

THE ETHEREAL GODS



# REDEMPTION

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RACHEL CALLAHAN

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THE ETERNAL WIVES



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by Rachel Callahan

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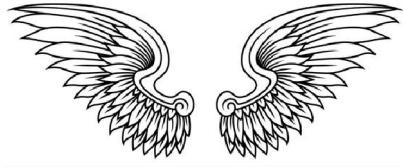
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# Chapter One

## Olivia

“CAN WE GO BACK to the voice? What kind of voice?” my father asks, a hint of trepidation tingeing his tone.

Reluctantly, I pull my gaze from Maximus, the burgeoning heat building between us snuffed out at the reminder that my father—my *parents* are here. That’s something I’ll have to get used to.

My father’s sea-green eyes, so like my own, hold the shadows of fear as they meet mine, sending cold tendrils of dread down my spine. The voice hadn’t seemed like it meant to hurt me, but what if my father knows something I don’t? An echo of the throb in my temple pulses back to life, but it’s gone in the next second, reminding me of the dark, ancient, all-knowing presence that had filled every crevice of my mind.

*Break the link. Offer it your blood.*

My blood soaked into the blade, accepting my offer and linking our power.



My lips part, and I'm about to explain more when two figures begin to appear, stealing the words off my tongue. A silent wind swirls around them, their bodies reforming before us. I pull on that ocean of power within me, and the warm, comforting flicker of flames heats my palm in preparation.

Anger sends a scorching heat over my skin as I make out the faces of our unwelcome guests. Titus and Kallen.

Mateo tenses, the tight muscles of his back bunching as though he's preparing to get up. For some reason, the simple movement seems to trigger the memory of what Seraphina told us in the cave moments before she sacrificed herself for the sake of her people and her land so that the heart could move to her court, her mates.

Vale entrusted the *Descent of the Dark* with Titus, knowing today's events would unfold. If Titus wasn't on our side, he would have never brought me back to the infernal realm, let alone given me that very book that allowed me to locate the dagger and in turn, Seraphina. Still, I can't be too sure about Kallen.

The god of storms shifts uncomfortably as I narrow my gaze on him. He glances around the group nervously, and I can only imagine the assessing glares he's receiving from the others too. He helped Titus in the fight against Romulus' followers, but that doesn't mean we can trust him, not yet.

"Hey," Titus says, breaking through the tension enveloping our group. "I must've missed the memo about the family

gathering.” He feigns his usual cocky tone, but I don’t miss the hint of apprehension.

Silence sweeps over us, as though each of us is too shocked by their appearance to say anything in response, so Titus continues.

“I see Mateo is as healthy as a horse ... and still as large as one. Maybe lay off the protein, buddy. You’re going to make the rest of us look bad,” Titus says, nodding to Adrian and Kyros sympathetically like he’s sure they should be on his side. Instead, Adrian crosses his arms over his chest, narrowing a glare on the god of vengeance, while Kyros pins him with a disapproving look.

Mateo shifts to his feet and reaches out a hand to help me up too, but before he can say anything, Maximus steps in front of us all, a growl emanating from his chest. He rolls his shoulders back, his muscles tensing beneath his tight shirt as he goes toe-to-toe with my brother.

“Hey now, your hulking, bolder-like muscles were never in question, man. You put us all to shame, no doubt about it,” Titus snickers. I’m sure I’m not the only one who catches the nearly imperceptible throat bob, betraying his nerves at the closeness of my god of destruction.

“You still talk too much, Titus,” Maximus grinds out, his fists clenching at his side. “How dare you show up after what you tried?”

“What?” Titus asks, but before he can say anything else, Maximus stalks forward.

His massive hand reaches out, and I launch into motion—about to come to Titus’ defense in the biggest twist of the century. But I stumble to a stop as Maximus clenches the front of Kallen’s black shirt and twists it in his firm grip, lifting him a few inches in the air to meet his emerald glare.

“How dare you even show your face here?” Maximus growls, his lips curling in disgust. Kallen’s eyes widen and he thrashes in Maximus’ hold, but he doesn’t budge, merely managing to flail around like the weasel he is.

*He did fight on our side.* Damn conscience, why do you have to make an appearance *now*?

Thunder cracks in the distance, pulling my focus from my thoughts. Storm clouds sweep in, snuffing out the last flickers of the setting sun shining in the distance. Their ominous crackle of electricity flashes amongst the nearly pitch-black haze, reminding me of where exactly we are and what the consequences could be if both of these gods unleashed their cataclysmic forces here.

“Try it, I dare you,” Maximus hisses, shaking Kallen like a rag doll as the earth rumbles beneath us. “I’ll dump you in a hole so deep, it’ll be centuries until you see the light of day again after you claw your way out.”

“Max,” I breathe, stepping closer and placing a soothing hand on his arm. Mateo grips my other hand as though he’s about to stop me, but lets his hand drop from mine and sighs in defeat, clearly coming to the same conclusion. “Can we hold

off on the burial, at least until we find out what they want? Besides, the students ...”

Lightning glints off the marble dome of the school in the distance, the barest glimpse still visible over the tops of the trees. The flash draws Maximus’ gaze from his captive, and I feel some of the tension ease from his muscles as he lowers Kallen to the ground.

“Stop your storm, Kallen,” my father demands, stepping up on Maximus’ other side along with my mother. “Or else you’ll have more than Max to answer to.”

Maximus keeps his grip on Kallen’s shirt while the clouds dissipate, clearing as quickly as they swept in, the roaring thunder a distant memory as the lightning, too, blinks out of existence. The ground stills beneath us, and Maximus releases his grip, reluctantly letting his arm fall to his side. Kallen stumbles back, but in his haste to put distance between them, he trips, falling backwards, arms flailing wildly as he tries and fails to regain his balance.

“Oof,” Kallen huffs as he falls into the grass, his cheeks reddening with embarrassment. I can’t help but wince in sympathy for him. Today is not his day.

Kallen hurriedly clambers back to his feet, but I can’t help but notice the small mound of earth poking through the grass, slowly creeping back down to blend in with the smooth ground.

“*Really?*” I project to Maximus.

*“That’s the least he deserves,”* Maximus’ deep voice vibrates back through my mind as he steps up to Kallen again.

This time though, Titus manages to get between them, raising his arms defensively to block his brother.

“Because that worked out so well the last time.” Titus sighs. “I know there’s a lifetime of bad blood between us all, but I can explain.”

“They did both fight on our side, Maximus,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest and cocking a challenging brow at my half-brother. “We should at least let them tell their story.”

Titus’ chest puffs up, newfound confidence brimming in his light brown eyes as a smug grin curls on his lips.

Dammit, now he’s going to think I can actually tolerate his annoying ass.

“Are you going to tell them the truth?” Maximus glares back at Titus, causing the latter to deflate. “Kallen wasn’t on our side at the start. He almost struck Adrian while his back was to him. Is that someone we should trust?”

“That was just a misunderstanding,” Titus groans, scrubbing a hand over his face. “Kallen made a choice in that fight, and I trust him to honor that decision.”

“And who says we trust you any more than him?” Adrian asks

*“I’m not sure I trust Kallen either, but we found out that Titus was entrusted by Vale to hold on to the Descent of the Dark after a vision showed him that I would free Seraphina,*

*his heir,*” I project to my mates, filling them in on what Mateo and I discovered.

“I fought with my brother, even when it went against what I’ve stood for my entire life,” Kallen snaps, stepping up beside Titus.

Titus lets his arms flop to his sides, groaning in annoyance. “If everyone would drop their egos, I’d explain everything.”

“Look who’s talking.” I snort. “I’m surprised your ego hasn’t physically manifested with how large it is.”

My outburst seems to lift some of the tension growing thick around us, and Mateo huffs out a breath of amusement and wraps an arm around my shoulders.

“You have the floor,” Mateo says, waving with a flourish.

Maximus grumbles something unintelligible under his breath and takes a step back to stand on my other side, his thick fingers twining with mine like he was pulled by a magnetic force. I squeeze his hand in support and comfort, the weight of today truly now sinking in as the adrenaline from the fight slowly seeps away. Adrian and Kyros stand behind me, their warm, comforting presence easing the tension radiating through my chest from all of the bitter sniping back and forth. My heart hums in contentment, my four mates surrounding me, together again like we were always meant to be.

Titus clears his throat and straightens his suit jacket, the gesture nervous despite his confidence just moments ago. As he sweeps a look over all of us, meeting each of our gazes, I

can't help but realize how drastically his world has changed. Earlier today, he had a family, and regardless of how broken and toxic the four of them were together, either following Romulus or pretending to do so, now they've been torn apart. Our mother is now standing across from him, patiently waiting for his truth, even though he kept secrets from her. It makes sense that he would try to cling to the one tendril of normalcy he has left—his brother by his side.

“I was with Romulus for the meetings with Vale and his court. I bonded with them. I saw the beauty the infernal realm once held before we tore it apart,” Titus begins, his eyes shining as his memories must play before him, envisioning the land I only know as a wasteland. “I visited on my own, explored the great libraries in the castle, losing myself in the history and culture, and learning the magic buried within their soil from Vale himself.”

My brows crease as I study Titus, his demeanor shifting from the pompous asshole I've seen before. He seems ... sincere? Shadows of guilt dance in his eyes and pain crosses his face for the friend he lost.

“Romulus never told me of his plans to claim the realm as his own, to split from the light gods and abandon our home. I was clueless until Vale came to me and revealed his vision, but it was already too late, he knew that, and he knew that no matter what he did, his fate was sealed. It didn't stop him from trying though, from throwing everything he had at us when that attack came.”

The dagger. Vale created the blade, knowing that we would need it one day. He wielded it against Romulus with everything he had, knowing it wouldn't be enough. My chest tightens for Seraphina, having been locked away for thousands of years waiting for me to one day find her, at having to watch her father sacrifice himself, just to know she would one day have to do the same.

She'll return though, and I can't wait until she does.

I glance at my father, the last beams of the setting sun lighting his hair to a golden blaze as he watches Titus intently. He and Nelle were all I had for so long. He did everything he could to keep me from this, to keep me safe, and now it's my turn to do the same. These gods gathered beside me are my family, and no one will ever take them from me. Otherwise, they'll have death on their heels ... literally.

“He gave me the *Descent of the Dark* and told me to keep it safe for when a goddess with dark brown hair, sea-green eyes, and golden wings comes into her power,” Titus says, giving me a pointed look. “I didn't believe him at first, I thought he'd lost his mind, but when I returned that night, I knew it was true. Romulus and the rest of the dark gods were already preparing for battle. He expected me to join in, to destroy the land and worlds I'd come to cherish, demolish the knowledge and magic they'd fostered for thousands of years before we invaded.”

He takes a staggered breath for the fallen leader, the one who fostered his love and knowledge of the infernal realm while



his own father sought to destroy it.

“But Vale knew the infernal realm needed to fall to Romulus for his vision to ever work, for me to use my powers to make sure what he predicted came to fruition. I knew that the moment he fell to Romulus, vengeance flickered in his eyes, and I knew what I had to do. It wasn’t Romulus’ vengeance that drove me; that was my cover, my excuse for bringing you with me, Olivia.”

Silence sweeps over us as his words sink in, shaking my reality to its core. I spent so long thinking he was our enemy, only to now realize he was on our side this entire time.

“I’m sorry,” Octavia says. Stepping forward, she reaches a tentative hand out towards him. “If I knew—”

“Then we would’ve had someone to trust?” Titus laughs, his blasé tone betraying a note of pain, letting Octavia’s gesture of comfort go unanswered. “It was for the best though. Everything worked out as it should. We both had our parts to play, but our job isn’t done, not yet.”

“Right,” my father says, taking Octavia’s hand in his own. “We must go to the generals—”

“First, we need to discuss him,” Mateo says pointedly, nodding to Kallen. “We heard Titus’ story, but we haven’t heard anything from Kallen yet. He could very well go back to Romulus and give him all the information he’s gathered.”

“I’ll stay for you, brother, but know I’m not entirely convinced any of you are on the right side of this,” Kallen

says, placing a hand on Titus' shoulder.

“How can you say that?” Titus steps out of his touch, turning an incredulous glare on his brother.

“You might not remember how it was before the infernal realm, but I do,” Kallen sneers towards my father. “Osias disobeyed the rules of Ethereal. He tried to rule us all—”

“Romulus has filled your head with lies, brother,” Titus huffs out in exasperation, scrubbing a hand over his face. “He twisted things to fit his narrative. He overstepped in his role as a god, overtook worlds he was never meant to.”

Kallen takes a deep breath, his brows furrowed as though he's about to launch into another argument, but instead, he presses his lips into a thin line. “We'll see. I'm willing to see this new future you promise, and I'll be here to save you if they stab you in the back.”

“You know a thing or two about that, don't you,” Maximus growls, his fingers gripping mine tighter as he keeps his composure.

Kallen smirks, eyeing the gesture pointedly. “Where was that bravado you had a few minutes ago?”

“I don't need to endanger the school and its students just to teach you a lesson,” Maximus grumbles. “But if you betray us, if you hurt my family, I'll keep my promise and bury you in the center of the earth.”

“*Aww, the big, bad god of destruction is growing soft,*” I project to my mates, hiding the smile that begs to pull at my

lips as my chest warms with pride.

*“I’m doing this for you, princess, but trust me, I’m anything but soft around you,”* Maximus projects back, and I nearly choke.

I struggle to keep a straight face. My cheeks heat, and a chorus of laughter echoes in my mind from my other three mates. I swear they’re going to be the death of me.

“Are you okay?” my father asks, his brows furrowing as he turns to face me.

Bury. Me. Now. I’m deceased.

I am going to kill these guys ... right after I take them upstairs and show them how grateful I am that they’re all here, unharmed and safe with me. Yup, sex, then murder. Sounds like a great plan to me.

“I’m fine,” I say and clear my throat, tamping down on the urge to chastise my guys, which would only draw more attention to us.

“The decision should be up to Octavia,” my father announces. “She had to live a lie for so many years, had to live without knowing her daughter as she grew into adulthood. I refuse to do that to her again if Kallen is willing to work with us. But be warned, if you seek to deceive us, I will not give you any leniency.”

Octavia caresses my father’s cheek, her dark blue eyes brimming with unshed tears as she looks up at him, adoration shining in their depths.

“Thank you,” she breathes, her words shaky as his palm comes to cover hers, the two of them soaking in this moment they so rarely got to have over the years.

Pain slices through me, and my mates grip me a little tighter in response. We only had a taste of what they endured for thousands of years, and I even had Mateo with me.

Octavia lets her hand fall back to her side, and they hesitantly release their hold on each other, as though that moment of love and tenderness was far too brief for either of them. But there is too much to still be done.

“Kallen,” she says, turning to her son. Tension radiates around the small circle as they stare at one another. “I want you to stay. I want to believe that you’re willing to see the other side, free from your father’s manipulations. But I can’t risk hurting the rest of our family because of that.”

Kallen tenses, anger brimming in his eyes for a moment as he stares back at Octavia. Does he hate her? Blame her for tearing his family apart? He takes a deep breath and nods in understanding, his face smoothing as he looks between Octavia and my father.

“I want to stay, I want to see this other life you promise, but I’ll remain neutral,” Kallen declares. “I won’t reveal his secrets, but I also won’t reveal yours.”

“Swear it,” Kyros says over my shoulder. “Make a binding pledge to Osias.”

“Fine.” Kallen reaches out his palm and takes a step closer to my father, annoyance written across his features. “I vow to keep what I learn to myself.”

My father steps forward to clasp Kallen’s hand, and golden ropes flash around their arms, entwining the promise into life, a magical contract binding him to his word. It shines brighter as the sun sets in the distance, leaving the image seared into my vision even as the ropes dissipate into thin air.

Kallen snatches his hand back, hissing in discomfort as though the touch had burned. He hastily puts distance between himself and the leader of the Light Gods like his mere presence disgusts him.

*This should be fun.*

“I must meet with the generals,” Osias says, clasping Octavia’s hand in his.

“We all should,” Titus agrees. “This fight is nowhere close to being over, especially since Mateo is still alive.”

Mateo’s arm tightens around me, his jaw working as he studies Titus.

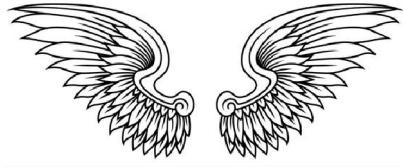
“Were you hoping for my death?”

“Of course not,” Titus huffs, an enigmatic grin curling on his lips. “Well, maybe just a little—but in all seriousness, you being alive must mean the dagger Romulus has isn’t real.”

The satchel at my side seems to get heavier as the weight of everyone’s stares turn to me.

“It isn’t,” I confirm tightly, unwilling to reveal where the real one is just yet.

“Quick thinking, little sister, but he’ll find out sooner or later.” Titus nods to me, but his expression turns grim. “He’ll do anything to get it back, even if it means destroying everything you love.”



# Chapter Two

## Mateo

**O**LIVIA STIFFENS, HER SHOULDERS rigid beneath my palm. We knew this though. Regardless of the dagger, we knew Romulus was going to come after us; it was only a matter of when.

“I’ve been able to keep the magic flowing to the fake dagger,” Olivia says, glancing over her shoulder at Adrian. “Adrian told me he’s been able to feed power to his illusions in the mortal realm for centuries, so I should be able to do the same.”

“We wouldn’t have a problem if it was a building or a structure, but it’s a dagger that kills dark gods, one he’ll be itching to use now to keep the others in line,” Titus explains, and Kallen nods in agreement. “Someone will have to pay the price of their failure tonight, and he’ll use them as an example in case any of them seek to betray him.”

“I’m afraid he’s right,” Octavia says sadly. “He’ll know you’ve made a switch the moment he tries to end someone, and he won’t take that embarrassment lightly.”



“Which means he’ll know that his connection has been severed,” Olivia murmurs, her mouth tightening into a thin line as she looks off into the distance.

“We all made it out of there relatively unscathed,” Kyros interjects, and Adrian claps me on the shoulder as if everyone needed a reminder of who got stabbed. “But I know there were some who weren’t as lucky. We should get to the others so I can try to save who we can.”

“I can help,” Olivia insists, pulling out of my grip, her hand falling from Maximus’.

I frown back at Kyros, but he doesn’t bother acknowledging my annoyance as he captures Liv’s hands in his own and dissipates them away.

I should’ve thought of that first. I figured almost dying might get me a little bit more sympathy, but apparently I’m supposed to be over that already.

“Asshole,” Maximus grumbles, his thoughts seemingly headed in the same direction as mine.

“He definitely did that on purpose,” Adrian huffs, crossing his arms over his chest.

“You’re so whipped,” Titus snickers, shaking his head in disbelief.

“I’ll be sure to remind you of this if you find your mate,” I taunt.

“Not that this isn’t entertaining,” Osias interjects, his brow raised, with amusement dancing in his mocking eyes like he

wasn't just all over his mate a few minutes ago. "Some of us have things to do."

Motherfucker.

He gives me a pointed look before dissipating to the meeting point with Octavia in tow.

"You two should stay here," I say, my jaw ticking as Adrian and Maximus dissipate too, leaving me to clean up the mess. "You'll only cause more stress."

"But there might be something—"

"No," I command, cutting Titus off. "We heard your story, but there isn't enough time to relay that to the whole army. We need to focus on regrouping and taking care of the injured."

With that, I dissipate too, leaving them to do whatever the hell they do.

The swirling wind whips around me, carrying my body to the meeting point. My boots press into the soft grass as I take form, the emerging stars in the distance twinkling over the hilltop as shouts ring out through the clearing, echoing off the nearby trees.

"We need a medic over here," someone shouts, snapping me into action. Searching the distance, I try to spot Olivia amongst the throng of gods, demigods, and guardians rushing about. Many race about with supplies, bandages, and water to help clean wounds, while others run with food over to the large, makeshift kitchen already set up by a roaring fire to provide sustenance for the team.

There. Olivia's long, dark brown hair fans out around her as she drops by a demigod's side, his prone body laid on a stretcher, eyes closed, hand drooping from clutching the gaping wound on his side. Her hands immediately hover over it, a golden light beaming from them as she pours her magic into him. The wound knits together slowly, skin reforming and vessels reconnecting. There are countless others in the same state, making me wish I could help her, but Kyros and Osias are by her side, healing demigods and guardians, while Adrian helps where he can with bandaging the wounded.

I might not be able to do any healing, but I do know how to strategize. Cool calm washes over me as my powers take control, and I launch into action.

"Mateo," one of my generals, Irene, the god of archery, shouts to me. Linus, the god of stealth, stands beside her along with Lysander, the god of strategy, each of them hunched over a table with a map lying open atop it.

"Give me a breakdown," I command, joining them. I give them a nod of greeting and shift back into my role.

"We still have troops guarding Ethereal, but there's been no sign of a secondary attack so far," Irene explains, her long blonde braid shifting as she waves a hand over the map to activate the enchantment. A portal flashes before us, giving us a direct view of the gates of Ethereal.

My eyes narrow as shock straightens my spine at the sight of my home. I knew Romulus and the dark gods attacked there while Liv and I found the dagger, but seeing the damage

strikes a chord within me. A contingent waits just beyond the gates, the crumbling and gouged marble behind them making the home of the gods look like a war zone.

“Keep them there.” I wave over the map to dispel the image. “I want a rotation on guard twenty-four-seven in case Romulus attacks again.”

“Of course,” Lysander agrees. He pulls a paper from a stack beside him and scrawls instructions to the commanding officers before passing it off to be sent to Ethereal.

“How much damage did we take?” I ask, unable to chase away the visions of destruction.

“It looks worse than it is,” Irene says, frowning. “We’ve already cleaned up most of the wreckage but held off on some of the damage—”

“Because it will just happen again,” I sigh, finishing her sentence. She’s right. This fight is far from over. A few crumbling buildings are the least of our worries right now.

I sweep my gaze over the clearing, searching for Olivia again, needing to make sure she’s safe. I spot her a few beds over from where I first saw her, and I’m able to relax slightly, but the blood drains as I notice what’s beside her. Blankets are draped over some of the stretchers, some of the fighters unable to be saved, waiting to be brought home to Ethereal. To their families. Maximus helps a few of the demigods as they move the covered bodies to a quieter area for their friends and family in attendance to mourn.

Olivia watches, her hand poised over a female guardian's shoulder, healing the wound there. She's seen death, but not on this scale. Her face pales, and I clench my fists at my side, my heart and my mind warring with one another. I want to take her away from this. More than anything, I want to keep her safe, but I know she's meant for so much more.

That doesn't mean I can't help her along the way though.

"Mateo," Irene says hesitantly, bringing my attention back to the table.

"Right." I clear my throat. "Linus, have your sentries found anything?"

"Not yet, but they're combing the infernal realm as we speak, looking for any sign of where Romulus is hiding out."

"Good, just keep an eye on them. The terrain is unforgiving out there," I say, my thoughts drifting to the barren wasteland, magma waiting just below the surface, ready to burn its victims alive.

"I'll be joining them as soon as we're done here." Linus nods, shuffling some of the papers in front of him.

"Good. I want Lysander to stay in Ethereal, and Irene can run things from here," I instruct, but my focus is already drifting back to Olivia. She moves to the next stretcher, her powers seeping into the demigod there and knitting up the wound on his arm.

"We have things here," Irene offers hesitantly, "if there's anything else you need to do."

I clear my throat and nod, scanning the distance for Osias.  
“Thank you.”

I take a deep breath and stride towards Osias. His guardian commanders surround him as he gives out instructions.

I can't believe I'm about to do this.

“Osias, a word.” My tone is clipped.

“Can it wait?” Osias signs a paper and passes it to the guardian on his right, not bothering to drag his attention away from what he's doing.

“No,” I say simply, delighting in the exasperated sigh he gives before he turns to face me.

“We'll continue this,” he says to his guardians, and they scatter, leaving the two of us alone. “What is it?”

“I—I need to check on Olivia,” I say, my chest deflating a fraction at the confession.

“Is she okay?” His brow furrows, and the color drains from his face as he frantically searches for her.

“She's safe,” I say hurriedly. “But I'm not sure she's coping well with everything that happened, and everything going on now.”

He frowns as he watches her, but relaxes slightly. She moves on to the next patient, her attention split between healing and watching the last stretcher being carried away.

“Sometimes I forget that she isn't used to this, that I tried to shield her from the pain and suffering in the world.” His

shoulders slump, his usual mask fracturing in this moment. “Thank you for looking out for her, and ... for taking that blade for Octavia.”

“I didn’t do it for you.” The words slip from my lips, an automatic reaction from the millennia we’ve spent at each other’s throats, yet the words lack their usual bite.

“Trust me, I know that.” He chuckles, shaking his head. “Despite everything that’s happened in the past, you’ve risen above it. You’ve proven me wrong, and I’m grateful for that.”

“I guess you’re not so bad yourself.” I sigh begrudgingly. “Can you coordinate with my generals while I’m gone?”

Osias’ eyes widen, but he nods. “Of course.”

I clap a hand on his shoulder and give him a nod of appreciation. It might not be much, but it’s a hell of a lot better than we used to be. A few months ago, I would’ve never trusted Osias to command my generals out of fear of him taking that power from me, but now, I understand him, as crazy as that sounds.

“*Kyros, can you spare Olivia right now?*” I project as I stride towards them. Guardians and demigods still race around the clearing, but it isn’t as chaotic as before.

Kyros’ head pops up from where he was hunched over a guardian, his brows furrowed as he searches around him, so lost in his healing I bet he barely knew what was going on.

“*Sure. There aren’t too many patients left, and all the serious injuries have been taken care of,*” Kyros projects back before

he focuses back on the injury.

“Little mate,” I breathe as I reach Olivia’s side and gently rub her shoulders.

She looses a small moan at the massage before remembering herself, her cheeks flushing red as she glances down at the guardian. “You’re all healed up. Just make sure to get some rest.”

“Thank you,” the female guardian says, clasping Olivia’s hand. Exhaustion quickly takes its hold though, and her hand slips back down to the cot, her eyes shuttering as she slips into a deep slumber.

“Mateo,” Olivia hisses, turning to face me. She stands and pushes me away, nervously glancing back at the guardian to make sure she hasn’t woken. “What are you doing?”

“I need to talk to you ... in private.” I grin, wrapping my arm around her waist as I lead her up into the dense line of trees.

“Can’t it wait? I have more injured to—”

“No, it can’t wait. Plus, Kyros already told me he can take care of the rest.”

Reluctantly, she lets me lead her away with a sigh of resignation and a final glance over her shoulder at the camp. We head deeper into the forest, brush cracking under our boots with each step we take. The sounds of the soldiers and messengers fade into a mere murmur, the crunch of leaves and twigs echoing over it. The orb light from the clearing is a distant twinkle now, as tiny as the stars dotting the skies.



“I can’t wait to take you to other worlds,” I breathe, finally coming to a stop when I’m sure we won’t be seen or overheard.

She frowns and pulls away from my touch to lean back against the rough bark of a towering maple tree, looking back at where we came as though she’s about to argue. I close the distance between us, caging her in, distracting her from the reality we just left behind.

Trailing my fingers over her cheek, I brush back a wisp of hair behind her ear. She leans into the touch, her sea-green eyes flicking up to meet my own, a mix of pain and longing swirling in their depths.

“Sometimes I forget there’ll be a time when we aren’t having to fight for our lives every other week.” She places her hand over my chest. “What world were you thinking of when you looked up at the stars?”

“I was thinking of how small the stars look here.” I smile, swiping my thumb over her bottom lip, wishing I could brush my own over hers and absorb every ache from her soul. “There’s a world where it looks like the stars are right beside you, but no matter how far you go, you can never touch them.”

“That sounds beautiful,” she breathes, looking up at the stars above. “Even though it might not be as breathtaking, I want to show you the human world, show you where I grew up, and I want to see your home, our new home in Ethereal.”

“We have all the time in the world, little mate. We can see anything and everything you desire.”

“Yeah.” She sighs, a wistful smile curling on her lips, but her eyes shine with unshed tears. “We just have to make it through this fight.”

“We will,” I assure her, wiping my thumb below her eye and catching the tear before it falls. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“But something almost happened to you tonight.”

“What do you mean?” I ask absently, my brows furrowed in confusion.

“I knew that I made that dagger appear in his palm, that he had no control over it anymore. But seeing you jump in front of that blade, seeing you lying on the ground ready to accept your fate, it tore my heart in two.” She pauses, taking a staggered breath. “I can’t lose any of you—you and Maximus are susceptible to the dagger, but we don’t know that it won’t work on light gods. Any of you could be taken from me in the blink of an eye.”

“But we have the dagger, little mate.” I cup her cheek and she leans into the touch, hope glimmering in her eyes as they meet my own. “We’ll make sure it never gets into Romulus’ hands again.”

“I—I’ve seen death. It nearly broke me when I saw Nelle die. But I’ve never seen so many—”

“I know,” I say, not needing her to finish. I saw the shock on her face from across that field. “I wish I could hide you away, shield you from all of this, but that wouldn’t be fair to you.

You're meant for greatness. Just know that I will do everything in my power to ensure Romulus is stopped before he can take another life."

"We'll fight for them," she agrees, determination shining in her eyes. "We'll make sure no one else needs to be buried because of that monster."

Her words ring through the night air like a promise, so filled with life, blood, and battle lust, my mind nearly fogs over with need, but when I scan her face, I can tell that something is still off.

"What is it?"

"I struggled with control over my powers and came to terms with them, but something happened in the fight," she chews at her bottom lip before continuing, "I killed Abigail. The shadows ... they just swallowed her whole—devoured her until nothing remained."

My expression remains unchanged as she searches my face.

"I'm just—I don't want to be like him. I don't want to become a monster."

"Everyone said there was a reason that Romulus didn't receive the power of death." I rub my thumb over her cheek while my other hand caresses her arm. "The fates only bless those who are worthy of wielding it. Your mother had two children before you, and despite them both being able to manipulate shadows, neither of them received the power of

death. You were given this power for a reason. Trust yourself just as much as we all trust you.”

Silence stretches between us for a moment, indecision warring in her eyes like she wants to believe my words, but something is holding her back.

“I trust you with my life, little mate. As do my brothers.” I smile softly. “But more importantly, everyone else does too. You showed them today how caring and selfless you are, tending to the injured while you warred with these feelings. You saved countless people today, not just by healing them, but with your quick thinking. Countless more would’ve died tonight if Romulus knew he’d lost the dagger. He would’ve sacrificed everyone to get it back.”

Her expression shifts as my words sink in, that glimmer of hope blooming into full life as her lips crash on mine. I groan into her mouth, our tongues tangling desperately like we need the other to breathe.

“Thank you.”

Our lips barely part as my hand skims down to the hem of her shirt and delves beneath, grateful that she must have taken off her tight leather armor. I groan as the pads of my fingers graze her soft, warm skin, reveling in the smooth expanse of her body, fitting perfectly against me.

“No, thank you, Olivia,” I say, pulling away for a moment. She looks up at me, her lips parted and swollen from our kiss. The sight nearly takes my breath away, distracting me from the very reason I pulled away in the first place. “You’ve brought

so much into my life that I never knew was missing. I can't imagine what my life would be without you."

"Good thing you'll never have to." She grins, rubbing just above my heart where that invisible tether links us, joining our souls as one. "You're stuck with me for eternity. Think you can handle that?"

"Oh, I can handle it." I smirk. "Can you?"

"I can handle anything life throws at me, as long as you're by my side for this life and the next." She leans up, gently biting my lower lip and rolling it between her teeth. My cock throbs at the sensation, pain and pleasure mixing in a perfect symphony, just like my mate and I.

I stab my fingers through her hair as my lips crash on hers, consuming her with every stroke and caress.

My hand moves further up her torso until I reach the soft curve of her breast. Kneading the sensitive flesh, I push the cup of her bra down and automatically find her nipple, coaxing a moan from her luscious lips. Her sounds are swallowed by my tongue sweeping in to caress hers in long, languid strokes, showing exactly what I'd do to her pussy if we had time.

"I need you, Mateo," she says between our kisses, unwilling to part long enough to get the words out. "I need to feel you inside me, to know you're still with me."

"You'll never get rid of me, little mate," I growl, ripping her shirt off. She gasps as I pull it from her heated skin, her back arching as she tries to get closer. Her skin pebbles into

goosebumps as a cool gust of air breezes past us, but she won't be cold for long—I'll make sure of that.

I hurriedly pull my leather armor from me and throw it to the ground, not caring where the hell it goes as long as it's off me.

“This might be quicker.” She smirks mischievously, cocking a brow.

My lips part, and I'm about to ask her what she means, when the cool breeze wraps around my naked skin, teasing it into goose-flesh.

“Sneaky little mate,” I chastise, unable to keep the conspiratorial grin off my face as I drink in every inch of her supple skin.

“Magic makes getting fucked so much easier.” She giggles, wrapping her arms around my neck. My hard cock presses against her stomach, and I growl in warning, barely holding myself back. “Now, are you going to make use of our extra time, or are you going to keep on staring?”

“Oh, I'll make use of it alright. The real question is, can you keep quiet?” I don't wait for her to answer as I start kissing along her jaw, reveling in the way she clings to me, her body instinctively pushing closer, needing the press of my skin against hers.

“I guess we'll find out.” Her breathy words turn into a yelp of surprise as I grasp her thighs and pull her up for her to straddle my waist.

My cock throbs at the grind of her hips against me, causing me to nudge closer to her folds. I suck in a sharp breath at how wet she is already, and press her against the tree trunk, needing to feel my cock sheathed within her.

She reaches between us, lining me up and pressing the thick head of my length against her opening. Rocking myself forward a fraction, I fight against the urge to close my eyes and bask in the pleasure. I want to watch every reaction she has, ingrain them into my memory and play them like a film on repeat.

She gasps as I sink into her tight channel, her hips impatiently urging me on.

“Shh, let me do the work,” I whisper, wondering if she’ll let me take control.

She inhales a shuddered breath and nods eagerly, crushing my lips with hers.

“You’re so perfect, Liv,” I murmur, memorizing the curve of her lips and the soft wisps of her lashes. I grind my hips against her, and she cries out, desperately clutching my shoulders.

“We have to stay quiet.” I grin, shifting my hold on her to support her with one arm while my other hand trails a soft, teasing touch over her hip and up to her breast. I roll her nipple between my fingers, eliciting a whimper of need from her kiss-swollen lips. She arches into my touch, her reaction urging me on.

My breaths grow ragged as I sink into her delicious pussy, reveling in the feeling of having the woman I love wrapped in my arms. Despite my saying I would take control, she meets my hips thrust for thrust, our bodies melding together as the rest of the world fades away.

“Mateo,” she moans, and I have to bite down hard on my lip to keep myself from coming then and there. The sound of my name rolling off her tongue is the greatest pleasure I’ve ever had.

I pick up the pace, my desperation at having this woman so completely driving me to pound into her, to give her every ounce of pleasure just being with her gives me.

Her nails dig into my shoulders, spurring me on. I plunge into her drenched core, desperate to send my mate over that cliff. She clenches around me, and I keep going, keep working her body, knowing she’s so close.

“Please,” she whispers, and I roll her nipple between my fingers again, sending a jolt of pleasure straight through her. Her sea-green eyes are locked on mine, the only thing in this world that matters from this moment to eternity.

I trail my hand lower, and she whimpers at the loss until she realizes what I’m about to do. My thumb sweeps across her sensitive nub, swirling it in time with my thrusts as I pound into her.

“Oh my god,” she moans, and her hips grind against me, sending her over that precipice. Her core pulses around me,



but I don't stop, my cock unrelenting as I thrust into her, fucking her through her orgasm.

I'm so fucking close—so close to following her, to losing myself in her body that on the next thrust, I grind into her, sinking into her further than I had before. I throw my head back, grunting, and Olivia gasps, clutching me desperately as my cock throbs, my release spilling into her core. My release must coax another climax from her since her core tightens around me, eliciting a growl of pleasure from my lips.

Olivia pulls in ragged breaths, desperately trying to fill her lungs, while I do the same. Who needs air with a mate like this? I could fill my life with her and be the happiest god in existence. Warmth floods my veins, and I just want to cocoon her up in my arms and take her back to the manor, ravishing her delectable body all night long ... with the door firmly locked to keep my brothers out.

I'm the one who thought I was about to die. I deserve this.

"I love you, Mateo," she murmurs, pressing a soft kiss against my lips and drawing me from my daydreams of continuing this.

"I love you too, little mate," I breathe. Slipping my hand from between us, I bring it up to my lips, groaning as I lick her arousal from my fingers.

Her lips part as she watches me intently, a renewed heat flickering in her eyes. Fuck, maybe my dreams can become a reality.

“Oh, and about what you said earlier, right before I made you come. You got that right; I’m your god, and you’re mine.” I chuckle, capturing her lips in a deep, searing kiss.

“You’re hilarious,” she says drily when I pull back, yet I don’t miss the sparkle of amusement in her eyes as she holds back her laughter.

“You won’t think I’m hilarious when I have you splayed on my bed like an all-you-can-eat buffet,” I growl, angling my hips to let her feel how hard I am already.

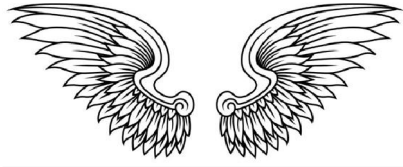
A needy moan slips from her lips, her legs wrapping tighter around me like she never wants to let me go.

“You’re mine tonight, no one else—”

*“The council members just woke,”* Adrian projects into our minds. *“Get your asses out of the woods and up to the school. We have work to do.”*

*Well fuck. There goes that plan.*

If I wasn’t going to kill those assholes before, I’m really going to now.



# Chapter Three

## Maximus

“WHAT IS THE MEANING of this?”

Victor’s shouts echo off the marble, ringing down the hallway to greet us.

“Oh great,” Adrian huffs, scrubbing a hand over his face. “I see they’re in an amazing mood already.”

“He’s been screaming ever since he woke up,” Orrin grumbles as we round the corner to the headmaster’s office. “Next time, one of you is stuck with babysitting duty.”

“Are you going to fight against Romulus then?” Osias asks, coaxing a snicker from Adrian. Orrin’s hand hesitates on the doorknob, and he glares back at Osias over his shoulder.

“I’m sure I could’ve taken him out if I was there tonight.” His pompous tone rings full of incredulity. “I can see you accomplished what truly mattered to you anyway.”

He narrows a pointed look towards Octavia, but before any of us can respond, he opens the door and steps through, leaving the leader of the light gods fuming behind him.

“Pompous prick,” Osias mutters under his breath.

“Don’t let him get to you,” Octavia says. “He has to come up with something since he knows he couldn’t come close to the damage we did.”

Osias lifts Octavia’s hand to his lips, his sea-green eyes brimming with heat as he looks up at her.

“Don’t mind us,” Adrian snorts, trying to choke back his laughter. Osias slowly lowers Octavia’s hand and narrows a glare on him.

“We’re not this bad, right?” Kyros whispers to Adrian, shivering in disgust as he looks between our mate’s parents.

“You four are much worse.” Osias’ jaw ticks as he looks between them, his eyes widening slightly in disbelief.

“Doubt it,” I add, crossing my arms over my chest and earning myself an incredulous glare.

Osias looks like he’s about to argue, his cheeks reddening as his lips part, but he’s cut off before he can get a word out.

“Are you coming, or would you like a written invitation?” Orrin shouts.

“See, stop wasting time, father-in-law.” Adrian chuckles

“See what I have to put up with,” Osias groans, following behind us. The door clicks closed, and to my surprise, he doesn’t force his way into the center of the conversation, instead content to observe from the back with his mate.

“What the hell is going on?” Victor growls, struggling against the glowing golden binds.

“If you stop shouting, we’ll tell you,” Orrin grinds out.

The room doesn’t look much different from the last time I was in here. Nyssa perches on the desk, still pushed against the wall, as she watches the three former council members tied to chairs in the middle of the room. The chunk of plaster still litters the floor from where my powers shook it free, dust scattered in a pile on the hardwood floor beside it.

The crumbled plaster catches my eye for a moment as memories flash through my mind. The last time I was here, I was hanging on by a thread, with only the thoughts of Liv keeping me from turning this wing of the school to rubble.

Olivia.

She was taken from me—from us, and these three helped make that happen. Despite knowing Titus’ true intentions now, I can’t help the anger that burns through me at the sight of them. If I sense any hesitance or lies this time, I’ll wrap my powers around them tighter than the ropes that bind them and strangle the truth out of them.

I can’t help but glance at the door, my annoyance ratcheting up with every second she’s out of my sight. My teeth grind as I curse Mateo for leading her away, but despite wishing I’d been the one to do it first, I’m glad that one of us was able to be there with her. I’d seen the way she was struggling, and I’d already planned to take her away when I got back from

moving those who couldn't be saved, but by the time I did they were gone.

Kyros chants the words of a silencing spell, and the magic zaps around the room, sealing the sounds in and drawing my attention back to the traitors in our midst.

“Great, now no one will know the torture I'm having to endure in here,” Orrin huffs in annoyance.

“The torture you're enduring?” Victor asks incredulously. “We're the ones who are tied up.”

“For good reason,” Nyssa says, her powers tightening around the former council members as she hops off the desk and strides over to grip Victor's shoulder. Quicker than a whip, she unleashes her pronged sword, power sparking between the points as she drags it up to his throat. “They're going to do some checks, and then we're going to have a little discussion about your involvement with Helene and Romulus. Hopefully, you'll be more forthcoming than the last time.”

“What the hell are you talking ab—” Victor's question cuts off abruptly as power zaps close to his skin.

“Kyros and Orrin, can you check them over again?” Nyssa asks, taking a step away from Victor, her sword still raised in warning.

“Of course,” Kyros responds, stepping towards Anastasia.

“P-please,” Anastasia mutters.

“No one's hurting you ... yet,” Orrin says, standing in front of Victor.

“Don’t you dare—”

Victor’s protest is cut off though, as Orrin places his palm on Victor’s head. Orrin speaks the ancient words of his spell, searching the depths of Victor’s mind and knocking him out momentarily.

Kyros sweeps his golden healing light off Anastasia first before moving to Agathon, and shaking his head as he finishes, signaling there’s nothing physically wrong with them.

The room vibrates with anticipation as we wait for any sign the spell has loosened its hold on the former council members. A shiver runs up my spine as I remember the blood-curdling scream Anastasia let loose the last time, and I grit my teeth in preparation, but it never comes.

“There’s no trace of the spell lurking anywhere in his mind,” Orrin says, releasing Victor abruptly. He wipes his hands on his robes in disgust before moving on to Agathon and Anastasia.

“Of course there’s no spell,” Victor says incredulously. “Now, what is the meaning of this? You might be one of the light majors, but I am a council member—”

“You *were* a council member,” I interrupt, unable to bury the smugness in my tone.

“How dare you—” Victor snarls, but his protest is cut off by Osias.

“You’ve obviously forgotten what you did while under the spell’s effects, so why don’t you shut up so we can get you



caught up?” Osias strides to the front of the room to stand in front of the sniveling god of fire.

Victor looks like he’s about to say something else, but with one look at Osias’ venomous expression, he presses his lips into a firm line, doing the first smart thing he’s done all day.

“Please clear the air for us,” Agathon says, his brows furrowed as he finally catches sight of Octavia standing in the back.

Before anyone can get a word out though, the creak of the wooden door opening splits through the room, plunging us all into silence. Nervous energy radiates through my limbs as I wait for them to step past the barrier, my muscles tensed and ready for the worst.

“Ah, so kind of you all to wait.” My defenses lower the moment Mateo strides into the room, his arm draped around our mate’s shoulders.

My jaw ticks as I scan them over. They’d left wearing their leather armor, with thick dirt and blood coating every crevice of it. Now they appear to be wearing the same clothes, yet they’re missing the same signs of battle that caked the thick material before.

“*Mateo*,” I project to him, growling his name and eyeing our mate’s hair. Sometime in the hectic aftermath of the battle, her hair must have come loose from her ponytail, but the wisps of hair sticking up at the top of her head make it clear just what the two of them had been doing.

I don't wait for him to respond though. Instead, I clasp Olivia's hand and tug her free from his grip and right into my side.

Jealousy and anger flicker to life inside me, wrapping around my chest like a vise. He should have been comforting her, taking care of her—but not like that. On the other hand, I can't help the tick in my jaw, irritation clawing its way up again at not having thought of it first. I could have been the one to sweep her away and actually take care of her, unlike that selfish asshole.

"What—" Olivia asks, but her words cut off as I send a gust of air through her hair, subtly smoothing it over for her.

"*Thank you,*" Olivia projects to me and nestles into my side. I drape my arm over her shoulder, throwing a menacing glare at Mateo.

"*Seriously?*" Mateo projects in bewilderment, but his protest is cut short by Victor.

"Who is she?" Agathon asks.

At the same time Victor snaps. "Can someone explain what the hell is going on already?"

"*She* is Olivia," Osias says, stepping closer to Victor to eclipse his view of us. "My daughter. Watch what you say, because your actions played a role in Romulus capturing her."

"What the hell would Romulus want with a demigod?" Victor scoffs, sneering at Osias. My lips pull back, and a growl rumbles through my chest in warning. He's lucky he can't see

past Osias right now because if he gave my mate that look, I'd pry his eyes from their sockets.

"She's not," Agathon corrects him, glancing from Octavia to Olivia. "She's a god, and I'm willing to bet her powers aren't anything to scoff at if Romulus wanted her."

"No—but this isn't about her. This is about you three and your role in the treachery that happened here at the academy," Osias says, redirecting their focus.

"The academy?" Anastasia's brows knit together as she looks around the room.

Orrin sighs, leaning against the wall. "What's the last thing you can remember?" He cocks a shrewd brow at them before continuing. "And remember, Nyssa will be able to tell if you're lying, and then I'll get the green light to go poking around in those tiny brains of yours."

"There was an attack at the school." Agathon scrunches up his face like the memories are difficult to dredge up. "You came to argue that there should be guards stationed at the school, but Headmaster Mavros said he had everything under control and that the two of you were blowing the situation out of proportion to get out of your time at the school."

Agathon glances at Adrian and Mateo, his lips pressing into a thin line. I focus in on the golden binds though, but they don't shine any brighter. Truth.

"Anyway, now we know the real reason you two were so invested," Victor sneers, attempting to glare at Adrian and

Mateo, but Osias still stands firmly planted in his way.

“Yes, and you took his word over ours,” Mateo grumbles, crossing his arms over his chest as he steps towards the former council members. “We met with you multiple times, but somehow *Mavros*’ always knew when we were there to sway you. I guess we know why now, because you were working with Titus all along.”

“No, we weren’t,” Anastasia says, drawing everyone’s attention to her. “We, too, thought it was strange that Mavros kept showing up, that he didn’t want the help we were ready to offer. It was only Helene who argued for him.”

Again the binds stay the same, not glowing to reveal a lie.

“You’re right,” Agathon says, chewing his bottom lip in thought. “We all thought it was strange, and we met to discuss Helene the night you left Ethereal.”

“Yes. We went to the human world to not be seen by Helene,” Anastasia admits, her cheeks reddening as she glances at Osias. “But she found us, her and ... Romulus.”

Silence sweeps over the room, and I narrow my eyes at them, almost unwilling to believe what they’re saying.

“Nyssa?” Osias asks, his gaze locked on the ropes like his thoughts have leaned the same way as mine.

“They’re telling the truth so far,” Nyssa says, her lips quirking to the side like she almost can’t believe them either.

“Of course, we’re telling the truth,” Victor says, groaning in annoyance. “What reason would we have to lie?”

“You might not remember the trials, but I do,” Olivia says. She steps forward, letting my arm fall from her shoulder as she joins her father. My fist clenches at my side, but I fight back the impulse to shield her from them.

I haven’t forgotten what they did to her, but neither has she. She deserves to face them down, to be their judge, jury, and executioner if need be.

The same indecision wars on my brothers’ faces as they too battle the urge to protect our mate, but none of us moves. I fought side by side with Liv and saw first-hand what she can do—the power and fury that dances in those sea-green eyes in battle. She can more than handle herself against the likes of them.

“I remember you refusing to help us. I remember you showing up here and declaring the decision to lock away my powers would be up to you.” Olivia meets each of their gazes unflinchingly. “You forced me to take the trials with zero regard for my safety or how much training I’d had.”

Power and vitriol leak from Olivia’s words, eliciting a spark of pride at just how incredible she is. My princess is a force to be reckoned with.

A grin tugs at Mateo’s lips as we watch her, all four of us enamored at our mate’s ability to cut her opponents down to their knees with merely her words.

“I remember that smug, delighted grin on your face as you watched the demigod I was pitted against, knowing that he was about to try to plunge a dagger into my back—a dagger

meant to kill dark gods,” she hurls the words at Agathon, and he reels back, face blanching as his eyes widen.

Silence sweeps over the room as the three council members attempt to reconcile the revelations Olivia is hurtling their way.

“I remember after my second trial, after I’d been separated from my mates and my father, you all watched as Titus tried to take me. You were stripped from your positions and were being held for trial under the watch of the guardians. I watched you and Helene breaking into this very office after you’d been arrested, admitting you’d given the guards a tincture to knock them out, enabling Helene to retrieve an item she needed to contact Titus, and allowing him to break the wards and get to me after my last trial.”

Anastasia sputters, her lips popping open as she stares in disbelief.

“And you,” Olivia says, narrowing a look at Victor and propping her hands on her hips. “You’ve always been a dick, and it seems like the spell had nothing to do with it, Vicky.”

Victor grits his teeth, seething back at Olivia, his eyes flickering with amber flames, but he stays silent as the other former council members still reel from the snippets of their treachery.

“You might not remember what you did, and you might not understand why all of this—” Olivia gestures around the room at all the powerful gods waiting to hear their full story, and deem their innocence or guilt “—is necessary. But we do. I

lived it. They witnessed it, and countless nearly died because of it.”

She takes a deep breath and clears her throat, but Adrian is already there by her side. He doesn't touch her, but she instantly regains her composure at his closeness. She almost lost Nelle because of them—which is something none of us will forget anytime soon.

They'll never understand the depth of the pain their actions led to, the consequences it nearly had on all of our lives. But if there is any chance they acted willingly, I'll be the one to make sure they feel every agonized ache they put my mate through.

“We didn't do any of that willingly,” Agathon assures, swallowing thickly. “But I understand some of us—” he pauses to stare pointedly at Victor “—have brought the depth of our involvement into question.”

Victor's brows furrow and he lets out an indignant sound of protest, but Anastasia cuts him off.

“We met in the human realm, but Helene still found us. We had only begun our meeting when she appeared on the island with Romulus in tow.”

“Yes,” Agathon nods, his eyes shuttering as he pulls on his memories. “Romulus asked us to swear an oath to him, to follow his instructions, and he'd give us all the power we've ever wanted in his new world, but we refused.”

“He turned on Helene, but she brought the sea crashing over us,” Victor snaps, grimacing as though he’s reliving the memory. “She sent the salty sea water down our throats while Romulus cast a spell, and after that—”

Victor grinds his teeth, waiting while the others search their memories. Agathon’s lips purse, and Anastasia’s shoulders slump in dismay.

“There’s nothing.” Agathon finishes for him.

Is it all an act though?

“They’re telling the truth,” Nyssa says, clearly sensing the palpable skepticism wafting off each of us.

“I know it might be hard to believe, especially after hearing just what we’ve done to you under this spell, but I swear to you that I will help fight against them however I can,” Anastasia says as the rope flickers red, sealing the vow into blood.

“*What was that?*” Olivia projects to us, not letting her confusion show as she watches the former council members.

“*When a promise is sworn in the binds of justice, it’s written in blood,*” Kyros answers. “*Nyssa will be tasked with imprisoning her if she betrays us now.*”

“I vow to help you bring them to justice in whatever way I can,” Agathon says, nodding his head to Olivia and then Nyssa in acknowledgment of the promise.

Our attention shifts to the god of fire, tension brimming in the small room as we wait for his response.



He frowns down at the golden binds, as though he thought he would immediately be released. When that doesn't happen, he glares at Nyssa, who shrugs in response, uncaring of Victor's silent protest.

“Fine, I'll help too, but only because I hate them more than I despise all of you right now,” Victor sneers. He goes to cross his arms over his chest with an indignant huff, but he doesn't make it very far with the binds cinching his arms to his chest, and ends up just flailing slightly.

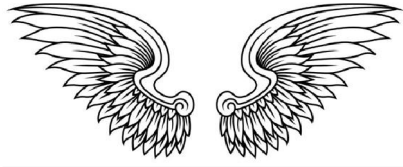
“Right back at you.” Olivia takes a step forward, quirking a brow in challenge as she scans over him, utterly unimpressed with what she sees. “But if the fates change, I'll have fun finding out just whose flames burn hotter.”

Fire dances on her fingers, casting an orange hue over Victor's face. It curls its way up her arm in a tender caress before it extinguishes in a puff of smoke—right in Victor's face. He sputters, coughing on the smoke that fills his lungs, his cheeks red as he tries to curse but instead chokes again, only a strangled sound of rage escaping his lips.

I can't help the grin that curls on my lips as she turns on her heel and strides away from the furious god of fire. My fiery princess upstaging the obnoxious god of fire without a care in the world, sends a thrill of excitement up my spine. My possessive need to have her only grows with that display.

Whatever I did to bless the fates to have this woman as my mate, I'm grateful for it, because I don't remember what my

life was like before this woman came colliding into me and filling every recess of my life.



# Chapter Four

## Kyros

“**D**O YOU THINK WE can actually trust them?” I ask. My fingers trail over Olivia’s shoulder, the soft leather and warmth helping to ease some of the tension in my muscles.

She leans against me slightly, and my skin tingles beneath my sweater, lighting up just at my mate’s proximity. It feels right to be here, to be home with my mate finally here by my side. The house had felt empty without her, like the heart of this home was missing.

“I don’t trust them, but I don’t know any of them without the spell,” Olivia admits.

I can’t help but study her face, appreciating every line and curve like they were painted by the Fates themselves. She was incredible in that battle, and her quick thinking when Romulus called for the dagger saved countless lives. I shudder at the thought of what Romulus would have done if he knew then that the dagger that appeared before him was fake.

“We’ll have to proceed with caution,” Osias says from the plush leather couch across from us, his hand twined with Octavia as she sits next to him. “Nyssa and Orrin are doing a few extra tests, and we know they won’t try anything with Maximus staying behind to watch over them.”

“We might not trust them, but there is some weight in the vow they made,” I say, playing devil’s advocate. “We’ll need all the help we can get, so we’ll have to put our egos aside.”

I watch our guests as they descend the stairs, clearly not having heard our conversation. Titus perches on one of the wooden dining room chairs he pulled over, while Kallen leans against the railing, far enough removed for his comfort.

I don’t blame him, and honestly, it’s more comfortable with him at a distance. I still don’t know what to make of him or if we can fully trust him either, but I have to try and take my words to heart. Ego won’t help us on the battlefield.

Titus catches my gaze and rolls his eyes as though he knows exactly where my thoughts have gone.

“Speaking of help, do we have a status report on the progress the students have been making?” Mateo asks. He leans against the wall on the opposite side, like he’s observing and poised for attack, keeping our guests and the door in his sights.

“The demigods have been progressing well in their enhanced training, but it isn’t enough,” Osias says, shaking his head. “Most of them think it’s a long shot that they’ll have to fight, and it’s impeding their progress.”

“That is going to be a problem,” Titus says, eliciting a disapproving sigh from Kallen, which we all ignore. “Romulus will be attacking the school. It’s not a question of if, but when.”

We knew this was a possibility; we knew that Romulus might split his troops to attack both the academy and Ethereal, but hearing it put like that is another matter entirely. My stomach drops, and tension radiates through the room.

Exhaustion drags me down like a lead weight, the burden of my limbs greater than it’s ever felt before. My eyelids begin to shutter, broadcasting my need to regain some of the strength I lost from healing so many soldiers.

Olivia rests her hand on my leg, and the simple, comforting touch sends a burst of energy straight through me. She was there with me each step of the way. She fought her way through the barren wasteland of the infernal realm, battled against Romulus, and helped me heal some of the worst patients, saving them from wounds the medics wouldn’t have been able to patch.

I’m not sure what I’d do without this woman, without her strength and support.

“We need to have a meeting with the professors, get an accurate picture of what they and the demigods have been doing in terms of the enhanced training schedule, and we’ll need to ramp it up,” I announce, already forming lesson plans in my mind.

My time might have been short as a professor myself, but I've taught before, and read countless texts on the subject.

“We'll have to tell the students that the threat is imminent, that this isn't just so they can defend themselves on the off chance the demons and dark gods get through our soldiers. They will have to be there, fighting side by side. It's the only way we can fight this war on two fronts.”

Olivia's hand tightens on my leg while she chews her bottom lip, apprehension clear in her expression, but she doesn't argue.

“You're right,” she agrees before I can say another word. “They need to learn how to fight, and they need to be prepared for how serious this battle will be.”

She swallows thickly, a steely determination in her gaze.

“We need to step it up though,” Adrian says, his hand caressing Olivia's leg over her leather pants in comfort. “The demigods helped them access their powers, but we need to help them know how to wield them with deadly accuracy.”

“Agreed,” Osias says. “I'll send word out for a shift of gods to arrive each day to teach. It should help some of them shake the rust off their defensive and offensive powers as well.”

Some of the tension seeps from my bones at the beginning of the plan coming together, but there's still the issue of implementing it.

“We should meet with the professors in the morning,” I announce, knowing there will be a lot of preparation behind

the scenes, especially with the gods taking over the reins. “You should plan your speech to the students right after that, and we’ll have to clear out the—”

“Me?” Osias chuckles. “No, I think it would be best if you did the speech.”

“I’m sure the students would rather hear from the leader than from me.” My brows furrow as I stare back at Osias, disbelief drawing my lips down into a frown.

Silence echoes through the room, and I wait for someone to agree with me, to tell Osias that it should be him that speaks to the students, but no one says a word.

“Olivia?” I ask, my eyes softening as I look to my mate, searching for her support.

“I agree with him, Kyros,” she says, her grip tightening on my leg as a sign of support.

“But I’m not the leader,” I insist, my head tilting in confusion as I study her face, searching for some sign that she’s joking.

“You might not be the leader, but you’re a leader to them. You’ve been with them—with me—each step of the way, helping them navigate their new lives and giving them hope and strength in the midst of every new obstacle that has stood in their way.” Her eyes shine with pride when she looks back at me, a small smile tilting her lips up in encouragement.

“We’ll talk about this tomorrow.” I clear my throat, numbly standing from the couch. My stomach twists as Olivia’s hand



drops from my leg, but I don't dare look back at her, my heart unable to take the look of disappointment on her beautiful face.

The blood drains from my face as I stride from the room, my body moving on autopilot. I try to ignore the giant pit opening in my stomach as I walk up the stairs, my shoes echoing on the wooden planks the only sound my brain registers.

I don't have a problem speaking in front of crowds; I don't even have a problem being the one in charge of the training plans. But this is different. If I'm the one going in front of the students, the one telling them their lives are in jeopardy before they've even truly begun ... it adds a new level of pressure, a feeling that I'm truly responsible for all of their lives.

I've never been a leader. I've always been happy to leave that to Osias and Mateo. And I never searched or lusted for power like the council.

The cool brass of my door handle seeps into my palm, jolting me from my thoughts as I slip into my room. I take in the towering bookshelves lining every wall, their weathered, ancient spines soothing my soul. This is where I'm meant to be. I can be useful in a battle, and I shine looking after my patients after, but inhaling these dusty pages is where my soul feels at ease, where I'm able to put behind the horrors I've seen and get lost in another world.

"Kyros," Olivia murmurs, her delicate fingers gently easing open the door.

I hadn't even closed it in my haste to lose myself in the worlds between the pages.

"Can I come in?"

"Of course," I breathe, some of the tension easing away once she steps inside and closes the door behind her.

Books had been my escape, helping me leave behind the horrors I face every day, the blood, the gore that my powers wipe away, leaving only memories etched into my mind. But now—now I have her, my mate, my partner, the one person who puts my soul at ease with only a touch or a look.

"I'm sorry, I just—"

"Sit down." She nods her head towards the inviting mattress covered in green satin sheets.

I cock a brow in question but don't argue. Groaning, I sink onto the soft bed and run my hand over the satin. My eyes shutter, and I barely keep myself upright as exhaustion washes over me, my body knowing it's moments away from being able to shut down for a few hours.

"Now, what's going on in that head of yours?" she asks. Her boots thud on the hardwood, and I barely contain my smile at the thought of cuddling with my mate tonight.

"Sleep."

"What else?" She giggles. Metal and hard leather thud to the floor next, and I can't help the way my cock throbs at the thought of her taking her clothes off. I reach under the hem of

my sweater and pull it off too, keeping my eyes closed as anticipation heightens my senses.

“I—”

I pause as her soft footsteps grow louder, then her warm palms slide up my khaki pants to my waistband. I reach to help her, but she gently bats my hands away, making a tsking sound.

“You always take care of me, Kyros. Let me take care of you this time. I want to help you through whatever is weighing on you.”

Her fingers tease at the edge of my waistband, and I groan in protest, wishing we could let this go for tonight, wishing that she would inch her hand lower so I can feel the warm press of her hand against my cock. I peel my eyes open, unable to resist gazing back at my mate for a minute longer. My breath catches the moment I lock eyes with her. Her sea-green eyes shine brightly back at me, and I swear I could get lost in them if time allowed. Olivia’s bare skin glows in the pale moonlight that filters in through the window as she kneels between my legs. She’s taken almost all her clothes off, leaving her in only a set of ruby-red undergarments. I want to get lost in her, drink in every inch of her luscious curves, and worship her body like she deserves. But my chest also warms at the thought of her wanting to take care of me like I’ve done for her.

“You drive a hard bargain.” I chuckle. I place my hands on hers, not urging her on but just needing the warm, comforting press of her skin against mine. “This is so much more than

preparing for the chance of a battle. We're asking these students to put their lives on the line, to fight a war they're being forced into."

"I know it's not fair," she agrees. "But it's better that they know the truth, that it isn't a matter of if but when. They deserve to know."

"I know." I scrub a hand over my face. "I just don't know that I should be the one to tell them, to rally them. They need a leader, someone like Osias or Mateo—not me."

"Why?" Her brows knit together, head tilting to the side as she waits for me to continue, but I don't know how to answer.

"What do you mean why?"

"Why don't you think you're a leader?"

"I never wanted to command troops or order anyone else around. I just stick to my studies. I stick to healing and helping wherever I can." That's my true calling. That's where my strength lies.

"That isn't what makes a leader though." She smiles, grasping my hands in hers. "A leader is someone who is respected, someone others can turn to when things get hard. You might not want to command armies or give orders, but that doesn't mean you can't. Your kindness, compassion, and willingness to help others make you the perfect leader, especially to these students."

"But—"

“You’ve been with them every step of the way this year,” she says, cutting me off before I can voice my protest. “You’ve helped them answer questions and explore more about their lineage and this new world when no one else would. You stepped up to be our professor when we really needed you. I don’t think there’s another god who the students respect and admire more. They trust you to keep them safe, and so do I.”

“Olivia,” I breathe, freeing my hand to cup her cheek in a tender caress. My heart hammers against my chest as I take in the true meaning of her declaration.

“Those students are my friends. I saw the demigods and guardians who died tonight, and as much as I don’t want my friends to have to fight, I know that it’s the best shot they have.” Olivia swallows thickly, her eyes shining with unshed tears. “I know with you there to lead them—to use your knowledge to train them the best that we can—we’ll all have the best shot at surviving whatever Romulus throws at us.”

My chest aches as I stare back at my mate. Tracing my thumb under her eye, I catch her tear, wishing I could take all her pain away. She’s had to overcome so much already, endure battles and trials that no one should have to weather. Her faith in me steels my determination. My mate trusts me to do this, to see the students through this time and be the person they can turn to for help and support, and I won’t let her down.

“Thank you.” My mouth is dry as I look back at my mate, imagining the world at our feet and the centuries to come. I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with this woman,

growing and watching her explore her powers and strengths, being there to push her and empower her just as much as she's done for me.

“For what?” Olivia giggles lightly, pressing her cheek into my hand. I can't help the smile that unfurls on my lips in answer to hers, my heart singing as I clasp onto the bond that tethers our souls as one, vowing to cherish and protect our hearts for this lifetime and the next.

“For helping me see what was right in front of my face.” I laugh. “For calling me out and showing me what I need to do—no, what I want to do. I want to be there for the students and be the one to help them through this.”

“I'll call you out any time.” Olivia grins. “That's one thing you can always count on.”

“Good, because I think more than a few of us will need it from time to time.”

“Oh, trust me, I've already figured that out.”

This woman.

I let my body move on autopilot, not wasting another moment overthinking, and I tilt her lips up to meet mine in a sweet, tender kiss. Heat sparks between us, our lips still curved, joy warming my chest with my sweet mate in my arms. Her mouth molds to mine, our souls twining in this dance as her lips part beneath mine, inviting my tongue to sweep in and caress hers in long, languid strokes.

“I thought I said I was going to take care of you,” Olivia murmurs, pulling away slightly. I chase after her, needing more of the delicious caress of her lips, but she stops me. She places a hand on my chest, keeping me at bay. “Not yet. Let me help you relax and put your mind at ease.”

“I really want to argue, but—”

“Shh.” She presses a finger against my lips. She trails it back down my chest, the smooth, teasing touch sending a cascade of tingles up my spine. Her touch is electric, and I’m addicted to it.

My cock throbs as her finger trails lower, dipping back beneath the edge of my waistband. She undoes the button and slowly lowers the zipper. Leaning back on the bed, I watch as she slides my trousers and boxers down my legs, easing off my boots, socks, boxers, and pants, and tossing them to the corner of the room. A rush of anticipation surges through me, and I draw in a staggered breath, forcing my hands to stay planted where they are. I enjoy being the one in control, the one who takes away the need to think so my mate can relax. It takes everything in me not to wrap my arms around her waist and pull her up to straddle me, to flip her onto the mattress and take away every ounce of stress she has, at least for tonight.

This is what having a mate is about though. I need to let her take control and show her how much she means to me by letting go, letting her show her love for me the same way I’ve shown her.

I suck in a sharp breath as she runs her hand up my length and circles her thumb over the head.

“That feels amazing, sweetheart,” I groan, barely keeping my self-control.

“You haven’t seen anything yet.” Olivia winks and dips her head to run her tongue over my tip.

“Fuck,” I breathe, my hips jerking up like my cock has a mind of its own, but she pulls her mouth away.

“Patience, Kyros,” Olivia teases, reminding me of our first night together when I urged her not to be impatient. I loved seeing the way she craved my touch, like she was going to explode if I didn’t give her more. I’m kind of regretting that now though, because this anticipation is excruciating.

Satisfied with my compliance, she continues. Olivia lowers her mouth onto my length slowly, as though she’s testing me for a reaction. I close my eyes, my lips falling open, but I keep my hips cemented in place this time despite the fireworks that are erupting behind my eyelids as the waves of pleasure wash over me. She strokes my length, working me in time with her mouth, and it takes every ounce of strength I have not to thread my hands through her hair and beg her to never stop.

I fist my hands in the sheets, holding on for dear life as my mate sucks my cock, working me closer and closer to that sweet release. Olivia circles her tongue over my head, eliciting a desperate groan from my lips. My eyes flash open, my need to see my mate overwhelming my need for control. She gazes up at me, and the sight of her head bobbing on my cock, while



her eyes are focused on me and my pleasure, is the most tantalizing view I've ever seen. I can't keep my eyes off her, and I know I might not last much longer if I don't stop, but I can't help it.

“Let go, Kyros,” she breathes. “Let me take it all.”

Her words vibrate straight through my cock, only adding to the pleasure she's wrenching from me. I can't hold on much longer—but why do I have to?

With the rush, I realize I don't have to be the one that keeps everyone and everything together. I don't have to bear the burden on my own. I have a mate by my side willing to shoulder some of it with me.

A weight seems to lift off my chest at the reassurance that my mate is safe here with me, that I haven't lost her, and she'll be here by my side for eternity.

Olivia sucks me into her mouth, and her hand pumps on my length, pushing me closer and closer to the edge.

“Olivia,” I groan. Her eyes are soft as she watches me crumble apart for her, and with one last stroke, I'm hers. My cock pulses in her hand as tendrils of desire shoot up my spine. Olivia's throat works, her mouth sucking down and swallowing every drop of my release as though she's sloughing away a layer of worry and stress that has been clinging to me for far too long.

“I don't know what I'd do without you, Olivia,” I murmur, finally allowing myself to thread my fingers through her hair.

She pulls her lips from me with a pop. “Good thing you won’t ever have to find out.” She grins up at me.

I bend to wrap my hands around her waist and pull her up to straddle me, needing to feel her skin against mine, our hearts beating in time. My lips are on hers before I even know what I’m doing, devouring her mouth with my own. My tongue delves between her lips, tasting my salty release on hers, reminding me of what she just did. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to forget the sight of her head bobbing on my length, her sultry eyes gazing up at me, drinking in every action like my pleasure only heightened her own.

“Tonight was about you, Kyros,” she whispers against my lips. “But I might let you return the favor in the morning.”

“That I can do.” I laugh, grinning right back at her as I pull away. I swear, her joy is damn contagious. I don’t think there could be a time where she’s smiling and I’m not mirroring it.

I shift back higher on the bed and take her with me, maneuvering to lie against the pillows. She snuggles into the bed as I pull the sheets up over our heads, cocooning us away from the rest of the world for tonight at least. We have a hell of a day to face tomorrow, but tonight is ours.

“This is what I want, Olivia, us together like this for the rest of our lives. I don’t want there to ever be another day where I wake up without you lying right next to me.” Just enough light filters in through the sheet to glimpse her, our faces mere inches from each other as I gaze into her eyes. I swear I could get lost in their depths, and I’d gladly sink into the sea for her.

“I think that can be arranged. We’ll just have to make sure to get a bed big enough for us all since I don’t think the others will let you keep me all to yourself.”

“That’s the first thing on my to-do list then, as soon as this war is over, because there’s not a chance I’m going to let one of my brothers sweep you away from me.”

“Thank you for today, not only for what you said earlier but for helping me heal the wounded.” I sweep a piece of hair back from her face as an excuse to touch her. I keep my hand there, cupping her cheek and stroking my thumb over her skin in a soft caress. “I’ve never had anyone other than Osias who’s been able to help me do more than patch them up, and he understandably has a million duties as it is.”

“Of course,” she breathes, placing her hand atop my own. A sigh of relief slips from my lips at the press of her skin against mine. “I couldn’t let you heal them on your own, not when I could help.”

“I know doing what is right is not always easy. It can be overwhelming at first to see the aftermath of war.” My eyes flick between hers, watching for any sign of discomfort, but it doesn’t come.

“It was a lot, to see the bodies of the demigods and guardians who died, to know that their friends and families will have to live with that loss.” A flicker of pain crosses her face, but it’s gone in the next instant.

“If you ever need to talk about it, or need to walk away, or even have me take over, you just let me know, okay?” I hold

her gaze, needing her to know it's okay to protect herself and her mental health too. I can manage on my own, especially with all the medics we have on staff.

“Okay.” She smiles sadly. She places a kiss against my palm, and we sit in a comfortable silence for a few moments.

“I guess you'll be the interim headmaster,” Olivia says, nestling against my chest. I wrap my arm around her, my heart warming at how natural it feels to have her in my arms. Safe and where she's always meant to be.

“Oh, don't go spreading those rumors, sweetheart,” I chuckle, placing a sweet kiss on the tip of her nose. Her face wrinkles, and she teasingly pushes me away, but I don't miss the pink that rushes to her cheeks.

“Come on, let me have my fun. Besides, it will give you a great opportunity to show Titus how it's really done. He was a shit headmaster, even when he was pretending to be Mavros.” Olivia chuckles.

“Don't get any ideas,” I warn, unable to keep the smile off my lips. “You've convinced me to lead the students through training, but that doesn't mean I'm going to be the headmaster.”

Would it really be that bad to be headmaster here? At least until we can appoint a new council and demigod to the position ...

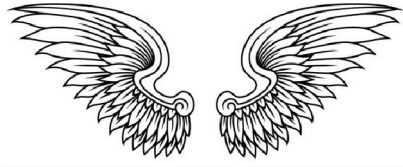
“I'm just saying, I think you would be the best headmaster in the history of this school.”

“You don’t even know any other headmasters other than your brother,” I huff out in amusement.

“Yup, and I already know you’d be a million times the headmaster he was.” Olivia yawns softly, her eyes closing as she rests her head against my chest.

“Get some rest, sweetheart. I love you.” I place a chaste kiss on the top of her head.

“I love you too.” I barely catch her words before her breathing evens out and she slips into a restful slumber.



# Chapter Five

## Kyros

“**I**’VE GATHERED YOU ALL here today to discuss the enhanced training and our next steps,” I say, striding around the other side of my desk. Professor Gabris, Pallas, and Barros are all gathered on the sofa in the small office in the library. Barros shifts uncomfortably between the other two demigods as he tries to adjust his bulky frame between the other two. Gabris’ frizzy, red hair shifts in front of her face as she’s jostled, and she blows the thick strands out of her eyes, pursing her lips as she glares at Barros.

“The students have responded well to the new training techniques, and under the guidance of the other demigods, they’ve made some drastic improvements in the last few days,” Pallas responds, his face serene.

*Few days.*

The reminder shakes my confidence for a moment before I push the uncertainty away, remembering what Olivia said to me last night. It’s strange to remember that only a few days have passed since the students were first brought into this new

training program. Being swept up in the battle has made these last *few days* seem like months, especially without having Olivia by my side. I adjust my linen suit vest and nod, focusing back on the task at hand.

“What happened with the battle, God of Healing?” professor Gabris asks. “Is the threat over?”

The tinge of hope in her words turns my stomach, but I shake my head, ripping it away like a band-aid.

“Romulus is on the run, but he’ll be coming back with a vengeance,” I say, needing to convey the severity without telling them the secret only a few of us know. “We just received some insider information that confirms the academy will be under attack when he unleashes the rest of his forces.”

“Are we leaving then?” Gabris asks, her head on a swivel as though I just said that demons are already at our gate.

“No, we aren’t leaving. We want to make sure the students are as prepared as possible though, so I’ll be going over everyone’s specialty and their skill level. Anyone who is unable to fight, or unwilling to, will be brought to Ethereal, but anyone who is willing and able will be put through rigorous training for the next week and will be helped by their godly parents.”

I’d already begun going through the list of students this morning, dividing them into combat and defensive categories, and contacting their parents with an order from Osias himself to attend training starting tomorrow morning.



“Everyone’s power will be useful in battle; we just need to play to their strengths, which is exactly the reason why we put each student through combat training,” I explain, nodding to Professor Barros. His chest puffs out with pride as he nods enthusiastically. “Learning combat is essential to understanding offensive and defensive moves and strategy, and by harnessing that knowledge, we can build an army strong enough to mimic the gods themselves.”

“I’m here to help with anything you or the students need,” Pallas says, inclining his head. “I will help the students find the magic and the peace within their souls to stay calm no matter what creature they’re facing down.”

“I’ll help, too,” Barros exclaims, running a hand over his thinning hair. “I’ll continue teaching the students about combat and defensive and offensive strategies, just like you said.”

Barros grins, bouncing in his seat as though he can’t physically contain his excitement.

“Thank you both,” I huff out on a breath of amusement, nodding in appreciation. “What is your decision, professor Gabris?”

Her cheeks flush as I turn my attention to her, and she swallows thickly. “I want to be here to help the students, but after that demon attack, I’m not sure what help I can be. I don’t want to frighten them with my nerves.”

“The choice is yours, but think about how you would feel as a student. There will be plenty of demigods who are terrified, certain they won’t be able to face the demons, demigods, and

gods on the other side of this battle. If they see you turn away, they might follow, or they might stay and have that tendrill of doubt in their mind that if their professor left, what hope is there for them.”

I let the words sink in for a moment before I continue.

“That chaos demon came out of nowhere in an environment where you were completely unprepared. None of us could have predicted that he could have gotten through the barriers. Would you have reacted differently if you were prepared, if you knew you were about to face down a demon?”

“Of course,” she gasps, her brows furrowed. “I would have protected my students to the best of my abilities. That moment replays in my mind every night before I go to sleep, and I wish I could go back and change everything about how I reacted that day.”

“Then this is your chance,” Pallas says before I have a chance to. “This is your chance to stand with your students rather than protecting yourself and leaving them to fend for themselves.”

Silence echoes through the room as Gabris swallows the harsh truth. All of us were upset when we heard what happened. Regardless of whether my mate was in that room or not, I would’ve been just as upset if it had been any other student forced to fend off a chaos demon with no powers and barely any training. If it wasn’t for Olivia and her need for more training to face the trials, I’m not sure I would’ve let Gabris come back to her teaching post.

“I’ll help,” she says finally. “I want to redeem myself, and I want to protect my students like I should have that day.”

“Good.” I nod.

I’m not sure how involved she’ll be, but it’s admirable that she wants to try. I’ll have to keep a close eye on her to ensure she isn’t doing more harm than good, though. Pallas catches my gaze and gives me a tight nod as though he could read the thoughts running through my mind. Who knows, though? Maybe he can.

“Now, I want to go over the lessons in detail and work on expanding them.” I walk back over to my desk and pull out the notes I’ve already collected. I’ve been helping them so far, but with my focus split between the battle, Olivia in the infernal realm, and training the students, I haven’t been at the forefront of the planning as much as I’d have liked to be. “I’ll need you all to go through my preliminary list of students and their godly parents and specify what their strengths and weaknesses are so that I have notes for when they arrive tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Gabris exclaims, her eyes widening as she looks from me to her fellow professors. “With the number of students—”

“We’ll get it done,” Pallas says, cutting her off. “The demigods you brought in to help have been working with the students this morning. We’ll just ask them to fill in for a few more hours so we can get the planning in place.”

“Yes, whatever we need to do,” Barros agrees excitedly.

“Perfect, and once we get this under control, I’ll meet with all of the students in the afternoon. We’ll have to ramp up the combat portion, and I think I have the perfect place for it.”



“This is where we’re going to train?” Olivia groans, staring up at the stone monstrosity in the middle of the field.

“Yes, but not like this.” I chuckle, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

“Man, you really did a number on this thing, didn’t you?” Adrian huffs out in amusement, wrapping his arm around Olivia’s waist. He tugs her out of my grip and sticks out his tongue at me over her head.

*“You had enough time with our mate last night,”* Adrian projects to me, his chest puffing out with pride at his smooth move.

Olivia just shakes her head in exasperation, chuckling beneath her breath. I sigh, but I don’t argue. He’s right, and I wouldn’t give up the time we had together for anything.

“I think Maximus held himself back, otherwise he’s getting weak in his old age,” Mateo quips, elbowing Maximus in the side.

Max glowers back at him in warning. “I did that with my fists, not my powers. So don’t test me, brother, or else we’ll be trying out this arena, and it won’t be pretty for you.”

“Will you four ever stop arguing?” Osias groans, scrubbing a hand over his face. “See what I have to deal with?”

My lips purse as I watch Octavia pat his arm sympathetically. Mateo huffs incredulously at them, and Adrian groans in annoyance.

*I didn't even say anything. How did I get dragged into this?*

“Anyway,” I continue. “Max, do you mind?”

I nod towards the stone building where Olivia had her third trial. My stomach twists as memories flit through my mind. The uneasy feeling rears its ugly head again, reminding me of the moment Olivia stepped within those impenetrable walls, only to be transported into the forest at the end with Titus there waiting for her. It's strange to think about that day now and how far we've come. Mateo, Maximus, Adrian, Osias, and I were here with Olivia, each of us reassuring her before the final trial. Now though, we have Octavia by our side, and Olivia's brothers ...

I can't help but glance at Titus, a mix of anger, confusion, and uncertainty churning in my gut as I try to reconcile that day with right now. We knew that the council had something up their sleeves when they made this building, and that they were working with Titus. We were apprehensive and on high alert for any sign of Titus, prepared to stop him before he took the chance to trap our mate again. And now, he's here, saying he's been on our side all along.

Titus doesn't look back at me though; he and Kallen stand off to the side—Kallen looking off into the distance, probably

wishing he was anywhere but here—but Titus watches Olivia, regret and sorrow creasing his features.

Olivia stares back at the building, a flurry of emotions swirling in her sea-green eyes—pain, sorrow, and determination. And that’s why I love this woman. Despite everything that’s happened, her strength never ceases to amaze me.

“Princess?” Maximus says, walking over to her.

“Yeah, let’s get rid of this piece of shit,” she says, forcing a smile onto her lips.

Max nods and takes a few steps towards the building.

“We should move back.” Adrian chuckles nervously, pulling Olivia away a few feet with him, and the rest of us do the same, not wanting to get swept up with the debris as Maximus raises his arms. The ground shakes beneath us, and I brace myself on the edge of the arena leading to the seats while grabbing onto Olivia with the other hand.

Chunks of stone crumble from the walls, sending a plume of dust billowing up as they cascade to the ground. Crashes echo around the arena, and the building collapses, but none of it travels more than a foot away from the edge of what once was its borders. Either Maximus or one of the others must have erected a barrier around it to keep all of us safe from the destruction. Piles of rubble cover the area where the building used to be, and as the earth rumbles and a wide gap rips in the ground, swallowing the disintegrated walls piece by piece, a

sense of ease washes over me, chasing away the tension I hadn't even realized had been seizing my chest.

Olivia's hand grips mine, and my attention flashes to her. She smiles softly at me, that same relief echoing on her face. I turn back to watch as the final pieces of the council's building are swallowed up by the earth, and the ground reforms. The wind ruffles through the soft, lush, green blades of grass like they have always been there, like the beauty of this place was never tarnished by that monstrosity to begin with. The wind sweeps past, the air fluttering through my curls, and washing over me like a cleansing shower, clearing away the painful memories that structure held within it.

Maximus strides back to us, his steps in slow motion. The world seems to stop for a moment, as though with the elimination of this symbol, our fate has been restored, and we're able to start anew.

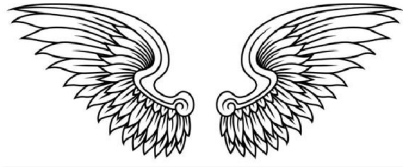
"This feels like a new beginning," Olivia says. "A fresh start for us to set things right like they should have always been."

Olivia's gaze drifts to her parents, and she gives them a soft smile. She's right; everything that I thought I knew has been turned upside down in the last few weeks, and with the destruction of this last remnant of the council's influence on the academy, it feels like a renewal, like that world is finally set back to how it should have been all along.

"Let's get started then," I say, capturing all of our friends' gazes, old and new. "We still have a lot to do."

Despite how monumental this moment feels, it's only the beginning, the start of a new life, and the commencement of this final chapter. Death and rebirth—life—hand in hand.





## Chapter Six

### Olivia

“**T**HERE HAVE BEEN MANY changes in the last week, and I know many of you are still coping with the enhanced lesson plan we’ve laid out for you,” Kyros says from his place in the middle of the field. He strides across the makeshift stage that Adrian erected for him, a spell amplifying his voice to be heard throughout the arena.

“He just wanted attention. He’s a natural at this,” Adrian scoffs, shaking his head as he wraps an arm around my shoulder. We’re far enough away that none of the students will hear us, but still. My heart warms as I watch my mate up on the stage, his expression kind and caring as he looks out at the students—the personification of the leader they all need right now.

“He didn’t just want attention, and shh,” I admonish Adrian and straighten in my chair, wanting to watch Kyros. My skin tingles with unease as I look around at the box where the council was sitting during my first trial.

“Sure,” he says, cutting off the next part of Kyros’ speech. I glare at Adrian, and he raises his one free hand in contrition, but the smirk on his lips says otherwise.

“You deserve to know the truth and the real threat that we’re under,” Kyros continues. “As you already knew, there was a chance that Romulus and the dark gods might attack the academy, but that threat has now been confirmed.”

Murmurs echo around the stadium, a mix of excitement and fear spiking through the crowd.

“We don’t want you to be caught off guard, but we also don’t want you to worry,” Kyros says, drawing their attention back to him and drowning out the nervous exclamations. I watch him in awe at how he’s able to calm the masses with only a few words, and how he’s been able to earn their trust and respect in such a short time. He’s sexy and sure as he walks across the stage, exuding the most confidence I’ve ever seen from him.

“I can make a speech too, little mate,” Mateo whispers next to me. His breath brushes the shell of my ear, sending tendrils of desire shooting up my spine. Dammit, I was already getting distracted with how handsome Kyros looks up there in his tan suit, and now I have one mate’s arm wrapped around me while he seductively trails a finger along the exposed skin of my shoulder, as another mate whispers in my ear, his strong biceps pressed against my arm, reminding me of how he was able to hold me against that tree yesterday while he—

“Which is why your professors and I have spent the morning going over everyone’s progress and outlining a specialized plan for the next few days in preparation,” Kyros explains, drawing my attention back to the field.

I breathe a sigh of relief, grateful for the distraction from the lust burning through me right now.

“This is not the time,” I grind out, low enough for only my mates to hear.

“Are you sure, princess?” Maximus says, his voice a deep seductive rumble that makes me want to dissipate the hell out of here and back to anywhere we can be alone. “Because we can—“

“Shh,” I snap, cutting him off before he’s able to lure me anywhere. Adrian chokes on his laugh, using his other hand to slide up my inner thigh in a soft, teasing touch to the bottom of my shorts.

I really wish I’d worn pants right about now, rather than a tank top and shorts for training. At least it’s not a skirt though, then I’d really be in trouble.

“Osias has sent word to your godly parents, outlining the expectations for your training, and we expect most of them to arrive tomorrow,” Kyros says, thankfully distracting me again as excited murmurs echo through the field. “We’ll be going over your powers, both defensive and offensive, and deciding how they will be used best during this conflict. I want to reassure you that no one who is not ready or is not able to use their powers on the frontline will be there. Even still, you will

not be in this fight alone. We're currently working on plans for how to distribute our forces, including gods, demigods, and guardians."

Kyros motions to the box where the rest of us are sitting, and the students turn to look up at us. My chest tightens at their scrutiny, and despite all I've learned, and the mastery I've gained over my powers in such a short time, it still feels strange to be called a god. Only a couple of months ago I still thought I was a demigod, that I was still half-human. I scan the crowd searching for my friends, but I can't make them out in the sea of faces as they turn back to Kyros.

"Now, we're going to split you into different groups based on your magic abilities. Those who need to work on accessing their powers will be put with Professor Pallas to work on internal blockages. We'll have Professor Barros working with offensive powers, and Professor Gabris will work with defensive powers," Kyros explains, pointing to the three professors spread out along the field. "Demigods and gods with the same category of magic will be circling as well, ready to jump in with any strategy that might be helpful."

My stomach twists as I search the crowd still. I've been so focused on the battle and everything that came after I haven't even checked on Nelle. Worst best friend ever.

*Kali is taking care of her*, I remind myself, but it doesn't do much to dispel the nervous energy thrumming through me. Nelle is my family, and she's still dealing with her life being turned upside down. Adrian gave me the gift of having Nelle

with me on this journey, of performing the blood bond so I could tell her about this new life. I had her with me when I needed her the most, and yet I haven't been able to be there for her in the same way yet. But that ends now.

“Please go to the group you feel best suits you. We've made our own lists and will make adjustments where we see fit, but we don't want anyone who is struggling in silence to be forced along too quickly. Once we have a better idea where everyone is in the next few days, we'll make adjustments and move into battle techniques, which is why our training will be conducted outdoors in the arena from now on.”

“Our work never ends,” Orrin sighs, pushing up from his chair with a loud scrape. His golden hair shines brightly in the sun as he makes his way to the stairs to join the other gods and demigods moving onto the field.

“Maybe you shouldn't have so many kids, then you wouldn't have such a key role in training,” Adrian snorts, and I choke back a laugh of my own. He's not wrong. I already know two of his daughters, and there could be countless other mini-Orrins out there for all we know. Hell, I bet he doesn't even know how many children he has.

“That would be a disservice to the world.” He grimaces as he spots a few students already crowding around the bottom of the stairs, their blond hair a dead giveaway as to who they're waiting for. “Duty calls.”

“The fact that he actually thinks getting human women pregnant is a sacred duty is hilarious,” I scoff under my breath.

“Tell me about it,” Mateo groans, frowning as we watch the swarm of students crowd around the God of Wisdom. “For someone so wise, you’d think he’d figure out that a million children as pompous and annoying as he is, isn’t what the world needs.”

“Please remember that, Mateo,” my father groans. “I don’t need any grandchildren with an ego as large as yours.”

“Ugh, Dad, no,” I blurt, clapping my hands over my ears to try to drown him out. “Don’t even talk about that. I’m only twenty, and we have an eternity ahead of us. I don’t want to hear the word grandchildren for at least a few centuries.”

“Good,” my father chuckles, shooting a smug look at Mateo as he passes him and descends the stairs.

I expect Mateo to fling an insult back at my father or sneer at his back, but to my surprise, a laugh slips from his lips. He shakes his head as he watches my father descend the stairs and stride towards where Kyros stands off to the side of the stage, meeting with a few of the other gods.

I glance around the box, my brows furrowing when I realize Octavia hasn’t followed him. She’s seated in the back row still, staring off into the distance, her mind seemingly somewhere else.

*“I’ll meet you down there,”* I project to my mates, turning back to them. *“I think I’m going to talk to Octavia.”*

Anxious energy thrums through me at the thought of being with her on my own, but I know I have to do this. There really

hasn't been a time I've been alone with her since finding out the truth. I've always had Mateo there with me as a buffer. She's my mother though, and sooner or later, I'm going to have to get to know her.

"We'll see you in a bit, angel," Adrian murmurs, looking back at Octavia pointedly. My chest tightens, but I nod. Mateo follows him, nodding in understanding before he makes his way down the stairs too. Maximus grumbles something under his breath and follows them, his emerald eyes locked on me each step of the way.

I'm pretty sure that even if I don't see him, my protective mate will be watching me from afar for this conversation, hell, maybe all afternoon.

"Is everything okay?" I ask, turning to face her. My lips quirk to the side as indecision wars within me. Octavia is my mother. I've accepted that now. I've seen her love for my father, but I don't really know her.

"I just—I don't know where my place in all this is," Octavia says, a sad smile tilting her lips as she stares out at the field. She folds her hands primly in her lap, her thick black embroidered dress shifting slightly. "This is what I always wanted, what I imagined for years, to be here with you and your father, but I don't know how to help. Planning, sure, but helping students prepare for an attack isn't something I can do. My powers are ... different."

"Well, I know someone you can help," I say hesitantly, unsure if I should open this door. I want to know her, I want to



see her as a mother, as my family, but it's not going to happen overnight. This might just be the perfect opportunity to start though. "Me."

"Yes," she breathes, relief relaxing her expression. "I can help you master the shadows."

"No, I mean ... " I take a deep breath. "I used the power of death in the battle. Abigail. She was seconds away from dissipating back here and killing my friends, and it just happened. The shadows swallowed her whole, leaving no trace that she ever existed."

"Olivia," she breathes. She reaches for me, her hand hesitating a moment, but she pushes through the uncertainty and smooths a hand over my hair. The gesture is comforting yet confusing. I try to reconcile the loving touch with Octavia, my mother, but also the woman who's nearly a stranger to me. "Of course, I can help you. You already have such an impressive control of your powers, so please don't worry."

"Thank you," I say, unsure what else to say. "I wasn't sure if you knew."

"I had a feeling, especially since you gained all of your father's powers, it would make sense that you gained mine too, but I wasn't sure, since neither Titus nor Kallen developed more than shadows," Octavia explains, resting her hand on my shoulder. I nearly jump at the touch, the expression of comfort strange coming from her, yet, as I sit with it, it feels ... right? "I just didn't want to frighten you with it, especially with being in the infernal realm."

Silence stretches between us as I remember the fear and anger that had coursed through me when Titus first swept me away from my life. Yeah, I definitely wouldn't have taken being told I have death powers very well if she'd blurted it out then.

"I'm not sure that we should train for that specific power here though. I'm sure my presence is already worrisome to some," Octavia murmurs, glancing out at the throng of students, demigods, and gods below. Sure enough, I catch more than a few of them looking up at us. They quickly avert their gazes as I make eye contact with them, but I don't miss the hint of fear.

"I want you to know that the fates did not bless you with this power lightly," Octavia says. "There was a reason your brothers and Romulus didn't receive the power, despite their positions and their blood."

"I know." I smile softly back at her. Her words remind me of what Mateo told me yesterday when I revealed that the weight of this new power frightened me. "It will just take some getting used to and some practice."

"Exactly." Octavia pulls her hands back and stands from her seat, looking out at the field with a renewed sense of excitement. "Do you know if there's a place where we can practice?"

"I think I know just the place." The image of the small cottage just outside the arena pops into my mind. It had seemed like a meeting place, but if Kyros isn't using it for

something, I'm sure we could go there away from the prying eyes of the people around us.

I take the lead and stride down the steps, with Octavia following behind. A mix of nerves and excitement swirl around in my gut as I imagine how exactly Octavia will teach me how to use the power without ... well, killing anyone.

"Hey, can we talk?" Titus says, coming out from seemingly nowhere. I clasp my chest, my heart jackhammering at his sudden appearance. I nearly stumble as I take the last step onto the grass, barely righting myself before I faceplant.

"Really?" I huff incredulously. "You need to wear a bell or something."

"Sorry," Titus says, but I don't miss the choked laughter and barely disguised smirk.

He is so not sorry.

"I'll let you two have a moment," Octavia smiles, gliding past us. Her black dress sweeps out behind her as she turns and strides away to where my father stands in the distance, a group of students already surrounding him.

"What do you want?" I sigh, crossing my arms over my chest as I pin him with a look of disdain ... mostly for scaring me.

"You— Ugh, why do you have to make this so difficult?" he groans, scrubbing a hand over his face in exasperation.

"Me?" I nearly shout, my eyes narrowing in disbelief. "You're the one who wanted to talk to me so badly."

“And I’m regretting it already,” he says under his breath but still loud enough so I can hear.

I grit my teeth, about to go off of him, but he cuts me off.

“I wanted to apologize for everything I put you through. You know all the demons and trials and nonsense.” He waves it off like it was nothing, as though he’s trivializing the hell I went through because of him, but I see the tinge of pain in his light brown eyes as he rakes a hand back through his hair.

“Oh, like, trying to abduct me, sending demons after me, and putting me through weeks of hell preparing for the trials only for them to just be an excuse to finally capture me, is something so easily forgiven,” I scoff, half-jokingly.

“Okay, okay,” he says, bringing his hands up in front of him as though he’s trying to appease a wild animal. “I just—I rationalized everything, you know? I told myself I wasn’t actually the bad guy because I was doing everything for the greater good. But seeing the building earlier and how you all reacted to it ... it made me realize how much my actions affected all of you. I’m truly sorry.”

Silence stretches between us and my brows furrow as I look back at Titus—my brother, seeing the true contrition creasing his features. I can tell he’s been struggling with this—both feeling like an outsider because of what he’s done, and knowing that his endgame was for the greater good.

“I know, Titus. It hasn’t been easy to see that shift. Hell, I needed Seraphina to confirm it for me before I was actually convinced that you were on our side, but I know that now.” A

weight seems to lift off my shoulders as the words leave my lips, like I'm letting go of the past, ready and willing to see where the future will take us.

“It might have been for the right reasons, but that doesn't make it any less difficult,” he says, looking back at where the stone building used to stand. “I had a part to play, one you were never supposed to see through. Because of that, I had to do some things I'm not proud of. On the plus side though, if you hadn't gone through the trials you wouldn't have been able to face Romulus head-on like you did.”

“I know,” I breathe, some of the tension easing at his apology. “I'm trying to see past it though, now that I know there was a reason for it all. It would help, though, if you weren't such an ass.”

I lightly shove his shoulder, giving him a smug smirk.

“Only if you stop being such an annoying little brat.” He smirks back at me, playfully shoving me in return.

“Where the hell you been, bitch?” a female voice screeches as a blur of pink flashes in front of me, followed by a crash of limbs as she collides with me. Her chest smashes against mine and she nearly knocks me over as her arms band tightly around me. I pull in a strangled breath, trying desperately to fill my lungs in her vise-like grip, when realization comes crashing into me.

*Nelle.*

The prick of tears stings my eyes as I return her hug, squeezing her back just as tightly as she's crushing my ribs.

“Oh, just saving the world, no big deal,” I chuckle, pushing her away slightly so I can see her face. Her black hair is pulled back into a ponytail, her brown eyes shining as they meet mine. I rub my hands over her arms, needing to reassure myself that she's here and she's real. “Nelle.” I can't help the sob that slips out when I say her name, all the emotions from the last few days coming crashing back in.

Of course I saw her, just she was still on bed rest, and both of us were reeling from her near death and transformation. My soul had been crushed at the thought that I'd lost her, and then I was terrified that she hated me. But this is my Nelle, energy bursting from her like a shooting star.

“Liv.” She claps her hands on either side of my face, and I don't even care that my cheeks sting under her palms, not when she's alive and here with me. Slap me all ya want, bestie.

“You have to tell me everything,” both of us shout at the same time, before we both erupt in roaring laughter.

“What on earth am I watching?” Titus asks hesitantly, his lips twisting in disgust as his eyes flick between the two of us.

Nelle's spine goes ramrod straight at the sound of his voice, her hands slipping from my face as she turns on her heel to face him.

“You,” she shouts incredulously and points a stern finger at him. She takes a step towards him, her feet stomping on the

grass. I can't help the grin that spreads on my face as Titus's face pales, and he casts a worried gaze over her shoulder to me.

That grin doesn't last long though, not when her skin starts to glow in a pale gold light and white wings spring from the back of her pink racerback tank top.

What the fuck.

I knew I changed her into a guardian, but knowing and seeing are two completely different things.

"How dare you show your face here?" Nelle screams. She shoves him back a step, sparks zapping from her fingertips as she places them on his chest. They vanish in the next minute though, as he stumbles back, clearly caught off guard since he nearly trips over his own feet.

"Nelle, wait," I say, stepping between them from going at each other's throats again. "There's a lot I have to catch you up on, babe, but he's not the bad guy."

"I don't know about that," she huffs, but thankfully doesn't start after him again.

"I know you have every right to be pissed at him, but just please, give me a chance to explain everything." I know the words have little meaning right now—he was the reason she was even in that clearing, the reason why her life has been completely turned upside down.

"Fine." She slices a cutting glare his way.

“What the hell was that?” I blurt, turning to Titus, my stomach twisting at the sight of the sparks that erupted between them when Nelle pushed him.

“It was nothing,” Titus says hurriedly, eyes darting from side to side as the nosy onlookers begin to turn away. He straightens his black suit jacket as though he hadn’t just seen what happened.

“There was definitely something,” I say, looking between the two of them.

Nelle crosses her arms over her chest, her snow-white wings fluffing up behind her.

“Probably just something with her new powers,” Titus says, clearly still flustered, despite his feigned nonchalance. “I should go.”

“Yeah, you should,” Nelle says, glaring at him as he turns on his heel.

“No, you shouldn’t,” I call after him, but he ignores me. He strides away a bit too quickly to be classified as casual.

*What the hell is going on with him?*

“Did you see that?” I ask Nelle, my lips quirking to the side as I study her.

“See what?” she huffs, cocking a brow at me expectantly.

“Nevermind.”

*Was that all in my head?*



“Does that happen often?” I nod pointedly to her wings, a smile spreading on my lips as I take her in. As strange as it is that Nelle is part of this world now, I have to admit, it suits her. She seriously looks like an avenging angel as the glow slowly seeps away.

She places her hands on her hips, frowning as she looks over her shoulder at the new appendages. “Not really, just when I’m pissed. But I have a hard time getting rid of them.”

“Well then, I guess I’ll just have to join you.” I chuckle, grateful that I chose to wear a tank top too. I call on my wings, spreading them like limbs behind me. A smile spreads on my lips as Nelle’s eyes widen, and my golden wings fluff up behind me just like hers. The sun glints off the gilded feathers, sending a cascade of dancing lights onto the shadowed grass beneath me.

Nelle launches herself towards me again, and I struggle to pull in a breath as her arms band around me again. “Thank you, Liv.”

“Of course.” I chuckle, hugging her back. “There’s no way I’m going to let my girl show me up by being the only one with her gorgeous wings on display.”

Her grip on me tightens in response, both of us laughing as we finally pull away.

“I want to teach you everything I can, Nelle,” I say, holding back the urge to apologize yet again, because you know what, the alternative would be that this amazing woman wasn’t on this earth any longer, which would really be horrible for me

and the rest of the world to not have her sunshine presence any longer. “And I’m going to make sure you have the best teachers for everything I don’t know.”

“I love you, Liv.”

“I love you too, Nelle. You’re my family forever.”

“Forever,” she agrees.

“Liv,” a female voice exclaims, before a head of thick red curls pushes through the crowds a few feet away.

“Oh yeah. I guess I kinda ditched them as soon as I saw you.” Nelle’s cheeks redden as Kali finally pushes her way through with Zina and Lucas on her heels.

The sight of all of them together is like a breath of fresh air, like the last week never happened—hell, like the last couple of months never happened and we’re still all newbies learning the ropes—except someone is missing.

I smile despite the pit that forms in my stomach at the reminder of Domenic and his betrayal as the three of them hug me and Nelle joins in, her soft wings cocooning around us all.

“You don’t know how relieved we are to see you safe,” Kali exclaims, pulling back to examine me in her mom-like fashion. “You should have found us as soon as you got back.”

“I know,” I sigh, my heart sinking slightly at memories of yesterday and the soldiers I had to heal. I chew my bottom lip debating whether or not I should reveal that point, but I can’t lie to them, not when it’s what we’re all about to face. “There

was a lot going on after though, demigods and guardians that needed to be healed.”

The four of them go silent and step back as reality comes crashing back in. Lucas twines his fingers with Zina’s and pushes his glasses up with his other hand, the gesture warming my heart. Speaking of friends in love, Stacia walks up next, with Katrina following along behind her. They awkwardly wave to me before Stacia wraps her arm over Kali’s shoulders.

“I was about to beg you to save me from all these couples, but I forgot you and your mates are the most nauseating of them all,” Nelle groans, tipping her head up to the sky.

Everyone laughs, but I don’t miss the tinge of sadness in her eyes as she rolls them, trying to hide it.

“I need to hear everything,” I say, changing the subject. “How has the training been going? Any hot gossip I missed?”

I push away the feeling of unease that creeps up my spine, along with the heat of anger that swirls in my gut—yet another reminder of Domenic and what he did to her.

“We’ve all been doing really well with our powers, look,” Kali exclaims as she crouches. She places her hands over the grass and it shoots up beneath her palms. “My fertility powers work on more than just beings. They help crops and plants along too, blooming new life.”

“And I’ve been doing well with thunder,” Lucas says. “It’s been interesting studying the different scientific aspects of thunder and learning everything I can do through that.”

I can't help but smile. Such a Lucas answer. Of course he'd learn everything he can possibly do with his power. The perfect mix of science and magic.

"I—I haven't really been doing well with my powers—you know the sea and all that..." Zina trails off, looking down at the grass nervously.

"I'll help you, Zina," I assure her, placing a hand on her shoulder. "I'm not an expert by any means, but I've seen them in use, and I've had to use them a few times now."

My stomach twists as I look at Nelle, and I try to bury the memory of Helene's air stream wrapping around her neck, and the panic and desolation I felt as I frantically tried to save her.

*She's still here, she's still alive.*

Zina breathes a sigh of relief and gives me an appreciative nod. "Thank you, Liv. I just can't be near any of the other demigods with my powers. They remind me too much of her."

"If it's any consolation, I know why she did it," I say hesitantly, unsure if she'll want to hear this revelation. "She was coerced into working with Romulus because he took her best friend—her sister, and Domenic's mother."

"What?" Kali exclaims, her eyes wide in shock.

"It doesn't excuse anything that they've done, but there is a reason at the root of it all," I explain, not wanting anyone to think they're the victims. "I've spent a lot of time with Helene, unfortunately, and while I can confirm she's formally taken

Romulus' side in this battle, regardless of who he's taken from her, I can tell you that you're nothing like her, Zina."

"Thank you." Her shoulders slump slightly. "It's at least reassuring to know she wasn't always a monster."

"And if you're up to meeting them, I'm sure the other sea demigods aren't either."

"Yeah, you're right." Zina smiles softly, but I still see the hesitation in her gaze. There's no way I'm going to push her though, just like I wouldn't want anyone to push me with my messed up family.

Speaking of family...

I stand up on my toes so I can look over the sea of students, demigods, and gods. Practice streams of water, air, and fire race by, floating on an invisible wind. Spark and crashes erupt around us too, as I search for the two gods I'm looking for.

There.

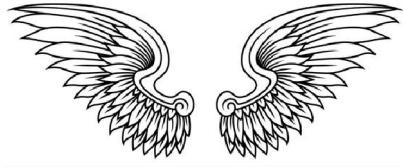
My father and Octavia stand by the stage, with Kyros and a few other gods I haven't met yet.

"Do you want to meet my parents?" I ask, remembering where I'm supposed to be right now. I'd asked Octavia to train me, and because Titus interrupted us, I completely lost track of what I was supposed to be doing.

"Of course," Kali beams, already looking around for them. The others voice their excitement too, nearly buzzing at the chance to meet two gods they've read about in class.

“You don’t have to ask me twice, Daddy Oliver—I mean, Osias, is always a sight for sore eyes,” Nelle giggles, narrowly dodging my shove.

“Just be careful with your flirting, Nelle; he’s a taken man now.” I laugh, waving the others along. My heart beams with pride as I lead one part of my family to meet the rest.



# Chapter Seven

## Olivia

“THESE SELFISH ASSHOLES,” MY father grumbles as he crumples up a piece of parchment. He even goes so far as to light this one on fire, the paper puffing up into a ball of flames, leaving only ashes in its wake.

“What did this one say?” Mateo asks, leaning back on the plush leather sofa.

I pull out a seat at the dining table beside my father, chancing a glance at the pile of papers in front of him.

*Osias, you can kiss my—*

“Ajax, along with a few other of the delightful gods we have to live with in Ethereal, have declared they won’t be helping train their own children,” my father huffs, turning the pages over so I can’t read anymore.

I lean back casually, feigning innocence, but judging by the pointed look he gives me, he knows exactly what I was doing.

“I’m going to have to go to Ethereal tonight and gently explain the importance that they be here.” My father sighs, yet



I don't miss the way his sea-green eyes light with excitement.

Cue knowing look.

See, Dad, I can be condescending too.

He shakes his head in annoyance, clearly not wanting to be called out.

"I want to go too," I announce, drawing the gazes of my mates from around the room. Adrian even peeks around the corner from the kitchen, a turkey sandwich balanced on the plate in his hands. I eye the food with longing.

"I think that's a great idea," Mateo says, striding over to the table and pulling out a chair beside me. "We should all go."

"Is that really such a good idea?" Kyros says from the seat across from me, looking up from the stack of papers in front of them. "We really don't have much time to prepare for tomorrow. Besides, there's a few of us that I'm not sure would be welcome back in Ethereal just yet." He and my father had just been coordinating which gods would need to attend the academy for training tomorrow when the stack of refusals came sailing my father's way.

I glance towards the leather couches where Titus and Kallen sit, opposite to where Mateo just was.

"That's a good point," Adrian says, striding into the dining room. He slides the plate in front of me, giving me the other half of his sandwich.

A sly grin spreads across his face as my eyes light up and immediately grab for the soft bread. "Thank you," I mumble

between bites, uncaring if I'm speaking with my mouth open.

Even though I haven't had the chance to train with Octavia yet, I still worked up a sweat helping my friends. It was an adjustment being the person giving the instructions, but I loved watching them improve their handle on their powers. Even Zina was able to access the air energy.

"But our mate hasn't seen Ethereal yet. Are you saying she should miss out just because some gods and demigods might hurl rotten fruit at her half-brothers?" Mateo asks in his disapproving tone.

I swallow down the last bit of my sandwich, nearly choking as a laugh slips out at Kyros' bewildered expression.

"Of course I'm not saying she should miss out," Kyros says, turning a concerned look on me as Adrian claps my back, making sure I don't choke on my food. "I'm saying we should wait for a better time."

"Is there going to be a better time though?" Maximus grumbles as he strides over from the stairs he was leaning against. "We're in the middle of a war right now, and she deserves to see her rightful home."

"Yes, I understand that," Kyros sighs, looking down at the papers strewn in front of him. "I'm sorry, sweetheart, I just really wanted to be there the first time you went, and with all this planning, I'm not sure that's possible right now."

"So, bring it with you," I say, reaching across the table to clasp his hand. "I want you all to be there too, but mostly I

want to see where you all live, and I'm sure you can get work done there, no?"

"You're right," Kyros agrees, his delicious dimples showing as he grins back at me, his honey-brown eyes soft and warm.

"So it's settled," Mateo declares, the wooden chair scraping across the floor as he stands abruptly.

"What's been settled?" Octavia asks, clearly having missed the entire conversation. She strides down the stairs, and I admire the grace she carries herself with as the train of her gown trails behind her. It seems surreal still that she's really here, but she fits in perfectly.

I've never seen my dad happier.

"It seems we're all going to Ethereal," my father says, a smile spreading across his face as he looks over his shoulder at her, despite his annoyance that we've all invited ourselves on this trip.

"Are we sure that's a good idea?" Octavia asks, gliding over to the dining room table to stand behind my father. She pointedly looks towards Titus and Kallen, giving them a sympathetic look. It was their home at one point too, yet after everything they've done, I'm not sure many of the gods or demigods will welcome them back with open arms.

"Yeah, I mean, you all are more than welcome to go, but I think we should stay here," Titus says, leaning back against the sofa and placing his hands behind his head.

“There’s no way I’m going there,” Kallen agrees, awkwardly shifting on the couch.

I still haven’t completely figured him out yet. Does he even feel any remorse for what he’s done, or is he truly only here because of Titus?

“I think it would be a good idea if you two joined us,” I announce, drawing a few curious gazes. “With everything that’s happened, the gods and demigods in Ethereal should know where you stand. Plus, you should have to face them after everything you’ve done.”

I catch Kallen’s gaze, and his lips turn down into a frown before he breaks eye contact with me.

*“There’s only one way we’re going to know if he’s truly willing to break ties with Romulus, and that’s if he faces what he’s done and shows remorse. Until then, I still won’t trust him,”* I project to the guys.

“I also don’t think it would be a good idea to leave you both here unescorted in the academy,” my father adds. “So it’s settled, we’ll all go to Ethereal. Let’s gather up anything we might need and get ready.”



“You’re sure about this?” Octavia asks, her arms wrapped around her chest as a cool breeze flutters past us.

“I’m sure,” my father answers, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. “They’ll see the truth, my love.”

He presses a kiss to her temple and looks at me. I shake my head and turn from them, still not used to my father's PDA.

I took the opportunity to shower and change into something other than my workout clothes while the others were gathering supplies. The hem of my knee-length red dress flutters in the wind, and I smooth it down, not needing a Marilyn Monroe moment right now.

"I really don't think this is a good idea," Titus sighs, raking his hand back through his dark-brown hair, his light-brown eyes gleaming in the orb light as he looks off into the distance.

"Yeah, we'll be lucky if they don't tie us to the gates and use us for target practice," Kallen grumbles, his black jacket shifting as he crosses his arms over his chest.

"Now that would be entertaining," Adrian chuckles, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. I lean into the embrace, grateful for the warmth. Despite the light cardigan I threw on, the chill of the night air still creeps in, eliciting goosebumps along my arms in its wake.

"No one is being strung up on the gates," my father groans.

"Never say never," Maximus grumbles, cutting a glare towards Kallen.

I reach out and take his hand in mine, loving the way my hand fits against his large calloused palms.

"Is everyone ready?" My father cuts in, tapping his foot impatiently, his leather loafers echoing off the stone pathway.

“Coming,” Kyros shouts from the front door to the manor, a light leather briefcase in tow. He hurriedly closes the door and sprints down the pathway to where we’re waiting past the wards. “I just had a few more books to gather.”

“Are you even going to have enough time to read all those books?” Mateo huffs in amusement, eyeing the papers sticking out the front of the corner of the briefcase.

“Maybe I can borrow one of those—”

“No,” Adrian cuts Titus off abruptly. My brows furrow as I look at him, curious as to why he’s so protective over Kyros’ books. “Sorry man, you’re not going to be following us.”

Adrian gives me a mischievous grin and winks, not bothering to explain anymore.

These men.

“On that note, let’s go,” my father says. “I’ve already adjusted the wards to you both, so you shouldn’t have a problem getting past them for now.”

“That doesn’t sound very—” Titus begins, but before he can finish his sentence, my father and Octavia are gone, dissipating into a silent wind. “—promising.”

Adrian chokes on his laugh, covering his face in an attempt to disguise it, but judging by the glare Titus pins him with, it didn’t work.

“I’ll dissipate you in since you’ve never been there before, angel,” Adrian explains, his arm sliding across my back to clasp my hand.

“Ah, just like old times,” I giggle, squeezing his hand.

We don't waste another moment, the silent wind sweeping our bodies away, breaking us apart and putting us together again. Bright orb light is the first thing that registers as my vision focuses, the ground beneath my feet is hard, solid, and ... uneven?

Cobblestone.

The rest of my mates dissipate in next, and I barely register my father and Octavia in front of me, my attention drawn to the narrow street and marble buildings surrounding us. The facades of the shops and restaurants are a soft white, the orb light glimmering off the walls, their shiny surfaces reflecting it in the night. I wish I could see this place in the day and admire the sun shimmering off the brilliant stone.

Baskets of flowers are perched under every window, adding a hint of color to the city. A large building stands on one side of the street with shimmering gates on the other. The building looks almost like the front of the school, with its marble columns and large bronze doors.

“It honestly reminds me of some of my favorite cities in Greece,” I murmur, barely noticing Titus and Kallen join our group.

“We made replicas of Ethereal in what is now Greece when we lived there amongst the humans,” my father explains, stepping closer.

Adrian squeezes my hand, giving me a soft smile I can't help but return. Being with him here reminds me of our first official date in Santorini before any of this mess started, before I knew anything about mates or being a god. Now we're here together, and looking into his crystal blue eyes reminds me that there's going to be an after, a time where we'll be able to be as carefree as we were there, as open and brazen as we were when I gave him his dessert surprise beneath the table.

My cheeks heat, and I turn to face the others, unsure of what might happen if I don't break eye contact with him right now.

"What the hell are they doing here?" a deep masculine voice projects from behind us. I look over my shoulder at the hulking newcomer. He's nearly as tall and muscular as Max, who steps towards him, blocking his way as the god goes to reach for Kallen.

"You don't want to do that, Ajax," Maximus grumbles, his muscles flexing as he crosses his arms over his chest. If he wasn't facing off against another god right now, I would definitely allow myself to get distracted by just how menacing and strong my chiseled mate is, but his safety is still at the front of my mind.

"This is what we're doing here," my father says, striding towards the god. He stops beside Max just as a paper flutters in front of Ajax's face.

"Get that out of my face," Ajax grunts, swatting the paper away, but it only zips back in front of him. "You know I'm not



talking to you. I'm talking about Romulus' spawn behind you."

"And that will all be explained with the paper right in front of your nose," my father announces, giving him a smug grin. "I didn't know that the god of strength can't read. I'll be sure to tell Orrin right away so he can bestow some of his knowledge upon you."

Ajax purses his lips, his jaw ticking with annoyance, but a rumble from Maximus cuts off anything else the god of strength was about to say.

"A meeting?" Ajax sighs. "I don't need a meeting to know they shouldn't be there."

"Well, then it seems you do," my father says, pointing behind the towering god. "Off you go."

Ajax looks like he's about to argue, before he sweeps his gaze around at each of us, clearly realizing he's severely outnumbered. "Fine."

Ajax snatches the paper from the air and turns on his heel, marching up towards the large building at the top of the hill.

"I sent notices back to all the gods who refused to attend to meet at the summit," my father says, turning back to face us. "The four of us will go there, and I'll explain the developments to the gods who think this is a request and not an official summons."

"You don't want us to come with you?" I ask, my brows furrowed. "I'm sure there will be others like Ajax there. We

can help keep everything running—”

“No, Olivia,” my father stops me, smiling. “You’ve been a part of this from the start. You deserve to be able to explore your home without having to worry about politics or stubborn gods.”

“But—”

“I’m the leader of the light gods. It’s my responsibility, one that I’ve had to face for centuries before you were born. I promise you, if anything happens, I will let all five of you know.” My father claps his hands, not allowing any further argument. “Go explore the city and get to know your new home.”

“Thank you.” Some of the tension seeps from my shoulders.

“We’ll see you soon,” Octavia says, her dark-blue eyes shining with warmth.

“Lucky,” Titus groans, stomping off behind my father and Octavia. Kallen follows behind them silently, with one last glance over his shoulder towards the gates.

I can’t help but look there too, only now noticing the guards placed on either side.

“Are we concerned at all about him reporting anything about the city back to Romulus?” I murmur.

“We already took care of it,” Mateo says, low enough that the others can’t hear us, strolling up the hill.

“Exactly, angel. There’s a lot more by that gate than meets the eye.” Adrian winks. “Now, let’s show you around.”



We spend the next hour walking around the city, and the guys show me a few of their favorite places. We walk up the hill to the summit where the majors have their meetings and the gods gather for announcements. Kyros shows me the ancient library, housing a copy of every single text that has ever been written. Adrian shows me the theater where they perform nightly plays. My heart swells at getting to know more about my mates and seeing the place they call home. It speaks to my soul, like intrinsically, I know I was always meant to be here. It makes sense why I never felt at peace in my life in the mortal realm, and why I was always pulled to places that were built to resemble this city. I can imagine our life here; I can picture going to the theater with Adrian, and going to the library with Kyros, picking out a book with him and walking to one of the quaint coffee shops. I can even see myself visiting Mateo at the summit, and really learning how this world works, helping them make this realm and the many others they travel to even better.

“Where to next?” I ask and clasp Maximus’ hand, swinging it with each step we take down the cobblestone road. “You haven’t shown me your favorite place yet.”

“We were saving the best for last.” He squeezes my hand in return, his lips tilting up in his barely perceptible smile.

“Hmm, let me guess, is it a volcano?”

I earn a huff of exasperation for my guess.

“How about a black leather jacket store? You really seem to like those.”

“You’re hilarious, princess,” he grumbles, stopping abruptly.

I jolt backwards at the sudden stop, nearly losing my footing on the uneven stone if it wasn’t for his firm grip holding me upright.

“It’s the view from up there,” Maximus says, turning to face the building in front of us. “From our home—and your home now, too.”

I look up at the towering building before me, nestled amongst the shops and restaurants that make up the downtown. It resembles a townhouse in the human world, reaching five stories high. Yet unlike a townhouse, there doesn’t seem to be any buildings directly on either side of us.

“Most of the gods and demigods choose to live on their own, many of them having their houses on top of their shops or a bit further from the city center,” Kyros explains, stepping up to my other side.

“But we all chose to stay together,” Adrian says, striding over to the front door. He places his hand on the handle and the bronze knob glows beneath his palm.

“What do you think, little mate?” Mateo asks from his place beside Kyros. His lips twitch slightly, clearly already seeing the answer written across my face.

Glancing back at the house, I can't help but stare at it in awe. We've spoken about what will happen after the academy, after we defeat Romulus, but seeing this house, the symbol of our future, makes it all feel real.

"It's perfect," I breathe, grinning at each of them. My chest warms at the relief in each of their expressions. "It's home."

"Well then, let me give you the tour," Adrian says, swinging open the door to our new life and our future.



"We were thinking of making this top floor yours," Kyros explains, placing his briefcase on the large, white, ornately carved table in the living room. "Unless you want to have your own floor and keep this as the communal one."

"We originally planned to have only four floors, but when we built it, it just felt incomplete," Adrian says, spinning around the open-concept living and dining room. "It's like we knew you were always meant to be with us."

"This is perfect." And I'm not just saying that. Each of the floors had the guys' personal touches and whatever other rooms they felt drawn to, library, study, gyms, and strategic battle rooms—*cough, cough Mateo*. They were each made to be their own little apartments with a dining room, kitchen, and living room, as though they each wanted their own living space, but at the same time, built this floor to stay connected. Like this floor was already made perfectly for me. It has one of the largest bedrooms I've ever seen, a huge closet, a smaller

library and study, and a small gym—like each of them put a piece of themselves into it.

The floors are all marble too, giving the space the perfect light and airy feel. Hell, even the drapes and bed sheets are my favorite burgundy shade, with bronze accents everywhere.

“I’m still waiting to see your favorite place.” I nudge Maximus, not letting him get off the hook.

“Like I said, I was saving the best for last,” he says, taking my hand in his. “Close your eyes.”

“I don’t think—”

“If you want to see it, you have to close your eyes,” Maximus grumbles, his feet firmly planted. Yeah, there’s no way I’m moving him on my own.

“Fine.” I sigh and close my eyes.

“Just to be sure...” Adrian adds.

I’m about to ask what he means when a piece of soft silk slips across my face. My eyes pop open, but I can’t see a thing as someone—I’m assuming Adrian—ties the silk blindfold at the back of my head.

“How would you feel about using this later?” Adrian whispers.

Tingles of desire run down my spine as his breath caresses the shell of my ear. Fuck, that felt amazing. I can only imagine what it would feel like if he was—

That thought cuts off as Maximus lightly tugs me forward. I take a tentative step, and he helps guide me through the house, not going too slow or too fast.

Footsteps follow behind us, along with hushed whispers as my other three mates scheme something up.

“What are you whispering about?” I ask, my lips quirking to the side.

“Nothing,” Adrian, Mateo, and Kyros all chorus as one.

That was suspicious.

To their credit, they don't continue—dammit, they're probably just projecting their plans now.

“Where are we—” My question is cut off, though, at the whoosh of a sliding door. A soft, warm breeze wraps around me, and a cool mist tickles my skin.

What?

Before I can even begin to piece anything together, Maximus lets go of my hand, reaching under me to scoop me up in his arms.

I let loose a squeak of surprise as he lifts me against his chest, and I desperately grip his shirt, needing to feel like I'm holding onto something.

“He's not going to drop you, little mate,” Mateo huffs out in amusement.

His voice seems closer than before, as though he's right beside me now.

“I know that,” I hiss, still unable to pry my hands from the warmth of Maximus’ soft cotton shirt. “You try being blindfolded and carried somewhere you’ve never been before.”

“I’m putting you down now, princess,” Maximus says, his deep rumble a mix of humor and exasperation.

That mother—

Maximus gingerly lowers me down, and I hesitantly tap the floor, making sure it’s solid before putting my weight on it.

“You can put your hands here,” Adrian says from beside me. He grasps my wrists and places my palms onto a solid cool ... railing?

“Can you take the blindfold off now?” I plead, needing to see where they’ve taken me as moisture clings to my skin.

“Okay, only because you asked so nicely.” Adrian chuckles.

“I don’t know, maybe we should make her wait a bit longer,” Kyros teases from somewhere behind me. “She hasn’t been very patient.”

“Guys,” I groan ... impatiently.

“I’ve got it, angel.” There’s a soft tug at the blindfold before it slips off my face, revealing the breathtaking view before me.

Soft orb light filters in from the balcony, revealing a jagged cliff’s edge as though the house itself had been built into the side of it. Water cascades down the rock edge, so close I can reach out and let the cool liquid caress my fingertips. In the



distance, there are other houses built into the cliff, and winding roads leading to a beautiful crystal-clear lake below.

“This is incredible,” I breathe, leaning back against Maximus’ chest. He places his hands on either side of mine on the railing, cocooning us into our own little bubble of perfection.

“It’s peaceful here,” he explains, the rumble of his chest pressed against my back, comforting me even further. “Everything lives in harmony here, the gods, the earth, and nature. The cliff never used to be like this, not until an earthquake revealed this part of the land to us. It’s nice to remember something so stunning came from destruction.”

“That’s beautiful.” I shift my hand to cover his own, loving this place and this moment, like he’s showing me another piece of his soul.

“Thank you, for appreciating it and understanding.”

Pain slices through my chest at the reminder of how lonely he used to be before, how he felt he couldn’t control his powers, and no one understood that.

“I want to know everything about you—about all four of you,” I add, glancing at my mates on either side of us.

“Good, because there’s another thing we should tell you,” Adrian says, grinning mischievously.

“What’s that?” I grin back at him, already knowing my cunning mate has something up his sleeve.

“No one can see us right now, and no one can hear us, just like that night in Santorini,” Adrian says, leaning his shoulder on the railing to face me fully. He cocks a brow as he runs his scorching gaze down my body. My skin heats as I remember that night looking out to the sea, surrounded by tourists unable to see us. I’d wanted him then; I’d wanted him to lift up the hem of my dress and take me against that railing, just like I want Maximus to do now.

“Fuck,” Max groans in my ear, and only then do I realize I’ve arched my back into him, rubbing against him like a fucking cat in heat and giving him the perfect view down the front of my dress. “This is about to be my favorite place for another reason.”

“What do you say, princess?”

I glance towards my other mate as they watch me intently, practically salivating at the thought of watching their brother fuck me right here and now.

“I say fuc—”

My words are cut off abruptly as a crash reverberates through the silent night. Clouds sweep in too quickly to be a storm or at least a real storm ...

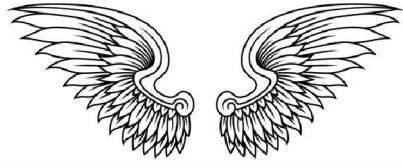
“Kallen,” Maximus growls. Lightning slices through the clouds as they sail overhead and towards the center of the city.

“The summit,” I explain, terror sending an icy chill down my spine.

My father, and Octavia are there. I slip under Maximus' arms and through the still-open door, grateful that I chose to wear sneakers tonight.

"Olivia," my guys shout from behind, but I'm already across the common room and at the stairs.

Kallen will have to get through me first if he wants to try to hurt my family.



# Chapter Eight

## Olivia

“**O**LIVIA!” ADRIAN SHOUTS AS I jump off the last stair and make my way to the front door. Their footsteps pound behind me, but I don’t dare wait, knowing that a moment’s hesitation could mean disaster. My heart pounds, and a sweat breaks over my temple as nervous energy thrums through me.

Fuck, do I even know where I’m going? I look up and down the narrow street, trying to remember which way we came from. There. A line of demigods and gods rush along the street to the north, heading west. That has to be the road we took when we came from the summit.

“Liv,” Kyros shouts.

“We should go to the summit,” I say, already sprinting up the street by the time they close the front door. A mix of gods and demigods charge forward, and I weave through them, putting on a renewed burst of speed and leaving my mates behind me again.

Thunder rumbles ominously above us, the storm clouds converging in the middle of the city. A bolt of lightning illuminates the dark sky, flashing like a beacon right over the summit.

“Mateo, what’s going on?” one of the female gods shouts to my mate, the name immediately snapping me from my thoughts as I realize he’s nearly caught up to me.

“We’ll see in a second,” he grinds out, finally catching up to me. “Dammit, Liv.”

He wraps his hand around my wrist as though he’s about to pull me to a stop, but I yank it out of his grasp before he can get a good hold. “I have to get to my father.”

I push my power to my limbs, my muscles working overtime as I weave through the crowd and put even more distance between us.

Did Kallen lead the dark gods here?

The narrow road opens up ahead, but I slow my pace as the throng of people grows too dense to move around.

“Liv,” Mateo shouts ... from above me. A gust of air rushes past me as Mateo lands beside me, his large golden wings automatically retreating into his back in the tight quarters.

I should have thought of that, dammit. I could’ve been there by now.

“Mateo, I have to—”

“I know, little mate, but there’s no way in the infernal that we’re ever going to let you go alone,” Mateo says, wrapping an arm around my waist to keep me close to him. Together, we follow the wall of people into the open courtyard before the summit.

I pull in a deep breath, some of the tightness from my chest easing now that we aren’t packed in like sardines. Mateo pulls us off to the side, and I scan the distance, searching for—there.

At the top of the marble stairs to the summit, I spot a few familiar faces, and one in particular that I’m going to destroy if this is his attempt at an attack.

“Liv, Mateo,” Adrian shouts, and I turn as Maximus shoulders his way through the bottleneck of people apparently second-guessing their decision to rush over here at the last second.

“The stairs.” I point, already pulling out of Mateo’s grip and hurtling towards the summit. I don’t use my powers this time, not wanting Mateo to swoop down on me again. The guys keep pace with me, and we bolt to the summit, maneuvering around the crowds of people littered over the courtyard. Some look as though they’re already preparing for battle, while others look on in shock, completely confused as to what they should be doing.

Well, at least this can act as a fire drill because if it was Romulus’ troops banging on the gates, I’m sure we wouldn’t stand a chance with this lot.

Gods and demigods shout as we pass them, but I ignore them, unsure what they're even trying to say. We take the stairs, and I push a bit of power into my legs now that I'm at a disadvantage while the guys leap up them two or three at a time with their longer legs.

"I'm not doing anything," Kallen shouts, just as we reach the top of the stairs. I rush over to my father's side. Octavia stands on his other side, and Titus is beside Kallen, his arms crossed over his chest, his gaze flicking between us and his brother.

"Yes, because I completely believe that the god of storms isn't creating the storm above us right now," Osias huffs in exasperation. "That lightning bolt almost hit—"

"I didn't do that. I swear." Kallen raises his palms, his brows furrowed as he looks up at the sky. "If I could stop this, I would."

"So how is this storm being created?" Titus asks, looking between the rolling black clouds and his brother. There has to be some explanation for this, especially since there hasn't been any rain yet.

"My powers are both light and dark; how do I know it isn't one of you doing this and trying to pin it on me?" Kallen exclaims, narrowing his gaze on me and my father.

I suck in a sharp breath, about to lay into him, when Maximus steps in between us. "Don't you ever speak to my mate like that."



“Fuck you,” Kallen snaps. “I don’t need your shit too. I’m trying to come up with an answer because I sure as infernal know it isn’t me doing this.”

“Neither Osias nor Olivia would do that, Kallen,” Octavia says as she steps forward, her lips pressed into a thin line while thunder rumbles again in the distance. “If you’re saying it’s not you, then that means—”

“Are you actually believing this shit?” Ajax exclaims, barging his way into the center.

“Adrian,” I gasp, already reaching out with my own powers as a bolt of lightning arcs towards the courtyard. I hurriedly block the bolt, and it crashes off my shield as Adrian places an invisible dome over the entire city.

“Enough,” Ajax shouts. He reaches for Kallen, but Titus is there in front of him, blocking his way.

“Don’t you lay a hand on my brother, because I promise you won’t like the vengeance I release on your ass if you do,” Titus says smoothly, his light brown eyes narrowed.

“Stop fighting, all of you,” Octavia shouts, drawing everyone’s gaze to her. “I believe him, which means we need to be ready because—”

“Osias!” The voice is a loud crack, the echo rumbling through the sky like the thunder itself is speaking.

“Get back,” my father says. He goes to conceal me behind him, but Maximus is already there, pushing me back and shielding me.

Not again. I attempt to peer around his massive shoulders, but it's no use.

There's no way I'm going to stand back and let them risk themselves like this. I pull off my cardigan and toss it behind me, already hearing the protests from Adrian and Kyros beside me. I call on my wings and they come bursting forth, the feathers fluffing out behind me. Hands grab for me, but I stretch my golden feathers, knocking their hands away as I lift into the air.

I float through the air just above their heads and land right in front of them, back by my father's side.

Shouts and gasps erupt from the crowd below, but I drown them out. A mix of gods and demigods have already taken up positions along the main road, ready for whatever is about to come our way.

"Olivia," my father sighs, shaking his head in exasperation. "I thought you were—"

"Haven't you learned yet that I'm not going to be pushed to the sidelines?" I grin at him.

"Sorry," I whisper to Maximus as he steps up beside me, giving me his unimpressed glower.

"I should have known you'd find a way around," he grumbles, but nods in respect.

"Osias!" The thunder cracks over us again, rage rolling off the bolts of lightning as they crash into Adrian's shield. "Octavia!"

“It can’t be,” Octavia murmurs, searching the skies. “We need to make sure there hasn’t been a breach.”

My father snaps his fingers, and a paper flashes in and out of existence. I can only imagine he’s passing on the order to the guards shielded by Adrian’s invisible cloak at the gates.

“What is going on?” Ajax rumbles from behind us, clearly still confused despite the face forming in the clouds above him.

“Romulus,” I murmur, a shiver of unease running up my spine.

“Olivia!” The thunder cracks next, sending tendrils of fear skittering along my skin.

The clouds converge above the courtyard, and Romulus’ face becomes even clearer; the voidless eyes, shoulder-length black hair, and even his scar become visible, making it unmistakable which god is truly controlling this storm.

“You thought you could take what was mine and get away with it?” Romulus demands, his voice becoming clearer now as well. My stomach drops as his words sink in. There can only be one thing he’s talking about.

“You thought I wouldn’t notice that you left me with a fake?”

Fuck. I was hoping it would at least take him a bit longer than this.

“I’m coming for you, Olivia. I’m going to destroy everything you’ve ever loved—your father, your bitch of a traitor mother,

your mates, your school, and all of your little friends.”

I grit my teeth, wishing I could go after the asshole now.

“You can say goodbye to everything you hold dear, because I’m coming for you. This will be the end of you all, the end of light and dark. We will prevail, and I will be your master. And once I get that blade back, I’ll slay any god who stands in my way.”

Murmurs and shouts echo around the courtyard as the demigods and gods hear Romulus’ threats firsthand.

My father lifts his hand to the sky, and a bright ball of light emerges from the darkness. “You will die before you ever come close enough to touch my daughter,” my father roars. The light breaks through the face formed of clouds, sending them dissipating into a light foggy mist. Rain smatters down in droves, but it ricochets off of the shield keeping the city dry from the toxic rain, leaking from Romulus’ clouds as he fades away without a trace.

“If you thought this was some benign issue, that Romulus was making idle threats, I hope you see the true gravity of our situation now,” my father says, his voice echoing through the streets. “This is not the time to sit back, to rely on the soldiers we have to keep you safe as you sit comfortably in your houses, waiting for the threat to pass. This is real. All of our lives are at stake here because Romulus will not stop until each of you is subservient—until he has total and complete control over you all.”

Demigods and gods all gather closer as my father's power, the power of the sun, fades, leaving only twinkling stars shining in the night sky.

"The secret is out now, we have the blade that can kill a dark god, and we suspect it can be used against light gods as well," my father admits. "We have the upper hand in this fight, but if you all cower in fear or just refuse to do your part out of complacency, we will lose that advantage, and most of you will lose your lives if it comes to that and Romulus takes control of Ethereal."

"I'll stand with you," Ajax says, stepping before my father and kneeling on the marble stairs. "Whatever you need us to do."

One by one, the other gods and demigods kneel, the courtyard filling up more than it had before as the rest of the residents come from the neighboring streets.

"We have information that Romulus is ready to attack the school in conjunction with our city," my father continues. "Mateo and I will be setting up our defenses. If you received a summons to the academy, that is where we need you for the time being. We need to make sure our demigods are ready for this fight too. My own daughter has already been at the front line, battling directly against Romulus and ensuring us and our demigods the best chance at success by capturing the dagger."

My father clasps my shoulder, pride beaming in his eyes as he looks back at me. Murmurs sound around the courtyard as

they stare up at us, a mix of wonder, appreciation, and confusion, echoing around the square.

“We have two essential players—”

“You have three,” Kallen corrects from behind us. We turn to face him, allowing him to step forward. “I was impartial before, but after today, I’m willing to help.”

“Why are you changing your tone now?” Maximus asks, wrapping his arm around my shoulder as he manoeuvres me away from Kallen. I can tell that he’s trying his best not to tuck me behind his back and protect me from any threat.

“It’s one thing to stand on the other side of that gate, trusting what my father says as the truth. He would tell me it was only a matter of time before you came after us, until you tried to take our new home from us too, that if Osias had his way, we would be sent to a land far more desolate than the infernal realm, and rot our days away there for the rest of eternity,” Kallen says, looking around the courtyard. “Now I see how much he had me wrapped around his finger. I see all of you going about your day, and how much fear and chaos he causes for those who are innocent.”

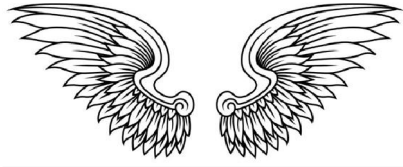
The crowd murmurs down below, unable to hear what Kallen is saying from so far away.

“I’ll help you fight against him, because this isn’t right,” Kallen declares, his dark-blue eyes steely with determination. “I can see why you were always working against us in the shadows, brother. And you too, Mother. I see why he never

trusted either of you completely. He knew that you saw through him, while I was blinded by his lies.”

“So many are,” Titus agrees, giving his brother a nod of understanding. “He knows how to warp the mind like an expert.”

“We should continue this discussion in private,” my father says, gesturing to the interior of the summit. “Because this changes everything.”





# Chapter Nine

## Adrian

“LET’S GET TO THE meeting room to discuss this further,” Osias says before turning back to the crowd. “Ajax, I need you to get to the signal room. We need a message broadcasted to all demigods and gods who aren’t already in Ethereal or at the academy, and instruct them to come home.”

“Of course, leader,” Ajax inclines and stands. Ajax has never been one to respect authority, so seeing him so ready and willing to follow Osias’ orders now, really puts things into perspective. We’ve been dealing with attack after attack, so it’s been hard to differentiate what constitutes a real emergency. I guess this takes the cake.

Ajax rushes past us and into the summit, wasting no time. Crazy how a few hours can change everything.

“Lysander will start directing everyone,” Mateo says, looking down at the crowd where his general is already organizing the demigods and gods around the courtyard. “I already instructed them to have anyone well-versed in the

ancient magic to strengthen the shields around the city and figure out where the powers came from. He had to have been somewhere close, yet none of the protections alerted us.”

“I know,” Osias says, glancing around the courtyard, his gaze vigilant as though he doesn’t want to risk leaving.

“Lysander will let me know if anything else happens,” Mateo reminds him, clapping him on the back ... did I miss something?

I clasp Olivia’s hand and lead the way into the summit, wanting to see her face when she enters. It was amazing to see her reactions when we went around the city, the wonder as she cataloged every street corner. It was almost like how she looked at the academy when she first saw it.

We step through the open bronze doors and into the main hallway. Sure enough, Olivia is already gazing up at the marble walls and bronze ceiling, admiring the giant skylights lining the hall.

“It’s incredible,” she murmurs as we pass by the open amphitheater, pausing so she can get a good look as the others pass by us. The large room is big enough to house all the gods, yet, with magic, it can either shrink or expand to house anyone who is in attendance. The large stage is marble, with burgundy upholstery seats facing it. A large golden podium glitters in the orb at the center of the stage.

“The main part of the school was made in honor of the summit,” I say, leading her further down the hall past the large marble fountain. We follow the others slowly, to let her get a

good look at the rooms along the way until we reach the meeting room.

“This is where the majors have their meetings,” I whisper in her ear, loving the appreciative smile that spreads across her lips.

The oval table stands in the center of the room, but no one takes seats.

“I know where Romulus is hiding, and I’m willing to tell you where that is,” Kallen says as the doors close.

Kyros places a silencing spell on the room, giving Kallen an incredulous look.

“Are you prepared for the consequences?” Osias asks, scanning Kallen with an assessing gaze. “If we don’t succeed, you won’t be able to go back to your father. He’ll kill you for giving him up.”

“And if I don’t, hundreds will die,” Kallen says. He takes a deep breath and shakes his head. “I don’t want him dead, maybe we can trap—”

“There won’t be a choice,” Mateo says. “You have to be prepared for the worst, otherwise I don’t think we should take this information seriously.”

“The one for the many,” Kallen sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face. “Like I said, Romulus convinced me that you were the aggressors, that you would never let us live without ruling over us in the end. Now I see just how many lies he told.”

I watch Titus, noticing the way he observes his brother carefully, like he isn't sure yet if he should believe him. Hell, do I actually trust Titus now?

“Linus and his scouts are already in the infernal realm. If you tell me—”

“No, the entrance is hidden—only someone who's been there before can locate it,” Kallen explains, shaking his head. “I have to be there with them, at least.”

“Fine, I'll go with you,” Mateo declares with a terse nod.

“I don't think—”

“You may have had a change of heart, but that doesn't mean I trust you,” Mateo huffs with a derisive snort. “I'm not going to have my spies walk into a trap, and that's final.”

“Fine,” Kallen says, crossing his arms over his chest, defeated.

“I have another idea,” Liv says, stepping out of my hold. My lips quirk to the side as my arm falls, already not liking where this is going. “If we're already going to the infernal realm, I think I should go and meet with the demons.”

“The demons?” I ask incredulously at the same time Mateo asks, “Seraphina's demons?”

“Yes, Seraphina's demons.” She nods, looking around at the rest of us. “Seraphina's mates were locked away, and only with her death was she able to transfer the heart to them. They're the rightful rulers of the infernal realm, and they might be willing to help us.”

“You have no idea where they are though,” Octavia says, her look pensive as though she’s actually considering this.

“No, but there might be someone who does,” Olivia says, looking at Octavia pointedly.

“There might be someone,” she admits, placing a finger to her lips thoughtfully. “Maybe I’ll—”

“No, I have to go with you,” Olivia says, cutting her off. “I was there with Seraphina in her last moments. I saw the pain in her eyes at the thought of leaving her demons alone in this world. I have to let them know how much she loved them. I have to make sure they know of the promise I made to her.”

“What promise?” Maximus grumbles, crossing his arms over his chest as his eyes narrow on our mate.

“I promised to kill Romulus and help her people rebuild their world.” Olivia sighs as though it’s no big deal.

Maximus growls, but she cuts him off before he can get a word out.

“If they knew about that, if I could prove it somehow, I might be able to gain their trust,” she explains, her eyes lighting up as the plan unfolds before her. “They might just be the help we need to tip the scales.”

“I don’t know—” Kyros starts, but Mateo cuts him off.

“I’m with you, little mate,” Mateo says, and the three of us turn our incredulous glares at him. “I don’t like it, but you know what you’re doing, and I support you one hundred percent.”

Olivia grins at his praise, her chest puffing out with pride.

*“Asshole,”* I project to him. *“Now she’s going to think we’re pricks if we disagree.”*

*“That’s not my fault.”* He chuckles. *“Don’t be a prick, and she won’t think you are one.”*

*“You motherfu—”*

“We should go first thing in the morning,” Mateo says out loud, cutting off my projection. “You start working on a map of the area, Kallen.”

Kallen takes a deep breath as though he’s about to argue, but Mateo cuts him off.

“I don’t care if we won’t be able to find the entrance without you. I want to give our scouts as much information as possible,” Mateo says, his jaw tightening as he leaves no room for argument.

“Fine,” Kallen huffs in annoyance.

“Titus and Maximus will bring you to a room and gather the supplies for you,” Osias says, giving a nod to the two other gods. “The rest of us will confer with Lysander and Irene and assign the gods and demigods their areas of patrol, and we need to also brief everyone on the security measures in case of an attack like today.”

Everyone murmurs their agreement and files from the room. I’m about to follow them, but something niggles at the back of my mind. I watch Olivia as she turns to the door, my stomach twisting at the thought of not voicing my concerns.

“We’ll be there in a second,” I say, waving the others on and catching Olivia’s wrist as she’s about to follow them.

Kyros and Maximus nod as they walk out to the hallway, but Mateo gives me a warning look before he closes the door behind him.

I swallow thickly as Olivia turns to face me, her brows furrowed. I waste no time closing the distance, needing to be closer to her.

“We just got you back, angel,” I breathe, my shoulders slumping as I gaze into her sea-green eyes. My stomach sinks as memories from the last week come flooding back. The fear that had gripped me when I realized she was gone, the panic that had wrapped around my heart when I was just seconds too late.

“You’re not losing me, Adrian,” Olivia murmurs. She leans forward placing a sweet kiss on my lips. I nearly chase after her as she pulls away, the tender moment over far too soon. “I’ll only be there for a day tops, and if I can’t find them by then I’ll come back. It’s a long shot but it’s one we have to take.”

“I know,” I sigh. “I just wish you weren’t the one going.”

“It won’t be my first time in the infernal realm, and this time I have Octavia by my side. I think the two of us can do quite a bit of damage.” Olivia smirks, wrapping her arms around my neck.

“I know, angel. I’ve seen your power firsthand, but it doesn’t mean I don’t want to keep you safe.” I inch forward and grasp her hips. My fingers dig in as though I can keep her here with me if I hold on to her hard enough.

“And that’s why I love you,” she whispers, closing the distance between us. My mouth covers hers in an instant, desperately pressing my lips to her, consuming her like I’ll never get enough. My heart warms as she reaches up on her tiptoes and presses her chest against mine. I wish we could stay like this forever, lock ourselves away from our responsibilities. Only my body and hers coming together as one.

My tongue delves in, caressing hers in long, languid strokes, and I shift my grip to her ass, cupping her delectable cheeks as I lift her against me. She wastes no time straddling my waist, and I press her back into the cool marble, needing to feel every inch of her body against mine.

“Adrian,” she groans, tipping her head back and arching into me, exposing her delectable throat.

“You’re so delicious, angel,” I whisper against her, dragging my lips down her heated skin. I adjust her in my grip and slide my hand up her thigh, my chest rumbling at how soft her skin is. She whimpers, her hips jerking and urging me on.

“Do you want me to take you right here, angel?” I growl, teeth scraping against her skin.

“Yes,” she gasps, trembling in my arms. My lips capture her again in a searing kiss, our breaths coming in ragged pants as



sparks of anticipation dance along my skin.

“Olivia? Adrian?” Kyros calls out, just as the door opens.

“Dammit,” I huff out in exasperation. “I didn’t walk in on you the other night.”

“That was my bedroom.” Kyros chuckles, striding into the room. “This is a public place, where anyone could walk in on you.”

His amusement vanishes the moment he spots me and Olivia, his heated gaze running over our mate. His throat bobs, and he adjusts the collar of his dress shirt.

“Are you sure you don’t want to join us?” Olivia offers, biting her bottom lip as her gaze flicks between the two of us.

Silence stretches between us, indecision warring on Kyros’ face.

*We almost—*

“Kyros?” Osias calls, his voice further away, but the echo of his shoes against the marble floor

“Shit,” Olivia hisses, wiggling in my grip. I hurriedly lower her back to the floor and adjust her dress, making sure she doesn’t have a hair out of place before—

“Is everything alright?” Osias asks as he rounds the door.

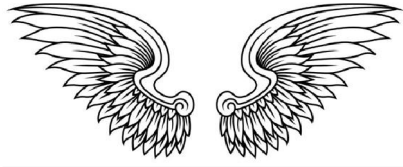
“Everything was going great until—” I murmur under my breath, but Olivia elbows me in the ribs.

“Everything’s fine,” Olivia says, striding over to the door. “We were just about to join you.”

Olivia slips out into the hallway, leaving Osias looming in the doorway, his look of warning flashing to Kyros and me before he follows her.

“I didn’t even do anything,” Kyros mumbles in accusation, shaking his head in disappointment as he follows.

This war can’t be over soon enough. Maybe then I’ll be able to get a moment alone with my mate without someone barging in on us.



# Chapter Ten

## Olivia

**O**UR FORMS SWEEP IN on a silent wind, and a blast of heat sears my skin as my body reforms. I shield my eyes against the red sun, its glare nearly eclipsing my vision before I blink the red haze away.

“I really didn’t miss this place,” I say, glancing around at the desolate land. Thankfully, we decided to dissipate outside rather than inside the castle. Despite Linus’ reports that none of the dark gods had returned since the battle, I don’t trust it. That place just oozes bad energy. Romulus’ bad vibes probably stunk up the place—metaphorically speaking.

Lava bubbles in the distance, and a shiver runs up my spine. I definitely forgot about all the dangers we ran into the last time. I really hope we don’t have very far to go because this land can get treacherous.

“Me either, but at least we don’t have any vampire books this time,” Mateo quips, wrapping his arm around my shoulder.

“We don’t have much time,” Kallen reminds us, pulling the map out of his back pocket. “The patrols will be running this way in an hour, so we’ll have to be out of the way by then.”

“My contact should be here soon,” Octavia agrees, placing a few stones into a circle beside her. “I’ll call them as soon as you three are far enough away. They only agreed to meet with Olivia and me.”

“Remember, you can contact me at any time; just say the word and I’ll be there,” Mateo says, placing a chaste kiss on my lips before he lets go.

“I know, and the same to you,” I say, giving Titus a pointed look. “We might be cool-ish, but if you let anything happen to him—”

“Yes, yes, I understand my oh so scary little sister,” Titus huffs in exasperation.

“We’ll meet back here in five hours,” Mateo says, ignoring Titus. “I don’t care what’s going on. You get back here, or I’m coming to find you.” His hazel eyes bore into mine, searing the words into a promise.

“Same goes for you.” I smile, grateful for my god of war.

Kallen and Titus turn towards the mountains and walk off, apparently over our display.

Mateo gives me one final kiss before he turns and catches up with the two dark gods.

“We can trust them, right?” I murmur, taking a step back to stand with Octavia as I watch the three of them walk away.

“Titus won’t let anything happen,” Octavia says, her lips quirking to the side as she watches them.

“That isn’t very reassuring.” Worry gnaws at my gut now as I focus on Kallen’s back, the red sun gleaming off his black hair.

“I know,” she says. “I’m not sure if I can trust him just yet.”

“Me either,” I sigh, watching until they fade into small specs in the distance.

And neither does Mateo, which is exactly why Linus and the scouts are watching over them silently and hidden away from sight.

I straighten the leather armor of my usual Infernal realm adventure gear. If I could just throw these out already, that would be great—not because I don’t like it, but more so because of the memories attached to it. The castle to my right sends memories flashing through my mind, and dread sinks in my stomach like a leaden weight. I glance down at my hands as though I can see the physical manifestation of my powers through them.

My attention drifts to Octavia as she puts the last stone in place, and I cloak us from anyone who may be watching.

Octavia murmurs a few words in an ancient language and raises her hand before her. Thick shadows curl up her black leather pants and around her arms draped in a thin, light linen shirt. A dark, ominous glow shimmers around the stones, a figure flickering in and out of focus.

“Delilah,” Octavia whispers as her shadows billow out around her, cocooning us in an impenetrable shield.

“God of Death,” Delilah whispers back, her blue face flickering in and out of focus until it solidifies.

“Yes, is it safe to talk?” Octavia chews at her bottom lip, nervously glancing around as though she can see through the shadows—which, of course she can.

“Yes, but I only have a few minutes,” Delilah admits, frowning back at us. “I was able to find the information you asked for.”

She brings a piece of paper in front of her face, and Octavia reaches through her portal and clasps it, bringing it back through with her.

“That’s a map from where you are now to where the princes are regrouping. It’s the old castle, but it has gone into disarray over the years.”

Octavia frowns as she reads the map. “I’ve never been there before, but I can get us pretty close.”

“You have to be careful though, Octavia,” Delilah exclaims, her eyes widening as she remembers she needs to stay quiet. “There are so many more dangerous demons lurking around the infernal realm now. There are archdemons everywhere looking for any lower-power demon they can spot in the hope to replenish their armies.”

“How did it go? Are you safe?”

“Yes,” Delilah breathes, giving her a grateful smile. “I was able to get the word out to as many as I could, and it spread like wildfire. We’re in hiding across the realm in the hopes that the princes regain their power in time to control the archdemons again.”

“Hopefully we’ll be able to help,” Octavia says, smiling softly at the sapphire demon.

“You’ve already done so much. You’re the reason we were able to escape in the first place,” Delilah says. “If you hadn’t warned me, so many of us would still be trapped with the archdemons.”

“It’s nothing compared to what my people have done.” Octavia frowns. “I promise I won’t stop until we’re able to get you to safety and undo the harm Romulus has done.”

“I know.” Delilah smiles. “I know that you’ll help us. Just please be careful.”

“We will,” Octavia agrees, nodding to her friend. “You know how to contact me if you need anything.”

“Safe journey.”

Octavia waves a hand over her enchanted stones, and Delilah’s image flickers away.

“Like I said, I can get us part of the way, but we’ll have to travel the rest by foot.” Octavia studies the map again and tucks it into her back pocket. The shadows slip away in tendrils of smoke, revealing the desolate landscape around us



once more. “I’m not sure what we’ll run into on the way though.”

“I can shield us,” I say, glancing around nervously. “But we should get out of here before the guards come.”

I set the timer on my watch for five hours. One way or another, we’ll be leaving then, with or without finding Seraphina’s princes.



Octavia loosens her grip on my hand as our bodies reform, and I hurriedly make sure my shield are still intact. I sigh a breath of relief and nod, giving Octavia the all-clear. I step forward and grimace as the earth cracks beneath my thick leather boots. I forgot about that. I scan the distance, making sure there aren’t any large cracks around us.

Falling into a pit of lava is not how I want to go.

“What is this place?” I ask, already looking around for some cover. I narrow my gaze as my eyes catch on something.

“This was where the battle was fought all those years ago.” She grimaces as she looks around. “This is as far as I’ve gone in this direction.”

My eyes widen as I take in the large pit to one side. There’s a steep cliff leading to a large canyon. Octavia looks down as well, sorrow creasing her features as though she’s imagining the battle playing out before her eyes. Thousands of years have passed, but this place looks like it’s been abandoned since that

day. The wind blows through the canyon, lifting up a layer of dirt and revealing the edge of what must have been a spear. Has anyone been here since?

“Did you...” I trail off, unsure of how to ask the question. I know at that time, Octavia had found out my father was her mate and was trying to leave Romulus, only to be drawn back in for the sake of both the ethereal and infernal realms. I don’t know how far she had to go in order to prove herself to Romulus.

“No, I didn’t fight in it, but I wasn’t able to stop it either,” she sighs, crossing her arms over her chest. “Romulus had already killed Vale by the time I got here, and his plan was too engraved in this world for me to unravel that quickly. I wish I could’ve though. I wish I could’ve put an end to this long ago to save you from this fight.”

“We can do it together,” I say, taking her hand in mine again. I smile softly at her, and her eyes widen slightly before she hides her surprise.

“Yes, we’re in this together,” she agrees, squeezing my hand in response. Her smile is sad though, full of regret and sorrow, but it’s gone before I can say anything. Reluctantly, she releases my hand and grabs for the map in her back pocket. “It should be this way.”

She situates herself to the north based on the sun and points to whatever I spotted in the distance.

“What is it?” I narrow my eyes again, hoping to make out the object to no avail.

“It looks like a bridge from what the map shows,” Octavia says, and hands the thick piece of parchment to me.

I grimace as I search along from the gods’ castle, grateful that Octavia was able to take us this far. There was no way we’d make it here if we had to walk the whole way. “It should just be on the other side of the bridge,” I agree and hand the map back to her. “Please tell me there’s some sort of natural water here.”

“I haven’t seen anything.” She grimaces and puts the map back in her pocket. “Hopefully it’s a—”

Octavia’s words cut off as a thunder boom echoes in the distance.

That can’t be good.

I make sure my shields are firmly in place around us, and that they’re blocking out us and our sounds as Octavia sends her shadows out, searching along the cracking land.

“There’s a boulder demon coming this way; how good are your shields?” Octavia asks, blinking away the shadows from her eyes.

Yeah, I definitely have to get her to teach me that.

“They’re good, but we should at least get out of the way.” I glance around us, looking for where the demon might be heading with nothing else in sight.

“It could be on patrol. Let’s head towards the bridge. That should be far enough out of the way,” Octavia says, her shadows blinking out of existence as she strides forward.

We both look around, staying vigilant as the thunderous footsteps get closer.

“It looks like he’s staying near the edge of the canyon,” she says, motioning for us to keep going.

The heat is nearly stifling. A gust of hot air washes over my skin, sending a shiver of discomfort up my spine, but I keep pushing forward.

“Wait,” Octavia says, her hand flashing out to stop me in my tracks. I nearly stumble in my haste to stop but right myself at the last moment. There’s no way I want to face plant here. My throat is dry enough, I don’t need the earth choking me any more.

I turn slowly to face back the way we came, my eyes widening as I take in just how much distance we were able to put between us and the demon trudging his way along the edge of the cliff. He looks like he was made from the ground below us, his massive boulder-like arms and legs stomping along the dirt and nearly blending in with it. On the plus side, if he isn’t falling through, I guess that’s a good sign for me.

Dirt puffs up like smoke with each step he takes. My heart pounds as he pauses by the edge, his gaze scanning the distance. His glowing red eyes cast an assessing look our way, and my blood freezes, almost sure he’s seen us, but his gaze just passes over us. I nearly sigh a breath of relief until something glitters from around his throat, catching my attention.

“Was that an emerald?” I whisper as the demon stomps along his path again.

“It looked like,” Octavia agrees, her eyes narrowing as we watch the boulder demon walk further and further away.

“Is it like a demon fashion statement?” I ask, my brows furrowing.

“I’ve never seen it before. Jewelry, yes, but just a stone below their necks while they aren’t wearing anything else? Never.” Octavia purses her lips, but she shakes the confusion away. “We should keep going.”

Nodding in agreement, I turn and follow her, saving that piece of information for later.



“Definitely not water,” I groan as I look down past the old decaying boards and into the lava flowing like a river below it. It’s at least two car lengths long and maybe ten feet from the lava, but that does nothing to ease the queasy sensation bubbling in my stomach.

“We can try to dissipate, but magic is finicky in the infernal realm.” Octavia grimaces. “I’m afraid that we might not make it all the way to the other side, even with the map.”

“Yeah, probably not the best idea to dissipate straight into the lava,” I say, rolling my shoulders back. “I’ll go first.”

“No, I’ll go first,” Octavia says, placing a hand on my shoulder. “I don’t want to risk it if there is a loose board.”

“But—”

“I can handle it,” she says, giving me a reassuring smile.

She takes a cautious step forward and grips the rope railings, the wood creaking beneath her foot as the entire thing sways.

“Maybe we should see if there’s—” My protest is cut off as Octavia’s shadows sweep in, helping to support the board. “Or we can do that.”

Octavia takes her next step, but the wood groans under her weight, snapping beneath her just before her shadows can support her.

My power snaps from me in an instant, the only thought on my mind is my mother as the energy bursts from me. I expect an invisible shield to wrap around her, but instead, shadows shoot from me, wrapping around Octavia’s waist and hauling her back up onto the boards.

It takes me a moment to fully comprehend what just happened. If I didn’t know any better, I would’ve thought Octavia did that herself ... Did she?

I let the shadows roll from me to cover the length of the bridge as though it’s forming a second layer over the wood that is firm enough to walk on.

“Thank you,” Octavia breathes, her eyes lighting up as she looks from me to the bridge. “That was quick thinking.”

“It just happened,” I explain. “We should probably get across this thing before it stops.”

We don't waste another moment, each of us making our way across the sturdy shadow bridge. As an added bonus, the black smoke cuts off my view from the bubbling heat of the lava below, leaving me blissfully unaware of just how close it is to my feet.

"The shadows must be reacting to your level of control already," Octavia says once we make it to the other side. I watch as they disappear, vanishing into thin air. "When we get back, I'll teach you how to call on them willingly."

"Thank you," I say, nodding in appreciation. "Being back here made me think of those powers again, and I don't want to go into another fight without knowing how they work."

"I know." She smiles softly. "I'll make sure to teach you everything I can."

My lips part, and I'm about to ask her more, when a dark shadow catches my eye.

"Look." I point to the top of the hill. Somehow it wasn't visible until we crossed over the bridge, but now the castle stands before us looking ... a little worse for the wear.

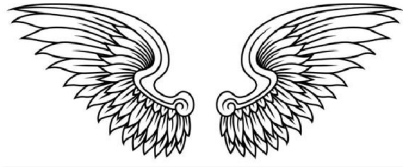
"Are we sure they're here?" I ask, scanning the decrepit gates that I'm not sure would keep anyone out. The castle doesn't look like it's in any better shape, either. The facade is made from the same obsidian stone as the mountain, but there are divots in the stones ... from an attack? The bricks are crumbling from where it looks like it's taken damage, and the front door is completely off its hinges. "If I was an archdemon

and this was all that was keeping me out, I wouldn't hesitate to attack here first.”

“It can't hurt to look,” Octavia says with apprehension. “Maybe they figured this would be the last place their enemies would look.”

“Let's just hope that if they're in there, they don't attack first and ask questions second.” If they are in there and they're relying on this to keep them safe, they must be powerful enough to fend off anyone who comes looking for them.





# Chapter Eleven

## Mateo

“**A**RE YOU SURE WE can’t dissipate closer?” I scan the distance, keeping my eyes peeled for any sign of a demon. I might trust Titus more than before, but the jury is still out on Kallen, and if this turns out to be a trap, I want to get Liv out of this realm as quickly as possible.

“I already told you that we can’t,” Kallen snaps, shaking his head in exasperation.

I keep my arms poised by the knives lining my leather armor, not willing to let my guard down for a second. I have my battle shields up, hiding us from sight, but I haven’t told either of them that.

“I thought the god of war was supposed to be tougher than this,” Titus snickers, but I don’t miss the apprehension in his gaze as we travel further into the desolate realm.

At first, I thought we were heading towards the large obsidian mountain, but we veered off to the east, trekking through terrain I’m unfamiliar with.

“Maybe I just don’t want to spend any more time with either of you than necessary,” I quip back snidely.

“Likewise,” Kallen grumbles. “Luckily, we don’t have much further to go.”

“So explain to me why this place is so special,” I ask, wanting to keep the conversation going ... not because I like hearing the sound of their voices but because, if Kallen is distracted, it’s more likely that I’ll be able to tell if he’s about to lead us into a trap.

“It’s hidden from anyone who hasn’t been there before,” Kallen sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face. “If you don’t know that it exists or aren’t led to the exact point, you would simply walk right through it. Rather the magic surrounding it would make it seem as though you were walking straight but you’d actually be going around it.”

“So why didn’t Romulus show me this hidden escape plan?” Titus says, feigning curiosity but a hint of suspicion gleams in his eyes.

“He only showed me,” Kallen huffs in exasperation. His footsteps pause, and we come to a stop beside him. “Can you two stop distracting me? I’m trying to find the markers.”

Titus and I share a look over his head as Kallen looks down at his map. At least we’re both on the same page.

“Good, good,” Kallen mutters almost to himself and marches forward again.

“If he only showed you, then how would all the other dark gods and demons know to go there?” Titus asks. We let Kallen take the lead, and we both trail a few steps behind, alternating as we look around in different directions. My jaw ticks as I focus, wishing I knew that Linus and his spies were still with us.

“He must’ve led them all there,” Kallen huffs, looking over his shoulder at us incredulously. “Is this really the time for jealousy?”

“I was never jealous of you.” Titus chuckles and shakes his head. “I never even wanted to be a part of this whole mess.”

“Fine,” Kallen says as though he’s trying to pacify his brother. “You never cared that our father always trusted me and not you.”

“It’s hilarious that you still don’t see the truth,” Titus says in disbelief. I cut a look of warning towards him, but he ignores me. “You were always blinded by Romulus; you were his puppet. He never cared about you. He never cared about anyone but himself.”

“Titus,” I murmur as Kallen’s shoulders stiffen. This was definitely not part of the plan.

“Oh no, please let him continue,” Kallen snaps, turning on his heel to face us. “Please, brother, tell me what you really think.”

“I think I’m still trying to determine if this change of heart is all an act or if you really do see how deep you were into his

deception,” Titus growls, taking a step towards his brother.

“Why did you even bother to bring me with you if you thought I’d betray you?” Kallen asks, his lip curling as he stares back at his brother.

My teeth grind as I debate whether or not to get into the middle of this. I nervously glance around us and make sure my shields are still firmly in place, not wanting anyone—or thing—to sneak up on us while they’re arguing.

“Because you followed me in battle, you were willing to change sides then, and it made me believe there might be some hope. But if you think that I was ever jealous of you, I’m not sure there’s any hope,” Titus says, indecision warring in his eyes.

I can’t help the spark of power that flickers in my chest, the conflict helping to fuel my battle lust. *No, we’re not going there.*

“You two need to listen,” I growl, placing my hands between them and easing them each back a step. “If you fight now, the only person who is going to win is Romulus. Do you want that?”

“No,” Titus sighs, rolling the tension from his shoulders.

“No,” Kallen agrees and takes a deep breath. The battle lust eases from my chest as the animosity between them dissipates. “It was just a reflex, I swear.”

“I know.” Titus rakes his hand back through his hair and nods forward. “We should keep going.”

“I’m assuming this has been an ongoing fight between you two,” I huff in amusement as Kallen leads the way.

“You could say that,” Titus says noncommittally.

“I don’t really think you were jealous,” Kallen admits as he strides forward, picking up his pace. “If we want to get there before there’s another sweep of this area, we need to go now.”

We continue on in silence for a few miles, the shale-like ground crumbling with each step.

“Is it a little too quiet?” I ask, glancing around the abandoned flat landscape.

“No, they’re likely on lockdown,” Kallen explains. “Only a few guards will be allowed out under these protocols.”

I let the silence sweep back in as sweat beads on my forehead. Seeing at least one more living being would’ve at least helped ease some of the feelings of unease twisting in my gut, but I guess it’s better that we’re able to keep a low profile.

“Are we almost—”

“Yes,” Kallen says, cutting me off.

A jagged cliff of the shale-like rock is off to the right, the top overhanging like it might topple over at a moment’s notice. Kallen comes to a stop right in front of it, and I grimace up at the dagger-like rocks seemingly holding on by sheer force of will.

“Titus.” Kallen nods back to him as though they’re sharing some sort of code. I grimace but hold my tongue, readying

myself to dissipate out in a second if things look like they're about to go sideways.

"I'm providing cover for us," Titus explains, giving me a pointed look.

I give him a terse nod, only then realizing my finger had gripped the hilt of one of my daggers, readying to launch it at the first sign of danger. I clear my throat and relax my arm back to my side. "Carry on."

Titus shakes his head in exasperation, before black shadows billow out from his hands, cloaking us in darkness. They're pitch black at first, blocking out the desolate hellscape around us, until they slowly become more translucent.

"No one will be able to sense us like this, but we'll be able to see and hear everything," Titus explains, and I nearly stumble a step back as he turns to me, revealing his pitch-black eyes.

Well, that was ... unexpected.

Titus grins and pats Kallen's shoulder, giving him the signal to continue.

I bet he did that on purpose, the prick.

Kallen reaches out and taps lightly on the stone, and I intrinsically prepare my shields, not wanting the rocks to come colliding down on top of us, but to my surprise, nothing happens.

"What—"

My question cuts off as rock seems to burst forth from the ground, climbing higher and higher until it connects with the cliff's edge above, revealing a large cave.

"This way," Kallen murmurs, leading us towards the opening. My chest tightens with each step we take, and I pull on the reserve of power within, readying for an attack as shadows move just beyond the entrance.

"We shouldn't risk heading any closer," I grumble, still wary of the figures lurking mere feet away.

"Agreed," Titus says.

We creep closer to the mouth of the cave, keeping silent despite the shadows shrouding us. Powers can do a lot, but they're never one hundred percent. I wouldn't put it past Romulus to be able to undo his son's abilities, which is exactly why my powers cling to us tightly just below the shadow's surface.

Orb light flickers within the cave as demons, gods, and demigods shuffle around, organizing crates and supplies. Their voices are a low murmur as they work, not loud enough to make anything out.

"I know I said we shouldn't get closer, but it's almost worth the risk," I say, my vision focusing on the large table at the center of the room. Parchments and maps are strewn on the surface, and I would bet anything that those are their plans. If we could just get our hands on—

"We could," Kallen says. "But if we're caught..."



He trails off, not needing to finish the rest of that sentence. I reach out with my powers and probe along the cave's entrance, searching for what sort of wards they have in place.

“It would be a long shot that we would get past there undetected.” I sigh, cataloging the power signatures for later, not wanting to reveal anything that can be used against us in front of Kallen just yet. There's, of course, a ward meant to alert the caster, but it feels like there's also one meant to entrap. I keep the information to myself and file it away as well. If we're going to attack them, we'll need to shatter that ward first because there's no way I'm letting any of us get trapped in there.

A figure flashes in the distance as they step into the orb light and approach the large table, drawing my attention there.

Romulus.

My jaw ticks, and my fists clench at my side, wishing I could storm in there now and take him by surprise, ending all this here and now. There wouldn't be any point though, not without the dagger. I might be able to knock him out or tie him up, but breaking those wards would alert him before I even get close enough to put a finger on him.

Helene appears next, and Titus stiffens beside me, his pitch-black eyes simmering with rage just at the sight of her. Good to know.

I hate the sea bitch too, but I didn't realize how deeply Titus despised her.

They take each side of the table and lean over it, apparently planning their next move.

Maybe if we just stay here for a few minutes, we might be able to hear something?

Hope warms my chest as I wait patiently, but that plan is quickly quashed as Helene grabs a stack of papers and strides away from the table, her navy blue gown trailing behind her. I narrow my eyes, attempting to make out anything on the pages, but there's no way I can catch anything from this far away.

“Was this enough?” Kallen asks, turning to face us.

“Enough for what?” I ask absently, my focus still latched onto Romulus as he pulls a map out.

Ethereal.

I know that land mass like the back of my hand.

He must be planning something soon, and judging by the circles at each of the main waterways, he's planning to hit us from every side.

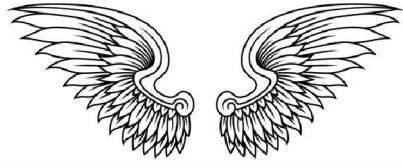
“Enough for you to trust that I'm on your side?”

My lips purse as I reluctantly drag my gaze from Romulus, and my brows furrow. Kallen crosses his arms over his chest, his eyes steely with determination as he looks back at me.

“I don't know about trust, but it's a start,” I murmur, my focus flicking between him and his father as Romulus turns from the table and strides further into the cave.

“I don’t think we’re going to find anything else out today; we should probably make our way back to the meeting point,” Titus says, giving me a tight nod.

“*We’re on our way back, little mate,*” I project to Olivia.  
“*You have one more hour before I come find you.*”



# Chapter Twelve

## Olivia

**R**EACHING OUT, I PLACE a hesitant hand on the worn gate and push, waiting with bated breath to see what will happen.

I snatch my hand back as the decrepit gate groans, the metal nearly disintegrating beneath my fingertips.

“Are you okay?” Octavia asks, her brows creased with concern as she takes my hand, carefully assessing my skin.

“I’m okay.” My heart is nearly bursting from my chest. I’m not exactly sure what I expected, but the gate crumbling under my touch was not it. Maybe a searing pain or flesh-eating acid coated on it. “I’m really not convinced that anyone lives here.”

“It seems strange that there isn’t any sign of life here or at least some spells or reinforcements,” Octavia agrees, giving me a soft smile as she lets go of my hand. “But I trust Delilah. If she says that they’re here, I believe her.”

I nod in agreement and push against the gate again. We already came all the way out here, so there’s no way I’m going

back without at least checking inside.

*“We’re on our way back, little mate,”* Mateo projects to me, and I jump at the sudden sound. *“You have one more hour before I come find you.”*

“Olivia?” Octavia asks, placing her hand gently atop mine as it rests on the worn wrought iron gate.

“I’m fine. Mateo just startled me, is all.” I take a deep breath and push the gate open another foot with Octavia’s help. “That should be enough to get through.”

We pull our hands back, and I brush off the rusted metal flakes from my palms. For an old gate, that was deceptively hard to open, especially with the seized hinges.

“What did they say?” Octavia asks, reminding me of Mateo’s message.

“They found the hideout, and they’re on their way back to the meetup.” I glance down at my watch just to confirm the time. “We have an hour left before we need to be out of here.”

“We can do this,” Octavia assures me as she steps towards the gate. “I’ll take the lead.”

I purse my lips, but she’s already slipping through the crack in the gate before I can argue. I squeeze through too, and with one final look back, I cast an illusion, making sure the gate looks untouched to anyone who might walk by. We saw one guard already, and despite the nearly decomposing bridge, I don’t want to risk another discovering us.

Octavia waits for me by the stone bridge that hovers above ... a moat of lava. Perfect.

“It’s like déjà vu,” I huff in exasperation, examining the stone.

It’s the same smooth obsidian stone, yet it doesn’t seem to be crumbling like the castle. A coating of dust covers it, yet the shiny surface still gleams beneath, the sides glowing red from the bubbling lava below it.

“I learned my lesson the last time,” I say, and place a shield over it.

Octavia’s lips quirk, but she doesn’t say anything, her own shadows billowing out across the smooth stone in almost the same way mine had. She takes the first tentative step forward, and I join her, each of us sighing a breath of relief when our powers hold the form of the bridge solid.

We make it over the bridge with ease, and I cast a parting glance over my shoulder to the lava, grateful to be over that hurdle. I seriously will never understand the lack of making stable structures over a danger that could burn your skin from your body in an instant. No thank you.

“Do we knock?” I frown, my gaze flicking between Octavia and the large wooden door in front of us. It’s at least twenty feet tall, and held together with the same rusted wrought iron as the gate.

“And give them a chance to attack us or turn us away?” Octavia asks, a small grin spreading across her face.

I can't help the indignant huff that slips from my lips. Well, when she puts it that way ...

"Here goes nothing then." I clasp the large iron handle and push, using a bit of my power to send a little extra strength into my muscles when it doesn't budge at first. The door slowly groans open, sending a cloud of dust billowing up into my face. I nearly choke on the debris floating through the air and take a step back, my lungs desperately trying to pull in a breath of fresh air.

"Olivia," Octavia exclaims, her shadows sweeping in around us as she clasps my shoulder, blocking out the cloud of dust looming closer.

"I'm all right," I choke out, my throat parched and scratchy. "We should go, though." I eye the open door and the gloomy interior just beyond it, Octavia's words echoing in my mind. If they didn't know we were here, they definitely do now.

"You're right," she agrees, giving me one final assessing look before she turns back to the door. She eases through the narrow pathway, and I follow behind, my powers already sweeping around us to form a shield and cloak the door. Octavia's shadows flow into the foyer, thinning to a subtle black mist as though it's mapping the area and reporting any activity back to her.

That's definitely a useful skill to have.

I keep my eyes peeled for any sign of movement as we walk into the dark interior. Dust and grime coat the large glass windows, barely letting any light into the tomb-like castle.



Signs of opulence are scattered along the entryway, large ornate tables and gilded mirrors all hidden beneath years and years of grime and disuse. I swear if there was any vegetation in this place, the forest would have reclaimed this building as its own, sucking it back within its depths.

“Princes?” I call out, unsure how to even start this conversation if they are here. “We’ve come to help.”

I mean, we are here to help ... and ask for theirs.

A shadow flashes in the distance, the figure there and gone in an instant. My heart thunders at the sudden movement, my brain still trying to determine if it was just a trick of the light.

“Did you—”

“Yes,” Octavia murmurs, crouching into a defensive stance.

Well damn.

“We want to help you defeat Romulus,” I say, my head on a swivel as I search for any other signs of life.

Octavia stretches her hand in front of me, pulling me to a stop, and I nearly stumble in my haste.

“We stay here,” Octavia whispers, her voice barely audible in the silent castle. She glances behind us, and I follow her gaze back to the once opened door.

Fuck. I hadn’t even heard it close.

“Who are you?” A deep voice echoes around us, the sound seemingly coming from everywhere and nowhere at once.

“I’m Olivia,” I answer, my gaze darting around for any sign of the source. “And this is my mother, Octavia.”

“I don’t need your names,” the voice rumbles in irritation, the floor beneath us quaking with his ire. “Who are you to think you can walk into the royal castle? And what makes you think you are powerful enough to defeat the gods?”

I swallow thickly at the question, indecision warring in my mind. He didn’t say Romulus ... he said the gods.

“We stand against Romulus and his occupation of the infernal realm,” Octavia answers, skirting around his question. “We know the heart of the infernal realm has been transferred to you. The princes are the rightful rulers of the infernal realm, and we intend to help you regain control.”

“How do you know that?” another voice snaps, his tone laced with incredulity but just as dark and dangerous.

“I was there when it happened,” I say, stepping forward.

Octavia grabs for my shoulder, but I quickly step out of her hold, knowing I need to do this. I saw that pain in Seraphina’s eyes when she came to terms with leaving them here on their own. But I also saw the hope and pride shining in her eyes at the thought of her demons setting her world right, at the sacrifice she was all too willing to make for them and her people.

“I was there with Seraphina in her final moments. I helped her unleash your souls from her amulet to take control and help your people.”

“That can only mean—”

“That we’re gods,” I answer for him, readying to fend off any attack that may come our way. “I know what you must think of us, but please trust that we’re here to help you. Just like Seraphina trusted me with her final wishes.”

“How dare you speak her name.” Another voice, dark and seductive, but it doesn’t do anything for me other than send a spike of fear skittering up my spine.

“Stop,” the first voice bellows, and a shadowed form creeps out from the walls. The form looks to be of a man ... yet not. Large horns protrude from his head, and webbed wings stretch out from his back. My eyes narrow as he steps forward, trying to make out any details I can, but it’s as though he’s a cut-out of his former self. Any details making up his face or body are nonexistent.

“But she—” the third voice says, but he’s cut off

“We knew what had to happen when Seraphina locked us away. We knew that Vale had a vision that she would be visited by a god ... ” he trails off as though he can’t bear to finish his sentence.

“She’s the reason Sera is gone,” the second voice argues as another shadow emerges. He’s a bit shorter than the first, and his horns cut out to the side a bit more.

“No, Sera is the reason she’s gone,” the first prince snaps. “We both know there was no changing her mind. She made her choice, and now it’s we who must live with it.”

“But she’ll come back,” I interject, my brows furrowing in confusion.

“She’ll be reborn,” the first agrees and clears his throat, turning to his brother for a moment before focusing back on us. I wish I could read their facial expressions. This shadowed form thing is leaving us really vulnerable right about now.

“I’m assuming you came here for help of some sort?” the second brother asks, his shadowed form crossing his arms over his chest. I can sense the vitriol leaking off of him in waves.

“I promised Seraphina I would stop Romulus and help your people,” I say, my spine straightening with determination. Having the demons on our side in the fight was the best-case scenario, but we can still do this without him. “I’ll be keeping that promise, with or without your help.”

“You think we don’t want to help?” the third voice asks, his voice dripping with deadly disdain as he too slips from his hiding place. There’s something graceful yet deadly in the way he moves, like he would rip your spine straight out while he distracted you with lust-filled thoughts. “I want to go out there and slaughter all the gods that put us in this position and all the demons who chose power over their own king and princess.”

“What my brother means is we want to, but we can’t. Look at us, we barely have our powers back, and our other brothers haven’t taken their forms yet,” the first demon explains. “Which is exactly why we must remain hidden away. If Romulus or the archdemons knew that we’re mere shadows of

our former selves, they wouldn't hesitate to lay waste to what is left of our land.”

“I understand,” I breathe, giving them a sharp nod and swallowing down my disappointment. I knew it was a long shot, but having them on our side would've helped to ensure the safety of countless others, including their own demons still in hiding.

“Are we really going to let them leave?” the second demon asks, creeping a step closer. Octavia takes a step closer to me, her hand clasping my shoulder, but I don't dare move. They seem like the type of demons to pounce at the first sign of weakness.

“Yes, we are,” the first demon huffs in annoyance, as though he regularly has to reel in his brother's murderous tendencies.

“I agree,” the third drawls. Tendrils of fear creep up my spine, but I push them down, forcing an unimpressed look on my face.

“It would be so much fun making them scream.”

“Get your head out of the clouds,” the second huffs in exasperation. “They might just tell the archdemons where we are. Distract them and it would be easier to take Romulus out.”

“I told you that I made a promise to Seraphina,” I grind out, summoning my powers around me. My shadows whip around my hair in a silent flurry, forcing them to take a step back at once. “I promised I would help her people, and she seemed to think you would be there to help bring this realm back to what

it once was. I keep my promises, whether I have your help or not.”

“I keep my promises too,” the first demon growls, clapping a hand on the second and third’s shoulders and tugging them back. “My promise to Seraphina was that I would do what’s best for our people, and right now, I can’t do that. I’m keeping my promise by staying away and regaining my strength, as are my brothers.”

“I understand and respect that,” I say tightly, my gaze flitting between the three demons, my powers still ready to strike at a moment’s notice.

“You’ll leave here unharmed; that is my word to you,” the first demon says darkly.

“Let’s go,” I murmur to Octavia, motioning for her to go ahead. Despite giving me his word, I’m not too sure he can keep a tight enough leash on the other two to extend his promise to them.

Octavia turns, taking the lead while I retreat, keeping my gaze locked on them every step of the way.

“I can see why she trusted you,” the first demon says. The other two flank him now, but they don’t follow. “You remind me of her. The fire, the near reckless abandon. Just make sure it doesn’t get you killed like it did her.”

A chill sweeps over my skin at the mix of sorrow and rage in his tone, his words not a threat but a warning.

“I can take care of myself,” I say, taking another step back. “I have people there to support me just like Seraphina had you.”

A growl emanates from the third demon’s lips, but before he can say anything, Octavia steps forward.

“If you change your mind, or you regain your powers.” She reaches into her pocket and places a small stone on the table. A puff of dust billows out, coating her fingers before she backs away to stand at my side. “That stone will bring you to the battle and transport you back, no questions or obligations.”

Transport? I don’t let the confusion show on my face as I look back at the rock.

The transmitting stone.

My heart warms at the thought of Octavia willingly giving them that stone, knowing she may never see it again. She doesn’t truly need it now that she’s away from Romulus and with my father, but it was her security for so many years. I can understand how it might feel to part with something that felt like it was your only lifeline for centuries.

The three demons watch without another word as we leave, the wooden door opening without any issue this time as we step out of the castle and back into the blistering heat of the red sun still shining brightly above us.

“That wasn’t great,” I murmur once the door closes seemingly on its own. My shadows dissipate from around me, apparently thinking the threat is over.

“No, but at least we laid the groundwork.” Octavia turns to the bridge, her shadows sweeping out to cover the surface as we stride across it.

“What do you mean?” My brows furrow as I look between her and the bridge beneath us, my stomach still a ball of nerves from today.

Octavia grimaces and looks behind her, and I follow her gaze. Yeah, probably not the best place to be having this conversation.

That thought is confirmed as we approach the gate and it swings open for us automatically like a metaphorical kick in the ass. They really don’t want us sticking around.

We keep our strides even, not letting them see an ounce of fear as we cross the threshold and the wrought iron shutters behind us with an ominous clang.

I pull my shield tightly around us, letting it wrap us in illusion and silence.

“They won’t be able to hear us now,” I say, letting Octavia know my powers are in place, and she nods.

“At least they know now that we don’t stand with Romulus, and the link to their princess will help us should they decide to blindly attack,”

“I honestly don’t think they will,” I breathe, frowning back at the ominous castle as three shadows lurk off to the side, their forms barely visible with the thick film covering the



windows. “They seemed to blame Seraphina for this as much as they obviously cared for her.”

“Can you blame them?” Octavia smiles sadly. “Their mate sacrificed herself for them, leaving the fate of the kingdom she was meant to rule in their hands.”

I knew they held a deep connection like me and my gods, but mates? How would I feel if one or all of my mates sacrificed themselves for me? They can’t even be sure when she’ll be reborn, let alone if she’ll remember them.

“I can’t blame them, but I spoke with her, I saw her in those last minutes,” I argue as we walk away from the castle, leaving the decrepit tome in our wake. “She sacrificed herself. It was the only way.”

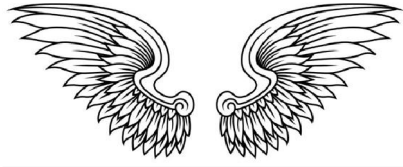
I barely got to know Seraphina, but I felt a connection to her like our paths were meant to cross again.

“Love blinds us sometimes. It magnifies both the good and the bad,” she says, reaching her hand out for me. “Maybe they don’t see it that way.”

I nod and take her hand, giving her a small smile. I know she’s right, but it doesn’t make seeing Seraphina’s mates in pain like that easy, not when I herald her sacrifice as the most selfless choice she was faced with.

Octavia smiles in return, and dissipates us back to the meeting place just as realization washes over me. She would know better than anyone else since she was faced with a nearly

impossible choice that ultimately was for the greater good of the world but meant she had to leave her mate.



# Chapter Thirteen

## Olivia

“TELL US EVERYTHING,” KYROS says as he pulls me into a tight embrace the moment we enter the manor at the academy, placing a chaste kiss on my forehead. “I missed you, sweetheart.”

Excitement bubbles up in me even at that slight touch, and I lean into the kiss, loving the way his dimples appear as he pulls back and smiles, like his excitement at seeing me and to learn something new about the infernal realm are making him nearly burst with anticipation.

“Can you let our mate walk in the front door first?” Adrian huffs in amusement and tugs me from Kyros’ grip, placing a not so chaste kiss on my lips. My toes curl as his mouth devours me, my body too wound up to think about anything else going on around us.

“Really?” my father groans, and Adrian reluctantly pulls away, much to my dismay.

“Get used to it already, pops.” Adrian smirks, wrapping an arm around my shoulder.

It isn't there for very long before Maximus tugs me away and wraps me tightly against his chest, nearly suffocating me with his muscles.

“Can't breathe,” I mutter, pretending as though I can barely get the words out.

“Really, princess?” Maximus grumbles, pulling back slightly to see the wide grin on my lips.

“Not fair,” Mateo grumbles, stomping in through the front door. “I barely got to see her, and you've already stolen her away.”

“Tough luck,” Maximus says simply, before practically picking me up as he leads us over to the sofa. He sits down first and lifts me onto his lap, letting me nestle into his comfortable embrace.

“Is this really what you were all doing as I was busy expertly planning my attacks,” Titus groans, pulling out a chair from the dining room and bringing it towards the couches. “Seriously, how did you all manage to thwart me when you were all busy being lovey-dovey and crap?”

“Don't be jealous, Titus.” Mateo claps him on the shoulder as he strides past him and flops onto the couch beside me. Titus winces at the impact but quickly hides the expression, feigning a look of incredulity.

“I’m sure you’ll be able to find a girl desperate enough to date you.”

I swear a flicker of pain passes through Titus’ light brown eyes, but he quickly disguises it as he looks away.

“Don’t keep us all waiting,” my father says, taking a seat on the couch across from us with Octavia by his side. Kallen hesitantly pulls up a chair beside Titus while Kyros and Adrian take a seat on either couch.

“Everything went well for us,” Mateo starts. He leans forward and pulls out the map Kallen drew yesterday. He shows the path we took and explains the terrain. “There was little cover, but we didn’t encounter any trouble.”

“What about the cave itself?” my father asks.

“The cave was active,” Mateo admits, pursing his lips. “We spotted both Romulus and Helene there. They have wards guarding the entrance, but they’re nothing we can’t take care of.”

Mateo’s explanation sounds vague almost, as though there are some details he doesn’t want to discuss.

“Thank you for this information, Kallen,” my father says, nodding to the two brothers. “This might just be the key to keeping our city safe.”

“What’s the plan then?” Kallen asks, his jaw tightening as though he doesn’t actually want to hear it. I narrow my eyes on him, watching him closely as he looks between my father and Mateo.

Silence settles over us as I'm sure the others debate the same thing running through my mind right now.

*"Can we trust him?"* Adrian projects to all of us, yet I know who the question is for.

*"He gave us the information on his own."* Mateo sighs. *"I don't see any reason he'd do that. Would it really be a trap if we're prepared for a fight?"*

I let the words sink in and roll them over in my head. What would either Romulus or Kallen have to gain from giving away their hideout?

"We keep a contingent in Ethereal and at the academy, but we bring the fight to him," Mateo says, finally breaking the silence. "It didn't look like there was a back way in, so we hold control of the entrance; no one other than us gets in or out."

Kallen nods tightly, as though Mateo confirmed the plan he had already formed in his head. His face remains calm and resigned like he's coming to terms with what needs to be done.

I can only hope that's true.

"Will that plan work?" my father asks, watching Kallen.

"Yes." He nods. "The wards placed on the cave ensure no one can dissipate in or out."

"And what about the demons?" my father asks, grasping Octavia's hand.

“We found them,” I start, unsure of how much to say. “But they definitely were not in a helpful mood.”

“Olivia tried to convince them, but they weren’t willing to join with us,” Octavia agrees, leaving the rest out.

Kallen seems to be on our side, but if there’s a chance of the demons eventually joining us, I want to keep that information to ourselves.

“That’s understandable,” my father says with a terse nod, clearly seeing through our silence.

“I should get back to the arena to check on the progress,” Kyros says with a regretful sigh as he stands from the couch.

“I need to go upstairs and change before I do anything,” I groan, scrubbing a hand over my face and grimacing at the thin layer of dust that coats my hand.

“Agreed,” Mateo says. “Why don’t we—”

“I don’t think so,” my father says as he stands from the couch too, and Octavia stands with them. “We need to meet with Linus and get a plan of attack ready to go.”

“Fine,” Mateo grumbles. He lifts my hand to his lips and places a soft kiss there. “I guess I should go and make plans.”

“I’ll join you, Kyros,” Titus says, drawing a curious gaze from each of us. “What?”

“Why would you want to go to train the demigods?” I ask, my brows furrowing.



“Because I care about education, dear sister,” he says with mock incredulity as he stands from his chair.

“Do you want to come with us?” Titus asks Kallen.

“I guess,” Kallen says, looking at Titus like he has two heads.

“Perfect.” Titus follows Kyros to the front door, with Kallen trotting along after them.

“I guess I should go with them,” Adrian sighs. “Unless my mate—”

“No,” Maximus nearly growls, his arms wrapping around me possessively. “I can take care of Liv.”

“So greedy with our mate,” Adrian chastises, shaking his head in disappointment. He winks at me before joining the others, making sure to convey we’ll have our alone time soon.

Tendrils of desire shoot up my spine as I nestle into Maximus’ embrace, grateful for the time alone with him. Especially when everyone else is leaving the house ...

“Come find us at the arena when you’re ready,” Adrian says with a wistful sigh, and drags his feet through the doorway, as though he wishes he could stay with us.

I wish they could too, but I’m glad that this will give me a chance to have my god of destruction all to myself.

“Alone at least,” I murmur, pressing a soft kiss to Maximus’ lips. He groans at the soft touch and immediately captures my

mouth with his, his tongue wasting no time delving between my lips and caressing my own in long, languid strokes.

“This house has been too crowded lately,” he grunts, adjusting his grip on me and slipping one arm under my legs to cradle me against his chest.

I giggle as I wrap my arms around his neck, and he lifts us from the couch, marching his way over to the stairs like a man on a mission. “I missed you, princess.”

“I missed you too,” I breathe. These last few weeks have been a whirlwind, and I almost feel like I’ve been on autopilot, moving from one adventure to the next without enough time for my guys.

“I wish we could have the house to ourselves more often,” he grumbles. He strides up the stairs, taking them two at a time in his haste, making a laugh bubble up from my lips.

“There will be plenty of time for that.” I press a kiss to his cheek, but he quickly turns, capturing my lips as he climbs the last stair. I close my eyes and let him take control, trusting him to get us to my room safely. Before I know it, the hard wood is pressed against my side as he grabs for the doorknob and turns it, revealing my soft bed and luxurious sheets. I groan at the thought of sinking into them, my exhaustion barely staved off by the lust lighting my body on fire.

Maximus kicks the door closed behind us with a booming thud, barely missing a step as he leads us towards the bed.

“What do you need, princess?” he grumbles, eyeing the bathroom. I can tell he’s debating between taking me for a shower first or giving into the lust that has been pulsing between us ever since he captured me by the door. Hell, maybe even since our interrupted moment on the balcony in Ethereal.

“I need you,” I beg, gripping the opening of his leather jacket.

A low growl emanates from his chest as heat flickers in his emerald eyes.

“Olivia,” he growls as he tosses me onto the bed. I barely let go of his jacket in time and let loose a squeak of laughter as my back hits the plush mattress. Excitement thrums through me like electricity as I hurriedly peel off the leather armor and dusty linen shirt while Maximus unbuttons my leather pants and tugs them off me. Goosebumps pebble on my skin as the cool air washes over my heated skin, and I fling my clothes to the other side of the room, hoping to never have to wear the stifling battle uniform again, but I know that thought is a lost cause.

My burgundy lace bra and panties are all I’m left in as I lie on the bed, loving the way Maximus’ heated gaze roves over my skin like he can never get enough of me.

I slowly shift to kneel on the bed and reach for his jacket. I pull the soft leather off his shoulders and throw it behind him before slipping my hands under the hem of his shirt. He groans as my fingers lightly caress the chiseled muscles, loving the way his hard torso feels beneath my touch. I drag my hands up

his chest along with his shirt, teasingly pulling it up over his head.

“You drive me crazy, princess,” he groans, threading his fingers through my hair and tilting my head up to meet his soft gaze. His eyes are usually as hard as the stone they resemble, but they seem to melt as I look into him, like only I can soften his heart.

“I hope that’s a good thing.” I glance down at his dark jeans, noticing the large bulge already pressing against the thick fabric. Yep, that’s definitely a good thing.

I smirk up at him as he wraps a finger under my chin.

“You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

I swallow thickly, my cheeks heating at the sincere look in his emerald eyes. My chest warms as our bond pulses, our souls forever linked as one. “I didn’t know that I was missing something until I found you, and now I don’t know how I could’ve lived my whole life without you.”

The words slip from my lips, the easiest truth I’ve ever told. Although there were good parts of my life before, like the moments I had with Nelle and my father when he was there, I always knew I was meant for something else. I knew I was meant to find them and go to this other world, before I even knew that gods, demigods, or demons even existed.

“Good thing we’ll never have to spend another moment wondering what life would have been if we hadn’t found each other.” His lips find mine. The kiss is hard and needy, like he’s

trying to wash away any thought of a lifetime without me. Good, because I'm never going anywhere, and neither is he if I have anything to say about it.

I slide my hands down his chest to the waistband of his jeans and pop open the button, loving the sharp hiss he loses as I pull down the zipper, slowly rubbing my finger along his shaft as I do.

"Liv," he groans, and I finally relent, shoving his pants and boxers down his legs for him to kick off.

He looks like he's about to reach for me, but before he can make another move, I grip his thick shaft, needing both hands to wrap all the way around it.

"What are you doing?" he grumbles, cocking a questioning brow as he looks down at me. I lick my lips as I watch him, my imposing, massive god of destruction. He could strike fear into the hearts of anyone he faces, but for me, I could never look at him with anything other than love and desire ... and maybe sometimes annoyance when he gets on my nerves.

"What does it look like?" I ask coyly, lifting a brow in challenge before I tilt my head down to roll my tongue over his tip.

"Liv," he grunts, half in reproach and half in ecstasy. "We don't have time."

"We have as much time as I say," I purr, wrapping my lips around the head of his cock.

"Fuck."

I rub my hand up and down his length as I work my mouth on his tip, alternating between sucking the sensitive flesh between my lips and running my tongue over him.

“You are such a troublemaker,” he groans, his grip on my hair tightening as his cock throbs under my hands.

He smooths his other hand down my back, sending a thrill of lust up my spine as he reaches the curve of my ass. He doesn't stop there though. He leans over until his thick fingers dip under my panties and run over my needy clit. I hum a sound of approval, and he jerks at the vibration that runs through his length. “You're going to be the death of me, princess. You're so fucking wet for me already.”

His fingers circle my clit as tendrils of desire wrap around my core. I lean into his touch, wishing I had his fingers inside me, but he can't reach that far at this angle. Dammit.

My hips jerk closer to him as I pump him harder, loving the way his breaths become ragged as he nears his release.

“Liv,” he growls in warning, clearly noticing how close he is too. I don't stop though, wondering how close I can get him before—

He pulls his fingers away from my core, and I whimper in need, debating whether I should pull one hand from his—

That train of thought cuts off abruptly as he pulls his cock from my grip, his eyes narrowed into a delicious glare as I look up at him.

“What?” I innocently ask and bite my lower lip, loving how his eyes simmer with lust as he follows the movement.

“You know exactly what you were trying to do,” he growls, tugging my chin up as he leans closer. His lips crash on mine, his teeth capturing my lip and lightly rolling the sensitive flesh between them. My pussy pulses with need as I cling to him, using his support to keep me upright.

That was so fucking hot.

“The only way I’m coming is inside that tight pussy of yours,” Maximus growls, the vibration seemingly rumbling through me straight to my core. He reaches behind me and unclasps my bra in one swift movement, slipping the lace fabric off of me and slinging it across the room. “Is that understood?”

I nod eagerly in agreement, wanting nothing more than to have the delicious friction of his cock pounding into me right now.

“Good,” he grumbles. “Now lie on your back like a good little mate.”

I go to move back onto the bed, but he grabs my waist, keeping me in place.

“Right here, princess.”

I give him a curious look but oblige, shifting my legs to sit on the bed before I slowly lie back. As soon as I’m flat on the bed, he grips the waistband of my panties and slides the fabric from me. I shiver as the last piece of material is removed from

my body, a chill sweeping over my skin as I lie bare before him.

He gazes down at me as he fists his cock, his scorching emerald orbs pausing on my curves, sending a thrill of anticipation up my spine. I wiggle on the bed impatiently, needing him to run his hands over my heated skin or something.

“Please, Max,” I moan, biting my lower lip as I rub a hand over my hip, barely holding myself back from touching myself.

“You’re so fucking gorgeous, Liv,” he growls, the sound dark and possessive. The rumble rolls straight through me, and I arch my back, inching myself closer and closer to him. He curses under his breath like he wants to spend more time admiring me, but he just can’t help himself.

He grasps my calves and tugs me swiftly towards him so my ass is just off the edge of the bed. I hurriedly wrap my legs around his waist and hiss in a sharp breath as his hard length brushes my heated core. He curses under his breath as he rubs himself over my entrance, gripping himself with one hand as he props one of my legs over his shoulder with the other.

Before my lust-filled mind can even form another thought, he sinks into me, and I gasp as he fills me completely.

“I love you, Liv,” he groans as he lets me adjust to his size and leans over me, placing a hand on either side of me.



I nearly whimper as I stare back into his eyes, completely losing myself in this moment as he stretches me more than I swear I've ever been before. "I love you too, Max."

His hips roll against me, pulling out and plunging into my soaked core, my body lighting up with each thrust. I desperately cling to his shoulders and wrap my other leg around him tighter, needing more and more of him.

His lips capture mine in a scorching heat, sending a wave of warmth flooding through my body and straight to my toes.

My body buzzes with electricity, my lips and hips moving in perfect unison as desire curls around me. He quickens his pace, his breaths becoming ragged as he pulls his lips from mine, watching as he elicits toe-curling pleasure from every inch of my body.

I draw in a needy whimper, my body completely and totally under his control as he pounds into me, and I suck in a sharp breath as he hits the perfect spot. His eyes light up at the sound, and he rolls his hips in the same motion as waves of ecstasy wash over me.

"Maximus," I plead, begging him with my body and soul not to stop. Thankfully he continues plunging into me, not daring to stop or change his speed, sending my body barreling over that cliff. My pussy clenches around him, and his jaw tightens, clearly trying his best to hold on as he fucks me through my climax until he finally joins me. His cock pulses as his release spills into me, sparking another small orgasm as he fills me so completely.

I gaze up at my god of destruction, not completely ready to put an end to this fun. I need more of him, and this time it's my turn to be in control.

He slowly lowers my leg back down to wrap around his waist. Each of us relaxes into the other, not wanting to move away just yet. Well, I have other plans.

Not caring about the mess we make as I roll him over, I straddle his waist, loving the way his eyes light with surprise at how easily I'm able to flip him. He doesn't need to know I used a bit of my powers to do it.

"I swear I can never get enough of you," he grunts, his cock already getting hard for me again. I roll my hips and suck in a sharp breath at the delicious friction as he strokes into me, repeating the motion until each of us are desperately panting for air. Electricity runs over my skin as I chase my release, my body completely and utterly addicted to my men.

Both of us are still so worked up from our last orgasm that it barely takes any time to get to the tipping point again. I dip my hand between us and rub my clit in time with the movement of my hips as I ride him straight into another release. My pussy pulses around him, driving him into another release as our bodies come apart again, a warm, languid heat spreading through my body and seeping the last of my energy from my tired limbs.

He scoops me up in his arms just as I'm about to collapse on him, and I curl against him, knowing he won't drop me. He strides to the bathroom and nudges the door open with his

back as he leads me to my bathroom ... to an already full and steaming hot tub.

“Did you plan to seduce me, Maximus?” I ask in mock outrage, clapping a hand to my chest in shock.

“I didn’t plan to seduce you,” he grumbles and lowers me towards the water. I stretch out a toe to test the temperature, and the warm water laps against my foot, welcoming me with the perfect bath. I grin up at him and nod as he gently lowers me into the tub, letting the warm water glide over my skin as I sink into it.

“Sure you didn’t,” I sigh, relaxing into the tub and letting the warm water seep into my aching limbs.

“Maybe I did,” he grumbles under his breath, and I can’t help the laughter that bubbles up. Maximus grabs a washcloth and goes to kneel at my side, but I grab his wrist to stop him.

“Why don’t you join me?” I ask, eyeing the tub. I’m honestly not sure there’s enough room for the two of us, but hey, I can always sit on his lap.

“That’s probably a bad idea if we want to get anything done today.” He frowns as though he’s trying to debate the likelihood of the rest of them leaving us alone for today.

Yeah, the chance of that isn’t very high.

He must realize the same thing as he sinks into the plush bath mat and begins soaping up the cloth to run over my skin. I almost tell him I can do it myself, but the words stick on the

tip of my tongue as heat rushes through my veins at the thought of his hands running all over my skin. Yes, please.

“So what else happened today?” Maximus asks, running the soapy cloth over my shoulder.

“Huh?” I ask, pretending I haven’t heard him as I close my eyes and rest my head against the edge of the tub. I really don’t want to talk about that right now.

“Olivia.” He pauses halfway down my arm. I peel my eyelids open reluctantly and let loose a huff of exasperation as he cocks a brow in challenge.

“Fine,” I groan, sitting up in the tub so as to not fall asleep. “But why do you think something else happened?”

“Because you’re a bad liar,” he says simply as he wipes the cloth over my collarbone, sending a thrill of anticipation up my spine.

“I am not,” I snort derisively, but finally relent as he pauses again. “Fine, the demons did say no, but Octavia left them with the transmitting stone in case they change their mind.”

He lifts a brow as though silently demanding I tell him the rest.

“They also haven’t taken their full forms yet,” I concede, pouting at the fact that I’m apparently that transparent to him. But that is wiped away in the next moment as he continues lower, his fingers gently rubbing my nipple between them. I let loose a hum of approval and sink into the tub, enjoying as he switches to my other breast and does the same.

“So that’s the real reason they aren’t joining us?”

“That and they hate the gods,” I sigh, shifting so his hand continues lower. A deep rumble emanates from his chest, but he doesn’t go straight where I want him to, instead running the cloth over my stomach. Dammit, I was so close.

“I can see why,” he grumbles, bringing his arm out of the water to reapply some soap to the cloth. I purse my lips but don’t argue, my mind already putting actually getting clean on the back burner. Being dirty is so much more fun.

“There’s something else.” The words aren’t a question but a statement. Dammit, nothing gets past him.

He runs the warm cloth over the back of my shoulder, the soft caress making my toes curl. I tilt forward and let him continue farther down my back.

“I—” I pause, not sure I really want to start this right now. “Being back there just reminded me of the battle.”

He continues washing my back slowly as I explain what happened with the shadows.

“They seem to almost have a mind of their own.” I sigh, the tension seeping away as he massages my achy muscles, and I lay the thoughts that had been niggling at the back of my mind at his feet. “They seem to work on instinct, and when I call them, they don’t come. Octavia said she’d train me, but what if we don’t have enough time and I hurt someone?”

“You would never hurt anyone without reason,” Maximus says simply, like it should be a given.

“But what if I—”

“If the shadows follow your instincts, I know they won’t hurt anyone, because I know you, Liv.” He sits back so he can look me in the eyes. “You’re the best person I know, Olivia. You showed me that I have control of my powers, that I wouldn’t let anyone get hurt in the crossfire, and I know the same is true for you.”

“Thank you,” I murmur, leaning forward to capture his lips with my own. The kiss is soft and sweet, so different from the earlier heated, desperate ones.

“Anything for you, princess,” he grumbles as he pulls away. “Now, lean back and let me continue.”

He definitely doesn’t have to tell me twice.

His lips descend on mine again, his tongue sweeping in to caress mine, helping to ease away all the stress and worry that just resurfaced. He picks back up where he left off, dragging the cloth over my lower stomach before dipping lower. I suck in a sharp breath as he runs the cloth over my aching pussy, desire coursing through my veins already just with that small touch.

“Cleaning first,” he says in warning against my lips. He washes me thoroughly, cleansing away his release from my skin. Before I know it the cloth is floating up to the surface as his fingers take over, rubbing circles on my clit.

“I swear I’m not going to be able to walk after this,” I groan.

“You’re saying that like it’s a bad thing.” He smirks, his eyes lighting in challenge as though he’s daring me to ask him to stop.

There’s no way in hell I’m going to be doing that.

I jerk at his touch, my hips lifting, needing more of the delicious friction as he brings me closer and closer to my release.

“My mate,” he grunts as his fingers send delicious tendrils of desire shooting up my spine.

“Yours,” I agree, loving his possessive edge as he sends me hurtling over that edge. A deep growl rumbles from his chest as he watches me come apart again for him. I tilt my head back, moaning as my core spasms, leaving me in a warm puddle of sated limbs. Slumping against the bathtub, I pull in a ragged breath, desperately trying to fill my lungs as he pulls his hand from the tub.

“Do we really have to join them?” I sigh, already knowing the answer, but I have to ask.

“Yes, princess,” he huffs in amusement, his lips quirking slightly. “But if you get ready now, we might be able to stop and get you a coffee on the way.”

My eyes light up, and I hurriedly wash my legs, already picturing the hot cappuccino as the rich, delicious taste rolls over my tongue. “Sold.”

“I’ll have to remember that next time you’re wasting time,” he chuckles as he grabs another washcloth and heads into the

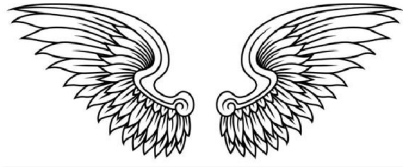
shower.

“The only thing better than coffee is sex, and maybe chocolate.”

“Good to know.” Amusement dances in his eyes as I watch him through the slightly fogged glass, my mouth already going dry as I watch him stroke his cock.

*Coffee*, I remind myself, and reluctantly pull my gaze away from him as a deep rumble of laughter peels from his lips. Yup, the order is definitely: sex, coffee, and then chocolate.





# Chapter Fourteen

## Nelle

“DO I SERIOUSLY NEED to go over this again?” Dion groans, placing his hands on his hips as he pins me with a look of exasperation. He obviously doesn’t want to be here.

Well, that makes two of us.

I glance around the training field and look after my new friends with a wistful smile. I really wish they were the ones training me again. At least that was fun.

“If you want me to actually understand what you’re trying to teach me, then yes, you do.” I mimic his stance and stare back at him with an unimpressed look.

I don’t care how high his rank is; if you give me attitude, you’re going to get it right back.

“I will never understand why the gods decided to make you a guardian,” he sneers, shaking his head in disappointment.

“I’ll never understand how the gods put up with your attitude,” I volley back at him, wishing we were doing verbal

sparring rather than the physical kind. This I can do all day.

A warm breeze flutters past me, ruffling my ponytail. The air caresses my arm, giving a brief reprieve to the warm afternoon sun.

“They don’t.” He grins smugly. “I reserve my attitude for only those who deserve it. Now—”

“And what did I do to piss your royal highness off enough to deserve the attitude?” I ask, grinning gleefully as I cut him off.

“Watch yourself, Warner,” he growls, cutting me with a scathing glare. “You might have a connection to the leader of the majors, but I’m still your ranking officer. You speak to me with respect, or you don’t speak to me at all, is that understood?”

I place my hand in front of me and check my nails, grimacing at the dire state of my cuticles. Are there any nail salons in Ethereal, or am I going to have to spend the rest of eternity—

“I asked you a question,” Dion barks, his face reddening as I frown back at him. I let my hand fall back to my side and tilt my head in confusion.

“I thought you said not to talk to you if I can’t do so respectfully, blah, blah, blah.”

“Warner,” he growls in warning, the crease between his brows going even deeper as he glares at me.

“Fine,” I sigh. “I’ll speak to you respectfully.”

“Good,” he huffs and smooths out his training uniform of a loose-fitting black shirt and forest green shorts, as though I’d literally ruffled his feathers. But, of course, that’s not the case because mister perfect Dion would never allow a feather to be out of place.

His large snowy, white wings spread behind him as though he’s shaking out the tension before he folds them tightly against his back.

“Now the first move to a good offense is...”

“A good defense,” I repeat the lines he first spewed about an hour ago, making sure to put exactly zero enthusiasm into it.

His lips purse, but he continues, apparently not rising to my goading this time. It seems my distraction technique is failing.

“And how do we form a good defense?”

“By getting a shield,” I say, my chest puffing out as though I actually believe I got the right answer.

“No,” he grumbles. “By learning how to block an incoming attack.”

“Oh, my mistake.” I do my best to cover the laughter that bubbles up as his eyes narrow on me, but I really don’t do that good of a job if his growl of annoyance means anything. I doubt it does.

“Now show me how you would block an incoming punch.”

I swing my arm upwards like he taught me the last time, putting little to no effort into it.

“If I’m going to punch you, do you really think that’s going to stop me?”

“Probably not.” I shrug, not really caring.

“Then put some effort into it.” The wind ruffles through his shoulder-length dirty blond hair, making the asshole look like he should be in a damn shampoo commercial or something.

Dammit, Nelle. He’s not hot, he’s an asshole.

That’s a lie, he’s hot, and he’s an asshole. I swear, before he opened his mouth I would’ve signed on the dotted line and let him whisk me off to wherever the hell he wanted to take me. But then he just *had* to talk.

“Okay,” I groan and repeat the movement, nearly twisting my wrist with just how much effort I put into it.

“You’re hopeless,” he groans. “Fine, what about if I tried to kick you? What sort of block would you use?”

I wave my wrist, trying to make the sharp pain fade before I perform the next one. I swing my arm lower as though I’m sweeping away a foot aimed at me.

I wish I was sweeping away an ass that’s staring at me right now.

“I don’t understand what your problem is.” He takes a step towards me, his lip curled in disdain as though he knows it’s my personal mission in life to piss him off.

Well, I guess it kind of is right now.

“I’m starting to think you’re just a bad teacher.” I grin, looking over my shoulder at where Kali is training with one of the professors, Gabris I think. “I guess I should just go—”

“You’re not distracting the demigods anymore,” Dion snaps. “You’ve already caused enough of a disruption. They need to prepare for the upcoming battle just as much as you do.”

“Well, they’re learning their powers, right? Maybe I should practice that instead of this whole blocking situation.” A flicker of hope lights in my chest as the strange electric buzz zings to my fingertips.

“Fine,” Dion says, and my mouth drops open, completely astonished at my argument skills. Wow, I should become a guardian lawyer or something. “If you can take me to the ground, then we’ll work on your powers.”

Maybe not...

My lips purse as I size Dion up. My chances are slim to none, but maybe luck might just be on my side.

“You’re on.” I crouch down into a defensive stance that Zina taught me and clench my hands into fists in front of me as I prepare to hand Dion’s ass to him. “Prepare to be—”

“You might want to take your thumbs out of your fist,” Dion interrupts me, pinning me with an unimpressed look.

“Why?” I frown back at him, almost sure this must be a trap.

“Because if you do manage to get a hit, however doubtful that may be, you’ll end up breaking your thumbs like that,” he huffs in exasperation and scrubs a hand over his face.

I quickly take my thumbs out of my fists and drop into my ready stance, pushing down the embarrassment that bubbles up at that oversight. I distinctly remember someone telling me that. Oops.

“Do your worst,” I manage to say just as Dion sweeps his leg out and knocks me back off my feet. “Oof.” I let out a small groan of pain as my ass hits the hard ground, grateful for the thick grass to semi-break my fall.

“Now, are you going to listen to me?” Dion places his hands on his hips as he stands in front of me with a cocky grin.

“Not fair,” I groan, rolling to my knees to push myself up. I do my best to hide my wince as pain radiates through my ass but judging by the smug smirk he gives me, he definitely saw it.

“It was completely fair.” He takes a step back and motions for me to take my position in front of him again. “So are you going to listen to me, or am I going to have to show you again why I know more than you?”

“You’re—”

“I see your training is going well,” a dark, seductive voice chuckles from behind me.

“God of Vengeance,” Dion says stiffly, his eyes narrowing with suspicion on the newcomer.

God of—

“Titus,” I growl as I turn on my heel to face him. “What are you doing here?”

“Warner,” Dion says in warning, but I ignore him.

This asshole doesn’t deserve my respect either.

Titus lifts a brow in question, his light brown eyes dancing between the two of us in amusement.

I hate to admit his smug, cocky attitude is really kind of sexy. I mean, it *would be* sexy if he wasn’t a giant asshole.

*Yes, he’s definitely not sexy, Nelle. He’s your best friend/sister’s half-brother who abducted her and left you for dead. Wow, that’s a hell of a history.*

“I wanted to check to see how your transition is going after your outburst the other day,” Titus says, crossing his arms over his chest. “It seems to be going a lot better than I thought, all things considered.”

“What do you mean all things considered?” I ask incredulously and stomp closer to him.

“Warner,” Dion snaps, his hand grasping my shoulder to keep me from taking another step. “She forgets herself, God of Vengeance,” Dion grinds out, but I can’t tell who his annoyance is directed towards anymore.

“She’s fine, commander,” Titus nods. “We have history, and I’m sure I deserve more than a few harsh words where Penelope is concerned.”

I bare my teeth at him, hating that I love the way my name rolls off his tongue. Why do the hot ones always have to be the worst people?



“I can take over for you if you need a break,” Titus says, having a conversation over my head as though I shouldn’t get a choice in the matter.

“I really shouldn’t,” Dion says, yet his hand slips from my shoulder. “On the other hand, it might be beneficial to see if his training techniques are more your style.”

I suck in a sharp breath and turn my glare on Dion as he grins. “You better—”

“Good luck, God of Vengeance. You’ll need it.” Dion cuts me off and turns on his heel, merrily strolling away as though he isn’t leaving me here with a dangerous god that nearly got me killed.

“That was entertaining,” Titus chuckles.

“Shut up,” I grumble, internally cursing Dion for leaving me here.

“I see you’re making friends everywhere you go, Warner,” he says pointedly. “It must be that charming personality.”

“I am charming,” I scoff, my brows creasing in outrage. “I’m just selective.”

“Sure you are. Now are we going to train?”

I narrow my eyes on him as I scan down his body, realizing belatedly he isn’t wearing his usual suit. Instead, he’s dressed in a loose white cotton shirt and dark brown leather pants. “Why are you dressed like that?”

“I didn’t know you were so concerned with my wardrobe.” He chuckles, the sound making my teeth grind.

“I’m not concerned. It’s just not your usual look,” I say on an indignant huff and cross my arms.

“I had to go to the infernal realm on business,” he says smoothly, as though traveling back there is supposed to make me believe he’s really on Liv’s side.

“Does Liv know?”

“She went with me,” he says, shaking his head. “If she can forgive me, why can’t you?”

I purse my lips and roll the question around in my mind. Liv explained the situation after our run-in the other day, but I still can’t shake the outrage and anger that linger whenever I see him. I know he wasn’t the one that killed me, and now I know that he was playing a role the entire time. But as crazy as it seems, it’s almost like I expected more from him.

I shake my head, trying to dispel that thought. I can’t expect more from him. I don’t even know him.

“Fine, are you going to teach me or what?”

He frowns back at me but motions for me to take my place. “What did the commander teach you already?”

“The best offense is a good defense,” I say, mocking Dion’s uptight tone.

“He really said that?” Titus asks, amusement dancing in his eyes.

I can't help but return his smile, but I wipe it away the second I realize it, not wanting him to think we're becoming friends or something. Barf.

"I actually think it might be the other way around," he taps his chin in thought before shrugging his shoulders, apparently not caring that much. "Anyway, I'm guessing he was trying to teach you how to block an attack?"

"Yes, it was a whole lot of whooshing," I say, waving my arm up and down to mimic his blocks. "And not a lot of fun."

Titus' grin widens at this, and my stomach flips at the sight ... not in disgust but in excitement?

"You want fun then?" His light brown eyes light with mischief and I swallow thickly, wondering what kind of disaster I just walked myself into. "Try to hit me."

"What?" I snap, sure I must've heard him wrong.

"I said, try to hit me," he repeats slower.

I let a moment of silence stretch between us as I wait for the punchline, but it never comes.

"Are you serious?"

"Of course I'm serious." He chuckles. "How else are you going to learn the importance of defense?" His chest puffs out like he's imitating Dion's no-fun, no-nonsense attitude.

I press my lips together, needing to consciously remind myself not to laugh. This is Titus, after all.

“Fine.” I drop into my stance and make my hands into fists—the *right* way this time. I double-check that my thumbs are clear of the danger zone. “Are you ready?”

“Are you?” he laughs, eyeing my fists like I’m doing something wrong.

I for sure know I’m not though ... right?

I decide I’m going to punch him in his dumb, handsome face, and lash out. I swing, but my knuckles don’t connect with his dumb, pompous mouth. Instead, he simply takes a step back, dodging the blow.

“That’s not fair,” I grunt, readying to swing again.

“I said try to hit me, not that I was going to let you.” Amusement dances in Titus’ eyes, making me want to punch him even more.

I swing again, and this time his arm comes up, knocking mine to the side swiftly. He doesn’t stop there though, somehow his hand grips my forearm, and before I know what’s going on, he spins me around so that my back is to his chest and my arm is twisted behind me.

“So what did we learn?” He asks so smugly I can already hear the grin in his voice. I seriously hate this guy.

“Nothing,” I snap, and thrash in his grip to no avail.

“When it comes to an attack, your best friend, little guardian, will be speed and agility.”

“I’m not little,” I grind out, hating that as the words slip from my lips, they make me feel like exactly that. Small. Helpless. At someone else’s will.

I never want to feel like that again, not after what happened in the forest that day.

“You first need to learn how to dodge your opponent’s blows, and tire them out, then you can attack,” Titus continues, ignoring my outburst.

My breaths come in ragged pants as I try to desperately fill my lungs. I know he’s helping me, but visions of that day keep floating through my mind, watching as he attacked Olivia. I was helpless to do anything, and then ... snap.

“Let go of me,” I breathe, the demand lacking its usual heat. He must sense the change as he doesn’t argue. His fingers slip from my arm, and he takes a step back, giving me the space I desperately need. Air floods my lungs so quickly I nearly choke on it, my throat instantly expanding at the space between us.

“Are you okay?” he asks, his usual cocky tone gone. I turn to face him, and my brows furrow at the true concern that creases his expression.

“I’m fine,” I say, not wanting to tell him about what was truly going on in my mind.

*Shake it off, Nelle.*

“Now, what were you saying about speed and agility? Does that mean I’m going to have to run or something?”

A grin splits across his lips, helping to ease the tension in my chest. “Yes, you’re going to have to start running to get your physical stamina up.”

I nearly choke on a laugh but swallow it down at the last second because there’s no way I’m going to get into the sexual innuendo there, not when his light brown eyes seem to radiate warmth as the sunlight sparkles against them. Nope, there’s no way in hell that I’m going there.

“I think I like Dion’s teaching better. At least he didn’t suggest I run,” I say, needing to get my mind off the way the linen shirt clings to the sculpted muscles.

“He didn’t suggest it *yet*,” Titus corrects me, crossing his arms over his chest. “I’m sure he was going to work his way up to it. I’m not sure if you know this, but you’re not the easiest student to work with.”

“I resent that,” I huff indignantly, crossing my arms over my chest.

“See, right there,” he says, pointing to my pouted lips. “You’re already trying to distract me to get out of training.”

“I am not,” I argue, internally cursing him for figuring out my game. I was definitely trying to run out the clock so that we wouldn’t have any time for training. I was doing a pretty good job with it until Dion knocked me on my ass. I guess distraction by annoyance only takes a girl so far.

“Let’s go for a run.”

“I think the fuck not.” I take a large step back from him, hoping to somehow slip away. Can you even escape a god?

“If you’re trying to run away, you’re just playing into my plan,” he says with a sing-song voice, getting on my last nerve.

Dammit, I didn’t even think about that.

“I can chase you if that’s what you want?” A sly grin spreads across his face, making irritation boil in my veins.

“Maybe we should go back to me trying to punch you. That was fun.”

“It was,” he chuckles, his eyes lighting with mischief. “I’ll tell you what, if you run with me. I promise that I’ll let you try to hit me again.”

“Change that to let me hit you and we have a deal.” I grin triumphantly.

“Fine,” he groans, dragging his hand back through his short dark-brown hair. “But not in the face, that’s my money maker.”

“What are you even talking about?” I shake my head in exasperation. This man is definitely going to drive me crazy if I have to spend any more time with him.

“Five laps around the arena, and if you don’t make it, you have to do fifty push-ups,” Titus says, motioning for me to start.

“That was not part of the deal,” I groan, trying to get him to waste some more time, but he just stands there, apparently catching on to what I was about to do. “Fine.”

I trot over to the outside of the arena where a dirt track was made the other day. Students are running a few paces ahead, their pace way too quick for me. I start off slowly, basically a fast-walk as Titus follows behind me.

“It’s going to take us all day if we go at this speed,” Titus says. “I don’t mind, but I’m sure you don’t want to spend the rest of the day with me. At this rate, I’ll be able to talk your ear off the entire way.”

He is *the* worst.

I step it up and increase my stride, doing my best to keep a steady distance with the group in front of us. Thankfully Titus keeps his word and stops talking for once, both of us dropping into a comfortable silence as we make the first lap.

“I seriously hate you,” I gasp as I think ahead to the next four laps.

“That’s fine.” He chuckles, shrugging his shoulders as he decides to run beside me rather than a few paces behind. “You can do better than this.”

I groan, but I push myself farther, already seeing the widening gap between us and the students in front of us.

I pull in ragged breaths as I focus on the track, trying to drown out anything else from my mind other than completing



this stupid task. Five laps and I'll actually get to hit this asshole.

Four laps.

Three laps.

Two laps.

One more lap to go. My legs feel sluggish now, my mouth wide open as I struggle to pull in air. Whoever thought that running should be a regular exercise should be severely tortured—but then again, if they think running is fun, they might just like physical pain. There goes that plan.

“We’re almost there,” Titus says, and I almost want to punch him right now for being so positive ... and also for being able to speak right now.

I narrow a glare at him, letting that fill in the blanks as I focus on breathing.

“Keep pushing,” he says, grinning as though he knows how much he’s pissing me off right now.

*Almost there*, I tell myself, keeping that prize in my mind’s eye.

As I cross over that invisible line I memorized at the start, I finally slow my pace to a walk before pulling off the track. No way am I getting in the middle of these students and their running.

I clasp my knees and bend over, pulling in breath after breath as my heart thunders away.

“Wow, I never thought I’d see the day,” an unmistakable voice says, and a grin spreads across my lips at the sound.

*My savior.*

“He tried to kill me, Liv,” I gasp, trying desperately to fill my lungs as sweat beads ... everywhere. I *hate* running.

“I did not,” Titus says, his eyes widening as he looks between me and Liv. Oh, he thinks I mean ... Oops.

“And which one of us is dramatic again?” Liv asks. I finally pull myself up to look at her. She’s wearing her training clothes too, with her long dark-brown hair pulled into a tight ponytail. She better not try to make me run anywhere else. Liv takes a sip from a white to-go cup, and a bead of brown liquid sticks to her lip before she licks it away. Coffee. Ugh, that looks so good.

Maximus stands beside her with his arm wrapped around her shoulders. Amusement dances in his emerald eyes as he looks between me and Titus. I never thought I’d see the day that the stoic bastard was actually amused, but my stomach sours as I realize he is basically laughing at me as I’m still gasping for breath, and Titus is stretching his arms like he just went for a light jog.

“Definitely you,” I gasp, reaching for her coffee, which she swiftly pulls out of my reach.

“Then say he didn’t try to kill you before you give Titus a heart attack,” Liv says expectantly, lifting a brow as she waits.

“Fine, I guess he didn’t try to kill me,” I groan. “He just almost did it inadvertently.”

Liv laughs as she sips from her coffee cup. “Let’s get you some water,” she says, motioning towards the refreshment station towards the middle of the stadium. “You should walk anyway.”

“No way am I walking anywhere. Someone can carry me—not you.” I add, cutting a glare towards Titus.

“Trust me, I wasn’t about to offer,” he chuckles, the sound of his laughter making my annoyance ratchet up even higher. “Liv is right though. You need to cool down.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do,” I groan, wishing I could smack all of them ... which reminds me. “I still have to get my reward.”

“Reward?” Maximus asks, his deep grumbling voice incredulous as he lifts a brow in question.

“Yes,” I reply primly, not caring about his attitude. “My reward for running was I get to hit this jerk.”

“Interesting,” Liv murmurs, her eyes flicking between the two of us like she sees something I don’t.

“You can go ahead and hit me now,” Titus chuckles. “Just remember, not in the face.”

“That’s seriously how you motivated her to go running?” Liv asks in disbelief. “We’ll meet you at the refreshments.”

Maximus shifts his arm to her waist and guides her through the throng of students training, his shoulders shaking as he apparently takes amusement in Titus' suffering.

*At least the gruff god has a sense of humor.*

I lift my arm and drop into my stance, only for my arms and legs to scream in pain. My muscles ache as I bend them, protesting against any further movement.

“You seriously did this on purpose,” I groan. “My arms and legs feel like they’re melting right now. How am I supposed to get a good hit in?”

“Maybe that was another lesson?” He chuckles. “To show you just how important it is to build up your stamina, otherwise you’ll be the one out of breath and struggling to keep up in a fight.”

“You suck,” I hiss and swing my clenched fist towards his biceps. My knuckles barely make contact, but a win is a win, honestly, and I’m not going to pass up this opportunity.

My mouth pops open as tiny sparks erupt from my skin as I make contact, but they’re gone without a trace in the next second, almost like I imagined it. I almost would think I did if this was the first time.

Titus stares back at me, any hint of his smug grin gone now as though he too saw the power zap from my hand.

*Nope, I’m not doing this right now. Whatever this is, I do not want to know.*

I turn to follow after Liv, but Titus grasps my shoulder, pulling me to a stop.

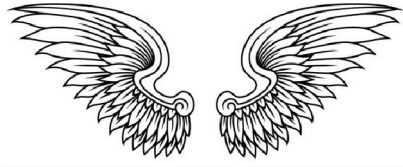
“Penelope,” Titus murmurs, sending a chill straight down my spine.

This cannot be good.

“My name is Nelle,” I huff and pull my shoulder from his grip, needing to put some distance between us.

Weaving my way through the crowd, I pick up my pace, pushing the ache of my weary muscles to the back of my mind in my haste to get away.

I need to forget that asshole and the way my heart skips a beat whenever he’s around. He’s still the bad guy in my mind, and that’s not about to change any time soon.



# Chapter Fifteen

## Maximus

“WE’RE READY WHENEVER YOU are,” Linus says, giving the signal as Mateo, Kallen, and Titus take their places at the top of the hill. A cool breeze filters past us, ruffling Olivia’s hair as she ties it into a braid beside me. I can’t help but stare at her, unable to take my mind off my mate, especially after the day we spent together yesterday. Those damn brothers of mine are always taking up her time, but I finally got a chance to keep my mate to myself ... at least for a few hours.

“Let’s run over the plan one more time,” Osias says, pausing to look up from the papers. “You three will dissipate closer to the cave this time.”

Mateo rolls his eyes but doesn’t say anything as he repeats the plan again. “We’ll dissipate closer to the cave, and I’ll break the wards while Titus sends you all the signal. From there, you’ll be able to dissipate straight to the cave.”

I eye Kallen suspiciously, searching for any sign of unease, but he looks resigned yet ready, like what he’s been saying is

true and he's prepared to put a stop to his father's treachery.

Osias nods and looks over the maps again.

"You're ready, Liv?" Osias asks my mate, and she nods, patting the pouch at her side. This might just be the best chance we have at ending this fight for good, and we need to use this opportunity for what it is.

We didn't discuss it as a group, but the rest of us know that she has the dagger with her.

I wish I could land that killing blow for everything he put her and her family through, but I know it should be Olivia that gets that privilege, especially after she and Mateo retrieved it.

I'll do everything in my power to make sure she succeeds though.

"Let's go then." Osias gives the signal, and Mateo nods, giving Olivia a wink before he's swept up in a silent wind, his body breaking apart and disappearing from view.

"We aren't sure how far they'll be from the cave, so we may have minutes or hours, people," Osias announces. "Be ready for the signal."

I wrap my arm around Liv's shoulders and pull her closer to me, loving the comfort that soaks into me as she returns the embrace. I know we'll get out of this, that we have the upper hand, and if anything, we have the dagger, so we'll be able to escape unscathed even if they're ready for us. But I can't shake the feeling of unease that settles over me. Anxiety thrums through me, but I do my best to push it down.



“Are you ready, angel?” Adrian asks, stooping to place a kiss on her cheek. I grimace as a grin spreads on his lips, wishing I could be that upbeat about ... well, anything, but especially this. I should at least feel a little excitement at this close of a chapter and the beginning of our new life, but something weighs in my stomach, something that I just can't place.

“Of course.” She smiles back at him, tightening the satchel at her side.

“I'll be glad when all of this is over,” Kyros says, and Olivia sighs in agreement.

The best-case scenario, of course, would be preparing the students for a battle that will never come, but with everything that has weighed us down this far, I can't help but think this is too easy.

I frown and look ahead, over the hill and down towards the arena below where the students are already training. We have a contingent of soldiers staying behind in case Romulus is ready for them, and the students are warmed up and ready if they're needed, but we don't expect it.

“Max,” Olivia murmurs, lightly nudging me with her shoulder. “What are you thinking?”

I take a deep breath, my head and my heart warring for supremacy, but I just shake my head, not wanting to unnerve her. “Nothing, princess.”

“Maximus,” she says in warning, clearly not believing me, but before she can get another word in a yellow flare bursts

before us—the signal.

“Follow the signature to the infernal realm, alpha team,” Osias shouts as the flare of magic explodes into an elaborate fireworks display, giving us enough time to lock on to it.

“Ready?” I ask Olivia as I shift my hand down to hold hers.

“Ready.” She nods in agreement as our powers swirl together, transporting us to the sweltering heat of the infernal realm.

Screams pierce my ears the moment we reform, and I grit my teeth as I take stock of the situation. Demons and gods are scattered on the ground, knocked out by the blast of power Mateo must have leveled them with when he broke the wards. They must have caught them off guard, but from the looks of it they’re starting to rally as they converge past their fallen comrades.

We rush forward as one, our hands slipping apart as we focus on the demons swarming Mateo, Titus, and Kallen. I send my power out and suck a few demons into a swirling tornado, their bodies disintegrating as they hit the ground. Olivia releases a blast of fire and air towards a god in front of Titus, wrapping them in a cell of flames.

“Thanks,” he says as he moves to the next god, his powers lashing out like a whip as they slice into the dark god.

Osias and Octavia charge forward as one, their powers combining into a whirlwind of light and shadow that swallows demigods and gods whole, transporting them to fates know

where. I scan the crowd of enemies, taking stock of where the major players are as Adrian sends clones of himself out to battle against the demons. Despite what Olivia and Octavia reported, there still seem to be hundreds of them under the control of the archdemons, even though the word went out to many to escape while we battled against the dark gods.

I send a gust of wind through the cave, collecting demons and sweeping them closer for our troops to combat, knowing it's safer for them to stay on the outside.

“Keep control of the entrance,” Osias shouts to the demigods and gods behind us, relying on them to hold the line as we trek forward. “Does anyone have eyes on Romulus?”

I narrow my gaze as I look into the cave and send another gust of wind to wrap around a batch of demigods. It isn't good to have enemies at our back, but with the move, we're able to push forward and allow more of our troops into the cave.

“Any majors?” Mateo asks again as he battles against one of the dark gods, their sound waves shaking the unstable ground beneath us until Mateo pins them with a blast of his battle magic, knocking them unconscious.

I look behind us first, already seeing a handful of gods in similar fire cages, and send another batch out to them before I turn my focus on the back of the cave, systematically working through their troops in an easy rhythm.

There.

The back of the cave seems to have a separate enclave just past the large table with maps and plans splayed upon it.

Romulus.

“He’s at the back of the cave,” I announce, already pushing my way through.

“Maximus!” Olivia shouts as a bolt of lightning flashes past me and into a chaos demon, their claws poised and dripping just inches from my side. The demon spasms as the electricity freezes him in place, before finally frying him to a smoking crisp.

I push forward, crumbling my adversaries one by one as I reach them. Gods scream in agony as my power tries to break their skin from their bones but doesn’t kill them.

“Sending some back,” I growl. Shoving my powers around them and pushing them back towards the others, knowing they’ll be able to hold them better than I can right now. If it was up to me, I’d open up a hole in the earth and let them all fall into it before burying them and letting them figure their way out. Probably not the best solution though when there are countless numbers of our own soldiers in here with us.

I lock eyes with Romulus as I get closer, my brows furrowing as he doesn’t even try to move. He’s the most powerful person here—on his side at least. Why isn’t he attacking?

*He’s about to leave. He’s about to save himself and let his followers figure the rest out for themselves.*

Well, not if I have anything to say about it.

I launch myself forward just as he's about to dissipate away, aiming to barrel into him if need be. There's mere feet between us when I swing my arm, attempting to put him into a headlock, but my arm sails through thin air.

What the—

He darts to the side at the last second, not dissipating away, but leaping out of my reach, leaving me standing a few feet past where he was moments before. My eyes narrow on him in suspicion as he skids across the dusty cave floor, his suit ripping in places.

*How did he think that was a good idea?*

I stomp back towards the battle, my powers reaching out to wrap a stream of air around his neck, but before I know what's happening, I careen off a barrier.

A sly grin spreads across Romulus' lips as I fall backwards, the force of my step sending me hurtling towards the ground as I rebound off the invisible barrier. Pain radiates through my back as I land on it, the force knocking the wind out of me for a moment before I shake myself out of it.

“I didn't know that it was going to be you, but I'm glad it was.” Romulus grins maniacally, an unhinged gleam in his light brown eyes.

I hurriedly jump to my feet, my fists pounding against the barrier, but it's no use. I call upon the depths of my power and unleash its full force, but nothing makes it past the barrier

cutting me off from the rest of the battle. I look around, noticing the small back section of the cave is empty, as though everything had been cleared out from the space ... in preparation to trap one of us here.

“It’s a trap!” I shout, hoping to at least let the others get out of here.

“*Get Liv out of here,*” I project to my brothers, my first thought always with my mate.

“Maximus,” Liv shouts as she electrocutes another demon and he falls to the ground, leaving her line of sight to me and Romulus.

Her eyes widen as I bash against the barrier, panic freezing my veins to ice as she sprints towards me.

“Liv!” Mateo bellows as his swords cut through a dark demigod, blood spraying as he nearly walks through the falling corpse in his haste to get to our mate.

“Get out of here Liv,” I growl, as I thrash against the barrier. I even try to dissipate to the other side, but the invisible trap is blocking my magic.

“Oh don’t leave, Olivia,” Romulus says darkly as he steps in front of me just beyond the barrier. “The party’s just getting started.”

“I’m going to rip your face off for that,” I grind out, wishing I could tear the dark leader limb from limb. He’s so fucking close, if this damn shield wasn’t in the way I’d tear him to shreds with my bare hands.

Liv fights through a swarm of demons, her shadows unleashing themselves and decimating them in a cloud of dark smoke. I suck in a sharp breath at the fury that blazes in the eyes of the woman I love as she leaves nothing in her wake, their bones sucked into the abyss.

“I’m going to kill you,” Olivia screams as she hurtles herself towards Romulus.

“Olivia, no!” I bellow, needing her to be alright—needing her to be safe and outside of this cage.

She’s there in a blink of an eye though, but like what happened to me, Romulus careens to the side at the last second, skidding across the floor and leaving the entrance to the makeshift jail wide open.

“No!” I shout in terror as Olivia tries to stop herself in time. I reach out my palms against the barrier ready to push her back, to stop her from suffering my same fate, but she’s jerked back at the last second. Her fingertips are mere inches from me as Mateo wraps his arms around her waist and tugs her back.

“Well that was no fun,” Romulus sighs as he pulls himself back up to his feet and snaps his fingers. A silver gleam flashes over the barrier, and I can only imagine he’s sealed whatever spell he used to trap me here in place. “I was hoping to get two for the price of one. Oh well.”

“Olivia,” Osias shouts, his voice too far away for him to be of any help right now.

Mateo lets Olivia go and turns on Romulus just as a silent wind swirls around him.

“I don’t think so,” Mateo shouts as Romulus’ body is about to break apart. His hand clamps around Romulus’ arm as he dissipates away, following Romulus wherever he’s about to go.

“Mateo!” Olivia screams as she rushes forward but she’s too late. Both of them are already gone, without a trace of where they might be.

“You have to get out of here, Liv,” I growl, needing her to focus. “It’s all a trap, we’ve been betrayed.”

“I’m not going anywhere without you,” she shouts, and stomps back to the invisible wall that separates us.

“No,” I snap as she places her hands on the barrier, but she doesn’t sink through, not after Romulus sealed it. Her brows furrow as beams of light and streams of black smoke burst from her chest and slam into the shield.

I suck in a sharp breath and watch my mate in complete awe of the power she holds. Her breaths come in ragged pants and she closes her eyes as she pushes and pushes her power into it, but it’s no use. I place my hands against hers, hating the distance between our palms. Pain slices through my chest as I watch a tear roll down her cheek, wishing I could feel the warmth from her hands against mine.

“Olivia.” Her eyes snap at the sound of my voice, her sea-green orbs shining with tears. “It’s going to be okay.”



“I can get you out,” she pleads, her voice ragged from the sob she’s holding back. “Just a little more—”

“Olivia, please.” My heart breaks as I watch my mate crack. “I need to know that you’re safe.

“Not until I get you out,” she grinds out, teeth gritted as her power streams from her in waves, sinking into the barrier but not breaking it.

“I don’t think you can, princess,” I admit, sucking in a sharp breath. “I’ll be fine here but you need to—”

“Liv,” Adrian shouts, his arms banding around her waist as he pulls her back from the invisible wall.

“No!” she screams, thrashing in his arms as she attempts to get back to me. Her power sinks back into her skin and I sigh a breath of relief that she won’t burn herself out.

“Get her out of here, Adrian,” I bellow, pushing down the soul-crushing pain that radiates through my chest at the thought of her being so far from me.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she shouts, wrenching herself from his grip. She sprints back to me, her hands pounding on the wall that separates us as she sinks to her knees. I follow her down, needing to make sure she’s okay, to be as close to her as I can, to do anything I can to help take some of that pain away.

“We’ve cleared the cave,” Osias says as he skids to a stop at the edge of the barrier. “What’s happened?”

I shift my focus to the rest of the cave for just a moment before my eyes are back on Liv, only now noticing the bodies littering the cave floor behind us as our soldiers detain anyone they still can. I hadn't even realized the sounds of battle had died out after Romulus left.

“It was all a trap,” I say, placing a hand against the barrier, as a tear rolls down Liv's cheek. I grit my teeth, wishing I could wipe it away as Adrian sits on the ground beside her, wrapping his arms around her and giving her the strength and support she needs.

“Romulus trapped him in here, and if it wasn't for Mateo, I would've fallen for his tricks too,” Olivia murmurs. Her eyes widen as she looks around. “Mateo—he dissipated with Romulus!”

“I'll send word to Ethereal and the academy to stay vigilant for both of them,” Osias says, already sending a note off as the parchment vanishes in a cloud of white smoke.

“Olivia, Max,” Kyros shouts as he rushes over to us, his eyes wide as though he's trying to piece together what exactly happened here. I can tell he's figured it out though when his jaw tenses, apparently only needing the context clues to get up to date.

He sinks down on Olivia's other side, and she leans her head against his shoulder, inhaling a staggered breath.

“We need to find Mateo,” she says, straightening as she looks between Adrian and Kyros.

Kyros nods and he gives her a chaste kiss on her forehead before he stands. His lips part and he's about to say something when Octavia rushes towards us, cutting him off.

"Kallen is gone," Octavia says, her face pale as she joins us.

"I thought we kept enough from him in case he turned on us," Osias growls, his fists clenching at his sides.

"What about his oath?" Titus asks as he strides over to us, his brow furrowed as his jaw works.

"He'll have to suffer the consequences of breaking his vow, and that's up to the fates to decide," Osias answers. "I need to go back to see if I can locate Mateo outside of this realm."

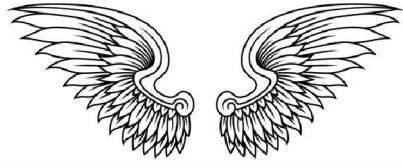
"I'll go with you," Kyros says, nodding to us as he projects. *"Take care of our mate."*

"We'll stay here," Adrian says, his arms banding around Olivia as though he already knows she'll refuse to leave.

Just as Osias and Kyros are about to dissipate away though, a sweeping wind spirals beside him, a figure forming before our eyes.

They pause as they gather their power, ready in case a dark god is about to attack. But as the figure comes into focus, we all release a collected sigh of relief, that is until his face comes into focus, panic and sorrow creasing his features.

"It's gone. It's all gone."



# Chapter Sixteen

## Mateo

**M**Y FINGERS LOCK AROUND Romulus' arm in a vise-like grip, refusing to let him slip away this time. Anywhere he goes, I'm coming with him. I pull my shields around me, readying myself for an all-out battle as soon as our bodies form, but as the wind sweeps around us, I feel a crack in a barrier with my power signature woven into it, like Romulus just single-handedly bashed through our wards.

Fuck.

My heart jolts as our bodies form, expecting to be in front of the school or even by the gates of Ethereal, but instead, the manor comes into focus, the thick ivy covering the walls flashing like a beacon.

Our home?

“You just had to come with me, God of War?” Romulus bellows, his face reddening as he pushes me off of him. “What do you think you're going to be able to do to me?”

“This,” I shout as I blast him with an explosion, my swords already drawn and ready to slice and spear him with my powers.

He easily blocks the attack and throws his own arching blow of black lightning towards me. I absorb the power, lifting my sword to catch the blast and consume the dark lightning as it hums to life around the steel’s edge.

“I can do this all day, Romulus,” I jeer, stabbing my sword forward and launching his strike back at him. He waves his arm and flings the bolt to the side. “What’s your plan?”

“Well, I was going to attack the school, but then you just had to come along, didn’t you?” Romulus growls, sending a tornado straight for me. My wings sprout from my back, and with a big gust, I send the tornado off in a thousand directions, letting the air and debris dissipate away.

“Even if I didn’t follow you, did you really think we wouldn’t be ready for you?” My wings spread again and lift me into the air, the sun glimmering off my gold feathers and sending a blast straight towards him. My battle lust sings in my veins as this blow lands, knocking him back off his feet as a translucent black barrier forms around him.

“Did you really think I didn’t have a backup plan?” Romulus grins as he pulls himself back up. My feet smash against the ground as I land, already preparing to fend off his next strike, but it doesn’t come. He raises his arms above him, summoning his power as the ground shakes beneath me. I bend my knees and launch into the air as the ground crumbles where I was

just standing. Pulling my shields around me, I'm expecting something to come shooting from the earth straight for me, but it doesn't come.

I narrow my eyes on him, but he doesn't even bother to look my way when he attacks me.

What the—

He turns with his arms outstretched towards the manor, towards our home.

“No!” I shout as I swoop down towards him, readying another blast, but the ground is already crumbling beneath him. I pull up abruptly, barely able to get airborne in time as the ground disintegrates into an enormous crater, swallowing the house and everything surrounding it whole.

Romulus' wings lift him into the air, keeping him hovering just over the destruction he unleashed below.

Everything is gone, the house, the garden and gazebo out back, everything in the house, the memories we made with our mate—it's all gone. My eyes narrow on the god responsible for it all as I swoop down, about to dissipate us right back to that cave so we can force him to tell us how to get Maximus out. I come eye to eye with him, my hand outstretched, seconds from clasping his arm again, but ... he's gone.

I sail through thin air, his maniacal grin still ingrained in my memory as I turn to find nothing but the carnage he left in his wake. Desperate, I sail upwards, needing to get a better view of the scene, needing to see if there's anything left to salvage.

How the hell did Romulus do this? He's never had the power level of destruction as Maximus and yet, he was able to level the manor in one blast. He had to have used another power but what other power could have done this?

That thought, along with all the air in my lungs is sucked away as the weight of wreckage barrels down on me.

The earth has nearly consumed the house and everything inside, not an item or a trinket left to save. The blast left a crater at least ten feet deep, and a mountain of wood and boards sticking out from the massive pile of dirt. It would take an army or an immense amount of power to fish anything out from there.

Gone.

I suck in a deep breath, reminding myself that it's better than the alternative. If I hadn't followed him here, countless demigods, guardians, and students could've died if he tried this on the school.

I shake my head, trying to dispel that image from my mind. Our first home may be gone, but our mate is still with us. Maximus is locked away, but he's still alive.

Which is more than I can say for Romulus when I get my hands on him next.

"Mateo," Nyssa shouts, her voice carried on the wind as she shoots towards me, but she's already too late—we're already too late. "What happened? Is the school—"



“No,” I answer, cutting off her question. “But we need to repair the wards now.”

“Who did this?” she asks, her eyes wide in shock as she surveys the utter destruction below us.

We hover above the crater, neither of us able to take our eyes off of it. “Romulus. He said it was his backup plan. If I hadn’t followed him, he would’ve tried to do this to the school.”

“I have to tell Orrin. Where are the others?” Nyssa says, already jumping into action.

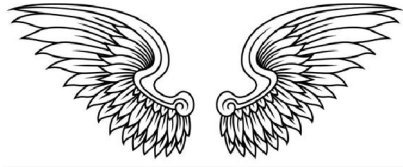
I shake my head and snap myself out of it. There’ll be time to process this, and that time isn’t right now. “They’re still back at the cave. It was a trap, all of it. Max is stuck there, and now we have no idea how we’re supposed to get him out.”

Nyssa curses under her breath and shakes her head, realizing just how much trouble we’re in.

“You go back to them,” Nyssa commands, stepping into that leader role. “I’ll get Orrin, and we’ll place more wards until you and Osias can get back.”

I nod but don’t dare speak the words on the tip of my tongue. It’s useless. With the way Romulus ripped through them without a second thought, if he wants back in, he’ll get in. The clock is running out, and we just have to be prepared for when shit finally hits the fan.

“Go,” Nyssa insists, breaking me from my thoughts. I don’t waste another second as I dissipate from the place I never thought would feel so much like home.



## Chapter Seventeen

### Olivia

“IT’S GONE. IT’S ALL gone,” Mateo says as he appears. I scan over him, making sure he isn’t injured. There are some rips in his white linen shirt but other than that, he’s unharmed. I shift about to go to him but ... Maximus.

I place my hand back over the barrier and turn to Mateo, wishing I could be in two places at once right now. My stomach turns at the stricken look on Mateo’s face, my joy at seeing him eclipsed by whatever catastrophe must’ve happened.

“What’s gone?” Kyros asks. He shifts to stand in front of Mateo, placing his hand on his shoulder. Mateo doesn’t even seem to notice until he registers the touch and is immediately jerked from his thoughts. His eyes refocus on us, on me specifically, and he presses his lips into a thin line as though he doesn’t want to tell me.

“What happened, Mateo?” I ask, needing to know no matter how hard it is to hear.

“I followed Romulus back to the school, but he changed his course when he realized I was with him,” Mateo says. A leaden weight sinks in the pit of my stomach when he says the school.

My lips part, and I’m about to ask the question I both need and dread to hear when he continues.

“He went to the manor. He leveled the house completely. There’s nothing left.”

Kyros turns to face me, and I share a look with each of my guys. I nod stiffly, needing him to finish telling us, holding on to the fact that at least no one was there.

“He meant to go to the school, but he knew, with me and all the other gods and demigods there, he wouldn’t have the time necessary to inflict the damage needed to level the entire building,” Mateo explains.

Some of the tension eases from my chest at that as I realize the students are safe. I cling to that knowledge, not letting myself dwell on the house. It might’ve been just a place, but it was home to us. It was where we shared so many integral moments in our relationship.

*No, Liv. Don’t think about it now.*

I look back at Maximus. I need to be here; I need to hold my shit together for him. His emerald eyes gleam in the orb light, steeled with determination. He’s in there. He’s trapped, and we have no clue how to get him out, and he was more concerned about me before than he was about himself.

“The wards?” my father asks, his brows furrowed in confusion as Mateo just shakes his head, the two of them sharing a look.

I don’t need to be a mind reader to understand that look. Romulus was able to tear through the protections all on his own.

“Nyssa and Orrin are replacing them now, but they’ll need our help,” Mateo says, yet I can tell from his tone that he doesn’t think they’ll hold up, not when Romulus was able to break through them so easily.

“What happened to the gods we trapped?” I ask, turning to my father.

“We were able to take some of them back to the cells in Ethereal, but it seems both Kallen and Helene managed to release the majority of them.” My father’s jaw tightens at the admission, and I nod, not sure what else I expected.

Of course Kallen and Helene helped them escape. Why would something work out today?

“We should go—” my father says, his eyes focused on me, but I cut him off.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Adrian’s arm tightens around my waist in reassurance. “I’ll stay with Liv.”

“No,” Maximus grumbles, a crease forming between his brows as he narrows his eyes on me. “I don’t want you to stay in the infernal realm, princess. What if they come back?”

“Exactly,” I huff, glaring right back at him. There’s no way in hell he’s going to make an argument like that and expect me to leave him. “What if that was their plan all along, wait for us to leave whomever he managed to catch and steal them away the second the rest of us leave?”

Maximus’ jaw tightens, but he doesn’t argue.

“And don’t you dare try to convince them through the mind link that they should persuade me to leave, because it’s not going to happen.”

His brows lift in surprise, as though he hadn’t thought I realized what it meant when the rest of them went quiet around me. Fool me once and all that. Nope, I always know when they’re up to something. That’s my job as a mate to call them out.

He glowers back at me, silently brooding away, like it’s a bad thing that I care about his safety just as much as he cares for mine.

*“Glower at me all you want, but it’s not going to change anything,”* I project to him with a smug grin, grateful for something to take my mind off of the dumpster fire this day has turned into.

“I’ll stay with you too,” Octavia says, placing a hand on my shoulder.

“Thank you.” I rest a hand over hers, grateful for the show of support.

“I’ll head back to the school,” Kyros says, his gaze catching mine, his honey-brown eyes soft and comforting, like with just a look, he can tell me everything’s going to be all right. “I won’t stop until I find something. I promise.”

I give him a soft smile, not daring to look at my pessimistic god of destruction. I want to hold onto this glimmer of hope for as long as I can.

“I’ll stay—” Titus says, his crestfallen expression glued to his face since we learned about Kallen betraying us, but I cut him off.

“No, you should go back to the school too. I’m sure you’ve stashed some of your books somewhere,” I say decisively.

“I did. In the house though ... ” he trails off, not needing to connect the dots there.

I suck in a deep breath and nod. “If anyone can sift through the wreckage, I know it’s you.”

Titus’ lips pop open, his eyes widening as though he wants to argue.

“Olivia—” Mateo says, but I cut him off, not wanting to hear about how bad the house is—not when we have no leads and no clue where to start looking for a way to get Maximus out.

“That is the plan,” I declare, holding no room for argument.

“I’ll try my best, but I can’t make any promises,” Titus says, nodding in understanding.

No or impossible are not words in my vocabulary right now.

“I still don’t understand what Romulus had to gain from this,” Adrian says, his brows knitting together. “Sure, he trapped Max, but what does he really gain from that? We still have the—”

His words cut off as his crystal blue eyes light with realization.

“Have you checked the bag yet?” Titus asks hesitantly, but both of us already know what the answer will be.

I chew on my bottom lip and shake my head. No, I hadn’t checked the bag, because I knew the answer to Adrian’s question the moment we learned that Kallen had betrayed us. There’d only be one motivation Romulus had to set all this up—one reason he had to show his cards and let us decimate a large number of his troops—the dagger.

Reluctantly, I shift the satchel in front of me and open the top. *Gone.*

I shake my head and let loose a deep sigh, even sweeping my hand along the bottom to make sure.

Titus drags his hand back through his hair and kicks the wall, sending pebbles cascading down onto the floor.

I purse my lips, holding back the words that are on the tip of my tongue. He’s blaming himself for bringing Kallen with him, but it’s all of our faults. We could’ve told him to leave. We could’ve locked him up until this whole mess was over, but we didn’t.



Each of us felt like we needed to hold things back from him, but we still trusted his information enough to come here today. We all walked right into that trap. And although I know this, I can't tell him that just yet, not when Maximus is trapped in this hellhole. Because selfishly, I do blame him, just as much as I blame myself.

“None of us trusted him, yet we didn't see the downside of coming here today, even if it was a trap,” Mateo admits, scrubbing a hand over his face like he doesn't want to admit it either. “I sensed the wards, the one limiting the ability to dissipate out, but they used it to cover up their trap. None of us could've guessed that.”

His words stick in my mind though, and I replay them in my mind. *None of us saw the downside ...*

I frown and rack my brain, trying to remember if I had told them about what the voice said to me before or after Titus and Kallen arrived.

“Does he know?” I ask, my eyes widening in urgency, yet I don't dare speak the rest of my thoughts. I glance around the cave suspiciously, unsure if they have any way of overhearing us right now.

“Does he know what?” Titus asks, his brows knitting together as he looks at each of us, sensing we're speaking in some sort of code.

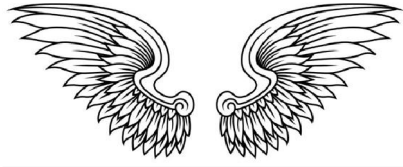
“The voice,” I remind them, casting a look around the room. I see the moment realization dawns on each of their faces—everyone but Titus.

“What voice?” he asks again, and I sigh a breath of relief. If he doesn’t know, I must’ve told the other about how exactly I was able to keep the real dagger away from Romulus when he called for it.

Which means Kallen doesn’t know.

“Perfect,” my father says, his eyes lighting up with a glimmer of hope. I hold on to that flicker of warmth in my chest desperately, needing to make sure we guard this knowledge.

This could just be the key to ending this, which means none of us can speak a word about this, not until we’re ready to finish this once and for all.



# Chapter Eighteen

## Kyros

“WE SHOULD HEAD BACK as soon as possible,” I say, pushing down the urge to shift my weight from foot to foot as my body thrums with nervous energy.

“I need to see the manor first,” Osais says, grimacing as he does his best not to catch Liv’s gaze.

I purse my lips as she leans her head against Adrian’s shoulder and silently wish I could stay here with her. But she needs me somewhere else. I nod stiffly at Maximus, and he inclines his head in understanding. One way or another, I’m going to get my brother out of there, even if it kills me.

“Let’s dissipate there first, and we can spread out from there,” Mateo agrees, his jaw tensing as though he’s holding back his warning.

I nod in agreement and pull my power around me, my thoughts already on the library and what books I can pull from there. My heart jolts as I remember the massive bookshelves

that overflowed with ancient tomes, my stomach sinking as I try to rack my brain for what titles it held.

If the book I need was in there—

“Kyros,” Titus murmurs, jerking me from my thoughts as I realize Osias and Mateo have already dissipated. I scowl back at Titus and let my powers sweep me up into a silent wind, transporting me to the outskirts of the property.

My hands fist at my sides as Titus appears beside me, my annoyance ratcheting just at the sight of him—that is, until I take in the wreckage that was once my home.

Silence sweeps over us as we all take in the crater. Dirt and debris cover every inch of what used to be our home—the first place I got to call home with my mate.

This is not what I was expecting. I thought there would be at least something to sift through, but Romulus left nothing but splinters and devastation in his wake.

“This...” Osias is unable to take his eyes off the destruction before us. “Liv doesn’t see this—at least not yet.”

I nod in agreement, and so does Mateo, both of us sharing a look. Both of us could tell Liv was nearing her breaking point, and I’m terrified that actually seeing the destruction with her own two eyes will be the thing that throws her over the edge.

“I might be able to salvage something, but that will take time we don’t have right now,” Osias continues, dragging his gaze away from the wreckage and towards the school.

“The students are the priority right now,” I agree, wishing I could at least find something, some small token to give to Liv to remember this place and what it meant for us.

The manor wasn't just a house; it was the place that really allowed our love and our bond to blossom. Without that closeness, who knows where we'd all be right now. Memories flash through my mind of when we formed the blood ritual, cementing our bond with Liv and bringing her into our family, where she was always meant to be.

The first time I knew she was meant to be mate to all four of us was in this house, when I walked in on Adrian and her in the stairwell. He had her pinned against the wall and—

“I don't think I'm going to be able to find anything in here.” Titus grimaces as he looks at the manor as though it's a chore.

Of course it is—because of him.

“Liv said to look for your books, and that's what you're going to do,” I snap, drawing surprised looks from Osias and Mateo, but I don't care. Mateo can say his piece all he wants, that we all chose to use Kallen's information, but I don't care. To me the person who's truly responsible for this is standing right in front of me.

“Woah,” Titus says, raising his hands in peace as he takes a step away from me. “No one said I wasn't going to try.”

“Good, because I don't care what anyone else says, this is your fault and you know it.”

“Kyros,” Mateo murmurs, stepping towards me. “I was there with him when Kallen showed us that cave. If you want to put the blame on anyone, I’ll share that burden with him at least.”

“It’s him,” I insist. “It’s been him since the start.”

“I get that you’re angry,” Osias says, turning towards me now too, like I’m the one who’s overreacting. “But this isn’t the time to turn on each other.”

“Then when is the time, because shit keeps hitting the fan and he’s always at the center of it.”

“I think you should—”

“No, I shouldn’t do anything. I’m always the one who keeps an even head; I’m always the one who helps everyone else see reason, but where has that gotten us?” I demand, turning on Titus, where I know my anger truly belongs. “I’ll tell you where it’s gotten us. We now have no home, no dagger, my brother is trapped in a cave, and my mate is barely holding it together and somehow thinks that you’ll be able to solve everything. And despite her faith in you, you’re here whining about how you might get dirty.”

“You don’t think I know all that,” Titus grumbles, fisting his hands at his sides. “You don’t think I’m beating myself up inside for ever bringing my brother here, for trusting him to be part of my future, to help in the plan that I’ve been keeping secret for thousands of years before you even became invested in this fight?”

“This isn’t helping anyone,” Osias says, getting in between us, but I step around him, needing to unleash my anger and frustration on someone.

“Why should we even trust you now? Maybe you knew what Kallen’s plan was this whole time, and you used him as a scapegoat so you could continue to spy on us?” I shout, my hands clenching at my sides.

“Kyros, you’re going too far now,” Osais interjects, but I ignore him, about to fling another insult towards the god of vengeance, when he cuts me off.

“Do you have anything else you want to unleash on me Kyros? Everything you can possibly say to me I’ve already told myself a thousand times over,” Titus huffs in frustration, dragging his hand back through his hair as his eyes light with anger. “So go ahead and throw whatever insults and accusations my way that you want. It won’t help us now. It won’t help either of us find a spell to get Maximus out of that cave.”

I frown back at him, wishing his words hadn’t struck a nerve, but they did. He’s right. I look around at the three of them, noticing how they’ve converged on me, surrounded me. Am I really on the wrong side here? Am I really the one who is blinded to the truth?

I suck in a sharp breath and push my anger to the back of my mind, reminding myself that Liv needs me right now. Who else does she have to rely on? Titus?



*“You should go, Kyros. Clear your head,”* Mateo projects to me, and I turn on my heel, not bothering to say another word.

Each step feels heavier than the last, like I’m dragging my feet through mud with every stride I take away from what once was our home.

“And I wasn’t complaining about how I might get dirty,” Titus calls to my back. “I was trying to lighten the mood, Kyros. Maybe you should try it sometime.”

“Not the time,” Mateo growls, the thud of a smack echoing through what’s left of the surrounding trees.

I don’t rise to his baiting, not even bothering to pause as I stomp away and dissipate mid-step. My body reforms in my office at the school, and I sigh a breath of relief, letting the tension that had been building ever since I turned on Titus, seep away as I take in the familiar surroundings. I sink into my plush office chair and turn on the computer, immediately searching for every book that references traps or invisible barriers and writing down their locations on a sheet of paper.

I should really start cataloging all these tomes into an online database—if we make it through this of course. It would’ve really made all the research I’ve had to do in the last few months a lot easier.

My anger seeps away as I stride amongst the stacks in the library, my mind focused on finding all the books on my list. That is until I spot the seat I brought Olivia to when I healed her ankle on that first day we met. I still remember her shock as the mate bond stretched between us, solidifying the moment

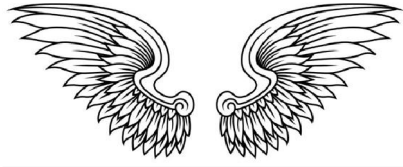
we locked eyes. She of course didn't know it yet, but I did. I knew she was mine from the very first minute I laid eyes on her, and I'm not going to let her down now.

My resolve strengthens as I remember my mate, making a silent vow to her here and now. I will find a way to free Maximus. I will find a way to finish this war and get us to the other side of this. I want that happy ending I pictured as we walked through our home in Ethereal. Olivia's eyes lit up as she took in our home, our future. We may have lost one place that felt like home, but there's no way in infernal that I'm going to let Romulus or his sons take Ethereal from us.

I murmur a string of ancient words and clicks ring out around the large library as the locks engage on all of the doors and windows, shutting everyone else out. With everything going on, I doubt any of the students will want to spend their free time in here, but just in case, I need to keep my focus.

I'm not leaving this room until I find an answer, until I find a way to rescue Maximus and bring Olivia back to where she belongs.

My mate needs to come back to where her family and friends are, and I know she won't step foot out of that cave until we have a plan in place.



# Chapter Nineteen

## Titus

I CLOSE MY EYES to concentrate my power on the pile of debris before me, yet I can't help but replay Kyros' insults in my mind over and over again like a song on repeat. A really shitty song.

I wanted to trust Kallen. I wanted to believe that he was ready to change, to see the error in Romulus' way of thought, the horrors he has put countless people through, but I guess I was wrong. I exhale a long breath, trying to concentrate again. There's enough vengeance floating through the air to spur me on, to make my powers kick into overdrive, so why can't I focus on the books I need?

*Dammit, Kyros.* I peel open my eyelids and assess the damage, hating the thought that lingers in the back of my mind that this was my fault. I might have been on the outside looking in, but I saw how much this place meant to them. I could see how at home they were, despite the fact that I'm sure most of them hated that they were placed at the school. But the

fates aligned since if they hadn't been, things could've turned out a lot differently.

Things could've turned a lot different for all of us.

Slamming my fist into the packed earth, I replay every conversation I've had with Kallen over the last few days. He seemed distant of course, I felt the distance even between us, but I believed him when he told me it was because he was adjusting. I felt that too. Living here, being out of the infernal realm, it's both a blessing and a curse. It had been so long that I wasn't sure I was ever going to get out of that desolate land. And now, being amongst the light gods, our home that we left behind so long ago, it seems like both a dream and a nightmare.

I don't enjoy the uneasy look I get from guardians and demigods alike though. And the gods ... well most of them just outright scowl at me.

But I thought we were adjusting together, getting used to our new home, our future. I guess I was wrong. It was nice to have someone who at least understood how I felt, but now—now I have no one.

I roll my shoulders and push those thoughts from my mind, knowing that's not true. I came here to repair my relationship with Octavia and Olivia, and my sister needs me to do this. I owe it to them to get them the answers they're looking for.

I just wish Kyros hadn't been such a dick. Not because I don't deserve it, but because it's distracting me.

“Any luck?” Mateo asks, calling down from the edge of the crater.

“Not yet,” I call back, frowning at the wreckage in front of me.

Honestly, at this point it might just be easier if I go through each piece of rubble piece by piece. I still don’t know how he was able to do this. Sure he can use the power of destruction, but he’s never had this level of control. He could maybe destroy the front entrance, but nothing like this.

“Do you really think you’re going to be able to find anything in there?” he asks, badgering me with another question.

“Maybe this would go a lot smoother if you stopped asking questions,” I say, wishing he’d just leave.

“If you say so,” Mateo calls back.

My brows knit together and I turn to look if he’s left—nope.

“I don’t need a babysitter,” I remind him, closing my eyes again as I try to concentrate.

“Oh I know, but you might just need a bodyguard if Kyros comes back for you.” Mateo chuckles. The sound of his laughter grates on my nerves, making my eyes pop open to stare at him incredulously.

“Yeah, right. What is he going to do? Heal me to death,” I scoff, shaking my head in disbelief.

Unbelievable.

“You never know,” Mateo says, crunching down on an apple.

I grit my teeth but push him from my mind, reminding myself I need to focus. I close my eyes again and hone in on the power signature of the books I brought with me. The power is dark and ancient, the tomes bound in leather, and the pages weathered.

The book I really want is the *Descent of the Dark*.

Splaying my palms wide on my knees, I imagine the feel of the book and the magical signature that radiates from it. The book itself has power, but the spells and knowledge within it are some of the most advanced known to god or demon. I have no idea where Romulus got his hand on a spell like that, but if there's a book that holds the answers, it's that one.

I imagine the silver inlaid cover, the dagger, and the snake twining around it. I picture the day I placed it in Olivia's bag, the image twisting my lips into a grimace and catapulting me from my train of thought.

Aggravated, I slam my fist into the ground again, causing the pile of debris to shift in front of me from the force.

Laughter echoes above me and I turn to glare at Mateo again.

"It would be easier for me to concentrate if I didn't have a laugh track playing behind me," I shout.

"Come on, Titus. Today was a shit day. At least let me take a little enjoyment from you suffering," he pleads, his lips twitching as he tries to hold back his laughter.

“So stop getting in the way and maybe today might not be as shitty as it started,” I grind out.

“Fine, I’ll stay quiet,” he groans. “Do you want one?” he asks as he crunches down on his apple.

“I do not want one,” I answer, and shutter my eyes again, hoping to drown out whatever he says next.

Thankfully he keeps his word, munching away on his fruit rather than bothering me again.

I drag in a deep breath, and let my mind go blank and wander where it needs to go. The image of the book resurfaces and I grasp on to it, letting its energy mold with mine. My power twines around my hands and I focus the combined drive of vengeance on finding this book.

“You actually did it,” Mateo shouts, his thick boots thumping on the ground as he jumps down to join me.

My brows furrow and I peel my eyes open slowly, not expecting to see anything, yet there it is. The silver dagger glimmers in the sunlight, the ruby inlaid into the hilt glowing like blood splatter, as though it’s taunting me, reaffirming all my thoughts from before.

“Do you need more than just this one?” Mateo asks, his boots thumping on the packed dirt, sending small plumes of dust flying into my face as he reaches my side. Perfect.

I cough and glare up at him when his lips twitch in amusement. He’s clearly enjoying this.



“If any of my books hold the answer, it would be this one,” I murmur, holding it out for him to see. I suppress my smirk as he takes a step back.

“You can keep that vampire book far away from me.”

“It already took your blood.” I sigh, frowning at the amount of dirt surrounding us. There’s no way I’m going to let a book that predates our existence get ruined by the elements. “Do you think Kyros will share the library with me?”

“Doubtful,” he huffs in amusement.

“Fine,” I grumble and climb to my feet.

“I’m sure the book will be fine.” Mateo crosses his arms over his chest. “It was just buried in the dirt and rubble of an entire manor. If it didn’t fall apart from that, I’m sure its blood sucking tendencies will protect it.”

I tune him out as I stride to the side of the crater, my golden wings spreading from my back to lift me up without breaking a step. Calling on my powers, I lift a fallen tree from where it collapsed and draw on the jagged edges of the stump. It takes a minute, but by the time a gust of air from Mateo’s wings flutters through my hair, I’ve created a makeshift table and chairs from the wreckage.

“I guess that’s a better idea,” he grumbles in defeat before he takes another bite from his apple. The loud crunch of the fruit’s flesh grates on my nerves, but some of the tension seeps away from my bunched muscles as he tosses the core into the forest.

I stride to the rough table and pull out one of the chairs. “You can have a seat if you keep your mouth shut and let me work,” I offer, hoping that will appease the annoying god of war.

Taking a deep breath, I lay the book on the table, grateful that it seems steady enough. Mateo joins me, pointedly keeping his lips locked together as he mimes throwing away a key.

I silently pray to the fates for an answer as I open the cover and use a blast of magic to clear the dust from the pages. My lips silently twitch as Mateo coughs up the gust of dirt that went his way. *Payback.*

Focusing back on the book, I flip through the ancient pages, breathing a sigh of relief when I realize nothing was damaged in the wreckage. I skim through the relic spells, grimacing at some of the ones I come across. There are curses and hexes, stuff I don’t even want to touch—but I know someone who would, especially if they were desperate.

“There are always consequences for using this type of power,” I murmur to myself, nearly forgetting that Mateo is there, surprisingly.

“What do you mean?” Mateo asks, his fists clenching on top of the table as I shift my attention from the book to him. His jaw ticks as he waits, tension radiating from his tight posture.

“I mean, Romulus had to cast something dark and powerful for none of us to be able to break that barrier, especially with the amount of power that Liv sent into it,” I say, pushing

thoughts of the ancient magic away for a second now that a crack in the god of war's facade has shown. He might be annoying as infernal right now, but I get why. "And with dark magic, comes consequences to whoever cast it."

Mateo nods stiffly and taps his finger on the table, seemingly needing some way to release the nervous energy clearly radiating through him right now. "Sorry." He curls his finger back into his clenched fist as though he only just realized what he was doing.

"It's fine," I murmur and focus back on the book, settling into a comfortable silence as I scour the pages for some sign of a trap or encasement charm strong enough to hold a god.

I comb through every spell, not wanting to miss a detail, until the sun finally lowers in the sky. The change in light as the sun dips beneath the tree cover jerks me from the book.

"How did I not realize it's so late?" I murmur and scrub a hand over my face, only now noticing how blurry my eyes had been getting.

"You were so focused, I didn't want to disturb you," Mateo says, his earlier levity gone now as he shifts his focus from the crater and back to me. "Nothing yet?"

"Nothing yet," I agree, shaking my head as I turn the page. "I still have about a hundred pages to go so there's still a chance."

Mateo nods, but both of us know this isn't a good sign. I sigh in frustration as I look down at the next page. Every spell and

story has been getting darker and darker, just like the title of the ancient tome promised. There's a reason I've never read this book in its entirety, and this is exactly why. I almost hope I don't find anything now, and that I need to search for another book, because I already know that the price of any of these spells is not going to be something easy to part with.

"Do you want me to read some?" Mateo asks, his lips quirking to the side.

"That's okay," I chuckle, shaking my head and doing my best to hide the way that my stomach sinks at the thought of anyone else reading this text. There was a reason it was entrusted to me—not that I think Mateo would actually use the spells in here, but I can't take that risk.

I grimace as I read the effects of the next one, and force myself to shift to the next page.

*Demon's web.*

I pause at the table, my blood turning to ice in my veins at the title already. A leaden weight sinks in my stomach, but I push it aside, somehow knowing this won't be good.

*The demon's web is cast to both entrap and drain the individual of their powers.*

The blood drains from my face as I glance at the disaster site mere feet from me. That was what he was able to do with a trickle of Maximus' power combined with his own—this is how he was able to destroy the house on his own. If he was

able to bide his time, or get Liv or Osias into the web, he would've been able to take out the entire school in one blow.

*The power seeps from them slowly, until they're a mere husk of themselves. The spell shall take a week to fully drain even the most powerful being you lure to their demise.*

Fuck. That means we're up against the clock. If we don't get him out of there soon, I'm not sure there'll be anything left to save.

*Ensure you do not trap someone accidentally. Blood for blood, the greatest sacrifice of all, the only form of rescue.*

*The caster shall only be able to retain the power for a period before sanity begins to be stripped away. Consuming you the same way you drained your victim, leaving you a shell of your former self.*

I do my best to keep any sign of emotion from my face as I close the book and force a smile onto my face.

"I know a way to save him," I say weakly, doing my best to feign excitement despite the blood draining from my face. "I'm going to need a few ingredients first."

"Are you serious?" Mateo demands. He bolts from his chair so quickly it topples over and clatters on the earth behind him as a wide grin spreads across his lips. My stomach sinks as his eyes light with a mix of excitement and hope, which I try to emulate, despite the fear slithering up my spine.

"Yes." I nod, hoping he doesn't see past my facade. "You can tell the others that in a few days' time, Maximus will be

out.”

“Can I help you find anything?” Mateo asks, nearly leaping away from the table.

“No, I can find all the ingredients,” I say, needing to keep the details to myself.

“If you’re sure, I’ll go let Kyros know he can stop his search, and we’ll go let Liv know,” Mateo says, barely able to contain the eagerness in his tone. “I’ll let Osias know too, and he’ll get you set up in a room for the night; you must be exhausted.”

I nod in agreement, not even sure I can trust the strength of my voice right now.

“Maybe this will even get Kyros to stop hating you.” Mateo chuckles, nudging me teasingly with his elbow before he dissipates away.

I stroll over to what used to be the manor for the gods, remembering the moments of levity we had here before it was all snatched away. It seemed like I was almost about to have it all, my brother, my sister, and my mother, a real family after all these centuries trapped under Romulus’ thumb.

He never wanted children, after all. He wanted minions, versions of himself that would gladly do his bidding. I guess one out of two wasn’t a bad trade.

Olivia deserves to have that though—a life, a family, the love of her mates. After everything I’ve done to bring the prophecy to life, after selfishly wanting to have it all and

putting my sister and her mates in jeopardy once again, I deserve to pay the price.

I drag my gaze away from the aftermath of my foolish dreams and focus on the school in the distance, where the future lies ... or where it would've lain. I never admitted the truth to anyone, not even myself really. But I knew the second that Helene wrapped that stream of air around her neck, and the force of that echo reverberated to the depths of my soul.

“We were supposed to have forever,” I murmur, smiling sadly at what could have been. “But I know what I need to do.”

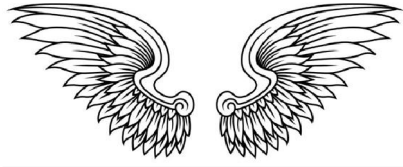
I have to fix this mess, I have to do whatever I can to help my sister, to help my—

I cut myself off before I can even think the word, not wanting to accept something I can never have, not when my days are numbered.

*Blood for blood. The greatest sacrifice of all.*

I know what that means. The spell requires the blood of the caster, it requires the life of someone connected to them in order to be broken. There's no doubt in my mind that Romulus knows this, which means there's no way we're going to lead him back to the cave.

The only blood of his kin is me—I'm the key to unlock Maximus before the spell drains him dry.





# Chapter Twenty

## Olivia

**S**LEEP THREATENS TO DRAG me under as I rest my head on Adrian's shoulder, all of today's events piling up on my chest and carrying me off into a restless slumber.

"Olivia," a man's voice calls my name, shocking me out of my sleep. My eyes fly open despite my eyelids gritting like sandpaper across them, and I leap up, ready to fight off whoever—

Mateo?

I shake my head, hoping to clear away the thick fog that has been looming over my mind for the last few hours, but it doesn't work.

"Liv?" Mateo asks. Before I even know what's happening, his arms wrap around me and pull me in against his firm muscular chest.

Sighing a breath of relief, I sink into his embrace, relying on his strength to keep me upright.

“Let’s sit back down,” Adrian says, clasping his hands around me from the back and tugging me back down onto the chair. I sink down without an argument, letting the hard wood keep me balanced. Of course, Adrian could have made any chair, but I insisted it had to be uncomfortable to keep me awake and focused.

Maximus’ emerald eyes are hard on me when I look his way, clearly still pissed at me. He’s, of course, been telling me that I need to go back to the academy, that I need to get some rest, that we should at least make beds out here, but I refused every single one of his suggestions.

It just seems wrong to even be comfortable here when he’s trapped in there with nothing but the hard cave floor to sit on.

“Liv, are you okay?”

My shoulders lump slightly at Kyros’ voice, my chest warming with a flicker of hope that he’s back so soon.

I turn in my chair and blink at my other two mates, not even realizing Kyros was there before.

I’m clearly not the best guard, I guess. Fuck.

I grimace and try to shake myself out of this. I need to be here, and I need to be alert.

“Did you find something?” I ask Kyros hopefully, reminding myself not to get too excited. It’s only been a few hours, after all.

“I didn’t—” Kyros starts, but Mateo cuts him off.

“But Titus did. He said he found the spell that Romulus used. He just needs to gather a few ingredients and then we’ll get you out of there in no time,” Mateo announces, clapping Kyros on the shoulder. I look between the two of them, noticing a shadow almost looming over Kyros that hadn’t been there before.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, focusing on Kyros, my stomach sinking as I wait for the giant ‘but.’

“Nothing’s wrong.” Kyros smiles weakly, but it doesn’t reach his eyes.

“What’s wrong with you two?” Mateo asks, dragging Kyros closer to where Adrian and I sit. “This is a reason for celebrating. Max is going to be out of here in a few days. Oh, is this about Titus figuring out the answer first?”

“Of course not,” Kyros huffs in frustration, pulling out of Mateo’s hold. “I don’t care who found the answer, as long as we get Max out of there safely.”

“Max—” Mateo starts, but Maximus cuts him off.

“You need to take Liv home.”

“I already told you, I’m not going anywhere,” I grind out, narrowing a glare at my mate.

I suck in a sharp breath as realization slams into me. I don’t want to be fighting with him. None of us should be turning on each other right now.

“Liv,” Adrian says, breaking through my thoughts. “We should really take you home to get some rest. Max should get

to sleep too to keep his strength up, and he can't do that with you here."

I frown as I focus on Maximus, letting all the emotions that have been piling up on my shoulders slip away, and really look at him. He's lost some of the color in his face, and sweat beads along his brow. I place my hand on the barrier, wishing I could touch him, that I could heal him or do whatever necessary to take away his pain. His shoulders slump slightly as he must see the fight drain from my face.

"I'll keep watch, Olivia," Octavia says, strolling from the entrance to the cave, clearly having overheard the conversation from afar.

"I'll stay too, little mate, and we'll switch out in a few hours so everyone can get some sleep," Mateo murmurs, kneeling down to place a chaste kiss on my forehead.

"I really don't want to leave you," I sigh, pressing my hand harder against the barrier, like I can somehow rip him from his prison. "But I can see that you need your rest too, and obviously me being here is getting in the way of that."

"Princess," he grumbles, placing his hand against mine, but I shake my head, silently assuring him it isn't like that.

"I understand because I would feel the same way." I wish I could feel his rough palm beneath mine, the warm, comforting touch that I'm so used to, but my hand rests against the cool, smooth magic that keeps us apart. "We'll get you out of here soon though."

I slowly peel my hand away, regret wrapping around my chest with a vise-like grip. This is what he needs from me right now, but it doesn't make it any easier. I desperately hold on to that flicker of hope that burns inside my chest, the one piece of good news I've heard since we left for the infernal realm.

"I'll see you soon, princess," Maximus says, his voice a low rumble. Pain slices through my chest, but I nod and slowly pull myself to my feet, hating the way that Adrian's arm wraps around my waist, like he doesn't think I can stand upright on my own right now. I pull out of his grip and take a few shaky steps away, not wanting anyone's help.

*Why the hell am I so weak? Everyone else is fine.*

"Thank you," I nod to Octavia, my lips pursing as I scan her over. Her hair is still done in her tight braid, eyes open, ready and alert.

"Of course," she breathes. "I'm here for anything you need."

My chest warms at the gesture. Every day I seem to be getting closer and closer to my mother.

"You know I'm always here for anything you need, little mate," Mateo murmurs, wrapping his arms around me from behind and lightly squeezing me. "And you too, brother."

"Thanks," Maximus grumbles. "Now go. We'll be fine."

Mateo backs away from me, and I pull my powers around me, determined to dissipate out of here on my own.

"Olivia, wait—" Adrian shouts, but it's too late. My power sweeps me up on an invisible wind, and I breathe a sigh of

relief, empowered to be doing this on my own and not being treated like a—

“What is this?” I say on a shaky breath, my eyes stinging as I look around me at the house—or what’s left of it now.

The energy I was clinging to is zapped from my body in an instant, and I crumple to my knees, sending a cloud of dust up at the impact. The tiny particles cling to my throat as I take my next breath, and I desperately try to clear it but it won’t go away—it won’t go back to what it once was.

The house—our home. It’s gone. Completely and totally destroyed.

I knew it. They told me it was gone, but seeing and knowing something are two completely different things. I couldn’t have even pictured this level of desolation if I’d tried.

“Olivia,” Adrian shouts, his footsteps clambering towards me, but I tune him out, unable to register anything but the pit where our house used to be.

I learned to love in this house. I learned the truth about my life, my future, and my parents—and now it’s just gone.

Everything can be wiped away in a second.

“Angel,” Adrian breathes as he sinks to his knees beside me, his arms wrapping around me like the same thought just dawned on him too, like he’s clinging to me as if I might disappear before his eyes.

“Sweetheart,” Kyros breathes and kneels on my other side. His hand clasps mine, and I let the warm, comforting heat of

his touch seep into my skin.

I suck in a staggered breath, taking a moment to be grateful for each of my four mates. Maximus will be out soon and no one is hurt, that's what should matter, but I can't help but think about how easily Romulus wiped a place out that meant so much to us.

“What would've happened if we were in there, or if Nelle—” I cut myself off, turning a pleading glance on Kyros, and he shakes his head.

“Everyone was out at the arena today,” Kyros confirms, squeezing my hand. “Your father went down to make sure.”

I sigh in relief and focus back on the ruins before us, unable to take my focus off of it. “I thought this was it, that we'd finally be able to stop him once and for all, that we'd get the life we pictured that night in Ethereal ... but he's always ten steps ahead of us.”

“I know I should be grateful that he didn't get to the school, and that no one is injured, but even when we get Maximus out, we're back where we started. He's won yet again.”

“Don't say that, angel,” Adrian murmurs, curling a finger under my chin to meet his crystal blue eyes, even in the faint moonlight they shine like a beacon, always letting me know that I'm home, that I'm safe. “He hasn't won anything. This is a war, not a battle.”

“How many times can we tell ourselves that without losing hope?” I ask, tugging my chin free so I don't have to see the

pain in his gaze. “This house was ours, and now it just feels like everything we built has been destroyed, and everything we dreamt of is too far to reach—perpetually moving farther and farther away with every day that passes.”

“Olivia.” Kyros seems to break as he says my name. “I promise you, we’ll find a way. Just please don’t lose hope.”

His honey-brown eyes glimmer with unshed tears in the silver moonlight. I wish I could cry, I wish I could unleash the despair piercing through my chest, dispel it and let hope surge again, but it’s no use. I’m numb. My emotions and energy are completely drained.

“I felt the same way when I saw this; I felt as though all was lost, but it isn’t,” Kyros pleads, a crease forming between his brows as he pulls my hand into his lap. “We have so much to look forward to, so much to live for. Please, just don’t give up.”

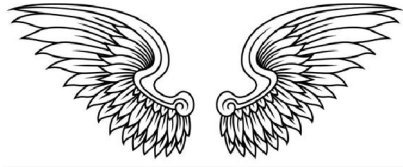
A dark cloud had seemed to be looming over Kyros before, but it’s as if seeing me dip into that same abyss has snapped him out of it. My eyes shutter, and I pull in a deep breath, wishing I could turn back time, that I could stop us from even following Kallen to that damn cave, but I can’t—just like I can’t just climb out of this hole I’ve plummeted into.

That ember of hope I felt flickering in my chest before seems to be snuffed out now, leaving my heart a cold and empty void.

“Let’s just find a place to sleep for the night,” I murmur, tugging my hand from Kyros’ and pulling myself to my feet with the last of my strength. Adrian’s hands tighten around my



waist as he stands with me, but I pull out of his grasp, needing to feel the cool breeze across my skin. I hate the way that their touch doesn't light the same fire in me that it usually would, that it doesn't warm my soul and comfort me, but right now ... I can't feel anything.



## Chapter Twenty-One

### Adrian

“I’M WORRIED ABOUT HER,” Kyros murmurs, glancing at the door to the dorm room longingly.

I suck in a long, calming breath and nod in agreement. Looking around the hallway, I make sure there’s no one here before discussing what we’re going to do when we go back to Liv.

“Did you tell Osias?” I ask, scrubbing a hand over my face.

“No, I wasn’t sure it was the right time, not with the preparations and Octavia choosing to stay in the infernal realm. He’s about to go back and relieve her for the night,” Kyros says, and I nod, knowing it wouldn’t be long until he joined his mate. I would do the same thing too.

I glance at the door. If only there was something to help my mate through this. Seeing the manor was hard, but she’s my home, not some silly house.

“That’s for the best.” I sigh, wishing I could take away the doubt curling around her mind like a plague, but keeping this

to ourselves is the best course of action. If we let anyone else see the hopelessness that sapped the life from my normally vivacious mate, it could spread like wildfire.

“Is she sleeping?” Kyros asks, and I shake my head. “We should be in there with her, maybe that will help?”

Kyros grimaces, but wipes the expression from his face as he opens the door, and I do the same, doing my best to stay positive and reassuring. My chest tightens as the door opens, revealing the small dorm room. The orb light is dimmed, barely illuminating the small bedroom. My thoughts immediately go to the first day I brought Liv to the school. She was terrified, yet instead of cowering, she lashed out and came at me with her heels, like that would really do anything to me.

The bond had pulsed between us since the first moment I locked eyes with her. She felt me from across the dance floor, just as I was immediately drawn to her—she just hadn’t known what it meant yet. But I did.

Some days I wish the illusion had been the truth, that we could’ve been just magnetically drawn to each other, and lived a human life together—but that wasn’t meant for either of us.

A grin curls on my lips as I stroll over to the side of the bed and place a kiss on her cheek, remembering the first dorm room she was in, when I promised her that even though the pull she felt for me was sudden, it was right. My heart warms, knowing that version of my mate is buried under these covers somewhere, I just have to find her. I magically strip my clothes off and I climb under the blankets with her in only my boxers,

curling my body around her. I expect her to lean back against me, to feel her back against my chest, her heart beating next time mine, yet she stays still.

Kyros closes the door and sheds his clothes before climbing onto the other side of the bed. He wraps an arm around her waist, his hand sliding against the thin silk nightgown clinging to her skin. Nothing.

I chew on my bottom lip and share a look with Kyros over her shoulder.

*“She won’t even look at me,”* Kyros projects to me, nestling his head onto the pillow and closing his eyes.

I run my hand over her arm, my fingers trailing over her chilled skin and raising goosebumps in their wake. I wait with bated breath for some sign that the sensation broke through her barrier, but still, nothing.

Gritting my teeth, I hold back my scream as I flicker the orbs off with my power. I want to shake her by the shoulders and snap her out of this, but at this point I don’t even know if that will do more damage than good.

*“She’s been strong through everything she’s faced; she deserves this time to just not be okay,”* I project back to Kyros, scolding myself for being upset at the way she’s handling this.

*It’s selfish to want her to bounce back, to expect more than she’s able to give right now.*

*“You’re right,”* Kyros answers as the silence settles in around us.

I want to be there for her, to support her and comfort her. I don't want to push her even though I know she's better than this.

"I feel numb," Olivia whispers, and my heart jolts at the sudden melody of her voice. My hand tightens on her arm and I wait for her to continue. Pain slices through my chest for my mate and I wish I could take away every doubt from her mind and take it on myself.

"How can we help you?" Kyros asks, the question easing some of the tension in my body as he voices how I feel.

I want to help my mate, but the worst part about tonight is I feel completely helpless—just like her.

"Can you make me feel something?"

My breath catches in my throat at the question. That is something I can do.

"Anything for you, angel. You're my home," I breathe, pain slicing through my heart. "I love you."

I run my hand down her arm, but pause as she stiffens under my touch.

"What did you say?" The question sounds harsh on her lips, and I swallow thickly.

"I love you." My heart thumps as she turns to lie on her back, her sea-green eyes cutting towards me.

"No, before that."

“That you’re my home,” I whisper, leaning closer, needing to feel her lips beneath mine, to have our bodies come together and wipe out all the agony and hopelessness in her heart, to remind her that we’re here, we have her, and he can never take that away from us.

Her brows crease as she stares back at me, the light returning to her eyes like those words turned on a switch.

“You’re right,” she murmurs, her eyes going far off for a moment. I lean forward and place a kiss on her cheek before dropping down to her jaw. She sucks in a sharp breath and I move to her neck, dragging my lips over one of her favorite spots.

“How does that feel, angel?” I whisper, lightly sucking on the sensitive flesh. A low moan slips from her lips as she leans into me.

“Amazing,” she breathes. Anything else she wanted to say is cut off as Kyros steals her lips. He devours her completely, their tongues twining as I move to her collarbone. Her back arches as I kiss along the neckline of her nightgown and slowly tease under it as I slide my hand up her thigh.

She reacts to my touch and lifts her hips as I near the crux of her thigh, already knowing where she wants my fingers to tease. My hand itches to pull the soft lace thong off of her, to bury my face between her thighs and fill her head with mindless lust as I bring her pleasure. I want to replace every thought in her head with the memory of us, the three of us coming together to make something better come from today,

but my stomach sinks at the thought of her somehow regretting this.

I know my mate, and this isn't her. I don't want her to feel my touch in a week from now and remember this moment, the desperate need to have anything else but the hopelessness and doubt filling her mind.

I lightly nip her earlobe and she gasps against Kyros' lips, my heart and my head warring with one another as I plan my next move.

Reluctantly, I pull my hand from her thigh and put some space between us, needing to say this now before I lose my nerve. Her lips part from Kyros' and her brows knit together, clearly sensing my shift.

“Adrian?” she asks, and I nearly cave as I gaze back at her.

“This isn't you, Liv.” I stand from the bed to put some more space between us, and I notice the sheets have shifted off her legs, revealing the delicious swath of her bare skin. “The Liv I know doesn't give up. She fights even when the road in front of us looks impossible to navigate. You use powers you don't even know about to save your sister. You face down the leader of the dark gods and trick him into thinking he has the one weapon that can kill a god when you really stole it from him. Hell, you even found the princes of the infernal realm, just on the chance that they might help us and take some of the risk off your family and friends.”

Silence pulses between us for a moment as my heart nearly leaps from my chest.



Kyros pulls away from her too, giving her some space as his gaze flicks between the two of us.

“I know.” A small smile tugs at her lips.

My brows furrow and my lips pop open as I rewind her words back in my head, making sure that I heard her right.

“You know?” Kyros murmurs, clearly as confused as I am.

“I know this isn’t me... well, *wasn’t* me,” she corrects. “But something you said helped to snap me out of it.”

“Really?” My eyes widen in shock as I watch my mate. She looks lighter than before, like some of the weight has lifted off her chest.

“Don’t act so surprised,” she giggles.

“What did I say?”

“When you said that I’m your home,” she says, her smile widening. “It gave me an idea, and snapped my thoughts from all that doom and gloom from earlier.”

“Are you serious?” I ask, nearly needing to pinch myself to believe that this is real.

“Yes, I’m serious.” She shakes her head in disbelief like I’m the one that’s not making any sense right now. “You were right. You four are my home, and we have a lifetime to make new memories, wherever we might go.”

“Was our mate replaced by a doppelganger?” I ask Kyros, who looks just as confused as I am.

“Then why did you ask—” Kyros starts, but Liv cuts him off.

“I asked that before Adrian said that I’m your home—that was really sweet by the way,” she coos, giving me a wink. “After that, I wasn’t going to stop anything, because even though I didn’t feel numb anymore, I still wanted you both. I still wanted to feel close to you.”

“Wait, I take it back—” I say desperately, but she’s already shifting on the bed and pulling the hem of her nightgown down.

“Nope, you can’t take it back, Adrian.” Her eyes light with mischief as she leaps up from the bed and boops me on the nose. “You just opened up a can of worms, and I sure as hell am not going to let your inspiring speech go to waste.”

“I think whatever you’re planning can wait till the morning, sweetheart,” Kyros says. The normally passive god of healing glares over her head at me as though he’s going to throw me into one of those lava pits in the infernal realm. I’m about to throw myself into one too.

I feel like a complete and total idiot right now. I look down at my semi-hard cock and silently apologize to him for ruining the moment. *Newsflash, Adrian, save the inspiring speeches for after sex next time.*

“But now I’m excited and I need to live up to Adrian’s impression of me,” Olivia says as a black trench coat pops into her hands and she pulls it on. Black running shoes appear on her feet next and she’s already walking to the door.

“Wait a minute,” Kyros says, but she ignores him, reaching for the doorknob.

“We’re only in our boxers,” I shout, pulling on my powers to form clothes on my skin.

“What about me?” Kyros says, and I huff out a breath of frustration as I form clothes for him too.

By the time I look back to the door, she’s already gone, the door propped open as she must have silently slipped into the hallway.

“I blame you for this,” Kyros hisses as he stomps towards the door, apparently just as pissed with me as I am with myself.

“You should be thanking me,” I say instead, focusing on the positives. “If it wasn’t for me, she would still be stuck in depression. I single-handedly helped her snap out of it. What did you do?”

“I was doing what she asked us to do,” Kyros whispers, cutting a glare in my direction as I follow him into the hallway and close the door behind me.

“Stop thinking with your cock, Kyros,” I say triumphantly, my chest puffing out with pride that I get to take the moral high road this time.

“Don’t act like you weren’t trying and failing to backpedal just a few minutes ago.” Kyros gives me an incredulous look as we jog down the hallway, only knowing the right direction

since we catch the edge of Liv's black trench coat as she enters into the main hall.

We pick up our pace, breaking out into a run as we try to catch up with her.

"That was a few minutes ago," I say dismissively. "Now I'm focused on looking at the positives."

"Well, I'm positive we're losing her," Kyros huffs in exasperation as we reach the main hallway.

"Losing her?" My heart jolts, before he points in the distance as Liv flings open the door to the main entrance. It closes behind her just as she rushes towards the steps, refusing to wait for us. "Damn she's fast."

Kyros shakes his head and barrels forward, clearly over listening to my nonsense.

"Fine, I didn't want to talk to you either," I call out to him as I launch into a sprint.

He reaches the front door first and he flings them open, just as Olivia dissipates away. A few of the guards turn our way, their brows furrowed as they watch us. Troops are further down the path towards the hill, and they stare at the spot Olivia was just moments before.

"It's mate stuff." I wave dismissively, and the guardians on either side of the door avert their gazes as if they only just realized they were staring.

"Where do you think she went?" Kyros asks once we get out of earshot. We take the steps two at a time, doing our best not

to let the panic show.

“I’d probably guess the god’s residence ... or where it used to be,” I say, frowning as I avoid calling it home.

We shift into a jog as we make our way to the break in the wards and dissipate mid-stride, right back to the place I was hoping to avoid for at least a few more days.

Our bodies reform at the top of the crater, and I focus on the cool sense of relief that washes over me at seeing Liv right in front of me and do my best to suppress the ache in my chest the sight of the destruction evokes. The loss of this house echoed through to my soul, but I meant what I said before. Homes will come and go, but Liv is my forever.

“Is this a good idea?” Kyros asks, grimacing at the wreckage in front of us.

*“She just snapped out of this, it can’t be good for her to be back here,”* Kyros projects to me, and I nod in agreement.

“Angel,” I breathe, reaching out to clasp her shoulder. But I pause, my fingers mere inches from her as she lifts her hands up towards the pit of destruction. As white light floods her palms, I let my hand fall back to my side.

I step closer, needing to see her face as the light grows brighter. Her eyes are closed with a serene smile on her lips as though she’s replaying every single one of the memories we had in this home.

*“Quick, think of all the moments you had with her, all your favorite things about the house and touch her shoulder. I think*

*I know what she's doing.*" I send the thought to Kyros and immediately close my eyes, wanting to help her in this as much as I can.

I send the projection to Max and Mateo, telling them to send their memories through the soul bond and straight to Liv, hoping that will be enough. I put everything I have into letting them flow through her, sending my hope and power to aid her too.

The light grows brighter and brighter through my eyelids, but I keep them shut, not wanting to look too soon. I can't risk ruining this for her. I keep the flame of hope burning in my chest, letting it surge into my mate and empower her to keep pushing. The ground shakes beneath us, and I tighten my grip, making sure she stays steady. Groans and crashes echo around as the wind shifts and I can only imagine the house is unearthed. Heat sears against my skin, but I push the discomfort away, not wanting to do anything to break her concentration.

Olivia inhales a staggered breath as the light slowly fades, the absence of it sending a cool chill to caress my skin as the heat is sapped from the air.

Slowly, I peel my eyes open, my lips popping open at the sight before me.

"I hope everything's the same," she says, her sea-green eyes alight with joy as her grin widens.

I share a look with Kyros over my shoulder, both of us just as astonished that this actually worked. We really shouldn't be

surprised anymore though; Olivia has always had a knack for making miracles happen.

“You rebuilt the house,” I murmur, needing to hear it out loud to truly believe it, as if the fully formed house and path in front of us wasn’t enough of a clue. I blink up at the manor, debating if I need to pinch myself to see if this is real. I swear, I’m going to be really upset if this ends up just being a dream.

“How did you...?” Kyros asks, his question trailing off.

“I trusted myself.” She grins at both of us. “The shadows seem to follow what I need from them with barely a thought, so I thought it was worth a try to do the same with my other powers. I just poured my will into my power, asking it to rebuild our home.”

“Incredible,” Kyros murmurs, looking between our mate and the house like he isn’t sure which one he should be staring at right now.

“She really is,” I agree, and clasp Olivia’s hand before tugging her to me.

She laughs as I spin her, her hair fluttering around her as pure joy and excitement radiates from within her. This is my mate, wild, glowing, and magnificent.

“I do have to thank you for the idea. It was a thought in the back of my mind before, but it wasn’t until you mentioned all of my amazing feats that I really believed that I could do this.” Her smile grows wider as she steps back, admiring the miracle she brought to life.

Kyros takes her other hand, the three of us staring in wonder at the place that grew to mean so much to us. We were all feeling the weight of its absence, like it grew to mean more to us over the last few months than we ever could have imagined. The aged brick seems to glimmer like a beacon of hope, a reminder that all is not lost.

“He won’t win,” Olivia declares, steel hardening her voice as she stares back at the beauty her powers were able to create. “He did this on purpose, tried to shake us, to make us doubt ourselves, but I refuse to let him have that power over us.”

I grip her hand tighter, never wanting to let go, and my chest warms at the certainty in her voice. “You’re right, angel. We won’t let him win.”

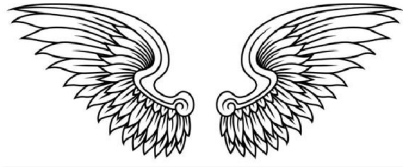
“We won’t let him take our happiness or steal your sunshine away ever again,” Kyros agrees as the twinkle of the morning sun peeks over the horizon, adding to the golden luminescence surrounding the house.

“I’ll race you there,” Olivia says, her hands already dropping from mine and Kyros’ as she launches herself towards the house. I can’t help but watch her, intrinsically knowing we’ll be all right as the sun casts a golden shimmer on her hair, lighting her up like the god she is.

With Olivia by my side, we could be buried in the depths of the infernal realm and I would still be the luckiest god to ever live.

With her, for the first time in my life, I actually feel alive, and there’s nothing in the world that will take that from me.





## Chapter Twenty-Two

### Olivia

“**Y**OU DID ALL THIS?” Titus asks, staring up at the ceiling in awe. I honestly wouldn’t be surprised if he was trying to find some sort of mistake in the construction.

I mean, I’m not an engineer, but I trust my powers to not remake the manor so it would cave in on us... *I really hope it’s structurally sound. Is there like a demigod of engineering we can call or something?*

“Don’t act so surprised,” I admonish, tsking him for doubting me. I wish my tone could be more scathing, but honestly, I can’t help but smile back at him. My excitement at him figuring out the answer to getting Maximus out seems to be overshadowing the usual annoyance I hold for him.

“Sorry.” He rolls his eyes, trying to be sarcastic, but I can still tell that he’s impressed.

“It was incredible to witness,” Kyros says, wrapping his arms around me as he pulls me down onto his lap. I let out a

small oof as I collapse back onto him and he bounces on the plush sofa.

“She was a superstar,” Adrian agrees as he sits beside us, glaring playfully at Kyros for scooping me up first.

“She is my daughter after all,” my father chuckles as he sits on the couch opposite from us after just touring the new house.

I was amazed with just how many details I was able to remember, like this place has ingrained itself in my memory. Honestly, I think it was the house itself that did most of the work. I just had to breathe new life into it, feeding it all the love and joy that flooded into me from my guys, and it rebuilt itself, piece by piece. Everything back in its rightful place.

“Our daughter,” Octavia corrects him, giving me a wink as she takes a seat beside him. I can’t help but grin back at her, eternally grateful for her stepping up last night and watching after Max when I couldn’t.

My stomach twists with concern at the reminder that none of us are with Max, but he still has the protection of Orrin and Nyssa, who agreed to watch after him while we discuss what Titus found. Max wasn’t exactly thrilled with the two majors looking out for him, but if Titus really found the answer to getting him out of there, I’m willing to do whatever it takes.

“I just wish I’d been here to see it,” Mateo says, propping himself onto the arm of the couch on my other side, his thick fingers feathering a light touch through my hair as he pushes it back from my face.

“Romulus won’t be happy when he finds this out.” My father beams, like the thought of pissing the dark leader off gives him more joy than the house being rebuilt does. I shake my head, not even bothering to respond to the delight the thought brings him.

I was so close to giving up yesterday, so close to letting him win, until I realized that if he won, it would be my choice, and I’m not giving up without a fight.

“Are you going to let us know what sort of ingredients you need to break this spell?” Mateo asks, bringing us back to the reason that we’re here.

I was able to get maybe an hour or two of sleep as the sun came up, but before I knew it the day was already upon us and I wanted to visit Maximus again. My stomach twists at the memory that comes trickling back as he slept in the corner, his face just as pale, if not worse than it had been when I left last night.

Was it some sort of reaction to being in the infernal realm, or was it something more?

“Max didn’t look great this morning,” I admit, chewing on my bottom lip and wishing I could do more to help him right now.

Titus nods, as though it’s something he expected as he stands beside the couches, clearly preparing to announce his plan. “I have to get the ingredients for the spell today, but we’ll need to have a plan in place because what I need for it won’t go unnoticed by Romulus for very long.”

“What do you mean?” Kyros shifts beneath me, and I can already tell he’s alert and ready to learn more without even having to look at him.

“I have to get the dagger in order to complete the spell.”

Silence settles around the room and I look to all my mates, knowing what this will mean. It was the same reason we were keeping my bond with the weapon quiet. As soon as I call it back to me, Romulus will unleash an all out war upon us.

“I’ll have to track them down and sneak into their hideout before I can secure it,” Titus continues, completely oblivious to the palpable tension vibrating through the room as he turns towards the door, seemingly deep in thought. “But he won’t take losing it again lightly. We have to be ready for a full-scale attack as soon as I leave. We already know he’s willing to sacrifice his army just for the weapon.”

He turns back to us, his brows furrowed as we sit in silence, each of us debating if we should let him know.

“What’s going on?”

I take a deep breath and nod, deciding to trust him with this now. He’s willing to sneak into the infernal realm alone to search for them, risking his own life to bring back the dagger to save Maximus. That alone shows me he’s worthy of our trust.

“There’s something you should know,” I say innocently, hoping he isn’t upset that we didn’t tell him sooner. “When I found the dagger, there was a voice that came to me. It told me

to let my blood drip onto the blade to form a bond. So I haven't tried it out of course, but in theory, I should be able to summon it back to me."

Titus' brows furrow as he looks around the room. His eyes light with understanding a moment later, clearly gauging that everyone knew about this except him.

"There wasn't really a good time to tell you," I explain, wincing at the glimmer of pain that slices across his gaze, but it's gone in a flash. "Kallen was always around, and for obvious reasons I didn't think it was a good idea to trust him with something like that."

Titus' shoulders slump slightly, but he nods in understanding.

"Liv," a woman's voice nearly screeches as the front door flies open, revealing the harried face of my best friend. I leap from Kyros' lap and sprint across the room to Nelle as she grips the door frame for support, dragging in ragged pants as she catches her breath.

"Nelle, what's wrong?" I clasp her shoulders, scanning her body for any sign of injury.

"Penelope?" Titus asks, already at my side as he peers at my friend over my shoulder.

"Penelope?" I ask incredulously, turning a look of disbelief on my half-brother.

"That's her name," he huffs in frustration, as though I don't know what my own damn best friend's actual name is.

What in the actual fuck is that all about?

“I heard about the house and I had to see it for myself, but it’s here, you’re here,” Nelle says, drawing in several staggered breaths.

“We really need to get you on another run,” Titus says dismissively as he takes a step back, giving me some air.

She cuts a glare over my shoulder at him, not bothering to dignify his insult with a response.

“Come in.” I sigh, tucking my arm under her shoulder and leading her in. Titus motions for us to pass with a flourish and closes the door before following us back to the living room. The rest of the room settles back into their seats, apparently satisfied that my best friend isn’t about to be attacked and has just now taken the moniker as the dramatic friend for herself.

I should get her a plaque or something to celebrate the occasion.

I help her over to the couch and my parents move over, letting her sit beside them. Before I can decide where to sit now, someone clasps my arm and tugs me back straight onto Adrian’s lap.

Mateo and Kyros both frown at him while he grins triumphantly, telling me exactly who pulled me back.

“I guess that means we can continue with the spell as soon as the defenses are in order,” Titus says, continuing our conversation as he takes his place at the edge of the living room again. I don’t miss the way his eyes drift to Nelle as she

leans back against the couch, sweat beading over her forehead as her chest heaves for air. There's a small wistful smile on his lips, but it's gone before anyone else can see it.

What is going on with him today?

"I saw plans in the cave when we went to scope it out," Mateo announces. "I didn't alert Kallen to seeing them, and they were gone when we attacked, so I'm assuming he's still sticking to the map I saw." He goes on to explain a map of Ethereal sitting on a table, with the water access points circled.

"That would be a good plan, attack by water and land to spread our forces thin." My father taps his chin thoughtfully.

"Exactly, but that also gives us an advantage since his troops will have to split up as well." Mateo grins, the battle lust already shining in his hazel eyes as he plans his attack. "I'll pass the information along to the generals so they can lay out a preliminary plan for us to authorize."

My father nods in approval, a small grin playing on his lips.

"That's a good plan for Ethereal, but if I know Romulus, he won't be focusing his attack there," Titus says, his warning wiping the smiles from everyone's faces. "Especially since Kallen would've told him when we were there, he'll know his plans won't be a surprise anymore."

"You're right." Octavia grimaces. "If him destroying this house is any sign of his intentions, I'm willing to bet the majority of his forces will be focused on the academy."



“That would make sense. He knows we’ve been centralized here throughout this war, and he’ll be coming for blood,” Mateo agrees, his eyes distant as he must reformulate his plans in his mind.

“So the house was destroyed?” Nelle asks, her brows furrowing. She sticks her tongue out at me when she notices my attention on her, like she was right and I was wrong.

“Not the time,” I murmur, giving her a quick shake of the head.

“So I’ll summon the dagger once everyone is in place,” I say, needing to focus back on that part of the plan. I need my gruff and grumpy mate out of there before he gets any worse.

“And I’ll go rescue Maximus,” Titus finishes for me with a nod, as though that’s the end of the plan.

“I don’t think so,” I say, shaking my head. “You’re not going down there alone.”

Titus purses his lips but doesn’t argue.

“I’m going with you.”

“I don’t think that’s—”

“There’s no use in arguing with me Titus. I’m coming with you,” I say, cutting him off.

“And I’m coming too,” Nelle announces, crossing her arms over her chest with a defiant gleam in her eyes.

“Absolutely not,” Titus says, narrowing a glare on her.

I clamp my lips shut, since I was about to say the same thing, but now I want to hear how this conversation is going to play out.

“You’re not the boss of me,” Nelle huffs in exasperation, narrowing her gaze on him. “And if Liv is going anywhere with you, you know I’m going to be there to watch her back.”

“You can’t even run away if something goes wrong.” Titus chuckles, the sound making Nelle’s cheeks burn red.

This is so weird.

“I’ll go with Liv,” Mateo interrupts, cutting their conversation off prematurely.

*Just when it was about to get good.*

“I don’t think that’s the best idea,” I say, giving him a sympathetic smile. “Not because I don’t want you there, but because your skills are best used on the battlefield.”

“Ah, my mate knows the perfect way to let me down easily.” Mateo sighs dreamily. “By stroking my ego.”

Adrian nearly chokes on his laugh behind me, and I hold myself back from elbowing him, my cheeks burning as we sit right across from my parents.

*“I know exactly why you’re laughing,”* I project in warning, and his laughter abruptly cuts off.

“I should be the one to go with Liv,” Kyros announces. “Adrian is too useful to spare, and I can help Titus with the spell.”

“I don’t need any help.” Titus scowls at my god of healing. “But I’m more than willing to let you tag along to see how a real spell is performed.”

I look between the two of them, my brows knitting together as I try to figure out what exactly I missed here. Since when does anyone scowl at my Kyros?

Judging by the chagrined look of Kyros’ face as he looks away, I already know he did something to earn that attitude.

“Aww, you’re so sweet, calling us useful and all,” Adrian says, breaking through the palpable tension permeating the room. “I never thought you noticed all the hard work I put in, bro. It’s so good to know you care.”

Adrian feigns a snuffle as though he’s tearing up, lightly tugging on my waist as if he expects me to laugh along with his bad joke. Kyros smiles softly and shakes his head, ignoring Adrian’s teasing.

My eyes light up at the shift in his demeanor, grateful to see my god of healing’s dimples creasing his cheeks. I just want to reach out and—

“Let’s get to work then,” Mateo interrupts, drawing my thoughts away from Kyros’ handsome face. He grins triumphantly back at me as though he knows exactly what he just did.

These mates of mine ...

“Come on Nelle.” I hop up from the couch and clap my hands, drawing her attention to wherever it had drifted off to

while the rest of us were talking. “Come with me and I’ll tell you everything that happened in the last day.”

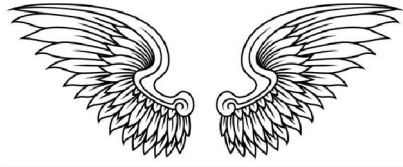
“Okay, I can’t wait to hear the tea,” she nearly squeals as she hops up from the other couch.

“Oh, you’ll get all the tea and more ... after we go for a run,” I say, waggling my eyebrows at her. The smile falls right off her face as I drop the real reason for my plans, and she scowls back at me.

The others laugh behind me as I race towards the stairs, heading her off before she can catch up to me.

“I hate you so much right now,” she grumbles, stomping along after me.

“No you don’t,” I call back to her, racing up the stairs as she trudges behind me, a string of curses slipping from her lips with every step she takes.



## Chapter Twenty-Three

### Olivia

I INHALE A STAGGERED breath and look up at the school, remembering the first day I laid eyes on this place. A smile curls on my lips as I remember the way my heels sunk into the grass and Adrian had to change them to flat gladiator sandals just to get me out. The sun shone off the white marble just as it does now. I had no clue what I was getting myself into, but strangely somehow this place already felt like home.

The statues line the large entryway, and I can't help but laugh when I realize just who they are. With everything going on, I don't think I gave them another thought since I first got here and remarked that one of them looked familiar. At first glance, I couldn't make out the facial features, especially while trying to cope with my entire world being tossed upside down, but now I can clearly make out the face of my father staring back at me.

Dammit, I was faced with the truth this whole time, and I completely missed it. In my defense though, the carved face

barely looks like him now with the shoulder length hair and beard he used to have.

The rest of the statues are the other light majors, Orrin, Nyssa, Phillipa, and Mateo. My smile grows wider as I land on my god of war, his stature large and intimidating, with his imposing glare hewn in the stone.

“I’m glad to see you smiling, angel,” Adrian says, wrapping his arms around my waist from behind. I lean back against him, grateful for this moment of peace before all hell breaks loose ... literally.

“I was just remembering my first day here,” I say, glancing up at him over my shoulder with a pointed look. He winces and gives me a chagrined grin.

“That first day feels like it was both yesterday and a century ago.” Adrian places a kiss on my cheek and backs away. A chill runs down my spine and I almost step back into him, but I know it’s almost time.

I glance back up at the school, knowing exactly why my focus had drifted to the marble statues lining the entrance ... because I was trying to take my mind off the thousands of students, demigods, gods, and guardians gathered in front of it, ready and waiting for Romulus and his dark forces. A sob racks my chest at the sight of them, and I quickly avert my gaze, turning to look over the hill to the arena down below.

“We have the two-prong attack ready for when Romulus strikes,” Mateo says, wrapping an arm around my shoulder and pulling me into his side. I inhale a steady breath and nod,

seeing hundreds more at the bottom of the hill, ready to attack from behind. “I promise this will work.”

“I trust you,” I breathe, smiling softly at him. If anyone knows what they’re doing in a battle, it’s him.

“Good. Now get Maximus back here and let’s unleash everything we have on these assholes.” Mateo grins and slaps me lightly on the ass.

I playfully shove him away, grateful for my mates helping to lighten the mood. I wish we could’ve done this without the students being put in danger, but I have to trust that they’ve had the best training they could possibly get.

My heart warms as my god of healing clasps my hand, just his touch helping to soothe the anxious energy thrumming through me. He did this. He got the students ready, and helped to rally the gods to give us all the best shot.

*I honestly don’t know what I’d do without these men by my side.*

“Good thing you never have to figure that out,” Adrian projects to me, and only then do I realize that I sent that thought out to all my guys.

My cheeks heat and I nod, giving them all a grateful smile, my heart and soul so full with them in my life.

“Olivia,” Kali calls out as footsteps pound behind me, and I turn to find my friends rushing forward.

They’re decked in their battle gear, and my stomach twists slightly at the sight. Cora had made up uniforms for everyone



from loose fitting black material—lightweight enough to move around in, but with enough magical material sewn within it to shield from attacks to the vital organs. There's a crest emblazoned on it, which I'm sure some of the gods aren't very happy with. A golden shield with an 'O' in the center, written in flowy script is stitched into the right side of each of the shirts, for Osias Academy.

I rush over to Kali, Zina, Lucas, and Stacia, meeting them halfway and wrapping them each in a tight hug. Katrina lingers a few steps behind, and we both awkwardly smile at each other, not sure what else to do now that our two groups have combined.

Mateo waves to me and turns back to Adrian and Kyros, the three of them seemingly deep in their own conversation.

"I'm so sorry about Max," Kali whispers, peeking around at the few demigods and guardians that linger near us. I grimace but nod in thanks, wanting to keep the news quiet. Nelle must have told them last night. Only the high-ranking officials know about Maximus being trapped in the infernal realm. Everyone else was told that we received intel that Romulus would be attacking today.

Zina clasps Lucas' hand, the two of them leaning on each other for support.

"Do you think Domenic will be here?" Lucas asks grimly, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. I can already tell by the way the others awkwardly shuffle, this is something they've been discussing and agonizing over.

I wince but I don't want to sugarcoat this for them. Not when they might come face-to-face with him on the battlefield. I don't want them to end up getting hurt because of it.

Lucas sucks in a deep breath and nods, squeezing Zina's hand a little bit tighter. Kali's face falls at that but she does her best to smile through it.

"There's so much I need to fill you in on, Olivia," Kali exclaims. "I got to meet my mother, and she showed me how to use my powers defensively."

Kali waves her hand over a dandelion barely peeking through the grass, and with the swipe of her hand it grows up to her knee. My eyes widen and I grin back at her, seeing the excitement gleaming in her eyes as she bounces on her toes.

"I want to hear everything," I reply.

Pain slices through my chest at just how much I've missed with my friends, and I make a silent vow to have a friends' night at the manor as soon as today is over, not daring to let a negative thought wiggle its way into my mind.

There's one person that's missing, one that I really need to keep my eye on. "Has anyone seen Nelle?" I ask, looking around the groups gathered near us just in case she's trying to go unnoticed.

"I haven't seen her since yesterday," Kali says, her brows furrowing. "I went by her room this morning but she didn't answer. I figured she was just upset about not being allowed to take part in the action."

My lips purse, and I slip my phone out from the pocket of my leather pants and send her a quick text.

Olivia: *Please don't try anything today.*

I wait for her reply with bated breath, but let loose a sigh of relief when it comes in a few seconds later.

Nelle: *Don't worry. I was scolded earlier by Dion and told to stay in my room and not open the door until he comes for me.*

Nelle: *Like how does that even make sense?*

Olivia: *Idk but just listen to him lol*

I quickly slip my phone back into my pocket. “She says she’s in her room. It seems like Dion already told her to be careful.”

“Thank goodness,” Kali says, clasping a hand over her chest.

“Let’s just hope she listens to him.” I grimace and shake my head, belatedly wondering if I should go lock her door just in case.

*No, that would be wrong ... wouldn't it?*

“Do you mind if I have a word?” Katrina asks, catching me off guard. She plays with the end of her blonde braid as if she’s nervous to speak to me.

Strange ...

I try to keep the surprise off my face the best I can. “Sure, I have a minute.”

Katrina nods and strolls towards the line of trees, just far enough out of earshot of the others. I can’t help but glance

back at my friends in question. Some of the tension radiating through my chest eases as Kali gives me an encouraging smile.

I mean, I'm not scared of Katrina Beauchamp, but I really don't feel like getting into some petty squabble with her, especially with Maximus waiting on us.

"Is everything okay?" I ask stiffly, not sure what to expect from the seemingly former mean girl. If Kali of all people is willing to accept her, she must've seen some redeeming qualities, right?

"Yeah, I mean, not really," Katrina sighs, scrubbing a hand over her face. "We just haven't had a chance to really talk since that day in the hall ..."

My mind drifts to that moment, when Katrina first met her father, Orrin—who was less than enthused to find another offspring and pretty much wanted nothing to do with her.

"I'm sorry." Katrina's apology snaps my focus from the memory so quickly I don't have time to disguise my shock. "I deserve that, but it's true. I'm sorry for how I treated everyone when I first got here."

I smooth my features into a calm, impenetrable mask, willing to withhold my judgment. Hell, I've changed so much since I walked through those doors. Who's to say that Katrina can't grow and adapt.

"I know it's hard to believe it, but I was freaking out when I first got here."

I can't help the laugh that bubbles up past my lips despite my effort to clamp it down.

“Okay, fine, I guess it is easy to believe, but I thought I had everyone fooled.” Katrina narrows a glare on me, but it quickly vanishes as she continues. “I was never the popular girl in the human world, and I took this as my chance to change all of that. I emulated all the girls I used to hate, with their superior attitudes and hot boyfriends, and I latched onto the first person who was nice to me, knowing that if I said I was dating one of the gods I would be the envy of the school.”

I can't help the way my jaw ticks at the memory of how she tried to claim Adrian was her boyfriend despite him denying even knowing her to her face.

“But when you came in and he actually started giving you attention, I knew the identity I was clinging to was about to crumble, so I lashed out at you. It was really messed up, and in the long run, acting like that lost me friends.” Katrina worries her bottom lips between her teeth, her cheeks reddening with her admission. “I told myself that at least my godly parent would be proud of me, but that all came crumbling down the moment I met him.”

She crosses her arms over her chest and takes a shuddered breath, quickly blinking away the tears that well in her eyes.

“I get it, Katrina,” I say, not needing to hear anything else. “A lot of us were messed up after losing our old lives, so I forgive you.”

Katrina tilts her head to the side and blinks, her lips parting slightly as though she hadn't expected my acceptance of her apology to come so easily. Honestly, if Kali backs her up now, and Nelle was able to stand being around her, I'm sure what she's saying is true.

Her lips part, but a voice booms through the low murmur of voices echoing through the courtyard, cutting her off.

"We need all students up near the school to receive your assignments," Orrin announces, his voice projected across the courtyard so loudly I can't help my wince of pain.

Katrina frowns as her father strides up a few steps onto his makeshift stage, waiting for the students to converge. "I guess the great god of wisdom has spoken." She rolls her eyes and giggles. "I should get going, but thank you for hearing me out."

"Of course," I say, giving her a tight smile. "I hope I can get to know the real Katrina."

"I'm looking forward to it." She smiles genuinely and strides towards the school.

"Find us after," Kali says as I rejoin the group, and she wraps me in a tight embrace. My chest warms as I hug her back, grateful to have such a calm and positive friend in my life.

"You know I will," I agree as I pull away.

I hug the others in turn, until I get to Stacia. "I'll keep her safe," she whispers as she embraces me, and I hug her just a

bit tighter for it in answer, not wanting the others to know our whispered conversation.

“I’ll see you all soon,” I say, and wave them off, knowing they’ll be paired off with gods to help them through this fight—Kyros made sure of it.

“They’ll be safe,” Kyros says as I watch my friends walk away. He places a hand on my shoulder while Mateo and Adrian join us.

“I know, I just wish I could shield them from this, and keep them from seeing Domenic on the other side of the fight,” I say, my shoulders slumping slightly in relief at the comfort and support of my guys.

“Just like we want to keep you out of it.” Mateo chuckles, and I glare at him, playfully sticking my tongue out.

Some of the easy comfort drifts away as my father, Octavia, and Titus make their way through the crowd, reminding me of what we still need to do. Today has just begun and there’ll be countless fights along the way.

“We’re ready,” my father says. His lips twitch upwards as he tries to give me a reassuring smile but it fades away just as quickly. “I don’t like you going off on your own, your mother or I—”

“No, you both need to be here,” I remind them, just as Octavia steps forward, clearly about to offer to join me again. “I can take care of myself. Besides, I’ll have Kyros and Titus there with me.”

My father nods as he locks eyes with Kyros, his eyes narrowing just slightly in warning, and I shake my head in exasperation.

“We’ll be out of there so quickly, I doubt you’ll even notice we’re gone,” I say, holding onto the glimmer of hope that flickers to life.

“Exactly. The spell is simple, so they’ll be back in no time.” Titus steps forward and gestures to me and Kyros. “We should be going. Mateo can give us the final signal once we’re in position.”

Kyros’ hand shifts to mine and we step closer to Titus. “I love you, all.” I give Mateo a wink, remembering our conversation the last time I dropped the L-bomb and left. “Leave some of Romulus for me, because I need to at least kick his ass a little first.”

“We love you, little mate.” Mateo steps forward, Kyros’ hand falling from mine as Mateo wraps his arm around my waist and tugs me against him roughly. He places a scorching kiss on my lips, his tongue twining with mine like a promise that we’ll continue this one when this war is finally over, before he swiftly backs away.

I can’t even get a word out before Adrian is there taking his place, his mouth hard and demanding as it slants over mine, searing his silent promise into my soul with his fervor. “*I love you, angel, and I’ll see you soon, one way or another.*”

“We love you, Olivia.” My father wraps me in his strong arms, making me feel like a little kid again.



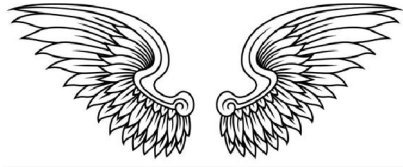
“More than anything,” Octavia agrees, wrapping me into a tight embrace, which I return.

It feels strange to think that just a couple of weeks ago I thought I would never feel close to her and that she was helping Romulus, but now I don’t know what I would do without her—without any of my family. Octavia takes a step back and turns to Titus.

“Come back to me, both of you.” Octavia wraps her arms around Titus next. He stands stiffly for a moment before he returns the hug, tightly embracing her back as his eyes shutter closed. They part a few moments later, and Titus straightens his loose black battle shirt and turns to me.

“We should go now.”

I nod and clasp Kyros’ hand. Pulling my powers around me, I let the energy sweep my body on a silent wind, but just as my body is about to break apart, a hand desperately grabs for my forearm, a pair of brown eyes the last thing I see as darkness swallows me whole.



## Chapter Twenty-Four

### Olivia

“**W**HAT THE HELL DO you think you’re doing, Nelle?” I scream as my body reforms, immediately dropping Kyros’ hand and clasping her by the shoulders. I jerk her in my grip, needing her to get it through her head just how dangerous this is.

“Stop that,” she grunts, rolling her eyes as she pushes out of my grip.

“Do you not understand that the last time you put yourself at risk, you died?” I ask her incredulously, waving my finger at her. My blood turns to ice as fear grips me, and I scan the cave, needing to make sure the coast is clear.

“I’ll do a sweep, sweetheart,” Kyros murmurs, backing away slowly to check the rest of the cave. Of course we’ve been here throughout the day and night, but we have to be sure, especially with Nelle with us now.

“I didn’t die though,” Nelle says, waving her hands as though I can’t see her fully healed and very alive body

standing right in front of me.

“Because I saved you.” I start in on her, wishing I could take her back with me but there isn’t enough time. “I don’t even know if there’s any coming back after you’re already a guardian.”

“There isn’t,” Titus interjects, and grinds his teeth. He fixes an unimpressed look on Nelle and crosses his arms over his chest.

*“Is everything okay?”* Mateo projects, panic clear in the urgency of his tone.

*“It was just Nelle,”* I project back to him and Adrian. *“She’s fine, and everything is clear here. We can still go on with the plan.”*

*“Okay, little mate. I’ll let your parents know.”*

“What made you think this was a good idea?” I sigh and scrub a hand over my face, narrowing my eyes on my reckless best friend.

I’m really regretting not locking her in her room at this point.

“I told you that I was coming with you,” Nelle announces, crossing her arms over her chest. “I don’t trust him.”

Nelle nods towards Titus and pins him with a scathing glare.

“What is going on?” Maximus grumbles. He pushes himself up from where he’s been lying on the cave floor. He tries to

get to his feet, but his arm gives out beneath him and he lands back on the ground with an “oof.”

“Max!” I rush over to him, putting my disagreement with Nelle on the back burner as I scan my mate. Sweat beads on his brow and he inhales a shaky breath.

“I’m fine,” he grunts as he tries to climb to his feet again but this time he can barely get his feet under him before he’s panting desperately for air.

“What’s wrong with him?” I place my hand against the barrier, wishing I could rip him from this prison with only a thought.

“It’s the effects of the trapping spell.” Titus grimaces as he strides over to me. “They’ll subside as soon as we get him out of here.”

“We’ll get you out of here soon.” I kneel down, capturing his emerald gaze. His eyes usually resemble the hardness of stone, but now they seem like they’ve been drained of their usual brightness, leaving only a shroud of their former radiance. “Just stay still, don’t use any more of your energy.”

Max’s jaw tightens and he looks like he’s about to argue, but he glances around himself for a moment and nods, clearly piecing together that it’s his best chance of getting out of here with enough energy to repay Romulus.

“I’m sorry,” Nelle breathes. “I didn’t know he was this bad, I just wanted to—”

“It’s fine,” I say, cutting her off. I pull myself to my feet and suppress the anguish bubbling up inside me at the sight of my mate so broken. “Just please stay safe, Nelle. I can’t risk you getting hurt too.”

“I will. I swear you won’t even know I’m here,” Nelle promises, pleading with her hands in front of her like I have any choice now than to let her stay.

“I’ll watch after her,” Kyros says as he walks back from the mouth of the cave. I give him a grateful smile, some of the tension easing from my chest at the assurance.

“Have they given the signal yet?” Titus asks, rolling up the sleeves of his shirt.

“Nothing yet,” I confirm, taking a step back and giving him his space. I pull in a deep breath, trying to ease the panic racing through me so that I can focus.

As soon as Mateo gives me that signal, I need to call the blade to me—something I have no clue how to do. It’s not like I could practice or anything.

I close my eyes and try to find my peace as I examine the ocean of power within me. The waves of energy ripple in answer, ready and willing to do my bidding. I exhale, letting the air flowing through my lungs ground me as I become one with the earth, the same homeland that created the dagger.

“*We’re ready for you, little mate,*” Mateo projects, giving me the signal.

“*See you soon, my god of war,*” I send back to him.

“I have the signal.” I don’t dare open my eyes, and instead open my palms, trusting in myself and the voices that told me to imbue my blood into the dagger that fateful day, that it will return to me.

“I’m ready too,” Titus says, giving me the final confirmation I need.

I search along my links, finding all of the bonds that are tied to my soul. One reaches to the side where I can already feel Kyros’ cool, steady presence. Another reaches in front of me where Maximus lies on the ground. My brows knit together as I examine it, knowing his bond would be strong, determined, dark, and destructive, but there’s something else. A darkness lingers over him almost as though it’s draining his life force. It must be the effects of the spell that are physically taking their toll on him now.

*This has to work.*

The next two links seem the same as the first two, but I can’t exactly locate where they lead, like the stretch through time and space. One is sparked with life and joy, a mischievous glimmer that is oh so enticing, while the other is magnetic, possessive, and hardened, like it’s strewn from iron and will, yet it’s lighthearted and carefree. Adrian and Mateo.

I expect there to only be four, yet ... there’s six. The fifth is different from the first four, yet it seems to connect not through my soul, but from the heart. It stretches from me to the place beside the first link. Nelle. The blood ritual links us

together, strong and unbreakable just like my bond to my mates.

The last one though, it seems tenuous at best, as though its allegiance could shift at any moment, like it isn't meant to be linked to me for eternity. It stretches from my heart to ... somewhere in the infernal realm.

This must be the tether to the dagger.

I take a deep breath and feel along the connection, racking my brain for where it might lead. It almost seems like it ends in the direction of the castle. They must've gone back there after we attacked the cave, knowing we'd be too preoccupied to try another one so soon, especially when he has the blade.

If they only knew.

I soothe my power along the connection, slowly coaxing it with a steady stream, enticing it to follow me. It seems resistant at first, as though it knows I'm not its true owner, but it seems to react to something in me—the blood connection. My chest warms as it tugs on the bond, as though it's trying, yet failing, to leave where it's held.

“I think he placed some sort of protection on it.” I grimace, gritting my teeth as I try again, feeding more power bit by bit.

“Can you still get it?” Titus asks, a note of panic clear in his tone.

“I'm working on it.”

I send out another stream of power, giving it some of my strength as I let the energy exude from it, knowing the magic



held within the blade will know what to do.

Another moment passes and I open my lips, about to give them another update, when a weight settles in my hands. One hand supports the cool edge of the steel, while the hard rubies press into the other, warm against my palm. I peel my eyes open, as though I'm afraid it will vanish if I look at it too soon.

"You did it," Titus breathes. Pain slices across his face the moment my eyes flicker open, yet it's gone in the next moment.

"So what's the next step?" I ask, shifting the weight of the dagger into one hand to grip it by the hilt, not wanting to put that sharp edge anywhere near me.

"I have to place my blood on the barrier and pierce it with the dagger," Titus explains. He takes a step closer to me and reaches his hand out tentatively.

I can't help but hesitate as I look down at the weapon, indecision warring within me on what to do. I only just got it back, but I don't have time to agonize over this choice, and neither does Maximus. I glance to my god of destruction. He looks so run down, like this spell is eating him away on the inside. His skin is almost grey now—that really can't be a good thing.

My eyes flick up to meet Titus' light brown ones, hating how much they remind me of Romulus'—but he isn't his father. Just like I told Zina that she's nothing like her mother, Titus has proven to us that he's worthy of my trust.

I meet him the rest of the way and give him a grateful nod, glad that he gave me the time I needed to come to the decision on my own without rushing me.

He gives me a tight smile as he grasps the hilt and fastens it at his side, bringing another blade out to slice across his palm.

Nelle gasps and starts towards him, concern creasing her face until she stops herself short, feigning a look of nonchalance as though she wasn't about to go check on the man she claims to hate.

Blood wells to the surface and the red liquid gleams the same shade as the rubies as the orb light hits it, making my stomach churn.

I've seen blood before, but this is different.

A chill creeps into my face and my blood drains, a feeling of unease washing over me as Titus's other hand wraps around the hilt.

"Titus." His name slips from my lips like a warning, but before I can even think about what else I was about to say, a silent wind rips through the cave, and a body begins to take form right in the middle of our small group.

I pull my powers around me, and summon a ball of fire in my palm, preparing to launch it at whoever is about to appear.

I suck in a breath at the black hair that takes shape, my mind immediately going to the worst case. Romulus.

Kyros shifts Nelle to stand behind him, already sensing the danger we're in as the intruder forms.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Kallen exclaims, his eyes filled with fury as they lock onto Titus.

I waste no time in placing a shield around us before I launch my attack at him. Of course the ball of fire ricochets off of whatever barrier he’s placed around himself. He shoots me a scathing glare before focusing back on Titus, as though I’m nothing more than an annoying gnat to him.

“I think a better question is what do you think you’re doing?” I demand as I throw a strike of lightning at him. I direct it to sweep over his shield, searching for any weak spots and wrapping him in a web of electricity.

“I’m saving my brother’s life,” he snaps over his shoulder, sending a lightning strike of his own to neutralize mine. “I should’ve known you were going to pull something like this.”

“Just like you knew what Romulus’ plan was this entire time. Don’t play the savior now, brother, it’s not a good look on you,” Titus says with a derisive snort as he narrows his eyes.

“What the hell is going on?” Nelle demands, shouting over Kyros’ shoulder before he moves to hide her once more.

Kallen shifts towards her but before I can even move a muscle, Titus sends a wave of shadows towards Kallen, blocking him from even looking her way.

“Don’t you even look at her,” Titus growls. I expect him to stomp towards his brother, but instead he steps closer to the barrier, placing his bloody hand on the invisible wall. I

grimace as my gaze drifts to Maximus, noticing him barely keeping himself sitting upright as he props himself up with his hand.

“Stop!” Kallen starts forward but Titus lifts the dagger, the rubies glimmering off the light in a silent threat. “How could you let him do this?”

My brows knit together as Kallen turns on me with an incredulous glare, like I’m the one who betrayed him.

“I have no idea what’s going on, but you need to leave, Kallen.” I take a step towards him, my shadows swirling around my feet in answer to the threat in his stance. His fists are clenched at his sides, cheeks red as though he’s barely holding himself back from launching towards me.

*Fucking bring it.*

“I don’t believe that,” Kallen grinds out. “You always seem to have your nose in everything.”

“Leave, Kallen,” Titus snaps, lifting the dagger in warning.

“Come back with me, help me fight against them. They don’t care about you if they’re going to let you do this,” Kallen pleads, turning back to Titus.

*Let him do what?*

“You still don’t get it, do you Kallen?” Titus shakes his head in pity. “I never agreed with what Romulus did, and I’ll never go back and willingly be a part of his followers again.”

“Then for me.” Kallen takes a tentative step towards him. “Come back for me. I can’t lose you too.”

“You did this Kallen.” Titus sighs in disappointment. “The moment you conspired with Romulus and gave him that spell, you resigned us to this fate.”

“I didn’t know.” Kallen falls to his knees, his arms barely bracing him in time as he hunches over, heaving in deep breaths like he’s trying to stave off a panic attack. “I didn’t know—I didn’t think of the consequences.”

My blood turns to ice in my veins as my gaze flicks between the two of them. There’s something else going on here, something Titus has been keeping from us.

I lock eyes with Kyros across the room, seeing the worry and confusion in his honey-brown depths too. Nelle though—her face is red, her lips curled into a snarl as she glares at the two dark gods.

“What’s the price of this spell, Titus?” I ask, my lips going numb as the words slip free.

Silence rings through the cave, and Titus refuses to meet my gaze, his bloody hand still shaking as he presses it to the barrier.

“The spell requires the blood of the caster, and the greatest sacrifice of all,” Kallen answers for him, refusing to tear his gaze from his brother. “Romulus would never come here willingly, he’d die before he let his blood be used to save

another, and if the death doesn't happen here, the spell won't be broken."

*Death.*

The word echoes through me, draining the blood from my face as I look at my brother. His throat bobs as he looks at the ground, still refusing to meet anyone's gaze.

"We can find another way," I say, shock freezing me in place as reality slams into me.

Titus was about to sacrifice himself.

"There is no other way," Titus breathes, his light brown eyes flicking up to mine finally. "The spell is draining Maximus' lifeforce and giving his power to Romulus. If I don't do this now, there'll be more casualties than just the god of destruction."

I suck in a sharp breath, my gaze immediately running over my mate and taking in just how much he seems to be getting worse, even in the last few minutes. I wouldn't be surprised if Romulus found a way to speed up the draw to help in the battle.

It makes sense now, how he was able to inflict so much damage. Before Mateo even went with him, he was stealing Maximus' power.

My lips part and I'm about to protest again, my eyes locking onto Kallen's back as a last resort, when a strangled cry reverberates through the cave. The sound pierces my soul as

Nelle screams, desperately trying to fight her way past my god of healing.

Titus' chest wracks with a silent sob as he turns from her, not even allowing himself to look in her direction as he lifts the blade.

"No!" Kallen screams, scrambling to his feet at the same moment Nelle breaks free. I wrap my will around the dagger, attempting to yank the blade back to me, to figure this out, but just as I latch onto the bond, the three of them are tangled, their arms twined in a mess of limbs I can't tell who is where.

Fuck.

I can't risk the blade nicking someone.

"Don't you fucking dare," Nelle screams. She elbows Kallen out of the way and wraps her hands around the hilt just as Titus brings it towards his heart. The dagger slices through his shirt just as a bright light bursts from Nelle's chest, enveloping them both in a blinding blaze.

"Nelle, Titus!" I shout, raising my hand to shield my eyes.

Hands grasp for me, pulling me against a firm chest. Kyros.

Cold dread washes over me as a scream tears from Nelle's lips, but I still can't make out anything around me. The white light fills the entire cave, nearly having the same effect as if it was pitch black.

Slowly, the light begins to fade and both Kyros and I start forward, needing to get to Nelle and Titus. I nearly stumble

over Kallen's form crumpled on the floor, his body curled in on itself as he rocks back and forth.

I blink against the light as it fades, trying to keep myself going as my eyes burn. I don't have any time to let my vision adjust, not when I have no idea what the hell that even was.

Nelle and Titus both come into focus, and relief slams into me. Falling to the cave floor beside her, I wrap Nelle up in my arms, yet she refuses to let go of Titus. Her hands are balled into fists, desperately clenching the sides of his ripped shirt as she jerks him.

"Penelope," Titus murmurs, his hands wrapping around hers and holding them there, as though he never wants her to let go.

Kyros stoops down too, placing himself just behind Titus to support his weight. Titus sags against him, a sigh of relief escaping his lips as though he was barely holding onto enough strength to keep him upright.

"What happened?" I look between the two of them, my brows knitting together as I clamp down on the millions of questions that flit through my mind.

"Liv," Maximus murmurs, his hand shakily grabbing my shoulder as he pulls himself up.

His hand... I almost don't believe it's real as his strong thick fingers grip my skin, the warmth sinking into me and sparking something I hadn't let myself admit was missing with him locked in that spell.



My chest shakes with silent sobs as I look at him. This has to be real. Tears well in my eyes, blurring my vision, but I quickly blink them away, needing to see clearly to make sure my mind isn't playing tricks on me. His emerald eyes are soft as they meet mine, a million words passing between us with just a look as he swipes his thumb under my eye and catches a stray tear about to roll down my cheek.

If Maximus is free, that must mean ...

I tear my eyes from Max and focus on Titus and where I saw the dagger slice through his shirt at least. Nelle grips either side of his shirt, silent tears rolling down her cheeks as her eyes are locked on the spot where it's split, yet I don't see a gaping hole in his skin or even a slash of blood. There does seem to be a raised scar there now though, red blood smeared on either side of it as if ...

My gaze flicks to Nelle's hands spotting the bright hue on her palms.

My brows knit together as I try to figure out the pieces of this puzzle lying at my feet. I saw that blade cut Titus, but if it did, how is he still breathing? And if he's still breathing, how is Maximus out of his makeshift cage?

Nelle and Titus.

My eyes flicker between them, confusion clouding my mind. I've seen how they've interacted with each other these last few days, and it's been strange to say the least. I thought she hated him, but the way she's clutching him like his life depends on it, obviously shows that's not the case.

I roll the words that Kallen said over in my mind again—blood of the caster and the greatest sacrifice of all.

That would be a life, but if that was the only way, Titus wouldn't be alive right now.

“Penelope,” Titus says as though her name is both a blessing and a curse, the reverence in his tone causing the answer to barrel into me like a semi going full speed ahead.

The greatest sacrifice of all ...

A mate bond. It has to be. The way they've been acting, like despite everything that's happened between them, they can't help but be drawn to one another. The way she reacted at him slicing his palm, rushing to his side and trying anything within her power to stop him before he took his own life.

My eyes widen as I look at Titus. It takes him a moment, but I can see exactly when understanding washes over his features. He swallows thickly and shakes his head, panic clear in his eyes as though he's begging me not to say anything.

He knew, just like my guys knew before I even had a clue. They're mates. Two souls destined for one another, linked for eternity—but now they're not. Because something had to be sacrificed to pay the price of the spell, and it seems that Nelle unknowingly offered up their soul bond to pay the toll.

I cover my mouth with a shaky hand and take a staggered breath, not wanting to alert Nelle to anything. Even if she knew of the bond, I'm sure she'd do the same thing, just like I

would if I was in her shoes. Trading a soul bond for a life is a trade I would take in a heartbeat.

But the blade...

My attention flashes to the ruby hilt laying by Titus' side just as Kallen's hand inches towards it and I call it to me. The blade immediately listens and flashes into my palm, my fingers instinctively wrapping around the hilt. I climb to my feet in one smooth move, letting Max's hand slip away. He moves to take my place, helping to support Nelle despite how weak he still is from the spell.

Kallen leaps to his feet, his eyes narrowing on me like I've done anything fucking wrong. Well who the hell knows, maybe he guessed the thought at the back of my mind, and what I would've done to save both Maximus and Titus, even if the latter ended up hating me for it.

I shrug my shoulders, not even a little bit sorry, because I would do anything to help my family, and this god is not part of that equation, not after everything he's done.

"Are you going to kill me, Olivia?" he asks, lifting a brow in challenge as he sinks into a defensive stance.

I make sure my shield is secured around the people I love and chuckle, really wishing I could, but I owe Titus so much more than sparing this insignificant speck of dirt's life.

"I should kill you," I murmur, letting the steel edge of the blade flash as I bring it up in front of me. I can't help the smile that curls on my lips as his gaze dips to it, a hint of fear

creeping into his deep-blue eyes. “If it wasn’t for Titus, I would already be sinking this dagger into your chest. But I owe him, so I’ll give you a five-second head start. But if you’re still here when the clock counts down, your ass is mine. Do you understand?”

I take a threatening step towards him, letting him see the gleam of violence in my eyes. I want to kill him. I want to see that life fade from his eyes for ever putting us in this position. He stole the spell to give to Romulus, helped him form the plan to trap one or more of us, making Titus feel responsible enough that he was going to take his own life in penance.

Well fuck him. He would already be dead if it wasn’t for our brother.

Kallen looks behind me to Titus, regret in his expression for only a moment before it vanishes, and a sneer curls on his lips. “You wouldn’t.”

“Oh, I would,” I assure him, taking another step forward. “You’re fucking dead to me, Kallen, and I wouldn’t be surprised if after this, the same is true for our brother.”

His eyes widen a fraction at the title I used before he schools his features.

“Your time starts now,” I say in warning. “And trust me, if I see you on the battlefield, I won’t hesitate.”

“Neither will I,” he grinds out, casting an assessing look behind me towards Titus and Nelle.

“Five.”

I bare my teeth at him, shifting to block them out of his line of sight.

“Four.”

He glares at me and rolls his shoulders back, as though he’s considering staying just to have the chance to fight here and now. Fine with me.

“Three.”

I cock a challenging brow at him and let a ripple of black smoke curl around my feet as a bolt of electricity twines around my fingers.

“Two.”

His jaw grinds, and indecision wars in his gaze as he hesitates for one final second.

“One.”

I launch myself towards him, not giving him another moment of grace, but just as I lash out with the blade, it slices through thin air, his body already broken apart on the silent wind as he dissipates away.

“Well that was anticlimactic,” Titus breathes, grimacing as he clutches his chest.

“Just stay still for a second,” Kyros warns as his healing light sweeps over first Titus then Nelle, healing any superficial wounds they may have.

Whatever pain is radiating through them right now can’t be healed with magic, if it can ever really be repaired at all.

Nelle reluctantly lets go of his shirt and fists her hands in her lap like she doesn't know what to do with them anymore.

"We need to get back," Titus urges, trying to stand, yet his legs wobble beneath him.

I hurriedly sheath my dagger, switching my focus now that I'm sure the god of storms is gone. For now.

"Here," I say as I conjure a large, plush sofa, knowing that we need to check each of them over before finding a way to bring them back that won't put them in the middle of a battle. I grimace as I survey all three of them, already knowing that Nelle won't be fighting, but right now it looks like all three of them should be put on bed rest.

"I'm so sorry for unleashing on you before, Titus," my god of healing says as he helps my brother to his feet and shifts him towards the sofa.

"It's fine." Titus tries to wave him off but instead he collapses onto the cushions.

"No it's not," Kyros replies, his brows furrowing as he scans over my brother. "I blamed you for all this, meanwhile you planned to sacrifice yourself."

"In your defense, I hadn't figured out that was what was needed, otherwise I probably wouldn't have been so nice," Titus chuckles, but the laugh doesn't last for long as he clutches his chest and sucks in a sharp, pained breath.

Nelle's eyes widen and she tries to stand, but she wobbles on her knees instead. Maximus helps to steady her, but despite

some of the color returning to his face, he doesn't look like he's much better off.

Rushing over to them, I catch Nelle's arm and support her weight as I hoist her up. Kyros is already by Maximus' side, helping to guide him over to the couch too. We gently lower them each down and share a look, both of us clearly trying to figure out what we should do with the three of them.

"Don't," Maximus grumbles, shifting on the couch as though he's about to get up. I place a tentative hand on his shoulder in an attempt to make him rest for a few more minutes.

"I'm not an invalid, I'm the god of destruction. Just give me a minute and I'll be out there burying our enemies alive."

"While the sentiment is sweet, I think you should all sit the rest of this one out." I tap him on the shoulder and tune out the chorus of outraged refusals that meld together into a symphony of disgruntled injured people.

I send my healing powers through Maximus, trying my best to mend anything physical. There are a few scrapes here and there, but I pinpoint the cause of his lack of energy, and it isn't anything I can heal right now.

"I agree," Kyros interjects, cutting their protests off. "I think the three of you should go back to the house and rest."

"I'll be fine," Maximus grumbles, and I dubiously take another assessing sweep over his energy. I guess I can admit it seems to be replenishing at an amazing rate now, making me think he might actually be telling the truth. I press the back of

my palm to his forehead, already noticing he isn't burning up anymore.

*"I think he's gaining his energy back, but I'm not sure if we should risk it,"* I project to Kyros.

Kyros steps forward and sweeps his powers over him next too, his eyes widening a fraction as he must sense the same thing I did.

"What's going on?" Maximus grumbles. "You know I can tell when you're talking through the link."

I can't help the way my lips twitch at that, remembering when I said the very same thing the other day. Oh how the tables turn.

"We were just noticing that your energy seems to be returning quickly," Kyros huffs in exasperation. "If you truly feel fine, I don't see any issue with it, especially with how stubborn you are."

Maximus grumbles something under his breath but doesn't argue.

"Titus, will you take Nelle back to the house and keep her safe there?" I ask, giving him a pointed look.

He frowns at my wording, knowing that he can't argue. There honestly isn't any other choice though. With the wards on the school, the only places to dissipate into are the house or in the middle of the battle that is surely already underway.

"Of course," Titus says with a nod of understanding.



I don't know if I should tell Nelle the truth about what actually happened here today, but I know he definitely should, sooner rather than later.

“I want to come—”

“No.” The word leaves my lips at the same time that Titus voices his protest.

I purse my lips not wanting to scold her for coming in the first place because without her, I have no doubt in my mind that Titus might not be here with us.

“Can you stand?” Titus asks as he pulls himself up and holds out a hand for Nelle. I wait with bated breath as I watch them, looking for any sign that I might need to step in and help them, but with Titus' help, Nelle stands, keeping her hand in his as they prepare to dissipate.

“Take care of her,” I remind him, knowing I really don't have to when he gives me a solemn nod. The bond might have been snapped between them, but it doesn't change the fact that she's his mate, his perfect match. That knowledge can never be taken away from him.

I close the distance and wrap them both in a tight hug, unable to let them go without showing them a fraction of the love I hold for each of them. I may not know the pain that snap caused, but I do know that I never want to find out.

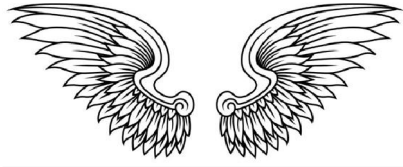
I take a step back and Kyros wraps an arm around my waist. Maximus is already there too, his thick fingers twinning with my own as we watch them dissipate away.

“I’m assuming you know exactly what happened here,” Kyros says, his brows knitting together.

“I do, and I’ll tell you all later,” I say, focusing my power on the next obstacle before us.

I have no doubt that both the academy and Ethereal are under siege right now, and they need our help. I glance at the dagger sheathed at my side, and a smile curls on my lips.

“Now it’s time to take care of Romulus, once and for all.”



## Chapter Twenty-Five

### Mateo

“**W**AS THAT NELLE?” ADRIAN asks after a woman latches onto Olivia’s arm, her black hair flying wildly behind her as she reaches her at the very last second and both their forms dissipate into the swirling wind.

“*Is everything okay?*” I project to them all, my jaw ticking as I wait for Olivia to reply.

“*It was just Nelle,*” she responds, and I can already tell how unimpressed she is. “*She’s fine and everything is clear here. We can still go with the plan.*”

“*Okay, little mate. I’ll let your parents know.*”

“That was Nelle,” Adrian confirms, snorting in disbelief.

“I love that girl like she’s my own daughter, but sometimes she doesn’t know when to leave well enough alone,” Osias huffs out in exasperation, scrubbing a hand over his face.

“Well, think of it this way, if the tables were reversed do you really think Liv would let her go on her own?” Adrian asks smugly.

“You have a point,” Osias admits. “Now let’s get everyone into position, because if we’re right, we won’t have long after she calls for the dagger.”

I nod and launch into action, ordering groups into their places with Irene by my side.

“Have you checked in with Linus and Lysander?” I ask as I ensure the students are in their place at the back. We have a line of gods at the front as our first line of defense, and one at the back, tasked with keeping the students safe.

“Linus is in position in the infernal realm. He has his eyes on the dark gods, so we’ll know exactly when they mobilize,” Irene shouts over the battle calls erupting around us. The calls to action trigger my battle lust, but I push it down, knowing I need to focus on the other fronts too. “Lysander let me know that everyone is in position in Ethereal. They have groups posted at the entrance and each of the waterways, but they’re prepared to converge on one point at a moment’s notice.”

“Excellent work.” I nod in appreciation, a smile already spreading across my face as we take our places at the front lines.

“I try.” She chuckles. “I can see the battle lust has already taken its hold.”

I shake out the tension in my shoulders, allowing my power to wash over me. “Now it has.”

“Perfect.” She grins back at me as she draws her bow from her back and strings an arrow with no effort at all. I pull my

swords from my back in one swift move, loving the way the sun gleams off the smooth metal, then wrap my power along the blade. I'm ready to deliver blow after deadly blow to our enemies.

Adrian plants himself on my right, while Osias and Octavia take their positions to my left. Adrian draws his sword from the sheath on his back and pushes his power out around us, shielding as many people as possible and spreading his clones as far in front of us as he possibly can.

"The southern front is ready," Osias announces as he pulls his own sword at the ready. Fire and electricity spiral along it, reminding me of my mate.

*She's safe*, I remind myself. She has Kyros, Maximus, and Titus by her side—not that she needs any of them to help her. I swear she could take on a whole army on her own if she needed to, but that doesn't quell the need to keep her safe that pulses with every beat of my heart.

"I'll give Liv the signal." I let the battle lust take complete control of me, trusting my powers to lead us and keep our troops as safe as possible.

*"We're ready for you, little mate,"* I project, sending as much assurance as I can through the bond.

*"See you soon, my god of war."* Her words echo in my mind, bringing a smile to my lips as my blood sings with power, bringing every inch of my body alive.

"And now we wait."

The seconds seem to pass in slow motion, my body poised and ready as Osias sends out a battle call to each of our soldiers, students, guardians, demigods, and gods. They hear the war trumpets in their mind—the first sign of battle, and a warning to be prepared.

A low-pitched shout echoes first from behind us, and then in front of us as we start the rallying cry. The sound vibrates through me, from my head to my toes, only urging my battle lust higher and higher.

The sound reaches its crescendo just as the first flash of green erupts in front of us. A giant tear rips through the air, its edges black as smoke billows from the gap. Demons of all shapes and sizes climb through the opening. The first wave are taken out one-by-one by Irene's arrows. They strike their marks true, piercing through the demons' heads, causing them to fall to the ground with a booming thud that echoes through the courtyard.

The dark gods must have realized their tactic of sending the weaker demons through in groups small enough to fit through the tear was a bad idea, since the next wave is the gods themselves, clearly aiming to keep us busy while they allow the mortal soldiers to spread their way onto the battlefield.

A grin spreads across my lips as they play into exactly what I wanted to happen.

“Keep your eyes peeled for Romulus,” I announce to those closest to me as I raise my sword, signaling the first wave of the attack to be ready on my mark.

Adrian's clones battle against the gods, while Irene continues to take out as many demons as she can, but the gap is already widening, allowing for more to filter through than she can keep up with.

“First row, charge!” I announce, leading the group as we sprint towards the gods already filtering through the clones, and heading them off before they're able to take more ground.

The first row of gods stream forward with me at the center, our group spreading into an arrow formation, meant to pierce through their ranks. I aim my swords at the nearest enemy god and unleash an explosion powerful enough to blow him and the five gods nearest to him back as others place them in makeshift restraints.

A grin spreads across my lips as Nyssa comes swooping in beside me, her golden wings glittering in the sun as her binds wrap around the incapacitated gods like a whip and she drags three along behind her, depositing them in the holding area her and Orrin have set up.

I slash my sword at the next dark god I see, but they duck the blow at the last second. The lack of impact doesn't upset me though as I let loose another blast of battle energy at the group of gods behind him, taking three out at once. They fly backwards just in time for Nyssa's next pass.

“God of War.” A woman's voice filters through the battle cries and clashes of metal on metal, sending shivers of dread up my spine.



“On it,” Adrian says, his clones already surrounding her before she has the opportunity to use her powers on anyone.

My golden feathers spread behind me, lifting me into the air with one strong flap, and I unleash my battle magic on her before she even has a chance to spot me looming over her.

Aurelia.

A shiver of disgust rolls over my skin as I watch her fall to the ground, completely knocked unconscious by the direct blow.

“Nyssa,” I call to the god of justice as she swoops back around, wasting no time pointing the bitch out.

“Good call.” She grimaces as she dives and lassos the god of lust. If there’s one person you want to take out early in a fight, it’s Aurelia.

With one blast of her lust, she can incapacitate her opponent, or worse, turn them to her side to do her bidding. Otherwise, without that power she’s pretty useless in a fight. It makes sense that Romulus would want to send her out first to try to shift the tide as much as she can before anyone catches sight of her.

Too bad she wasn’t in on the plan, because letting me know exactly where she was wasn’t the smartest idea. I don’t even mind that Nyssa is forced to only take her this round.

I cut through dark god after dark god, fighting through the ones that I can while knocking others out with my powers for Nyssa to collect. As she takes yet another one, I wonder when

the real forces will come out. Most of the gods I've seen so far have been on the lower levels of power, a distraction, meant to waste time—but why?

I glance around at the battlefield as we push back the lower-level demons, letting the troops behind us converge on them, easily taking them out.

“Do you have a link to Lysander, and Linus?” I ask Irene as she floats a few feet off the ground, launching arrows into our enemies.

“Yes,” she shouts, as I swing my sword and it clangs off another god.

“God of Fury.” The title slips from my lips automatically as his sword arcs down towards me again, and I easily block it before swinging with my second one, slicing across his arm.

He sucks in a sharp breath, but barely falters as another two gods converge on me. I easily blast them both back, wanting to focus on Nicholas before me.

“It was always fun sparring with you before you went to the dark side.” I grin, spinning expertly, but his sword is already there, blocking me as I slam both of mine down on his.

“I don't know if I'd call it fun,” he grunts, slamming his elbow towards me, but I dodge at the last second, toying with him so I can see just how riled up he still gets.

“Stop playing with him,” Osias scolds as he takes out another god with a snap of his fingers. The binds of justice wrap around her as she's dissipated into the holding section.

Show off.

“Fine,” I grumble. “Sorry about this, buddy.”

Nicholas’ brows knit together, his sword already slicing towards me, but I duck it and arc my own down on his arm, sweeping my leg out at the same time to knock him back off his feet. The steel shreds through his clothing then flesh, severing his arm as he falls to the ground.

“Motherfucker,” Nicholas screams, grasping desperately for the missing limb.

“It will regrow.” I wave him off before I land a swift kick to his face, knocking him out. “At least I hope.”

I frown down at him for a moment before rejoining the fight, immediately taking on two more gods.

*Damn, there’s so many of these fuckers that I forgot about over the years.*

“Has anyone seen Romulus yet?” I shout to Osias as I slam the hilt of the sword into a god’s face and swiftly land a kick to her chest that sends her hurtling backwards.

“Not yet,” Osias says through gritted teeth. He and Octavia work together like a well-oiled machine as they clear a path towards the rifts as more and more demons sweep through. “Any suggestions?”

“Irene,” I shout to my general now perched in a tree, taking opponents out right and center with her ever-replenishing arrows. “Do we have any word on what’s happening at the bottom of the hill?”

“A swarm of demons were heading down there the last I saw, but they’re focusing the attack up here.” Irene lines up her next shot, her braided hair swinging over her shoulder as her arrow aims true, piercing through the skull of a fire demon.

I purse my lips and decide I don’t want to leave anything to chance. We need a better picture of what’s going on down there if we’re going to win this fight. “I’ll check it out and decide our next move.”

“We’ll be here,” Osias says snarkily as my wings spread behind me. I launch myself up off the ground with a blast of my power, shooting myself into the air for my wings to take over.

I soar over the battlefield, letting my powers take hold as I assess the situation.

Our ranks have circled the rift, the troops swarming the enemies and moving them aside to make room for more. A smile curls on my lips as I spot god, demigod, guardians, and students working together as one. But as I sweep closer to the edge of the hill, my smile fades.

Some of our soldiers are up on the hill’s edge, looking as though they followed the retreating dark fighters near it, forgetting in the heat of the battle that we have more warriors below, ready and waiting to take them out before they can escape or lay in wait. A trickle of demons and dark gods make their way down the hill, unprepared for the forces that wait within the trees, ready to take them out when they least expect it.

I don't like the idea of them fighting so close to the hill, but there aren't enough of the demons heading that way to be a major concern.

I circle around the rift and raise my sword, about to send a blast towards the dark gods that linger on the hill's edge when a shock rocks through the ground below. Light and dark forces alike stumble as trees crash around them. Some narrowly avoid being crushed at the last second as wood splinters, sending the trees crashing towards the ground.

Screams echo around the battlefield, but I remain airborne, using the advantage to plan our offensive for whatever, or whoever, is about to make their way to the tear in the realm. I sweep around to the side facing the school, knowing instinctively that whatever is about to emerge will attack there first.

Black smoke creeps out from the edges of the rip in our world. It slinks along the ground, slithering threateningly like a snake as it approaches its victims. A blast of air sweeps forward as Osias barrels his way through the crowd, Ocatvia at his side as her own shadows sweep forth to battle against the incoming ones. The air and light slam into them just as they reach the ankles of the soldiers nearest to them. Agonized screams echo through the courtyard as the smoke sears against their skin, the sizzling audible even from up here.

It doesn't discriminate, burning the flesh of anyone it encounters, until it's pushed back by Osias and Octavia's powers. A bright healing light bursts from Osias' palms as

Octavia battles against the shadows, surrounding them and pushing them back inch by inch. Osias' healing light sweeps over our soldiers at the front line, healing their flesh from the searing shadows as they take the front line.

Fuck, I have to get down there with them.

I swoop down, mere feet from the ground when the crash sounds again, the force sending a shockwave through the air and straight towards the light and dark gods on the front line. My wings jolt me above the blast at the last second and I send out an explosion of my own, hoping to stop at least some of the force before it barrels into its unsuspecting victims.

The blast is too strong though, and my power barely holds the brunt of it back before it pushes against the light and dark gods in the front lines, forcing them back towards the school.

Fuck.

We were doing a good job at keeping them at bay, but that blast sent a horde of dark gods straight into the mass of students.

“Get those gods out of there,” Irene instructs, but we're too late.

A swarm of demons reform into existence, dissipated in by the remaining gods in the infernal realm to waste our damn time before we can push the dark gods back.

Another blast shakes the earth as a pair of black leather boots step from the mist of black clouds forming at the mouth of the

rift. He shoots the clouds upwards to block out the sun, bathing the courtyard in darkness.

Sunlight blasts from Osias' palms as he hurriedly tries to clear them from the sky, knowing we need to give our troops sunlight to see in order to fight against these demons.

Octavia rushes forward, a plume of her own black smoke swirling around Romulus like a cocoon, but he pushes her back with the force of a tornado, the wind and debris swirling around with deadly accuracy to put some space between them.

*What the—*

I bare my teeth and send a blast of my power at him to knock his tornado off-kilter, catching him off guard. The swirling wind dissipates into nothing, letting Octavia attack again. Just as she's about to reach him, Romulus slams his foot down with the force of an earthquake. The impact knocks Octavia back and she barely catches herself before she topples over along with some of the gods around her. Osias' wings spread, lifting him into the air at the last second as his power clears a break in the clouds, allowing a ray of sunlight to pierce through the gloom.

Romulus' destruction power has never been this potent, not since ... he destroyed the manor.

Trees splinter again around the courtyard, sending some that were barely holding on to crash to the ground. I swoop down, about to snatch up anyone I can save, when a shift towards the hill catches my attention. Changing my trajectory, I sweep

back around to the rift, my heart jolting at the sight I'm met with.

Thousands of demons stream down the hill, their stampede along with the force of the earthquake causing the edge of the hill to crumble right beneath them.

"We need the forces at the arenas to be prepared. There's a horde on their way," I shout to Irene, and she nods, already sending a message to her second in command who is leading the troops down there.

The last of the demons make their way down the hill, the rest seemingly sensing the weakening earth beneath their feet as they stream around the side of the rift and rush into the fray.

I knew Romulus had the archdemons on his side, but I had no idea that there were so many that were still under his control. I grit my teeth and inspect the crumbling hillside as the earth breaks apart, sending clumps of dirt tumbling down the hill after them.

There were light gods fighting there before. Where did they —

Screams pierce through the melee below, the terror alone sending an icy chill over my skin as I pinpoint where they're coming from.

The hill.

I sweep lower, panic sending my pulse racing as I spot the source of the fear. Two light gods cling to the edge of the steep hill, their fingers clutching to tree roots as they desperately try



to hold on. The soil has eroded from beneath them, leaving a sheer drop to the bottom, and with the wards blocking anyone from dissipating within the school grounds now firmly in place, there's no magical escape for them.

I hurriedly sheath my swords and reach out to them as I swoop closer, my wings shifting to let me hover right beside them. "Grab on."

The blonde god reaches out a shaky hand, her fingers tentatively stretching out for mine as she desperately holds onto the cliff. The other black haired god clutches the tree root, refusing to even try to break his grasp.

"Gabriel," the blonde god shouts, panic in her voice as she waits for him to latch onto my hand.

"I can't," he says, his voice shaky as he swings from the tree root.

"Please, for me," she begs, glancing from him to the root, barely holding on for dear life. With the amount of trees that have already fallen, I wouldn't be surprised if these aren't even attached to anything anymore, meaning the time they have to cling onto it might be limited.

"I need to go," I say in warning, not wanting to rush him, but from the sound of the battle going on above us, I don't have much time before the battle lust calls me back.

Gabriel nods and lifts his hand, nearly dropping as he shifts his weight from two palms to one. His eyes widen and he clutches the root again with both hands.

I can't wait anymore.

I shift myself as close as I can get and wrap an arm around his shoulders. He nearly jumps as my hand winds under him, but luckily he realizes it's me just in time before he makes me lose my grip on him.

"Swing yourself towards me on the count of three," I instruct the blonde god, and she nods, readying herself to leap into my grip. "One. Two. Three."

On the count of three I heave her up, letting her clutch my arm as she desperately shifts her weight to my torso. With her now relatively safe, I shift my focus to Gabriel.

"You need to let go."

"O-okay," he stammers out, barely able to string together his sentence as he tentatively lets the roots go. I don't wait for him, and instead lift him the rest of the way off, needing to focus on the battle raging on around us rather than Gabriel.

I grit my teeth as his scream pierces my eardrums. He flails around desperately as though I'm about to drop him.

Well if he keeps doing that I might have to.

"Stop," I growl, tightening my grip around him.

The sudden pressure must remind him that he isn't falling, since his scream cuts off and he nearly goes dead-weight in my arms. Motherfucker.

The short flight isn't nearly short enough as we reach the top of the hill and I deposit them in the clearing, far enough from

the crumbling edge that I'm sure the earth won't break off beneath their feet again.

"Thank you," the blonde god breathes as she stumbles onto her feet, releasing me from the awkward way she was clinging to me just beneath my wings. Gabriels feet are on the ground but he doesn't move them, instead letting them awkwardly shift to the side as though he isn't awake.

"Dammit," I hiss as I release Gabriel and his limp body crumples to the ground like a ragdoll. "Take care of him, or don't, I really don't care anymore."

I never used to care. I wouldn't have even stopped before, not with a war waging on around us. I guess that's just another way Olivia has helped me to care for others or whatever.

"Of course," the blonde god says as I shoot back into the air, needing to get a better grasp on the battle after that shit show.

Irene has repositioned some of the groups, and now there's an all-out battle unfolding at the bottom of the hill where gods and demigods fight against the horde of demons that were unleashed upon them.

To be fair, the battle up here isn't going much better. With the shift in the troops, the dark gods have been able to infiltrate the ranks, and now it's chaos as all hell breaks loose. I sweep down and land in a crouch next to Irene, needing to check in on Ethereal before losing myself to the battle lust once more.

“How is Lysander doing?” I ask, unsheathing one of my swords as a demon gets too close for comfort. I pull my wings back in, aware I’ll soon be too crowded to really maneuver around with them out.

“He just sent a report that a rift has opened in Ethereal, but it seems to be mostly a distraction tactic as they focus the brunt of their attack here,” Irene says as she lets another arrow loose and it embeds itself in a demon’s eye. “It’s all demons there, but he’s not sure if it’s meant to lull them into a false sense of security.”

I nod in understanding, a wave of cool relief washing over me at the assurance that this is it. Our plans may have gone off the rails a bit, but we can handle this—I can handle this. “Agreed, we don’t pull any teams from Ethereal unless it’s an emergency.”

“Understood.” Irene strings another arrow and takes aim.

“Anything from Linus?”

“They’re waiting outside the castle, and on your mark, they’ll attack from the other side.”

“Good, give him the go as soon as the trickle of demons slows here. I don’t want them to be overwhelmed there.” I swing my sword towards an oncoming demon, scowling as I slice its head from its body. Green blood spurts from the mortal wound and coats my shoes, but my focus has already gone somewhere else.

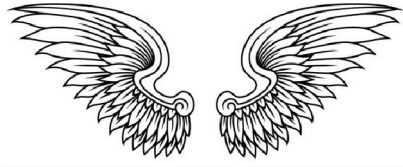
“Of course.”

I desperately search the battlefield for the other major players. If Romulus really only sent demons to Ethereal, the dark gods must all be here, meaning Helene and Kallen should be here too.

As though my thoughts summoned him, Kallen leisurely strolls from the rift as though he's on a brisk Sunday walk. Lightning crashes behind him, his dark-blue eyes alight as if electricity shines in their depths.

*That fucker's mine.*

My battle lust sings in my veins, as I send a blast below me and catapult myself forward, my sword outstretched, already prepared to battle the moment my feet touch the ground.



## Chapter Twenty-Six

### Olivia

**M**Y SHIELD IS ALREADY in place around us as our bodies take form, and a red flash of power shoots off it just as my vision reforms. Gasping, I take in the battle raging on around us. Demons in all shapes and sizes converge on our troops, but they fight them back, swords and powers colliding in a flurry of motion.

“This way,” Kyros instructs, leading me towards the downed trees. I tug Maximus along with us, the three of us needing a second to regroup before we launch into this fight.

“Irene,” Maximus calls to the brunette woman perched on a downed tree, far enough out of the way that she’s able to pick our enemies off one by one with her arrows.

“Good to see you breathing free air, Max.” She grins as another arrow pierces through the skull of her intended target.

I really need to learn that power next.

“There’s already a station set for the injured forces,” Irene says, as she strings another arrow and takes her shot. Perfectly

hitting her target, of course.

I seriously could watch her accuracy all day.

“I should go,” Kyros says, his brows knitting together as indecision wars in his gaze. He looks from the woods where the infirmary is set up to me, as though he isn’t sure if he should leave.

“We’ll be fine, Kyros.” I drop Max’s hand and turn my attention to my god of healing. “That’s where you’re needed, not out here.”

“You’re right,” he says, relief softening his gaze. “Let me know if there’s anything you need though.”

“We will.” I press a chaste kiss on his cheek, silently reassuring him that we’ll be fine without him.

Kyros and Maximus share a look over my head, and I can only imagine that their projected conversation is going somewhere along the lines of keeping me safe.

“Just go,” I urge him, slipping my hands from his. I take a step back and give him a soft smile, needing him to be able to focus on his work and not me.

Kyros returns the gesture, my heart warming as I watch the man I love go to help countless others.

“Has anyone seen ... ”

There’s a large tear near the hill—or where the hill used to be. Icy dread spreads like frost along my skin as I assess the



place where the path leads down to the arena below, but now there's a jagged cliff where the soft slope used to be.

Panic wraps around my heart with a vise-like grip as I frantically search for my family.

“Last I saw, Mateo was taking on Kallen, and your parents were battling against Romulus,” Irene says before she unleashes a series of three arrows, all knocking in the skulls of three demons standing side by side. “And Adrian has been helping to keep the dark gods away from the students.”

Snipers have nothing on this god.

I breathe a sigh of relief, able to think logically now that I know they're at least safe.

The students ...

My heart jackhammers, and I assess the situation, pinpointing where I should attack first. I might have the dagger, but we need to get the dark forces under control first because it looks like all Hell has broken loose.

Light gods and dark gods battle closer to the school than we planned. How on earth did that happen?

I shake the thought from my head and focus on the battle. We need to thin out the gods before I go after Romulus. They know this is their last stand—it's either fight with Romulus or pay for their actions, and I know that even if we take Romulus out, they won't go down without a fight.

“Let's go to the students,” Maximus says as he takes my hand, clearly already seeing the decision on my face.

“I’ll let them know you’re back if I see them first,” Irene says, following our conversation without ever taking her attention off her targets. She murmurs something into a green glowing stone at her wrist, and I can only imagine she’s communicating with the other generals.

“Will do,” Maximus grunts. He tugs me forward and I focus on the war zone ahead of us, my mind shifting into battle mode.

I pull my hand from his, using my powers to form a sword for both of us. “Ready to take the world by storm?”

“I was born ready,” Maximus grumbles, his emerald eyes sparkling with excitement as he clenches the hilt of the sword in his fist, his muscles rippling with power as hurricane-force winds swirl around us, knocking back the few demons that were approaching us.

I can’t help but grin back at him, because despite the shit show that’s surrounding us, I’m beyond grateful to have my god of destruction by my side, especially after learning I almost lost him.

We rush forward at once, fighting our way through the horde of demons that surround our forces. Somehow, the dark gods were able to make their way to the center, far too close to the students for comfort. Luckily, there were light gods there to aid them, but they can only do so much. Flames and electricity wrap around the thick steel as I block an incoming attack with my sword. Claws reach for my throat, but the blade slices

through flesh cutting through the skin and sinew of my attacker with ease as the flames spread along his skin.

A strangled scream tears from his lips, but it cuts off with the next arc of my sword as I take his head off in one fell swoop. Green blood spurts from the wound, but the flames absorb the liquid with ease, leaving no trace behind.

“If I didn’t love you before, I sure as hell would after that,” a familiar voice says to my right.

An automatic grin spreads across my face as I send a blast of destruction power at the next demon, already turning to greet my god of illusion. His arms wrap around my waist, twirling me around as he presses a kiss to my cheek ... my cheek that just so happens to be coated in green sticky demon blood.

He grimaces as he pulls away and gently lowers me to the ground, spitting out the foul taste from his mouth.

*Note to self: No more kissing until this battle is over and we’ve all had a shower.*

“I did not think that one through,” Adrian says, frowning as I slice through a fire demon charging towards us.

“Any luck getting to the dark gods?” I ask, trying to spot some of his clones in the melee.

“I have a few clones here, but it’s been harder to get through this pack of demons,” Adrian says as he brings his sword down on a chaos demon, narrowly avoiding the gleaming tips of his claws.

“If you have this, we can fly to the center of the battle,” Maximus grunts as he uses his destruction power to dismember two of the demons closest to him, their bodies breaking apart as though they’d been disintegrated from the inside.

“Yeah, I can take care of these guys,” Adrian says as he spears his sword into a demon, while swiftly kicking another one away. A sea of clones appear beside him with swords poised in their hands. They charge the demons en masse, freeing Maximus and us up to take a step away.

“Am I carrying you?” I ask excitedly, overjoyed by the thought of being the one to get him across.

“I have my ways,” Maximus grumbles, shaking his head in disbelief. With that, a swirling wind wraps around my mate, the force of the hurricane level winds lifting him into the air as though he has wings of his own. I suck in a sharp breath and watch him in awe, before belatedly realizing I need to fly too.

I call on my golden wings and they unfurl from my back, the feathers shining in the streams of sunlight that break through the clouds. A wave of relief washes through me as I pull my shield tightly around our forms and lift into the sky, my wings sending me upwards as I meet Max in the air. Despite the chaos and death surrounding us, I can’t help but smile at my god of destruction who never ceases to surprise me.

Lightning and strikes of green magic flash in the distance, drawing my focus back to what we need to do. The wind carries us towards the fountain, and I scan the area, trying to

decide where to land. I sweep the area, looking for the biggest threat, when a stream of water shoots from the fountain spearing straight towards us. I spot the god who cast the power as it ricochets off my shield.

Helene.

Maximus follows my gaze as I stare daggers at the god of sea. Her sleek black hair is pulled into a tight ponytail as she bares her teeth at me, her calculating glare already planning her next attack. Of course, Domenic stands right beside her, his lips quirked to the side as he stands awkwardly, as though he doesn't really want to be here.

Well, newsflash, none of us do. I'm not sure what he thought Helene was going to have him do, bake cupcakes?

*"Let's get that bitch,"* I project to Maximus, as I block a spear of water heading straight towards us.

He gives me a terse nod and we lower ourselves to the ground, our swords at the ready the moment we get within striking range. I lash out at the dark god nearest to me, while Maximus charges at Helene. Their swords crash as they collide in a flurry of sparks, and I redirect my focus towards the brunette god before me. Her hair is curled, almost in ringlets, the resemblance niggling a memory locked at the back of my mind.

"You must be the bitch who killed my daughter," the woman grunts as a strike of lightning flashes from her palm and runs down the edge of her blade.

I suck in a sharp breath, and send along a bolt of my own where it meets hers in the middle with a flash and an explosive boom that reverberates through my chest. The god grits her teeth and her sword arcs towards me again, fury blazing in her gaze.

*Abigail.*

I shake off the tendril of dread that slithers its way around my heart, reminding myself that I did what I needed to. I'll choose my friends and family over some wicked bitch any day.

I shrug my shoulders and block her attack, flames erupting as the steel clangs together. "Where were you?"

A scream tears from her lips as a bolt of lightning slams into my shield. I suck the power into myself and send it crashing back towards her, not wanting the deadly electricity to bounce off and hit someone else.

"Did I strike a nerve?" I chuckle as a ball of fire shoots towards her. She narrowly dodges the flames and I extinguish them before they hit someone else by mistake. "Get it ... *strike?*"

I send a bolt of lightning towards her, but she already has one ready to go. The two crash in an explosion that rocks the earth beneath us, the lightning slamming into the earth in an effort to escape. A large crater forms between us and she stumbles forward, nearly teetering over the edge.

"Look, you seem as lovely as your daughter, and that's not saying much." I grit my teeth and form a tornado to surround

her, knowing that we aren't getting anywhere right now. I need to knock this bitch out and move onto the next one before they gain any more ground. "But I really have to be going right now. Say goodnight."

"What?" she screeches, but before she can make another sound, I free a large rock revealed by the crater and sweep it up into the tornado. The rock crashes into her skull and she leans to the side, only kept upright by the force of the wind whipping around her.

I call my power back to me, the wind dissipating into a strong gust of air, allowing her body to crash to the ground along with the rock that thuds beside her. A flash of movement catches my eye, and I send a gust of air to wrap around an approaching dark god, knocking them into the hole too. The wind guides them down so their head crashes against the solid rock too, blood already coating its slick surface.

I wave a hand above me and signal Nyssa as she loops over me, pointing down to the two fallen dark gods lying in an unconscious heap.

"Nice work," Nyssa calls out from above me, her golden powers lassoing around their listless bodies and tugging them up into the air with her. I give her a thumbs up with one arm while I send a fireball hurtling towards a dark god who tries to sneak up on my right. The flames spread over his clothes, and he hurriedly tries to put them out, giving me enough time to suck the air out of his lungs, leaving him gasping for a breath that will never come. He falls to his knees, trying to

desperately fill his lungs until his limbs go still and he falls the rest of the way into the crater, knocked out and ready for pickup.

“Keep checking the hole,” I call up to Nyssa as she flies away, carrying her two unconscious gods along behind her. She lifts a hand in thanks before she gets out of range, sweeping over the treetops towards the makeshift jail they created.

I really wonder if there are going to be enough cells by the time this is over. Pushing down the feeling of unease, I arc my sword towards another god—no, not god. Domenic.

“Help them,” he whispers, his words nearly catching me off guard as a dark god attacks on the other side.

“Domenic,” I growl, sure that this must be some sort of ploy. I send a bolt of lightning at the other attacker, their body jerking as the electricity jolts through them until they slump over, their unmoving form oh so close to the hole. Dammit.

“I think Helene is going to go after Kali and Zina,” Domenic says as I push him back, our swords grinding against each other with the force. The metallic grate pierces my ears, and I grit my teeth, not knowing whether to trust him.

“Where are they?” I ask, hesitating for just a moment. My brows knit together as I watch him, still not trusting that this isn’t some sort of trick.

“They’re over there,” Domenic points to the other side of the fountain. I barely switch my gaze, unwilling to take my eyes



off him for too long. A flash of light erupts on my other side and I send my shield out just in time to block a strike of golden magic from piercing Domenic's skull.

He sucks in a startled breath, his gaze bewildered as he looks from me to where the magic was just moments before, inches from colliding into him.

"I'll keep my friends safe, thanks for the head's up." I give him a blank stare, still not knowing what to make of this. But, one thing I know for sure is I'm not going to turn my back on him, even for a second.

A pained look crosses over his features, but it's gone in the next moment. "I understand you don't trust me, but I'll always look out for my friends."

I don't dare say another word as he slinks away, probably going to hide back at Helene's side. Shaking my head, I focus on the sea of bodies surrounding me. I scan the distance as I dodge attacks left and right, throwing a few more gods into the hole for Nyssa to pick up while I search for Maximus' massive form.

There.

He and Helene have moved closer to the opposite side of the fountain, inching closer and closer to where my friends are. Domenic meets my gaze from over her shoulder, eyes wide in warning.

Fuck.

I launch into motion, sword blazing as I tear through the dark gods and demigods surrounding me, fighting my way around the other side of the fountain. At this point I don't even care where bodies are flung, knowing Nyssa will locate them somehow—my singular focus is cutting through my enemies in enough time to get to my friends.

Kali's red hair flashes in the distance, her powers creating a large weed sprouting up under a dark demigod as Zina blasts a wave of water at him from the fountain. Stacia and Katrina chant a spell as Lucas aims a thunderous blast at him, knocking him unconscious and binding him in a power restraining cuff. They work together as a flawless team, destroying whoever comes near them systematically. I can't help the smile that spreads across my lips, pride burning in my chest for how far my friends have come with their powers.

The smile quickly falls as a flash of Helene's ponytail catches my eye.

*"Domenic warned me that Helene is going to try to attack my friends,"* I warn Maximus as I cut through another god, using the hilt of my sword to knock him unconscious before moving to the next one.

Maximus tries to spot where they are as she takes another step back, a wide vortex of air swirling around her to keep anyone else at bay.

*"She's leading you towards them,"* I warn, not wanting him to become too distracted.

“*Got it,*” he projects back, his gust of air melding with hers and stopping her in place. She jerks backwards, her momentum stopped by the warring forces of wind.

I breathe a sigh of relief as I get closer and closer, knowing that at least Maximus will buy me some time to get over to them. Gritting my teeth, I send a stream of wind whipping towards a dark god as purple sparks ignite from his palms, but he’s too late. My magic wraps around him, stealing the air and tying him in place. His face goes red as he struggles for a breath before he finally passes out. The air drops from around him, whipping out to launch another into the forest as my desperation ratchets up a notch. My focus is split between my friends and the battle for control unfolding between Maximus and Helene, each of them desperately trying to gain the upperhand, but their control of the air is a perfect match.

If this was a wide open space, Maximus would have no problem burying her beneath a landslide of rocks and earth, but doing that here would be disastrous to say the least. I suck in a deep breath as I knock out the last god in my way, hurrying around them to block the other side.

“Liv?” Kali exclaims from behind me, but I don’t dare move. Not when Helene looks like she’s seconds from breaking free from the tenuous hold Maximus has on her.

“Keep doing what you’re doing,” I call back to her, shielding them from an oncoming golden spear of power. “You guys are doing great.”

“Okay?” Lucas says, his tone thick with confusion, but I can’t focus on that.

The wind picks up around Helene and Maximus, the swirling vortex turning into a tornado with each second that passes. Domenic ducks out of the way at the last second to avoid being picked up in their destructive force. I grit my teeth as I look around us. I have to do something. If I don’t, I have no doubt that the tornado will tear through the courtyard, indiscriminately sucking people in.

I break through the gods standing between me and the cyclone, and send a shock of electricity into the center, right where Helene stands. An agonized scream rips through the air, but it does nothing to stop the tornado as it swirls closer and closer. What turned out as an attempt to stop Helene, is now just helping her.

The gods I pushed through now flee, clearly understanding the strength of the oncoming attack and wanting to get the hell out of the way. I push a wall of flame before me, knowing she’ll either have to pull her power back or head directly into the fire. The swirling debris gets closer and closer, and I grit my teeth, really hoping this works, otherwise I’m going to have to clear everyone out of here before a giant flame tornado destroys everything in its path.

Luckily, Helene looks behind her, clearly confused by the spark of heat at her back. The heat must seep through the air, the flames flickering as the tornado threatens to either

consume the fire or blow it out. She draws her air back in, stopping the near destruction before it reaches the flames.

That was close.

She turns on her heel, a sinister grin curling on her lips as her eyes narrow on me.

“You should just give up now, Helene.” I raise my sword between us, black smoke wreathing itself around the steel this time.

She jumps a step back, clearly caught off guard by the dark magic at my fingertips. Her gaze darkens as she meets my stare, undoubtedly remembering what I was able to do to Abigail. Although I might not be able to kill her with the death power, I can with the dagger.

“Why don’t you just give us the dagger, and all of this will go away?” Helene says, raising her own sword at the ready.

“I’m not an idiot, Helene,” I scoff.

Maximus strides over to my side, both of us standing to block her way forward. I go to place a shield over my friends, but something blocks my power from surrounding them.

“Oh, that?” Helene laughs, shaking her head at me like I’m an idiot for even trying. “I’ve learned some new tricks in the last few days.”

My eyes narrow at the calculating gleam in her eyes. Whatever power she’s using to block my shield is something she’s learned exactly for this moment here, and now we’ve played right into her hand. I bare my teeth at her, doing the

best I can to block her powers from getting past me, but I know it isn't as good as my usual shield.

I strike first, launching into motion, my sword coming down on hers in a sharp arc. I send fire streaming around the steel's edge, but she quickly washes it away with a wave of cool sea water. Maximus starts forward, but switches his attack at the last second as a dark god strikes at him, splitting his attention away from Helene for now.

Gritting my teeth, I know I can't use some of the powers I've come to rely on with her. I block her next attack, meeting her water halfway with a stream of my own, except this time I send a jolt of electricity along with it. The blast vibrates through her sword, forcing her to drop the metal as the shock nears her palm.

She hisses out a pained breath as steam rises from her hand, her eyes glaring daggers. A ball of water forms in her palm and I can only imagine she's trying to soothe the burning flesh—too bad I don't have that problem. A grin curls on my lips as I send another lightning strike for her, excitement thrumming through me at the fact that the water in her hand will only aid in my attempt to shock her, when a stream of water out of the corner of my eyes steals my focus. The water spears from the fountain, just behind the makeshift barrier I erected, heading straight towards my group of friends.

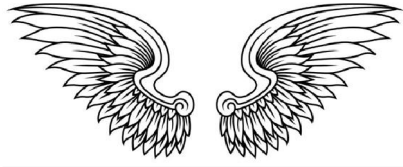
“No!” The scream tears from me as I desperately wrap my power around the water, battling for control of the power from Helene, but it's already too late. The water curls around a long

throat, cutting off their airflow as she forces the liquid past their lips. I can't even focus on which one of my friends she has her powers wrapped around, my singular focus on freeing them in enough time.

I send a blast of destruction towards Helene, knocking her back off her feet to collide into a group of gods behind her, and I scramble to my friend's side. Helene's screams are the least of my problems right now as her water splashes onto the ground. A body slumps towards the floor, but Kali clutches them, desperately trying to cushion their fall.

My brain still hasn't caught up with my body as I rush to their side, my hands automatically poised over the person's neck, allowing my healing power to flood their body, searching for some way to mend the unmistakable break I heard.

"Come on," I beg my powers, pleading with them to save my friend's life ... but there is no life to save.





## Chapter Twenty-Seven

### Olivia

**T**EARS WELL IN MY eyes, blurring my vision as I suck in shuddered breaths. I push my power again and again, begging it to remake my friend to help them become something else, something new, but I know it won't work ... they're not human.

"I heard a snap, Liv," Kali sobs, desperately clutching the man to her chest as she rocks back and forth, like she can lend him some comfort despite his life already being stolen.

I clutch Kali's hand, and she squeezes mine back as I blink away the tears. I suck in a startled breath as the man's face comes into focus, my panic finally ebbing enough for me to take in the scene around us.

"Domenic?" His name is half-question and half-accusation on my lips. Skin paling as the signs of death start to set in, his black hair shines in the sunlight, unmistakably him.

"He jumped in front of me at the last second," Kali says, heaving in a staggered breath as tears stream down her face.

Stacia collapses beside her, wrapping her arms tightly around Kali, but she refuses to let go of Domenic's lifeless body. "That was meant to be me. Why—"

Her words cut off as though she doesn't really want to ask the question, dreading the answer just as much as I am.

"He told me Helene was planning to come after you all—that's the only reason I was able to get over here in time," I murmur, my lips numb as I form the words, but I need them to know that it wasn't a split second decision. He had their safety in mind the entire time, and despite the mistakes he's made, he was a good person at the end of the day.

Mine and Kali's hands are still interlocked as they brush against his cooling skin. The lack of warmth sends a shock through me, just another reminder that he's gone. Guilt wraps around my heart, squeezing around it so hard that I'm almost sure it's about to be ripped from my chest.

"We can take care of him," Zina says, drawing my attention up to her. Greif creases her face, and I know the guilt that must be wracking through her despite the fact that it isn't her fault ... just as much as it isn't mine.

There's one person to blame here and that's Helene.

I give Zina a tight nod and pull myself together, knowing this fight is far from over. There'll be time to mourn my friend, both the person he was when I knew him and the demigod he could have become if he wasn't led down the wrong path.

Behind her, Lucas and Katrina are already clearing a path with the help of a few light gods, one with the same red hair as Kali.

“I’ll be back soon.” I squeeze Kali’s hand one last time before I let go.

“Make her pay, Liv,” Kali breathes, vengeance flickering in her blue eyes as she looks up at me. I can only nod solemnly as I wipe away the tears from my cheeks, and latch onto that desire for revenge, letting it fill my own heart. The power fills me, strengthening my muscles and urging me on.

Helene will pay, but I have no plans to kill her. No, that would be too easy. I want her to deal with the consequences of her own actions and live with the guilt of killing her own blood sister’s son.

Black smoke wreaths my arms, ready to take direction as I launch myself back into the fray.

Maximus thankfully seems to be back to full strength, having taken a few dark gods down in the time I was fighting with Helene, and now he’s moved back to head off the god of sea before she tries to attack again.

At least that’s one thing I can feel grateful about right now.

Helene screams as I approach her, fury brimming in her eyes like this is somehow my fault. “I’m going to kill you!”

“I’d like to see you try, sea bitch.” My shadows stream from my arms and come to a stop at Maximus’ side, spearing for her

and breaking through the pathetic air magic she wraps around herself in an attempt to shield herself.

The shadows eat through her defenses and absorb the energy like it's nothing more than fuel. A scream tears from her lips as the shadows mimic her attack that Domenic took for our friends. The sound is so filled with terror it only serves to drive the fury feeding my shadows higher as they wrap around her throat, tightly cinching around it before they force their way past her lips, suffocating her and drowning her at the same time. She drops to her knees and I let her feel the fear Domenic must have felt as I pull the dagger from my side, brandishing it for her as she's helpless to do anything to stop me. The rubies glint in the sunlight as I walk towards her.

"You're not worth the energy it would take to kill you," I whisper in her ear before the shadows snap her neck, just like Domenic's.

"I can do it if you need me to, princess," Maximus says as he places a warm hand on my shoulder and we stare at Helene's broken, crumpled form lying lifeless on the cobblestone.

"That would be too easy for her." I sheath the dagger back to my side and shift the weight of my sword into my dominant hand. "She did this all for her sister, right? I can't wait to see the look on her face when she learns it was all for nothing and her sister turns on her for killing her son."

"I like the way you think." He places a kiss on the top of my head while he waves above us to signal Nyssa.

Warm air brushes against us as Nyssa lowers herself within earshot, her golden binds wrapping around Helene and a few other dark gods Maximus has downed. “You really took down the wicked witch of the sea.” She laughs, shaking her head in amusement. “Maybe we do have a shot after all.”

“Such confidence,” I say with feigned admonishment as I look up at her.

“What can I say? I’m a realist.” She chuckles. “I think they might need you back at the other end though.” Her blue hair whips around her as she lifts herself into the air, dragging the unmoving bodies along behind her.

“You should go,” Maximus says. I look around, my lips parting as I’m about to argue, but he cuts me off. “I’ll stay and help with the last of the dark gods here, but you know where you’re supposed to be.”

I suck in a deep breath and nod, glancing back to where my friends were a few moments ago. It seems like they’ve removed Domenic’s body and are off to the side of the battle—safe, at least for the time being.

“I’ll look after them,” he assures me, drawing my attention back to him.

“And you’ll look after yourself,” I say in warning, my brow lifting and daring him to argue.

“Only if you promise to get back to me safe and in one piece.” He lifts his brows in challenge, waiting for me to break first.

I shake my head and lean up, meeting him halfway as his lips collide with mine, searing me with a toe-curling kiss despite the war waging on around us.

Yeah, I broke my no-kissing-until-after-the-battle rule, but so what. That was so worth it.

“Now go,” he says as his lips break from mine, and reaches around to give me a firm tap on the ass.

I can't help the grin that spreads across my lips as my wings unfurl from against my back, lifting me into the air in one swoop. “You'll pay for that, god of destruction.”

“I'd love to see you try to make me pay, princess,” he growls back, his heated emerald eyes hard on mine as I turn to find the rest of my family, knowing my friends will be safe with Maximus by their side.

I pull my shields around me tightly as I fly over the battle, taking stock of the tide that has turned. We were able to make a huge dent in the number of dark gods among the students, freeing up others to battle against the demons. I tug on my connection to Adrian, finding his true form amongst his clones as he takes out demon after demon. The sheer numbers make me grimace as I survey the field. They've stopped coming from the rift, but there are still hundreds of them. I send a spear of shadows towards a demon at Adrian's back, halting my flight to make sure it pierces the thick scales. The purple demon collapses to the ground, drawing Adrian's attention just as my shadows drift back. He tracks the trail up to me and gives me a salute and a wink in thanks.

I can't help but grin at him as he launches into battle with the next one, but it quickly fades as a group of four demons surround a light god near the edge of the trees. I grimace as I look between the battle waging between my parents and Romulus and the light god getting mauled by the demons, but my wings are already aiming me towards the trees before I've even consciously made my decision. I need to thin out their numbers.

I land behind the group of demons and immediately send a lasso of golden light around them, using the power of justice to yank them away from the blonde god. I spot another unconscious form beside her as she crouches over him, trying to shield him from the demons. Red flashes through the rips in her shirt, the blood already starting to ooze from the tears their claws have left.

My shadows rip through them, eating them alive from head to toe and leaving nothing left in their wake. I sigh a breath of relief as the god looks up. She'd been so focused on the god on the ground, she didn't see the display of death power making quick work of her attackers.

The less questions the better right now.

"T-thank you," she stammers out, her brows knitting together as she looks around, clearly trying to at least see where the bodies landed.

"Is he okay?" I ask skeptically, waving off her thanks.

"Gabriel, wake up," she pleads, her hands desperately clenching his arm as she tries to shake him awake.

I don't know who this Gabriel guy is, but judging by the lack of signs of injury, I'm starting to wonder if he just fainted. I lean over him and scan my healing power over him, but there's only a few small superficial scrapes and no other reason he should be passed out.

"You should get him out of here." I grimace, as I look down at him. His chest rises and falls, calm and peaceful, like he's sleeping despite the chaos spiraling around him.

"I dragged him over here thinking it would be out of the way enough while I got back into the fight, but I had to come back when the demons started circling him." She glares down at him. Yup, he definitely passed out.

"Just take him to the infirmary tent in the woods." I point in the direction, my patience already waning. "You aren't going to do any good in a fight if you have to keep coming over to save him."

"O-okay," she says, stumbling over her words, her arms wrapping under his arms as she lifts his torso and drags him over the rocks and branches and into the woods.

I'm just about to return to the fight when a flicker of movement catches my eye. I raise my sword in front of me, fire and shadow already twining around the steel's edge. The flames bring the figures into focus, the orange light reflecting off them.

Three shadows emerge from the woods, their shrouded forms somehow familiar despite being cloaked in darkness. My eyes snag on the curled horns of one and the webbed



wings of another, and realization crashes into me like a freight train. The princes.

“You decided to come after all?” I ask, amusement lacing my tone as I lift a brow and meet them at the edge of the woods, the flames extinguishing from my sword as I reach them.

“We did,” the first prince says, his voice strong and authoritative. “I guess we should thank you for not destroying our new corporeal forms the way you killed those demons.”

I frown back at him, trying to read his expressions, but it hasn't become any easier with their new bodies still not fully formed. “I wouldn't do that.”

“We didn't plan on it, but I guess the other god made it glow when the attack started, and we had to at least see for ourselves,” prince number one says, answering my earlier question as he lifts the transmitting stone for me to see. The red hue still emanates from it before he slips it into his shadowed pockets... at least I think they're pockets.

I nod in understanding. “If you wanted to jump in, we wouldn't be opposed.” I motion towards the battlefield as hordes of demons still attack en masse. “We've been keeping them back, but any help would be good.”

“Why else do you think we're here?” the second prince grumbles, crossing his arms over his chest. I can almost imagine the fury burning in his eyes with the rage that rolls off him. “If we let you fight our battles for us, we wouldn't be worthy of our land or our princess now would we?”

There's no way I'm going to touch that question with a ten-foot pole.

"I know just how to make our princess weak at the knees," number three purrs to the other two princes. "Don't you worry about a thing. As soon as she's reborn, she'll be ours again."

*Anyway...*

"Are you ever going to tell me your names?" I ask, needing something other than prince one, two, and three to call them.

"I'm Lucifer," the seemingly leader says, the name catching me off guard for a moment before he motions to two and three in turn. "This is Satan, and Asmodeus. And are you going to properly introduce yourself?"

"Olivia," I murmur, my brows scanning them as realization slams into me. Those names...

Pride, Wrath, and Lust—three of the seven deadly sins. I knew they were the princes, but I didn't know they were *those* princes.

"And what are you the god of, Olivia?" Satan asks, his voice booming.

I swallow thickly, trying to wrack my brain for a name, but I come up empty. "I really don't have a title." I shrug. "My father is the leader of the light majors, and my mother is the god of death, so a mix of those I guess."

"I think we shall call you the god of redemption," Lucifer says, nodding to himself. "Because if Romulus and his dark

forces are defeated today, you will be the god to redeem your kind to us.”

“That would be an honor.” I clasp my hand over my chest, my memories flashing to Seraphina in her final moments.

Her father prophesied of my existence centuries before I was born, that I would free her from her prison for her to release the princes so the heart would move to them. To be the one to redeem all the good I see surrounding me, all the light gods, demigods, guardians, and students fighting against Romulus and everything he stands for, is the highest title I could ever wish to hold.

“We should get in there,” Asmodeus says, glancing at the battle raging on behind me. “Who’s ready to show the archdemons that even with half our usual power, we can make their forces fall to their knees?”

“Do you even have to ask?” Lucifer steps around me, with Satan and Asmodeus flanking him on either side. Power ripples off of their forms in waves, sweeping across the battlefield and drawing every eye it reverberates into.

Murmurs spread across the demons as their attention locks on the figures of three of the demon princes. Recognition sparks in some of their eyes as they back away, suddenly desperate to make their way back to the portal.

“All those who wish to die by the hands of your princes can by all means stay and meet their fate,” Lucifer’s booming voice echoes across the battlefield. “And all those who wish to

live another day and exist in the new world we're about to bring forth can leave."

He reaches a hand where he placed the stone, drawing upon its power as another rift splits through the courtyard beside us, to open another doorway to the infernal realm. Heat blasts from the opening, the dry cracked earth beckoning the demons home.

A roar breaks through the silence, a temporary pause to the fighting as Romulus rages. The earth shakes beneath us, and I poise my wings, ready to launch in the air at any moment.

"This deal does have an expiry on it," Lucifer continues, motioning to Satan. "You have a minute to leave, otherwise you'll have us to answer to, and Satan has been begging me for something to kill for days now."

Malice ripples off Satan in waves, sending tendrils of fear skittering up my spine. I know I'm not the only one since a group of silver-scaled demons closest to us shudder, practically scattering at the chance to get away from Wrath.

They're the first ones to make their way through the portal, and once they're through unharmed, a swarm of other demons move to follow them.

"Olivia," Romulus bellows, the grating sound of his voice sending the hair at the back of my neck to stand on end. My hand automatically reaches for the dagger at my spine, the rubies pressing against my palm, reassuring me that this is almost over. There's only one hurdle left to overcome, and there's no way he's walking out of this alive.

“We have this, god of redemption,” Lucifer says, drawing my attention back to him. Demons stream through the portal, but some still fight against our forces, apparently unmoved by the princes’ appearance. “Go earn that title of yours.”

I nod in thanks before I take to the skies once more, ready to end this war once and for all. Black smoke spears for me, but my own shadows bat them away like they’re more of an annoyance than an attack. I reinforce my shields as I get closer to them, my boots thudding on the ground as I land and immediately roll to dodge an incoming blast of fire.

“I should’ve known that a spawn from the two of you would be my worst nightmare,” Romulus bellows, sending a cascade of rocks and debris at my parents. Octavia’s shadows send them ricocheting back at him and his own black smoke scarcely reacts in time, barely forming a shield around him to avoid a rock straight to his face.

“Little mate,” Mateo calls to me, drawing my attention to my left as he sends a blast of power at Kallen. “Give him hell.”

I nod, unable to stop a sly grin from curling on my lips.

I intend to do just that.

That smile fades the moment my eyes lock on Kallen’s as he throws a bolt of lightning at Mateo, and my god of war sends it bouncing off his shields. Kallen bares his teeth at me, a look of understanding passing between us. I slice a final cutting glare towards him before focusing on his father, the look a silent promise that I’ll keep my word. When I’m done with

Romulus, it's his turn, and after what he's done, he doesn't deserve to be spared.

Romulus sends a strike of lightning at my father, but before it can even get close enough for him to block, I send a strike of my own, letting it grow and absorb his power. The currents shift and I send the bolt careening towards him, but he narrowly jumps out of the way at the last second, leaving the electricity to strike the ground right where his feet were moments before. It singes the ground, the force leaving a small crater, reminding me of exactly what he'd done to our home.

Romulus took so much from so many people, killed thousands in his quest for power, and today he'll pay for the millennia of pain and suffering that he's caused.

I raise my sword between us and launch forward, knowing the long-range fighting won't work if I want to finish this. I need to get close enough to him to stab him. He materializes one of his own as he meets me in a clash of metal, our shadows twinning along the steel to meet in an explosion of smoke. The blast knocks us both back, but I meet him in a flurry of limbs and swords and we collide again.

"How did you do it? How did you take the dagger from me?" he sneers, knocking me back as his sword passes a hairsbreadth too close for my liking. My father intakes a sharp breath, but I drown him out, not able to keep my focus on both him, and returning Romulus' attacks.

"It's a secret," I whisper back to him, my words barely audible through the melee surrounding us.

“I’m going to rip that annoying, sharp tongue out of your mouth before I kill you,” he says as he raises his sword and runs at me. The edge looks like it’s about to spear through me, but I easily side-step his attack, letting him careen past me. He’s allowing his anger to control him right now. I can use that.

“I’d like to see you try, old man,” I retort, not letting go of my advantage as he spins around and I arc my sword at him, coupling the strike with a blast of lightning. “Do you need to take a break? I’m sure we can find you a nice grave to take a little nap in.”

“I’ve lived in hell for hundreds of years, you insolent little brat,” he snaps, shaking off the blast of lightning before it can do too much damage.

*It got through his shields though...*

“Your little taunts do nothing.” He takes another swing at me and I dodge the blow, my shadows wrapping around his leg to knock him off balance. He falls back and lands on his ass, but he kicks out and launches himself upwards in one swift movement. I’m already in front of him though, sending a blast of destruction power at him.

He screams as the force knocks into him, the energy eating away at his arm before his shadows sweep in to staunch the bleeding. I don’t miss a beat though, and go to unsheathe the dagger from my side, but when my fingers reach for the ruby inlaid hilt I know should be there, they pass through thin air.

“Looking for this,” Romulus says darkly, glowering back at me as he lifts the blade for me to see. The sunlight breaking through the clouds streams down on it, casting its light through the rubies and setting them ablaze.

I take a step back as my parents rush forward, all three of us ready to take him on despite the certain death looming at the end of the steel’s edge if it slices through our flesh.

My shadows burst forth, knocking both of my parents back, and I charge forward, my plan unfolding just as I knew it would. A sinister grin twists on his lips as he holds the dagger before him, readying to plunge the steel straight into my heart I assume.

“Olivia!” my parents scream, but I keep the shield up, pushing all my power into holding it in place.

I throw my sword to the side as he plunges the dagger straight for my chest. His fist punches against my ribcage, while I plunge the dagger into his heart, twisting the cold metal for good measure before I yank it free.

The grin slowly slips from his face, and his brows furrow as he searches my chest, clearly confused when he doesn’t see a gaping hole where he punched me. His gaze flicks down to his own chest, the adrenaline pumping through his veins keeping him from feeling the pain until his eyes lock on the mortal wound piercing through where his heart should be.

“You,” he breathes, blood already spurting from his lips the moment he opens them. He presses his hand against his heart,



his light brown eyes shifting from the blood oozing through his fingers to the same blood coating the dagger.

“Yes, me,” I say, keeping my distance as I watch the life slowly draining from his face. “You thought I didn’t notice you reaching for the dagger and slipping it free. Why do you think I let you get so close to me in the first place?”

“Bitch,” he spits out, his energy slipping away as he falls to his knees. He wheezes as he draws in another breath, his body barely holding on at this point as he desperately tries to cling on to the shred of life still flickering in his chest.

“Call me whatever you want, Romulus. I’m the one that’s still breathing. And you’re the one who’s about to answer to the fates for all of your crimes. I really hope there’s a hell dimension made specially for you.” I send a splash of water over the blade, clearing the blood from its surface. Even the dagger doesn’t want it.

“See you there.” His voice is almost a murmur now, the sound barely making it past the blood clogging his throat.

“Hopefully not any time soon.” A smile plays across my lips as he slumps on the ground, the red blood spilling onto the grass quickly turning black as he takes his last breath, his body going still with the last of his remaining shred of a soul fleeing his body.

“Olivia,” my father calls to me, desperately trying to make it past the bubble I formed around them.

“I still have one god left,” I say, turning to where Mateo was fighting Kallen just moments ago. They both seemed to stop and watch those last few moments between Romulus and me since Mateo is mere feet from me. I should’ve known he was about to step in. But Kallen...

Hatred brims in his dark blue eyes as he stares back at me, but instead of unleashing his fury upon me, he turns for the rift, quickly dashing through the tear in the realm while he still can.

Shit.

I quickly release my parents but it’s too late. As the shadows clear, Kallen is already on the other side of the tear, pinning me with a scathing glare through the shrinking gap.

“I’ll go after him,” Octavia says, her hand reaching for the dagger, but by the time I look back he’s already gone, his form dissipating away on a silent wind.

“There’s no use.” I sigh and sheath the dagger back at my side. “I guarantee he won’t be sticking around in the infernal realm.”

“You’re right.” Octavia wraps her arm around my shoulder and tugs me against her side. “Please never do that again.”

“I make no promises.” I chuckle, returning the embrace.

“The rift is closed and the wards won’t allow anyone to dissipate out of here,” my father says as he strides over to us. His lips press into a thin line, yet I can see the deep sense of

relief in his sea-green eyes. I know I'm going to hear an earful for the stunt that I just pulled, but I don't regret it.

I glance down at Romulus' lifeless form splayed on the ground, almost not believing this is real.

"I feel like we might need to burn it for good measure." I grimace, not sure I'll ever trust that he's truly gone, not with Kallen lurking somewhere in the universe.

"I agree," Mateo says as he stands on my other side, the four of us watching Romulus like he's about to turn into a zombie and try to eat our brains.

"I really don't think that's a bad idea," my father says, and places a shield over the body. That simple act seems to dispel some of the unease thrumming through me.

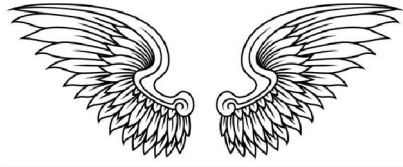
"We did it," I breathe, needing to say the words aloud to really believe it.

"You did it," my mother corrects, and Mateo nods his head in agreement.

"Yes you did, and even though I want to yell at you for keeping us out, I've never been prouder," my father says, a smile spreading across his face as pride beams in his eyes.

"I hate to ruin the moment, little mate, but we still have work to do." Mateo gives me a teasing grin as he motions to the battle still waging on around us. It's barely a battle now though, with dark gods and demigods surrendering, and the princes finishing off the last of the demons who remained.

“You’re right,” I agree, summoning a new sword in my palm with a resurgence of energy. “Let’s go finish this, once and for all.”



## Chapter Twenty-Eight

### Olivia

“**H**OW DO YOU PLEAD?” My father asks from his place at the podium, his voice echoing through the large auditorium at the summit.

“Not guilty,” Helene answers, bristling in her seat with her hands tied together by the bindings of justice.

I roll my eyes, clamping down on the string of curses that beg to spill from my lips at the thought of that woman being innocent.

She doesn't look nearly as cunning or elegant in the plain white jumpsuit and messy hair as she usually does. I guess she'll have to make do without her fancy ball gowns and hair straighteners for a while.

They adjusted the stage for the trial so that Helene sits on one side, her chair raised on the platform for everyone in the audience to see, while my father, Mateo, Orrin, and Nyssa stand on the other side, each of them preparing their inquisition for the god of sea.

Phillipa is still noticeably absent, and despite the message that was sent recalling all of the gods to Ethereal, she hasn't been seen since.

"Your argument," my father says, giving Helene the chance to defend her case.

"Like she has one," Adrian murmurs beside me, earning a disparaging look from Kyros on my other side.

The only one of my guys who didn't want to attend the trial was Maximus because his job back at the academy is much more important than getting one last shot in on Helene—he's so mature ... not like the rest of us it seems.

But there was no way I was going to miss this. If Kallen is going to try something, I'm going to be right here, ready and waiting with the dagger hidden in the leather pouch at my side.

"I was coerced into working with Romulus, since he was holding my sister Daphne hostage," Helene answers primly, her eyes narrowing on my father. "Has anyone even gone to retrieve her?"

"All in due time," Orrin says, lifting a hand to cut off her segue. "Proceed with the rest of your defense."

"As I was saying, I had no other choice than to follow Romulus, otherwise he would've killed my sister." Helene focuses on Mateo, as though he would ever have any sympathy for her. "What would you do if it was your brothers? Or your mate?"

Mateo's lip curls in a sneer, but he doesn't rise to her baiting at the warning look from my father. In Ethereal laws, the being on trial is allowed to state their defense, and if they're interrupted by the majors presiding over it, it could mean that they walk free. Helene knows exactly what she's doing right now.

Her jaw ticks, her frustration at being thwarted shining through.

"I can get into specifics if you need to know, but we all know that the safety of a blood bonded relation is more than enough reason to act in the manner I did," Helene implores, raising her chin defiantly as though she knows without a doubt that she's about to get off.

"That may be so Helene, but there are rules that govern our society that even you can't control," my father says, not moved in the slightest by her argument. "Is that all?"

Helene's brows knit together as she looks at each of the majors, her calculating eyes attempting to piece together what exactly they have planned. "Yes, that's all."

For the first time since I met the god of sea, she seems unsure and knocked off-kilter. Glad she finally gets to see how it feels.

"Let's bring out our witness," my father instructs, gesturing to the main doors of the auditorium.

On cue, they fly open revealing Phil. I can't help the grin that spreads across my face at the sight of the god of



weaponry, having missed him while he kept everything organized in Ethereal for my father.

He runs a hand over his ruddy-brown hair, a few strands noticeably falling from the nervous gesture. He must notice me in the front row since he gives me a little wave, as though he's trying to be inconspicuous despite having the attention of the entire auditorium on him right now.

“Phil better not try to steal our girl,” Adrian whispers, his tone light, yet I can sense the threat in his words.

Nudging him lightly with my elbow, I roll my eyes, silently letting him know just how ridiculous he's being. My focus shifts to the woman standing just behind Phil as she steps up beside him. He gestures her forward and she takes the lead, her long green velvet gown trailing on the floor behind her.

Her long black hair is curled neatly into a bun atop her head, but what really steals my attention is the raven perched on her shoulder, its eyes keenly assessing the room as though it's her eyes and ears while she walks straight for the stage.

“Daphne,” Helene breathes, her hands jerking against her constraints as she tries to cover her mouth.

Daphne strides up to the stage and climbs the steps, little blue birds materializing out of thin air to lift the front of her dress just over her heels so she doesn't trip on it. I scan her face as she comes to a stop at the podium, her features so much like Domenic's. Pain slices through my chest at the reminder, but this is what we're here for. That agony pulsing

in my heart is a reminder of why I need to watch this woman get the punishment she deserves.

“Please, Daphne, tell us if Helene’s actions are within the blood rights,” my father prompts, letting Daphne have the floor.

Helene’s lips quirk as she watches her sister step forward, already predicting her response. I wait with bated breath as anxiety thrums through my body like electricity. When Linus’ spies finished off the rest of the demons on the other side of Romulus’ rift, they searched the dungeons, finding Daphne right where Octavia said she would be.

My father told Daphne everything that transpired while she was locked away, but she stood there stoic, asking for some time to process everything. I chew on my lip nervously, wishing I’d had the chance to speak with her before this, to give my first hand account of how Helene manipulated Domenic, and how her son saved his friends, his heart pure despite her treacherous actions.

“Helene, they’ve told me your story, but I want to hear it from your lips,” Daphne says, her expression pensive and calm, not revealing if she’s been swayed one way or another.

“Of course,” Helene says. Clearing her throat, she sits up straight, a smug smirk spreading across her face as though she’s ready to put on a performance of a lifetime. “I noticed you were missing from your home in Ethereal, but before I could even search for you, Romulus came for me. He told me that he had you, but you would remain unharmed if I helped

him by keeping a disguised Titus in the position of Headmaster of the academy.”

“And you agreed?” Daphne asks, coaxing Helene to continue despite the feigned sorrow lacing her words.

She pauses to wipe a suspiciously dry eye before continuing. “I had no other choice. I knew you would do anything to get me back, just as I have done for you.”

“You also knew that I wanted nothing more than to finally meet my son, to be there with him, with you, while we trained and got to know our children. And despite knowing that, you used him to further Romulus’ cause.” Rage flickers in Daphne’s eyes, and the raven flaps its wings beside her, as though it’s readying to do her bidding at a moment’s notice.

“I needed help, and I knew you’d want to—”

“No, you chose to put his life in jeopardy. You chose to bring him to the infernal realm under the guise of helping me. You crossed the line, Helene, and the fact that you can’t even see that anymore shows me that you’re no longer the woman I made that blood ritual with so long ago.”

“Daphne—” Helene exclaims, but she’s cut off before she can get another word out.

“You can’t even see how many people you’ve hurt, can you? You attacked students, killed a human, and killed my son.” Daphne grips the edge of the white podium, clearly holding herself back from lunging across the room. The raven releases its hold on her shoulder and circles above her, like it’s seconds

away from diving towards the god of sea. “The blood right does not apply here because you have broken everything that bond stood for.”

“Daphne,” Helene pleads, real panic in her eyes for the first time ever as her former sister turns on her heel and strides down the stairs, her long velvet gown trailing along behind her as she storms to the exit, unable to look at the woman who broke her trust for a second longer.

“Please.”

The raven circles over Helene in warning before swooping out over the crowd at the last second and following Daphne into the hall as she pushes the door open. The crash of the door slamming closed echoes through the room, conveying the finality of her words.

I exhale a breath, and watch the god of sea squirm, apparently not too confident in her future after that.

“It seems your defense is invalid. Do you have anything else to say before we hand you your sentence?” my father asks, taking his place back at the podium.

“If I’m going down, he’s going down with me,” Helene shouts, her hands jerking against the binds as she looks towards the crowd.

My brows knit together as I try to spot just who she’s talking about when I spot the three other former council members on the other side of the auditorium. Agathon and Anastasia look

just as confused as I am, but Victor's eyes dart around, his throat bobbing, pretty much giving himself away.

"Who, Helene?" Nyssa asks, her barbed sword flashing out before her as she strides to the center of the stage.

"Victor," Helene sneers, that calculating gleam glinting in her eyes once more.

"We didn't sense any lies when we interrogated him," Orrin says, stepping forward and sharing a look of confusion with Nyssa.

"He must've been giving you half truths then." Helene sighs, shaking her head in disbelief.

"He wasn't willing to give any information on his own," Nyssa murmurs, her eyes narrowing on Victor as he shifts in his seat, obviously trying to gauge his options now that he's been caught. "He only agreed with whatever Anastasia and Agathon said. I thought it was just because he's an uncooperative asshole but—"

"She's lying," Victor shouts, bolting upright from his chair. "They were controlling me just like the others."

"Yes, because you were getting on my last nerve," Helene snaps, her calculating gaze spearing Victor. "I double-crossed you at the last second, because it was your idea in the second trial that got us caught and locked in those offices in the first place."

She's one hundred percent trying to throw him under the bus in an attempt to get a lesser sentence herself.

“Like any of your ideas were any better,” Victor scoffs, then claps a hand over his mouth, belatedly realizing he’s just outed himself as a traitor.

He’s about to bolt down the aisle but Agathon and Anastasia both stand in his way, pushing him back into his seat just as Nyssa’s golden binds wrap around him, tying him to his chair.

“You bitch,” Victor snarls. He thrashes against the binds, desperately trying to get free. His lips part, and I’m sure he’s about to spew something else that’s just as vile, when Anastasia shoves a branch in his mouth, just wide enough to keep him from talking. A vine shoots out from either end, connecting around the back of his head to keep the wood in place like a makeshift gag.

“You took away our choices, now I’m going to make sure you suffer the consequences of yours, Victor,” Agathon grinds out between gritted teeth as a white light flickers from his palm and slams into Victor’s chest.

“What does that mean?” I ask, my brows knitting together as Victor thrashes against the binds again, his muffled screams filled with terror.

“He’s the god of choice, which usually means he helps other see their choices clearly before them, but when he’s angry, he can make the consequences of a choice manifest themselves with physical pain,” Kyros murmurs, none of us able to keep our eyes off the usually smug god of fire paying for the part he played.

“He will be dealt with,” my father assures, giving a warning look to Agathon.

The white light slowly recedes from Victor’s chest and the fire god slumps over, his eyes shuttering as his consciousness slips away in the absence of pain.

“As for you, Helene. This revelation does nothing to sway your sentence,” my father declares and glances at each of the other majors. They all shake their heads in agreement and Mateo’s glare narrows on her, his hands fisting at his side like he wishes he could exact her punishment for himself.

“I’m sure your jails are overflowing at this point, so why don’t you save us both the hassle and put me on house arrest,” Helene says slyly as a last-ditch attempt at retaining some freedom.

My lips purse, but I already know what their answer will be. Although I wasn’t told what her punishment would be, I seriously doubt house arrest will cut it. She is right though. We were able to detain the rest of Romulus’ dark gods and place them in the jails under the summit before they awoke. But we can’t keep them there forever, and with this new information, that Victor was able to bypass Nyssa’s powers by only admitting to part of his involvement, the rest of his army will have to be put under even harsher scrutiny.

It will be a long process, determining who was there willingly and who was under duress, but it’s something that has to be done. We wouldn’t be any better than Romulus if we just decided to kill them all.

Helene's punishment might just help deter some of the others from rising against us once they've served their time, especially with Kallen still in the wind.

"Your sentence is a life in the mortal realm."

Gasps sound around the room as my father's tone rings with finality. "Your powers will be stripped, and your memories wiped away. You will live your life as a human, perpetually repeating your life for the rest of eternity."

"No, no, please," Helene begs, her eyes glassy with terror as her face drains of color. "I swear I'll do anything."

Two guardians climb the stairs to take the stage, and her eyes dart between them as they take her arms.

"Don't do this." Her voice is shaky as she tries to wrench herself from their grip, but with the power-blocking cuff already on her wrist, she's practically powerless. "You're making a mistake."

"We really aren't," Mateo huffs in amusement as we watch the guardians drag Helene from the stage. A string of curses spew past her lips and she drags her feet, but the guardians carry her with ease, down the stairs and back down to the jail cells.

"The cast-away ceremony will take place in the courtyard once we go through the rest of the gods and decide their fate," my father announces, turning to the crowd. "The memorial and the burning will take place in an hour at the academy, and we



invite all who are able to join us in giving their condolences and taking part in the celebration.”

Excited whispers sound around the auditorium as the rest of the gods, demigods, and guardians in attendance stand to leave.

“A life as a human? Is that really such a punishment?” I ask, frowning as I look between Adrian and Kyros. Adrian wraps an arm around my shoulders, a wide grin spreading across his lips as he looks at Kyros to explain.

“Trust me, that’s the worst sentence she could receive. For Helene, being trapped and powerless in the human world is a fate worse than death,” Kyros murmurs drily.

I quirk my lips to the side and nod in agreement. “I guess that’s true. To me it would be normal, but for someone like her who would stop at nothing to gain power, I can see how that would be a punishment. It’s a shame she won’t be able to remember though, to live with the guilt.”

“She won’t have all her memories, but she’ll always feel like something’s missing at least. And with Helene, that will eat her alive,” Kyros explains.

I silently remember just how lost I felt before Adrian found me and brought me to the academy. We share a look, and he dips his head in acknowledgement, as though he too is remembering that moment at the beach club where I mentioned trying to travel and find myself.

I really wouldn't wish that feeling on anyone ... well maybe anyone except Helene. After all she's done, her powers are not something she should be using.

"Let's go say goodbye." Adrian smiles softly, and Kyros places a hand under my arm, helping me to my feet like the gentleman he is.

I take a deep breath as my father and Mateo descend the stairs to join us, a mix of hope and sorrow swirling in my chest in a flurry of emotions. "Let's go say goodbye."



The warm afternoon sun beams down on us as we dissipate onto the academy grounds, hundreds of gods, demigods, and guardians already surrounding us, milling about as they wait for friends and family.

"On to the main event," Adrian says, excitement in his crystal blue eyes ... until he sees the disbelief written across our faces. "I'm sorry that was insensitive. I wasn't talking about that part though."

"I know." I sigh, shaking my head in exasperation, but I can't blame him. "We'll all be relieved after today."

"I, for one, can't wait to see the fucker burn," Mateo says, tugging me out of Adrian and Kyros' grip, and twining his fingers with mine. Annoyed grumbles vibrate from my two other mates, but Mateo ignores them and leads me down the repaired hill.

“Me either,” I agree, tension radiating through my chest at the thought of his body still fully formed. I really wish he would’ve just crumbled away into dust like in the movies. That would’ve made our lives so much easier. “But we can’t let it overshadow the memorial.”

“Never, little mate,” Mateo assures, placing a kiss on the top of my head as Adrian, Kyros, and my father trail behind us.

“I hope Maximus is okay,” I murmur almost to myself, chewing at my bottom lip.

“He’s fine, angel,” Adrian says, his fingers teasing through my curls from behind me.

“*Max?*” I project to him, needing to make sure. A feeling of unease washes over me, the sensation crawling under my skin like there’s something I’m missing, like this won’t feel truly over until we take this last step.

“*Princess,*” Maximus answers almost immediately, his tone a deep rumble even in my mind. Hearing that alone helps ease some of the tension thrumming through me. “*I’ll meet you by the entrance.*”

“He’s meeting us by the arena,” I say out loud, and Adrian groans behind me.

“Lucky bastard.”

I narrow a glare at him over my shoulder as we near the bottom of the hill, already knowing the thoughts going through his head. Despite how much they love each other as brothers, I

know now that there'll always be some shred of friendly rivalry.

My hand slips from Mateo's as we near the arena, and the massive, hulking form of my god of destruction comes into view. I run towards him, nearly jumping into his arms as I embrace him. His thick arms wrap around me, cocooning me against his chest. My heart warms as a wave of comfort washes over me, grateful for my gruff yet loving mate and everything he does for me.

"I should've stayed too," Mateo grumbles, clapping a hand on Maximus' shoulder. "How did everything go this morning?"

"It was fine," Maximus grunts, his arms reluctantly easing away from me. He tucks me against his side instead as we face the others, neither of us willing to let go just yet. "No sign of Kallen."

"I feel like we should stop saying his name," Adrian whispers, his shoulder rising to his ears as though just the sound of Kallen's name is sending shivers skittering up his spine. "We're just asking for problems. What if it's like *Beetlejuice*?"

"Adrian," I groan, giving him a warning look, which he laughs off. I don't want to admit it though, but I'm starting to think the same thing. How long will the god of storms really be able to stay away for? I guess ignorance is bliss and all that.

It's been like this since the battle two days ago. After everything that's happened, I can't stand not being close to my guys. We were so close to losing everything, and it still feels

like it's all a dream. Which is exactly why today needs to happen—the final nail in Romulus' coffin.

“And the others?” I ask hesitantly, wishing I could have been there with him earlier, but I had to make sure Helene wasn't able to get away with what she's done. And despite having that same bloodthirsty taste for retribution, especially when it comes to Helene, Maximus stayed behind to both guard the school and dig the graves of those who didn't make it, ensuring they were buried peacefully.

“Everything went as planned.” He looks to the arena, where just on the other side of the massive structure lie the graves of the fallen, their bodies already put to rest before the memorial ceremony today. We lost fifty-seven guardians and demigods that day, including Domenic, and each of their lives will be honored and celebrated.

I give him another tight squeeze—a silent thanks for being there when I couldn't, for being there to bury Domenic when both shame and guilt still spiral in my gut. But like Agathon showed today, everyone has free will, everyone makes their own choices. I wish I had seen the signs and helped to draw him back from going down that dark road with Helene, but it was his choice—as was the decision to jump in front of Kali.

I suck in a sharp breath and nod, not wanting this dark cloud of sorrow to continue looming over me. Today is a day of remembrance and celebration.

“Turn that frown upside down,” Adrian says, his fingers poking the side of my mouth and pushing them up. I can't help

but laugh at his attempt, which I'm sure was his goal in the first place. "Everyone went into that battle knowing what could happen, and Kyros here saved so many people that would've been lost if he was on that battlefield instead."

Adrian claps Kyros on the back, and my god of healing's cheeks redden, a small smile highlighting his dimples perfectly. The look makes my heart melt and a genuine smile spreads across my face, full of love, joy, and life. I'm beyond lucky to have these four incredible men in my life.

"I should get to your mother," my father says, his voice breaking through the moment. Heat rises to my cheeks as I almost forgot he was here with us.

At least we didn't do anything too cringe-worthy in front of him.

"We'll be right in." I smile back at him, grateful for my family too. Having him and Octavia with me has helped these last few days despite all the shuffling and meetings they've had to attend.

"Take your time," he assures, smiling back at me. A glint of pride shines in his sea-green eyes before he waves goodbye to the others and makes his way into the arena.

"Hi, Headmaster Kyros," one of the students says in greeting as he passes, waving with a wide smile on his face.

Kyros waves back with a polite smile and we all attempt to suppress our laughter ... until he passes at least. "Really?"

Kyros asks incredulously, his eyes narrowing on each of us as a giggle slips past my lips and I slap a hand over my mouth.

“Yes, really,” Mateo says, wrapping his arm around my shoulders.

“We’re not laughing at the fact that you’re the headmaster, but at the way it seems to get under your skin,” I explain amongst the muffled laughter of the others.

“No,” Adrian corrects, “That’s why Liv’s laughing. The rest of us are definitely laughing at you.”

“Thanks so much, guys,” Kyros grumbles, narrowing a glare on his brother that lacks any real heat. “It’s only going to be temporary, until we can find a demigod who’s more suitable for the position.”

“I think you’re exactly the headmaster the students need right now,” I say, pulling away from Mateo and Maximus.

Kyros immediately reaches for my hand and tugs me into his side, wrapping his arm tightly around my waist, which of course makes the others grumble in outrage.

“And I’m grateful that I’ll have you by my side to help me each step of the way,” Kyros says, placing a soft kiss on my lips, so full of warmth and comfort it makes my toes curl.

“Suck up,” Adrian says under his breath, breaking through the tender moment.

“I’m putting you to work too there, mister recruiter,” I say, giving him a pointed look. He only grins back at me, his eyes lighting at the warning like a challenge, and I already know

just how hard it's going to be to keep him on track while we're working together on the new plan for initiation into the academy ... Well maybe both of us, because if he keeps giving me that look I doubt I'll be able to keep my head on work either.

"I can't wait to see what new systems we can come up with," Adrian murmurs, his eyes locked on mine and his tone filled with heat, betraying the real undertone of his words. A tendrill of desire licks up my spine, my knees already going weak at the thought of being in an office by myself with my god of illusion.

"Have you given any more thought to your title?" Kyros asks, his eyes sparking with intrigue. I know it's not because he cares about the prestige of my future role, but because he's basically seeing history unfold before him—a live play, acting out all the significant events of our time, and he has a front-row seat. I honestly wouldn't be surprised if he pens the history books for future generations.

"I haven't," I lie, chewing on my bottom lip. "Please don't remind me of that right now."

"Lie," Adrian calls me out, and the others all nod in agreement.

Ugh, I hate that they always know when I'm not telling the truth.

"Fine, I have thought about it, but I don't think the god of death fits," I murmur, glancing around us as gods, demigods,



and guardians mill about, leisurely taking their time as they enter the arena.

There are a few curious glances cast our way, and I have no doubt in my mind that more than a few of them are trying to eavesdrop on our conversation. From what my friends have said, me and my guys are the talk of the academy right now—not that we weren't before, but amongst everyone now, not only the students.

“What are you thinking then, little mate?” Mateo asks, his eyes gleaming with excitement as he obviously knows what I'm about to say.

*“It seems you have earned the name, god of redemption.”* The memory of Lucifer's parting words ring through my mind. He had nodded with what seemed like respect when he saw Romulus' lifeless body before he and his brothers left, taking the rest of the demons who hadn't surrendered with them to be used as an example, I'm sure.

I had to reveal the conversation where the name came from to the others once they heard it. I can still picture the pride that gleamed in my parents' eyes as my father repeated it. The name fits so much more than the god of death. That's my mother, and my powers are so much more than that one aspect. They're light and shadow, just like life.

“I like the sound of the god of redemption,” I admit, heat immediately flooding my cheeks as the words leave my lips. “I don't know how to explain it but it just feels right.”

“It does,” Kyros agrees, nodding enthusiastically.

“It’s everything else that still doesn’t feel real.” I sigh, reflecting on what’s happened since the battle. It’s only been two days, but amongst the chaos and tears it feels like there’s been a huge shift in the world itself.

“Aurelia’s golden wings have disappeared,” Mateo murmurs, his voice breaking through my thoughts. My brows knit together as we all focus on him, our attention riveted by this new development for the god of lust. “Apparently the fates have decided that she no longer fits in the dark majors as they stand now.”

“If that’s true, then I wonder if Kallen has lost his?” Maximus grumbles, crossing his arms over his chest. After the part Kallen had to play in Romulus’ plans, most specifically providing the spell that would’ve drained Maximus of his life if Titus hadn’t broken it, I don’t think we’ve seen the last of him. The fates have plans for us, it seems, and I think he still has a part to play.

“I wouldn’t be so sure. I have a feeling that we haven’t seen the last of the god of storms,” I murmur, a shiver of unease skittering up my spine. I hate the unknown, but as things stand now, he would be an idiot to attack us with no allies.

“Do we have any clue who has become the next dark major then,” Adrian asks, concern creasing his brows as he looks at each of us.

“Not yet, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it ends up being this guy right here,” Mateo says, slapping a hand down on Max’s

shoulder. “Aurelia’s power only waned today, so they could still manifest in you.”

“A dark god?” Maximus grunts.

“Yes, a dark major,” Mateo says, shaking his head like Max is being ridiculous. “You didn’t want to give into the dark side because of Romulus, but with him gone, we can go back to how things were always supposed to be. Besides, you’re in good company now.”

Mateo gives me a wink and I groan in exasperation. “I thought I said don’t remind me.”

“Well what did you expect?” Mateo chuckles. “You’re the child of the leader of the light majors and now the leader of the dark. Of course you were going to be chosen to take your mother’s place.”

My shoulders slump slightly, and Kyros grips my waist tighter. “You should be excited, Olivia. It’s a great honor to be a major, of either the dark or the light.”

“I know.” I give him a soft smile, not wanting them to think I’m ungrateful for the position or the opportunity to forge forward and help the dark and light gods come together as they were always meant to be. “It just came as a surprise is all. My mind has been so focused on defeating Romulus, I never really thought about what would come after, other than getting to spend more time with you four.”

They each grin at that, the joy and elation even breaking through Maximus’ usually stoic expression.

“As two of the new dark majors, you can both help me with the best way to integrate the dark demigods into the school too,” Kyros says, excitement sparkling in his honey-brown eyes, his dimples on full display as he looks between me and Max.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, you don’t even know if I’m going to be a major, and I didn’t say I’d help,” Maximus grumbles, shaking his head. “We should get going before the ceremony starts.”

Maximus doesn’t wait for anyone else to respond before tugging me away from Kyros. He wraps an arm around my shoulders and practically carries me as he stomps towards the field.

“Max,” I hiss, wiggling in his grip as I try to get my footing, but he just hoists me over his shoulder, apparently not wanting to slow his pace enough for my shorter legs to keep up—not because I’m actually short, but he’s so damn tall. I choose not to fight him though, letting him wrap his arm just under the ass of my black dress pants as I prop myself up on his back to keep my face from smacking against his hard muscles. “You’re so lucky I’m not wearing a dress.”

*And not a super low-cut blouse,* I add silently, glancing down to make sure my cleavage isn’t spilling out of the maroon blouse.

I reach down and slap his ass, ignoring the string that radiates through my palm from his buns of steel.

“Two can play at that game, princess,” he growls, the deep tone of his voice rumbling through his chest and sending vibrations straight to my center.

*This is definitely not the time for that.*

Before I can get another word out, he swats his massive palm over my ass cheek and lightly squeezes it, sending a burst of pain and pleasure up my spine.

*Fuck me. Not. The. Time.*

He eases me down slowly and I take a moment to adjust my clothes as the blood rushes from my head. He’s carried me just inside the arena, and thankfully not too many people witnessed the ass slap, because even though this is supposed to partly be a celebration, I don’t need all of these people thinking we don’t care.

I clear my throat as the others catch up to us and they cast incredulous and jealous looks towards Maximus, clearly wishing they’d thought of scooping me up first.

“No more of that,” I whisper in warning, giving each of them a stern glare. Realization seems to loom on them then as we look at the crowds of people here to honor the fallen and witness the final assurance that Romulus is gone forever.

A somber silence washes over us as we stride towards the box where Titus and a few of the other gods are already waiting for us, but my eyes catch on a group of students sitting in the row just beneath them.

My eyes flick between the two places, but I already know what I need to do.

“I’m going to go sit with my friends,” I murmur, pausing to turn to them at the foot of the stairs.

“Of course, angel.” Adrian gives me a soft smile as he steals my lips for a kiss. He pulls away far too soon, and a blush spreads over my cheeks as I remember just where we are once again.

*There will be plenty of time for that now, Liv. You have forever with them.*

Adrian gives me a wink before he climbs the stairs, and each of the guys stop to say goodbye before they follow after him. Kyros’ kiss is soft and teasing, while Maximus’ is hard and all-consuming, and Mateo makes me feel like I’ll never need to breathe another gulp of air again as long as his mouth is on mine. I drag in a staggered breath as I compose myself and climb the stairs after them.

“Liv,” Nelle calls as her eyes lock on mine, relief creasing her expression. She stands as soon as I reach her, wrapping me in a tight embrace which I immediately return.

“Hey girl.” I’m grateful beyond belief to have her here. Pain slices through my chest as memories from the cave flash through my mind, reminding me that she still doesn’t know what exactly happened that day. I attempted to tell her everything when I got back to the manor, but she avoided the subject anytime I brought it up.

I can't help but look at Titus before I let her go, already knowing his watchful gaze would be on us. That's another conversation I have to have, sooner rather than later because I can't keep this information from my best friend for much longer.

Nelle moves a seat over, letting me sit between her and Kali. I hug Kali, Stacia, Zina, Lucas, and even Katrina in succession before taking my seat, not even caring about what happened in the past between my new friend and me. Even if she hadn't opened up to me before the battle, seeing how fiercely she fought by my friends' sides would have chased away any resignation I had about her.

Each of them are wearing one of the battle uniforms, hell most of the school is in solidarity, the clothing the perfect mix of unity and recognition for the fallen and what they fought for.

"Please tell me they made the bitch pay," Zina says, anger searing her words as she leans over to speak with me.

"They did," I say, feeling the collective breath of relief they sigh at the news.

I fill them in on everything that happened at the summit, from Daphne's speech, to Victor's guilt being discovered, and finishing with Helene's sentence. My friends frown just as I had, obviously not thinking the punishment is harsh enough, just as I hadn't.

"By the terror that struck her when my father told her her fate, and the way she pleaded, it's a worse punishment to her

than we can even imagine,” I assure them, knowing that we will never understand.

“That day is still such a blur,” Kali says, tears already welling in her eyes as she grips my hand. I squeeze hers back, completely understanding what she means.

“The moment I saw what happened to Domenic, it was like my brain blocked out his face from my mind, and I was only focused on saving him,” I explain, closing my eyes to dispel the image of the water wrapping around his throat.

Kali nods in understanding, a sob wracking her chest that she quickly tries to cover up.

We sink into a comfortable silence, none of us trying to give false assurances or polite placations. The battle and what happened to Domenic changed us all, and all we can do now is remember him the best we can, and keep the message of his redemption in our hearts. At the end of the day, he was still that friend willing to risk everything for the people he loved, and as misguided as it was, it was that same energy that brought him to follow Helene in the first place—because he believed he could truly help free his mother.

There were selfish reasons too, of course, but that’s human nature. We fail, we live, and we learn. And then we get up the very next day and do the same thing all over again.

Nelle reaches for my other hand, and I squeeze hers back, giving her a silent look of understanding. Despite his act of redemption in the end, I’m not sure that even if he lived I could have forgiven him for luring Nelle there that day, and



that's okay too. We're not meant to forgive and forget everything, but we can make peace with it, with the path that life leads us on and the lessons we learn along the way.

Nelle's shoulders slump in relief as though she can read those thoughts on my face. I could tell that she was struggling with her emotions when I told her the news, and I let her know that very same thing. We can both feel pain and betrayal at his actions, and make peace that he was as flawed as any of us, trying to do what he thought was right at the time.

The others don't need to feel that way, they can remember that in peace now, and I want that for them—to remember our friend how he was when they first met him, each of us scared students, just trying to find our place in this new world.

*"We love you, Liv,"* Mateo thought projects to me, warming my heart and easing some of the tension.

*"I love you, too,"* I project back to them just as movement from the stage draws my attention out the center of the field. My father and mother walk across the stage, but my focus shifts to the large pyre just behind them. I knew what the plan was, but I still hadn't seen it yet.

Long pieces of wood are placed in a cone shape with an opening in the center, the opening where Romulus' body will go. Just seeing it is reassuring as it reminds me that we'll have that sense of finality soon, that closure that he's not about to awaken from the dead, that all of this is almost over.

"Today is a day of remembrance, and a day of celebration," my father announces, his voice booming off the sides of the

arena, assuring everyone can hear him. In the time since I sat with my friends, I hadn't even realized how packed the seats have become. Every god, demigod, and guardian who fought with us, both here at the academy and in Ethereal, must be here today.

The sight of everyone gathered for this moment takes the breath from my lungs for a second, the overwhelming sense of unity weighing heavily on my chest.

“We all fought bravely; we all went onto that battlefield with one goal in mind, to save the lives of our friends, our families, and stop Romulus from taking our freewill, just as he'd done to the demons of the infernal realm, and finally help them take their freedom.”

“We did so unified,” my mother continues, her hand clasping my father's as their golden wings spread behind them. “And the dark majors will continue to work with the light to ensure nothing else happens like this again.”

Murmurs spread through the stands as my mother lifts her opposite hand and sends a bolt of lightning up into the sky, letting the world know what we've known since the first moment we got back to the manor, that Octavia is now the leader of the dark majors, embodying all the dark powers, including death.

My father's blond hair shines in the sunlight, clad in a black suit with a white-silver tie, while Octavia wears a long, flowing, black lace gown with gleaming white pearls, her elegant dark-brown curls cascading around her shoulders. If

there are two people who can usher in the changes between the dark gods and the light, it's the two of them.

“Today is not only about those who survived though. It's about those who lost their lives in the battle, who risked themselves to stand for their friends and families, to stand for their home and a future we can all look forward to,” my father says, gesturing to the place beyond the arena where the bodies were laid to rest earlier today by Maximus and a group of volunteers. “I welcome you all to take a moment of silence, and please, visit the graves of those brave soldiers after the ceremony to pay your respects.”

His head dips along with my mother's, and the rest of the crowd follows, the low murmur quieting to a ringing silence as we all take a moment to remember those we lost.

Kali squeezes my hand and takes a staggered breath, pulling my thoughts back to Domenic. I close my eyes, letting my thoughts drift to the grave site when I saw it earlier this morning. Each of the graves were marked with a headstone, most of the families and loved ones choosing to lay the fallen to rest where they fought, but some others insisted they be brought back to Ethereal for a burial at their home.

We made the decision to bury Domenic with them too, choosing to remember him for his final act of bravery, the one that took his life. I send a silent thought out to him, wherever his spirit may be, thanking him for saving Kali. I don't know where I'd be right now if I'd lost her, where any of us would be right now. She's the glue that holds us all together, the

sweet, kind, and caring friend that first took me in, who helped me realize I wasn't alone here despite it feeling that way at first.

Domenic wasn't the only one who sacrificed himself in this fight. There were countless others who didn't make it to the healing tent, those who gave their lives to fight for what is right. I send a silent thought up for them next, hoping the fates bless them well in wherever we might go after death.

"Thank you," my mother murmurs, and my eyes flutter open. A silent tear rolls down my cheek, adding to the countless others I shed, and will continue to shed when alone with my friends and we all have a moment to take this new reality in and decompress.

I squeeze both Kali and Nelle's hands, meeting their gazes in a silent thanks for being with me. There's something clouding Nelle's gaze though, but it's gone in a flash before I can put my finger on it, and a soft smile spreads across her face.

"Romulus was at the center of all this. He manipulated and lied to countless people, not that it takes away anything from their actions," my mother continues. Her hand slips from my father's and they retreat to opposite edges of the stage, allowing us a full view of the pyre. "I know that each of us needs this to heal. We need to make sure that Romulus is gone for good this time."

A group of gods appear at the entrance to the arena with a body on a wooden stretcher. Romulus. Tension radiates through my chest at the sight of him, and despite the black

gaping hole in the center of his chest, my hackles still rise just at the mere sight of him.

Some of that anxiety wanes at the sight of the god leading the procession. Phil is at the front on the left, while Ajax is on the right. With them watching over his body, I already know that nothing happened to it, and with Octavia watching him before that, it helps to ease the incessant thought that he isn't really dead despite the fact that I took his life myself.

They carry his lifeless body behind the stage, and I keep my eyes on him the entire way as they slide him into the opening and wait on either side, planks in hand.

My father and mother walk to the center of the stage and turn to face the pyre, their fingers interlocking as they lift their opposite hands towards the wood. At once, fire spits from their palms, engulfing the kindling under Romulus in flames. The gods who carried him out quickly place the final boards, narrowly avoiding the flames already licking up around Romulus' body.

They grow higher and higher, slowly consuming his lifeless body, his skin and flesh no longer immortal as they incinerate in the magnificent blaze.

A weight lifts from my chest at the sight, my grip on my friends' hands easing slightly as the bone-crushing relief sweeps over me.

No more looking over my shoulder wondering when the next attack is going to come. No more having to live with my

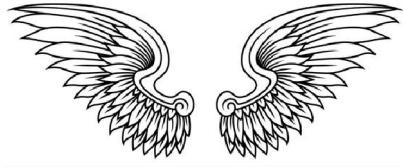
friends' lives being placed in jeopardy because that's their best chance at surviving this war.

*We get to breathe.*

Air fills my lungs, and for the first time in a long time, they feel full—full of life, of love, of freedom, of possibility.

Those flames represent a future we can be proud of. The crackling of the wood and sinew, a chance to begin anew, to give those who were swayed by his lies and promises a chance at a new life, a chance that some, like Domenic, never got.

*We're done. We're free.*



## Chapter Twenty-Nine

### Olivia

“**I** WISH I COULD just stay with you.” Nelle sighs as we look up at the manor.

The moon has now taken its place in the sky, the day quickly shifted into night as we all stayed in the arena until long after the sunset, eating, drinking, and sharing memories of those we lost along the way. I learned so much about the fallen demigods and guardians while chatting with hundreds of people I’ve never met before. Rank or position was long forgotten as we collectively grieved and celebrated their lives, sharing stories that will live on for generations.

I caught Kyros more than a few times, jotting down names and stories, and I have no doubt in my mind he’ll be serializing every single one that he can.

“Me too,” I agree, grinning at her. “But we still have a few more days before you have to leave for training, so we should make the most of it.”



“Oh, you know we will.” She giggles, her brown eyes twinkling in the moonlight. “I just want to take a few more minutes to admire this place. It still blows my mind that you rebuilt this with your powers.”

We both look back up at the manor, and a calming peace washes over me as we stand there, my best friend, my sister, my ride or die, the person I first started this journey with, and who was there with me every step of the way—even when she was thrust into a whole new world.

“I still can’t believe it myself, but I did have a bit of help.” The powers flowed through me, but I still felt each of my mates there with me every step of the way, helping to recreate the manor we grew to love, through our joint memories.

“I guess we should go get changed,” Nelle says, her smile dropping from her face as she looks back at me.

Of course I could’ve just used magic to change our clothes back at the school, but I wanted to have a moment alone with her and give us each a sense of normalcy we haven’t had since my birthday at the beach club.

“Are you telling me that *the* Penelope Warner is groaning about having to go to a party?” I gasp, slapping a hand over my chest in feigned shock and outrage.

“I am not groaning about having to go to a party,” she says, but her voice is lacking its usual playful tone. “I guess I’ve just felt off the last few days is all, but I’m sure a bit of bubbly and dancing will change everything.”

Her smile doesn't reach her eyes, and she looks back at the manor, seemingly in the hopes that I won't notice. My stomach twists and my palms get clammy as I chew on my bottom lip, indecision warring within me. I have to let her know, I have to tell her why she's felt so off, but is it really my place?

"I thought you'd both be at the party by now," a masculine voice says behind me, shocking me from my thoughts. I turn on my heel as Nelle jumps beside me, clearly just as caught off guard, but the voice registers seconds before a ball of flames forms in my palm.

"Titus." My breath rushes from me, half in relief, and half in discomfort.

*Why did he have to show up just when I was debating whether or not to tell my best friend about him?*

"Titus," Nelle repeats, her eyes widening as they lock on his.

My lips quirk to the side as an awkward tension radiates between them, neither of them speaking, yet they're unable to pull their gaze off each other.

"You didn't want to join the party?" I ask, trying to break the uncomfortable silence that has settled over them.

I have no idea what happened between the two of them when they went back to the manor, and at this point I really don't want to know.

"I'm not really in the mood for a celebration," he admits, reluctantly dragging his gaze away from Nelle. "I was

wondering if I could borrow you for a minute, Liv.”

Nelle’s lips purse as she looks between us, her body rigid as anger radiates off of her. My lips part and I’m about to tell him no, when Nelle cuts me off.

“I’ll be inside then. Just don’t take too long, or else I’m going to steal all your clothes.” Nelle shrugs and gives me a half-hearted wink before she strides to the house.

Titus strolls to my side and we both watch as she opens the door, neither of us saying a word until it closes firmly behind her.

“What’s going on, Titus?” I ask, pushing down the sneaking suspicion at the back of my mind. I have a feeling that it isn’t a coincidence that he showed up when he did.

“I could ask you the same thing, sister.” Titus crosses his arms over his chest, giving the manor one final look before he faces me.

“I’m really not in the mood to play games, Titus. Say what you have to say.” I mirror his pose, not allowing him to out attitude me.

His chest deflates and his arms drop back to his side, obviously realizing he isn’t going to get anywhere that way. “Don’t tell her. Please.”

I press my lips into a thin line, a crease forming between my brows as I really study him. He’s been distant since the battle, and I wanted to give him time to handle his shit before I had this conversation with him. Although there was no love lost

between the two of them, his father was still killed, and the person he thought he had on his side through it all, betrayed him in the end and is now gone in the wind.

I thought he was going to take the time he needed to process all of that and the break of his bond with Nelle, then do the right thing. But I guess not.

“Why?” I don’t inject any of the emotions I feel swirling inside my chest into the question, needing to hear him out first.

“I have to let her go, Liv,” Titus says on a pained breath, and despite how much he tries to hide it, I can tell just how much it hurts him to admit that. “She hates me, I can see it every time she looks at me. The only thing that was drawing her to me was the soul bond, and with that gone, there’s nothing to keep her here.”

“You don’t know that,” I hiss, narrowing a glare at him. “She’ll hate you even more if you keep this from her and she eventually finds out.”

“Then don’t tell her,” he says again, his light brown eyes pleading as they lock with mine. “You’ll only hurt her—you’ll hurt us both.”

Silence stretches between us as I think over his request. It isn’t fair for him to put me in this position, but would it be fair to Nelle to tell her this, to put the thought of a mate in her head and add to the stress that she’s already under with having to go to her guardian training in a few days?

“No, Titus. I can’t promise that I won’t tell her. Don’t place the weight of that on my shoulders to bear.” I shake my head, memories of my mates flashing through my mind. Regardless of the bond that links our souls as one, I still couldn’t imagine my life without them. “The fates bonded your souls for a reason. You’re meant for each other, and maybe all this is what you’re meant to go through, to show each other that it isn’t just the connection that draws her to you like you said.”

He takes a deep breath and squeezes his eyes closed, as though he wants to believe it but he just can’t let himself.

“I’ll keep it to myself for now,” I murmur, hating the pain and relief that mixes on his face as his eyes snap open. “Only because of what you were willing to do for me—for Maximus.”

I pull in a shuddered breath as tears prick at my eyes at the memory of Titus with that dagger, the struggle between him and Nelle when he tried to give his life to save Max.

“There wasn’t another option in my mind, Liv,” Titus says, shaking his head like he can’t handle the praise for his selfless act. “It was my fault he was in there in the first place. If I hadn’t—”

“No,” I cut him off. “It wasn’t your fault. We all brought him in, we all hoped that he could change. Don’t put that on your shoulders.”

I take a tentative step forward, unsure if he’d even want my hug, but before I can talk myself out of it, he wraps his arms around me, pulling me into a tight embrace. I’m frozen in

shock for a moment, but I quickly regain my composure and return the hug, needing him to know that he has someone, that he isn't alone in this new world.

“There was always another way, Titus. You're just too good of a brother to have thought of it, but I would've done it for you,” I murmur, needing him to know there wasn't a second that I was going to just let him take his own life once I knew.

His grip on me tightens in response and he nods once he pulls away, silently acknowledging my words.

“There were two people to blame, two people who made the conscious choice to place that spell, and neither of them were you,” I say, needing him to understand that.

“I know,” he murmurs, swallowing thickly, his eyes shining brightly in the moonlight with unshed tears.

“I'll give you time to handle yourself, and give Nelle an opportunity to adjust, but you'll have to tell her eventually,” I warn, my gaze stern. He blinks away the moisture that welled in them and nods in understanding.

“Okay, but—”

“No buts!” I declare. “You're doing it or I'm doing it for you. You say that she hates you, but she might just surprise you.”

I smile softly, my brows lifting as hope fills my chest. I don't want to promise anything, but I know my best friend, and regardless of the bond, I know the concern she showed for him was genuine.

“Okay.” He sighs, and thankfully it isn’t followed with a but this time.

“Now, were you actually heading back to the manor or were you just stalking us to make sure I didn’t say anything?”

Judging by the reddening of his cheeks and the way he remains silent, I’m going to go with the latter.

“Well then get back to the party and we’ll meet you there soon,” I say, waving him away in dismissal.

“No one’s going to want me there,” he says, looking down at his feet.

“I do not know who this mopey guy is. Where is my usually over-confident brother?” I snap my fingers in front of him to get his attention, and clasp his shoulders, needing him to look my way. “If you want Nelle to like you on her own, I can tell you right now this isn’t the way. Now we’re going to get changed and you are going to charm and annoy your way into her heart, do you understand?”

“Liv,” he groans, his head tilting like he thinks I’m just placating him.

“I’m serious, and screw anyone who isn’t willing to listen to your story. You’ve done more to stop Romulus than most of those people have, and I’ll make sure they know it.”

“Fine.” He shakes his head, a small grin forming on his lips.

“Get going then.” I let go of his shoulders with a small push to get him on his way.

“If you insist.” He takes a few steps away, readying to dissipate when he pauses for a moment. “Hey, Liv?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.” I can make out the sincerity on his face even in the pale moonlight.

“You’re welcome.” I smile and wave as he dissipates back to the academy, to the feast and celebration that awaits us all there.

I take a second and stare at the place he once was, silently wondering if he’s ever truly had someone to look out for him in that way, someone who had his back no matter what.

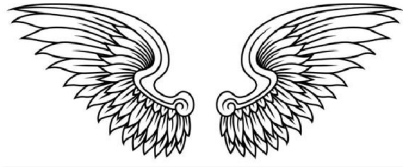
I can already tell that despite everything that has happened throughout the centuries, my guys are warming up to him. I can only hope that the five of us can be that support he’s never had for years to come.

“What’s taking so long?” Nelle calls from the manor, her head sticking out of the partially opened door. “We’re going to miss out on all the food if you keep staring off into space like that.”

A laugh spills from my lips as I look at her, my heart warming at the sense of home and family that wraps around me like a tight hug.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” I say with feigned exasperation as I break into a run, rushing towards my home and a life filled with love, and more happiness than I could ever have imagined.





# Chapter Thirty

## Olivia

**T**HE BASS VIBRATES THROUGH my body as I move to the beat, my ass grinding against Adrian with every swing of my hips. His fingers dig into my skin as he moves with me, the sun beating down on our nearly bare bodies. I close my eyes and lose myself in the moment. The only sound that pierces through the thumping dance music is the sound of people jumping into the pool, their laughs of joy and crash of water adding to the feeling of nostalgia.

Is it the first time we've been back to my father's beach club in Toronto in the last few months since the battle? No. But every time brings me back to the moment I saw Adrian from across the dance floor, electricity racing between us despite the crowd of people who separated us. His eyes locked on to mine like I was the one person he'd been searching his entire life for, and he hasn't lost that look since.

I turn in his grip, loving the way his hand slides along the delicate chain at my stomach, tendrils of desire rushing up my spine at the sensation of his skin on mine. He pulls me close,

his leg slipping between mine as he hands me a glass of champagne from the table in our booth.

A moan slips from my lips as I move my hips, making his leg press against my pussy perfectly through my thin bathing suit bottoms. The moan is also partially from the bubbles rolling over my tongue as I take the last sip from the fluted glass.

A grin spreads across his lips as he takes the glass from me and places it back down on the table, clearly already guessing my pleasure was from the combination of both him and the champagne.

I shake my head, unable to help my answering grin as I run my hands up his chest, loving the way his sculpted muscles feel beneath my palms.

“You’re incredible,” Adrian murmurs as his heated gaze roves over my skin. “I can’t wait to take you home and devour you.”

I hum in approval, tipping my head back as I lose myself in him and the music. If I could spend every day like this, in his arms or one of my other mates’, my life would be complete.

But work—

“Stop thinking about work,” Adrian says, snapping me from my thoughts.

“Did I project that?” I giggle, clutching his biceps tighter as the tempo of the music changes, the pulsing beat vibrating through me with every sway of our hips. Seductively, he

angles his leg closer, making sure my clit rubs against him with every move I make.

I suck in a sharp breath, both loving and hating the way he brings my body to life.

“No, but I could tell by the look on your face.” He chuckles, his sly smirk growing as he lowers his lips to my ear. “Today is for relaxation, and just remember, this is only the appetizer.”

“This is the appe—?” The last part of my question comes out as a moan though, as he clamps his lips around my earlobe, lightly dragging his teeth over the sensitive flesh. A spark of lust shoots straight to my core, and I can already feel myself getting wet for my god of illusion.

“What are you doing to me?” I suck in a sharp breath, and close my eyes as his mouth trails lower, sucking on my neck. The sensation causes fireworks to burst behind my eyelids, my body so overwhelmed I don’t even care what the answer is just as long as he doesn’t stop.

“I’m helping you relax,” he murmurs against my skin as he moves to my collarbone.

My breaths come in ragged pants, my body and my mind battling for dominance. I know we should stop, that we can’t go any further with all the people below us writhing on the dance floor, but my body doesn’t give a shit. I need Adrian to nudge the edge of my red bathing suit top to the side and wrap his lips around my nipple, almost as much as I need air to breathe.

“I have an idea.” I grin and reluctantly pull away from him, a plan already forming in my mind. A cool rush of air sweeps over me at the absence of his body pressed against mine, even with the sweltering sun beating down on me.

“Angel,” he warns and reaches out to grab my waist, hunger already darkening his gaze, but I move out of the way at the last moment and curl my finger towards me, silently motioning for him to follow me.

I don’t waste another moment, knowing he’ll be right on my heels, and I turn to make a beeline to the private changing rooms, exactly where we went that first day we met.

“Liv,” he growls, his chiseled arms wrapping around me just as I push open the door. We don’t miss a beat, and the second we’re through I turn in his arms, his lips crashing on mine in a searing kiss. I hurriedly lock the door behind us before he eases me back towards the vanity.

“Now this feels like *deja vu*.” I giggle against his lips, barely getting the words out before his mouth is on mine again.

He slides his hands down my back until he reaches the globes of my ass and squeezes them in his palms. The sharp pressure sends tendrils of lust shooting straight to my core. He doesn’t waste any time lifting me up onto the counter, and I hiss against his mouth at the sudden coolness of the marble against my heated skin.

Adrian takes the opportunity to delve his tongue between my lips, caressing mine in long, languid strokes. The heat that blazes through me washes away any of the discomfort I felt.

“I can’t wait to show you exactly what I would’ve done if we hadn’t been interrupted that day,” Adrian murmurs. He pulls away slowly and runs his heated gaze over my curves, sending my heart racing.

“I’m waiting here, God of Illusion,” I purr, placing my palms behind me and leaning back, letting him look his fill.

His lips pop open and he’s practically drooling at the thought of having me all to himself. “Well I guess I can’t leave my angel waiting, now can I?”

My head rolls back as he picks up where he left off on the dance floor, his lips trailing along my collarbone, placing light teasing kisses down between my breasts. His hands swiftly pull the material of my bikini top to the side, and a rush of cool air sweeps over them, teasing my nipples into peaks for him. His crystal gaze sparks with mischief as he looks up at me, the look itself sending a thrill up my spine.

He kisses his way over to one breast, not wasting the opportunity to taste every inch of my skin that he can, while he cups the other in his large palm, teasing the sensitive flesh.

I suck in a sharp breath, sweat beading on my skin as he sucks my nipple between his lips. He lightly rolls my other one between his fingers and I arch my back into the touch, loving the way he knows every inch of my body.

“Then I would’ve kissed down your stomach,” Adrian murmurs against my skin, the heat of his breath making my toes curl as he trails his lips lower.

A whimper slips from my lips at the loss of the delicious friction against my nipple, but he quickly rolls the other one between his finger and thumb, reminding me that he's far from done with me.

My breaths come in ragged pants as I watch him get closer and closer to where my body craves his touch. My hips jerk closer to him involuntarily as his hands slide to the edge of my bikini bottoms. He draws light circles on my skin, just above the edges of the thin material, teasing me as he sinks to his knees.

My lips part and I'm about to plead for him to go faster, but he relents before I can get a word out. He slips the material down and I lift my hips off the counter slightly to help him ease them off me. He tugs them down my legs so slowly, I swear he's trying to torture me.

"Adrian," I groan, impatience lacing my tone as he takes his time.

He does love to watch me squirm.

I open my legs slightly, watching the moment his eyes lock on to my pussy, his teasing long forgotten as he tosses the bottoms across the room.

"Not fair," he admonishes me, but a sly grin spreads across his lips as he grips my thighs. He tugs me closer to the edge, placing me in the perfect position as he kisses up the inside of my thigh, getting closer and closer to where my body demands his touch.

I wiggle myself closer to him, my ass nearly all the way off the counter at this point as I urge him on, desperately needing him. “Please, Adrian,” I beg, not above asking nicely for what I want.

“Please what, angel?” He chuckles, the throaty sounds teasing me even more as I imagine how it would feel pressed against me.

“Please put your mouth on me, Adrian.” I barely get the words out before his lips are wrapped around my clit and he sucks it into his mouth. A low moan slips from my lips as he switches to circling his tongue over it, loving the delicious friction against my sensitive nub.

He props one of my legs against his shoulder, while he holds the other, angling my hips perfectly. As he eases two fingers into me next, I can’t help but roll my hips against him as electricity thrums through my body. He curls his fingers, sending another shockwave through me as he hits that perfect spot.

“Adrian.” His name on my lips is like a prayer, begging him not to stop as he brings me closer and closer to the precipice. He’s determined to wrench every ounce of pleasure from my body, and he increases his pace, working his fingers inside me and his mouth on my clit in a perfect rhythm, lighting my body on fire.

A shuddered gasp escapes me, and my pussy clenches around his fingers, my body inches from hurtling over the edge. He swirls his tongue over my clit, and my hips jerk in



response, the delicious fiction of his mouth against me the final piece of the puzzle as my orgasm slams into me. Warm waves of pleasure wash over me as he works me through my release, my core shuddering around him as he works me back up, my body practically begging for him to keep going.

But to my dismay, his fingers slip from me and he trails kisses back down my thigh, leaving me craving more of the delicious ecstasy he's able to bring me.

"I need you, Adrian," I plead, hoping this means he's about to pull down his black and blue swim shorts and—

"You're killing me, angel," he groans as he pulls his head back to look up at me, desperate, and panting, waiting for him to give me more. "That wasn't part of the deal."

"What deal?" I ask incredulously, my brows knitting together as I look down at him with suspicion. "I didn't make any deal."

"No, but I did." He grins as he pulls himself to his feet. "Like I said, this was just the appetizer, and one condition I made with the guys was that I wouldn't give you your dessert, not until the main course."

My lips pop open, but no sounds come out. He literally stole the words from the tip of my tongue.

I clamp my mouth closed, hating the amusement that dances in his eyes as he waves his hand and changes my clothes. The bikini top is gone now, and so is the chain, my barely-there clothes now replaced with a flowing dress. I climb down from

the counter carefully now that my flip-flops are replaced with red, lace heels, excitement coursing through me. The top of the dress is a tight lace corset, while the skirt flows around my hips, there are two gaping slits starting at the top of my thighs, revealing my smooth, long, legs for my mates to see.

Again. I have no words. I can't even yell at him because this dress is beautiful.

But as an unmistakable chill sweeps in, I realized he conveniently forgot one thing. "Seriously?" I cock a brow in question and prop a hand on my hip.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Adrian says, feigning innocence as he whistles.

"Sure you don't," I say skeptically. "Don't forget that I have powers of my own now."

With barely a thought, a pair of red lace panties forms against my skin, and I grin triumphantly back at him. He must be able to guess what I've done since a frown immediately pulls at his lips.

Oh, but I'm not done, not even close.

I pull my powers around me readying to dissipate from the changeroom, but just before my body breaks apart, I pull the swim shorts from his body, leaving him completely naked as I vanish from sight.



“Where’s Adrian?” Kyros asks curiously as he raises his arms out to the side, blocking my view of the balcony behind him. We’ve been splitting our time between the manor at the academy and the townhouse in Ethereal, but today we insisted we take a bit of a break from the school and stay in the city.

“Oh, he’s coming.” I smirk, knowing my trick won’t slow him down by much, but I still got a bit of payback. “The better question is, what are you doing?”

I try to look around him, leaning to the side in the hopes of getting a better view, but Maximus and Mateo come up on either side of him, thwarting any hope I had at seeing past Kyros. My god of healing lets his arms fall back to his sides, clearly realizing I won’t be able to see past my two hulking mates. I’m about to ask what they’re doing again, but the words are stolen from my lips the moment I realize that something else is amiss.

“Why are you all wearing tuxes?” Suspicion laces my tone as I scan up and down each of their bodies. They’re all wearing the same style of tux, yet it looks different on each of them. The pants and jacket cling to Kyros perfectly, while they are snug around Mateo’s arms and his thighs, and Maximus looks like he’s about to burst out of his.

“Adrian did this,” Maximus grumbles. “If it was up to me I would’ve got something that actually fit.”

While the suit does look odd, and a bit snug on him, it perfectly displays his toned muscles, making my mouth water at the delicious sight. “I think it’s working for you,” I say

noncommittally, not wanting to give them too much praise before I find out what the hell is going on.

“I knew you’d like it,” Adrian says from beside me, wrapping an arm around my shoulders.

I didn’t even hear him dissipate in.

I turn to look at him slowly, vaguely realizing his arm isn’t bare against my skin, rather there’s a soft linen fabric tickling me.

Adrian, too, is dressed in a form-fitting tux, a smug grin curling on his lips. “Your little trick didn’t do anything other than make me change before I dissipated here.”

“Can someone answer me now? What’s up with the formal wear? Are we going someplace?” My irritation rises as they grin at each other, and I hate how much I love their stupid, handsome faces right now.

“We aren’t going anywhere,” Kyros says innocently. The three of them move, at once as though that was their cue, revealing the balcony behind them.

My mouth falls open, whatever I was about to say long forgotten as I take in the scene before me. Red rose petals line the floor, leading in a trail out to the balcony. The glass doors are wide open, as though beckoning me out to the beautiful dinner they have prepared. They must’ve been busy while we were in the mortal realm since there’s a large dining table draped with a red tablecloth that wasn’t there before, with chairs and place settings already arranged. Candles flicker,

adding to the ambience as the sun begins to set, casting an orange hue over the white roses set in the center of the table.

“It’s beautiful,” I breathe, reluctantly dragging my eyes away from my surprise and back to my guys. “You did all this for me?”

“Of course,” Kyros says, his brows knitting together as though it shouldn’t even be a question.

I mean, it probably shouldn’t. They’re always surprising me and finding cute little ways to show that they love me.

“I would burn the world down for you, princess,” Maximus says, the deep rumble of his voice flooding my body with warmth.

“As would we all, so a dinner is really the least we could do to show you how much we love you,” Mateo agrees, his lips twitching as he scans my body over, his heated gaze catching on my cleavage.

“I told you, earlier was just the appetizer,” Adrian murmurs, placing a kiss on my cheek.

“So if that was the appetizer, and this is the dinner, what do I get for dessert?” I tease, debating if we should put dinner on the back burner and skip straight to my treat.

“Whatever you want, angel,” Adrian chuckles, his hand shifting to the small of my back, his fingers brushing over the curve of my ass.

Such a tease.

He guides me forward, and I take my time soaking in every small detail of the dinner they put together for us as we walk out onto the balcony. There's an array of actual appetizers on silver platters, a combination of cheeses, cured meats, and bread, my favorites. A few bottles of wine that I love are already on the table, with a mix of main dishes from some of our most cherished places we've visited in the human world.

"This is amazing," I say, turning to my guys as Adrian pulls out my chair at the head of the table.

"Anything for you, little mate," Mateo says, snagging the spot on my left, much to the chagrin of Maximus and Kyros. Adrian sits to my right, grinning, and Max and Kyros sit further down the table. "We know you've been stressed with everything going on, and we wanted to do something nice for you to take your mind off of everything."

"Don't remind me," I groan as I pile food onto my plate. Adrian pours me a glass of Lambrusco that we tried in our favorite spot in Venice, immediately putting a smile back on my face.

A girl can really get used to this.

"Is there anything we can help you with?" Kyros asks as he fills his plate and passes down the tray of meats and cheeses.

"No, it's just squabbling, like usual," I say, my chest feeling lighter as I tell them just what we've been dealing with. Of course, Mateo and Maximus already know the stress we've been under integrating the dark gods back into Ethereal. There

are some light gods who are dead set against it, and they've been making everything more difficult than it needs to be.

There were countless others who were given the same punishment, but at the end of the day we can't strip everyone's powers, not when they have a crucial role to play throughout the realms.

What they don't know is the extra stress I've been under because of Titus and his damn secret I've been keeping. It's been eating away at me ever since, and I'm starting to hit my breaking point right now. I have to tell Nelle.

"Are you sure that's it?" Mateo asks, his hazel eyes light with a knowing look, like he can read the thoughts straight from my head.

I take a bite of my food just to avoid the question for a moment longer, shrugging like I can't answer just yet. Guilt claws at my insides, but I can't tell them, I can't break Titus' trust, not after what he was willing to do for me—for us.

"With the new students coming in soon, I'm just worried about the new protocols we'll have in place. Plus Nelle ..." I trail off hoping a bit of the unspoken truth will be enough to dissuade their worries.

"Don't worry about the recruiting," Adrian says, clasping my hand in his as he holds my gaze. "I have that under control. And I'm sure Nelle must be catching on to the training by now, right?"

I give him a grateful smile, but shake my head, revealing the other issue that has been on my mind. “I just spoke with her last night and ... she’s struggling.”

“Well why don’t we head over to the training grounds tomorrow to check up on her?” Mateo asks, and I nod, a grateful smile spreading across my face as I look around at my mates. They’ve all stopped eating, their attention completely on me, ready and willing to help me with whatever I need.

“I think I’m ready for my dessert now,” I say, lust fogging over my gaze as I run my bottom lip between my teeth. I want to express to them just how lucky I am to have all of them with me.

“I thought you’d never ask.” Adrian leaps up from his seat, the table settings and the food disappearing in an instant as they pop up on the table inside. I expect him to lift me up on the table, but instead he hops up onto the solid wooden surface right in front of me, his legs hanging off the edge of the table on either side of me.

My eyes widen in shock, but before I can even ask him what he’s doing, he reaches towards me and grasps me under my arms, hoisting me up onto the table too. I let loose a small squeak as I lift my legs and straddle his waist, expecting the long skirt of my dress to bunch under my knees, but instead my skin presses against the cool polished wood.

“Adrian,” I say in warning, already knowing that the dress is gone, as a cool gust of air sweeps over my heated skin. The



only scraps of clothing still clinging to my skin are a red lace bra and thong.

“I’m just repaying the favor and saving you a bit of time, angel,” Adrian says grinning up at me. My lips purse as I notice he too has gotten rid of the rest of his clothes, the formalwear now replaced with the smooth, chiseled planes of his chest.

I sigh as I lean over him and run my hands up his abs, resting them on his pecs, unable to resist my god of illusion any longer.

“I can’t complain about the view,” Mateo says, leaning back in his chair. His gaze roves over my bare skin and his thick fingers wrap around his tie to loosen it, a noticeable bulge in his tight pants already.

Before I can say a word though, Adrian pulls my lips down to his, consuming me with a toe-curling kiss. His tongue wastes no time as it sweeps in, caressing my own in long, languid strokes.

I moan into his mouth as a pair of large palms smooth over my ass, the skin rough against me. He reaches for the waistband of my thong and even before he rips it at the seams, I know it’s Maximus’ hands on me. I press my ass back into his touch, loving the possessive way he grips my hips. I expect him to slide his fingers into my already soaked pussy, but his arms wrap under my legs and he presses his face into me. I whimper as he slides his tongue into me, wasting no time as he devours my pussy.

“You’re so gorgeous, sweetheart,” Kyros murmurs as he slides his hands over my shoulders, lightly massaging me before reaching for the clasp of my bra. He swiftly undoes it, and I lift my arms for him one at a time as he slides it off of me.

Adrian clasps the back of my head, holding me down as Maximus replaces his tongue with two massive fingers. I moan into his mouth and he swallows the sounds, not letting me have a moment of reprieve from the flood of pleasure rushing through my veins.

Max curls his fingers inside of me, and I push my hips back, needing as much of the delicious friction as I can get.

“She’s so fucking wet for us,” he grunts, and anticipation thrums through my body like electricity, waiting for the moment he pushes his thick cock inside of me. I’m already so worked up from what Adrian did to me earlier, I’m not sure how long I’ll make it if I don’t have one of them inside me now.

Warm lips press against the middle of my back, placing soft kisses all the way down my spine that only add to the lust racing through my veins.

Movement to my left draws my eye, and I break away from Adrian to watch as Mateo pushes his pants down his legs and his thick cock springs free. “Are you wet for this, little mate?” he growls as he wraps his palm around his long, hard cock and strokes it slowly.

My eyes are riveted by the sight, my brain and mouth apparently short circuiting for a moment as I forget to respond. “Yes.”

“You heard our mate. She’s ready for your cocks now.”

It takes me a minute to realize what he said as Max pulls his finger from me.

Cocks?

“Do you think you can take both of us?” Adrian asks, curling a finger under my chin to draw my gaze back to him. “We both want to fuck that tight pussy of yours, angel.”

Realization lights in my brain and my eyes widen, my imagination already running wild. I’ve taken more than one of them before of course, but this takes on a whole new meaning and I’m here for it.

I nod eagerly and the guys chuckle in response as Adrian’s hands dig into my ass and position me just over the head of his cock. “Just let us take care of you,” he murmurs.

His lips capture mine just as the thick head of his cock presses against my entrance and he slides in. He lets me adjust to his size for a moment before he slides in and out of me in a steady rhythm, working my body up. I lose myself in the moment, not letting myself worry about both of them fitting inside me. But as Max’s hands grip my hips, I try to pull my lips from Adrian’s but he shifts one of his hands to my hair, keeping me in place.

“Do you trust us, princess?” Maximus asks from behind me, his voice a low sensual rumble that immediately puts me at ease. These are my mates and I know that they wouldn’t do anything if I didn’t want it. I nod, barely able to move as Adrian’s mouth consumes mine, helping to encourage the flames of desire as they lick up my spine.

Adrian pauses and pulls out slightly. I’m about to ask what he’s doing and tell them that I’m ready, when Maximus pushes the tip of his length against me. He slides in slowly, stretching me more than I’ve ever been before.

I gasp and tear my lips from Adrian’s, too overwhelmed by the pleasure rushing through me to have his lips on mine right now. My legs shake as Maximus reaches around me and circles his fingers over my clit, immediately sending a shockwave of ecstasy from my head to my toes.

Maximus grunts, and if his face is anything like Adrian’s, he’s barely holding himself back right now.

“Please,” I say on a shaky breath, unsure how I’m even able to speak right now. But I need them to move, I need the delicious friction of their cocks plunging inside me, and bringing me more pleasure than I ever thought possible.

To my relief they don’t tease me, and Max pulls out partially while Adrian slides back in.

“You’re so fucking tight, princess,” Maximus groans, his pace increasing in time with Adrian’s. Flames of desire ignite as I’m caught between them, unable and unwilling to move as they pound into me. A scream tears from my lips as they bring

me closer and closer to that precipice, Maximus' fingers relentless, working my clit in time with his thrusts.

“You're ours,” Mateo says from beside me as he stands, his hand still leisurely stroking himself as he watches every second of what they're doing to me. The possessive growl sparks something inside me, ratcheting my pleasure even higher as I throw my head back.

I'm so fucking close, one more move and—

My thoughts cut off as something wet and hard presses against my ass, and I look over my shoulder just in time to see Kyros there, a bottle of lube in his hand as he circles a finger over my tight hole. The sensation throws me over the cliff as an earth-shattering orgasm crashes over me. My pussy pulses around them, slowing their thrusts, but they don't stop. Their lengths plunge inside me, fucking me through my climax and sending me hurtling right into another one as Maximus pulls out and Kyros slips his finger into my ass. I gasp, my lungs desperate for air as Adrian's release spills inside me, drawing out my orgasm by angling his hips to hit as deep inside me as he can.

They don't give me a moment to recover though, as Kyros pushes another finger into my back entrance, stretching me out for him while warm languid heat rushes through my limbs. My heart is thumping wildly, but I'm ready for anything these men are willing to give me.

I expect Kyros to replace his fingers with the head of his cock, but he slides them out just as Adrian pulls out of me.

“What—”

My question is cut off as Maximus’ hands wrap around me and he lifts me from the table and cradles me against his chest.

I go to ask my question again, but before I can say anything Adrian climbs off the table and Mateo takes his place. A grin spreads across my lips and I shake my head. These men never cease to surprise me.

Sometimes the ability to speak mind to mind annoys me, but right now it only heightens my desire for them as they make their silent plans and keep me guessing.

I expect Max to place me back over Mateo like I was straddling Adrian, but he surprises me again as Mateo positions his feet on the table and Maximus lowers me on top of him facing the other way.

“Just lean back on your hands, little mate so I can take that tight ass of your,” he purrs, sending tendrils of desire up my spine.

Maximus helps position me over Mateo, placing my legs over Mateo’s, keeping me upright as Mateo positions his length at my back entrance. I moan at the delicious pressure as he pushes in slightly, needing more and more of that intoxicating fire blazing through me. He must’ve put lube over himself before as he slides in easily.

He rolls his hips slowly as I adjust to the fullness of him seated inside me, and I suck in a sharp breath, my body on fire with everything my mates are doing to me.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” Maximus growls as he steals my lips, his fingers rolling one of my nipples between them. I moan against him and he greedily swallows the sound as a possessive rumble vibrates from his chest.

He slides his other hand from my back now that I’m situated and strokes his still hard cock, reminding me that I’m not done with him yet. I want to be the one to make each four of my mates come today.

Mateo slides in and out of me, the delicious pleasure rolling through me causing my arms to shake as I struggle to keep myself up.

“I have you, angel,” Adrian says, his hands slipping under my back to support me. I pull my lips from Max’s about to ask where Kyros went, barely able to think straight with the lust fogging over my mind, but when my eyes flicker open he’s right in front of me, his honey-brown eyes dark with hunger as he devours me.

“Kyros, I need you,” I plead, my pussy aching, needing for my fourth mate to fill me completely.

“Sweetheart,” he groans and fists his cock, but he doesn’t waste anymore time as he leans over me. He guides his length into me as Mateo pauses, letting him sink in fully so I can adjust to the overwhelming pleasure of both of them inside me.

I moan as Max rolls my nipple again, tingles of desire washing over my skin as anticipation races through me. “Please, fuck me.”

As if my words snapped them into action, Kyros and Mateo move at once. Their cocks plunge in and out of me, overwhelming my senses with the fullness and friction of both of them pounding inside me.

They work me up, the delicious friction almost too much as my breath comes in ragged pants and sweat beads along my skin. I'm so close that when Max rolls my nipple one final time, it pushes me right over that cliff. Sparks erupt behind my eyelids as they snap closed and my pussy and ass clench around them.

I force my eyes back open, needing to see the agonized pleasure on Kyros' face as he fucks me through my orgasm, barely hanging on as he grits his teeth. But with one final thrust he grunts and presses himself as far as he can inside me and I gasp as his cock pulses, his release spilling inside me and triggering another climax. I cry out, and Mateo pulls in ragged pants, desperately trying to push through and draw out our pleasure as much as he can.

Before I know what is happening Kyros pulls out of me, and Max takes his place. I grin as I think he's about to slide his hard cock inside, but instead Mateo grips my waist, his cock stilling inside me as Adrian helps me up onto my knees.

A whimper of protest slips from my lips as he pulls out of me, but I quickly realize they're just repositioning me.

"I'm not done with you yet, little mate," Mateo growls, his teeth grazing my ear. He helps me lean forward, my arms still shaky from the orgasms.



Mateo wastes no time sliding into my ass, and I gasp at the languid heat that rolls through me at the fullness of his cock inside me again. My gaze flicks up to Max as he stands before me, already piecing together what their plan is. I balance myself with one arm as Mateo grips my hip with one hand, pinning me in place while he gathers my hair with the other, lightly tugging it back for me.

His pace increases as I reach for Max's cock and wrap a hand around him.

"Fuck, princess," he grunts, as my lips wrap around his tip and I run my tongue over it. I groan as the salty taste of his precum mixes with my arousal still clinging to his skin, and glide my mouth over him, urged on by his pleasure.

Max's cock pulses in my hand, and I know that he's already so close. I increase my pace just as Mateo slides his hand from my hip to my clit, rubbing circles over the sensitive numb.

A moan slips from my lips and Max jerks as the vibration rolls over him, his hips rolling against me, silently urging me on.

I'm almost sure my body can't handle any more pleasure, so when my orgasm crashes over me it takes me completely by surprise. Neither of my mates can hold on any longer either, and we all come together. Max's release spills into my mouth, and I swallow every drop as Mateo spills his climax inside me, our bodies coming together as toe-curling pleasure washes over my skin, stealing away the last of my strength.

I quickly release Max's length, and I catch myself on the table just as Mateo slides out of me.

"That isn't the only surprise we have in store for you," Adrian says, excitement lacing his tone as he wraps his arms around me and cradles me against his chest.

"If it's any more orgasms, I think I'm going to have to sleep for a few hours before we can start again," I murmur, wrapping my arms around his neck as he carries me back into the house.

"Nope, it's not more orgasms." He chuckles, the rumble of his chest soothing me as my eyes close. "Well maybe later, but—don't fall asleep."

"Wasn't falling asleep," I say, doing my best not to sound sleepy, but I don't think it works. "I just need cuddles and a bed."

"We can do that," Kyros says, and I open my eyes as his voice echoes off the tiled walls of the giant bathroom.

I take a deep breath of air as the soft scent of lavender tickles my nose. "A bath?"

"A bath," Kyros confirms. He steps into the giant tub while Adrian lifts me in with him, the massive whirlpool bath large enough for all five of us.

I let loose a moan as Adrian lowers me into the warm water and I sit on one of the seats, loving the way that the bubbles gently tickle my chin. Kyros pulls me into his warm embrace and I gladly follow, loving the waves of comfort any of their

touches elicit in me. The water splashes again as Mateo and Maximus climb into the tub next and take seats on the opposite side. The tub is deep enough to cover most of their torsos too, so they lean back as well, letting the warm water relax us after the workout we just had.

A goofy grin spreads over my lips as I watch each of them in turn, contentment and joy clear on all of their faces. Kyros' cheeks dimple as he smiles back at me, his honey-brown eyes so warm with love I could melt every time he looks at me. Adrian's crystal-blue eyes spark with mischief, so full of life, and joy. I already know that he's concocting his next scheme, but that's just part of his charm. Mateo's hazel eyes watch me, like he knows exactly what I'm thinking. He's grown so much from that pompous jerk chucking daggers around my class, and it fills my heart with more pride than he'll ever know that I was able to help him as much as he's helped me. Maximus' emerald gaze is usually stone cold, but when he looks at me I see the passion behind them; I see the fire and heat that burns in his soul for me.

"I love all of you so much," I breathe, tears welling to the surface as I look at each of them, my heart so warm and full of joy and life, more fulfilled than I could have ever imagined.

"I love you, too, angel," Adrian says, his brows furrowing as though he's trying to figure out where this is all coming from.

"I love you, sweetheart," Kyros says, rubbing his hand over my arm in a comforting gesture.

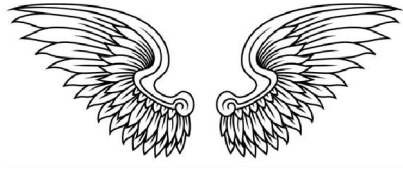
“I love you, princess,” Maximus says, his words searing into me like an unending promise, meant to stretch until the end of time.

“I love you, little mate,” Mateo says, his lips twitching with amusement, but I know that he’s loving every second of this. “You’re ours forever and always.”

“And you’re all mine.” The words settle in my chest, locking the ties to their souls in place, because there’s no way I’m ever letting these four men go.

# Afterword

Thank you so much for coming on this journey with Olivia and her men! This was my first series and I want to thank all of you amazing readers for sticking by my side. The last two years have been incredible and thank you for being here with me. This is the end of this series, but I have so many more plans for this world and I hope you'll join me, and some of your favorite characters, for the ride!



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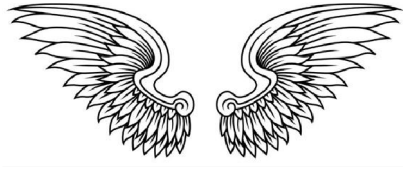
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## About the Author

Rachel lives in Toronto, Canada with her husband and her pup Callie. When she isn't writing, or reading, she can be found on a patio or at a farmers' market. She loves traveling and hitting up her favorite wineries.

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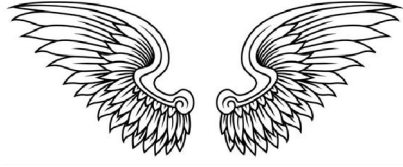
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