



R.M. VIRTUES



A GODS OF HUNGER NOVEL

LET ME IN

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GODS OF HUNGER #3

RM VIRTUES


STRANGE HUNGERS PUBLISHING

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For my Nana

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Welcome back to Khaos Falls.

I am often asked if this Greece is built within our world. It is not. It exists in a realm far removed from our own, and while we may share many similarities, we also hold many differences. Sometimes, it's just the name. Other times, it's an entire system. They are further advanced in some ways and further behind in others. The aim here is to *escape*. Escape from our world and thrive in a new one, one where room need not be made for those deemed "other". Instead, one made *by* those deemed other. Because we have always been here, and we are no longer interested in being erased.

I hope you enjoy your stay.

As for the story of Dionysos & Athena, I could speak about them for hours (and in a way, I do). This book is broken into 2 parts (with TWO HEAs) and is essentially the story of 2 kids who were forced to grow up too fast realizing that they're still kids in a lot of ways, and that isn't necessarily a bad thing. For all of the responsibility forced on them, they're still young and brash and foolish ESPECIALLY when it comes to each other, and they have to learn to accommodate that. Because this is the kind of love that makes you reckless.

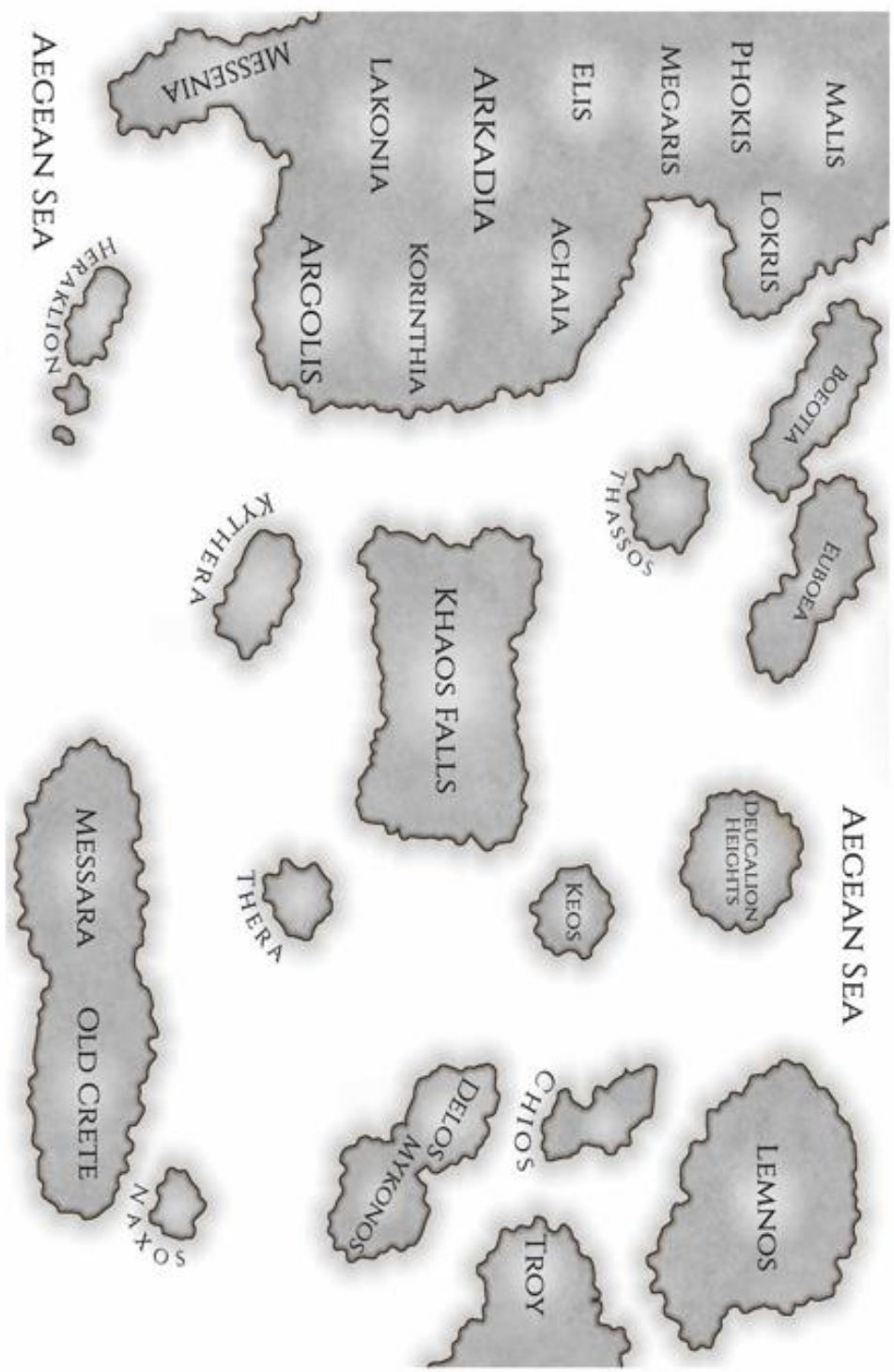
Dio & Athena were my first Greek Myth ship w no rhyme or reason other than I saw myself in both of them and wanted to believe both parts deserved love. They're messy, frustrating, foolish, immature, sometimes unlikable, brilliant, bold, and absolutely wild for each other. And I love them with all my heart. I hope you do too.

CONTENT WARNINGS

This book contains the following:

explicit sex, sex-based bet, femdom, pegging, praise, dry humping, alcohol consumption, drug use, threats of harm, physical harm, injury, physical violence, guns, explosions, murder, on-page battle, on-page death, attempted murder, kidnapping, inferred mental/emotional abuse (past)





PART 1

CHAPTER 1

ATHENA

Athena's hands tightened around the slick railing of the ship's deck, her eyes steady on the horizon. The sun had begun to chase them just over her shoulder, the purple hues reaching out like clawed fingers. The lights of Khaos Falls' eastern coast glittered before her, a siren song calling her home. Since first arriving in Khaos Falls, this was the longest she'd been away from the city. It was also the hardest trip to date. And not just because of the many meetings with city and island leadership denominations that put her at their whims as she lauded the pros of striking an alliance with Khaos Falls. It was more so because of what she had to leave behind, of *who* she had to leave behind.

After spending nearly every day with him in the hospital, leaving Dionysos for weeks at a time had been rough. However, leaving him for this trip, which had lasted over two months, felt like leaving behind a limb, and even without spending all of that condensed time with him, it still would have been difficult. Leaving him always was.

Still, those days with him had been such a dangerous thing to do, all of her memories now cast aside for the ones made in that small room. Falling asleep with her head on his chest, holding his hand through the night, checking him over each time he winced, feeling his lips on her forehead when he thought she was asleep. What a fool she had been to think she had finally gotten over her "little crush".

Because it had never been just a little crush.

But there was *one* memory from before she kept going back to — their first kiss.

It was a foolish thing to think about. After all, the kiss meant nothing at the time, and it certainly meant nothing now. At least not to Dio, who had had many real kisses since, but it was still her first actual kiss. They were just children, Dio no older than eleven and Athena just shy of thirteen. She had fallen off of her bike, angry at herself and eager to punch Ares when he started laughing at her, the cruel edges of his face twisted in his unabashed amusement. Dionysos had intercepted her —back then, he hated to see any of them fight because he feared they would never make up. It was a valid fear— grabbing her face and kissing her hard on the lips. Of course, in her anger, she had stomped on his foot and kicked him in the shin so hard that he'd crumpled to the ground howling in pain. Ares only laughed harder while Hermes screamed at him to stop, and all that ruckus brought Hades out to lay down the law. Though not before Athena managed to kick Ares *and* his bike over.

Dio agreed that he deserved the kick after Hades scolded him for touching her without permission, but later that night, Dio and Athena had hid in his pillow fort for hours just holding each other. And the ice packs on their respective wounds. But she'd let him kiss her in a mutual apology once he'd promised to never do it again unless she asked.

She hadn't asked. She wouldn't dare.

And so maybe agreeing to this trip so easily had not simply been because her uncle had tasked her with it. Maybe it was because she was running, and so maybe this return was as bitter as it was sweet. Because...

“No more running.”

Athena's head turned so fast that something in her neck popped, and Artemis snickered as she came to stand beside her.

“Who's running?” she scoffed.

“Oh, please. Lie to everyone else but not to me. As if you even could.”

No, she couldn't because every minute in the hospital Athena spent with Dio, Artemis spent with them both. She had been designated as their guard right up until he was cleared to leave by Asklepios, and even with everything going on with Hephaestus and Aphrodite, Artemis had often made time to ask Athena if she had “spoken to Dionysos”. Of course, Athena always feigned ignorance, especially after Dio returned to his endless nightlife activities, and Artemis would stare her down until she was certain Athena was not going to break. But it wouldn't matter either way because apparently everyone knew, could read it on her like a tattoo across her forehead when she was in a room with him. That didn't matter either though. Dio was not a man to be kept in a cage, and she was not a woman who shared.

And he was her best friend, so any risks were too great against that.

“I'm not lying, and I'm not running,” Athena said, defiant.

“So you're not gonna go see him first thing or...?”

“The sun isn't even up yet.”

“It will be by the time you get there.”

“—Well, yes, I'd like to see my best friend first thing.”

Athena was sure she had just opened a door she did not wish to open, but rather than continue on with the pressing questions, Artemis merely expelled a breath and nodded.

“Good, because you haven't been texting him much all week, and so he's resorted to checking on your well-being via my text messages. And voicemails. And—”

“Okay, I got it.”

“... Which made me curious—”

“Oh, for Fate's sake.”

“As to why you haven't been texting him.”

“I've been busy.”

“Less so than the rest of the trip.”

“I just - I was trying to unwind, debrief, come down from all the political stuff. We just hit six islands one after the other, Artemis. I’m exhausted.”

Artemis put her hands up. “Look, I’m just pointing out the fact that you couldn’t wait to talk to him every night, and then all of a sudden, a week before we come home, you ignore every attempt he makes. And I just wonder if—”

“Please don’t wonder.”

She did it anyway, just louder. “I wonder if it’s because you’re trying to run away even while you’re about to be back in the same city.”

“I’m not running.”

But it was petulant, like a child, because she was, and she knew she was. Facing him felt more unnerving than facing any of the Aegean’s most egotistical leaders even if it was the most rewarding reunion she could possibly envision. It was all that kept her going and kept her going in the other direction. So there she was torn between not wanting to see him and *needing* to see him more than she needed air in her lungs.

Artemis left her there on the deck, allowing her to ruminate on that one irrefutable truth: He would always be home.



THE CITY WAS WELL into waking by the time they reached port, the Sarpedon District coming to life around them as they came off the ship. The markets that operated just past the carpark were bustling with business, workers either moving towards the docks or the automobile factories. And here in her own city, her arrival didn’t draw every nosy neighbor or eager eye. There were waves and salutes, the generous warm welcome of a people who respected their own, but it wasn’t the way it had been every stop for the past two months. She was still

surprised that every person on the docks in Paros did not drop dead from how hard their necks snapped in her direction when she stepped off the ship.

Kind as Paros' leadership may have been —though they had only truly agreed to the alliance because their neighbor, Melos, already had— it was not a place she wished to visit more than once, at least not on the official ship of Khaos Falls with its official seal emblazoned on the side of the ship. While Zeus's thunderbolt had been intimidating, it was nothing compared to the dark helm of Hades. Therefore, she didn't know if they had looked at her out of fear or wonder. Perhaps both.

Her car awaited her in the lot, her driver stood outside of it with a cigarette between his lips. He gave her a toothy grin and a wave, and she returned it although her smile was not nearly as impressive as his. In fact, it was hardly a smile at all on anyone else's scale, but most had learned not to expect much more than that. As long as she was polite, she didn't see the issue.

“Good travels, Athena?” he asked.

“As good as I could have hoped for,” she returned, her voice curt but pleasant enough. “Thank you for coming, Lykos.”

“Of course. It's my pleasure to be driving around a district leader. Plus, an early day means I get home to the kids on time.”

“And the husband. How is he? Still dealing cards?”

“Good, actually, yeah. He finally got the call up to the Asphodel tables. Which is why he's so thrilled about me being home in time to grab the kids.”

“Well, I'll make sure we keep you on this schedule then.”

Lykos lit up. “Fates, Athena, thank you. I'd really appreciate that.”

She merely nodded, thinking only that Dionysos would be proud of her for willingly engaging in conversation alone, but he may have thought her outright compassion was cause for

celebration. She tended to carry out such things in actions rather than words, but she was in an odd mood this morning. Whether that was good or bad was yet to be seen.

He put his cigarette out, pocketing the half that was left, and she caught a whiff of the mint and sweet herb of whatever was within.

“So where are we headed?”

Of course, Artemis reached her just then, her SUV parked a few feet away. Nike was a few steps behind her, carrying her bag.

“We’ll meet you at the estate, yeah?” Artemis asked her, lips twitching. “We’ll make sure your luggage gets there in one piece.”

Athena rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I’ll meet you there.”

Artemis bumped her shoulder before walking past. “Take your time.”

Athena ignored her, instead turning back to Lykos. “To the Market District Vineyard please.”

He bowed and climbed inside the car while she slid into the backseat. Taking out her phone, she checked the time before scrolling through her messages and emails. It was just past nine which tested her current resolve. She doubted Dionysos would even be awake yet, and if he was, it was because he had yet to go to sleep. Not that this would in any way make him unhappy to see her, but... well, truly it wasn’t that she was worried he would be sleeping. It was that she was worried he wouldn’t be sleeping alone.

But by the time she had fully talked herself out of seeing him before tonight when they would all meet at Asphodel for family dinner, Lykos was entering the Market District, endless rows of dormant vines now rushing past her window like a welcome. Farmers were already out in the fields, preparing the earth for their spring revival now that the chill was gone from the land. When she’d left the city, there had been ice on the ground. It drove home just how long she had been gone.

Her heart jumped into her throat, knee bouncing rhythmically as she chewed her lip. She was fit to burst with her excitement, the only thing keeping it corralled being her dread, but as they entered the long dirt drive that led to the front building and Dionysos' resident loft, both quieted inside of her. It was as though neither wished to have any part of her decision to actually get off the car.

Because Athena made logical decisions, not emotional ones.

Lykos did not question her when she failed to step out of the vehicle the moment he put it in park, merely allowing it to idle in the drive behind Dio's navy blue Lush Facade, a town car designed and developed in Aphrodite's Lush District. Vaguely, for the sake of procrastination, Athena wondered why Dionysos had chosen a navy blue car when his favorite color was mint green last time she checked, but once she formed her first theory, —the theory of a lovesick schoolgirl that thought far too highly of herself— she decided it best to get this over with before her mind wandered any further.

Opening the door, she slipped out of the car and made her way into the winery's front offices.

There was no one yet at the desk which was more of a relief than anything. Athena simply moved down the hall towards the stairs that led up to the loft. The sound of clinking glasses and utensils against pots and pans wafted toward her, the winery's restaurant kitchen preparing for the day. However, it grew quieter as she climbed the stairs, her suspicions that Dio had yet to rise becoming more concrete.

Once she reached the door at the top, she hesitated, rocking on the balls of her feet. The confidence she had stormed into so many leadership houses with was long gone, left at the end of the drive absent her acquiescence. She considered turning around and marching right back down the stairs, but she was already here, and her pride kept her rooted to the floor. As she finally raised a fist, the door opened before her, and for a moment she struggled to conclude what it was she was looking at.

A woman with brown skin and a mane of curls halted before her, gasping in surprise. Her brown eyes were blown wide, her white dress rumpled in the way dresses got when they were cast aside for the duration of an evening. Which was no doubt exactly what had occurred because Athena knew this woman. It was Ariadne.

Ariadne had been Dionysos' longest —and maybe only— exclusive relationship, not that Athena was keeping track. Dio never spoke about why they had broken up after eight months of what seemed like a promising pairing, but as far as Athena knew, they had remained friends, and Ariadne had come to the hospital a few times while he was healing. And each time, she had looked at Athena the same way she was looking at her now that she had realized who she was. Her face fell, trembling lips slightly parted and eyes cautious in the way a frightened animal's were. And Athena wasn't entirely sure what the look meant, but if she had to take a guess, she would say it looked a whole lot like... defeat?

Before she could say anything, Ariadne muttered a swift greeting and a swifter apology before slipping past her down the stairs. Athena's eyes followed her, her face still colored in shock.

“Athena?”

She turned back around, and for a moment, she forgot about the woman in the stairwell.

“Dionysos.”

The name tumbled out of her mouth like a loose tooth. He stood there on the other side of the room, frozen in surprise, his black curls mussed and his baby face unshaven with a deep shadow cresting over the rich brown skin of his jaw. The t-shirt he had tried to put on was bunched up around his chest, leaving his soft, round belly and generous love handles on display. She had the fleeting thought that in all the years she had known him, she had never seen him naked from the waist down, and she quickly berated herself for entertaining that thought in any capacity. She also berated herself for the disappointment that followed that thought.

What she should be focused on was the fact that after two months away from home, he was standing there before her, broad and burly and beautiful. But before she could truly wrap her head around that, he was bounding towards her, nearly knocking over everything between her and the door before he swept her up in his arms.

Now she was home.

“You’re really here.”

He said it more to himself than to her, but she tightened her hold on him nonetheless. Warm tears hit her neck, and she fought not to let her own fall, the reality of his warmth almost too much to bear. She pulled back and took hold of his face, a genuine smile on hers.

“Hey, Dio,” she whispered, wiping the tears from his cheeks.

“Hi.”

He laughed, first softly then louder, the sound filled with a boyish glee that called to the little girl inside her she thought long gone.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” he said again, setting her down and squeezing her shoulders. “It felt like forever. Like longer than forever. Like several forevers!”

She laughed too. “Now you’re exaggerating.”

“Absolutely not, it is the truth! Come on, I’ll—”

Footsteps echoed on the stairs behind her. She turned her head just as Ariadne reappeared on the landing, an apologetic look on her face.

“Sorry, I - Dio, I forgot my phone.”

“Oh!”

Dionysos made his way back into the room, his hip checking the counter for the second time so that he bounced off of it with a mumbled curse. Athena’s eyes followed him rather than remaining on Ariadne, sweat licking the back of her neck. It felt like ages before he returned, the device in

hand and a triumphant expression pasted across his features. He handed it to Ariadne with a smile, and she tossed out a quick “thanks” before disappearing once more. Athena’s muscles flexed, her jaw clenched so tight that she feared a tooth might shatter before she managed to pry it open again. Meanwhile, Dionysos stood there still grinning as if this wasn’t at all as awkward for him as it was for her.

“So yeah, I’ll call downstairs for some breakfast, and you can tell me all about your trip,” he continued at last. “You want your usual, or—”

“Actually, I don’t have much time.”

She had no clue what made her blurt that out... Okay, that was a lie. She knew exactly what made her blurt it out, but it still surprised her, and it was too late to take it back. Despite the look of sheer and utter disappointment on his face.

“I just - I wanted to tell you myself that I was back in the city,” she pushed on. “And that you didn’t have to worry anymore. Plus, I wanted to make sure you weren’t getting into too much trouble yourself.”

He sidestepped the joke, coming back towards her and only just avoiding the countertop this time.

“What? You already have to go back to work?”

“You know as well as I do that it never ends. Even when you’re not working, you’re working.”

“I mean, yeah, but I still have time for breakfast. And - you’ve been gone for months.”

Guilt smothered her jealousy until the latter was buried under layers of the former, the sheer weight of it threatening to make her knees buckle. Then her eyes wandered into the room, falling upon the messy bed with the sheets as rumpled as Ariadne’s dress had been, and her resolve was fortified.

“I’ll see you tonight for family dinner,” she said, and impatience must have reflected in her voice because he opened his mouth but then shut it again and nodded. She wanted to tear her hair out. “I’m sorry. I really wish I could stay, Dio, but I have to get over and see Uncle.”

He nodded again, the smile he offered not at all meeting his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, of course. It’s alright, I get it. I’ll see you tonight. I - can I walk you back down?”

Her lips twitched. “I would appreciate it.”

He lit up some, not much but some, and she savored it. Slipping on his shoes, he followed her back downstairs and out the main doors.

“How did you know I was here?” he questioned as they approached her car.

She snorted. “Please, I could find you anywhere.”

Though she immediately felt foolish regardless of how true it was. The fact of the matter was that she knew two things. One, it was the weekend, meaning he had certainly gone out last night, and two, she knew that Hermes was in Deucalion Heights. When Hermes was out of town, Dio was less likely to stay in the estate house on his own, and he didn’t like to take people back there either. The vineyard was central to his favorite haunts, so that was always the first place to check. If he wasn’t there, it was fair to assume he had stayed the night in whatever club he had spent the evening in. So yeah, under normal circumstances such as this, she could find him anywhere.

He side-eyed her. “You have a tracker on me or something?”

“No,” she shot back, preparing a lie on her tongue with haste, “but I called the office the moment eight o’clock hit and asked if your car was out front.”

He clicked his tongue. “Glad to know they’ll give me up at a moment’s notice.”

“Don’t worry. They and I have an understanding.”

“Oh, do you?”

“Yes. They don’t give you up to anyone but me.”

“Ah, well then, I suppose I have no objection to that.”

“You better not.”

They reached her vehicle, and he pulled the backdoor open for her before leaning in to say hi to Lykos. Because of course, Dionysos knew everyone. She didn't get in right away though, instead hanging over the door and looking up at him.

"And how are you?" she asked, her tone far more serious. "How is the shoulder?"

"It's good, yeah," he immediately replied. She knew he hated to talk about it, but she had to know. "Haven't worn the sling since yesterday morning, but it hasn't locked up or anything. I think we're about 100% now."

Her eyes searched his for signs of deceit rather than avoidance, and when she didn't find any, she nodded. "That's good then. Make sure to keep stretching it out regardless. Not a lot, but enough to keep it from—"

"I know, I know," he assured her, patting her hands atop the door. "And I will."

"I know you will, but I feel better once I've said it."

"Of course."

"Okay, I will see you tonight then."

"You will, yes."

Their eyes met again, a thousand words going unsaid although they echoed in the space between them. Then he leaned forward and kissed her cheek, and she leaned into it like a lifeline.

She wished she could say nothing felt different, that it all felt the same after their time in the hospital and nothing had changed, but that would be a lie. An absurd and outlandish lie. And she could put up a good front with him, just enough to keep him from asking, but that was where her ability ended. Beyond that, she couldn't pretend even if he wanted to. She had tried.

Sliding into the car and away from his touch, she shut the door and gave Lykos the green light. She could feel Dio's eyes on her through the dark tint of the windows, and all the way back down the drive, she fought the urge to look back.

CHAPTER 2

DIONYSOS

“Uncle Dio!”

Dionysos had only just stepped inside Hades’ Asphodel suite when he was nearly tackled, two sets of arms wrapping around his middle. Phobos and Deimos seemed to grow an inch each time he saw them, and they already reached his chest in height. It was amazing what a few months of complete and consistent meals could do when they had been little more than phantoms when Dio first met them. But Hephaestus and Aphrodite had breathed new life back into them, and in turn, the twins had breathed new life into the entire family. He’d heard they’d even softened up Demeter a bit, which was a feat no one thought possible.

“There are my boys!” Dio returned, hugging them both and ruffling their dark hair.

“We’re getting a puppy!” Phobos announced much louder than necessary.

Deimos hushed him, but Dio wasn’t surprised. Hephaestus had come to him the moment he realized Phobos had the same attention and impulsivity struggles as Dionysos, and they had worked with Asklepios to come up with a proper treatment. That was much easier to do once Phobos’ broken leg had fully healed, and he no longer had to worry about his full pain management ritual. Now, he was doing well in school, and it was almost as if the leg had never been broken at all. Not that Aphrodite cared about the last part. She was still pretty strict about his level of physical activity for the time being.

“Skylia is pregnant,” Deimos added, his own voice more level.

“Already?” Dio hissed. “Persephone, didn’t you just get that dog?”

“Cerberus works fast, okay!” Persephone shot back from the couch in the living room. “Don’t blame her! He’s been waiting around for a shot!”

“For years,” Hades snorted from the kitchen.

“Guess we’re all getting puppies then, huh?” Dio said, more excited than he let on. He’d been waiting for a famed puppy of Cerberus’s line since he was a boy.

“That’s right,” Hades confirmed. “And you get the first one, Son.”

“Hey!” Phobos shouted, but Dio tickled him.

“Hey to you! I’ve been waiting much longer than you have!” Phobos giggled into his side until he showed mercy. “Haven’t started taking anyone’s money without me, have you?”

“Yeah, yeah, I beat Auntie Hestia in checkers!” Phobos stated proudly as Dio released him.

“No way,” Dio gasped.

“Yes way! I got like three queens and didn’t let her get even one!”

“Hey, I did too get one!” Hestia shouted from the living room.

Phobos shook his head, snickering before he whispered. “No, she didn’t.”

He ran off then, back towards Hephaestus while Deimos remained standing beside Dio.

“Yes, she did,” he muttered before smiling up at Dio, and Dio smiled back. “She let him win.”

“Aw, come on, give your brother a bit of credit.”

Deimos shrugged. “Phobos is horrible at checkers.”

“Well, no more checkers until after dinner, and no more gambling while you’re in your uncle’s house, you hear me?” Aphrodite warned them as she appeared in the mouth of the hall. “Ironic as that may sound.”

“But you said I could try and beat Grandpa Charon for his car!”

“I believe what she said is she would like to see you try,” Hestia returned.

“Exactly!”

Dionysos laughed to himself now as he entered the suite fully, taking in the scene. Hades was in the kitchen with Eros, both of them moving through the minimal space around the stove in a smooth dance they seemed to have choreographed. Hephaestus, Hestia, Psyche, and Persephone were in the living room, and Ares was on the balcony with Uncle Poseidon and Aunt Amphitrite. It seemed that every month, their family dinners grew bigger, and soon enough, they would need to move it to one of the ballrooms downstairs. Not that Dio was complaining. He loved it.

The elevator doors opened up behind him to reveal Hecate, Charon, and Thanatos, and once again, the twins were running for it. Dio greeted the newcomers with haste before he stepped safely out of the way and into the kitchen, greeting Hades and Eros. He continued his rounds, eventually winding up beside Hephaestus on the couch. He had been to dinner with Heph and Aphrodite just the night before, but he was still excited to see him. He and Heph had grown even closer over the past few months as they worked through their many issues that stemmed from Zeus’s influence together, and Dio found a lot of comfort in his presence.

“Have a good time last night?” Heph questioned nonchalantly.

“It was alright, I guess,” Dio sighed. “And you? I assume you and ‘Dite arrived home to find both of your boys fast asleep like the little blessings they are.”

Hephaestus exhaled heavily, his eyes darting towards the kitchen. “If only. What we arrived home to find was all *three* of them in a brownie-eating contest.”

“I was an unwilling participant!” Eros called out. “They wore me down!”

“You’re the adult!”

“So are you!” Aphrodite injected, leveling her gaze at Hephaestus. “And yet, I seem to recall that just last week—”

“Okay, that was a real-life lesson—”

“You let them goad you into a knife-throwing contest!”

“It wasn’t a contest, and I wasn’t goaded! I was teaching them how to defend themselves!”

“Mhmm, with a pile of drachmae as motivation.”

“It worked!” the twins declared.

“Okay, okay, enough gambling talk,” Hades announced, approaching the table with a pan of thick, grilled meats in his hands. “...For now. Let’s eat.”

No one needed to be told twice, the family making their way towards the table that seemed longer each time Dio saw it. He hung back however, tugging at Heph’s sleeve.

“Where’s Athena?”

“Uncle sent her down to the port for something,” Heph replied. “She should be back any minute.”

Dio only nodded, unwilling to seek out any further disappointment. He took a seat beside Ares. Everyone else purposely avoided the seat on the other side of him, for which he was grateful. He only hoped Athena—

The elevator opened again to reveal the woman herself, windswept and awe-inspiring. She had changed into a lighter blue suit and white sneakers, and her hair was loose around her face, her curls voluminous and dark. He tried not to stare. Or to make any sound at all, for he feared that if he did so, it would give him away. Not that he had anyone left to give himself away to.

Except her of course.

She waved to everyone as she entered, greeting the twins by name when they yelled for her before slipping into the seat beside Dio. They shared a smile as the food was passed around, everyone loading their plates with potatoes, salad, shrimp, tomato fritters, and meats. Hades pulled out all of the stops for their monthly family dinner, the spread he laid out for them more divine than anything the city's most upscale restaurants could provide. The only rule at the dinner table was that work had to wait until after dessert, and although there were some slip-ups —of which the culprits tended to be Athena and Hades, who had put the rule in place to begin with — they did a decent job.

Tonight, Hermes was the only one notably missing because although both Demeter and Hera had been invited on multiple occasions, no one actually expected them to come. From what Hephaestus had told Dio, Hera wouldn't even meet him and Aphrodite for dinner, continually cancelling plans. The only reason she'd even met the twins was because Heph had taken them to see her at work, and while she seemed thrilled, she still wasn't "ready to embrace an entire new family". Hephaestus said she just wasn't ready to face his father.

Even Ares had been consistent with his presence, and he at least acknowledged Hephaestus now. They had seemed to come to some understanding in the past couple of months, but it was evident he still had bitter feelings towards Aphrodite. While Dio of course did not, he could understand his brother's pain. He couldn't imagine what he would do if he had to watch Athena suddenly decide to not only date one of his brothers but to have an entire instant family with him as well. It was a harsh reality to accept.

Still, the twins seemed oblivious to that tension, and Ares was good to them, which was all anyone could truly ask of him. Dionysos hoped Ares found his happy ending someday too. For all of his sharp edges and moments absent of compassion, he was still doing pretty well for being raised by Zeus. They could give him a bit of credit.

After dessert, they stayed talking at the table for awhile longer before Poseidon, Amphitrite, and Hestia decided to call it a night. While everyone was distracted, Dionysos managed to sneak the twins away into the bedroom Hades and Persephone had set up for them on the nights they stayed over in Asphodel. They immediately turned on their game console, debating which game to start with tonight, and Dionysos watched them with raucous laughter. It was a wondrous thing, being an uncle, and the boys seemed to be as enamored with him as he was with them.

“Tell you what,” Dio said, mischief in his voice once Deimos and Phobos decided on a car racing game. “Whoever wins best 2 out of 3 gets all the money in my left pocket and another slice of pie.”

“Deal!” both boys shouted.

Though it wasn't long before the agreement had extended to best of seven, and the boys were casting glances over their shoulder at him as they *lightly* argued over who got the sports car.

“I hope your dad teaches you how to drive better than this in real life,” Dio chuckled.

“He will,” Phobos announced. “He's the best at driving. Better than Mom even. You know, he said Aunt Medusa has a bunch of nice cars, and she's a great driver too.”

“He's right. Did he tell you that she used to race?”

They both glanced over at him, suspicious. “No way.”

“Yes way. I swear it. She was the best ever, and she still holds races, but it's a really exclusive club. She doesn't let just anyone in behind the wheel, you know. Maybe you can ask her when you go see your grandma Hera again.”

“Dad's supposed to take us to see her this weekend,” Phobos said excitedly.

“Yeah, but maybe not now if he has to go with Aunt Athena this week,” Deimos sighed.

Dio perked up. “Leave? Where are they leaving to?”

Deimos shrugged. “I dunno. Aunt Athena has to go somewhere for Uncle Hades, and Dad said he wants to go with her.”

“Yeah, but maybe Uncle Hades won’t let him go.” Phobos sounded hopeful.

Dio was on his feet already, ruffling each of their hair before they batted his hands away. He headed back into the living room where the rest of the adults were already settled, drinking and talking about work without a doubt. Though Dio seemed to have perfect timing because this was the exact conversation he had planned to ask about.

“I’m not sending you out there, Hephaestus,” Hades stated, a finality in his tone that ensured it wasn’t up for debate.

“You just said you don’t want Athena going alone,” Heph pushed anyway. “I can protect her.”

“You can, that’s true, but if you’re the first face they see after everything, they will take it as an insult regardless of the intent. You took down Acrisius, and they hate us for it.”

Dio watched Aphrodite recoil at Heph’s side at the mention of Acrisius, and Heph immediately placed a hand on her thigh.

“These guys weren’t even in power when I took him down.”

“The message still carries. We put their inability to deal with their own criminals on display, and with new leadership, that inability shines as bright as ever. Sending you there, I may as well announce a full-blown occupation.”

“That isn’t the worst idea.”

Hades gave Hephaestus a look, which quieted him. He sat back, Aphrodite wrapping her arms around the one of his still slung across her.

“Besides, we don’t know how long this trip will last,” Hades continued, and Dio tried not to groan. “You need to be here for your boys. Hippocrates said it was crucial that you

keep to a strict routine for at least the first year, and I'm not doing anything to compromise that."

"I'll take Artemis and Nike," Athena told him. "We'll be fine."

"I don't doubt it," Hades continued, "but I would prefer to send two leaders. It signals trust and respect, and given that they now have two leaders, I want to ensure you aren't overwhelmed."

"Why do we want their respect anyway?" Ares growled. "They let that man go free, allowed him to run here and infect our city with his sickness. We should let them live in fear of us every day from here on out."

"That is exactly why *you* can't go, brother," Hephaestus sighed.

Everyone laughed while Ares slumped back in his seat, sucking his teeth.

While Dio may have agreed with Ares to some extent, he fully agreed with Hephaestus. Ares was no diplomat. Of course, Hephaestus wasn't either, but if they were discussing Thassos, tensions were as high as high could get, and if that was the case, Ares could be nowhere near it. They would be at war before nightfall on the day he arrived, and both his and Athena's lives would be hanging in the balance.

"What about Poseidon?" Persephone offered. "Sending your brother would be a huge sign of trust, and he only needs to be seen there. Athena can handle the talking."

"Uncle Poseidon won't go," Heph huffed. "He never stays for shop talk because he doesn't want to be part of the shop talk. That's no accident. That's not to say he's not responsible, but he likes to keep his responsibility to a minimum."

"He doesn't trust himself enough is the issue," Hades agreed. "If I send him, I have to send Amphitrite, and if something goes awry, we cannot have Atlantis off its guard. It's the district closest to Thassos, and that's where they would hit first."

“So then...” Heph began but couldn’t figure out how to finish.

“Hermes?” Ares offered although it seemed more obligatory than anything.

“He won’t be back until the end of the coming week, and we can’t wait,” Hades countered. “They invited us this week, and if we go over that...”

Everyone understood. The ball was completely in Thassos’ court right now. Even if they were the ones who had made the initial mistake.

“I suppose I’ll just have to—”

“I’ll go.”

Dionysos looked around for the speaker. Until he realized everyone was looking at him.

Oh. He’d said it. He’d volunteered.

Ares was the first to react. With a snort.

“No offense, baby brother, but - for what? You can’t drink them under the table and expect them to fall in line. That might work in the clubs, but—”

“That might not be the worst idea,” Hephaestus interjected although Dio was convinced it was just to shut Ares up. But now everyone was looking at *him*, so he went on. “Dio might not have the skillset Athena does, but that’s the point, right? You want someone who can complement her. No offense to you, Athena, but while you’re a great diplomat and the best negotiator we have, your - *bedside manner* could use some work.” Everyone laughed softly. Athena rolled her eyes. “Dio is charismatic, and he’s charming, and he knows how to squash tension, how to make people feel good about themselves. As much as I hate to admit it, we might have to coddle these people a bit if we wish to get anywhere. Plus, he and Athena, they...”

He gestured between them, Dio turning red in the face, but everyone seemed to understand. Everyone except Athena of course.

“We what?” she demanded.

Hephaestus opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Hecate tagged in.

“What he said before. You complement each other. What one lacks, the other provides. Athena is no doubt going to be dealing with men who fancy themselves above all else, and I don’t care who you are, that is frustrating to no end when you’re trying to level the playing field. Dio can diffuse some of the tension, and - he makes you comfortable, doesn’t he?”

Athena deflated some, nodding her head.

“But - it’s only been a few months since the shooting, and ___”

“Eight,” Dio corrected.

He moved further into the living room, coming to a halt beside the couch Athena occupied. He had already stepped into this, and his brother and Hecate had stood up for him. He wasn’t going to be pushed out now. A decent amount of this determination had to do with pride, but there was something else too. This might be the only chance he got to make his family take him seriously, to prove he was just as useful as his brothers, just as worthy. Even if his initial reasoning had been selfish and childish, not wanting to be away from Athena for a prolonged amount of time again so soon, the reasons manifesting now were of a more noble variety. At least he hoped. If he could help her do this, if he could help keep her safe, he would. Plus, Hephaestus was telling the truth, and if he believed in Dio, Dio owed it to his big brother to believe in himself too.

“It’s been eight months,” he went on slowly. “And - you all thought that I didn’t take it seriously, that I didn’t realize I could’ve died in that parking lot, but I did realize it. And none of you could possibly understand what it felt like, because it was just me at the end of it. I was the only one who could save me. I was the one who had to fight on that table because if I didn’t fight, all the healers in the world wouldn’t have been of any use.”

He looked up. No one was looking at him anymore, everyone's eyes on their laps. All except Hades, who could never again look away from the harms he'd caused.

Dionysos continued.

“And - even once I made it, I had nightmares about it for weeks. I was afraid of my own shadow, and I dealt with all of that on my own. I know how close I was, and I know now that I'm not invincible. But I also know that if I can handle that, I can handle anything. I know I can do more than I've been doing, and I know I can handle this. Athena and I talk about this stuff all the time, and I understand it just fine. Plus, I've been to Thassos plenty of times, and I know people there. I can get information Heph can't find in the records. I know how serious this is, to her and to Uncle and to this city. *My* city. So if I can go, if I can help, I will. And I don't need to drink them under the table to do that. I can do anything you all can do. I just need a chance.”

No one seemed prepared to rebuke that. No one seemed to want to either. Ares sat back in his seat, his eyes moving up to Dio again although they were sparked with something strange and unfamiliar. Hephaestus had a look of sheer pride in his eyes, but Hades' and Athena's were filled with pure, unadulterated worry. Before Hades could deliver a verdict, Persephone gripped his shoulder, pulling his gaze to hers.

“He can do it,” she assured him firmly. “If there is anyone in this room that can make miracles happen, it's Dionysos.”

“And if Athena can't do it on her own, a miracle is exactly what we're gonna need,” Heph added.

Hades looked back at Dio who forced his features to remain neutral although he was already wound up, a surplus of energy buzzing beneath his skin. Reluctant as he may have seemed though, Hades at last nodded.

“Is that alright with you?” he asked Athena.

He seemed to catch her off guard, but she quickly recovered, her eyes shifting between him and Dio.

“I - it scares me, taking him into it but not because I don’t think he can handle himself. It’s just because he’s - he’s my best friend.”

Dio sat beside her on the couch. “Yeah, well, imagine how I feel letting you go without me all the time. At least this way, we can look out for each other, right?”

She stared at him, chewing roughly on her lip. Then, after what felt like a century, she nodded.

“Yeah, you’re right,” she exhaled. “Okay, yeah, we can go. We can do it.”

“What about the banquet?” Ares questioned. Dio fought not to roll his eyes. “It’s coming up quick, isn’t it? That’s your favorite event, baby brother.”

“I’ve already mapped out most of it,” Dio replied, trying to keep his cool. “Implementation comes next, but I can’t do much of anything until I have everyone’s permits, so...”

“Aphrodite and I can get them and handle the initial preparations until he gets back,” Hecate offered, Aphrodite nodding in agreement. “We can have end-of-day video call meetings if need be, but we’ve helped him every year, and we know the process. I’m sure we can manage.”

“Plus Hermes will be back by the end of the week, and he and I can help too,” Eros offered. “We’ll be fine.”

“Alright, then it’s settled,” Hades concluded, although it occurred to Dio that his uncle simply wanted the discussion to be over before he changed his own mind. “You’ll leave in two days’ time. You two will take Artemis and Nike, and you will check in with me frequently. If anything feels off, anything at all, you leave right away or you get to the safe house we established. Understood?”

They both nodded, and Hades did the same, signaling that the conversation was closed. Aphrodite and Persephone didn’t hesitate to move onto lighter topics, but now that the focus was no longer pressing in on him, his confidence began to wane. Every doubt, every second guess, every insecurity he

had ever had seemed to bubble up to the surface and spill into his lungs.

What had he done?

“Uncle Dio! Uncle Dio!” Phobos came racing around the corner, breathing heavily. “I won! Where’s my money!”

“What did I say about gambling in your uncle’s house!”

Dionysos only had a split second to hop over the back of the couch before Aphrodite was bolting after him, her shoe in hand.

CHAPTER 3

ATHENA

“Tell me about Nisyros.”

“Oh, they wouldn’t even let me off the docks.”

“That resistant?”

“I believe the message we received was that they were not interested in planting flags because flags drew the wrong kind of attention no matter who it belonged to.”

“Fair enough.” Hades met Athena’s gaze in the full-length mirror before them. “Still, 4 for 6 is a very impressive turnout.”

“Please, Uncle, most of them were a given.”

He gave her a pointed look. “Nothing in this world is a given, and you know that.”

Athena merely hummed, turning her attention back to the suit now draped over her frame.

Arachne’s shop was right on the coast in the southwest end of the River Styx District. It was small and quaint, the interior walls lined with dapper suits and darling dresses, all of which had been made right there in the shop. Everyone in the city knew Arachne, but few could say they were proud patrons of one of their unique creations. And even fewer people could say they were routine customers. However, Arachne’s mother had been designing, sewing, and tailoring Hades’ suits since they were teenagers, and before that, Arachne’s grandfather had done the same for Hades’ father, Aten. Now, Arachne had

taken over the majority of shop duties, and they did work for Hades' entire family, none more so than Athena.

Athena and Hades stood side by side on the sizing floor, Arachne themselves moving around them and measuring limbs and torsos and necks. Hades thought it might be a good idea to take a brand new suit to Thassos, but he also knew a tailoring session would calm Athena's nerves like nothing else. They had found long ago that this was the most effective way to bond, at least for them, and they held to the tradition at least once each season.

But today, this session was as unnerving as it was comforting.

"I had expected you two a bit earlier in the season," Arachne noted as they took in Hades' waistcoat.

They never spoke much, more keen to listen and observe, but they had grown comfortable enough with Hades and Athena that they surprised the two leaders every now and again by initiating conversation. Their dark eyes remained fixed on their work, jet black locks piled atop their head and full of multicolored pins.

"The city's keeping you both busy I guess."

"Like you wouldn't believe," Hades sighed. "Have you given any thought to my offer?"

Arachne snorted, but it was a giddy kind of sound. "Moving the shop into Asphodel? And what, lose the rest of my business?"

"Everyone comes to Asphodel. This will just be another excuse."

"Hm, I'd rather stay on the coast. It keeps me grounded, and besides, this shop has been in my family for ages. My ancestors would come back to haunt me if I abandoned it."

"Now that, I can understand. The offer will remain standing nonetheless."

Arachne moved in front of the two now, their purple-painted lips carved with a smirk against their olive skin.

Despite how often Athena came into this shop, she knew so little of the tailor that knew her body so well. In fact, all she really knew was that no one could compare to the talents Arachne's lineage possessed, and Hades had never even considered stepping foot elsewhere.

"Do you really think Dio can do this?" Athena blurted out as Arachne disappeared into the back of the shop. "I mean, I know he's capable, but I just mean, after..."

She hated to sound like she was doubting him, but more than anything, she was doubting herself. If she failed to keep him safe, she would never be able to live with herself, especially after the initial anger she felt when he'd volunteered. Of course now, all that was left of that anger was guilt. Because in that moment, her only thought had been that he was impeding on her ability to flee from him. And now, her only thought was that she could not lose him.

"I do." Hades didn't hesitate. "It doesn't mean I want him to, but I do believe that Dio is capable of far more than any of us truly know. Besides, he'll be with you, and that's when he's at his best."

There was so much he wasn't saying. She could sense it. In each word that he spoke, evidence of a hundred more he withheld were easily found. Yet even if she knew the right questions to ask, she wasn't sure she would. Some answers were best left undiscovered until it was absolutely necessary.

"He's never done anything like this before," she uttered.

"Perhaps not, but he knows people, and sometimes, that's just as important as knowing strategy, even more so every now and again. Hecate wasn't wrong either. You balance one another out."

"But he's - he's still healing, Uncle."

"He is. And truly, I think more of that day has stayed with him than just the scar tissue, and that there are pieces he doesn't want to admit he's missing. But I saw the look in his eyes last night. Whatever his reasons, he was sure. He was ready, and he wasn't going to be persuaded otherwise."

“I saw it too,” she admitted with a sigh. “I just hope he’s not doing this because he feels he has to prove himself to us.”

“It may very well be, but you and I both know the only person he has to prove anything to is himself.”

Her lips twitched. “You really have a lot of faith in us, Uncle.”

“Well, it’s not without its struggles. If it came between Dionysos and Khaos Falls, Dionysos and anyone, I know who you would choose without a second thought because I would make the same choice.”

She fought off the fear that crept up her throat, suppressing the urge to panic. “I can’t imagine there are many people who wouldn’t make that same choice.”

“True, but not many people have the type of responsibility that we do. If we had to risk everything, it would cost everyone, and we both must be able to live with that reality.”

She was acutely aware of that one fact, more so than he realized. It was why she was asking at all.

“I’ll be honest, Uncle. You’re not really boosting my confidence much right now.”

Hades barked a laugh, clapping a hand on her shoulder. “I’ve got to keep you humble somehow.”

And humbled she was, but that hardly placated any of the many fears and doubts she had woken up with this morning. She couldn’t explain it to him now however. She could not make him understand the turmoil that constantly claimed her mind, threaded with Zeus’s warnings about weakness. She knew he was wrong. Of course he was wrong. But when you are told the same lie your whole life, it starts dressing like the truth, and not even Athena was immune to that type of indoctrination.

And if that wasn’t enough, the evidence she had supplied herself with mere months ago would surely suffice.

She had seen who she could become while Dio was in the hospital. How she had thoughtlessly ran to him every chance

she got, tending to him and looking over him and refusing to leave his side. And all of that care, that compassion, that fear, that need, it had all culminated into a merciless revelation that had taken seconds to manifest but had cost her lifetimes. She had wasted days in that hospital room, days she could have been working, planning, preparing, practicing, anything but what she was doing. All Dionysos had to do to take her off of the board was to exist, and she couldn't afford that, especially when she didn't have the slightest effect on him.

And Hades could never truly understand the effect Dio had on her or how much worse that effect could get. She had to keep him at a distance. She could not let him in any further than she already had. It might just cost them both next time, and it was a cost she could not afford. Certainly not behind enemy lines.



AFTER DEPARTING from Arachne's shop and parting ways with her uncle, Athena made her way to the city security headquarters which was settled in the northwestern corner of the River Styx District. The vast compound had been built with swift deployment but maximum security in mind, meaning although they recognized her, Athena had to formally check into the facility using her personal access code and a fingerprint scan. Nonetheless, it was a smooth process, and she had to give credit where credit was due. Hephaestus had put together something special, and the city was at its absolute best for it.

She found Artemis and Nike down in one of the training rooms sparring, their passionate cries echoing down the halls which ran underground beneath the main floor. Below this was the armory and garage where their vehicles were built and bulletproofed and Heph's creations were mass produced. She remembered taking a tour of the place just as it got underway. It had evolved a lot in the past few months, and soon, there

would be no force in the Aegean that could intimidate them. When that day came, maybe she would know some peace.

Athena stood at the edge of the mat, watching the two women's movements with keen eyes. Artemis' dark brown skin glistened with sweat, her brown eyes blown wide with alarm. Nike's dark black hair was pulled back in a tight bun, her pale skin tinted a bright pink and her molten brown eyes narrowed. They were like fire and water, Artemis' movements fluid and smooth while Nike's were sharp and stinging. They must have been at it for awhile, the exhaustion evident and enduring. It was Artemis who managed to take advantage of it before it took advantage of her, sweeping Nike's legs out from under her with her leg and pinning her to the mat.

"Alright, alright," Nike grunted, tapping the mat with her hand.

Artemis relinquished her hold immediately, standing and helping her comrade up.

"Did you both get my messages?" Athena questioned, drawing their attention.

"Yeah, back on the boat already, huh?" Artemis replied, scooping up two water bottles from the floor and tossing one to Nike, who caught it with ease. "Is it really that bad in Thassos?"

"Worse maybe. Uncle's sending two of us."

"Two leaders?" Athena nodded. "Please don't tell me it's Ares. We'll never make it out of the first meeting."

"Fates, no." Athena shook her head, choking down her emotion. Not that it would matter. "Dionysos is going with us tomorrow."

She watched Artemis and Nike exchange a questioning glance before they turned back to her. She simply waited, crossing her arms over her chest.

"So no more running then," Artemis muttered around the tip of her water bottle, her lips twitching.

“I wasn’t running.” Although Athena knew better to respond.

“And you definitely won’t be now.”

“Was that your idea or Hades’?” Nike asked.

“Dio’s actually. Uncle didn’t want to send Hephaestus or Ares, and Hermes is gone all week.”

“Poseidon?”

“You know he likes to keep to himself, and it wasn’t like I could take Demeter or Nyx, so...”

“So Dio was the last resort?”

She licked her lips. “He shouldn’t have been, but this isn’t usually something he’s eager to volunteer for. My uncle thinks it’s the best plan of action though, and I trust him.”

“And Dio?”

“Do I trust Dio?” A laugh escaped her. “With my life.”

“Yeah, but do you trust yourself *around* Dio?” Artemis clarified. Athena merely bit her lip. “Look, I stand by what I’ve told you a dozen times. You feel how you feel, but you have to accept that and adjust to it because pretending that ain’t the reality is only gonna come back to bite you both in the ass. And I try not to be too pushy, but it’s business now, so...”

“Figure it out before it bites all of us in the ass,” Nike finished.

Athena rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah, I got it.”

“Good,” Artemis huffed. “Now, what are we walking into tomorrow?”

Athena relaxed some. “Tantalos and Amphitryon are Thassos’ new leaders, and they seem to be the freshest kind of meat. No prior experience, no real claim to the position. They saw an opportunity and they took it. From what I’ve gathered, Tantalos seems to do a lot of the talking, and if I’m reading him right, he has the ego. That means Amphitryon is probably the brains.”

“And the final say.”

“Exactly, so the goal is not to let Amphitryon control the conversation. What have you two got on their current security state?”

Artemis collapsed into a chair near the door. “Since Perseus left, a bunch of smaller companies have cropped up but none all that impressive and none signing on with the new leaders in any official capacity. We still have a few teams over there, but they said there’s a whole lot of unrest and not enough incentive to step in. Leadership is painting the place red.”

“These guys are no different than Acrisius or the others that came before them.”

“Explain to me again why your uncle wishes to make peace.”

Athena pinched the bridge of her nose. “If we were to make a move on Thassos, we would most certainly win but then rebuilding it becomes our responsibility.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing.”

“Maybe, but we’re still getting our bearings, and it would look like an ego trip to everyone else in the Aegean, especially when we just spent six months recruiting allies. Then it wouldn’t just be Thassos anymore. We could be at war with other entities before we even knew what was happening. We don’t have enough alliances yet, and I doubt the alliances we do have would be too pleased with us if we incited something like that so soon. It would look like a setup.”

“And he thinks they will give us an alliance after everything that happened with Aphrodite?” Nike scoffed, dropping down to sit on the raised edge of the mat. “They’re too proud. In order to make peace, they would have to admit they made a mistake.”

“Honestly, we just need to make the effort,” Athena answered. “What my uncle wants is a treaty if not an alliance. If they refuse to make peace, so be it, but then we have the

right to defend ourselves by any means necessary if they decide to make the same mistakes.”

Truth be told, Athena still believed that Thassos knew exactly what would happen when they let Acrisius step down from his city leadership position instead of dealing with him properly. He had already established an intricate human trafficking chain throughout the Aegean, and on each stop of her trip the past few weeks, more evidence of his dealings had been uncovered and presented. Evidence she would spring upon Amphitryon and Tantalos if need be. They may not have been the ones to let him go free, but they would be the ones to inherit his sins if they refused to acknowledge the harm. Hades had agreed to the same thing when he had Zeus sent to Naxos. Whatever harm he managed to do there fell upon her uncle. She wondered if he regretted not putting Zeus in a cage under Asphodel instead.

Athena straightened, squaring her shoulders. Now wasn't the time to think about Zeus.

“We leave at dawn. Bring six of your best. They'll remain on the ship, but it's best to have backup and a quick getaway on hand.”

Both Artemis and Nike nodded.

“How long do you think we'll be gone?” Nike questioned.

Athena shrugged. “I'm not sure, but the quicker we handle this, the better.”

The last thing they wanted to do was overstay their welcome.

CHAPTER 4

DIONYSOS

Aphrodite's estate sat on several acres of sprawling green just up the hill from Lush's northern Conch Shell Beach. Despite the age of their friendship, Dionysos hadn't visited the house much due to the fact that Aphrodite spent most of her time at Lush or one of her other establishments. However, now that she and Hephaestus had the twins, they made more of an effort to spend time in the house as it was much more appropriate for two teens than the club.

Currently, they were going over plans for the banquet, ensuring everyone was on the same page by the time Dionysos left the next day. Although they added new activities and themes each year to ensure the excitement never dwindled, much of the foundation was the same, so Dio wasn't at all worried about them taking over. He never would've been able to pull it off his first few years without Aphrodite and Hecate, and there was no one he trusted more to oversee his flagship project.

"So the banquet and festival will take place at Pegasus Park." Hephaestus was staring down at the map of Khaos Falls spread out over the kitchen table, a detailed depiction that allowed them to see the streets and highways as well as landmarks and neighborhoods. "I think we can cordon off the entire block, plus a bit more down Firestone Drive for extra parking and incoming supplies. I can spare fifty or so people for the outer perimeter, but the bulk will be within it. What about the bonfire?"

“That will take place here in my district,” Aphrodite replied, pointing to a strip of beach just west of Lush. “You can use as many of my guards as you need. Several of the pleasure dens will be shut down until it ends, so we’ll have the excess. Oh, Heph, what about Medusa’s car show? I know she talked about doing it in her district because the port is there, but most people will already be in the city, and the Sarpedon District is small.”

“No, I talked to her. She’s meeting with Uncle and Hecate next week, so they can work out how to hold it outside of Asphodel.”

“We have more than enough room,” Hecate assured them. “Plus, it will bring in more traffic for Persephone’s new show later that night.”

“Okay, so the only thing left would be the food and donation drive,” Dio said, more to himself than to them. “If we hold it in Demeter’s district, it might buy us some of her favor for the rest of the year.”

“That depends on how humanitarian she’s feeling,” Hephaestus grunted.

Aphrodite shoved at his shoulder but immediately laid that same hand on the back of his head in a loving pet.

“I’ll talk to her,” she volunteered. “If she doesn’t wanna do it, we can hold it at Twilight House again. Now that we’ve expanded the property, we have more than enough room, and I can ask our current residents if they want to do some day work for a little pocket change on top of their monthlies.”

“Perfect.” Dio grinned. “See, easy stuff as always.”

“Uncle Dio, what is the Blood Moon Banquet?” Phobos questioned.

He sat on the living room couch reading a book, but of course, it did not take much to snatch his attention. Dio recalled how he himself had struggled through his studies as a boy, and even now, extensive focus was not a skill he was capable of mastering even with the herbs he used to help rein

it in. Yet he liked to think he did pretty well for himself, so he didn't worry too much about Phobos.

"It's only the biggest party of the year in all the Aegean," Dio replied coyly, jumping over the back of the couch to sit beside him.

"Party!" Phobos nearly sent his book flying across the room just as Aphrodite and Hephaestus sat across from them, Hecate taking up a chair in the corner. "Do we get to come?"

"Everybody gets to come."

"But you two only get to if you keep up your grades," Hephaestus warned. "And knock off the gambling."

"We don't like the gambling, Dad," Deimos sighed from where he lay on the floor, reading his own book.

"Yeah, we like talking you guys *into* the gambling," Phobos chimed with a smug grin. "You always fall for it too."

Hephaestus narrowed his eyes while Aphrodite tried to hide a smile in her glass. "Not helping your case."

"Just being honest," the twins both muttered.

Dio chuckled, throwing his arm around Phobos' shoulders. Though it was Deimos that urged him on.

"But why is it the Blood Moon Banquet?"

"Well, soon, the northern islands like Khaos Falls get to start working the land again after winter's gone. Some of those islands, like Phokis and Euboea, have really fine, red earth that they have to work extra hard to grow anything in. So when they all start working the land at once, the dust gets into the air, and it turns the moon red for a whole week."

"It can't reach the moon," Phobos shot back with a cheeky grin.

Dio returned it. "No, but we see the moon through that dust in the air, so it looks red. And during that week, we have a lot of festivities, and at the end, we hold a banquet to celebrate our return to the earth."

“Uncle Dio was only a couple years older than you when he started organizing it too,” Hecate pointed out. “He’s the best entertainer around, and you haven’t lived until you’ve been to one of his parties.”

“I could help!” Phobos proclaimed. “I could, Uncle Dio.”

“Good, because your mom and dad and Aunt Hecate are gonna need it while I’m gone.”

Phobos’ face fell. “Where are you going?”

Dio’s eyes cut to Hephaestus who had a tight look on his face. They didn’t like to even mention Thassos or any of that business around the boys for fear it might trigger something.

“On a trip with your Aunt Athena,” Dio said slowly. “We’ll be back before you know it though. Plus, if you do a good job helping, I might bring you something back. No gambling necessary.”

“You ready for this, brother?” Hephaestus asked, and Dionysos could tell he had been holding that question on his tongue for a while. There was nothing accusatory about it. There was only - worry.

Dio glanced at him, his breath caught in his throat. It had been the first time someone had asked since the meeting, and honestly, Dio had been running from that very question for the same amount of time.

“Boys, why don’t you go upstairs and get ready for bed?” Aphrodite immediately said, watching while the twins lazily got up from their spots.

The boys bid each of the adults good night with a hug, the gesture bittersweet for Dio. He’d always been on the other side of goodbyes, waiting for whoever was leaving to come back. He had to admit that this side didn’t feel too great either.

Once the twins had left the room, the others turned back to him. His face burned red with embarrassment, uncertainty crawling up his throat at a sluggish pace.

“It’s okay to be afraid,” Hephaestus offered, his voice soft, soft in a way it had only ever been with Dionysos. At least

until Aphrodite and the twins came along. “It would be worrisome if you weren’t.”

“I just -” Dio wet his lips. “I don’t want to let her down. Or Uncle, or - anyone.”

“He believes in you, Dio, and so do we. He wouldn’t have even entertained you going if he didn’t.”

“But what if it’s misplaced?”

He looked down at his hands, swept up in every emotion he had been hiding from the past day. All the doubt he could not find in himself when he volunteered was spilling over into his lap now, and there was no escape from it. Was spending more time with Athena worth risking her disappointment?

It was more than that though. The longer he thought about it, the clearer it became. It wasn’t just about tagging along with his best friend. Long before Ares opened his mouth in objection, there had been something else, something that antagonized him every time the room was silent and his thoughts had space to breathe. If it were just about Athena, he wouldn’t be so afraid. Nervous, sure. Doubtful, yes. But afraid? Dio had never been afraid of much, even when he should’ve been, because he had always believed himself immortal. If he couldn’t beat them, he could always join them because he had the charm necessary to disarm the most wretched foes. Except one.

“Don’t do this because you think you have something to prove, Dio.” It was Aphrodite, her tone firm. It was like she was reading his thoughts as they manifested. “I know better than anyone that it is not a smart course of action.”

“Nor is it necessary,” Hephaestus added. “You have nothing to prove to anyone.”

“I do,” Dio croaked.

“To who?”

“To me.”

“Dio—”

“You don’t understand. What Zeus did, he didn’t even do it to me. I wasn’t even there in his eyes. He didn’t see me. I wasn’t shot because I was important. I was shot because I was in the way.”

“And you’re angry because you think you weren’t important enough to get shot?”

“No, I—” He balled his hands up into fists, his nails piercing the skin of his palms. “All those things I’d done up until then, they all seemed so minuscule after that. And I’m not saying I think my work isn’t important or that - that people don’t appreciate it, but - you secure the entire city. Aphrodite saves people every day in a million ways. Ares commands hundreds of people. Uncle runs everything, and Athena and Hecate make sure that he can. All of you do all this, and I just - I plan parties.”

“Dionysos, you are the most loved man in this entire city,” Hecate scoffed. “People would do anything for you. Your family would do anything for you.”

“Yeah, including fight. And die. All so I can pretend I’m untouchable. Hephaestus, you have protected me from everything. And if it wasn’t you, it was Uncle or Athena or you, Hecate. Someone was always making sure I was safe in my little sandbox to do as I pleased, and I’m grateful, but I want to help now. And -” He shrugged. “Yeah, I want to prove to Athena that I’m not a distraction, that I don’t just mess around. I want her to take me seriously, and I don’t want her to keep thinking that I can’t do what she needs me to do because I can.”

“I know you can, brother.” Hephaestus huffed, his frustration cresting over his gaze. “Look, I understand, Dio, and I’m not telling you not to go. If you want to do this, you do this, but - all I am asking is that you don’t let this change you into someone you don’t wanna be. You don’t let Zeus win.”

“And I don’t want him to, but - I can never be me again until I know I don’t have to hide behind one of you. I have to know I can do this.”

Hephaestus stood, stalking towards Dio until Dio stood too. Hephaestus pulled him into a hug, and Dio didn't realize just how much he needed it until he had his arms around Heph's shoulders.

"You're the best of us, baby brother," Heph whispered. "Nothing will change that. You make all of us better, and that's more than enough for us."

"Well, maybe it's just time I let you all make me better too."



"NOW THAT YOU all have a drink in hand, let us raise a toast to our humble king, who is in fact here tonight after his way-too-long hiatus! Dionysos!"

The DJ's voice boomed around Perihelion, met with the collective cry of an adoring crowd. Dio waved from the center of the floor where he had been dancing, kissing cheeks and shaking hands before raising his glass. The entire club downed their own alongside him then broke into raucous cheers, crowding around him in a rush of excitement. This was Ganymede's idea of a going-away party, and although he was the only one in the club that could know Dio was going away, Dio appreciated it nonetheless. He needed to take the edge off.

The absence of both Market District leaders had been an unfortunate afterthought, but by the time Hades had visited it, it was too late to change course, so Gany had been primed for interim leadership with Hecate and Thanatos to aid. He had been working for Dio and Hermes ever since Zeus had been exiled from the city eight months ago, which had of course led to the strengthening of his longtime friendship with Dionysos. Second only to Athena, Gany was Dio's closest friend. He was the one Dio did things with that he couldn't do with Athena. And the one he talked to about the things he couldn't talk to Athena about. Like, for instance, Athena herself.

Tonight however, Dio was trying to do anything but.

He made his way back to his corner booth, sliding in beside Ganymede. Dio watched him refill both of their glasses before extracting a joint from his pocket and lighting it. As he exhaled a cloud of smoke, Dio downed his drink and poured himself another one.

“Nerves?” Gany asked.

“Of a sort.”

Gany passed him the joint. “Don’t you think it would be easier to tell Athena how you feel than to tag along on her business trip?”

“That’s not what I’m doing.”

He took a long drag, allowing his lungs to expand to capacity as his eyes roamed the club.

Perihelion had been a joint venture between him and Aphrodite, your typical bar on the main floor, themed playrooms on the basement floor below, and other group and private rooms in the two floors above. The cylindrical building sat on the border of the Lush and Market Districts, banners depicting both Dio’s insignia and Aphrodite’s alternating along the walls around them. It was more low-key than many of their other establishments, clothing optional and safety ensured. Any other night, Dio wouldn’t have made it beyond the threshold before he’d stripped down to nothing, but tonight, he had yet to feel the need.

He held the smoke for several seconds then blew out, taking a swig of his drink to soothe his throat.

“And anyway, Athena and my uncle wouldn’t just let me tag along.”

“Well, no, of course not, but - do you actually wanna go?”

“So you don’t think I can do this?” Dio’s tone was somber.

“Don’t put words in my mouth.” Ganymede pushed his wavy, dark hair back from his face. “Of course you can, Dio, and you will, but are you really going on this trip because you wanna sit in stuffy meetings with diplomats all day?”

“I’ll never know until I try, will I? Besides, I back out now, and my uncle will never assign me an important task again.”

“Are you kidding? The banquet is the most important task of the year. You know how quickly Khaos Falls would go bankrupt if it tanked? You run the whole world, D.”

“Yeah, well if this is how running the world feels, I’d rather not.”

Gany turned in his seat to face him, but Dio kept his eyes forward. “Look, all I’m saying is that you are good, Dio. Exactly the way that you are. The city loves you, and none of that love is unearned or unwarranted.”

Dio said nothing although he heard every word. It was nothing he hadn’t heard before though. Hephaestus had said much of the same thing, and while he understood their concern, he wasn’t prepared to explain at length why he felt he had to do this or when he started feeling so strongly about it. The point is he would be on that ship tomorrow, and there was no changing his mind.

As he filled up his glass again, his phone began to buzz in his pocket. He knew by the pattern that it was his personal phone rather than his work phone, meaning it could only be one of a select few people. Extracting it from his pocket, he suppressed a smile as Athena stared back at him from the screen. Then he quickly scrambled out of the booth, ignoring the questions Gany was launching at his back and slipping into one of the service halls off of the main floor.

“Hey,” he greeted once he managed to get the phone against his ear. “Sorry, I was - trying to get somewhere quiet.”

Not that the difference was entirely optimal. The bass still shook the walls around him, muffled music pressing in through the cracks of the door. He turned his back on it, walking deeper into the hall.

“Oh, are you - out?”

Her voice sounded odd, almost strained in a way, but he wasn’t sure how to interpret it.

“Uh, yeah, with Gany,” he answered cautiously. “He just wanted to spend a couple hours together before I left, you know.”

“You sure you’re gonna be able to manage without him for awhile?”

Dio shrugged. “I mean, I’ve managed without you, and no offense to him, but that’s much harder. So if I had to pick between the two...”

She was silent for a few moments. He bit his tongue. “Dio, you’re not going just because we’d be apart, are you? I mean, you—”

He laughed, perhaps too hard, too loud. “I wish people would stop accusing me of that really.”

“I’m - I’m not accusing you of anything. I’m just asking.”

“Is it a benefit of going on this trip? Yeah, but I wanted to help you, and I know I can do that. I know I’ve never shown it or done the things you all have, but I *can* do it.”

She sighed. “I’m not saying you can’t, Dio. I would never say that, and if I honestly believed you couldn’t, I wouldn’t care what Uncle said. I wouldn’t let you go. I just -”

“You’re worried, and you wanna make sure I’m not forcing myself to go or doing it because I think I have to prove myself or whatever else Hephaestus and Aphrodite and Gany and Hecate think I’m doing it for. I get it.”

He leaned against the wall, scrubbing a hand over his face. For somebody everyone swore they believed in, they sure did question him a lot. And with every question, they seemed to water that seed of doubt planted in the pit of his stomach, but he wasn’t sure he could do a thing about it.

“We’re leaving first thing in the morning,” she continued, her voice low and slow. “Just please don’t be late. We need to meet with our scouts before we meet with leadership the morning after. I don’t want any surprises.”

“Okay, I’ll be there first thing in the morning.”

“At Harvest Port.”

He shut his eyes. “At Harvest Port.”

“Okay, good night.”

“Good—”

She had already hung up. It was the first time he truly considered changing his mind.

Pocketing his phone, he returned to the club, a sudden exhaustion sinking into his bones. He reached the table where Gany sat and let him know he was heading home to get some rest before tomorrow. While it was still early in the evening for them, the last thing Dio needed was to sleep in and arrive late to the port. Whatever had been in Athena’s voice tonight, he didn’t wish to hear again, and he certainly did not wish to summon her wrath. He had gone their entire friendship without doing so, and he wasn’t about to break the streak now. It was best he call it a night and, at the very least, ensure he was prepared for tomorrow.

Gany of course tried to talk him into staying, but Dio held his ground, downing one last drink before making his way out the back entrance. Stepping out into the cool night air, remnants of winter on the breeze, he shivered even as his shirt stuck to his sweat-slick skin. The lower level of the parking garage was quiet, and as Dio opened the personal garage embedded in the back wall, he cringed at just how loud the door echoed throughout the cavernous space. He quickly climbed inside of his car, hitting his home address on the automatic-driver navigation system and sitting back as the car pulled out of the lot and headed for the vineyard.

While it would have made more sense to go to the eastern vineyard as it was closest to the port, Dio had always been most comfortable at the Market District Vineyard loft. And right now, what he needed above all else was comfort. Comfort and quiet.

Though when he arrived at the winery, he was surprised to find another vehicle already parked out front. He recognized it of course, and he bit his lip as his car halted alongside it.

As he got out, the other car's door opened, and Dio's eyes were immediately drawn over the roof of his car to drink in loose curls and bright brown eyes. His breathing slowed.

"How long have you been out here?"

Ariadne met him in the wash of the headlights. "Only about twenty minutes. I was just about to leave."

He smirked. "Were you?"

She shrugged. "Guess we'll never know."

Of course she would come here tonight. Temptation was now on his doorstep, peering through the windows, and he couldn't answer the door, not tonight. No matter how badly he wanted to.

"Actually, I've gotta turn it in," he managed, clearing his throat. "I've got an early morning, and there is no negotiating it. I've got things to do for my uncle."

She stepped closer. "You're telling me I drove all this way - for nothing?"

Dio licked his lips. It was a bad idea. For a number of reasons, and not just because he had to be up at dawn. At the forefront, it was unfair to Ariadne. Every time they did this, it was unfair to Ariadne. When they started hooking up again a few months ago, it had been for all the wrong reasons, and Gany had warned him on multiple occasions that she still had feelings for him. And it wasn't that Dio felt nothing for her. He still cared about her. She was a good woman with a good heart and a great sense of humor, and they used to stay up talking for hours about anything and everything. Plus, the sex was amazing. In fact, she would be perfect if not for one thing and one thing alone. She wasn't Athena.

But she looked like Athena, and when Athena started spending more time away from him, from the city, that had been enough. Dio had taken what he could get after all those long days and late nights spent spoiled in the hospital. He had already been in love with her by then of course, those seeds planted long ago, but the more time Athena had spent at his side during his healing period, the deeper those roots had

reached until nothing else would do. But with the lights off, he could pretend with Ariadne, and she had yet to ask anything more of him.

It still felt wrong every time he gave in though.

“Come on,” she cooed, pulling him closer as she stepped back toward her car. “We don’t even have to go inside.”

And despite all those thoughts confronting him now, he was losing the flimsy hold on his control. He knew she could see that whether she understood his ordeal or not.

“You want it that bad?” His voice sounded more gruff than he meant it to, the words more goading than questioning.

“Yes,” she whimpered. “That bad.”

She pulled him down into a kiss fueled by nothing but unbridled lust, her tongue probing his mouth and her fingers knotting in his hair. And the moment he closed his eyes, every ounce of resistance went out the window. The fantasy slotted into place, his body melding into hers and his hands gripping her hips with a possessive pressure.

He yanked up her dress, bunching it around her waist before his hands slid around to squeeze her ass. She reached between them, shoving his pants down and taking hold of his cock, stroking it until it was solid in her hand. He kept his eyes closed as he pulled back enough to grab her by the shoulders and spin her around. She gasped, her hands slapping against the hood of her car, and it morphed into a whine as he pulled her panties to the side and pushed his cock into her slick pussy.

He knew everything about her body that he needed to in order to have her crumbling as quickly as he desired, and tonight, he desired to do it as quickly as possible. Though no matter how quick it was, all he could think about was Athena and the fact they would be attached at the hip for at least the next week. But he also thought about the fact that despite this, no matter how close they were, he could never get *this* close to her, this *deep*, and thinking this one quick romp with Ariadne would rid his system of that need was as foolish as it was futile.

He could face that later.

Right now, all that frustration, that disappointment, that anxiety was cast aside. Or at the very least blanketed by a diluted brand of lust. Tangling one hand in Ariadne's hair, the other took her hip in a bruising hold as his stroke grew rougher.

And if he kept his eyes close, he could pretend all he needed to.

“Dio!”

He growled, tightening the hand in her hair and yanking back on it. He sped up, stroking deeper and harder into her until his knees were banging against the front grill hard enough to dent it if this went on too long. She was all but sobbing, clawing at the cherry red paint as she sung her praises for him. He pressed her firmly into the hood, her entire upper body imprinted upon it like a mural he could hang among his memories. Then, without warning, every inch of her went rigid until she was convulsing, the vibrations echoing in the metal. Her legs shook so hard that her feet came off the ground, kicking at the air on either side of him. Her sounds were strained, strangled by the orgasm itself as she came hard enough to coat his lower abdomen with her offering.

He hardly noticed.

He leaned forward, forearm against her back to keep her down as conscious thought became a lost art and hunger took hold of him. With every sharp thrust, each more forceful than the last, he was so close to feeding it. So fucking close...

“Athena! —Fuck!”

It shook the trees lining the driveway, scandalizing the dark eyes of the winery that looked down upon them. It rang between him and Ariadne like a bell before he collapsed atop her, drawing in deep breaths and the scent of his lover that reminded him who she was *not*.

After several moments of silence, he pushed himself up, taking a step back and pulling up his pants. Ariadne rose on trembling arms, and once she was upright, she fixed her

clothes and smoothed out her dress. When she turned to him, the tension grew thicker than it had been before they started.

“I can’t believe it took me this long to figure it out,” she stated, her tone matter-of-fact.

“What are you talking about?”

She gave him an unimpressed look.

“I mean I had a hunch, especially after seeing you two in the hospital the couple times I visited, but you would think I would’ve known then. How could I not? She was the only one who ever came before me when we were together, the only one I could never match up to.”

“Ari...”

“I do look like her a bit, don’t I? You’ve got good taste.” She smirked at him, which kept him quiet. “And I know she’s why you broke up with me, but - is that why you dated me in the first place too?”

He immediately shook his head. “No. I mean, maybe you caught my eye because of that, but it wasn’t - a conscious thing, and once we got to know each other, I really loved spending time with you. We had a lot in common, you know? My feelings for you were - *are* real, and I care about you. Which is why I called it off when I realized I wasn’t over her. Or that it wasn’t just a crush or some - physical thing I’d eventually lose interest in. When I realized I loved her, like *really* loved her, I ended it because you deserved better. And I’m sorry if I’ve given you the wrong idea—”

She shook her head quickly, cutting him off. “You didn’t. I knew it was someone else, and I knew nothing had changed when we started messing around again. I mean, like I said, I saw you two in the hospital, and I think I knew then, but - I still couldn’t stop myself from taking what I could get.”

He smiled. “Me either.”

They stared at one another as a silence settled, Dio unsure of what else to say. She reached up, pushing a hand through his curls with a small smile. He didn’t close his eyes this time.

“She’s lucky,” she whispered. “Don’t let yourself stand in the way of letting her see that, Dionysos.”

He chuckled. “Oh, I don’t think it’s up to me to—“

“Please. When I said I saw the *two* of you, that’s what I meant. If you honestly think it’s one-sided, you haven’t been paying attention.”

She patted his cheek before turning and rounding the car to the driver door, opening it and disappearing inside. He watched her back out and drive off, her words on repeat in his head.

But no, she must have been mistaken because while he may have found a way to rope Athena into being his friend, not even he, at his most charming, could have tricked her into loving him the way he loved her.

CHAPTER 5

ATHENA

He was late.

Of course he was late. Why wouldn't he be late?

Athena paced the dock, her face set with indignation, the ticking of her watch growing steadily louder above the bustle of the port. They were set to leave at dawn, but the sun had already hoisted itself over the horizon, and now it stared back at her, taunting her and testing her patience. As if she had much to begin with this morning.

She had awoken with this frustration fidgeting beneath the skin, unsure where it stemmed from beyond a very long night with very little sleep. She tossed and turned for most of it, fraught with tumultuous worries that left her gasping for air until she at last gave up and instead prepared for her departure. Dionysos had not been plagued by such worries of course. She knew this because when she had called him, he was out with Gany, doing what he was always doing. Soaking up alcohol and admiration. It was the first time she'd questioned his motives for volunteering. It also reminded her just how nonchalant he'd been since their moments in the hospital, how easily he'd returned to his routine activities while she left the city, unfazed by the hours that had changed her in irrevocable ways.

Damn him.

"I'll call him," Artemis offered.

However, before she could complete that call, a dark car rolled up at the top of the ramp leading down onto the dock,

and out of the backseat stumbled Dionysos. Dark shades covered his eyes, the shadows of his unshaved face evident in the light, but his baby blue polo was freshly pressed and his curls were perfectly sculpted atop his head. He looked - put together enough. Her eyes darted back to that shadow, shaped around his full lips, pillow soft and perfectly pink and—

“Sorry!” He was closer now than she realized, a sheepish grin on his face. “A bit of car trouble back at the house. I—”

“Are you sure? Or did you just sleep in after you got drunk last night?”

Dio’s entire demeanor changed, shifting into softer edges and a cautious expression. Athena hadn’t even realized she’d spoken until the words rang back at her, but by then, that unhinged anger had overflowed, and it was impossible to stop when she had no clue what the source of it was. So she leaned into it instead.

“Athena, I—”

“Dionysos, I gave you one single order. We leave at dawn. Fates, we haven’t even left the city yet, and already, this is what we’re gonna deal with?”

He removed his sunglasses, but she looked away.

“Athena, I - I didn’t - I wasn’t sleep—”

“Look, Dio, just - maybe it’s best if you stay. I know you volunteered, and it was really good of you, but you don’t have to do this. I’ll just tell Uncle I wanted to do this on my own. It’s okay. We don’t—”

“Athena, no.”

The tremble in his voice drew her eyes up to meet his, and the moment they did, she wished they hadn’t.

There was panic there, painted over a base coat of confusion, and a chill ran through her. He shook his head, breaking eye contact.

“I didn’t sleep in.” She could tell he was trying to be assertive, but the edges of his words were frayed and feeble, which was worse. “I swear the first car wouldn’t start, and -

and I was gonna call, but I forgot once we got going, and I just wanted to make it here. I - It wasn't— I went home right after you called me, I swear. I swear I - I didn't sleep in. I didn't."

She hated herself. No matter how hard she tried to cast blame on him, it continued to rebound and hit her square in the chest. He couldn't hold this control over her so easily. She wouldn't allow it.

"Do you really think you can do thi—"

"Yes." It was as though he had anticipated the question, his eyes back on her. "I can. I know I can. I'm - I'm not gonna fuck this up."

"Dio, this isn't a game. You understand that? Mistakes are crucial."

"I know that. I know, and I'm not gonna make any more. I swear it."

She stared at him, long and hard, well aware of Artemis's eyes on the back of her neck. What could she truly do to keep him here? And would the repercussions of that be worth it? She reminded herself that she was not the one who made the final decision here. Hades had already done that. She need only respect it.

"Get loaded up," she said shortly. "We have to get out of here now."

Dio didn't say another word, instead adjusting the strap of his bag on his shoulder and rushing past her up the ship's ramp. The moment he disappeared from view, guilt overtook her like a tidal wave, leaving her cold in its wake. Swallowing hard, she proceeded up the ramp, Artemis falling in step behind her.

Nike awaited them, and once Athena nodded to her, she alerted the captain via radio that they were ready to depart. Athena stationed herself against the railing furthest from the port, staring out into the crisp blue sea. She gripped the metal with both hands, tightening them until her knuckles had turned as white as they possibly could. She inhaled deeply, the ocean air filling her lungs, but it failed to calm her nerves.

It was an odd feeling that settled in the pit of her belly. Usually, the worst part of leaving Khaos Falls was saying goodbye to Dionysos. For the past few months, it was the main reason for leaving. Now, those opposing emotions clashed like two speeding trains entering either side of her ribcage, and all she could do was brace herself. She should be happy he was there, and yet, she was anything but. Because she had been running, not from him per se but from the way he made her feel, and if she was forced to face that on what might be the most important trip of the year, she wasn't sure what kind of success they could possibly expect.

"Don't worry," Artemis said from behind her. "He admires you too much to let you down twice."

Yet that was the problem. She wasn't sure it was Dio that was letting her down at the moment. She was more frustrated with herself.

"You were right," Athena croaked, leaning over the railing. "I should've stuck by what I said. I should've been honest with him, told him I couldn't do this with him here."

"First of all, I only asked if you trusted yourself around him." Artemis stepped up beside her, placing her forearms atop the rail. "So I'm not right about anything except that it was a valid question to ask. You said you could, and I know that you can, so if I encouraged otherwise, I was actually completely wrong."

"But I - I *can't* talk about my feelings with him, not now. Especially when I know how foolish it'll sound."

"And how the Fates do you know that?"

"Because it's - Dio!" She hissed his name like a curse, eyes wide as she turned them on Artemis.

Artemis gave her an expectant look. "And?"

Athena huffed. "And I can't just tell him about my feelings for the sake of telling him. I'm sorry, but of all my strengths, divulging that kind of information as if it's intel is not one of them."

Artemis was quiet for a beat. Then another. Then, “For being as smart as you are, Athena, you can be really fucking dense sometimes.”

“Excuse me?”

Artemis put up her hands in surrender. “Look, it doesn’t matter. What does matter is that you stop looking at him as a weakness for the duration of this trip at the very least. Hades did not let him come on this trip because he thinks Dio is a weakness to you, so I need you to ask yourself why, and then I need you to trust whatever reason you find.”

“My uncle says he brings out the best in me.”

“Okay, so trust in that.”

“But I—“

“No.” Her hand sliced through the air between them. “You’re still living by Zeus’s rules, holding yourself to his expectations. You think you wasted your time looking after Dio in that hospital, but ask Dio if you wasted time. Ask your uncle or Hephaestus or anyone who cares at all about that boy. He was everyone’s priority, but only you could do for him what he needed done.”

“And what is that?”

“A reason.”

Athena shook her head. “Please.”

“Athena, don’t let this be some self-fulfilling prophecy. You aren’t weak, and no one can change that unless you let them. Zeus would let you believe that loving anyone but yourself is some sort of downfall, but look where he is. And look where you are. Your uncle took over this city not because he wanted the power but because he wanted better for his family. Is that not proof enough?”

“I know that, and I hear you, but - I’m not like that. I’m not like him.”

“Then be like Zeus if you want, but if you think that will fix all of your problems, I’m sorry to say that it won’t. If you don’t wanna believe me, fine, but just remember what that

means for your family, for Dio. And if losing him is better than loving him, he *still* deserves to know.”

She patted Athena’s shoulder before walking off, the ship lurching as it was freed from the city’s grasp.

ATHENA TOOK her breakfast and lunch in her cabin, going over information she had been through at least a dozen times now. It was easier to focus on files and documentation than to focus on literally anything else though, and it brought her back to center quicker than anything else these days. Though if she wasn’t worrying about what she would say to Dionysos the next time she saw him, she was worrying about what she would say to Thassos’ new leadership body when she was faced with them come the following morning.

Hades had warned her how difficult this would be in every way he could, and even when she had assured him each and every time, she knew he wouldn’t bother if he didn’t anticipate an issue. He had sent her to some of the most foreign and isolated islands in the Aegean without hesitation, but Thassos was as unstable as a civilization came. They were a deep wound in the flesh of Greece, and patching it up would take far more than tender love and care.

If it were up to Athena, they would just cut off the infected limb and let it fester in a controlled environment. If it were up to Ares, they would burn that limb to ash, and she wouldn’t be so quick to stop them. But it was up to neither of them, and so they had to go along with Hades’ search for peace.

When she could no longer make sense of the words she was reading, she resigned herself to the fact that she would have to speak to Dionysos eventually. They couldn’t walk into Thassos a divided front. These new guys would tear them apart, and it would reflect directly on Hades.

Pouring herself a glass of wine, she took a long drink, shutting her eyes and savoring the taste. Pear. She remembered the first time Dio had come up with the flavor, making all of them try it before he sent it into mass production. It had always been one of her favorites, and only then did she realize

that there was always some in her cabin when she left the city, no matter which ship she took. She smiled to herself.

Setting her glass down, she exited her room, moving down the hall towards Dionysos' cabin at the end. However, she was only halfway there when she heard his voice coming from the corridor to her left, which branched off the main one and led to the dining hall among other areas. She followed his voice, which grew louder and more excited the closer she got.

She was expecting to find him in the dining cabin where the bar was stationed, but no. He was in the radio room, and although the door was closed, she could hear him clearly once she was close enough. She could see him too, the door flanked by two windows in place of the walls that lined the rest of the corridor. He was pacing in front of the long table that sat against the back wall, the radio receiver in his hand.

“Okay, explain it to me again, will you?” he groaned, bowing his head and rubbing his eyes.

Another sigh echoed inside the room, this time from the radio. Athena recognized it instantly. It was Hephaestus.

“Tantalos is the chaos, and Amphitryon is the calculation.” Hephaestus enunciated each and every word. “Tantalos bought out and shut down a lot of the businesses in the city, rebranding the whole place as his own. Amphitryon is more focused on foreign imports and exports. He's trying to revive Thassos' dead trade relations.”

“And the vineyards? They still have vineyards there, right?”

Hephaestus paused. “Well, yeah, but they've downsized a lot, and Amphitryon oversees the production stages while Tantalos oversees the marketing and shit. No exports right now because most islands buy exclusively from us, and those islands aren't willing to pay twice the price for half the quality.”

“That's good news, I guess.”

“So don't even worry about that, brother. In fact, you don't really have to worry about any of this. Just let Athena do the

talking, and you back her up.”

“Yeah, that’s all fine and well, but it wouldn’t look very good on her if one of them asks me a question, and I can’t answer it, will it?”

“I guess not, but I don’t think you have to know every little thing about them.”

“Heph, I don’t want to look like an idiot, alright? It will make her look bad, it will make Uncle look bad, and it might offend these guys if they think Uncle sent some - disposable dumbass along.”

“You’re not disposable, Brother.”

Dio huffed, halting his pacing. “*They* don’t know that!”

But the moment the words left his lips, he seemed to deflate, his voice growing softer, so soft that Athena had to strain to hear what he said next.

“—and - even if I do, I don’t wanna feel like one, so please, Brother. Just - help me out here.”

Athena took a step back from the window, unsure whether to turn around and go back to her room or just wait. She didn’t want him to think she was spying on him, and taking in the look on his face at the moment, she already felt guilty enough.

“Dio, relax,” Heph said. “You’re gonna be fine.”

“If I fuck this up, I don’t -” He stopped himself, inclining his head and staring up at the ceiling. “She didn’t want me to come, you know.”

Athena recoiled.

“Neither did Ares if you recall.”

“Yeah, but I don’t care what Ares thinks.”

“You forget that the entire world is on her shoulders every time she has to take one of these meetings. It’s not about you, Dio.”

“Yeah, but even before. It’s been different since... Well, for awhile.”

“But that isn’t really something you can deal with right now, is it? You’re there for business, and—”

“Yeah, I get that, Hephaestus, but if she doesn’t even want me here, how am I supposed to help? How can I be of any use when she doesn’t even think I can be?”

“Now we both know that isn’t true, Dio.”

Dio sighed. “Look, maybe all of you were right, okay? There, I said it. Maybe I should’ve stayed home.”

There was a pause, and then, “Brother. Listen to me. You have a very specific purpose, and that purpose is the one you have had your whole life.”

“Yeah, the comedic relief.”

“No. You are the guy that steps in when nothing else works, when it all seems hopeless, and everyone is ready to call it quits. You’re the guy that makes something out of nothing. You always have been, so I don’t wanna hear about ‘disposable’, not about you, not ever again. Because this city would fall apart without you, Dionysos. This *family* wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you. And if two leaders whose reign is younger than the wine in your cellar— ”

“Well, most people are younger than the wine in my cellar. I keep—“

“Shut the fuck up, Brother.”

“...Fine.”

“My point is that they are nothing but another business deal, alright? Sell them whatever you want, but remember. At the end of the day, you’re a district leader in one of the most powerful cities in the Aegean, and not by birthright. Not by Uncle’s sheer generosity. Your people love you because you’re good at what you do. So just do it.”

Dio raised the radio to his lips but didn’t press the button. Eventually, Heph spoke again, and for a moment, Athena wished he were here right now instead of her.

“Now go get some rest or something. Once you step foot in Thassos, you have to be on your best behavior.”

Dio rolled his eyes. “Yes, I am aware.”

“I’m not lecturing you or anything, Brother. We aren’t at fault here, but Uncle wants us to play ball, so we have to do that. Or at least try. If it were up to me, we’d just - cut ‘em off and forget the whole island exists.”

“We can’t do that,” Dio snapped back quickly, taking Athena by surprise. “The leadership is awful, and their brand of justice isn’t justice, but there are people there, Heph. Just like there are people in Khaos Falls. Thassos has its own Dionysos. And it’s own Aphrodite and Deimos and Phobos. They don’t run the city, but they’re there, and we can’t give up on them.”

Athena bit down on her tongue. Admittedly, she had never considered that, the people who suffered under poor leadership. Hades probably had. He’d probably anticipated the struggle of establishing an alliance, the inevitable need to do it again once new leadership came along, and the resistance they would always be met with. But Hades cared about people. More than anything, he cared about *his* people, and he would do anything to ensure their safety. Whereas Zeus certainly would have cut off the limb.

She may not have been enough like Hades, but after what Artemis said, she realized she didn’t want to be anything like Zeus either.

“You’re right,” Hephaestus agreed. “You’re right, Brother, we can’t abandon them, but we also can’t save them all on this one trip, so stick to the plan, and once we can give both sides some peace, maybe they’ll accept our help, okay?”

“Okay. Alright, I’ll stick to the plan.”

“Good. Now call me once you get there. I should be home by then so the boys can say hi.”

“Alright, will do. I love you.”

“I love you too, Brother.”

Dio set the receiver back in its holster on the side of the radio, and Athena moved out of view. Only then did she

register how fast her heart was beating, sweat collecting on the back of her neck.

With a deep breath, she counted to ten then walked up to the door again, knocking softly. Dionysos whipped around, his eyes wide as he took her in. She waved bashfully before he rushed forth, pulling the door open.

“Sorry, hi,” he breathed out, stepping aside to allow her access. “I, um, I was talking to Hephaestus. I’m - I’m done now though if you needed the radio.”

“No, no, it’s okay.” She walked completely into the room before she turned around to face him. “I actually came to talk to you.”

His face fell just enough for her to notice it. “Oh, okay, yeah. Sure.”

He leaned against the table beside the radio, gripping the edge on either side of him. She stood in the center of the floor, crossing her arms over her chest. He seemed to be shrinking in on himself, which was difficult to do when he was so large. Since they were kids, he was like some friendly giant who was soft as a teddy bear and twice as comforting. Fates, could anyone blame her for loving him?

Then again, the only one who blamed her was her.

“I’m sorry for getting on your case this morning,” she said.

“Oh, it’s alright,” he immediately replied. “I should have called or texted or something. It was my fault.”

“No, I had no right to accuse you without letting you explain. I could’ve just asked. Instead, I had already made up my mind about what had happened, and that wasn’t fair to you at all. All the things I said, the questioning, I shouldn’t have done that. Especially not out in the open.”

He looked down at his feet, and she could tell he was warring with something. Then, “Is that what you think of me? That I’m just - a drunk?”

She shook her head. “Of course not, Dionysos, that’s not what I think of you. I think the whole world of you, and I

shouldn't have said that. I was upset and angry, and I took it out on you."

"But you were angry because I came. You didn't want me to."

"You're right. I didn't, but again, it isn't because I don't think you can handle it. It's because I don't think *I* can handle it."

He looked up now, and all the momentum she'd picked up died beneath her feet. She wasn't certain she had meant to be so honest, but he made her want to be. He deserved as much. However, he wanted an explanation, and a thorough explanation required an autopsy. *Her* autopsy. Right here in the middle of this room. And she simply wasn't sharp enough yet. She wasn't ready to bare herself to the world, so she gave him what pieces she could spare at the moment.

"I - you're my best friend," she attempted, waving her hands about. "I don't want anything to happen to you, especially not with me, because I will never forgive myself."

She could *feel* him deflate again, but it was the best she could do right now. Or ever.

"You don't have to worry about me, Athena." His voice was hollow. "I'm a big boy. I know I might not act like it all the time, but I can take care of myself. Besides, you taught me a lot. I'll be alright."

She nodded her head, more so because if they didn't close this conversation soon, she might fall apart. "I know that, and I believe in you. I just - I'll always worry."

"Me too."

Before she could decide what more to say, he had his arms around her, and her body betrayed her before her mind could catch up. She melted into him, wrapping her arms around his waist and allowing herself this moment. If anyone had the right to be worried, it was him. She was always gone, always running away, always walking into harm with her head held high. But he had simply stumbled upon it, and so which was worse?

Maybe it didn't have to be a competition.

CHAPTER 6

DIONYSOS

The bungalow that Thassos' welcoming party had arranged for them during their stay in the city was comfortable and quaint, close enough to the port for a quick getaway and far enough inland for the sounds of the city to creep through an open window. Dionysos had personally been on Athena's side when she insisted they could spend their nights aboard the ship, but Tantalos' messengers had been adamant about the relocation. Naturally, that made Athena more suspicious, but after Artemis and Nike did their sweep of the place and assured her there was nothing immediately untoward, she had begrudgingly agreed.

They were supposed to meet leadership first thing that morning, but the welcoming party had also informed them that both Amphitryon and Tantalos were indisposed until noon, thus moving the meeting to dinnertime. Dionysos could tell right away that it unnerved Athena. He struggled with change as well, but for her, change was more of a physical blow that knocked her off balance. In an attempt to assuage her concern, he had rushed down to the local market for ingredients then returned and immediately busied himself in the small kitchen with a hearty brunch featuring all of her favorites.

It wasn't often that he cooked, but it was one of the first skills Hades had gifted him with when he was younger. That was how they had begun bonding in the first place, the one thing Hades felt comfortable connecting through when he was just as new to being a guardian as Dionysos was to having a father figure. He and Semele had cooked together too, but their dishes were more simple because she had to work as

well, often getting home much later than she intended. Plus, they had survived on the bare minimum for the most part. She had grown most of their vegetables, and twice a year, they hunted for their own meat. Khaos Falls wasn't really a place where Dionysos could carry on such a tradition as they lacked the abundance in wildlife, but he remembered it fondly all the same.

Once he'd finished setting the table, he made his way down the narrow hallway to Athena's bedroom. He knocked twice, waiting patiently for a response. He heard a chair scrape across the floor, no doubt away from the desk, and then soft footsteps on the hardwood. The door opened, and despite being prepared for her, Dionysos still managed to lose his breath. Her thick curls were pulled back hastily from her face, her reading glasses perched at the edge of her nose. She was over a foot shorter than him, but that was easy to overlook. An unstoppable force *and* an immovable object, Athena wasn't someone to underestimate. It was the first thing he learned about her.

"Oh, I was just coming to look for you," she said almost breathlessly, pulling him out of his head.

"Really? Um, well, I - I made breakfast."

"Did you?"

Almost on cue, the rumble of her stomach sounded between them. He smirked as the light brown skin of her cheeks took on a generous red undertone.

"I did. With your favorites."

"Thank you, but um, first. Come here."

She took his hand, pulling him into the room and shutting the door. He wasn't sure what to expect, but the nervous energy that descended upon him was instantaneous. The room felt hotter than any other space in the house. And once inside, she gestured to her bed. Or rather, the garment bag on her bed.

Releasing his hand, she unzipped the bag, revealing a charcoal grey suit, a grey and green patterned tie, and a green waistcoat.

“Arachne used your measurements they took last week for the banquet,” Athena explained, and if he didn’t know any better, he would say she sounded nervous. “I thought maybe it would be nice if we - color coordinated tonight. I meant to give it to you last night for the morning, but I forgot all about it until I was unpacking. You can wear whatever you want. I don’t want to make you uncomfortable, but I - it was a thought.”

He wanted to groan at first. She knew how much he hated suits, and the one he always got for the banquet only ever lasted through the entree before he was down to the dress shirt half-tucked. However, he couldn’t bring himself to interrupt her babbling, much less tell her no, so once she finished and looked up at him, he nodded.

“It’s gorgeous.”

He wasn’t lying. He did love the colors. They were the colors of the Market District. As if to confirm, his eyes were drawn to the pin clasped to the lapel. It was not the formal insignia of the Market District that depicted a winged staff wrapped in a grapevine for both him and Hermes. No, this depicted only a cluster of purple grapes on a vine within the standard laurel wreath border. *His* insignia.

He grinned at her. “Where’s yours?”

She blinked several times before she caught up to his agreement, and then there was nothing but relieved gratitude on her face. She moved to the closet, opening it up to take out her own garment bag. Inside was a charcoal grey suit much like his, the lapels thin and the buttons glinting in the sun. Her waistcoat and tie were a deep blue to match the colors of her own insignia, a majestic owl with eyes as wise as the women who bore it. Dio couldn’t deny it. He was rather proud of her foresight, but he was more proud of sharing something of this magnitude with her.

“Perfect,” he stated with a firm nod. “If nothing else, we’ll certainly be the best dressed at dinner.”

She laid her suit next to his. “If only that were enough.”

“As long as you work your magic, I can sit there and look good, and all will be well. Now, my turn.”

He took her hand again, dragging her out of the room and into the kitchen before she had time to gather a resistance. She gasped when she saw the spread which included fruit, yogurt, an egg skillet, and an assortment of her favorite kinds of breads and pastries. At the center was a bottle of Dio’s signature berry breakfast wine and orange juice, light on the alcohol but generous on the flavor. Then on her side was a pot of fresh coffee and a sugar bowl.

“You made all this right now?” she questioned.

“Mhmm.” His grin widened, pride in his eyes. “I know you don’t really like to eat during business meetings, so I figured I’d go all out now, and you can pick around dinner.”

She looked around then. “And - where is everyone else?”

“Artemis took them for a tour so they could, and I quote, ‘get acquainted with the city before it got acquainted with them’.”

Athena smiled. “Well, okay then, I guess it’s just the two of us.”

It was only once she sat down beside him that Dio realized how afraid he was that she would find some excuse to skip it. While they had made up the night before, spending the last few hours on the sea telling stories, she had still been rather skittish since that day in the hospital. One moment, everything was normal —better than normal really— and next, she was avoiding him like a bad smell, and he could hardly keep up. He didn’t know what was worse anymore: the fact that she could never love him the way he loved her or the possibility that she would stop loving him altogether.

“It’s been a long time since you’ve cooked for me,” she commented after a few bites of her eggs and vegetables. “I’ve missed this.”

“Yeah, well, to be fair, we’ve both been short on time lately,” he offered, buttering his bread. “Maybe once Uncle’s

made friends with every island in the Aegean, we can do this more often.”

“Making friends seems like the easy part. It’s keeping them that always seems to be a struggle.”

“For Zeus maybe.” The moment he said it, he had to fight off the urge to wince at the name, concealing it with a light laugh. “You and Uncle are doing just fine. Besides, these guys, Tantalos and Amphitryon, they seem like the types of people who just wanna be winners, and it won’t take them long to realize that the only way to be a winner in this climate is to side with Uncle. Their exports are limited, and their imports mainly come secondhand from Phokis and Megaris. Either they do something about it and gain their people’s trust or they lose what footing they have, and the next hopeful gets their shot. But they’re surrounded on all sides by us and our allies, and while they may be able to buy off Skyros, that’s hardly an alliance to look twice at. Combined, their exports are still worth less than Lemnos alone, and as for cost of living, even Deucalion Heights comes cheaper, and they’re the jewel of the Aegean. And compared to Khaos Falls, well...”

He shoveled the last of his eggs into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully until he realized she hadn’t answered. Looking up, he found her gawking at him, her cheek swollen with the strawberry she’d been eating for at least a minute now. His brow furrowed.

“What?”

She started chewing again. Swallowing, she shook her head.

“I - I didn’t know anything about their exports,” she managed almost shamefully. “Well, I know what I need to, but...”

“Oh, Hermes deals with all those numbers, but he always insisted those are things I should know, so I finally started reading all the reports he e-mailed me. And it makes sense you wouldn’t deal with them. Hermes says that trade agreements are never used as bartering tools in treaty discussions. It leaves too much room for deception.”

She nodded. “Do you think you could show me some of them? After breakfast?”

He could admit he was surprised. Pleasantly so. “Oh, yeah, sure. I can do that.”



THAT WAS how they spent the rest of the afternoon, Athena scrolling through spreadsheets on his tablet and Dionysos explaining what they meant. If it weren't for Artemis returning to the house to fetch them, they may have missed dinner altogether. While Artemis trimmed Dio's hair and beard, Athena took a quick shower, and while Dio took a shower after her, she went over safety measures with Artemis and Nike. The four of them left the bungalow half an hour before they were due for dinner at Amphitryon's estate, piling into an SUV with Artemis behind the wheel, Nike beside her, and Dio and Athena in the back.

Dionysos straightened his tie once more as he stared out the window before he began attempting to adjust his cufflinks, a gold and green pair Hades had apparently sent for him. It made him feel bad for leaving Khaos Falls without seeing his uncle and giving him a proper goodbye. However, Dionysos wasn't sure he could stand to see whatever emotion Hades had held in his eyes the night Dio had volunteered, and if it had turned out to be regret, he may have broken there and then. It was better this way. Dio vowed he would call home the moment he got back to the bungalow. As long as he managed not to bring the city to war tonight.

Athena took his hand abruptly, and once he relaxed in her grasp, she properly attached the first cufflink with agile fingers. She then reached for his other hand, which he extended to her. When she finished, she ran her hand up his arm in a way that insinuated she had no clue she was doing it or why, but when it reached his tie, she gave the knot two firm tugs, just enough to make it easier to breathe, before straightening it. He gave her a smile of gratitude. He reached

out to do the same but knew he would only fray her nerves further if he put her tie even slightly out of place, so he instead patted her thigh.

“Are you ready?” she questioned.

“Yeah,” he stated coolly despite the desire to rub his hands over his own thighs until his palms burned. “Just a little nervous for my first time.”

Her lips curled upward. “That’s alright. I was nervous my first time too.”

“I’m just glad it’s with you.”

He swallowed hard at his own admission, eyes widening momentarily. Hers did the same. She cleared her throat, looking towards the front of the car. In the quiet, Dio caught Artemis’ mirthful gaze in the rearview. She must have heard him, and he would certainly hear about it later.

“Me too.”

Athena’s words were so faint that he almost missed them, but his body reacted nonetheless, melting into his seat with the kind of comfort that came all too eagerly when she was this close to him. And yet all too soon, they were at the gates of Amphitryon’s estate, a guard buzzing them in after confirming their identities. Once through, the SUV climbed the steep hill leading to a manor as imposing as the Olympus house had been when Zeus occupied it. To some extent, it remained so, a haunting reminder of their city’s dark past and Dionysos’ first rejection.

The walls were red brick, fronted by ivory pillars and an eccentric veranda. It reminded Dio of the leader house in Old Crete, except that one had been surrounded by barbed wire and riot gear, their leader worlds away from the people he was meant to serve. He vaguely wondered if it were any better now, if his mother’s dream of a place worthy of pride had come true when the brothers of Erebus, the Tartarus District’s co-leader, had taken complete power of the southernmost islands a few months ago. He would have to ask Athena later.

“Come on,” Athena urged him.

They had stopped in front of the house at some point while he was in his own head again, and he took a deep breath, reminding himself to remain focused. Once Athena was out of the car, he reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and extracted his vapor pen, taking a long drag. It helped with his concentration. Most days, it was the only thing that could. He hoped it didn't fail him now.

CHAPTER 7

DIONYSOS

Climbing out of the car, Dio followed Athena up the short staircase, Artemis and Nike flanking them. The doors opened as they approached, two men on either side. Another woman stood just inside the doors. She said not a word to them, simply gestured for them to follow her deeper into the house. Despite his best efforts, Dio found his head swiveling left and right and back again, attempting to take in everything about the place. The twin staircases, the priceless art adorning the walls, the sculptures peppering the marble floors. It wasn't elegant. It was atrociously extravagant, a show of wealth that made his stomach churn when he thought about how many people in this city were scraping by.

The dining hall was no different. It could fit at least fifty people comfortably although there was only a small table in the center of the room. At each end of that table sat a man with olive skin, one of them older with salt-and-pepper hair and glasses and the other younger with a thick beard and dark, brooding eyes. The older man stood first, holding his arms out in greeting with a large grin on his face. Dionysos knew then who was who.

“Ah, our esteemed guests have arrived!” Tantalos declared. “Wonderful! Dinner is just about ready, so perfect timing.”

Dio could see the twitch in Athena's eye from the corner of his own, and he knew she wanted to roll them. He suppressed a laugh as Tantalos approached them, extending a hand. He shook Athena's first then Dio's followed by Artemis's and Nike's. Only then did Amphitryon stand.

Tall and willowy like a shadow, the perpetual hint of a sneer scrawled across his features, he stared them down as though expecting a fight. Artemis and Nike both shifted closer to their two charges, and Tantalos grinned wider.

“You two don’t look like anything to fuck with,” he commented. “From what I hear, Khaos Falls has one of the most prestigious security forces in the Aegean.”

Dionysos wanted to respond, to tell him someone had lied to him because Hephaestus ran *thee* most prestigious security force in the Aegean, but one look at Athena, and he thought better of it.

“A compliment we hold in high esteem,” Athena returned, her own fake smile plastered across her face. Dio could track the places it splintered and peeled.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Amphitryon stated now, turning to Athena and Dio. “Thank you both for coming.”

“The pleasure is ours.”

Athena’s mouth hardly moved, but there remained a sickly sweet tone to it that Dio was not at all familiar with. Thank the Fates.

“Please, have a seat. Dinner will be out shortly.”

Dionysos had planned on taking the seat nearest to Amphitryon and furthest from Tantalos, but after a second thought, he decided it best he should sit nearest to Tantalos. He could handle jolly and flamboyant, especially considering how many people thought him jolly and flamboyant, and while Athena put up with him well enough, he didn’t want Tantalos’s aggressive nature to overwhelm her. Besides, Amphitryon was the one she needed to speak to.

However, it turned out that he didn’t quite understand the seating arrangement within the seating arrangement, the one Athena and Hades stuck to dictating that one Khaos Falls leader sat on each side of the table with a guard beside them. Therefore, Nike and Athena sat down opposite him and Artemis. He was still nearer to Tantalos, and Athena was still closest to Amphitryon, but that meant they were furthest apart.

He tried not to dwell on that part. At least he and Artemis were close enough that he felt comfortable beside her, and he knew she would aid him however she could even if she would joke about it all later.

“So as I understand, you are the leader of Khaos Falls’ Market District?” Tantalos asked him immediately, and only then did the idea that Athena would do *all* the talking seem bizarre.

“Co-leader actually,” Dionysos replied, tugging at the confidence he’d been trying to regain since the shooting. “With my brother.”

“And you are the winemaker?”

“I am, but that isn’t all.”

“Oh?”

“Rum, whiskey, some specialty items. I also own restaurants, clubs, things like that.”

Tantalos looked genuinely impressed, but before he could respond, Amphitryon cut in.

“Maybe you can help Tantalos. He can’t keep a business open to save his life.”

It was the first time Dio saw him smile. It looked like it hurt.

“Oh come on now, ‘Tryon, cut me some slack,” Tantalos groaned playfully. “I just haven’t found my niche yet is all. I’m sure it took Dionysos here awhile to find his, yeah?”

Dio shrugged, but Athena spoke now. “He’s been running Khaos Falls’ biggest annual event since he was sixteen, and by then, he had already opened the vineyard... But it’s not a competition.”

Tantalos barked a laugh, clapping a hand on Dio’s shoulder. Dio grinned, but not for him. For Athena, who was now gulping down her first glass of wine.

“Well then, very impressive,” Tantalos huffed once he’d caught his breath. “Your uncle makes all of you earn your keep

then?”

“Very much so,” Dio went on, feeling bolder now. “We all have our role to play to ensure the city prospers in every way it can.”

“And we see that it is,” Amphitryon said.

Servers were now surrounding them, placing plates down in front of each person. The first course was a thick soup, traces of lemon wafting up into the air along with other distinct seasonings Dio could immediately pick out.

“Your uncle seems to have a plan for all the Aegean,” Amphitryon went on before Dio could take a bite, his tone light and conversational but not at all friendly.

“Yes,” Athena affirmed without hesitation. “Peace. The whole point of our trip is to ensure peace.”

“And we are pleased to hear it, but first impressions tend to remain with people for a very long time.”

“Indeed they do, but Hades is willing to overlook that.”

Amphitryon chuckled. There was no humor in the sound.

Dionysos was certain that Athena knew what the man had meant, and he was also certain Amphitryon knew she had too. The tension bloomed so suddenly that it felt like a physical pressure, a heavy hand against his chest all too close to his throat. He reached for his glass of wine, something to take the edge off, but the moment the bitter liquid touched his tongue, he regretted it. He fought to restrain any external sign of his disgust, drinking it down with haste. Luckily, it seemed that all attention was on Athena and Amphitryon and their hasty progression towards a pissing contest.

“What is it exactly that Hades offers us and every other leader he sends you to meet with?”

Amphitryon’s tone remained crisp and cool, something more savory than the wine, and there was a commanding air to him that could easily be overlooked had Tantalos taken more time to speak. Dio had a burning suspicion that Amphitryon had come into this meeting knowing exactly what game he

planned to play, and Dio feared Athena, who was always ten steps ahead, was stepping right into it.

“As I said, peace,” Athena went on. “He wants unity among the islands, a way to ensure that we all look out for one another without imposing upon one another.”

“And yet he sent his head of security here without our knowledge, and that head of security—”

“Hephaestus.”

“Used our port and our airspace without permission.”

“At the time, the leadership of Thassos was unstable. He had no one to tell, no one to go to, and the matter was time-sensitive.”

“He apprehended a Thassos citizen who he then forced to fly him—”

“Perseus was not forced. He extended the offer to use his plane because he understood how dire the situation was.”

“Are you saying *we* would not have understood how dire the situation was?”

“*You* were not yet leader. He did what he felt he had to do.”

“And what about the next time he feels he has to do something?”

Dionysos tensed, but Artemis’s hand on his arm stilled him.

“If there is a stable power in position at that time, we will be sure to inform them,” Athena said curtly.

Dionysos was so damn proud of her. And so damn afraid for her.

Amphitryon laughed again. “I can see why Hades has elected you to speak on his behalf. I cannot imagine he would conduct himself with such - confidence.”

“What about that statement was confident?” Athena returned, chin raised. “It’s no secret that Thassos’ power gets -

moved around a lot. We assume that is why Acrisius was let go so swiftly despite his crimes developing while he was still city leader.”

“You say your uncle does not wish to impose, but if he has so little faith in our justice—”

“Now, Amphitryon, come on,” Tantalos interrupted, his voice honey thick and twice as sweet. Dionysos swore the man’s teeth must be rotting as he spoke. Maybe even Dio’s too. “That’s not what she said. Mistakes were made by those before us, and we understand that. We’re sure Hades can understand that as well considering who he took over for. He just wants to get us all on the same page.”

Every word sounded better than the last, and with every word, Dionysos grew more uncomfortable.

“I guess my question is this,” Tantalos went on, leaning back in his chair, “because as you may have guessed, we like to do things a bit differently here. What *does* happen if we don’t fall in line? What is the next step if your uncle doesn’t like the way we do things?”

“Again, he doesn’t wish to impose.” Athena’s frustration was a smoldering ember beneath her stern tone. “Acrisius *did* impose on our city. That is the detail you seem to be overlooking.”

“We can’t keep people from leaving the city, good or bad. You understand that.”

“Acrisius was a leader. His crimes were known. He was allowed to step down and disappear without proper—”

“Justice?” Amphitryon finished.

Dionysos realized it then. This *was* the game. This was the game, and he couldn’t figure out the fucking rules. Between the volley of words and the change of schedule this morning, Dio had to wonder just how much research they had done on Athena, how well they knew her, because if she was ten steps ahead of everyone else, Amphitryon and Tantalos were the ones waiting on step eleven for her to catch up.

“Do you plan on handling your justice?” Athena pushed forward regardless although she seemed to sense that the walls were closing in on her. “Do you need help?”

“No, no, I don’t think we do,” Amphitryon stated. “That is what we are trying to tell you. Khaos Falls is lucrative, yes, and your uncle should be proud of the city he inherited. However, not all of us were so lucky. Tantalos and I are attempting to rebuild from ruin, and we do not need anyone telling us how to do that.”

“Nor were we planning on it. We came here for one thing and one thing alone—”

“Yes, yes, peace. You want peace, but you coming here to ask for it insinuates that you do not trust us to give it on our own.”

“Us coming here to ask for it is a sign of respect for you and your city. Would you rather we pretend you didn’t exist at all?”

“I don’t think that’s the worst idea, no.”

“You aren’t the first city I’ve visited.”

“But we are the only city like ours. We are not a stop on some popularity parade, and we cannot be bought by pretty words like ‘peace’.”

Dionysos could feel it, the frustration radiating off of Athena’s skin. He could see the sweat collecting on her brow and the way she shifted in her seat like she was struggling to remain in it. He had to do something, but all of his preparation felt useless now in the face of two starved wolves. They had never intended to listen to her. They welcomed them here only to carve a message into their skin, one that would be easily deciphered by Hades.

Dio picked up his glass again which had been refilled although he hadn’t seen a server do so. Taking a deep breath, he drank.

“Your city—” Athena began, but Dio didn’t let her finish. He couldn’t.

“Mm!” He grunted, pulling the cup from his lips quickly and wincing.

This time, he wore his disgust like a medal around his neck, his face contorting and his lips pressing hard together until he managed to swallow the red. He could feel everyone’s eyes on him, Athena’s burning almost as deeply as Amphitryon’s, but he didn’t yet open his eyes, pressing his fist into the table once he managed to set the glass down.

Tantalos laughed.

“Not what you’re used to in Khaos Falls, huh?”

“Not at all.”

“I told you, Amphitryon. The wine is shit, and we have an expert here to confirm it.”

“Are you sure the expert isn’t merely attempting to insult us further?” Amphitryon muttered although loud enough for everyone to hear.

Tantalos acted as though he hadn’t. “I told them they couldn’t grow shit on this island. I could stick a straw in the ground and drink straight from the sea. Literally salted earth.”

“Oh, no, the growing, that’s not the problem,” Dionysos stated, straightening up in his seat and wiping his mouth with a napkin. “I don’t even think it’s the harvest at all. I’m willing to bet it’s something in the fermentation.”

“I have no clue what the fuck that means.”

Dio perked up suddenly, looking at Tantalos straight. “Do you happen to have grapes left over from your last harvest? Or even just the - you know, any kind of leftovers?”

Tantalos was again amused. “What are you gonna do? Fix it for us? I doubt you want the competition, Dionysos.”

Dio grinned now, his best and most charming grin, lopsided and, from the right angle, looking like some sort of smirk.

“Oh, I have no competition and plenty tricks up my sleeve to share.”

Tantalos grinned too, grabbing his shoulder again, and Dionysos fought not to wince as his thick fingers brushed over the scars there.

“Alright, alright, what’s the catch? And don’t bullshit me.”

“You mean what I want in return?”

Dio hummed a moment, scratching at his chin. In the corner of his eye, he could see Amphitryon staring hard at Tantalos, who merely shrugged.

“Alright, I fix your wine, and you come to my banquet. As my guest,” Dio proclaimed proudly.

“Your banquet?” Tantalos repeated, looking back at him.

“Yeah, the Blood Moon Banquet. Have you heard of it?”

“The Blood Moon Banquet? *You* run that?”

“What did you think Athena meant when she said I ran our biggest annual event?”

“I thought she meant for the city. This banquet is legendary in all of the Aegean.”

“She doesn’t like to flaunt me too much.”

“I cannot fault her. I wouldn’t want to share you either.”

Dio cleared his throat, working the blush that crawled up his throat. “So is it a deal?”

He looked between both leaders now, and while Amphitryon appeared visibly disappointed that Dio had intervened in his little game of hardball, he didn’t look all too eager to say no. But what they didn’t know was that Dio knew about their export troubles, and if Dio had read Tantalos right at all, he knew that he was serious about giving Dio the competition. Even if he couldn’t. The point was he thought he could.

“Alright,” Tantalos shrugged. “You fix the wine, and I’ll be on the first ship out to Khaos Falls come the week of the Blood Moon. Amphitryon too if I have anything to say about it.”

“And if he fails?” Amphitryon was staring at Dio now.

“What are you, a supervillain?” This laugh Tantalos emitted now was different from the others, more overt, and Dionysos almost feared they had anticipated his move too. “If he fails, he gets to go home to good wine, and we’re stuck with the shitty barrel we’ve got, Amphitryon, for fuck’s sake. What have we got to lose?”

After a moment, Amphitryon sighed. “Well, this would count as imposing.”

“It counts as help,” Dio stated now, unable to hold his tongue. He met Amphitryon’s gaze head on. “That’s what people do. They help each other. Maybe you don’t think we do that in Khaos Falls, but we do. And before that, when I was growing up in Old Crete, we helped each other too because our leadership couldn’t see past their own noses, and all we had was each other” Amphitryon shifted in his seat then, and something in his face changed, but he said nothing. “That’s what I know. I help people. And sometimes, it costs more than I should be able to afford. Sometimes, it blows up in my face, but I do it anyway because my uncle, and my mother before him, taught me that the most valuable thing you can give someone is help.”

They continued to stare at one another, neither willing to back down, to look away. Until Amphitryon did at last, waving his hand in a vague gesture.

Tantalos clapped both of his together. “Perfect! So I’ll call our curator first thing in the morning, and you can meet him at the winery. It’s not hard at all to find, but I can escort you myself if need be.”

Ignoring the twinkle in Tantalos’ eye, Dio gave him a polite smile and shook his head. “I’ve been through the city before. A long time ago maybe, but Artemis knows her way around too. We’ll be just fine.”

Tantalos nodded, the disappointment evident. “Let’s see if you can work miracles then.”

Athena finally spoke again at last, the words echoing in his chest like a second heart.

“If anyone can work a miracle, it’s him.”

CHAPTER 8

ATHENA

Athena's nerves were threatening to break skin by the time dessert finished and it was appropriate to leave the house of Amphitryon. Truth be told, she wouldn't have even made it that far had it not been for Dionysos and his quick thinking, and so amidst the erratic beating of her heart, it swelled several sizes, overwhelmed with her adoration for this man beside her. He had charmed his way and hers through the rest of dinner until even Amphitryon was failing to fully suppress laughter at his jokes, no longer casting withering glances in her direction.

It was evident now that her brand of diplomacy had been planned for, a counterattack already on the table by the time she took her seat at it. It made her wonder who they had spoken to, what news of her reputation had preceded her, and if there was any way to salvage it. For now, she sipped her wine—which was no longer the tart and bitter wine of Thassos but Dionysos' own pear and berry make—and let the night wind down on its own.

However, as they prepared to leave, Tantalos stopped them again, and her anxiety and paranoia were once more on high alert.

“The night is still young,” he said with a coy smile. “I won't even pretend to know a place as good as any of the ones you own back in Khaos Falls, Dio, but we did just open a nice little spot on the beach. I would be honored if you all would accompany me for a few drinks.”

Before Athena could conjure up an excuse and risk looking yet again like the uptight and arrogant leader they believed her to be, Dionysos stepped in.

“I’ve got an early morning tomorrow now, remember?” he stated, his tone almost melodic. At least to her ears. “We should probably call it a night.”

“Oh, come on. Just a few drinks. This house and this dinner, extravagant as it is, is Thassos the way Amphytrion sees it. I would like to show you the way that I see it. No matter what you do to our wine, it cannot be fixed unless you understand the soul of Thassos.”

Dio cocked his head, his eyes flickering to her briefly. “While I am inclined to agree, I doubt I’ll fix the issue in a day, so we can definitely do another night.”

“How is it you throw banquets and run clubs when you turn in before midnight? I don’t believe it one bit.”

Dionysos shifted on his feet, unsure how best to move forward. Athena saw the opportunity to return the favor and save him now.

“You know, I wouldn’t mind seeing this place,” she quipped, her manner haphazard. “A few drinks won’t hurt, certainly not Dio.”

“Ha!”

Tantalos clapped a hand on Dio’s shoulder, his injured shoulder, *again*. And although Dio smiled, Athena could tell right away he was trying not to wince or groan or shove the man’s hand away. She clenched her jaw.

“Brilliant! You all can follow me as I assume you don’t want to come back for your vehicle, and I will lead the way. It’s actually within walking distance from where you’re staying, just in case you can’t manage to drive back!”

“Will you be joining us?” she asked Amphytrion.

“Oh, no, the tour is always left in Tantalos’ hands,” Amphytrion answered gruffly, already up and prepared to leave the room. “You all have fun though. Dionysos, I wish

you all the success, and I will see you all again soon, I'm sure."

Too soon if you asked her.

Tantalos led them out to the circular driveway where he unsurprisingly slid into the back of an expensive car that Athena recognized as being a high-end import from Messara. It idled while Athena and her party climbed into theirs. The moment the doors closed, she breathed out a sigh of more than relief. Before she knew it, Dionysos's large hand was wrapped around hers, squeezing it gently until her nerves began to settle.

"That was a fucking ambush," Nike huffed, voicing what they were all thinking.

"Let's hope it's the only one," Artemis stated, bringing the engine to life. "I don't think I brought nearly enough bolts for both those men *and* their egos."

"They won't do anything." Dionysos sounded so certain that Athena had no choice but to believe him, his energy like an ocean current beneath her placid surface. "They know if something happens to us here, Hephaestus and Uncle will have them surrounded by dawn, and there will be no mercy."

The car was quiet, each of them attempting to grasp that reality and wade out of the nightmare that had been sprung upon them. Athena had little hope for the rest of the night going any better, but she decided she would let Dionysos handle this leg however he wanted. Tantalos was correct after all. This type of thing was *his* specialty.

"He's right." Athena's voice was quiet. Dio leaned into her further, and those dreadful winged insects flapped against the inner lining of her belly, incessant. "Amphitryon wanted to knock me off my game, say something I would regret, and I probably would have had it not been for Dio, but they weren't planning on attacking us here. They just wanted a reason to stow away for later, some way they were wronged by me."

"You held your own just fine," Dio assured her. "Better than I would have had it been aimed at me to begin with. They

pulled out all the stops. I would've lost it."

"Oh, he almost did," Artemis injected, lips curled upward as she looked at them both through the rearview. "I thought he might just lunge over the table at that jackass."

"And I would've moved the glasses out of his way," Nike chimed absently.

Athena finally turned to him now, staring up at his face in the dark. It was amazing how he could harvest so much innocence in those big, brown eyes when he was anything but. His lips were full and still slick with the pear wine, the look of them pillow soft and ever inviting.

And she had the gall to wonder if the pear would taste sweeter if she licked it from his lips right now.

Stop it.

The neatly trimmed facial hair was rather new, his face usually remaining smooth, but it made his jaw look so - *sturdy* although she had no clue why that was the word that came to mind. Perhaps it was because he had just turned on that boyish charm beneath a roguish mask, running to her rescue despite strict instructions not to, and now that she could fully appreciate it absent the panic she had been in at the time, it was like a match struck against the pit of her stomach. Or many matches, all of their little flames dancing through her bloodstream.

She leaned into him.

"Thank you," she whispered once Artemis was preoccupied with following Tantalos through traffic. "I'm sorry I didn't trust you before."

He shrugged. "I didn't even trust me before, so it's okay."

She paused then shook her head. "That's not even what I meant to say. What I meant to say is that I did trust you, but I thought I could do it on my own."

"And so did I."

"I just - I don't know what happened."

“Hey.” He tightened his hold on her hand, and her heart stuttered through its rhythm. “They had an agenda, and it wasn’t peace. They wanted to rile you up, and they didn’t.”

“They almost did.”

“‘Almost’ doesn’t mean they did. You’ve taken Khaos Falls forward with leaps and bounds. You didn’t just get truces. You got alliances from cities that never took us seriously before. But - Thassos isn’t like us. *Amphitryon* isn’t like us. He wants power and submission, and he was foolish enough to think he would get it from you. He’s not as smart as you are, Athena. He isn’t even as smart as you gave him credit for. Because smart men would agree to peace, not try and goad us into a fight. You’re above him. He played dirty and went at your knees because you’re above him. Don’t forget that.”

She blinked several times at him, and even when something out the window caught his ephemeral attention, she continued to stare at his profile in awe. This was her Dionysos, her best friend, the man who would hold her heart even if she could never tell him she had slipped it into his pocket when he wasn’t looking. But he was something else now too. Or at least in this light, and she wondered how many other times she could have saved herself some trouble if she had just gone to him for help. If she had just let him in.

It wasn’t that he’d never soothed her before because of course he had. He had always been wise in a way she wasn’t, but before, he had always seemed so ignorant to his own healing powers, oblivious to his own charisma, at least when it came to her. But now, he seemed so sure of it, so certain, and it made her feel invincible beside him. It made her think that maybe—

No. No, she made a decision, and she had to stick by it. Loving Dio, rewarding though it may be, was a risk she could not take. If someone ever came for her, it was bad enough that he was her best friend, that he was affiliated with her at all. If he was more than that, who knows what they might do with that knowledge. And if it was Zeus who came for her...

Besides, he may be good with her, but she was nowhere near as good with him. Worried as she had been for him all night, she had still succumbed to her own bullheaded pride. If the worry alone of him being harmed could put her off her game so easily, she could only imagine what would happen if he had actually been disrespected instead of her. War would have been all but ensured. And while he had saved her this time, she couldn't expect him to do it again.

"This is exactly the kind of place I feared he was herding us towards," Artemis grunted, drawing Athena's attention.

They were pulling into a parking lot of a small, discreet building, the only thing giving its nature away being the neon purple sign above the door that read "The Siren". Its exterior looked run down and absent care, but that didn't seem to bother the people lined up at the door. The lot was already packed, but Tantalos' car continued down the aisles until it was able to loop around the building into a back lot that housed only what she assumed to be employee vehicles. It was cordoned off, meaning Tantalos' car had to stop in front of a boom gate so that a guard could grant them access. Once the gate's arm swung upward, they continued forward, parking in the shadows of the building's backside. Athena shifted in her seat.

"What do you think?" Nike questioned, looking over at Artemis.

"I'm thinking keep your thigh holster on," Artemis returned, scoping the surroundings. "Can't take the crossbow in, but I'll take a blade too just in case. I'm hoping Tantalos isn't expecting us to be patted down."

"If he wants his drink, he won't," Dionysos stated.

He really did sound more engaged in this whole thing, more sure of himself than he had on the radio the night before. Athena squeezed her knees together before sliding out of the car.

Straightening her lapels, she smoothed a hand down her tie with a deep breath. Dio tugged at his own, no doubt wanting more than anything to remove it. He had always hated wearing

suits despite Hades' best efforts, and each time he wore one, pieces would inevitably go missing from his person within the hour.

She distinctly remembered Hades dressing them all for a banquet in the Sarpedon District once as children, and Dio had been forced into a tight white suit that had been ordered months before his sudden growth spurt. He had promptly walked outside and "tripped" into a puddle, putting those puppy dog eyes on Hades until he allowed Dio to change into a nice sweater and jeans. She had been upset with him at first because they had been matching, and she had been proud, but then he picked some flowers for her out of Medusa's garden—a garden which, at the time, they believed to be haunted but actually just had a variety of poisonous plants, one of which had given Dio a nasty rash—and she couldn't possibly remain mad. Even if Zeus had not let her bring them into the house.

He had tried to tear everything soft from her. She supposed that was why he grew to hate Dio so much. Everything Zeus managed to rob her of and toss away somehow made its way into Dio's hands where he preserved it until she could reclaim it. He would never know how much that meant to her.

He took her hand now, leading her straight out of her thoughts and into the club. They soon realized that the outer appearance was nothing more than a facade, lying about what lay inside.

They entered onto a balcony which looked down onto a vast dance floor skirted by several well endowed bars. Erotic dancers dotted the landscape, showcasing their athletic upper body strength as they wrapped themselves around poles and silks. Neon lights flashed across the floor at a sluggish pace, the smell of sweat and various colognes and perfumes rising to greet them. Athena had never taken to the clubs. Then again, it wasn't as though she had been given much choice. Even though Zeus went out, she was expected to remain home and work or study or complete some other task he'd laid out for her that he'd most likely failed to do himself. It was one thing she and Hera had in common, this obligation to remain in the house and clean up whatever messes he refused to tell Hades

about. The more she thought about it, the more she resented him, but that didn't negate the reality. Her interests had long been set in stone, and places like this held little joy for her.

But they did for Dionysos, who lit up like a kid on his birthday, turning his head this way and that to try and take in everything at once. He was still holding her hand although now, his fingers were threaded through hers. She grew acutely aware of that fact when she realized how many people had turned to look up at them.

"My friends!" Tantalos called from near the stairs up ahead. "Come on, I'll show you to my table, and we can order our first round!"

Pulling her hand free from his, she followed after Tantalos without looking back at him, scared of what she might find there. She hoped he wouldn't even notice. She also hoped he would.

Artemis brought up the rear as they descended the steps, ever vigilant and always anticipating an encroachment. Tantalos led them to a large booth in the corner where Nike sat first, leaving Athena and Dionysos to sit beside one another with Artemis at the end. Athena was certain Dio would wind up on the floor soon enough, his tie loose around his neck and his shirt untucked, his hair tousled and his smile vibrant. And the whole world seemed to stop and marvel at it all.

They put in their drink orders before sitting back, Tantalos already preoccupied with a man who had come to sit on his lap. Still, he turned to them after a time, noticing how quiet they all were.

"What do you think, Dio?" he asked.

"I love it!" Dio immediately replied, giddy with excitement. "It's brilliant!"

"You're not just saying that? You know you don't have to flatter me. I quite like being put in my place."

Was he - flirting with Dio? His eyes were sharp and hungry, fixed on Dio despite his hands roaming along the unknown man's waist. The man didn't seem to mind, mainly

because he was also looking at Dio. Someone was always looking at Dio.

“Oh, no, I think it’s amazing,” Dio assured him, looking up at the ceiling, which mirrored the night sky sporting a vibrant moon and twinkling stars. “A hidden gem really.”

“Wait ’til you — Ah, here we are.”

The server had returned, setting their drinks down before them. Dio’s was a large glass with frothy blue liquid and a cherry on top. He took a large gulp and came away grinning. Tantalos grinned back.

“Delicious, isn’t it? Not all of our alcohol is pathetic.”

“What is it?”

“Rum. Imported from Kythera, but the drink recipe is our own.”

Dio kept drinking, nearly dancing in his seat, and she smiled to herself. Her eyes fell on her own drink, a simple glass of rum and cider, and the realization that she was now trapped in the center of the group caught up with her. The anxiety that had been so pervasive at dinner reared its ugly head again, but she wasn’t sure why.

Then Tantalos spoke again.

“Dio, come dance with us.”

He and his friend stood up, looming over Dionysos with expectant gazes.

“Oh, I - I haven’t even gotten my first drink in me,” Dio chuckled.

“It’ll be there to cool you off after this first round. Come on. We are dying to see what you can do.”

He glanced at her because of course he did, and she swallowed her apprehension right away. Nudging him, she offered an encouraging smile.

“Go on. Just don’t make him look *too* bad.”

Grinning, he leaned over and kissed her cheek, and before she could process that, he was gone, wading into the crowd with Tantalos' hand on his back. Before long, her premonition came true, the entire club drawn to him and his magnetic energy, his howling laughter filling the room. Every now and again, she caught brief glimpses of that smile above everyone else's heads, and every now and again, his eyes would find hers, and she could pretend it was just for her.

Though the truth was always there, scratching at the back of her eyes. That smile belonged to the world, and hoarding it would be like hoarding the sun.

After two drinks, Athena wandered up to the balcony they had entered on with Artemis and Nike in tow. Neither of them were drinking, not wanting to skew their own judgment in case something happened. In the past hour, the place had become impossibly more packed, bodies now filling the floor from wall to wall and leaving little room to maneuver otherwise. The temperature had skyrocketed, the cooling system having little effect by the time the air hit the crowd. Between the noise and the people, Athena's social battery was soon spent, leaving her overwhelmed and overstimulated. What she wanted was a quiet corner and a warm bath.

She found Dio in the center of the crowd, dancing and laughing and throwing down drink after drink. Tantalos was nearby, but he had been separated from Dio's form by several other people attempting to get a taste of him. A hand on his neck, in his shirt, his tie missing altogether and his waistcoat unbuttoned completely. He looked happy. He looked free.

Turning to Artemis, she leaned closer so as to speak in her ear.

"Will you look after him? Make sure he makes it home? Even if Tantalos insists he go with him, I... Well, even then, stay with him. And let me know."

Artemis gave her a look that said she knew Athena wanted to say something else, but Athena didn't take the bait. So instead, Artemis nodded. It was only after she and Nike left the club, walking the short distance back to the bungalow, that

Athena realized she wouldn't be getting much sleep tonight, not when Dio was out in this city without her. She considered going back, but it was almost as though Nike could sense that.

"He'll be fine," Nike assured her. "Tantalos doesn't think with the right head needed to manage putting Dio in danger."

Athena snorted, ignoring the way her stomach churned at the thought. "Dio is more than capable of finding trouble on his own."

"But he won't, not here, not with you."

That was the problem though. He wasn't with her.

"What do you honestly think might happen to you if you stopped thinking so damn much?" Nike hissed, bumping her shoulder against Athena's. "I can hear the wheels turning from here."

Athena shrugged. "I'd have to think about it."

Nike doubled over in laughter, stumbling a few steps. "Smart ass."

"Hey, if you think I'm afraid to find out, I can assure you I'm not."

"But you'd overthink it anyway, so it doesn't really matter."

They both laughed.

The moon guided them home, the sound of the sea a soft soundtrack underscoring their steps. It was nice, and Athena could not remember the last time she'd just... gone for a walk or sat down in a cafe. She bit her lip, vowing to herself to do so at least once more before they left here. Then maybe, once they arrived home, she could keep it up. Hopefully with Dionysos.

"You know, you don't have to carry the world on your shoulders, right?" Nike said after a moment of silence. "Zeus isn't holding it there anymore."

"Yeah, but it still feels like he is."

“And if you keep holding it, it probably always will. You can cut yourself some slack, Athena. You’ve done more than enough.”

“With my luck, the one time I cut myself some slack, everything else falls apart.”

“It’s not your responsibility alone to hold it all together.” She moved closer. “And it’s definitely not in your contract to sacrifice all the things you want for whatever the city needs.”

Nike knew as well as Artemis knew what it was about. Athena could try and bury the truth under a million excuses, but there would always be some silver corner sticking out of the dirt to give her away. Especially when Dionysos was within a few dozen feet of her. It was impossible to pretend she didn’t look at him and see the future she had always dreamed of when they were children.

But they weren’t children anymore, and while he may have proven himself tonight, it only enforced her resolve. He was who he was, and he shouldn’t have to volunteer for business trips across the Aegean to impress anyone. Nor should he have to give up his freedom to appease her and these silly emotions she failed to leave in girlhood. She loved his passion, his energy, the glint he got in his eye when a new idea came to him. She cherished it all in a secret place no one knew about, and she would continue to do so. But she could never bring it all into the light. And she can never put that light on him.

Once they reached the bungalow, Nike situated herself on the couch while Athena went to prepare a bath. She took great care in removing each piece of her suit, setting them back in their garment bag to be dry cleaned later. First the tie, laid aside until the end, then the jacket and waistcoat. Her cufflinks were returned to their box along with the watch she had donned for the evening. However, she had only undone the first few buttons on her shirt when there was a knock at her door.

Quirking a brow, she turned towards it. Another knock, but it was soft and patient and not at all the kind of knock one would use if the matter was urgent or someone was in trouble.

If Dio was in trouble. It was more like the knock one used after the trouble was already over. When it was too late to do anything but tell someone.

She swallowed and moved towards it, opening it up.

There stood Dionysos himself, his tie hung around his neck and his waistcoat still wide open. Her lungs failed her as she took him in, the windswept curls and glistening forehead. His shirt was undone partially too, a generous swath of skin exposed and black ink peering out from above his wrinkled collar. It reminded her of the ink that adorned her thigh, a dark and elegant vine from which hung a cluster of deep purple grapes. She swallowed almost audibly.

He had two glasses in his hand and a bottle of wine, her wine. His wine.

“What are you doing here?” she breathed, surprised by her own surprise.

“You left me.” Although he was smiling. —No. *Smirking*.

“I - I was just tired. You know it’s not really my scene, those places.”

“But you said we would go.”

“Only because I knew you wanted to.”

He stepped closer to her, and it was like lightning striking at her feet, the electricity buzzing and burrowing beneath her skin, a warning that next time, it wouldn’t miss. Fates, she hoped it didn’t.

“I wanted to go with you though.”

His voice was barely a whisper, and yet it decorated the room with his thick baritone. Her tongue was lead in her mouth, every word she may have said turning to mush at the back of her throat.

“Well, I brought the party to you anyway,” he went on, holding up the glasses. “How about it? Just the two of us.”

She met his eyes, tracking the flickering flames behind them, preparing to devour her whole. He knew. She knew it

too. If she agreed, if she let him in, all her walls would come crashing down, and that resolve she had so carefully constructed would shatter across the floor like a mirror, her own failure reflected back at her. And she wouldn't regret it tonight, maybe not even tomorrow, but it would catch up to her eventually. And she would hate herself for it.

But she wanted him. She wanted him more than she had ever wanted anything in her life.

"I'm sorry, D, maybe tomorrow night. I'm just really tired. I need a long bath and some sleep."

His expression didn't change. His gaze remained locked on her, sifting and sorting through her features in search of some kind of sign. To push, to plead, to pummel her guard into the ground. But he wouldn't. Unless she caved right now, she knew he wouldn't because that wasn't Dio. Dio didn't push. Dio didn't demand. Dio only came to the door and knocked. And made it physically painful to do anything but agree. And it *was* physically painful, but she held fast.

He nodded.

"Alright." She couldn't gather a thing from his tone. "I'll see you in the morning then? For breakfast?"

"Uh, yeah, yeah. That sounds good. Okay, good night."

"Good night."

She shut the door the moment he stepped back out of the room, unwilling to give herself even the slightest chance of changing her mind. Still, she listened to his footsteps retreating down the hall, slow and soft, until the house was quiet once more. And for the first time, she hated the quiet.

CHAPTER 9

DIONYSOS

“How is it going?”

It was evident by how faint Hades’ voice was that he was engaged in something else, his eyes fixed on something Dionysos and Athena could not see within the confines of Dio’s computer screen.

“We’re being held hostage,” was Dio’s deadpan response.

That grabbed Hades’ attention, his dark eyes flicking towards the screen of his phone. He raised a brow, and Dio grinned. Athena shoved at his shoulder.

“Well, I struck out, but Dio has a date with the vineyard curator,” Athena filled in.

“The vineyard curator?” Hades’ brow rose even higher into his hairline. “What am I missing?”

Athena sighed. “Tantalos made a deal with Dio. If Dio could make their wine taste better, which I’m not sure even he can save that garbage—“

“I can,” Dio said proudly.

“—Tantalos would come to the banquet as a guest of honor.”

Hades hummed. “I take it that peace talks weren’t enough then.”

Athena shook her head. “They had no interest in peace from the moment we walked in.”

Dionysos was consistently amused by the look they both donned when they were unimpressed, especially with other people.

“Dio basically saved us from a civil disturbance,” Athena went on as Dio tossed a grape up into the air and caught it in his mouth. He would rather risk choking on one than try and remain calm amidst her praise. “Coming up with this deal.”

“Really?” Hades smirked. “I’m proud of you, Son. I knew you could hold your own.”

Dio smiled at him but quickly caught sight of Athena’s face. There was something somber about her expression that dampened his certainty that this would work. He could read the thought right off her face then, and it tumbled out of his mouth before he could stop it.

“What if he’s lying?”

“Who? Tantalos?” Hades questioned. Dio nodded. “If he’s lying, your earlier conclusion holds true. They have no desire for peace.”

“So then what?”

“Then you two come home, and we keep our distance until another opportunity presents itself.”

“But what about the people here?” This was Dio’s own personal concern.

“The people will be fine. It’s still open waters, and if they wish to come to our city they can, but from what I know of Amphitryon, his pride dictates everything he does. If he declines peace, it is because he believes it comes with some sort of sacrifice, a stripping of power in some sense.”

“But it doesn’t.”

“I know that, and you know that, but some people can’t quite imagine a world where what they have is not coveted or that a war is not inherent, especially for people of Thassos who have watched their leadership change its face every year or so for decades.”

“Or people who have had to fight all their lives.”

It had taken Dionysos a long time to accept that wasn't the case in Khaos Falls. When he'd boarded that ship in Old Crete, he had been certain he would wind up in another city that required bloodshed to survive. What he found was a utopia where the fulfillment of basic necessities weren't negotiable, and poverty was not a moral failing but a systemic one. Even when Zeus was in power, there was help for whoever came to their shores with a need for it. And now that Hades was in charge, everyone shared in the wealth twice over.

“Exactly,” Hades agreed. “That doesn't make them inherently bad people, but it manifests in different ways. For Amphitryon, he would rather fight and die than ask for help, but that also means he'll continue to provide for his people if only to prove that he can.”

Dionysos nodded, pretending that made all the sense in the world to him for now. Of course, he understood what his uncle meant, but he wasn't sure it was the most foolproof belief to have. He had seen the darkness in Amphitryon's eyes just as he had seen the gluttony in Tantalos'. If either man decided they wished to watch the world burn, the other would be all too eager to provide the match.

It wasn't evident upon first meeting them though, not entirely. It had seemed as though Amphitryon was the leash around Tantalos's neck. After their little game of two cats and one mouse with Athena though, he had realized the dynamic was anything but. They were both their own brand of villain, and they complemented one another in insurmountable ways. The only difference was that Tantalos had taken a liking to Dio.

After hanging up with Hades, Athena and Dio finished breakfast before they began cleaning up. While he went to the vineyard, she planned to spend more time looking over Thassos' financial reports and any other information Hephaestus could dredge up in the excavation she had sent him on first thing that morning.

Dio made quick work of the dishes, washing and drying them before putting them back in their proper places. Athena remained at the table, his tablet in her hands.

“Hey,” he called, catching her attention. “There’s a restaurant here in town that’s got amazing kabobs and a bunch of desserts and stuff, and I *maybe* made a reservation for it already. Will you come with me?”

“Tonight?”

“Yeah, I figured a night with just us... and Artemis and Nike if - if they wanna come would be a good recovery period from last night.”

His heart clenched, anticipating making its way through his lungs. Then she smiled.

“Yeah, sure, we can do that.”

He brightened instantly. “Perfect! You’re gonna love it. It’s not a wild place by any means, and it’s in a quieter part of the city. —Well, as quiet as Thassos can get.”

“That sounds great.”

“Yeah, so I’ll meet you here at sundown? And we can go?”

“I’ll be here.”

Relief washed over him, a new kind of anticipation budding in his belly. He had made the reservation in hopes that he could cleanse them of whatever awkward energy had been born last night from his boldly misplaced bravery, but he had also feared that same energy would keep her from agreeing. An odd thing considering just a year ago, he never would have feared something like that despite his feelings. But as he’d told Hephaestus, things between them were different now.

He hadn’t been sure of it before, convincing himself that he was simply imagining it when she would come home from long trips and still only spend a small amount of time with him. He figured he was just projecting his insecurities onto her increasing workload. However, after the day on the docks when she’d lost her temper with him for the first time since they were kids, even after she’d apologized, he knew he had been correct. Last night only strengthened that certainty. He just didn’t know why.



THE THASSOS WINERY was located on the northeastern edge of the city, the sight of the vineyard alone assuring Dio that he had been right. It had nothing to do with the earth. Although it looked as though the farmers were tasked with planting new crops each year, the earth they were tending was healthy, which meant the issue was happening somewhere in the winery.

When they arrived, they were greeted by a short, bulky man with big brown eyes and bronze skin, his smile wide and welcoming.

“You must be Dionysos!” he called out, coming down the stairs. “Ikarios. It’s a pleasure to meet you. Big fan of your products. Don’t tell Amphitryon that of course.”

Dio smiled, shaking the man’s hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you as well. This is Artemis, my guard.”

Artemis was already looking Ikarios over, searching for any cracks in his facade. Making note of his weaknesses. Ikarios shook her hand with a more subdued smile, sensing she meant business and only business. He would be right. Artemis didn’t make friends. She made notes and examples.

“Come on in then.” Ikarios led them into the building, all but bouncing the whole way. “I’m sure this place is nothing compared to what you have back home, but we make a living.”

“Oh, I’m sure it gets the job done just fine,” Dionysos assured him. “We were able to have a look at your vineyard from the road. The soil looks healthy.”

“Yeah, they’ve just started preparing it for the renewal, should be ready in a few weeks. It’s my favorite time of year really. Spring. That’s when the fun starts. Of course, it ends much sooner than we hold out hope for each year, which is why you’re here. To keep that from happening, but I’ll walk you through our process, so you know all the steps.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that. And you’re the curator, yeah?”

“That’s right. Been overseeing things for the past several years. Before that, I was an apprentice, but my mentor, he retired to Elis once he thought I was ready. Wine’s been shit long before that though, I assure you. Maybe even before his time.”

“Well, Thassos has never been known for its wine.”

“No, we were famous for our strawberry fields, back before the earthquake a few years back. They never really recovered, and our new leaders never seem too keen to keep trying too hard, but they were the sweetest berries in the Aegean. Of that, I am sure.”

“Oh, I concur. My mother loved them as well. They weren’t always stored well on the way to Old Crete, but sometimes, the ship was quick enough that the produce was fresh. She planted her own, and they were good, but they weren’t quite like these.”

“Hopefully, you can help us restore Thassos to some semblance of glory then. I would like to have someone tell a story like that about my wine.” Ikarios chuckled. “Though I’m sure you hear them all the time.”

Dio only chuckled, his face flushing scarlet.

“Anyway, you’ll also meet *my* apprentice at some point,” Ikarios went on. “Roxana. She’s been a huge help, but we only do what we can. This way.”

Dio let his eyes wander once they entered the processing room. The familiar sounds of production were like coming home, his heartbeat falling in line with them. Ikarios walked them through each step in the process, explaining everything from harvest to bottling. While he had been right about the soil and the vegetation itself, there were several issues he found along the line, the most glaring being the small workforce. Dio could make the wine taste better, but to some extent, they would have to choose between quality and quantity.

“So you stick to natural fermentation?” Dio questioned.

They had concluded the tour and now stood down in the wine cellar, Artemis walking through from end to end to ensure no hidden surprises.

“Uh, yeah, is that the issue?” Ikarios seemed more nervous than he had to start. “I know it might be more beneficial to help the process along, but we’ve always done it this way.”

“No, natural fermentation is great. I do it for most of my products apart from our busiest times of year. *But* there is such a thing as letting it fester too long, you know? Grapes are still prone to rot, especially depending on the amount of oxygen in the must to start and where you’re keeping them during that stage.”

“Definitely not down here.” Ikarios was red in the face now.

“It will certainly work better. You’re bringing the barrels down anyway. You might just wanna do that earlier. More than a few weeks for both reds and whites, and the quality begins to decline quickly, more so for the latter. I’ll create a timetable for you for the upcoming year.”

Ikarios looked dumbstruck, his jaw slack. “Fuck, we’ve really been winging it, haven’t we?”

Dionysos placed a hand on his shoulder. “It’s a lot of trial and error, but if no one’s looking to experiment, you’ll never know how good you can get.”

“Truth be told, I rarely drink the stuff anyway. I dunno if I’d know what exceptional wine tastes like. I prefer whiskey, and your whiskey at that.”

This made Dionysos chuckle. “A fair preference, for sure. Don’t worry though. You’re not beyond saving. I would recommend going for dormant vines though, instead of leafy greens.”

“Dormant vines?”

“Yeah, you can plant them earlier in the year, and you get a lot of the prep work out of the way for the rest of it. They go dormant during the winter, come alive in the spring.”

“No shit.”

He snickered. “No shit. It’s usually a preference thing, but seeing as you have such a small workforce and limited land, it’ll give you a step up, and you can focus work efforts on the harvest.” He squeezed Ikarios’ shoulder. “It’s okay to question traditions, Ikarios. I had it easy because there were no traditions in Khaos Falls. We didn’t have vineyards then. Just a lot of open land. I did have people who had worked in them before though, and their knowledge was invaluable. The point is you have a starting point, and that’s more than enough. You just have to trust yourself. Now, what do you have going right now?”

“The last of our tanks are going on five days or so, I think?”

“Okay, perfect. Let’s get a few crates bottled tonight. Even if we can’t salvage last year’s harvest fully, we might still be able to have some fun with the product, add a few ingredients. You mainly do reds, so we can add in some new flavors to at least make these final batches enjoyable. I’ll come back tomorrow, and we can try them, yeah?”

Ikarios breathed a sigh of relief, relaxing beneath Dio’s hand. “That would be great, thank you.”

“Of course. It’s my pleasure. Just have your people on standby in case we have to bottle the rest of it tomorrow, yeah?”

Ikarios nodded, pulling his radio off of his belt and relaying the orders to his workforce. Dionysos moved deeper into the cellar, eager to inspect it. He loved spending time down in his wine cellars. The cool air, the dense quiet, the magic happening inside each barrel of whiskey or rum or wine. Down there, tucked away from the world, was where he had done most of his healing after the shooting. Walls of dirt and stone acted as impenetrable shields beneath the earth. It was where he would hide when Athena started leaving again and leaving longer, sometimes wishing he could burrow deeper into the ground until he disappeared altogether. Those

days were the hardest, but in the cellars, he was comfortable. In the cellars, he was safe.

“Can I treat you two to dinner?” Ikarios called down the line.

“Actually, no, I’m - I’ve gotta meet my - the other leader that came with me.”

Dio forced himself not to look at Artemis although he could feel her eyes on him. He walked back towards Ikarios, who was nodding.

“So you’ve been to our city before?”

“A few times,” Dio replied. “It’s been awhile though.”

“When was the last time you were here?”

“At least three years or so. Things have been busy in Khaos Falls.”

“Oh, I bet. What about the first time? You ever see this place in its prime?”

“What would you call its prime?”

They both laughed. “Six or seven years ago, before Acrisius took power. Before him, the place wasn’t so wild, so - unstable. People were friendly, and things were good. You didn’t have to worry about someone stabbing you in the back or cutting your throat just to eat for a week, you know? It was a good place.”

“It will be again, don’t you worry.” Although Dio wasn’t sure how long it would take. “How has it been since Amphitryon and Tantalos took over?”

Ikarios’ face fell, and it was immediately evident that he was contemplating whether or not to tell the truth. His eyes flickered between Dio and the ceiling. Both Artemis and Dio moved closer to him.

“I already met them both, remember?” Dio offered, instantly aware of how important this would be. Something to bring with him to dinner at least.

Ikarios crossed his arms over his chest. “Is it better than it was with Acrisius? Immensely, but - the whole thing feels the same, you know. An ego trip. Tantalos wants to feel young again, and Amphitryon wants to play with the big boys.”

“And the guy before them? The one that took Acrisius off his high horse?”

Ikarios glanced around again then moved closer. “Still missing. No one has seen him in over a year, but it can’t be said for certain that Tantalos and Amphitryon had anything to do with it.”

“Why not?” Artemis asked.

“Because there were others who made a move for leadership, others who were knocked back down the moment they put their hands on the manor doorknob. It’s impossible to know who got rid of him and who merely took advantage of his absence.”

“And how did these two manage to get in?” Dio had been wondering about that.

Ikarios shrugged. “If you asked me, it was nothing but spite. They were a team though, and not many people here are willing to be part of a team even if it means getting into leadership. But when someone takes over, those who want that spot don’t put much stock into it. Tantalos and Amphitryon, they’re wearing paper crowns. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if they were just puppets while someone else pulled the strings.”

Dio glanced at Artemis, who was already looking at him with keen eyes. He then looked back at Ikarios, his curiosity piqued.

“Someone else like who?”

Ikarios gave another shrug. “Who knows. Tantalos started throwing money around the moment he took over, money he didn’t have before by way of his official background, and no one can really say where it came from. But there are just too many players and not enough squares on the board to fit them all. It could be anyone. There were rumors of the same thing

happening with Acrisius too, and it would explain how someone got to Timotheos, the leader after him, so easily and so quickly after Acrisius died. If they can remain behind the curtain, they avoid the risk of being assassinated.”

Dio shook his head. “I just don’t get it. Why not just give the people what they need? If you give your people what they need, you’ll never need to worry about trouble because the city will be behind you. That’s why no one in Khaos Falls worries about my uncle.”

“If you can keep all the wealth and all the power, and you also have the bodies to spare, why would you give anyone anything?” Artemis offered.

“How did you all manage behind Zeus?” Ikarios asked, his voice thin. “We heard horror stories about him, always in comparison to our own.”

Dio fought not to flinch. “Even though Zeus was city leader, my uncle still did most of the work, and we have our own districts. We still had power, and Zeus was too busy living off the spoils to try and bully us much. As long as he got his, we got ours.”

“Well, Amphitryon and Tantalos may not strip us of everything we manage to scrounge up the way Acrisius did, and the kids on the street are a bit safer, but I suppose we have you all to thank for that last part.”

“What about the violence in general?” Artemis’s eyes were probing.

“It fluctuates. Most of it has been contained to certain parts of the city, but every now and again, it gets - excessive. I will say that Tantalos is no stranger to inciting it either. Depending on his mood, his antics can get pretty extreme.”

“I imagine they are not well liked.”

“That depends on who you ask. Those he gets along with love him. Those aware of what’s important know it’s only a matter of time until resources become scarce, and this place starts looking like Heraklion.”

And Heraklion wasn't a place any city wished to look like because Heraklion was hardly a city at all. It was a cul de sac of rundown streets that surrounded the underground fighting pits. Dionysos shuddered. Hermes had spent time in those pits before he managed to claw his way out and make it to Khaos Falls, but he was damn near a corpse when he reached Asphodel. He had recovered well, and one would never guess how much blood was on his soft, manicured hands, but Dionysos knew. He'd also cleaned those knuckles enough times to know that after going through that, it's difficult to know when to stop fighting.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," he said quietly, his eyes still gazing out beyond the walls of the cellar. "If I can get them to listen, to come to Khaos Falls and talk with my uncle, we can keep that from happening. I know that."

Ikarios didn't look convinced. "Just don't underestimate them. Those men are so much more than they appear, and none of it is any good."

Dionysos nodded, allowing the room to fall into silence. Even if he knew this was likely the reality, it was difficult to hear it. He wasn't used to feeling helpless, not anymore, and the past year had imposed it upon him so viciously that he was afraid it was going to be a permanent adjustment.

He was still dwelling on everything he'd heard when Ikarios walked them back upstairs and out to their vehicle. Dio assured him once more that he would be there early the next morning so that they could get to work. Ikarios waved to them as Artemis pulled out of the parking lot, turning back onto the main road, the sun preparing to set.

"Do you think we'll be able to help?" It was no more than a whisper.

Artemis exhaled a heavy breath. "You know what they say. You cannot help those who do not wish to be helped."

"But the people want help. And they deserve it."

She smiled, her stoic demeanor shattering piece by piece. Intense and intimidating as she was, Dionysos knew the other

side of Artemis, the caring and compassionate side that poked fun at him all day but would take a tooth from anyone who would dare do the same with any malice. He was grateful for both.

She elbowed his arm lightly. “If there is a way, Dio, you’ll be the one to find it. That is the one thing I know for sure.”

Dionysos hoped she was right.

CHAPTER 10

ATHENA

Without the pressure of a meeting on the edge of her conscious thoughts, Athena found Thassos to be relatively enjoyable. Of course, she remained on the outskirts within a mile of the bungalow, but the seaside cafes and bookstores were something she could marvel in for hours if allowed. More precisely, if she allowed herself.

She did take the morning however, after some pestering by Nike, who insisted that Dio was more likely to be recognized here than she was. She perused the bookstore for several hours with Nike keeping a reasonable distance, getting lost in the endless opportunities for knowledge and escapism alike. She purchased several books, many of them used and battered but interesting nonetheless. She would have likely read them all where she stood if the shopkeeper hadn't cleared her throat several times in just under fifteen minutes, tossing pointed glances in Athena's direction.

It *was* nice to have some anonymity here though. Back home, not only was she the Olympus District leader. She was still Zeus's shadow, his protege, the one he had traded his sons for. It caused friction with Ares to this day, and why wouldn't it when people made him feel as though he had usurped a throne, gifted to him by his uncle despite his father's wishes? It was no surprise he took it out on her either. He had been doing so since she came to live in Zeus's house just as his mother had. The only difference was that Athena didn't stand quietly and take it anymore. She could fight fire with fire, so while Ares was a minefield she had learned to navigate, she

was sure to pour gasoline on everything she passed. That way, no matter where she flung a match, it would always catch.

He was careful about unleashing his anger now.

As she sifted through the many items for sale in the outdoor marketplace, she nearly ran right into someone, only just sidestepping them but still managing to graze their shoulder.

“Sorry, I—“

She looked up at the man before her, who had stopped as well, his bronze skin glowing beneath the sun and his dark hair falling in waves around his face. She could hardly make out his features at first due to the position of the sun above, but once he bent forward, they were clear as day. Hazel eyes, thin lips, and the faintest smattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose.

“Pallas?”

“Oh shit. Athena?” His eyes widened as he looked her over, placing his hands on the back of his head. “No fucking way. Is that you?”

She laughed nervously. “It is. Fates.”

Then he was swooping her up in a hug, flattening her into the hard planes of his chest until it was almost painful. She awkwardly hugged him back, patting his shoulders with shaking hands until he put her down.

“What are you doing here?” they both asked at once, causing another round of laughter.

“I’m here on business,” she replied, adjusting her scarf. “Meetings and stuff. You?”

“I’m - well, I live here now. I’m the harbormaster.” He paused. “Speaking of which, when did you get in? Where did you come from? Where have you been all this time?”

“Okay, take a breath.” She smirked, shaking her head. “Khaos Falls. We got here the night before last.”

“Khaos Falls? Wait, you - oh shit. You’re a district leader?”

She nodded proudly. “I am. The Olympus District.”

“Oh, that - wasn’t that—“

“Zeus’s district, yes. How do you know about him?”

“Who doesn’t? It became a cautionary tale here right before Amphitryon and Tantalos took over, but everyone had heard stories by then about how he went about his business. Even in Delos.”

“You were still in Delos?”

“Yeah.” He scratched the back of his head, his smile sheepish. “Actually, I probably would’ve stayed there too, but - well, I found my father.”

Her eyes widened. “What? Really?”

“Yeah.” He chuckled, his nerves evident. “It took a lot of work and drachmae and stowing away on boats just waiting for a reason to sink, but I found him. He was in Lemnos, working for some shady people, but I helped him pay off his debts, so he could come home to Thassos. Then he helped me find work at the port, and now I’m at the top of the food chain.”

“That’s great, Pallas, really. I know how much you wanted to find him. Is he...”

His smile turned sad. “Naw, he passed a couple years back.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s alright. I mean, we had a good run while we were together. He didn’t even know my mom was pregnant, you know, and considering what my mom did with me, I could never put that past her. We got along great though.”

“I am glad to hear that at least.”

“What about you? You ever find your family?”

She smiled to herself, unable to help it. If there was anything that could make her soft and steel all at once, it was mention of her family. The one she made all on her own, the one that made her.

“Yeah, but not in the way you did. Or in the way I intended.” He furrowed a brow. She went on. “Zeus took me in and raised me with his sons.”

“Seriously? Ha! It all makes sense now. I mean not to say you couldn’t have taken the whole city if you wanted to, but you know.”

“Yeah, well now my Uncle Hades runs it all, and they’re my family. All of his nephews. One of them is—” *Everything*. She swallowed the word. “Well, he’s here with me as well. He leads one of the districts too.”

“It wouldn’t happen to be the winemaker, would it?”

Athena straightened. “How did you know?”

“One of my friends works down at the winery, said they had a celebrity in today. The winemaker from Khaos Falls. I figured he was on the ship too.”

She silently berated herself before breathing out a laugh. “Yes, that would be him.”

“Hear he’s trying to work magic on the shit wine Ikarios puts out. I wish him all the best.”

“Oh, you’ll be surprised at what he can do. Everything he touches turns to - very good wine.”

He grinned. “I can’t wait to see the end result then.” Looking around, he shoved his hands in his pockets. “Were you going somewhere before I nearly knocked you down?”

“Mm, actually it was me who almost bowled you over. I was just finishing up at the shops though. Thought I’d take a day to see the more casual side of the island.”

“I hope it treated you well, but if you haven’t gone into The Trojan yet, there is no way you’re done.”

“The Trojan?”

“Yeah, that little cafe back there.” He turned and pointed at the windows at the end of the line. “The guy who runs it... Well, you can guess where he’s from. Come on. My treat.”

Athena glanced at her watch. She still had a decent amount of time before Dionysos was set to arrive back at the bungalow, and there was also the chance of him running late if Tantalos decided to drop in and hassle him. Still, she wondered if she would be cutting it close. She looked up again.

Pallas’ bright eyes were fixed on her. She would know those eyes anywhere, once guiding her like stars in the dark when they were both nothing but lost children left on the rocky shores of Delos by some circumstance or another. They had grown up together in a group home run by the local temple where you earned your keep via manual labor and high marks in your studies. Athena had surpassed all expectations early on, and she was rewarded by one of her teachers, Ianthe, who taught her how to play chess in one of the empty rooms of the house. She had loved the game from the first time she ever saw Ianthe play it against a fellow teacher, and Ianthe had promised to teach her if she passed all of her tests with the highest possible marks. Athena didn’t slack for a second, and it was worth every sleepless night and excessively long day.

But it wasn’t Ianthe alone who had gotten her through the worst times in the house. It was Pallas, the brazen boy with the heart of a lion. Back then, they were the only constants in one another’s lives. Other kids came and went, teachers were hired, fired, and retired, but they remained together until... well, until the day he left without warning.

She had hoped one day they would be reunited, thick as thieves once again. But after several years, life went on or got in the way, and she had new things and people to focus on. She could only hope he had fared as well as she had after he left her in that group home, running away on some mission he refused to speak of for fear someone might hear. She supposed that mission had been to find his father. She just didn’t know why he couldn’t tell her.

But that was so long ago, and it didn’t bother her anymore.

After Athena managed to get Nike to go back to the bungalow without her and await Dio, she and Pallas entered The Trojan and took a table by the window. Pallas ordered them a few pastries he swore by, and he went to get them when the cashier called their number. Athena didn't wait to start eating, the sun having drained her of more energy than she had realized. The pastries were in fact delicious as well, and the crisp, cold water went down so smooth that she finished most of the bottle in a single drink.

“So what is it like? Khaos Falls?” he questioned after fifteen minutes of eating and idle chatter. “I've always wanted to go, but this job - I don't get a lot of days off, you know. Amphitryon and Tantalos are pretty strict about who gets to work what, which pretty much leaves me on my own a lot of the time.”

She filed that away for later. “It's - well, what did you hear about it?”

“A lot. Praise for the wine, the beaches, the banquets, the sports, the casino, and even the river with all the spirits in it.”

She snorted. “Really?”

“Yes, really. Sounds like a paradise.”

She nodded even as she rolled her eyes. “In a way, yeah. At the very least, everybody can find their brand of paradise there. Now that Hades is in charge, things run a lot more smoothly.”

“I bet.” He cut into one of his pastries. He'd already devoured the first. “So I take it you all are here to mingle with our leadership?”

“I don't know if I would call it mingling.”

“But you met them, right?”

“Oh, yeah. Had dinner with them, and then Tantalos took us to a club last night.”

He snickered around his fork. “That man is a wrecking ball. He turned The Siren into his own personal playground as his first order of business.”

“What was it before?”

“It was still a club, but believe it or not, it’s a lot more exclusive now. Those people are his people. They have something to offer him. Everyone else is kept out.”

“I figured it had to be something like that considering how they all flocked to him. I had to be the only one uninterested apart from my guard.”

“He’s the kind of guy they like. Flashy and expensive, you know.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Though she realized she wasn’t at all interested in talking about Tantalos right now. Or work in general. Odd. “So why did you stay on Delos after you left?”

He sighed. “Well, I got roped into a job, chopping up cars and delivering parts around the city. Once I realized no one was looking for me-“ He flicked his eyes in her direction momentarily. “I mean, the overseers, I decided I could stay on the island as long as I wanted. I went to Northern Delos eventually, visited Mykonos for awhile, but I was still struggling with a lot. I couldn’t read much for one if you recall.”

She nodded. “I recall.”

“You used to have to read the literature assignments to me.”

They both laughed. “And the math too, but I think that was a separate issue.”

“Yeah, a lack of will. But - I figured the numbers out much sooner than the letters. I wasn’t around the best people, and my dad didn’t finish his schooling either, but I don’t judge. I’m sure my position isn’t all that lucrative to some people.”

“Like district leaders.”

He threw her a hard look, but once he realized she was smiling, he smiled too and tossed a berry at her. She caught it and set it on a napkin before taking the last bite of her pastry. He began rifling off questions about her job then which she was more than happy to answer although he mainly wanted to

know what she did with her free time and what kind of lessons Zeus gave her to prepare her for leadership.

Still, she found that it was easier to talk about her past with Zeus than it was to consider her present without him, not because she missed him but because she missed the naïveté she was able to hide behind when he was still there. Now she had no choice but to own all of her flaws. He may have inflicted the wounds, but it was her job to tend to them, to keep them from bleeding all over other people.

They quieted as the barista came over to fill the coffees they'd ordered halfway through their chat, thanking her with kind smiles. Athena set about putting sugar in hers, inhaling the fresh scent of a divine dark roast.

“I'm sorry.”

She froze mid-stir and looked up at him. He wasn't looking at her anymore, but his lips were parted, and he was exhaling deep breaths.

“Sorry for what?” she asked.

“Leaving you there. I figured things would go a lot smoother for you if you didn't have to carry me all the time, and - I didn't wanna drag you into trouble if I didn't make it, you know?”

She waved him off, wiping her mouth with her napkin. “You don't have to apologize, Pallas. We were both in an impossible situation, and getting out started getting less likely every single day. I don't blame you. I mean, was I hurt at first? Of course. You were my best friend. My only friend, and—“

“And we'd made a pact that we would stick together.”

“Yeah.”

“And I regretted breaking it every single day. I felt - like I wasn't a whole person. Like something was missing.”

“I assure you I can relate.”

“I kept telling myself that once I saved up enough for two tickets out, I would go back for you. Get you out somehow. But the guys I was working with, they kept me in debt until I

realized it was going up not down, and then I had to duck out of there too. And by then, I - I figured you'd been adopted, and you didn't feel guilty about it anymore because I left you first."

She only nodded again, unwilling to explain to him the truth of the situation, which was that the people who had been raising them had never been trying to get them adopted. And if she hadn't accidentally happened upon Ianthe's discussions with the headmistress, she never would have known what they were doing. Selling children to the highest bidder.

And the highest bidder was never a nice family who wanted children to love. It was always people like Acrisius. Ianthe had been shielding Athena for as long as she could, but someone had finally met the headmistress's number, an offer she couldn't refuse.

Ianthe knew it was the end of the line too because while Athena had resorted to crying in a broom closet, Ianthe had escalated to packing her a small bag and hiding it in the dumpster behind the kitchen. She had led Athena out in the dead of night, giving her some money to eat and just enough for a ship ticket. But before Athena found the port, she had been cornered by two bigger boys who hadn't harmed her physically but had taken everything she had save for a box of crackers and a bottle of water. Still, she managed to get on that ship. She managed to make it to exactly where she needed to go.

"We both got out," she said. "We got out, and we're here now. And I didn't leave very long after you did. I didn't look for you either because things had to move fast, so I understand. You found your father, and I found a family, and that's all we wanted for each other in the end, right?"

"Yeah, except - we wanted to do it together."

"We were young and optimistic. The world had no room for us then."

"And now?"

She gave him a soft smile, heart slowing in her chest. It was odd. She would have never expected to feel so much seeing him again. She had built walls as tall as mountains after leaving Delos, hardening her heart to the harshness of the world. While Dionysos had managed to weasel beneath them and the rest of her adoptive family had earned various levels of entry, no one else had proven quite capable, and she preferred it that way. But this was her first friend, and regardless of the amount of time passed, that bond still remained, a frayed string that tugged on her heart every now and again. He knew the most fundamental parts of her, understanding them in a way only possible by those present. How could she ever feel nothing for the boy with a hammer for a heart?

“Now, the world is ours,” she said. “There’s no one to stop us from going forward together, at least in some ways. I’ll be honest. I - I didn’t make a lot of friends after you. And with Zeus, he made it a point to keep my circle small. If he had it his way, I wouldn’t even be friends with his sons or have a relationship with my uncle. He made it hard for us to get along because he treated everyone else so horribly, but...”

“I can’t even imagine. Like - I’m glad you got a family, but I remember you. I know it had to be hard getting shoved into a big ass family right away.”

She chuckled. “You have no idea.”

“...But - so you replaced me?” He smirked.

She shook her head. “I could never replace you. I have - well, I have a best friend, and he’s been there for me since the day we met. We’ve been there for each other really, but he’s much better at that than I am.”

She chuckled, Dio’s face rising like the sun behind her eyes and filling her with warmth—

Dio.

“Shit.”

Her face fell, a panic rising in her throat. She looked out the window, the beach outside bathed in shadows. The sun had set. She was the one that was going to be late.

No. She already *was* late.

“Something wrong?” Pallas questioned.

“I - I was supposed to meet Dio for dinner,” she explained, gathering her food tray and standing up to dump it.

“Dio?”

“Yeah, my - the other leader that I came with.”

“The guy you were just talking about?”

“Yes, the exact one, and he was taking me to a restaurant he knew—“

“Well, which one. I could run and get my truck, give you a ride.”

“No, no, I don’t know which one it was. We were supposed to meet back at the house at sunset.”

“Oh, well, I’ll walk you back then.”

He got up swiftly, packing his last pastry into the bag it had come in and dusting off his shirt. Once she had cleaned up her area, he led her out the door.

“Where are you staying?”

“It’s nearby.” She was flustered of course, guilt coursing through her especially after last night when she’d sent Dio away despite wanting to do anything but. “Amphitryon reserved a bungalow for us. We were gonna just stay on the ship, but—“

“But he felt the need to show off.”

She gave him a side glance, amusement holding some of her anxiety at bay. “Do you interact often with these guys?”

He sighed. “Well, Tantalos has his cruise ship or whatever in the harbor, and that’s usually where his after parties end up. He always invites me as if I’m not working all the time. Amphitryon cut our city security budget. I mean gutted it, so we don’t really have a lot of help watching the water. And after the main security firm left to Deucalion Heights on a contract—“

“Perseus?”

“Yeah, you know him?”

“Yeah, he was Acrisius’ grandson, right?”

Pallas clapped his hands together. “That’s right. I guess he was wrapped up in that whole thing, huh?”

“He was the one that told Hephaestus, our head of security and - my adoptive brother, that Acrisius was going to Khaos Falls for Aphrodite. Then he flew Hephaestus back in his plane.”

“No shit? Yeah, he seemed like a cool guy, much cooler than his grandfather for sure, but he was the main shield around here. I don’t blame him for leaving though. I’ve thought about getting out of here quite a few times since these guys took over.”

“Why don’t you?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Timing never felt right, and my savings grow at a very gradual pace. I try to help some of the elders in my neighborhood too, people who helped my dad when he got back. People who helped me bury him.”

They turned the corner onto the main road, and she could make out the bungalow in the distance.

“That’s good of you,” she replied. “You know, you can always come to Khaos Falls. Now that you know someone in a leadership position.”

He laughed. “Yeah?”

“Of course. We always have work. Our city forces are growing, and we’re actually opening another port soon, so there’s that. The harbor is growing too. Expansion is a never-ending game even just within the city.”

“That does sound nice. Like I said, I’ve always wanted to go. But - leaving the job and leaving the community are two very different things.”

“Yeah, I get that. And I get wanting to help. That’s Dio’s big thing here too. Not that I didn’t want to help, but I was

focused on the politics of it all. I came into it kind of all-or-nothing, you know? Either they agreed to an alliance or they decided to be an enemy. Dio reminded me it's about the people though. That the city isn't made up of its leadership but of its citizens."

Pallas smiled. "He seems like a smart man."

"One of the smartest. But - not in the way I'm used to."

"What do you mean?"

"He thinks with his heart before his head most times." Or his - other head, but she kept that to herself even as a sudden jolt of heat hit her belly. "But it works."

"You probably fit together pretty well then, huh? You always had trouble with that. Trusting your heart."

She scoffed. "No, I did not."

"Oh, yes, you did. Or at least ignoring your logical little brain. Remember when I tried to get you to walk barefoot in that little pond out behind the school?"

"There were literally thorns everywhere."

"And *logically*, that's a good reason not to do it."

"Practically too."

"Yeah, but it was fun."

"I can have fun *and* be logical."

"But you also don't have to be logical all the time."

"You were just as logical as I was. Even without the math and the reading, you plotted and planned out everything. I learned how to plan things from you."

"Hey, I had to have some kind of skill, especially when I had to work around my weaknesses."

"Okay, so being logical wasn't all that bad."

"I never said it was." He bumped his shoulder against hers. "It *was* - *is* one of my favorite things about you, and I'm glad it hasn't changed much."

“What do you—“

“Athena?!”

Her head snapped up at the sound of her name. Dionysos was running towards her down the sidewalk, Artemis and Nike already gaining on him.

CHAPTER 11

DIONYSOS

Dio's heart was a bomb fitting to burst, tearing his insides to shreds at any moment. Seeing Athena was a great relief of course, but seeing her next to a strange man had nearly sent him into the kind of panicked fury that could never possibly end well. Fortunately, Artemis had reached them first, but before she could grab the man, Athena had stepped in front of him like a shield. Then she was explaining that it was her childhood friend, and it was almost as though someone had submerged Dio's head underwater, her words distorted amidst the deafening thud of his pulse.

When he arrived back at the bungalow to find Athena gone, he hadn't been all that surprised. Nike explained she had gone out for a walk down the beach with a friend she'd run into, but she hadn't given anymore detail beyond that. Although that may have been because Artemis' rage had whipped into the room in the blink of an eye. Nike had then been forced to talk her down from sending a full search party, and Dio had resigned to pacing the living room, holding out hope that she would return any moment for their date. Well, for dinner. Just dinner.

But then she didn't come, and anticipation turned to hurt turned to worry until all that he could think about was every worst case scenario possible. Then she'd come strolling down the street with this man without a care in the world, and none of that anxiety subsided. Instead, it grew worse.

He stood back as Artemis and Athena spoke, Artemis lowering her blade although not yet sheathing it. He was dizzy

and disoriented, the entire debacle taking a toll he hadn't expected. Still, when Athena pushed through their guard to get to him, he stood tall and offered her a weak smile.

"Glad to see you're alright," he managed before she could speak. "You had us worried."

"I'm sorry I was late for dinner," she immediately countered. "I ran into Pallas, and we got to talking. Pallas."

The man stepped around Artemis's distrustful gaze, smiling as he came to stand beside Athena. He was several inches taller than Athena with dark hair and glittering eyes, and the t-shirt he wore was tight enough that it accentuated the flat of his belly and chisel of his chest. Dio offered his hand and a smile in return.

"Dio, this is Pallas," Athena introduced. "We were together for awhile. I mean, we grew up together. We were kids, in Delos, at that group home I told you about. We were so small, and we went in at the same time, and so—"

"We kept each other safe," Pallas contributed, dropping his hand.

"Ah, well, thank you for that." Dio's voice was more hoarse than he had expected.

"And this is Dio," Athena went on.

"Yeah, I got that. I heard you were down at the winery today," Pallas said.

"Oh, yeah. Trying to help out is all."

"They can use all the help they can get down there, so from everyone in the city, thank you."

"It's nothing really. I just wanna help."

"Athena said that, that you help people. That's good to hear. Invaluable around here."

"Yeah, I bet. You - you live out here now then?"

Pallas nodded. "I'm the harbormaster. I missed your ship unfortunately. It was one of the few nights I was able to get away for a few hours although I'm surprised now. Having two

leaders from Khaos Falls coming in, you would think they would have all hands on deck.”

“Don’t complain about the rest,” Athena warned him playfully.

“You’re right, you’re right. But I’m so glad I ran into Athena. That was some luck, huh?”

“Definitely.”

They were looking at one another now, and Dio shifted uncomfortably where he stood. His eyes wandered of their own accord, landing on Artemis’s. They met his, and her face softened some, but she said nothing. What could she say? What could anyone say to soothe the ache in his chest right now.

“So I should get going,” Pallas finally huffed. “But, uh, you - can we get dinner tomorrow night? I know this place across town, great meat and bread selection. You can literally build your own kebob and cook it yourself or have them do it. It’s a whole thing.”

Dio went still. *No, it couldn’t be.* How could it be? How many restaurants were in this bloody city?

“Um...” Athena’s eyes flickered towards Dio then back to Pallas, and she smiled. “I will call you.”

“Oh, yeah, sure. I forget you’re here on business and not just to run into old friends.”

“If only,” she chuckled, pulling out her phone.

They exchanged numbers as Artemis and Nike came back towards them, Dio looking down the street although he had no clue what he was looking for. A way out maybe.

Once Athena and Pallas finished, Pallas bid them all good night before continuing past the bungalows towards the port. Dio immediately turned to head back to the house, Artemis at his side, and he did everything he could to scrub the emotion from his face.

“Dio, hold on,” Athena called.

“Calm,” Artemis hissed to him before continuing towards the stairs.

Dio turned, smiling as big as he could although it didn't quite meet his eyes.

“Yeah, what's up?”

“I'm really sorry. I just lost track of time.”

He waved a hand. “No worries. It's fine. It's - you didn't know you were gonna run into an old friend, and - you know, you were catching up. I get it.”

“I should have called. I didn't mean to worry you or anything.”

“You're safe now, and that's what matters. I mean, I know we missed the reservation, but I'm positive I can still get us in, so it's alright. We can still go.”

She bit her lip. His heart plummeted. Or was it his stomach? Either way, he was no longer hungry.

“Or we don't have to,” he corrected. “It's alright.”

“I promise we'll go before we leave. I'm just - I'm exhausted, and I didn't realize how hot it would be today. It drained me. I just wanna shower and lay down.”

“Oh, yeah, yeah, okay. Actually, it sounded like Pallas was talking about the same restaurant, so you know, I - I'm pretty tired too anyway. It was a long - a long day.”

She stared at him, and he held his smile until it hurt. Until everything hurt. He knew it wasn't a big deal. He was being childish and needy again, and this was her friend too. Just like him.

At least you get to go home with her. Although, he was beginning to wonder if that would ever be enough for him or if he had been lying all this time.

He supposed it would have to be.

“Come on.”

He jerked his head toward the house before turning and continuing on. He heard her steps fall in line behind him, each clashing with the heavy beat of his heart, but he kept his head forward. There was nothing more he could say. They had a job to do, and this was a reminder that the job was their only priority.



DIONYSOS LEFT for the vineyard before the sun came to the bungalow seeing as sleep never arrived for him at all. The place was still quiet. There were some people in the fields, but the processing floor was still empty, and the quiet comforted him in a way it never had.

He made his way towards the wine cellar, but as he reached the door, he jumped back when it swung towards him. A woman walked out, gasping when she saw him and nearly dropping a case of bottles in her hands. He lunged forward, placing his hands beneath it and keeping it from slipping.

“Sorry, sorry,” he hissed, the glass within jingling. “I’m - I was - um—“

“Dionysos!” She breathed with an embarrassed laugh. “Yeah, Ikarios said you would be by, but I didn’t expect you so early.”

“Yeah, I - I couldn’t sleep, so I just decided to get an early start. I should have called or—“

“Oh, no, no, you’re absolutely fine. Ikarios should be here within the hour. These are actually the bottles that you requested.”

“Oh, brilliant!” He took them from her with a nod. “I should’ve told him to have you leave them down there. I’ll - I can take them, but - well, would you like to taste them with me?”

She laughed. “No, I’m fine, thank you. I’ve had more than my fair share.”

He chuckled too. “Of course, I’m sure.”

“But I’m absolutely willing to watch you do anything but enjoy it. I’m Roxana.”

“Oh, right, Ikarios’ apprentice. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“And you as well. You’re very much a celebrity down here.”

She offered her hand, and he took it. It was both soft and rough all at once, much like Athena’s hands. In fact, now that he took her in, it felt like... Well, it was much like looking at Ariadne. The long, dark curls and the golden brown skin and the matching golden brown eyes. Familiar yet foreign all at once. Almost her and yet not at all. Like an echo. Like someone else’s memory of her. Because he himself couldn’t forget the intricate details of her face if he tried.

He swallowed and released her hand, moving past her onto the stone steps leading into the cellar. Setting the crate on the desk, he dug a corkscrew out of the drawer and popped the first bottle open. Roxana came up beside him, setting down two glasses she had acquired from somewhere in the corner of the room, one of them filled with water. He was prepared to drink the wine straight from its bottle but thought better of it, pouring himself a decent amount.

“That bottle is one filled from the barrels we had already stored,” she stated. “For comparative purposes. And these...” She pointed to three other bottles in the crate. “Are freshly bottled from the fermentation tanks.”

When he drank, it almost burned, burned the way wine shouldn’t, and he didn’t care to contain his disgust this time. Even chilling it would have done nothing for the obvious rot on his tongue. Groaning, he set the glass down, and she chuckled.

“I’d like to say it gets better, but...”

“I wouldn’t believe you if you did,” he assured her, picking up the water glass.

“Do you think you can fix it?”

“This batch? I can help you make it, erm, consumable, maybe even tasty after a few glasses, but starting over is best. After this though, I promise you’ll have something worth selling.”

Swishing some of the water around in his mouth, he spit it on the ground then used some to clean out his cup. Opening one of the other bottles with the fresh wine, he poured some more, and after a deep breath, he took a drink. A little one. Then he waited.

A swish of his cheeks, a smack of his lips, then another. He drank again. And swallowed. When he looked at Roxana, her eyebrows were in her hairline.

“Maybe even before,” he concluded, looking at the deep red liquid. “This is not all that bad.”

Handing it to her, she gave him a suspicious eye, but when he didn’t laugh or smile or say he was kidding, she took a drink. The surprise on her face was evident.

“What - what’s wrong with it?”

He snorted. “You mean what’s right with it. Well, for one, the fermentation is on par to be perfect. It’s still a bit sweet for a red, but a few more days? Just a few more, and it will be a darling. No longer than that though.”

“And how do you plan to fix the other barrels?”

He sighed. “More fruit. The ripest fruit in the city we can find.”

“I don’t know if we’ll find enough fruit to fix all of this.”

“I can make some calls. You all have the berries. Khaos Falls has the apples and pears, some citrus. And I can also use a few spices. We’ll have to heat it a bit before storing it again, but we’ll make it work as best we can.”

“You really are a miracle worker.”

He grinned. “More like a mad scientist.”

As she set the glass down, the cellar door opened, and moments later, Ikarios appeared on the stairs.

“Ah, you’re here already!” he declared, arms spread open.

Dio nodded. “I am. Come taste this.”

He went through the same stage of suspicion as Roxana then the same stage of surprise once he tasted the wine.

“What did you do?” he asked slowly.

“Nothing yet. That’s the wine from the tanks. As I told Roxana, you leave it in there for a few more days, but then you pull it out and bottle, alright?”

“Wow, if I would’ve known...”

“You know now, and that’s what matters. As for the stuff in the barrels, I want you to find as many berries as you can in town. I’ll have some fruit shipped over from Khaos Falls. Maybe Tantalos and Amphitryon will even let me fly it in once they taste one of these new bottles.”

Ikarios threw his arms around Dio before Dio knew what to do, and he awkwardly hugged the man back with a deep chortle. It felt good to help, to be useful. Maybe he hadn’t wasted his life after all.

“Thank you, Dionysos,” Ikarios said, pulling away. “This is - it’s a miracle.”

“That’s what I said,” Roxana chirped, a smirk on her lips.

“Truly unbelievable.” Ikarios cleared the rest of the glass with a smile. “Now come. We can talk more over breakfast. The wine may be under par, but the restaurant upstairs is divine.”

Dio didn’t have the heart to argue nor the stomach, so he nodded and allowed Ikarios to lead them out of the cellar.

CHAPTER 12

DIONYSOS

The plan was to drag out his time in the winery for as long as possible. The longer he was here, the longer he was out of the house. If he was lucky, he wouldn't have to see Athena until tomorrow. He had already texted Artemis to let her know he'd taken a cab, but he only did so once he arrived so she wouldn't be worried. She had already replied that she would come meet him soon, but he also wanted to delay that as long as possible. He didn't want to talk about last night. He didn't want to think about it. He didn't want to be reminded of it. And he certainly didn't want to do any of those things about tonight. He might just have to choke down a barrel of this horrid wine, but he would do it if it meant not choking down the reality.

He wondered if all of this was written on his face multiple times that day because even once Ikarios said he could leave, Roxana instead offered to show him around the vineyards. He wanted to say no, to tell her he couldn't because she looked too much like the one person he was running from and yet not enough like her to save him, but he agreed instead because what else could he do?

Artemis told him she would meet him back at the winery, and while he was still aiming to be alone at some point without locking himself in his room, he had given up any hope for real peace for the remainder of the trip. Even as they walked among the rows of fertile soil, he could find no salvation. Was this why Athena kept leaving the city every chance she was given? So she could find solace from the pain Zeus's actions had inflicted upon her? And is that why things

were different now? Did she blame him for losing her mentor, for forcing Hades to finally drive Zeus from the city? It was a thought he had been trying to smother, but with each day and each excuse to be away from him, it grew more difficult to silence.

“You’re a quiet one.” He had almost forgotten Roxana was beside him. At least she didn’t sound like Athena. “I never would have guessed from what I’ve heard about you. What I’ve seen...”

“Not usually,” he assured her with a smile. “I... wait. What have you heard?” He slowed his steps, staring at her. “And what in the world have you seen?”

She flashed him a sly grin. “You were the life of the party at The Siren the other night. I was there with some friends.”

“Ah.” He laughed at his own paranoia, continuing on alongside her. “Right, of course.”

“And honestly, Club Elysium is as legendary as Casino Asphodel in most circles.”

“Yeah? You ever been?”

“Naw, have not had the pleasure, but I did visit the Lush District a few times when I was still in university. You have clubs there too, don’t you?”

“I do.” He wet his lips. “You aren’t some spy for Amphitryon, are you?”

She scoffed, which devolved into a burst of laughter. “Are you kidding? Amphitryon wouldn’t trust me with that kind of job.”

“Why not?”

“Women are second-class citizens at best to him. And the darker in skin tone we are, the worse he sees us.”

Dio wished he could say he was surprised. He rolled his eyes, finding himself suddenly more angry than he was used to being at any given moment..

“Makes a lot of sense, the arrogant little fuck.”

“Mm, he won’t say it outright, but he isn’t shy about showing it either.”

“I definitely saw it, but I - I figured it was just Athena’s way of doing things that he didn’t like.”

“Athena?”

“My - uh, she runs the Olympus District back in Khaos Falls. She came with me.”

She hissed. “Yeah, I can only imagine how that went. He’s a bastard, and Tantalos is a pig. Although I imagine he spent more time looking at you.”

He scratched the back of his neck. “I guess so. Does he only like men?”

“No, no. He’s really not picky, and he really doesn’t have to be, but he prefers them I think. More importantly, he prefers men who he can see himself in. —No pun intended.”

He snickered. “Of course not. Well, yeah, I could see how we have some things in common.”

“He likes to have fun mainly, and I think you can relate.”

“I can.” He remembered the days when he didn’t feel so ashamed about it too. “It seems like everyone here knows their leaders rather well.”

Her smile softened. “That’s what happens when just anyone can be leader. I went to university with Amphitryon, and I have always known him to look down on me. As for Tantalos, I knew him when he was a DJ at The Siren. And a bootleg CD salesman on the pier. And a car salesman.”

“Huh. So it really is just anyone that can be leader. Not to say I have a whole bunch of credentials myself.”

“But you have a trade, and you’ve created plenty of things worthy of coveting.” She shrugged. “Although I shouldn’t sell my leadership so short. I suppose there are a few things you need. Mainly flexible morals and a matching spending account.”

“Makes sense. What about Amphitryon? What did he do before this?”

“He worked for the old leader actually, Timotheos. Amphitryon has a degree in political science in case you couldn’t guess, with a minor in manipulating people into thinking they need him.”

“—But there’s no way Tantalos was making much money with any of those gigs, right? And how much could they really be paying Amphitryon when Timotheos didn’t even last a year?”

She shrugged. “We always figured Amphitryon’s family had money, but no one really knows where he came from prior to school.”

“But what’s the money for anyway if you’re just taking power?”

“The guard.”

“The guard?”

She nodded. “Whoever has the loyalty of the leadership guard is the leader. Flimsy as it is, it works.”

“Until it doesn’t.”

“Right, but.- I don’t know.”

“What is it?”

They came to a stop at the edge of the vineyard aisle, both of them looking out beyond the fence at the city. Dionysos couldn’t recall seeing a city so defeated. Even in Old Crete, when things were at their worst, the people still banded together. The people still held strong. But the people of Thassos seemed all too eager to pretend they weren’t where they were, no matter what that looked like.

“It’s different with Tantalos and Amphitryon,” she finally said, little more than a whisper. “They came in and immediately had order. There were no riots, no last-minutes attempts to take them out before they settled, nothing. The announcement was made, and the people who needed to accept it just - did.”

“What do you mean the people who needed to?”

“We do have community leaders, people who keep things up and running in those moments when we have no official city head, and they are never eager to accept the next one. They run interference, intimidate supporters, interrogate everyone they can if they don’t think them suitable. They are the only ones apart from the leader themselves that have the loyalty of the guard, so they have as much sway over the leader as one can hope for. Even when Acrisius swept in with all his bullshit promises that most of the people believed, they were plotting on him from day one. It’s just that - sometimes, they’re not enough, and the guard folds.”

“Everyone has a number. That’s what my uncle says.”

“And he would be correct.”

“But they didn’t do that this time.”

She shook her head. “If they were or they are, they’re not vocal about it. And everyone is always vocal. That’s why no one ever gets comfortable. Acrisius was hardly in the city when he was leader even though most people didn’t know about it.”

“And how did you know about it?”

“I was friends with his - his grandson.”

“Perseus?”

She glanced at him. “You know him?”

“Well, he helped my brother, Hephaestus. Acrisius tried to kill his girlfriend, my friend.”

She nodded. “Aphrodite. Yeah, we heard about it. Timotheos lied about that too, said Khaos Falls had sent a small army here to cause trouble. It wasn’t until after he was run out or whatever that the truth came out. Yet even then, Amphitryon and Tantalos, they just swept in and made everyone feel comfortable. Too comfortable. They get richer, and the city gets weaker, and no one even realizes it.”

“How are they doing it?”

“They send all the money to things people want but not what they need. Food production is down, but wine is up even if it’s horrible. Liquor imports are prioritized over produce imports. Tantalos has made The Siren into a paradise, but once they ran Perseus out of town, security was—“

“Wait, what? They ran him out of town?”

She nodded solemnly. “Timotheos had been trying to get him to leave for his entire time as leader. He wanted to wipe Acrisius’s memory from the city in every way possible. So Perseus, he set up a contract with Deucalion Heights. He wanted to leave, at first. Then Timotheos left, and Perseus wanted to stay to help rebuild the city after his grandfather’s death, to give back. But when they took over, Amphitryon and Tantalos, they went to him. I don’t know all that was said, and I don’t know they’re reasoning. Perseus wouldn’t talk about it either. He kinda just - left. All I know is that he made it very clear he had to leave. He was gonna go to Deucalion Heights to try and salvage the contract, and if he couldn’t, he would just keep going until he found something. Luckily, they let him in.”

It took a moment for Dio to realize he was shaking. So much information, and while he didn’t understand all of it, he knew it was important. He knew he needed to tell Athena.

But it was late in the afternoon, and she was probably getting ready for dinner, and he didn’t wish to intervene during that time. He would tell her later, but he had to tell someone, anyone who could help him make sense of it. He could tell Artemis. He would, but calling Hades or Hephaestus also seemed to be in his best interest, especially if it was pertinent information. If it wasn’t, he could wait to tell Athena in the morning. If it was, he might have to swallow his pride and go see her tonight.

When they got back to the vineyard, Artemis was waiting inside for them, speaking to Ikarios. It was evident to Dionysos that she wasn’t particularly riveted by the conversation, but she was doing her best to be diplomatic as well. As they approached, Ikarios cut the conversation to greet them.

“Glad you’re here!” He patted Dio’s shoulder. “Can I steal Roxana for just a moment? We are having some marketing issues, *but* good news. The berries will be here tonight. Will you stay and show us a recipe or something?”

“Yeah, for sure.”

“Perfect!”

Dio looked to Roxana. “Just come find me down in the cellar when you’re done.”

Ikarios thanked him once more before leading Roxana away. Meanwhile, Dio headed for the cellar, gesturing for Artemis to follow.

Once downstairs, he dialed Hades, sitting down at the desk and putting the phone on speaker. However, it wasn’t Hades that answered. It was Persephone.

“Seph? Where’s my uncle?”

“He had to run downstairs to handle something with Thana,” Seph sighed. “Forgot his phone of course.” Hades had been doing that a lot since taking over as leader. At least with his personal phone. “Your brother is here though. Aphrodite and Hecate too.”

“Will he be up soon? I have some information to share, but I’m not quite sure what any of it means or if it’s important at all. I mean, I think it is.”

“Where’s Athena?”

“She’s - um, having dinner with an old friend she ran into.”

“Old friend?” Seph and Hephaestus echoed at once.

“Yeah.”

Dio attempted not to sound so bitter. The look on Artemis’s face told him he’d failed. Miserably. He huffed.

“Anyway, can I just tell you?” he pushed.

Hephaestus answered now. “Go ahead, brother.”

Eager to move on, Dionysos recounted everything that Roxana had said to him. Of course, that led to Hephaestus

asking 21 questions about Roxana while Artemis searched the room again for any cameras or bugs, but after, everyone was silent for a time. It made Dio anxious.

“That *is* odd,” Hephaestus finally concurred. “Timotheos disappearing is one thing, but these guys just swooping in and pulling stability out of their ass is something else entirely.”

“How would they manage it?” Seph questioned.

“They would need friends in high places, and as far as we know, they don’t have that.”

“Maybe we just - don’t know,” Dio offered.

“But Athena hit every major island doing business with them in any way. We checked and double checked.”

“Maybe you missed something.”

“I highly doubt it.”

“Well, I’m sure they don’t need that much money to run a little island like Thassos,” Aphrodite offered. “They just need enough.”

“And what is enough?” Seph asked.

Dionysos sat back in the chair, his head beginning to hurt. That was the question, wasn’t it? What was enough? And who would help a car salesman and an intern run a city?

“It’s not - the city though,” Dio said, his voice strained with frustration. “The money, it’s not going to helping the people. They’re funding clubs and - and cutting food imports. They’re self-serving cons, so how is it that they manage to keep stability when they’re letting people starve? *That’s* what doesn’t make sense to me. How do you get the entire city to turn a blind eye?”

“But you said it, Brother.” Hephaestus’ tone was dark. “It’s not the entire city. It’s just the people they trust to protect them from their own leadership. And what does Uncle say?”

Dio huffed, repeating the words for the second time today. “Everyone has a number.”

Another long silence, Dio's thoughts clashing and colliding until they were one muddy mess.

"I'm gonna go down to the security office, see what I can pull up on our servers," Hephaestus announced. Dio could hear him getting up from the couch. "Dio, keep that woman close, alright? Get anything you can out of her. I'll look her up, see what I can find."

"What about Uncle?"

"I'll go down and talk to him while Hephaestus does that," Hecate assured him. "Don't worry too much. As long as you're safe and you've bought yourselves some time in the city, we can figure this out."

"Actually." Dio sat up quickly. "I have a way to buy us more time. I need a fruit shipment."

It was evident that everyone on the other side of the line had frozen, and Artemis's brow was raised. He explained.

"The wine is shit, and the only way I can make it tolerable is if I add a bunch of fruit to it, something Thassos severely lacks. So if it's possible, can you help with that? I can ask the leaders if we can fly it in."

"No, you know what? We can send a ship tonight," Seph stated, her voice firm and final. "I'll call my mother. She can have a ship loaded and ready to go in a bit."

"At what cost?" Hephaestus muttered albeit loud enough for all to hear.

"Easy," Aphrodite stated. She sounded smug. "A visit with the boys."

"You're using our children as bargaining chips now?"

"Not really. Seph and I will take them to visit, and while we happen to be there, we can ask. We found out she's pretty flexible when they're around."

"And if that don't work, we'll just ask Aunt Hestia," Seph added. "It'll fall to her anyway."

“Thank you, I appreciate it,” Dio breathed out, rubbing at his eyes.

“Hey, you’re doing great, D,” Seph said, her voice softer. “And don’t worry about what you’re worrying about. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“You didn’t see,” he blurted before he could help himself. “I - look, it doesn’t matter. The important thing is we figure this out and get out of here as soon as possible. I’ll fill Athena in when I see her later.” *Or in the morning.* “Heph, call me if you find something.”

“Will do,” Hephaestus called back, already far from the phone. “Be safe, baby brother.”

Dionysos hung up and shifted his gaze back to Artemis, who stood on the opposite side of the desk with lips pursed and brows knitted together. There were several long seconds of silence which neither was eager to fill, but before Artemis could decide which topic to breach first, the door opened at the top of the stairs. Dio stood up, leaning closer to Artemis.

“Go upstairs and call Nike,” he whispered quickly. “Give her an update. I’ll see if I can get anything else.”

Artemis didn’t argue, nodding her head before turning towards the stairs. He returned to his seat. As she went up, Roxana came down, a smile on her face. Her hair was pinned back now, leaving her face clear. At least then he couldn’t pretend she was someone else, not with his eyes open.

She set down two clean glasses before him and a bottle of dark liquid.

“Whiskey,” she informed him. “I figured I’d give you something worth drinking.”

“Oh? Thanks.” He offered her a lopsided smile.

She poured some of the whiskey into each glass, neat, and slid one over to him before coming around to perch on the edge of the desk nearest his seat. Picking up his glass, he held it up.

“What are we drinking to?”

“You,” she said plainly. “The miracle worker.”

“Ah. And where is Ikarios?”

“Headed home to the wife and kids.”

“What about you?”

She hummed before shaking her head. “No wife, no husband, no kids.”

“Any family at all?” She looked down. “Sorry if I - overstep?”

“No, it’s fine. My parents live across town, but our relationship hasn’t been the best in some time, so we keep the visits to a minimum.”

“Understood.” He took a long drink, letting the burn course through him.

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m not - lonely or anything. I have friends and two very great roommates, but they are probably already at The Siren, and I can only do that place once a week.”

“Not as fond of Tantalos, huh?”

“Not even close.” She shrugged, tipping her glass towards him. “And you?”

Dio shook his head, jutting out his lower lip. “I don’t really feel one way or another about him as a person, but as a leader, I’m pretty disappointed.”

“You aren’t the only one.” They drank again. “So what about you?”

He looked up. “What about me?”

She rolled her eyes. “You have a family, don’t you?”

“Doesn’t everyone know my family?”

“We know the formal story. I want to know about you.”

“Why? It’s nothing interesting.”

“Isn’t that up to me?” She cocked her head. “Or do you still think I’m a spy?”

“Honestly, I don’t know.” Yet it almost felt like a cork being pulled out of a wine bottle, the pressure dissipating as it prepared to pour out of the top. He exhaled, shrugging his shoulders. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to think. This is my first business trip, and I thought I’d have - Ath... My other leader to walk me through it, but - I don’t, so I’m not sure who I’m supposed to trust when I’m prone to trusting everyone.”

He could feel her eyes on him, but he kept his on the floor, trying to pull himself together. He couldn’t fall apart, not now, not when he was doing so well. He could do this. He swore he could do this.

But weaknesses have a way of rearing their ugly head at the most inopportune times.

Standing, he licked his lips and reached for the bottle of whiskey, refilling his glass. Her eyes remained steady on his profile, scorching a trail wherever they went. His tongue swept his mouth again as he brought his glass to his lips, but he froze before it touched. He turned his head to look at her, to really look at her. Or... he started to, but something stopped him. Maybe it was because his peripheral distorted her enough that she looked like who he wished she was and not who she actually was. Maybe because if he kept his head just so, he could pretend Athena was here with him and not at dinner with someone else. Maybe—

She took a gentle hold of his chin and turned his face to hers. Her intentions were written there in her molten golden brown eyes, but he was powerless to contend them. And part of him —most of him because most of him *wanted* to be distracted— didn’t wish to. So he simply put his glass down and parted his lips.

The kiss was passionate and perilous, a kind of violence between teeth and tongues. He stumbled forward, the backs of her thighs hitting the desk, allowing her to slide onto it. Opening her legs, she pulled him closer. He shut his eyes.

And then he could pretend. Then she was *almost* someone else, and that was enough to start sewing him back together.

She unbuckled his belt with a flourish as his hands dove beneath her shirt, the heat of her skin warming his palms and allowing him to feel something. It was glorious. It was grotesque. It was sickening. It was salvation.

Her teeth sunk into his lip, her fingers curling in his hair, the kiss deepening until the snarls of frustrated desperation bled out onto their clothes. She dragged his mouth down to her neck, allowing him to ravish the skin there while his hips ground into hers. The sounds she made pierced every inch of his body, leaving a lasting mark as her hips bucked too. Her free hand slipped between them and into his pants. She cupped his bulging cock and squeezed.

“Dio...”

And there it was. The scent of her, of someone else. It was her. It wasn't *her*.

He tore himself away with a shuddering breath and forced his eyes open.

“Shit, I'm sorry,” he croaked, fixing his shirt and then his pants. “I - I can't. I - I just. I'm sorry. I want to, but I—“

“No, you don't,” she said softly, standing up and fixing herself as well. “You didn't, and - I'm sorry, Dionysos.”

His face contorted in confusion. “What do you have to be sorry about?”

“Look, don't get me wrong. I am *very* attracted to you, and while this was a horrible attempt at helping, I had my own - *interests* as well.”

He was only more confused, and she seemed to gather that because she dropped her hand and leaned back against the desk.

“—So... you *are* a spy?” he asked, although more as an afterthought.

She shook her head slowly.

“Say her name.”

He cocked his head forward, giving Roxana a quizzical look.

“We don’t have to talk about any of your family or your life in Khaos Falls. Just say her name.”

“Say - whose name?” He had not a clue what she meant.

Her laugh was soft. “The woman you’re in love with. You keep calling her ‘the other leader’ like you two just got paired up at random, but the look in your eyes says it all. Even when you look at me, it’s like - you’re looking at someone else, and I saw her at The Siren. I know we have some - *similarities*. And I also saw the way you kept looking for her even when everyone in the club was looking at you, how you ran out the moment you realized she was gone.” His bewilderment must have been written on his face because she shrugged her shoulder. “Like I said, I was very attracted to you.”

He rubbed the back of his neck, his gaze once more finding the ground as he tried to regulate his breathing. She stood up straight again, smoothing out her ruffled clothes. Then she ducked her head to meet his eyes.

“So say her name, right here in this room, or it’s going to start to mean something else for you, and I don’t think you want that.”

“It already means everything.” He let out a self-deprecating laugh. “What else could it possibly mean?”

“Say it, Dionysos.”

How had it come to this? Foolish, shameful, weak little thing he was, he’d let it manifest across his skin like a big, neon sign asking every one of their enemies to act upon it. If Roxana had noticed it, Tantalos probably had as well, and this was why Athena had not wanted him to come. He was a liability through and through.

But Roxana, he didn’t believe her to be anything more than an insightful person, and maybe he did need permission to say it. For his sake. He just... wasn’t sure he could. He wasn’t sure he deserved to.

Wetting his lips, he went to take another drink, but Roxana took the glass from his hand and set it on the desk before him. He met her eyes.

He wished he hadn't.

"Say it."

"Athena."

It was no more than an exhale, a last breath, a death rattle. She let it linger there, suspended in the air between them, blanketing his skin like a humid heat, smothering his face until it was hard to breathe. He opened his mouth to say something else, to apologize or explain himself, but she shook her head.

"I know." She smiled, touching his cheek. "It's okay."

Once she had straightened her clothes, she approached the stairs. The door above opened, and Dio turned away, leaning against the desk to catch his breath. He assumed it was Artemis, coming back down to make sure he hadn't been gutted or something, and he quickly tried to dash the guilt from his person. However, the voice that came from behind him wasn't Artemis.

"Hey."

He screwed his eyes shut.

CHAPTER 13

ATHENA

Athena's eyes were fixed on Dionysos's back, focused on the bunch of his shoulders around the rigid stalk of his spine. She was acutely aware of the strange woman's slow ascent to the door behind her, but she had already offered what pleasantries she could. Her stomach turned over twice and then twice more, guilt and regret a toxic combination in the pit of it. When he turned around, his eyes were red and warped with something she didn't recognize. That woman lingered in the air, but once the door shut behind her, Athena's acidic apprehension began to melt away. Something was wrong.

"Hey, how was dinner?" he questioned, the smile he attempted to offer more of a grimace than anything else.

"It was fine," she returned.

Truth was that it hadn't been. While she had enjoyed Pallas's company and catching up with him, that aforementioned guilt had tainted her appetite as well as her mood. Pallas had sensed it too, asking several times if she wanted to take a raincheck, but she couldn't bring herself to do it even when it became evident that he was not the boy she remembered nor was she the girl he had hoped to find again. It wasn't that they were incapable of rekindling their friendship. It was simply that now was a horrid time to try because it required starting from scratch in many ways. But she had done it anyway like the stupid, foolish girl she was when it came to Dionysos, the stupid, foolish boy she had been in love with since she knew what the word meant. The boy —the man—

she could not have because having him meant keeping him and keeping him meant keeping him safe and satisfied, and she just didn't trust herself to do that.

And given his devotion to his own debauchery, she doubted she could satisfy him anyway.

So what was she really angry about?

“How was the restaurant?”

“Oh, it was - alright. Nothing special. We went to a hamburger place by the beach.”

He gave her a confused look. “I thought you were going to the—”

“No, but this place was good. It was simple and not too crowded.”

She should tell him. She had no reason not to. She should be able to tell her best friend that she had made Pallas change the restaurant because she had promised Dio before, and even if she hadn't, even if he had asked after Pallas, he still would have taken precedence because he always took precedence. And he always would.

But something stopped her. Maybe it was because she could still smell that woman between them. Maybe it was because his lips were swollen and his shirt was ruffled. Or maybe it was because it wasn't any fault of his since she was always running, and he was always waiting, so what else could she possibly expect him to do but—

“Athena?”

Her eyes snapped up to meet his, and the question was out of her mouth before she could stop it.

“Who was she?”

He didn't seem to understand the question at first, but eventually, realization dawned. He licked his lips.

“I take it Artemis didn't fill you in?”

She had no clue why Artemis would tell her he was down here with some woman. “No.”

“That was Roxana. She works here at the vineyard. We spent the day together.”

Her walls went up without further prodding, a shield of stone and steel and stoic features. He didn't appear to notice, moving closer to her. He glanced over her shoulder at the stairs, his chest almost touching her face. She could smell that woman. But she could smell him too.

“She told me all about Amphitryon and Tantalos,” he said now, his voice lower, and it took her more than a moment to catch up with what he was saying. He was *working*? That whole time? “Tantalos did a bunch of job hopping before this, and Amphitryon went to university with her. Political science, but now they're suddenly leaders with a very stable foundation.”

“What do you mean? Thassos isn't stable.”

“Thassos isn't, but they are. The last leader just disappeared, and from one minute to the next, these two were in charge. Roxana said that never happens because every leader has to be vetted by the community leaders, and oftentimes, they're enough to keep the worst prospects out of the running, especially since Acrisius.”

“Then how did he get in in the first place?”

“The leadership guard. They're the only constant here apparently, and their loyalty is what makes you an official leader. The community leaders have that, so they can usually sway them when necessary, but they failed that time.”

“Does anyone know why?”

“It didn't seem like it, but - you need major money to gain that kind of footing, and no one knows where the money came from. For Acrisius though, it was probably from trafficking, right? He had friends in high places who were helping him with that business. Maybe he just had the right amount of money to pay off the guard. As for Amphitryon and Tantalos though, no one can explain where their wealth is coming from. *And* they ran Perseus out of town and won't let any other city security firm set up shop.”

“Perseus?” She remembered what Pallas had mentioned about him, which had only been a confirmation of what she already believed. “I thought he moved his firm to Deucalion Heights?”

“He did, but after Aphrodite killed Acrisius, he planned to stay in Thassos and help them recover. Then all of a sudden, Timotheos is out, and Amphitryon is coming to Perseus saying he needs to get out of town.”

“But - they have no security.”

“Oh, they do. The city doesn’t, but they do.” The cogs in her mind began to spin faster. “Roxana says they’ve just been shoveling money out of social programs and into their own ventures. The Siren, their security, their liquor. I was worried they wouldn’t want to invest in my suggestions, but they might just use my suggestions as another hole to fill with city funds.”

“If there are any city funds. Uncle was certain their coffers were next to empty. If these guys didn’t bring money in...”

“They’re getting it from somewhere, right?”

Athena shot a quick look over her shoulder at the stairs. Although Nike and Artemis were just outside, she felt somehow exposed, like walking in here had marked her somehow.

“And how does - Roxana know all this?” she demanded now, assuring herself that it wasn’t jealousy in her voice but frustration. “How do you know you can trust her? What if she’s some kind of—“

“Spy? Yeah, I asked her outright. I didn’t really believe it when I did, but after, well... I don’t know. I told Hephaestus anyway, and he’s looking into it.”

“You told Hephaestus?”

“Yeah, I—” He paused for a moment and seemed to change directions with what he was saying. “Artemis and I called him as soon as I could get away for a moment. We don’t have access to all the records he does, and he would have had to look into it anyway. He’s gonna try and find a paper trail, something that might hint at where the money’s coming from.

Can you think of anyone you met on your trip that might have been a suspect? Maybe they're trying to gain ground here so they'll be closer to Khaos Falls."

She opened her mouth but quickly closed it, taking the time to consider the question. It was a good one, and she couldn't deny that. However, after scanning through her memories, she came up with nothing. Nothing except...

"You said they were getting secondhand imports from Phokis, right?"

He nodded. "Yeah, why?"

"Phokis isn't like the other city islands. They don't just have one leader or even district leaders. They have a - like a judicial board. I had to state a case to all of them, and they all had to vote on it. Only one of them voted against an alliance, one."

"Who?"

"He was in charge of their trade."

Dio's eyes grew bigger. In them, something glinted. "No shit."

"I can't be sure, but - maybe there's something there."

"We can tell Hephaestus. If they're only taking imports the way we thought, the money should only go one way, right? But if not..."

"Then something is up."

"— But... there still has to be more, right?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why would he just help two random guys hold Thassos? It has nothing of value without the imports. Even if I saved their entire wine industry, the place is worth less than the water it sits on. The only thing worth anything is the people, and they obviously don't care about them. One man in Phokis and a small group of security guards are hardly any match for a war. So what else could it be?"

She hated to say it, but - she didn't know. She would have to talk to them again, Amphitryon and Tantalos. But they had to go in prepared. *She* had to go in prepared. Dio might be able to disarm them with their new and improved wine, but if they were going to figure out what was going on here, they would need more. And they had to figure it out. A truce was no longer enough.

Inclining her head, their gazes locked. He looked electric, the excitement of this discovery, whatever it may be, coloring him in with the most vibrant hues. By proxy, she felt it too, running through her veins and leaving her breathless.

He was so close, and she was so sorry.

He leaned in. She leaned up, her eyes falling across his lips. His swollen lips. His swollen lips she suspected still tasted of someone else.

She placed a hand on his chest.

"D..." she breathed, looking away before her resolve shattered and sent the shrapnel directly through their skin. "What are you doing?"

She couldn't see his face, but she could feel his body, tensing beneath her touch before it slowly retreated from her own. And she wanted to look at him, to see his face, to peel the expression from it and analyze it then analyze it again and then overanalyze later as she lay in bed doing anything but sleeping.

But before she could think to, decide to, commit to doing so, a rogue anger washed her of the desire. He had been with someone else, and she had been getting over him. Kind of. Maybe. So why would he do this now?

"You don't want to?"

This drew her attention back, shock and surprise drenching her like a sudden wave on the shore. She hadn't expected him to question it, to push the issue any further. She expected him to run. But no, not Dio. Dio wasn't the one who ran. She was.

"That's - not the point."

“Shouldn’t it be?”

She took a step back, and they both breathed out, the fog of desire palpable between them. She stole a look at him through her lashes, but his eyes were fixed on the ground. And she couldn’t take it. She didn’t have the strength necessary to take that look on his face, her heart twisting itself up into various knots, each more painful than the last.

She tried to laugh, to keep the tension from turning malignant between them. But she feared it was too late for that.

“You play too much.”

It didn’t sound so much like a joke once it left her lips, but she could feel his eyes whip across her from one breath to the next. And the room was so quiet, and that quiet was so thick, so the words remained dangling in the air where she’d hung them. Then he smiled. Because that was what Dionysos did when he was hurt, when he was afraid, when he was anything other than happy. He smiled anyway because that was what the world demanded of him, and how could she ask him for anything else? Especially when she didn’t deserve it?

She couldn’t hold a microscope to her reasons right now for a multitude of others, so she didn’t answer, instead moving closer to him. She wanted to reach for him, to feel the soft swell of his cheek beneath her hand, to embrace the softest parts of herself by embracing him. Instead, she crossed her arms over her chest and offered him a smile in return for his.

“You’re my best friend,” she said softly. “No one can ever compete with that.”

“And you’re mine.”

Unlike her, he wasn’t afraid to reach out, pulling her closer by her hips until they were pressed against his. He moved his hands up to her elbows, cupping them as he bowed his head and pressed it against hers. She shivered and stilled.

“So why don’t you believe me when I tell you that no one can ever compete with that?”

She snickered, this sound brimming with nerves. “Come on, D.”

“What? You really don’t believe me?”

“I believe that - you believe it. Until it happens, and the adventure is over.”

He lifted his head. “You’re not an adventure to me. You think I’ve been your friend all these years because I’m out for a conquest?”

“No, but - I don’t wanna know what happens when we blast that last door off its hinges. I don’t want to see what else gets in.”

“I’ll build a new door.”

She laughed louder now, shaking her head. She only then realized that she was curling her fingers in his shirt, drawn by that magnetic pull she could never seem to step out of.

“You like what you like,” she sighed, melting into him nonetheless. “You like drinking and fucking and being alive, and I am comfortable with surviving.”

“Maybe you haven’t noticed, which - I don’t know how because everyone else seems to, but - I am most alive when I’m with you.”

He was going to kill her, slowly, and maybe she wasn’t good at surviving at all.

“But you won’t let yourself see it,” he went on, his tone anything but accusatory. Instead, it was sympathetic. “Because you think I can’t go a day without sticking my dick in something.”

It caught her off guard, her eyes snapping open before she fell into him with a sharp guffaw. The trembling in his chest told her he was laughing too as he wrapped his arms around her fully.

“You really do play too much,” she eventually managed.

“But that doesn’t have to be a bad thing, does it?”

“Maybe not, but...”

“But what?”

“It’s okay for you to - stick it wherever you want.”

“Wherever I want?”

She inclined her head to give him a pointed glare. He grinned. She rolled her eyes.

“You couldn’t go a week without sticking it somewhere.”

When she said it, it was every bit the joke it sounded like, but when she saw his face, the amusement bled out of hers. There was that glint in his eyes again, that dangerous glint that tended to be followed by something reckless. Like trying to kiss her.

“Bet me.”

She blinked. “What?”

“Let’s bet on it.”

A scoff escaped her, but as she made to pull away, he took hold of her hands, his thumbs pressing into her palms. She loved when he did that. Then again, she just loved when he touched her. *Oh, fates.*

“Didn’t I just say you play too much?”

“Yeah, well I might as well own up to it, right? So let’s bet on it.”

“Bet on what exactly?”

“You think I can’t go a week without sex, but I know I can, so let’s bet on it.”

“Dio.” She screwed her eyes shut. “What purpose will that serve?”

“I’ll prove to you that I can do it.”

It was foolish and childish and reckless and all the other things she loved about him, but she didn’t see how it would matter.

And if he proves it, what excuses will you have left?

Plenty. She would have plenty. Because it still didn't mean she could keep him satisfied. It still didn't mean she could keep him safe.

“Dio, you don't have to prove anything to me.”

“Yes, I do.”

“I believe you—“

“No, you don't, and I don't blame you, but I can prove it, so just - let me prove it. And at least then, if I fail, you don't have to lie to yourself about why you're afraid.”

She scoffed again, but before she could conjure up some kind of retaliation —because she wasn't afraid! She wasn't afraid of anything— she turned towards him. She shouldn't have, of course. She should have done anything but. Those big, bright eyes and those plush lips and that soft belly, and - and this big, beautiful man who she loved so much that she didn't know what to do with all of it. And it was evident now that he was going to fight her and whatever daimons she blamed for this distance she kept putting between them. And part of her, a part too large to bury, wanted him to.

And the rest of her? *Needed* it.

“Fine,” she sighed although her lips twitched. “I bet you anything you can't go until the banquet without sticking your dick in anyone else.”

He lit up. “Anything?”

She eyed him warily. “—Anything.”

He clapped his hands together. “Deal! Shake on it.”

She rolled her eyes, a chuckle slipping between her teeth as she took his hand and shook it. He knew what he was doing, and he knew what she would do as well. Because Athena didn't back down, and Athena didn't just play the game. She played the game to win.

“And what exactly do you want?” she questioned, but he clicked his tongue and shook his head.

“Nope, you said anything, so when I win, you find out.”

She scowled at him. “And if you don’t?”

He smirked, and Fates, was she was in trouble.

“Then you won’t have to.”

CHAPTER 14

DIONYSOS

Dionysos clasped his hands beneath the table, pressing the pads of his fingers into the valleys between his knuckles until it ached. He kept his eyes on the vivid green hills spanning out before him, disappearing into the thick trees at the back of Amphitryon's manor. The late afternoon sun sat atop the edge of their vast canopy, bathing the grass in shadows that looked like claw marks. He was glad the leaders had planned for lunch outside rather than a dinner in their grand dining hall. It meant that Dio wasn't expected to don a fancy suit and tie. He and Athena still matched although it had not been planned. He had left that morning before she emerged from her room, and when they met up at the manor an hour ago, they had been surprised to find one another in a blue v-neck of the same shade. Dionysos had settled for jeans, having spent his morning in the vineyard, and Athena had opted for her usual navy blue slacks. Close enough.

She sat beside him, her eyes wandering across the grounds. He knew she hated being back in Amphitryon's presence, especially after he'd confirmed her suspicions that he looked down upon women with reckless abandon. Judging by the sheer apathy in his eyes at the moment, he wasn't happy about them being here either, but at least he hadn't tried to speak to her. Athena was fearless and immovable, and if Amphitryon could be intimidated by anyone, Dio knew it would be her.

"This is *our* wine?"

His gaze snapped to Tantalos' awed expression, a glass of rose pink wine in his hand.

“It is,” Dio confirmed with a wide smile.

Tantalos handed the bottle to Amphitryon, who poured a small amount into his own glass. He swirled it around, taking a whiff, and Dionysos knew he had very little knowledge of wine and its etiquette. He bit down on his tongue, preventing himself from betraying his own amusement.

“This is magnificent,” Tantalos stated.

He had moved on to the glass of red he’d poured, smacking his lips harder than necessary before he grinned at Dionysos.

“What did you do?”

Dio shrugged. “With these two? Nothing. The wine was being left in the fermentation tanks for too long, but Ikarios and I have worked out a schedule for the next harvest that will prevent the same mistakes. As for the rest of your barrels that were already sealed for bottling, we were able to add a few ingredients to help.”

He gestured to the last bottle on the table. Tantalos cleansed his palate with some water before he poured some of this bottle into a third and final glass. He then slid it over to Amphitryon, who had sipped both of the first two samples but had yet to say anything. Tantalos took a drink and immediately slammed the glass down with a gasp.

“There is no way in fuck that’s the stuff we’ve been drinking,” he laughed.

“It is,” Dio assured him. “Some fruit, some salt—“

“Salt?”

“Helps with the bitterness if it’s done right. I can fix most of the rest of your current supply, but that’s going to take a good amount of fruit, more than what is currently available here in the city.”

“And you want us to purchase yours, right?” Amphitryon questioned now, setting his glass down.

Dio fought not to roll his eyes, but he could feel Athena tense up. “Actually, no. My uncle has already agreed to

provide it at no cost to you. The ship should have already arrived in the port actually, and the produce is being taken to the vineyard.”

Amphitryon’s eyes were hard, an endless assault of jagged edges being thrown at Dio’s confidence. Any other day, he may have withered under this glare being aimed at him, but today, there was no need. He had been victorious. He had won. Additionally, he was doing *them* the favor, not the other way around. The shipment itself could go for bags upon bags of drachmae, yet Hades had freely donated it, and Demeter had been more than eager to contribute. This was what you were supposed to do for people, your people, but these men sat up here and did nothing for anyone outside of their manor.

He wanted to ask, to demand an explanation as to why so little land was afforded to produce, why so little funds were placed on public work. Athena must have sensed it however because she stood suddenly and gestured for him to do the same.

“Thank you for your time, gentlemen.” She gave each of them a nod.

“I will start planning my trip to Khaos Falls straight away,” Tantalos assured them with a smile, pouring more wine into his glass. “Perhaps I can bring some of this with me.”

“We would be honored,” Dionysos assured him. “I can reserve a stand for Ikarios, and you can let him or a representative sell whatever wine you wish to.”

“Brilliant! And before that, I have to take you out on my boat. You’ll love it.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“Thank you, Dionysos. This was quite the miracle you made.”

“It’s wine, Tantalos,” Amphitryon said coldly, eyes narrowed. “The boy makes wine. It can hardly change the world.”

“And yet most of our world drinks my wine,” Dionysos returned before he could reconsider, his tone just as icy

through the mirth coloring his lips. “And now, if they absolutely must, they can stand to drink yours too. Although perhaps, if wine seems like a waste of time, you can use your land for something else. Like keeping your people fed.”

Amphitryon seemed surprised he’d spoken at all, but Dio didn’t wait for a response. Patting Tantalos’ shoulder, he led Athena off of the back veranda and around the house, Artemis and Nike in their wake. They climbed into the SUV without a word, and he assumed Athena was preparing a proper lecture for him in her silence. He would eat his words from last night, and she would point out how right she had been, that he took nothing seriously and that he took too many careless risks. And he would have no defense even if what he’d said had been anything but careless. There had been anger much like that of Ares and arrogance like that of Hephaestus, but there had been care too. Care for the people Amphitryon failed to care for, for the futures they continued to bury beneath the vines.

Once they reached the bungalow, he was the first out of the car, struggling to sit still or stay quiet. Closing himself in his room, he paced the limited space, attempting to cleanse himself of the anxious energy now plaguing him. It had crept up on him, and all at once, spilled over like a tidal wave that left him drenched through to the bone. Thus, it was impossible to relax —as if he didn’t have enough trouble with that already— and a lump had begun to form in his throat. Now didn’t seem to be the most appropriate time to fall apart over one little misstep, but Dionysos had never been much for the appropriate time, and he also wasn’t ashamed to wear his emotions on his sleeve. Or his face or the front of his shirt.

He considered the pros and cons of calling Hephaestus, wondering if his brother would feel obligated to scold him regardless of whether Athena already had or not. At the very least, Heph would probably be nicer about telling him to get his shit together before making some dumb joke that would make Dionysos laugh *at* him rather than with him. If he was lucky, the twins would be there, and then he wouldn’t have it in him to panic anymore because at least he still got to go home and be an uncle at the end of this.

Before he could dial Heph though, there was a knock on his door. He knew it was Athena without a doubt, the knock light but firm, like a business transaction. With a deep breath, he pocketed his phone and braced himself for impact before opening the door. At the very least, he hoped the anxiety would wither once this was over.

She stood framed in the doorway before him, her expression unreadable and her hands tangled in front of her. She didn't look angry though. She looked... nervous.

“Yeah?”

“Do you still wanna take me to that restaurant?”

His vision focused all too fast, taking her in, searching for confirmation that she had spoken at all, much less spoken those words.

“You're not mad at me?” The question tumbled out before he could clench his teeth around it.

She breathed out a laugh. “No, D, I'm not mad at you.”

“Not even for maybe fucking up our chances at winning Amphitryon over?”

“We were never gonna win Amphitryon over. However, I think Tantalos likes you well enough that you could afford one good shot.”

“But - then why were you so quiet in the car?”

A pause, her mouth opening and closing before she gathered her thoughts. “Because I should have been the one defending you. I let him get in my head that first night, and so today, I didn't even know what to do or how to conduct myself. I was weak, and I—“

“You weren't weak.” His voice was more stern than he had meant it to be, but it was well warranted. “We both know that if you said anything, he would have just gone at you like the dog he is. He wouldn't have listened. And anyway, we're a team. That's how it works.”

She smiled. “Yeah, we are. And a good one.”

“Exactly.”

“Okay, I’ll - I’m gonna wash up, and then we can go?”

He nodded, watching her back away slowly before turning and heading back down the hall. His stomach did several somersaults, the anxious energy morphing into something more electric and elated, buzzing beneath his skin. Shutting the door, he quickly began undressing, tossing his clothes in the corner and racing into the small bathroom attached to his room.

He took the fastest shower he could, scrubbing the dirt and sweat from his skin until it was red and just a few rounds short of raw. Once he felt clean enough, he quickly dried off and pulled on a fresh pair of pants and a muted grey button-down over a crisp white v-neck. He then ran some oils through his hair and along his face. He hadn’t taken the time to shave that morning, a shadow emblazoned across the edge of his jaw, but he didn’t worry too much about it. After all, it was Athena. She had seen him in every state.

He found her in the kitchen with Nike and Artemis, and the sight of her halted him in the mouth of the hallway. Her curls were no longer pulled back, feathering around her face. She wore a simple blue blouse over grey slacks that halted just above her ankles, the color scheme the same as his although the colors themselves were inverted. She looked stunning.

They were speaking in low voices although he couldn’t make out the words, but once Athena noticed him, she straightened, flashing him a small smile. He returned it, his mouth dry as he attempted to maintain his composure.

“Ready?” she asked.

He nodded.

The four of them marched outside, the SUV keys jingling in Artemis’s hand. The drive to the restaurant was quiet, pleasantly so this time, Dio’s attention fixed on the passing streetlights and stop signs and dark storefronts. Gradually, the streets morphed from empty and bleak to lively and crowded and back again, the city’s pulse visible in the pattern.

And if you looked closely, you could see the areas hit hardest by this new leadership team. They were like gaping wounds on the face of a city that had once been the height of eloquence, the city Dio remembered. The city he wished to see it return to. Still, he found himself awed by the art of it all, a decadent dance beneath a sky of dying stars.

Every now and again, he would swear he could feel Athena's eyes on him, but he never did manage to confirm it.

Fifteen minutes later, Artemis pulled up to the curb in front of a quaint building on the corner of the street, its exterior walls black marble and the skirt white, its name in pearlescent letters above the door. Dionysos climbed out, offering his hand to Athena, who graciously took it and stepped out onto the sidewalk beside him. Taking in the place, she gasped.

"Wait," she said, gripping his forearm. "The Athenian Owl?"

"Yep." A flicker of brazen pride came to life within him.

"What—"

"I helped open this restaurant four years ago. And I got to name it. I've been funding it ever since."

"I - Dio, Athenian is not a word."

He chuckled. "I'm gonna let that slide because I know you're bad at accepting any kind of flattery, but anyway, it is now. I coined it."

"Oh? And what does it mean to you exactly?"

Everything. "Wise, strategic, quiet, beautiful. And all my other favorite things."

She said nothing more, and he didn't dare look at her, but he smiled when he felt her hand slide into his, giving it a squeeze.

"Call me when you're ready," Artemis called from the window of the SUV as she and Nike drove off.

"They're not coming in?" Dio asked.

Athena shook her head. “It’s just us. I sent them on a mission.”

“What mission?”

A sly grin teased her features. “To check out that burger place. Come on.”

CHAPTER 15

DIONYSOS

She led him inside, and they were immediately swept up in the bright lights that bathed the dining room floor.

Marble melted into thick, black carpet past the host booth, the only exception being the designated dance floor on the other side of the vast room. The ceiling was dotted with priceless chandeliers, and the walls were covered in vibrant navy blue and gold tapestries. Although she'd maintained the original color scheme, Isidora had certainly taken some exuberant liberties with the decor since the last time he'd been here, which signaled that the place was doing as well as expected. And speaking of...

“Dionysos!”

A plump woman with bright green eyes and sun kissed skin rushed towards them, arms outstretched and silky black curls bouncing around her face. Dio didn't let go of Athena's hand when he swept the woman up in his arm with a soft smile.

“Dora, how are you?”

“How am I? I haven't seen or heard from you in over a year, and you just show up without calling? If you weren't who you were, I would've thought you dead.”

“And you would've almost been right, but that's a story for another time.”

She raised her brows. “I'm gonna hold you to that. I'm hoping to make it out to your banquet this year actually.”

Business has been great, and I've finally been able to afford some solid help."

"Is that right? Well, we'd love to have you. Feel free to bring some of your special sauces with you, and I'll even handle your arrangements. I've got a villa you would absolutely love."

"Ever the charmer, especially when it's about my food."

"I mean, it got you this place, right?"

She grinned, stepping back before she looked over to Athena. He tried not to tense up. He had spent months in Thassos with Isidora, trying to bring this dream of hers to life. Well, mainly her dream was to cook and be able to do so while caring for her little brothers. She had hardly cared where, which was why she had allowed him to pick and name the place. The point was, they had spent a lot of time together, and anyone who spends a lot of time with him inevitably hears all about Athena whether he means for them to or not. This was especially so when he named the restaurant after her.

"And who do we got here?" Dora questioned in a way that told Dio she had a hunch. "She must be special if you're bringing her all the way to Thassos for a date."

"That's not untrue, but - we actually came on business, so it really worked out."

"Of course. All you do is work."

"This is Athena. Athena, this is Isidora, owner of the restaurant."

Dora's eyes widened, looking between the two. "This is - Athena?" Then she laughed, nearly doubling over. "I swear I thought you were making her up back then."

Athena turned to him as well. "Yeah, well, as you can see, I wasn't."

Dora took Athena's free hand, her grin splitting her face in two. "It is wonderful to finally meet you after hearing about nothing but you for three straight months. I figured he had a fever dream about this wonderful woman he kept talking

about, and it was just his way of spinning a story behind the restaurant name. Especially when we'd get to drinking, and Dio is—”

“Dora, please.”

“Yes, Dora, please. Keep going,” Athena urged her with a coy smile.

“Our table, please,” Dio said louder, although he couldn't help but smile too.

“Fine.” Dora rolled her eyes. “But don't go to the bathroom. I might be in the kitchen tonight just so I can give her the best experience possible, but I talk fast.”

“I'll make sure he drinks plenty of water,” Athena whispered loudly.

Dora led them through the rows of tables, most if not all occupied by excited patrons. In the back, on several raised platforms, were more tables set into a circular booth, the surfaces of those still vacant draped in navy blue linen. Dora led them to the table in the corner, Dio's eternal reservation that she kept for him even though he did try to give her a head's up every time he came.

He smiled. It was nice to be remembered, to be immortalized in some way.

Athena and Dio slid into the booth as Dora removed the linen cover to reveal the circular grill beneath. Athena didn't move all too far from him, remaining close. It felt like being oversaturated with his favorite color, too much and not enough all at once. Licking his lips, he passed a menu down to her. They made their wine selections with Dora before she made off, assuring them her best server would be with them shortly.

“This place is beautiful,” Athena said.

“Yeah, Isidora did an amazing job making it her own.”

“But I can still see traces of you in here.”

“Oh, yeah? Like what?”

She gestured to the wall directly behind their booth. “The mirrors for one. You love mirrors. You hate standing still for photos, and you would rather live in the moment, but you like to watch it all happen anyway.”

She said it with such nonchalance, like a fact she had repeated one too many times. He would know because she’d repeated many facts one too many times like the patterns in the rise and fall of sea levels or foreign hierarchies. She didn’t look at him as she said it, her eyes moving back down to the menu, but his own remained on her.

“And if I told you I didn’t suggest the mirrors?” It was more out of curiosity than anything.

She snorted. “I wouldn’t believe you.”

“—Good.”

“Oh, and of course, the wine selection.”

He bumped her shoulder lightly with his own, feeling lighter than he had when they first arrived in the city. He decided that if she could relax for one night, he certainly could too.

“But tell me, how do they get your wine?” she questioned. “I mean, Thassos doesn’t trade with us anymore, so...”

“Oh, Isidora deals directly with me,” he explained. “So she puts in an order, and I fill it myself, and it gets marked on the manifest as a business supply for The Athenian, so when it shows up at the port, it’s brought straight here. Any business can do that. My wine isn’t outlawed. It just isn’t contracted for the entire city. If it were, everyone would be serving it, but for now, it’s just the individual businesses who opt for it.”

“So what’s the difference between city imports and - that?”

“Well, if I’m contracted with the entire city, it’s a win-win. I get more profit, but the city as a whole gets a discount because usually, the city’s trade department is paying the ticket. Then they sell it discounted in bulk to shop owners or if they own the establishments, they supply it at no additional cost. In this way, the money comes directly out of the business owner’s pockets. I still give them good deals, and Isidora gets

hers at a very low price of course, but I can't do that all the time.”

She seemed to be considering all of this as their server appeared with their wine selection balanced atop a tray, two filled glasses and the rest of the bottle in a silver bucket. When asked if they were ready to order. Athena picked a few appetizers first although she couldn't decide on any one entree. Dio's solution was to order the full kebob cart to be delivered to their table so that he could show her the true magic of Isidora's vision.

The kitchen was swift, and they only had fifteen minutes or so to chat before the food came rolling out, a delectable spread passed around the table. Dio turned on their grill, letting it heat up before he began throwing together several meat and vegetable combos on the metal skewers.

“Preference?”

Athena shook her head. “I trust you. Show me what you got.”

He grinned, happy to take the challenge as he began placing the kebobs on the grill. She offered him a braised meatball cooked beforehand, which he gratefully took, humming his satisfaction.

“And Isidora, she created the menu?” Athena asked, pulling another plate in front of her.

“Uh, yeah, for the most part. I helped her arrange her house specials and main recommendations, but they're all her personal recipes, yeah.”

“This is amazing.”

“She spends most of her time in the kitchen. That's where she's most happy, which is why we tried to put someone in management at the start, but it didn't work out, so she sort of had to juggle both for awhile. She seems to have figured it out though.”

“How did you meet her?”

“Well, I was down here trying to find some restaurants to sell stock to. I went to this place called Ambrosia, and it was in sharp decline, but Dora was their chef, and the dishes she made me were amazing. We got to talking, and I found out that the restaurant was getting ready to close. The managers were overworked and underpaid. She was the only chef of any kind that showed up half the time, so even though she learned everyone’s area, it was still too much for one person. And the owners didn’t care at all. They’d just opened a place in Deucalion Heights, and everyone knows the money is always better there, so...”

“So you bought a restaurant.”

He smiled wryly. “I bought *that* restaurant.”

Athena gave him a confused look before, “Wait, so - this was Ambrosia?”

“It was. Owner sold it to me cheap, then I put Isidora’s name on the title. I came back a few months later, and we gutted the place, started putting this one together. I made sure she had enough to pay everyone a good amount, some of the best wages in the city, and I brought over a few people from our winery restaurants who knew how to run a place like this. I’d say it’s gone pretty well.”

Athena stared at him, slowly shaking her head.

“What?”

“You just - never cease to amaze me,” she breathed.

He ducked his head, instead focusing on taking the kebobs off of the grill, but as he placed one on her plate, she gave him a pointed look.

“I’m serious,” she said. “You make people’s dreams come true. You make them see their purpose, their potential. That’s really important, Dio, and don’t ever think otherwise.”

He nodded. “I will do my best. —Now, try this.”

He could feel her eyes still on him, but he simply tapped the kebob skewer. When she still didn’t budge, he picked it up and held it close to her mouth. She rolled her eyes and took it

from him, earning a cartoonish grin as he picked up his own. The verdict came in soon after.

“Okay, this is amazing,” she groaned.

“Told ya,” he shot back around a bite of meat. “It’s literally a stick of meat! You can add chicken or fish too, but these are some of the best cuts you’ll ever taste, and Dora marinates ‘em in this sauce that she’s been perfecting for years. Honestly would’ve sold my soul the first time I tasted it. It was brilliant.”

“Between this and your wine pairings, I can’t believe this place isn’t famous.”

“I bet it would be if it weren’t in Thassos.”

“Why didn’t you just bring Dora to Khaos Falls?”

He chuckled. “Believe me, I tried. I offered accommodations. I pitched the best schools in the city for her brothers, but - this is her home. And people love her here. She runs a free kitchen here twice a month for folks who can’t afford a hot meal, and she takes a lot of boxed meals down to the shelters too when she can. All the leftovers are given to someone who needs ‘em. And I realized that even if I could convince her, I’d be taking away that help.”

“Well, either way, you did everyone a favor helping her out. She’s fantastic.”

“Just wait until you taste dessert. The woman is an artist. I’m telling you.”

They each made it through several more kebobs, finishing off two bottles of wine before their server returned with a cart of desserts. Dio guided Athena through a tasting of each, grinning proudly each time she declared the clearing of her expectations. Laughter and banter filled the spaces in between, and it almost felt like it had before the shooting and the hospital stay and the many weeks away from one another. And though his mind continued to wander to the night before, their bet always at the forefront, he enjoyed himself thoroughly, more than he had in a long time.

“Was it everything I promised?” he asked, watching their plates being carted away.

“And more. I love this place. Maybe you can get her to open another in Khaos Falls even if she isn’t there to run it.”

“I’ll pitch that idea to her. We can put it right near your place.”

“I’d spend every meal I could there.”

“If nothing else, maybe she’ll give me the full recipe, and I’ll just come over and cook for you more.”

“I will absolutely settle for that.”

He glanced out at the rest of the room. The dinner rush had wound down, and only a few tables were still taken. There were a few couples on the dance floor, the speakers concentrated around it so that the music was light in the air where they sat. Dio bit his lip before turning and offering his hand to her. She looked up, uncertainty shining in her eyes.

“What?”

“Dance with me.” It was a mere whisper passing over his lips.

“What?” she repeated. “Dio, no, I - I don’t... I can’t.”

“Of course you can. Come on.”

“I’ve just eaten my weight in food.”

“Actually, I think you ate *my* weight in food, but this will help with the digestion. Come on.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, but he simply grinned until she at last took hold of his hand. Pulling her from the booth, he led her across the floor, careful not to crash into any of the tables out of sheer excitement. His wide hips still managed to bump a few empty ones, but nothing fell and shattered, so he considered that a win.

Once he reached the tiled square, he turned to face her, placing her hands on his shoulders and his own on her waist. It was little more than a subconscious sway after that, the two of them passing small smiles and soft laughter between them like

secrets. He remembered dancing with her just like this at the parties they used to attend as kids, the ones thrown anywhere but Zeus's estate where he wasn't welcomed.

On those days, she would come over to Uncle Hades' house early in the day so he could help her with her hair. Zeus hadn't cared to, and Hera wouldn't or couldn't, but Hades had watched his mother work with hers enough to know a thing or two about her type and texture. Dio would sit in front of her while she sat on the floor in front of Hades, trying not to lash out when he tugged too hard or went in on a particular rough knot. Dio would play games with her to distract her until Hades was done braiding or combing or styling. Anything to help. Anything to be close to her.

To this day, that desire hadn't changed, and being away from her didn't grow easier with age. If anything, it grew more difficult, especially when hopes of being more than her friend began to wane. So he filled the void with everything and anything else.

And now he wondered if in doing so, he had sabotaged himself.

She moved closer to him, resting her head against his chest with a content sigh. He relaxed beneath her touch, acutely aware of every place their bodies made contact. Winding his arms around her waist further, his eyes wandered to the wall beyond their table. His reflection stared back at him, a peaceful sort of bliss making his skin glow beneath the chandeliers.

"Thank you for bringing me here."

He barely caught her words threaded through the notes of the current song's bridge, and his heart stalled for a moment too long. Taking a deep breath, he shut his eyes.

"Thank you for coming with me."

He'd wanted to ask yesterday why she hadn't let Pallas bring her here, why she'd settled for a mediocre restaurant on their night out, but he didn't want to bring the man up. He certainly wouldn't now. And maybe he was fooling himself,

believing that winning this bet would mean anything to the bigger picture, but he had already put it on the table. He also knew he could do it. The sex was never the addiction. Filling the void that echoed inside him was. So if he could sway her even just a bit, he would do it. And if she still couldn't see him as anything more than what he was now, at least he could say he tried.

"I'm glad you came," she said now, glancing up at him.

He smiled. "Okay, let's not go too far."

"No, D, I mean it. I - I keep thinking about how things would look if anyone else had come, and I just - I don't think we would have made it this far. And not just because of your winemaking abilities, but..."

"But what?"

She swallowed just as the song changed. "Every time I wanted to lose my cool and say something foolish, I just had to look across the table at you. I had to remember why I was there and how it was bigger than me or my pride. Everyone was right. You - you make me better."

"Well, I wouldn't have been able to think on my feet or - or do anything I've done without you here. I just - I didn't wanna let you down."

"And you haven't. You've done the exact opposite."

She beamed at him, and suddenly, every ounce of stress and doubt and moment of panic was worth it.

"I'm also glad we could do this, tonight," he chanced. "It's been a long time since we've been able to have a whole evening."

"Yeah, it has."

He wet his lips. "And - maybe I'm getting greedy or something, but - you think I could take you somewhere else tomorrow?"

She quirked a brow. "Where?"

"This one's a surprise."

“What kind of a surprise?”

“The kind where you don’t ask questions, and I don’t give hints. You just trust me.”

She rolled her eyes. “Okay...”

“Is that a yes?”

“Hm, yes. You can take me somewhere.”

“Brilliant! You’re gonna love it. It’s gonna be great! I’ll get up early, make some preparations, and we’ll be outta the house by noon.”

She shook her head, still smiling, and pressed her cheek back into his shoulder. He rested his own against the top of her head despite the awkward angle it put his neck at, closing his eyes once more. He wouldn’t worry about the outcome right now, but if he had any chance at all with her, he was going to take it and run. And he’d pull out every stop on the way.

CHAPTER 16

ATHENA

Dionysos was, as promised, already in the kitchen when Athena awoke the next morning. She had slept so soundly that when she came to, it took her some time to remember where she was. Last night had been a dream, one she could remember with striking clarity, and the thought of it etched a smile across her face before her eyes even opened. It also made her more eager to find out what he had in store for today.

He was cooking, which was already a sign of good things to come. She could smell the decadent and delectable scents of his favorite seasonings creeping in beneath the door. When she entered the kitchen, he was loading things into a large wicker picnic basket she'd never seen before, singing to himself as he did so.

“Good morning!”

He greeted her with a glowing grin, immediately pouring her a mug of coffee and setting it on the counter alongside the sugar bowl and a plate of breakfast pastries. Sitting down on one of the stools, she watched him with a mirthful gaze, his energy inebriating and infectious all at once. Or maybe she had some of her own. Either way, it was somehow the best coffee she'd ever tasted and the most delicious pastry she could imagine even though she'd had the same coffee since they'd arrived in the city and his breakfast pastries on many occasions.

“What's the basket for?” she asked, attempting to sound innocent.

“For you to wonder about until it’s time to go,” he shot back.

“Ah, extra cheeky this morning.”

“And completely for your benefit. Wear good shoes, alright?”

She gave him a suspicious look. “We are staying *on* Thassos, right?”

“Mm, on it but not quite in it. Not the city anyway. I personally think you spend too much time in the city. It’s time for you to reset.”

“I do that when I’m on the sea.”

He rolled his eyes at her. Her heart fluttered like a piece of paper picked up by a sudden wind. She would do anything for that smile, the color in his cheeks luminous and the gleam in his gaze brighter than every and any star in the sky. She would go anywhere as long as he kept looking at her like that.

“I’m almost done here,” he assured her. “Artemis agreed to trust us with our own safety for a few hours, but she has our location in case we go too long without checking in. Don’t worry though. I don’t plan on that. There isn’t much of the island that’s outside the city anyway, so we won’t be too difficult to find if need be.”

“You *have* been to this place before, yes?”

“Yes, I have. Found it by accident though. I got lost.”

She giggled, the carefree sound foreign to her own ears. “I should’ve guessed.”

“Don’t worry. I know the route by heart now though.”

“Okay, I trust you.” Finishing off her coffee and one of the pastries, she set the mug down on the counter and stood up. “I’m gonna go get dressed.”

Though as she made for the hallway, there was a knock at the front door. Artemis appeared in the living room before Athena could think to answer, stalking towards it and pulling it open. Immediately, she looked over her shoulder at Athena

without saying a word. Still, Athena could make out the faint greeting of the visitor.

She glanced at Dio, who was still focused on the stove, before walking over. Pallas stood on the steps, an apologetic smile on his face. Artemis said not a word to either of them, simply returning to the seat by the window she had apparently been occupying the entire time.

“Pallas? What are you doing here?”

“Sorry to stop by all of a sudden,” he started, pushing a hand through his hair. “Listen, we’ve been having some - issues down at the harbor lately. A few ships have been vandalized, broken into, things like that, and I don’t have a lot of men of course because of the cuts. One of ‘em got hurt last night though, and I don’t want these guys getting too antsy, so I was wondering if you could come down and help me strategize, see how best to tackle the issue.”

“Oh, uh, yeah, but can it wait until tomorrow? We’re actually on our way out.”

“Shit, yeah, I figured. I know you’re on business out here too, and I wasn’t trying to take you away from that.” He looked up at the sky, or at least the awning above the door, and sighed before lowering his gaze again. “I just... What about this afternoon? It’s been happening the last few nights pretty consistently, and I’m just at a loss with how best to use what I’ve got. Plus I’ve got Tantalos’ boat there, remember? They haven’t touched it at all, and maybe it’s nothing, but I also don’t want it to get fucked up and have it come back on me.”

Athena stared at him, chewing her lip for a long time. He seemed desperate, the worry etched across his face making him look several years older than he was. He was right. She had come here for work, and this was more work than what she and Dio were going to do. Besides, this was the whole point, wasn’t it? To help the people of Thassos rather than the leadership, and the thought of Pallas losing his job or being reprimanded for something he had no control over made her blood boil.

At last, she nodded.

“Can you just give me a second?”

He perked up. “Yeah, of course.”

Though when she turned around, the kitchen was empty, and Dionysos was nowhere to be found. Athena searched the living room, her eyes finding Artemis. Artemis jerked her head towards the hall. She took a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves.

Leaving Pallas beside the door, she marched down the hall towards Dio’s room. The door was slightly ajar, and when she knocked, she heard shuffling inside. Dio had never been good at being quiet.

“Dio?” She pushed open the door a bit.

He was standing beside the bed, tapping the screen of his phone with a look of concentration. She wanted to turn right back around, tell Pallas it would have to wait, that she would go down there tonight. But she would rather get it over with and spend the rest of the evening with Dio on this adventure he had planned. And she wanted to be clear about that.

“Hey.”

She walked in, stopping directly in front of him and placing her hands on his sides. Fates, how easy it would be, could be, to lean up and press her lips to his, to assure him that he was first and would always be first and that he had nothing to worry about. But no. The risk was too great for far too many reasons.

And maybe Pallas’ arrival —not just today but on this trip as a whole— was a sign, a reminder of how great that risk was. And not just because he was the first to abandon her once he learned to live without her. He was also keeping her from spending too much time with Dio which she knew to be most dangerous. It was why she started running away from Khaos Falls in the first place.

As for their bet, she knew that no matter who won, it wouldn’t change anything. It couldn’t.

For now, she focused on the matter at hand.

He kept his hands between them as if guarding his own chest. She didn't blame him, but she knew it was pointless. She would always manage to scrape that precious organ if he kept insisting on entrusting it to her.

“Can we just - postpone our trip for a few hours? Not completely or until tomorrow or any other day. Just until this afternoon. I gotta help Pallas, not just for him but for the harbor and the city. The people.”

It was a low blow, using his own words against him, and she could see the hurt in his eyes. She felt it in her bones. However she also saw the understanding, the acceptance that he wasn't going to deny her. He never once had.

She knew it then. She would love him in every universe and all of her lifetimes, but she would never once deserve him, especially when she was prepared to use that very fact as an excuse not to try.

“Yeah, I get it.” He tried to sound unbothered, understanding, unperturbed. And all for her. She could appreciate the effort. “Go on. I'll be here.”

She wanted to ask if he was sure, but she knew he wasn't, and he knew it wouldn't matter, so it would simply be driving the stake deeper into his chest. Leaning up, she kissed his cheek softly, feeling his lips curl up towards hers. Reluctantly, she pulled away.

Without another word —for fear she would change her mind— she left the room and returned to Pallas by the door. He grinned wide.

“Thank you, you're a lifesaver,” he professed, pressing his palms together.

“Of course.”

She chanced a glance at Artemis, who was staring at her with a clouded expression. Immediately, Athena felt a sharp sting of shame, but she choked it down.

“Will you tell Nike to meet me at the harbor?”

Artemis only nodded before turning back to the window. Athena wanted to tell her she needn't be disappointed because Athena held enough of that for the both of them, but instead, she simply followed Pallas out.

"I hope Dionysos doesn't hate me already," he said nervously, pulling the door to his jeep open.

"Dionysos doesn't hate anyone," she assured him.

Which may have been the worst part about it. It was also the source of her guilt. She knew Dio would do anything for her regardless of the cost to him, and while she tried to always be conscious of that in order to avoid taking him for granted, she was as flawed as anyone. But she reminded herself that all she had to do was help Pallas as quickly as possible, and then she could spend the rest of the evening making it up to him.

When they arrived at the harbor, just west of the port of entry, she wasn't surprised at the sudden crop of problems. The place was far too open, meaning far too vulnerable, and she was only surprised that it hadn't been more of an issue before. The walls would hardly protect the boats enclosed within from larger waves much less manmade chaos.

"You said this just started?" she questioned, walking the dock.

"I mean, we've had some trouble before, but not so frequent. Not - so many incidents clumped together, and I've never had one of my guards hurt."

"What happened to them?"

Pallas winced. "Got caught from behind. He didn't see whoever did it. He said he just remembered checking the sailboats, and when he got back off the dock, he just blacked out. Woke up in a healer's house not far from here. The other guy on duty with him drove him over."

"How many people do you usually keep here overnight?"

"Just the two plus one person designated to Tantalos' boat specifically."

The luxury yacht was of course easily identified on the far end of the harbor, and not just because “The Siren” was scrawled across the side in fancy green letters. She was willing to bet one could fit most of the other boats being stored inside of it and still have room for Tantalos’ ego, which was saying something.

“Where is the vandalism happening? And are the break-ins on a concentrated area of the harbor?”

“All of it is scattered across the entire left half and half of this side,” he explained, pointing out the areas he was referring to.

That left out the yacht itself and only several other medium-sized vessels that must have belonged to affluent people as well. Many of the boats to the left were fishing and tour boats, commercial units that definitely represented the livelihood of many Thassos citizens. She began to walk down that way, looking over the distance between the docks and the parking lot as well as between both areas and the main street. Unlike the harbor in Khaos Falls, there was open entry and access into the harbor, the city right up against it.

“You’re certainly going to need more bodies,” she commented, inspecting the area as a whole. “That’s the quickest fix here. The main issue is the ease of access. In Khaos Falls, the entire harbor is walled in and fenced off. There is a security checkpoint before you enter the parking lot, and another when you get to the docks. I know your budget’s been cut, but if Tantalos and Amphitryon are as sensible as they wish to pretend they are, they’ll move some things around.”

Pallas snorted. “Sensible. The only thing sensible about Tantalos are the pockets on his suits. As for Amphitryon, everything comes at a cost with him, and he doesn’t care much for the money. He already has it all. What he wants is your dignity.”

“I won’t be the one to argue that.”

“He won’t even bother bargaining with anything if you aren’t willing to beg for it. He—“

Pallas stopped walking, squatting down there on the dock and putting his head in his hands. It was so sudden that Athena walked several more steps before she realized he was no longer beside her, and when she turned around, she froze. Swallowing hard, she looked around the docks, making sure they were still alone. Then she moved back towards him and squatted down before his form.

“Hey, what is it?”

“He was my friend,” he croaked, his voice thin and hoarse, and she could tell he was holding back tears. Or a good scream. “He was my friend, and he got hurt like so many other people out here working for nothing but fucking scraps. And they sit up in their manor, getting full off of our hard work, caring nothing for - for us.”

“Pallas.” She gripped his arm. “I get it.”

“Do you? Athena... I know we grew up together, and you’ve seen struggle, but you’ve been living a dream the past few years. Here, we struggle every day just to find a reason.”

She allowed the accusation to slide although Zeus’s consistent manipulation could hardly be called a dream. Instead, she pressed her hands into his shoulders, her eyes once more scanning the surroundings although not for company. For a solution.

Her eyes fell on Tantalos’ boat.

The people in Thassos were restless and tired and angry, their jobs constantly at stake and their wages on the chopping block. Why wouldn’t they make an example of Tantalos’ beloved yacht?

“Here is what you’re going to do, okay?” She moved closer, whispering to him. “Tonight, we’re going to put more people on the docks. I have some of my guard to spare while we’re here. They spend most of their time on our ship anyway waiting for something to happen.”

“Athena, you don’t - you don’t have to do that. It’s—“

“It’s fine. But while they’re here, we concentrate them on the left wing. Leave Tantalos’ yacht unattended. Completely.”

He looked up, eyebrows knitted together. “What? I can’t do that. I—“

“Just have the man you keep on it to do more rounds through the entire harbor and the parking lot. If anyone asks, just say you need the extra help in the areas that were being targeted.”

“What will that do?”

She bit her lip. “I’m not sure yet. I just - I don’t think this is something random.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why would they leave that boat unscathed, Pallas? They had no problem knocking out a guard, so why not take their chances with the lone guy on the yacht? Leave the entrance beyond it unguarded. I’ll work out some schematics for you, see what you can stand to sacrifice in order to put some extra security measures in place at the other entrances. I know it’s a lot, but the alternative is to wait for these incidents to die down and hope no one gets killed.”

He stared at her, his eyes glossy and red and filled with a pain she remembered all too well, a pain she did everything in her power to soothe when they were children. She doubted she ever succeeded, but it didn’t make her want to try any less right now.

At last, he nodded.

“Show me what to do,” he breathed. “I’ll do anything. I’ll sell my father’s house if I have to in order to get the resources. Just please, help me.”

She nodded as well before helping him to his feet. He took in a few deep breaths then led her up to his office where he laid out the harbor’s blueprints so that she could look over them. Before doing so, Athena called Nike, who had been checking out the perimeter, instructing her to go out to their ship and retrieve the guards they had on standby. It was parked off the coast, away from the threat of any harm while Dionysos and Athena attended to business, but it could be

brought in at a moment's notice, always prepared to take their leaders to safety.

Once they hung up, she turned her attention to the blueprints, searching for the best possible way to accomplish what she had in mind. She could admit that it wasn't going to be an easy fix, but she was convinced that it would be worth it.

"How much would you ask?" she questioned, her eyes still fixed on the prints. "For your father's house?"

He sighed, rubbing his hands over his thighs. "Shit, I don't even know. I'd have to have it inspected, and... I mean, there's no way it'll be enough."

"It will be."

"—How do you know?"

"Because I'm going to buy it from you."

He scoffed. "Athena, come on. That's going too far. I can't let you—"

"You don't let me do anything."

She paused long enough to mark off the places where the boom gates could or should go followed by the barricade that would separate the harbor from the street. All the while, she thought of Dio and what he'd done for Isidora, buying a restaurant and investing in her skill. And he had asked for nothing in return beyond putting his wine in the kitchen, which wasn't really much of an ask at all considering the benefit to the restaurant. Then again, he never did ask for much in return, did he?

"The Olympus District is still recovering from the mess Zeus left it in, but I have the resources and drachmae to spare. Think of it as an investment. The more security you have, the more likely people will keep their vessels, commercial or otherwise, here in Thassos. For those people who store them elsewhere at a higher cost, this will be a blessing."

"It'll still take me years to pay you back."

"I'm not asking you to."

“Then what do you want in return?”

“To see this city flourish. And to know that you’re safe.”

She lifted her head, sitting back in the desk chair. He stood in front of the desk, hands on his hips and lip between his teeth. The veins of his forearms bulged, the sleeves of his shirt rolled up to the crook, and sweat stained the chest, causing the fabric to cling to his chiseled pecs. It was an odd thing to see him so grown up, so mature and compassionate, so devoted to helping others. He may have changed a lot, unrecognizable in many ways, but there were still some pieces she knew. And other new pieces she quite admired.

“Although... you could always come to Khaos Falls,” she pointed out before she knew she’d started speaking again. “I know what you said, and I know why you’re staying. I just want you to know that the invitation stands.”

“Thank you,” he sighed. “But I have to try first. I have to try and make this better, make this work.”

“I get that, and I’ll do everything I can to help you. At the very least though, you should come to the Blood Moon Banquet next month. You can finally see the city, maybe fall in love with it.”

At last, he smiled. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. You wouldn’t believe the amount of people who come for the banquet and stay for the city. Not that I’m trying to bait you into staying, but you know. At the very least, you’ll have somewhere to go on vacation.”

There was a twinkle in his eye, and she almost thought he might cry again when he expelled a heavy breath. Instead, it was followed by a soft laugh.

“You’re still her.”

Her brows knitted together. “Still who?”

“The girl I loved when I was a kid.”

Heat flooded her cheeks, and she looked away even as a smile bloomed across her face, a smile that didn’t last long. Reality set in quickly, and as she sobered, she shook her head.

“That girl is long gone, Pallas. Honestly, I don’t think she ever left Delos.”

“I don’t think you could have gotten off that island without her.”

She shook her head. “You saw me before then, and you see me now, but - the aftermath. Who I was, what I became, it - you wouldn’t have liked her.”

Athena hadn’t even liked her. She had been callous and cold and cruel and malevolent, and Zeus had scooped her up and took her home to sharpen those flaws into something deadly. It took her so long to find some semblance of her old self and the innocence she had been stripped of on the icy waters of the Aegean. In fact, if it weren’t for Dionysos, she may have never recognized herself again. If it weren’t for Dionysos, she would have become a mirror image of Zeus. Or something worse.

But before Dionysos, it was Pallas who she had leaned on and looked to, and that was still written on the deepest layers of her skin. He had always been such a vivid memory, buried beneath a new world and a new life and a new purpose. But now, here he was, standing there before her like some harrowing hallucination, and she could never have envisioned a better reunion. And yet...

“I can’t imagine your - Zeus would be too happy with you fooling around with the working class though, huh?” Pallas chuckled, seeming to garner the gist of her current thought.

She huffed. “Zeus was never happy unless he was making everyone else miserable. People were just things to him, tools to be used. But my Uncle Hades, I’d say he’d be impressed. You work hard, and you care for people, and you don’t shy away from that. You’re sweet and charming and funny, although still not as funny as you think, and—“

Oh.

Her face once more turned a deep scarlet as she bit down on her tongue. Pallas was moving around the desk towards her, each step careful and measured as if he feared the ground

would collapse in on itself if he stepped too hard too quickly. She tracked him in the corner of her eye, her heart thudding so loud that it filled her ears until every other sound was muted and muffled.

“Are you finished?” he asked, his voice falling several octaves.

“Pallas...” She took a deep breath before pushing herself to her feet and facing him. “We were close, and you were - my whole world back then, and I’m so glad I found you...”

She trailed off once he closed the distance, her heart thudding in her ears, and when he pressed his lips to hers, whatever she had been trying to say was lost to her.

Frantic as she felt, she let herself lean into it. She reminded herself that this was Pallas, her oldest friend, who had grown up and grown into his skin. He wasn’t a celebrity. He wasn’t the sun incarnate. He wouldn’t have to change for her. And maybe she would still have to share parts of him with an entire city, but it was better than sharing all of him with the entire Aegean. And maybe Zeus would have liked him. Maybe Zeus would have approved. Maybe Zeus would have allowed her to be happy with a man other than him.

...But if Zeus did any of that, it would be for one reason and one reason alone — the man wasn’t Dionysos.

Athena placed her hands on Pallas’ chest and pushed him back.

“Wha—”

“Pallas, I - we can’t.”

He looked astonished. “Why not?”

Her mind was fuzzy, her tongue leaden, her emotions a tumultuous storm knocking everything else loose and out of sorts. And nothing felt right. Nothing fell into place the way she thought it would, the way she knew it should. Not here, not with them, and Athena had never been the kind of person willing to settle.

“I - this isn’t - I can’t—”

Before she could string together a coherent response, the office door opened. Nike stood there, a sardonic smile on her face.

“Where do you want ‘em?”

Athena took the opportunity for what it was, stepping around a distracted Pallas and pointing Nike towards the map on the desk. She tapped the places she wanted the guards stationed, careful to instruct her that the gate nearest Tantalos’ yacht was to remain relatively unwatched. Amidst the mosaic of quick thinking and unorthodox measures the past few days, Nike seemed to have resigned from questioning her, and Athena was grateful. She didn’t have the mind to explain herself further right now.

Night had fallen by the time they finished rearranging the security on the harbor. Nike had easily stationed her guards, but they then had to wait for Pallas’s shift change so as to ensure everyone was on the same page. As soon as they were though, Athena said a quick goodbye to Pallas and led Nike back to the parking lot, eager to get home.

The drive was silent, but Athena knew that Nike was just as disappointed in her as Artemis albeit not as upfront about it. And just like Artemis, Nike knew it was futile to say anything because Athena was going to cling to her excuses if it killed her.

Artemis was in the front room watching television when they arrived back at the bungalow. They greeted one another with a nod, neither of them willing to say anything else that may lead beneath the feet of the elephant in the room.

“I need you two to do rounds at the harbor every few hours tonight,” Athena instead explained. “Keep out of sight, and don’t be too obvious. Check in with our guards there frequently. Anything suspicious at all, you let me know.”

The two of them nodded. Athena chanced a glance around the room at last, unsure if she was relieved or unnerved that there was no sign of Dio. She stood awkwardly in front of the door for another few minutes, Artemis and Nike having

enough decency not to look at her, until she at last gathered enough nerve to proceed deeper into the house.

Walking down the hall, she listened for him, for his joyous laughter or his frustrated growls or his heavy sighs in the silence. She heard none of it although light crept beneath the door to his room. Standing before it, she took several deep and measured breaths. Then she knocked.

No answer.

She counted down a minute then knocked again. Another minute, she waited. Nothing.

“Dio?” Nothing. “Dio, can we talk?”

When anxiety got the best of her, she tried the handle, as nervous as she was grateful that it was unlocked. Pushing the door open, she peered inside. Then she entered fully, inspecting the room. Why, she wasn't sure since she knew he wasn't there. In all honesty, she had known it in the car, without a shadow of a doubt, that he wouldn't be here when she returned. He would be at the winery because no matter which city he was in, that was where he went when he was upset. And he had every right to be upset with her now.

But she had to see him. She had to make this right. Because it was him. It would always be him. And she would rather risk everything with him than settle for anyone else. She would rather share him with the world than try and convince herself she could ever replace him. Because she couldn't. He wasn't just her best friend or even just the love of her life. He was everything. And so how could anything else ever do?

CHAPTER 17

DIONYSOS

“**Y**ou do realize that you don’t have to pretend for me, right?”

Dio shifted the phone from one ear to the other as he leaned back in the desk chair. He had been doing such a good job of keeping Hephaestus on task and off him, but he supposed that could only last so long. The muted silence that filled the wine cellar only served to amplify the volume of his thoughts, and the more he begged them to shut up, the louder they became.

“And even if you had to, you couldn’t. I can see right through you, D.”

“I’m not pretending,” Dio sighed, scratching the back of his head. “I just don’t see the point in discussing it. She stood me up. Again. And I know. We’re supposed to be working, and that’s what she’s doing, but that doesn’t change the facts. She’s been trying to put distance between us for months, and instead of taking the hint, I volunteered for this trip. What did I expect to happen?”

“You went to dinner last night. It makes sense you would expect things to be different after that. And maybe things are, D. Maybe she really just got caught up in the work. That’s Athena. Always has been, always will be. Maybe this has nothing to do with you.”

“She didn’t call or text or say anything at all. We *just* had this conversation the other night. We said we would stop doing that to each other.”

“When has she ever checked in at a reasonable time? Brother, I understand that this whole thing has you stressed out, but don’t start overthinking everything. Don’t sabotage yourself like that. Remember, you’re there to do a job.”

“I know. I know.” It didn’t make it hurt any less.

Dio stood, stretching out his arms before he began walking the aisles of thick, wooden shelves. He ran his fingers over the barrel tops thoughtlessly, searching for some kind of soothing sentiment in their rough surfaces. He had come back to the winery the moment the sun had disappeared from the sky like a child coming home, slipping out of the bungalow while Artemis wasn’t paying attention. But tonight, down here in the quiet after everyone else had gone home to their families, there was little comfort to be found.

“You know, we made a bet,” he surrendered with a self-deprecating laugh.

“What kind of bet?” Heph’s tone turned dark.

“She said I couldn’t go without fucking anyone until the banquet.”

Hephaestus snorted. Then he fell into a full bout of laughter until Dio was demanding he cut it out despite how refreshing it was to hear him laugh like that.

“I’m sorry, brother, I’m not laughing at you,” he managed. “—I mean, I am, but not just you.”

“What do you mean not just me?”

“Oh, I’m laughing at both of you. The lengths you two will go to avoid talking about your feelings is amazing.”

Dio narrowed his eyes. “That’s real rich coming from you, Hephaestus.”

“Hey, I don’t go to any lengths not to talk about them. I just - don’t.”

Dio couldn’t argue with that. “Whatever. It’s just a stupid bet. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Are you serious? D, have you ever known Athena to do anything that she thought was a waste of time?”

“It wasn’t a waste of time. She agreed so that I’d shut up about it.”

“If you really believe that, you don’t know her as well as you think you do.”

“Don’t insult me right now, alright? I’m—“

“Fragile?”

“Shut up.”

Hephaestus chuckled. “She wants you to prove her wrong, D.”

“Or she wants me to prove her point.”

“Either way, that’s up to you, isn’t it?”

“...What if it really doesn’t? Mean anything.”

“And what if it does?”

Again, Dio had no immediate answer, and frustration swelled in his stomach. Hephaestus was right, of course. He was always right, even when he was wrong, and Dio had long come to terms with that. It didn’t alleviate his anxiety in any sense of the word, but it did give him something else to gripe about for a brief moment.

Until he turned around to find Athena standing at the foot of the steps.

Swallowing hard, he managed a small wave, which he immediately berated himself for. She returned it nonetheless, coming further into the cellar.

“What’s wrong?” Hephaestus asked.

Dio began walking again, towards her now, despite the growing thud of his heart. It felt like an alarm, warning him against proceeding any further.

“I’ve gotta go, brother,” he managed.

“She’s there, huh?” Dio hated how smug he sounded. “Is she there?”

“Uh, yeah, Athena just got here, so...” He didn’t sound nearly as natural as he’d hoped. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Mhmm, you got it, baby brother.”

Hephaestus hung up before Dio could fully commit to doing so, and even then, he kept the phone pressed to his ear until he came to a halt before her. Reluctantly, he pocketed it and gave her a small smile.

“Was I interrupting something?”

He shook his head. “Naw, Heph was just checking in. Nothing important to report.”

“No word back on the paper trail?”

“Uh, no, he said he was having some trouble tracking their finances back beyond the past few months, but he’ll keep working on it. Hermes will be back tomorrow too, so they can try and compare shipping data.”

“He’s accessing their systems though, so what does that mean?”

“That they’re keeping things off of the books. They have no one to answer to, so why would they bother putting it on record if they feel comfortable spending money they don’t have and leaving the city high and dry? The only people who suffer for it are the ones they’re supposed to be leading, and what can they do?”

It was easy to sound bitter about this particular topic when that was the only taste in his mouth currently, but he would rather talk about this for hours than acknowledge the fact that she had once again let him down. He reminded himself again that it had been for a good cause, that they had come here for one reason and one reason alone. Or at least, she had, and regardless of his own motivations, he had no right to step over hers.

“Did you manage to get the harbor secure?”

He blurted out the question almost as if to prove to himself that he believed that. She nodded, crossing her arms over her

chest. She always did that when she was uncomfortable. He took a step back.

“Yeah, I put some of our guards on it as well just to see how the place operates with full supervision. The security is usually three guys and a prayer, so hopefully, it goes smoothly.”

“I’m sure it will.”

He offered another light smile before he moved to step around her. Her arm caught him around the front of his waist, stopping him in his tracks. She then pushed him back in front of her, stepping closer until there was so little room between them that if he breathed in deep enough, his chest would touch hers. Luckily, he could hardly breathe at all.

“I—”

“You don’t have to,” he interrupted, unable to hear another apology from her. “Say anything, I mean. You were working. That’s what we came here to do, and you did that.”

She stared up at him, eyes wide and lips pursed as she appeared to try and decode his emotions. He had no clue what his expression was doing right now, what it would betray, but he didn’t offer anything else.

“It doesn’t mean it was okay for me to leave you hanging again,” she said almost cautiously. “I should have called or texted. Hell, I should have delegated before it was too late.”

“You don’t like to delegate. We all know that.”

“I told you I would be back, and I should’ve been.”

“Maybe so, but you did what you had to do, which was the point, right?”

“Dio, come on.”

He shrugged, an uncanny agitation rising up the back of his throat. He hated it. “I - don’t know what you want me to say.”

“You can be upset. You have the right to be upset, Dio.”

He exhaled a slow breath, shaking his head. His frustration was like a throbbing pain just behind his eyes, growing with each passing moment caught in the web of this conversation.

“Yeah, well maybe I don’t want to be upset. Maybe I’m tired of being upset.”

“And what does that mean?” Athena’s voice was almost unrecognizable, thin and unsteady.

“What do you think it means? It means I’m tired of being upset, and so I don’t want to be anymore. So I’m not.”

“Okay, but I’m saying it’s okay to express that. I know you hold a lot in because you don’t want to - impose or something, but you don’t have to do that. Not for me. You can be angry.”

“And what good will that do?”

She inhaled, but whatever argument she was preparing died there on her tongue. He was grateful for it too. He had never willingly engaged in an argument with her because whether he was right or not, he would never *win*. But if she kept pushing him, he might not be able to stop himself from trying.

“But - does that mean you forgive me?”

He bit down on his tongue until he tasted blood. “I do. I forgive you, and all is well.”

“Okay...”

She didn’t look convinced, but for once, he didn’t care. But when she spoke again, any hope of upholding the lie he’d just uttered went out the window.

“Do you think we could try again tomorrow? I mean, going wherever you wanted to go?”

He looked away. As much as he wanted to say yes, he wasn’t sure he could handle another night waiting for her. He was always waiting for her, and sure, he probably always would be, but the expectations were different in this context. He didn’t want to watch her make another promise she couldn’t keep.

“Maybe we should just focus on the work for now.” It was like yanking out his own teeth. “Until we get home or...” He could feel her tense, but he refused to look, setting his eyes on a point over her head. “I mean, it’s alright. I know you’ll still busy or you’ll have to leave again, and I understand that. You’re the best Uncle has and you love your work, and I admire that about you. That’s what you know, and that’s what Zeus wanted for you, and I’m not trying to interfere with that or give you something else to worry about.”

“Dio...”

“And I don’t want you feeling guilty when things like this happen. Because I was the one that volunteered to come, and you told me from the start that - this wasn’t a game and I had to take it seriously, and you were right.”

She placed a hand on his chest. “Dio...”

“I don’t want to be in the way, Athena. I know I’ve always been a distraction, and I’m not exactly like - you know... I mean, I’m not like other people who are - self-aware or conscious of the chaos they create, and-“

“Dio, can we please just—”

But he kept talking. He had to. Even if it meant nothing. Even if it was all in vain. He couldn’t stop. Because stopping meant letting go. Stopping meant it was over, and he wasn’t ready for it to be over. Even if it had never truly begun.

“—and I’m not as focused on work, especially not the politics of it. And I get you can have those conversations with Pallas, and he’s a lot more like you. He does real work, and I just - I plan parties. And I’m good at it the way you’re good at this. We’ve worked with that just fine nearly our whole lives, and we can continue to do that, but as for everything else—”

He was silenced by the sudden grip of his collar and the sharp yank of his head downward. Athena’s piercing stare set flame to the last of his thoughts and the rest of his words, leaving nothing but ash on his tongue.

“When you kissed me the last time,” she said, her voice thin. But like the blade of a scalpel. “What did you promise

me?”

He couldn't even begin to sew together a sentence, but the memory manifested of its own volition, vivid and in color behind his eyes. Her falling off of her bike, Ares laughing at her in that mocking way, Dionysos grabbing hold of her to keep her from fighting him, Athena battering his chest with her sharp fists, Dio kissing her hard on the mouth, her body relaxing against him...

And that moment of bliss just before she shoved him off and kicked him in the shin, leaving him down on the floor and Ares laughing even harder.

But then there was Uncle Hades' lecture about permission to touch someone, his tearful apology to his best friend, their collective tearful exchanges in his pillow fort later that night, and that promise. The promise he made her. The promise he'd kept.

She must have seen it because she gave him an expectant look. He watched it from beginning to end, and the worlds spilled out of him in time with the dialogue of the recollection.

“That I wouldn't kiss you again until you asked.”

“I want you to break it.”

“What?” His vision focused. “Why?”

“Because I'm not asking.” She swallowed, and he watched the movement in her throat like a hawk. “I am begging you.”

But even then, he had no clue who moved first. All he knew was that before he could take another breath, her lips, *Athena's* lips, were melded to his.

Before he could even begin to try and process what was happening, she was moving back, taking slow steps until she hit the desk. On instinct, he gripped her thighs, picking her up and sitting her upon the surface.

Any resolve he had managed to build in the past few minutes shattered between them, the pieces falling to the floor where they were stomped further into the ground. He kissed her with a fervor dictated by the fact that every fiber of his

being believed this would be the last time, one final chance to pretend like everything he wanted was within his reach. If he closed his eyes and focused on the soft shape of her lips, he could pretend the two of them were possible. He could pretend that it all didn't end the same.

At least he didn't have to pretend it wasn't someone else.

And each time one moved to pull away, the other would chase relentlessly, as if they both knew what came next the moment they put any distance between them. She would change her mind or he would find a way to ruin it, and then what would be left to keep their friendship upright?

And how do you go back to just being friends when the illusion has been broken?

Dio had all of these questions and wanted none of the answers, so he kissed her for as long as he was allowed, his hands cupping her cheeks while hers fisted his shirt. Her ankles hooked around the backs of his calves, tightening each time they managed to snag a breath. There was no doubt in his mind now. He would always be waiting, and it would always be worth it.

When they did finally part, it was like finally breaking the surface after being lost in a current. Relieving but cold. He braced his hands against the desk on either side of her as she cradled his head in her hands, forehead pressed to his and breaths rushing across his lips. He kept his eyes closed, unwilling to look at her, to find out it wasn't her at all or that it was simply some vivid hallucination he had managed to conjure up. He couldn't bear the thought of that. If he woke up now, he would never forgive himself.

But of course, Dionysos had never been one to sit still and stay quiet, his composure—or lack thereof—a traitor to his cause on more than a few occasions.

“What was that for?”

She offered no response right away, and he occupied himself by listening to the gradual slowing of her breathing. She stroked the fine hair at the nape of his neck before her

hand climbed up into his thick curls. His fingers pressed into the wood beneath them, the absence of an anchor making him feel as though he might float away. She pulled him closer.

“I - don’t know.” He held his breath. Her voice was so soft against the shell of his ear that he hardly believed it had come from a real person at all. “But I - I want to figure it out. Just... Dio, please don’t—“

The cellar door opened suddenly, loud and abrupt, and Dio jumped back on instinct the moment Athena let go of him. The steps coming down the stairs were quick before Artemis jumped the last three and landed on the ground. Her eyes found them with haste, the look in them wild and — worried?

“We have to go.” Her tone was cold, but Dio could hear the cracks in it, a faint trembling beneath the surface. “Amphitryon wants us at the leadership house now. He’s on the phone with Hades.”

“What?” Athena slid off the desk. “What happened?”

Artemis’s eyes slowly shifted from her to Dio. He recoiled. “Tantalos has been killed.”

CHAPTER 18

DIONYSOS

Dionysos sat quietly in the backseat, staring out the window of the SUV. Athena sat beside him anything but, tossing question after question at Artemis, who had minimal information at best. All they knew was that Tantalos had been found on his yacht with a knife through his neck and a bottle of wine broken over his head. Dionysos assumed it had happened in the reverse order, but considering the way Artemis was talking right now, he thought it best not to comment on that.

“He has no one who can account for his whereabouts,” Artemis repeated for what had to be the fourth or fifth time now. “And we cannot lie for him. Even if we did, Amphitryon will not believe us. Fates, even if I’d been with him, it wouldn’t matter.”

“There were people at the winery who saw him.”

“Yes, but not the entire time. And again, even if someone were to step up and say he never left, everyone else’s word means very little. The *truth* means very little.”

“So Amphitryon just gets to sit there and pin this on Dio? Dio! Who has never done anything of the sort in his fucking life! Whose shoulder is still healing to the point where he struggles to lift his arm above his head!”

“Athena, remember I am on *your* side. Amphitryon can sit there and believe he’s right, but no, he cannot pin anything on him. Your uncle will be here by morning.”

“Yeah, I assume because Amphitryon wouldn’t let him fly in.” She scoffed, crossing her arms over her chest. “And why would he? Whatever this is, he’s obviously planned it. He’s in no rush. We are.”

“We cannot go in there accusing him—“

“The way he’s accusing us?”

“The way he’s accusing me.”

Everyone’s eyes flickered over to him, Artemis catching his gaze in the rearview.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice weak. “I shouldn’t have left the house without telling you. I knew better, and I did it anyway.”

Athena didn’t tell him he was wrong because she knew he wasn’t, and she was the last person to pity anyone’s reckless mistakes. Still, she gripped his hand, her frustration evident in the force with which she squeezed it. He knew what it meant. She was angry at him, and she didn’t want to be. She was angry at him, and she still blamed herself.

“We’ll figure it out,” she assured him in her district leader voice rather than in her best friend voice. For once, he appreciated it. He didn’t want to hear her coddling him. “They can’t prove anything, at least not anything true, and Uncle isn’t going to let them railroad you. Neither am I.”

“Hephaestus is coming too,” Artemis stated.

“Why!” Dio’s outburst caught everyone off guard, including Dio himself. “And leave the city vulnerable? He can’t do that. What if that’s exactly what Amphitryon wants?”

Artemis was still watching him in the rearview. “That’s what he believes. He has Patroclus preparing the naval forces and Achilles on the ground with Ares and Charon.”

Dio breathed out slowly. He had done it. He had driven them to war without any sort of effort, and there was nothing he could do to rectify it. However, he couldn’t sit here and pout about it. That would not do anything for anyone. He had to hold fast.

His stomach still churned as he looked back out the window. While he wasn't sure he would call Tantalos a friend, the guy had certainly started to grow on him. Dio liked him well enough, and to think that he was dead now, regardless of who did it, left an ache in his chest. As for whoever *had* done it... Well, if Athena was right and Amphitryon had organized this in an effort to stop a treaty with Khaos Falls, they were in more trouble than they thought. There was no way he would go to such ends if he wasn't sure he could hold his own in a fight because the only reason he would go to such ends was for a fight.

He could have simply sent them home empty handed. Plenty of other islands had done the same according to Athena, but instead, he had concocted this flimsy plan, and he was willing to sacrifice Dio to it. Which left them at the question they had been trying to answer the other night. Who was backing him? And why?

“He'll blame me too.”

Dio turned his head towards Athena with confusion on his face. She was staring out the front windshield, eyes glazed over and lips slightly parted. Soft, full lips still slightly swollen from their kiss, and Dio wished he could just run back to that moment and never emerge.

“Why would he?” Dio managed.

“I moved the security around. I left the entrance *and* the yacht unguarded on purpose.”

“Why did you do that?”

“The graffiti and vandalism, it was all confined to the area away from the yacht, which seemed odd to me. I wanted to know why they refused to touch it, especially since they weren't afraid to assault a guard.”

“What if that was their plan though, to have you move the security?”

“I think we're giving these people too much credit. No one could've known I'd move it around, and even if they had, no one could've known I would leave the yacht unguarded.”

Not even Pallas. That part went unsaid, but it was evident in the look she shot at Artemis. Artemis said her peace anyway of course.

“One thing I have learned over the years is this: If you can think it up, someone else can too. Maybe not everyone, but all it takes is one. Intelligent as you are, Athena, underestimating everyone else is anything but.”

Athena fell quiet, and Dio tightened his hold on her hand as they reached the end of the path and pulled up to the front of Amphitryon’s manor. A concerning number of vehicles were already parked in the circular drive, guards swarming the place. The moment Artemis opened the door, guns were trained on their SUV, and someone ordered they get out of the car slowly.

Dio brought Athena’s hand to his lips, kissing the back of it before he let it go. She didn’t look at him, but he felt her squeeze it one last time. Somehow, it was more painful. He had let her down. After everything and all of his promises, he’d failed her. And just when he thought he’d finally been enough.

They were all but marched through the large double doors, the entrance hall alive with chatter and anxiety.

“Don’t you fucking lie to me!” Amphitryon’s voice boomed down the hall, and the closer they came, the more the sound seemed to shake everything around them.

“I’m not lying to you, Amphitryon,” came another voice. It sounded familiar, but Dio couldn’t quite place it. Until Athena tensed beside him.

“You had something to do with this!”

“No, I didn’t.”

“She used you!”

“No—“

“And if she didn’t, it is only because she put you here in the first place!”

“I’ve been here for years, Amphitryon, before you ever stepped up to lead. This is my city, *my* home.”

“And you would do anything to protect it if you didn’t like the way it was being run!”

“You know, I’ll be honest. Of the two of you, I’d slit your throat before I went after Tantalos.”

“You fucking—“

Amphitryon severed his tirade as Dio and Athena were led around the corner and into the dining hall. Pallas and Amphitryon stood on either side of the table, which had seemed to be the initial target of Amphitryon’s outrage. Shards of porcelain littered the floor, broken candles sprinkled throughout. Directly to Dio’s left, a thick, brown liquid dripped down the wall, and judging by the chunks of meat and potatoes on the ground, he would guess it had been stew. A glass was paired with it, shattered into pieces in a pool of red. Red like wine. Red like blood.

The moment he registered who they were, Amphitryon was rounding the table and stalking towards them. Despite his guards flanking them, Nike and Artemis still slipped in front of their leaders, prepared to fight him with their bare hands if need be. The guns were once more trained on them, but they did not flinch. They did not move at all. Amphitryon came to a halt in front of them.

“You!” He pointed a thick finger at Dionysos, his face beet red and slick with sweat, his dark hair plastered to it. “You did this! You killed him! You killed my brother!”

Before Dio could respond, Athena spoke. “And what proof do you have?”

“I know he did it! I know it in my blood!”

Spittle flew from his large lips, his eyes bulging from his skull. Dio was beginning to think that Athena’s theory regarding Amphitryon’s involvement was very, very wrong. Either that, or he had been practicing for this moment his entire life.

“I know this might be news to you, but that is not the way justice works.”

He scoffed so hard that Dio was willing to bet it hurt. “Justice?! You think you people know about justice! Khaos Falls only knows justice when it wishes to know justice! You let a tyrant sit on your back for decades, and only when he shot this worthless little bastard did your coward of an uncle do anything about it!”

Dio grabbed Athena’s forearm before she could burst through Artemis and Nike’s barricade. While the women were not phased by the guns aimed at their face, Dio very much was, and if Athena weren’t beside him right now, he may have passed out.

But Amphytryon knew he’d struck a nerve, and he focused all of his attention on Athena now.

“And you, Hades’ little bitch he sicks on everyone to get them in line.”

Dio stepped slightly in front of Athena without thinking. “Call her out her name again, and I’ll give you a reason to arrest me.”

“No.” Amphytryon shook his head, suddenly grinning maniacally. “You’ll give me a reason to shoot you dead right here in my kitchen and hang you up for the world to see. And I will feed them wine made from your blood!” He growled at Athena. “You think I don’t know you’ve got both these boys wrapped around your fingers? I know everything in my city!”

“You only know I know her because I told you,” Pallas interjected before Dio could speak again. “If you knew everything in this city, we wouldn’t be here.”

Pallas looked absolutely bored in the face, but Dio watched his hands. Hades told him it was a good trick to watch the hands if you found nothing in the eyes, and he was never wrong. Pallas’ hands were trembling.

Amphytryon didn’t even look at him. “Remember Hades and his dog can’t save you, Pallas. You *are* my citizen, and I *am* your justice! And I hope that *you*.” He pointed at Athena

now, and as he jabbed a finger towards her chest, it wasn't Artemis or Nike that managed to catch his wrist before he made contact. It was Dio, who shoved it toward him so hard that Amphitryon stumbled back.

Immediately there was a hand on Dio's shoulder. Two perfectly placed fingers dug into the scar tissue on both sides of it, so deep that his vision immediately blurred, and his knee buckled so that he went down onto it. In the blink of an eye, Artemis had a gun to the guard's chin, her hand prying his away from Dio while Nike blocked her back, two guns now aimed at both the guard nearest her and Amphitryon. Athena was down beside Dio, grabbing his good arm and trying to calm him as he fought the urge to roar out. Or lash out.

"You know what that was, Dionysos?" Amphitryon looked down at him. "Assault."

"You've obviously never been assaulted then," Dio grunted, allowing Athena to help him up.

Amphitryon ignored him of course. "And do you know what that means? It means I am entitled to justice!"

"We have immunity here, and you know that," Athena said now, taking a step forward. "You either order them to shoot us here and now and hope that they listen—"

"Of course they will listen! What are you—"

"—ensuring the end of your very short leadership stint in the process. *Or* you let us go, and I won't have to humiliate you by buying your guard's loyalty in your dining hall while you watch."

Amphitryon opened his mouth again, but after glancing at his guards already lowering their weapons, he shut it. All he could do then was stand there seething.

Athena's voice relaxed some. "We can reconvene when my uncle arrives, and feel free to send a tail with us to our ship—"

"Your ship is being searched as we speak!"

"Then we will wait until they finish, but those are your only options. I won't sit here playing point-the-finger with a

child.”

“A child! You will—“

“We are *done* here.”

She gripped Dionysos’ hand tighter, beginning to step away, and Amphitryon seemed to realize that he truly did have no other options because he once more turned his attention to Pallas. Dio wished he had the heart—or rather, the absence of one—to enjoy it. Instead, he looked to Athena with panic in his eyes. He might not like the guy out of sheer jealousy, but he wouldn’t stand here while Amphitryon punished an innocent man without oversight or impunity.

“Lock this fucking traitor up!” Amphitryon roared. “I don’t want to—“

“No.” Athena had stopped moving, and Amphitryon whirled around again, eyes prepared to roll out onto the floor. “Pallas, ask Khaos Falls for refuge.”

“No! You don’t—“

“I request refuge from Khaos Falls,” Pallas immediately returned, staring at Amphitryon in challenge.

“Refuge granted. Come on.”

Pallas need not be told twice, stepping between the guards and into their pack. Athena turned then, leading them away and out of the room, Artemis and Nike trailing backwards to ensure Amphitryon didn’t come charging at them. The guards had already dropped their weapons.

Once outside, Dio expelled the breath that had been lodged in the bottom of his lungs, unwilling to leave and unable to allow much more in. All eyes were on him, and he could feel them bleeding through his clothes and seeping into his skin. It was the first time he’d ever felt uncomfortable at the center of attention.

As they reached the SUV, Athena opened the door, allowing Pallas to slide inside before she shut it. She then led Dio by the hand around the other side of the vehicle, but before opening that door, she spun around to face him.

Shocked as he was, all he could do was stare at her, teeth clenched and throat tight. She reached up for his face. He dropped his gaze.

“Look at me.” He couldn’t even attempt to defy the command, meeting her eyes once more. “I am not going to let anything happen to you, do you hear me?”

He tried to smile, but the light was lost to him. “I know.”

“I won’t leave here without you, Dio. You know that. I couldn’t. You—”

“I do. I know. I mean, I - I know you wouldn’t want to, but, Athena.” He placed his hands over hers. “I did this. Even if I didn’t kill him, I was careless and stupid, and so if you have to go home, you just go. You—“

“No. No, I won’t.” She gripped his face harder. “I will not. I can’t.”

“But— you have to. You have to go home. They need—“

“You *are* my home, okay!”

He didn’t know whose tears escaped first because at the same time he watched one fall from her eye, she was sweeping her palm over his cheek, leaving it damp. He reached up to do the same for her, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

“There is no home to go back to if you’re not there, Dionysos,” she muttered.

“Okay,” he sighed. “Okay.”

He held her for a long moment, and although he could feel eyes on them from every direction, he let her stop shaking some before he began to reluctantly loosen his grip.

“Now come on,” she whispered, although she seemed to be struggling just as much as he was to pull away. “Let’s get out of here.”

Dionysos stilled himself, nodding in agreement. They stood there a moment longer before she turned and opened the door. A delicate calm settled into his bones, offering him a moment of respite. And he realized that he could make peace

with this situation. Because no matter what came next, he would still know the shape of her mouth and the taste of her lips. He'd been given the one thing he had wanted his entire life, and it had been as beautiful as he had imagined it would be. After that, nothing else could compare. After that, nothing else mattered.

CHAPTER 19

ATHENA

The breeze rolling in off of the sea made the night feel colder than it was, rocking the ship back and forth on the water. The ship parked across its path up ahead did nothing to block the winds, nor did the smaller ships it was flanked by. Of course, those ships had one purpose and one purpose alone — to ensure their ship didn't leave the harbor and cross into open waters.

Athena pushed away from the railing, turning to once more survey the deck. Her guards were stationed around its edges, cloaked in shadow and prepared for any sudden movements on both land and sea. Artemis stood at the front of the elevated platform in the center, Nike on the opposite end of it watching the rear, the intermittent static of everyone's radios disturbing the quiet every now and again.

Thassos was a sleeping giant that stretched its limbs out before her, the city unaware that their leadership had been cut in half just hours ago. Amphitryon wanted to keep it under wraps according to Pallas, who had been the first one dragged to the manor following the discovery of Tantalos by his guards. He'd explained the scene to them in grave detail on the way back to the bungalow to collect their things: the broken bottle beside his head, the lack of shirt and belt on his body, the crimson stains across the cream carpet where blood and wine could not be distinguished from one another, and the long, thin knife that had been jammed up through the bottom of his chin but only after it had been used to cut his throat.

The only thing they knew for sure was that it had been no stranger. It had been someone Tantalos knew, someone he was willing to take onto his yacht without alerting anyone. That hardly narrowed it down, but it also didn't rule out Dio, and that was the only thing she was concerned with at the moment.

Now that they were out of the manor and she'd had a hot shower and a hot meal, Athena could admit how suspicious it all looked. Between her moving the security away from the yacht, Pallas allowing her to do so, and Dio going off on his own for who knows how long, she would have questioned them as well. And while she knew in her heart that none of them had anything to do with it, it had been the perfect combination of missteps.

Her main thought was that someone planted in Pallas' guard had done it, but she couldn't pinpoint why. She had studied Amphitryon's body language, every use of his hands and movement of his eyes and note of his voice. Nothing in it suggested he would have had his fellow leader killed. Even doused in rage, his grief seemed genuine. She imagined she would have reacted the same if something happened to Dio.

But her readings of people were not infallible, and if anyone needed to sell their innocence in all of this, it was Amphitryon. He was the only person with motive. It was evident Tantalos was leaning towards an alliance with Khaos Falls, and it was just as evident that Amphitryon had been looking for a reason to not only reject that alliance but stomp on any truce that may have come instead. He didn't want peace. He wanted chaos.

The question was who was helping him get it.

She doubted she would get much sleep. She was radioing Hephaestus and Hades at least once every hour to check their progress, worried they might trot into some trouble of their own on the way. Hades leaving Khaos Falls was the one thing they had all agreed could never happen unless there was legitimately no other choice, but considering Amphitryon had used the story of Zeus shooting Dio earlier, he was very much aware that if there was one sure way to draw Hades out of his fortress, it was to put Dionysos in mortal danger. So while his

grief may have looked genuine, he was still the prime suspect here.

And she hated that she had failed both Hades and Dio. She hated that she couldn't protect him on her own. But it was just another reminder of what she'd already known, falling from the sky the moment she had begun to forget it. Love would never be enough to protect him, not even hers.

She headed downstairs to her cabin, knowing it would do her no good the moment she reached the bottom. The enclosed space made it hard to breathe, and her thoughts didn't have enough room to run the way they wished to. Still, she proceeded down the hall, focusing on the floor beneath her feet.

Pallas was back in the city, meeting with people he knew and trusted to help those who would likely feel Amphitryon's wrath or recklessness first. He had finally agreed to Athena's offer to buy his father's house if only so that he could fortify the safety of Thassos' most vulnerable citizens. She only hoped it made a difference, one that didn't cost him his life.

The night seemed so endless, and it felt like days had passed since she had left the bungalow with him, since she had inspected the harbor and moved the guard around, since she had kissed Dionysos in the wine cellar with the full intention of telling him the truth about her love for him. She couldn't now of course, not after that harsh reality check. She had to focus on keeping him out of a Thassos prison. Or worse, from a public execution.

Yet her lips still buzzed with the memory of his kiss, every thread of her being tugged towards his, bound by the Fates long before she ever knew herself much less Dionysos. She stopped outside of his door, placing a hand against the wood. He had come straight downstairs at her insistence when they arrived although she knew he wasn't pleased about it. The faint notes of a familiar song spoke to her through the door, the telltale sound of glass clinking against glass sewn into the instrumental. He hummed along too, a symphony of soothing that had her rolling her shoulders and breathing out at least a fraction of the stress bogging her down.

She knocked on the door.

The clinking was replaced with creaking, his heavy steps growing closer until the door opened before her, and she was faced with his bare torso. After a moment of frozen awe, she looked up and flashed a bashful smile, unsure of what to say or if she had to say anything at all. Mercifully, he simply stepped aside and allowed her access.

His room was identical to hers, spacious enough that it wasn't claustrophobic but small enough that it was cozy. Well, at least for her. His head was so close to the low ceiling that he was bent slightly forward, and she could tell he was struggling to get comfortable just by the way his shoulders were bunched up around his ears. Although of course, that could be the stress.

There was a bed, a mini fridge and microwave, a table and chair, a compact desk in one corner and a small bathroom in the other. She stood beside the table, and he pulled the chair around for her before sitting down on the bed himself. Taking a clean glass off the top of the fridge, he opened the fridge and pulled out a bottle of pear wine, filling it halfway and sliding it to her.

"I don't think drinking is going to solve this particular issue, Dio," she said softly.

He picked up his own glass, which seemed to be filled with the same wine. "I don't think drinking solves any issues ever, but it's a good way to pass the time before we do, isn't it?"

She looked at him, her muscles coiling and tensing beneath her skin. Her frustration spiked without any kind of warning.

"This isn't a game, Dio. You need to take this seriously. You - *we* could be in big trouble."

"You don't think I know that." It wasn't a question. He kept his eyes on her as he downed his drink and refilled the glass. "I know what I've done. I know I shouldn't have come."

She sighed. "That's not what I'm—"

“And I *know* that since I did come, I shouldn’t have let my feelings get in the way of what we were doing here. I shouldn’t have acted on impulse or ran away from home like a child, and I shouldn’t have been so naive to think that the only person I had to worry about was myself when I did it. I know all of this.” He held up his glass. “This is my fourth glass, and I still know all of this. So if you don’t think I’m taking this seriously, you didn’t hear a word I said the night that I volunteered for this.”

There was something in his face that made her shift in her seat, a sort of hollowness in his eyes she had never seen there before. It unnerved her, made the room smaller than it had been a moment ago, and she needed the air.

She stood up. He gripped her wrist and pulled her towards him.

She tried to free herself, giving her arm one firm tug, but it was a futile attempt, one she wasn’t willing to go for a second time. He reached out for her other hand, and she had no choice but to face him although she didn’t meet his eyes. She didn’t know what would happen if she did. She imagined it would be much like striking a match, and at the moment, she was nothing but kindling and kerosene.

He reeled her in, slow and steady, and with each step, her hastily repaired resolve began to bow and bend beneath the makeshift patches she’d applied upstairs until resistance was no longer an option. He guided her down to straddle his lap, and once his arms were around her, it all fell apart. *She* fell apart, limbs roped around him like a buoy in the middle of the sea, burrowing her face into his neck. And it was the first time she’d ever felt safe. Well prepared, sure, but never safe, and that was, in itself, a jarring revelation.

Because being smart and being the smartest person in the room were two very different things. Because if it came down to it, she would not hesitate to take a bullet for Dio, her mortality never at the forefront of her considerations. Yet she consistently scolded Dio for taking his own for granted as if he’d live forever. She guilted him for being reckless with the man she loved but never thought twice about his feelings when

she stepped foot on foreign ground or enemy territory. And even though his presence gave her more incentive to keep her composure, it wasn't foolproof. In that, she was as much to blame for all of this as he was.

"I'm not afraid to die," he breathed. "I'm afraid to stop living."

She pulled back, taking his face carefully in her hands like the precious thing he was. His doe eyes and soft lips and round cheeks and big heart; she would do anything to protect him, to protect his smile and his laugh and the look he got when entering a new club. But more than anything, she wanted to *hoard* them, keep them all to herself. "I'm afraid to lose you," she admitted quietly.

"You won't."

"You can't promise me that."

"Yes, I can."

"No—"

"The Fates already tried with everything they had to tear me from this world once, Athena, and I wouldn't go. You know why?" Her lip trembled. He brushed his thumb over it. "Because you're here, and as long as you're here, I'll be here too. Because I refuse to go anywhere you're not."

All she could do was stare at him, every other argument she had conjured fell apart in her mouth. And she realized she didn't want to argue it. She wanted him to be right. She wanted to believe him.

She leaned forward, claiming his lips for her own again and again until her entire body was held captive in his gravity, her hips grinding down on his to elicit a sharp groan. She drank it down in desperation, savoring the taste of it on her tongue until his was sliding across it. His hands moved down to her hips, pressing them harder against his own. Just right too, the outline of his dick pressing against the apex of her thighs. She gasped, unprepared for the feel of the bulge much less the size of it, and the way it twitched against her through his shorts had her shivering. She wasn't sure she would know

what to do with it, with *him*, but she was determined to figure it out.

But even though caution had already been thrown to the wind and she was beginning to sweat out her clothes, they couldn't do this, not here, not now. As much as she wanted him, as certain as she was that this was inevitable now, she couldn't afford to be off her guard. She didn't want to spend the entirety of their first time wondering if they would make it home.

Still, she slipped a hand between them, palming his bulge and giving it a firm squeeze. She didn't want to leave him like this even if he was beautiful when he was needy, looking up at her with pleading eyes and swollen lips and sweat-slick skin. She wanted to give him everything she could possibly offer and then some. After waiting their whole lives, one would think she could wait another few days, but impatience coursed through her like venom, and he was the only antidote.

"What about the bet?" It was a weak attempt at best, hissed against his temple with her hand mapping out every inch of his shaft.

"—Right, I almost forgot," he managed through a series of grunts, rolling his hips into her palm. "Yeah, I - I committed to that."

The moment he began to loosen his hold on her, she tightened her hold on him. "Well - what were you gonna ask for? If you won?"

"Mm." He shook his head. Then he clasped a hand around her wrist once more and pulled her hand from his cock. "You'll find out once I've won."

Then he was standing up, every muscle of her body shrieking its protest as he perched her on the edge of the table. Every decision she'd just made seemed terrible now that he was carrying them out for her.

"Dio..." she groaned.

"No, no. We made a bet. I'm gonna keep to it. I'm not sticking my dick in anyone or anything until the banquet."

She leaned back on her hands with a huff, and only then did she take note of the moisture that had her panties plastered against her. She squeezed her knees together, acutely aware of the erection tenting his shorts in her peripheral. When he moved closer, she shut her eyes, and when she opened them again, he was on his knees before her.

She gave him a puzzled look. “What are you doing?”

“Do you trust me?” he asked instead.

“Of course I do, D, but what—“

“Then...”

He placed a finger to his lips, shushing her before both hands went to the front of her trousers, undoing the button and pulling down the zipper. When he gave her an expectant look, she couldn't find a thing to say. All she could do was oblige, pressing her hands into the wood and lifting up her thighs so that he could peel the pants from her legs. She was running so hot that the cool surface of the table beneath her bare thighs didn't phase her.

Anticipation seized her, making it impossible for Athena to do anything but stare. Good thing too, otherwise she would have missed the way his tongue swept over his lip just before he sunk his teeth into it. If she focused on that, she could bypass the embarrassment of sitting there on his breakfast table with her legs spread and her panties soaked. Of course, that was the only thing *he* could focus on.

Ducking his head, he moved his mouth along her inner thigh, her stomach tightening so hard that she feared she might be torn in two. She wanted to lay back, though not as much as she wanted to watch him, and so she forced herself to remain upright, scooting closer to the edge of the table and placing the leg he now ravished over his broad shoulder. It effectively spread her open, and Dio rewarded her with one languid lick through the fabric over her folds that sent tremor after merciless tremor up her spine.

Her toes curled as did her fingers, her head falling back and her eyes falling shut. Some kind of sound clung to the

back of her tongue, but she focused on finding hold of her composure. She didn't want to miss a thing, certainly not the sensual kiss he gave her clit through her panties. Though the moment she registered this image, her eyes rolled back of their own volition, a shaking groan leaving her lips.

The kiss morphed into a slow sucking, his tongue swirling around the bud and flicking it every now and again with just enough pressure to make her hips jerk. The cotton between them only added to the sensation.

Her other leg came up to hook around his back, her thighs working to pull him closer. He snickered against her, the tips of his fingers probing the darkened fabric over her entrance.

“Oh, you really know what you're doing,” she managed, her tone husky.

She knew he'd had a lot of practice of course, and tonight, she would pretend that all that practice had been for her.

When she finally began adjusting to the rhythm he set, he tilted his head slightly and opened his mouth wider, pressing it over her heat and flattening his tongue against her blanketed folds. He kissed her cunt the way he kissed her, with a reverent passion that burned brighter than a thousand vengeful suns. Her panties were now soaked through completely without a doubt, and he suckled and siphoned her arousal from the cotton with a palpable greed in his eyes. Then he buried his face in it completely.

“Dionysos!”

She shoved a hand in his curls, any shame and embarrassment she may have housed prior now running down her thighs as she ground down onto his face. He growled in response, a deep and rumbling sound that vibrated through every inch of her. Soon, her moans meshed with the lewd sounds of him eating her pussy through her drenched panties. His hands slid out from between her thighs to instead wrap around beneath them, helping them both quicken their pace while the bridge of his nose pressed into her clit.

With each passing moment, each bout of pleasure, she was regretting that bet. She wished more than anything that she hadn't agreed to it, and if nothing else, she hoped he would be compelled to abandon the effort. More accurately, she hoped she would be able to compel him to abandon the effort. Because if this was only his tongue—

“Ah, fuck!”

His teeth were now scraping over her folds, an additional sensation that made the ship rock uncontrollably around her. Or was that her? She bit down on her lip, her eyes fixed on him and the eager motions of his head. He buried his face deeper into her pussy, stimulating every inch he could reach until she had both hands in his hair and no sense of time or space.

Her orgasm crept up on her like Dio's unexpected accomplice, seizing her so suddenly that all she could do was hold on for dear life as it ravaged her without any regard for her well-being.

And she loved it.

With trembling hands, she poured every ounce of her energy into dragging him up and away from her heat, and he came willingly. His lips were plump and glistening with her, tongue hanging out amidst his panted breaths. His eyes were hooded with hunger, and his stiff cock now seemed larger than before. She took hold of the front of his shorts and tugged him closer, their teeth clashing as their mouths met once more.

It was a domino effect. The moment she opened this door, all the walls fell down, and there was no going back to before. Every fantasy she had refused to indulge in, every thought she had buried beneath all of her excuses, they all came bobbing up to the surface, evidence of the mark he'd left on her long ago. Just that quick, every defense built specifically to protect her against him and his charms were disarmed and dismantled, never to be raised again. Right now, she had no qualms about that. Later? She would have to see.

Shoving his shorts down his thighs, his cock sprung free, twitching against her stomach. She groaned at the sight, all at

once territorial. He grunted, snatching up her hands and holding both behind her back as his mouth cascaded down the length of her neck. Lowering himself, he pressed the underside of his shaft against her clit, and her vision went white in its wake.

“Dio... Please.”

He offered nothing in return, his tongue and teeth working one specific spot just above the juncture of neck and shoulder. She was torn between putting some distance between them and pulling him closer, her ankles hooking around the backs of his legs and her hands straining against his hold. Nothing gave.

And she hated him for making her a wanton woman, for having to bite down so hard on her tongue that she drew blood knowing it was better than letting herself beg. Sex had never been of much interest to her. She wasn't at all interested in casual sex, and she certainly had no time or patience for dating much less relationships. At first, the latter had been because she was so afraid of ending up as bitter as Hera. Then, once she realized the source of the issue, she was afraid of ending up with someone like Zeus.

But above all, it had always been because no one but the man before her would do. She was in love with her best friend. And despite all of her denial, it was one of the first real things she learned about herself.

He ground into her at the most painfully slow pace, taking both her wrists in one hand so he could wrap an arm around her waist to pin her in place. She surrendered to him, her body bending to his will in every way he desired it to. And it felt so good, to give him that control, to let him pleasure her as he saw fit. Her legs trembled around him, his grunts bleeding into her skin and finding a home beneath.

“You've thought about this, haven't you?”

His voice was like a new song from her favorite artist, familiar enough to recognize but foreign enough to stop her cold. She tried to open her eyes, the heavy headiness of her hunger making it almost impossible. Instead, she let that deep

bass and innocent hope dig into her until she was rutting against him again in eager agony.

“I think about it all the time,” he whispered in her ear, and she swore he could break her just like this. She couldn’t even find the ability to speak. “And when I’m finally inside you—”

He released her wrists in favor of sliding his hands beneath her thighs then hooking them around her waist, bending her into thirds with her knees on either side of his broad shoulders and her thighs spread wide before him. His eyes burned into her like a brand.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever pull out.”

The words were a lightning storm, touching down on every inch of her, his predatory growl buzzing beneath her skin like an accompanying thunder.

“Fuck, Dio,” she exhaled, gripping his biceps. “Fuck!”

He leaned closer, brushing his lips against hers in a teasing manner until she was chasing them. He turned his head, letting her mouth hit his jaw, but she kissed him there anyway, sloppy and senseless and absolutely insatiable. His mouth found her ear again.

“And then, you’re gonna *hate* yourself for holding out so long.”

If only he knew. She already did.

She nipped at his jaw, hard, her nails digging deeper into his skin until he was snarling in response. She slid her hands down his arms then his sides, slipping them around his back and over his ass. She gripped each cheek ruthlessly, nails piercing, the initial impact knocking a roar from his throat. It served its purpose. He was grinding his cock into her clit again, his body pressing into and over hers so that the angle was just right. She took back control in one fluid motion, kissing and sucking his neck until he was putty in her hands, allowing her to guide his stroke so that each and every one hit her clit completely. It wasn’t enough. It wasn’t even close, but she would make do.

“Fuck, I - Athena, I’m gonna—”

He tried to pull or push away, to give them both room, but her own orgasm was clutching her in its grasp, causing her to clutch him in hers. Her legs tightened around him, her hands holding him firm to her. Then she was buzzing from head to toe, her muscles tensing and her back arching and the world going black as her eyes rolled into her skull.

“Dio!”

His name was punctuated by the sudden sensation of something wet and warm hitting her belly beneath her shirt, which had fallen over the head of his cock at some point or another. He was shuddering against her, his head buried in her neck as whimper and roar alike spilled out across her skin. Her hands were immediately moving, an arm wrapped around his shoulders, a hand cradling his head, her legs going limp at his sides. And as she held him there in her arms, the only anchor she had in the world, she knew. He had already ruined her.

She supposed that was what was meant to happen with the love of your life.

CHAPTER 20

DIONYSOS

In that blurred space between sleep and waking, Dionysos was forced to wonder if the night prior had been a dream.

A vivid and brilliant dream but a dream nonetheless. The closer he came to the surface, the harder that wonder tugged on his legs, attempting to drag him back down into the depths where he wouldn't have to risk disappointment. He fought to allow it too, eager to sink into the memory, to relive it for an hour or two more.

And then he felt her lips on his neck.

He was certain he had succeeded in the endeavor, resigning himself to this padded dreamscape where the only thing between them was their mingling breaths. Yet even as her kisses grew more eager, the darkness did not deepen. Instead, it began to lift.

“Wake up.” Her voice was husky and thick with hunger. “Uncle is about to reach port.”

His eyes fluttered open as she straddled his stomach, and he nearly choked on spit trying to drink in the sight of her nude form poised above him. He fought the urge to yell and scream and shout his praise to the Fates for finally making all his dreams come true. Though in all of his dreams and fantasies, in every dirty and devious thought, he could never do her justice. And no one would ever be able to stand in for her again. He knew nearly every inch of her now, and nothing less could ever do.

“You know we can’t make this habit,” she hissed even as she rocked her hips against him, his stomach instantly slick with her arousal. “I’m not gonna be another one of your friends with benefits, Dio.”

“Are you really lecturing me right now when your pussy’s dripping all over like that?”

She glared at him, but it fell away when he snatched her up by the hips and placed her down directly on his covered cock, her arousal seeping through the sheet between them.

“Besides,” he grunted, drawing his knees up and planting his feet flat on the mattress before rolling his hips into hers. “After I win this bet, I won’t need to - *fuck* anyone else.”

She moaned. “And why is that?”

He looked up into her eyes. “Because I’ll finally have the real thing. I won’t need to pretend they’re you anymore.”

She paused her movements, staring down at him with a look he couldn’t quite read. If he was honest, he had hardly heard his own words. It was almost as though she had compelled him to speak this blatant version of the truth. Or maybe it had been the pressure building up beneath that truth for the past decade and a half. Either way, it hung suspended above him now for all the world to see. And she was certainly looking right at it.

Anxious energy swept him up, and he twisted his big body, slamming her on her back. His rutting grew frantic almost immediately, the damp sheet warming his cock. A string of messy mewls left her. He pressed his head to the side of hers and whispered in her ear.

“And I can’t go back to just being your friend. No matter the benefits.”

She did not answer, at least not in words. Instead, she hooked her claws into his back and pressed her heels into his thighs, muttering his name like a curse.

There was a knock at the door.

Dio slapped a hand over Athena's mouth just as another sound climbed up her throat.

"Your uncle is about to dock." Came Artemis's voice. He knew damn well she knew where Athena was and had been all night. "I'd say about twenty minutes until he boards."

The moment her steps began to recede, Dio was rolling, Athena somehow gathering enough strength and leverage to shove him back over and onto his back.

She was atop him again before he settled, gripping one of his ankles and pushing it toward his head before situating herself between his thighs, scissoring him. Grinding her pussy down on his dick, she had him seizing up within minutes, and he had to focus every ounce of his energy on *not* cumming.

"Fuck!" he growled, throwing his head back.

She had *all* the friction now, riding him like her life—or his— depended upon it. Precum littered his belly as her folds parted around his shaft, her chest now pressed to his leg to keep it up and her hand anchored on his hip. He reached around his leg and gripped her ass, molding the flesh in his hands like clay until a stream of sultry sounds emptied out onto his chest.

His back arched hard until his shoulders were digging into the bed, his orgasm reaching out for him. The ship rocked. She rocked faster. He pressed his hands into the wall above his head, gritting his teeth so hard, it felt like they might shatter.

"Athena! I - oh sh—"

His cock spasmed, thick ribbons of white painting his soft belly. She released his leg as his hips bucked and buried her head in his neck, biting down on his shoulder as her body began to shake.

"Dio - nysos, I—"

She pounded her hands against the wall as she came, his hands reaching down for her ass, pinning her hips to his. Nothing had ever felt so good. He'd pleased many, and he'd taken pleasure in return, but to be given pleasure to such a

degree... Fates. Without doing anything himself, she had taken him to a level of ecstasy he had only ever hoped to reach.

He supposed that was what was meant to happen with the love of your life.

She went limp atop him, and he sunk into the mattress, trying to catch his breath between kisses to her temple.

“We have to focus now,” she muttered before rolling off of him with a kiss to his cheek. “Come on. Before Uncle has to come down here.”

“Just one more minute,” he whined, turning to throw an arm over her.

“Dio...” Her tone was one of warning. “What did I just say? We have to focus.”

“And I heard you, but *you*’ve worn me out.”

She tried to glare at him, but he merely flashed a grin before her lips twitched. Crawling back towards him, she kissed his lips, slow and soft, pulling what was left of his spirit into her mouth. When she pulled away, he inhaled sharply, his eyelids fluttering.

“Now come on, big guy.” Her tone was softer now, her lips dragging down his chest before they were gone for good. “I’m gonna go shower. Get ready.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Once he heard the door close, he forced himself out of bed, dancing his way towards the bathroom with a wide smile. He could end up in jail by the end of the day, and he would still be smiling. At least for a time. It would take the Fates themselves to bring him down right now.

He took the quickest shower he could before pulling on fresh clothes. He had just run some curling gel through his hair when there was a sharp knock on his door followed by retreating footsteps, and he knew it was Athena. He smiled. He supposed he wouldn’t trust himself to wait for her either.

Slipping his shoes on, he hurried out the door and up to the deck just as the bridge of Hades’ ship landed upon it. Hades

stood at the railing, his red waistcoat catching the sun beneath his grey suit. Hephaestus stood beside him in a red shirt buttoned up to the collar, the cherry wood and gold plating of his cane glinting beside him.

Athena stood opposite them, Artemis and Nike flanking her. Dionysos surveyed the rest of the harbor, taking in the many smaller vessels that now occupied every inch of open water on the outskirts of the inlet. Amphitryon's paranoia was on full display, and it only made Dionysos want to prove his innocence all the more.

He stood back while everyone offered their somber greetings, his eyes fixed on the city. It was only when a shadow was cast across him that he was shaken from this trance. He turned to find his uncle standing before him, and he smiled instinctively. Hades returned it before folding him into a hug.

Dionysos felt like a child. How often had Hades hugged him like this just before he was forced to face the consequences of his actions? Hades cradled his head, and in that brief moment, he wasn't the leader of Khaos Falls. He was simply Dio's uncle.

"It'll be alright, Son," he whispered. Dio screwed his eyes shut. "We'll handle this."

Dio nodded as they pulled apart, Hades cupping his neck then his cheeks before his hands fell away completely, leaving something cold in their wake. Before he could miss it though, Hephaestus was embracing him in his much rougher way.

"Good to see you, brother." Heph stood back, squeezing Dio's shoulders with a lopsided smile. "You're looking - very well."

Dionysos didn't quite meet his eyes. "Yeah, trying not to think about the fact I'm on trial."

"Good idea. Just think of it as a very stuffy lunch none of us wanna go to... Without food because even if it's served, it's probably poisoned."

"Isn't that exactly what it is?"

Heph patted his cheek. “That’s the spirit.”

Dio followed the rest of them down the ramp onto the docks. Two SUVs awaited them, following the newest guideline that stated no more than two leaders —especially if the leader of Khaos Falls is one of them— would ride in a single vehicle. And certainly not in enemy territory. Artemis drove one car, Dionysos and Athena in the back, and Hephaestus drove Nike and Hades, each of them taking a different route up to Amphitryon’s manor. Somewhere along the way, Athena took his hand in hers.

The streets were relatively quiet, making the trek feel almost eerie. Or... maybe eerie wasn’t the right word. He could find none better however. He imagined this was what it felt like to walk into the Hall of the Moirai, awaiting the judgement of the Fates.

Dio forced himself to keep stride with Hades as they entered Amphitryon’s manor, security lining the walls as though they were anticipating a fight. Hades didn’t spare them a glance, and so Dio didn’t either, trying to keep his chin up and eyes straight ahead. When they entered the dining hall, Amphitryon sat at the center of the table alone, empty plates surrounding him and a bottle of wine open beside a half full glass he picked up as they appeared.

“Amphitryon,” Hades greeted with a slight bow. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

The switch was flipped just like that. Amphitryon swept his hand across the table, knocking over the glass. Hades stepped back just before the wine dripped over their side of the table and onto his shoes, his face stoic as ever.

“Brought your best, did you?” Amphitryon mocked, the slightest slur in his words as he stood.

“Perhaps we should give you some more time to sober up,” Hades offered.

Amphitryon barked a laugh. “Don’t patronize me, you treacherous son of a bitch. You stabbed your own brother in

the back, and you think you can do the same to mine? You don't know who you're dealing with."

"Enlighten me please."

His face twisted into a dark snarl. Then he pointed at Dionysos, who had to force himself not to react. "I want that boy in a cage."

"I have my nephew Hephaestus here. He is the head of our security team—"

"I do not care who he is!"

"He has evidence that exonerates Dionysos, and he will help your forces investigate your brother's murder, so that we may—"

"Your nephew murdered him!"

"And what evidence do you have of that?"

"No one knew where he was!"

"I did." Hephaestus stepped forward, holding out a folder. Dio's eyes narrowed on it. "Witnesses placed my brother at the winery until sundown. After that, his phone maintains that location. He was talking to me for an over an hour, and after that, he and Athena were together—"

"And you think I trust you and your fucking evidence!" Amphitryon swatted the folder from Hephaestus's hands before turning back to Hades. "My brother was foolish giving his attentions to *him*, and he took advantage of that! And your niece rearranged my security! She gave him the perfect opening!"

"She did that out of an abundance of caution for your harbor and the damage being done within it. Your harbormaster came to her for help—"

"Because the little bitch is fucking him!"

Hades stood straighter. Dio knew what that meant, and if he hadn't, the sudden shift in the tone of his uncle's voice would have given it away. All friendly manner and diplomatic flair was removed from it. All that was left was ice and smoke.

“We can have a civil conversation about the matter if you wish, Amphitryon, but if you disrespect my children again, that all goes out the window.”

“And what are you going to do, Hades? Make me disappear like Zeus?”

“I can if you’d like. I’ll even let you choose where you disappear to. You can visit my brother, or you can visit yours.”

“Is that a threat!”

“That is merely the truth.”

“I want justice! I want justice for my brother!”

“And I am happy to provide that.”

“Then give him to me!”

“When you have concrete evidence that Dionysos did this, I will happily step aside and allow him to face the consequences of his actions.”

“The whole thing was mapped out and set up by *your* children!”

“Were there fingerprints on the knife?” Hephaestus asked. “The bottle? Any sign of Dio’s presence on the yacht at all? Witnesses?”

Amphitryon scoffed. “I’m sure there isn’t! He probably cleaned it all up!”

“So you’re saying you didn’t check?”

Amphitryon inhaled hard, prepared to shoot off on another tangent and tear into Hephaestus, but as he looked around at them, the tangent seemed to die in his throat. After a moment, he chuckled.

“This was your plan all along, to wipe us off the face of the earth.”

“I have no plans to do any such thing,” Hades returned.

“You preach about your justice! You lecture us on ours! But you have no morality! You have no heart! You are traitors and liars, all of you!”

“I understand you’re grieving, and this entire situation is upsetting, but our only intention has ever been to help, Amphitryon. And I am willing to help you solve your brother’s murder, but we have to do that the right way.”

Amphitryon rounded the table. Immediately, Artemis and Nike were in front of Hades, Amphitryon’s guards closing in until their leader came to an abrupt halt.

“The only way is to watch all your little bastards drown in their own blood,” he snarled.

Hades straightened his jacket. “Then we are done here.”

“We are done when I say we are done! He won’t leave this island if I—“

A blink. That was all it took. One blink, and Hades had yanked Amphitryon by his throat into the barricade of bodies surrounding him. The guards merely looked on, at the ready but unwilling to try and interfere despite how grossly they outnumbered their opponent.

Vaguely, Dionysos wondered how much their loyalty was truly worth. And if it had already been bought by someone other than their leader.

“Ask Zeus what happened the last time someone dared touch my boy. *My* family. And just by accident.” Hades’ voice was cold and cutting, his eyes fathomless pits. “If you continue on with your threats, you and I will spend an evening watching a pack of dogs eat your intestines as I drag them out of you.” Amphitryon opened his mouth, but Hades cut him off. “And understand this. If I wanted this island, it would be mine, and there would be nothing you could do about it. For now, accept this gift, and we can call it a day.”

Amphitryon gripped Hades’ wrists, his face red. “What - gift?”

“Of your head still being attached to your shoulders.”

Hades stood him upright, releasing him and smoothing out his shirt. Dio bit down on his tongue, every emotion known to man rushing through him.

“My offer stands until tomorrow morning.” Hades’ tone was more conversational now as he fixed his cufflinks. “If you wish to make amends and accept our help, you can come and see us, but we will not be stepping foot in this house again. If you choose to refuse, we will leave here at noon, and we will not make this trip again. Whatever decisions you make after that are on you.”

Amphitryon only stared at him, all but foaming at the mouth when they marched towards the door. No one said a word as they left the house, ignoring the clattering and crashing and shattering that exploded behind them. Once they were outside, Hades pulled them closer together.

“Hephaestus, I need you and Nike to meet Callisto now and go search the yacht at its new location,” he instructed.

“Callisto’s here?” Dionysos questioned despite himself.

“We brought more help than you think,” Hephaestus assured him.

“Dionysos, Athena, and I are going back the to ship.”

“I’ll go with Heph actually,” Athena corrected. “I have to make a stop.”

Hades looked uneasy but nodded regardless. Dio swallowed the bile rising in his throat, instead focusing on another point of concern.

“They’ve probably cleaned up everything by now, right?”

Hephaestus shrugged. “Probably, but we can’t leave without trying. If something comes from this, we have to be able to show our allies we didn’t start this fight.”

“Be quick about it,” Hades went on. “If we find something, we’ll take it back to Amphitryon.”

“Uncle, I highly doubt he cares about the evidence,” Dio pointed out. “In fact, I’m pretty sure he’s never cared about it at all.”

“Then at least we can say we tried.”

They all nodded their understanding before returning to their respective vehicles. But rather than climb in, Dionysos turned back to find Athena. He nearly bowled her over where she already stood behind him.

“I can go with you,” he croaked without thinking.

She smiled, reaching up to cup his cheek. “I’ll be fine. And back before you know it. I promise.”

“But - we’re still a team.”

“You’re right. We are, but I need you to trust me right now, okay?”

He swallowed hard but eventually nodded. She rose up on her tiptoes. He turned his face, thinking she was going for his cheek, but the hand on the other turned him back to face her. Her lips found his, surprise soon overrun by relief. It couldn’t have been more than a second, but it soothed him.

Pulling back, she patted his chest. “Now go.”

He obeyed albeit reluctantly, sliding into the backseat opposite Hades and dodging the looks from Artemis and his uncle. Not right now. He wasn’t ready to break it open right now.

But the effects of Athena’s kiss wore off too soon, and Dionysos found himself both eager and anxious to go home, to leave this place. Amphytrion’s threats clawed their way down his throat, tearing at the lining of his lungs until he was struggling to draw breath. He knew he couldn’t fall apart, not now, but knowledge did not equate to ability.

Once they arrived back at the harbor, Hades hung up the phone.

“Just give us a moment please, Artemis.”

Artemis nodded at him in the rearview before killing the engine and exiting the vehicle, taking up a position at its rear. Dio chanced a glance at his uncle who was looking at him with some sort of reverie in his dark eyes. He looked older than he ever had, at least in Dio’s recent memory, the lines of his face evident despite the small amount of light that made it

through the tint. His thick beard held traces of grey amongst the black strands, and Dio imagined there were some atop his head too. Even so, he seemed - relaxed. Then he smiled, and for the first time, the sight of it didn't soothe Dio. Instead, it made him feel ashamed.

“Uncle, I—“

“The first time I met with a foreign delegation, I ended up in a cell in Delos overnight until your grandfather could negotiate for my release.”

Dio raised a brow. “Was Zeus with you?”

Hades chuckled and shook his head. “No, I told their leader that Delos was already on the edge of the world, and if he gave me a reason, I would push him and his entire island off of it.”

Dio's eyes widened. “Why would you do that?”

“I believe that he insulted your grandmother. Maybe Cronus as well. Your grandfather had just made another unsuccessful bid for the city leadership position, and he was looking for allies to help clean his wounds. He thought I could handle Delos, said it would be easy because of the bad blood between their leader and Nyx's family.”

Dionysos nodded. Erebus and Nyx were famed leaders of the Tartarus District, and before Zeus and Hades took power from Nyx's father, they had been poised to take over for him. They were allies now for all intents and purposes, but while Nyx was the last of her father's line, Erebus's family still held immense power on the southern islands of the Aegean. In fact, his brothers had just taken up leadership of the three largest. Like Naxos, where Zeus had been exiled to.

“I'm still sorry,” Dio sighed. “Honestly, maybe it wouldn't feel so bad if I'd actually done something to earn the suspicion, but - all I did was run away.”

“You made a mistake, Dio. A simple mistake that you could've never foreseen the consequences for. Who could have? And - I made a mistake too. The pressure I've put on you, on Athena... You're still kids in a lot of ways. That isn't

to say you're incapable of being mature or taking things seriously. It just means that Zeus and I continued this cycle that our fathers and those before them began. We keep putting the weight of the world on the shoulders of our children and expecting it all to go smoothly. The fact of the matter is that - this is Athena's first real diplomatic tour on her own, and this was your first diplomatic meeting completely. I sent her here with nothing but talking points because I thought it was enough, and that was foolish. I believed in you, but that doesn't mean I gave you all the tools I should or could have to ensure you were successful. Nor did I give you both the time necessary to make sure we were all prepared. I hid away too. I didn't see you off from the port because of my own fears, and in turn, I allowed yours to board that ship with you."

"Yeah, but it just means you were right."

"About what?"

"About thinking I shouldn't come."

Hades turned to him fully now, folding his knee on the seat between them and placing a hand on Dio's shoulder.

"Do you know why I didn't want you to come, Dio? You must."

Dio shrugged, looking down at his lap. "You didn't think I could—"

"No. I didn't think *I* could." He squeezed Dio's shoulder, drawing his gaze once more. "I didn't think that I could watch you get on that ship and sleep through the night until you made it home. And I was right, but never once did I think you couldn't handle it. Never once did I doubt your ability to do what needed to be done. You did that, Son. You made progress, but whoever did this set this course before you ever stepped foot on this island."

"But — Honestly, Uncle, are you ever gonna want me to volunteer for another trip this important? Knowing there's someone better for it?"

"When I gave you the vineyards, what was there?"

"What do you mean?"

“Was there a district for you to run? Or was Hermes still selling stolen goods out the front of a car dealership?”

Dio couldn't help but smile. “Yeah.”

“And when I gave you the district, do you think it was because those tasks couldn't be handled elsewhere?” Dio shrugged again. “It was because I knew you both had skills, gifts that would benefit the city, but I didn't know what they were yet. So I gave you the funding and the freedom to figure it out, but never once did I ask you to stick to the vineyards or stick to the clubs, and do you know why?”

“Because - you believed in me.”

“Because I believed in you. Because I will always believe in you, Dionysos. If you want to try something new, if you want to learn, I will never stand in the way of that. Does it scare me? Absolutely. I almost lost you, and I never would have recovered from that. I could have never run a district much less a city if I had lost you. And that will always take precedence for me. Does that make me a liability in my position? Perhaps. I am certainly supposed to put the city before myself, before everything, but I could never put it before you. I knew that going in.”

“And so - you'd even be willing to go to war?”

Hades wet his lips, looking out through the windshield. “If it comes to war, it is because it was always meant to come to war. Men like Amphitryon do not adjust or assimilate. They make up their minds about what they are going to do before they ever walk into a room, and they cannot be negotiated with. But to answer your question, yes. I'd be willing to go to war for you.”

“I'd go to war for you too, Uncle.”

Hades smiled. It didn't reach his eyes. “That's what I'm afraid of.”

There was a knock on Hades' window. They both looked up to see a man Dionysos did not recognize standing outside of it, Artemis between him and Hades' door. Hades rolled down the window.

“Go on,” Artemis urged the stranger.

“Amphitryon would like to meet tomorrow morning,” the man recited on command. “He agrees to meet you here at the port at 9 ticks.”

Dionysos looked the man over, uncertainty brimming behind his tongue. The messenger seemed nervous, but he supposed that was to be expected. Most people who had never met his uncle before walked into Asphodel like that, unsure of what to expect and not entirely willing to find out.

Hades nodded. “Very well. We’ll be awaiting his arrival.”

The man didn’t hesitate, turning and rushing back to his car just as another SUV pulled up beside theirs. Dionysos could just make out Hephaestus in the passenger seat through the dark tint. When he opened the door, his expression was unreadable although Dio was willing to bet they hadn’t found anything of value. He and Hades got out of their car as well, the latter leading them all back down the docks and onto his ship.

“Where is Athena?” he questioned, descending the stairs into the saloon.

“With Pallas,” Hephaestus returned, and Dio could feel his big brother’s eyes on his back. “I left Nike with her after we checked out the yacht. They’re nearby though.”

“And what did you all find?”

“Less than we expected.” Hephaestus was the first to collapse into a chair, the rest of them following suit. “And we didn’t expect much of anything, did we?”

“Then how?”

“The blood, the wine, all of it had been scrubbed clean, I guess because you wouldn’t even know someone had died there last night.”

“Maybe they’ve staged the whole thing,” Callisto offered.

“That isn’t so farfetched,” Hades offered. “But it would be quite the risky endeavor considering Tantalos would have to disappear. For good.”

“And he wouldn’t,” Dio supplied. “He likes to show off, to be seen. Unless that whole thing is an act, and it didn’t seem like one, the last thing he’d be capable of doing is disappearing.”

“I’m inclined to agree.”

“Well, we did try—”

Heph was cut off by his own phone ringing. Dio watched him extract it and immediately accept the call, hitting the speaker button.

“Go ahead, brother.”

“Is Uncle with you? Is Dio?”

Hermes sounded uncharacteristically panicked.

“Yeah, they’re right here. What’s going on?”

“Listen, our scouts just checked back about those boats they spotted this morning.”

“Boats?” Dio asked, but no one answered him.

“Four more just left Phokis with the same tags, but there is no official log for any ships leaving Phokis today, and definitely not seven of them. Scouts said they looked like cargo ships, no aircraft, but there were people inside. A lot of them.”

Dio felt Hades behind him now.

“Who would be coming from—“

“Athena,” Dio breathed.

Hephaestus gave him a confused look. “What about her?”

“She said that there was - there was some member of the leadership board in Phokis who had been against an alliance, and he was in charge of their trade. She had this - this theory that he might be the one who was sponsoring Amphitryon and Tantalos.”

“Shit.” Heph’s jaw tightened. “She asked me to look into him, but I couldn’t find anything.”

“When did they leave?” Dio asked Hermes. “The first ships. What time did they leave?”

Hermes didn’t answer. Hephaestus did, and Dio’s blood went cold at the strain in his voice.

“They were just off the Boeotia coast an hour ago.”

Which meant they were no more than an hour away.

“Artemis, go get Athena right now,” Hades commanded. “We have to go.”

CHAPTER 21

ATHENA

The room was silent save for the scratching of Athena's pen, a repetitive rhythm dotted with the turning of a page. Sunlight spilled into the kitchen through a single rectangular window above the sink, illuminating its unkempt state. Pallas had explained that this was the first time in a long time he had stepped foot inside of his father's house, but he didn't have to. It was evident in the fine layers of dust and antique smell blanketing everything. Still, it was a charming two stories of bleached stone behind a wrought-iron gate, and with a bit of work, it could be back to its former glory. She had already decided to include restoration costs in her buying price.

Once the deed was signed over and Pallas's name was on the lease, she signed the last of the paperwork necessary of a leadership official before placing all the documents into a single folder. She supplied him with copies of his own as well, patting them like a neat little bow before sliding them across the table.

"If Amphitryon decides to burn the place down once you leave, there are no refunds," he joked.

"Don't say things like that," she snapped.

"I'm being optimistic. It isn't the worst thing he could do to me, so..."

"It is once you're in Khaos Falls."

"...I can't." She froze, looking up at him. He quickly went on. "I - not yet. I can't just abandon everyone here."

“Pallas, Amphitryon will have you tortured. Probably killed.”

“He’ll have to find me first, and in case you’ve forgotten, I’m very bad at getting caught.” His smile made her smile albeit reluctantly. “I’ll be fine. I’ll be there in a couple weeks, I promise.”

Athena inhaled a sharp breath. “I don’t want anything to happen to you. I - I will never forgive myself, Pallas. This was my fault.”

“What?” He leaned over the table. “No, it was not, Athena. I asked you for help, and you gave it to me. And - you know, maybe whoever was vandalizing those boats knew what you would do or - at least what I would do. Maybe we walked right into that trap, but that’s still not on you. You did what you thought was right, and if I hadn’t agreed, I wouldn’t have gone along with it.”

“That doesn’t make any sense, and you know it. Who could possibly know what I would do?”

“You go all over the Aegean seeking out allies for Hades. Whoever is - doing whatever this is doesn’t seem to want that. It’s not a reach to think they’d be studying you. And for all we knew, they were just guessing, and they happened to guess right.”

“And if Amphitryon’s guards catch you? It doesn’t matter who’s at fault anymore when he just wants blood.”

“I got back to you once, didn’t I? I’ll do it again.”

She looked away, unable to stand that twinkle in his eye. She had enough guilt to last her a lifetime as it were, dismissing him the way she had at the harbor. She wasn’t interested in replaying it.

“I have to ask,” he began slowly. “Are you sure Dionysos had nothing to —“

“I’m gonna stop you right there.” Immediately, that guilt was doused in a smoldering indignation. “I know for a fact he had nothing to do with it.”

“But - how do you know for sure, Athena? You do have a bias.”

“The evidence does not.”

“What evidence do we have that—“

“Hephaestus tried to give Amphitryon his phone records, proving he was at the winery all evening.”

“He couldn’t have been on the phone the entire time, Athena.”

“No, he wasn’t, but witnesses put him there until he went down to the wine cellar to take that call, and he only hung up that call because I got there. Then he was with me for the rest of the night.”

He seemed to be considering her. Or his next words. Either way, he was quiet for a moment, and Athena began gathering her phone and the papers she would be taking with her. When she stood, he did too, reaching out and grabbing her hand.

“Listen, I’m sorry,” he said. “I just - Tantalos wasn’t great, but he was the best shot we had at decency, and now we’re left with Amphitryon.”

“And I get that, but you don’t know Dionysos. I do, better than I know anyone or anything else. And even if I thought for one second that he was capable of doing something like this, I know he wouldn’t, not when it would put me in danger.”

“What was he doing without a guard then? Why would he disappear?”

“He - he goes to the winery when he’s - when he needs... It’s where he goes, okay? He works in the vineyards at home. That’s his place. He can go there if he wants to. It doesn’t mean he killed anyone.”

“Then at the very least, he was being reckless, and now he’s not the only one in danger, Athena. We’re all in this mess because he decided—“

She pulled her hand away and pointed a finger at him. “We are in this mess because I decided to go with you instead of stay with him.”

Her tone was acidic, and he retreated a step.

“Athena, I just want—“

“Look, I don’t have to explain it to you. If you can’t trust him, trust me, and if you can’t do that, I can’t help you.”

He blinked, still staring at her with that blank expression. And she couldn’t take it. She hadn’t come here for this, for any of this. Everything that had happened thus far truly was her fault because she had done everything but what she was sent here to do. She had lost her head at the most inopportune time, focused on either Dio or Pallas but never on the work, and it had all been spiraling since.

“It’s him, isn’t it?”

She turned back to him. “What?”

“Dio. It’s him. You love him. And that’s why you won’t even try to admit to yourself that you still love me.”

Her anger flared again, his erroneous entitlement egging her into a ripe rage.

“I won’t try to admit it because it isn’t true, Pallas.”

“Look me in the eyes and tell me that’s the only reason.”

She moved closer. “I do not owe you anything. I do not have to explain, confirm, or justify anything to you. We are friends, and barely that right now.”

“We made a promise.”

“We were children! Naive, ignorant children! And as much as you may act like one, those children are gone!”

He scoffed. “I act like one? If that’s the case, then you must have really done your best finding my replacement because you walk around with a literal man-child at your side who runs off and hides in a wine cellar when he’s sad. Is that really what you want? Is that the man you want to spend your life with, to have children with, to lead a city with? It’s—“

“I want a man who respects my decisions, who listens when I speak, who trusts my judgment and knows when to shut the fuck up because he has no clue what he’s talking

about. And more than anything, I want a man who doesn't feel entitled to me regardless of what we've gone through or what we've done. And you know what? Dionysos has never demanded anything from me, and he has never once tried to make me or anyone else feel inferior. He has been there every single day since we met. Even when Zeus tried to run him off, even when he was told he wasn't good enough to be around me, even when the entire world discounted and disregarded him, he was there. *For* me. And so yes, that's what I want. And honestly, it's more than I deserve because if you think for one second that you are in any way a better man than he is, I have some grave news for you, Pallas. Whoever you are now, you are not even half that man."

He grabbed her hand once more as she turned. This time, he didn't manage to get a grip. She twisted, taking hold of his hand and bending it back towards his wrist as she faced him. He yelped, going down on a knee without resistance.

"Touch me again, and I break it, Pallas."

Shoving him to the ground, she stalked out of the kitchen and through the back door where they had entered from so as to not draw attention on the street. Nike was no longer outside the door, but one of their SUVs was already in the alley, and she could see the top of Artemis's head over the slightly open window. She composed herself, tucking away her fury as she climbed into the backseat behind Nike.

"Pallas?" Artemis questioned.

Athena glanced back towards the house on instinct, picturing him on the floor still. She squeezed her eyes shut. Angry as she was, she still didn't wish to leave him here to die. But he'd decided already, and she wasn't going to force him onto her ship.

"He's staying."

"We're leaving Thassos."

She leaned forward over the center console as Artemis pulled out onto the street. "Now? I thought Uncle wanted to wait."

“There are ships coming from Phokis, many of them, with a whole lot of bodies on board.”

Her stomach churned. “Why would Phokis send ships? They’re *our* allies.”

“They’re coming from Phokis. Phokis did not send them.” Artemis met her confused glance in the rearview. “Harbormaster knows nothing about it. Your uncle’s online with their head of the board, but he’s not willing to risk waiting for them.”

“How long do we have?”

“By now? Under an hour.”

Athena sat back. Though she had plenty of questions, it felt pointless to ask them all at the moment. They were leaving. That was the point.

“Are you good?” Nike asked, looking over her shoulder at Athena. “About leaving?”

Athena snorted. “More than good. I’m ready to get the fuck off this island.”

Artemis hummed. “Or are you just ready to get back on the ship for twelve uninterrupted hours?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Athena shot back, Nike snickering as she turned back around.

“Oh, please. If you think you were any kind of quiet last night, you are every kind of wrong.”

“Oh, for Fate’s sake.”

Nike’s laugh grew louder, accompanied by Artemis’, and Athena fought down a smile of her own.

Artemis met her eyes in the rearview again. “Ah, was he disappointing?”

“Shut up, Artemis.”

“I’m only asking! Why else would your face look like that?”

“My face looks like that because of you, not Dio.”

“Then I’ll lock you two up in the cabin when we get on the ship, and he can wipe it off again.”

At last, Athena devolved into laughter. “You’re horrible.”

“All I’m saying is it’s about damn time.”

Athena paused. She had no argument for that. “Yeah, it is.”



THE DOCKS WERE BUZZING with activity when they arrived. Throngs of people were on the edge of the port’s parking lot, attempting to push past a barricade of Khaos Falls guards. Before Artemis could park the SUV at the edge of the docks, her radio crackled to life on her hip.

“Straight onto the ship, Artemis,” Hephaestus’s voice instructed. “Someone let it slip that we were leaving despite suspicions of murder.”

“Someone,” Artemis scoffed. “I’m sure.”

He said it so casually that Athena was almost able to avoid the nausea that took over her stomach. Artemis drove at a normal speed, ignoring the crash of multiple objects against the side of the vehicle. The ramp to their ship’s cargo hold was already open for them. It closed behind them once they were safely inside. The second SUV was already there, parked and secured in place. They got out, Artemis pulling the metal boots over the tires while Athena and Nike strapped the vehicle down with thick belts.

“Did we do a sweep of the ship for bugs or anything?”

“Hephaestus did that,” Artemis confirmed. “He didn’t find anything, but he ran full diagnostics on the computer system and cleared it all out to ensure there were no hacks either.”

The door opened on the far wall, admitting Hades and Hephaestus.

“I’ve spoken with Aikaterine,” Hades said straight away. “She says she has no knowledge of any ships leaving their

harbor, but she's checking it out personally. I did not mention their trade leader for now. I'll let her get back to me first, but we have to move. You go first, head east towards Keos before going to the Sarpedon Port. We'll head straight for Atlantis."

"We should stick close together."

"No, if those ships catch up to us with intent to do damage, they will do it, and there is nothing we can do. At least this way, we spread them out. If they do catch up, they'll follow us. Patroclus has ships on the water, and they're heading our way. We just have to reach them."

Athena nodded, knowing they didn't have time to argue.

Artemis checked the belts of the vehicles once more before following them up to the deck. Hades crossed the bridge back onto his own ship then the bridge began to raise and retract. Athena wished her anxiety would do the same.

And it did, at least a fraction, when she turned around to find Dionysos emerging from the stairwell. She rushed towards him, all caution cast aside, and he caught her in his arms, cradling her head and pressing his lips to hers.

"You alright?" he asked, and the edge in his voice told her that he could feel it, that excess tension that had nothing to do with their current circumstance.

She nodded. "I am."

Despite the look in his eyes, he didn't question her, and she was grateful. They turned to the front of the ship. Before them was open water, but at least a dozen vessels flanked their path. And although Athena had full faith in their ability to make it out of this port, she knew it wouldn't be without blood if Amphytrion's small force decided to attack.

The ship began to move, the pressure began to build, and it became a question of whether or not someone would be bold enough, foolish enough to try something. Yet as they passed, none of the smaller ships or boats moved. Those stationed on their decks only watched them sail by. Yet once they were in the clear, all Athena could do was look back to her uncle's ship, her heart sinking like the sun and just as heavy in her

chest. She hated leaving him behind, and truly, she shouldn't have to. He was the leader of the city. He should always come first, but they had each known coming into their new roles that this could never be the case. He loved them too much.

She reminded herself that wasn't a weakness and turned into Dio's side.

They were well out at sea when Athena's radio crackled, the signal weak but there.

"We're moving," Hephaestus informed them. "We were able to get all our men on board without too much trouble, and the mobs didn't try to overrun the ramps."

Athena assumed it was due to the snipers on the deck.

"Be safe please," she encouraged.

"I don't know how to be anything but."

He signed off, and Athena relaxed into Dio's chest. She now stood between him and the railing, staring out at the water towards Keos. Despite how close it was to home, it would still add at least a couple hours to their journey, but Athena understood why her uncle would want them headed for it if those ships did catch up.

One of their first allies, Keos was a small island but a strong one run by Nemesis, the mountains and cliffs creating an impenetrable enclosure. The only entrance into the city was a narrow canal that was walled in and heavily guarded, and visitors had to board one of Keos's boats which had been specifically designed to fit within the canal with passengers and cargo alike. Athena just hoped they would have time to endure that process in the event they *were* being chased.

When Thassos was lost to the glare of the sun and the water at their back was clear, Dio leaned down behind her, his lips against her ear.

"Come on," he whispered.

She shivered, so wound up in the warmth of his breath that all she could do was allow him to take her hand and lead her downstairs. They moved down the hall, and when they reached

his door, he pulled her in front of him. Despite the more reserved curl of his lips, she could see he was giddy, which made her curious as to what he was doing.

“Close your eyes,” he instructed, already placing his hands over her face. She obeyed nonetheless.

She heard the door open, and Dio urged her forward. Yet she only made it a few steps before he told her to stop, shutting the door behind him. Then he dropped his hands.

“Open them.”

She did, and she gasped once her vision focused.

The room from last night was lost to a wall of sheets which hung from the low ceiling. At the center was a slender gap, and through it, she could see the mattress laid on the blanketed floor beneath a mound of pillows, Dio’s laptop slightly in front of it, and a haul of snacks between the two. The bedframe was on its side against the wall beside the mattress, another mattress fitted into it to create a makeshift couch. It wasn’t quite as large or intricate as the forts he used to build when they were kids, but it would certainly do.

“When did you do this?” she asked, breathless.

“While I was waiting for you. I was a bit hyped up and all, so I thought I’d put that energy to good use. That way, you can relax a little bit before we get back home, ironic as that sounds.”

She laughed, and it was the elated sort of laugh she did not often produce. A laugh only he could draw from her. She moved towards the opening.

“Ah ah, hold up.”

She whipped around. “What?”

He reached behind one of the sheets and pulled out what she thought was a sheet, but when he shook it out, she realized it was one of his shirts.

“You gotta get outta those street clothes first,” he said.

She rolled her eyes but accepted, turning and stripping down quickly. Before she could pull on his shirt however, his voice caught her attention.

“Did you - Did you get that for me?”

She turned to face him, question in her eyes, but then they followed his, and question melted into anxiety. He was staring at the grapevine inked on her bare thigh.

It took her several moments to nod.

“When?”

“When I was seventeen or so? It was my first trip away from home alone. I was in Arcadia. I - was rebelling I guess, mainly against Zeus trying to keep us apart more, and I just - I don’t know.” She shook her head. “It’s foolish, I’m aware, but don’t laugh, alright? I was - it was just—“

“Hey.”

She looked up at him just as he pulled off his shirt and pointed to his chest. She looked at the mural she had seen so many times before but had never fully inspected, too bashful to stare at his bare skin for too long. There, in the center, was an owl. The owl he’d carved for her out of winter wood when she was sixteen. The owl now on her insignia

“Dio... Fates.”

She moved closer, tracing over the wise eyes with her fingers, Dio shuddering at her touch.

“Got it when I was fourteen,” he admitted. “While you were away in Arkadia... Then I got scared and got a lot of the others right after you came back.”

She didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, so she did both, resting her head against his chest. She wanted to ask how she’d never seen it, but the answer came to her as quickly as the question did. She hadn’t been looking at him. She had been running in the other direction.

“Come on,” he said. “Get changed, so we can watch this movie.”

Reluctantly, she obliged, sliding easily into the shirt. Despite the way it hung off her frame and down past her knees, it was surprisingly light and very comfortable. And it smelled like him.

When she crawled inside the fort, he followed after her — in only shorts of course— and they settled atop the mattress. But before Dio could hit play on whatever movie he'd chosen, she placed a hand on his chest.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, freezing.

“Nothing’s wrong,” she assured him. “I just - I know I haven’t been the best to you lately. I mean, before this trip, things were different between us, and they shouldn’t have been.”

She expected him to wave her off, to tell her it was fine and offer his forgiveness. It was what he tended to do when she fucked up, forgive her without anything more than a half-assed explanation. She wasn’t going to let him do that anymore.

But this time, he surprised her.

“What was it?” he asked.

“I was - I was running. I was running away from you.”

“Why?”

He didn’t sound sad or hurt, just curious, which made her heart clench painfully.

“Because in all that time we spent together in the hospital, I - I was falling harder for you than I already had, and I didn’t know how to cope with that. I’m not even sure I knew what those feelings meant then, and I’m still not sure I know what they mean now. Then - this trip happened, and - I’m not used to having you in the field with me. I’m used to coming home to you, and - I realized I took that for granted too. Because after the hospital, it was hard for me to look at you and pretend I didn’t feel anything when it is the realest thing I’ve ever felt. And I know that isn’t an excuse. But I also know I don’t wanna run anymore. I just - I need time. More time than most

people I imagine, to get used to letting myself love you, but I can't ask you to wait around for me, D."

He chuckled softly, cupping her cheek with his hand. His eyes still glittered with mirth.

"Athena, I've been waiting my whole life for you. What's a little bit longer?"

She had been right. She would never deserve him.

Capturing his lips with hers, she allowed herself to sink into this uncanny relief consuming her. He deepening the kiss but remained tender. It wasn't a kiss of hunger but of satisfaction.

When he pulled back, her eyes fluttered open. She brushed her thumb over his chin.

"I don't know why you've been waiting at all," she sighed, more to herself than to him. "You can have anyone. Everyone."

His eyes narrowed. "You do realize I'm in love with you, right?" Her heartbeat stuttered so hard that it rattled her spine. "But if you need me to say it... There is no one in the world that compares to you, Athena. No one can. Trust me. I've tried to find you in everyone, but - it's impossible. You're it for me, and if it's not you, it's no one."

She couldn't speak, her chest swelling with a level of emotion she could not yet speak into existence. She would though. She swore she would. For now, she kissed him again.

"Okay." She nuzzled his nose with hers when they parted. "Get your little chips or whatever and turn on this movie."

He grinned back at her and reached for the laptop before they sat up and situated themselves against the couch, her settling between his legs. And even though they were hours away from Khaos Falls, she was home.

"Thank you," she whispered as the movie began. "For being patient with me."

"Who else is gonna do it?"

She scoffed, smacking his bare leg as he fell into a fit of laughter.

“We were having a moment, Dionysos.”

“Yeah, well I’m not very good at those.” He kissed her cheek and wrapped his arms around her. She immediately relaxed. “I love you though.”

She smiled. “I love you too.”

Deserving or not, Dionysos loved her, and she would spend every day of the rest of her life earning it.

PART 2

CHAPTER 22

ATHENA

Docking in Khaos Falls offered very little relief although the city itself seemed to exhale a breath when both leader ships returned. The moment they descended the ramp though, Athena and Dio were separated, Dio departing with a waiting Hermes to continue preparations for the banquet while Athena, Hephaestus, and Artemis returned to security headquarters to begin discussing plans for their forces.

Amidst all of this, a palpable worry hung over each of their heads, one that Hades was doing everything in his power to alleviate. If word got out that Dionysos was a suspect in the murder of a Thassos leader, and people began to believe it, it could bring the entire event—and maybe even Khaos Falls' lucrative economy— crashing down.

If that occurred, it wasn't just Thassos they would have to worry about. It was their allies. It was Tartarus. It was Demeter. It was everyone who made their comfort possible and all those who wanted to take it from them.

And Athena knew that if it came between Dionysos and her comfort, she would rather starve than sacrifice him to a lie.

Since returning, he called every night, and if she missed the call, she called him as soon as she was able. It worked well for the first week, but not seeing him in person began to take its toll rather quickly, and not even a video call could soothe the ache in her chest.

And last night, she'd fallen asleep on him, exhaustion snatching her without warning. She texted him apologizing as

soon as she woke up, but she hadn't been able to check if he'd written back. Currently, she stood on the newly drawn border between the Harvest and Olympus Districts, her and Artemis silently watching Demeter pop off on Persephone.

They were merely meant to check in on the expansion, wanting to make sure it would be done before the banquet, but of course, Demeter was taking her time for no other reason than she wanted to, and Persephone was now having to talk some sense into her. It didn't seem to be working, and Athena was at her limit. She was on a schedule, and the sooner she got everything done, the sooner she could finally see Dio. Even if it was through a screen.

Fates, she missed him.

Apart from the anger distorting her features, there was not a flaw to be found on Demeter. Her tall and slender frame was draped in the finest white blazer and slacks, her hair pulled back in a high ponytail. It pulled the skin at her temples and around her eyes, making her gaze all the more fierce. Athena had always respected Demeter in the way she respected Hera, from a distance.

But right now, the older woman was testing her patience.

Athena stepped between mother and daughter. "If you need extra help, Demeter, we can do that, but we need this done in two weeks otherwise we'll have to put a hold on it until after the banquet. It's up to you."

"Now that is not what I agreed to," Demeter shot back.

"You agreed to complete this expansion in six months. It's been seven, so you'll get to finish it, but it's either in two weeks or two months from now. Those are the options. Upending the banquet in any way could be costly for all of us."

"Hm, from what I hear, you and your little friend already did that seven different ways last week."

"Mama, come on," Persephone huffed.

"What? Am I wrong?"

“Yes, you are.” It was Athena who retaliated, hardly able to cap her anger. “And if that’s your only justification for this, we can put a hold on it right now and discuss resuming it at a later date.”

Demeter inclined her chin, her dark eyes sweeping over Athena as if searching for signs of a bluff. Athena didn’t waver in any sense, her feet planted and her hands behind her back. At last, Demeter waved a hand and forced a smile that could cut through glass.

“Relax, darling, I will have it done in two weeks,” she crooned. “Two weeks, and you’ll have all the permits and pledges in hand, and we can each prepare for what I am sure is going to be the best banquet this city has ever seen.”

“Thank you.” Athena gave her a curt nod. “Two weeks then.”

“Two weeks!”

Demeter didn’t wait around any longer, turning on her heel and climbing back into her SUV. Persephone and Athena watched her pull out of the lot before they turned to one another, the slightest of smiles on their lips.

“You wanna get lunch?” Persephone asked. “My treat.”

Athena wanted to refuse, citing her packed schedule, but then Persephone took off her sunglasses, and something in her eyes told Athena that the decision had already been made for her.

Fifteen minutes later, they were sitting down in a nearby cafe with a pizza between them, and Athena was trying to figure out what question she wanted to ask first. Persephone seemed to be waiting for it too, loading her plate and sipping her iced tea without so much as a glance across the table. Artemis soon sat between them with the sandwich she ordered, but she didn’t seem particularly interested in disturbing the peace either.

At last, after she’d eaten a slice, Athena gave in.

“Did my uncle send you to check on me?”

Persephone tsked. “*I* sent me to check on you.”

“But you *are* checking on me.”

“Of course I am, Athena, you had a rough ass trip last week, and you still haven’t caught a break, have you?”

“I haven’t really been given the chance.”

“Exactly, so I’m giving you an excuse to breathe for a second. I did the same with Dio although he was a much more willing participant.”

Athena perked up without meaning to, and she could feel Artemis’s eyes on her. Still, she did her best to keep her voice level.

“How is he?”

“As well as he was after being shot. Which is to say as well as we can hope for although he may or may not be faking it.”

“Seph—“

“And if I know anything about you by now, it’s that you carry a whole lot of weight on your shoulders whether you have to or not, so I’m here to make sure you’re not beating yourself up about it.”

She sighed. “It was... The decisions I made — the decisions *we* made indirectly created the situation, and I...”

But she didn’t know how to describe it, how to explain that the guilt had been swept away by something else, something bigger, something she could not possibly put into words.

But Artemis tried for her anyway.

“I doubt she had much time to feel guilty the way she and Dio were—“

“Artemis!” Athena snapped.

Artemis shrugged, taking a bite from her sandwich. Persephone was staring at Athena with a devilish grin.

“Okay, girl, details,” she urged.

“Absolutely not.” Although with irritation came that familiar elation, and it was growing more and more difficult to combat it.

“Hey, I’m just glad y’all are finally there,” Persephone replied. “You two are somethin’ else, walkin’ around here like nobody sees what—“

“We aren’t.” She blurted it out before she could think about the words.

Both Persephone and Artemis stopped eating, their expressions sobered from one breath to the next.

“You aren’t what?” Persephone managed. “Together?”

“Yes. I mean, no, not... We’re not fucking.”

Artemis’s head recoiled quick as a viper. I know you are not lyin’ in my face right now. I know what I heard.”

“No. I mean—“

She glared down at her plate, frustration bearing down on her. She couldn’t even talk about him without losing her head, devolving so quickly into something lovesick when they’d only been doing this a week. But of course, it was Dio, and nothing was ever traditional with Dio. And she wanted to tell them. Or at least, she wanted to tell *someone*. She wanted to be able to talk about it with someone.

“I - bet him that he couldn’t go without sticking his - *dick* in someone until the banquet,” she started slowly.

There was a beat of silence. Then another. And another until it became too thick. Artemis was the first to speak. Or rather, retaliate. Still, Athena could tell she was biting back laughter.

“And why the fuck did you do that?”

Athena waved her hands in front of her. “It was before we... I don’t know, okay? We were talking about... Ugh!” She rolled her head back with a huff before trying again. “I was jealous, okay? Of that woman at the vineyard, and I told him he couldn’t go a day without fucking someone so he said to bet him. And - I did. Then we kissed and - and messed around,

but he wouldn't go all the way. He's insisting on finishing it, and I just—" She laughed bitterly, shaking her head. "I'm losing my fucking patience."

Another long beat of silence. And then the Seph and Artemis burst into unfiltered laughter, the collective sound so loud that it drew glances from other tables.

"Down bad, huh?" Persephone choked out, tears in her eyes.

Athena groaned, dragging a hand down her face. "It's embarrassing and frustrating and really inconvenient."

"It's supposed to be. It means you're actually looking forward to it."

"But why? It's just sex."

"Is it? Because the way I see it—and I think I see it pretty clearly—it is a whole lot more than that with Dio."

"Okay, but hold up," Artemis said. "You did this because you were jealous of this woman?"

Athena shrugged. "I mean - not just her. He's *always* with someone."

"Someone who looks like you."

"And he — wait, what? No, he is not."

"Yes, he is," they both returned.

"He dated your stunt double for years in case you forgot," Artemis drawled. "And only broke up with her when she wanted more. But then when you start leaving the city more, he starts fucking with her again. She's damn near a mirror image if you squint."

"And I'll be honest," Persephone started slowly. "Gany?"

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Athena scoffed.

"Hey, I just mean that he - also has very luscious curls, and you're about the same height."

"And shape," Artemis added.

“And when he turns around, he probably looks mildly similar after a bit of substance use.”

“You’re both—“

“Telling you the truth,” Artemis interjected. “Even that woman at the vineyard looked just like you, and if you fail to see that, you’re doing so willingly.”

“Athena, you have to know how much he loves you, right?”

Athena looked up at Persephone, whose face had softened to something more sincere. Her voice had too, and it soothed whatever had been nagging at Athena since the start of this conversation.

“Anyone would know it after talking to him for an hour,” Seph went on. “I did. If he isn’t talking business, he’s talking about you, and he rarely talks business if he can help it. And it was obvious to me you felt the same that day he got shot. Come on now.”

“I knew it when we were kids.” Artemis sounded exasperated now. “It was only a matter of when, and now that Zeus is gone, what else could hold y’all back?”

That was one conversation she wasn’t prepared for. She was not ready to admit to herself that it had always been there, Dio’s love for her. But it had been. And maybe there were times where she would look for it on him like a bruise or a mark, and when she didn’t find it there on the surface, she used that to pad her resolve. Maybe they merely had to wait until everything fell into place. Or for the stars to align. Dio always talked about the stars aligning because Dio’s mom used to always talk about the stars aligning. He discussed it as if it were this sure thing upon which all of his hopes rested. She warned him against it, but he was so damn sure that eventually, she no longer had the heart to warn him. But in the end, he might’ve been right after all.

“I’m different when I’m with him,” Athena whispered.

“In what way?” Persephone asked.

“I think less with my head and more with my heart. I’m reckless.”

“*Are* you reckless, or did Zeus make you believe that you were reckless when you took other people into consideration?”

She didn’t have an answer for that. Or at least not an answer that she wouldn’t second guess a dozen times over.

“Do you think your uncle’s a good leader, Athena?”

Athena gave Persephone a bewildered look. “Of course I do.”

“And so you would follow him anywhere?”

“I would.”

“And you also know that if it came between this city and his family, he would choose his family without a second thought?”

Athena deflated. “I do.”

“But because he knows this, because he acknowledges that this great strength as an uncle is his one weakness as a leader, he does everything in his power to ensure he never has to choose. It doesn’t have to be any different for you. You’re good at what you do, Athena, the absolute best. Loving Dionysos isn’t going to change that. Especially considering you’ve been doing that a long time already.”

Athena could hear her uncle’s words penetrating the silence that followed, so simple and fluid.

Because fear and pain can only get you so far, and apathy will keep you pinned in one place, but when all else fails, love for those you hold dear will drive you forward. And it will take you as far as you need to go.

She didn’t doubt them, not in the slightest. Nor did she doubt Persephone’s insistence, but what all this advice failed to account for was that she was not built the way her uncle was. She was built the way Zeus built her, and in that design, there were a number of flaws and failsafes she couldn’t simply step over and be rid of. But she was trying. She was doing everything in her power to let herself love him, and for the

time being, that would have to suffice. Because the alternative was...

Well, it was something she didn't wish to think about.



SHE ARRIVED home well after dark, her feet sore and the faint suggestion of a headache throbbing behind her eyes. Ares was nowhere to be found, but now that he had something to do, that was no surprise. He now spent all his time preparing for the war that he and he alone hoped would come. While there had been no word from Thassos since they'd left, and the fate of those ships from Phokis remained unknown, that meant nothing. Because this was how wars began. In silence.

After checking emails, she retired upstairs, wrapping her hair and climbing into bed after a shower. With less than a month left until the banquet, everything felt so urgent, and spare time felt like a luxury she shouldn't be entitled to. Nevertheless, when Dio's face flashed on her phone screen, she quickly opened her laptop to answer the video call there instead.

She could tell right away that he was in the vineyard villa where he'd spent most nights since returning from Thassos. It made sense considering he was all but rooted to the winery, the wine supply for the banquet one of the largest tasks at hand.

He was sitting on the couch, his bare shoulders visible beneath his wide grin, and she couldn't help but return it.

"Did you have a productive day?"

She nodded. "Very much so. And you?"

"Oh yeah, definitely. Picked our six flavors for the banquet. Heavy stuff."

"Those six flavors could make or break us, so I hope you chose well."

“Of course I did. Do you have no faith in me?”

“I have all the faith in you.”

He feigned a bashful look, moving around on the couch. He never seemed to stop moving. It had been so jarring for her when they were kids, and even once she understood why, it was an adjustment. But Dio made such adjustments easy. Or at least worth it, and now, it was just one of those things that denoted him, the hyperactivity like a badge signaling her boy.

“I miss you.”

She hadn't realized she'd said it aloud until his crooked smile nearly split his face in two, all of his teeth on display. Her cheeks began to hurt. She was matching it.

“I miss you too,” he sighed, resting his head on his propped up fist. “I uh -“ There was a soft laugh that sounded almost bashful, and this face reddened. “I was thinking about you. Earlier. While I was - um—“

“In the shower?”

His eyes widened. She giggled.

“How did you know?” he hissed.

She leaned closer to the camera. “Because I was thinking of you too.”

Despite this very mature conversation, it felt like a very childish happiness erupting within her. Could it really be so easy, so welcome, so comfortable? She still wasn't completely sold, but the fact of the matter was that she had already leaned into it, and getting back out proved impossible every chance she gave it.

“What were you thinking about?”

She expected him to hesitate, to bow his head and contemplate just how much he should disclose. Instead, he took a deep breath and snatched whatever air was in her lungs all at once.

“About how good it's gonna feel the first time I slide my dick inside you.”

Her hips ground into the mattress as she dropped her face into the crook of her arm.

“You’re gonna be the death of me, D,” she muttered.

“What was that?”

His voice had dropped several octaves, smooth as silk and syrup thick. She was almost afraid to look up, but she forced herself to do so anyway. He was licking his lips. *Bastard*.

“I said you’re a tease,” she shot back, her tone rueful.

“Yeah, but see, I think you like that shit.”

She scoffed. “What does that mean?”

“Baby, your favorite pastime is denying yourself indulgence. What do you mean what do I mean?”

She didn’t have an answer to that. She couldn’t have formulated one even if she wanted to either. She was hooked and hung up on the pet name he’d used and the way his mouth shaped around it. It gave her chills. And something similar to an electric shock that shot straight down into her belly.

“That’s sort of gone out the window though, hasn’t it?” she forced out.

He shrugged. “Not entirely.”

“No?”

“Nope. If it had, you would be here right now begging me to fuck you.”

Despite the lack of clothes, she felt like she was burning up. Still, she laughed.

“I don’t beg.”

She expected some line about how he could make her, and maybe that would have had the necessary effect, but what he said instead had a far more *significant* impact.

“Then you would be here making *me* beg.”

“You think so?”

“I know it. Because that’s what you want, right? You wanna lose control without losin’ control.”

“But you’d do it?”

He didn’t waver. “I’d do anything you wanted me to do.”

“—Anything?”

“Anything.”

Ideas flooded her mind by the dozen. “We’ll see about that soon enough.”

“Will we?”

She nodded resolutely, but she still needed a more immediate fix. Which meant she was fully prepared to do something she had never done with anyone before. Naturally.

“But right now, I want you to do me a smaller favor.”

“And what’s that?”

“Strip down and sit back from the camera a bit.”

A low groan vibrated through his throat, her ears sensitive to it. “And what do I get if I do?”

She didn’t hesitate now either. They were long past that. She pushed herself up onto her knees, still in full view of the camera, and unclasped her bra, pulling it off and tossing it to the floor. She then slipped her thumbs into the hem of her panties but stopped, giving him a pointed look.

He jumped to his feet so fast that she nearly flinched, shoving his boxers down his thick legs to unveil his semi-hard cock.

And it was *close*.

She’d never seen it this up close, the head glistening with an early arousal and the skin of his shaft dark and veined. He took a step back towards the couch, and she had to stop herself from chasing him as he took the shaft in his hand and began to stroke. It wasn’t long until he was fully hard, his erection curving upward slightly. The effect this little show had on her was undeniable. She could feel it between her thighs.

“Sit down.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

His obedience was instantaneous, collapsing onto the couch as if she had pushed him down herself. She kicked off her panties and sat back against the headboard, pulling the laptop towards her and positioning it between her legs. She watched him squirm, his lower lip held hostage between his teeth and his other hand clawing at his thigh. She wanted to see him this way far more often.

Drawing her knees up and spreading her thighs further, she watched his jaw gradually descend into his lap with a proud satisfaction. His hand squeezed his cock before he began stroking it faster, his jaw clamping back down. His eyelids grew heavy, but he didn’t look away. It was as if he were refusing to.

She truly hoped so.

Sliding her fingers between her folds, she found that her clit was still slightly sore from the water jets earlier. She attempted to take her time, be gentle with herself, explore her arousal and every individual sensation it allotted. It proved difficult however when he was sitting there looking like that, his skin flushed and his beautiful brown skin shining with sweat.

“Fuck, Athena,” he hissed.

And all bets —unfortunately except for one— were off. She pressed the heel of her palm into her clit with a broken moan, two fingers hooking into her entrance. He grunted, reaching over to pull the laptop closer which effectively magnified his dick and the precum leaking from the tip. He caught it on his hand on the way back down, slicking up each inch until he was moving again. He kneeled on the couch facing her and began to fuck his hand. Her stomach tightened with anticipation. Her pussy did too.

She cupped one of her breasts, her mind so far gone that everything seemed hazy. Everything but him. She couldn’t look away, her eyes trailing after his hand, up to the head and

back down to his balls. Her fingers slipped deeper inside of her pussy.

“D... Oh fuck...”

It was so much. The friction, the heat, the palpable tension, the yearning that tugged at her through the screen, the pressure building in her abdomen... She loved watching him watch her, growing addicted to the power it allowed her access to, and she longed to see it in person. For now, this would certainly do.

She added more pressure to her clit, pumping into her cunt and slowing up when she got close. Maybe Dionysos was right. Maybe she liked to deny herself, to hold out for as long as possible until she felt her suffering had earned it. But he didn't leave much room for temperance, his features distorted by desperate determination, the sound of his strokes now distinct beneath her breathless moans. She pumped her digits faster, curling them against her walls, each and every motion drawing her closer to climax.

“Fates, you look so fucking sexy,” he grumbled, his words probing her alongside her fingers. “I want it. I want it.”

“What do you want?” She sounded more demanding than she thought possible in her position. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want to - fuck...”

She wasn't sure if that was part of the sentence or one of its own, but his hips were slamming against his fist now, his head falling back. He was close.

“Dio, please...” She would beg for him just this once if it meant watching him fall apart. Truly, she wished she could frame this image before her. “I need it. I need you to - to cum for me.”

“I - fuckfuckfuck —FUCK!”

His shout filled the room as his hips bucked wildly, and she was torn between throwing her head back and keeping her eyes fixed on him. She worked her clit mindlessly, her mouth salivating at the sight of him. And then thick ribbons of cum shot out of the top of his cock as he aimed it upwards, striping

his chest and belly and dripping along the couch. Her mouth fell open, and she drank up his high-pitched whimpers with an insurmountable greed. Her name was a sharp whine that punctuated each one as his hand slowed down, and he dropped back onto the couch. Then her orgasm gripped her too, marked by a broken and battered gasp followed by the fractured syllables of his name.

Her back arched, head hitting the top of the headboard none too gently while her free hand clamped down on the other. The pleasure was transcendent, sending her into a dizzying spiral that nearly had her toppling off the side of the bed. She hit notes she'd never hit before, never had reason to, but more than that, every knot in her body seemed to go taut before unraveling completely.

Then she was empty and limp and unable to do much of anything.

Slowly, she opened her eyes to find Dio marveling at her, his gaze primal and fixed on her body. His tongue hung over his lip, cock still in hand and twitching idly. Again, she wished she could frame it. She refused to believe he looked at anyone else like this.

She needed more, and she was willing to break all of her rules to get it.

CHAPTER 23

DIONYSOS

Dionysos dug his feet into the warm sand, gazing out at the sea. Despite teams of people bustling around him to prepare the beach for the Blood Moon Bonfire, it was the first real moment of calm he had been gifted all week. The ocean breeze ruffled his hair, and he smiled.

He thought of his mother and *her* smile. Every year, he wished she could see the banquet just once. She loved a good festival, and if they had nothing else for the rest of the year, she made it a point to take Dio across Old Crete to the ocean each fall for the Grand Harvest Festival. It had been his greatest inspiration —and hers— and while she'd never managed to have her plants featured in their displays, she dreamed big nonetheless. And she taught him to do the same.

“Uncle Dio, what else should I do?”

Phobos came to stand beside him, crossing his arms and following his uncle's gaze out to the water. Dio had put Deimos in charge of collecting the firewood which he had been excited about, and although Phobos was running around on his leg just fine now, Aphrodite thought it best that he take on something less physically demanding. Therefore, he had been sent to help mark the perimeter of the bonfire itself, planting flags so that Hephaestus' safety protocols for the fire and the crowds alike could be easily implemented.

“I think...” Dio contemplated it a moment. “You should tell me how school is going.”

Phobos froze for a moment. Then he shrugged, leaning his head against Dio's side.

"I struggle a bit with maths. The numbers get all jumbled up sometimes, so Dad got me a tutor. He says it happens to some people, but I don't know. Seems sort of unfair because Deimos is great at maths."

Dio hugged him. "Ah, maybe it is kinda unfair, but - it's sort of like your dad and his muscles, right? It means you have to work a bit harder, but it doesn't mean things are impossible. Plus, I'm sure you're good at other things."

He nodded eagerly. "I write good - er, *well*. I write well, but I've gotta work on my handwriting. Mama says it's important to have good handwriting even if we mostly type on computers."

"Yeah, that's true. There will inevitably be a day where you have to use a piece of paper." Dio smirked to himself. "And what about your other subjects?"

He shrugged again. "I like history. And art. Did you know next year, we get to make sculptures? And we study architecture too? We get to meet a real architect! I looked him up in my free session, and he's so cool."

"It wouldn't happen to be a fellow named Apollo, would it?"

Phobos reeled back, looking up at him. "You *know* him?"

"Know him? He's one of my closest friends. He comes to my clubs all the time."

"He has a book! With all of his buildings in it, and I'm gonna save up to get one."

Dio chuckled. "You realize you've seen them before, right?"

He narrowed his eyes, and Dio had to guess he hadn't mentioned this fascination to his parents yet. That didn't surprise him considering the chaos that had descended upon them all. And with the way both their minds worked, for all

Dio knew, this particular fixation had only just sprouted within the duration of this conversation.

“Phobos, Apollo designed most of this city,” he explained. “Uncle Hades’ casino, Aunt Persephone’s theatre, your dad’s security headquarters, your mom’s clubs, *my* clubs.” Phobos’ eyes widened with each addition. “And you know Artemis, right?”

“The scary lady with the crossbow?”

Dio grinned. “Yes, the one that helped take care of you at Twilight House.”

Dio paused a moment, afraid he wasn’t supposed to mention Twilight House, but Phobos merely nodded enthusiastically.

“Did he make Twilight House too?” he asked.

“I think he helped renovate it, but the buildings have been there for ages. Anyway, Artemis is his twin sister.”

“No way.”

“Yes way. Listen, you keep up your schoolwork, and I’ll introduce you to Apollo at the banquet, yeah?”

“Really!”

“Of course. What’s the point of having connections if I can’t use them to upgrade my status as the cool uncle?”

“You’re the coolest uncle!”

“Yeah, make sure to tell Ares and Hermes that.”

They had a short walk down the beach before Deimos returned, drenched in sweat and wood chips. Dio walked them back up to the lot where Hephaestus and Nike were discussing parking and traffic directions. They finished up as Dio and the twins approached.

“Dad, did you know that Uncle D knows Apollo!” Phobos immediately declared. “The architect!”

Hephaestus snorted. “Son, *I* know Apollo. How do *you* know Apollo?”

“We talked about him in art class.”

Deimos was looking between both Heph and Dio with wide eyes, not yet privy to this new connection. Dio merely gave him a nod.

“Uncle Dio said he’d introduce me-“ Phobos glanced at his brother. “*Us* to him at the banquet!”

Heph looked fit to one up him, but after a look at Dio, he seemed to change his mind.

“That’s very exciting. Just remember our deal about you going.”

“Yeah.” Phobos deflated slightly. “Uncle Dio said it too. We have to keep up with school.”

“Exactly. Now Nike is gonna drive you two home so you can shower and get dressed.”

“For what?”

“Aunt Hestia wants to take you guys out for dinner, and Uncle Dio and I are gonna go meet your mom.”

The twins nodded, giving both Dio and Hephaestus a hug before Nike herded them towards her car. Once they were gone, Hephaestus and Dio left for Elysium where Aphrodite and Hecate awaited them.

The usual traffic that tended to befall the Lush District at this hour seemed to have doubled. People were already beginning to come into this city, which was a good sign considering Amphitryon had been attempting to tear the banquet down before it began by flaunting his false accusations across the Aegean. Hades had been hard at work getting in front of it, sorting out the narrative and pointing to the facts. But the deciding factor was often that many knew Dio, and very few knew Amphitryon. Plus, those who knew him hardly trusted him or Thassos leaders in general, so thus far, things had fallen in Dio’s favor. But his uncle had warned him. Things could very well change at the drop of a hat, and they had to be ready. They all had to be ready.

When they arrived, everyone was already situated in Hecate's Elysium skybox, keeping up an idle chatter. Dio and Hephaestus collapsed on either side of Aphrodite on the couch, each of them getting a chin scratch from her long painted nails. Heph gave her an unimpressed look, but Dio was far more satisfied, smiling and patting her leg.

"All locations have been prepped for food and drink deliveries the day before their designated events," Aphrodite started off. "We'll shut down Perihelion Wednesday night, so that it's ready for the Night of Needs on Thursday."

"What is that again?" Hephaestus had a sour look on his face.

"Ooh, I forgot this is your first, baby." Aphrodite pecked his cheek. "Your brother's trademark night of debauchery."

"Isn't that every night?"

"Not like this. A lot of swinging, a lot of group sex, and a lot of things people will never talk about again once they leave the city with or without their significant other."

"Okay, this will not be my first because we are not doing that."

"Aw, not even a little curious about what they'll have to offer?"

"If I were curious, I wouldn't be with you."

Aphrodite smiled and kissed his cheek again. "It's not for everyone."

He raised a brow. "Why? Are *you* curious?"

"I was the first year. And the second. And the third—"

"I got it."

"But no. I just didn't want to make you feel like you had to miss out."

"I appreciate it, but I know I'm not missing out on anything."

"You are so getting lucky tonight."

“Was that not already—“

“So what have we got left?” Dio asked loudly, cutting them off.

“We’re just waiting for some last-minute RSVPs,” Hecate recounted with a smirk. “Your uncle seems to have soothed everyone’s worries, but—“

“But what?”

“Well, Phokis’s delegation is coming, but we still don’t know who sent those ships to Thassos, and even though they rerouted after we left, they never went back to Phokis.”

“But - they were Phokis’ ships. Right?”

“Actually... we couldn’t identify the ships,” Hephaestus explained. “We compared our scouts’ photos to our database of everyone’s vessels, and while the design was a close match to some places, we couldn’t narrow down who they belonged to. Whoever it is though has a whole lot of resources because those weren’t your run-of-the-mill vessels. Despite the weight they were carrying, they were fast. Our scouts lost them as soon as they lost light. We’re still trying to find someone who can identify them. Or at least place them somewhere before they reached Phokis, but...” He shrugged. “For now, we have to leave it as is.”

“And what about the banquet? What if they show up here prepared to start a war? What if they have more than seven ships?”

“Then we’ll be ready. We’ve prepared every defense we have, and Keos, Mykonos, and Megaris are offering naval squads for perimeter patrol. Deucalion Heights is on standby too, and the Sarpedon Port will be blocked off completely, allowing us to funnel everyone through the Harvest Port. All who step foot on our soil will be vetted before they are allowed entry. I promise you, brother.”

Dionysos was quiet for a time, trying to process this new development. Not that he had any answers or additional information to plug into the equation. But he was afraid. He was truly and genuinely afraid. Hundreds of thousands of

people would be in the city, over a million on the night of the banquet, and if they missed anything, anything at all, it could cost everyone everything.

And it would be all his fault.

“Okay now,” Aphrodite sung as if detecting his oncoming panic. “Let’s take a quick break from work so you can tell us all the details.”

“Details of what?” Dio questioned.

“This little bet with Athena.”

“Heph!”

“Okay, to be fair, she was in the room during that part of the conversation!” Hephaestus said, his hands up in surrender. “What was I gonna do? Lie?”

“Don’t get all bashful now,” Aphrodite chided. “Come on.”

Dio huffed, throwing himself back in the couch seat. Things were going well. That much was true, and he had in fact been keeping to the bet although when they’d had video sex a few nights ago, temptation almost dragged him across town to the Olympus Estate. The wait was all but killing him, and if he was the only thing standing in his way, not even his pride was enough of a drive anymore.

And although it was going well, he felt it was too soon to speak of it too loudly for fear that it would come crashing down on his head the moment that he did. It was so fresh and new and fragile, and he didn’t want to risk ruining it before it had begun.

“I have no details to offer you,” he said curtly, and everyone groaned.

“You are a damn liar, and I can see it all over you, Dionysos,” Aphrodite said. It was rare she used his whole name.

“I’ve kept up my end of the bargain, alright?”

Hephaestus smirked. “Okay, but Artemis said—“

“Oh for fuck’s sake!”

“Fuck’s sake indeed,” Aphrodite hummed. “So tell us about it.”

“I just - I don’t want to, okay? I’m not ready. *It’s* not ready.”

“You can be happy, brother.” Hephaestus’s voice was instantly softer, more sincere. “You can celebrate the win.”

“Yeah, and what if while I’m doing that, it’s all falling apart?”

“Why are you so certain it will? You are exactly who you were yesterday, and so is she. Sure, it’s taken y’all a lifetime to get here, and it’ll probably take another little while to figure out how you two operate on that level, but look me in the eye and tell me you honestly believe this isn’t what it’s meant to be.”

Dio stared wide-eyed at his brother before looking over at Aphrodite. “What have you done to him?”

Hephaestus reached over and shoved his shoulder. “Hey, smartass, I’m trying to be on your side.”

“Plus he’s right,” Aphrodite chimed in.

“We’ve all watched it for years, Dio,” Hecate said. “Maybe you two didn’t know, but we did.”

He expelled a heavy breath. “But if I ruin it, if - if we can’t make it work, I lose everything. My best friend and my first love, and then what?”

“That’s a big ‘if’.”

“I don’t know how many more ways we can spell it out for you,” Hephaestus sighed. “You love each other. You complement each other. You’re good together.”

“We almost sent the city to war.”

“You’re giving yourself way too much credit,” Aphrodite scoffed, palming Heph’s jaw. “*We* started this shit, and here we are, doing just fine, so.”

Dio stared at them, and although that reminder hardly soothed him, seeing them together did. If these two could fall for each other and make a relationship work while raising two teenagers, what was to stop him and Athena? What rationale could there possibly be as to why they wouldn't work? And yeah, sometimes people were better as friends. It was why Hecate and Hades had never become a couple. But he and Athena weren't anyone else, and he believed it could work. He was just... afraid that she didn't.

"You're thinking too hard about it, baby brother," Hephaestus warned. "Just see where it goes. And if it doesn't work, you do what you gotta to keep that friendship intact because no matter what, we're family."

"I just - I don't know what I'd do if it didn't work, if - if I fucked it up."

"Then don't make any plans to find out. That's all you can do."

It felt easier said than done.

"I cannot think of anyone who makes more sense than you two, and I am rarely wrong about these things," Aphrodite said. "And even when I am wrong..." She patted Hephaestus' cheek. "It works out. So you might as well start looking for a nice ring with a big diamond because I'm telling you right now. Y'all are made for each other."

Dio hissed. "Athena is less of a 'shine like a diamond' kinda girl and more of a 'diamonds don't shine, they reflect' kinda girl, you know? She doesn't care for shiny and flamboyant."

"She obviously cares for it a little bit. She fell for you."

The three of them laughed as Dio rolled his eyes, but he couldn't help but smile. Because they were right. She did fall for him, and right now, that was more than enough. It meant he had a chance, which was more than he thought he had just a month ago. He wouldn't blow it either.

CHAPTER 24

DIONYSOS

After a few more drinks and a quick bite to eat, Dionysos called a car to take him home. It was nearing eleven, and he'd lost track of time once the conversation turned lighthearted between them all. Apart from the initial strife, he always felt rejuvenated after spending time with any number of his family members, and this was no different. Additionally, a happy Hephaestus was far more enticing than a brooding Hephaestus, and hearing him talk so colorfully about the twins and his new normal made Dionysos want his own happy ending even more.

And maybe it was seeing Heph and Aphrodite slowly melt into each other on the couch, sharing random countless kisses and feeding each other seasoned fries, that made him ask his driver to stop at Athena's favorite seafood place before heading for the Olympus Estate. Or maybe it was the missing her. Either way, they were soon climbing up the hillside drive, and Dio was praying to the Fates that Athena wasn't too stressed to be happy to see him.

He told the driver to wait fifteen minutes though just in case.

He walked up the stairs, greeting the guards and trying to steel his nerves. The door opened as he approached it, and he stopped just short of running headfirst into Ares. Or well, Ares would have run headfirst into his chin.

"Baby brother!" he greeted, a bit too chipper for comfort, embracing Dio. "You're in one piece."

“For now, yes. How are you, brother?”

“As well as I can hope for.”

They parted. “Where are you going?”

His expression darkened. “Tartarus. Uncle and Erebus have agreed that we should begin mending bridges for the next generation or something, which just means Tethys and I have to have dinner once a month.”

Dio tried not to pull a face. “Ah, she’s a real - *delight*.”

“For the dead perhaps.”

“Just - don’t start a civil war, huh? We’ve already got our hands full.”

“Well, now that I can expect a war with Thassos, I have no interest in starting one with Tartarus, so I should be thanking you.”

“Please, you really don’t have to.” Dio looked up at the house. “Is Athena here?”

“Yeah, she’s upstairs in her office. I had to check in with her before I left, so she can keep a timeline.”

“A timeline?”

Ares patted his shoulder. “Just in case I go missing.”

Dio rolled his eyes, the two of them sharing a smile. “Of course.”

“Which means I better go. I don’t wanna throw off the departure time. I’ll see you later.”

“Alright.”

Dio took only one step before Ares’ hand was on his shoulder again, gripping it. Dio looked back at him, and he found himself confused by the look on Ares’ face. He couldn’t quite place it, the emotion there, until Ares began speaking.

“Listen, I’m sorry for what I said when you volunteered for the trip. It wasn’t fair to you.” He moved his hand from shoulder to neck, and Dio knew the emotion now. It was *care*. “I’m proud of you, Dionysos, and you handled what they tried

to do to you much better than I would've. They were right to send you."

Dio didn't realize how much he needed to hear that until Ares had said it, but something inside him settled into a comfortable silence.

"Thanks for saying that, brother," he managed.

Ares nodded and patted his cheek. "I know I've never been much good at it, being your big brother, but - I'm glad I still get to try without, you know, Zeus around."

Dio gripped his forearm with a smile. "You're doing just fine, brother."

Ares smiled too. "But I can do better, and I will, alright? Now let me get out of here. Be careful, eh?"

"I will."

Ares released him, continuing down the steps with one last glance, and Dio proceeded into the house, all at once forgetting he was supposed to be nervous.

He jogged up the stairs, coming to a halt outside of the large door at the end of the third floor hall, a narrow-eyed owl greeting him with wings extended. The door itself was winter wood, imported from Mykonos, and when the light hit it just right, you could see threads of navy blue amidst the ash grey color. It was very much Athena. He'd known that when he first carved her a small owl his same type of wood when he was fourteen, an owl that very much looked like the one on the door.

And the one on her insignia.

Artemis opened the door just as he lifted his fist to knock, and he quickly stepped back. They stared at one another for a moment, an entire conversation playing out, but Artemis didn't give him any sign of warning or disapproval. Instead, it was more of an - *exasperated* look. Or maybe it was one of pleading?

As if to confirm, she closed the door slightly and stepped closer to him to whisper in his ear.

“Maybe you can calm her nerves a bit. Remind her it isn’t the end of the world.”

He nodded, not entirely sure he agreed but completely prepared to attempt it regardless. He had not come all this way just to turn around and flee. Foregoing a knock, he pushed the door open once more and stepped inside.

He always liked coming into Athena’s office because it reflected her so well within the sharp silver and dark blue color scheme. Vast winter wood shelves covered each wall, each of them filled to the brim with books categorized by genre, subject, size, and color. Even after she’d moved into Zeus’s larger office, the theme hadn’t changed. In the center of the room, guarding the large desk, was a great silver owl stitched brazenly into the navy blue rug. Unlike the one on the door, this one stood stoic, eyes piercing and chest puffed out, its wings neatly folded at its sides. And not a feather out of place. It was almost a mirror image of the one on his chest.

Athena sat in her second home, the high-backed chair behind her desk. A desktop computer sat on the left side, a laptop directly in front of her, and several stacks of papers littered the rest of the surface area. It took her a moment to look up at him, no doubt expecting Artemis’ return, but when she registered who he was, everything stopped.

“I brought you food,” he blurted out, holding up the bag. “From The Trident.”

“You didn’t,” she gasped. “Oh, I am starving, and I’ve been craving their shrimp.”

“I am glad to hear that because that’s exactly what I got.”

“You cannot be real.”

She stood moving around the desk, and he held out the bag further. She sidestepped it however and wrapped her arms around his middle. A grin gradually wrapped around his face as he embraced her, inhaled her, offering himself a chance to just exist within her in his arms.

“I missed you.” The words fell from his lips as if she’d pulled a string.

“I missed you too. You have no idea.”

She pulled back far enough that she could move her hands up to his neck and pull him down into a kiss. When she began pulling away, he wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her closer, picking her up off the ground several inches and kissing her deeper. She groaned against his lips but didn't protest, and he kept kissing her until the need for air pushed them apart.

“I wanted to kiss you good and well before you ate these shrimp,” he breathed.

She rolled her eyes. “Are you saying you won't kiss me?”

“—No, I will.”

“Thought so.”

“Mhm. Now shut all this shit down, so we can go upstairs. You're done for tonight.”

She raised his brows at him, but he said nothing more. Mainly because he was as surprised by his own forwardness as she was. But even though it was obvious she wanted to protest, she did what she was told and quickly shut the lid of her laptop. With a smile, he led her out of her office and back towards the stairs.

When they took over the Olympus Estate, Athena and Ares had each taken one of the master suites on the top floor. Ares took over the space his mother once occupied when she needed away from Zeus, and Athena took over Zeus's suite. Both rooms had been stripped and scrubbed plain, everything from the fixtures in the bathrooms to the carpets in the bedrooms replaced. Dio had of course never seen the room when Zeus occupied it, and he'd only seen it a few times since Athena took it over, so this felt like quite a feat. If she was in this house, she was usually in her office, and dragging her away had never been so easy.

They sat down at the small table on her balcony, Dio rolling a joint while she dove straight into her meal. The night was cool, the noise of the city muted this far out although he felt like he could see the entire thing from here, thousands of

bright lights dotting the dark, gradually growing indiscernible from one another. To his left, the vast tower of Hotel Asphodel winked at him from across the river, the many windows illuminated by soft yellow light.

He lit his joint, the sweet smell of his homegrown strain permeating the air. While beverages were the central component of his business, his herbal production was still quite large. The difference was that he only supplied Khaos Falls as opposed to the entire Aegean, most notably Asklepios and his healers. Athena herself preferred vaping herb to drinking although it had taken some thorough research on her end even after Dio assured her of the benefits.

He offered her the joint once she was finished eating, and she took it gratefully. As he stood up however, she paused.

“Where are you going?”

He smiled and kissed her forehead. “To run you a bath.”

To no surprise, she didn’t argue that, swatting his ass as he passed by. He found his way into her master bathroom, which was nearly as large as their bungalow back in Thassos, and turned on the water in the tub... which was nearly as large as his *bedroom* back in that bungalow. As he added soap and oils, he heard her light footsteps on the tile just before her hand slid over his chest. Wiping his hands on a towel, he took the joint back from her and set it between his teeth as he turned to face. She stood back and began to undress.

“Are you gonna join me?” she asked, her voice low and sultry. “Because I know you didn’t come all this way just to feed me and leave.”

“Of course not.” He bit his lip, watching her slacks slide down her smooth legs. “I wanted to run the water too.”

“Is that all?”

Her panties followed. He licked his lips, just catching the joint with his fingers before it fell into his lap. Slowly, he shook his head.

“Then what else?”

She unbuttoned her shirt, allowing it to slip from her shoulders. Her chest was bare beneath. He swallowed. *Audibly.*

“Come on, big guy.”

He didn't need further instruction. She took the joint from his lips as he stood up, quickly yanking off his clothes and slamming into both the wall and the counter in the process. Her laughter echoed off the floor before her hands were on his sides, trying to keep him from falling over. Or at least that was what he thought she was doing before she wrapped her lips around his nipple, sucking it gently before tugging at it with her teeth. He hissed, wrestling his way out of his shirt just as she gripped his cock. What little resolve he had left, he was clinging to it like a drop of water at the edge of a leaf. And he was quickly losing the ability —and the will— to hold on.

Mercifully, she stroked it once and let it go before turning him towards the tub. He obeyed the unspoken command, but the moment she was settled between his legs, he did away with caution.

Bowing his head, he pressed his lips to her neck. She hummed her satisfaction, leaning further into him as his fingers danced along her inner thigh. She took hold of his free hand and threaded their fingers together, squeezing the tips harder and harder the closer he got to her heat. In the back of his mind, Dio wondered if he had ever actually left the hospital or if he was still there now, deep in slumber where he could reach his greatest desires. Then again, he sure had gone through a lot between the time Asklepios had released him and now, so maybe, just maybe, this was real. And maybe, just maybe, he deserved it.

“Dio...”

Her other hand flew up into the hair at the back of his head, gripping it tight. He grazed her folds with the edges of his digits, allowing her to feel every point of contact from top to bottom and back again. She brought their entwined hands to her breast, and he squeezed on instinct, her head falling against his shoulder.

His fingers found her clit, providing just enough pressure to earn a gasp before he began this torturous circular motion. She drew one knee up, doing what she could to spread her legs open further for him, and he marveled at his own control. He had waited a lifetime for this, to be able to touch her and taste her, to torture her and test her resolve against his own. And in all of that time, he had built a tolerance for that same torture, so dragging this out was a kind of pleasure in and of itself. Meaning Athena wasn't the only one with an appetite for denying herself. But he knew it would make the first time he slid into her that much more...

He couldn't even think of a word for it. Because there was no word that encompassed every emotion the mere thought induced, especially not when she was winding back on him the way she was. Her hips rolled against his hand, her lips seeking out any and every part of his jaw she could reach. The faster he worked her clit, the more teeth she used, and when he slid two fingers inside of her, she released his hand in favor of gripping the wrist between her thighs, his name trickling from her lips over and over again in quick succession.

And amidst all this lust and hunger and need, his heart was bursting with a feeling so overwhelming that if he weren't so focused on finger fucking her, he might fucking cry. It was something so elaborate and all-consuming that he feared if he attempted to identify it, the effort alone would shatter him into a million pieces, and he had too many things to do to her to be fucking around like that. So he kept that focus right where it was and pumped his digits into her faster, tweaking her nipple and turning his head to catch her mouth with his own.

It became evident soon enough that although she was the one being pleased, she still wanted to be in some manner of control. She twisted and writhed until she had turned around fully, mounting his lap and riding his fingers while she pulled his head against her breasts, prompting his mouth to ravage each of them in chaotic fashion. He simply bounced from one to the other and back again, and her hips seemed to lose their rhythm as well, overwhelmed by his tactic.

And he liked it. *All* of it. The frustrated growls, the demanding grip, the merciless nails against his scalp; she had him dizzy with his own desire, and he made himself malleable beneath her touch.

Then she took hold of his cock, and it was anything but.

His head lolled back as he gasped in surprise, allowing her to regain control. She rode him with the same rhythm she stroked him with, and he was powerless to do anything but let her. Water splashed around them, sloshing out onto the rug and tile below, but he could hardly process that in the haze he had been submerged in. He curled his fingers every now and again when she sunk down to the knuckles, and it earned him a sharp moan that imprinted on his memory in every way possible. Yet she didn't stop, and he wouldn't last very long the way she squeezed at varying intervals along his shaft, the water allowing her to change speeds at a moment's notice.

Drawing together as much of his focus as he could, he turned his hand, allowing his thumb to seek out her clit. She pressed her body into his once he found it, something between a whine and a grunt escaping her, a particularly rough squeeze of his cock following soon after.

“Fuck—“

He didn't know who had said it, him or her, but it didn't matter either way. He screwed his eyes shut and braced his feet against the wall of the tub, muscles clenching and sac tightening as his free hand gripped the edge.

“Athena... Fuck... I can't —“

She only stroked him faster, turning her head to tug at the shell of his ear with her teeth. Whatever she whispered into it next was lost on him because he seized up, hips thrashing wildly in the water as he succumbed to his orgasm.

Even as he coated her thighs and stomach in his seed, she reached down for his wrist, keeping his hand in place as she continued to fuck his fingers. The tremors running through him was an added sensation, but he doubted it was as good as it could be. Cutting through his haze with vicious

determination, he pulled himself up. And his fingers out of her. Before she could question him, he was grabbing her waist, hoisting her up and onto the corner of the tub where she had enough room to sit. Turning himself over, he wasted no time, burying his face in between her thighs and his tongue in her wet cunt. She bucked against his mouth, both hands fisting tufts of his hair as she screamed.

Her first orgasm came quick, Athena already teetering on the edge when he'd retracted his fingers. However, he didn't stop, lapping up her juices with his hands scooping up her ass. She wrapped her legs around his broad shoulders, heels digging into his back and shoulders pressed into the wall behind her. He twisted and swirled his tongue, the bridge of his nose bumping consistently against her clit until he eventually replaced it with his fingers, and a string of indecipherable sounds ricocheted off of every surface in the room. He would eat her out for hours if allowed, taking immense pleasure in the reaction he received and the taste of her on his tongue. And once they had more time to themselves, he vowed to make this a habit.

“Dio, please...”

He doubted either of them knew what it was she was begging for, but he followed his hunch, plunging two fingers inside of her once more and latching his mouth to her clit. He pumped into her with a dedicated urgency, searching for that spot that would send her over the edge again into a beautiful oblivion. He could feel the muscles in her belly tightening beneath his other hand, her nails threatening to break skin, and he leaned into it in every way he could. He reached up, squeezing her breasts in one large hand just enough to garner a reaction. Her heel came up off of his back before she hammered it back down into his shoulder. Then all at once, she came apart.

As she bucked and whined, holding his face to her pussy and rutting against it with a shameless desperation, he wanted nothing more than to get up and slide his cock inside of her, make her scream for him until she went hoarse while he

fucked her into a stupor. But he bit down on the urge and let up on her clit until she had finished riding it out.

“Fates,” she breathed as he pushed himself up onto his knees before her, his face slick with his efforts.

“What?”

“I don’t know how I survived a whole week without this.”

He smirked and licked his lips. “Once everything settles down, I’ll promise you’ll never have to go another day without me eating you out again.”

She purred. “I think you might have to start earlier than that.”

“Yeah?”

“Mhm, because I’m not going another week. I’ll wait for the rest of what you got, but from now on, you are coming home with me. —Unless you’re busy or—“

“I won’t be.”

He was certain because nothing was more important than coming home to her. And this time, she didn’t question him.

CHAPTER 25

ATHENA

Despite the jubilant spirit that traipsed through the streets at her back, the day hardly felt like one of celebration to Athena. There in the port and all down the docks lay a palpable tension, hanging heavy over the guard like a thick fog. The weather was clear, the Aegean waters docile, but as day descended into night, that tension ripened. It felt like the calm before the storm, and Athena couldn't tell if it was her paranoia or her instinct. Or both. It made sense that one had begun to bleed into one another.

Yet Phokis' delegation had arrived without a hitch. They had been gracious as their ships were searched, patient as their persons were swept, understanding while their bags were probed, and Aikaterine herself, head of the board, had come as a sign of good will. Athena didn't realize just how much the display would soothe her, but it certainly made the rest of the evening go much smoother.

Until a lone vessel from Thassos arrived.

Amphitryon had, of course, not sent a delegation, but that was to be expected. Not only was he angry that Dionysos wasn't locked under his manor, he was livid that no one else believed he should be. Not even the fledgling allies of Khaos Falls. But because his absence was expected, Athena knew who was on that ship, and she had been dreading its arrival for weeks now.

Only four others preceded Pallas before he descended the ladder they had lowered onto the dock. He looked years older and years younger all at once than when she'd last seen him,

his beard thicker but neatly trimmed, his hair slick with the sea's kiss. She had received a text from him the week before, apologizing for his behavior and assuring her he would offer another in person, but it had been swept to the back of her mind with everything else going on.

Athena straightened her posture and pushed her shoulders back, Zeus's scathing tone of scrutiny in her ear. Pallas smiled when he saw her, but she could manage no more than a lazy grimace and a nod. He went in for a hug but thought better of it at the last moment, pulling up short and extending a hand.

"Athena," he sighed. "It's good to see you again."

She couldn't say she didn't feel bad. After all of those years apart, wishing and wondering, he was finally back in her life, and here she was, angry. But she was well aware that the guilt had more to do with who she was as a person and less to do with the situation itself. Still, she was in good spirits, and the last thing she was willing to do was let him sour her mood, which would in turn sour Dio's mood, and after all the work he'd put in after coming home, he deserved better.

You do too.

"Good to see you're alive," is what she settled for, taking his hand and shaking it. "At not too steep a cost, I hope."

"Naw, not too steep at all, all things considered." He smiled. "The city looks beautiful. I mean, from what I've seen so far."

"And you've seen nothing yet, I assure you. We have shuttles that will take you to your accommodations, and then they'll get you down to the bonfire on the western coast."

He flinched. "I'm - assuming that means your offer to let me stay with you has been rescinded."

She kept her features schooled. "My uncle thought it best that all visitors were given lodging in the apartments he's set aside for the occasion."

"Is that what I am? Just a visitor?"

She took in a slow breath through her nose. She knew better. Or at least she used to. She had to be straightforward with this man.

“No, Pallas, we’re friends, but we aren’t who we thought we were, not anymore at least, and it’s best for both of us if we take this reintroduction into one another’s lives slowly, especially with everything else already going on.”

“Better for who, Athena? Not for me because I—“

“Better for Dionysos and I.”

That hadn’t been her initial meaning of course, but the correction came forth of its own volition, and she wasn’t about to retract the statement. If she was honest with herself, the look on his face was well won.

“So you’re with him now?”

“I am.”

Again, no hesitation, and no lie either. It didn’t matter anymore. The titles, the expectations, the doubts, the concerns, the logistics of it all (and she did not say that lightly in any sense), none of that mattered because regardless of all of it, she was with him. She was committed to Dionysos and Dionysos alone. In a way, she always had been.

“And are you happy?”

“I am,” she replied again, her voice suddenly softer.

“You could have been happy with me too, you know. If you waited.”

A sardonic laugh left her. “I almost died waiting on you, Pallas. I couldn’t have waited any longer even if I’d wanted to.”

Because Zeus was there, setting the mold and making sure she fit in it. Then came Dio, a rogue and wild wrecking ball that left cracks all over that mold, leaving her a chance to break it when the time came, to find herself again when the time came. Who else could ever give her what he had given her simply by existing?

“Look, I’m sorry for what I said.” He seemed to catch onto her frustration, switching gears accordingly. “You were right. I don’t know him, and maybe I don’t know you anymore, not the way I used to. But I want to, and the things I loved most about you are still there. I’d know ‘em anywhere. And I’ll wait if I have to. Maybe it’s him. Maybe it isn’t. Maybe somewhere down the line, you realize that we work, that we’ve always worked, that I’m more like you than anyone, and that with me, you’ll have the life you always envisioned for yourself.”

She smiled now, fully. “You’re right, Pallas.” He perked up as she patted his shoulder. “You don’t know me anymore. The life I envision is... well, I’m living it right now. With him.” He inhaled a sharp breath, but she continued. “You are my oldest friend, and I will never forget everything we went through and everything you did for me, but - I could’ve waited for you forever, and still, the moment I met him? No one else stood a chance. No one else ever will. So if you decide to wait, that’s on you, but you’ll be waiting your whole life because it *is* him. It’s always been him.”

Her heart fluttered in her chest. After weeks of overthinking and overanalyzing, she had just neatly summed it up in just a few words. Because it wasn’t all that complicated. Loving Dionysos was as natural as breathing. Sometimes even more so. She could hold her breath but never stop loving him, not even for a moment.

Pallas chewed his lip for a moment before nodding. “Well, if - you’re happy, that’s what I want for you.”

She didn’t comment on that, but when she spoke, there was a finality to her voice. “I’ll see you later. Enjoy the festivities, and make sure to stop by the casino. I’m sure you’ll love it.”

She didn’t quite notice the moment he picked up his bag and walked past her, her eyes already scanning the docks again, so when a hand landed softly on her shoulder, she turned swiftly on her heel and nearly slugged Hephaestus right in the center of his chest. He blocked her with his forearm and a roguish grin.

“That was a very touching speech, sis,” he whistled, lifting his hands in surrender. “Good judgment too. Guy seems like he grew up to be a tool.”

She huffed out a breath. “Something like that. I figure it was a 50/50 chance from the jump.”

“Him aside, it’s nice to hear you finally admit it.”

“Admit what?” Her faux innocence hardly came across as such.

He rolled his eyes. “Please. I already had this convo with your man. I’m not about to do it with you. Old news, kid.”

“I honestly have no clue what you’re talking about, Hephaestus.”

A sharp chuckle echoed from behind them, and it was only then that Athena realized Hephaestus wasn’t alone. Hera stood a few feet away, draped in a billowy black long-sleeve dress with two buttons at the chest and a belt around her waist. Her wavy, dark hair was down, which was such a rarity back when she and Athena shared a home that Athena was momentarily speechless. However, what she could say —internally at least — was that Hera looked a decade younger, the color having returned to her cheeks and the fire in her gaze no longer razing everything in its way. No, now it burned brightly and consistently, a vivid and virtuous thing that Athena truly admired.

She was healing.

“You have been running around with stars in your eyes for that boy and that boy alone since you met,” Hera surrendered once she realized she had been noticed. It was, in effect, the nicest thing she’d ever said to Athena. “My - Zeus hated it, but he couldn’t deny it. No one could. And he certainly couldn’t do a thing about it.”

“Bless the Fates,” Hephaestus added with a sly smile.

She tried to brush off the sudden chill that ran through her at the mention of Zeus. Or more specifically, Zeus’s disdain. However, it lingered in the pit of her belly for far longer than she liked. The last time she saw him felt like ages ago, but

every word he had ever said to her in disappointment, especially about Dio, remained fresh. They repeated themselves when it got too quiet, when she got too comfortable.

“Heph!” someone called from across the docks.

Heph rushed towards the sound without further prelude, which left Athena and Hera standing an awkward few feet apart amidst the bustling crowd.

Eventually, Hera stepped up beside her.

“It’s good to see you again,” Athena offered, more so out of instinct than anything.

“I’m sure it isn’t.” Hera’s laugh was more self-deprecating than malicious.

Athena chewed her lip. “No, it is. It’s good to see you here and not where we were a year ago.”

Hera seemed to consider that a moment before nodding. Athena stole another glance at her. Her lips were painted a deep maroon, and her eyeliner was masterfully subtle. It was no secret—at least among their little family—that Hephaestus was attempting to get her to talk to his father after years of silence. Meanwhile, Athena and Dio were still stopping every now and again to say things like “Can you believe Charon is Heph’s dad?” at random intervals in completely unrelated conversations.

But Hera deserved that. She had spent years propping Zeus up, and Athena knew that most of the vitriol Hera had towards her and Zeus’s extramarital children had not been about the children themselves but about Zeus and his blatant disrespect of their marriage. For that, Athena forgave her, and she hoped Hera took her second chance.

“Don’t marry for power.”

Athena blinked. She had been so caught up in her own thoughts that she hadn’t realized Hera spoke. Only once the words were already bouncing around inside her skull did she turn to the older woman with a puzzled look.

“It’s nothing but a rotting thing,” Hera went on, her eyes on the sea. “That man that just left, I can see it in his eyes the way I saw it in Zeus’s eyes. You are as much an advantage as you are a catch to him. Marry for love. It is the only thing that lasts whether you want it to or not, in some form or another. Because while falling out of love hurts greatly, denying yourself love hurts worse than any physical wound ever could.”

Even without the sincere sadness in her voice, Athena of course knew she spoke from experience.

“If you could do it all again, would you marry for love?” Athena asked without much commitment to doing so.

Hera nodded. “If I never had Ares and love him as I do, yes. I could say I would have done it all very differently.” Hera turned to her now, looking her straight in the eye, and Athena fought not to retract. “But I don’t get to do it all over again. I don’t get to make that decision now.” Hera’s eyes locked on hers. “You do.”

Athena nodded. “...While there aren’t any do-overs, there are still second chances. And you deserve a second chance, Hera. You deserve to know what it’s like to be loved. We all do.”

Hera smiled. “It would seem that boy - *Dionysos* truly has rubbed off on all Zeus’s charges in the best ways.”

Athena raised a brow. “How do you know?”

“You and Hephaestus both speak as if you have never known Zeus’s contempt for such things. Frankly, I’m relieved. I don’t know if I could forgive myself if my sons didn’t believe in love.”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t seem like you’re forgiving yourself now either.”

“Maybe not.”

Athena held out her hand before she could think twice. “I’ll take your advice if you take mine.”

Hera stared at her palm, the seconds ticking by, and Athena half expected for Hera to laugh in her face and push it away. It was what she would have done when they were competing for Zeus's attention. But at last, Hera smiled. It was a smile Athena had never seen before much less seen aimed at her. It was a real one.

Hera took her hand.

"You're an intelligent woman, Athena. I'd be a fool not to take your advice."

"I can say the same of you."

They dropped their hands, and Hera glanced at her watch. "It's getting pretty late though, and the ships have calmed down. I'm only here to pick up my brother, but Hephaestus is gonna take a patrol down here. Maybe you should go check out the bonfire. The lighting ceremony is always such a big deal, and correct me if I'm wrong, but that's Dionysos' main event."

Athena smiled more to herself now. "You're absolutely correct."

She scanned their surroundings. It was true. The port's traffic was slowing down, most of the ships having moved down the coast into their designated harbors, and if she moved fast, she could make the beach by 8 on the dot to see Dio light the bonfire. It would feel good to see him in his element again, as entertainer rather than entrepreneur or party planner.

"Can you tell Heph—"

"I will," Hera interceded with a smirk. "Go on."

Athena thanked her quietly before racing down the docks. She had parked two blocks over from the port, knowing very well it would be impossible to get anywhere fast from the parking lot, and she was very much right. Shuttles and rental cars were playing a game of slide-to-fit, horns honking and shouts decorating the cool spring evening. The smell of the sea soon clashed with the scent of the pizzeria on the corner of Acheron and Deucalion, the myriad of smells from fleeting food trucks like a baseline beneath them. Once she reached her

car, the traffic thinned out in the immediate vicinity, but it would still be a fight to get from there to the beach on any major roadway.

At the last moment, she opted to take the tramway which was of course twice as busy as usual but still far more reliable a transition since most of the freshman tourists hadn't heard about it yet. It would also save her the hassle of trying to park.

As she approached the doors of the station however, her name broke through the noise from behind her. Whipping around, she saw Hermes jumping up and down, waving his arms in the air. Apollo stood beside him, stoic as ever and best dressed as always, his plum-colored suit vivid against his dark brown skin.

"Hey! Athena!" Hermes raced up to her as she approached them. "Where are you going?"

"I was trying to get to the beach for the lighting ceremony."

"Come with us."

"Where?"

"We got the helo."

"You got the helo?"

"Yeah, Apollo and I were surveying earlier, and Uncle wanted us to drop it off at the beach for Achilles so he could watch the coast, provide aerial water support in case the bonfire gets outta hand."

She nodded. "Do you have room?"

"Yeah, it's just the two of us. Come on." He gave her a grin. A *knowing* grin that crinkled the rich brown skin around his caramel brown eyes. "I don't want you missin' the ceremony."

Athena greeted Apollo, who gave her a warm hug amidst his usual reserved expression.

"Good to see you in one piece," he remarked. "It's been a minute, hasn't it?"

“Definitely. You’ve been busy of course.”

“You and I are always busy. The way of our worlds I guess.”

Apollo’s architecture had now reached across Aegean, and he remained in high demand, expanding his business as well as his crews. He dabbled in many art forms, leaving his mark wherever he went, and yet he still managed to run a district that was thriving as well. Athena sometimes wondered why he and Artemis had come to Khaos Falls rather than stay in their family’s islands where their parents and older siblings now ruled, but she was glad they had regardless.

“For a bit, yeah. My parents are here of course as are my older brother and sister. And apparently, there is a little boy eager to meet me, and Dionysos promised to introduce him.”

“Phobos,” Hermes grunted. “So now Dio is his favorite uncle. Well, at least until Phobos sees me land the helo with the architect himself.”

“Yes, like the chauffeur,” she shot back.

Hermes rolled his eyes. “We’ll see.”

The helicopter, which was designated for official business only and limited to inner-city limits, sat atop the building opposite the tram station on a large purple and black pad with the infamous helm of Hades embedded in it. The River Styx insignia was now the city insignia, the only difference of course being the large “KF” scrawled over it in rich, black ink. It had replaced the former insignia, Zeus’s crystal white lightning bolt that had struck all over the city with a level of gusto that was characteristic of its liege. Athena could say for certain she didn’t miss it.

As they rose into the air, the noise of the city smothered by the noise of the copter, her eyes drifted over the dazzling lights below, a magic carpet of lively indulgence descending upon every street and district. Her shoulders sagged some, unwinding from her ears, the soft breeze washing the cabin relaxing her. Soon, the western coast came into view, on the edge of the bright neon jungle that marked the Lush District.

From here, the crowds of people moving through the streets looked like snakes and eels, traffic hardly moving if at all. Uncle had been right. This would be the biggest banquet year to date despite the setback with Thassos, and as excited as she was for Dio and the city, she was also twice as nervous. More people meant more threats, and with Dionysos at the center, he was the perfect target. He was not like Athena. He was certainly nothing like Hades or Hephaestus. He didn't do quiet or low-key.

I'm not afraid to die. I'm afraid to stop living.

As if to punctuate the thought beyond the replay of his words, his voice suddenly boomed through her mind. —No, through the air. Just below them stood the grand platform they had placed on the beach a safe distance from the large pyramid of wood, and atop that platform stood Dionysos with a microphone in his hand.

“It's starting!” Hermes roared over the propeller.

They moved quickly towards the water and further down the beach behind the stage where the crowd was barred from. Another temporary pad had been put down to minimize the sand being kicked up, and once clear, they began their descent.

The roar of the ever growing crowd soon replaced the sound of the propeller, and Athena was as overwhelmed as she had ever been. This was not her element, never had been, but she took a deep breath and hopped down onto the shore. She saw Artemis and Achilles coming towards them, both dressed in their black security gear. While more inconspicuous on Achilles' barreled chest, the bulletproof vest made Artemis seem bulkier than ever. Still, she moved as well as always, her crossbow folded and fitted on the side of her thigh.

She greeted Athena and Hermes first before embracing her twin brother, quickly falling into deep conversation about the overlap between their respective roles. Athena always marveled at the fact that they were as different as they were similar, both thinkers and doers, both as bold as they were calculating. They fell in stride beside one another, and the others followed toward the stage, Dio's voice growing louder

with each step. Soon, it was competing with the thud of Athena's heart, but before she could try and settle, Hermes was grabbing her hand and *running*.

He didn't react to her yelp of surprise nor did he answer her demand for an explanation, and she had no choice but to race after him in order to keep from being dragged. Soon, heart and breath both were pounding in her ears, drowning out Dio's voice. Well, almost. If she focused, she could hear every word.

“So without further delay, let's light it up!”

The crowd cheered his declaration just as Athena and Hermes turned the corner of the platform. Dionysos was coming down the stairs, and before she knew it, they were face to face. It took him a moment to confirm with his conscious mind that she was here, and honestly, it took her a moment as well. Then he was sweeping her up in his arms, twirling her around in that way he'd always been able to since they were children and she had often scolded him for even if she liked it very much. At the moment, she was more attuned to the fact hundreds of thousands of people were watching them—or trying to—and so she was stiff in his hold up until she felt his smile against her neck.

“You came,” he breathed, the relief palpable.

She relaxed and wrapped her arms around his neck, cheers turning to something else she didn't have the mind to scrutinize at the moment.

Once he put her down, his hands moved over her arms to her hands, clasping them in his own.

“Come on,” he said with a sly smile.

“What? I thought you had to—”

“Light it with me.”

Before she could refuse the invitation, he turned and strutted towards the woodpile, the crowd parting before him even as they grew louder. She offered a smile and a nod every now and again, reminding herself that she was still a leader in

this city, and she needed to remain civil to their visitors despite the nerves.

Once they reached the wood, there was a decent amount of space, a perimeter having been blocked off to ensure no one drew too close to the flames. One of their city guards met them at the base of the pile with a lit torch, and Dio took it from him gingerly. He then turned to Athena, wrapping the hand he held around the handle below his own.

“Okay, ready?” he asked.

“I think?” she returned.

He smiled, placing a hand on her waist and pulling her closer until his chest was against her back. Then, together, they leaned over and guided the torch in between two of the larger pylons. They touched the flame to the tinder beneath, which looked wet with what Athena assumed to be kerosene, and the entire first layer went up.

Tossing the torch in, they stepped back as some of the wood began to shift and settle, other guards skirting the perimeter with long staffs to ensure it kept its shape. But her eyes were not the flames because the flames were not the brightest thing on the beach. No, she was staring at Dionysos’ radiant grin, the fire blazing in his eyes and glinting off his teeth, illuminating the vibrant colors in his face. Her heart was sure to take flight from her chest any moment. She marveled at the sheer amount of color in his face and excitement in his eyes. He looked all put together again, like the old Dio, the one that had never taken a bullet or been accused of murder or had his best friend run away with his heart across the Aegean. He looked like the boy she’d fallen in love with all those years ago.

Because Dio never really changed. He grew and matured and got better at things, but he never changed the fundamental parts of himself that made her love him even when they were complete opposites, even when they shouldn’t work.

But they did, didn’t they? They worked really damn well.

And then her arms were around his neck, and his lips were fused to hers, and he kissed her with a fervor unmatched by the flames burning beside them, the sheer passion in his touch blotting out the whoops and whistles now filling the air. He picked her up in his arms. And everything fell into place.

And maybe in many ways, Dionysos was in fact her weakness. However, he was also her greatest strength.

CHAPTER 26

DIONYSOS

The bonfire's majestic flames were at their highest, reaching for the stars behind a steady stream of thick smoke. No one noticed, far too busy guzzling down wine and dancing in next to nothing like no one else was watching. And truly, no one else was, and even if someone were, they would surely forget it by tomorrow.

The helicopter Achilles had been taking up at the top of each hour hummed faintly a few feet out above the calm sea. The intermittent crash of waves against the shore was now just another thread in the instrumental of whatever song came on, a far better addition than the many off-key renditions being plugged in between long swigs and sloppy kisses. Whatever world existed away from this beach and outside of Khaos Falls had fallen away, off to await them at the end of the week.

"Dio, we're getting low on all the fruit whites and the berry reds!" Lysandra, the current bartender, called from behind the bar beside the stage. "You got more around?"

He and Athena had just returned to refill their drinks after a dance by the fire, both of them flushed and dusted in a light sheen of sweat and sand. He looked around at the current crowd, attempting to remember what the stock looked like. They had kept a good amount of cases in a small shed a ways up the beach, shortly beyond the helipad.

"Uh, yeah, I can go check," he nodded. "Is the cart back there?"

“Yeah. I can go if you want. I just need you to watch the bar for a bit.”

“No, we can go,” Athena returned before he could do so himself. Athena looked at him. “Come on.”

He smiled at her, taking in that glint in her eye he knew so well yet rarely saw her don. It excited him in ways nothing else could. It was how she looked at him the first night she snuck out of Zeus’s house and took him to see the horses Zeus kept in the back garden but never let them ride. It was the look she gave him the first time she agreed to smoke with him in the Asphodel service hallway. And it was the look she gave him that first night he got her off.

He liked that look a lot.

Lysandra tossed him the keys to the cart, and they rounded the back of the bar, climbing into the vehicle. Bringing the engine to life, they headed down the beach towards the pop-up shed.

It was only when Athena called him on it did he realize he was grinning.

“Are you excited about something?” There was a note of playful mocking in her voice.

“Being with you, yeah,” he shot back louder than he meant to. “And it’s been a great fucking night, stomped every one of my expectations through the ground truly.” He glanced at her, reaching for her thigh. “I’m really glad you made it.”

“Yeah, I - it took some persuasion, but I promised you I’d do my best, and it just happened to be enough.”

“Persuasion from who? Someone other than me?”

She grinned wider, moving closer to rest her head on his shoulder.

“Not to come. Just to - leave the port earlier.”

“Hmm. Well, thank them for me.”

“Will do.” She kissed his cheek, squeezing his bicep. “So this thing usually goes all night?”

“Technically until the flames die, but it usually does end in the presence of the sun, yeah.”

“Still a lot of people out too.”

“And even once the flames begin to die, they find a way to keep themselves entertained. Most of them will end up in Uncle’s casino before sunrise. The rest of them will get there after a nap.”

“They must save up every ounce of energy they have for the entire year to keep up with you.”

“Oh, no one can keep up with me.”

She chuckled, rolling her eyes. “If only you could bottle yours alongside the wine.”

“Oh, I’m gonna need all of mine come the weekend.”

“Why? Everything will be over then.”

“Yes, including the bet, and after I win, you’re gonna pay up every second I had to wait.”

“Excuse me. I tried to call it off.”

“Hey, I’m not a quitter. It was too late for all that.”

“Is that what you were gonna ask for if you won?”

He shook his head. “No, that’s still a surprise to be unveiled at the conclusion of our agreement, but for now, you are welcome to know I plan to fuck your brains out the moment the banquet ends. And not a moment later.”

She scoffed. “You can’t just leave with everyone else.”

“Who says we have to leave?”

She smacked his shoulder as he pulled up to the shed and parked. Grinning still, he slid out and rounded the cart to take her hand. He would be lying if he denied the sheer torment he was enduring in his attempt to uphold the bargain, but he had accepted the fact that he would be paid in full at the end of it all. Besides, it was nice to see her desire compete with his. He would hate to be the only one suffering.

The shed was quite spacious inside despite the shabby look of its exterior. Shelves lined the sleek, metal walls which glistened with frost, chill air greeting them upon entry. He made his way along the perimeter, looking over the various checklists secured on hanging clipboards which reported the inventory. He began pulling boxes then, and Athena took them from him at the door to place in the cart. Once they had it loaded to capacity, Dio tallied up the new numbers on each of the clipboards.

He bit his lips as Athena's hands suddenly slid over and around his waist, trying to keep his focus even as her lithe fingers dipped into the waistband of his joggers and teased the skin over his pelvic bone.

"It's really hard to count when you're doing all that," he hissed.

"Oh, really?" She hummed, that spark in her eye now manifesting in her voice. It sent a chill down his spine. "What about when I do this?"

Her fingers descended further over his boxers, dancing across the top of his shaft that twitched to life at her touch. He clenched every muscle he could, his hand trembling so bad that the number he meant to jot down didn't come out as a number at all, his messy scrawl falling off the edge of the page.

"Athena..."

"Is that a yes?"

"You know damn well it is."

"Mm."

He quickly managed to get the number down before slamming the clipboard back on the shelf, gripping the edge of the wooden surface as she palmed his bulge with a rough squeeze. Her other hand moved up along his chest, innocent and anything but, her thumb brushing over his nipple.

"Is this why you wanted us to come out here?" he ground out between gritted teeth.

“It may have been a deciding factor, yes.”

“I think I’ve created a monster.”

“Or merely let one out.”

She was actively massaging his cock now, and he was reduced to a series of sharp hisses and short groans. Then, without warning, she shoved his pants down, freeing his erection. He shuddered as her fingers curled around the base, and she offered him no reprieve before she was stroking him, slowly at first and then faster once she managed to collect enough precum to lubricate him properly.

“Fuck—”

The word was gurgled through his whine, his head falling against his hand on the shelf while the other hand reached back for her, squeezing her ass.

“Who’s gonna fuck whose brains out again?”

Because of course, she’d taken it as a challenge, bringing him to the cusp of oblivion only to reel him back to the starting line. But he did not yearn for torment tonight. He was too keyed up, too erratic. He spun around, shocking her to the point that she jumped back. Enough for him to take hold of her shoulders and turn her towards the opposite shelf, pinning her to it. She grunted, her fingers clawing at the cold metal as he unbuttoned her trousers and shoved them down, bunching her button-up around her hips. Pulling her panties slightly to the side, he slid his cock between her folds and the fabric.

“Oh, fuck—” she howled as he reached around, sliding his hand down the front of her panties.

“Is that enough of an answer for you?”

He growled it in her ear, cupping her pussy and curving his shaft at the front of it. He glided through her folds like a ship through calm waters, soon coated in her arousal. His other hand came up to tangle in her loose curls. Her hand shot back to claw at his thigh. And he could feel *everything*, but he didn’t slow. He refused to divert from his focus this once. He was going to cum quick, and he was going to cum hard, and then he was going to do everything in his power to remind

himself there was only a week left and he could wait. Even if he wanted to do nothing of the sort.

Though at this point, it wasn't about this stupid, childish bet. It was about the thrill it created.

She ground her clit into his palm, his hips clapping lewdly against hers to complement her echoing moans. His mouth found her neck, kissing and licking and biting the slender column until her hand dove into his hair, pulling him closer while the one still on his hip tried and failed to push him back.

"I'm so - fucking close," he snarled, tangling his fingers into the fabric of her panties and yanking upward so as to press his cock more firmly to her slit. Her hips jerked and banged into the shelf, her nails digging hard into the back of his head.

"Cum for me - big guy," she whimpered. "Please."

And even if it weren't a command, it acted as one. He rammed into her once... twice... three times over before expelling his load in and all over her panties with a loud roar that shook the shelves around them. She reached down to keep his hand pressed to her clit, using it for her pleasure as her hips gyrated quickly against it. As he rode his orgasm out, she rode after hers until at last she seized up against him, arching in and then away before he felt a fresh warmth on his cock. Her legs shivered violently before her knees bowed and buckled, and he caught her just before she slid out of reach.

They leaned against the shelf for support, their panting breaths the only sound in the shed.

"So the bet..."

Her voice jolted him from his haze abruptly.

"...Mhm."

"The agreement was that you weren't allowed to stick your dick in anyone else, right?"

"Mhm." The sound was swaddled in a growl this time.

"So - you're not allowed to penetrate."

“...That’s right.”

“But you’re allowed to get penetrated...”

He froze, his eyes snapping open as he shuddered out a breath. He glanced down at her, his hooded gaze meeting hers, an anxious anticipation settling within.

“Yes.”

His voice was hoarse, his tongue sweeping out over his lips. They still felt bone dry.

“So I can take you home then?” she purred.

“You can take me anywhere you want.”

Slowly, painfully so, she dragged her ass down and away from his cock until it slid out of her panties, reaching down and pulling up her pants.

“Come on.” Her voice was that of a leader again. “Let’s go get these cases delivered first.”

He was already stumbling after her.

After dropping the cases off and alerting Ganymede to Dio’s exit, they drove to his vineyard loft first so that he could shower and change out of the day’s outfit and she could clean up after their activities in the shed. The amount of traffic made his stomach churn. What was normally a ten-minute drive now stretched out into nearly a half hour, and despite his pleas, Athena insisted they had to go back to her place. He could see how serious she was about it after the first pushback, so he abandoned that campaign altogether. Still, as he showered, he tried to come up with alternate routes that may save them some time, and by the time he got out, he had one.

Despite her own impatience though, Athena wasn’t completely on board with Dio hailing the helicopter for them. Achilles didn’t seem to mind at all. In fact, he was more relieved than anything, bored with sitting in the same place for most of the evening with only the length of the beach to explore. He was already landing the bird in the open space between the winery and the river by the time Athena got Dio to tell her what it was they were waiting for, and Achilles

didn't give her much time to verbally object, ushering them into the cabin and taking off for the Olympus District on the other side of the city.

Athena and Dio sat side by side, fingers grazing every now and again although they kept their eyes out the window. He knew if he looked at her right now, throat dry and boxers tight, he might not make it home, and he would hate for Achilles to see him beg.

He could only imagine what she had in store for him. Her question had only offered enough for his mind to wander aimlessly through a gallery of ideas, every single one more pervasive than the last. Despite his reputation, there were many things he had yet to venture into and few things he wasn't willing to try with Athena. It didn't matter what she asked of him once they reached her room. He highly doubted he would deny her anything right now. He wanted to see her happy. More than that, he wanted to see her have her way with him.

Their shoulders brushed, and a wave of merciless heat washed over him. Her pinky wrapped around his, squeezing, pleading, her thighs pressed together in a hopeless defense he could see in the corner of his eye. Tension grew taut in his muscles, wrapped around him like chains. And even once the Olympus Estate came into view on the horizon, it seemed so far away. He focused instead on the gradual fade to black from the Lush District's vibrant neon landscape to Olympus's dimly lit streets. Athena's eyes were on the port of course, work the one solace that could keep her grounded. He chanced a glance that way as well if only to see its silent safety for himself.

Although he would never say it aloud, he was anxious for whatever came next. Amphytryon's accusations may fade, but his belief in them would not. Neither would his bloodlust. And what better time to seek his own justice than now when Dio was surrounded by strangers? He was on high alert each time he stepped into a crowd, and someone was always close, Nike or Achilles or Artemis in his peripheral, but could anyone ever be close enough?

He shook his head. Right now, he was as safe as he could ever hope to be, high above the city with Athena at his side. And soon they would be locked away in her room where no one would be able to touch him.

No one but her.

“Where should I—”

“In the back!” Athena answered before Achilles finished the question.

Achilles descended on the slope behind the house, allowing the two to hop off without the helo fully touching the ground. They waved goodbye to him, and he took off again as they began to climb up the hill to the back door.

Athena had forewarned her guard of their arrival, ensuring they weren't shot out of the sky or pinned down on the slope. They were greeted by two guards at the back entrance who allowed them entry, and Dio followed her up the back staircase. He had assumed she would make a stop at her office to check things before retiring, but she didn't miss a step, continuing up to the top floor with his hand still enveloped in her own.

The moment they were over the threshold of her room, she turned on him, pulling him into her with impressive force. He caught her as she all but climbed up his body, capturing his mouth in a searing kiss that made his head spin and his knees threaten to buckle. He stalked forward until her back hit a wall, allowing him to deepen the kiss and get his hands under her thighs properly. She gripped the collar of his shirt in her hands hard enough to wrinkle, but it hardly mattered because soon enough, she was removing it entirely. She shoved it down his shoulders then shoved a hand through the hair at the front of his head, pushing his head back to expose his neck to her ravenous mouth. He groaned.

She reached for the waistband of his pants.

“Athena...”

His body surged upward as she took hold of his cock, stroking it with an insistence that could make him cum in

minutes if she kept it up. She seemed to garner that quickly because she eased up, nipping at his neck with a predatory growl. It became quite clear then that he was not at all prepared for what she was planning to do with him.

And he could not wait.

Unwinding her legs from around his waist, she slid back down to stand on her own. Except... she kept going. And she took his pants and boxers with her.

A sharp inhale broke across his lips, getting lodged in his throat when her teeth scraped down his thigh. He tried to follow her with his hands, but she ducked out of reach, leaving him to ball up his fists at his sides. He gritted his teeth, throwing his head back to look at the ceiling as if that would at all help tame the anxious anticipation roiling in his gut. He was going to bust quick tonight. He knew it.

Mercifully —maybe— she stood up again, dragging her hand up his thighs and hips and her lips up the center of his stomach and chest. He shuddered.

“Undress me.”

Her command was simple, but it held so much power that Dio was almost convinced he was being moved by the words themselves rather than any will of his own. He was reaching for her before she finished, unbuttoning her blazer and pushing it from her shoulders. He then started on dress shirt, the fabric damp with sweat and the strong scent of firewood. He loved the smell, and he knew it would linger long after tonight in this room. He hoped it made her think of him.

Once he had her slacks and socks off, he moved to stand again, but her hand on his shoulder stopped him. He looked up, curiosity in his eyes, but she simply guided him down to his knees with a firm grasp and a pointed look. His cock twitched.

Licking his lips, he curled his fingers into the hem of her panties, pulling them down her slender legs at a sluggish pace. Once the garment was at her ankles, she stepped out of them. His eyes were fixed on the neatly trimmed patch of hair above

her pussy, wanting nothing more than to burrow his face between her thighs and work her walls with tongue and fingers until one of them blacked out. He began to lean forward, tongue darting out of his mouth, but she intercepted him, taking hold of his chin and drawing his gaze to hers. With minimal pressure, she guided him back to his feet, her free hand reaching around to slap his ass once before she gave it a hard squeeze. He bit down on a whimper.

It was a wonder he could stand at all.

“Now be a good boy and get your ass on the bed.” Her voice was husky and raw, the sound of his ruin. “And take those with you. You’re gonna need them.”

He didn’t dare question her, moving towards the large bed. It was then that he noted the change in color scheme. Where muted blue once reigned, a glittering violet purple now lay, coloring the sheet set as well as the sheer curtains surrounding the bed’s platform. And he knew then that this had been no spontaneous adventure. She had prepared for him. And for much longer than a night or two.

“Fates, let me not bust quick,” he muttered under his breath.

Climbing onto the mattress, he tightened his fingers around her panties.

“Kneel,” she instructed. “Facing me.”

He obeyed with haste. She stood where he left her, and somehow, despite how imposing she was in one of her suits, she looked far more so in nothing at all. Her lips were braced against her teeth, her sharp eyes fixed on him.

“Good boy.”

He could have wept with how painfully hard his cock throbbed.

She began to move in, a predator crowding around its prey, and Dionysos could feel the sweat trickling down his shoulder blades. Anticipation peaked while apprehension ebbed and flowed, the sudden fear of underperforming clashing with his

commonplace confidence. Despite his best efforts, he had truly underestimated the impact of being wanted by her.

Tearing his eyes from her approaching form, he unfurled his hand, allowing her panties to spread over his palm. The silk matched that of the pillow cases, a gorgeous purple he would recognize anywhere. It wasn't the emerald of the Market District's shared insignia but the color of the grapes on his personal symbol. *His* color.

The narrow center of the garment was darker than the rest of the fabric and damp against his palm. He bit his lip and returned his gaze to her.

“Do you think you can figure out what it is I'm going to ask of you?”

She stopped a few feet away yet it felt like a chasm lay between them. She cocked her head to the side, her inquiry suspended in the air. With a thick swallow, he nodded, far less sure of himself than he was accustomed to.

She gestured to him. “Let's see.”

He fought hard not to wither beneath her scrutinizing gaze, but Fates, it felt like the whole world was watching. And really, *his* whole world *was* watching. But this was a presentation, a show, a segment of entertainment strictly for her enjoyment. And he was nothing if not an entertainer.

Moving his covered palm beneath his shaft, he took hold of his erection, hissing the moment he made contact with the sensitive skin. With a loose grip to start, he stroked it from the base up to the tip and back again, pausing at the peak of each movement before beginning the next.

Her expression gave nothing away, lips pursed and eyes fixed, but he caught the slightest movement of her thighs pressing together and her fingers tightening around her own bicep. She watched him the way she watched a shift change, every one of her senses evidently activated and attuned to the event. He shifted his hips back slightly, still not quite sitting on his haunches, and sped up just enough to make a difference.

It felt so good, too good, and yet not good enough. His jaw tightened around a plea, the need to be inside of her throwing uppercuts into his gut. His only salvation was the thought that it would feel far more like failure if he were to give in now when he was so close to completion, the natural end to their bargain right there on the horizon.

Yet in his immovable focus, he effectively distracted himself from Athena's silent movements around the bed. He blinked, and then her hands were on his shoulders, moving down his arms at the slowest possible rate and leaving a blanket of goosebumps in their wake. She halted at his forearms which were now bulging with both effort and restraint, his veins defined against his light brown skin. He pumped his hand faster, the other reaching back to grip her thigh. Her breath was hot on his ear, lips brushing the shell, and he swore he was going to catch fire at any moment. He attempted to say her name, but as her hands moved down to his hips, taking them in a possessive grip, all he could manage was a mangled cry.

His body lurched forward, but she held him in place nonetheless, her nails biting into the skin of his thighs. Her hips moved in time with his although she had yet to do whatever toy she had in store for him, which only served to make him impossibly more impatient.

"You're doing a really good job, Baby," she cooed, her own voice strained with need, and he nearly shot off there and then from the sound alone. "Don't stop. Not yet."

As if he could. He sped up, throwing his hips back into hers before slamming them back into his hand, the pressure in his gut compounding quickly. Her hands slid closer to his groin, fingers curling around the insides of his thighs, every touch burrowing deep into his belly, stoking the growing flames until they could no longer be contained.

He gritted his teeth. She kissed his neck. His eyes rolled back in his head.

"Athena!"

Had it not been for her acute awareness and fortified strength, he would have pitched himself forward off the bed as he came, thick stripes of white coloring the violet bedspread between his thighs on the backs of brash grunts. Her hands were firm around his chest, holding him to her, keeping him upright until he was spent. Then he rested back against her, his chest rising and falling with heavy breaths. She cupped his chin and kissed the side of his neck with a tenderness that made him shudder.

“A very good boy,” she muttered against his jaw. He squirmed, helpless.

She allowed him to recover before she pulled back, pushing him upright and giving his ass a light squeeze.

“Now grab the headboard.”

CHAPTER 27

ATHENA

She made him wait.

She took her time in her closet, adjusting and readjusting the straps of the harness now secured around her waist until the vibrator within was set flush against her clit before carefully deciding on which size of shaft to start with and what type of lubricant to use. Once she had done all of that, she looked at herself in the mirror. There was a fleeting moment of apprehension or maybe shame, looking at such an unrecognizable woman, but that was soon overrun by the profound power she felt when she thought of how quickly Dionysos had crawled over to the headboard and placed his trembling hands around the elegantly carved wood. He would do anything for her. She had known that long before tonight, but she had never taken full advantage. That was all about to change.

She did still half expect for him to have moved positions or relaxed against the headboard, but when she stepped back into the room, she found that he had not moved an inch. And he looked delicious. Neck glittering with sweat, knuckles pink with exertion, ankles spread behind him far enough for her to kneel between. She took a moment just to appreciate how large he was. If she didn't know him better than her own two hands, she may have been intimidated by him. But she knew better than anyone he was just a puppy beneath it all. With his baby face and broad shoulders and soft belly and round cheeks with deep dimples that drew her gaze when he grinned. If she weren't so riled up right now, she would collapse from her own tenderness, a tenderness only he could inspire.

He must have heard her coming. She watched his ass clench as she approached, the wood creaking under his punishing grip. She smiled to herself and climbed onto the mattress behind him, picking her panties up from where he'd dropped them.

“You didn't move, did you?”

He shook his head.

“Good. Now tell me. What word are you going to use if you want me to stop?”

She leaned over him, using his shoulders to pull herself far up enough to see his face and allowing her violet purple dildo to press into his back. His jaw tightened, the wanted whine sounding in the back of his throat.

“Uh - I—“ He swallowed hard once he was able to open his mouth, working up his nerve. “I've never - I never had to... I—“

She couldn't say she wasn't surprised by this albeit not quite as surprised as she was by how nervous she was. It was still her here behind him after all. Yet, if this was his first time being fucked like this, perhaps that was explanation enough.

A bullheaded pride reared up in her chest.

“You mean you've never been pegged?” she whispered against his ear. He shook his head again, and a sliver of doubt crept into the back of her mind. “Do you want this, D—“

He cut her off. “More than anything.”

Though that brought her to another question, one that spawned both jealousy and excitement.

“Have you taken a cock up your ass before?”

He was damn near panting. “Y-yes, but - I - I give more than I receive.”

He tried to laugh, but the sound was shattered as she ground her hips into him, eliciting both a moan from her and a yelp from him.

“Checkmate.”

She forced her eyes open to look at him again. “What was that?”

“That’s - that’s my word. Checkmate.”

Her lips curled. Somehow, he still managed to be cute and charming and endearing even now. And somehow, that made her more wet than before.

“Good boy. Now...” She snaked an arm in between him and the headboard, holding her panties up to his face. “Open your mouth for me.”

He shivered but obeyed without a moment’s hesitation, and she pushed the fabric between his lips, the moisture of their mixed arousal evident against her palm.

“It’s not too deep, right?” she questioned. “You can spit it out if you need to use your word?”

He seemed to test it with his tongue before nodding, and she kissed his shoulder before lowering herself back down onto the mattress. Sweeping up the bottle of lubricant, she placed another kiss to the center of his back, a reassurance that he was in good hands. It seemed to do the trick. She felt something beneath his skin unravel as he breathed out through his nose.

Carefully, she spread him open, eager to do it but more eager to do it right. Squeezing out some of the liquid onto her fingers—a decent amount spilling onto the comforter below to no surprise— she massaged it into the skin in and around his hole. His back arched, cheeks clenching around her digit, and she leaned forward to nip at his shoulder.

“Relax for me,” she coaxed.

It took him a moment, but he obliged, once more allowing his muscles to ease so that she could work her index finger into him. Instinctive muscles constricted around it, but he more or less remained as composed as possible, even pushing his ass back towards her to make the angle easier on her wrist.

Despite the fact this was her first time doing this, at least with a man, his eager submission made her feel far more confident in her abilities than she would have been otherwise.

She was glad to share this experience with him though, sharing something they hadn't yet shared with anyone else.

She had planned this out thoroughly, given herself every opportunity to back out or think twice, and instead, the fantasy had only grown more vivid and inevitable until the only thing left to secure was Dio's consent. Consent which he had given so willingly without a second thought, and now that she took stock, it had done something irrevocable to her. While she trusted him and knew he would never do anything to hurt or betray her, this possessive intent ran far deeper than insecurity or fear. She wanted to make it so that he could hardly function when he looked at her, so that no one else could ever make an impact again. And while he said this was already true, she wanted to solidify it herself. Selfish perhaps, but she was who she was, and he knew that.

And apparently, he liked it.

She worked a second finger in, her own walls fluttering as she grew wetter with want. His small whimper echoed in her gut, and she pushed in deeper with little thought, twisting and curling and stretching him out until he was panting around the panties in his mouth and all but fucking her fingers. Then it became too much, and she had to switch gears before she came just from watching him.

Retracting her digits, he groaned in response, ass tightening in the wake of the loss. She was no longer biding her time though. She squeezed a generous amount of lube in her palm before working it over her shaft, the vibrant purple glistening beneath its fine coat. She applied some more to his entrance before setting the bottle aside and moving closer to him. With one hand on his hip, she took hold of the shaft and pressed the head against his hole, adding more pressure until it slid into him and knocked loose a strangled sound.

Her thighs trembled alongside his, impatience battling with her overprotective nature. Yet she managed to inch into him, allowing him to exhale during each push and inhale after.

“That's my good boy.”

She was as addicted to saying it as he seemed to be to hearing it, both of them shivering as she gripped his hips.

Despite the fabric in his mouth, she knew he was begging, a string of muttered whines formed around the gag when she began to move. Once she found her rhythm, she reached down into the harness and activated the vibrator, a small circular device with a suction cup now seizing her clit with such force that her body bucked violently. A force she had certainly not anticipated.

Her hips jerked forward. She slammed into him without warning to either of them, the headboard —and Dio's knuckles — hitting the wall with a muted roar crowding around the garment between his teeth.

She pressed herself against him, her cheek to his back, her thrusts short and shallow to match his accompanying grunts. A long and drawn out moan escaped her. She fought to adjust to the new sensation, forcing her body to relax beneath it until she could right herself again. He kept still although she could feel how hard he was clamping down on the toy. His entire body was hot to the touch, and she knew if she were to peer around him, his cock would be stiff once more. She wanted to make him cum without so much as grazing it, but she also couldn't make any promises. She wanted to ravish every part of him and make it stick.

Between the steady hum of the vibrator and the intermittent plea of her lover, Athena found her stride once more, marveling at the sight of the colorful cock disappearing between his golden brown cheeks. He leaned forward, pressing his head against the backs of his hands but keeping his hips fixed in place for her convenience.

Athena thought she knew power. However, this was something else entirely.

It coursed through her veins, an unchecked stimulant that struck every nerve and sharpened every sense. She was acutely aware of each reaction she conjured and concocted with a single stroke or a kiss to his shoulder or the curl of her fingers against his thighs. She took hold of his shoulder, thrusting into

him harder and faster until the clap of their hips sounded through the room and the gag hardly held back his shouts. She knew if she pulled it out of his mouth right now, he would sing for her like a jukebox, and with every stroke, she wondered what was stopping her from doing so.

Nothing. The answer was nothing. She was in control.

Reaching around his head, she gripped the fabric and tore it from his teeth, letting it fall to the mattress before him before grabbing both of his shoulders in iron grips. Cries once muffled now hallowed the air, Dio fighting to keep hold of the heavy headboard as it bounced off the wall.

“Athena! Fuck - yes! Yes! Please!”

She leaned back some, forcing her focus away from the way the vibrator was ravaging her clit with merciless strength. It was such an odd sensation. The harder she fucked him, the more she wanted to be fucked by him, meaning this little improvisation did nothing to assuage the need still swirling inside of her. She fucked him the way she wanted to be fucked, rough and ruthless and without a worry for what came after. And reckless, as reckless as the love she had for her reckless winemaker. That was his direct influence without a doubt because never had she wanted anything so - *unhinged*. From anyone.

But from him? She couldn't have wanted it more.

But she also fucked him the way he seemed to need to be fucked, absent of all control and at the mercy of his lover. Of her. Though it was not completely in the name of selflessness. She was drunk off the way every thrust had him crawling halfway up the wall, his hands smacking against it before he quickly returned them to the headboard and lowered his chest, pushing his ass back towards her, eager to take her next stroke.

And he was so **LOUD**. The pitch of his cry clawing its way to impossible heights with reckless abandon. He was not ashamed nor embarrassed like so many past lovers had been. He sang his praises with a pride unyielding. She drank deeply from each, gluttonous for it. And he never let her go without.

Her thumbs slipped between his ass cheeks, spreading him open wider to the sound of a sharp yelp followed by a wail.

“Athena, I’m - gonna—“

“Uh uh.” Her response was as firm as the thrusts she delivered around it. “I didn’t hear you ask for permission. Good boys ask for permission.”

He whined. “P-please - can I - can I - cum?”

She reached up, shoving a hand in his hair and tugging his head back. She gave the shell of his ear a stern bite.

“I can’t hear you.”

His hips bucked against hers, the headboard creaking towards him in a way that hinted at the possibility of its own ruin. She hardly cared. In fact, she might have even been impressed.

“Please! Can I cum!”

He shouted it swiftly, forcing it through gritted teeth, and she knew he was hanging off the edge by a fingernail.

“You can.”

A grunt and a shudder, and she felt his ass clench harder than ever. He pushed back from the headboard, back arching, body taut, before he came for the third time that night, painting the wood before him with a generous amount of his seed, or at least with more than she thought him capable of at this stage of the night.

And watching him fall apart seized her in a way the vibrator could not, his orgasm becoming her own as she writhed wanton against his back. He reached back to grab her hip, his hand large enough to curl around her ass and dig his nails in. Her eyes rolled back, her mind went black, and she was nothing but a vessel for pure, unadulterated pleasure.

Yet even once she came down, all of her weight resting on his bowed back, she was still needy, still hungry, and the vibrator had numbed her to its own pleasure. Switching it off, she eased out of him, allowing him to stretch out and collapse

onto his stomach. Beautiful as he was like this, panting softly into the pillow, she wasn't quite done.

“Turn over.”

Despite his obvious exhaustion, he did not hesitate to obey her because of course he didn't. He rolled onto his stomach as she stood up between his legs, removing the harness and tossing it to the floor. He watched her with a worn gaze, hooded and heavy yet rapt and attentive. He looked, to no surprise, far more beautiful like this, Black skin glowing and glistening, his cock still semi-hard, and his cheeks wet with emotion. His cum dripped down the headboard above him, but he hardly seemed to notice, his lips parted and swollen from where he had been biting them throughout. How could she be so lucky? She got to wake up to this pretty face every day for the rest of her life.

But right now, there was only one thing she could think to do with it.

Stepping over him with cautious movements, she reached for the headboard to steady herself before she sunk down to her knees again above his shoulders. He immediately caught on, receiving her with eager hands and helping her to mount his jaw. He didn't wait for further instruction either, taking her sensitive clit between his lips and suckling it like a hungry babe. Her body stuttered in its descent, determined to get both further away and as close as possible all at once. He pulled her down nonetheless so that his chin pressed against her entrance and made her squirm further. Another orgasm was already building, the coil in her belly hardly relaxing at all before it began to tighten again, and she leaned all the way into it once she could adjust.

“Dio! Oh, fates, that's - you're so good at — fuck...”

Then he stopped, pushing her up slightly, and her eyes snapped open to look at him.

“Does my tongue in your pussy count as penetration?”

If her frustration wasn't so immediate and incessant, she would have marveled at the way he was able to look so

adorable with her arousal all over his face. It was because of this fact almost exclusively that she was so addicted to watching him eat her out. But she could focus on nothing apart from the loss of contact.

“No. Because if it did, you would’ve lost a long time ago.”

Then she abruptly sat back down on his face, grinding against him until he opened his mouth and plunged his tongue into her cunt.

“Ah, fuck! There’s my good boy! There - don’t you fucking stop.”

He didn’t. He sped up, pulling her closer and burrowing his face as far as it would go between her folds. She ground her clit into the bridge of his nose, reaching for his hair again and tugging his head upward slightly. Her praises rained down on him between her moans, and he earned each and every one. She could tell he was enjoying this, giving her pleasure, twisting and turning his tongue and head alike to keep her stimulated and unable to adjust to his rhythm. She rode him with the knowledge that while she was in the driver’s seat, he was controlling the pedals, and she would have it no other way.

Climax crashed down upon her without warning, a merciless force that had her bracing herself against the wall, her legs trembling violently around his head even as he gripped them tighter.

“Dio! D—“

Her throat all but closed up, sounds silenced in her ecstasy as she draped herself over the headboard. He kept her steady as she rode it out, and then he kept her upright as she caught her breath, his own labored breathing tickling her sensitive folds. With soft licks, he lapped up his earnings before carefully sitting up and easing her down into his lap. She cupped his neck, kissing him sloppily. He tightened his hold on her.

“Did you like it?” she asked, a smile on her face, her eyes remaining shut.

“I don’t think ‘like’ is a strong enough word,” he whispered.

“So you would be open to doing it again?”

“Anytime you want it, whatever it is, I’ll give it to you. You know that.”

“D...”

“Hm?”

She forced her eyes open, brushing her thumb over his cheek. He leaned into her touch, wrapping his arms around her fully.

“I love you.”

It was as if she’d flipped a switch. Dionysos lit up, his exhaustion falling away for a moment as he sighed with content. She committed the image to memory.

“I love you too,” he managed, his voice hoarse. “But - you knew that already.”

She nodded. “I still don’t mind hearing it.”

“Good, because I don’t plan to quit saying it any time soon.”

CHAPTER 28

DIONYSOS

The rest of the banquet week was filled with a whole lot of crisis management and very little sleep. Any time Dio was able to steal with Athena —outside of falling into bed beside her and promptly passing out— was spent napping on her office couch or eating a fast food meal in the car, each instance falling between some other engagement the two were due for. Still, he was on top of the world and having the time of his life, enjoying their most lucrative banquet week to date. The sheer capacity that the city had been able to accommodate was of immense satisfaction, and it gave him bigger ideas for the future. It also made this entire year of turmoil worth it.

Currently, he stood at the head of the vast table that ran the length of the Eastern Vineyard's center aisle. It was larger than the vineyard in the Market District, meaning it could hold more people, but as Dio had expected, they still had to open the side gates and use the space of the gardens despite the thousands of people forgoing the formal banquet and heading straight for the after party. There were no complaints of course. Those having to sit out in the gardens would get to look out over one of the most popular natural landmarks in all the Aegean, the River Styx. Not to mention, just beyond that, they could see the dazzling tower of Hotel Asphodel and the brightly lit dome of the Pantheon Theatre.

As the leadership delegation of each visiting island filed in, taking their reserved seat at the main table, Hades appeared, walking briskly towards Dionysos. Many eyes followed him from the moment he was in their line of sight, a wave of silence passing through the crowds. Dio tended to

forget that in many places, Khaos Falls included, his uncle was still a myth slowly coming to life. It was quite something to see too.

Hades placed a hand on his shoulder, a proud smile on his face.

“This is far more marvelous than I could have ever imagined, Dio. You truly made my first year as city leader a whole lot easier.”

“Thanks for trusting me with it, Uncle. Not just this year but every year.”

“You were good at it. There was never a question as to whether or not you could handle it, not even from Zeus.”

Dio fought not to flinch. “Yeah, but he still hated it. He hated the fact that it was me.” He hated me.

“He hated what you represented to him.”

“And what was that?”

Hades squeezed his shoulder. “A consequence of his actions. Just like your brothers.”

He snorted, but he cut it short when he saw that Hades’ face had fallen slightly.

“I apologize,” Hades said.

Dio shook his head. “For what? We were never that to you though, Uncle. We were always worth something, even if we didn’t see it at first.”

“But I still confined you to this box. I only wanted you to be happy, to ensure you were doing what you loved and that you were praised for it, regardless of what it was. Truth is though, you’re capable of far more than I was ever able to see, and you figured that out before I would have ever thought to look twice.”

He shrugged. “Yeah, but surprising you is a much greater accomplishment seeing as it’s really hard to do.”

Hades chuckled. “I suppose that’s fair. And by all means, continue to do so.”

Dio put an arm around his shoulders now. “I think I can do that.”

“My boy.” Hades ruffled his hair. “Now let’s get this thing going, hm? Looks like all the leaders are here.”

Dionysos’s eyes immediately scanned the table, but eventually, his eyes were drawn to the side of it where Athena was coming towards them. A lopsided grin overtook his face as she waved at him and Hades, but before she reached them, Hades lightly steered him around towards the raised platform behind them. With a nod, he climbed atop it, taking hold of the microphone secured to its stand and tapping it to ensure it was on. Before he began speaking, he found Athena again, standing at the seat beside his. His brothers had apparently been right behind her because they flanked either side of the table as well with Aphrodite and Persephone. They were looking up at him, and he gave them all a curt nod before bringing the microphone to his lips.

“Welcome, everyone, to the grand finale of our long week of celebration and gratitude!” he began, the crowds quieting all around him. “I would like to thank my uncle, our city leader, for gracing me with yet another year of running this banquet. I’d also like to thank everyone who contributed and helped put this together. This is the biggest year we have ever had, and so I’d also like to thank all of you, especially our guests of honor, our fellow city and district leaders who have joined us to bid goodbye to winter and welcome our spring renewal. May all of our lands thrive this season!”

Everyone roared with applause, the leaders around the table thanking Dionysos with shallow bows and humbled smiles.

“In just a few moments, our primary dishes will be set out before you,” Dionysos went on once order was restored. “After this course, you will be free to check out the food trucks and specialty stands we’ve set up to ensure you are able to sample and enjoy as many different foods from our sibling islands as you possibly can!”

Another round of applause, and Dio set the microphone down before hopping off the platform. He then hugged each of his brothers as well as Aphrodite and Persephone, thanking them for their contributions and accepting their praise with a bashful smile. Only once he got to Athena did he truly relax though, sinking into her arms with a deep sigh.

“I’m so proud of you,” she whispered, kissing his cheek. “This looks amazing.”

“Let’s just hope it remains that way, huh? We start running out of food and—”

“Hey, don’t jinx it. Come on now.”

He smirked, pulling back to peck her lips before pulling her chair out for her.

He wasn’t at all oblivious to the coy looks they were receiving from their family, but he tried not to pay them any mind, at least not at the moment. But they’d all been waiting as long as he had, so they shouldn’t be all that surprised by the development. Not that they wouldn’t make a huge deal about it the moment they were all alone. The look on Hecate’s face alone told him as much, but Hermes’ grin was a fair addition.

Within minutes, servers were rolling in to present the first bottle of wine to each section, a selection made by Dionysos at the start of each season. This year, it was a well aged red, and like every year, it was one of the first batches he had ever stored. It was to be paired with the first entree, a recipe for braised lamb that he and the chefs had also chosen together. He had hoped that Isidora would come so that she could add her personal twist, but he hadn’t heard from her since leaving Thassos nor had she shown up in the city.

Voices echoed down the table into their section as Dionysos opened their bottle of wine, other leaders speaking to them over the chatter. It was a marvel in and of itself to see so many of the greatest minds in one place from Medusa and Hestia to Apollo’s parents and older siblings. Even Erebus’s brothers were here, all three of them in the flesh for the first time. Usually, only one came to the banquet if at all, but it would seem their relationship with Hades was promising.

Usually, Dio let his uncle and Athena do all of the talking beyond event itinerary, but now, Hades directed more questions towards him regarding the city as a whole, and Athena didn't even look like she was considering intervening. It made him as nervous as it did excited.

“So you're telling me you've got more than wine coming out of that district of yours?” Hyperion, Apollo and Artemis' father and co-leader of Delos, questioned with a look of pure curiosity.

“Oh, wine is only the mouth of the river,” Dio chuckled. “In addition to the wine and whiskey, we've got herbal brews, medicinal vapor strains, you name it. The goal is to provide supply to any demand that may come up, here or otherwise. We like to be self-sufficient.”

“Medicinal vapor strains... Run that by me again.”

Dionysos reached into his pocket, producing his own pen and unscrewing the cartridge at the top. He held it up for those listening to the conversation to gawk at before continuing with an explanation.

“This small cartridge here is equivalent to the potency of five full stalks of the flower it's from, yet I produced as much with only a few leaves. More potent than burning the herbs but easier on the air quality. Plus, now that we've mapped out more uses for each strain and broken them down further, we can medicate a much broader span of conditions. It means there's a more effective individual treatment for everyone, you know?”

“Interesting, and have you considered exporting these cartridges?”

Dio shrugged. “I know the demand is there, but to export, we would certainly have to create more stock especially because most initial imports would likely be for recreational use. For medicinal use, we would have to ensure the knowledge is either already there or accessible to the healers in other cities.”

“We would certainly be open to the possibility of building that bridge,” Selene, Apollo’s older sister and leader of Deucalion Heights, declared.

She leaned over her father. “If they can be accommodated, we can send some of our healers here to learn. It might cut down on the more - pervasive substances used at home. I’ve seen your streets here. No homelessness, no overwhelmed crisis or rehabilitation centers.”

“We’ve been able to ensure housing and sustenance for all of our citizens in the past few years,” Dio said. “With additional aid for those who need it.”

“And Aphrodite and Dionysos have been at the forefront of that effort since its inception,” Athena offered, placing a hand on Dio’s knee. “Both the Market and Lush Districts have kept housing abundant with any extra space they can utilize.”

Dio smiled. “As for the medicinal effort, we can discuss it next week if you’d like. I can gather some numbers, look at the possibility and the timeline of it, talk to our healers. I’d be happy to help your people in any way I can.”

Selene seemed delighted by this which was great news for everyone. She was the most esteemed leader in the region, head of the Aegean’s entertainment capital, but it was no secret that when she took over Deucalion Heights, it had been submerged in problems, the shady underbelly of the entertainment industry becoming the shady underbelly of the city as a whole. In contrast, while Khaos Falls was anything but perfect, it did have some safety nets and assurances in place for its people. First and foremost, no one ever went without. Dio committed himself to that cause the moment he was given some power, and he hadn’t shied away since. Instead, he put everybody on until even Zeus could do nothing but accept and ignore it.

Once the main course had finished and the first bottles were replaced by the second and third bottles, the guests were given the green light to roam free throughout the gardens where a variety of food, drink and dessert stands had been erected. There were other wares as well, many local and

foreign shopkeepers having come to cash in on the crowds rolling through the city, and Dio was enamored with all of them.

He and Athena walked along the aisles, wine glasses in hand as they picked up samples and pointed out items of interest. Despite the hearty portion of lamb and potatoes he'd scarfed down, the smells alone had Dio's mouth watering. The only thing of more interest than the next stand was Athena's hand nestled in his and the way their shoulders bumped one another every now and again.

"So what happens next?" she questioned after they left a stand selling Trojan sea crystals.

"Well, after the banquet and the fair, there's the after party."

"In Pegasus Park."

"Exactly. We usually hold it in one of the clubs, but with this turnout, I doubt that would be possible, so..."

"And it just goes all night?"

"Oh, yeah. The last stand, you know? Then the weekend is for rest and recovery. Personally, I am looking forward to that part at this stage."

"Do you have to be present at the after party?"

"Not necessarily. I mean, I usually am of course, but it's always a choice. This year's just been a bit more taxing."

"Does that mean I can take you home early then?"

He looked at her now, suddenly catching on to the series of questions and their intention. She kept her gaze straight ahead, innocence set within them, but her lips curled slightly around her glass, and he couldn't help but smile too.

"Why?" he asked, his tone sly. "Ready to pay up on this bet?"

She snorted. "Oh, I've been ready."

"You and I both," he chuckled. "I applaud us for our restraint."

“Yours was much stronger than mine. I won’t even try and deny it.”

“I had more to lose I think.”

She came to a stop on the side of a drink stand. “Is that what you were gonna ask for if you won?”

“What?”

She gave him a pointed look, stepping closer to him. “To break your fast with me.”

A bashful smile colored his face now, and he looked down at his feet. He had almost forgotten this entire time what it was he had planned to ask for, tucking it away where she wouldn’t sense it. Not that it mattered anymore. She had already paid up far more than that.

He shook his head.

“Then what was it? What were you gonna ask for?”

“I don’t think you would believe me if I told you.”

“Try me.”

Though before he had the chance to consider it, the sound of his name drew his attention. They turned to find Hecate walking briskly towards them.

“We might wanna start directing people towards the park,” she said once she was close enough. “It’s getting a bit crowded, and we’ve had a few - spirited incidents. Hermes already started moving some of the food trucks that way before they got blocked in.”

“Alright, yeah, I’ll get on the horn.”

Hecate nodded, staring between him and Athena for a moment with a growing smile before she walked off, leaving him to his relief. She was working up to her momentous celebration, he knew. He was just glad it wouldn’t be right now in the middle of the fair aisle.

“Okay, I’m gonna go check in with Hephaestus while you do that,” Athena huffed.

He tried not to object. “Alright, be safe, yeah?”

“Always.”

He kissed her one more time, harder than before, and she gripped his sides with bruising fingers. It felt soothing somehow. They clung to one another until it was no longer socially acceptable for two leaders on duty, and even then, it was hard for them to separate. Her hands drifted down his arms to his.

“I’ll find you in the back by the gazebo in, say, twenty minutes?”

He wiggled his eyebrows. “Then you’ll take me home?”

She bit her lip. “Then I’ll take you home.”

“Alright, sounds good. Twenty minutes.” They began to back away. “Don’t be late!”

“Oh, I won’t.”

Once they let go of one another, he rushed back towards the front of the vineyard and the microphone wired to reach all corners of the grounds. It was a struggle moving against the dense crowd, but he made due until he at last came into the clearing around the table. Hades and a few leaders were walking along the vines talking, and several other leaders remained seated at the table drinking from the bottles being catered to them. He greeted them with a nod as he stepped up onto the platform.

“Alright, everyone, I can see we’ve all had our fill more or less.” His voice echoed a half dozen times around him. “If not, we’ll still have food available all night, but if you would like to start making your way towards the northern exit, you’ll be directed to Pegasus Park where we’ve set up a more—“

“Hades! Where is Hades!”

Dionysos pulled the mic from his lips, trying to make out who was yelling in the distance. The floodlights washed them out, but the voice sounded familiar. Then more voices joined.

“Where is Hades!”

“Hephaestus!”

“Athena!”

Dio set the mic back on the stand and jumped down from the platform as others began to get up. He rounded the table just as Hector came into focus, stumbling through the crowd on a limp. Then Nike. She was cradling one arm with the other, and her face was black with ash.

“Nike!” Hades’ voice boomed through the rows of vines, closing in on them. “Hector? What’s wrong?”

Dionysos met his uncle at the end of the aisle, and Hector moved close to them as if trying to keep everyone else from hearing him. Not that it made a difference. The tension was palpable. The entire vineyard had fallen into an unsettled quiet.

“There were boats. Planes. They - they came out of nowhere, and they started firing on the Sarpedon port. We don’t—”

Patroclus’s explanation was severed by the severe sound of a gunshot, and Dionysos nearly hit the ground when the sound hit his ears. It was only when he was crouching, ears covered, that he realized it wasn’t a gunshot at all. No, this explosion was much bigger.

And then everyone was screaming.

CHAPTER 29

ATHENA

Chaos did not begin to cover what was unfolding around Athena. Running, screaming, pushing, shoving, all underscored by the distant sound of gunfire. When Hephaestus got the call that the port was under fire, they had assumed that meant the main port in the Harvest District. However, updates kept coming in, and soon it was clear that this wasn't true. The port under fire was the one just east of the vineyard in Medusa's Sarpedon District, the port they had shut down for the duration of the Blood Moon Festival.

She followed Hephaestus at a run. He was hardly limping now, adrenaline and forward motion carrying him through the crowd although every now and again, he slammed his cane down into the ground to keep him from losing his balance.

Where is Dio? Where is Dio?

She could not look for him now, had no means of finding out. They had to get to the port, and they had to get there immediately.

Most of their defensive teams were placed on the main port, but that did not mean they were foolish enough to leave the Sarpedon Port or even the unfinished Market Port unguarded. It just meant it would take some time to get everyone on the same page and in the same place. But she had no clue what it was they were walking into. She only knew they had to work quickly. They had to push whoever was attacking back. They had to keep the threat out of the city.

“Athena!”

She could hear the cries of her name, but she could not recognize the voice as anything other than *Not* Dionysos, so she kept moving. Eventually, they reached the end of the vineyard street where the crowds had already cleared, running in the opposite direction. There was no doubt in her mind that they were being herded, at least indirectly, over the river and into the most secure place in the city —Casino Asphodel. She only hoped that meant Dio had been led there too.

Unless he's looking for you.

She shook the thought from her mind just as two people caught up to her and Hephaestus. One was Artemis, her crossbow drawn with a bolt already poised to shoot. The other was Pallas, who must have recognized Artemis and followed her to find Athena. Athena's anxiety was spun so tightly, she couldn't even be irritated. And in reality, she was relieved to see him alive.

"Aphrodite?" Hephaestus asked, not at all as shy as Athena about his priorities.

"She got out," Artemis assured him, the gunfire growing louder before them. "Eros and Psyche took the twins to Twilight House the moment it started, so they are safe."

"Achilles said he would meet us — there."

A dark SUV pulled onto the abandoned street, the windows rolled down. Achilles identified himself, his hand out the open window before throwing open the passenger door. They climbed in, and as soon as the last door closed, he stomped down on the gas and headed for the port.

"Medusa?" Athena questioned.

"She was trying to evacuate as many people from this side of the district as she could," Hephaestus explained. "My mother was - she left the banquet early, and I think she was in the archives, but I haven't been able to get in touch with her. I told my father, but..."

But he regretted it. He regretted putting both of them in danger, and Athena could see it in his face. She wanted to tell him she was sure Hera and Charon were both okay, but she

didn't know how to lie right now. She didn't know how to do much of anything right now.

This is what love does! It makes you weak!

She chewed on Zeus's words, his voice echoing in her head, and spit them out, trying to focus. She didn't have to try too hard. They crossed the River Phlegethon bridge between the vineyard and the Sarpedon District, and the landscape rapidly changed. The horizon was alight as if the sun had just crested it. Except - it wasn't the sun. It was a growing sea of flames.

"Where do we go?" Achilles asked.

Hephaestus glared down on the scene, unable to tell where the chaos began. Athena could see it too, the streets packed with people although she could not tell if they were residents or invaders. Even once they began to clear, it was impossible to interpret their motivation, nothing but silhouettes against the orange glow beyond.

"Do they have aircraft?" Hephaestus asked.

"I think a few seaplanes came in after the first wave attacked," Achilles answered. "But no aerial support."

"Get us to that warehouse across from the port lot. We can get to the roof and scope it out from there."

Achilles nodded, proceeding down the street, the vast gorgon statue that stood atop the library now a dark silhouette against the orange glow at its back. Before they reached the street however, there was another large boom, and a flurry of debris flew up into the sky ahead.

"Is Patroclus rerouting our ships?"

Hephaestus nodded. "Yes, coming in from both sides of the island. We've also got smaller gunboats coming down the canal."

"Did they see where the attack was coming from? Or how many ships?"

"He said he couldn't tell, and honestly? I don't even know if there *were* ships. The towers didn't see any. They didn't see

anything.”

“So - you think they may have come in on submersibles?”

Heph shrugged. “Right now? Anything is possible.”

But they knew to come to Sarpedon. No one came to Sarpedon except Tartarus’ exports to begin with, but they had been very clear that it wasn’t open for tourist arrivals either. They hadn’t had any issues with that this entire week.

And they could’ve come from anywhere. Ships had been coming and going all day, people leaving early or coming late or coming back after having to make a quick voyage in the middle of the week. While many islands felt worlds away, there were closer destinations just off the eastern coast. From here, the fortress of Keos was visible, Delos and Mykonos just beyond and Thera to the southeast. Off the western coast was Achaia, which bordered four other states, all of which were mere hours away from Khaos Falls. So not only were the options endless, but plenty of them were close enough to get back to untouched.

Athena couldn’t let that happen.

Achilles parked behind the abandoned warehouse just west of the port, the only structure now standing between them and the chaos. Hephaestus led them through the darkened building and into the stairwell. A staccato of gunfire rang outside, larger blasts littered throughout, and with each one, Athena’s heart contracted, adrenaline needling at every nerve in her body.

Once they reached the roof, they were met with a wall of smoke, hindering both visibility and air quality.

And their vantage point did little for them. Their guard was on the ground, but most of them had been in plain clothes for tonight, and it seemed that the attackers had followed suit. It was an apocalyptic scene, and between the vast amount of new recruits and the lack of uniforms, Athena wondered if anyone *knew* who they were fighting. And that thought alone dredged up so many other questions, one definitively louder than the others — what had they missed?

Without an intricate knowledge of the city's current layout put in place specifically for the week, this attack would be impossible. And really, even then, it should be. Getting to Sarpedon Port alone was no easy feat, especially with ally ships on the water. The enemy would have had to get through each of their forces unseen, and even with small vessels, it would have been risky. Their coastal towers were on high alert, specifically looking for small watercraft from all directions with both the naked eye and Hephaestus's own refined radar system.

So how the fuck did they miss this?

Heph's submersible theory was gaining more traction the more she thought about it, but they would have had to be deep-sea vehicles to remain under the radar.

"Alright, Athena, you're on," Hephaestus said, handing her the fold-up binoculars he had been staring through.

She had already been searching for the best way to bog down the enemy and halt their forward progression while also walling them in. She wanted to capture at least a few of these bastards. They needed answers, not just for tonight but for Thassos and every wall they'd run into looking.

"I've got three Keos ships about 300 yards out. Tell them to come in halfway and hold the blockade." She heard Artemis relay her message into the radio immediately. "Get some birds in the air, medical and tactical. There are two foreign seaplanes on the water, and I don't want them making it back off." She turned her sights to the northern end of the port. "There's a concentrated battle, corner of Huntress Drive. Send two squads there right now. Have them go around the back of the library and flank the street. Get me a bully there too, make sure they don't funnel down into the alleys. We'll lose a good lot of them that way especially when they're in street clothes. Take—"

She was suddenly picked up off her feet and slammed to the ground hard just as something large whizzed by above head. It crashed into the building behind them, a loud boom

radiating through the foundation and up her spine. A grenade launcher.

She looked up at Pallas, who was looking down at her with dark eyes shining, fear laced through them. He swallowed and pushed himself up before pulling her to her feet. She gave him a nod of thanks.

“We’re gonna have to take those out,” Hephaestus huffed, pointing out the two active grenade launchers. “They’re causing havoc, and they’ll shoot down our birds as soon as they see ‘em.”

“I can’t get a shot up here with all the smoke,” Artemis hissed.

“I’ve got it,” Pallas said.

“What?” Athena gave him a bewildered look. “You can’t go down there.”

“Look at everyone. They don’t know who is who until they start shooting. I can use that to my advantage.”

“Unless they just start shooting to be sure.”

“Then find me a quieter way to get around back there, but I can do this. I can be quick.”

“No. Heph, where is our closest mounted rig?”

“About a block north. On the roof of the car garage.”

“Artemis, grab someone and get over there. We’ll need the fire support closer from the ground.”

Artemis retreated quickly, but Pallas didn’t relent.

“By the time she gets over there, your helicopters might already be taking fire.”

“We’ll put them on hold until she does.”

“It’ll take too long, Athena, just let me go. I’ll be back here before you know it.”

“Pallas, it is not worth the risk. If I send you down there, and—”

“Just give me a damn route, Athena. Give me the route, or I’ll make one myself.”

“You can’t—“

“Please.”

She stopped as their eyes met, his own alight with something wild and lawless, and she knew then the debate was over. It had to be. She could not have feelings up here. It could get them all killed.

With a huff, she turned back to the port, surveying their options. Most of the fighting was taking place at the northern end of the port, meaning attention was aimed in that direction.

“Okay.” She lowered the binos again and stepped closer to Pallas, pointing south. “You see this building here on the corner?”

“Yeah.”

“That side wall is knocked out, and I’m willing to bet another one is too. If you can climb through there and loop around those cars on the edge of the port lot, you’ll be able to come up behind him. But you’ll need to use—“

“A melee weapon, I know.”

She nodded, not looking at him. “Artemis should be on the mounted gun by that time, so she can take out the second guy. Just come back the way you came. Do you understand me?”

She could see him salute in the corner of her eye. “You got it.”

Then he was gone, and it felt like the cord already tight around her chest grew tighter.

Immediately, her mind went back to Dio.

She knew that if something happened to him, no one would tell her until this was over. No one would let her lose focus. What they didn’t understand was that *not knowing* made it hard to focus in the first place. Zeus always said that love was a burden, but no. Worry was the burden. Right now, love

was what grounded her. Because love was the only thing heavier than her fear.

Her thoughts were disrupted by another grenade making impact with the building next door.

“Heph!” she yelled over the noise. “Is Artemis there yet?”

She heard him approaching from behind her as he called into the radio.

“Are you stationed, Artemis?”

“Trying to get there!” He had disconnected his earpiece, no doubt either catching interference or simply unable to hear, so Athena could hear the response. “We ran into some gunfire, but we’re moving now!”

Suddenly, the street erupted with an overlay of heavy gunfire, the kind that could only be created by the specialized weapons Hephaestus had designed solely for his brother. Ares had arrived.

But Ares wasn’t where her attention was drawn to. Between the two seaplanes, something was coming out of the water. Something with a very large barrel.

She turned to yell at Hephaestus. It was already too late. The blast sounded around them, *beneath* them. Athena felt it in her sternum. It made her teeth chatter. And then the roof was giving way under her feet.

Hephaestus managed to grab her just before she fell straight through three floors, yanking her against his chest as he stumbled back and tripped over his own cane. He hit the ground, but the reprieve was short lived. The building shuddered and shrieked, and then they were falling too, crashing onto the third floor balcony with the spine-chilling sound of metal and glass turning to ruin.

Athena landed on top of Heph, who landed on his back with the kind of broken wowl that filled her with fathomless dread. She had to check him, to call a medical helo, to get him out.

Except... she couldn’t move.

She looked down over her legs to find a large chunk of the roof laid over one, adrenaline having left her numb to anything beyond the inability to move. She tried to carefully raise herself up to push it off, but she was on her belly, her arm pinned between them, so it was nearly impossible to get any leverage.

“Fuck.” She looked up at his face to find his eyes were open, but his lids were heavy. “You alright?”

“Mm - don’t know.”

“What is it? What hurts?”

“My - nuts for one.”

She rolled her eyes. “At least you can feel them.”

But as she began to move again, he gripped her arm in an iron fist. “No - no, I - I think something skewered my thigh.”

“Fuck, Hephaestus!”

“Sh, don’t yell. Don’t—“

She tried to determine whether she could feel copious amounts of blood, but the blood to her own legs had been cut off, so it was impossible. Yet as she carefully reached down, she felt it. A piece of broken rebar going straight through his leg, and judging by the angle, it was too close to the artery to risk moving him too much.

“Where is your radio?”

“I think it - I think...” His words were slurred.

“Stay with me, Hephaestus. Don’t you dare start dozing off on the fucking job.”

“I don’t... Shit, ‘Thena.”

She moved her face closer to his before whipping her hand across it. He coughed up some dust and spit, but there was no blood, so she would take that as a win right now.

“—My kids.”

“Exactly, your kids,” she shot back. “And your kids need you to stay with me, alright?”

He nodded. “I know. I know they do. They’ll drive Aphrodite to the brink.”

“Not if Demeter buries them in a field or something first for driving her nuts.”

He tried to laugh. It came out as a cough. “Naw, she’s - she’s actually really soft with them. Even - Eros, which - I don’t know how - how... I don’t...”

“Hey, save it. We can talk all about Demeter at a later date.”

“I gotta... Athena, it—”

“Don’t—”

She searched the nearby area for his radio, pushing away what debris she could until she saw it a few feet away. She growled.

“Okay, just - stay still for a moment.”

He gave a hoarse half chuckle. “Was there another option?”

“No.”

Forcing her arm out from between them despite his groan, she placed it on the ground and stretched, reaching for the radio with her other hand. As her stomach came up off his, she felt a sudden cold, the kind that signaled her skin and clothes were wet. She didn’t dare look. Instead, she stretched further.

Her trembling fingers grazed on the radio’s antenna, and it took her some time to get a hold on it. She dragged it closer until she could pick it up, and once it was in her hands, she switched it over to the general channel.

“This is The Owl! I need a medical helicopter to the port warehouse on North Acheron immediately! Immediately! The Hammer is down! I repeat, The Hammer is down!”

Then all they had was white noise and the faint sound of the battle raging outside. She looked up at Hephaestus who kept moving his eyes as if to assure them both he was still in it, still alive. But they both knew the reality. Pinned down like

this, the building threatening to collapse completely, all they could do was stay still and hope someone got to them in time.

CHAPTER 30

DIONYSOS

Despite the sheer amount of people packed into Hotel Asphodel, the place felt like a ghost town. Silence washed over the crowds hunkering down in its vast basement and spacious ballrooms, mutters kept to a minimum for the sake of everyone's sanity. Dionysos was never good at keeping quiet to begin with, but he was especially bad at it right now. Because right now, he was angry and upset and worried and scared. And he was wondering where Athena was. Until he knew the answer to that question, he would be physically unable to do anything but pace the minimal space of the security office.

He hadn't been given the chance to go find her when the bomb went off. He had been trying to ward off a panic attack at the sound alone. Before he knew it, he, his uncle, and the other leaders were being marched to the dock outside of the vineyard. They were then carted across the River Styx in Hades' ferry before being led into the small boathouse on the other side. There, they entered the tunnels that went under and into Casino Asphodel, Hades' emergency route. And it was the first time he ever had to use it, in *or* out.

Behind them, all other guests were also directed towards Casino Asphodel for sanctuary although for Dio, it hardly felt like one. In fact, it quickly began to feel like a prison. He had been cut off from his brothers, his nephews, and Athena, and it was a feeling he never wished to endure again. He wouldn't survive it.

Hecate and Persephone sat in chairs beside the main security desk where Agamemnon and Leonidas were watching the cameras and commanding the guards on the perimeter. They had shut the gates into the Asphodel lot over an hour ago, maybe two. Dio wouldn't know. He had forced himself to stop checking the clock, and he'd lost his phone somewhere in the fray. Regardless, he got tired of seeing the same time for what felt like thirty minutes straight.

They discovered early on that the usual range of their radios had been severely limited although they had yet to decipher how. Thanatos and Hestia were on the main floor tending to guests, and Hades... well, actually, Dio had no clue where his uncle was, but Dio assumed he was with the other leaders. After all, regardless of what happened next, Hades was going to be judged unfairly or otherwise, and no one was going to take it easy on him. Certainly not Demeter, and definitely not the other leaders.

And it was all Dio's fault.

There was no doubt in his mind who had sent the attack and why. No one would be foolish enough otherwise, and the only island without a delegation present was Thassos. What other explanation could there possibly be?

But where had they gotten the army from?

Persephone's phone was ringing. Dio didn't quite process the sound until after she answered, and even then, it took the blood-curdling shriek that erupted from the other end of the line. He knew immediately that it was Aphrodite, her fury permeating the room around them in thick waves that had him gasping. It took very little beyond that, halting him in his tracks and stealing his breath. He turned on Persephone, moving closer to hear although he didn't need to. However, once he had the verbal confirmation, he was racing out of the room, Persephone and Hecate following him. Or running after him.

Then Persephone was calling his name, but he didn't stop until he entered the side valet lot reserved for leaders. There

were a few cars parked there but no drivers, and before he reached the front vehicle, two guards stepped into his path.

“Move!”

It came barking out of him without further prompting, swinging his arms as they tried to grab him.

“Sorry, Dio, but no one can leave the premise,” one explained. “Especially none of the leaders or Hades’ family members.”

“Where is he!” Dio shook them off again. “Where is my uncle! Where is he! You tell him—“

“Dionysos!”

Persephone had finally caught up to him. She took hold of his arm and pulled him from the guards’ grasp, turning him around to face her.

“Where is he!” he roared again. “Where is he! I need to get to my brother!”

“Dio.” She reached up and cupped his face, trying to bring his eyes to hers.

“Where! What the fuck is he doing! His nephews need him!”

“Dio!”

“Where—“

“He’s on his way down here!” The high pitch of her voice snagged his attention like a bed of brambles. She gripped his face tighter. “He is upstairs with the other leaders, and Hecate went to go get him, alright?”

It was only then that Dio realized Hecate was no longer with them, and somehow, that triggered the panic and terror he had been choking back for hours now. He felt his lip tremble, and then his vision began to blur, moisture streaming down his tinted cheeks.

Persephone pulled him into a hug.

“It’s okay,” she whispered. “It’s alright. Athena’s there with him.”

He shuddered, relief and refusal conjuring a shattering wail that took what strength he had left. Persephone shouldered his weight with ease, and then more hands were on him. He forced his head up to find his uncle beside him.

“I need you to take us to the hospital,” Hades said to the guards. “Two cars.”

They nodded and moved towards the vehicles while Hades took Dio into his arms. Although he was stoic as ever, Dio could sense the undercurrent of rage and worry riling beneath his skin. He would never be like Hades and Athena, able to contain his emotions in a neat little box deep in his chest, but he no longer wished to be. He was just fine spilling it all over the floor.

“Come on, Son,” Hades said softly.

They loaded up the vehicles, Hades, Persephone, and Dio in one car, several guards in the other. They branched off after the bridge, but Dio hardly noticed, his eyes fixed to the east. Smoke still rose blacker than the night sky it rested against, but that was the only remnant that a battle had taken place. He wasn’t sure if that was better or worse.

By the time they reached the hospital, he was drained of so much energy that he felt like he had run here. Still, he followed his uncle out of the vehicle, and they made their way inside.

Aphrodite looked much calmer standing in the hallway than she sounded on the phone, which Dio took as a good sign. Ares and Hermes stood with their backs against the wall, their eyes fixed on the swinging doors across from them that led into the emergency and intensive care units. Dionysos remembered his long stay there just months ago. He suppressed a shudder at the memory.

Aphrodite immediately headed towards them once she spotted their party, and Persephone reached her first, giving her a tight hug. Dio slowed to a halt only a few feet from the

doors, his legs unwilling to carry him any further into uncertainty. When she and Persephone parted, Aphrodite turned to Hades.

“He’s doing well,” she assured him, her own smile wobbly. “They got his leg patched up, and he - he can move them, but he has some spinal damage. And there were - internal things they have to keep an eye on now in case he needs surgery. He’s - there was—” She looked down and shook her head. Hades took her hands. “There was so much blood. —But they stopped it, and - and he’s stable. Resting now.” She forced herself to look up again. “Hera and Charon just went in, and...”

She trailed off, gesturing to the doors just as two people came walking out. Athena and Pallas.

Dio’s heart leapt up into his throat, what little energy he had left siphoned by the sight of Athena’s old friend. As much as he hated feeling that way, it was inescapable. Then she looked up at him, and his throat constricted right around his heart, making it difficult to do anything at all.

Then she was running.

She reached him before he dared blink, jumping up into his arms and crashing her lips against his. He wrapped his arms around her on instinct, reveling in the feel of her solid form against his. He swore that had he gone one more minute without that feeling, he would have collapsed.

“You’re here,” he breathed. “You’re okay.”

“I was so fucking worried about you,” she growled, and he knew she was attempting to mask her fear with anger. “Fates, Dio.”

“I’m alright. I was with Uncle. We got out of there right away. But - all the signals were jammed or something. It was really hard to get any messages out, and I lost my phone. And —”

He paused, catching sight of the large gash along her temple, which had already been stitched up.

“It’s alright,” she assured him. “It’s just a scratch.”

“I thought I lost you.” It was little more than a rasp, the fear mangling the words.

She shook her head with a soft smile. “You couldn’t. And you wanna know why?”

“Why?”

“Because you’re here. And as long as you’re here, I’ll be here too. I refuse to go anywhere you’re not.”

He exhaled a shuddering breath at the use of his own words, emotions spilling over. She ran her hand over his head, brushing it through his curls, and he relaxed into her touch.

There weren’t enough words in any language to express all that he was feeling right now, but even if there were, he didn’t have the energy to try. He simply kissed her again before burying his face in her neck, inhaling the scent of mint and ash. A lifetime of yearning was streaking through his veins, fresh tears trickling down his face. He heard her whimper against his temple, but he only held her tighter. He wasn’t prepared to let go just yet, to face the many other problems staring them down. For a moment, he simply wanted to revel in the fact that she was alive, that she was there with him.

Though of course the time came when they were forced to part, his solace shattered by the sound of the doors swinging open again. This time, it was the entry doors at the other end of the hall. Through them swept the tall and imposing form of Medusa, two guards in her wake, half of her thick black hair running in waves down one side of her face and the other half braided back on the opposite side. Her dark brown skin, warm with golden undertones and streaked with ash, glistened with sweat beneath the bright white lights, her eyebrows drawn together. Dio could not read her face for sure, but he imagined there was a great amount of rage boiling beneath the surface. After all, she, an unwilling party to their campaign in Thassos, had taken the greatest blow tonight.

Her district was in shambles, her people in varying states of trauma, and now her godson in a hospital bed. And she herself unaware such a thing *could* happen in this city much less *would* happen in her district. Yet, when she reached

Hades, who had already straightened into his city leader posture rather than his exhausted uncle posture, she did not demand explanation for the attack. Instead, she asked a simple question.

“Is he well?”

It took a moment for Hades to answer, no doubt caught off guard. Athena took Dionysos’ hand and led him back towards the others.

“He will be,” Hades said. “Hera and Charon are in there with him now. They’ll have to watch over him for a while, keep an eye on some internal injuries.”

“He saved my life,” Athena huffed, and Dionysos looked at her. “The roof we were on collapsed, and he grabbed me before I went down three stories with the rest of it. We still fell a floor, and he landed... I don’t even know what all he landed on.”

“He looked so fragile.” It was little more than a croak, Aphrodite’s voice growing weaker each time she spoke. “I - He didn’t want me to bring to the twins. He told them that in the helicopter. He - uh, he...”

Persephone gripped her again just as she began to shake, and Dionysos had to look away. His mind was racing, a million miles a minute trying to figure out what happened or what happened next. It felt cruel. He and Athena were finally together, and yet so much was being snatched from their grasp. He didn’t want to believe that it meant something cursed was upon them, but it was difficult not to at least consider the possibility. His big brother was laid up in the fucking hospital for Fate’s sake. After an attack right there on their home soil, the first in who knows how many decades or centuries. What else could it be but some kind of sick joke?

The doors opened again behind them, and Achilles, Nike, and Artemis came through them. Although they didn’t look quite as exhausted or resigned as one would expect. Instead, they looked - determined.

Achilles went right up to Hades and whispered in his ear. Dio couldn't hear a word of it, but it didn't matter because Artemis came up between his shoulder and Athena's and whispered what he assumed to be the same thing to them.

"We just got a report back from our scouts. They identified those ships sent from Phokis and the SubGun we saw in the port tonight."

Dionysos expelled a heavy breath.

"Aphrodite, will you take Medusa back to keep Hera company?" Hades asked. "Then bring Charon out here? This can't wait."

She nodded without hesitation, beckoning Medusa and moving towards the doors although Dio suspected she didn't much care for a reason. She just wanted to be back with Hephaestus. He didn't blame her in the slightest. He also wasn't surprised when Charon returned on his own, looking ten years older despite the fire burning in his black eyes. His face had lost the commonplace calm one could always count on. He looked shaken, like his world had been snatched from his hands and he was ready to plead for the thief to hand it back.

Hades had already sent Artemis to find them an empty room within the hospital to speak, and she came back within a few minutes, gesturing for them all to follow. Hades then had Nike go out and have their perimeter guard lock down the premises, allowing only the seriously injured through the doors until Hades said otherwise. Any minor wounds could be treated at the first response infirmary on the back end of the complex, and it made Dionysos feel a bit more comfortable with the fact that they were now all in one building.

It was only as they began moving down the hall that Dionysos—and perhaps Athena, but that may or may not have been wishful thinking on his part—was reminded of Pallas's presence. He had taken the initiative to stand aside, melting into the wall beside the doors leading to the patient rooms. Athena looked at Dio, kissing the back of his hand before she slowly released it. Oddly enough, he felt at ease about it, but

he didn't move. He would wait for her right here, his eyes fixed on Hermes' back as he tailed the rest of the group.

"Pallas, you should go back to your lodging," she said in a soft voice.

"I could stay," Pallas offered. "I can help. I'll do whatever you need me to."

"I appreciate that, and I'll get in touch with you as soon as we're out of here, but this part we have to handle as a family."

Pallas made a sound that almost resembled a scoff, at least to Dio. "And what am I?"

Athena's shoulders rolled. "Pallas, not now, please. This is a meeting for Khaos Falls leadership and Khaos Falls leadership alone, and I do not have time to go back and forth with you."

Dio felt Pallas look at him then, and he felt the unrelenting urge to meet his gaze. When he did, he couldn't quite make out what lay in Pallas's eyes, but Dio knew he didn't like or appreciate it much. And frankly, it put him on edge. He didn't like the idea of leaving him alone in this hallway with Hephaestus's broken body just through those double doors, regardless of Medusa and her guard being in the room.

Athena must have felt somewhat the same because she waved over one of their own guards at the door and gave them strict instructions to get Pallas back to his lodging. Even when Pallas called her name, she turned away without another word, taking Dio's hand again and marching them towards the group. Dio vowed to never play protector for that guy again.

The group arranged themselves around the small administrative office Artemis had garnered access to, the only ones opting to sit being Hermes and Ares. Hades stood at the front of the room, Achilles and Artemis flanking him, Athena and Dio moving as close as possible. It felt odd not having Hephaestus there, but that only drove home how important it was to discuss this at once. They had to get to the bottom of this. They had to know what they were up against.

“So where did Amphitryon get the hardware?” Ares snarled.

Dionysos looked at him properly now. He had certainly seen the thick of battle. Blood was matted in his jet black hair and caked across his body. Gashes and lacerations littered his tan brown skin, a few of them already neatly stitched. Still, he had an air of pride hanging over him, which meant he felt that they had won, and if Ares felt that they had won then Dionysos was compelled to believe they had.

Even if the aftermath felt like anything but victory.

“Nowhere.”

Everyone’s eyes snapped to Hades, including Achilles’ and Artemis’s.

“Because Amphitryon isn’t running this war campaign,” Hades went on slowly.

“Then who?” Athena questioned.

“That, we have to work out, but—“

“Who else would it be? They came here for revenge. He still believes in his claims and accusations against Dio. He sent this attack to—“

“He didn’t send the attack, Athena.” He said it in a way that made Dionysos’ skin crawl although he wasn’t sure why. At least until Hades continued. “Amphitryon is dead.”

“What?” It wasn’t any one person who said it.

“While the attack was ongoing, I received notice that Amphitryon was found at his home, dead.”

“How do you know for sure?”

“They sent a picture. There was - When they found him...” If his uncle was having trouble putting it into words, Dio knew it was bad. “He had been strung up from his second floor balcony at the front of the house for all to see. Arms and legs secured to the railing.”

“What?” Again, it was more than one person.

“That’s what he threatened to do to Dio,” Athena whispered after a moment.

Hades sighed. “That was the exact thought I had, and considering his guard was present for that threat, I do wonder if it was intentional.”

“Why? Did they kill his guard?”

“No. In fact, the theory is that the guard did it.”

“And why would they do that?” Ares questioned.

“Because they were never his guard.” Everyone’s eyes moved to Dionysos as he spoke. “They belong to whoever was funding his leadership campaign with all the money he blew. It was obvious from the jump. They didn’t even *pretend* to be protecting him. We could’ve killed him on his kitchen floor, and they wouldn’t have intervened. Both Uncle and me got hands on him.”

Hades nodded. “But of course, our problems extend far beyond Amphitryon.”

“So then? Where did the ships come from? I thought we checked them all.”

“We did,” Achilles answered. “All of the active fleets at least. But when we were looking over the ships with the most similar build, we managed to narrow it down to one ship that was most like our phantom fleet. We compared the differences between the two and realized that they really only differ in technology, maybe a slightly different hull shape, but other than that, they’re more or less the same ship with different upgrades.”

“Whose was it?” Dio asked, impatient.

“It was a Cretan ship build that was retired nearly five years ago. It was used in Old Crete, Naxos, and Messara with varying frequency.”

Old Crete, Naxos, and Messara. All three islands run by Erebus’s brothers.

“Are you saying that Erebus’s brothers are waging war against us?” Hermes questioned.

“That is not what we’re saying,” Hades immediately said, sensing the unrest. “Not yet.”

“And the SubGun came from the same place?” Athena questioned.

“Well, not exactly,” Achilles returned. “Hephaestus and I have seen that tech before though, and the only person making weapons like that anymore is Prometheus. So I went to talk to him. It turns out that he not only did the SubGun tech, he consulted on the ship upgrades too, writing most of the codes for their computers.”

“Did he tell you who he worked with?”

“He did most of it remotely. He only had one meeting in person here in the city with a man who paid him upfront to go out to his ship just off the northern coast and see what could be done. He didn’t recognize the guy though, and after it was all said and done, he couldn’t find a trace of him either. Prometheus figured he wasn’t from the Aegean because he couldn’t identify the ship either, and he’d been getting a lot of business from outside the region.”

“And we believe him? That he has nothing to do with it?” Ares asked.

“We have eyes on him for right now, but he seemed genuine. He gave me all the information he had on the orders including the blueprints he drew up for them and the codes.”

“So Old Crete is still our only lead then. And island belonging to Erebus’s brother.”

“We made peace.” Hades didn’t sound as convinced as Dio wished he did. “They renewed the treaty again when we sent Zeus away.”

“Uncle, think about it.” Ares pushed to his feet. “Zeus is out of the way. You’re a new leader, but the whole transfer of power shifted a lot of things. They could’ve seen an opportunity. They have what they lacked back when you and Zeus first took over.”

“Numbers,” Athena aided, her own mind working so hard that Dio swore he could hear the cogs. “Numbers and power.”

Back then, they only had Naxos. Erebus and Nyx hadn't even taken power here yet. What's stopping them from reclaiming the city before you do anything they don't like? Especially when it seems like they have just as many allies as we do, allies we can't identify."

"I hear you." Hades held his hands up. "And I agree it isn't so farfetched, but I spoke to Erebus myself. We were on good terms."

"It could have all been a front. And you know it. Tartarus has been virtually its own state since Zeus took power, and they made it very clear that they were willing to put the city at risk to prove a point."

"And you got city security after they did it," Hermes pointed out. "You made their forces more or less obsolete to us."

"But Erebus understood why," Hades said.

"He *told* you that he understood why," Athena shot back. "Plus, they have a last resort. If it comes down to a stalemate, they have Zeus, and I'm sorry, Uncle, but I'm not quite sure you're prepared to sacrifice him considering you couldn't do it even when he nearly killed Dionysos."

"Come on, Athena," Hermes attempted, but his voice hardly held much conviction.

"No, she's right," Hades replied, running his hand over his mouth. "I don't know if I'm prepared for that either, but - if this is true, if this is what the evidence is saying, I have to confront him with it. I know you may not condone or support my desire to keep peace, and I understand that. Each and every person in this room has a right to their anger. It is a righteous anger, and I wish for you to be able to express it, but we are young. This leadership, this city... Old as the walls may be, we as a unit are newborn at best. I cannot assure my allies that I will not bring ruin to their homes if I choose war first."

"War chose us," Athena said. "It came to Medusa's house without her approval or yours. It nearly took Hephaestus. Sometimes, peace costs too much."

Hades nodded. "Listen, I have to confront them first. It will become clear quite quickly if he is an enemy, and then we do what we must. Our allies have their forces on standby, but understand that Erebus and Nyx knew this. They knew we had backup all week, and they knew we were anticipating an attack. So it would be a very foolish mission to try and bring war here to our shared home where they are so easily cornered, but if that is the case, Athena, I will step aside. You and Ares lead our forces, and if this proves to be what it looks like, I will not question you again."

Athena seemed to consider that, but Ares was already nodding, so she eventually nodded too. Dio put an arm around her, his hand lightly gripping her hip. He could feel her emotions swelling like a rogue wave, threatening to plunge them all into icy depths, but she moved closer to him anyway.

"Athena, Ares, and Dionysos, wait for my call," Hades said now. "We can speak with Erebus tomorrow. It gives everyone time to settle and lets the culprits believe they have gone undetected for now, especially since we were unable to recover a living member of the attacking forces. They'll think they're in the clear."

Dio didn't point to the fact that they more or less were at the moment. He was already staring down the barrel of a headache, and he didn't wish to urge it on any further. What he wanted to do was get home and lay next to Athena for a few hours of peace before they ventured into whatever was about to happen. He wouldn't hold his breath though. With this amount of stress, he doubted she would be up for company.

He was pleasantly surprised when she took hold of his hand and guided him out of the room.

She didn't stop until they were outside, her car waiting on the curb. That eerie silence Dionysos had experienced in Asphodel seemed to have blanketed the whole city now, fitting beneath an ashen grey sky and a blood red moon. A guard opened the back door of the car for them, and Athena climbed inside before Dio followed.

“Where are we going?” He finally asked once they pulled away from the hospital.

She managed a tired smile. “Home.”

“Are you - alright?”

She shrugged. “I doubt it matters.”

“It matters to me.”

She moved closer to him, allowing him to wrap an arm around her shoulders so that she could snuggle into his side. Somehow, the action unnerved him as much as it soothed him. This was not a characteristic reaction to such a situation for Athena, and he knew that. Still, he wasn't about to question it. If she needed comfort, he would give it to her. Especially since he needed it as well.

“Yeah,” she whispered. “Right now, I'm alright.”

CHAPTER 31

ATHENA

Athena's mind was still buzzing when they reached the Olympus Estate, thousands of unanswered questions flying around like wasps behind her eyes. Dionysos kept quiet the entire drive, resigning himself to rubbing her back and kissing her forehead every now and again, and it was so relaxing that she almost felt guilty. But no, she refused to feel any kind of guilt for the rest of the night.

Usually, in times like these, she would yearn for isolation, shutting herself away to envision the chessboard that was Khaos Falls and its politics so that she could figure out their next best move. Yet after the night she'd had, worrying and wondering where Dionysos was and in what shape, she could not bear the thought of being apart from him again anytime soon. The mere suggestion of such a thing set her on edge.

She wanted to tell him this, to say it aloud for once so that maybe, some of the weight would slide off of her chest, but her tongue failed her in forming the words. Instead, she focused on getting out of the car while her security swept the perimeter.

They made it all the way up to her room without a word between them, but once the doors closed, Dionysos spoke in that soft voice he used when he was trying to be less than himself, a voice that told her he was afraid of upsetting her peace. She hated to think she had ever let him believe he could do such a thing.

“How about you go take a shower, and I'll fix us something to eat.”

She turned to him, and when he tried releasing her hand, she gripped his tighter and pulled him towards the bathroom.

“I’m not hungry,” she replied, shaking her head.

He simply nodded, his eyes fixed on hers as he shut the bathroom door behind them. She let him release her now, but he moved closer still, reaching down to unbutton her dress shirt which was now stained with blood and grime. She busied herself by unbuttoning his in turn, unwilling to look down and be reminded of the night’s events anymore than she already was every time she closed her eyes. She paused in her task so that he could push her shirt off of her shoulders and pull her undershirt up over her head. Before she could resume undressing him however, he pushed down her pants and underwear to mid-thigh and lifted her up into the air, perching her on the sink. She hardly felt its cold surface beneath her.

She watched him as he lowered himself to his knees, peeling her bottoms from her legs. He removed her boots in the process, then her socks, taking it all in his hands at once and tossing it to the ground. And looking at him - it hurt. It hurt because that fear still lingered, striking her with sharp jabs to the gut every now and again. Then his bright eyes crawled up to meet hers, and she nearly fell apart.

Gripping the front of his shirt, she pulled him up and against her, wrapping her legs around him and kissing him so hard that he gasped and stumbled forward, his hands clumsily slapping the sink counter’s surface. Then he was kissing her with matching ferocity, tongues and teeth and breathless groans all colliding. Every word that had gone unspoken since their reunion passed between them.

Yet when they parted again, she still felt the need to say something.

Resting her forehead against his, she tangled her fingers in the hair, their labored breathing filling the air. Her eyes burned with unshed tears, and she blinked them back to the best of her ability.

“I thought I lost you,” she managed at last, the words cut from her tongue with no small amount of grief. “And I know -

what I said at the hospital. I - I didn't want you to worry, but - I thought I'd never see you again, and I don't—“

“But I'm here now.” He rubbed her back. “I'm right here.”

“I couldn't do it, Dionysos. I couldn't survive it. Everything I am would have gone right down with you.”

“Come on.” His voice was strained with emotion. “That's not true. You're the strongest person I know. You could survive anything.”

“Not that. Not without you. I...”

She lifted her head, cupping his cheeks and raising his gaze to hers. She tried to convey it through a look alone, to explain to him without a word what such an idea could breed. She lacked the words capable of encompassing the dread of it, or of explaining the hollow places that would be left in his wake, her very being a void that could never be filled. But Fates, she had to try anyway.

Yet instead, all she could do was choke out a simple request.

“Don't leave me.”

“Athena.” He sounded exasperated, but she could no longer see his face, the moisture in her eyes blotting out the details. “You're my whole world. Where else would I go?” He took hold of her hands as they slipped from his face. “I have loved you all my life, and despite my *many* opportunities to get myself killed, I always make it back to you. I fought, each and every time, for nothing other than to get back to you.”

She only cried harder. “And all I ever did was run away from you.”

Yet even through the fog of tears, she could see the sharp hook of his boyish smile. “I knew that - if you wanted me to, I'd catch you eventually. Sure, there were times where I worried I was wrong, but most of the time, I had faith. If I didn't, I would've stopped chasing you a long time ago. And waiting just meant that the end would mean more.”

“And you just - believed that? All this time? That we would end up like this?”

“Well, not quite like this. I never thought we’d be in Zeus’s old bathroom after an attack on the city, but-” She gathered enough energy to shove at his shoulder, and the sound of his laughter felt like a shot of adrenaline. “I knew we would end up here, together. Maybe it would’ve been sooner. Maybe it would’ve been forty years from now. Either way, I knew.”

“I don’t deserve you.”

“You don’t give yourself much credit.”

“How could I ever?”

“How could you not?”

Her heart stuttered, giving her pause, and she did her best to clear her vision. In succeeding, she discovered a genuine curiosity on his face that caught her completely off guard. By the time she had even begun to comprehend the question, he had grown tired of waiting.

“You got here against all odds, and even growing up in Zeus’s house, you still wanted to be good.”

“Yes. For you.”

“But that’s still a choice you had to make every single day, and you did. A whole lot of people love people and still can’t be good for them. Because love isn’t always enough. And - you’re not just good. You’re smart and exciting and strong and - and athletic and absolutely stunning even straight out of bed. And I am in love with you. So focus on that.”

“But - why?”

She couldn’t help it. After all this time and all these years and all those openly opulent opportunities to find someone who could dedicate every waking moment to his every whim and desire, he still chose her. And it made no sense. All she had ever done was make him wait or run, and never once did she make it easier for him to do either.

“You remember when we were kids, and I would watch you practice your chess moves?”

He seemed to be sidestepping her question entirely, and although it confused her, she could do nothing but go along with it.

“You still do that now,” she whispered.

He smirked. “Well, yeah, but you used to ask me why I would rather watch than play with you, and I would always say I was scared because I knew you would win, which was true, but - that wasn’t the only reason.”

“So then... what was it?”

He shrugged. “I still can’t really put it into words, but it’s like - you were always the most honest version of yourself when you were at that table alone. Like - all the armor came off. You weren’t - you know, focused on anything else but those pieces. And while you were studying those pieces, I was - studying you. And I could see everything then.”

“Everything like what?”

“I learned how to tell when you were frustrated, when you were upset, when you were excited or confused or unsure of yourself. I learned all of those things at that table because you gave yourself permission to display them in these really small ways that you never did if someone else was sitting across from you. You hid all those things away around other people, but not then.”

She leaned towards him. “And - what does that have to do with you loving me?”

“You wanted to know why because you don’t see all the very valid reasons that I do, and I’m trying to explain to you that - I see a lot more than you let anyone else see. Fates, I see a lot more than you let yourself see. And those little things are my favorite things about you. And I don’t have any logical or legitimate reason why I’m so absolutely attracted to the way you put your hair up when you’re stressed or the way you pace when you’re reading a good book because you don’t want to have to move again when you get uncomfortable or the way you bite the inside of your cheek when you’re excited but don’t want to show it. I just know I am. And maybe it’s just

because you're the one doing those things and this whole thing was written by the Fates before I knew what it was, but the point is that I don't care for those things when anyone else does them. But when you do them, it's like - a special event or something. Like a little gift I get to keep all to myself. And that's just that."

She didn't know what to say to that. What response could she possibly have? What defense? She had none left, and any desire to seek out more had been stomped out by a desire of another sort, one she had become devout to.

She wrapped her own arms around his neck, nuzzling into him with a small sob.

"And - if you need me to," he said slowly, "I will stand here and list out all the reasons why I love you because there are so many, and I find new ones every day, but please don't insult my tastes by saying you don't deserve it. I know what I'm doing."

A watery laugh escaped her. She supposed she should simply get used to asking herself how she got so lucky. It would appear that this was gonna be a drawn out event.

"You don't have to list them all out... tonight," she offered at last. "Right now, I would just like to have a shower so that you can take me to bed."

She felt him nod before he pulled back, but before he could pick her up again, she stopped him.

"But first, can you tell me what you were gonna ask for?"

He paused a moment before he burst into laughter, and the sound was so buoyant that she could not help but laugh too as she clung to it.

"It's so foolish now," he sighed after a moment. "No point really."

"Uh uh, you don't get to do that. You made me wait all that time. Now you have to tell me."

"Yeah, but I made you wait because of how pointless it sounds."

He looked genuinely bashful now, his cheeks pink and his eyes downcast. She dragged her hands down his chest, at last taking the time to push his shirt off of his body. He allowed it without so much as an acknowledgement, no doubt considering the pros and cons of lying about what he had decided to ask for.

“Dionysos.” His head rose, and she took the opportunity to grip his chin between thumb and forefinger. “What were you going to ask for?”

“A kiss.”

It came out as a whisper, with such an ease that he looked back at her with pure surprise on his face as if she’d drawn it straight out of him by some divine power. Her heart twisted inside of her chest, attempting to wring itself dry of all this emotion. It was of no use.

Pulling his face down to hers once more, she kissed him. Soft and tender, Athena pouring every ounce of her fathomless feelings into it as best she could. He melted into her, malleable beneath her touch, his body an uncanny sort of relaxed. As if he was terrified of shattering the moment. She took her time deepening the kiss, as long as her lungs allowed.

“You were right,” she hummed once they parted again. “It is pretty foolish now.”

He chuckled and brushed his thumb over her lip. “Still worth it though.”

And she had to agree, but her appetite had far exceeded any rational threshold, and she was looking to exchange so much more with him before the night ended. She would not wait for another. She refused.

It soon became clear that he was in no way more composed than she was. Despite somehow making it through a quick shower without someone pinning the other to a wall, he had his hands on her the moment she wrapped herself in a robe, small droplets of water still glistening on her chestnut skin. Before she could tie the cotton belt around her waist, he

gripped the ends and pulling her against his bare body, his towel long forgotten on the counter.

He stalked forward, backing her against the door. His shaft throbbed against her, slipping between her thighs and twitching against her folds. A lifetime of waiting was coming into fruition, and she pulsed with anticipation.

She clenched her thighs around him, her hands cupping his ass. He groaned, palms braced against the wall on either side of her head as she rose up on her tiptoes to whisper near his ear.

“Be a good boy and take me to bed.”

He need not be told twice.

CHAPTER 32

ATHENA

Lifting her up, Dionysos carried her out to the bedroom, depositing her on the mattress with the kind of gentle care he seemed to only use with her. She supposed that was what he was trying to explain to her. They knew the parts of each other no one else knew because they had been excavating one another their entire lives, finding all the small wonders that everyone else overlooked or failed to find.

Nonetheless, she didn't want gentle right now.

Pulling him down beside her, she nipped at his neck before pushing herself up again. She sunk beneath his inquisitive gaze, moving down his body until she was able to settle between his thighs. She had always known what she planned to do first once all limitations had been removed and she could do what she wanted with him. A single languid lick up the length of his shaft ensured he was not at all opposed to her order of things, and as he drew up one knee, she took the opportunity to grip the underside of his thigh and hold him in that position.

It then became a coordinated attack on his sanity, tender kisses down his cock and faint nips around his sac until one of his hands was in her hair and the other was threatening to tear out his. She swirled her tongue around his swollen head, capturing the taste of his precum on her lips before she wrapped them around it, sucking softly.

Her name rumbled from the depths of his throat, growing higher in pitch with each rendition, and when she pulled off to go back to teasing the sides of his cock, he let out a distinct

whine of disappointment. Fates, she loved drawing new reactions from him each time they fooled around, but tonight would be unmatched.

Dusting her lips over the base, she began to stroke it with her fist, using his arousal as a lubricant to gradually gain speed. Though her impatience ebbed and flowed behind her eyes, his slow descent into it was well worth the wait. But she could feel the moisture forming between her thighs, her folds slick with the memory of his cock sliding between them. Her eyes fluttered as the sensation came back to her, teasing her in all the places worth teasing.

So maybe her impatience was still a force to be reckoned with.

She raised her head once more, taking him in her mouth and sinking down until her nose touched his groin.

“F-fuck!”

His wail rang through the room, his nails digging into her scalp none too gently. She relaxed her throat, but she still gagged around his girth, which only made his hips jerk upward. His cock crawled deeper until her throat constricted around him, his body shuddering hard beneath her. She imagined he looked beautiful in his current state, but she could hardly confirm. Her eyes were watering heavily.

Slowly, she receded halfway before slipping back down, taking one deep inhale through her nose in the process. Then he was pumping into her mouth in an erratic rhythm, each thrust varying in both range and force. She placed both her hands on his thighs, taking back some of the control, but she could hardly deny him, especially when his unintelligible whimpers turned to whimpered pleas, and she could feel those big brown eyes staring down at her in desperation.

“Fates,” he wheezed, throwing his head back. “I want - I - I want...”

She pulled off of him with a pop, dragging her tongue up the underside again.

“What do you want, baby?” Her breath crashed into his skin, and he shivered again.

“I want - I want you to fuck me, Athena! I wanna be inside you! I - I need it.”

“And you will be. Soon.” Another lick followed by a kiss. “Can you be patient for me first though? Like a good boy?”

Every time she used the title, he physically reacted, and every time he physically reacted, she grew wetter. His cock twitched against her cheek as he nodded vigorously, and she smiled before once more taking him into her throat.

He ground his hips into her face, thrusting upward every now and again when she pulled back, his control being shredded to pieces one by one. And she wanted to see it. She wanted the reckless, wild man who thrived at the center of attention. Because he would be for the rest of the night. She had already committed to it.

She slurped and sucked, letting spit and precum dribble down his shaft before taking him deeper, choking and gagging until her throat ached. She continued the cycle until he had both hands in her hair, and without warning, he gripped her harder, hard enough to keep her head in place so that he could fuck her throat with rough strokes.

And the harder he went, the louder he got until his sounds were something feral, an animalistic ecstasy coming to life between them. She caught herself wondering vaguely if this was who he was for everyone else, unable to restrain herself, but then he was saying her name again, and the question didn't hold much weight.

She tucked her elbows in, her small hands framing the base of his cock, and she could feel his balls begin to constrict under the pressure of his building orgasm. She pointed her tongue and thoroughly massaged his shaft through each stroke, gagging so hard that her stomach tightened almost painfully. But she wanted him to cum. She wanted to be the first to bring her lover to ruin tonight.

And there was nothing lacking in the man's presentation. Swept up by his orgasm, his entire body arched off of the bed, feet planted flat on the mattress and forehead pressed into the pillow now pinned against the headboard. She rose with him, her hands on his thighs and her head hooked on his shaft like a coat. She only just managed to get level when he came, hot cum filling her throat so fast that she could hardly swallow around him.

She was forced to pull off before he finished, which caused the last few streaks to land against her chest and his thighs. She salvaged what she could, lapping it from his skin as the aftershocks continued to roll through his limbs. The faintest utterance of her name crested his lips, and she chased it soon after, climbing up his body to straddle his hips and claim his mouth with hers.

It was a revival. His hands gripped her possessively, squeezing her hips and her ass and the backs of her thighs as he lifted his head to deepen the kiss. She rocked against him, her silken folds sliding across his cock. He was impatient now, more so than he had been at the start, and she could feel it in every inch of him. It coiled beneath his muscles like a snake, hunting for the moment when the defenses came down and the resolve broke.

And then it broke.

She was caught off guard completely. She blinked, and then she was on her back beneath him, the entire bed creaking like an applause. He went for her neck, teeth and tongue and lips injecting her with every kind of sensation she could possibly imagine. He rutted against her, his cock already hard again and his thighs spreading hers wider. He was showing no mercy now, and she had no interest in asking him to. This was what she wanted to see, him in his rawest form.

Yet despite this irrevocable transformation, he still pulled back when that impatience boiled over, his eyes wild but focused on hers, the question there evident and obvious. She couldn't form the words, her breathing rapid and her throat dry. She could only wrap her legs around him and press the heels of her feet into his thighs. That seemed to be enough.

He didn't look away as he slipped a hand between them, guiding his cock to her slit and tracing the length of it with his head. Then he was easing inside, a gentle whine growing into a drawn out moan as her body wrestled with the accommodation. She stretched out beneath him in more ways than one, reveling in the lazy kisses he laid over her jaw amidst the steady rhythm he was establishing with his thrust. He slid his hands up her arms, slotting his fingers between hers and pinning her hands to the bed above her head.

And suddenly, all of that desperation quieted. The impatience, the frustration, the carnal hunger, it all settled into a cohesive silence without subsiding in the slightest, and if she had the mind to do so, she would marvel at the sudden shift in sensation. But her head was fogged with unadulterated bliss, and the only thing she was truly conscious of was the comfortable weight of Dio's body atop hers.

"Fuck, that's - you're..." He spoke against her throat, his voice faint and far away. "So good. So fucking good."

She hummed her approval, rolling her hips against his, but she soon realized that there must have been a string to pull there, some sort of response that would garner a reaction worthy of her attention. He had slowed down again, packed away the wildest and most chaotic parts of himself, and while she appreciated it, that wasn't what she had been holding out for.

"Then show me," she hissed, pressing her cheek to his temple. "Fuck me the way you've always dreamed of, D. Fuck me like - like..."

Like you have nothing to prove.

Instead, all she said was, "harder."

There was a brief moment where he seemed to consider what that might mean to her before he cast aside whatever answer he'd come up with. His mouth returned to her neck as he began to speed up until his hips were coming up off of hers only to slam back down.

"Fuck! D!"

That was what she wanted. That was what she had envisioned, but still, she goaded him further.

“Stop - holding back on me,” she growled, sinking her claws into the backs of his hands. “Let - go!”

She was shaken by his strangled roar, clenching her thighs around him as he pushed himself up and shifted his hips lower. She swore the next thrust tickled her throat, leaving her both breathless and brimming with praise. She wanted to tell him, to remind him what a good boy he was for her and only her, but then he was thrusting again, his hips clapping against hers and his face screwed up in determined concentration. Every word she had ever known, every fact or piece of fiction, every prior fixation, it was all forgotten, purged from her mind in the midst of this image. And she regretted nothing.

Though how could she when she could not even begin to remember what regret was.

He maintained that same rhythm when he surged downward, kissing her hard and squeezing her hands in his. She realized then that he was not pinning them. He was holding them. A small reminder that even as he drilled into her with such ruthless and relentless force, he still loved her. And Fates, did she love him. She loved him more than she had ever loved anything or anyone, than she could ever love anything or anyone else.

Then again, she would not know what love truly was had she not known him first.

“Fates, I love you.”

No words had ever crossed the threshold of her lips so easily, expelled like a breath she had been holding and begrudgingly so. Yet it drew his gaze to hers like a moth to flame, his hips stuttering although not stopping. Then he was releasing her hands, and she was grabbing for him, pulling him down into her embrace. His arms snaked beneath and around her, cradling her with this raw sort of tenderness she could hardly handle. Even when his hips began moving again, his thrusts more vicious than before, he held her and kissed her

and whispered the same words over and over again like a mantra.

“I love you... I love you... I - love you...”

Her climax built quickly until she was bucking her hips and clawing at his back with a series of unhinged shrieks she had never made before. His arms constricted in time with her walls, holding her in place while he alternated between sharp strokes and slow grinding. He had her lightheaded and howling to the sky, the pleasure she was drowning in unlike anything she had experienced in her lifetime. She knew it would be good, finally having him inside of her. She had not expected for it to be this good.

She really needed to stop underestimating him.

Her eyes rolled into the back of her skull, her grasp on him weakening until she could hardly hold onto his slick form. She could sense his eyes on her face, drinking in her reactions and committing them to memory the way she had done with his, and the knowledge sent jolt after delicious jolt straight down into her spasming cunt.

Even then, she knew she wasn't done, and judging by the way he was still sliding in and out of her, he wasn't either.

She shivered around him, forcing her shaking legs open further. She wanted him deeper. So deep that he could unravel every wound up muscle in her body.

“D! Please!”

She had no clue what she was begging for, but he seemed to, escaping her grasp in favor of rising to his knees. The possessive grip he put on her hips had her aching in the most delicious way, her eyelids fluttering as her teeth sunk into her lower lip. She watched him through this hazy fog, noting the bulge of his thick biceps and the strain of his forearms and the tremble of his belly and the knit of his brow beneath several beads of sweat. The owl on his chest peered back at her, watching as he rammed his cock back into her pussy so hard that his balls slapped her ass, her entire body thrown towards the headboard.

That look of focused determination had returned, layered over that familiar innocence she would always associate with him despite all evidence to the contrary. It was her safe place, her sanctuary, and within its gravity, she would let him do anything he wanted with her.

Not that he needed the help persuading her at the moment.

The pure and unfiltered hunger in his eyes sent chills down her spine and flames right back up it, dazzling her in the way she imagined it dazzled so many others. This must be him, the Dionysos everyone else knew, the one she feared she may never connect to. But oh, was she connecting now. And it had her toes curling as she braced her hands against the wood above her head to keep from going through it.

“Am I - a good boy now?”

His voice was deep and devastating, penetrating her skin and stimulating whatever nerves he had yet to reach. He drew the answer from her with little thought on her part, her mouth moving before her mind fully caught up with the question.

“Yes, D, yes! Fuck - please!”

He scooped up one of her legs, pushing her knee towards her body until her pussy stretched out impossibly further. Straightening that leg out, he braced it against his chest while she tried to get a grip on the bottom edge of the headboard. With this new angle, she was all but immobile and at his mercy. Exactly what she'd been fantasizing about for weeks. She had no clue how she was going to last much longer, but she didn't want him to stop, not until she had no choice but to tap out.

CHAPTER 33

DIONYSOS

Athena's body was still spasming when he pulled out of her, dragging her up by the hips until her knees were hooked over his shoulders and her pussy was level with his mouth. There was no preamble beyond that, and just as she managed to raise her head to look at him, he bowed his own and shoved his tongue into her wet cunt.

“Dio! You - oh my— Fuck!”

Her eyes rolled back, and her body did too, a perfect arch over the bed as he bumped against her clit and curled his tongue against her walls. He swore he could see and feel every individual muscle contract, her heels digging into the flesh of his shoulders. He palmed her breasts in his large hands, kneading them as his eyes drank in her helpless reactions.

This was what he was after. He wanted to watch her lose her mind while he took his time tasting her, using as much of his face as he could to stimulate her. She tried and failed to grip any part of him that would keep her anchored, eventually submitting to the fact that he had all the control. And he didn't waste it, not a single drop.

Her thighs clamped down around his head, ankles locking in the valley of his shoulders as she tangled her arms in the sheets. He groaned his satisfaction but didn't ease up, knowing she would reclaim the higher ground—quite literally— if given the chance. But no, he wanted to savor this a bit longer. He wanted to watch her slowly unravel until she broke.

And he was biding his time too, reeling himself back from the edge while driving her straight towards it. He'd been teetering all night, trying to hold out even when he'd been perfectly capable of busting the moment he slid inside of her. But he had been waiting too long, chasing too long, wishing and hoping and begging the Fates for too long. It was finally coming to fruition, and he wanted to make it last. More importantly, he wanted to make it memorable.

Judging by the crescendo of cries she offered in return, he would say he was succeeding thus far.

“Dionysos!”

He drew his tongue out and up, lapping at her clit before circling it slowly. Her hips snapped towards him, and he responded by taking the bud between his lips, sucking with generous force until she was twisting around at the waist, so much so that Dio had to claim her hips again to hold her in place. He grinned against her folds as she slammed her fists into the mattress out of frustration, her curls now plastered to her face and her beautiful brown skin tinged red all over. Chaos had finally conquered her concrete composure, leaving nothing but her passion in its rawest form, and she was drenched in it.

He had never seen a more awe-inspiring sight.

Three beats of silence were followed by a long wail as she came again, her legs quaking around him and her heels banging against his back. Or trying to. It felt as though he was watching it play out in slow motion as she broke apart, her eyes snapping wide open and her hands yanking at her own hair, her hips jerking and gyrating against him. He kept his mouth fused to her as she rode it out, but when she finally propelled herself forward with enough momentum to sit up mid-air and grip his hair, he quickly dropped her back down to the bed and snaked out of her grasp.

She gasped.

“You had enough?” he asked, licking his lips.

“You wish,” she breathed although it was faint.

“Hardly.”

And he meant it. Even if he couldn't keep it up all night, he would spend as many hours as he could laying it down. And when he needed the recovery time, he was more than willing to resort to eating her pussy until she tapped out.

She rolled over onto her stomach and tried to get up, but he impeded her attempt, pressing a hand between her shoulders and pinning her to the mattress. Her muscles coiled beneath his palm, the strain futile, but once her hips pushed back towards him, he took advantage. She inhaled a sharp breath just as he slid into her, choking on it and clawing at the sheets before her. His free hand gripped her thigh, thumb spreading her open, and he didn't bother easing into it. They were way past that now. Or at least, he was.

“Fuck, Athena...”

It was a sharp whisper, but it may as well have been a whip across her back the way she bucked beneath him, throwing her ass back and meeting him on the downstroke. Leaning forward further, he raised himself higher before ramming down into her again. And again and again. Their collective cries colored the air, growing in volume and frequency, soon joined by the clap of their hips and the creak of the bed beneath them.

He'd been holding back. All this time, he was gradually easing into shedding those bindings he shrugged into when he was with her, but it had been a slow process with substantial resistance. He wasn't entirely sure why either, perhaps the overall fragility of this new leg in their relations making him cautious for once, but he had been clinging to control for weeks every time she touched him. It was easier when there was still that delicate barrier between them, whether cotton or competition, but that barrier was gone, and so was the need for them. Those bindings crashed to the ground the moment he was finally inside her, every ounce of self control he'd managed to gather pouring out of him and onto the sheets.

And nothing had ever felt this good.

He always knew sex with Athena would be something special, something rare and unique and top fucking tier. Better

than any wine he'd ever tasted or herb he'd ever smoked or meal he'd ever scarfed down and had second and third servings of. He had long since bought into the fact that being with her would be the epitome of euphoria, nothing short of hedonism, and he would cast the last of his devotion to her worship when allowed. Because if he ever got his shot with her, he would never take another shot elsewhere again. No one else could hold a candle to her.

Even then, he never could have imagined just how *good* it would be, how divine it would feel, how absolutely strung out he would become once he had a taste of her on his tongue and knew the warmth of her walls wrapped around him. The pure and unadulterated passion was unmatched, raw and riveting, and the addiction was instantaneous.

Now all he was hoping for was that she felt the same.

“Yes! D - yes! Please, Fates, don't — don't stop!”

“You like that?” he growled. It would have surprised him if he were able to focus on his own words. “Is it good, baby? Is it!”

“Yes! Fates, yes, D! Yes!”

He took her hips in both hands, easily taking over their motion and using it, using *her*, to his advantage. He slammed her down on his cock over and over, her shrill screams staining everything around her. It only made him want more, his hunger overtaking any sensible thought he may have been capable of conjuring on the way here. Or any other type of thought he didn't need at the moment. His only focus was her, the sounds she made and the shapes she bent herself into. He was close, the pressure in his belly compounding quickly, but he soon realized that something was wrong. Something was missing.

Pulling out of her again with a grunt, his heart stammered at the sudden frustration in her song. Still, he grabbed her thigh and flipped her onto her back.

Something in his face silenced her.

“What's wrong?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. I just - wanna look in your eyes when I cum.”

She seemed genuinely surprised, but he didn't wait, lowering himself back down. She recovered the moment his skin touched hers again, reaching down between them to guide him back into her pussy. He groaned as if it were the first time, ending in a whimper, but then her hands were grabbing his ass, or at least trying to, her nails biting into his skin, and then he was drilling into her in a mindless search for release. And she clung to him like a lifeline, keeping her legs spread so as to give him all the room he needed.

And eventually, she managed to claim that fallen control back.

“Cum for me.” Her breath was hot against his ear, the words a serpent nesting in his mind. “Where's my good boy? Let - my good boy cum for me.”

It was as quick as the pull of a trigger. And just as loud. Just as violent. His orgasm ripped through him, his body jerking up and bending backwards until he was shouting at the ceiling. The blood rushing in his ears blotted out any sound Athena would have made, but he could feel her clenching around him again, her walls shuddering. He pumped his hips in short bursts, emptying his balls with a series of feral grunts he wasn't sure he'd ever made before. Of course, he could never think clearly enough to be sure, and he didn't much care either way. He was submerged in the deepest bliss.

His eyes fluttered shut, his heart hammering against his ribcage so that it reverberated through every inch of him. In his haze, he was vaguely aware of Athena's hands on him, drawing him back down to crush her lips against his. He melted into her, the kiss lazy but sloppy until his mouth was drifting down over her jaw, her neck, the last dregs of his strength seeping into her skin.

Once he came down and his mind returned to him, he rolled off of her with haste so as to let her catch her breath. Still, she immediately turned, slinging her leg over his thighs and half climbing atop him. She cupped his cheek, kissing his

neck and drawing a low moan from him before she resigned to resting her head against the side of his. His eyelids were now too heavy to open, but he listened to her breathing begin to level and let his heartbeat do the same. Soon, the sound was lulling him into sleep, but he didn't quite succumb yet, lingering just beneath the surface of consciousness and soaking in the silence.

“When did you know?”

He didn't know how much time passed before he heard her speak, his mind muddled with exhaustion and ecstasy alike.

“When did I know what?” He wasn't sure he'd said it aloud much less coherently until she answered.

“When you were in love with me?”

He managed to chuckle. “I don't say this lightly, Athena. I really think I always just - knew.”

“But - how?”

His eyes slid open, the makings of a second wind entering his lungs.

“It was pretty obvious pretty quickly. I mean - I make friends easily and all, but - I never had friends I wanted to be around all the time. Not even the ones I fooled around with. And I was always down to blow off everyone else to spend time with you. It's like... Well, you remember when I used to follow Hermes around all the time when he first got here?”

“Yeah.”

“It was because he was - the first real brother I felt like I had, you know, one I didn't have to share with Zeus. And even though we were only about a year apart, he was always more mature, especially after what he went through in Heraklion, so I looked up to him, but before that, I thought that it was the same with you. That I felt the same way with you.”

“Like - you thought you just liked having someone close to you.”

“Yeah, someone who liked me regardless of whether we were family or not. Someone who didn't think I was too much.

But - I realized that it was different with you. Like I didn't just look up to you. I mean, yeah, I always wanted to make you proud, to impress you, but not the way I wanted to impress Uncle or Hermes or Heph or anyone. Not even my mother. I just wanted to impress them so that I could fit in, show them I wasn't a failure, that I wasn't a waste of their time, but for you, I - I didn't just wanna be enough. I wanted to be more. And then I was always thinkin' about you. There weren't a lot of big choices I made without thinking of you first. Fates, there weren't many small ones either."

"—What kind of decisions?"

"The navy blue upholstery in Elysium, the owl on top of the gazebo at the eastern vineyard, all the blue in my wardrobe, the pear-flavored wine, the winter wood imports, the restaurant in Thassos..." He knew she was looking at him now, her head raised, but he kept his eyes on the ceiling. "I - I figured if I couldn't tell you to your face how I felt, I'd tell everyone else in any way I could and - maybe one day, you would see it too."

There was a long silence before her lips touched down against his jaw. Then his cheek. Then she was resting her chin against the hand on his chest.

"I'll be honest," she hissed, and he tightened his arm around her waist. "I never in a million years thought I'd fall for the boy who could never sit still or be bothered to wear a shirt, begging me to keep his secret about the *herbs* he was growing on the roof of the casino. I mean he had a lot of potential, but he was more interested in the potential for chaos, and forget trying to bond with him over 'sophisticated' things like chess and literature." Dio grinned. "...But - then again, I never in a million years thought I'd even like the boy who ran around wild like the minotaur in the maze from the moment we met, nearly knocking me over every time he wanted a hug. Oh, and also kissed me just to keep me from beating up his brother."

"Hey, dont forget he built you a pillow fort for it even after you bruised him."

“Yeah, he did, but it didn’t matter at that point.”

His face fell. “Why?”

“Because it turned out I was already in love with him by then, and there was no going back.”

At last, he looked down at her, his eyes curious. She smiled and brushed the tips of her fingers over his lips.

“So you’ve been in love with me all this time, and you just - didn’t say nothin’?” he asked although it hardly sounded accusatory.

“I was a fool. I truly thought I could control everything, and the Fates took their time proving me wrong at every step.” And it was as though she could read the question in his eyes. “It wasn’t because I didn’t want to love you, Dio... I mean, it was, but it wasn’t because you didn’t deserve it. It was because I didn’t.”

“But—”

“Look, before you argue with me, understand that there is nothing you can do to change my mind on that, but I will say I’m going to spend the rest of our lives trying to because I believe you. When you say you love me and you don’t want anyone else, I believe you, and so I will work to earn that, but - you were always the best of us. All of us. Everything you are is all the things I was never allowed to be. And every expectation I had for you, you exceeded them by nature alone.”

“Like what?”

She shrugged. “When we first met, I was sure you wouldn’t like me the same way Ares didn’t. Because you thought I stole your father.”

Dio chuckled. “You didn’t steal anything from me, Athena. I mean, other than my heart.”

She snorted and pinched his cheek. “You’re a mess.”

He glanced down. “I know you’re not talkin’ about messes now.”

“Uh uh because you made that one too. Don’t even try it.”

Rolling his eyes, he pulled her closer. “The point is that no one could steal something I never had from me. And besides, I already had Hades and Charon and Hecate. I only ever wanted family, and I think that’s what my mother wanted for me too. And I found that, and - I don’t regret coming here looking for Zeus because it got me to you. And I’d go through all of it again to get to you.”

“Even getting shot?”

He didn’t hesitate. “Even getting shot. Or getting accused of murder or having my banquet disrupted or - even having to wait years to get to kiss you for real. All of that was worth it to me. And honestly, now that it’s real, it didn’t seem like such a steep price to pay, you know?”

She rolled her eyes. “Speak for yourself. Watching you near death is not something I would ever like to relive.”

“I never said I liked it, Athena, but... I mean, if someone told you that you would have to go through all of this again to keep me, no matter how painful or uncomfortable or scary it was, would you do it?”

She didn’t hesitate either. “In a heartbeat.”

“Then that’s my point. There is nothing I wouldn’t do to keep you.”

And in the silence that followed, he hoped that no one would test that theory anytime soon. Judging by her acceptance of that silence, he imagined she was doing the same. But he hadn’t lied. If it came to it, he would go to war for her. And whoever decided to face him better have the Fates on their side. It was the only hope they had.

Because the Fates were the only thing that could rival his love for her.

CHAPTER 34

ATHENA

Dio was already fast asleep, snoring like a bear, his round ass poking out from beneath the sheets. She had no clue how long she had been staring at him, but she knew it was far longer than socially acceptable, and sleep didn't seem to be coming for her anytime soon. No, now that Dio was no longer inside of her, wreaking havoc on her walls as well as her throat, her mind had wandered back to real life and recent reality. All those unanswered questions were swimming around endlessly again. It made her feel claustrophobic.

Kissing his forehead, she slipped out of bed soundlessly, pulling on a faded t-shirt and jeans before padding out of the bedroom and down the dark hall to the stairs. There were no windows on this floor outside of the suites and very few lights. In moments such as this, Athena was viciously reminded of the fact that this house was much too big. Even with Ares here—and he was rarely here—it was one vast ego trip that turned into a cavernous maze once the sun went down. Only once she descended onto the lower floor did she realize that the sun was already beginning to rise, the blackout curtains in her room having obscured that fact.

She wondered if she should purchase a secondary home like many of the other leaders did. Maybe then she could truly begin to undo the damage of being Zeus's shadow for so long.

Artemis surprised her on the third-floor landing, her chiseled arms crossed over her chest. Even standing upright, Artemis had always reminded Athena of a jaguar or cheetah, some big cat ever prepared to run down its prey. That was

good news for Athena and co. of course, but for those deemed enemy? Not so much.

“When did you get here?”

“About an hour ago.” Artemis fell in stride beside her as she walked towards her office. “Security called, said your boy was here to see you, and they didn’t recognize him.”

Athena raised a brow. “What boy?”

“Pallas. He says it’s urgent, and it’s about Thassos’ current lack of leadership. He wouldn’t give me any details, but he’s in your office.”

“Right now?”

Artemis nodded. “Trust me. If I thought he was exaggerating the situation, I would have made him wait elsewhere.”

Athena’s anxiety skyrocketed all at once. While having Artemis in the house made her feel much safer for both her sake and Dio’s, she still wasn’t fully prepared to dive back into work. Which was a first.

“I’m guessing Dio’s upstairs,” Artemis commented.

“He is.”

Artemis bumped her shoulder, and she couldn’t help but grin.

“I’m happy for you two,” Artemis said. “...because watching you two dance around it was getting really fucking annoying. We were getting ready to arrange an intervention.”

Athena chuckled softly, slowing her steps as her office door loomed ahead. “Who is we?”

“Oh, all of us. In the past week alone, I’ve discussed it with Hephaestus, Achilles, Eros, Aphrodite. It’s been a longstanding point of conversation.”

“You’re all deplorable.”

“We were fed up is what we were, but you got there. You’re happy, so that’s what matters.”

Athena couldn't argue that.

As they approached her office, she slowed even further, eyeing the wood. Despite the cloud she was still floating on from her very long night with Dio, the prior night's stresses still clung to her back like leeches. She hoped whatever Pallas had was something useful.

"Can you oversee the shift change while I handle this?" she whispered to Artemis as they reached the door. "I'd feel better if you were down there."

"Of course, but don't be afraid to call me if you need me," Artemis hissed back. "He may be your friend, but I do not trust him."

"I assure you I can handle him."

Artemis nodded, patting Athena's shoulder before turning back down the hall. Athena took a deep breath and entered her office.

Pallas sat hunched over in the chair fronting her desk, illuminated by a single lamp. The moment he heard her, he straightened, clicking the screen off and looking over his shoulder at her.

"Were you - asleep?" he asked.

"No." She sat at her desk, pulling her hair up as she did and tying it with the band around her wrist. "Artemis said you had information."

"I - yeah."

Yet he continued to stare at her as if expecting her to say something else, and she wasn't altogether convinced of his motives upon coming here. Then again, since their initial reunion, she had been unconvinced of so many things she thought she knew about him. This was essentially a stranger sitting across from her, and while she didn't regret the help she'd offered him, she knew that she and Pallas could never have the friendship they once shared. In fact, she wasn't sure they could have one at all.

"What is it?" she prompted.

He deflated slightly. “I - I thought that maybe first, we could—“

“Pallas, there was an attack on my city last night, an attack we believed came from Thassos up until the moment we found out Amphitryon was dead, and now we are floundering around in the dark, so if you have information that may be of use to us, I need you to give it to me.”

She could see the storm brewing behind his eyes, the frustration licking away at whatever resolve he came in here with, and that was the moment it all fell into place for her. He was here for a reason, and it had nothing to do with loving her.

Flashbacks of their time in Thassos welled up within her mind, minuscule details now being magnified under the light. Her stomach turned. A dozen theories entered her sphere all at once, and she was soon so sure of them that the idea they weren't all true in some way seemed outlandish at best. All that time apart may have been a mere act of the Fates, but their reunion had been anything but. He had known she was coming, and he had known who she was, who she would be when he asked for her help each and every time.

And all of this knowledge twisted inside of her beneath a carefully composed mask.

“I'm going back to Thassos in a few hours.”

It wasn't quite what she expected him to begin with, but it appeared that he was shifting gears in favor of keeping her intrigued.

“The people agreed that this time, they wished to try and choose a leader themselves,” he went on, looking down at his hands. “And they chose me.”

That twisting grew more severe to the point of physical pain, and she had to clasp her hands together until her nails were digging into the backs of them.

“They chose you?”

“Yeah.” He chuckled, seemingly unsure of himself. She no longer believed that. “All that money I sunk into the community after you bought my father's house and the

security at the harbor and standing up to Amphitryon, my name got thrown into the mix, and I got the call this morning.”

“From who?”

“The community leaders. They need me to come back so that I can soothe the people, let them know I can handle the position.”

She wasn’t sure what to say to that, but everything was suddenly so much more insidious.

“Congratulations,” she managed.

“And I’ll help you.” He looked up suddenly as if he’d forgotten how important that point was. “I’ll help you and your uncle figure out who launched the attack, who was running things.”

She knew there was a stipulation coming. “I’m sure my uncle would be happy to hear that.”

He blinked. “—And we can - give you your treaty. Or alliance if you still want it.”

“And the terms?”

He seemed caught off guard by it, but Athena held fast. This was now a chessboard, and she recognized when she was already a few steps behind her opponent, which was exactly what Pallas was.

“Terms...” Another weak laugh. “I haven’t even thought that far yet. I’m still trying to process the fact that they chose me, but-” He leaned forward over the desk, and Athena fought to remain still. “Athena, this is good. It’s good for us, for all of us. I can finally start rebuilding the city after all its failed leaders, and I’ll have the people behind me. We - we can be something special, and your uncle can further expand his territory—”

“My uncle has never been interested in expanding his territory. He only wants peace.”

“Everyone wants peace until they have it. Then they’ll want more.”

“My uncle isn’t everyone.”

“—Okay, but... How many islands turned down an alliance? How many have stalled or withstood the offer? And how many are in this city right now?”

She didn’t like to think about those, the islands she was turned away from or barred entry into entirely, islands unwilling to give Zeus’s brother a chance after experiencing Zeus. And what Hades was willing to do for him.

When becoming leader, Hades couldn’t just pack away the Wraith of Khaos Falls facade and pretend it never existed. No, people remembered, and many large islands that had even a chance of rivaling Khaos Falls had not responded to their request for a meeting to discuss alliances because here, alliances were not something often offered between neighbors. Trade relations were entirely different and eagerly accepted, but alliances? No. Because alliances meant war, and that was the last thing anyone was willing to entertain after decades of interstate peace.

And now, with this conflict, the point had been proven.

“What’s your point?” she asked.

“Taming Thassos is a feat that could show good faith to those unwilling to extend a hand to Khaos Falls.”

“We didn’t tame anything. The leaders are dead, and we look like the culprits.”

“But once I am leader, we can dispel those rumors by carving out our alliance.”

“And if your name shows up at all in the initial incident, it will look like we planted you.”

He shook his head. “My first goal as leader will be to find the real killers and bring them in. Then we can lay these accusations to rest and move on to bigger and brighter ventures for us both. There is - so much potential between the two of us, potential that would benefit both Khaos Falls and Thassos to the fullest.”

“What exactly is it that you are suggesting?”

“Well, I - I think that...” He paused, biting his lip before he seemed to find the words he was looking for. “I just think that it would be beneficial for both of us if Thassos became an incorporated state of Khaos Falls. Like another district.”

She hadn't expected that, but if she needed another red flag, there it was, the biggest and brightest of them all.

“Pallas, you don't need that, and neither do we. As I said, Uncle does not want another territory to be responsible for, and I highly doubt your people will be very grateful to you if the first thing you do as their leader is sell them off.”

“I wouldn't be selling them off. I would be ensuring their future. I can only help them so much on my own, and really, you helped them as much as I did with the money you gave me for my father's house. But without stability, without a sure thing, my leadership is on borrowed time. Athena.”

“And we will help you ensure stability. You will have our alliance. You will have our trade agreements. We will make sure you have the room and resources to fortify the island but as a partner. What would you need from us beyond that?”

“Protection for one.”

“From who?”

He scoffed. “Our leaders are dead, and whoever did it is trying to start a war with you while using us as a scapegoat. I'd say a lot of people really. Whoever thinks they have a shot at taking on Khaos Falls could sweep Thassos clean off the map when we're no longer of use to them, and honestly, I would say Amphitryon's death was a clear message that this is the case.”

“An alliance serves the same purpose. If that's what you want, we can discuss it with my uncle. I'm certain he wouldn't decline.”

“A united front will do more for us against our enemies, regardless of who they are. And we can give you unlimited access to our port, land so that you can have a midpoint between here and the northern islands for storage and layover. You'll have full use of us.”

“Pallas, our only goal in Thassos was peace. We didn’t care about any of the additional benefits that may have come with that. We weren’t even seeking an alliance.”

“But it could be so much more than that, Athena!”

Here we go.

There were only a few benefits to becoming a district that could not be secured via an alliance, the main two being funding and resource allotment and the voting power when it came to city matters. However, another perk that came to mind now was the explicit use of security forces. While Athena knew Hades would have no problem offering armed support to an ally, an ally would never see their full force outside of a full-blown war, much less have command over them. And even then, Hades would still hold his people above all else. However, as a district, Thassos *would be* his people. Essentially, they would be giving Thassos an army, and that was not a move Athena was willing to allow at the moment.

Besides, even if Hades bought into this plea from Pallas, and even if Athena agreed, incorporation was not something either could freely give. It was why Erebus’s island had defaulted to his brother rather than been left under his power when he became an official leader in Khaos Falls. Every leader in the city would have to vote multiple times, and each vote had to be won unanimously. No proposal had ever made it past the first vote as far as Athena knew save for the Market District, and that was only because Hades funded the entire thing, placing it on his land as an expansion of his district.

But an entire island? And Thassos at that, being run by a stranger? She could think of several leaders who would strike down the proposal the moment it crossed their desks, the first two being Demeter and Ares. Fates, Athena wasn’t sure *she* would approve it.

“Through our relationship, we can display the benefits of both our islands to those who still count us out,” Pallas pushed on. “Growth is the goal of any good leader, and this—”

“It just isn’t feasible,” she cut in, exasperated. “And it isn’t entirely up to my uncle. After the attack last night, the last

thing we are in a position to do is offer statehood. None of the leaders in this city will take such a thing seriously, especially when they have no clue who you are or what you will do with the resources you are given. It doesn't work that way, Pallas."

"You can vouch for me, can't you?"

"My word means very little to at least one leader in this city, and even then, vouching for an old friend I haven't seen since childhood will hardly go over well with anyone of sense."

He wet his lips. "But - what if we were - married?"

She nearly choked on her own saliva. "You're joking."

"No, I'm not joking."

"Pallas, we're not doing this again. I don't—"

"Look, I know, okay? I know you don't have feelings for me. I'm not even sure you like me much, but this could be good—"

"For you. It will be good for you."

"For my people! For yours."

"My people don't need your island, Pallas. We're doing just fine without it."

"Your people were attacked last night, for the first time on their homeland in what? Decades? Centuries? There is blood in the water now, and—"

"And what could you possibly do for us?"

That stopped him in his tracks. In the silence, Athena focused on her breathing. She was more disappointed than anything. Of all the acts of desperation she had seen in its many forms, this one was on another level entirely.

And it wasn't love. Whatever Pallas felt for her —be it possessive or envious or just plain vengeful— was so far from love that she was almost convinced he felt nothing for her at all, that he was not seeing her when he said things like this.

“I can stop it,” he said quietly after what felt like hours. “I can make sure no one ever hurts you or your family.”

She couldn't help but snicker. “As much as I wish that were true, Pallas, we both know—“

“It is.”

His voice was coarse, and for a moment, she would swear it was somebody else's. When she met his gaze, she found his eyes wild, his mouth twisted into something that resembled a snarl and his cheeks red with anger or embarrassment or both. And she was so damn tired.

She stood up.

“I have to get ready for what is sure to be a very long day, and you have a ship to catch,” she concluded, rounding the desk. “Once you have been formally dubbed Thassos' next leader, Hades will be in contact, and we can discuss—”

She was halfway to the door when his arm halted her in her tracks, flung across the front of her waist with enough force to knock the wind out of her. And when she turned to look at him, she found that she did not recognize the man before her. Any trace of the boy she had known was gone, replaced by a mask of vibrant vitriol that ate through her like acid. She tried to push him away, but he simply tightened his hold.

“I meant what I said.” His voice was gruff. It felt like sandpaper on her skin. “I can stop it. I am the only one who can stop it.”

The twisting was back, deep in her belly, but it worked its way up her chest to her throat, making it hard to breathe.

“You marry me, Athena, or what happened last night will happen again. And again. And it will keep happening until Khaos Falls has been chipped away to nothing.”

Something flared suddenly within her, and she first mistook it for fear. But no. It was rage, a white hot, blood red rage, and it was threading through every seam of her being at a rapid pace.

“Let me go, Pallas,” she growled.

She pushed at him again, managing to get out of his hold, but then his other hand was at her neck quick as a viper, pinning her up against a bookcase. She stared at him in awe for a moment before a venomous laugh left her lips.

“Is this what you’ve resorted to? You’re going to force me to marry you, knowing damn well I do not like you and I’ll definitely never love you? What happened to you, Pallas?”

“This is bigger than you and me, Athena. I was promised whatever I wanted, and that was you, but even if I don’t get you, it all happens the same way.”

“What are you talking about? Promised by who?”

“Either you marry me and persuade your uncle to incorporate Thassos, or you refuse and watch Khaos Falls come crashing down.”

“Pallas—”

“But if that isn’t enough, let me promise you this. Before the fire even catches, I will make sure you get to watch that boy upstairs you love so much bleed out at your feet.”

It was instinctive. Her knee came out, slamming into his groin, and the moment he put some distance between them, she extended her leg and kicked him square in the chest. He stumbled back, falling over the seat he had occupied earlier and falling to the ground. Athena reached into the bookcase, drawing out one of the books and flipping it open so that she could grab the pistol tucked inside. Aiming at him, she moved towards where he lay holding his nuts.

“Get up,” she demanded.

He took his time obeying, gripping the edge of the desk and hoisting himself up. Though once he was staring down the barrel, he only smiled. She pulled the hammer back.

“You can kill me,” he said, “and you can get out of the marriage, but you can’t stop what’s coming. I told you. It’s bigger than you and me. It’s bigger than your little winemaker and all of your brothers, your friends. But those in control,

they know your greatest weakness, Athena. They know his face, his name, and every property he owns. You think he's safe here in your house? That you can protect him from a bullet? How about two? Or ten?"

"I can try."

"And what about Hephaestus? Can you get to the hospital before someone empties a clip into his bed? And when Aphrodite runs to him, can you get to your nephews before my employers do?" She pressed the barrel to his forehead. "No matter what you do right now, in this moment, it will get to each and every one of them. Unless you agree to my deal."

"Do you honestly think you'll get away with this?"

"Do you honestly think you have another option?"

"My uncle knows who sent the ships from Phokis. He knows who's running this. He knows all of it."

"You know if that was true, I wouldn't even be standing here, Athena."

"He found the trail. Hephaestus found it, and by tonight, we *will* have names."

"Maybe so, but do you really want to bet Hephaestus' life on that?"

"I don't believe you."

"You don't have to. My cards are on the table, Athena. So raise the stakes or call my bluff, but either way, you're gambling with lives, and I hope that you can live with that." Her finger loosened around the trigger. He exhaled. "Now I have a boat to catch, and when I come back tomorrow evening, we can announce our engagement to this beautiful city."

He stepped around her, smoothing out his shirt before opening the door. Then he was gone, and the gun fell from her shaking hands.

CHAPTER 35

DIONYSOS

Aphrodite called Dio the moment Hephaestus opened his eyes, rousing him from a dead sleep, and Dio hadn't realized how out of sorts he was until he took that first easy breath following the news. He felt a few tons lighter and several years younger, and he was immediately focused on nothing apart from seeing his brother. It took him a few moments to realize that Athena—or someone—must have left this new phone for him with his number already attached to it.

Athena was already gone when he made it downstairs. He texted her but received no response, leading him to assume that she was either already at the hospital or somewhere with Uncle discussing next steps just in case today brought worse news. Truth be told, he wasn't surprised to find her absent when he awoke. She never slept in late even when they were up until the morning hours talking, and she certainly would have been restless after the night they'd had no matter how many times he made her cum. If it were anyone else, he may have been embarrassed at his inability to wear her out.

Once his car arrived, he exited the house, and as he climbed into the vehicle, his phone rang again. He furrowed his brow at the name on screen, not at all expecting it. Picking up with a bland greeting, he was immediately met with Isidora's frantic voice.

"I thought you were dead!" she screamed. "I heard about the attack, and I called, but you weren't answering, and Fates, Dio!"

“I’m sorry,” he sighed, more relieved than he’d expected to hear her voice. “I lost my phone last night when everything started, and I just got a new one. I - are you okay?”

“Me? Oh, I’m fine. My brothers and I locked ourselves in the house after... Did you hear about Amphitryon?”

“Yeah, I did. Last night, after the attack. We thought it was him.”

“Honestly, so did I. He’s been running a smear campaign on you since you left, and we just - we closed down the restaurant, scared he might do something to us.”

“I’m sorry, Dora. I never wanted—”

“Hey now. Don’t apologize. I wouldn’t have the damn place if it wasn’t for you, and I know very well you did nothing wrong.”

“I’m just glad you weren’t here for all this.”

“I wanted to be! The bastard shut down the harbor and all the ports out! He was holding us hostage here! We were just getting ready to leave when the order came in.”

“What? He - he wouldn’t let you leave?”

“Naw. When we got to the port, they were turning people away. The vineyard curator, Ikarios, had offered us seats on his ship when ours was stopped, but then they stopped his too.”

Something unsettling reared its head within his ribcage. He couldn’t quite hone in on what it was, but he didn’t like it. And it certainly did not subside when the hospital came into view.

“Listen, I’ll call you back in a bit, Dora, I’ve gotta handle something.”

“Oh, no worries. I’m just glad to hear you alive. Be safe out there, Dio.”

“You too.”

Hanging up, he pocketed his phone and stepped out of the vehicle once it parked.

The only people currently present were Aphrodite, Eros, and Charon. Dio had been able to see the twins for a few minutes in the parking lot before they left to eat with Hera, who was - civil *with* Dionysos for the first time in his life. Not that they had ever interacted much but enough to convince him that she despised his existence even if it was to no fault of his own. She did look much happier now though, healthier and more luminous, and the twins loved her. For Dio, that mattered more than anything.

When he entered his brother's room, Hephaestus was sitting upright in his bed, breathing on his own and scarfing down a bland plate of potatoes. His skin was getting its color back, and although Dio hadn't seen him the night before, he could tell he had a lot to regain. But what drew most of his attention were the many wounds littering his face and neck, patches of bandages obscuring their true nature from view.

Regardless, when Hephaestus looked up and saw him, he smiled as wide as the scarred skin along his face would allow, which was not an expression garnered from him all that often. Dio grinned back, his feet carrying him forward until he could gently embrace his big brother. Hephaestus's hands still felt weak around him, but he did his best, and Dio appreciated it.

"How's the vacation thus far, brother?" Dio asked once they parted.

"Not as well as I'd hoped."

"In fact, it hasn't really been a vacation at all," Aphrodite said, her tone clipped.

Hephaestus looked at her, so Dio did too. She looked pained and put out even though she did her best to loft a tight smirk beneath a narrowed gaze. The sound of her shrill voice on the phone last night came back to him, and he could only imagine what she was like when worried out of her wits. When she looked up at Dio, he tried to smile, but he swore it felt like a flinch.

"Your uncle and Athena are on their way," she said, her voice light as if she feared speaking any louder.

Hephaestus took her hand in his, bringing it to his lips and kissing her knuckles. Immediately, she relaxed some, but it was evident that it was against her will. Dionysos could understand. He wished Athena would take some time to rest or at least sleep, but he knew better than to ask. She, like Hephaestus, was gonna do whatever she wanted to do, and no matter how much she loved him, there was not a damn thing he could do to stop her. It was one of the reasons he loved her so fucking much, but it was also the one reason that made loving her so terrifying.

She and Hades arrived some fifteen minutes later with Artemis in tow, and Dionysos had to fight to keep himself from jumping out of his chair with glee. She didn't acknowledge him at first, and he swallowed whatever ill feelings that may have wrought, instead marveling at Hephaestus's healing.

Dio had seen Asklepios work some miracles before, his brand of medicine always evolving and improving. Fates, he had dragged Dio himself back from the dead, but this felt so much greater. It was almost surreal seeing Heph so animated after spending the night having his insides knitted up.

Hades began by recapping everything they had discussed the night prior, Athena remaining at his side. Achilles had already relayed most of the highlights, but Hephaestus didn't seem to mind the repetition. If anything, Dionysos was certain he was grateful for it as he was the meticulous kind of person that liked to go through everything multiple times from multiple different angles.

He wouldn't be able to make it to the meeting tonight in person, but he had insisted he be patched in via video call. However, Athena suggested he be in the room without the other leaders knowing he was in the room, analyzing everyone's mannerisms and actions as well as everything they said in response to Hades' information, and Hades and Heph both agreed. After all, it wasn't just Khaos Falls' leadership that would be present. Many of their allies had remained in the city explicitly to attend in person, and Dio couldn't blame

them. He doubted he would have been able to just go home after last night without some kind of explanation.

The conversation soon turned to what Hades would disclose to leadership and what he would omit. This included preparing themselves for the inevitable backlash that Demeter would center from the gate, and although Hades kept his composure, Dionysos could see the cracks in his facade. This was his first real meeting of this size, the first time he would be faced with Demeter in a room of their peers. In fact, Dio wasn't even sure they'd spoken in person at all up until now, most matters being relayed by Persephone one way or the other. Dio only hoped that the past eight months had given Demeter some semblance of doubt in her initial judgement of his uncle.

He wouldn't be holding his breath though.

“Okay.” Hades clapped his hands together, drawing all of their attention. “So what we have established here is that whatever is going on is much larger than Thassos or any bad blood we have with them. That is not to say they are an innocent party in the matter. It simply means they are not alone in it, and larger forces are at play behind the scenes. Until we know for sure what, or who, that could be, we have to close ranks.”

He looked around the room, waiting for each of them to nod their agreement before he went on.

“I expect the rest of you to meet at Asphodel at six, not a moment later. Achilles and Patroclus will remain here with Hephaestus, and the hospital will once more be on strict lockdown. Athena, Charon, and Dionysos will remain with me after the meeting when I speak to Erebus and then, if we are able, his brothers. Aphrodite, I would appreciate your presence as well if that's reasonable for you, but I understand if not.”

“I will be there,” Aphrodite assured him immediately.

Like the other leaders in Khaos Falls who had mainly kept to themselves during Zeus's reign, Aphrodite had become increasingly more involved with general city politics, and Hades liked to bring her along on any local meetings he could.

It wasn't because she was Persephone's best friend either. It was because Aphrodite, underestimated and overlooked as a leader by far too many, knew how to disarm people without them realizing they were being disarmed. And no one was immune.

Plus, she was getting scary good at that whole stoic thing Hephaestus was trying to teach her.

The conversation eventually banked into the topic of Erebus and his brothers, forcing them to collectively consider the possibility that Erebus had been biding his time all these years until he could reclaim power from Zeus and Hades. Or that his brothers may have been waiting for a chance to take the city. Because even if Erebus had truly accepted Hades' truce, it was possible that his brothers had not. Phobos was known as a warrior king in the southern islands, having fought his way into leadership in Messara, and while stories of Morpheus and Hypnos had never come across that way, they were as steeped in lore as Hades had been before his reign began, so who really knew them?

By the time it was all said and done, everyone seemed more confident than they had the night before, but Dio felt safe attributing that mainly to the fact they were no longer worrying about Hephaestus's status. At the very least, Dio could say that about himself because beyond that, he didn't feel much better. For all he knew, everyone believed this was his fault, and he had never faced so many prominent people at once outside of the banquet. He couldn't be who he was on that stage either. He had to be the man Athena had trusted him to be in Thassos, and then he had to be even better.

As everyone began filing out, Hephaestus spoke again.

"Uncle, Athena, and Dio, could you stick around for a second?"

The three of them nodded, Hades and Athena stepping back towards the bed while Dionysos remained in his seat at his brother's side. Artemis stood just inside the door, closing it behind Charon with a soft click.

“There was something else I was looking into,” Hephaestus started, folding the edge of the sheet over his legs. “And I received some information back about it, but I haven’t shared it with anyone else.”

“What was it?” Hades asked.

But Heph’s eyes were on Athena. Dio furrowed a brow.

“Athena, did this guy, Pallas, tell you where he’s been the past few years? Or tell you anything about his family?”

Athena eyed him warily, and in peripheral, Dio could see her jaw clench. It took her a moment to answer, beginning with a shrug.

“He said he found his dad some years back in Lemnos, and he took him back home to Thassos.”

“He said his father was from Thassos? Is that all he said about him?”

“No, he said he passed a couple years ago.”

“A couple years ago... Did he say how?”

“No.” Athena’s shoulders were bunched up by her ears. “Why? What is this about?”

Hephaestus simply stared for a long while. Then he turned towards the bedside table. He picked up his tablet and tapped the screen, no doubt pulling up what he found. Dio wasn’t sure why he suddenly felt so heavy, like he couldn’t stand up from this chair if he tried. He swallowed hard and held a breath.

Hephaestus handed Athena the tablet before he offered any further explanation.

“His father owned land in Naxos and Messara. A lot of it. Not only that, but he was head of their trade board, and he was in charge of the port. He was also in charge of ship maintenance and upkeep. He had a lot of power and a lot of influence. And he turned up dead under questionable circumstances 5 months ago.”

“No, that’s not—“

But she didn't finish, her eyes flitting across the page over and over. Dionysos could see realization set in her molten brown eyes. Then anger. Though when she spoke again, he realized he had misinterpreted its aim.

"You made a mistake," she said firmly, no sign of doubt in her face. "This is inaccurate information."

"I had it checked multiple times by multiple sources, Athena." Hephaestus, though still trying to ease her into the reality, hardened his tone as well. "We could trace Pallas' stay in the southern islands back 18 months, but before that, after he left that group home, he was a ghost. And his dad was one of the most powerful people in the southern islands apart from the leaders, no known enemies, in good health and good standing. Then he just - turns up dead a few months after his long lost son shows up?"

"How do you even know this is Pallas's dad?"

"He was the one that found the body. His name was only mentioned once before reports erased him entirely, but with everything else I gathered, it all checks out."

"And what? You think he killed his father?"

"I don't know, but I'm not ruling it out."

"How would that even make sense, Hephaestus? If he inherited all this land and all these assets, this wealth, why would he be taking over Thassos?"

"Taking it over?" Dio only realized he'd spoken aloud when Athena looked at him in bewilderment as if she had only just noticed he was still there. "What do you mean?"

Bewilderment morphed into further frustration as she realized what she'd divulged. Dio's ears burned red, his eyes falling to the bed between them again.

"Athena..." It was Hades' crisp and cool voice that prompted her to continue.

Her words were nearly a growl. "Thassos held an open election for their next leader, and they voted Pallas in because of the work he's been doing for the community since

Amphitryon and Tantalos took over. The community leaders pushed forward his nomination.”

“What kind of work?”

“He - helps a lot of people. He runs the port and the harbor, and he looks out for the people who are struggling, who lost businesses and wages due to Tantalos’ frivolous spending and Amphitryon’s carelessness. He was looking out for them.” She suddenly remembered that she was not supposed to be the one in the wrong here, and she glared at Hephaestus again. “So please explain why the hell he would be doing all of that if he had land in Messara?”

Hephaestus gave her a moment to inhale before he replied. “It’s a bit suspicious, isn’t it? He finds his rich and powerful father, and within a year, his father’s dead? And there’s no record of what happened to the estates or the assets, so... if Phobotor caught onto him, he may have made a deal. Pallas helps him handle Khaos Falls, and he gets to keep his father’s land. Pallas finds out you’re a leader here, and he has an in.”

“What ‘in’! He hasn’t asked anything of me! All the help I’ve given him, I’ve offered. I—“

“He asked you to help reconfigure security at the harbor.”

Dionysos knew he shouldn’t be talking right now, but once again, he’d spoken before he had time to think it through. His voice was soft, softer than was characteristic, but the logic he was slowly putting together took most of his energy. Hephaestus was nodding as if he had been on the verge of saying the same thing, and so Dio continued.

“He split us up. He made you make the call about moving the security, and he...”

He couldn’t voice the final thought, but Hephaestus took over.

“He was seen leading Tantalos onto his boat that night.”

Looks were shifted back to Hephaestus, the bewilderment returning.

“What?” Athena breathed, her disbelief overshadowing her anger for a moment.

“Like I said, that wasn’t the only information I gathered. We managed to find a witness... Or, well, we managed to make a witness out of one of his guards on duty that night. So we followed that trail and found someone else who saw them. They left some club Tantalos frequents just before they wound up at the harbor.”

“He set me up,” Dio hissed.

There was a moment of silence where it all seemed to be sinking in. It was shattered by Athena’s roar.

“This is bullshit!” All three men recoiled from her. “I know you don’t trust him, but the least you could do is trust me!”

“Athena,” Hades tried, but she didn’t stop.

“No! He is my friend! He is my friend, and I trust him! I - I love him, and I do not believe one word of this fucking theory you have, Hephaestus!”

“How did he get here?” Dionysos asked, trying to stand his ground despite the daggers she was aiming at him. And maybe it was jealousy, but he didn’t care. It had to be said.

“What? What do you mean—”

“How did he leave Thassos to come back to the banquet? Isidora said they locked down the harbor, that they wouldn’t let any ships leave, so how did he?”

“He - he had refuge, remember? We gave him immunity!”

“Yes, from being imprisoned or killed, but not from sanctioned orders. He would have had to listen to those same as anyone.”

“We don’t even know when Amphytrion was killed. He could have left after!”

“But then who would’ve shut it down? He’s still the harbormaster, isn’t he? The only person who could go over him with an order like that is the leader.”

Dio was surprised at his own ability to construct a solid argument against her, but he didn't feel good about it. And when wrath began morphing into something else, something he couldn't identify for all of his knowledge of her inner workings, everything in him began to fray.

"Athena," Hades tried again. "Look at the evidence—"

"What evidence!" she screeched, and Dio flinched. "The hearsay and the conjecture!"

"He framed Dionysos. He—"

"Dionysos did that to himself when he stomped out of the house like a child and hid in his fucking wine cellar! Pallas was the first one there after to try and reason with Amphitryon, so don't you dare!"

Dio's blood ran cold even though his body felt hot, like he had been showered under a sea of large floodlights. His mouth was dry, his mind blank, but his eyes found her anyway. Her face screwed up in rage, her eyes wild with bloodlust, and her fists bawled at her sides.

And in all this, he expected to find a stranger, someone he didn't recognize, a person merely trying and failing to mimic the woman he had gone to bed with last night. But no, he recognized her; the woman he loved in all of her beautiful, terrible glory, that passionate flame he had been chasing his whole life burning bright behind the barrel of a shot aimed at his chest. And he resigned himself to the fact that he was willing to take it. Because it was her, and that was what love had allowed him.

No one else knew what to say, none of them quite prepared for her to turn her back on them like this. She did it once more and stormed out of the room. The only one that moved was Artemis, who trailed after her, the door shutting behind them, and that left the three men staring at one another in shock. Well, Hephaestus and Hades were staring at one another in shock. Dio's eyes were set on the ground, unable to look at anyone.

"Dionysos?" Hades called after what felt like a lifetime.

Dio shook his head. “She was right. It was my fault.”

“Come on, D, don’t do this to us now,” Hephaestus coaxed, reaching for him, but Dio leaned back out of his grasp. “You know that isn’t true, and whether she wants to accept it or not, we cannot trust that dude. He has something to do with this, and we have to find out what.”

“Then why?” His voice was strained from trying to hold his own frustration at bay. “Why would she do that? Why would she - *say* that? Why would she protect him even after he... I mean he literally took over the fucking city!” His voice boomed through the room. “He’s leader now, and she just - she just turned on me. She...”

He stopped as something fierce nagged at him, forcing himself to take a step back, to look at the bigger picture. Because it was a good question. Even if she regretted last night, even if she was trying to run away from him again, she wouldn’t do that by endangering the city. Unless...

“She knows something.”

He wasn’t sure who said it first, him or Hephaestus, but their eyes met, and the thought was there in both. Athena knew something about what was going on, and she was hiding it from them. And if she was hiding it from them, it meant she either had something to gain—which was still as farfetched as any thought could be— or something to lose. Dionysos was betting on the latter, and he was betting it had something to do with him.

He was not at all flattered by it either. And it didn’t numb the pain.

“So what do we do?” he asked quietly.

“We’ll have to move forward without her,” Hades said, just as distressed. “If she’s been compromised by way of bribery or otherwise, we cannot risk it. We’ll have to handle this and hope we can save her from whatever she’s running headfirst into.”

Dio forced himself to nod. It was all he could do. He was fully convinced that the moment he stood up from his chair, all

the pieces her outburst had knocked loose would crash to the ground and shatter beyond repair. But he wasn't afraid anymore. Nothing could hurt more than the image of her wrath emblazoned in his head. It was the first time that wrath had been used against him.

CHAPTER 36

DIONYSOS

By the time they reached Asphodel that afternoon, Dionysos was drained. Exhausted and absent his commonplace confidence, there was nothing but dread for the upcoming meeting. He was not prepared to face the entire leadership body of the Aegean. He wasn't even ready to face Khaos Falls' leadership body, namely Demeter. With Hades and his family running the majority of the districts, Demeter was going to be more vitriolic than ever. Even with Persephone there —Fates, especially with Persephone there— she wouldn't be looking to hold her tongue, which could have a real impact on the outlook of their allies.

However, when he entered Hades' office, he was surprised to find only Hestia sitting with Persephone and Aphrodite. He immediately assumed Demeter must have dragged Hades somewhere to eviscerate him upfront, but Persephone must have read the confusion off his face because she immediately shook her head.

“Your uncle went downstairs to get Erebus,” she explained. “And luckily, my mother agreed to let Aunt Hestia handle today's meeting.”

“How the Fates did you get her to do that?” Dio asked, impressed.

Aphrodite shrugged. “Took the twins over and asked her after they gave her a gift.”

“What was the gift? It had to be good.”

“Actually, it was. They built her a replica of her house.”

“Are you for real?”

“Oh yeah,” Hestia answered. “Interior and everything. It was very impressive.”

“After they met Apollo, they’ve been really into building models,” Aphrodite explained. “They actually built a replica of the sports arena last week when Hephaestus was teaching them how to solder, so I imagine the rest of Khaos Falls is gonna follow pretty soon once Hephaestus helps them map it out.”

“At least they have something to bond over,” Dio pointed out.

“They can sit there for hours. Phobos is hyperfixating, but Hippocrates says it’s okay as long as he’s learning to take breaks and not skip meals.”

“And how does Hephaestus like it?”

Aphrodite scoffed. “He loves it. He’s basically doing with them what his dad did with him, building things. It’s what he loves, and having the twins love it too is... I think it’s really special for him.”

Dio smiled. It was still so odd, amusingly so, to think that Hephaestus was the first to settle down despite the fact he was the eldest. But it gave him hope too. In spite of the current state of things.

“Okay, Hades is on his way up, so we’re gonna head upstairs until the big meeting,” Persephone huffed, her eyes cast out the window overlooking the casino floor. “We’ll see you both later.”

Persephone gave him a tight hug before she and Hestia left, leaving him and Aphrodite alone. It didn’t last long however. Just as he crossed the floor to join Aphrodite on the couch, the door opened. He turned to see Hades enter the room, Erebus and Nyx in his wake.

It was of no surprise that Nyx had accompanied her husband to the River Styx District. They did everything together. At the moment, Dio admired that about them.

Erebus was a large man, and that was no simple descriptor. He was slightly taller than both Hades and Dionysos and probably as wide as the two of them side by side from his waist up. He had to turn slightly sideways to get through the door, and his broad shoulders and bulging biceps were not even the most imposing thing about him. Truly, most of the nightmare was in his eyes, dark and stormy despite the stoic expression on his face. His dark hair was thick and wavy, pushed back from the tanned skin of his face although a single strand fell over his left eye. His eyebrows, like his beard, were thick but neatly lined up, a fine grey scar running through one of them. He groomed well, but he still reminded Dio of the great bears one found roaming the hills of Chios, larger than life and cautiously calm. Like the sea before a storm.

Then came the storm.

Nyx was much smaller than her husband but only in stature. She was a statuesque Black woman with long black hair that fell in loose waves down her shoulders to her midsection. Her russet brown skin glowed as if illuminated from the inside, and her plump lips were set in what Dio classified as a perpetual smirk beneath vibrant amber eyes. It was a look that reminded everyone in the vicinity that while Tartarus may not occupy the throne, they were as powerful as ever.

Dio hoped that wasn't a threat.

While he rarely interacted with them outside of the banquet week, he knew them well enough that introductions were unnecessary and greetings were cordial. Thinking about it now, he could see just how easily it would be for Hades and Erebus to get along if it weren't for the politics of their respective positions. They mirrored one another in many noble ways.

Dio almost expected for Tethys and/or Coeus, their two oldest children, to follow in after them, but he was relieved to see that it was Charon who came in next. Although he knew not to expect Athena now, his heart still stuttered to a brief stop when the door shut, clattering against his ribcage

unpleasantly. He swallowed hard and let his eyes move back to Hades.

“Quite the offering for only the two of us, Hades,” Nyx commented.

It was playful and yet anything but.

“Actually, as I’d detailed in my initial request, I was hoping your brothers would accompany you,” Hades replied as they sat down on opposite sides of his desk. Dio noticed then that Hades’ web camera was facing away from him. “As for everyone else, I thought it best to have all relevant parties present so that any relevant information you may need is readily available.”

“Yes, but - relevant to what exactly?” Erebus asked. “I think we’d like to know that first.”

Hades placed two fingers atop the lone folder laying on his pristine desk and slid it across to them. He then began to explain to them in elaborate detail what lay inside. Erebus and Nyx were silent throughout his rehash of current evidence, Erebus looking through the material with meticulous eyes and Nyx casting intermittent glances at the documents whilst keeping her keen gaze on Hades. When she asked for additional insight regarding the acquirement of the information, Aphrodite supplied it in that slow, soothing voice that felt like smooth bourbon on a cold night. Nyx seemed to respond to this in the positive way they had hoped for, angling her body towards Aphrodite, but when she wished to discuss the incidents in Thassos that preceded the prior night’s attack, she directed her questions to Dio directly rather than wait for a referral from Hades.

It was the first time Dio truly wished Athena was here.

Still, he did his best, offering the details in the most comprehensive way he could. He tried not to wear his own guilt on his face despite Athena’s screeching tone still echoing through his head. He could not show his belly now. It might cost them everything.

“So you’re saying these ships that were sent from Phokis belong to my brothers?” Erebus asked after being completely silent throughout the conversation.

“We’re saying these ships were in use in the southern islands five years ago,” Hades replied. “Obviously that was before your brothers’ time as leaders, but from what we understand, these ships were being kept in a boneyard in Messara, so we would need to know who had access to them because since their retirement, they’ve been upgraded with some serious technology that would’ve required a substantial amount of drachmae.”

Nyx was eyeing Hades again, and Dio suspected she was searching for the catch, the hint, the tell that would let her know the underlying implication. Hades seemed to garner that as well.

“I only wish to get to the truth,” Hades went on. “And I called you here because I cannot do that without you and your brothers. When I walked into your offices eight months ago, you both looked me in the eye and said you trusted me, and I looked right back and said I trusted you as well. I meant that, so I brought this to you rather than continue this investigation behind your back.” Hades held his hands up, allowing himself a breath. When he spoke again, his voice was softer, the edges considerably sanded down. “You must know by now that the last thing I wish to bring here is war. My children are here, my baby brother, my family. And there is nothing I would put above them.”

“Not even this city?” Erebus asked, and Dio squared his shoulders.

Hades smiled wryly. “They are this city. And because I love them, I will defend this city with my life. And because they love me, they will do the same. But if I had to choose, I will always choose them.”

Despite the look Nyx was giving Hades, Dio knew this wasn’t a tactic. Hades had been speaking from the heart for the sheer purpose of reminding them that he had one, and that he used it frequently.

It was Erebus who relaxed first, sitting back in his seat.

“If you think my brothers can help, I will call them up here,” he said, his voice softer too. “And - I will say that I do not think my brothers at all interested in bringing war to Khaos Falls, but - if that turns out to be true, I would like you to know that while I cannot turn on my family either, I have no desire to harm this city in any way. I will step aside.”

“And Tartarus will remain neutral,” Nyx added, her tone still that of a politician.

Hades nodded. “You and your wishes have my utmost respect. If they refuse to aid us, we will continue our investigation on our own, and you will be kept in the loop for the duration of that investigation. My goal has never been to alienate you.”

“We know that, Hades,” Nyx assured him. “We never would have endorsed you in the first place if we did not believe that.”

“Why did you?”

It was happening yet again. That thing where everyone was suddenly looking at him, and he wasn't sure why until his own words echoed back at him. And now that Nyx was looking at him, he knew he had to continue.

“I mean, Zeus took power from you,” Dio said slowly. “And my uncle helped. Not to say he isn't a good leader. He is.”

“Then you've answered your own question, Dionysos,” Nyx said, her smirk back in place. “My father always said that leadership was as much a burden as it was a privilege, and while I was fully capable of running a district, this city was fully capable of running me. I'm not saying I was happy when Zeus took power from my father, but in the years since, despite the - *hardships* Zeus brought upon us, my husband and I have enjoyed the ability to stay to ourselves, to raise our family, and to spend time with each other. Things my parents did not have. As your uncle can probably tell you, running a district has far more freedoms afforded to you than running a

city. Then, your time is everyone's. *You* are everyone's, and there is no negotiation. I was not willing to offer myself up in that way. But of course, your uncle has what we lacked."

"What?"

"Help. He has you and your brothers, Poseidon and Amphitrite, Aphrodite and Athena, as well. And Persephone to quell Demeter." Her smirk turned to a smile. "He's doing much better than I ever could."

"Than *we* ever could." Erebus said this while looking Hades straight in his eyes. "And you have our loyalty, Hades. Regardless of the circumstances, if it were anyone but my brothers, I would be there beside you."

"And I appreciate that," Hades said, standing. "Though I'm sure there will be further opportunities down the line."

Nyx turned her smile on him. "I should hope not."

After a moment, Erebus excused himself to go out in the hall and call his brothers. While he did so, Nyx inquired about Hephaestus, and Aphrodite gave her what sounded like a scripted update. It drew Dio's eyes back to the webcam looking out at the room, and he suppressed a smile.

He did feel more relaxed than he had upon first arriving, but some of the anxiety returned when three large figures appeared on the landing outside the office.

The visiting leaders greeted Dio and Aphrodite with curt nods, one of them offering a serene smile and another trying but delivering more of a pained wince. Dionysos recognized the smiling brother as Morpheus. Ruler of Old Crete, he was the oldest, his dark hair and thick beard now streaked with an ash grey that matched his eyes.

The grimacing brother was Hypnos, leader of Naxos. His black hair was long and wavy, his goatee thin and well kept. The final brother was Phobos, and he did not smile. His hair was held in a long braid that hung over his shoulder, reaching down to his waist. His beard was almost as long, and his face and arms were substantially scarred. *The warrior king.* He

certainly looked exactly like Dio imagined someone with that title would look.

Dio fought the urge to chew his nails as Hades went through the evidence again for the umpteenth time, the brothers' faces as stoic as Erebus's had been throughout his first run. Erebus handed them the folded Hades had given them, and he watched Morpheus pull out the photo of the modified ship and hold it up for the other two brothers to see. And watching them, Dio was able to hold fast to his doubt.

While Hephaestus may have seemed certain of his theory regarding the brothers, Dio was not. Even before they had spoken to Erebus, before Nyx had soothed him with her unyielding belief in Hades' ability to lead, he had never been sure of their guilt. It felt too easy, and after everything they had been through in the past year, in the past month, he knew better than to think anything would be easy.

After a silence that seemed to stretch on for ages, Morpheus finally handed Erebus the folder back and looked at Hades.

“What I would like to say first, outright so that there is no confusion, is that my brothers and I have no knowledge of a plot against your city, Hades,” he began. “There was never any bad blood harbored for the ongoing here. Erebus made it clear from the start that he believed in your leadership, and even before you took the helm, there was never any expression of outright retaliation against Zeus no matter how well deserved. We came here as a show of good faith in our first year of leadership, and when we agreed to your offer of alliance, it was not just because of our brother. We made the choice to trust you as he did, and we stand by it. Regardless, we would never take aim at a city where our brother and his family reside much less reign. It would be a poor use of our time and resources.”

Dio stared up at the man, his eyes stern and his lips pursed, and maybe he did not have the kind of skill Hephaestus or Charon or Hades had where they could read people like a children's book, but he had his intuition. And it was telling him to believe Morpheus.

Hades and Charon must have had the same read anyway because they both nodded their acceptance of this declaration after a glance at Hades' desktop screen.

"I do appreciate it," Hades assured them. "And I know you must understand as well as anyone that as a new leader, my every move is under a microscope, and if I fail to find out who carried out this attack—or, Fates forbid, to prevent another—my people will not take it kindly. Nor would I expect them to."

"We absolutely understand," Morpheus returned. "And we wish to help in any way we can. I just don't know how much help we may actually be. We've sent personnel to the boneyard in Messara to take inventory, but unfortunately, I cannot promise that we'll be able to give you all the details you need."

Dio watched his uncle straighten in his seat.

"When I took over Messara, it was much like Thassos," Phobator explained. "Years of instability on lands stolen from our family. In the months since reclaiming it, we are still working through the mess left behind, and that includes much of the documentation involved. It's made trade in general quite the headache, and rebuilding a fleet of any kind has been next to impossible. If I didn't have my brothers next door, I fear my island would have already fallen."

"So you don't know where those ships may have gone or when they were taken." It wasn't an accusation, merely a statement of fact on Hades' part.

"Yes. And the one person that may have any direct knowledge on that front passed away some time ago. Coincidentally, he would also be the one person that both had the necessary access to the boneyard and could offer that access to another party. We might still be able to nail down a timeline with the dates of the blueprint sales, but—"

"How long ago?" Dio asked, this time with a bit more intention. But only a bit.

"What?" Phobator just sounded angry all the time, Dio decided.

“You said the man died, the one with access. How long ago?”

“A few months or so.”

“Did you catch the guy who did it?”

Phobator’s jaw clenched. “I never said he was murdered.”

Dio licked his lips. “It’s the harbormaster, isn’t it? Your harbormaster was murdered five months ago, and his son found him, but all the official records omitted the son except one. Is it because you thought he did it?”

Phobator leaned all the way forward in his seat, looking at Dio with narrowed eyes. Morpheus had a look of shock on his face. Hypnos looked on the verge of falling sideways off his seat. And Dio knew none of this was coming out right, that he was talking without thinking again, but all he could do was keep going. Because it had all clicked into place now. Something had to give, and he wasn’t leaving this room until it did.

“What did you say?” Phobator hissed.

“Pallas,” Dio said slowly as if he feared he would be mauled if he spoke it too loudly. It felt like dangling a steak in a lion’s den. “It was Pallas’s dad that died, right?”

“How do you know Pallas?”

“He was Athena’s old friend, and she ran into him in Thassos, but—“

“Is he here now?” Morpheus asked.

“I - I don’t know—“

“No,” Hades answered. “At least not yet. He went back to Thassos. They elected him as their next leader.”

Phobator jumped from his seat, snarling, and Morpheus quickly threw out a hand in front of him as he stood too.

“Pallas claimed it was his father, but we were never able to confirm. He wanted the inheritance, the land mainly, but we challenged the claim. We found evidence that implicated him in the murder, but when we went to arrest him, he fled. In the

process, he killed two others, innocent people who wouldn't help him escape."

"Could he have had access to those ships?" Dio asked, impatient. "The ones in the boneyard?"

"By way of his - father, yes."

"And they were operable? Like they could be moved out of the boneyard without extensive repairs?"

"Usually, those ships are stripped of valuable parts the moment they enter the boneyard. We've been searching for a way to better dispose of them, but I hadn't gotten to that point on my docket just yet," Phobator replied. "But no one is on that yard around the clock. If he had access, he could have gone in whenever he pleased to make repairs or even those upgrades."

"What happened after he fled?" Hades asked now.

"We had the ports locked down, so we believed that he was holed up in one of his father's properties," Hypnos took over. "We checked every one in Messara and Old Crete, but they were undisturbed. Then we got to Naxos. We were sure we had him cornered, and we managed to smoke him out of one property, but... He escaped somehow, got off the island."

"How could he have done that?"

Something in Hades' eyes told Dionysos that his mind was following a clear path now. Dio's stomach churned. He had a hunch, and he was hoping with all he had that he was wrong.

In his heart, he knew he wasn't.

"There was only one entry point that may have been missed by the coastal guards and our naval search forces during the night, but he would have had a very short window. Not only that, but he would have had to give strict directions to someone who could pick him up within that window as well as gain access into and through..."

Dionysos couldn't quite say what happened next or truly explain the way the air shifted in the room around them. It felt as though all at once, everyone tugged on the same thread of a

theory and kept pulling, eagerly so, like they already knew what was at the end. Morpheus's eyes locked on Hades. Erebus and Hypnos stood up. Hephaestus let out a sharp laugh that held no amusement of any kind, and absolutely no one in the room questioned the sudden confirmation of his presence. Dio felt like he might throw up.

“The Ambrosia Estate House,” Hypnos whispered.

Hades exhaled heavily. “Where you're keeping my brother.”

CHAPTER 37

ATHENA

Athena blew through the doors of the Olympus Estate like a natural disaster. They were *twisting* again, her insides, and it made each step she took away from the hospital more painful than the last. She'd shut her eyes nearly the whole drive back, ignoring Artemis' shouts from across the parking lot. Her adrenaline had spiked, her nerves frayed, and every instinct she had was now being buried beneath lies and untruths, things meant to soothe but failing to do anything of the sort. But she had already committed to it, to lying to her family and to hurting Dionysos all in the name of protecting them, and she couldn't turn back.

“What the fuck was that!”

Artemis's voice cracked through the air like a whip, lashing across Athena's skin and causing her to stumble in her first steps up the stairs. She pushed through the misstep though, acting as if she hadn't heard Artemis at all. She already knew what the woman thought of her at the moment. Artemis had heard everything Pallas had said, lurking in the hallway outside the office out of an abundance of caution. And a lack of trust for Pallas. Athena had been mortified first, outraged next, but since then, she was nothing but fear and panic. Keeping it contained and concealed from view grew harder by the minute too.

Artemis hadn't said anything when Athena emerged from her office that morning, pink in the face and panting hard. Her gaze spoke volumes however, her disappointment and discontent a tumultuous storm brewing beneath dark eyes.

That had been enough, and Athena had demanded she not say a word to anyone about anything before going upstairs to change. She had then allowed Artemis to drive her to the River Styx District, but not a word had passed between them since. She had hoped they could make it the entire day before Artemis blew up on her, but she wasn't entirely surprised. After what she'd said in that room, what she'd done to Dionysos, it was a wonder Athena had made it to her car before Artemis dragged her across the lot.

It seemed her luck had run out though.

Artemis grabbed her arm just as she rounded the third floor bannister, shoving her up against the wall none too gently. Athena glared at her, but it was useless on Artemis, whose gaze could penetrate marble and steel alike. And the crystalline composure adorned with imposing intimidation was wiped clean from Artemis's face, replaced with a raw and unbridled wrath that permeated the air between them.

"You fucking coward," Artemis snarled. "I said nothing, absolutely nothing, because I truly believed you would figure it out. That you would do the right thing!"

"I am doing the right thing!" Athena snapped back.

"No, you're doing the foolish thing! The easy thing!"

Athena shoved her back. "Nothing about this was easy! Nothing! You think I want this? You think this is what I went looking for when I got out of bed this morning! A bed with the man I love in it, where he was finally happy? I didn't want this!"

"But you agreed to it anyway. Instead of doing what you're supposed to do and trusting your family, you're going to fall for the oldest fucking trick in the book!"

"He threatened everyone I care about!"

"And this seemed like the most logical countermove!"

"He threatened Dionysos' life!"

"And what makes you think he won't just kill him anyway now that you've agreed!"

“I am protecting him!”

“No!” Artemis pointed a finger at her, a finger shaking so bad that it looked like several. Then her voice dropped to a low growl, and it vibrated through Athena’s spine in the most painful way. “No. You are condemning him to something worse than Pallas could ever deal out, and you and I both know it. Because you know what he is afraid of, and it isn’t death.”

And she was right. Athena knew she was right. She knew Dionysos would rather take another bullet than feel the way he was no doubt feeling right now, but she could not stand here and convince herself that he was incapable of living without her no matter what he said. He had so many others he could turn to, others who could make him happy, who could make him feel alive again. He would fare just fine. This sacrifice was Athena’s and Athena’s alone.

Artemis snorted a venomous laugh as if reading every thought straight off her face.

“You’re letting him win,” she at last said, her voice cold.

“I’m not letting him do anything. He has Thassos, and if we—“

“No, not Pallas.”

“Then who?” But she immediately regretted asking.

“Zeus. You’re letting him win.”

“Oh, come on—“

“Do you know why he made you believe that loving Dio, loving anyone, was a weakness?” Athena swallowed hard. “Because it was a weakness to him. He couldn’t control you if you loved someone more than him, including yourself. He couldn’t mold you in his image if you had a heart that would affect the shape. He couldn’t dress you in his ruthlessness if you cared for anything or anyone. Except him. He let you love him and him alone. And he used that love against you every chance he got.”

Her mind left her then, flying through a million different thoughts and a thousand juxtapositions, Zeus's entire ideology encompassing and eclipsing her, making her someone else. Or making her wish she was someone else. And the roots never took, but the impact was there, irrevocable and irreconcilable beneath the better parts she now put on display. And yes, he was winning. He was still fucking winning, him and men like him. Men like Pallas. And all this time convincing herself she was better than him and better without him —without both of them because both of them had let her down in innumerable ways— felt wasted because she was still running back to that comfort of at least being good enough by his standards. Even if she never truly was.

“You wanna do this, fine,” Artemis went on. “You do it, but you do not get to lie to yourself about why, you certainly do not get to lie to me, and you damn sure do not get to lie to Dionysos. So you really wanna do this? Hurt him and play hero, pat yourself on the back for your sacrifice? You tell him the fucking truth. And it isn't a suggestion.”

Artemis shoved her away, disgust all over her face, and retreated back down the stairs. It was only after the front door flew open and slammed shut that Athena breathed again, moved again, sliding down to slump against the wall. And then this vast, cavernous house with its too many rooms and maze of hallways and permanent stain of Zeus was filled with nothing but her sorrowful sobs.



IT TOOK her some time to pull herself together, the guards having been vigilant but non-invasive for the better part of the hour she sat against that wall. She had crawled into her office after, falling asleep on the couch there only to wake up a few hours later with a headache. Still, she managed to make herself look somewhat presentable before leaving the estate once more en route to Asphodel.

However, as she was about to pass the hospital, she made a sharp turn into its lot and took one of the vacant parking spots nearest the door, not entirely sure what her intent was just yet. She climbed out of the car before she could question it, walking with purpose into the building and towards the doors of the intensive unit. She greeted both waves of security with a curt nod, and they offered her no resistance. Part of her, a very small part, had hoped they would, but... She needed to speak to someone.

No. She needed to speak to Hephaestus and only Hephaestus.

And it was almost as though he was waiting for her, as if he'd been waiting for this visit since she stormed out that morning. He had always been closest to Dionysos of all of them, and neither Athena nor Hephaestus had ever been ones to willingly engage in conversations about their feelings. It was a mutual understanding they had had since they met, that understanding being the reason he had always been decent to her.

And she was about to tarnish it. He seemed eager to let her.

"I hope you didn't come all the way back here just to say you were sorry to me," he sighed with a smile.

Then she was crying. Or maybe she was already crying. Either way, moisture was streaming down her face, and she had no clue what to do about it.

Hephaestus reached for a tissue box on the bedside table before gesturing her over with careful movements.

"Come here, kid."

"I'll hurt you."

"Nothing could hurt me more than seeing you like that. Come on."

After another moment's hesitation, she made her way over to him, gingerly crawling onto the bed and burrowing into his less injured side. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, his motions slow, but it felt like the warmest blanket she had ever been draped in. He rubbed her arm with a low hum but said

nothing further, letting her gather her bearings and take what comfort she needed from him. She wished she would have come to him more. She wished they would have had more time. Or that she could stop feeling like it was running out.

“I hurt him,” she whimpered. “I keep hurting him.”

“Why?” It wasn’t accusatory, only inquisitive.

“I - I swear I am just - I just want to protect him.”

“And you think hurting him is the best way to do that?”

“I - I don’t know.”

“If it’s not the best way, I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“What if it’s the only way?”

“If it is, who’s gonna protect him from you?”

The question felt like glass shards forcing their way down her throat into her lungs. Soft sobs were torn to shreds by the time they reached her lips, leaving them ragged and raw. She turned her face into his side, her body shaking with this sadness she could not escape.

“You know, I know no one ever tells you this because they don’t think you’ll believe it —and by ‘they’, I also mean ‘me’— but, Athena, you carry way too much. You were never allowed to be a kid, and so every time you do something irresponsible, every time you do something human, you run yourself down because that was what Zeus taught you to do. And - even Uncle, who has loved us as much as a guardian could, wasn’t very good at reminding us to slow down on growing up. We’re all running districts and making interstate treaties with skills we had to learn on the fly. And you are great at what you do, but you can’t be perfect.”

“I never wanted to be perfect. I don’t.”

“Yeah, but you can’t always be right either. You’re gonna fuck up. You’re gonna make mistakes. You are really fucking smart, but that doesn’t make you immune to ignorance or misunderstanding.”

“But I can’t—”

“Listen, you’ve only got twenty-four summers under your belt. Dio’s got twenty-two. Neither of you know as much as you think you do about the world, and that shouldn’t be a bad thing. You’re still learning, and - as for this shit with Thassos... Is it bad? Absolutely, but is it beyond saving? Never. So whatever it is you think you have to do, I can assure you that you don’t have to do it on your own. Is that rich coming from me? Probably, but I think I’ve learned enough to be able to pass that along. You’re—” He seemed to reconsider what he was going to say. Then, “You’re not alone, Athena. Zeus only wanted you to believe that you were. That the only one you could trust was him, and then when you realized you couldn’t even do that, you just - stopped trusting everyone altogether when that was never the point of the lesson. The lesson was that you shouldn’t trust him about trusting others.”

He allowed that to sink in, and she had this faint suspicion that he knew more about her current circumstance than he was leading her to believe. Either that, or he could simply see where the turmoil was rooted, and regardless of specifics, it was all sourced from the same place. A fear that she would make a mistake, that she would be wrong.

“—Zeus always said he was a weakness,” she said. It was almost a whisper. “That I was reckless when Dio was around, that I couldn’t keep my head in the game.”

Hephaestus chuckled, and she inclined her head, giving him a bizarre look.

“I mean, come on, coming from him? Even if you are reckless around Dio, it’s nothing compared to how reckless Uncle was around Zeus. So isn’t it funny how he had a problem with one and not the other? ”

“Okay, I can’t *be* reckless, Heph. I cannot afford it. Who I am with Dio is not who I need to be for this city.”

“You know, I thought that too,” he sighed. “I was sure that loving Aphrodite would get one of us killed. And in a way, it almost did. I left her because I thought that staying with her was too easy, that it was the exact opposite of what I should be doing. Because how could I do my job *and* have what I want,

right? It made no sense. It looked too much like a happy ending, and I didn't believe in happy endings. And then - I left, and Acrisius still got to her, and I realized I was foolish for believing I could tempt the Fates. Because I *can't* control everything." He tightened his hold on her arm. "And neither can you."

"And what if I can't accept that?"

"The Fates will continue to do whatever it is they set out to do, and whether you accept that or not has no bearing on them. But you have to ask yourself if you're willing to suffer and make the people you love suffer on the off chance that it might change anything."

He let out another deep sigh, shifting slightly beneath her, but when she attempted to move, he hugged her tighter.

"We aren't powerless, Athena, and we aren't helpless. We always have a choice, and I told you the night Dio volunteered to go to Thassos with you. You complement each other. It didn't just make sense because he was the last resort. If anything, he should have been the only choice. He brings out the best in you. And not because he makes you more cunning or intelligent or pragmatic. You own all those things yourself, but Dio makes you better because he reminds you what is most important, and sometimes, what is most important has nothing to do with being right."

She gave him a puzzled look, but he simply waited for her to catch up. He had never been in the habit of spelling things out for her much less shoving it down her throat. Like Hades, he knew how much she liked interpreting these things on her own if only to ensure they could be integrated and adapted to her personally. Yet this time, she couldn't quite comprehend what it was he was saying to her whether out of genuine confusion or sheer will.

"So - you're saying that - I should be a bit reckless?"

"What does reckless mean to you exactly?" he returned.

She shrugged. "That I make spontaneous decisions that have no logic or thought to them, that I - I act without thinking

or that I make choices too quickly.”

“Look, we all know you can play the long game. We know you’re the absolute best at it, but sometimes, like now, we aren’t given the time to play that game. Sometimes, decisions have to be made in the moment.”

Her mind wandered back to Dio’s improvisation at dinner with Amphitryon and Tantalos, how he’d salvaged their chances at peace. And all because he realized she was struggling, not because he actually knew it would work.

“And if there comes a moment where you have to choose between your life and your ego, who is the one person that will ensure you choose the first?”

It all fell into place then.

“Dionysos,” she replied quietly.

“Exactly. He’s the person that pulls you back and reminds you that it’s okay to accept defeat when it means living to fight another day. And you don’t just make him believe he can do anything. You make him want to try and do it in the first place. As long as you’re together, none of us have to worry too much about what happens next.”

She scoffed, glancing up at him again. “We brought a war to Khaos Falls.”

He rolled his eyes. “Again, you two keep saying that and forgetting what I went through to give y’all the chance. Like damn, give *me* some credit.”

A snort escaped her as she fought the urge to shove at his chest. “Please.”

“And believe me, sis, you got it easy. You think Dio is reckless, try putting up with...”

Athena raised a brow before turning to look at the door. Aphrodite was walking in, the twins behind her, looking eager and anxious to get into the room. When they realized Aphrodite had stopped, they wormed their way around her.

“Hey, Princess,” Hephaestus greeted with a grin, but Aphrodite was giving him a pointed look.

“Naw, go ‘head. Finish that sentence.”

Athena immediately got up. “And that’s my queue.”

She was immediately engulfed in the long, gangly arms of two teen boys, who were nearly as tall as her and about as strong. They hugged her, speaking over one another as Phobos tried to tell a story about the stray cat he saw outside and Deimos discussed his first time throwing javelin at his school sports program. She answered none of it, simply hugged them and watched Hephaestus soften Aphrodite up with a dozen small kisses and a smile that once couldn’t be pulled from him with a pair of pliers. And she knew then that she had been right about coming to see him. Not just because he was older and wiser. But because he was just like her. And he’d already made the hard decision to trust his heart instead of his head. Maybe she could finally do the same.

But first, she had something she had to do.

CHAPTER 38

DIONYSOS

Dio's hands shook around his phone as he tapped Athena's name on the screen once more. For the seventh time, her voicemail message echoed through the speaker before he could even put the phone to his ear, and he had to fight not to throw it through the windshield.

"He won't hurt her," Charon said beside him.

The elder's eyes roved over the street as he turned onto the main block of the Market District. For a moment, the headlights that had been behind them disappeared, and Dionysos tried to tame his paranoia into something manageable.

"But where is she?" Dio growled.

Hecate said they hadn't been able to get ahold of her for the main meeting, and that attempt was hours ago. She hadn't shown up on her own either despite Hephaestus saying she had visited him just before. It was nearing half past two in the morning now, and Artemis had just updated that she wasn't at the Olympus Estate either. And to complicate things, two underwater vessels had washed up into the shallows near the Sarpedon Port. Judging by what Charon had been saying, it was possible that some of the invaders from the night before may have escaped in other similar vessels.

The night before.

It was jarring to think that the attack had only just happened. Dio had almost been awake for a day now, and fatigue was warring with worry and overt alertness, his brain a

haywire hive of activity. Just 24 hours ago, he had been in Athena's bed feeling invincible. Now, he felt like he was barely hanging on to a breath.

"We'll find her," Charon offered, but it was all he could offer.

They pulled onto the long, dirt driveway of the vineyard, the trees that lined it like black clouds obscuring the stars. The main building of the winery with the loft above it came into view, its white walls painted amber by the moonlight.

"Artemis will be on her way here," Charon said. "The idea is that less security draws less attention to an area."

"A nice idea," Dio mumbled. "What about Hephaestus?"

"The hospital's locked down, and Aphrodite and Achilles are with him."

"And the twins?"

"With Hera and Demeter." Dio raised a brow at him, and Charon's lips curled slightly, such a wonder amidst all this quaint chaos. "Well, Hera took them to Demeter's, but once we went into blackout protocols, Demeter agreed it best that she stay there. Medusa and Hades already moved most of the Sarpedon residents out of the port area anyway, so it was ideal."

"Uncle Charon, be honest with me." Dio swallowed before continuing. "Was this my fault?"

Charon parked the SUV in front of the winery and killed the engine, turning the headlights off. He then turned to Dio with a look of sharp consternation.

"How could you possibly think this is your fault when we now know Zeus has been behind it all along?" Dio shrugged, and Charon placed a hand on his shoulder. "You were a pawn on the board. All of us were. They set you up in Thassos, but this began long before Hephaestus stepped foot on that Fates forsaken island."

"Yeah, but - they set me up because of Athena. Not because I'm a threat or anything. Because I'm a liability. I

made this easy for them.”

“Dio, you *are* a threat. You have always been a threat to his control, of Athena and Hades and this entire city. Zeus wanted to be loved out of fear and submission. You are loved out of sincerity, and he hated you for it. He hated that Athena loved you more than him, and he hated that she would turn against him for you. Do you not know how powerful being loved can be?”

They stared at one another for a long beat, the truth of Charon’s words blooming and ballooning between them. Vaguely, Dio wondered if Charon’s mind was on Hera the way his own mind was on Athena, but truly, looking Charon’s eyes, he need not ask. It was written in vivid colors there among the black.

“I imagine it’s as powerful as loving someone else so much that you would do anything for them,” Dio said quietly. “Even let them go.”

Charon softened, wetting his lips before he nodded.

“Yeah, I’d agree. But sometimes, letting go isn’t permanent. Fates, sometimes it isn’t even a sure thing. And if we buy into that too soon, where will we salvage any hope from?”

Fear underscored all of it, the reality of their collective situation. It felt like the city was surrounded by sharks. Or maybe it was just Dio, but either way, his world had never felt darker than it did right now. He had only ever felt such despair one time, long ago as he lay awake during his first sea voyage, stowed away on a ship headed for some foreign place he wasn’t entirely sure existed. And all he could think about was his mother and how, with every moment, he was further and further away from her until he could no longer reach her at all, not even by boat, not ever again.

The difference was that this time, he felt like he might be getting closer to her.

“Now, get inside, keep the lights off, and don’t move, alright?” Charon instructed.

“At least not on my own, right?” Dio joked weakly.

“Right.”

Charon clapped his shoulder one last time before Dio climbed out of the car, shutting the door and jogging up to the steps of the winery’s empty central building. The restaurant had been closed, allowing the staff to go help in the Asphodel kitchens, and everyone else had been sent home as a precaution to ensure the safety of them and their families. There would still be caretakers and security to inspect things on nightly rounds, but those ended at midnight, so there was no one else on the property at the moment, and the eerie quiet that sat upon it enforced that fact.

He walked up the stairs to the loft, turning on the single light on his desk and looking around. Then he just... stood there, unsure of what to do or what to do next. He wanted to go look for Athena. He wanted to see her face even if she scowled at him and hear her voice even if she raised it against him. He wanted to know she was safe, that she was okay, that there was some proper way to say goodbye to who they almost were, who they had been for a moment up in her bedroom.

Love wasn’t supposed to feel like this. It wasn’t supposed to feel like some open wound with the shrapnel still inside, bringing him to his knees every time he moved too quickly. It wasn’t supposed to feel like an endless attempt to staunch the bleeding, where the pressure was never enough and all the linens were red with their futile efforts. But it didn’t matter that it wasn’t supposed to because it did. It did feel that way, and if he had the time, he would cry and sob and scream and do all the things the beloved lover boy of Khaos Falls was never supposed to do. Maybe it would help. Maybe it would soothe the pain.

He was sure he wasn’t supposed to hear the door open downstairs. And he wasn’t supposed to hear the footsteps creeping up the stairwell. And he wasn’t supposed to hear them cross over the threshold into the room with him. However, he probably *was* supposed to hear the gun click, his stomach turning as flashbacks filled his tired mind to the brim.

He gritted his teeth, but he couldn't stop his body from flinching.

“Honestly I didn't think you'd be this easy to get to.”

“I almost feel the same way.” Dio turned around slowly to face Pallas. “Where's Athena?”

“Truthfully, I was hoping I would find her with you, but no worries. Once I'm done with you, I'll sniff her out.”

Dio couldn't lie. He was pretty alarmed by Pallas' current appearance. No longer the clean-cut, put-together boy next door Dio had been introduced to, he looked worse than Dio felt. It was as if he hadn't slept in days, his eyes bloodshot and vicious, his lips curled into a sneer, and his hair mussed and oily. His facial hair was merely a shadow, but it was patchy in places like he had started and stopped shaving multiple times before giving up altogether. Dio wondered if he'd accepted his new leadership position looking like this, and if so, what had the people of Thassos thought?

Not that this should be his primary concern at the moment of course. He should be focusing on the barrel pointed at his face and unhinged look of the man holding it. It was just difficult when he would literally rather do anything else.

“It's hard to believe your uncle wouldn't have kept you at his casino,” Pallas said, his tone smug. “Or that this place isn't crawling with security.”

“Artemis is on her way.” Dio lifted his chin. “And truly, they didn't think I'd be the one in danger.”

“Or maybe they didn't think you were important enough to protect.”

Dio snorted. “Who else would make the wine? Without me, it would start tasting like the piss you have in Thassos. Or... had, I guess, considering I fixed that too. You're welcome.”

His hand clenched the pistol. “Come on.”

Dio arched a brow. “Come on where? Just do whatever it is you're gonna do right here.”

Pallas chuckled. “You don’t have to act brave now, Dionysos. This isn’t a stage, and no one is here to see your little show.”

“No one’s here to see yours either, and yet you’re still reciting whatever villain script you stole all of that from.”

Pallas shook the gun at him before closing the distance between them. His eyes only came up to Dio’s chest, but somehow, that made him seem more insidious. He moved around behind Dio, jamming the barrel into Dio’s back and urging him forward. And Dio could pretend all he wanted to, but the thought of another bullet breaking through his skin made everything in him freeze up.

“Go!”

Briefly, he hoped Artemis would be outside waiting for them, that she would show up and end this. More urgently, he hoped Athena would. However, he knew better than to buy into either of those scenarios. That was not how this night was poised to go, and he had accepted it. He had agreed to it.

He marched forward, obeying the shrill command of his newly minted captor.

Outside, an SUV waited, parked in the shadows of the building’s side. Two large figures were silhouetted beside it, and Dio was almost certain it was two of Erebus’s brothers. But no, as they drew closer, the two parted, a man and a woman he vaguely recognized from Thassos. Members of Amphitryon’s guard. Of Pallas’ guard.

They muscled him into the car, not taller than him but certainly stronger, though he didn’t put up a fight. He resigned himself to however this trip was going to go, sitting between Pallas and the woman while the man got into the driver seat.

“So where are we going?” Dio asked, clapping his hands despite the barrel snugly pressed against his abdomen. “Like a public execution in Thassos or?”

“You don’t deserve the effort of something like that,” Pallas growled.

“Then what is this? Do you think that Athena’s gonna congratulate you? Change her mind about thinking you’re a snake?”

He laughed again, something thin and unraveling. “It’s a shame you won’t be here to see her announce our engagement tomorrow.”

Dio tried not to tense, but judging by the snicker Pallas threw in, he must have failed. It wasn’t that he believed Athena would willingly agree, but he knew this must be what she was trying to hide from them. Meaning it was the reason for her outburst that morning, her need to distance herself from him. Because she always had to save everyone. She always had to pay some debt to someone, and often, that came with hurting those who reached out to help. Like him.

“Oh, that has you quiet, doesn’t it?” Pallas jabbed.

“The fact you’ve coerced my girlfriend into marrying you, and yet you’re still so threatened by me that you have to kill me?” Dio asked. “I mean, yeah, I need some time to wrap my head around how fucking pathetic that is.”

He never felt the barrel leave his abdomen. His adrenaline had numbed him. Just... not enough to shield him from the pain of the gun handle being hammered against the side of his skull. He may have blacked out for a second, his head jerking to the side only to be thrown back by the sharp upheave of the woman’s shoulder against the other cheek. The barrel hit his temple.

“Don’t fucking mock me!” Pallas roared, the last of his nerves seeming to fracture. “I’ll cut your fucking tongue out, boy! You don’t need it any longer!”

Dionysos was quiet for as long as his hyperactive mind would allow, shifting slightly in his seat. He could feel the thick blood running down the side of his face, and he still felt dizzy, but anger flared through him too. Not just for himself but for Athena, for what this man she thought a friend was doing to her, for what Zeus was doing to her. He couldn’t care any less about himself, but her? No, if all else failed, if he died tonight, he was going to take Pallas with him.

And if he lived, he was going for Zeus next.

“So where are we going then?” he finally asked, hoping that outburst might have loosened Pallas’s tongue. “You can’t possibly think it’s smart riding around my uncle’s city with me.”

“We aren’t going far, don’t worry.” His voice had calmed some. He sounded exhausted. “Just somewhere to keep you until I can get out of the city safely.”

“Why can’t you? You’re not as important as you think, you know. You’re pretty much in the clear until Artemis gets to the vineyard.”

“If Athena is missing, it could mean she ran her mouth to someone, and your bodyguard certainly had her suspicions about me, so I’m not risking them putting the pieces together on my way out. Especially with you. Plus, everyone’s on high alert at the port. I struggled getting back in today. If I leave so soon...” He trailed off, as if he’d grown tired of talking.

“And so you’re just gonna hide out in my uncle’s city with my big ass?” He guffawed. “Sounds super smart, Pallas, truly. Contrary to your beliefs, my uncle will raze this place to the ground looking for me.”

“If only. That would save us a lot of trouble.”

“Us?”

He sidestepped the question. “But no. When we get to the house, you’re gonna answer whoever starts blowing up your phone first. You’re gonna tell them you need some time because Athena broke up with you or whatever you wanna cry about, and you’re gonna alleviate their worries about you so they can go back to focusing on the attack that is coming.”

“So an attack *is* coming?”

“Then I’m gonna bury you under your own city. Athena will announce our engagement tomorrow so that I can give your uncle his treaty with Thassos. Then any doubts about me will be put aside, and after that, they’ll be certain you’ve fled the city to lick your wounds.”

Dionysos wanted to tell him that Pallas didn't know him at all if he thought Dio would just abandon his family. And Pallas also didn't know his family if he believed they would simply accept this engagement. But he let him think it all anyway, staring out the windshield as the Market District morphed into the Lush District morphed into the Harvest District. When they reached the Olympus District, Pallas started giving turn-by-turn directions. Dio leaned closer to him although he wasn't sure if it was entirely on purpose or if he was prone to losing consciousness sometime soon.

"I thought we weren't going far." He couldn't tell for sure if his speech was slurred. "We just crossed the whole fuckin' city."

"At least you got one last look at it."

Well, he was grateful for that, but eventually, while Dionysos could recognize the general area, the neighborhood itself became almost foreign, and Pallas abruptly stopped offering guidance. Dio tried to mutter the numbers of the houses under his breath, to catch a street name, but it was too dark, most of the streetlights out or flickering or dim and useless. Much of the neighborhood was rundown, but one row of houses remained in pristine condition, the middle of which was a large two-story development with an impressive yet out of place veranda behind a wrought-iron gate.

He once again felt ill.

Even here, even now, Zeus's flair prevailed. Something meant to be simple had been overdone with his overzealous touch, his fallen peacock feathers all over the place like potpourri. It almost solidified the fact that he and Pallas were intertwined, that Zeus had decided this man a better son than Dio. And not only that. Someone more worthy of Athena's affections. And even after all this time, it hurt. His mother had sent him here to find his father, and instead, he'd found a tyrant he would never appease.

Suddenly, his head didn't hurt so bad.

They pulled into the garage, the door shutting behind them, and Dio didn't dare chance a backward glance. He let the

woman pull him from the vehicle, her own gun now at his back, and she steered him into the house by the shoulder.

Inside was riddled with far more of Zeus's fingerprints than the outside was of course. Dio wondered if this was where Zeus brought all of his illicit affairs. Or maybe it was his place of other shady businesses he often dabbled in. Either way, most of it was velvet and plush, the bachelor pad of a married man with no respect for those around him.

"Sweep the house," Pallas ordered the driver.

He lit a cigarette filled with something Dio couldn't place by scent. Dio was almost tempted to ask for a hit.

Pallas then turned to him and the woman. "Let's take him downstairs."

The woman shoved him into the kitchen towards a door in the far corner. She opened it to reveal a stone staircase that descended down into the dark. He only just had enough time to step down on his own before she pushed him headfirst into the abyss, but he had to walk quick to keep from tumbling into it anyway. He could hear Pallas behind them, his feet heavy on the stairs. Someone turned the light on just as Dionysos reached the floor, and he found himself in a sparse basement with next to nothing except a washer and dryer, a few taped up boxes, and a single chair in the center.

"You're just gonna lock me up in a basement?" Dio asked, unable to quietly cooperate any longer. "Not cliché at all."

"I could bury you tonight if you prefer," Pallas shot back as Dio turned to him.

"In this basement? Because from what I've seen, the fence is see-through, and you're on a clock."

"You realize I can keep you here as long as I need to. I could let you starve to death. When was the last time you went a day without something to drink, Dionysos? Perhaps we can see how long it takes for you to crack, to beg and plead for my mercy."

Dio huffed. "You'll be waiting a long ass time, I'll tell you that. I'll bite my own tongue off before I give you anything

you don't deserve."

"Do us both the favor then."

"I'm not quite done reading you yet."

They stared at each other, the tension slowly festering around the room. Dio's ears were attuned to the house above, but he heard nothing in the immediate vicinity. Nothing outside. No search party, no surprise guests, no rescue, no hope. That night before he left Asphodel, his uncle called him brave, but Dio felt anything but right now. Mainly because he couldn't even feel afraid. Maybe hopeless, definitely angry, fully and completely reckless, but everything else was white noise that buzzed beneath his skin.

"And one day," Pallas went on, aiming the gun at him again. "I'm going to tell Athena all about it. How I brought you down here to rot."

"That's if she lets you live long enough to tell it," Dio returned, defiant. He met Pallas halfway, swelling to his full size in the process. "Because I know as well as you know that she will never love you. The only reason she would agree to anything you offered her is because of me, because of how much she loves me." Despite the last time he saw her, saying it aloud made it easier to believe. "And you'll have to look in her eyes every day knowing you only get to because of me, because she loved me enough to tolerate you. And even if I'm gone, she will love me enough to make sure you pay for it every day of the rest of your life."

The gun came down across his head again, but he didn't care. Whatever ran through him now was for her, vibrant and vicious and visceral. It was a raging inferno that could not be tamed. And as the third hit connected with his cheek and his knee buckled, rather than crumple to the ground, he bounced off of it and crashed into Pallas, Dio's shoulder ramming into his stomach so hard that he yelped in response.

They both hit the ground, wrestling around on the dusty floor until an arm wrapped around Dio's neck. He fought against the hold, trying to pull out of it, but the woman

strangling him was strong, and the more he fought, the tighter that hold became.

His limbs began to go numb, his legs giving out on him as she dragged him away. He still swung, at least until Pallas' fist connected with the center of his chest, the air knocked clean out of his lungs. Not even his owl could shield him now.

He went limp in the woman's arms. She threw him into the lone chair just as Pallas screeched, rushing towards him and hitting him again across the face. It hardly hurt this time. Dio was drowning in his turmoil. External pain no longer meant anything.

He hoped Athena got out. He hoped she got free of him.

"I swear to the Fates, I'm—" He stalked back towards the stairs as the woman tied Dio's hands behind him, halting at the bottom. "Zosimos! Get down here!"

Dio could tell Pallas was fully agitated now, on the verge of a tantrum the likes of a petulant child, and Dio was torn between pushing him to it or letting sleep take him if only for a moment. His head lolled, throbbing but not quite painful. The buzz in his skin only grew louder, echoing in his ears, and at one point, he was sure he couldn't hear anything at all. Then Pallas screamed up the stairs again before stomping up them. Still, Dio's eyelids grew heavier until he could no longer keep them open. So he didn't see what happened next.

Judging by the sound, it was evident that someone — someone who sounded exactly like Pallas when he screamed in surprise— had just tumbled back down the stairs.

CHAPTER 39

ATHENA

Athena's blood was pounding in her ears, a raging river that swept her up and kept her moving. Every singular sound, no matter how minuscule, had her ears perking up, her hands slick around the chrome clutched between them.

Lights came alive below and beyond the door, illuminating the cracks around it. Heavy footfalls trudged up the stairs. She pressed herself closer to the wall. The door opened.

There was nothing eventful about it. The man who came into the room stopped just inside the door, and before he could turn back around, Athena had pulled the trigger, the silencer at the end of her barrel ensuring she remained undetected by the rest of the house. She caught his massive body before he could hit the floor, struggling to slowly lower him and using the adjacent wall to her aid. Then she continued downstairs, anxiety and anguish grappling with a withering wrath. She knew what she heard. She knew *who* she heard. And that changed everything.

She hadn't come here to kill Pallas, but now? It was the only option.

She had known about the house the way she had known about everything Zeus thought he hid so well. She knew of the many people he brought there both for business and pleasure, and she knew that the house was nowhere on the records of his purchases while in leadership because he hadn't wanted Hera to stumble across it. Now, it was the only place in all of Khaos Falls that he—or his associates—could hide without a trace, and considering the fact Pallas had never checked into the

condo she had reserved for him, her guards informing her that they'd been made to drop him off at a restaurant after leaving the hospital, she knew he must have found another place to nest where no one could find him.

Or at least where he thought no one could find him.

One quick sweep of the house during his absence had confirmed her suspicions. He had left several belongings easily identified as his by someone who knew him, the most intimate parts of him, the parts that didn't change much over time. Then, once her guards had informed her of Pallas' arrival at the port and she had instructed them not to alert anyone else just yet, she had lied in wait for his return. She assumed he would go looking for her first before coming back here when his search failed. She never expected him to come back with another poor soul in his web. She had certainly not expected it to be Dionysos.

And for all the fear it embedded in her chest and all the vile anger it inspired in every fiber in her being, a small part of her was grateful. It gave her reason enough to finish this right here in this house.

She'd been searching downstairs for him when he called out for his guard, and she reached the door just as he came stalking up the basement stairs. There was no time to do much else when it swung open. She only had enough time to sidestep it and shoot, the shot low and unaimed. It hit Pallas in his thigh or his knee, somewhere below the waist, and before he could register what was happening, she had shoved him right back down the stairs.

She chased him now, bounding down into the basement with every intention of striking him again even as he lay still at the bottom. Movement in her peripheral shattered her tunnel vision, and she turned and aimed just as a second guard pulled her gun from her waist. It fell to the ground when Athena's next shot found its mark, leaving the tiniest hole between the woman's eyes. Her body fell to the side, revealing another figure slumped over in the chair.

“Dionysos.”

It was a broken whisper scraped from the inner lining of her heart and torn from her lips. All other thoughts went out the window. She could only focus on the dark blood matted in his precious curls and the broken mess of one side of his face. His lip was split, his eye swollen shut, blood still running down his neck from one or more of the wounds. If she did not know him in her bones, she might not have recognized him.

She rushed forward, cupping his face ever so gently, as gentle as she'd ever been, and called out to him. Tears were hot against her cheeks, shame and regret ravaging her like vultures.

“Dionysos.” It was hoarse and thick with emotion. “Please. Come on. I’m - I’m sorry, okay? I know I say it a lot. I know, but - I swear to you never again. I swear. Baby, please. Just...”

She brushed her fingers over the cheek not potentially split open. She could hear Pallas stirring behind her, but she refused to take her eyes off of Dio. She shook him firmly. Just once. And then just one more time.

His better eye fluttered open, the other trying but unable to. Still, through the slit, she could see how bloodshot it was. She clenched her jaw, that anger rising again in time with Pallas’ groans. A dead man’s groans.

Before she could turn around, Dio smiled at her. Through the blood and gore of his face, he smiled that boyish smile, his teeth stained red and one tooth chipped.

“You found me,” he muttered, his words slurred.

She tried to smile too. “There is not a damn thing in this world that could keep me from you.”

Tears mixed with blood as he dropped his head with a sob. Of pain or of joy, the sound pierced through her chest, and she kissed the crown of his head with a shuddering breath. A scraping came from behind her then.

She turned around to see Pallas crawling across the floor, a trail of red in his wake. He was going for the guard. He was going for her gun.

Athena stood up, striding forward and aiming her pistol at him. Kicking the gun aside, she then kicked him square in the mouth, Pallas rolling over and clutching his face with agonizing yells. She kicked him again in the stomach.

“Engagement’s off,” she said tersely, her eyes burning with hatred for the stranger at her feet. “You pathetic bastard.”

Pallas turned, spitting a glob of blood beside her boot. She stomped down on his chest, pinning him to the floor.

“I did what I had to do!” he roared, trying not to gurgle what was left on his tongue.

“And look where it got you. Zeus sent you on a suicide mission, and you took it like the pathetic pig you are.”

He tried to get up, but her weight did not give, and he hadn’t the strength to fight it. Their entire history flashed before her eyes. Their merciless childhoods, their unyielding loyalty to one another, and all the promises he broke the day he left. All for the best of course. Had she followed him, had he stayed, she might be the one on the other side of this gun. Or worse, she might be the body he felled for the chance at freedom he hadn’t earned.

“I - tried to do this the right way,” Pallas snarled, his hands still trying to remove her foot from his chest. “I tried to make it easier on you! But you wouldn’t even look at me - the way you used to! You wouldn’t even give me a chance!”

“Oh yeah, and that was definitely a mistake on *my* part, wasn’t it? You’ve certainly proven me wrong since.”

“I - I had every intention of letting Dionysos live. Even though Zeus wanted him dead. Even though he warned me that you would never care about anyone as much as you cared about him, especially if I let him live. Because he blinds you. He makes you weak!”

She leaned down towards him. “I have never been weak. That was Zeus’ problem. He never understood that, and neither did you. I was never weak! I will never be weak!” Her voice grew louder with each word. “You’re just angry, spoiled little boys who hate that you can’t control everything and

everyone! Zeus could not control me, and neither could you! Certainly not without Dionysos, and you know why? Because you two tried to claim me, but he was the one I chose for myself.”

Pallas bared his teeth. “If it is - the last thing I do, Athena, I will slit his fucking throat. And I will make sure you watch, watch until he bleeds out!”

“And that is why you aren’t leaving this basement alive.”

She pressed down harder on his chest, pushing the air out of his lungs, watching the fight leave him. Then she aimed the gun at his head.

“Athena.”

Dio’s choked gasp broke her focus, drawing her attention but not her eyes.

“Thena... Don’t.”

She shook her head. “Dio just - just wait. Just—”

“Don’t. Don’t - kill him. Uncle’s on his way. He’s coming, and he—”

“No one is coming, D. It’s just us, and I cannot let him hurt you. I can’t.”

“No, he - Uncle. He’s coming. This - this whole thing, we set it up.”

She looked at him now. “What?”

He slowly raised his head, his eyes still closed. He was smiling again.

“I was the bait.” He tried to lick his lips. “We knew - Pallas would come for me. Zeus thought I was your weakness, so - so he would come for me. And I said I would be the bait, so we could draw him out. That’s - that’s how he got me. But I couldn’t tell them where the house was exactly, so - so you have to tell them. You—”

“Dio, please.” Her voice was strained, the cogs in her mind turning. No. She would not feel guilty. She would not have second thoughts. If Hades had killed Zeus when he had the

chance, they would not be here. She would not make the same mistake.

“Athena - he - he’s not worth it.”

“He will kill you! He will kill you if I let him, and I will not let him!”

“I know. I know you won’t, but - that doesn’t mean you have to...”

He trailed off. She turned her eyes back on Pallas, who could barely keep his eyes open, but his smug smile was wide as could be.

And deep down, she knew what he wanted. He wanted to be vindicated by her anger. He wanted to be the victim at the end of the day. He wanted her to take the blame from his chest and put it on her back the way she did when they were children. Because he was always the coward, and she was always the noble savior, eager to challenge those who would reject or refuse him as he was. Even when she should have let them do that. Even when she should have done it herself.

Dionysos was right. Of course he was right. He was Hades’ son after all, not Zeus’s, and he had been raised better than she had. But her logic was solid. If you failed to wipe out a disease you were capable of wiping out, it would fester. It would grow. It would cause more harm than it was ever worth, and you would have to live with the knowledge that you could have done something and you didn’t. Maybe Hades could. Maybe he had made peace with his own mercy, and he was still patting himself on the back for not killing a monster when the monster was bowed at his feet. Athena couldn’t say the same. Because if the monster got up and took Dionysos from her, the only monster left in the end would be her. Because she was going to come for everyone.

So Dio was right, but she was right too.

There was a loud thud overhead.

Athena looked up at the ceiling, listening as a sudden commotion spilled down the stairs. Voices, footsteps, doors thrown open. Enough to steal her focus and hold it. Enough so

that she eased up on Pallas's chest enough for him to suck in a second wind. Then he shoved upward against her foot, causing her to lose her balance. She stumbled back before crashing to the floor just as he lunged in the other direction.

The basement door flew open, Hades' voice booming through the space.

"Dionysos!"

Athena pushed herself up, snatching the gun from where it had fallen beside her. Pallas had managed to get his hands on the guard's discarded gun, and he was now looking between her and Dionysos. That was all it took. One second. One single second of hesitation.

Athena swung her gun around and aimed as Pallas extended his arm towards Dio. Before his finger could find his trigger, she pulled hers. The bullet tore through the side of his neck.

He dropped the gun, clawing at his open throat as blood gushed out over his shirt. She watched him bleed out with eyes riveted, no trace of remorse in her veins. Hades came racing down the stairs, Artemis, Thanatos, and Nike in his wake. He came to a halt as he took in the scene, his eyes moving from body to body, from dead to alive to somewhere in between. Athena pushed herself to her feet, rushing over to Dio to untie him.

"Athena you—" Hades attempted, but he wasn't sure what to say. "How did you get here?"

"This is Zeus's house," she returned, her tone flat.

She felt a shallow contempt for her uncle at the moment. Perhaps for his moral failings. Or lack thereof.

"It's not on the records," she went on when Hades gave her a bewildered look. "But I knew about it. And I knew this was the only place Pallas could truly hide while he was still in the city."

"We were going to capture him. We were going to take him in."

That contempt began to grow. “He was going to shoot Dionysos. I wasn’t going to let that happen again.”

“We needed him. We needed answers. Zeus has who knows how many allies, how many people plotting against the city. Pallas wasn’t the only one.”

“Then talk to Zeus. He’s alive, remember? Which is why we’re here in the first place.”

Hades didn’t say another word, and she focused on placing Dio’s arm around her shoulders, Thanatos coming to her aid.

There were others outside, but she didn’t take the time to identify them. Conversations quieted to hushed voices, the surprise evident amongst them. They hadn’t planned for her. Luckily, Pallas hadn’t either. That was far more important at the moment.

Artemis followed them out, opening the door to her SUV so that they could place Dio in the backseat. She then climbed behind the wheel, and Athena settled beside him, Thanatos shutting them inside.

As the vehicle pulled away from the curb, Dio leaned sideways, the wounded side of his head pressed against the window.

“D, be careful,” she hissed, pulling him towards her although it was much harder for him to rest his head atop hers.

Still, he cracked his eye open and smiled at her. “It feels good. The cold.”

She couldn’t help but laugh, but it soon turned into a soft sob. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders again, hugging her to him and resting his cheek against her head.

“You did the right thing,” he mumbled faintly after a moment. “I know you did.”

“I - I don’t know if I would have listened to you anyway.”

“I don’t even know if I wanted you to. But - thanks for considering it.”

“It’s not because you weren’t right. I know you were right.”

She felt his smile widen. “I know. But you were right too.”

Her lips curled, and she moved closer to him. “I know.”

“So thanks for saving my life.”

“I’d say anytime, but I really hope we never have to do this again.”

“Eh.” He shrugged although it was minimal movement. “I make no promises. Plus - it was really sexy.”

She snorted. “What was?”

“You whipping the pistol around like that. And perfect aim from the ground?”

“You’re wild.”

“I could’ve cum faster than the bullet if I hadn’t been half conscious.”

“Dionysos!” Both Athena and Artemis said it now.

“Hey, I have a concussion,” he shot back. “I am liable for nothing at the moment.”

“I’m sure I won’t have any choice but to remember it a week from now,” Artemis grunted.

CHAPTER 40

ATHENA

Dio was making more jokes after only being in the hospital half an hour, and it got to the point where the healers threatened to put him in another room because he kept making Hephaestus laugh so hard that they feared he would further fracture one of his two cracked ribs. Once the healers left, it was up to Athena to scold him, but eventually, the pain medication they supplied him with kicked in, and he was fast asleep.

He looked peaceful despite the marred skin of his baby face. The gash that plagued his brow was sure to leave a scar, and his cheekbone was fractured and would take time to heal. Probably longer than usual with the way this man walked around grinning all the damn time even when he was in pain.

She loved that Fates forsaken grin.

Aphrodite and the twins came in at some point, but the twins were sent right back out to sit with their grandfather when they tried to wake up Dionysos, Phobos leaning over his body to inspect his face before demanding to know what had happened. Athena wasn't ready to speak about it though. There was no way to tell the story again without spilling salt in the open wound. Someone else would have to explain. Someone else would have to tell everyone everything.

Kissing Dio's forehead, Athena got up and walked out of the room. She needed some fresh air, and she wanted to allow Hephaestus and Aphrodite some time alone. Rather than go out into the main hall, she walked further into the patient care

area, flagging down a healer who could let her out of the side exit.

She skirted around to the front of the hospital and took a seat on the low wall that enclosed the parking lot. The sun sat over the distant horizon, beginning its slow ascent into the sky. Its rays warmed her face, and she closed her eyes, drinking it in. It felt fitting for a new day to start now. It felt like a second chance.

She only registered the sound of the approaching footsteps when they were but a few feet away, and she reeled back, her eyes snapping open. Her uncle put his hands up in surrender, and she relaxed some, although now that she wasn't sagging beneath the weight of an injured Dio, a new weight of everything she'd said to Hades now settled in her stomach like a stone.

"May I sit?" he asked.

She rocked in her seat before nodding, unsure of what more to say. She wasn't planning to apologize. Although the words had been uttered out of anger, she didn't mean them any less. In fact, she meant them more now.

He inhaled, but she spoke first.

"What happens to Zeus?"

He closed his mouth, seemingly taken aback by the question. She waited with as much patience as she could muster after 48 hours without sleep.

"He'll be moved to more secure facilities as soon as Erebus' brothers reach the southern islands," Hades said on the edge of a heavy breath. "Complete solitude. The guards won't even speak to him when they drop off his meals."

"You truly think that it's enough?"

"I do, yes."

"And if it isn't?"

He looked down. She looked back towards the horizon. The morning breeze ruffled her hair with gentle fingers.

“I know you don’t approve of my methodology,” Hades at last said. “Nor do I blame you. I do take full responsibility for what happened here. Not just because I’m a leader or a martyr or any of that, but because I know that Zeus has always been my weakness.” He expelled a self-deprecating laugh. “It’s how I know Dionysos isn’t yours. Because even when it comes to him, your logic is without fail.”

“You said we needed him. Pallas.”

He shrugged. “Maybe we did. Maybe we didn’t. It doesn’t matter now. You saved Dio’s life. You did what needed to be done. We will figure this out another way.”

“And who needs Zeus, Uncle?”

He smiled sadly. “I do.”

“Because of a promise you made to a woman who never had to see what he became?”

He nodded.

“And do you think that she would approve of you leaving a ticking time bomb around *your* children, so that they do nothing but wait for it to blow?”

“I don’t know.”

“When a plague comes to a city, we do not save the plague. We save the people.”

“Zeus is still a person, Athena.”

“A person becomes a plague when their life becomes more important than everything and everyone around it.”

“I—”

“How many people did Medusa lose? How many more might die before we figure out what his next move is or was. For all we know, he’s planned for all of this, and right now, his allies are gearing up to do something else just as heinous as the attack on the port. We showed our bellies, and now the entire Aegean has its eyes on us. And some of them want us to fail.”

“And I am well aware. I know what I’ve done, and I know what happened here. There is nowhere I can turn where I am not reminded of my mistakes, but I already saved him. The moment for vengeance has passed.”

“For you.”

Hades looked at her as she stood up, and she turned to meet his eyes head on when she spoke again.

“The longer you keep him alive, the more people he will hurt, and that blood will be on your hands. And if that blood is ever again Dio’s—”

Her voice broke, shattered into a million pieces at her feet, and she couldn’t find the strength to bend down and pick them up. Fear still gripped her around the throat, the very idea of what could have happened leaving her breathless. She couldn’t. She could never. Living without him was not an option.

“I will kill Zeus myself, and you will be my enemy too.”

She turned to walk away.

“Athena...”

She halted in her tracks. Not because she wanted to, but because walking away from him was no easier when it was righteous. Cautiously, he stepped in front of her, and the moment his arms opened, she was melting into him.

And all of the fight bled out of her, anguish and exhaustion tangling around her limbs like vines. She hugged him back, and he hugged her tighter, each of them trying to hold the other together to the best of their ability. Soft sobs and gentle pleas fell from her lips, searching for some kind of antidote to this uncanny grief she was feeling. He kissed the top of her head, his own body trembling with unshed tears and overgrown emotion.

“Don’t give up on me yet,” he whispered, his voice shaking. “I will make this right, and I will do right by you. By all of you. Just - please don’t give up on me yet. I cannot do this without you.”

All she could do was nod, her own words stuck to the roof of her mouth. She wanted to tell him she believed him. She also wanted to tell him she still meant every word she'd said. But that could be communicated on another day, because they had managed to buy themselves some time. How much, she didn't know, but she vowed not to waste it.

After leaving Hades, she returned to Dio's hospital room where Hephaestus was beginning to doze off as well, and Aphrodite was watching him with a reserved sort of awe in her eyes. At least that was the best way Athena could describe it, but even if it wasn't entirely accurate, the look itself was familiar. She offered it to Dionysos often.

"We might as well put our names on the door, huh?" Aphrodite sighed.

"And theirs on the beds."

She laughed. "Phew, Fates forbid it's ever the other way around. I'mma be insufferable for the sake of it the way he acts."

"You're already insufferable," Heph muttered, half awake.

"I hope you know I'm keeping a list of the shit you say while you're in here."

"Add it to my tab."

"Mhmm. I'll never hear the end of it if it's the other way around though. I still haven't heard the end of... well, you know."

Athena snickered with a nod. "Yeah, I know."

She moved closer to Athena, lowering her voice to a whisper.

"At least Dio's sweet. He'll probably be so excited to be able to take care of you for once."

"Yeah, you're probably right." Her lips twitched. "Maybe I'll let him try it every once in awhile."

"I think that's a good idea. That way you can train him if there are any shortfalls. Make him a checklist. Enjoy

yourself.”

“That definitely does sound nice.”

They were quiet for awhile before Aphrodite sighed.

“Alright, girl, I’m gonna get out of here, get these boys home and fed, but hey.” Athena looked up at her, and Aphrodite grinned. “I’m proud of you. What you did out there, you handled your business. And may I never get on your bad side.”

Athena smiled back. “I know what you’re capable of too. We can keep it civil.”

Aphrodite bumped her fist. “Deal.”

After she left, Athena quietly drew the curtains between the beds, giving Hephaestus his privacy and quiet. She had just sat back down when Dio stretched out like a large cat, several of his joints popping and his legs all but hanging off the bed. His eyes fluttered open, and when they landed on her, he smiled.

“You’re still here.”

She rolled her eyes. “Where else would I be?”

“I don’t know. Work.”

She softened. “Not today. In fact, I think I need a vacation.”

He let out a dramatic gasp. “I’ve died, haven’t I?”

“Don’t even joke like that right now, Dionysos.”

“But *you’re* joking. Right?”

“No, I don’t think I am. I haven’t slept in days, and my boyfriend keeps getting himself either shot or almost shot. I need a break.”

There was a beat of calm before he caught up to her words, and she swore that the smile that split his face was the biggest she had ever seen. She wished that she could savor it, keep it somewhere on her person where it would always be protected.

It was as if he had bottled the sun and splashed it across his face.

He beckoned her forward, and she reluctantly climbed up on the bed beside him, settling down against his side.

“So you got a boyfriend, huh?” he asked.

“I do. I mean, at least I think I do. I’ve been sort of a dick to him lately. And by sort of I mean very. And by lately, I mean a lot.”

“Eh, you’re pretty and smart and look like you give great —“

“Dionysos!”

“Back rubs.” He gave her a cheeky grin. “And if you did something like save his life, how could he really be mad at you?”

“I hope you’re right.”

“Oh, I am. Trust me.”

She nodded, listening to the thud of his heartbeat beneath her ear. It was the sound she had been looking for, the sound of home.

“So...”

She looked up at him as he drew the word out, looking suspiciously innocent.

“What?” she said cautiously.

“Does he got a big dick?”

She rolled her eyes again. “Actually, it’s the only downfall to him. It’s like the size of my pinky. Like my toe, not my—hey!”

His fingers dug into her sides until she was fighting to suppress her high-pitched laughter. She twisted against him, slapping a hand over his mouth and her own. Her wide eyes met his, and she gave him a pointed look.

“Shh,” she at last managed to say. “You’ll wake up your brother.”

“Don’t want that,” Dio whispered back. “You should probably find a better way to shut me up though.”

“Oh, yeah? That wasn’t enough?”

“Not at all.”

She smirked but relented, leaning up and pressing her lips to his. She ignored the rough skin of his broken lip, careful not to agitate the three stitches on the inside. When she pulled back, he was still smiling.

“I’m sorry,” she croaked, unable to help it. “For everything. Everything I did, and everything I said...”

He took her hand in his, threading their fingers together. “You apologize a lot. And I - don’t apologize enough. We’re probably both gonna have to apologize a lot more, and - we also probably have a lot more growing up to do than we realized, but - you’re my best friend, and I’m in love with you, so - no matter what we have to go through, I know it’ll be worth it in the end, and - I’m all in. I just... you can’t do it alone. No matter how much you want to, no matter how hard you try, life isn’t something you excel at by yourself, Athena. There are many things you won’t need me for. I know that now, but - it can’t be everything. If we’re together, we’re partners, right? And if we can make that work, if we can learn to share the burden, whatever it may be, we’ll make it through anything. Just please. Let me in.”

She stared up at him, cradling his cheek in one hand and his hand in the other. This wasn’t the boy she’d met all those years ago and immediately determined that he would lead her to ruin. She had been right, but this still wasn’t him. No, this was a man who would lead her in and right back out of it. Wise and beautiful, compassionate and caring, and every bit exactly who she saw herself with at the end of the world. And she loved him. She loved him more than she could ever put into words, but that was okay because his eyes said he already knew that.

She was still gonna try and show him though.

“Okay.” She gave him a firm nod. “Okay, I will.”

He smiled. “That’s all I ask. And I’ll try to be a little less reckless.”

She smiled too. “And I will try to be a little *more* reckless.”

“...Really?”

“Mhm. In fact, I’d like to be a little bit reckless right now and tell you a very important secret.”

His eyes bulged, and he immediately leaned in. “What is it?”

“You sure you can keep it?”

“Of course. I’m the king of keeping secrets.”

She didn’t believe that for one second, but she pulled his head down gently anyway until her lips could hover over his ear.

“My boyfriend... has a pretty big dick.”

“Ha!” He startled her into a fit of giggles with his sudden outburst, and she couldn’t even try and hush him. “I knew it! I knew you knew it too. But how about I show it to you anyway, and we could do that whole make-up sex thing right here in the—”

“Still awake!”

Hephaestus’ voice cut through the conversation, leaving them dead silent for several seconds before they burst into laughter. She wrapped her arms around Dio, his heart pattering to a much happier tune than before. She could fall asleep right here, and she knew she would any moment, so she tilted her head up slightly.

“I’m in love with you, you know,” she hissed.

He kissed her nose and wrapped both arms around her. “Yeah. I kinda figured. Which is cool considering I’m in love with you too.”

“You said that already.”

“And I’ll say it a million more times. Probably before tomorrow. So deal with it.”

And tired as she was, she was almost certain that she could.

EPILOGUE

Dionysos knelt down in the soft, green grass, running his hand over the smooth marble stone before him. He traced over the letters engraved in its face, searching for that warmth he knew should be there, should be everywhere she was, even now. It wasn't. The stone was cold to the touch, immune to the air around it. Whatever warmth that was left in this place, she'd taken it with her.

But you carry so much of her with you. You were that warmth too.

Geryon climbed into his lap, his big eyes trained on Dio's watering ones. Dio smiled and picked him up, turning him to face the stone.

"This is where the greatest person in the whole world lived," he explained although Geryon kept looking back at him instead. "She isn't here now no matter what the rock says. She's up in the Hall of the Moirai with the Fates, looking down on us."

He glanced up as if hoping to see it, to catch her eyes looking back at him, but there was nothing. Not even a cloud. Just the empty blue skies of an Aegean spring that preceded the annual rains.

His attention was stripped by the distant howling of a stray dog. Some things hadn't changed.

"You know, she loved animals. She used to get in trouble for trying to feed all the strays in the neighborhood." Dio chuckled, fond memories racing back to him. "So our yard

was always filled with cats at all hours of the night. The only ones that weren't welcomed were the rabbits because they always tried eating her vegetables, but the dogs ran them off."

Geryon turned himself around, climbing up Dio's chest until he could rest his head on Dio's shoulder. Dio ran a hand down his back.

"She would've loved you though. So, so much."

He shut his eyes, allowing the quiet to settle, to lull him into some sense of safety, of comfort. It didn't take long. He had always been able to find peace here. That hadn't changed. Even though he ached with a longing that could never be rectified. Even though the place was now marked with loss.

Dio only noticed the shadow that had fallen upon them after a hand landed on his other shoulder. Geryon was quickly trying to scramble off of him and onto the ground.

"I can get Uncle to send someone. We can bring her home."

Dionysos smiled, shaking his head. "She already is home... And she would come back to haunt me if I took her bones away from here."

Athena knelt beside him, Geryon now climbing into her lap, the small hound barking happily. Dio scratched behind his ears, thankful for his presence. Skylla had given birth just a few days after Pallas's death, and each of Hades' nephews as well as Athena had gotten a pup. In fact, there was enough for the twins to claim their own separate from Hephaestus and Aphrodite, and they had been thrilled. Athena's puppy was back home in Khaos Falls with Hades, but Geryon had hardly left Dio's side since they were given the okay to take them from Asphodel, and Dio needed all the support he could get.

Because regardless of perfect timing, Dio hadn't been sure he could make this trip at all, with or without Athena. And it wasn't due to the fear of danger although Hades' initial disagreement had been rooted in it. Dio had understood of course. It had been slightly more than two months since the attack on the city, and while things had been quiet, they all

knew it was far from over. Like the clear blue skies before the heavy rains, it was only a matter of time. Yet Dio felt that if he didn't make the trip now, when he was at his happiest, he never would.

Granted, he was sure that what Athena had wanted when she agreed to come to the southern islands was to see Zeus, but it turned out that he had already been moved, and Hades wasn't divulging his location to anyone. In the back of his mind, Dio hoped they'd driven him off a cliff, but in his heart, he knew better. He just hoped that wherever it was, it was a really small cell.

Regardless of Zeus's whereabouts though, Dio was nervous the entire voyage from Khaos Falls to Old Crete, a voyage he had only completed once in the opposite direction. He hadn't even known where exactly he was heading until Athena called Morpheus directly —without telling Dio of course— and Morpheus had promised to not only find the burial site Dio sought but offer them full security and lodging while on the island.

He had also been able to find the aforementioned burial site with a quickness despite the mess in the city archives, mainly due to the fact that Dio's mother was buried right where Dio had left her, at their home. Or at least in its soil. The house itself was nothing but ruin now, but in the backyard was the most beautiful headstone he could imagine with her name etched across it and an apple tree at its back. Her favorite.

He traced the epitaph once more. *Semele, beloved mother of Dionysos the Winemaker.*

The updated inscription wasn't the only evidence that someone had been visiting her often either. Fresh flowers were laid at the base, and new sprouts were already coming up from the ground around them, the soil damp. He had a hunch as to who the culprit was, but he would investigate it tomorrow. Today was for her.

“Besides,” he sighed, taking Athena's hand in his, “once things - settle down, we'll be here too. At least two weeks out

of the year.”

She smirked. “I can’t believe you talked me into buying a vacation home in Old Crete.”

“I can’t believe I got you to agree to a vacation anywhere much less Old Crete.”

“Well—”

“Nope. You already agreed. You can’t take it back. And Uncle agreed too.”

She rolled her eyes. “Brat.”

She kissed his cheek as he turned back to the headstone, taking in a deep breath.

They had agreed that while they worked on finding the rest of Zeus’s potential allies, Dionysos could have another house built on this lot, which was still in his name. Once they were done —both the two of them and the house— they would take at least two weeks every year and come out here.

For Dionysos, it not only meant reclaiming his first home, it was the first step in building one with Athena. More than anything though, he just wanted make sure nothing ever happened to his mother’s headstone because while he knew she went wherever he went, this monument was another piece of her mark here on this earth just like the label on his wine and the scripted ink outlining his collar. He had to protect it as he protected Khaos Falls.

Besides, she hadn’t just left the land to him out of obligation. She had wanted him to be able to come home.

“I used to tell myself she was still here,” he said softly. “That - she’d just sent me away so that I could have a better life, see the world, do better than just enough to get by. And I swore I’d come back, bring her all the spoils of being the mother of the Aegean’s best winemaker. But I was too scared because - deep down, I knew. I knew her soul was already with me, and her body was long gone.”

Athena said nothing, only rubbed his back, but he knew it was because she didn’t wish to try and offer a logical response

that would strip the emotion down to some scientific truth. It was something she was working on every day, and he was grateful. In return, he tried to do a better job of taking things seriously and not bottling up his feelings. He thought they were doing quite well.

“I just wanted her to see it, you know,” he sighed. “I wanted her to know that - that she didn’t make a mistake. That she didn’t have to be scared that she’d sent me to some horrible fate. That - I made it. For both of us.”

“She knows, Dio,” Athena said softly. “She’s watching over you, remember? She’s seen everything. She’s there.”

“I know.” He chuckled softly. “How else would I grow anything? I was hopeless without her help, and I know she used to fix my plots after she sent me inside to bathe. But - she made sure I could do it, what I loved. That’s why I named it after. Semele Wines. Because I knew she was doing it all.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit, and I bet she’d say the same thing.”

He smirked. “Yeah, she would. And she—“

“Dionysos?”

They both whipped around.

An older Black woman stood on the other side of the ruined hut, its walls now piles of clay in the overgrowth. She was slightly taller than Athena, her thighs and arms thick and her coarse, black hair short against her head. Despite how the years had imposed upon her, he recognized her and her warm brown eyes. They were so like his mother’s. And they were the last ones he saw before he boarded the ship to Khaos Falls.

“You made it home.” It sounded like an exhale she’d been waiting to relinquish.

Dionysos stood, Athena doing the same and remaining at his shoulder. He could feel the tension in her body, her mind on high alert in case there was a threat. But this woman was nothing of the sort. He moved towards her, Geryon at his heels, barking when they got too close. He thought her a stranger, but Dionysos knew her like his own name.

“Thyone.”

Athena slowly relaxed beside him. Dio had told her all about Thyone, her mother’s oldest friend.

Athena picked up their hound and halted a few feet away as Dio stepped up to the woman. Before he could embrace her, she reached up to take his face in her hands.

“You look so much like her. It’s like looking at a picture.”

“And you haven’t aged a day.”

She laughed, a watery laugh, but the joy was immense. “And you have become such a charmer. Then again, I’ve heard all about it.”

“Have you?”

“Oh yeah. I’ve kept it all. Bottles and bottles of your wine, every magazine cover and regional article, pictures of your vineyard. She would have loved it. She would have loved it all.”

Dio smiled. It hurt as much as it helped. There was something comforting about hearing his own love for his mother echoed back at him. Because Thyone was the only one who had loved her as much as Dio had, and he suspected that she had loved her in more ways than he’d realized back then. Regardless, Thyone had filled the voids of not only his father but every family member he never got to meet, helping Semele raise him until it all got too bad. Dio had wanted more than anything to stay with her when his mother first fell ill, but their island was being ravaged by more than just a plague. In the end, keeping him there hadn’t been an option.

But she’d survived it. She was still here waiting for him. And he’d been hiding from her all this time like a child. He vowed he wouldn’t be a child any longer.

“But how have you been?”

“Oh, I’m doing just fine. Still keeping things running, making sure everyone has what they need. It’s been much better since we got a new leader. They’re still getting

comfortable, but other parts of the island are already looking better for it.”

“Well, if that ever changes, you call me, alright? I’ve got an in with your new leader.”

She looked up at him with wide eyes. “Oh, is that right? Okay, I knew you were big, but that big?”

“Yes, ma’am. Oh!” He turned, beckoning Athena forward. “Thyone, this is my girlfriend, Athena. She’s one of the district leaders in Khaos Falls, and we grew up together. Athena, this is Thyone, my godmother. And that’s our puppy, Geryon.”

Athena stepped up quickly, taking Thyone’s offered hand.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Thyone. I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Oh, I’m sure that’s an exaggeration,” Thyone chuckled, scratching Geryon beneath the chin. “But it’s a pleasure to meet you too.”

“It definitely isn’t,” Dio shot back. “Athena was the first person other than my uncle that I told about you and Mom. She’s heard it all.”

“I was especially interested in the story where he kept climbing that tree you told him not to climb, and when he got stuck, you let him sit up there a few hours,” Athena quipped.

“Oh, yeah,” Thyone sighed, looking up at Dio. “He was always a big ball of trouble, but I wouldn’t be in near as good shape even now if it weren’t for chasing him around the block.”

Dio wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “We had good times, didn’t we?”

“Definitely.” She patted his stomach. “So you just come to see your mama?”

“I was hoping to find you next, so I guess it worked out,” he grinned. “I figured you were the one doing all the upkeep around here.”

“I do my best. It’s the least I can do for her now. Sometimes, a few of the neighborhood boys help out, bring supplies down, but it’s pretty easy by now. Routine.”

“Well, uh, I’ve decided that since the land is still in my name, I’m gonna rebuild the house. I mean, not the same house, but - a house, so that I can come see you both at least once a year. It’ll be our vacation home.”

She looked at Athena now. “Please tell me this won’t be your *first* vacation home.”

Athena smirked. “It will be.”

“In Old Crete?”

“It’s home,” Dio pointed out. “It always will be.”

Thyone’s lips twitched. “Well, I can’t say I won’t like seeing you more.”

“Speaking of which, when are you gonna let me take you to Khaos Falls?”

“I’m long past my traveling days, Dionysos.”

“Um, I don’t think your traveling days have started, Thyone, but we can revisit that topic later.” When his city wasn’t at war.

“Mhmm. How long you here for?”

“Uh, just a couple days this time. We’ve got some - work to get back to.”

“How about you stop by for dinner before you go? We can really catch up.”

“Oh, you know I’d never turn down your cooking.”

“You better bring some of that wine with you too.”

“Of course.”

“For now, I’ve gotta get goin’. Some of the elders down the street are waiting to get me their grocery lists.” Dio opened his mouth to say something, but she placed a hand on his chest. “Don’t you worry. I just collect ‘em. I got those neighborhood kids that come get ‘em in the afternoon when

they're done with school then they help me distribute. We take care of each other."

"But the markets are still far away, aren't they?"

"We manage. I gotta get down there though before they start worryin'. I'll see you later. And Athena." She gave the younger woman a meaningful look. "You look every bit as tough as you need to be to handle this one. Keep him out of trouble."

"She's been doing it most of her life now," Dio assured her. "She's very good at it."

"You can count on me," Athena said with a smile.

With one last long hug, she bid Dionysos goodbye and headed off down the block, but she'd only made it a few yards when a sudden panic gripped him. Then he was running.

"Thyone, wait!"

She came to a stop just as he caught up to her, turning to look at him with confusion in her eyes.

"What is it?" she questioned.

"I..."

Though now that he was looking at her again, he wasn't sure what to say. Of course, it was written all over his face, and she read it the way she always had. No matter how long it had been, she still knew him as well as he knew her.

"Don't apologize," she said softly. "You did what we wanted you to do. You got out, and you did well for yourself."

"But - I don't want you to think I forgot about you or that - I didn't miss you. I just—"

"Dionysos, I know you, and I know how hard it was for you to leave, so I know how hard it would be to come back. Did I worry? Of course I did, but once you started popping up all over, once I was able to check in on ya, I was just happy to see you happy. I knew you'd make it back when you were ready. And I am so proud of you."

“I never would’ve made it without you. I just - I wanted to pretend she was okay, and that you were both here and happy, and - I left you to deal with it alone. To - to watch her...”

She placed a hand on his chest. “Our last days together were everything I could have asked for, and - before that, the life the three of us had was the gift no one can ever compete with. The only thing I ever cared about was not letting you two down, and now that you’re here, grown and successful, I can live knowing I kept my promise to her. Don’t you worry about me, Dio. I’ll be here for you until my last breath, and there is nothing you have to do to earn that.”

He didn’t know what else to say, so he simply hugged her then, the tears spilling out of him of their own volition. Despite them though, he felt lighter than ever. Content maybe. This must be closure. Or the closest he could get.

He didn’t know how long he stood there after she walked away again, watching her disappear until Athena came and took his hand. She pressed her lips to the back of it.

“Come on.” Her voice was feather soft. “I got a surprise waiting for you back at the house.”

MORPHEUS HAD ASSURED them that the top-floor apartment he’d put them up in was one of the most secure locations in the city of Pephka, and considering the constant security roaming the nearby area, Dionysos was inclined to believe him. Even if that weren’t the case, Hades had sent them with an elite detail that included not only Nike and Artemis but Leonidas, Atalanta, and Calypso. Three of Hades’ best.

Following the death of Pallas, Thassos had been thrown into more internal turmoil although the community leaders had been more willing to accept help. Khaos Falls sent both food and monetary resources, and Apollo had agreed to help rebuild some of the neighborhoods that had been forgotten amidst the leadership of the last tumultuous year, most of which went unseen by visitors to the city. Even Dio hadn’t realized just how bad it was further in from the beach. Luckily, their past

few leaders hadn't been able to do much irreversible damage, and the city was set to recover rather well.

Regardless, they still had enemies, most whom still had no names or faces attached. Therefore, they were to take every precaution for the time being.

While Artemis walked Geryon, Athena took Dio upstairs. The elevator opened up into a spacious living room bathed in warm Aegean sunlight, cream-colored carpets and black marble surfaces spanning out before them. By now, Dio had stopped asking what the surprise was because at one point, Athena had stopped answering altogether.

She took his hand once more and led him down the hall towards their bedroom. He tried to suppress his giddy grin, but the moment she opened the door, he need not try anymore. It was washed out by surprise. Before him was a forest of sheets.

Athena had built a fort.

And it wasn't like the fort he'd thrown together haphazardly on the ship in Thassos. It was more elaborate, so much so that Dio would bet it could impress Apollo. However, Athena's touch was all over it, from the green and blue color scheme to the strategic placement of the pillows and furniture. It was beautiful.

Athena didn't let him linger long, walking straight through the archway she'd shaped just beyond the door. Dio still had to duck, but as soon as they were inside, he was able to stand up straight without issue, looking up at a sky of draped fabric.

She'd fortified the structure with what he assumed was everything in the apartment that hadn't been bolted down, so she must have had some help. The bed, the TV, and the mini fridge were enclosed as well, and an elated laugh left him as he surveyed the space.

"Impressed?" she asked.

"That's an understatement... We were only apart for an hour. How did you manage this?"

"I'm good under pressure...And I employed some of the guard."

Gripping her hand tighter, he stopped her forward progression, pulling her back into his chest. At the moment of impact, he expelled a heavy breath that made the world settle into place. He felt at ease. He felt... safe.

“You did this for me?”

She nodded, snaking her arms around his waist. “I knew today would be difficult, and - these forts are our safe place, so...”

He wet his lips. “But - I thought we agreed we had to - you know. Mature a bit.”

“First of all, everyone loves a good pillow fort.”

“Hm, good point. Hephaestus hides in the one he built for the twins all the time.”

“Second of all, we —well, *I*— also agreed to live a little, so we can mature when we’re back to work, but right now? I just wanna be with you somewhere that’s ours, you know? I mean, if I’m gonna take a vacation, I might as well make sure it serves its purpose.”

His lips curled as he pressed them to her forehead. “Thank you.”

Sweeping her up, he dropped down onto the pillow-padded floor and set her upon it before capturing her lips. It was still surreal. All these years, all this time, and he was finally able to kiss her, to touch her, to hold her hand and tell her all the many thoughts he once hid away. The freedom alone made him weak, and he settled easily into that comfort she’d spoken about.

But that was definitely meant to happen with the love of your life.

“Thank you for coming with me,” he whispered quietly, resting his forehead against hers.

She ran a hand down over his neck. “Did it help?”

“I...” He sighed, shrugging his broad shoulders. “I want it to. And it should. I just - need some time to let it sink in, you know.”

But there was something else too. The truth was that he didn't want to go to war wondering. More importantly, he didn't want to keep pretending. He'd made a promise to be more responsible, more mature, and there was nothing mature about playing pretend for the sole purpose of upholding denial. It would have continued to blind him, and he couldn't afford that. His family needed him.

But if he could do this, if he could face his greatest fear and make peace with his mother's death, he could do anything.

Athena seemed to understand the struggle in his eyes because she pulled him closer, nuzzling her nose against his.

"I'm really proud of you."

He smiled. "I don't know if I could've done it without you."

"You'd never have to."

Brushing a stray curl back from her face, he gazed at her with a honed focus. For all that he loved and adored and admired, nothing could ever quite compare to what he felt for her. It was such an odd and fantastical revelation that he always found himself going back to it like a favored painting in a vast museum.

"I wish we could stay here forever," he breathed.

A few months ago, he would have been terrified to say it. Because a few months ago, she would have scolded him for such an irresponsible thought, echoing the many scathing reprimands Zeus had imposed upon her. And he would have yielded if only to ease her burden. But now, she smiled, cupping his cheek.

"I wish we could too... But, even if we can't, I can promise you this. At the end of each day, when I make it back to you, we'll find this peace. No matter where we are. Even if it's just for a moment."

His smile widened to something mischievous. "Does that mean - we can build a fort in one of those extra rooms in Olympus Estate?"

She chuckled, her eyes glossy. “Yeah, I think we can do that.”

He nodded. “Good... And I promise, no matter where you go or how long we have to be apart, I’ll be there. Waiting for you. I’ll be - the best stay-at-home boyfriend you can imagine.”

She laughed louder, pulling him down into a hug and kissing his temple. Though soon, her mouth found his again, fusing together in a contented silence until it evolved into something far less innocent. And far more necessary.

They parted only long enough to free themselves of clothing. The fort began to fill with panted breaths and soft gasps as she let him ravish her neck, nipping and sucking the skin along her collarbone once he settled between her thighs. Her fingers threaded through his curls, tugging each time his teeth scraped across her throat. And with each pull, he could feel her impatience begin to slip.

His one solace at the end of each day was going home to her, and now that he had a few uninterrupted days with her, he wanted to take his time, to savor it. Though he supposed he could do that on the next around.

She spread her thighs as far as she could when his hand slipped between them, her hips already rolling. One swipe of his knuckles along her slit had them slick with her arousal, and they both shivered in the aftermath. He’d only just managed to slide the tip of his cock into her when her hands landed heavily against his ass, his hips snapping forward on instinct until they were flush against hers. A low snarl reverberated through his throat before he dropped his head and buried it into her neck, already moving against her with a blooming urgency.

Her nails bit the skin of his ass, and once they’d sunken in a ways, she dragged them upward, earning a fresh string of obscenities from him. He slapped his hand against the pillow beneath her head, the other slipping beneath her with every intention of palming her ass. Though in the moment, with his mind torn between action and reaction, the best he could do

was rest his palm against the small of her back, his thick middle finger sliding between her cheeks until it pressed against her hole. Her legs tightened around him, a stuttered whine leaving her lips as her hips became more insistent beneath him, thrusting up into his.

“Fuck, D, just - please. *Yes.*”

He muttered against her ear, a jumbled mess of dirty, filthy thoughts spilling unfiltered between each rough stroke. He could hardly think at all much less think straight, his tongue taking advantage, but it seemed to have the desired effect. She shouted his name, smacking his ass repeatedly until he was slamming his dick into her with a rabid thrust, each one accompanied by a monstrous grunt.

In time, Athena’s broken moans were laid over them, bleeding through the sheets that surrounded their writhing bodies. Getting his free hand beneath her thigh, he pushed it upward until her ankle was on his shoulder, leaving her wide open for him. Not that he could ever get quite deep enough.

He adjusted the angle of his hips every few minutes in a futile attempt to do so anyway. And he kept trying until he had her damn near folded in half, his knees crashing against the floor with such a force that it shook beneath them despite the padding. And he couldn’t find the will to care.

They clutched at each other, finding anchor wherever they could as he urged her towards the edge, holding out on his own orgasm to ensure hers. The strain was immense, and he gritted his teeth while still daring to stroke faster, harder, her walls constricting around him.

“Dio! Oh my— oh, fuck!”

“Cum for me.” It was nothing more than a rasped snarl, but it was drenched in conviction. “Please. Baby — cum. I - I wanna cum. I want...”

He need not elaborate further. Her hands scaled up, clawing at his back hard enough to break skin as he drilled into her cunt with the ruthlessness his voice lacked. His jaw

clenched as her walls did, clinging to the last bit of his resolve though the pieces were trembling in place. As was he.

“Fuck! Athena—”

“Dio, I’m—”

Her body seized up, spasming around him, and he followed right after, a rattled yowl leaving him just before he was silenced by his own climax. Then, without warning, he was catapulted into extreme ecstasy.

His eyes rolled back, his breath lodged in his throat as he rutted against her desperately, her pussy milking him of every drop he had to offer. His mind was blank save for the stars dotting his eyes, imploding and impressing upon his senses in a way that left them all useless. All he knew was pleasure. All he knew was her.

He shuddered and shook, riding out his orgasm alongside her as she clung to him for dear life. Her hips jerked violently against his until they were spent, collapsing back against the mattress. There was nothing more satisfying than feeling her cum.

When he at last went limp himself, she caught him in shaking arms, petting his hair as she whimpered his name again and again against his slick temple. He melted into her, unable to do anything else regardless of how his mind screamed at him to roll over, to relieve her. She stroked his hair unfazed, pressing her lips to his head every now and again as her breathing slowed.

It was a long time before she broke the silence.

“So this - is a vacation?”

“Mhm,” he mumbled, his eyes shut. “Been missing out, huh?”

“Very much so.”

“And what do you plan to do about it?”

He felt her smirk against his head just before her hand smacked his ass, eliciting a hiss. “I plan to make up for every vacation I neglected to take.”

“Yeah?”

“Mhm.”

“Well - there are other activities people tend to do on vacation, you know.”

“I don’t care. I’d like to focus on making up this activity first.”

Although they both knew they had much more than a few vacations to make up for in that department. And when he raised his head to look at her, he could tell that she was as interested in making up all of that time as he was.

“Just imagine. You’ll have two weeks of me nonstop every year.”

She wet her lips. “You keep surprising me, and I might have to take more than two weeks.”

He grinned. “Guess I’ll just have to keep surprising you then.”

“Looking forward to it.”

He kissed her again, a kiss as rough as it was soft, and embedded in it was a promise. He was going to make up for everything no matter how long it took. After all, regardless of what came next, he’d fight the Fates themselves to make sure they had all the time in the world. He was gonna need it.

CHARACTER DIRECTORY

For more information on each character, check out rmvirtues.com/gohseries. Directory only features characters already mentioned or introduced and will be updated with each book.

- **Achilles** - Co-head of City Security, Heph's second in command
- **Acrisius †** - Trafficker, tried to have Aphrodite assassinated, killed by Aphrodite
- **Adonis** - Ex-boyfriend of Persephone and Aphrodite, informant for Demeter
- **Agamemnon** - Hades' head of security
- **Aikaterine** - Leader of Phokis
- **Amphitrite** - Co-leader of Atlantis District, heir to father's shipbuilding business, wife of Poseidon
- **Amphitryon** - Co-leader of Thassos City (Let Me In)
- **Aphrodite** - Leader of the Lush District, owner of Lush nightclubs & Twilight House Survivor Shelter, best friend and foster sister of Persephone, ward of Demeter & Hestia
- **Apollo** - Leader of the Arts District, renowned architect, son of Hyperion & Theia, twin brother of Artemis, younger brother of Helios & Selene
- **Ares** - Co-leader of the Olympus District, son of Zeus & Hera, brother of Athena (adoptive), Hephaestus, Dionysos & Hermes
- **Ariadne** - Student at Atlantis University, ex-girlfriend of Dionysos
- **Artemis** - Co-head of City Security, Heph's second in command, daughter of Hyperion & Theia, twin sister of Apollo, younger sister of Helios & Selene
- **Atalanta** - member of Khaos Falls City Security Forces
- **Athena** - Co-leader of the Olympus District, sister of Ares & Hephaestus (adoptive), ward of Zeus, niece of Hades (adoptive), best friend of Dionysos

- **Charon** - Co-leader of the River Styx District, father of Hephaestus
- **Circe** - Right hand of Medusa, sister of Hecate
- **Coeus** - second heir to Tartarus District, son of Erebus & Nyx, brother of Tethys, Crius, & Iapetos
- **Cronus †** - father of Zeus & Poseidon, stepfather of Hades, former leader of the Olympus District
- **Cyclops** - former arms dealer in Khaos Falls
- **Danae** - owner and head chef of Eastern Vineyard restaurant
- **Demeter** - Leader of the Harvest District, mother of Persephone & guardian of Aphrodite, sister to Hestia
- **Deimos** - Adopted ward of Hephaestus & Aphrodite, adoptive brother of Eros, twin brother of Phobos
- **Dionysos** - Co-leader of Market District, vineyard curator & winemaker, brother of Hephaestus, Hermes & Ares, best friend of Athena
- **Erebus** - Co-leader of the Tartarus District, husband of Nyx, father of Tethys, Coeus, Crius, & Iapetos
- **Eros** - Owner of Lush Bakeries, adopted ward of Aphrodite, adoptive brother of Phobos & Deimos
- **Ganymede** - former assistant to Zeus, current assistant to / close friend of Dionysos
- **Hades** - Leader of Khaos Falls, heir of River Styx District, owner of Casino Asphodel, brother of Poseidon & Zeus, uncle to Athena (adoptive), Dionysos, Hermes, Hephaestus, & Ares
- **Hecate** - Co-leader of the River Styx District
- **Hector** - Head of Aphrodite's security team
- **Helios** - Heir to Delos/Mykonos city leadership after his parents, older brother of Selene, Artemis, & Apollo
- **Hephaestus** - Head of Khaos Falls City Security Forces, resident blacksmith, son of Charon & Hera, brother of Athena (adoptive), Ares, Dionysos & Hermes
- **Hera** - Head of Khaos Falls Historical Society, ex-wife of Zeus, mother of Hephaestus & Ares
- **Hermes** - co-leader of the Market District, son of Zeus

- **Hestia** - Right hand of Demeter
- **Hyperion** - Leader of Delos, husband of Theia, father of Helios, Selene, Artemis, & Apollo
- **Hypnos** - Leader of Naxos, brother of Erebus, Morpheus, & Phobetor
- **Ikarios** - curator of Thassos City vineyard & winery
- **Isidora** - owner & head chef of The Athenian Owl
- **Leda** - foot soldier for Acrisius, infiltrated Aphrodite's district
- **Leonidas** - Hades' head of security #2
- **Medusa** - Leader of the Sarpedon District
- **Morpheus** - Leader of Old Crete
- **Nemesis** - Leader of Keos
- **Nike** - member of city security forces
- **Nyx** - Co-leader of the Tartarus District, wife of Erebus, mother of Tethys, Coeus, Crius, & Iapetus
- **Orion †** - former member of Aphrodite's security team, killed while protecting Aphrodite
- **Pallas** - old friend of Athena, Thassos City portmaster
- **Patroclus** - Head of City Naval Forces
- **Persephone** - Aerial performer at Cirque des Coeurs
- **Perseus** - Head of Labyrinth Security
- **Phobetor** - Leader of Messara, brother of Erebus, Hypnos, & Morpheus
- **Phobos** - Adopted ward of Hephaestus & Aphrodite
- **Poseidon** - Co-leader of Atlantis District
- **Prometheus** - tech dealer
- **Psyche** - Head of Twilight House Survivor Shelter
- **Rhea †** - former co-leader of River Styx & Olympus Districts, mother of Hades & Poseidon, stepmother of Zeus
- **Roxana** - Ikarios' apprentice, future curator of Thassos City Vineyard
- **Selene** - Leader of Deucalion Heights, daughter of Hyperion & Theia, sister of Helios, Artemis, & Apollo
- **Tantalos** - Co-leader of Thassos City (Let Me In)
- **Tethys** - Heir to the Tartarus District, daughter of Erebus & Nyx, older sister of Coeus, Crius, & Iapetus

- **Thanatos** - co-leader of the Styx District, Hades' best friend
- **Theia** - Leader of Mykonos, wife of Hyperion, mother of Helios, Selene, Artemis, & Apollo
- **Timotheos** - former leader of Thassos City, currently missing
- **Zeus** - former leader of Khaos Falls. Father of Ares, Hermes, & Dionysos. Former guardian of Athena. Exiled

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dionysos and Athena have been my most cherished and favored couple in my imagined Greek Pantheon for nearly a decade now, meaning that writing their book has been the greatest struggle of my writing career thus far. I wanted to do right by them, and I feel I was finally able to do that.

Thank you to Nick, Maliyah, Whitney, and Nicole for keeping me grounded through this entire process. I don't think this book would have ever seen the light of day without you. You picked me up on my worst days, reassured me when I questioned myself, and made sure I knew I was valued beyond my writing. I can never thank you enough for that.

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Lastly, I dedicated this book to my Nana, who passed away last year and has been heavy on my heart since. In a lot of ways, Dio finally saying goodbye to his mother was my way of finally saying goodbye to her, at least in this realm. Although she will never get to read any of my books, none of them could or would be possible without her. She was everything for me. She wasn't perfect, but she tried her best to make sure I was loved. She was the one who took me to the library almost every day each summer (sometimes twice in one day) to keep up with my reading speed, sitting through the many summer reading program activities for the sole purpose of seeing me happy. She made sure I was fed, took me to all my sports practices, and went to as many of my games as she could. Beyond that, she was my biggest cheerleader, treating

the smallest of accomplishments like the biggest wins no matter what they were and acknowledging me when few else would. She made me feel like I could do anything, and in the end, I guess she was right.

Thank you, Nana, for believing in me. Regardless of what I myself believe in, *you* believed you would always get to watch over me. I hope that holds true. I hope you got to see this. We did it. I love you always.

For all of you readers, thank you for allowing me to share this work with you, and I hope to welcome you back to Khaos Falls —or perhaps another realm of the Virtues Verse— very soon!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



R.M. Virtues is a mythology junkie, lover of love, and creator of worlds. He writes fantasy and paranormal romance about underrepresented characters who get to live and love in a history unabridged. When he isn't busy conjuring romances, he can be found watching horror movies, playing fantasy video games, or eating Korean BBQ. He currently lives in Las Vegas, Nevada with his Funko Pop horror collection. You can find him online at rmvirtues.com or [@rmvirtues](https://twitter.com/rmvirtues) on Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and Patreon.



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