyn thought longingly of a warm house, a soft bed, or his favorite fantasy - a huge dining table stacked high with his favorite foods. Landyn had never been a fussy eater, but since he'd been on the run, even the occasional cockroaches he saw were starting to look tasty.

The problem with Chicago, the way Landyn saw it, was that it was just too big, too noisy, and too scary. Originally, when Landyn had stumbled into town, he thought he could hide in plain sight. No one noticed him or paid attention to him, but for Landyn the city was a huge culture shock. By the time he'd reached the lake, Landyn realized he couldn't run any farther. He was done. Just the thought of going anywhere else was too tiring to even think about. All he could do was hide and pray no one would find him.

"There you are. I've been scouring the whole park area looking for you."

Landyn jumped and then froze, his knees turning to water and his heart beating out of his chest. He couldn't have jumped up or shifted if he'd tried, he was so scared. All he could see was a large shadow, blocking his view of the water and he realized in that moment that when it came to praying, no one had been listening to him.

## Page 3

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Despite what he'd said to his friends, there was no way Hephaestus was actually going to talk to Zeus. It had been centuries since they'd had a civil conversation. Besides, in the modern age there was no reason for gods to congregate or socialize with each other. They had no input in mortal affairs, no one worshipped them anymore.

There had been many times throughout history when Hephaestus had wondered why ancient gods didn't just fade away instead of being forced to exist for eternity. But apparently because of their part in history, the gods were still important to mortal existence. They just had to find something to occupy their days that didn't involve meddling in mortal affairs.

Just because he didn't talk to Zeus, however, didn't mean that Hephaestus hadn't kept up with what the ruler of their pantheon was doing. Zeus had even made that easier for any interested gods when he introduced the Paulie app that was automatically added to phones connected to the godly network. Zeus said it was to stop hackers gaining access to information mortals weren't meant to have, but Hephaestus privately thought Zeus had only created the app so he could lord over the others about the fact he had a fated mate.

The Paulie app, despite being another way Zeus tried to exert his influence over other gods, was a useful source of information. So when Hephaestus heard his friends leave the house for the evening, he pulled up the app, ignoring the red message icon that was flashing at him.

"Paulie." Hephaestus cleared his throat, staring at the screen and feeling really self-conscious about talking to what was essentially a box. "What is the main indicator

used by the Fates to alert any ancient god to the fact they might be in the vicinity of the person chosen for them?”

“Good evening, Hephaestus.” The Paulie app was always polite. “Not all gods have found their fated mates yet, however early indicators are that the person, when seen by the god, will be highlighted, as though lit up by a light from an unseen source.”

“A very bright light?”

“Again anecdotal evidence varies, but it would appear that the light is definitely visible, and only to the god concerned. It should be noted that the individual would remain lit up, in the god’s eyes, until after the claiming is complete.”

Hephaestus thought that would have to be the case, otherwise every mated ancient god would get a headache if they looked at their fated one for longer than five minutes, and sleep could be virtually impossible. “Paulie, can you tell me what happens in the case of where a god sees their mate, and yet doesn’t pursue that person in any romantic or relationship way?”

There was a long moment of silence, broken only by the ticking of the grandfather clock Hephaestus had in the corner of his living room. But finally Paulie asked, “Are you referring to the impact that negative decision might have on the god concerned or the mortal?”

“Both, I guess. For example, I understand that Zeus was aware of his mate for the better part of a year before claiming that person, and even then it was his mate who made the claiming bite first.”

Hephaestus wasn’t sure if the Paulie app could see his face, but he kept his smirk to himself just in case. “Likewise, I heard tales of how Owen, the Native American god, knew about Baby being his mate for thousands of years, and yet them staying apart

for so long didn't seem to have any negative impact on either of them prior to their claiming."

"Neither situation was ideal." If it was possible for an app to sound disapproving Paulie was doing a darn good job of it. "In the case of Owen and Baby, however, both parties were gods and were therefore already immortal. I am aware though, that when Owen did finally introduce himself to Baby, their relationship had a rocky start when Baby found out how long Owen had been watching him through that Oracle of his."

"And in Zeus's situation with his mate – the person you are named after?" Hephaestus couldn't resist pushing. He wanted to know if Zeus had built a failsafe into the app that refused to let the app ever say anything against the god who created it.

"The Almighty Zeus was able to keep an eye on his mate through his office, ensuring Paulie was safe. When it became clear the young man was in trouble, he sent operatives to ensure the young man could live a happy life until he was ready for them to be together. As with all gods, Zeus has to abide by the non-interference law that binds all ancient gods."

That was about as close an admission that Zeus fucked up that Hephaestus was going to get. "So, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that not claiming or taking up with a mate, even after seeing them - that delay doesn't have any adverse effect on either party?"

"You forget, Hephaestus, that in the case of Baby and Owen, and Zeus and Paulie, those parties were all immortal by virtue of their birth or how they came into being. For most gods, their mate will most likely be mortal until after they've been claimed. Examples of this include Thor with his shifter mate, Hades with his shifter consort, Poseidon's mate is also a shifter, and so is the mate of Thanatos. In all cases, those shifters were mortal prior to claiming.

“If you, hypothetically, had seen your mate and then failed to render aid or make yourself known to them for whatever reason, believing you had time to make their acquaintance later, that might not be possible. Mortals are in danger every day of their existence. They are born knowing death is just around the corner.

“Failing to claim a mate, hypothetically, is refusing to allow that individual’s right to the gift of immortality that the Fates intended for them. Indeed, that rejection by the god could even cause an earlier demise for the mortal, because of the rejection.” Paulie paused and then said, “I can’t imagine why anyone would treat a gift from the Fates that way.”

“Not all gods are mate material,” Hephaestus snapped, although he instantly regretted it. You’re talking to an app, not Zeus himself.

Paulie didn’t seem fazed by his tone. “The examples I’ve cited prove your point. And yet all the gods who have claimed their mates so far have found a renewed sense of purpose, happiness, and even the chance to raise new families with someone they know they can love and trust by their side. That is a precious gift one would be foolish to squander. Was there anything else?”

“No, thank you.”

“All hail the mighty Zeus and his beloved mate Paulie.”

Hephaestus thought the app would close down, but it didn’t. The message light seemed to glow brighter, growing until it dominated the screen. Sighing, Hephaestus clicked on the icon to see that yes, there were three messages from Zeus, all saying the same thing.

What the hell do you think you’re doing?

Deleting all three messages with a swipe of his finger across the screen, Hephaestus put the phone back into his pocket and leaned back against the couch, his mind swirling with a mix of memories old and current. The worshippers who'd claimed to be devoted to him, who then forgot about him as the sands of time moved on. The relationships mythology claimed he had with Aphrodite and the Graces. In truth, no one had ever loved him, and if Hephaestus was truly honest with himself, he'd never loved anyone in return.

And mates were meant to love and be loved in return.

Bronte, Arges, and Steropes were the three beings who had been in his life the longest. For all Bronte's talk, their sexual escapades were infrequent, and while they met a physical need, Hephaestus always knew he stood apart from the cyclops and the bond they shared between themselves.

For the longest time that hadn't mattered. I've never believed in love. Yet Hephaestus couldn't ignore the tug in his soul when he'd seen that young shifter sprawled out across the road. As he closed his eyes and thought about the scene in more detail, looking past the horror that he himself was responsible for the man's pain, other details became clearer, and Hephaestus's concern grew.

The shaggy hair. The pale, thin face and faded clothes. By the forge, his shoes had worn right through. I could see the grubby soles of his feet. How did I not remember seeing that at the time? But Hephaestus already knew why. He'd been blinded by that light, and so shocked at what it meant for him, everything else had escaped him.

He'll reject me. Hephaestus knew that was a strong possibility. Out of all the gods, if someone mentioned the word ugly it was him they were referring to. Between his lame leg and, well, he was built for power not to grace a magazine cover. Hephaestus ran his hand over his facial hair. It was trimmed, to a point... He's a shifter. That has to count for something, right? Hephaestus knew, anecdotally, that shifters were

incredibly loyal mates. He just hated the thought that anyone would be with him purely because they had to be.

But if I don't go after him, my mate will die. The image of the young man sprawled across the road would not leave him. He'd seen many hateful and horrible things in his life, but that image touched a part inside of Hephaestus he believed long dead.

I'm being ridiculous. Before he could second guess himself, Hephaestus materialized out of his house – destination, the 31 st Street Beach. With the light that would still be surrounding that shifter, no matter where he was, it shouldn't be too difficult to find him in the dark.

And he was right. The shifter was lit up like a beacon for Hephaestus to find. He just wished he could've thought of a smoother introduction line, because that poor soul looked absolutely terrified.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:37 am*

“I don’t want any trouble.” Landyn hated how shaky his voice sounded, but he wasn’t sure his legs would support him if he tried to run. The man was big. There was a chance he couldn’t reach Landyn, seeing as he’d wedged himself up the edge of the overpass, but that wasn’t guaranteed. “I haven’t got anything worth taking, I promise.”

The sigh was long and loud enough for Landyn to hear. “Look. I can’t get any nearer, I have an issue with my leg. Do you think you could come closer to me so I’m not yelling for anyone in the park to hear?”

The voice was deep and warm – one might almost say kind. But Landyn was still scared and now he was confused as well. “I can’t think what you’d have to say to me. You say you sought me out, but I’m a nobody. A nothing person. I have nothing. I am nothing, and I’m not doing anyone any harm up here.”

“It’s a nice spot if you happen to like cement. You have a pleasant view, but I imagine it must be cold once the sun goes down, like now for instance.”

“It’s not raining, yet. That’s a positive.”

To Landyn’s surprise his mystery visitor chuckled. “That’s a beautiful outlook to have. Look, I haven’t had dinner yet. I don’t suppose you know anywhere around here that does a nice meal?”

Wrapping his arms around his legs, Landyn shook his head. Then realizing his visitor probably couldn’t see him that clearly, he said, “I’m not the right person to ask. The last thing I ate was a dollar scoop of fries and I can’t recommend them, no matter

how friendly the server was. But if you follow the road back toward the center of the city” - he pointed to the right - “I think you’ll find some eating establishments down that way. They always smelled nice to me when I’ve gone past them.”

“Hmm. Walking any considerable distance could be a problem for me, with this leg of mine. I don’t suppose you’d be happy to lend me your shoulder for balance as we go? I would pay for you to have a meal as well, in return for your kindness.”

“Is your leg really that bad?” Landyn scuttled forward a bit closer, trying to see the man’s face. “How did you end up in the park after dark looking for me if your leg is bad? Shouldn’t you be at home with your feet up, resting it?”

“I had to come and find you. In fact, it’s become a matter of urgency. I did a terrible thing.”

Oh no. The man sounded so terribly sad, and Landyn felt a little less scared. “I’m sure whatever you did wasn’t that bad.” Being kind was in Landyn’s nature. He couldn’t change it if he tried.

“You’re not going to think that when I tell you what it was. Tell me, do you remember getting knocked over by that car a while ago? You were on your bike.”

Landyn leaned back into the shadows. “You’re not the man that picked me up. Your voice is different. And it’s all fine anyway. I mean my bike was broken and I had to sell it for scrap, and I haven’t been able to find any delivery work since, which has made eating a problem, but...but...” Landyn did not want his visitor to think he was complaining as he hastened to explain.

“That accident was all my fault. I must’ve been daydreaming and not looking where I was going. You’ll think I’m silly, but at the time I genuinely thought I could smell pizza – isn’t that a hoot? I was really hungry, and I must’ve got distracted. But why

are you talking about it now? You can't have come to find me just to make sure I wasn't going to cause any problems, because I wouldn't, I just wouldn't. I told the guy who helped me up. I said to him I didn't want the authorities involved and I haven't told anybody. I don't have anyone to tell."

"I know whose fault it was. I was the man driving the car that hit you. I couldn't get out of the car fast enough to help, so one of my friends did it for me, but..."

"Oh, now it all makes sense." Lyndon let out a long sigh of relief. "Thank goodness. I thought you were tracking me down because of something else, but please don't worry. It was an accident and as I already said, it was my fault..."

"No. It wasn't your fault at all. It was mine. I saw you and got blinded by the light. It shocked me, the way it suddenly caught my eye, and while I was still processing what that light meant, I heard a crunch, and you were sprawled on the ground. I've felt awful about it ever since."

"Light?" Landyn scratched his head. "Huh. I wonder where that came from? It was the middle of the afternoon, so it wasn't like the sun was too low in the sky or something like that."

"The light was coming from you. It was how I found you so easily tonight. You shine, please believe me. In my eyes you shine as though you've got your own personal sun shining on your head. Tell me, little shifter, do you know about fated mates?"

"What? Did you say shifter?" Landyn wanted to shrink back into the shadows until he was completely invisible, but curiosity made him lean forward again. "You know what I am?" he whispered.

"I know you're a shifter. I don't know what type, but that doesn't matter. I also know

you're my fated mate. If you came a bit closer you could use that nose of yours and you would know that for yourself."

"Is that a good idea? I mean, I mean... You're right. If I sniff you and you are my fated mate, then my animal side will know. But..." Landyn looked around the bleak space he was in. "I don't have anything to offer a special someone. I did think I'd be better settled with a proper roof over my head or something like that by now. You know, so at least I could serve you a coffee or make you a sandwich, but everything I own I'm wearing, and it's been two days since I've eaten, or is it three? I'm not sure, but I can't even offer you a seat for your poor leg and you deserve a mate who would care for you in every way."

Landyn was torn. The idea of having someone by his side would make his current circumstances so much easier to bear, but that wouldn't be fair on the mountain man with his sore leg. "I'll find another way of making money," he said quickly. "I'm not sure how, now my little delivery system is bust, but if you give me a week or maybe two. Yes, two at the most and then perhaps you could come back? That way I could see if I can work to get enough for a chair so you can sit, or maybe I could find one sturdy enough that someone is giving away. Sometimes people can be nice like that. Oh, and I can save some coins, too, and get some fixings for a sandwich. But at the very least you should have a chair."

He felt a zing of what felt like electricity zap through the air, and suddenly the man was sitting on what looked like a sturdy chair. "I'm sitting down. Now will you come closer?"

"How did you do that? Are you magic?" Seeing that chair appear had to be the most exciting thing Landyn had ever seen. He scuttled a bit closer, still keeping low to the ground so he could shift and run if he had to, but he was beginning to think he might not have to. "Is it like a sleight of hand I saw a street performer do once? Or are you actually an honest-to-gosh-goodness magic user? Is that how you know what I am?"

“I can’t tell you what I am until you realize we’re fated. For that, you do need to come closer so you can sniff me.” The man was being very patient.

Lifting his nose into the air, Landyn inhaled deeply, and then started coughing. “Exhaust fumes and dust,” he spluttered, waving a hand in front of his face. “My nose isn’t that good, like in comparison to a bear or something, but those car smells get really strong under a bridge like this.”

“You forgot the coming closer bit.”

Landyn hadn’t forgotten. He’d just hoped that his nose would give him a hint of what the man might be – the fascinating man who could make a chair appear in a park. “I don’t have a good history with people bigger than me,” he admitted quietly. “The thought of having a fated mate, never having to be alone again until we die... it’s more than I could ever dream. I always wondered what it would be like to care for someone the way I believe a mate should.”

“That caring goes both ways from what I’ve heard, little shifter, although you might have to give me a few lessons. Caring isn’t one of the words people usually associate with me.”

“Is that people in that you’re famous and people know about you, or are you referring to friends or family.” Landyn couldn’t help it, he was scooting closer. He was hoping the man might not even notice, but the possibility of a fated mate, no matter how slim... I can’t let him get away if he’s truly mine. And if he can produce a chair from nowhere, then surely...please let this be the right thing to do.

The man never said anything, even though it was obvious to both of them that Landyn was moving closer to that chair. The more he came out from the overpass, the more other smells filtered through the air. Rain was coming – Landyn could smell it, and then there was the grass and the trees in the little park area.

And then, out of nowhere, the most heavenly scent Landyn had ever sniffed hit his nose, and filled it. There was metal and fire, summer heat and leather, and a sense of a being far older than anything Landyn had been with before. His anxious animal started chattering in excitement, and his body reacted in ways it hadn't done in years. The man was telling the truth – they were fated. Straightening his spine, Landyn was sure his shock was showing. “Who are you?”

“I’m yours.” The big man held out his hand. “Are you ready for that dinner now? If you are, take my hand.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:37 am*

“I’m not dressed for dinner.”

The shifter was showing such a sheer act of courage, sliding his small hand into the one he’d held out, Hephaestus almost missed the words. He was momentarily focused on the tingle of electricity that ran up his arm and knocked on his heart. He could hear the wealth of history behind the shifter’s concern though.

“My name is Hephaestus,” he said slowly. “You’ve already seen I have a few skills.” He patted the arm of his chair with his free hand. He wasn’t giving up the touch with the shifter now standing next to him. “That gives us options when it comes to having dinner.”

“You can zap up food?” The little shifter’s eyes looked like they were going to fall out of his pretty head. “That must be why you’re so big. If I could zap up food, I’d have it all on this huuuuuge table and I’d just lie in the middle of it and probably eat myself sick.” The shifter giggled. “Probably not what you want to hear from a mate. Sorry. It’s just...I never expected any of this. Having magical powers would be wasted on me.”

Hephaestus didn’t think that was true, but he smiled as kindly as he could – at least he hoped that was what he was conveying. “It would be nice to have a name, so I know who I’m having dinner with,” he suggested. Just thinking of the man as “Little Shifter” wasn’t fair. He was at least a foot shorter than Hephaestus, but then Hephaestus was more than average in height.

“I’m Landyn. I had my twenty-fifth birthday two months ago.” The man smiled as he toed the ground with his worn sneaker. He was truly cute, with a triangular face, wide

dark eyes, and the neatest eyebrows Hephaestus had seen on a person. His full mouth showed a hint of the shyness he would be feeling and for whatever reason, and Hephaestus wasn't going to examine that too closely, Hephaestus wanted Landyn to feel more comfortable with him.

"I'm pleased to meet you Landyn." Hephaestus meant it. "With regards to my powers, I could change your clothes for you, if that would make you feel more comfortable eating out with me."

"Is that allowed?" Landyn glanced around as if he was worried they'd be overheard. "I thought magic users weren't supposed to do things for personal gain."

"It's allowed." Hephaestus wasn't ready to reveal he was an actual god just yet. He figured that was more of an after-dinner conversation. "I'm a bit rusty when it comes to dating habits, but I genuinely would like to share a meal with you."

"I'd like that, too." Landyn winced. "I truly wish I had more to offer you. I always thought that matings should be between equals, and I'm failing to see what I can bring to this partnership when I can't even afford a decent pair of shoes."

There was a lot of pride in that little shifter, which was admirable, and also unnecessary. The mate of gods got looked after by their godly mate – Hephaestus knew that much. "How about we take this one step at a time. Step one, we ensure you're comfortable enough to want to eat with me. For that we need clothes."

Hephaestus thought about Landyn dressed in clothes a lot warmer, newer, and he hoped more comfortable than the man had on, including soft but durable boots. "And we need my truck," he added, as Landyn gasped, stroking his new coat. Bam. His vehicle appeared in the parking lot to the side of them. "Now we can go out for dinner, yes?"

“I guess we can.” Landyn sounded a bit distracted as if he was overwhelmed, something Hephaestus accepted as normal. Most mortals were when they came across immortal beings. He stood and stretched out his leg, sending his chair back to the house.

“Lets go and find some food.”

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Landyn wasn't silly. He wasn't going to walk around thinking he was in some ridiculous dreamscape – scooped up by a large man who smelled of something Landyn didn't even know he wanted. The clothes he was wearing were real. The bulge in his new pants was plump enough to be distracting. Landyn's animal spirit hadn't settled down since he'd taken in Hephaestus's scent. The man with the powers was real, and he was Landyn's mate.

His issue was that Landyn had only ever been taught about mates from a male/female perspective, not that he was bothered that his mate was the same gender as him. Secretly, he'd always thought if he met a mate, that would be his preference.

But in his teachings, the few he'd had, the whole function of mates was a situation where the female partner of the couple gave her mate the children necessary to...whatever. Landyn had never worked out why children were a necessary part of a mating, but it was what his mother had told him. A woman nurtured and cared for her mate while the male provided the material comforts such as food, a roof over their heads, and the love and security any woman deserved.

Landyn had none of the things necessary to help give his mate comfort. He was also a hundred percent certain he couldn't start sprouting children anytime soon. Which made him wonder what use he could be to Hephaestus.

“Do you need deliveries done, in whatever it is you do?” he asked as they were waiting for the food to arrive. Landyn was already impressed at how Hephaestus took charge, finding a restaurant, parking, and getting them a table while Landyn’s head was still spinning about his clothes. He nibbled on a breadstick, thoughtfully provided by the waiter who was clearly impressed with the older man.

“I have an art studio in one of the old warehouses just outside of town.” Hephaestus was looking at him like he couldn’t believe Landyn was sitting there. Landyn wondered if that was because of the light thingy his mate had mentioned.

Leaning over the table, Landyn whispered, “Is my light bothering you? Do you know how I can shut it off?”

“No, I mean, yes, I know how it can be shut off, but we can’t do that over dinner, and no, it’s not bothering me.” Hephaestus looked so serious. “Look, you should know, I’ve always worried about meeting my significant other. I mean, I’m not what you’d call handsome or young.”

“I think you look very distinguished.” Landyn was being completely honest. He’d noticed that in the truck. “The way you have your hair shaved here.” He reached up, showing the sides of his head before realizing he was still holding the breadstick. “Whoops,” he added with a giggle. “That could’ve been messy. But the tattoos on your head look incredible, although I bet it hurt to get them done.”

Hephaestus shook his head. “They were done a long time ago.”

“Well, I think they make you look very distinctive.” Landyn nodded.

It was Hephaestus’s turn to lean over the table, and Landyn noticed there was a slight flush of red on his cheeks. “You said big people concern you. You were scared when I first attracted your attention.”

“I can tell you’ve never been a rough sleeper.” Landyn stopped talking as the waiter came back. When his plate was put in front of him, Landyn wanted to check his chin to make sure he wasn’t drooling. That steak takes up half of the plate!

“I hope that’s all right.” Hephaestus must have noticed his shock. “I know people with additional benefits, like yourself, seem to enjoy eating meat.”

“You have no idea how much of a special gift this is. Thank you so much.” Landyn couldn’t help it. He had to start eating. He barely waited for Hephaestus to pick up his fork before he was cutting into that steak. It smelled amazing.

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*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:37 am*

Hephaestus had always been a decisive person, but as he picked at his food, enjoying watching Landyn devour his, he honestly wasn't sure what he should do. A big part of him wanted to whisk Landyn back to his home and curl up with him forever more, preferably in his big bed. He could zap up food, as Landyn had asked, and he'd happily feed his sweet mate every time Landyn opened his mouth.

But the other side, the one that had been formed when he realized how "less than" he was when compared with other gods, seriously wondered if he'd be better taking a page out of Zeus's book and simply ensuring Landyn never had to want for anything in his life again. For all his brave words about Hephaestus being distinctive or distinguished, Landyn couldn't say handsome, and Hephaestus really wished he could be the dashing, handsome, young-looking mate Landyn deserved.

"You're fretting about something." Landyn pushed his empty plate away with a happy sigh. "That is by far the best meal I have eaten in my whole life. Truly wonderful, thank you. Now, what are you worried about? Perhaps I can help."

Hephaestus glanced around. He'd picked the restaurant, one he'd been to before, because it was only half full, and he'd chosen a table isolated enough so they couldn't be overheard. But regardless, he waved his hand in a circle, creating a sound bubble around their table, keeping their conversation private.

"No one can overhear us," Hephaestus said, keeping his voice low anyway. "I am pleased I could provide something as basic as a meal, and you're right, I've never been a rough sleeper as you call it. I feel, before we leave here for the evening, I should offer you a choice in our mating."

“I can totally understand you not wanting to be with someone like me,” Landyn said, nodding, perfectly serious. “I’m not female. I can’t provide you with children, and a man like yourself would probably want to grow a family with their special someone.”

“Children are not the issue here.” Hephaestus didn’t see the point in explaining that all mates of gods could have children regardless of their gender. “My concern is that I’m considerably older than you are – like considerably - and very set in my ways. I fear you would be very unhappy being with me all the time. I mean, I could...”

Landyn held up his hand and Hephaestus stopped. “Whether I’m happy or not is on me, not you, Hephaestus. No one can make someone else happy. They either are or they aren’t. The same applies for you. I can’t make you happy, I can just ensure that nothing I do would cause you to be unhappy.”

Which was a different way of thinking about a relationship that Hephaestus hadn’t considered. But his insecurities still shone through – they were older than dirt. “When you dreamed of having a mate, didn’t you wish for someone younger or better looking?”

“When you were dreaming of your mate did you hope for someone bigger, older, and better looking than me? Perhaps even a person with lady parts?”

“No.” Hephaestus was shocked that Landyn turned his question back onto him. “That’s not what mating is all about. The Fates determine two or more people, who are perfect for each other...”

He left the rest unsaid. His sneaky little mate had just pulled the rug out from under his argument. “Okay. Fair enough. Matings are not about looks, or age, or anything else, especially when it relates to paranormals. I’m just worried that I won’t be enough for you, and it would devastate me if you were unhappy with me.”

Landyn was nodding again. “I’m worried about the same thing. I mean, you are clearly a man of means. You didn’t let me see the prices, which was sweet of you, but I know this meal wouldn’t have been cheap, and the same can be said for your monster vehicle.

“When I said I have nothing, I meant it. I’m just a skinny ferret shifter on the run from a rich vampire who wants to keep me in a golden cage like a pet. I haven’t slept in a bed for two years and this meal, that you provided for me, is the most I’ve eaten in one sitting within that same time span. You gain nothing from having me in your life. I have no skills, very little education, and would likely be a drain on your resources for the rest of our lives, which is hardly fair on you.”

The vampire comment threw Hephaestus for a moment, but when he thought about the rest of Landyn’s words, he started to laugh. And when he started, he found he couldn’t stop. Landyn was watching him, probably thinking he’d lost his mind, and Hephaestus wondered if he had – if the whole meal was some altered reality he was dreaming of.

“I’m so sorry, I know this isn’t really a laughing matter, but do you see how alike we are?” He said when he managed to get his humor under control. “We both worry that we have nothing to offer the other. We both worry that we’re not the best person to be in our mate’s life. The same mates the Fates threw together because they believe we’re perfect for each other.”

“Do you mean we have something in common after all?” That seemed to perk Landyn’s mood up.

“Well, we do, don’t we? If we’re both prepared to give each other up because we don’t consider ourselves worthy, even though that’s the last thing we want in our heart of hearts...”

“Then we truly are perfect for each other.” Landyn clapped his hands. “I knew it. Really, I did. I just needed you to feel it, too.”

He was being teased. It was as if Hephaestus could feel his mate’s happiness in the air. It was a heady feeling. “I’m glad we’re on the same page. Now, what did you want for dessert? They do a lovely apple pie here.”

“Can I be cheeky and ask for two helpings?” Landyn’s smile stretched over half his face. “Don’t be fooled by my small size. Ferrets eat a lot.”

“You will never go hungry again,” Hephaestus promised, and that was a promise he intended to keep for my mate . It was a heady feeling, knowing he could follow through.

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Laughter was a great leveler. Landyn hadn’t realized until Hephaestus laughed just how much he was worried about his mate rejecting him. It was true, he felt inadequate because he wasn’t in that position other gentleman ferrets put themselves in, before they started strutting around looking for someone to have their children. His particular breed of ferret – the black footed variety – were loners from when they were very young. But male ferrets of his kind were raised with very firm ideas on how they needed to provide a stable home environment for the prospective bearer of their children.

Landyn always knew he was different. He understood that children needed a loving and stable home, and a lady ferret was far more likely to provide those things if the gentleman ferret was making the income necessary to support that home, even if he wasn’t there very often. Because there were so few ferrets of the black footed variety, young men, like himself, were encouraged to look beyond their species to find someone to give them children, but those children were always the most important

part of any male ferret's mating requirements.

Hephaestus hadn't rejected him. Somehow, the Fates, that Landyn had only heard talked about in whispers, had paired him with someone who thought he wasn't good enough for Landyn. He really wants me.

"Yes, I do."

Landyn looked up in shock. He hadn't realized he'd said that thought out loud. He'd spent so much time on his own, talking to himself was sometimes the only time he used his words. "Sorry," he said quickly, feeling his cheeks heat. "I tend to spend a lot of time in my head because I've been on my own so much of the time. I don't even realize I've spoken until someone answers." He giggled. "This is all so new and wonderful, I just...my mind is officially blown."

"I'm glad it's a good thing. I feel the same way." Those bluish-gray eyes were so kind. "An unexpected pleasure."

"You'll make me blush." Landyn already thought his cheeks were on fire. "Tell me more about you. You said you had a studio. What sorts of things do you do there?"

"I will tell you, but I think the staff are waiting for us to leave." That kindly look didn't waver. "Do you feel comfortable enough coming with me to my home, or I could arrange a hotel for you, if you'd prefer, and visit you again for breakfast in the morning?"

Landyn shook his head. He already knew his ferret didn't want to let the older man out of his sight. "I'd rather be with you if you'd be comfortable with that. I mean, you might not be ready to have someone new, a person you don't know, be in your personal space. But," he added as he had a quick thought. "In my shifted form, I don't take up a lot of space, so I could shift and find a corner of your place to sleep in, if

that suits you better.” It had to be more comfortable and warmer than under the bridge.

“As much as I would love to meet your shifted form, and soon, we can’t talk or get to know each other if you don’t have the use of your words.”

“Less danger of me saying something silly that way,” Landyn said, but he happily waited until Hephaestus took care of the payment side of things, and they walked slowly out of the restaurant. Landyn frowned when he saw how much Hephaestus was limping, but he didn’t say anything until he was sitting in the passenger seat of Hephaestus’s truck, and they were driving down the road.

“Does your leg hurt very often?” The comfort of being in an enclosed vehicle that smelled of Hephaestus’s unique scent gave him the confidence to ask.

“I was born with a club foot,” Hephaestus said, although Landyn noticed he was focusing hard on the road. “Then, when I was older, I was thrown off a mountain and landed badly, which didn’t help. It aches if I walk on it too much or if the weather gets cold or things like that. But I’ve lived with it for a lot of years.”

“You got thrown off a mountain?” Landyn couldn’t believe what he’d heard. “Who would do such a thing? You could’ve died.”

“It was my dad. It’s no big deal. It was a really, really long time ago.” Hephaestus slowed the truck at a traffic light, but it turned green as they approached. “Did you learn anything about mythology when you were at school?”

Landyn looked out the passenger window. “I already told you I haven’t had much schooling. I can read and write and do basic math, but I don’t know about a lot else.”

“My apologies.” Hephaestus seemed to mean it, but Landyn was also getting the

impression the older man was uncomfortable or worried about something.

“Is this to do with what you are – like with your magic, and not dying when you get thrown off a mountain? Let me tell you, if I ever meet your dad, after hearing he did that to you, I’ll kick him in the shin and when he’s hopping around with his sore leg, I’ll bite him.” Landyn was just trying to make Hephaestus laugh. He didn’t think he could bite anyone, except his mate, of course, and his gums were itchy just thinking about that.

“It’s not likely to happen, but if it does, I’ll be cheering you on when you do it.”

Yes. Hephaestus was laughing, but then Landyn’s heart started to race and black spots appeared in front of his eyes when his mate added, “Hephaestus is the name given to the ancient Greek god of artisans, blacksmiths, carpenters, most craftspeople, fire metallurgy, metal working, sculpture, and volcanoes. That’s me. That’s why I didn’t die. I’m immortal and after we’ve claimed each other, you will be, too.”

“But...but...you’re an actual god and the Fates gave you a ferret shifter as a mate?” Landyn could barely get his words out.

“My uncle Hades, Lord of the Underworld is blissfully mated to a chipmunk shifter, and Thor, who’s a Norse god, is equally happy with his mate who is half sand cat and half fae.” Hephaestus seemed to be a very dedicated driver, keeping his eyes on the road. “It’s been theorized that the Fates are pairing many of the ancient gods from all pantheons with shifters because any shifter type is known for their loyalty, their ability to love deeply, the fact they can so readily show their caring for their mate, and they are the least likely of all paranormal beings to be affected by their mate’s godly status.”

Hephaestus quickly glanced his way. “There is also the little matter of most ancient gods have a shocking reputation for being promiscuous, and yet, when they have

been claimed by their shifter, they never have the urge to stray again, which helps cement the relationship the mated pair will have going forward.”

The words were going around in Landyn’s head, but they were like pinballs spinning around, crashing into walls – they weren’t making sense. But he knew Hephaestus was expecting some kind of reaction from him. “You’re happy about this?”

“I am, and you’d be able to scent if I attempted to lie to you, so you know my words are true. I am very happy that the Fates have blessed me with a shifter of my own.”

“Well, that explains the chair in the park.” Landyn’s head still felt woozy, despite Hephaestus’s soothing tones. It was tempting to rest his head on the passenger window of the truck, but Landyn leaned the other way, resting his head on Hephaestus’s arm. The bigger man – god – didn’t say anything but the vibe in the air around them was comforting. I got a god!

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:37 am*

Hephaestus had lived for the longest time, adjusting the things he did so that he could balance on a foot that just hadn't come out right. He had a lot of upper body strength, thanks to his work in the forge, and his legs had adapted to cope with his lameness. Even so, he dithered for about five minutes, once he'd parked his truck in his garage, as to whether carrying Landyn was a good idea.

The sweet ferret had fallen asleep, something that was totally understandable after a big meal and being in the warmth of the truck. But his peaceful slumber gave Hephaestus the chance to really study the man the Fates thought perfect for him.

How the hell did you stay safe when you didn't have a home to go to?

Why don't you have a home? Are your parents dead?

Who the hell is this vampire chasing you? And why...

Hephaestus didn't finish his last thought. The Fates never commented, gave reasons, or explained their decisions. Even in cases, such as when Poseidon specifically visited them to demand his mating be broken, they had pretty much just laughed in his face and sent him on his way. Hephaestus had no plans on following Poseidon's example.

The Fates have never been wrong. Hephaestus gently stroked down the side of Landyn's face, careful not to disturb his young mate's rest. He still had doubts – the habits of a hundred lifetimes weren't going to disappear just because someone with a cute smile and an accepting attitude came along. Landyn was nothing like the people he'd been with before, in looks or personality. But maybe that's why he's mine,

Hephaestus mused, because he is so different.

Sitting in the truck wasn't comfortable for him and Hephaestus was tired. He hadn't realized how stressed he'd been since causing the car accident, but now that it was over, he could sense how his worry for the shifter had been a constant burr under his skin, nagging at his mind since it happened. Now Landyn was with him, curled up trustingly against his arm. It was as if Hephaestus's mind had signaled to the rest of his body that it could finally relax.

Carefully pulling Landyn so he was resting on his chest, Hephaestus opened his driver's door and moved slowly, getting out of the truck and closing the door as softly as he could one-handed. Landyn weighed next to nothing, something Hephaestus knew wasn't normal for a healthy adult shifter. He thought of Landyn's innocent comment about lying in the middle of a table full of food and chuckled quietly. I could make that happen.

Walking slowly into the house, Hephaestus yawned. He could put Landyn into one of his many guest rooms, but Hephaestus reasoned that could be disconcerting for his mate when he woke up, so he made his way across the entrance, past the staircase, heading for his master suite at the back of the house. Passing the kitchen, he muttered a curse as Bronte called out to him. He hadn't realized it was so late and that his companions were home.

"Sire, what have you got there?" Bronte's voice was loud, and Hephaestus glared, trying to convey without words that Landyn was sleeping.

"Steropes, I told you. Didn't I tell you that our worried god was going to go and find that homeless shifter and make sure he was all right? He did. He's here." Bronte came closer. "Oh, sire. You shouldn't be carrying him. Only Zeus knows how much trudging around you did this evening finding the little nuisance.

“Let me take him. I’ll put him in one of the guest rooms until we can work out what to do with him. Did you need Arges to come and rub your leg for you? You know that helps you sleep. I can come and rub something else for you, too, if you like. The pickings at the club tonight were slim so we came home early.”

Hephaestus felt it, the moment Landyn realized they weren’t alone. The man’s whole body tensed. “Landyn is my mate,” Hephaestus said, in a low growl. “I don’t need my leg rubbed. I don’t need you rubbing anything else, and we’re not going to stuff my mate in a guest room as though he is a hassle to be dealt with in the morning.”

“I don’t believe it.” Bronte was craning his neck, trying to see Landyn’s face. Hephaestus tightened his arms, wanting to protect his mate from the scrutiny. “Sire, I know you’ve been a bit off lately – since the accident, yes, but there is no way the Fates would pair you with someone so small. He’s so...” Bronte waved his hand, “...insignificant. It’ll be because of the accident. You’re not thinking clearly. Let me take him and...”

“I said no!” Hephaestus yelled. It was as if he could sense Landyn’s panic and pain at someone dissing the claim they hadn’t even made yet. As he yelled, Landyn flinched, and then suddenly there was nothing but a pile of clothes in his hands as Landyn shifted, scurrying out of the arm of his shirt, down Hephaestus’s leg, and running as fast as his little legs could carry him back to the front door.

“You fucking asshole,” Hephaestus roared at a stunned looking Bronte. “You woke him up and because you wouldn’t listen to me, now I’ve frightened him, AGAIN. If you don’t believe that cute ferret is my mate, then fuck off back to Olympus. In two minutes you’ve undone all the work I’ve put into helping that sweet shifter feel comfortable this evening, and for what?”

“But sire...”

“For what, I asked you. Because you don’t like change? Because you feel your fucking bulk and muscles make you special somehow? You took centuries, millenniums of our friendship and blew it all away just because my mate, the mate the Fates chose for me,” - Hephaestus thumped his chest - “didn’t look like you expected him to. So you shit on him, and when you did that you were shitting on me and our friendship. Fuck off, do you hear me? If you can’t be supportive, fucking pack your things and fuck off. I’ve got to find where my mate ran off to.”

Refusing to listen to anything else the cyclops might have to say, Hephaestus made his way back to the entranceway, clutching the clothes he’d magicked up for Landyn, shuffling along as fast as he could. The house was dimly lit – one of the reasons why Hephaestus hadn’t realized his companions were home. The second reason being he just hadn’t thought about it. But Landyn hadn’t been claimed yet, so he was still lit up like a beacon for Hephaestus to find, even in his ferret form.

“I am so sorry, Landyn.” Hephaestus saw the light coming from the back of an armchair in the corner of his reading room. “I should’ve warned you I share my house with three cyclops – Bronte, Arges, and Steropes. They have been my companions in the studio since just after time began.”

The light started to move along the wall. Shit, he’s going for the door. Hephaestus didn’t want to shut his mate in or make him feel he was caged in any way, but he lived in a big house, and he really didn’t want to be chasing Landyn all over it, trying to get his mate to shift back again.

“Is this about the sex Bronte was implying? Of course, it will be. Shifters consider fidelity between mates one of the major cornerstones of their existence. See, this is one of those times when I fucked up because I wasn’t thinking straight.” Taking a chance, Hephaestus closed the door so Landyn couldn’t get out, but then sat on a two-seater couch watching the light slowly move.

“It wasn’t that I wasn’t caring about you.” By the forge, now I’m getting my words muddled. “The cyclops are my friends, or they were until five minutes ago, and yes we’ve fooled around. I’ve always known I had no place in the bond those three share and anything we did or shared was casual and just fun.”

That light was getting closer to the door. Hephaestus didn’t think he could watch if his little ferret wanted to leave and looked down at his hands.

“In all the time I’ve existed, I’ve never had a true bond with anyone. I’ve been worshipped in the past, there are stories of me being married in the past – a long, long, long time past. I can’t come to you and claim I’ve never touched another intimately, or that I haven’t shared a bed with others, but I can promise you absolutely, hand-on-heart, that I haven’t touched the cyclops or anyone else since I saw your light. As soon as I realized the Fates saw past my deformed foot and blessed me with a mate, I knew I needed to be worthy of you.”

Glancing up, Hephaestus saw the light had stopped heading for the door, and was now slowly moving its way around the wall the other way. He’s getting closer to me. Taking the long way around.

“You know, cyclops are unusual creatures. They’re giants, if you didn’t know that. In their natural form, they only have one eye, although I adapted their appearance when we moved to Earth, so they can morph and fit in during their daily life. They have been around longer than me, and like me, there are different stories of how they came to be. One story speaks about them being the offspring of Uranus, the Sky God and Gaia, the Earth Goddess which is the more likely tale. But then other scholars, who have nothing but their own imagination to guide them claim that my uncle Poseidon, the Greek god of the sea is the cyclops father.

“What is true is that they were the original blacksmiths in the Underworld, and when I set up my own forge under Olympus they joined me there. They taught me so

much.” Hephaestus chuckled, although there wasn’t a lot of humor in it. “Unfortunately, when it's all said and done, for all their skill the cyclops have, the giants’ mentality revolves around the idea that the bigger the person is, the more right that person might be. I can only apologize again for the way Bronte spoke this evening. He had no right to speak to me, or about you, in that way.”

There was a sharp little black nose peeking out from the side of the single seater armchair. “You would scent it, if I was lying, wouldn’t you?”

Bright eyes sparkled as the furry head nodded.

“I guess it’s been an overwhelming day, when it’s all said and done, for both of us, don’t you think?”

The nod was slower this time, and the front half of the ferret inched forward.

“What I was thinking is that we need sleep. You can stay furry, but I’d like you in my room, if that’s all right. Can we do that?” Hephaestus reached down, holding his hands open near the ground. “Did you want to come with me?”

One step. Then another. And then, like a blur the black-footed ferret sprinted across the distance between them, leaning up, his front paws on Hephaestus’s leg.

Being careful, because Hephaestus knew how big his hands were in comparison to the ferret, he picked Landyn up, bringing him up so they were looking eye to eye. Landyn had his mouth open as he panted. His teeth were sharp.

“You can bite me if you like,” Hephaestus said softly. “Claim me now, so you know no matter who else comes near me, I will always be yours. I’m not perfect. I’ve got a lot to learn. But you are a gift I will cherish for eternity. That much I can promise you.” With a thought, Hephaestus’s shirt disappeared. He was fairly sure he wasn’t

imagining the gleam in Landyn's dark eyes. "Can you reach?"

Leaning forward Landyn sniffed up Hephaestus's chest, his whiskers leaving tingles as he went higher and higher. Hephaestus closed his eyes, a grin forming as the ferret went right up his neck, those whiskers tickling behind his ears, before two paws landed on his shoulder. The bite was fast. Hephaestus barely blinked. But his cock went from half plump to full in seconds before his balls unloaded.

But more important than the messy pants was the click Hephaestus felt in his soul. A click that sent a warmth throughout Hephaestus's affection-starved body – a connection he'd been looking for since coming into inception without even realizing it.

"I claim Landyn as my own." The words were as soft as the tongue licking over his bite mark, but the ferret shivered and then cuddled into Hephaestus's neck.

"Are you asleep again?" Hephaestus chuckled, holding onto Landyn carefully as he made his way back through the house to his suite, without interruption this time.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:37 am*

I have died and gone to heaven. That was Landyn's first thought when he'd woken up in a huge bed that had soft covers and an overabundance of pillows, and he was still thinking the same thing an hour later when he was soaking in the biggest bathtub he'd ever seen.

He'd woken up naked. That had been unintentional and was a bit disconcerting, especially with a huge body beside him on the bed. But Hephaestus wasn't crowding him. In fact, when Landyn took a peek over the god's back he could see that even in sleep, his bigger mate seemed to be protecting him from anyone who might come in through the door. Landyn noticed things like that, and he had a quiet "aww" moment.

Another point, also in Hephaestus's favor, was that the man had tucked him under the blankets, but he was sleeping on top of the covers. It was as if the god had considered the idea of Landyn shifting, because the last thing Landyn remembered was biting his mate in his furry form. But Hephaestus had made sure Landyn could wake up in his human form and retain some dignity. Although Landyn didn't think he had a body worth looking at, he did appreciate how caring Hephaestus was being.

There had been a bit of awkwardness when Hephaestus woke up, and Landyn thought about that as his fingertips softly wrinkled in the bath. He was not in a hurry to get out. Hot water, enough room for him to be fully submerged without scrunching his arms or legs, and Landyn was a happy bather. It was the first time he'd felt truly clean in more than two years.

But Hephaestus. Sweet Hephaestus. Landyn ducked his head under the water and then popped back up again, wiping the water from his face. He could say, hand-on-heart, he'd never woken up in bed with another person before. Someone who he

didn't know. Someone, who if the mating bite could be ignored for a moment, would be considered a stranger. One dinner was hardly a strong foundation for a long life together.

But it's a start. Landyn reasoned as he swished his hands through the bubbles he had in his bath. I mean... The thing was, Landyn really didn't know what he meant. He just knew how he felt facing an awake Hephaestus – shy, a bit hopeful, and a lot self-conscious. Escaping to the bathroom wasn't just because Landyn longed to feel fully clean.

The thing was, Hephaestus seemed to be unsure of himself as well – just as shy as Landyn was, and yet, Landyn liked to think the bigger man was happy they were together.

How do new mates do it? How do they get past the awkwardness when they are two totally different people? Landyn hadn't met many examples of fated mates. His parents didn't believe in the concept, although the lore was part of his upbringing. But the emphasis, because he and his parents were so rare, was on having as many children as possible. A bond mate was just as capable of providing those children as a fated mate.

Landyn stroked over the new tattoo that covered almost the whole of his left pectoral muscle. It was so vivid against his pale skin, and yet Landyn smiled just looking at it. There was a hammer, the impression of fire, and a huge symbol, but it wasn't so much what the tattoo was, it was what it represented. It was like his mate – larger than life, forceful in some areas like the hammer would be, hot in so many ways, at least in Landyn's opinion, and yet unknown in the same way Landyn didn't know what the symbol represented. There was so much about Hephaestus he didn't know either.

You're not going to learn staying in this bath and getting wrinkly, either he reminded

himself . The water was cooling. It was tempting to turn on the hot tap. Hephaestus had said he could use as much water as he wanted. I have a mate now, one who is trying to show me how well he can look after me. While Landyn knew he was still a long way from being the partner he grew up believing he was supposed to be – a provider, in other words – he could show his caring. Or you could if you got your skinny butt out of this bath.

Ducking under one last time, Landyn came back up out of the water and pushed on the sides of the tub to stand up. His clothes, the new ones Hephaestus had zapped for him, were waiting on the bathroom counter. Reaching for a beautifully fluffy towel, Landyn wrapped it around himself, and stepped out of the water. Operation “Getting to Know My Mate” was about to start... as soon as he got dried and dressed.

Shirt and pants on, Landyn was standing barefoot, toweling his hair dry as best he could, when he heard harsh grunting coming from outside the bathroom. Then he heard a yell, and it was as if his tattoo – his brand new mating mark - seemed to heat and glow on his skin. Dropping the towel on the counter, Landyn opened the door and dashed down the hallway toward the noise. Is my mate fighting with someone?

/~/~/~/~/

“You’re determined that little thing is your mate then.” Bronte leaned against the kitchen counter. Hephaestus gave him the side-eye, and went back to frying up some sausages and bacon. He’d dithered, when he’d woken up, as to whether he should zap up some food for Landyn in his room. But when Landyn asked if he could bathe, Hephaestus decided he wasn’t going to skulk in his room with his mate in his own damn house. His mate was entitled to the full run of the place he would now call home, and if anyone was going to object to that, they could deal with Hephaestus.

Yes, the protective feelings were new, but Hephaestus expected that was how he would feel about his mate, so he wasn’t surprised. And in his current mood he would

assume that most people with any common sense would've left him alone with his mate, seeing as they were in his house, especially larger-than-life idiots who said hurtful things that upset his cute little ferret. But Hephaestus had always known common sense wasn't what the cyclops were known for.

"I seriously don't understand why you have an issue with any of this." Hephaestus flipped the cooked food onto a waiting platter and slid it into the preheated oven to stay warm. He cracked a half a dozen eggs into the still-hot grill and wondered if Landyn preferred them with a runny yolk or not. Deciding he'd do both, Hephaestus couldn't ignore the hulking cyclops who was edging closer.

"I still think this has to do with guilt." Bronte poked Hephaestus on the shoulder. "Everyone across all pantheons knows what a kind person you are. I can't blame you. The little guy is cute, well what I saw of him running off like a scared mouse in his fur. He seemed cute enough. That's fine if you like that type of person."

Hephaestus focused on the eggs. Cooking eggs to the right edge of perfection – where the whites were fully cooked, but the yolk wasn't dry – took precision timing.

"The problem is" - Bronte lowered his voice - "you and I both know that little ferret isn't your type of person at all."

"How would you know?" Hephaestus flicked a glare in Bronte's direction. "You think because I fool around with you guys a couple of times a month that makes you an expert on my type?"

"Hey." Bronte flexed his huge biceps. "It takes a big man to appreciate a big man, we all know that."

"You can keep thinking that. Just don't assume I think the same way." Hephaestus thought for a moment. He didn't usually talk "feelings" with his friends, but they had

known each other a damn long time. “I don’t understand why you’re not happy for me. Getting a mate is such a life changing event...to have my own person...”

“I know all that. I know.” Bronte took the pan out of Hephaestus’s hand and shoved it off the element, before manhandling Hephaestus around so they were facing each other. Hephaestus’s leg twinged and he growled. “Sorry. Sorry, sire. But you need to be looking at me. You need to truly hear what I’m saying. That ferret is not your mate. You’re talking yourself into believing he is.”

“You’ve...”

“No. No.” Bronte’s hand was slapped over Hephaestus’s mouth, and he pushed it away, his brows almost meeting in the middle he was frowning so hard.

“Sire, listen to me. Don’t talk. I know you’re a god and that sets you apart from regular mortals. I know you get lonely. Me and the others try and help where we can, but yeah, I know you have a romantic heart. And yes, did you think we wouldn’t notice that hope in your eyes, and the tone of your voice when you noted Zeus had claimed his mate, finally, and how Poseidon had his, and even Hades was given a cute little shifter of his own for goodness’ sake. I get why you wanted the same thing. That’s normal. But that little ferret frolicking in your bathtub isn’t it.”

“How did you...”

“Listen!”

For fuck’s sake . Bronte wasn’t letting Hephaestus get a word in edgewise and the thing was, Hephaestus really wanted for his friends to be happy for him. It was the sole reason he was listening at all. But Bronte wasn’t giving him a chance to say anything, and he clearly hadn’t finished talking either.

“I don’t know why you’ve latched onto him, specifically, although it’s easy to guess. Hitting someone with a car is going to make you feel guilty, I get that. And yeah, the boys shouldn’t have mentioned he was living on the streets, either, because that just makes you want for him to be yours all the more. I can see where your giant heart would want to just wrap him all up in a cocoon and look after him, sire, but if you do that – if you con this boy who’s barely a man...”

“He’s twenty-five.” Hephaestus was not going to let his friends think he was that bad.

“Twenty-five, fifty-five, a hundred and fucking fifty-five, he’s still a baby in comparison to you. He might’ve ticked all your boxes when it comes to having someone to look after, but he’s not your physical preference when it comes to a bed partner, and he’s not a pet. You can’t keep him, sire. That’s not fair on him, you, or us.”

Folding his arms across his chest, more to give himself the illusion of distance from Bronte than anything else, Hephaestus said calmly, “I saw him bathed in light. I know what that means. That’s why I hit his bike with my truck.”

“Sunbeams reflecting off a car mirror.” Bronte mirrored his pose.

“I saw that same light when I went looking for Landyn in the park last night.”

“Random light source. Streetlight. Car driving past.” Bronte shook his head.

“In my reading room? I saw the light there as well.” Lifting his hand, Hephaestus flicked his thumb down the hall in that direction.

“By the time you went running off chasing him into the reading room...and if he was your mate, he wouldn’t have run from you anyway...”

He was running from you.

“You were probably that tired you couldn’t see straight, sire, and those lights were just your eyes letting you know you needed to get some sleep.”

Bronte wasn’t going to listen. It didn’t matter what Hephaestus tried to say, the cyclops’s mind was already made up. Then Hephaestus remembered the bite. Every paranormal – mortal or immortal – knew that the only thing that could scar a god was the bite from a mate. Hooking his forefinger over the edge of his t-shirt collar, Hephaestus pulled it back. “What do you see?”

Of course, Bronte had to be right in his personal space, his nose damn near sniffing Hephaestus’s skin. But he moved back quickly enough, falling against the island counter, his mouth open in shock. “You let him bite you? Isn’t that taking your delusion a step too far?”

“That is not a bite mark, that is a bite scar. ” Hephaestus tapped it with his finger and felt his cock twitch. Interesting reaction. “The only being that can scar a god is a fated mate. You know that. You know that!”

“No. No. NO. NO. NO! It can’t be.”

“Why are you so dead set against this?” Hephaestus flung up his hands. “What the hell is wrong with you? This can’t be just because of how small Landyn is physically compared to you. It can’t be. You can’t be that shallow.”

“Things will change if you’re truly mated. Can’t you see?” Bronte’s eyes were wide. “We’ve all been together for so long, perfectly happy with our lives the way it’s always been, and now it’s all going to change. How could you?”

Hephaestus felt the pain of his friend’s callous disregard all the way to his soul. “You

couldn't be happy for me? After all this time, knowing how lonely I would get, fighting to stay relevant in a world that doesn't care if I live or die...you couldn't be happy for me about this?"

"We were happy the way we were." When Bronte got that stubborn tilt of his squared chin it meant his opinion wasn't going to shift. And yes, there were a lot of times when Hephaestus just let things go because when life is eternal, it never paid to sweat the small stuff. But while Landyn was small in stature, what he represented in Hephaestus's life was huge.

"You were happy. You came into being with your brothers, your kin, people you've been with since the beginning of time." Hephaestus fought to keep his voice calm, even as he was screaming the words inside. "I have always walked this world alone, even with you living in my house. If any of you were sad, you comforted each other. When I was sad you offered me sex. If any of you wanted to celebrate something, you did it together, never wondering if I wanted to be included, and I understood that." Hephaestus couldn't help it. His voice rose.

"I have always accepted that while our friendship has endured so much, there was always going to be somethings, some ways where I was excluded, where I didn't fit in with you three. And I knew why. I knew that even as a god most people thought me lacking, including you and your brothers."

"We didn't. We wouldn't." But even as he was spouting the words, Hephaestus could see the lies. "You gave me, Steropes, and Arges the chance to have a regular life on Earth. We love the life all four of us have built since being here."

"Do you though?" Shifting his leg, Hephaestus tried to ease the ache he felt. It always got worse whenever he was under stress. "Or do you love the life you have with your kin, and you see me as a god who just made that happen for you? Is that what your companionship has been about all these years? You were using me so you could have

your fun here on Earth?”

“Hephaestus, sire. We have always been as close as people who can be who aren’t bound by the Fates or romance,” Bronte said slowly. “Our lives have been forged together by virtue of the years we’ve spent together, the skills we’ve shared and the sweat of our labors and yes, the passions we shared in the bedroom, too. My brothers and I never dreamed in a million years that any of us would find fated mates, including you. Was it wrong we were content with what we already had? Weren’t you content with what you had with us?”

“I always knew there was something that set me apart from you.” Hephaestus kept his voice low. Landyn wouldn’t be in the bathroom forever and he wanted to recook the eggs which were now surely ruined. “You proved that last night when I brought Landyn home and you tried to just stuff him in a spare room. You reinforced that idea this morning when you made my mating all about you and how you don’t like it. You refused to believe Landyn was mine until I showed you my scar and even now, you’re only concerned about what my mating means to you. If you truly accepted me, if you were my true friend, you’d be happy for me.”

“Your ferret will never be enough for you.” Bronte was angry now, and Hephaestus felt his own anger rise in response. “He’s too small, too young, too damn simple to understand or meet your complex needs. He has no idea of your history, your brilliance, your skills, your standing among the other gods. He’s a damned ferret!”

“He’s my ferret.” Hephaestus pushed forward as Bronte rushed him, their bodies colliding with the island counter. Pans went flying and the plates Hephaestus had set out for his and his mate’s first breakfast together crashed to the floor. Bronte was trying to get him in a headlock – to what end, Hephaestus had no idea. He tried to push the cyclops away, but the damn man shed his human visage, and suddenly he was taking up half of the kitchen.

“Bronte, no. What are you doing? You can’t shift inside, you damn fool.” Steropes and Arges came running in from the living room, but Hephaestus kept his focus on where it counted – stopping Bronte from trying to squeeze the breath out of him. They’d been friends for so long, and there was a part of Hephaestus’s heart that died in that moment, but he pulled on his power using the strength to push the cyclops away from him.

Bronte went flying back, his huge bulk hitting the wall. Plaster fell and a window smashed, but Bronte just shook himself off, fixing his single eye on Hephaestus who was doing his best to stay upright. “That mate will make you weak,” he snarled as he rushed Hephaestus again. Hephaestus braced himself for impact – being hit by a cyclops was no joke, but Bronte went hurtling past him, grabbing Landyn, who must’ve been standing by the door, by the throat and throwing him against the wall he’d just peeled himself out of.

There was a moment of stunned silence. Hephaestus didn’t know what to do first – rescue his mate or take Bronte out of existence. Bronte made the choice for him. “I’ll be back when you’ve come to your senses and cleared out the trash,” Bronte snarled as he shimmered and disappeared. Steropes and Arges stood stunned, looking between Landyn and Hephaestus.

“Go. Just fuck off.” Hephaestus refused to watch as they too disappeared. Tears in his eyes, he shuffled over to his mate, grabbing him up in his arms. The man was unconscious, and so frail, that in that moment Hephaestus thought he might be dead. Brushing the hair off Landyn’s face, his heart stuttered as the ferret’s eyes slowly opened.

“Are you okay?” Landyn asked, reaching up, his hand soft on Hephaestus’s face. That kindness and concern was Hephaestus’s undoing. He broke down and cried, cradling his mate as if he was someone truly special, because by any standard an ancient god lived by, Landyn was.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:37 am*

I've been training for this moment my whole life. In Landyn's opinion the only thing he was good at doing was caring about other people. As he looked around at the wreckage of the kitchen, he could see his current situation with his devastated mate was what he'd been preparing for.

"You need to sit down," he said calmly, stroking his mate's facial hair. "Your poor leg will be aching, and you need to eat. It'll make you feel better."

"He threw you into a wall." The words were guttural and if anything, the arms around Landyn's back tightened.

"I know, my wonderful mate, but he probably couldn't help it," Landyn soothed. Facing a literal giant in the kitchen wasn't how he'd envisaged his first morning with his mate would go. Landyn focused on what was important, or rather who was important. "Please, come and sit down. Do you have a dustpan and brush, or something like that handy? I'll see if I can clean up some of this mess." The cleanup with a dustpan and brush would be akin to building a pyramid with a nail file, but Landyn wanted to show he could be useful.

Hephaestus waved his arm, and the kitchen was put back to rights again – the window fixed, the wall looking as pristine as it probably had before Landyn had hit it, and all the pots, pans, and plates were clean and off the floor. "Well, that's super helpful." Landyn made sure he was wearing his best grin. "Now did you want to zap up your big chair again, so you can sit down for me?"

"Why aren't you upset?" Hephaestus did as he asked though, and Landyn felt better when his mate was sitting down. Hephaestus positioned him so Landyn was sitting on

his thigh.

“Are you sure my weight won’t cause your leg any problems?”

“My leg’s fine. Landyn, I’m worried about you. You were unconscious for at least two minutes after you hit that wall.”

The thing was, Landyn could feel how upset Hephaestus was through their bond, and his ferret let him know as well.

“Will it make you feel better if we just sat here and snuggled for five minutes?” He suggested. Hephaestus must’ve thought that was a good idea because he didn’t seem to be in a hurry to let go, so Landyn focused on trying to soothe his mate by rubbing his temples and down the sides of Hephaestus’s face with his fingertips.

Unfortunately, his actions didn’t seem to calm his mate’s thoughts. “Not even a full day as your mate, and I failed to protect you.” Devastation was evident in every one of Hephaestus’s words.

“Hmm, I know how you feel,” Landyn agreed still working his fingers lightly over Hephaestus’s temples and forehead. “My first day as yours, and I couldn’t help you win a fight against one of your friends. I’m gutted about that.”

“There was a big-assed giant in the kitchen! I didn’t expect you to help me fight that.”

“It didn’t matter how big he was.” Landyn would never admit he’d been terrified when he’d first seen Hephaestus’s friend in his natural form. Sliding his palms down, so they framed his mate’s face, he caught Hephaestus’s eyes with his own. “I know why you two were fighting. Shifters have incredible hearing, and I bet your friend knew that.”

Hephaestus groaned, his hands gentle as he reached up, plucking a bit of plaster out of Landyn's hair. "You got all grubby again."

"Washing my hair is easy when my mate has a bathtub." Landyn smiled. "Are you sure you're okay? From what I heard, and you even told me yourself last night, your friends have been in your life for most of it. I could feel your pain." He reached down patting Hephaestus's heart.

"I didn't expect Bronte's reaction to you." Hephaestus looked down, so Landyn started rubbing the back of his neck. "I don't understand his response to you being my mate – how negative it was. Why couldn't he be happy for me, for us?"

"We should probably feel sorry for him," Landyn said, and he was deadly serious. "Just think. He has spent more time alive than most and he's never taken the time to appreciate how wonderful people can be regardless of their size. Think of everything he's missed out on by looking down on people smaller than he is."

"That's your take on all this? A ruined breakfast, a smashed kitchen, yelling and fighting on your first day in this house, when you told me yourself you get anxious around big people..."

Landyn chuckled. "Anyone seeing Bronte in his natural form would feel the same way, believe me."

"Why aren't you demanding your own private island – a place where you can stay safe and not have to have anything to do with them or me?"

"An island like that sounds like a prison, and why would I want you to do that for me? I thought we decided one of the few things we have in common is that we both were prepared to give each other up, because we didn't think we were worthy of each other, and yet we are exactly who we each need. So, I thought we decided to stay

with each other.” Landyn watched his mate’s face closely. “You do still feel that way, right? Or have your friend’s words changed your mind about being with me?”

“You should leave me. This crap this morning has to go down as the worst first morning any mated couple has ever gone through.”

“That didn’t answer my question. Is that what you want? Do you want me to leave you?” Landyn didn’t think he’d go very far, but maybe Hephaestus had a garden he could shift and make a small home in, so he could keep an eye on his mate.

“I don’t want you to leave. I desperately want you to be with me. I’ve done nothing but think about you since I knocked you off your bike. But look what happened to you this morning. Not together twenty-four hours and you’ve been thrown into a wall – by someone I thought was my friend. My gods. What’s going to happen tomorrow? Is the house going to fall down around your precious head because I’ve stomped too hard on the foundations or something?”

“I hope not. I’m rather partial to that bathtub and your bed is massive and comfortable.”

“You’re not taking this situation seriously.” Hephaestus caught his wrists, thereby stilling Landyn’s fingers. “My naked back should be flayed with the ends of a million cat’s tails, and it still wouldn’t make up for what I put you through. I should be suffering an eternal punishment.”

“That sounds a bit extreme.” Maybe my mate is prone to dramatics. Landyn wasn’t sure – he still had a lot to learn about Hephaestus. And at the end of the day, it didn’t matter. Landyn was good at dealing with the hand he’d been dealt. “But okay, if you feel the need to make amends, you can zap that platter of bacon and sausages I can smell to the table for me. That will save me getting up.”

“You want me to zap food as punishment?” Hephaestus asked as the food appeared on a table that had been moved next to the red and gold chair.

“Yes. Please and thank you. I’m hungry, and I have a love of sweet crispy bacon. Here, you should have some, too.” Reaching over, Landyn snagged a piece of bacon and held it up to Hephaestus’s mouth. “Eat it. I don’t have germs. I just had a wonderful bath.” Landyn added a smile to show he was teasing, and after a moment, Hephaestus took the food and started chewing.

“See, this to me is what mates should be doing.” Landyn grabbed a piece for himself and popped it into his mouth. “Oh wow, this is incredible. You’re such a good cook. Here, do you want another piece? Or perhaps you prefer a sausage this time?” He picked one up, pressing it against Hephaestus’s lips. “You know you want to.”

Hephaestus took a bite, and then took the rest of the sausage, so Landyn’s hand was free to grab one for himself. “This is the only way to eat, you know. I love that you cooked for me.”

“The eggs got ruined. I didn’t even know if you liked runny yolks or fully cooked ones.”

Aww. My mate is trying, and after such a horrible morning, Landyn truly appreciated it. “I’m a runny yolk person myself, if we’re having a fry up, although I love deviled eggs, too, and they’re cooked right through. Hmm. I guess that means I’m just not fussy.” Landyn grabbed two more sausages, passing one to Hephaestus and then picked up a piece of bacon and wrapped it around his sausage, before taking a bite.

“Oh wow.” Landyn did a little butt wiggle. “This is decadence right here. Try it. You have to try it.” He held up the bacon covered sausage to his mate. “Have you tried this before?”

“No.” Hephaestus shook his head. “I have to say, in all my long life, I’ve never had a bacon-wrapped sausage waved in front of me before.”

Landyn knew he was being teased, but it was all right. That’s what mates did with each other, he was sure. “Here. You eat some. I’ll make another one.” He waited until Hephaestus took the sausage, and then made himself another one.

“You’ll think I’m weird, I know people who’ve thought that before,” Landyn said happily once his sausage was finished, “but I’m so happy we’ve already worked out what our special meal will be. On our first day together. Don’t you think that’s awesome?”

He saw Hephaestus give him a strange look. “You think bacon-wrapped sausages is more special than the steak you had last night?”

“Of course. I mean the steak was beautiful, don’t get me wrong, but this is much more special, don’t you think?” Landyn wiggled again. It felt good. Holding up one hand, he ticked off his fingers with the other. “You cooked this for me, specially. It’s something you and I have never eaten before, so it’s our first-first together. You didn’t get grossed out by eating food from my fingers, which I am sure is a romantic thing to do, and...and...” He wagged his little finger, trying to think of one more. “Ooh, and this is our first breakfast of our mating. If we had beverages, we could make a toast to us sharing many more. Are you a coffee, tea, juice, or water person?”

“I prefer strong coffee in the morning.” A large pot and a mug appeared by Landyn’s elbow. “What do you prefer?”

Sighing, Landyn said, “I know it’s all grown up and mature to say coffee in the morning. But seeing as you’re zapping and it is our first morning together...” He gave his mate a side glance, noticing how Hephaestus’s lips were twitching upward at the corner. “I haven’t had a hot chocolate in so long. You know the tall ones they

make at the chain stores, made with heated milk and they have the marshmallows on top?”

“Like this?” A tall mug appeared with thick fluffy marshmallows on top. The smell of chocolate hit Landyn’s nose and he groaned.

“You are so good to me.” He reached for the cup. “I promise I won’t take advantage of your zappy powers. I’m sure that’s not allowed anyway, but after this morning’s unpleasantness this chocolate just hits the spot. You are wonderful, thank you so much.” He took a sip and then another larger mouthful, his eyes closing as bliss covered his tongue. “Best breakfast ever.”

Opening his eyes, he saw Hephaestus was watching him. “Do you know what happens now?” Landyn asked.

Hephaestus shook his head.

“Now we toast.” Landyn handed Hephaestus his cup and then clinked his cup against his mate’s mug. “To our first ever breakfast together. May we have many more.”

“To an eternity of breakfasts together,” Hephaestus said gravely, and Landyn grinned at him as they both took a drink. Landyn had a few more mouthfuls because he’d been genuine with his mate. It had been years since he’d enjoyed a hot chocolate and besides, there was something comfortable and cozy about sitting on his mate’s lap, them both enjoying their breakfast beverages.

Hephaestus put his mug down first, and Landyn quickly followed, putting his almost finished chocolate mug on the table. All of a sudden he felt shy, but Landyn pressed on. “There’s one more thing.”

“Is this part of our special breakfast ritual?”

It made Landyn feel so much better that Hephaestus was teasing him.

“I think it’s something that should be included as part of every breakfast we share.”

“Eggs?”

Laughing, Landyn looped his arms around his mate’s neck. “Kisses,” he said quietly. “Do you think you might want to kiss me sometime in the future? Like now, perhaps?”

Hephaestus’s eyes closed, and for a moment Landyn thought he’d overstepped, but then the god groaned, and Hephaestus’s lips were on his, and Landyn realized he had a new favorite treat. Hephaestus tasted a whole lot better than chocolate. Well, they both vied for top spot, in Landyn’s opinion.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:37 am*

I must've done something right in this life. The only reason there'd been any hesitation between Landyn's words and Hephaestus's actions was because the god genuinely thought he'd misheard for a moment. He couldn't remember the last time anyone wanted to kiss him, and anyone who'd gone before was quickly forgotten as he learned the shape of his mate's lips for the first time.

There was a brightness in Landyn that couldn't be faked. After the stress of the morning, Hephaestus had wondered if he'd done the wrong thing – if he should've set Landyn up somewhere and watched him from afar. But from the moment their lips met, Hephaestus realized how much of a travesty that would be. His soul longed for Landyn at the same time as his body burned.

“Hmm, you taste so good.” Landyn pulled off just long enough to breathe and then his lips were back before Hephaestus had a chance to miss them. There was so much Hephaestus wanted to do in that moment – stripping them both and being on a bed was fast rising to the top of the list.

But Landyn had said something about their first-first when he was talking about their breakfast. This was their first kiss and that would never happen again. Hephaestus breathed slowly and focused on how Landyn's body quivered in his arms, how Landyn's breath was a mix of chocolate and bacon, and how eager his mate seemed to be in kissing Hephaestus back.

“Ooh. Ooh.” Landyn said a kisses later. “My hunky mate. I'm going to make a mess in these new pants you got me in a minute. We should probably talk...shouldn't we? Do we need to talk, like what do you like? Don't like? You know. Sex stuff.”

Hephaestus couldn't help it, resting his forehead on Landyn's as he chuckled. "You're right. You're so right, sweetling. I'm sorry. I shouldn't laugh, but you make me so happy."

"Do you like sex?" Landyn's face was flushed, and his lips were puffed, and Hephaestus felt a shaft of pride. He'd made his mate look like that. Then the questions filtered through his synopsis and rang a bell.

"I've enjoyed sex in the past," he said cautiously. "I know shifters don't like to hear of their mates being with others, so we'll just skip that bit, but sweetling..." Hephaestus hesitated and then said in a rush, "I'm not a small person. Down there, I mean."

"I know." If anything, Landyn's grin seemed to widen. "I could sense that when we were kissing. I've played around a bit, but I might have to work up to taking that beastie into my body. Is that okay? Would you be mad about that?" His cheeks seemed to redden even more as he added, "I know you're used to having sex with people bigger than me and your friend did say I wasn't your type, but I'd do my best..."

"No, sweetling, don't go thinking that." Damn Bronte. "Yes, I had sex with the giants. They seemed to prefer people who were big. I...I..." Hephaestus wasn't sure how to explain. "I've always looked for people who simply accepted me as a man, when most people only ever saw me as the lame god."

"Who would think that about you?" Landyn looked so indignant on his behalf, Hephaestus wanted to laugh, but he knew that wasn't the right thing to do. "You've been so sweet to me, and you're totally hot. You almost had me messing my pants with a kiss. Honestly, I'm going to have to learn a martial art or something so I can fight people off you."

“Martial art? Fighting?” Hephaestus stared at his mate in shock. “No one has ever felt the need to fight over me at any time in my very long life.”

“You’ve never had a mate before.” Landyn folded his arms across his chest. “I would fight for you, or beside you...unless you’re fighting giants.” His arms and face fell. “I’m going to blame the shock of seeing your friend this morning for not doing more then. Face it, from a shifter perspective, most people don’t have ginormous one-eyed giants in their kitchens. But I’ll be better prepared next time.”

“There won’t be a next time.” Hephaestus ran his hand up Landyn’s slender back and curled his fingers in his mate’s hair. “What did I ever do to deserve you?”

“What answer will get me more kisses?” Landyn turned his face up. “Maybe in bed kisses? With no clothes on type kisses?”

There were times when being a god had it’s uses. Hephaestus wasn’t going to refuse an offer like that. Holding Landyn close, he zapped them both to his bed, clothes getting lost along the way. Just the feel of Landyn’s skin on his made Hephaestus groan.

Hephaestus didn't have a way with words. If anyone wanted an example of the tall, dark, hulking type at a party, it was him. But as Landyn writhed with excitement across his body, his smooth skin awakening parts of Hephaestus he thought long dead, he understood in that moment why the great poets in history wrote of love so passionately.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning with her "How Do I Love Thee" or the eloquent words from Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his poem simply entitled "Love." But then no, Hephaestus reasoned as he remembered that even with those wonderful words, the poets contrasted love and death, and Hephaestus was already so pleased to have spared his mate from that outcome. To have a life without a sweetling who held him

as he cried was already more than he could bear to even think about.

But oh, how Hephaestus wished he had the slick words that would help his mate understand how special he was already. How could he verbalize the overwhelming pleasure he got from Landyn's clumsy touches, his sweet groans, and how his body arched into Hephaestus's hands - and not just the sexy bits. With Landyn, Hephaestus's whole body responded, and it would seem the feeling was mutual. When Hephaestus ran his hand down Landyn's back, his mate arched into his touch like a sensual cat.

It was intoxicating. Yes, Hephaestus had a lot of sex before Landyn. If he thought about it, there had never been a time in his life when, if he was horny, he couldn't find someone to get off with. In that respect he was a lot like his kin. But the moment Hephaestus's lips had met Landyn's, he knew his mated life was going to be so different.

Sex with someone not his mate – cock is hard, I need somewhere to put it. Done.

Spending time with Landyn – Hephaestus wasn't even going to call it sex, because he didn't want to debase the trust his shifter showed in his nakedness with someone who was a literal stranger – it was already so different. Not just the kisses, although that wasn't something Hephaestus usually did.

The touches were all over. All over. Landyn's nose and mouth were mapping out every muscle Hephaestus had – and he seemed so happy about it. But then just when Hephaestus thought his balls would empty without his cock being touched, it was as if Landyn was missing his lips and he'd slide back up Hephaestus's body and spend the next five minutes kissing until they were both breathless.

When has anyone ever spent this much time seemingly enjoying my body and bringing me pleasure? If Hephaestus had any brain cells still functioning, he might

have truly considered an answer – any possible comparable incident must've been centuries ago. But he was too busy mapping out every part of his mate's body he could reach, learning what made Landyn moan.

The end, when it came, was as beautiful as it was simple. They'd rolled together, front to front, on their sides. Landyn's fingers were in Hephaestus's facial hair, and Hephaestus's hands were curled around his mate's smooth butt as they rutted together. Hephaestus's cock was leaking so much it was gliding against Landyn's skin, and he could feel the mess Landyn's was leaving on him. Groans filled the air, and the next thing Hephaestus felt was the brief sting from a bite. Landyn was claiming him all over again and yet this time, Hephaestus wasn't making a mess in his pants. He was panting as his racing heart sent blood thundering around his body and his cock was pulsing, spurting spunk all over the front of Landyn's torso, mixing with Landyn's own release.

Sticky. Messy. Abso-fucking-lutely perfect. And Landyn didn't try and get away, like so many of Hephaestus's partners had in the past. When Hephaestus wrapped his arms around Landyn's back, his precious mate simply sighed, his head resting on Hephaestus's shoulder, his arm curled around Hephaestus's neck, and his fingers lightly twirling in his hair.

"First-first?" Landyn's voice sounded husky, sleepy, and so damn happy.

"Definitely first-first sweetling." And for Hephaestus it was. For the first time after a release, he actually felt content. After the hassles with Bronte just an hour before, Hephaestus was going to hang onto that feeling for as long as he could.

“I was thinking we could go out today, if you felt up to it?”

Landyn looked across the table at his mate of three whole days. Three whole days of being offered food every time Landyn’s stomach rumbled, long hours spent talking about nothing serious at all, and making out on the couch with a movie playing in the background. On the second day packages started arriving with Landyn’s name on them that contained piles of clothes, shoes, underwear, and all those little things Hephaestus seemed to think he needed - like toiletries.

“I wanted you to feel special, getting the parcels,” Hephaestus had explained when Landyn asked why he didn’t just zap up anything he thought Landyn needed. Landyn was more than happy to work for the things he’d been given, but he sensed that Hephaestus had genuinely thought about the least possible way of offending him (a person who had nothing) by offering him gifts instead. Which was so much fun unboxing – Landyn had to be honest about that.

A particular favorite of Landyn’s was a huge cat gym which Hephaestus set up for his ferret in one corner of the living room. “You can shift out in the garden any time you like.” Hephaestus had been so serious as he followed the instructions with a lot of muttering and cursing, screwing poles and stands together. “This is just for when it’s cold, wet, or dark outside, and your furry half still wants to play.” Such a sweet thing to do and yet another way Hephaestus was spoiling him.

The perfect eggs Hephaestus had cooked for him that morning while Landyn was taking another bath was another example, as much appreciated as the cat gym. Landyn was still coming to terms with the fact he could eat more than once a day. “I’m sure it will be fun, going out with you. Are you taking me to see your studio?”

“If you think you’d like to go. I need to check my website and the details for that are on my studio computer, and I thought you might like to see some of the smaller things I’ve made.” Hephaestus pushed his plate aside and reached for his coffee mug. “You should know, I’m not sure, but it’s possible the cyclops might be there. I don’t think they will be, but we have all shared the workshop space for the longest time. Is that going to be a problem for you?”

Landyn shrugged and smiled. “If you recall, I didn’t have a problem with them in the first place. They were the ones who had a problem with me. Remember what I said about being happy?” He pointed his fork in Hephaestus’s direction. “I can’t make people happy who have no intention of being happy, and neither can you. I’m more concerned about you, and if you’ll be all right if they’re there. They’re your friends. You know them better than I do.”

“I thought I did.” Hephaestus sighed.

“I’m sure they regret the way they acted, especially Bronte.” Actually, Landyn didn’t think that at all. He was just trying to be diplomatic. He understood that change was scary, especially if a person was used to having things their own way for such a long time. Landyn imagined even giants would worry about things like that. “It’ll be fine.” He widened his smile deliberately. “I’m excited to see what you do in this studio of yours.”

“I’m really keen to show you.” Hephaestus nodded, but then those worried lines appeared on his forehead again. “There was one other thing. Do you remember, back when we met...”

“Absolutely, I remember every second of that night.” Scraping his plate clean, Landyn licked his fork and then set his knife and fork and plate to one side. Hephaestus had zapped him chocolate again and he just had to have a sip.

“You mentioned you were on the run from a vampire who wanted to cage you. Do we need to take any extra security precautions or be on the look out for anyone in particular while we’re out and about?”

Landyn froze for a moment, and then quickly licked his lips in case he had chocolate froth on the top one. “You should take it as a compliment that I haven’t thought about that little matter at all since you scooped me up and changed my life. Do you know any vampires? Like, are there any you’re familiar with in town? I probably should’ve asked this that first night we met.”

“There is a local coven, maybe a half a dozen vampires I believe, but they tend to keep to themselves.” Hephaestus got a cute furrow in between his eyes when he was thinking. “I’ve seen them, in passing, if I’ve been out at night at a club or bar, but I haven’t had anything to do with any of them specifically. They tend to stay away from paranormals they perceive as more powerful than they are. Gods and cyclops both fall under the more powerful category.”

“That’s handy.” Landyn took another quick swig of his drink. “With luck, no one will notice me with you and things will be fine.”

Yep. His bright smile wasn’t going to cut the mustard this time. Hephaestus shook his head. “Landyn, don’t you realize how stunning you are? You’re noticeable no matter where you go. Why don’t you tell me what actually happened that had you on the streets in the first place? Perhaps I can help.”

“I think your opinion about my looks is biased, but, oh...I feel so stupid about it.” Landyn groaned putting his head on the table, barely missing his mug.

“It can’t have been that stupid if whatever this guy did meant you were living on the streets for two years.” Hephaestus’s hand was heavy on Landyn’s head in a comforting way.

“But it was my fault.” Landyn lifted his head, pouting. “Well, I didn’t ask to be put in a cage, and I don’t remember agreeing to a collar any day of the week, either. Most shifters don’t like that sort of thing unless it’s part of what they and their partner are into.”

“So this was a date gone wrong? A relationship breakdown?”

“I don’t know what it was.” Sitting in Hephaestus’s lovely bright kitchen, thinking about HIM was the last thing Landyn wanted to do, but his mate deserved his honest story. “I was working. You already know I hadn’t had much schooling, and my home life was crap, and let’s leave the home side of things at that, all right?” Landyn waited until Hephaestus nodded before he continued.

“So I was working, stocking shelves, doing odd jobs for a huge department store. Nothing special, but the hours were plentiful, people were friendly, and I made enough money to have a small apartment to call my own. I was happy.”

“Okay, so did this vampire approach you in the store?”

“No, but I did have a couple of friends – they were human, so it’s not like they knew I turned furry once in a while, but we would go out drinking together on Friday nights. It was our payday and the bar down the road from where we worked had cheap drinks from six until ten at night, so it was a regular thing we did.”

“Sounds like you built a nice little life for yourself.”

Landyn basked under Hephaestus’s approval. “It wasn’t much, but I could afford to eat, and I had a roof over my head. I thought I was doing okay. I’ve worked almost my whole life, so to see a real benefit come from that...” He trailed off. “Anyhow, we were out – me and a few friends - playing pool and just talking about the week. Then I felt this presence. It was like...like a storm was coming, but no one else

seemed to notice it.

“Then I saw him – this tall man with clothes that were more expensive than all the booze in the bar. He locked onto me, and I barely had time to notice his eyes were strange and then bam he was beside me. Introduced himself as Michael, bought me a drink, chatted with me and my friends, and yet I couldn’t shake this feeling that he’d put me in some kind of trance...”

“Vampires can do that – it’s not considered a polite thing to do to another paranormal, but they do that have ability.”

“That would explain why I just followed him out of the bar like a puppy dog, then.” Landyn was still disgusted with himself for doing that. “There wasn’t a question of consent because he never asked, and you know, when I think back about it now, I’m not sure I talked at all from the moment he introduced himself, and you know that’s weird because I barely shut up around you.”

“I enjoy that you are happy to talk to me about things. The thing is not all vampires are evil predators,” Hephaestus said softly. “Having to hide who they are, especially with their unique feeding needs, especially in the modern world, it isn’t easy. They learn, over very long lives, to adapt and modify their behavior so they seem to fit in. Your Michael probably tranced you silent so if any of your friends thought about the interaction later, they would just think you were shy around a new prospective beau.”

“I get that, I really do.” Landyn did not want his mate to think he was speciest. “And, if I’d been asked, I wouldn’t have objected to the sex and feed that came afterward. Don’t growl. You’re not a shifter,” he added with a quick grin, because Hephaestus was doing an amazing impersonation of a grumpy bear. “The thing is, it was a hookup – it’s not like we exchanged phone numbers or anything. Done and done. He asked if...no wait.” Landyn held up his hand, thinking about that night.

“Micheal told me to be at the bar again the following week, and I just wobbled down the road on my shaky legs heading for home. He took far too much blood. It took me the weekend to recover. Anyway, I distinctly remember thinking, distinctly, and that was probably the first distinct thought I’d had since seeing Michael for the first time, but I thought that was it. There was no way I was going to do that again. I did not go to the bar the following Friday, or for two weeks after that, either.”

“That was a good idea, keeping yourself safe, and increasing the time apart so any temptation the vampire might have for your blood would dissipate as he took blood from other donors.”

“Right. Right.” Excited, Landyn shook his finger at his mate. “See, that’s what I thought. Well, not with all those fancy words, but I figured if he wanted to see me a week after the first feed, then all I had to do was stay away from him for about a month, and he’d feed from someone else and forget I ever existed.”

“Considering you turned up in Chicago as a rough sleeper, I’m guessing that’s not what happened.”

“He broke into my apartment Saturday morning two weeks later.” Landyn slumped in his chair with a sigh. “Huffing and puffing about how my place just would not do, annoyed with me because he had to trance one of the people I worked with to find out where I lived. I’m struck mute, unable to even order him out.

“He took me to another house. Just picked me up and walked me out of my own house, took me to another one. He locked me in a cage, telling me that would be my home from then on. I still couldn’t say anything as he took more blood from my neck. I just watched like a statue as he stripped me of all my clothes, took everything I had like my phone, wallet, and keys. He left me in that cage, too weak from blood loss to do anything.” Landyn sniffed. Not his finest moment, but Hephaestus wanted to know the risk, and as a mate it was up to Landyn to protect him with knowledge if

nothing else.

“I got out, obviously. I wouldn’t be here if I hadn’t. It took about a week for him to leave me alone long enough for the trance to wear off and for me to have enough strength to move. I shifted into my ferret. He never knew what type of shifter I was. He didn’t care.

“So I shifted and squeezed through the gaps in the bars. I got out and ran for almost an hour with bare feet on the concrete to get back to my apartment only to find someone else was living there.

“The guy there loaned me a shirt and pants and a pair of sneakers, but hey, it was his apartment. He showed me his lease and everything. He’d moved in three days after I was taken. He swore the place was empty when he was shown it. He had no idea what happened to my stuff. It’s not like I could go to the landlord, because clearly Michael had gotten to him, too.”

“Oh, sweetling, that’s so unfair.”

“I didn’t dare go back to work, or ask for help from any of my friends. They weren’t paranormal and they could’ve been hurt. I didn’t have a clue how to get in touch with anyone to get new paperwork. My ID and license were the last things my dad gave me before he kicked me out, but without it the bank wouldn’t let me have access to my account. I didn’t think it would be so hard. I’d just go to the next town over and start over. I’d done it once. I could do it again.”

“You shouldn’t have had to.”

“Anything to stay out of that cage, you know.” Landyn looked into Hephaestus’s eyes. “I just wanted to be safe. So I went to the next town over, but it’s hard getting work with no ID. And then, when I was doing a cash delivery some guy jumps out at

me from an alley one night and snarls “Michael’s looking for you’ and I freaked as he ran away.”

“That’s...”

“Obsessive? Weird? Psycho behavior on the part of a vampire? You’d better believe it was.” Landyn rested his head on the table again. It was easier than facing anything in that moment. “Two years, fifteen towns, twenty-six...or it could be twenty-seven, I lost count, but there were far too many random vamps just jumping at me out of nowhere, whispering or snarling Michael’s name, hounding me so I can never feel safe. I don’t even know how they kept finding me.”

“You will be safe with me.”

Landyn was cradled in Hephaestus’s magic even as his mate was speaking, swung over until he was cradled against his mate’s chest. When Hephaestus said something like that, Landyn believed him. In that moment Landyn truly wanted to believe that his days of having to avoid jumpy vampires had come to an end. Hephaestus was solid, he cared. Landyn could feel that through their bond. I must’ve done something right to end up with you as my mate.

It was lovely, sitting in a cozy kitchen, sun gleaming on the countertops and the smell of hot chocolate still tickling his nose. As much as Landyn could’ve sat there all day, he remembered his mate wanted to do something and he wanted to be supportive of that, too. “So,” he said, kissing Hephaestus’s chest. “Shall we go to your workshop now?”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:37 am*

Hephaestus wasn't one of the original gods, but when so much time had passed between inception and modern day, he might just as well have been one of the first beings around. But the point of that thought was that there wasn't much he hadn't dealt with before.

Unlike some of his family members in the Greek pantheon, Hephaestus was never known for going off half-cocked, fully cocked, or cocked up in any way – his uncle Poseidon was one case in point, and Zeus wasn't much better. Hephaestus was always a behind the scenes person – he made the tools that his pantheon fought with. He was the one that kept the forge fires burning.

But the anger that he felt, hearing Landyn's story, was hotter than the fires of his forge – and that thing never went out. As soon as he heard what Landyn had been through, he was struck by how twisted everything was. The worst of it being that the faceless vampire, Michael, probably forgot about his sweet precious mate a month after Landyn escaped.

Yes, vampires could get possessive over donors. Yes, Hephaestus knew of some situations, historically, where donors were kept in slavish conditions that were truly appalling. As far as Hephaestus was concerned, it was something he always hated about the non-interference laws he had to live by, especially if he had come across cases like that.

But times had changed for vampires drastically. Blood bags were now available with the right connections – something easy for a vampire to attain. And with the way a meme of a sneezing cat could travel from one side of the world to the other in five minutes thanks to social media, many vampires who didn't have solid relationships

with their donors preferred not to deal with live donors at all.

In other words, nothing Landyn said made sense. A vampire wouldn't stalk a man, especially someone who was nothing more than a casual donor. Especially across cities, the way Landyn had been hounded. And for so damned long.

"You're brooding." Landyn touched his arm and Hephaestus glanced at his mate, blown away as he always was by the man's smile. They were in the truck, on their way to the studio, and yes, his mate was right.

"I can't help it," he admitted. "Do you think people do things for a reason? Like, if they commit time and effort, resources, or money to something, there is usually an end goal in sight?"

Landyn always scrunched up his nose when he was thinking. I'm allowed to think that's cute if the person I'm thinking about is my mate.

"Does that apply to people who just live in the moment, too, do you think?" Landyn asked. "If someone randomly decided to go somewhere fun for a day, or just decided to cook a fun meal for people they care about? Oh. Oh. I get what you're saying though. The meal, or the place where a person might go, would still be the end goal, and the reason doesn't have to be like for a business or to make them money or anything else. The reason could be anything at all and so could the goal. Is that what you meant?"

It wasn't anything like what Hephaestus was thinking, but he nodded. "Thinking about reasons and goals, and time investment and things like that. Sweetling, do you have any reason at all why Michael pursued you all that time or why?"

"He was hungry?" Landyn's face shuttered and Hephaestus hated that his words caused that but there were still part of the narrative that didn't make sense, and for

Hephaestus to give Landyn any resolution to his vampire pest, he had to know more.

“When the other vampires jumped out at you, none of them were Michael, were they?”

Landyn shook his head.

“Had you seen any of the other vampires before?”

Another headshake. Seeing his turn coming up, Hephaestus turned into his parking lot and parked his truck, turning the engine off and applying the brake.

Twisting in his seat, he rested his arm across the back of Landyn’s seat. “This is really important, and I promise I’ll never ask again because I know this isn’t easy for you, but did any of the vampires who jumped out at you – the ones who scared you – did they hurt you in any way? Did they try and stop you leaving, try biting you, or anything else like that?”

“No.” Landyn turned his head away, looking out his side window. “They were just the messengers, letting me know I would never be safe.” His head snapped back, and Hephaestus realized his mate was angry. “Wasn’t that enough? Should I have just ignored the first one and lived my life as if I didn’t have a psychotic vampire after my blood?”

“No, sweetling...”

“They were all so big!” Landyn lifted his arms above his head, his fingers splayed. “One of the first ones grabbed me, and he was looming over me, leaning close so I could smell the blood on his breath. Two. Three. Four. Five...All of them so big, with their gangster suits and their black glasses as if that made them cool or something. I was terrified.”

And that right there was the reason – fear. Hephaestus was almost certain that the whole ordeal that Landyn had been through was nothing more than a game for a vampire who had contacts with covens in every city Landyn ended up in. His anger grew, but he tamped it down. His mate didn't need a reason to fear him.

“It won't happen to you again. No one will ever make you feel unsafe again – not the cyclops, demented vampires, or anyone else who takes affront at your cuteness. Wherever we go or whatever we do, you will be safe.” There wasn't much else Hephaestus could say, but as far as he was concerned, those words were a vow. Even if Landyn grew to hate him, and Hephaestus was fast coming to trust that wouldn't happen, he would make sure his little ferret was safe.

“We should go inside.” Landyn sniffed and Hephaestus realized his mate was trying not to cry. “You wanted to show me things that you'd made. This is your studio, right?”

Hephaestus was thinking they should probably head back home, but then he realized that might give Landyn the impression he couldn't look after him or keep him safe, and Landyn deserved to feel safe anywhere. “Yes, this is it. Let me get your door for you and we can head inside.”

Less than two minutes later he was regretting that decision as he saw the three cyclops all lounging around the large table that took up one-quarter of his warehouse space.

“What's this?” Bronte sneered, although he stayed in his seat. “Bring your boy to work day?”

“I'm showing my mate around,” Hephaestus said firmly. He really didn't want another fight. “He has as much right to be here as you do.”

“I sure do, because I’m the god’s mate, not you.” Landyn surprised him by moving around the showroom part of the space. “See, I’m looking at pretty things. Oh, Hephaestus your work is just incredible.” He carefully picked up a small bird Hephaestus had made once just to see it fly. “You are so clever.”

“So what do you do, mate?” Bronte called across the floor. “You can see how talented our god is now. What can you do?”

“Stock shelves,” Landyn said brightly as he put the small bird down and moved along the shelves. “I’m great at delivering goods when I have a bike, and my customer service skills are second to none according to the last reference I got.” He flicked a cheeky glance over his shoulder and Hephaestus had never been so proud when he said, “Being able to get along with all types of people is a rare skill to have, you know.”

“Did that pipsqueak just insult me?” Bronte turned to his brothers. “He did, didn’t he. He insulted me.”

“Just shush,” Steropes said sharply. “He wasn’t insulting you, he was answering your question.”

“Yeah, Bronte, you said you’d behave,” Arges chimed in. “The mate is part of Hephaestus’s life now and...”

“You’re taking his side?” Bronte was on his feet and Hephaestus grimaced. He was still none the wiser as to why his friend was acting as if he had a boil on his ass, but Bronte was going to have to accept their new reality or leave them the hell alone.

“I wasn’t insulting you,” Landyn said in a cheery tone, skipping across the floor, and resting his hands on two cupboard door handles. “I’m exercising my right to be here, as my mate’s mate. Look, I can open cupboards and...woah. I thought there would be

tools and things in here.” He backed away from the cupboard.

“They are automatons,” Hephaestus said quickly. “They won’t hurt you. They can be useful for a variety of tasks. I built them to be completely indestructible. They can follow complex instructions, even change their form if it makes the tasks easier, and yet they can react as any living being might when they are given those orders.”

“Incredible. You are so incredible.” Landyn shook his head as he moved close to them again, gently reaching out and touching the metal. “You had three giants in your kitchen, and six golden people in your studio cupboards. Look at the detail in those faces. It’s like any moment they’ll just open their eyes and start talking to me.”

“They can...”

“They won’t respond to you, runt.” Bronte barely flinched when Steropes smacked him around the head. “What? They won’t. He’s just a tiny mortal who...”

“You know, it really gets my goat when people keep harping on about my size like it means something,” Landyn said loudly, his smile gone. “Size doesn’t mean anything when it comes to instilling fear – it’s evil that does that. Evil intent. And I’ve had the pants scared off me a dozen times by people a lot smaller than you, Giant.”

“Er...Landyn?” Hephaestus wasn’t sure what his mate’s point was, although he’d defend Landyn’s right to say anything he damned well pleased until the sun fell from the sky.

“No, it’s all right, my lovely mate, I do know what I’m saying.” Landyn’s smile was back. “You see, if I do this...” he tapped on the chest of the nearest automaton. “Hi Charlie, wake up. You too, Bertie, and you can open your eyes, Cleo. There you go. Come out of the cupboard please.”

“What the fuck, Hephaestus? You’re doing this. Cut it out.” Bronte looked worried and for good cause. The giants couldn’t put a dent on Hephaestus’s creations.

“I’m not doing this.” Hephaestus grinned.

“Do you know what looming is?” Landyn lifted his arms, much like he’d done when he was describing the vampires. All three automatons lifted their arms the same way and Landyn clapped and grinned. “Now, mean faces. Put on your meanest looking face.” He frowned and scrunched up his lips in what was probably meant to be a scowl. Hephaestus thought it was adorable, especially when the automatons did it too.

“Awesome, you’re doing a great job. Now go and loom over the three giants. Be as big as you can and loom over the giants, scaring them. Don’t let them talk or move from their seats until I tell you to stop.”

The automatons could move quickly when they were instructed to, growing to double their height and width as they kept the post Landyn instructed them on, stopping the giants from getting out of their chairs. Hephaestus quickly warded around his companions so they couldn’t just translocate. Landyn was having fun – he couldn’t be expected to remember that cyclops had some magical powers, too.

“Did you want the other three to do anything else, my sweet mate?”

Landyn turned to him and shook his head. “I was going to ask the other three to point their fingers and laugh at the cyclops, but you know, that would be just mean, and I’m not like that. But I don’t think it’s fair that three of them have to stay in the cupboard while the other ones are having fun. Hi Georgia, hello Simon, and good day to you Sarah.” The three automatons all woke up. “How would you like to go over and sit at the other end of the table and play a game of Go Fish. It’s a card game. When your friends have been doing their looming for ten minutes, you can swap places with them. Is that all right?”

“Do you have playing cards, mate of Hephaestus?” Georgia asked, and Hephaestus noticed the automaton had taken on a female tone.

“My mate will supply them, won’t you Hephaestus?”

“They’re already on the table for you.” Hephaestus pointed his finger at the table and cards appeared. “All set.”

“Thank you.” Landyn came skipping over and taking Hephaestus’s hand. “Show me what else you have here. I’m fascinated already.”

“Hephaestus, sire, you can’t allow this continue,” Bronte blustered, trying to duck around the looming automaton who was doing a good job of blocking his vision. “This is humiliating. You know we can’t fight back against the tin cans.”

“Every time you talk, I’ll add another five minutes,” Landyn sang back happily. “My mom used to do that to us when she’d put us in time out,” he added more quietly to Hephaestus.

Time out? Hephaestus wasn’t sure if he’d ever understand how Landyn’s mind worked, but that didn’t matter. “You heard my mate, Bronte. Every time you talk you’ll have to sit there five minutes longer. Landyn, come into my office. I’ll show you my website. It has a gallery on it of some of the pieces that have been commissioned or bought by some people who collect my work.”

“Ooh, more pretty things.” Landyn skipped by his side. “You amaze me more every time I see something new.”

“You amaze me more.”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:37 am*

Landyn was getting restless, although that wasn't Hephaestus's fault. Two weeks into his mating and Landyn had never felt so rested, well fed, or cared for. Hephaestus looked for opportunities every day to make him feel special, and Landyn did his best to help his mate feel the same way.

And that was part of the problem. There were times when Hephaestus would worry out loud that Landyn would get bored being with him. Landyn, being his normal caring self, would reassure his mate that wasn't the case, and after lots of kisses and very occasionally some sexy rubbing times, Hephaestus's mood usually improved.

Hephaestus had said many times he didn't consider himself a victim, even though there were some stories he shared that Landyn felt definitely edged into the abusive side of things. Frankly, Landyn wasn't sure how else anyone could categorize being thrown off a mountain by his own father.

So Hephaestus's dips in moods were understandable, at least in Landyn's opinion. Despite that, for most of the time the burly looking god was the genuinely caring mate anyone could hope for. Landyn was absolutely spoiled – a bath was run for him every morning, breakfast was ready for him the moment he'd dried himself.

Gifts were still arriving almost every day, although Landyn said he didn't need anything. But if he said anything like that at all, then Hephaestus would look sad. Not in any sad-eyed puppy way designed to make Landyn feel bad, but a bleak look would flash across Hephaestus's face all the same.

"I have more money than I know what to do with," he explained more than once, and Landyn, who couldn't imagine how much that might be, would kiss his mate and

thank him for the latest gifts, because he could feel through their bond that Hephaestus really wanted to do those things for him.

Although Hephaestus's comment about money did make for one interesting afternoon for Landyn, sitting in Hephaestus's office with a piece of paper and a pencil, trying to work out how much money would be too much if a person lived forever. In the end, Landyn gave up. He struggled with any number that got bigger than four digits.

Landyn had a lot of time to puzzle things out like that. Since their first visit to the studio, Hephaestus started taking him to work every day, which was fun for about three days, and then not so much. After long hours pounding metal, Hephaestus was usually tired, and his leg ached so badly that he would wince on the drive home, something Landyn hated to see.

Then there was the little matter of the cyclops didn't talk to him at all, just sending pointed snarls in his direction, which Landyn did his best to ignore.

There had been one instance Landyn really struggled to ignore, where Bronte, Steropes, and Arges had gotten far too snuggly with Hephaestus for Landyn's comfort. Surprised by the sheer amount of anger Landyn felt at seeing their behavior, especially when he knew it was deliberately aimed at upsetting him, Landyn quickly got up and went to sit outside.

He'd been staying out of his mate's way while Hephaestus and the cyclops were working, just sitting in a corner reading a book. Landyn couldn't think why the giants would do something so blatantly wrong like that.

But as the cold air helped cool his anger, Landyn tried to reason that the giants still weren't comfortable with change. Maybe they had always been overly touchy-feely with his mate and hadn't believed they were doing anything wrong at all. Yeah, Landyn didn't believe that either. He hadn't seen them making any effort to accept

his place in his mate's life, something Hephaestus had clearly noticed too from all the yelling going on as soon as Landyn had left the space.

So... Thinking... Landyn was doing a lot of it. There wasn't much else he had to do. He truly appreciated his mate's skills in the workshop. Hephaestus could turn a piece of ugly metal into the most beautiful pieces of art. The flames of the forge seemed to dance at his command, and Landyn could admit, too, that his mate and the cyclops all worked together seamlessly when they were crafting bigger pieces. It was amazing to watch, but there was a limit to how much flame dancing he wanted to see.

I should get a job. Landyn was sitting outside again. He'd spent two years of his life being outside, and Landyn enjoyed the wintery sun and the chill of the air. There was nothing artificial about it. His toes were toasty in his new boots and he had his coat.

Knocking his boots together, Landyn admired the shine. There were no scuffs or holes in the soles or on the toes. I haven't been walking anywhere to get them grubby, he chuckled quietly to himself. That was something he missed – hearing laughter and general conversations from people just going about their business. Looking out at the bleak parking lot, Landyn couldn't see another person anywhere.

There were a few times when Hephaestus would laugh along with him, usually at breakfast if he'd had a good sleep, and Landyn loved those times. But Landyn knew that being quiet was his mate's nature. He also knew that Hephaestus wasn't ignoring him when he was working. It was just like any artist, when Hephaestus got into the flow of what he was doing he didn't notice how late it was most evenings before he stopped.

And it wasn't as though Hephaestus knew Landyn missed being out among other people. Landyn had never said. Admittedly, he'd always been careful when he was rough sleeping, especially at night. But during the day, especially if the weather was nice, Landyn used to sit in a shopping area, just watching people going about their

day. Laughter, conversations, random snatches of private lives that were always interesting.

Is it weird we don't have friends, Landyn mused? In his head, the cyclops didn't count. Yes, they'd been in his Hephaestus's life forever, but they never came to the house now, and if they invited Hephaestus to go out and drink with them if work had finished earlier than normal, the invite never included Landyn.

Their loss, Landyn reminded himself. Before the vampire incident, Landyn would go out every Friday night with people he was friends with. Drinking, dancing, playing darts or pool... I was good at pool, Landyn sighed.

Technically, there's nothing stopping me from going out now. Landyn tapped his jean's pocket. Hephaestus had arranged a new ID for him through his godly connections, a driver's license even though Landyn didn't know how to drive and even a birth certificate. Hephaestus had also given him a credit card so he could buy anything he wanted... which would be handy if we ever went out to the shops.

It was getting dark. Landyn had no wish to walk into town, and he knew Hephaestus would hate the idea. But, he reasoned, there was nothing stopping him taking an Uber. Peering over his shoulder at the big window, the darkness outside made the inside easy to see. All four of the big men had shirts off, pounding metal with hammers, the fires dancing wildly.

Probably best not to bother him at the moment. But then Landyn had a light bulb idea. Jumping up and hurrying back into the building, he scuttled through to the office and called the Uber number that was on the office noticeboard. Apparently, there was a car only two minutes away. Must be fate. Then Landyn ran over to the automaton cupboard, opening it and tapping one of them on the chest.

"Wake up, Charlie."

The magnificent machine opened his eyes. “Hello, mate of Hephaestus.”

“Nice to see you, Charlie.” Landyn beamed – Charlie was the closest thing he had to a friend. “Hephaestus is really busy, and I don’t want to disturb him. His work is very dangerous with all that fire and hot metal, so it’s important not to interrupt him while he’s doing it. I don’t want him to get hurt. However, I’m hungry. I’m going out for a little while. I have called for a car to come and collect me. When Hephaestus has finished working, will you tell him I will be back in an hour from now? I am just off to get some food.”

“I will tell him, mate of Hephaestus.”

“Thank you. Come out of the cupboard, so you can see when he has finished working.”

The big machine lumbered out and turned to face where the men were working.

“Good job.” Patting Charlie’s back, Landyn heard the toot of a car horn. “I’ll be back in an hour.”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:37 am*

“What’s causing this sudden influx of custom orders?” Hephaestus snarled as he wiped the sweat from his brow with his forearm. He noticed as he raised his head that it was already dark – another day gone before he’d had a chance to blink.

“Your art style is popular,” Steropes said. “Perhaps you’ve gone viral on one of the social media platforms people seem to spend all day looking at these days. Probably a customer making a post about how happy they are with their order.”

“Yes, sire, that’s probably what it is.” Arges nodded. “It’s not like it’s a problem. You’ve never worried about hard work before. Do you remember how many times we just worked twenty-four hours straight? We’d forget what day of the week it was sometimes.” He laughed loudly, his kin joining in.

Hephaestus didn’t see anything funny about it. “We’ve had a lot of orders before, yes, but usually you were a lot better at setting the delivery times so we could have time to eat, drink, and shit. I’ve barely spent five minutes with Landyn for the past two weeks.” Speaking of which, Hephaestus looked around, but most of the warehouse was in darkness. He limped over to the nearest wall and flicked on the lights. Landyn must be in the bathroom.

“Your work is important to you. Always has been,” Bronte yelled over the noise of his hammer. He was still working. “It’s a crucial part of your identity, sire. No one should ever pull you away from the core of who you are.”

By “no one” Hephaestus knew the cyclops was referring to Landyn. The damn giant would never call him by name. “I have someone else in my life now, and you damn well know it.” He frowned as he saw one of the automatons moving toward him.

“What is it? Where’s my mate?”

“The mate of Hephaestus has a message for you.” The automaton bowed stiffly. “He wished for me to not disturb you while you worked. He worried you might be hurt by the flames or hot metal if you were interrupted. I was instructed to wait until you are finished. Are you finished working?”

Bronte snorted. “That fucking ferret doesn’t know a thing about you, does he, sire? You’re the master of volcanoes and metallurgy. You could walk through the flames, and it wouldn’t hurt you.”

“He cares about me.” Stung, Hephaestus turned his focus back to the automaton. “I am finished working. What is the message?”

“The mate of Hephaestus was hungry, sire. He said he was going out for food...”

Hephaestus glanced at the window, again. It was fully dark out.

“He said he called a car to collect him and that he would be back in one hour from the instruction.”

“How long ago was the instruction?” A car? Who’s car?

“Forty-six minutes and twenty-seven seconds from this second right now.”

Almost an hour. Fuck! “Thank you.” Hephaestus dismissed the automaton with a wave of his hand.

“Stop that damn banging,” he yelled at Bronte, the noise suddenly annoying him beyond measure. Or maybe it was just the smug look on the cyclops’ face. “This is on you.”

“Me? I’m working here. What did I do?” Bronte was still holding the hammer, but at least the banging had stopped.

“Not just you. I’m not that stupid that I think you orchestrated this all by yourself. The three of you are tighter than my automaton’s asshole. All this.” Hephaestus flicked his hand at the items they’d made just that day. “You did all this.”

“The work, sire?” Steropes managed to look puzzled, even when his tone was slightly nervous. “All four of us have been working hard to meet the deadlines these past few weeks. Our clients have come to expect an exceptional level of service...”

“Who set the deadlines?” Hephaestus thundered. “Who gave the clients ridiculous expectations? Which one of you?”

The three men looked between each other as if pushing anyone else but them to answer.

“We’re getting through the work,” Arges said at last. “I mean, look at what we’ve gotten finished today.”

“And look at how long it took. No lunch break, no dinner break. My mate has had to go out for fucking food, in an unsafe city, because I was busy working my ass off meeting deadlines you all set.”

“You should just leave him at home,” Steropes suggested. “It would probably be more comfortable for him there.”

Hephaestus chuckled, but it wasn’t a happy sound. “That’s what you’re waiting for, isn’t it? You know I wouldn’t leave him – Landyn is my fated mate forevermore - so you tried to bully him while he was here. When that didn’t work, thanks to my mate making a clever use of the powers he gained when we claimed each other, you

decided to just pile me up with so much work that I wouldn't have time for him. Did you think he'd leave me permanently? Or was leaving him at home enough for you?"

"You might claim that ferret is the center of your existence, but what does it say about you, when you're engrossed in your work and forget he's even in the room," Bronte sneered. "He left because you were ignoring him, not us."

"He left because he was hungry, and yes, that was on me. But do you want to tell me why I was so busy? Why there are still another dozen orders waiting to be fulfilled in the next twenty-four hours, when before Landyn came along, we'd only get a couple of orders a month? The only orders we ever get are word of mouth – there's no way this many orders can come from that. So why? How? Answer me. I command you!"

Pushing his power over his former friends, Hephaestus snarled, showing his teeth. "I'm waiting." They might be giants, but he was the only god in the room.

It was Arges who cracked first. He'd always had a sensitive soul. "Steropes made a social media account and shared some of the pictures we have of your pieces. There was a new customer offer on the posts, only for a week, but..."

"Bronte was the one flexing his muscles in front of the forge, creating pictures for the account for people to drool over," Steropes protested.

"And you were the one who told everyone they could have their order within a week of ordering," Bronte jumped in. "And we can meet the deadlines. We all just have to work..."

"It was all three of you in other words. I should've guessed. In fact, I did guess, didn't I? One of you can't shit without the other ones clenching their asses."

Hephaestus heard a car pull up outside and his worry dropped ten points when he

heard Landyn's voice thanking the driver, followed by a car door slam. "Fine. You got the orders, you can fulfill them. I won't be coming in, so don't count on me doing anything."

"Sire, this work is the core of who you are," Arges protested. "We just wanted to remind you of that."

"All you reminded me of is that I clearly have shit judgment when it comes to friends." Hephaestus limped toward the door as Landyn came bustling through.

"Good timing. Have you finished for the day?" Smiling wide, Landyn held up a box, and then winced. "Oh, your poor leg. You've been standing on it too long again today. But never mind, we'll take you home and you can put your foot up. No cooking for us tonight, I got us dinner. Are you hungry?"

"I am. Thank you for caring, sweetling." Touching Landyn's shoulder, Hephaestus flicked an obscene gesture at the open-mouthed giants with his other hand as he translocated them back to the house. Landyn was right. His leg was sore, and so was his heart.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:37 am*

“I’m so sorry. I’ve been a neglectful mate.”

Landyn almost choked on his hot chocolate. They were sitting on Hephaestus’s large couch, enjoying the food Landyn had bought. Hephaestus had been really quiet, but Landyn expected that. His mate was truly tired from working so hard all day. As for Landyn, he’d had a dose of peopling, and he was just happy they were home.

So hearing those words out of his mate’s mouth was a total shock. “You’re the best mate a shifter could wish for. I wouldn’t even have warm clothes if it wasn’t for you. What would make you think that? Was your day really awful?”

Putting his chocolate down, Landyn shuffled across the gap between them. “I’m not able to give you my special hugs when you’re working, because I know it’s not safe if you get distracted. But clearly that’s what you need.” He wrapped his arms around Hephaestus’s torso, silently marveling at how translocation cleaned his mate off and even provided a shirt, not that Landyn thought his mate needed one. But then, Landyn knew he still had a lot to learn about magic, and Hephaestus seemed more comfortable eating when he was fully dressed. “Did you want to talk about it?”

Hephaestus’s sigh was long. “I know I’ve been working a lot lately.”

“I guess there’re lots of people who want a piece of your beautiful art.” Landyn thought everything his mate made was incredibly complex and definitely special in so many ways. He’d never imagined how a twist in a piece of metal could evoke so many powerful emotions, but under Hephaestus’s hammer those pieces of metal sang.

“Landyn, sweetling, I need you to sit up so you can see my face. This is very difficult

for me, this next thing I've got to say. You might not even want to hug me once you hear what I have to say."

Frowning, Landyn sat up, although he smiled and stroked his finger over the furrow on Hephaestus's brow when he saw it. "My ferret would sense in an instant if something you said wasn't true. But here I am, watching your face, as you asked. What's wrong? You know you can say anything to me, my mate."

"All those orders I've been doing..."

"That's a good thing, isn't it?" Landyn widened his smile. "You must be very proud you have so many happy customers."

"I wouldn't know." Hephaestus was still frowning. "Apparently, the cyclops put pictures of my work on social platforms and offered customers a discount if they put orders in quickly."

Landyn scratched his head, his lips twisted as he tried to work out what his mate was saying. "You're not happy you've gotten so many orders. Oh," he said, suddenly having a lightbulb moment. "Is this a supply and demand sort of thing? I remember, when I used to work in the warehouse, the managers would talk about how if they had too many of a particular item, then they had to reduce the price they charged, so they could make lots more sales. Are you actually losing money from all the hard work you've been doing? That's not right."

"No, sweetling, it's not right, although not for the reason you've given so beautifully. You have a clever brain."

Landyn just had to give his mate a quick kiss for that, because he knew he wasn't clever, so Hephaestus was being sweet, even when he was so tired. But all too soon, Hephaestus pulled back, leaving Landyn's lips tingly.

“The cyclops set me up to be busy all the time so I couldn’t spend time with you.”

His mind still foggy from the kiss, wandering off from the serious conversation on the couch to a whole different room and topic, it took a moment for the words to register. When they did, Landyn was outraged. “They were making you deliberately busy? Didn’t they think about your leg, or how tired you were getting? I thought they cared about you.”

“Did you think they were caring because of the hugging episode? Because I never apologized for that, either.” Hephaestus said gravely.

Landyn’s cheeks heated. “I didn’t blame you. I thought hugging you was something they were used to doing and they just forgot you were mated for a moment...you know. Habit.”

“Is that honestly what you thought at the time?”

Thinking back, Landyn flipped a mental coin in his head. “No, but again it wasn’t your fault, and it might have all been perfectly innocent. I was trying to be fair.”

“But sweetling, while you were trying to be fair, they were trying to come between us, can’t you see?”

Looking down, Landyn picked a speck of something off his fingernail. “I don’t know what you want me to say to that. It’s not like I can do anything to change their minds. They don’t want to get to know me, and I do think that’s unfair. You know” - he was hit by another thought - “it’s one thing to hate someone because they did something horrible to you, but to hate someone without knowing them at all...that is unfair. Truly unfair.”

“You’re right.” Hephaestus took in a long breath, and then added, “But Bronte did

make a good point today, and that's why I need to apologize to you."

"I think those giants need to give me an apology. A mating to a shifter is the most important thing in our lives, but they don't even want to think about what might happen to you if I died because we weren't together. I would never leave you. My heart would shatter." He threw his hands apart, indicating a mini explosion. "My poor ferret would curl up in a ball and pine away with the pain of it all. He would die. If they can't care about the human me because I'm too short for them notice, can't they care about my innocent ferret? We'd both be dead in a week without you, and who would care about you then? It wouldn't be them."

Hephaestus tilted his head slightly. "Sweetling, you do remember when we met, I told you I was immortal, and you would be, too, once we claimed each other. You can't die."

Landyn's hands flew up, smacking his own cheeks. "My goodness, that's worse. If you left me, me and my ferret would feel torment for eternity. Those giants truly don't care at all what they're doing."

"I think they got it into their block heads that if I was too busy working to pay attention to you, then you would leave me, and then they could come back and live in the house with me, to keep me company like things were before."

"They don't know a lot about shifters then, do they." It wasn't a question, it was fact in Landyn's opinion. "If you got mad with me and my ferret, or you didn't want me around anymore because I was too skinny for you, or whatever reason, then I'd just shift, and we'd lurk in your closet, or under a bush in your garden – somewhere close so we'd know you were all right."

Hephaestus's arms came out of nowhere, catching him up and holding him close to his mate's solid chest. "I won't ever cause you to lurk in my closet, sweetling."

Hephaestus's words were muffled in Landyn's hair. "Do you have any idea how perfect you are for me?"

Arching back, because while Landyn could hear the sincerity in Hephaestus's words, this time it was him who had to see the man's face for himself. "Like you're perfect for me, right?" He smiled, showing his teeth, but Hephaestus still didn't smile back.

"I have been ignoring you."

"You've been working."

"You had to go out for food because I didn't stop to eat."

"That's not good for you either, which is why I bought us dinner."

Hephaestus huffed. He seemed to be getting a little frustrated. "Sweetling, repeat after me. My mate should put my needs first."

Frowning, Landyn wrinkled his nose. "I do put your needs first. That's why I didn't interrupt you when you were working, and why I got you some food, because I knew you'd be too tired to cook, and you've never even asked me if I can cook for you, so I wasn't sure if I could use the kitchen. And I would even drive us home after work, too, but I don't know how to drive, so maybe don't ask for me to do that just now, but I could learn and then I could do that for you, too. Oh, oh." Landyn had another thought. "Maybe I could take lessons while you're working? Would that work for you?"

Hephaestus groaned, banging his head on Landyn's shoulder. As he didn't move away, Landyn stroked over the hair on the top of his mate's head. "You don't want me to learn to drive?" he asked hesitantly.

“I want to teach you to drive.” Hephaestus lifted his head. “I want to cook things with you in the kitchen and taste the things you create. I want to take you places – anywhere you want to go in the world. I want to spend whole days in bed with you, loving over every inch of your body so you never worry that you’re too small for my tastes, because believe me you light a fire in me no one has ever done before.”

Thinking about all the work Hephaestus had been doing, and was likely to keep doing, Landyn tried to work out when they could do those things. “Perhaps you could take a weekend off once in a while so we could try some of those activities?” That could be fun.

But Hephaestus shook his head. “Tell me one thing. These past two weeks, when I’ve been dragging you into work with me, have you had a really fun and exciting time, amusing yourself while I’m busy?”

Ooh. That was another one of those hard questions. “I like playing cards with the automatons, sometimes,” Landyn said slowly. “But I know they’re your special machines, so I don’t want to do that very often, and besides, they always let me win. But then, it can be nice to sit outside and watch the clouds move across the sky, on other days. Sometimes they form shapes of all types of things, did you know that?” Then he chuckled at his own silliness. “Don’t answer that. You’re a god. Of course you know about cloud shapes.”

Hephaestus was silent for a moment, and then he said, “That’s the most long winded way anyone has told me no before.”

Chewing the inside of his lip, Landyn asked, “Is that the wrong thing to do? I wasn’t lying. I just don’t like seeing you sad. I know you have to work. I’m not a clingy mate, I promise I’m not.”

“I’m the one who’s been such an idiot mate. The worse mate in history, I reckon.”

“No, don’t say that. See, this is why I don’t say anything because then you get all down on yourself and I hate seeing that. You’re amazing in so many ways, why can’t you see that? Can’t you see how much I love you? Isn’t that worth something to you?”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:37 am*

Bam! Landyn's words went in Hephaestus's ears, slapped him around the head, and then plunged down into his heart, punching that unused organ into life. "I...I love you, too." Hephaestus stuttered over the words, but he got them out. He'd never said them to a living being before, but he felt an instant calm knowing every syllable was true. "You're so brave. You never shy away from sharing your feelings, and in every word and gesture, you're always thinking of me. I can't think what I did to deserve you, but I'm so glad I did it."

"We deserve each other, remember? Perfect for each other." Landyn snuggled into his chest. "Now stop fretting about stuff that's not your fault. You've had a really hard day, doing all that hammering and making art. We should probably get you to bed."

"Not just yet." Hephaestus was physically tired, but Landyn's words of love energized him inside. "When we met, I was mean, because I just fit you into my life without ever asking if you had hopes and dreams of your own. Things you would like to try, do, or experience. Maybe things we could do together?"

"I used to dream of the silliest of things when I had a roof over my head and a job. You know, the sort of thing people would dream about if they'd won the lottery – going on a cruise, flying to far off lands I'd only seen in books. Then, in my dreams, when I'd tired of traveling I'd come back to a huge house with lots of land all around. I dreamed of keeping animals, growing my own food, being part of somewhere rural where the people were friendly." Landyn's voice was low.

"When I was on the streets, my dreams changed, and that was understandable. All I could think about was finding something to eat. But in a lot of ways, rough sleeping

was an eye opener for me. It was hard getting through each day. I was cold and hungry, often scared. But because I kept moving, kept moving, kept moving on to the next town, the next area, just trying to stay ahead of the vampires, I got to see so many places.

“I didn’t always stay in cities, you know. I had to get to them, and most of the time I was hitchhiking or walking, and there were times when I used to come across these smallest places – just a general store, a garage, and usually somewhere to eat. The people there were so friendly, always happy to give me a meal in exchange for me washing dishes or sweeping floors.

“There was this one place, a diner in the middle of nowhere, but it was so nice. It was run by a lady who insisted I call her Aunty Kate. She took me in and I stayed for three days, helping her out with the customers, taking orders, cleaning tables, and washing dishes. In between the customers she used to talk to me about the locals – they all sounded like so much fun. She said I reminded her of her son. I think he was dead, the way she spoke of him.”

“Why didn’t you keep staying with her if she was so nice?”

“The vampires. I didn’t want anyone to hurt her to get to me, so I told her I had to get to the next town over...that’s how I ended up in Chicago and then I met you, so that was a good thing.”

Tilting his face up, Landyn smiled at him, that one look that never ceased to make Hephaestus feel special, making him feel reckless. “We could go on a cruise,” Hephaestus said quickly – he didn’t have an affinity with water. “Live on a farm, you could have a shop, or go back to school and study for something. Sweetling, we can do whatever you want. That’s a positive part about having a god as a mate.”

Landyn chuckled. “You didn’t like the idea of the cruise. I could hear that in your

voice.”

“I’m trying to think if there was ever a time in my life when I’d been on a ship,” Hephaestus admitted. “Water is more Poseidon’s thing than mine.”

“I’ve never been on a ship either. I only got the idea from the advertisements I’d see on the television when I had my own place. They always seemed to travel to exotic locations, and everyone was always dressed nicely, looking as though they were having such an amazing time.”

“Was that the only reason cruise ships appealed to you?” Hephaestus suspected his cute mate might be leaving some details out.

“You got me.” Landyn dissolved into embarrassed chuckles, burying his head on Hephaestus’s chest. “They had buffet meals! Smorgasbord! Huge long tables with crisp white tablecloths and they would be piled high with platters and bowls full of delicious fresh foods. It looked so tempting especially on the Thursday nights before payday, when I was having noodles for dinner.”

“Perhaps we could go on a culinary world tour,” Hephaestus said as the idea started to take shape. “We could ignore the water bit, you know just in case you got seasick and then couldn’t enjoy all that wonderful food. But we could zap from country to country, stay in new places and try all the different foods to see what you like. That could be a fun holiday.”

“In case you get seasick, too.” Landyn stroked over his chest. “I can’t imagine how bad it would be if a god got an upset tummy. That all sounds like a dream, it really does, but Hephaestus, what about your work? You said the giants were doing promotions and everything – there’ll probably be more orders when you go back in again tomorrow.”

“Ah, thank you for the reminder. I’m not going in at all tomorrow.” Hephaestus clicked his phone into his hand. It had been in his pocket, but he didn’t want to dislodge his mate. Clicking on the relevant button, he said, “Paulie, can you pass on a message to Zeus’s computer team for me, please?”

“Good evening, Hephaestus,” Paulie said politely. “I can send a message through for you. Can I offer you congratulations on your mating?”

“Your phone knows about me?” Landyn sat up, a hand on his chest, his eyes wide.

“Paulie is the communication app for the gods to use, designed by Zeus, and named after Zeus’s own mate. He is extremely helpful in a lot of ways.” Hephaestus chuckled at Landyn’s reaction. “You can introduce yourself if you like.”

Peering at the phone screen, which just showed a glowing orb, Landyn said, “Er...hello, Paulie. My name is Landyn. I am a ferret shifter and Hephaestus is my mate.”

“Congratulations on your mating, Landyn,” Paulie said warmly. “I trust you recovered from falling off your bike?”

“He knows everything.” Landyn pointed at the phone. “Yes, yes I did, thank you for asking, Paulie. Hephaestus found me and has been looking after me ever since. He’s a wonderful mate.”

“Zeus will be pleased to hear that update,” Paulie said. “I understand prior to meeting your mate you were running from a vampire problem. Did you want the Zeus network to take care of it for you?”

Landyn’s eyes couldn’t get any bigger. “Mind blown. How did he know that?” he mouthed, waving his hands around his head. “Can you really do that for me, Paulie?”

he said to the phone. “My mate and I want to travel sometime soon, and I don’t want Hephaestus to get hurt by any vampires after me. Can you really stop them?”

“That is very commendable, Landyn, mate of Hephaestus,” Paulie said, “and to answer your question, yes we can do that for you. The matter will be resolved by morning. You won’t have problems with any vampires again. Consider it a mating gift from the Almighty Zeus.”

“That is very generous of Zeus, thank you,” Hephaestus said, when it seemed Landyn couldn’t get his mouth to work. “Could you also ask the computer team to clear any images of my metalwork posted on social media platforms by the cyclops – especially in relation to special offers or sales they might be running to encourage mortals to place custom orders. If a way could be found to stop the giant’s using social media platforms at all, at least in relation to soliciting orders in my name, that would be appreciated.”

“Consider it done, Hephaestus. Congratulations on your mating. All hail the Almighty Zeus and his beloved mate, Paulie.” The swirling orb on the screen darkened and Hephaestus put his phone on the coffee table.

“Did what I think happened just happen?” Landyn couldn’t stop side glancing at Hephaestus’s phone. “Can Paulie still see and hear us?”

Chuckling Hephaestus flicked his finger at his phone and sent it into his bedroom, stashed in a drawer. “In theory, gods can see and hear everything if they wanted to. But can you imagine how overwhelming that could be? Paulie is an app and responds when spoken to. Zeus has an extremely efficient command center, so I’m told, that has a huge wall covered in computer screens, looking in on various situations on Earth. But even then, it would be impossible to see everything.”

“It’s amazing he gets anything done in a day, if he spends all his time watching

screens,” Landyn mused. But then he frowned. “Hang on a minute. Is the Zeus we’re talking about your father Zeus? The one I still have to bite for kicking you off the mountain and damaging your leg even more than it was?”

Hephaestus nodded, trying to hide his grin. The way his mate’s mind worked fascinated him.

“Well, that gives me mixed feelings now.” Landyn huffed. “In my head that Zeus of yours was the worst stinker ever for causing you pain, but now he’s doing something nice - taking care of the vampires and stopping your giants from taking any more orders for your works of art, giving them away at cut-rate prices. I’m all confused now.”

“Sweetling, gods live forever. You’ll find in that context, it’s easier to not hold grudges and just keep living life. When it comes down to it, before Zeus claimed his mate, he was just a lonely bitter god living among his computer screens.”

“So he’s powerful, a stinker, and yet I should feel sorry for him because he was lonely and bitter before he met Paulie.” Landyn sighed. “I’ve been mortal for all of twenty-five years. It could take me a while to adjust my way of thinking.”

“We’ve got all the time in the world, sweetling.” Stroking his hand down Landyn’s back, Hephaestus added, “Are you about ready for bed now?”

“Are you going to let me rub your aching leg when we get there?”

Hephaestus was getting better at keeping his wince to himself at Landyn’s suggestion. Landyn loved on his mangled foot the same way he did any other part of his body, but old habits were still difficult to break. “You can, if you let me rub your cute ass while you’re doing it,” he teased.

“Oh, am I ready for the next size of toy?” Landyn’s wiggle showed his excitement.

Three days into their mating, Hephaestus had bought a range of toys in various sizes, when Landyn let him know how badly he wanted to join with his mate in what he called the “shifter way”. Hephaestus had to ask Paulie in a private moment what that meant and blushed when Paulie explained that shifters didn’t consider themselves fully claimed unless they smelled of their mate from the inside out. Or their mate smelled of them. Either way, Hephaestus was grateful for the toys.

“The next one up is the biggest one,” he warned. “Are you ready for that?”

“Let’s get to bed and see. Zap me, my mate.”

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Landyn arched his back, raising his butt in the air as he groaned out loud, stretching his arms down to grab his mate's ankles. His body tingled all over. Hephaestus wouldn't let Landyn rub his aching leg until he had kissed Landyn from the top of his head all the way to his toes. Landyn squealed when Hephaestus actually sucked his toes – yes, he was ticklish – and Hephaestus's chuckles made the ticking sensation more intense.

Those squeals turned into moans when Hephaestus started rubbing his butt cheeks. Landyn's love of ass play had been born and grew under Hephaestus's care. He'd learned not to worry about how his skinny body might look naked, Hephaestus's cock was rubbing against his hip, dripping onto his skin. No man could fake that reaction.

But oh, when Hephaestus teased his hole, Landyn had to fight himself to stay still. His mate's hands were big and calloused from a lifetime of wielding a hammer. Their roughness dragged across Landyn's skin, tantalizing his nerve endings, sending delicious shivers over the rest of his body. Then the roughness was gone, and lube was massaged into Landyn's muscles - Hephaestus's finger, pressing then rubbing, pressing then rubbing again, pressing a bit harder...Landyn widened his legs as if that would help that moment of penetration come sooner.

Hephaestus never rushed. The worry that he might hurt his mate came through their bond often in those first few days they were together. As they got more used to each other, those worries were less, but still Hephaestus took his time. Another groan was wrenched from Landyn's chest as his mate's hand reached underneath him, cupping his balls before spreading fingers ran up the length of this cock.

“Not yet,” Landyn panted and wiggled, as the need to climax hit him. “In me. In me.”

The hand slid away, giving Landyn a moment of regret as his orgasm backed off a bit. But then a finger pressed against his hole. Landyn took long breaths, knowing it would relax those tight muscles that guarded his insides. As his mate's finger went in, Landyn was prepared for the automatic clench he knew his body would make. He breathed out, long and slow, loving how Hephaestus wouldn't move his finger until his body had relaxed its grip on it.

One finger became two, two became three. Landyn breathed into the stretch his body was getting used to. He leaned his side against Hephaestus's solid cock, inhaling deeply as the smell of his mate's arousal fell all around him. Eyes closed, Landyn felt the slide of Hephaestus's fingers out of his body before the blunt head of the toy was resting at his opening.

"Breathe out, sweetling." Hephaestus's voice had gotten to the raspy stage.

Resting his head on his mate's broad thigh, Landyn breathed out slowly as the toy was eased into his body.

Stretched muscles. Tingles inside and out. A sense of fullness that Landyn breathed into, knowing it would make it easier for his body to accept the toy. Hephaestus had explained early in their mating that he could've magicked Landyn's body into accepting his cock, but they both agreed they didn't want that. If his mate had used his power, then Landyn wouldn't be prone over Hephaestus's body now, feeling the heat of his mate's skin, hearing the god's harsh breathing, sensing the intense concentration and pleasure Landyn felt through their bond.

"Oh, gods yes." The pressure went on and on. The toy had small ridges, and Hephaestus had clearly taken the chill off whatever material it was made from. All of this, Landyn was aware of from a peripheral edge, but his focus was directly on his stretched out hole.

“It’s in, sweetling.” Hephaestus’s hands rubbed his lower back and Landyn had a sudden mental image of the toy protruding like an extra lump on his spine. It felt that big. “Can you move?”

Landyn’s brain was foggy with lust, and he didn’t want to, but he knew the best bit was still to come. Reminding his arms and legs that they could still work, he moved around, gasping as he went to straddle Hephaestus’s legs. “It’s in so deep,” he murmured, draping his arms over his mate’s broad shoulders, resting on his knees. “So deep.”

“It’ll be me inside of you soon,” Hephaestus promised as he bent his head for a kiss – one hand splayed across Landyn’s shoulders, pressing their top halves together, the other one cupped around his butt. They moved in tandem, leaning, pressing against each other, their cocks nestled beside each other, slipping and sliding, searching for that friction.

Every tap of Hephaestus’s finger against the toy sent a zap of electricity through Landyn’s body – his need building so high his body ached with it.

“Come with me,” Hephaestus murmured against his lips. Just a whisper really, but it was like a grip around Landyn’s cock, demanding he come. Moaning against his mate’s beard, Landyn’s whole body pulsed as his balls unloaded, his spunk mixing with his mate’s, mashing together, threatening to stick them together if Landyn didn’t move.

But he couldn’t. His arms and legs were noodles, and all Landyn could do was rest his head on Hephaestus’s shoulder, the weight of the toy still tugging at his ass. “Love you,” he said softly, kissing the skin closest to his lips. His mate would clean him up.

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Hephaestus was exhausted, but his mind wouldn't let him sleep. On one side, his brain was beating him up for being so stupid as to fall for the cyclops' tricks. Bronte had been right – he had been the one who would just get into his work and forget the rest of the world existed. That was on him.

Even while that was going on, another part of his brain was marveling over how lucky they were in life now Landyn was a part of it. Hephaestus glanced to the side where Landyn was curled into his body, a soft smile on his sweet lips, probably dreaming of tables full of food.

So trusting, and the way he cares about me...I've got to do better.

That last thought was because there was always a part of Hephaestus's mind that struggled to shake off the resentments he'd carried back when people cared about gods. Yes, his worshippers loved him. He was strong, skilled, and kind, and that couldn't be said for many of his kin. But he was never noted for heroic acts, men and women didn't swoon at his feet longing to carry his children...or whatever. Logic said the men couldn't carry the children back then, but one of the reasons Hephaestus disappeared under Mt. Olympus all those eons ago was because he was often shunned or mocked because of his lameness.

Something my sweet mate doesn't care about, and what's better, he doesn't ignore it either. He doesn't think less of me because of it, he just wishes I'd look after myself better... In his hugely long life there had never been a person who treated Hephaestus with such kindness.

Hephaestus thought of all the gifts he'd bought Landyn, pretty much from when they met. At the time he thought he was doing the right thing. Gift giving was expected if someone wanted to curry favor with someone important, and Landyn had been appreciative. But his mate's words - Can't you see how much I love you? Isn't that worth something to you? – Hephaestus closed his eyes, seeing the truth behind the

words.

When Landyn spoke of how his ferret would pine for him, how they would spend an eternity of torment without him. How he was so blunt about how he'd hide in the Hephaestus's closet, not to spy on him, but to make sure he was all right. From the moment they'd met, Landyn had put him first.

I need to do the same for him. As Hephaestus thought it, he realized his relationship with Landyn was that simple – he needed to put Landyn first the way Landyn did for him because they were equals in their relationship. Bronte didn't see that, and originally Hephaestus hadn't either. Hephaestus hadn't plucked Landyn from the streets because Landyn's plight tugged at his heart strings like Bronte suggested. But he had been determined, as the god, to be responsible for his mate, and he had been up to a point.

Being equals, and in love with each other – that added a dimension to their relationship Hephaestus could barely believe was true, and yet he knew it was. No one had loved him before. He hadn't loved anyone else – typical god behavior in other words. Then Landyn came along and changed everything with a smile. Hephaestus fell asleep, thinking of all the places in the world he could take his mate, just so he could see the wonders he'd taken for granted through Landyn's eyes.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:37 am*

Landyn's ferret was on a mission, planning a sneak attack. It had been a busy week since they'd last been to the warehouse, but this time Hephaestus and Landyn had been enjoying their time together.

Hephaestus had been ready to whisk Landyn off to parts unknown from the moment they'd woken up the following morning. But Landyn explained he liked Hephaestus's home, and asked if they could plan things where they could still zap back at nights, which Hephaestus seemed genuinely pleased about. So far, Landyn had tried gorgeously fluffy, crispy croissants fresh from a bakery in a village in France Hephaestus knew. He'd also tried fried tofu balls in Greece, which he wasn't as keen on, but the crispy outsides of the balls were delicious, as well as the yogurt dressing and salad that went with them.

Just the day before they'd gone to Amarillo, Texas, where Hephaestus was determined to see him eat the biggest steak Landyn had ever seen. It was seventy-two ounces, and the plate was huge. Apparently, there was some kind of competition run by the restaurant where a customer could get the steak for free if they could eat the whole thing in one sitting within a time limit. Landyn bowed out of the competitive side of things – he liked to take the time to enjoy his food. But Hephaestus's steak was refunded. He ate his in just twenty minutes.

“Don't feel bad, sweetling,” Hephaestus had teased as they left. “My stomach has to be twice as big as yours at least.”

“I bet I could eat a salad faster than you,” Landyn grinned. “We both know you don't like your veggies.” In other words, a fun day.

Today they were spending it at home. Lunch was omelets Landyn had made, and Hephaestus had eaten every bite, which made man and ferret really happy. Afterward, Landyn's ferret was getting restless, so he shifted in the bedroom before going to find Hephaestus in the living room. Hephaestus was sitting on the couch, his feet up, and reading a book.

Hence the stealth attack. The ferret couldn't help it – he was playful by nature. He'd noticed his mate had a small smile on his face, so it was possible the god knew he was in the room, but the ferret was working on the assumption he couldn't be seen.

He kept to the sides of the room, stopping and peering over to where Hephaestus was busy with his book, making sure he wasn't being watched. But no, his god's head was down. The book must've been very interesting. The ferret scuttled along a little bit farther stopping behind a large armchair.

There was a wide patch of the floor he had to get across that had nothing for him to hide behind, leaving him open to being seen. He eyed up the distance between the chair he was behind and a large potted plant about five feet away, swaying a bit on his front legs, his tail still.

Hmm. The god on the couch was to his right. The potted plant he needed to get to, to get behind the couch was to his left. The ferret had two options. He could make a mad dash for it – he was very speedy on four legs – and hope Hephaestus would miss the blur of his fur...or...

The god was still reading. The ferret peered under the edge of the chair at him. Must be an interesting book. All right then. The ferret decided to go with option two, walking at stealthily as he could, sniffing at the edge of the wall every now and then, paying absolutely no attention to the god. None at all. Nope. Nothing to see here. Just an innocent wee ferret sniffing the woodwork, because he was a curious creature who was making sure no sneaky mice were encroaching on his territory. Or worse, rats.

The ferret did not like rats, but what he wasn't doing was paying any attention to Hephaestus.

It wasn't until he got to the potted plant that the ferret peered at his mate again. Still reading. It didn't look like Hephaestus had moved, but just as the ferret thought that, the god turned a page. Definitely reading.

The ferret eyed the back of the couch. The next stage required precision timing. His plan was to climb up the back of the couch and then bury himself in Hephaestus hair, maybe even nibble on his ears a bit. But the moment he hit the side of the couch, there was a good chance Hephaestus would know he was there.

Speed and precision timing. Planning over, the ferret started running. He was committed. Streaking across the floor, he leaped as high as he could, his claws gaining traction on the soft back side of the couch. Faster than a ninja, he raced to the top, only to see Hephaestus looking at him, a wide grin on his face.

“Was that fun, sweetling?” Hephaestus was careful, reaching over the back of the couch and scooping him up with one hand. “You’re a very stealthy ferret, aren’t you?” He said as he carried the ferret over the back of the couch and onto his chest.

Aww, their mate noticed. The ferret was very pleased with himself. He licked down one side of his fur making sure to catch his mate’s finger with his tongue. His mate always tasted of fire, and the ferret was quite addicted to it. But even as he did it, he stiffened, sensing the presence of someone else in the room and he tried to peer over his shoulder, or turn around so he could see. Hephaestus was shielding him with his hands, and the ferret didn’t know what to think about that.

“Eros, what reason have you to appear in my home without permission?”

Eros? Who in goodness name was Eros? At least it wasn’t one of the giants.

“My apologies,” a soft masculine voice replied. “Our goddess, Aphrodite, needed to see you on a matter of some urgency, and I was sent to take you to her.”

“I can hardly think of any matter Aphrodite requires my counsel on,” Hephaestus was using his gruff voice. “It has been centuries since our paths have intersected. If she has the need of a trinket or tool she wants me to make, she can place her order just like any other god in our pantheon.”

“It is a personal matter she wishes to speak to you about.” There was a pause, and then the voice continued, almost hesitantly as if he was deliberately choosing his words. “A story has reached the goddess’s ears which causes her some concern. I believe it pertains to the animal you are cradling on your chest. Is it the truth that you claim the small animal was gifted to you by the Fates?”

“It is.”

Ooh, this isn’t good. My mate sounds angry. The ferret wished he was in his human form. He wished Hephaestus would let him see the intruder.

“I see. Is it also true that because of that small animal, you are no longer forging the works you’ve become known for?”

“I make sculptures for human collectors.” Hephaestus was snarling now. “I hardly call taking a break to spend my time with my mate an issue for anyone else, especially Aphrodite.”

“The goddess has also heard you have severed ties with the giants, which is also concerning...”

“Why?” Hephaestus was furious. “For your information, the giants severed ties with me due to the hateful way they treated my mate. So you can take that information

back to the goddess with the added message to leave me alone. My life hasn't concerned her for eons, and I don't see that changing anytime soon."

"Mythology tells tales of you and the goddess as husband and wife, partners in the Greek pantheon. Any negative behaviors on your part..."

Hephaestus is still married? Landyn couldn't hear anymore. The words were being drowned out by the sound of his heart snapping in two.

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*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:37 am*

The pain Hephaestus felt through his bond with his mate was so intense, it made him gasp. Not that busybody Eros noticed.

“...standards have to be kept, and...”

“Get the goddess down here now,” he thundered, his words rattling the pictures on the walls. Landyn, still in his ferret form, was trying to get out of his hands, and Hephaestus didn’t dare let that happen. He had no idea if he could even find his sweet mate again, now the ferret wasn’t lit up like he had been.

“Aphrodite requested you attend her in her grotto.”

“Aphrodite can get her ass down here right now, or I’ll lay a complaint with Zeus and the Fates about her interference in my mating. Do it now!”

“The goddess is simply concerned. You can’t expect her to ignore the tales brought to her door.”

“Listen, bum fluff, call your goddess now, or I will, and it won’t be pretty. Your callous words have done my mate incredible harm, not that I expect you to understand or care, but I could wipe you out of existence for what you’ve done. God of love, my ass.”

“My first duty is always to the goddess.” Eros pursed his slim lips, looking up at the ceiling. “The goddess will arrive directly.”

Hephaestus ignored him, focusing on his darling ferret who had genuine tears in his

eyes. “Landyn. Sweetling. Don’t let Eros’s harsh revelations ruin our day. We were having so much fun. Marriage wasn’t even a construct when Aphrodite and I were paired in mortals’ ridiculous stories. If it makes you feel better, then think of us as divorced. She was never my wife in the way you think about the word, and if you’re wondering in that sweet head of yours why I had never mentioned it, it was because anyone who came before you was and still is completely unimportant. I told you that when we met, and that applies double now.”

“Those are strong words from someone who once chased me for eons praying for an ounce of my attention.”

“Which you never gave me, if you remember. You were too busy screwing Ares and causing mischief in the name of your power.” Hephaestus looked up at his former partner. Aphrodite had an ethereal beauty that would never look natural on Earth. “What right have you got to send one of your minions into my home, entering without permission, insisting I attend you as if I was one of your companions?”

“I heard stories.” Aphrodite seemed to glide across the floor as she came closer, her head tilting, trying to see Landyn, who Hephaestus was still holding on his chest. “Stories, I admit I didn’t believe. You have lived your life with the giants for so long, I believed that the tales of your surliness and desire to spend your time as a hermit, doing nothing but honing your craft, were true. And yet here you are, cradling a ferret as though that animal was precious.”

“This is my mate, Landyn, and he is precious. More important to me than anyone or anything else.”

“This is not what I expected. The giants...” Aphrodite cut herself off. “Your young man, Landyn. Would he shift for me so we could speak?”

Looking back down at his ferret, Hephaestus gently rubbed his finger across the furry

head. “Did you wish to speak to Aphrodite? I can make it so you shift with your clothes on, but only if you want to.”

The ferret was watching him, his eyes so sad, but then he nodded slowly. Hephaestus felt the magic of the shift, and made sure Landyn was wearing his most comfortable clothes. Ignoring Aphrodite, and Eros who was still hanging around like a bad smell, he held Landyn close, whispering in his ear, “I’m so sorry sweetling. Do you forgive me for not telling you sooner?”

Landyn’s arms wrapped around Hephaestus’s neck, his warm kiss on Hephaestus’s cheek worth more than gold. Then straightening himself out, Landyn turned to face the intruders, one arm still around his neck.

“You are Aphrodite, the ex-wife of my mate?” Landyn’s words were hesitant, but they strengthened as he spoke. “You are truly beautiful. I can see why Hephaestus would want you as a wife. It is fitting he’d have someone elegant and gracious who cared for him.”

Aphrodite laughed as she shook her head. “I confess, I didn’t expect to hear that. I am sorry to break your illusion young shifter, but I never loved Hephaestus and he never loved me. His opening words to me were true. I was unfaithful to him from pretty much day one, and that never changed in the tumultuous times we had together.”

Looking down, Landyn seemed to think for a moment, and then he looked up at Aphrodite and said, “Why did you marry my mate, if you didn’t care for him?”

“Our father, Zeus, insisted on it.” Aphrodite shrugged. “He was an old prude at the time and didn’t believe that his goddess of love and desire and pleasure should have as much fun with lovers as he did. So he ordered me to marry Hephaestus, believing your mate’s skills as a blacksmith would appeal to something inside of me that was clearly missing and stop me fooling around with others. It didn’t. Hephaestus is

highly regarded by many in our pantheon, but he was hardly husband material for one such as me.”

Hephaestus wanted to break in and say something. It wasn't like the words from his ex hurt him anymore, but Landyn didn't need to hear them. She'd said the same things pretty much from the time Zeus ordered them to be together. But Landyn was clearly thinking.

“So you didn't even try to be the wife Hephaestus deserves?” Landyn was frowning.

“Why would I?” Now Aphrodite seemed puzzled, and that tickled Hephaestus. “Look at me.” She twirled around, the skirt of her white robe flowing around her legs.

“Yes, yes, I already said you were beautiful.” Landyn shook his head. “Is that all there is to being you? Dancing around, never staying faithful to your vows, never caring for someone with your whole heart?”

“I don't think you understand what I signify in the Greek pantheon.” Aphrodite had stopped swirling.

“No, I heard. You're the goddess of love, pleasure, and all that sort of thing. But when someone loves another, they care about them, don't they? Isn't that what love is all about?”

“I suppose so. In other people.” Aphrodite looked at Hephaestus. “Is he for real?”

“Landyn never needed your power, goddess, so it's clear why you wouldn't understand him. He shares his heart wholeheartedly and without question.” Hephaestus stroked down Landyn's cheek with his finger, not caring that his smile would probably shock his ex-wife. “I have never felt love, or caring, as much as I have with my precious mate.”

There was genuine confusion on Aphrodite's face. "But what about the giants? I admit, when they pleaded to see me, I truly didn't care to hear what they had to say until they mentioned your name. How is it caring if you discarded those who were your constant companions for more lives than this shifter could comprehend?"

"Did they tell you what they did to my mate? How they tried to gaslight me, telling me first that I was deluded in thinking he was my mate. And the morning after I was graced with my sweet mate's mating scar, Bronte picked my mate up and threw him into a wall. Those giants refuse to accept Landyn in my life, and I refuse to spend time with them until they do. I don't see that situation changing, but none of that concerns you."

"No. I think you're right." Aphrodite pondered for a moment, and then asked Landyn directly, "Do you tell me honestly and with your whole heart that you love Hephaestus and will stay with him always?"

"Yes. Hephaestus is perfect for me." Landyn's smile was back, and Hephaestus basked in it. Even Eros took a step back, his mouth dropping open when he saw it.

"You are beautiful inside and out, young Landyn," Aphrodite said softly, and this time Hephaestus could see she was being totally genuine. "You have my blessings on your mating. May your children be bountiful and may your lives be full of pleasure."

"Children?" Landyn was looking up at Hephaestus in shock and Aphrodite laughed.

"I see that's another conversation you need to have with your mate, Hephaestus," she said. "I am truly happy for you. In truth, I am envious. A bond like yours is something I fear I will never experience, and I wish you joy in it. You can be assured your mating will have no more interference from me or mine." Touching her heart with one hand, she grabbed Eros with the other and disappeared.

“So,” Landyn said after a long moment. “That was the ex-wife, huh?”

“Yep.”

“Those giants are really trying to stir up your family against you, aren’t they?”

“Yep.”

“Hmm.” Landyn turned and Hephaestus knew what was coming. “What’s all this about children? We can’t have children...can we, or have you already got some?”

Hephaestus winced. Trying to explain all that was going to be a long conversation. “How about we talk about that another time. Where did you want to go to dinner tonight?”

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“Oh, so that’s what Aphrodite meant about your children. You do have some...” Landyn glanced down at the book his mate had given him. “With a number of people, but this was all a really long time ago, right? These children are all grown up now?”

“I believe so.” Hephaestus had been a bit closed off since they’d finished dinner. He’d taken Landyn into his library, picked a book from the shelves, which turned out to be stories about different gods in different pantheons, and found the page related to himself. Landyn thought it might be kinda cool for someone to have a page about him in a book, but considering all of the people in the book were ancient, his short life would barely make a footnote. He actually chuckled quietly when he thought that – a footnote on Hephaestus’s page.

“The thing you have to understand about these books is that they are not written by the gods themselves. Mortal scholars, poets, and philosophers wrote them, usually as epic plays created hundreds of years ago.”

“People made things up about you? That’s so rude.” Landyn shut the book with a slam and put it on the table next to the loveseat he and Hephaestus shared. “Why did you show me the book if it’s not true?”

“You got surprised about Eros’s thoughtless comments regarding my relationship with Aphrodite. I needed you to see what people have written about me over the years. True or not, those words form the public opinion people might think of when they hear my name.”

“But they were so mean about you.” Landyn tapped the book. “They called you names, they couldn’t decide who’d thrown you off the mountain, but no one made

any comment about how it was a horrible thing for someone to do. I mean, that business with Athena..." Landyn trailed off. He knew his mate would never treat a woman that badly. "It should never have even been in there," he said staunchly.

"That story is a classic example of people vilifying people they perceive as ugly."

"Well, that just goes to show how wrong those writers were." Landyn scrambled onto Hephaestus's lap. "You're not ugly, you're distinguished. You're not lame, you have a bad leg. Hundreds of thousands of people have a club foot or problems with their legs and feet. Some people don't have legs at all. No one goes around writing horrible stories about them."

"True, but you forget almost every god in existence is incredibly beautiful, like you saw with Aphrodite today. Face it, if a story just had pretty people in it, it would be boring. I do believe I'm the only god who came into being with a deformity." Hephaestus frowned as he was clearly thinking about it. "It's difficult to say. There are hundreds of pantheons and thousands of ancient gods."

"Well, I do hope they don't decide to keep popping into our house like that Eros character did today. He wasn't even fully dressed. He didn't have pants on."

Landyn was hoping the outrage in his tone would make Hephaestus laugh, and it did. "Eros was wearing a robe, sweetling. It is customary for Aphrodite's companions. They don't live on earth the way we do."

"They couldn't. They'd be done for indecent exposure." Landyn sighed, resting against Hephaestus's shoulder. "Thank you for explaining about your children and your exes. My ferret was a bit miffed, but he'll get over it."

"Your ferret was wonderfully clever this afternoon, sneaking up on me the way he did."

“You knew where we were all along, didn’t you?”

“Maybe. Just a little bit, but that sashaying along that blank piece of floor, ignoring me completely...” Hephaestus was chuckling again. “Very convincing sneaking skills.”

“He’ll be pleased you thought that. Are we watching a movie, tonight?” Landyn yawned. “Or did you want an early night?”

“It’s nice just sitting here with you for a moment.” Hephaestus was quiet for a while, and then he said, “Did you want to have children?”

Landyn laughed. “I know you’re a god and that comes with amazing powers, but I didn’t realize you could turn into a woman.” Landyn shifted his position again, getting comfortable. “I used to think about children when I was younger – it was all my family ever talked about. A male ferret was expected to set themselves up and then bond with a female to give them lots of children. I remember thinking I didn’t want to have lots.” He giggled. “It’s not like I was trained to do much else but stock shelves. Not exactly the sort of high powered position allowing me to afford children. I bet you were an amazing dad to your kids.”

“That’s not how things worked back in ancient times. Women reared the children, men were off doing other things.”

“Sounds like my dad’s form of thinking. He was barely ever home when I was growing up.” Looking up at his mate, Landyn asked, “Did you want more children? Is that what this is about? How would we even make that happen? You couldn’t be with anyone else now I’ve bitten you.”

He didn’t mention that he was sure his heart would shatter into a million pieces at the mere idea of Hephaestus doing things to another person – treating that person with

the same love and caring Landyn enjoyed. His ferret, who'd been napping, woke up furious at the very idea.

"There are a number of same-sex couples among the gods," Hephaestus said slowly. "Poseidon and his mate Claude who is a wolf shifter. Then there is Zeus and Paulie. Hades also has a male mate who is a shifter as well. I think I told you that before. They all have kids."

Pushing himself up, resting his hand on Hephaestus's chest, Landyn studied his mate's face. "How is that even possible? Doesn't a shifter's mating bite work on a god the same way it might do to someone else?"

"Oh no, it works. Remember when I told you Poseidon went to the Fates asking to have his mating broken, and they laughed him out of their grove? That was because Poseidon's bedroom used to have a revolving door. He barely slept with anyone more than once, but he had a lot of people in his bed. Claude's bite put a stop to that."

"Okay." Landyn felt a bit better knowing that little nugget of information. His ferret, who got bored easily was already napping again. "So, who carried and gave birth to these children the gods and their mates are raising?"

Looking up at the ceiling, Hephaestus's face muscles twisted as he thought. "In Hades and Poseidon's case, they were the ones who gave birth to their babies – they both have a set of twins. In Zeus's case, Paulie was the one who got pregnant and gave birth."

Landyn waited for the punchline, or some further explanation that might make the impossible possible. Hephaestus was looking at him, but not saying anything. "Is this a godly power?" Landyn flipped his hand indicating Hephaestus's body. "Can you just wave your hand and..." He quickly grabbed at his crotch. Nope, his cock and balls were still there. "Do you just change our basic equipment to make that happen?"

He wasn't sure if he liked that idea.

But Hephaestus shook his head. "No, sweetling. To be honest, I'm not sure how it happens, but it does. A few years ago, when gods started meeting their fated mates, the Mother of All Things made a decree that all gods and their partners, regardless of gender, would have the ability to produce children if that's their intent."

"What do you mean? Is that like, if we were just sitting on the couch here, and we decided we wanted children, then that would just happen and one of us would wake up tomorrow pregnant?" Landyn had heard some things since meeting his mate, but that sounded a bit far-fetched.

Apparently, it sounded that way to Hephaestus too, because he laughed. "Not exactly, no. We would still have to have sex, specifically anal sex. But if we did that, with the intent of wanting children, then within a short space of time it could happen."

There was something in the way Hephaestus said it...something... Tuning into their bond, Landyn's eyes widened. "You want to have our babies?" His voice was a hushed whisper. "Like you..." He pointed to Hephaestus's stomach. "Did you want to carry our child under your heart?"

"Would you think it was weird if I said I'd thought about it?"

"Not weird, no." Landyn shook his head. "But that would mean that I would be the one who was... you know, doing the penetrating part. You've been spending all our wonderful time together using toys on me, so I can take your cock into my body. Should we have been using them on you instead? Although," he added, "my bits are nowhere near as big as yours."

"A lot of male-male couples take turns in giving and receiving." Hephaestus looked uncomfortable and Landyn didn't want that. He was still wrapping his head around

the idea they could have children. “Look, you don’t have to. I’ve never done anything that way before, but I just thought...”

“I’m not saying no,” Landyn said quickly. “I’m not saying no at all. I love the idea of having children with you. I’m sorry, I was just blown away that it was possible that’s all. Now I know it’s possible... I want to so badly, but I think we have to wait for a bit.”

“Of course.” Hephaestus responded too quickly. “As long as you like. It doesn’t matter.”

“No, it clearly does matter.” Landyn stroked over his mate’s belly. “I think that would be really wonderful and you know I would look after you so hard. But, mate, I’m still worried about what happened this afternoon. The giants are determined to cause trouble. I’ll be honest, I’d be scared bringing children into our household while they are so set on destroying us as a couple. All that fighting, bullying, being thrown into walls. Children shouldn’t see that.”

“Hmm. You make a good point.” Pulling him close, Hephaestus dropped a kiss on Landyn’s head. “I doubt I could take them out on my own, and I’ll be honest, I don’t want to have to fight people I used to call my friends. Does that make me weak in your eyes.”

“No. Not at all.” Landyn tightened his hug. “You have a caring nature – far more than those three deserve, in my opinion, but you are who you are, and I love you for it.”

“Thank you, but you are also right. When those giants get an idea in their heads, it’s like shifting solid concrete with a feather to get them to change their minds. However, we could be in luck.” Hephaestus was grinning. “I know someone who might help. He’s a god, not Greek, but we won’t hold that against him. He was another one who gave birth to the twins he had with his shifter mate.”

“And he could stop the giants?”

“He could give them a damn good run for their money,” Hephaestus said with a chuckle. “In fact, from what I’ve heard, of all the gods in all the pantheons, he is one would take on the giants, swinging his huge hammer, and love every minute of it.”

“He sounds like a bit of a superhero. Who is he?”

“He is called Thor, Norse God of the Storms.” Hephaestus’s phone appeared in his hand. “I’ll see if I can get a message to him.”

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“You haven’t done anything about fixing that hammer handle, I see. It’s still too short.”

“You haven’t done anything to fix that gammy leg of yours either.” Thor grinned, enveloping Hephaestus into a solid hug. The leg/hammer debate was a running joke between them.

He and Orin had agreed to come for dinner the following evening. Landyn had been cooking a huge roast and all the trimmings, spending most of the afternoon in the kitchen. The house smelled wonderful, and more importantly, inviting, and that was what Hephaestus had hoped for.

“You’ve not met my gorgeous mate, Orin, have you?” Thor broke his hold and stepped aside indicating a man similar in size to Landyn. The man had kind eyes and a sweet smile.

“It was so kind of you to invite us for dinner.” Orin came forward, holding out his hand. “I have read so much about you in the scrolls I used to decipher for the ancient documents department in New York.”

“My mate reads. Can you imagine?” Thor laughed, slapping his own thigh. “Who would’ve thought the Fates would pair me with a booklover, although I have to say they were right.”

“It’s not like I ask you to read anything.” Orin looked around. “You have a lovely house. I have to admit, when I heard you lived with three cyclops, I wasn’t sure what to expect. But it was so nice to get out of the house for a night...Bastet is babysitting

for us. As you can imagine, any twins of Thor's are going to be a handful and now they're walking, it's bedlam at times."

"As you know, Orin is the God's Keeper, but when it comes to keeping bedtimes he's not as powerful."

"I had heard." Hephaestus nodded. "You know how gods gossip. Come on through to the kitchen. My mate, Landyn has been busy cooking. You're our first dinner guests."

"Ooh, I sense a story behind what you're not saying, Hephaestus. A new mate and no cyclops breaking the furniture." Thor rubbed his hands together. "Does this mean I get to smash some cyclops' heads?"

"We'll talk over dinner. Come on through."

Walking through the living room, Orin stopped and gasped. "We need one of these in our house." He pointed to the cat frame. "Do you have a pet cat, or...?"

"My mate is a ferret shifter. I didn't want for him to have to shift outside at night or when it was cold." Hephaestus could feel his cheeks heat.

"That is the sweetest thing," Orin said warmly.

Thor pouted. "I get you balls of wool for your cat to play with."

"But this is a whole structure that has a scratching post and a climbing frame and places to where I could sit in my shifted form, without being tugged at by the boys." Orin eyed the structure. "Although, ours might have to be a wee bit taller and sturdier. Knowing our boys, they'd start climbing it."

"Yes, well we don't have that problem yet." Hephaestus took them through to the

kitchen where Landyn was wrestling with the roasting tin, trying to get it out of the oven. “You should’ve called me. I would’ve come and gotten that for you.” He shuffled quickly over to the stove, taking the tin from his mate and putting it on the counter.

“I knew you were greeting your friends.” Landyn stood up, using his arm to brush his hair from his face. “Please excuse the state of me.” He fanned his face. “That oven is hot, and yes, the tin is heavy, but I wanted to make sure everything was just right.”

“It is so sweet of you to make the effort.” Orin rushed over, giving Landyn a hug. “You must be Landyn. I’m Orin, half-cat, half-fae, mate of Thor, and lover of the smells in this kitchen. So lovely to meet you. I was just admiring your cat setup in the living room. I’m so jealous of it.”

“Hephaestus built it for me, following the instructions and everything.” Landyn giggled, clearly thrilled with Orin’s friendliness. “There was a lot of cursing going on that day.”

“See, Hephaestus actually built it, no zapping it up and then standing there with his chest puffed out.” Orin pointed at Thor who was watching his mate, a half-smile on his face. “That’s Thor, my mate. He’s the Norse God of the Storms. We met when he saved me from a magic attack.”

“My mate saved me, too,” Landyn admitted shyly. “I was a rough sleeper, and he came and found me, all thanks to some light or other, and he’s been wonderful ever since.”

“That Fates know what they’re doing.” Orin beamed. “Now, what can I do to help? Shall we get Thor to carve the meat, or does it need more resting? Are we making gravy with these meat drippings? What can we do?”

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Secretly, Landyn had really been worried about meeting any of Hephaestus's friends. It's not like he'd had a good history with the ones he'd met so far. But rather than being "godly" as Landyn called it in his head, Thor and Orin were friendly and really funny.

Pictures of kids came out. Thor had a whole wallet full of them, and he happily passed them across the table, clearly proud of his two boys who were a beautiful mixture of Thor's blond looks and Orin's cute features. Landyn was amazed to hear that Thor gave birth to his kids, too, although the big blond blushed like crazy when Orin said Thor had tried to use magic to cause his babies to come because he didn't want Silvanus, another god, to open him up.

What was also really lovely, at least in Landyn's eyes - more than the praise for his cooking or the warm smiles Hephaestus would send his way - what was truly wonderful was how relaxed Hephaestus was with his friends. Landyn learned through the conversation that Orin had read a lot about Hephaestus's past and was genuinely interested in his work. That made Orin a solid friend in Landyn's mind. It was almost a shame when Thor asked about the reason for the dinner.

"Not that I don't like spending time with you, man," Thor said. "You've always been an ally in my opinion, and across pantheons, that's rare. But what's happening and who's heads do I get to bash in because of it?"

"Thor's always like this," Orin confided. "He's been getting bored lately as he's only had fae guards to fight with. Or the occasional bouncer at a club, where he starts a fight purely because someone looks at me funny." His grin was warm, and Landyn guessed Orin totally accepted his mate the way he was.

"As you know, I was living with the cyclops when I met Landyn. We've been

together for more years than I can count..." Hephaestus went on, explaining everything. How he'd knocked Landyn off his bike with the car, how he hadn't been able to stop thinking about the light and what it meant and what had happened when he found out Landyn was sleeping under a bridge and why.

"That had to be so scary for you," Orin said, showing real concern. "Honestly, sometimes a person, of any species, gets some entitled views in their damn heads and doesn't care at all about the person they are hurting."

"Paulie told us the vampires would be taken care of. It was Zeus's mating present to us," Hephaestus explained. "Zeus also took care of the social media platform problem the cyclops caused." He carried on, laying out about the orders, how bullying the cyclops had been when Landyn first went to the warehouse, and how proud he was that Landyn had solved that problem.

"Those automatons are real?" Orin squealed with excitement. "I read about them, and I just thought there was no way even a god could create something like that well before the age of technology. You will have to show me them sometime."

"They responded to Landyn because we're mates." Hephaestus smiled. "That was quick thinking, but of course, it's not like the cyclops could work and be loomed over by automatons. And the cyclops, Bronte in particular, just kept getting worse. He won't even refer to Landyn by name, and I truly think if his opinion was changed, then the others would fall into line."

"Yes, but what do you want to achieve out of this?" Thor pushed his empty plate aside and rested his elbows on the table. "Landyn, you haven't said much. What's your take on all this?"

Landyn thought for a moment and then said, "I thought they would just leave us alone when we stopped going to the warehouse. I guess in my mind, I thought that maybe

one day we'd have the house and land I dreamed of back when I was working. I imagined Hephaestus having his workshop there, and he could just make pieces when he felt inspired. But that didn't happen. The cyclops went to Aphrodite and tried to get her to interfere."

Landyn's anger rose all over again. "I'm not intelligent like Orin, and I haven't read hundreds of books. I didn't know who Hephaestus had been married to before, and then this snotty person with no pants on turns up in our house, in our house while we were just having a relaxing afternoon and starts spouting all this stuff about how Hephaestus was in the wrong, and what he was doing was going to reflect badly on Aphrodite, and...and... The cyclops are trying to turn other gods against my mate, and he hasn't done anything wrong."

"Eros?" Thor asked Hephaestus who nodded. "Honestly, that guy is as about effective as the god of love as I am. He can be a damn nuisance at times. But all right, this is serious."

"Of course, it's serious," Orin cried. "Can you imagine how poor Landyn felt when he first heard Hephaestus had been married? Remember when I thought you were still married to your ex-wife? For a shifter, hearing something like that is akin to getting a stab in the heart. That's deliberately cruel, especially if you didn't know the history of the person you were talking about. The cyclops need a beatdown for that alone."

"And when it comes to giving a beatdown, you know I'm your go-to god for that sort of thing. But I can't take them out of the weave – the Fates would have a fit," Thor said, with a grimace. To Landyn it seemed he didn't like that sort of restriction.

"I don't think they deserve to die," Landyn said, just in case his new friends got the wrong idea. "I don't even care about an apology anymore. They don't have to like me, that's not what this is about. But Hephaestus and I are talking about having children." He had to force himself not to duck his head as his cheeks heated. "I don't

want to bring them up in a troubled home. I know what that's like, and what's going on with the cyclops and what they're doing doesn't make me feel safe when it comes to bringing children into the mix."

"I feel like shit because I truly believed Bronte, Steropes, and Arges were my friends – true friends. I brought them to Earth with me when I decided I didn't want to live under a mountain anymore, never dreaming they would turn against me like this. My sweetling is more understanding about this than I am. I'm gutted they're behaving like this."

Oh, no. Hephaestus sounded so defeated and that just would not do in Landyn's opinion. "Scoot your chair back," he said, getting out of his. "You two will just have to excuse this, but Hephaestus gets down sometimes, and this cyclops situation is not helping." He climbed onto his mate's lap and wrapped his arms around Hephaestus's torso. "Sometimes mates need special hugs to help them feel better."

"Works for me," Thor said, nodding. "And hey, I'm happy to bang the cyclops around a bit – consider it our mating present to you two. Far more effective, and more in keeping with who I am than a silly gift basket or something." Then he winced at his mate. "However, I have a strong suspicion my cute mate is going to put the blocks on that plan."

"You'll still get to play with the cyclops, stop being a baby." Orin slapped Thor's arm, and then wrapped his arms around Thor's bicep. "Honestly, keeping this one occupied is a full time job on its own, and that's without the twins. If Thor doesn't have someone to fight with at least once a week, he gets edgy, and there's only so much pounding my sweet ass can take."

Landyn was so shocked, he burst out laughing. Thor looked pleased though, and Orin was wearing a big grin.

“But no, what I meant to say is, Hephaestus, why don’t you rescind the cyclops’ right to live on Earth? After you’ve had your play,” Orin added to Thor. “It’s not like you owe them anything. They are here through your grace alone. From what I read, they did help you learn your craft, but that was back before humans even had fire. What you’ve gone on to do since then, with all the objects, weapons, and treasures you’ve created for the gods since, you’ve done through your own skills. Your obligation to the cyclops as a friend has long since been paid.” He shrugged. “If they can’t be made to behave, then don’t allow them back on Earth.”

Landyn looked at Hephaestus, who had his thinking face on. “The thing is,” Landyn said, “I don’t see how that would stop them going to any of the other gods, the way they tried to mess with Hephaestus using Aphrodite. I don’t know about godly stuff, or even where gods live, but wouldn’t that make it easier to cause even more trouble for us that way?”

“Not really, no,” Hephaestus said slowly. “Their use of Aphrodite was deliberate, and Orin was right. It was cruel. Actually, when I think about it, none of the cyclops would have anything to do with me when I was married to her either, or during my time with the Graces. It was as if, when I had a partner, they didn’t want anything to do with me, although I never knew why.”

“Jealousy? Codependence?” Orin shrugged. “That does explain why they’re not accepting of Landyn to a point. They don’t seem to like the idea of you being with anyone.”

“But they never interfered with those relationships,” Hephaestus said. “Not in the way they are with my mating.”

“Ah, but you said it right there.” Thor pointed at Hephaestus. “Every being knows a mating blessed by the Fates is permanent, forevermore sort of stuff. I guess the question of the hour is are there any other gods who’d listen to them?”

It was like watching tennis. Landyn looked back at Hephaestus who was shaking his head. “I don’t think so, no. Not anyone who could cause me any grief, or who would care enough to bother. Hera doesn’t like to even remember I exist, so she’d be no help to them, and Zeus and his brothers are busy with mates of their own and wouldn’t listen to them either.”

“Awesome, so we have a plan.” Orin clapped his hands. “Come on Thor, use some of that power of yours for something useful, like clearing this table and zapping up some tiramisu for dessert. Have you ever tried it, Landyn? It is divine.”

Orin was right. The tiramisu was divine.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:37 am*

“You don’t want to do it, do you?” Landyn came in from the bathroom, towel drying his hair, another towel wrapped around his middle. It was dark, their guests had gone home, and Landyn had said he wanted a bath. Hephaestus knew that was his mate’s way of giving him some time to himself.

Hephaestus didn’t need to ask his mate what he was referring to. He was sure his sweet ferret could sense his turmoil through their bond. “It seems like all we ever seem to do is talk.” He patted the space next to him on the bed. “But if you’re referring to banning the cyclops from Earth, yes I have mixed feelings about it, although I understand why Orin suggested it.”

Dropping his towels in the hamper, Landyn skipped across the floor, climbing up on the other side of the bed and snuggling in under the covers Hephaestus pulled aside for him. “If you don’t want to ban them, banish them, or whatever else it’s called, then don’t,” Landyn said simply, giving Hephaestus that special smile that always warmed his insides. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. It was just a suggestion.”

“I feel bad enough asking Thor to thump them for me.” Hephaestus sighed. The dim light of the room made it easier to confess the darker thoughts he had sometimes. “I know they hurt you...”

“They hurt you, too.”

His mate always put his feelings first, but this time Hephaestus needed Landyn to listen. “Hear me out, all right?” He suggested softly. “This is not a simple case of who they hurt, or when, or why. My friendship with them goes back a very long time.

It's not easy to turn my back on them now."

Landyn looked at him, his lips tightly shut. Chuckling, Hephaestus shook his head. "Yes, sorry. I do want to hear what you've got to say."

"I just wanted to ask what you think your friendship means to them."

"I wouldn't know. Not much, from the looks of things now."

Landyn stayed silent, the twist of his lips suggesting he could say more, but he wanted to hear Hephaestus's thoughts.

"They have always preferred it when it was just the four of us. Well, mostly it was just the three of them and me, because you see there was a very fine, but distinct, line between us. Those three fought with each other countless times, but they never fell out with each other. But if one of them got angry at me for anything at all, then the other two would take their kin's side. Every time." Hephaestus hadn't seen that so clearly before.

Landyn nodded.

"And then, when you think about it, what did they do on Earth?"

That got an eyebrow raise, as if his mate was saying "I don't know, you tell me."

"They ate, they lounged around the house. Yes, they worked with me in the workshop, but nine times out of ten if there was an order to be finished, they were sleeping in because they'd been out on the town the night before."

Frowny looks and shaking head.

“Exactly. I set up my small business taking commission orders. It was more to keep me busy than anything else, and I wanted to be a part of life here on Earth. I bought my house, I bought the warehouse. I set it up so I could have a small forge without causing any damage to businesses around me. It was my part of carving out something for myself so I could feel as though I have a life.”

Hephaestus got two thumbs up for that one.

“All they ever wanted here on Earth was to find men and women to sleep with. Night after night after night. If they weren’t talking about who they’d been getting their rocks off with the night before, they were talking about going out again. I gave them their human form so they could fit in down here and what have they done with it? Nothing but sleep around and then sleep because they were tired.

“The only reason they were working so much those last two weeks in the warehouse was because they were trying to prove how you couldn’t work with the fire, and how helpful they were to my life. When it was their fault we had so much to do!” He looked at Landyn who was just watching him. “Don’t you have anything to say to that?”

“You’re doing great on your own, my wonderful mate. Just think about it.” Landyn snuggled closer. “You came into being with a strike against you already. You spent the bulk of your early life being made to feel like your life didn’t have the same value as other gods. You had your club foot, you got thrown off the mountain, your mom didn’t want you, your dad was pissed off with you, there was that horrible business with Aphrodite.

“You constantly refer to yourself as ugly, when nothing is further from the truth, but that’s how you see yourself. You’ve always tried to fit in, and you thought you had that with the cyclops, when all they were doing was using you, too.”

“Ouch.” Hephaestus rubbed his chest.

“You said they were using you yourself, you’re just not listening to the words you’re telling me.”

“So I should banish them?”

“It’s not my decision to make. You will do what you think is the right thing for us, the same as you asked Thor to thump them for you.”

“You don’t think any less of me for doing that, do you?” Hephaestus hadn’t considered it from his mate’s perspective before. “I’m not a fighter. I would fight for you if I had to...”

“I know, you were fighting a giant in the kitchen on our first morning together.” Landyn sighed. “Don’t go thinking you have to be like some macho alpha wolf or something like that, fighting everyone who looks at me the wrong way, like Thor does with Orin. I hate fighting of any form.”

“Did you see a lot of that at home?” Hephaestus realized they’d never talked about what Landyn had been through, beyond the vampire incident.

Which I didn’t solve either. Zeus did that for us. Admittedly, knowing Zeus, he didn’t go and fight Michael or any other vampire who’d spent two years scaring Landyn. It was more his style to ruin that person’s business through a computer glitch or something similar. Ruining a person’s business could often be far more effective than hitting someone around the head, especially among vampires.

“There were always fights in my house growing up,” Landyn said sadly. “I told you before that our kind were raised believing we had to work to provide for the mother of our prospective children. My dad did work. He also drank and slept around every

time Mom was pregnant, which was often.

“There was never enough food, which caused more fights, because my dad might not have come home very often, but when he did he expected to be fed. My mom was so worried about losing her bond mate, she spent all the money he gave her on clothes and spa treatments, leaving us kids to our own devices.”

“Is that why you didn’t go to school much?” Hephaestus knew Landyn was intelligent, but there were some very big gaps in his basic education.

“If I wanted to eat, I had to earn my own money for it. I was lucky that where we used to live, a lot of the neighbors knew what was going on. They had jobs for me from when I was about eight years old, I suppose. I would mow lawns, shovel snow, clean cars, get grocery orders and run errands, just so I could eat.”

“Damn.” Hephaestus pulled his mate into his arms. That certainly explained Landyn’s preoccupation with food.

“It was okay.” Landyn was patting him again, soothing him, when it was Landyn that deserved the softest cuddles. “I got out of there when I was fifteen and started working. I got my own place. I made friends. It’s just, when people fight I seem to cringe up inside. I can’t breathe, I can barely think to move fast enough to hide. It really makes me sick to my stomach and I don’t understand why people can be so horrible to each other. Orin seemed to think that Thor’s fighting was funny. I could never be like that.”

“You’re just proving more and more why we’re perfect for each other.” Hephaestus marveled at how amazing his mate’s attitude was, given all he’d been through. I could learn a lot from him. “I’m not a fighter. I don’t think I could ever be, although I would always protect you – you do know that, don’t you?”

“Yes. The same as I’d do my best to protect you.” Landyn giggled. “I’m just not very good at it.”

“But you’re stealthy,” Hephaestus teased.

“And fast.” Landyn chuckled with him. When he stopped, he said more seriously, “But any kids we have, they have to be safe. That’s an absolute hard line for me. I saw what my siblings went through. I was cuddled by the older ones until they started to act the same as my dad and ignored me. I tried to help the younger ones all I could until I left. But there was only so much I could do. Right up until I got taken in by the vampire, I was sending food parcels to my mom’s house every chance I could.”

“It’s amazing to me how wonderful you turned out, a true spark in a shit pool of madness. You’re definitely the light in my life,” Hephaestus said. Bending his head, he brushed Landyn’s lips with his own. “I promise you safety. Safety and food. You have my vow on that. Always.”

Landyn’s kiss in reply let him know his vow had been heard, and more importantly, was valued. Just like Hephaestus knew he was himself, in his mate’s eyes.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:37 am*

The little ferret was having a wonderful time in the back garden. Hephaestus was inside. Landyn knew his mate was keeping tabs on Thor and how his efforts with finding the cyclops was doing. Apparently, they'd absconded from the studio, where Hephaestus had thought they were staying, which made them more difficult to find.

But that was a worry for another day. Hephaestus's garden had huge brick walls, creating a very private place filled with bushes, trees, and small patches of lawn. The ferret loved it – there were so many interesting places to sniff and check out. I should hide, he thought gleefully, even as his human side was warning him not to. Hephaestus was already stressed enough, and the ferret truly cared about his godly mate.

I'll be good. But, oh, that was an interesting spot. The ferret spied on a burrow tucked underneath a bush, down toward the back of the garden. Hmm. Something is living in this garden. He snuck forward, nose twitching, trying to scent out what it might be. He wouldn't go near it if it was a snake, but there were lots of other animals that could live in a hole much like the one he was getting closer to. The ferret knew he was lucky. His body was slender, but it was also long, so he could keep his back feet out of the burrow, while his front half did the investigating.

This is fun. The ferret couldn't scent anything except the warm damp earth, but the burrow was deep. He inched forward a little more, his belly resting on the ground as he worked to keep his back feet anchored. There had been an incident, once a long time ago, when he had fallen into a damn hole when he hadn't realized how deep it was. It had taken him ages to catch his breath and climb out again.

This one wasn't nearly as deep. His nose twitching wildly, the ferret sniffed out every

inch of the small open space at the bottom of the shaft. It clearly hadn't been used for a while, but the ferret had to check. He could hardly be the savior of Hephaestus's garden if he wasn't thorough.

Once he was sure he'd cataloged every smell, now came the slightly awkward process of edging backward to get himself back out again. Some parts of the soil wall were crumbly, and as the burrow wasn't very high, the ferret had to do more of a shuffle than a graceful exit. He was just about to rethink his options, drop down into the burrow and turn around and come out face first - just in case Hephaestus was watching - when a huge hand grabbed him around the middle.

Mate? But it wasn't Hephaestus. The ferret's heart almost jumped out of his chest as he was swung into the air, a thick hand tightening his grip around the ferret's rib cage.

"Just like a mosquito," Bronte sneered. "So easy to swat away. I'll teach you for turning our god away from us. Sending that damn Thor after us. You and that god are just pathetic."

The squeeze was getting tighter. The ferret could barely breathe. He tried to wiggle his legs, kick out, do anything but he felt it as one of his ribs cracked and then another. A shooting pain ran up his spine, leaving him unable to feel his legs at all. With the pain there was no way he could shift, and it wasn't as though he could anyway because the grip on him was just too tight. The ferret knew he should be protecting his mate – he should be able to do something. But he was in his furry form without an automaton in sight. In desperation he screamed through their bond, praying that Hephaestus would hear.

HELP!

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“That damned giant is here in my fucking garden.” Hephaestus dropped his phone and hobbled as fast as he could out of the house. It wasn’t one giant, it was all three, and Hephaestus threw a ward up around the garden – it would keep the giants in and stop anyone in the neighborhood hearing them.

“Oh, look, the cripple has come limping along, trying to save his mate.” Bronte’s grimace was ugly in his cyclops form. “You’re too late, old man.” He held up his fist, and Hephaestus could see the limp form of his sweet ferret hanging over the side of beefy fingers. There wasn’t a sign of life in that still form, and while Hephaestus knew he’d blessed his mate with immortality, he had no idea how that worked, or what he could do.

“Give him to me.” Bronte wasn’t the only one who had a second form. Hephaestus rarely appeared as a god to anyone, but that didn’t mean his form didn’t exist. He grew until he met Bronte eye for eye, his hammer appearing in his hand. “Give me back my mate, or you will cease to exist. I’ll send your remains back to the afterworld, and you’ll never walk the earth again.”

“You sent Thor after us!” Bronte roared waving his fist – the fist Landyn was caught in. “How could you do that? I thought we were friends.”

“You think we’d be friends after what you did?” He had no choice. Raising his hammer, Hephaestus prayed his bad leg would hold him. It would have to, because Hephaestus was committed. Swinging wildly, he hit at Bronte’s arm with his hammer, causing Bronte to let go of Landyn’s ferret form. The tiny body flew into the air, and suddenly Thor appeared in midair, catching him.

“I’ll call Silvanus,” he yelled. “You do what you need to do.”

Silvanus? What the hell. If Thor thought that was the way to go, then Hephaestus had to trust him. Raising his arm, he swung again, this time at Steropes, who was trying to

get behind him.

It was harsh. It was brutal. Three on one was never going to be easy. Hephaestus got a thump to the rib cage at one point, and he was sure he'd never breathe again. But the good thing about being a god was that he knew he couldn't die. He could be in a world of pain for the rest of his days, and he would welcome every second of it, if that's what it took. Seeing his ferret's limp body was the final straw. Any thoughts of past friendship dissipated in that moment and Hephaestus lashed out.

Landyn had told him one night after watching him work, how Hephaestus's love for his craft came through with every beat of his hammer. Now Hephaestus was using his hammer to weave a spell of eternal pain around those who tried to tear him apart from his mate.

At one point he thought he was lost. Arges had snuck up on him while he was fighting Steropes and Bronte both, kicking at his bad leg, causing him to stumble. But Hephaestus had lived a million lifetimes adjusting for his foot, and he was determined it wouldn't let him down now. Using the momentum, Hephaestus kicked back, using sheer force of will, to stay on his feet. Arges went flying when he followed that kick with a strong blow from his hammer.

Bronte was the last one on his feet. That was inevitable. Out of the three he was both the biggest and strongest. But Hephaestus wasn't going to stop until that cyclops was down.

"He's already gone," Bronte taunted as he jabbed with his fists – Hephaestus blocking every blow. "You'll live your life alone and be miserable without us."

"Far better to be miserable than being lied to by so-called friends. Just remember you brought this on yourself." Hephaestus raised his hammer one last time and called on every last ounce of his power. "I revoke the cyclops' right to live on earth. Send them

back to the fires of Tartarus where they belong.” His roars bounced around his wards. One final swing at Bronte’s face, and the giant went down, shaking the ground as he fell. His shocked face was the last thing Hephaestus saw of his ex-friends as they disappeared into the earth.

Shallow panting, Hephaestus rested his hands on his knees, letting his human form come through. Every bone in his body ached. His knee on his bad leg felt as if it was broken, and he wasn’t sure he could take a deep breath without puncturing his lungs. But he had only one thought - Landyn!

Turning, he could see Thor, Orin, Silvanus, and Artemas all crowded around his mate. Artemas noticed him first and came running over, offering his shoulder for Hephaestus to lean on.

“Uncle Hephaestus, you certainly know how to use that hammer of yours. But seriously, I think you need to sit down now.” A chair appeared, but Hephaestus resisted.

“Landyn. How bad is he?” All Hephaestus could see was that his ferret wasn’t moving.

“He had a lot of broken bones,” Silvanus was working quietly, weaving his hands in a mesmerizing pattern in the air above Landyn’s form. “The shock made him lose consciousness. It often happens in animal form. Your young mate was lucky he’s naturally supple in this form. I have healed most of the breaks and reinflated his lungs. A few hours rest, some food, and I’m sure his shift will heal any lingering aches and pains.”

“Please bring him to me.” Hephaestus’s legs couldn’t hold his weight anymore. He sunk into the chair Artemas had zapped for him, tears rolling down his cheeks. “I have to hold him. This was all my fault.”

“I wouldn’t let your mate hear you say that,” Silvanus said, cradling the ferret carefully as he brought him over, laying him on Hephaestus’s lap. Then Hephaestus felt the same strong hands resting on his head. Soothing vibes flowed through his body, healing the bones, chasing the stiffness from his muscles. “The first step to healing yourself, Hephaestus, is recognizing where the fault lies. It is not with you. It’s never been with you, and you are not to blame for any of this. Call me if you need me again, and I promise I will heed your call.”

“Your kindness is a gift. Thank you both,” he added as Silvanus and Artemas disappeared.

“Are you going to be all right?” Orin asked, his hands twisting in front of him, worry written all over his sweet face. “Can I do anything? Get you some coffee or maybe some juice?”

Considering he didn’t think he had enough energy left to zap a glass of water, Hephaestus nodded. “Hot chocolate if you please. It’s Landyn’s favorite. The smell might help revive him.”

Perhaps glad he had something to do, Orin disappeared into the house, leaving just Thor hovering near his chair.

“I can see your point about having a longer handle on your hammer,” Thor said gruffly. “Those were some pretty powerful skills you were showing back there.”

“You saved my mate, that is worth more to me than anything else.” Hephaestus looked up, brushing the tears one handed from his cheeks. His other hand was cradling his precious ferret. “But if you ever want some modifications done to that thing you call a hammer, you know where I am. Thank you for coming. You didn’t have to.”

“That’s what friends do.” Thor shrugged as though he was uncomfortable admitting it. “Our paths might not cross that often, but I was always in awe of your craft. A man who knows how to treat a hammer is always a handy person to have on my side.”

“Understood and appreciated.” Hephaestus looked down at the still ferret again. At least the chest was rising and falling now, when it hadn’t been before. “What made you think to call Silvanus? I haven’t seen him in centuries.”

“He was the one who attended the birth of my twins. He was the first god I thought of who knew how to heal. And besides, Artemas carries the Tree of Life on his back – I figured that couldn’t hurt either. He and Orin are good friends. They both love books most of us can’t be bothered to read.”

“Yeah, I can see your point. Good thinking, Thor, and thank you.”

“I gotta say, you could’ve let me get a few thumps in. I’ve been wanting a go at those cyclops for centuries.”

Wiping away another tear, Hephaestus shook his head. “You were the hero today when you caught my mate. It wasn’t until I saw that...when I saw just how far they would go to destroy me, destroy my mate.” His breath caught and he struggled to get his next words out. “It was only yesterday I vowed to Landyn he would be safe. I gave him my fucking word.”

“You proved you could do that today – proved it to yourself and to Landyn.” Thor was looking at the mess of the lawn – giants falling would do that. “You know, having a smaller mate, we could spend our time worrying every second how to keep them safe, and we’d still never be able to account for every little thing in life that goes wrong.”

“Only you could call three attacking cyclops a little thing.”

“Meh. It’s all relative. The thing is we’re gods, not oracles. Your Zeus might think he can predict the future, and I know Odin makes claims like that at times, but we can never know what the future will bring from one minute to the next. Think about it. One minute you’re on track, thinking you’re getting a blowjob and the next thing you know your mate is sucking your toes. What I’m trying to say is that we can only roll with what life brings us, and you definitely did that today.”

“You’re making a good case for just staying in bed.” Hephaestus chuckled quietly.

“Or maybe I just like my toes sucked.” Thor chuckled with him. “The thing is, you fight when you have to, you love on your mate every chance you get, and if you ever mention to anyone I can be mushy, I’ll be coming for you with my short-handled hammer.”

“Noted.”

Stroking over Landyn’s fur gently, Hephaestus sat quietly, guarded by his friends, willing his mate to open his eyes.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:37 am*

Landyn needed to have a serious conversation with his mate, he just wasn't sure how to bring it up. It had been four days since the cyclops had come to visit. When Landyn regained consciousness he was in his human form, tucked up against Hephaestus's chest. The god looked as though he hadn't slept a wink, and Landyn felt awful when he'd found out he'd been unconscious for a full day.

There had been some tears of relief on both sides. Hephaestus wouldn't speak of what he'd done, but he was adamant the cyclops couldn't hurt him anymore. They both decided that worrying about who should protect who was counterproductive, and it didn't take long for Landyn's natural good humor to be restored.

It took Hephaestus a bit longer to relax. He started to talk about how bad he felt that Landyn had been attacked in the first place a few times, but Landyn refused to listen. "In any case of abuse," he said firmly, "the fault is on the one who raises their fist first. End of story." He wasn't sure Hephaestus was totally convinced, but he was slowly starting to smile more.

Which led to Landyn's current predicament. He didn't want to upset his mate, but he did feel some changes to the way they lived and where would make a positive difference for both of them. It was just a case of finding the right time to bring it up.

Hephaestus had taken him out to dinner at the same restaurant they'd been to the night they'd met. He decided it was their one month anniversary and wanted to celebrate their mating. Which was a beautiful gesture. Landyn just wasn't sure if it was the best time for a serious conversation.

He should never have underestimated his mate. Hephaestus waited until they'd had

their appetizer, and had a break before the main course. The plates had been cleared, and Hephaestus reached across the table, taking his hands.

“You’ve had something on your mind these past few days, and I sense you’re trying to hide it from me. Did you want to tell me what’s wrong?”

“It’s our anniversary dinner,” Landyn hedged. “That’s a time for happy conversations.”

“Okay. So that tells me you think I’ll be upset if you ask for something you want. Hmm.” Hephaestus appeared to be thinking for a minute, but his eyes were sparkling. “Would this have something to do with you not wanting to go outside in the back garden anymore, or why, when I dropped the fry pan in the kitchen yesterday morning, you jumped a foot in the air? Or how, even when we’re curled up together on the couch, you miss half the movie because your stressed out ferret is consciously cataloging every creak and groan in the house, likely worried we’ve got intruders?”

“When you put it like that, it sounds silly.” Landyn met his mate’s eyes. “Sorry?”

“You have absolutely no reason to be sorry and it’s not silly at all. Your memories of that house so far aren’t pleasant ones.” Hephaestus’s thumb was warm, running over the back of his hand.

“I’ve been doing some thinking these past few days, and after what happened in the kitchen, and then in the back garden, and the fact that the house we’re in I’ve shared with three other people, whose names won’t be mentioned, for a lot longer than you’ve been alive... I wondered how you felt about us looking for a house where we can make memories together. Possibly somewhere we could raise a family?”

“You knew how I was feeling?” Landyn checked around them, but no one was paying any attention to their table. “Are you sure you can’t read my mind? That’s

what I wanted to talk to you about, but I didn't know how attached you were to your home."

"It wasn't difficult to work out, sweetling. You built a home for yourself after a rough upbringing, and then some asshole came along and wrecked that for you. There would've been no safety for you at all living on the streets, and then me, like a big buffoon, brings you into my house, thinking you should be safe, but you haven't been. That house has too many memories, but more than anything else, we need a place where we can feel safe. That's totally understandable."

"You have no idea." Landyn was so relieved he felt tears prickling his eyes. "I'm not crying, honestly I'm not." He sniffed and blinked quickly. "I know the cyclops are gone, but it wasn't just them. Thor and Orin, when they came to dinner, were the only people who visited us that actually knocked on the front door. Everyone else just appeared out of thin air, some of them dropping in so quickly they forgot they were meant to be wearing pants."

Hephaestus chuckled, as Landyn knew he would. Eros was fast becoming a joke between them. "We will definitely ward any new house against people who forget their pants." Hephaestus said, completely serious. "All we need to decide is where you want to go, what type of place you'd like to live...you know that idea that you had about a small farm with a workshop for me sounded like fun. Seeing as we might be bringing children into our place, the automatons could help with chores and house cleaning, things like that, at least until after the baby is born."

"I'd love it if they could come." Landyn grinned widely. "Again, I know you'll think I'm silly because you think they're just metal, but I've named them and I hate the thought of them being in that cupboard in the warehouse, all in the dark, and with no one to talk to."

"They can come with us. They can look after our house while we're continuing our

culinary travels as well. At least while we can.”

Landyn knew what Hephaestus was referring to. Once he was pregnant, they would have to stay out of the public view for a while. “You’ve been really patient with me,” he lowered his voice. “I know I haven’t felt much like doing stuff we’d both like to do...you know, in the bedroom.”

“We’ve both been through a lot this past month,” Hephaestus said warmly. “More than most, I reckon. Sex is fun, but you being in my arms every night means more to me than anything else.”

“Me, too.” Landyn winked. “But tell me. Did Thor seriously tell you he liked having his toes sucked over getting a blow job?”

“I think he was joking.” Hephaestus laughed. “I think all the beatings he’s taken over the years has him mixing up his analogies sometimes.”

“Even so, it could be fun to give that another go for ourselves.” As the server came back and Hephaestus sat back, releasing his hands to make room for the plates, Landyn lifted his glass. “Happy one month anniversary, my mate. I love you.”

“Happy anniversary, sweetling, and I love you, too.”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:37 am*

When Hephaestus bought his Chicago house, he'd simply picked a spot on the map, bought the largest house that could comfortably fit four large adults, and moved in. Back before things got complicated, the whole process took less than a week, especially as he was paying cash.

Finding the right place with Landyn was a lot more difficult, especially when Hephaestus realized they were both scared of committing to somewhere, or showing how enthusiastic they might be about one home over another, worrying that the other person might not like it.

"I have a suggestion," Hephaestus said one morning a couple of weeks later. They'd already been to see three places so far that weren't suitable, and Landyn's nerves understandably still hadn't settled. "How about we make a list of the things our new place has to have, along with a list of definite must-not-have items, and then give it all to Paulie and see if they can come up with somewhere. What do you think?"

"Paulie can do that?" Landyn looked up from his breakfast plate. "That has to work better than what we've been doing so far." He chuckled and popped another piece of bacon in his mouth.

"I'm sure it will." Pushing his plate aside, Hephaestus pulled out his phone, and tapped on the note taking app. "All right, how big do we want this place to be?"

"A minimum of four bedrooms," Landyn said. "A big room for us, so you can have your huge bed, another one next to it for any baby or babies, a room for guests, and another big room for the automatons."

Hephaestus raised his eyebrow. “Sweetling, the automatons don’t sleep. They are either powered on or powered off. You can just put them in a corner somewhere when you’re not using them.”

“They don’t have to have beds in their room,” Landyn protested. “But they should have a chance to sit down sometimes. Maybe a table so they can play cards or read. We could get them a television to keep them amused, seeing as they don’t sleep. Honestly, if you keep them standing all the time, their joints might rust into place and then where would you be?”

Making new automatons. Hephaestus laughed as he shook his head. “My automatons don’t rust, but fine, sweetling. Four bedrooms minimum.”

“And we will need two living areas, one with a television and one without. Also a small room for your library, and you’ll also need an office.”

Hephaestus tapped them into his app. “What about a room for you, sweetling? You might want to take up art, a hobby, craft, or something similar. We want this to be a forever home if possible.”

“That would be nice, but then that means any kiddies will need their own playroom, too. Wow, this house is just getting bigger and bigger.”

More tapping, and then Hephaestus asked, “Do you like the idea of eating in the kitchen like this place, or do you want a separate dining room.”

“No dining room. We want an open plan kitchen. Maybe Thor and Orin might come over again and have dinner sometimes and we’re bound to make friends in the area.” Landyn nodded, and Hephaestus could see he was getting excited about the idea.

“I’ve added that in. Now what about land size? How much land did you used to

dream of?”

“I haven’t got a clue about land sizes. But I’d love some forest area with trees and trails so we can ride the horses, and we need room for maybe four horses, and four cows, and a couple of goats maybe, and...” Landyn threw out his arms. “That much land.”

“Then there’s a stable, a barn for when the animals get cold, and room for a house garden, because nothing screams permanence to me like a garden, and oh, your workshop, which will need to be huge as well so you can make your lovely art. What other things do you want to add to the list?”

“A swimming pool and a hot tub,” Hephaestus looked over the table at his mate. “I might not be keen on boats, but I like to swim, it helps my leg.”

“Good idea, so long as it’s fenced for little ones.” Landyn nodded.

“I was also thinking about a game room, maybe? Darts, a pool table, with a bar, which could be fun if we have an evening at home.”

“I’m good at pool.” Landyn clapped his hands in excitement. “That sounds like fun. Anything else? Oh, a garage for the car – maybe two or three cars, in case I ever get to learn how to drive? I wouldn’t reach the pedals of your big machine.”

“That’s a good point.” With everything that happened Hephaestus had forgotten he’d promised to teach Landyn to drive, and his mate was right about the size of his truck. “We’ve got a good list. Now where do you want to live? Do you like seasonal weather, do you prefer warm places? Do you like the snow or hate it? We need privacy for when you shift, or if I’m pregnant, but do you like being around people sometimes? Do you want to shop locally?”

“I’m not a fan of being out in the snow.” Landyn huffed. “There’s a lot that goes into making the right decision, isn’t there? I didn’t like the cold when I was rough sleeping, but if I’m curled up with you inside on a cold day, with a fire roaring in the grate and we’re reading or watching a movie, that sounds really romantic. We’d better get heating in the barn for the animals though, if we live somewhere that it snows.”

Hephaestus added that to the list, but then moved on quickly. Landyn would be suggesting the automatons needed their own heaters as well if he had the chance.

“Local shops would be lovely, if we could be on the fringes of a small town, or something like that, but it’s not necessary. You zap me all over the place, so that’s not a big deal, is it? But having people call us by name in the shops would be nice.”

“For a while,” Hephaestus agreed, “but remember we don’t age, so we would have to move if people got too used to seeing us around.”

“True. I hadn’t thought about that. We don’t want to be moving all the time, especially if we find our dream place.” Landyn frowned, and then brightened. “Are you a beach or a mountain sort of person?”

“More mountain I think. I don’t think you’d get many decent small farms too close to the salt air.” Hephaestus added that to the list as well. “Can you think of anything else?”

“Preferably not near a vampire coven or a wolf pack. Is that okay?” Landyn was looking at him sideways. “I know not all vampires are bad. I mean we haven’t seen a hint of one in the past month, and we have been out a fair bit. But I want to feel safe. The same with wolves. I don’t have a problem with other shifters, but at the end of the day, I’m a prey animal, and wolves are very territorial, especially when it comes to land.”

“Safety is the first thing on the list,” Hephaestus promised, adding in those “not” items. “All right, we have our dream list. Now, we’ll just submit it to Paulie.” He tapped to open the app. “Good morning, Paulie.”

“Good morning, Hephaestus. I hope you and your mate are well.”

“We are, thank you. We have a list of requirements for a new house. We are hoping to start a family sometime soon, and my mate needs to feel safe in our new environment. If I send you the list, can you search and see if anything is suitable on the market to buy at the moment?”

“I have accessed your list from your note taking app, Hephaestus. I will pass on these requirements to Zeus’s computer team. They will handle any purchasing and legal requirements to prevent any delays caused by lack of paperwork or credit inquiries. Money laundering is an issue many realtors concern themselves with in recent times and as gods tend to pay in cash, that can become an issue.”

“I wasn’t aware of that, Paulie, so thank you, and please pass on my thanks to Zeus’s team.”

“I will send suitable properties to your phone within twenty-four hours. Have a nice day. All hail the Almighty Zeus and his beloved mate, Paulie.”

Hephaestus put his phone on the table. Landyn had pushed his empty plate to the side and was resting his head on the table, laughing like crazy.

“Two weeks,” he said, sitting up, still laughing. “Two weeks we’ve been looking almost constantly and finding nothing that suited both of us. I know that’s not long compared to what some people go through, but for us, it’s been all-consuming.”

“I need for you to feel safe in your home.” Hephaestus had even suggested booking

them into a hotel until they found a new place to live. But Landyn had vetoed that idea, saying that would be even more stressful, and he doubted a hotel would have a bed big enough for Hephaestus to be comfortable.

“I know, I know, and I love you for that. But see, we were doing it wrong. With a few taps on the screen, Paulie says they will send us suitable properties in twenty-four hours. Twenty-four hours! If everyone knew what that Paulie app could do, they’d all want one.”

“I’m sure technology will catch up with Zeus’s network sooner or later.” Hephaestus wiggled his eyebrows at his mate’s flushed face. “So what do you feel like doing now? Seeing as we don’t have to spend the day house hunting.”

“How about we start with our breakfast kiss and go from there.” Landyn had scampered around the table in the time it took Hephaestus to push back his chair. Definitely the perfect way to start a morning.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:37 am*

It actually took six weeks to move into their new house, although Paulie had, as promised, sent through details of two lovely places that fit all of their criteria within the specified twenty-four hours. Both of the small ranches were in Montana, which was apparently a surprise to Hephaestus who had never considered living there.

Paulie mentioned that a number of gods had moved into the area, mainly due to the privacy and land offered with a number of larger houses, and Hephaestus had confided in Landyn that he thought Zeus might be trying to build a godly compound on Earth. But as Landyn hadn't even met Zeus and Paulie, and wasn't likely to, and he literally fell in love at first sight of the second house Paulie suggested, an offer on the house was made.

There was so much for Landyn to love. The wide porch that went right around the house, the small pool with the hot tub to one side of it, the open plan kitchen and lounging area all called to Landyn's soul. There were practical considerations too. The parking area in front of the house and the garage was all concrete, so there was no gravel for Hephaestus to contend with. There was a ramp up to the porch, rather than steps, which would be easier for Hephaestus as well. The master bedroom was downstairs, much like it had been in the house he shared with the cyclops. In fact, the whole house was spread out over a single level, which was perfect for their needs.

The original owners hadn't moved out yet. There was some back and forth about rights to the land, which Hephaestus had left up to Zeus's team to take care of. But the owners had been happy for Hephaestus and Landyn to take a tour throughout before signing the offer papers. Landyn loved the older couple who showed them through and made them feel so welcome. Olive, the wife, was happy to spend all afternoon sharing memories of the lives they'd had, raising their children and living

off their land.

“It is such a beautiful home.” Landyn hadn’t been able to show disinterest, which Hephaestus warned he should in case they pushed the price up. “You can feel the love in these walls. You must be heartbroken to leave your home.”

“Our son has a nice place for us down in California,” Olive said with a sigh. “Honestly, now Herbert is getting a bit on in years, although he’d never admit it, foolish man, it’s for the best that a younger couple can take over. You know, if you and your gentleman were planning to have children at any time, Herbert created me a wonderful nursery.”

“Please show it to me. My partner and I are hopeful that can happen for us.” Landyn grinned, and when he saw the nursery, with its cute mural painted walls, and the two sweet beds set up in readiness, he knew he was ready – for the move and the baby.

By mutual agreement, Hephaestus and Landyn still hadn’t had any anal sex, although Landyn still enjoyed the playing with toys. But when Hephaestus asked if he was ready for the real thing, Landyn reluctantly refused. “The Fates might get their wires crossed, and I know how badly you want to carry our first baby. We can’t have them zapping me with their magic woo-woo. Not for our first one.”

“It might not happen the first time.” Landyn could hear how much Hephaestus wanted to be inside of him. His body ached for the same thing, but he had to be strong.

“You’re a god, of course it’s going to happen first time. Orin told me he’d only had sex that way with Thor the one night, and bam, he was pregnant with twins.” Landyn didn’t mention it had been three times in the same night. He didn’t want Hephaestus thinking he was greedy, although just thinking about it...

Tonight was the night. Hephaestus had been in the bathroom for the longest time, and Landyn wasn't going to hurry him. He spared a thought for shifters who jumped on and penetrated their mates from day one, without a second thought. But Landyn was glad he and Hephaestus had waited.

"We love each other," he reminded himself quietly, as he sat curled up in an armchair. "We've had all this time to get to know each other, to care for each other, and to fight our foes." He glanced around their new bedroom. The soft cream and green wallpaper, with its matching green curtains and cream rugs was comfortable and welcoming.

"Our sanctuary." He breathed in deeply, feeling the vibes coming from the wall. Landyn believed that walls absorbed the energies of the people who lived in them, and that's what appealed to Landyn about the house more than anything else. He was confident he and Hephaestus would continue to add to that vibe as they raised their own family in their new home.

"I thought you'd already be in bed." Hephaestus came in from the bathroom, his hair hanging down his back, just a white towel wrapped around his waist. A tented white towel.

"I was waiting for you," Landyn said happily. "It's a new bed, in our new house. Everything smells so wonderfully different." He didn't mention that he hadn't realized how much the stink of giants had permeated all of Hephaestus's things. Hephaestus had decided that everything they would have in their new house would be new, chosen by them, for their own space.

"Even new sheets," Hephaestus grinned, sharing his delight as he dropped his towel and pulled back the sheets. Settling himself down, Hephaestus groaned. "Oh, this is a great mattress. Just the right combination of support and letting me sink into it."

“Don’t get sunk in too far,” Landyn said with a laugh, jumping out of the seat and throwing off his clothes. Naked, he climbed into the space Hephaestus made for him. “How are you feeling? Not too tired with all the walking around we did today?”

“I’m fine,” Hephaestus draped his arm over Landyn’s shoulder. “Actually, let’s rephrase that. I feel renewed, rejuvenated. There’s something in the air here, can’t you smell it?”

“I can smell you.” Landyn nuzzled his nose into Hephaestus’s chest. “Fire, spice, and everything nice. My favorite kind of smell.” He slid his hand down under the covers, stroking Hephaestus’s already hard cock.

“I did prepare myself,” Hephaestus said as his cock arched into Landyn’s touch. “We’ve both waited so long for this, and I...I really want to feel you in me.”

“We talked about this. We had the position worked out and everything. We could’ve written a how-to manual with all the planning we did for this. And one of the key points was that you were going to let me prepare you.” But Landyn was still laughing. He had the same need running through his body. “Pass me the pillows. We need to make your leg comfortable first. Roll onto your side, and let’s move that leg up onto the pillow.”

“Just do it, please.”

Shaking his head, Landyn got the pillows in position. In the time they were waiting for the house, they’d researched different positions where they could have anal sex for the first time without creating any aches in Hephaestus’s leg. When Hephaestus would have his turn in Landyn’s body, Landyn would be able to sit upright on Hephaestus’s lap and they both believed that work would for them that way. Both of them enjoyed their face to face interactions and often rubbed off on each other that way.

But Hephaestus wasn't comfortable with sitting on Landyn. He was so much bigger and heavier, and while Landyn thought it would be all right, Hephaestus didn't want him uncomfortable. There was also the issue of him kneeling for any length of time. The knee bone he'd broken during his fight with the giants still ached sometimes. Landyn was convinced Hephaestus would have to be lying down.

"Yum, every part of you is rock hard." Landyn moved Hephaestus's leg into position, monitoring their bond to make sure his mate wasn't feeling the slightest bit of discomfort. He bent down, dropping butterfly kisses up Hephaestus's leg to his hip. "So solid, and all mine."

Landyn could feel that now. Moving into their own house settled something deep inside of him. He no longer thought himself unworthy of a god, and he knew the love they shared was solid. Yes, Hephaestus would still have his bad days sometimes. That was part of their life. But Landyn was confident that he was enough, and he could help see his mate through it.

In the meantime, he could tease his mate with kisses. Up strong arms and over wide shoulders. Down Hephaestus's back, to the two small dimples that sat on either side of his tailbone. Hephaestus was moaning, groaning, and there was the occasional curse, but Landyn was not a jump and pump kind of guy. He wanted every part of his mate to feel the love.

That was until he reached Hephaestus's ass cheeks, and then Landyn couldn't help but run a finger down the crack. It was his turn to groan as his finger probed the opening and slid inside easily. He quickly pinched the head of his cock, or their first time would be over before he'd begun.

"I told you I was ready," Hephaestus grunted.

"You can't blame me for wanting to savor an extra special first-first between us." But

Landyn moved into position. He didn't know if it was the thought of the nursery already ready for any children they might have, or that his mate would finally smell like him from the inside out. Although, no, he cautioned himself. This was about him and Hephaestus. A celebration of how far they'd come together, and what they still had left to achieve.

"Breathe out my darling mate. Try to relax." Grabbing his cock around the base, Landyn held it against the tiny hole and slowly started to push.

There was some push back. Landyn expected that. Not even a god could go through anal sex for the first time without his body automatically trying to close his hole against intruders. There was a lot of heavy breathing, even more muttered cursing from Hephaestus's side. Landyn stroked every inch of his mate's skin he could reach, soothing the tense body even as he pushed forward with his hips, gaining entrance one millimeter at a time.

He could've stopped. Anal sex wasn't for everyone. At one point, Landyn really thought that he should, because Hephaestus's body was so tense. But as fast as he thought it, Hephaestus yelled, "Keep going," and breathed out long and hard, which automatically relaxed the muscles holding Landyn's cock in a vice grip. That was all that was needed as the final inch of Landyn's cock was buried inside of his mate's body.

"Breathe, my mate. Just breathe." Landyn could do with a spot of coaching on that side of things himself. He reached around for Hephaestus's cock, teasing it with loose fingers, bringing his mate up to full hardness in a matter of seconds. The truth was flooding their bond. Hephaestus wanted this. He wanted to be joined with Landyn, to have a family with his mate. He wanted to carry their children. Whether it was one baby or six, Hephaestus didn't care. Landyn could see the picture clearly in his head. Hephaestus saw any child they might have as further proof of the love he already knew was his.

Landyn wanted all that too. When Hephaestus urged him to move, he was ready, holding his mate's cock in one hand, bracing himself with the other as he plastered himself against Hephaestus's back. The movements were clumsy at first. Landyn had only penetrated one other person in his short life, and that had been fast-paced and embarrassing for both parties.

But they found their rhythm, and once they did it was as if all the stars aligned. The Fates were smiling on them, Landyn was sure of it, and as their breathing intensified and their mutual arousal grew, Landyn's thrusts got faster and harder. Hephaestus's hands were fisted into the sheets, as he held his body rigid, meeting Landyn's thrusts.

"Now," Hephaestus roared, and Landyn let his instincts take over, biting down on the nape of his mate's neck as his balls unloaded. A warm stickiness let him know Hephaestus had climaxed too. Unhinging his teeth, Landyn licked over the mark he'd left. It wouldn't scar. His original mating mark was glowing on Hephaestus's neck. But his ferret was so excited – their bond was finally complete in the shifter way. As for Landyn, he rested his forehead on Hephaestus's shoulder, trying to catch his breath.

"Don't pull out just yet," Hephaestus murmured when Landyn went to move. "That was a super energetic first-first, but maybe we should go one more round, just to make sure."

Or maybe twice more? But Landyn simply chuckled his agreement. Making love to his amazing mate wasn't a hardship.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:37 am*

It was a couple of hours before dawn when Hephaestus slipped out of the covers, wincing at the ache in his butt. He rubbed his belly, filled with a calm certainty their love would bring the desired result. But for now he had a different desire – one he hadn't had for a while. He wanted to craft something.

Making his way quietly down the hallway, he stopped in the room where the six automatons were watching television. They had a bit to learn about “engaging in leisure activities,” as Landyn called it, all sitting rigidly, their eyes fixated on the screen. But Hephaestus wasn't about to interfere with his mate's education of his automatons.

“Charlie,” he said, pointing at the one with that particular name badge – another Landyn innovation when Hephaestus couldn't get their names straight. They were designed and built to all look exactly the same, so it wasn't like he could be blamed for that. But for some reason, Landyn could tell them apart. “I am going over to the workshop. You are to stay outside our bedroom door, and you will answer if my mate calls. Let him know where I am, so he does not worry. Guard that door and my mate.”

“Yes, sire.” Charlie nodded.

“Bertie and Simon, you will attend me in the forge. Cleo, Georgia and Sarah, you will wait one hour and then ensure the kitchen is straightened up, all things put away in a logical order in the cupboards, and that everything is clean for when my mate wishes to make breakfast. You will do it quietly. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sire.” Yep, they all still looked the same to Hephaestus. But if names made

Landyn happy, then so be it.

Heading outside, Hephaestus looked up at the clear night sky. The stars were so brilliant it was almost as if he could touch them, but that wasn't his focus. He was looking at the end of the ramp that led to the porch, and then he checked the space on either side of the front door.

Decided, he made his way down the ramp and across the large parking lot. He waved his hands to ensure the double wooden doors, that were almost as tall as the building itself, slid silently on their tracks. His mate was worn out, pleasantly so, and needed his sleep.

The workshop used to be where Herbert, the previous owner, had maintained his tractors and machinery. It was empty for now, except for a wide wooden bench that ran the width of one wall. The floor was concrete, and on one side there was a deep pit. Hephaestus filled that in with a flick of his hand. That wouldn't be safe for his mate in either form or any potential children.

Where to put the forge? Hephaestus decided on the one corner of the workroom that didn't have any windows. His magic would protect the concrete and the walls from the heat, and wards would prevent anyone who shouldn't see what he was doing from doing so. The last thing he wanted to deal with was authorities who would start worrying about health and safety regulations.

Now, what to make? Hephaestus wandered over to the newly installed forge, breathing in the flames. It was an eternal fire, sourced from Tartarus itself, and it would never go out. Then he remembered the gold and silver dogs he made for King Aklino's. Much like his automatons, they would guard on command, although Landyn will probably teach them to play fetch, Hephaestus thought fondly.

He would make the dogs. A pair of them to guard his new home, his new life, and in

time, his new family. His heart was filled with love, hope, and a renewed sense of purpose as he called his supplies to hand and started to work.

It was some hours later when Hephaestus looked up, pleased with what he'd created. Looking over at the door, he saw the sun was shining, and Landyn was approaching the door, a coffee mug in one hand and a plate in the other, Charlie trailing his every step.

"I made you breakfast." Landyn's smile lit up the dimness of the workshop.

"Thank you. I made you puppies." Hephaestus laughed at his mate's delight. "Yes, you can name them."

"You've got your mojo back," Landyn said, putting the plate on the workbench and bringing over the coffee. "You have that urge to create again?"

Hephaestus nodded. It had been lost there for a while. Overworking in his studio with the cyclops hadn't helped and afterward, with finding the new house and worried about his mate, Hephaestus just hadn't had the heart Landyn claimed he put into his work.

But as he looked at the dogs he'd created in just a matter of hours, their shiny metal glistening in the sun, he knew his life was only going to get better with every passing day.

"Can they play with sticks or a ball?" Landyn asked, handing him his mug and then hugging him tightly around the waist, not minding for a second that Hephaestus was sweaty and grubby.

"I'm sure you can teach them, my mate. Just don't let them get on the furniture. I made them to guard our front door."

“They might get lonely there, when we’re all in the house, and what about when it gets cold?”

They’re going to be laying on the couch in a week. I can see it now. “We’ll work it out, sweetling. We’ll work it out.”

Three months later

“They’re here. You stay sitting down, I’ll get the door. I can’t believe it, they’re using the door.” Landyn ran to the door and flung it open. “And you’re wearing pants. Yes!” Ignoring the crowd, he gave Orin a hug. “It’s so lovely to see you. Who are your friends?”

When Landyn had mentioned to Orin that he wanted Orin and Thor to come to dinner as a form of housewarming, Orin had asked if he could bring friends. Godly ones, because Hephaestus was indeed pregnant, and Landyn didn’t want anyone around who might make Hephaestus feel bad about himself. It was why the housewarming dinner had to wait a bit until after Hephaestus had gotten over his morning sickness, but his friends had arrived.

“These are your Montana neighbors,” Orin said, returning the grin and the hug. “From the left, we have Ra, the Egyptian God of the Sun and his two mates, Kirill and Arvyn. Then we have Seth, God of the Storms in the Egyptian pantheon and his mate Luka, and finally we have Zeus, and you know who he is, and his mate, Paulie. And Thor. Goodness, Landyn’s already met you before.”

“Hello, you’re welcome here,” Landyn said in a bit of a daze as he moved so his guests could come in. Zeus is in my house. Zeus is in my house! He looks... No, Landyn didn’t know what Zeus looked like. None of his visitors could be considered ordinary.

Paulie gave him a smile and handed him a plate with delicious looking cookies on it. “A small gift from us, to say thank you for dinner.”

“That is very sweet of you, thank you. Go on through, go on through.” Landyn froze as they filed past. Ra’s mate is a vampire. He’s in my house!

“Hey, are you okay? You can tell me, I’m a doctor.” Luka was the last to come in and stopped in front of him, taking the plate of cookies away from him and putting it on the key table. “You’re looking a little pale. You’re not pregnant, are you?” He’d lowered his voice, which was sweet, but totally unnecessary.

“No, that’s Hephaestus.” Landyn tried to catch his breath, which wasn’t easy. “I really want this dinner to go well.” He covered his face with his hands. “Come on, get it together, get it together.”

“Have you met one of the mates before or something?” Landyn found himself being pulled into their little reading room. “Your heartbeat is going through the roof.”

“It’s so silly,” Landyn confessed, his voice still shaky. “I had a bad experience over the past two years, lots of them actually, with vampires. Not Kirill, obviously. I never dreamed... I know Ra’s mate must be a decent man... it was just...”

“Sit down, catch your breath.” Luka cocked his head toward the door. “From the sounds of things, your mate is explaining the situation to the others. You’ve got nothing to be embarrassed about. Oh, my goodness, is that your dog?”

Landyn looked up, smiling at his dog’s expression. “You can come in, Rose, but no sniffing guests. Yes, this is Rose, and somewhere, probably guarding Hephaestus, is her brother, Rufus. Hephaestus made them for me the night we moved into the house.”

“She is just adorable, yes you are. Oh, you do like pats.” Luka looked delighted as Rose wagged her golden tail. “They are so lifelike. Hephaestus is a true artist.”

“They don’t poop or shed hair either.” Landyn inhaled and let his breath out slowly.

“All right. Let’s try this again. Hi, I’m Landyn, it’s lovely to meet you. Let’s go and join the others and then I’ll check on dinner.”

He got up, managing a smile, his smile widening as he saw Ra lurking by the door. The god wasn’t any taller than he was.

“Hi Landyn, I was just popping in to make sure you’re okay. If you want me and my mates to leave...”

“No, please, don’t feel like that. Honestly, I’m fine. I’m embarrassed, if truth be known.” Landyn could say that and mean it. “It’s just, I’ve not come across a vampire in a while – what is it they say about muscle memory? I reacted badly. I will apologize.”

“I think you’ll find it will be better if we just forget the glitch at the door happened,” Luka suggested. “Kirill is a great guy as you’ll see for yourself.”

“It would mean a lot,” Ra added with his own smile. “We are neighbors of sorts, and now with Hephaestus expecting, you’ll just have to meet our little girl. She’s almost two now. And Paulie and Zeus have their son, Egan, and Luka and Seth’s twins, Darius and Mal, so it will be nice to have somewhere else for our unusual children to visit. Makes a change from having to come up with creative excuses of how confetti appeared out of midair, which is what happened the last time I took Aziza to the mall for an outing. That was an experience none of us was ready for.”

“My goodness, I hadn’t even thought of things like that.” Ra and Luka made it easier for Landyn to walk through to their main living area/kitchen, where Hephaestus was sitting with the other gods. Walking right up to Kirill, Landyn said, “Hello and welcome to our home. I’m Landyn, and I apologize if anything I did at the door made you feel you weren’t wanted here. That was not my intention.” He held out his hand.

“You’re a brave young shifter,” Kirill said gravely, holding his hand just long enough

to register, before dropping it. “I apologize on behalf of any of my kind who weren’t kind to you.”

“That’s not your apology to make, but it’s appreciated all the same, thank you.” Landyn nodded, and then looked at his mate. He could feel Hephaestus’s concern through their bond. “Has everyone got drinks? Cleo can take your drink order for you.” He waved to indicate the automaton waiting by the kitchen counter. “If you want snacks, then Sarah will tend to you. Bertie and Simon are tending the grill. Honestly, having automatons who can cook is such fun.”

“They didn’t get it right the first few times.” Hephaestus chuckled. “And didn’t I tell you the dogs weren’t meant to be on the couch?” He pointed to Rufus, who was doing a good impression of a sleeping dog.

“Our guests are all inside now. There’s no point in them guarding the front door.” Skipping across the floor, Landyn moved Rufus far enough away so that he could perch next to his mate. “Ra tells me you all have children. Does anyone have pictures to share?”

Clearly that was the right thing to say as the guests all dug into their pockets to show off photos on phones or kept in wallets.

Crisis averted.

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Hephaestus had to pinch himself more than once throughout the fun-filled evening. The first pinch was when Zeus turned up with his mate, looking and behaving like any other man out with his mate for a fun evening meal.

“You’ve got a good place, here,” he said, nodding as he looked around. “We have something similar just over the hill. You and Landyn should come over soon and

check out our outside stone fireplace. I think something like that would look lovely on your porch. We don't have a pool though. Hmm, Paulie's tiger might like something like that." He wandered off to inspect it.

It was more than just Zeus's behavior though. It was the mere fact that there were gods sitting around his table as though it was a regular thing. Everyone was having a great time, and the automatons, both two-footed and four, were a huge hit. Admittedly, Zeus was the only Greek god, but in his entire existence, Hephaestus had been largely ignored except for what he could make for people.

There was laughter, a lot of it coming from Landyn. But it seemed that all of the mates were like his own – not taking their godly mates too seriously, everyone just loving their partners and enjoying having a rare night away from their children.

"This is what happens when you find a mate," Thor leaned over his chair at one point. "They sweep us up and force us to be civilized. No worries about pantheons or rivalries. No posturing, or flaunting powers and being stupid. Just everyone getting along. Isn't it great?"

"Yes, yes it is." Hephaestus nodded. Landyn looked up at that moment and caught his eye. His smile was as warm as always. "Thank Orin for me, would you? I know the guest list was mostly on him."

"Next time, you can come to our place and meet the twins." Thor laughed. But then he lowered his tone and said, "Did you know it took me over four hours to put up that cat thingy Orin went gaga over? And I still had three screws over when I was done."

"That can happen. They were probably spare ones."

"Spares? Do those things come with spares? Odin's thunder." Thor banged his head on the table. "I spent ages, literally ages going over every joint, turning it upside down and right side up again, trying to work out where they went. Spares," he yelled

across the table at his mate who was chatting with the other mates. “Those screws were damn spares.”

“I did try and tell you.” Orin burst out laughing. “You wouldn’t listen to me.” He bent his head back to his friends, probably telling them the story of the cat frame building exercise.

“You just have to love them, don’t you?” Thor didn’t seem to mind Orin was telling stories about him.

“I do that every day,” Hephaestus agreed. “Every single day.”

Later, when Landyn came over, perching on the edge of his chair, still chatting with everyone, his arm draped over Hephaestus’s shoulder, for the first time in his life, Hephaestus finally felt like he belonged. Rubbing his belly, Hephaestus sighed a happy sigh. The future was looking bright, and the brightest part of all was Landyn.

The End