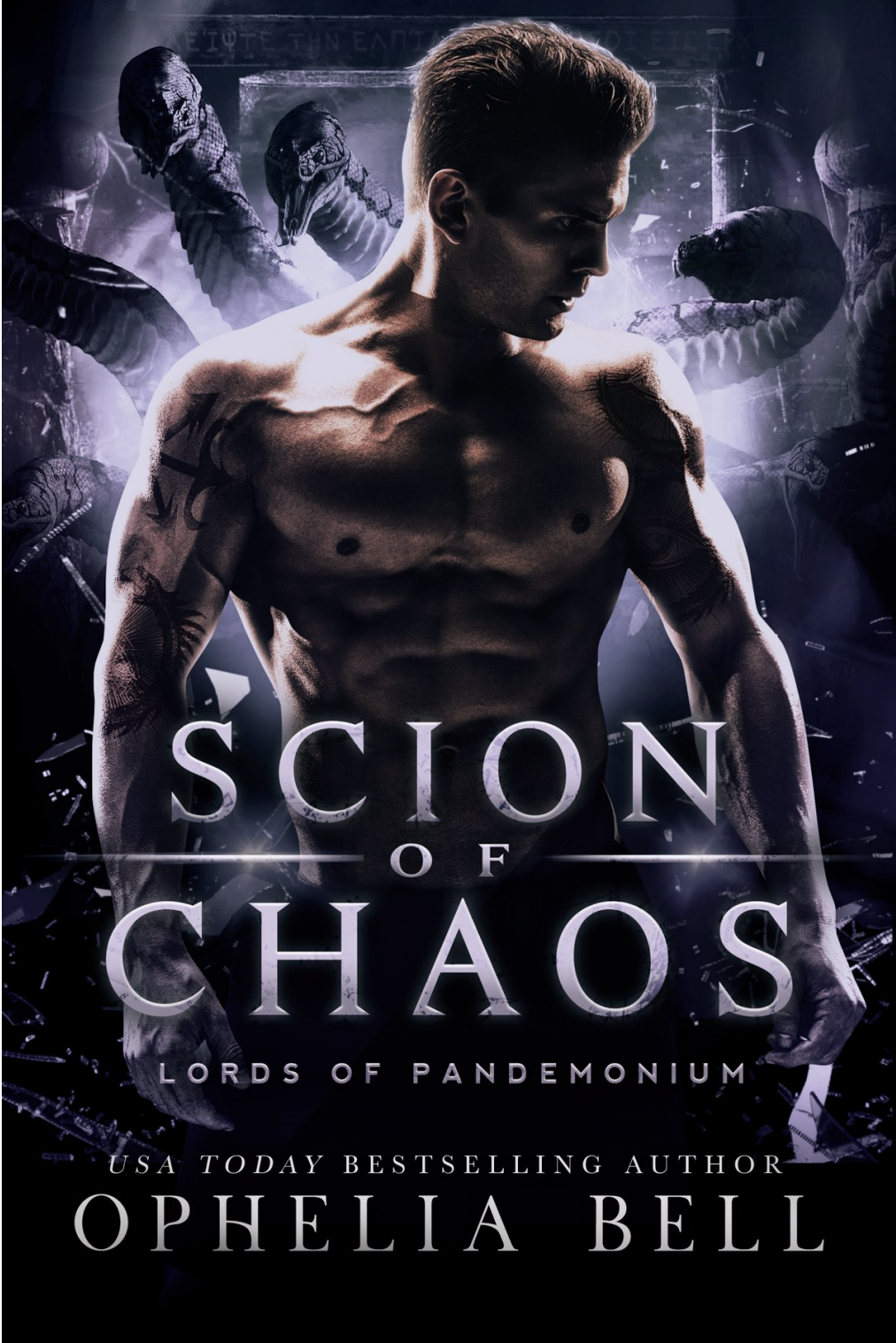


SCION
OF
CHAOS

LORDS OF PANDEMONIUM

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

OPHELIA BELL



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SCION OF CHAOS
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BOOK ONE

OPHELIA BELL



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DESCRIPTION

Enjoy this extra spicy reverse harem monster romance by USA Today Bestselling paranormal romance author Ophelia Bell.

When Nemea Jones wakes up naked and bruised, amidst the wreckage of an isolated cabin, she discovers that twelve hours of memories have been stolen from her. In their place, she has gained the ability to wreak havoc on the world with every flicker of emotion. The arrival of a dark, alluring stranger a few days later only threatens to fan those sparks into a raging inferno.

She used to believe she was insignificant. Despite belonging to a portion of humanity interwoven with the essence of magical races, she has yet to touch her own magic and understand what it can do. This longing for truth compels her to accept this stranger's invitation and begin a perilous journey to unleash her dormant elemental power, convinced that something truly extraordinary slumbers within her.

From the secluded, elite art institute nestled along the Puget Sound to the unfathomable abyss of Tartarus, Nemea relentlessly pursues power and enigmas she never imagined possible. Along the way, she must confront her inexplicable

attraction to the otherworldly beings she encounters—and the insatiable longing they share for her.

Scion of Chaos is the first book in the Lords of Pandemonium series set in Ophelia Bell's ever-growing fantasy/paranormal world. The world features mythical creatures and gods alike, and the powerful heroines who capture their hearts. Each book has a happy-for-now ending, perfect for fans of C.M. Nascosta, Siggy Shade, Opal Reyne, and Katee Robert.

FOREWORD

This novel is a product of the author's fascination with the intriguing world of Greek mythology, but it's important to remember that it's a work of fiction, not a historically accurate retelling of these ancient tales.

While you will encounter various elements inspired by the Greek myths, they serve as starting points for the narrative, not strict guidelines. This novel showcases a distinctive reimagining of classic characters and events, so expect familiar themes interwoven with creative twists and turns.

The book is designed to entertain and intrigue, rather than educate about Greek mythology. It aims to present a fresh, imaginative take on these stories, and any deviations from the traditional narratives are intentional. This creative liberty doesn't undermine the importance of the original tales; it is simply the nature of artistic interpretation.

While it's hoped that this novel might pique interest in Greek mythology, it's crucial to acknowledge that any exploration into the ancient tales themselves will reveal a depth and complexity that is beyond the scope of this novel. Thanks for understanding, and enjoy the journey!

He too, that enemy of the gods, who lies in fearsome Tartaros,
Typhon the hundred-headed.

—*Pindar, Pythian Ode 1*

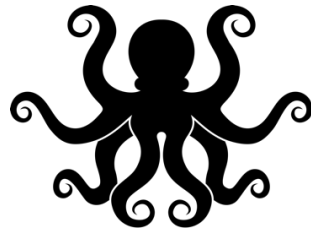
CONTENT WARNINGS

Elements found within that might cause alarm or concern to some readers:

- Amnesia
- Weird dicks
- Snakes
- Oversized horny (and horned) monsters

I

TYPHON



Thunder cracks outside the warm, cozy darkness of my quarters, jolting me out of a restless sleep. *Breach*, my instincts tell me, and immediately the claxons sound. The bad kind. The kind that mean I should rouse to action and aid my fellow prison guards in the fight they're no doubt embroiled in.

I can't move, though. Erebus' darkness acts like a drug, dulling the pain of my injuries. How long ago did I sustain them? It could be hours or days, or even a thousand years since the last battle we fought—the one where I lost three heads and was called to the earthly realm beyond Tartarus to fight a goddess, despite my brothers both agreeing it was pointless.

Time has no meaning in Erebus' darkness, though it is a healing shade. I open the eyes of my strongest head and see nothing, but feel the itchy, tender throb of regenerating flesh. I raise and crane my neck, then nuzzle the crown of one of my other reptilian heads, its scales still as soft as a hatchling's, the cerebellum inside barely conscious and its spine just strong enough to hold itself up. The other two are in better shape,

almost fully healed. Enough to fight? I don't know yet. I must wait for orders.

I drift back into a fugue, mentally reaching for my oldest brother—my commander, and the warden of this place we guard.

“Brother Tartarus,” I prod, trying to wake him. *“Should I report for duty?”*

He doesn't answer.

I push against the blanket of darkness my other brother wrapped me in. I cannot reach him with my mind, which is worrisome. It means Tartarus himself is unconscious; I can't mentally communicate with any of the other guards until he wakes.

The alarm claxons bleed through the muffled cloud of blackness that cradles me.

Breach, I remember. A prison break has occurred, and I can't help. My orders were to heal, and until I'm told differently, this is what I must do. If the breach was bad enough to render my brother unreachable, it must be a bad one. The prison is one and the same with his flesh; they are bound the way a soul is bound to a body. If he's hurt, I should ignore my orders and do what I can to help.

Agitation presses outward from my belly, turns to nausea when I'm still unable to do more than raise my heads. The newly healed ones wobble, and the still-forming one sags lower, then drops back to hide beneath my wing, its incoherent hiss the only indication of its awareness.

“Tartarus,” I try again. *“Are you well? Should I report for duty?”*

Still no answer. I try again, using his other name... the name he uses in the human world.

“Vesh. Are you there? Please answer.”

The answer finally comes, preceded by a sense of agony as vast and debilitating as the pain of decapitation. I throw up a barrier against the howl that reverberates through the entire prison, shaking its very foundation.

“Guards, report!” comes his command, the relief I feel at the sound of my eldest brother’s voice enough to abolish my agitation. I wait and listen for the others.

“The gates are shattered,” says Asterius. *“The Titans have escaped. Void demons are invading. We’re doing what we can to hold them off, but we can’t repair the breach without you.”*

I feel Tartarus taking stock like a silent observer lurking at my back. It happens in an instant, and then his presence is gone, the voice returning.

“Where is Pan?”

“Hasn’t reported yet,” Alcides snaps, his voice clipped the way it is when he’s focused on a task. If the gates are destroyed, the entry must be overrun by the creatures that exist in Keño, the plane between Tartarus and the rest of existence. All the other guards should be there. I would be there too, if I could move.

Tartarus curses. *“I’ll come as soon as I find the treacherous faun.”*

Pan is one of us. He has no reason to betray my brother or the other guards of this prison; no reason to fall in with the enemy. He was with us when we caged the Titans the first time. His power was instrumental in taking them down. It

must be a mistake. But he is notoriously prone to mischief and regularly irritates the other guards with his antics.

Except this goes beyond the pale where mischief is concerned. A breach bad enough to shatter the very gates is beyond most of the guards' capabilities, including Pan's. But Tartarus' thoughts don't linger on the problem. He's focused on something else now—distracted. He's hunting the faun, I realize, and has caught a thread of power that pulls at his consciousness. I can sense the tug through our link.

Now that he's conscious, I can sense the others as well, and reach out to determine whether the other guards are aware of this pull the way I am. They are too preoccupied with the breach to notice, or to care. But I am intrigued and let my awareness piggyback on Tartarus', riding his search. Will it lead us to Pan, or to something that can explain the breach? Perhaps it will lead to wherever the Titans escaped to.

The power itself is like nothing I've ever encountered. It's soft, but potent, as varied as the scents of our kitchen when Pan and Asterius prepare our holiday feasts. It incites a hunger within me, and I eagerly cling as my brother continues his search. I don't sense Pan, though, which means he is either in another realm entirely, or he is unconscious.

"He'd better hope that's how I find him," my brother says, startling me into retreating. Guilt over my eavesdropping makes me burrow back into the darkness, each of my hundred heads tucking back beneath my wings. But the sensation of power Tartarus chases lingers, and I can't help but reach out for his mind again after a time.

As an excuse to be in contact, I venture, *"Should I join the fight? Erebus must lift this darkness if you want me to report for duty."*

“They will call you if you are needed. My orders to them were to let you heal. I don’t want to waste your power on a breach the others can handle themselves. They’ve seen worse. I will return to repair the doors once I locate Pan and he is safely back inside.”

“This magic you’re tracking... do you think it’s related to the breach? Is it the Titans?”

“Uncertain. It’s a novel magic, isn’t it, little brother? It intrigues me. It does not feel like the Titans; I doubt they will prove as easy to track.”

“It tastes like Chaos, but ... different,” I say. “Why can’t we portal right to it? It’s in the mortal world, isn’t it?”

“It is. I tried to portal, but something blocks me. I must travel by land to get to it. Be silent and let me focus.”

I leave him to his hunt, drifting along in the back of his mind, peeking out through his eyes as the world blurs by. I have been unconscious during much of my recuperation so have missed these ride-alongs. I almost never have an excuse to visit the mortal world, and am never asked to go unless I’m needed to fight some battle. The last one was the worst in eons and left me bitter for want of a taste of *fun*. If only I could shift into a human shape the way the more beastly of my fellow guards are able to...

Not that Tartarus allows *them* out, either. As guardians of this realm, we are only a step above the prisoners. We don’t step foot outside unless summoned by the call of Chaos to carry out some task the ancient primordial wishes of us. Even then, only Erebus and myself can physically leave the prison; the others must get their taste through the eyes of one of my brother’s clones, a result of his mind merging with the faun’s

and reproducing bodies like an amoeba's penchant for self-replication.

Chaos' summons have come for increasingly petty reasons, I've noticed. The last one was to chase down a man who'd dared to *cheat* at cards in the casino Chaos has chosen as his home in the mortal world.

My brother mistakenly assumed it would be an easy fight and promised us fun would be had after we finished and reported back to the casino. He promised I could fly us there after the battle was over.

But we did not win. We were soundly beaten, left to crawl back to the prison with our tails between our legs and with me three heads lighter.

I don't blame my brother; we are all tools of a more powerful being, so if I blame anyone, it's Chaos, who still refuses to let go of his ancient rivalry with Fate. Their ongoing feud will ruin us if it keeps up—death by a thousand cuts.

"What is it?" I ask when Tartarus abruptly halts. He's hovering above a cold, dark sea, staring at a pine-covered island that's barely more than a speck in the distance. A chill rises through me, buzzing at the base of all one hundred of my skulls. *"No. We mustn't go there again. You must come back with me. We can find Pan another time!"*

"I don't think we can go there."

He ventures closer despite his words and my objections. This is the place where we battled last. The pain of the decapitation is still fresh in my mind, and my still-healing head lets out a pitiful whimper.

"This is odd," he muses. *"He is here. Can you sense him now?"*

I'm too distracted to hear him at first, but then I reach out with my mind, seeking Pan. I hit a barrier that feels like the goddess who severed my heads. I recoil, but Tartarus keeps going anyway. We're nearly upon it when I finally *see* the shimmering barrier that reeks of fate magic and balk.

"See? We mustn't go farther. Fate has clearly barred us from ever stepping foot on that island again." And I'm more than fine with that, even though the intriguing magic that drew us here is somewhere on the other side of that barrier.

"But I can sense Pan in there," Tartarus says. *"Extend your senses. Tell me if you can find him. Don't worry, I've hidden us, so he won't be aware. We don't want him to run."*

I shouldn't even be able to push my mind past a barrier of fate magic, but I do as he asks. The magic parts, and I find a small cabin resting on a rise amid redwoods. Pan is inside. I easily slip into his mind and peer out through his eyes.

As my brother promised, Pan doesn't acknowledge me. He's enthralled by a creature who is with him: a beautiful woman with pale skin and black hair, darkness painted around her eyes and lips stained the color of venous blood. She is tending him, talking to him. And I realize *she* is the source of the strange-tasting power.

Her power is like chaos deconstructed, but the potential is there and unmistakable. She shows Pan an object that resembles his own cock, constructed out of my brother's flesh.

Does Tartarus know she has this object? Of the power she wields if she can transform the cast-off remnants of his body in this way?

I return to my brother, who stands on the rocky beach, staring down at a pile of broken void glass. Pieces of him left

behind after our battle? Or pieces of the doors that came through when Pan arrived? Either way, this must be where she found the shard she turned into an offering for Pan.

He crouches and picks one up, frowns, then squeezes it until his knuckles turn white. The shard melts, its matter reabsorbing into his flesh. But there is more... so much more.

“Did you see her?” I ask.

“Yes,” he growls. *“I don’t know what she is, but she’s what has drawn us here, likely summoned Pan with that replica of his dick. I didn’t think we’d be able to return, but now that I’m here, I see there’s work to be done. After we retrieve Pan and mend the breach, we’ll come back and clean this up. Leaving these pieces strewn across the island is too big a risk.”*

He clenches his jaw, his entire body tense. A war unrelated to the one being fought in the prison rages in his mind. I know what it is, though, because the pull of her tugs at my awareness just as much.

His mind is a jumble of excuses and emotions, the likes of which I have never felt when sharing his consciousness. He is relieved that Pan hasn’t betrayed us, pissed about the Titans’ escape, and perplexed by our very presence on the wrong side of a fate barrier. He stalls because he wants to let Pan have a moment of pleasure before hauling him back home; we get so few opportunities to leave, and almost never get to venture out with our own bodies.

Beneath all his questions is the undeniable pull of the woman inside the cabin, and the disbelief at the realization of *how* we are here at all, how a barrier that was meant to keep us out has let us through.

Is it a trap set by Fate? How else would we be here, after all? Creatures of Chaos are said to not be bound to answer Fate's summons, but what if we are and it just hasn't happened yet? Only fate magic would allow us to pass through.

I'm privy to his entire thought process and reach the same conclusion the moment he does when he whips his head around to stare at the cabin. It may be a trap, but if it is, the bait is inside, ripe for the taking. Why not have a taste while we're here—test the trap, see if it springs, and deal with the consequences after we've had our fill.

“Yes,” I say when I grasp the thread of his thoughts. “*Let me taste her with you.*”

2

TYPHON



Fear of the island has all but disappeared. We could be on the verge of a battle even worse than the one we fought here three years past. But when Tartarus reaches out his mind to link to Pan's, the faun is already inside the woman. She's riding his cock, her scent and juices covering his beard from tasting her.

Tartarus doesn't disguise our presence, and Pan pushes back against us. *"No, get out. She's mine!"*

"Not if we were able to follow you. You know what this means for us. She is ours. Even if this is a trap, she belongs to us, and I mean to have a taste before I take you home."

Tartarus pushes deeper into Pan's mind, taking me with him as he walks toward the cabin. We inhabit the faun's body for one glorious moment of pleasure before he ejects us, begging the woman not to stop. He thinks if he can finish inside her that he will be free.

"She can't save you, Pan," Tartarus says through the mist he's summoned as an extension of his consciousness. It fills the space around the fucking couple, letting us see them from all sides before we've even entered the room. Chaos magic sparks through the mist as the woman writhes atop Pan,

seemingly oblivious to our presence while we wrap her in a loose embrace, gliding the moisture over her smooth, warm skin.

“Vesh, how the fuck are you even here? She’s mine!” Pan yells aloud this time.

The woman stills as though aware, but not afraid. Tartarus slithers his vaporous form around her, teasing her soft and sensitive parts. She moans when he tweaks her nipples. My own arousal pushes against his mind, and he silently coaxes me to be patient.

We will have her together, he promises.

The cabin shudders when we step up onto the porch, but I don’t think it’s our doing. Panes of glass in the windows begin to crack when we cross the threshold, buckling under the pressure of the power pushing *outward*, not *in*.

“*This is her, isn’t it?*” I observe, more eager than ever to touch her, even if it’s through my brother’s fingertips.

“*She is dangerous, little brother. Isn’t it wonderful?*” Our mist continues to stroke her supple skin, coasting over her curvy body, drawing more moans from her. When we push open the bedroom door, Pan rises onto his elbows, a panicked look on his face.

“Get out!” he yells. But he isn’t about to make the girl stop riding his cock.

Nemea. I pluck her name from Pan’s mind as Tartarus carries us to the bed. He climbs on, kneeling between Pan’s spread legs and pressing up against her back. This close I can scent her, and every one of my hundred heads rouses to full alertness. My cock rouses with them, engorged enough that I maneuver onto my haunches in my cave, fully awake from the

flood of desire through my system. Without letting go of my connection to my brother, I move to the dark warmth of my bathing pool and slip into its depths, rolling onto my back to let my cock breathe while I enjoy the moment.

My brother dips his head and drifts his lips across her ear. “When you summon him, you summon me, Nemea. He is bound to me, as are all the guardians of Tartarus. I’m sorry I couldn’t answer your call sooner. But I’m here now, ready to take my share.”

Nemea shudders, but not from distaste or even fear —“dangerous” is right, if she is so flushed with power that she doesn’t fear us.

Pan scowls up at us. “Why do I have to share *everything* with you?”

Tartarus lifts a hand and presses against the center of her back. She bends over without protest, gifting us a glorious view of her round ass. Her opening is stretched around Pan’s cock.

“It’s okay,” she says to him. “I want you both.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” Pan protests.

But her statement is enough to urge us on. My brother grips the remnants of her panties still clinging to one hip and rips them off, then tears open his own pants, releasing his stiff cock. I drift three of my heads down low to lick up my own shaft where I float atop my pool, letting out a groan as pleasure floods me.

“Are you ready, little brother? Be alert, because if this is a trap, this is when it will take us.”

But I don’t care. It’s been centuries since we’ve had a cunt so sweet, if we ever have at all. Tartarus nudges his cockhead

at the place where Pan fills her. My own tip throbs, greedy for more.

“Will you share?” he asks, teasing his fingertips between her thighs.

She cranes her head to look at us, her eyes wide, her pupils fathomless and dark as she studies his face. I want her to see me too, but to show her might be the end of this fun. I am not a creature women are happy to set eyes on, so it's easier if I can hide behind my brother's handsome face.

Finally she nods and bends over again. She kisses Pan, and they share a silent exchange we aren't privy to, but I sense his surrender too. A moment later, he shifts his hips down to slide out of her, granting us room to move in. Tartarus aligns his cock with the faun's and presses both their tips to her core once more.

Then we slide into her, and the tight perfection of her pussy squeezes all three of us. Several of my heads let out soft rumbles of pleasure while others join the few that are licking my cock.

“That's perfect,” Tartarus says on a groan. He grips her hips and pushes deep. Pan's mind links with ours, easily giving over to the need to please her now, to pleasure ourselves. We are in sync as we fuck her, bending over and setting a steady rhythm. The air around us vibrates with power, some of it ours, but most of it not. The power is unrestrained, untrained, and wilder even than Chaos himself. It's all her, and when she lets out her first orgasmic cry, the window beside the bed shatters.

I'm lost to the grip of her sheath, my own climax boiling over even as the cabin begins to shudder around us, beams cracking and glass shards tinkling to the floor. Tartarus and

Pan both yell in tandem with her cries when the cabin collapses around the bed.

“Here it comes!” Pan yells. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you!” And I can’t help but wonder if it’s a warning to her, or to us. But we are all lost to the moment, helpless in this ecstatic grasp.

I briefly lose contact with my brother when it takes me, and when I reclaim control of my senses and reach out, he’s already sent the faun back home and is alone with the girl. He has her back pressed to the mattress, now an awkward, crooked mess on the floor. I hover in the recesses of his mind, waiting to see what he will do, ready in case the trap springs shut.

But nothing happens. He heaves a breath, marveling at the creature beneath him.

“What did you do with him?” she asks.

“I sent him back where he belongs before he could finish mating you. He has to answer for what he’s done. His error could destroy the world, and I’m the one who has to pick up the pieces. I’m sorry we can’t stay.”

He rises, leaving her naked and flushed. Broken things crackle beneath his feet, and he holds his hands out, drawing all the chaos that lingers in the air back into himself.

Nemea rises to a sitting position, shaking her head frantically. “I need answers! He said I had chaos in my veins. What does that even mean?”

Sadness washes through us, resignation over the need to leave to attend to the mess awaiting us back home. “To me, it means you’re perfect,” Tartarus answers. “But it’s better if you forget. You’ll be safe here inside the barrier of fate magic. The

rest of the world won't be so lucky if I don't fix Pan's fuck-up."

I keep watch, stretching my awareness out in search of any potential threats, but find only the static bubble of fate magic that shrouds the island. Its purpose is to keep out any creature who isn't meant to be here... who isn't *fated* to set foot on the island. Which means if we are here, somehow Fate has wrapped their threads around us.

It should frighten me to realize my creator's enemy has somehow found a way to control us, but after what just happened, I'm not scared—I feel more alive than ever.

Tartarus tuts a warning. *"We cannot have her... at least not yet. If we can leave this place under our own power, we must. We have work to do, and she will be safe if she remains here."*

"What if she follows? What if she draws us to her again the way she somehow pulled Pan to her? Is she the reason the gates were shattered?"

"That, I don't know. I don't believe her power is strong enough to break me. The Titans could have broken the doors if they were working together, though."

Beneath his words, I sense a thread of doubt. She could break him. She could break us all. So I agree with his decision to leave her behind... for now.

He rounds the bed and bends over her one last time, tilting her chin up with one finger, then presses a slow kiss to her mouth. I close my eyes and savor her softness. Then he gazes into her eyes, pushing a small measure of power out to cloud her memories.

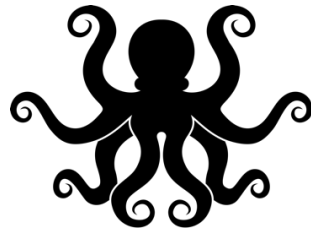
"Forget us, Nemea. We are nothing but a fever dream that your awakening power summoned. Learn to harness the chaos

inside you, and you'll be more powerful than you can imagine."

Then, with an arcane crackle, we retreat all the way back to the prison and right into the middle of the fray.

3

NEMEA



W *et. Cold. Ugh.*

It's a hell of a way to wake from *the* most erotic dream I've ever had. I don't really want to open my eyes—I want to sink back into that sensation of being touched all over—but something's poking me in the shoulder, and it's starting to hurt. My nipples tingle and my thighs ache, and the sense of having been fucked stupid fingers when I open my eyes.

At first I'm disoriented, because the world just looks *wrong*. There's a doorway in front of me, but the wall that should be around it is gone, giving me a view of the mist-shrouded redwoods' sun-gilt edges, their golden hue burnishing as the sun sinks farther behind the trees.

I sit up and something beneath me creaks. Pieces of my day creep back in, the events in a jumble, but only one event matters. I look down at my lap where the dark, solid shape of the obsidian dildo I sculpted rests, glowing faintly purple in the dim light.

It was midnight when I started my ritual. What time is it now?

Looking around, *everything* is wrong.

“What the actual *fuck*?”

The quaint little cabin, which has felt like the perfect sanctuary these past few days while I worked up the nerve to try summoning a god, is just *gone*. I’m sitting in the middle of what remains of the rough-hewn wooden bed, amidst the rubble of what used to be a building. It’s nothing but broken logs, splintered shingles, and piles of rotting pine needles now. A dense marine layer is rolling in, all but obliterating what promises to be a spectacular sunset. I’m gradually being covered in a layer of chilly moisture, but the heavy stone phallus still feels warm against my body.

I scowl down at it. There’s no god in sight, so obviously the ritual failed. I’m no closer to learning what flavor of higher races blood is mixed with my humanity. But *something* sure as fuck happened here.

The other thing that’s all wrong is the time of day. I’m looking *west* at an orange sky that’s darkening by the second. It should be dawn; I started the ritual at midnight—if you can call masturbating with a magic dildo at midnight a ritual, that is. The dream has all but completely faded, the sense of having been *with* someone unshakable. The musky scent of sex covers me, but the dildo is clean.

Because I washed it... didn’t I?

But I couldn’t have, not if I passed out after fucking myself with it.

I gingerly set it aside and scoot to the edge of the mattress, peeking into the pile of rubble to find my satchel and retrieve my phone.

I'm not imagining the time. It's early evening, about the time supper is served at the school's main lodge. The gnawing twist of hunger in my belly seems to corroborate this. So I must have done the *thing*, then passed out for.... what, eighteen hours?

"That's fucking bonkers. How the fuck...?" I dig my shirt and pants out of the pile, then my boots, and roll back to the middle of the mattress to dress, since it's really the only clear spot in the entire place.

Wait... I had panties too. I rise onto my hands and knees to hunt for them, but the slippery wetness between my legs makes me stop and look down.

That's *way* too much fluid for just rubbing one out. It's been a while since I had unprotected sex with a guy, but this was what it was like, except this is ten times messier. My upper thighs are coated with sticky fluid, and when I widen my stance to slip my fingers between them, their tips come away coated in thick, creamy fluid that there's no fucking way could've all come from me. I bring it to my nose and sniff, the scent throwing me halfway back into the dream, my entire body tingling from the memory of an orgasm so body-shattering I am kind of sad it wasn't real.

Then I extend my tongue and lick the tip of one finger. A rich, earthy flavor like truffles and saffron washes over my tongue, followed by a deeper, spicy flavor. All it does is make my stomach growl louder, but one thing I'm sure of is that it isn't how *I* taste.

I kick the blankets around to keep looking for my panties, but have no luck, so I just wipe up with the sheet and put on my clothes, then grab the dildo and shove it in my bag before slipping into my boots and buckling them up.

So whatever the dildo is has *got* to be magic if it not only gave me an epic orgasm that knocked my ass out for half a day, but also left me filled with jizz of indeterminate origin. I'm just glad I'm on birth control. Still, I think I ought to visit the clinic just in case.

After I get some food.

I book it to the path and jog several hundred yards down the beach to the steps that lead up the hill to campus. I'm winded and sweaty by the time I reach the dining hall, though half the moisture matting my hair to my neck and forehead is from the foggy evening air.

The buffet line is still up at least. I fill my plate with two of the grilled burgers remaining in one chafing dish. One thing I'll say about this place is that the kitchen never skimps on offerings for the carnivores among us. I suppose it's a bonus of having to feed a bunch of ravenous dragons and urasa every night.

I glance around, expecting to see fries too. It's a Thursday, and Thursday is burger night, and burgers always come with fries, but all I see are little pre-packaged bags of potato chips. Not one to quibble about food when I'm starving, I grab two bags and peer around the dining room. I see my crew seated at one of the round tables near the windows, chatting. Audra waves me over.

"Hey, guys," I say, plopping down into a chair and digging in.

"Where ya been, Nem? We missed you in class today. They finally got the electrical issues sorted out so we wouldn't have to work by lanternlight."

Shawn eyes me suspiciously. “Girl, that’s some serious bedhead you have going on. What *have* you been doing since last night?”

“Stuff,” I say, taking a huge bite of burger and moaning at the absolute deliciousness of it. “This is so fucking good. Did they change the recipe or something? *Fuck.*” The beef is tender and juicy, the bread soft and sweet. If I didn’t know better, I’d think I was high.

Nobody answers me, so I just focus on devouring more of the food. Even the potato chips taste better than I expected. Rachel tilts her head and her irises flicker. I tense, because the last time she used her dragon sight on me, it didn’t go that well.

I prop both elbows on the table and peer at her over the burger still gripped in both hands, eyebrows raised. “What’s the verdict this time?”

Rachel shrugs. “Still wonky as fuck, but your aura *definitely* looks like that of someone who just got laid. So spill—who is it?”

I snort and take a drink from my water glass. “I wish.”

Shawn chuckles. “It must be that new toy you made. If it works that well, you should make more. Sell them. I’ll take one.” He steals one of my chips, popping it into his mouth to crunch around a grin.

“Everyone here’s already oversexed enough,” Rachel says. “Except the two of us, anyway.” She nudges Shawn on the shoulder with a fist. He just looks dejected. At least they both know what higher races blood runs in their veins, even if they haven’t paired off with a mate.

It's an unspoken truth about the St. George School of Crafts that students don't just come here to learn about their bloodline—they come because fate magic brings them here to find a partner... or in Audra's case, *partners*. She has ursa blood, and since ursa males typically come in pairs, the lucky bitch gets two.

"I don't think it works that way anyway," I say. "I think it just responds to me. Something about the obsidian I found..."

Not obsidian. Void glass.

I blink at the errant thought, unsure from where it originated. But it makes sense; the shards I found on the beach didn't behave like any material I've ever used. It responded to my touch, letting me mold it into the shape I pictured in my mind.

"Nemea! Does that mean you figured out your bloodline?" Audra asks, sitting up straighter. "What is it? Nymphaea, right? I knew it, especially after that satyr you sketched the other day. Your sculpture was totally a satyr dick."

A barely coherent image of a handsome face with a goatee flashes through my mind, and my food settles like a hard lump in my belly. I go cold and set my burger down, swallowing and bracing my hands on the edge of the table.

"No... it isn't that simple."

The lights flicker overhead, and I distantly hear Shawn mutter "not again" as he glances up.

But it's not a memory; it's just a dream. A sensation. A voice. A beard against my face, a pair of lips against my ear. I stare at my reflection in the dark window past Rachel's head across from me and drift my fingertips over my cheek. The scent—wet forest and lush green things. But not just that...

Chaos.

Hard, terrifying beauty and primordial power rolled into one. The shape of the *other one* looms in my mind's eye, like a sentinel behind my reflection. Eyes sparking with violet power, his naked body threaded with veins that pulse with the same magic.

Suddenly the window shatters. Rachel yelps and ducks, covering her head with both arms. Then the lights go out, drenching us in darkness as thick mist rolls in from outside. Audra and Shawn both curse.

From somewhere in the kitchen comes the clattering of dishes falling off shelves, followed by cursing from the staff. I snatch up my bag and run.



THE CAMPUS IS DRENCHED in darkness when I hit the courtyard in the center, the only light the magical glow of the tree which isn't connected to the power grid, but is illuminated with its own ethereal power. I stare up at it like I've done often in the past few weeks, in awe of its very existence. The trunk is a tangle of different types of metal bars, formed and welded into an organic shape that resembles a mass of thick vines. The branches are covered in thin metal leaves that make music when a breeze blows through. The coastal weather has cast them in a patina of green that looks completely natural and plant-like, despite everything about the tree being made of metal and glass, in addition to whatever strange magic fills the globes hanging like ripe fruit from the branches.

As I stare, the globes begin to vibrate, a whistling whine filling the air like the sound of a fingertip around the edge of a

glass goblet. I'm rooted to the spot in disbelief. This isn't me. It can't be me. It's some curse that's following me.

But I can't look away when, one by one, the globes shatter with muffled pops, followed by the tinkling of glass shards hitting the flagstones below them.

One globe doesn't break; instead it brightens with a purple glow. This one hangs from a lower branch close to the trunk only a few feet from where I stand, I step forward and reach for it, my gut twisting. Just like the void glass did, it practically gravitates into my hand, the glass warm when it hits my palm.

"This isn't fucking happening," I murmur, staring into the glass and trying to make sense of everything.

What I see is baffling in its detail. A landscape of spires and pits splays before me, vast and unforgiving in its scope. At its center, an immense tower looms, surrounded by bridges extending outward like the spokes of a wheel.

Before I can study it in more detail, voices reach me from the other side of the dining hall, along with footsteps running in my direction. I quickly stash the globe in my satchel and dart away, heading for the path down to the beach.

Halfway to my secret retreat, I remember the cabin is a wreck.

"Fuck!" I yell at the sky, tangling my fingers in my hair and pacing several steps back the other direction. My chest burns and my breaths come quicker. This can't be happening. What *is* even happening? I turn again, not even focusing on my surroundings, simply trying to mentally retrace my steps from the day before, but getting lost after the moment I climaxed with the dildo inside me.

Something hard hits my boot, and I glance down to find I've wound up back at the collection of void glass where I gathered the pieces I used for my project. The shards all glimmer with faint purple light, which is new. Crouching, I sift through them, wishing for answers, but not hopeful they'll come.

What *does* come is a fresh creative urge. When I made the dildo, the elusive tingle of power surged within me to craft the shape in my mind's eye. It felt *good* to finally be creating something for real for the first time.

The surge rises again when my fingers connect with the shards. Ideas form of other shapes I could create with the pieces. From out of nowhere, I simply crave the act of creating, which is completely at odds with the panicked sense of losing control that rose moments before things started breaking earlier.

Desperate to hold onto this feeling and fend off my anxiety, I lean over and gather as many shards as I can with both hands. Some are sharp enough to leave tiny cuts on my hands, while others are almost as big as the first one I collected for my project. I stuff them into my satchel until it's so full I can't even zip it shut. Then I rise and lift it, but pause halfway through slinging the strap across my shoulder. It weighs almost nothing.

I frown, holding the stuffed bag out at arm's length. The thing should weigh at least forty pounds, but I'm not even straining to hold it aloft.

Panic threatens again. I take several deep breaths through my nose as I stare at the bag.

"Okay, Nem. You're not losing your marbles. This is just a sign that you aren't a dud, even if what the fuck you actually

are is still a mystery...”

I can't think too hard about it, or I'll lose my mind. So I sling the strap over my head and shove the bag to my back, where the contents clank softly. It *feels* solid and weighty against my ass, the strap digging into my shoulder. Gravity suggests it weighs as much as I think, but I don't feel burdened by it as I jog down the beach toward the cabin.

Obviously it's still in ruins when I reach it, though I'm not sure why I hoped for anything different. I sigh, scouring my brain for any flicker of memory of what actually happened. The door frames are still erect, but the roof and walls are a splintered mess, like a tornado blew through.

I carefully step through the front door into what was once the main room. Frantic squeaking noises reach me from the other side where the sofa is buried beneath a hunk of roof and a beam.

“Oh god, the mice.” I navigate the mess as quickly as I can to reach the sofa where I discovered a nest of baby mice when I found this quaint, abandoned cabin a couple days ago. The heavy central cross beam lies across the back of the sofa, debris almost completely obscuring it. Brown fur wriggles in a hollow beneath a broken swath of shingles and a wild-eyed, whiskered face comes into view, the squeaking growing louder. Her pink nose pushes through a crack, little claws scrabbling at the sides as she tries to climb through and out of the small space she's trapped in, but the gap is too narrow. Her body is caged between several shingles and the large beam, while her babies are barely two feet away, still safe inside the fluffy stuffing of the cushion.

Without thinking, I drop my satchel and wrap my arms around the heavy beam. It lifts easily... *too* easily, but I'm too

focused on making sure she can escape before I carefully set the beam aside on the other side of the sofa.

Mama Mouse scrambles out in a rush and heads straight for her babies, her whiskers practically vibrating as she sniffs at the wriggling pink tangle.

Taking a deep breath, I crouch close to the sofa and peer down at her. “You’re okay mama. And your babies are okay too. I’m so sorry your house is ruined, but I promise I’ll try to fix it if I can.”

I glance around, frowning. The magic I wished for is unmistakably there now, a steady hum within, where it was once barely a tickle. And somehow it’s made me stronger, because I’m pretty sure the rest of the world didn’t suddenly become lighter. That wooden support beam has to weigh a couple hundred pounds.

Just to prove it to myself, I rise and start to rearrange the rubble. First, I reposition the beam again, propping the end of it back against one remaining section of wall, then finding a chunk of roof that’s more or less intact and leaning it across the beam, then another on the other side. When I’m finished, there’s a rudimentary shelter covering the sofa and the mouse nest inside it, and I’m not even winded.

Next I rifle through the mess in my satchel and find an oatmeal cookie I pilfered from the dining hall a couple nights ago. I crouch again and set the cookie on the plaid fabric of the couch cushion next to the nest. Mama Mouse lifts her nose and sniffs, eyeing me warily.

“You need to keep up your strength for them,” I say. “Here.” I break off a piece of cookie and hold it closer to her. She snatches it with her mouth and holds it in her little claws

to nibble at it while her babies latch onto her nipples to suckle. Satisfied that she's eating, I rise.

Like it or not, this is somehow my fault, which is painful to admit. I'm not a destroyer. I'm an artist; I want to *create* beautiful things, not break them. But what does it even mean? What am I? I've met so many other students and teachers at St. George I'm well aware of the possibilities.

There are four elements they taught us about when we arrived, each associated with one of the higher races. Everyone who is allowed onto the island has some flavor of higher race running through their blood. Some students have more than one.

So what do I have? This isn't the fire affinity of a dragon or the water affinity of a nymphaea. I don't feel like singing or making music the way a turul-blooded human might. And nothing I've done since being here has led me to believe I have ursa blood. No interest in blacksmithing or metalwork, aside from the silver cock ring I made and set with a small piece of void glass. The dildo was really just a model for the jewelry. I *can* use all those mediums, but don't feel drawn to any one in particular.

I toss some rubble aside, pull out a chair, and sit down, hunting through my satchel for the piece of jewelry that awed my classmates when I presented it for critique. No one seemed fazed by its purpose, wrapped around the enormous stone phallus. Even our instructor, a burly ursa named Steven, was impressed and told me what a perfect ornament it would make for the right fertility god.

Except the ring isn't here. I *know* I stashed it in my bag along with the dildo the night I came back out here to use it.

Frustrated by the gap in my memory, I clear the floor and dump my satchel out. Black shards scatter, along with my sketchpad and colored pencils; a pill bottle repurposed to hold my stash of Kush and more lighters than I thought I had; a couple tampons and a pair of old socks; and other pretty gewgaws that I randomly pick up while out hiking around the island. More junk both creative and non-creative falls out but, the jeweled silver cock ring isn't among any of it.

“No panicking allowed. Deep breaths,” I tell myself, trying to rationalize all the things that are going wrong today. Things I can't explain. My strange surge of strength that isn't even a surge... it's just *there*. The destroyed cabin. The creative urges.

For the first time since I woke up, I think about the mess of sticky fluid my vulva was covered in. I search deep for any sense of trauma—I might not remember everything, but my *body* should, right? But all my mind wants to dwell on is the pleasant buzz still flooding my veins—the kind of loose, relaxed feeling I have after really *good* sex.

I shove all my stuff back in my bag and rise to return to the pile of ruins that were the bedroom. Perhaps the ring is in there still? But I stop in the doorway, filled with the certainty that it *isn't*, and there's no sense digging through the mess to try to find something that won't be there anyway.

Instead I trudge back to campus, girding myself to face the music over the destruction I caused before running off.

4

NEMEA



The lights are back on, at least, and when I pass by the dining hall, a work crew is already installing a new pane of glass. I suppose it's a bonus that the school is owned by a glassblower wielding powerful fire magic.

I skirt past, tamping down my guilt, and head farther up the hill to the girl's dormitory nestled in the trees on the other side of the rise facing the eastern shore. A warm glow emanates from within and I head up the stairs, looking forward to a hot shower and my own bed.

Audra's bed is vacant, which is no surprise, but Rachel's sitting up with her reading light on, paging through a notebook. The other three girls who share this floor are occupied with their own activities and barely acknowledge my arrival, but Rachel looks up and gives me a concerned smile.

"Hey girl. Are you okay? You ran off so fast after that crazy power outage and the bird flying into the window."

"Bird?" I ask, tossing my bag onto my bed. The contents clank and rattle, and my bed creaks.

“What else could have done that much damage? They think it must’ve been an eagle or a pelican. Something that could’ve survived, anyway, because whatever did it flew off.”

I sit and unbuckle my boots. “That’s crazy,” I say, hoping it sounds genuine. “At least they got the lights back on.”

“Some weird shit’s been happening the last couple days, though—the electrical stuff, and now that bird, and I heard from one of the kitchen guys that when he went to the root cellar to get the potatoes for the fries tonight, it was like a fucking jungle down there. Every last spud had sprouted and grown into a plant. They had to order more potatoes from the mainland.”

I stare at my bare feet and shake my head. There’s no way *that* was my fault, if any of it was. That’s the kind of thing I’d expect of earth magic, not—

Chaos.

—whatever I’m afflicted with. The kind of thing a fertility god might be responsible for, perhaps.

I shake off the sense that I’m right, no matter how crazy it sounds, and reach for my shower kit in the cubby at the foot of my bed.

“As long as we have hot water, I’m good,” I say, and pad to the bathroom.

I crank the water as hot as it’ll go and stand beneath the spray for several minutes before reaching for my soap. When I get to my nethers, I have the smallest, most incongruous sense of *regret* at washing away the mess.

It occurs to me that maybe I got roofied and assaulted, in which case I should probably not bathe, but that isn’t the root of the regret. Despite my confusion and uncertainty since

awakening in a ruined cabin, I feel pretty good. Better than good. I'm not tired, and I don't hurt aside from the faintest pleasant soreness between my legs. I'm still fucking hungry, but otherwise, I feel like a million bucks. My creativity is off the charts, the ideas coming so fast I'm forcing myself to resist running for my sketchbook every time some new idea strikes.

Still, while washing my hair, I give my scalp a good once-over, checking for any sign of head injury. I did wake up amid the ruins of a building—maybe something hit me on the noggin? But I find no soreness or contusions whatsoever. And after a perusal of my body in the mirror, I find not even so much as a hickey unless it's hidden somewhere under my tattoo.

The big purple octopus that clings to my side peers back at me, inert and silent. I tilt my head to get a closer look, scanning the lines and shading that stretch all the way from the side of my neck down to the top of my hip. Then I turn, craning my head to examine the part of the design that extends to part of my back. I'm interrupted by one of my dorm-mates popping in and hurriedly wrap my towel back around me. She just eyes me curiously before slipping into a stall to pee.

When I get back to my bed and slip into boxer shorts and a tank top, I throw a sweater on top and grab my sketchbook out of my bag along with a pencil.

"I'm going to go scrounge for a snack. Want anything?" I ask Rachel.

She looks up and cocks her head. "Actually, do you want some company? I could use a snack too."

The first floor of our dormitory includes a small kitchen and a great room that doubles as a library and cafe during the day. Behind the counter is a fancy cappuccino maker and a

full-sized fridge, along with a cabinet filled with assorted boxes of cereal—hot and cold—several loaves of sliced bread, a bowl of fresh fruit, and a cookie jar that never runs out.

I grab a box of granola and a banana from the fruit bowl on the counter. Rachel retrieves two clean bowls, and we tag-team making granola with sliced banana on top. We settle at one of the small cafe tables beneath a light and dig in.

“Fuck, this is good.” I stare into my bowl in wonderment, because it’s the same experience I had when I took my first bite of burger earlier tonight. Is it just because I’m starving?

“Eh, it’s passable,” Rachel says. “The banana helps.”

But it’s more than passable to me. It’s like I can taste every molecule of life that went into the grains and fruit. Flavor explodes across my tongue with every bite.

I slow my eating and stare into my bowl. “Something weird is happening to me, Rache.”

She nods. “It seems that way. Your aura said as much. It’s changed over the last few days.”

I stare at her. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“You seemed spooked the first time I mentioned it, so I wasn’t sure how much detail I should give you. I didn’t even know what it meant. Just that things were different today.”

“Different how?”

“Just-got-laid different, for one thing, which I told you. But aside from the glow everyone’s aura has when they’ve just boned—something I see a *lot* at St. George—the colors were all brighter. You’re the only person whose aura is like a crazy rainbow kaleidoscope, but tonight all the colors looked like the saturation was set to max.”

I crunch on my cereal for a few and shake my head. “That’s the weird thing. I feel like I got laid too. Except I didn’t. Or if I did, I don’t remember it.”

She stops eating and stares at me. “Did you lose time?”

“About eighteen hours.”

My friends all knew about the dildo part of my project, but Audra’s the only one who saw the whole finished assignment, since it was for a class we share. I explain to Rachel about the jewelry portion of the assignment, and our instructor’s suggestion of summoning a god to tell me what I am. Then actually attempting to do it.

Her eyes widen to saucers and her half-eaten bowl of granola goes soggy by the time I finish.

“Holy shit, Nem. What if you succeeded? What if some uber-powerful god answered your ritual, fucked you silly, then made you forget?”

“Well, they did a shit job if they left all that mess. I had *cum* dripping down my thighs when I woke up, Rache. That’s what it tasted like, anyway.”

Her mouth drops open and she lets out a stuttering cough. “Wait, you *tasted* it? As in put some in your mouth and swallowed?”

I frown. “That’s the literal definition of tasting. It tasted like semen. Better, actually.”

She shoves her bowl aside and takes a breath, spreading her hands out on the tabletop. “Okay, there’s something you need to know that I don’t think you do yet... and the reason they *really* need to have a higher races sex-ed class at this place, for fuck’s sake. For most of the higher races, bodily fluids carry serious magic. The significance of the magic

depends on which race the fluid belongs to. But for nymphaea it's *especially* sacred, because it's how they form a mate bond."

Something flutters in my belly and I tamp it down. "What are you saying?"

"I don't know if it means anything in your case, but it's something to consider. If you were with a nymphaea—a satyr—and you tasted each other's essence, that's a big fucking deal."

Ever the skeptic, I narrow my eyes at her. "Are you saying I inadvertently bound myself to a god?"

"Not necessarily. It takes three exchanges for it to be official, but all it takes is one taste for a nymphaea to know you. Not to mention there's a whole deal with the barrier protecting the island. For someone to come through, they have to be fated to be here—to be with someone who is already here."

This is all good info that I wish I'd known, aside from the fate part, which was a rumor Rachel just confirmed. But I don't see how it changes anything. I still don't remember any of what happened.

Rachel sees my dissatisfaction and reaches out to grab my hand. "Sweetie, it's messed up if you summoned a god and he smashed and dashed, even if you were willing. Especially if he gave you amnesia before he disappeared. You don't seem to think you were raped, and your aura doesn't look like you were traumatized... quite the opposite, in fact. If it was good, I'd think you would want to remember it."

"I wish I fucking did, because whatever happened to me, it changed me. The world feels different. Food tastes different. I

have all these ideas.” I hold up the sketchpad I’ve been steadily doodling on and flip back through the several pages I’ve filled. Her eyebrows shoot up.

“Nice! I’m seeing a theme, though: gods and monsters. Do you think it means something?”

I frown at the sketchpad, because I haven’t even really thought about what I was sketching. But there is a distinct theme. Besides the satyr I modeled my dildo after—the sketch still gives me a warm, fuzzy feeling when I look at it—I’ve sketched another hoofed creature: a minotaur. Along with him is a dragon, another dragon—except this one has dozens of heads—a three-headed wolf-dog, a swirling mass of misty darkness with the vague shape of a man, a flying warthog creature, a muscle-bound hunk with a lion pelt over his shoulders, and the last and most riveting, a man with eyes like deep voids and angular features more beautiful and severe than anything I’ve ever laid eyes on. The final figure is depicted standing in an architectural archway with an expanse of stark, black and gray landscape behind him that looks familiar, but I can’t remember why.

“It’s got to be a clue,” she says. She hops up and heads to one of the bookshelves, dragging her finger along the spines until she finds the right section, pulls several books out, and heads back, already flipping through the pages of one.

“Good old Edith Hamilton,” she says, spreading the first book open between us. “We’ve got a practical pantheon of ne’er do wells here. This guy....” She points at the multi-headed dragon. “...he must be Typhon, the son of Chaos and Gaia. And this guy is Chrysaor.” She flips to the winged warthog. “He’s the brother of Pegasus. And this one is Cerberus, obviously.”

She flips through the book some more, staring at each of my sketches, then steals my pencil and starts writing names under each of the pictures.

We skip back and forth, comparing my drawings to different illustrations from the books, and have all but the last one named before too long. Then we stop and stare at the final sketch, and an anxious flutter fills my belly.

“He’s kind of beautiful in a terrifying way,” she says.

But I can’t stop fixating on his mouth, which is a perfect shape. Everything about him is perfect. God-like. Except for his eyes, which look.... fractured.

“But who is he? Does anything in there help figure that out?”

“Well, some were obvious. Herakles with the Nemean lion he killed. That feels like a clear sign this is about you, by the way. But this guy... Maybe he *is* Tartarus?”

“I thought Tartarus was a mythological prison.”

“It is. And it’s also a god. At least at one time it was a god, see?” She flips through one of the books we’ve been scouring and turns it around, showing me a section that describes Tartarus as a primordial god, whereas all the others seemed to claim it’s a part of the underworld where the criminal element of the divine were sent as punishment for their wrongdoings. Or basically anyone who ever wronged a god.

“This guy is his brother, Erebus, who’s *also* conflated with a different section of the underworld.” She points at the darker image I sketched just before the last guy, a figure that looks like no more than a shadow. “He’s the god of darkness.”

I page slowly through each of the sketches again, staring at the names Rachel jotted beneath each one. My insides are

tangled, because I feel like I need to know more.

“Anything coming back to you?”

“No. But thanks for trying to help.”

She stands and grabs our dishes, laying a hand on my shoulder as she passes by to the kitchen. “Maybe you just need to sleep on it. If you want to talk again tomorrow, let me know.”

5

VESH



Pandemonium greets me when I materialize in Tartarus' entry hall, and not the fun kind. My guards are embroiled in combat as void demons of all sizes pour through the broken doors. The smallest scabble in rat-like swarms, burned to ash the second they reach Campe's fiery breath, while Alcides confronts a solo gargantuan beast whose skin is a writhing mass of twisting sinews as black as an oil slick. He swings his club, smashing into an arm that shatters into an explosion of hundreds of the smaller beasts. When he jumps back, Erebus throws a ball of pure darkness at the creatures, sucking them into a spinning sphere that he hurls back through the broken opening.

“What the fuck took you so long?!” Alcides bellows, swinging his club into the gut of another void demon. “We’ve been fighting for almost a full day!”

In the center of the fray is Pan, locked within the void glass cage I shoved him into when I sent him back *inside*.

“Let me the fuck out so I can fight!” He shoots a frantic look through the bars while stomping his hooves on the small monsters snapping at his ankles.

I grit my teeth and shoot a chaos vortex from one hand, vaporizing a fresh wave that pours through the doors, so my guards can finish handling the ones that have already breached the barrier. But where the ashes fall, more creatures flow in to take their place.

Chrysaor swoops in, folding his wings against his bristly back and ramming his tusks into another big void demon, forcing it backward. It loses balance and Cerberus leaps, all three heads snapping at the creature's throat as it collapses.

Asterius charges at yet more of the larger monstrosities, his enormous bull head lowered, plowing into the chest of one creature before tossing it aside to charge at a second. I ready another spinning wheel of chaos magic to toss at the stunned group whenever he gives me an opening.

In my head, Typhon proclaims his intention to join the fight. I guess our little diversion energized him, so I mentally welcome him into the madness.

A moment later, an unholy series of reverberating roars behind me causes my hair to stand on end. I peer over my shoulder at the gargantuan beast that just joined us.

One hundred giant snake heads wave through the air, snapping down into the mass of invaders surrounding us. Well, one hundred heads minus one that's no more than a purplish, immature snakeling still.

“Glad to see you up, brother!” I call to him.

His largest head—that of a massive iridescent dragon, scales rainbow-black—tilts sideways toward me, one big eye blinking. He rumbles in camaraderie before letting out a roar so powerful it pushes the invaders back several feet.

“Clear out!” Alcides bellows, retreating to Typhon's flank.

Erebus appears at my side, his form no more than a three-dimensional shadow so black all light disappears within his shape. He gestures with one hand over top of the other, the sign for “merge.”

“Let’s do it,” I say.

He steps into me, his incorporeal form melding with my flesh, magnifying our power. He’s already pulling power through our limbs when I join in, vision going ultraviolet as the magic surges through us and out our fingertips. A massive shield forms in front of us, expanding in a spiral until it fills the corridor between our group and the portal that separates Tartarus from Keño, the emptiness between realms.

“What about me?” Pan howls from his cage, all but buried beneath the swarming creatures.

“I’ve got you,” I call back, mentally transforming the bars of his cage into solid walls.

“Not what I fucking meant, asshole!” Pan screams inside our skulls.

“Don’t be a pussy,” Erebus retorts, his voice clear as day now that he’s literally inside my head. He pushes more power into our shield, and the effort starts to pay off, forcing the waves of void demons back inch by inch. Behind us, Typhon inhales a deep breath, digs his claws into the ground, and lets loose.

A billowing torrent of purple flames flood over the top of our shield and into the mass of creatures. High-pitched screams fill the air as thousands of them are incinerated by Typhon’s fire. It takes him three breaths before the demons get the idea and retreat, leaving the ashes of their brethren behind, scattered among the shards of the broken doors.

My guards move forward, remaining behind the shield until Erebus and I have it flush with the opening.

“I’ll hold the barrier,” Erebus says, and warmth floods my limbs as he steps free of my body, his entire being transforming into the black cloud that fills the empty opening.

My skull aches from the abuse of all the feet treading upon the debris strewn across the floor. The doors of Tartarus aren’t just part of this ancient prison—they’re part of *me*, and any damage done to Tartarus affects me on a molecular level. Usually it’s just a niggling tickle, but this time I have a full-blown migraine and an unmistakable sense of being exposed.

I begin the arduous process of reconstructing the doors while the others gather the shards and bring them closer.

“Any other damage?” I ask without looking. Rebuilding the gates of Tartarus requires almost all my attention. It’s akin to regrowing a limb, something I’ve had to do on far too many occasions.

Asterius holds out a shard that levitates into the opening, snapping into place among the others. “There were a few stragglers that made it past us, but Cerberus hunted them down before you got here. They weren’t at large long enough to do any damage.”

“What about signs of our escapees?”

“We haven’t had a moment’s rest to investigate, beyond discovering they’d gone,” Alcides says. He’s still fresh as a daisy, a sharp contrast to the other guards who are all winded and battle-worn. Asterius is still huffing steaming breaths through his nose, the heavy gold ring attached to his septum glinting with moisture.

“Cerberus reported seeing a vine growing out of their pit,” Campe says as she shifts from her enormous dragon shape into a woman in worn leather armor.

A *vine*? Nothing green grows in the depths of the prison beneath the central tower in this place; it’s a dungeon unfit to sustain life. But of all of us, only one is capable of producing such a thing out of nothing.

“Take Cerberus back and fly him down to sniff it out. I need to know what caused it.” I need confirmation before I act. “Take Typhon back to his cavern, while you’re at it so he can rest.”

I eye my multi-headed brother, whose body blocks the entire bridge. He’s only half conscious after the exertion, lying with his massive dragon head on his fore claws, all his smaller heads forming a cushion for his chin.

“You got it, boss,” Campe says. “Look alive, kid,” she adds, nudging the toe of her boot against Typhon’s nose. She manifests her wings and takes to the air, flying down the bridge that leads away from the doors. Typhon hoists his bulk up and follows, his long strides easily keeping pace until he clears the columns and can stretch his massive wings. Wind gusts across my back, ruffling my hair around my head as he lifts into the air, following Campe down the bridge before veering off and doubling back toward the cavern below the tower, where he sleeps. Cerberus lopes down the staircase after him, veering off onto an adjoining bridge to keep up with Campe. I’ll have to check on Typhon later, make sure he didn’t over-exert himself. He’s had a long, difficult recovery since losing three heads in the last battle we fought.

I continue the painstaking reconstruction of the gates, ignoring Pan’s muffled griping from inside the cube of his

cake. The idiot can wait until I'm finished.

6

NEMEA



My late-night chat with Rachel only leaves me with more questions and I'm barely able to sleep. The next day I attempt to participate in the new assignment in metal smithing and fall back on the sketches I made the night before. They're all gods or demigods of some sort; what if I craft another ornament and attempt to summon a different one for answers?

The brief this time isn't a piece of jewelry, but a multi-media, cross-studio endeavor. We're tasked with designing a flacon for perfume, then spending half our time in the alchemy lab creating a special scent for it to hold.

Before our instructor, a broad-shouldered ursa named Steven, even finishes explaining the brief, I've started sketching, the design drawn from the architectural elements of the one sketch of the man Rachel thinks is Tartarus in the flesh. Maybe if I do this right, I can summon him to me.

When the other students pull out their metal-smithing tools, I retrieve several small shards of the void glass from my satchel and lay them out on my workbench. I glance around, feeling somewhat conspicuous because I'm using neither the same materials, nor tools as the other students. My idea

includes a silver filigree cage that wraps around the bottle. I'd start with that, if I didn't need the finished bottle as a template.

I fashion four of the shards into flat trapezoids, and snap off a piece of another and form it into small, flat square. I've never tried to *build* something out of this material. With my last project, it was more like sculpting clay into one solid shape. This time it's more like slab-work, except the pieces don't leave behind any residue and don't need moisture to be malleable the way clay does. They remain solid and hard as diamonds unless I'm touching them with the intent of shaping them. Every time I touch the material, it gives me a thrill when it obeys my will, and I still can't quite believe it's actually working.

Steven is making rounds to each student's bench, offering critiques and pointers. When he comes to mine, he crosses his arms and simply watches me work. Heat creeps up my neck and I fumble, trying to hold all five of the pieces together to fuse them into one small, angular vessel. The work is tedious, especially because the design is meant to hold only about twenty-five milliliters of liquid, so it's rather small.

"Try working from a solid piece. See if you can use some glassblowing techniques to create the vessel."

I nod and try again, stacking the pieces together and pressing tight. My chest warms, followed by the faint tingling of power flowing down my arm, fusing the pieces together. Then I mold them into a narrower version of the shape I want and use an awl to create the start of an opening where the stopper will go. Next I hold the small, solid blob of void glass between my fingers, seal my lips around the opening, and blow.

It takes all my lung power, and I nearly run out of breath before I finally feel it give. The shape inflates the tiniest bit.

It's working! Elated, I take a big breath and smile at Steven in gratitude. But he's frowning at my hands and the object gripped between my fingers.

"You used the same type of stone for your last project, didn't you? I meant to ask where you found it."

"Yeah... um. It's kind of all over the beach. I... I'm not sure exactly what it is, but it responds to my touch." I brace myself, expecting more questions, but he keeps staring at my partially inflated flacon, then looks at me.

"May I?" he asks, pointing at the bottle. I hold it out to him.

He gingerly grips it between both thumbs and forefingers, squeezing until his knuckles turn white.

"What are you doing?" I blurt, standing up and reaching for my project before he crushes it and I have to start over.

He presses his mouth into a tight line, continuing to squeeze, but nothing happens. My heart is pounding, and I stare at him in shock. The lights overhead flicker.

"What the fuck? Why would you try to *break* what I just made?"

He shakes his head and hands it back. "I wouldn't have tried if I thought I would succeed. I just needed to satisfy my own curiosity. This is power unlike anything I've seen, Nemea. Does this mean you finally got the answers you were after last week?"

I scowl at him and sit back down, both hands cupped protectively around my piece. "Not exactly, but I don't feel as

lost as I did. I thought I'd try again. See if I can summon someone again who actually has answers for me."

He nods. "Scent can be a powerful tool of magic. Just be careful with it, okay? We're protected here on the island, but fate magic can work in strange ways."

The lights continue to flicker, and he glances up at them in concern, but when I redirect my focus back to my project, the flickering stops. I tell myself the same lie again: it has nothing to do with me. But ever since learning about the higher races' existence, I've come to understand that there is no such thing as a coincidence.

It takes the rest of the afternoon to complete the small vial. When it's finished, it resembles a shining black bubble enclosed within a silver cage. The filigree resembles the eight arms of an octopus wrapped around the outside, which I carefully cut out of a thin silver sheet and etched with textured markings before affixing it to the surface of the vial.

I crafted the stopper out of another piece of the glass and fitted it into the opening, then attached a hinged silver latch that keeps it closed. Finally, I added a loop and jump ring at the very top and threaded a silver chain through it so it can be worn as a pendant. Tomorrow our class is scheduled to spend the day in the alchemy lab under the supervision of a nymph named Clio, who is going to walk us through the process of creating the custom scents our bottles will contain.

But I already know exactly which scent belongs in my bottle and where to find it. With the flacon dangling between my breasts, after supper I head back to the cabin on a mission, but unsure exactly how I'll accomplish my task.

It's a clear evening for once, but a chilly breeze blows through, making me wish I'd stopped back at my dorm for a

sweater. But the hike warms me, and by the time I reach the ruined structure, I'm warmed through.

I stop beside the little hutch over the sofa and crouch, peering in at the mouse nest. Mama Mouse stares back at me, nose and whiskers twitching.

"You already smell what I brought for you, don't you?" I smile at her and retrieve the paper napkin wrapped around the chunk of blackberry cobbler I pilfered from tonight's dessert. It's a sticky mess, but she doesn't care, eagerly climbing up to nosh on the purple goo and crumbled biscuit underneath it.

I stand and wipe my hands on my pants, then turn toward what's left of the bedroom. Despite my doubts, I'm operating on the assumption that Rachel is right and that someone—a god—actually showed up and had his way with me, then made me forget the encounter. I try to ignore the feelings of betrayal and abandonment rising with me, despite the fact that I don't know whether that's what actually happened. For the record, I'd have kept it a secret, if he'd only asked.

All the more reason to get answers, though, and *real* ones this time. I don't want to be left with only a vague impression of something happening, and the very real powers I'm developing with no clue how they're supposed to work.

The bed is the only area clear of rubble. It's as if something protected me from the roof crashing in and the walls collapsing around me while ... whatever happened, happened. The dip in the center is where I stood to dress the day before, and the corner of the sheet draped across the pillow is the one I cleaned myself up with, but that isn't what I'm after.

I crawl onto the bed and pull the blankets back. I was lying with my head on the pillow, so if I *was* fucked, the wet spot

would have been somewhere a few feet lower. If he was here, that means some of his *essence*, as the dragons like to call it, is still here too. After all, I lay here for almost an entire day, and I doubt it all stayed inside me.

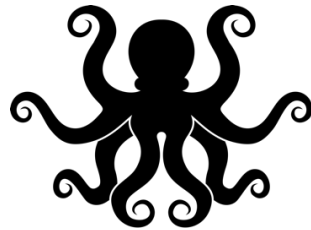
“Where’s a fucking blacklight when you need one,” I mutter, and then a thought occurs to me. I reach into the bag and pull out one of the shards. It glows purple when I stroke it, and I hold it over the sheet, pushing some of my newfound power into it until the glow brightens considerably.

“Hell yes! It’s working.” I sweep the light over the sheet until the dull glow of plain fabric brightens to a more vibrant ultraviolet. The spot is right in the center, and when I drop a hand to brush my fingertips over it, it’s definitely stiffer than the fabric around it.

I pull out my multitool and cut the section out, stick it in a baggie like I just collected evidence from a crime scene, then head back to campus.

7

VESH



Only a few shards remain when the flap of wings fills the air again, along with the rhythmic clatter of Cerberus' claws running across the bridge toward me.

"Report," I say when Campe shifts while still airborne and drops to land on her feet at my side. Cerberus settles on my other side sending a trio of low, accusatory "woofs" in Pan's direction.

"I don't think you'll like what we found," Campe says.

"I don't fucking *like* any of this. Time is wasting, and I still have to go give Chaos the bad news."

Erebus' shadow still spans the gap left in the gates, extending dark tendrils that begin levitating the remaining shards. It takes some of the burden off, and I smile grimly in appreciation.

Campe's attention shifts to the box holding the opportunistic ass I had to go drag home. Of course he had something to do with it.

"We found satyr semen at the bottom, Vesh," she says. "It was mixed up in the roots of the vine that grew out of their

waste.”

I growl at the news. Impatient with the pace of the repairs, I summon all my power and stretch my hands out at my sides, palms facing forward with chaos magic surging through my fingertips. Erebus wisely evacuates the doorway, materializing beside me as I let out a roar. The broken pieces of the doors rise into the air and snap back into the opening. Then with a loud groan, arms shaking from the effort, I fling all my power at the doors. The fissures between the shards glow with ultraviolet light as they fuse. When the light fades it's as if the escape never happened, the doors once more a solid barrier of dark glass.

The entire prison shudders from the force, but the doors hold, the echoing howl of the void on the other side falling silent. As an afterthought, I push an extra layer of power at them. This is the first escape attempt that's ever succeeded, and it'll damn sure be the last.

With the last ounce of energy I have, I haul the box over and the sides drop open with a reverberating clang. Pan huddles in the center, arms wrapped around his knees, and peers up at me.

I frown, registering for the first time that something is off about his appearance.

“Where the fuck are your horns?”

He lifts his hands and drifts his fingers over the nubs growing from his skull. They used to be enormous, majestic coils, but now are now no bigger than his thumbs. I'm surprised I didn't notice their absence earlier, but I was too distracted by the lure of Nemea's lush bottom and the scent of her arousal to care much about Pan's appearance.

“Hopefully still buried in Hyperion’s stomach. I suppose it’s too much to hope the bastard dies of sepsis.”

“Are you sure you didn’t negotiate a ride out with them and just use your horns as payment?”

His eyes widen and he shoots to his feet. “Fuck no! I tried to hold them back, but I’m no match for all four Titans. Where were the rest of you when I called?” He shoots an accusatory glare at the others.

“We’re still short-handed while Typhon heals,” Asterius says. “We were all patrolling our sectors.”

“Cerberus got here a split-second too late,” Alcides says. “You were already gone. Where *did* you wind up, anyway? Did you see where Hyperion and his brothers went?”

“I didn’t go to the same place as them. The second I went through those gates, I got pulled elsewhere. *You* know exactly where I landed, Vesh.”

Cerberus pads over, all three noses lifted and alert. One head sniffs in Pan’s general direction while another aims at me. The third lets out a gruff, inquisitive bark.

Campe chuckles. “You wanna tell us where *you* were, boss? Because Cerby seems to think you were both in the same place.”

“Retrieving his lecherous ass.” I cross my arms. “Explain to me how your semen wound up at the bottom of the Titans’ pit.”

He glances at the others, jaw clenched. His gaze shifts to the floor after a second, his cheeks reddening with shame. He spreads his hands in supplication. “I know this is going to sound like I’m passing blame. I’m not; it was all my stupid fault for getting distracted and stopping where I did to jerk off.

There aren't exactly an abundance of options for sexual release here, you know. No offense, Campe."

"Sweetie, if I wanted your dick, you know I'd have had it many times over by now. But I also know you aren't that particular about who or what you stick yours into." She eyes three of the other guards. Cerberus is studiously ignoring her, one head licking some nonexistent wound on his front paw, while Asterius and Chrysaor are both more interested in their fingernails. I don't police my guards in their free time, but it isn't lost on me that the more randy of them wind up in one another's beds on occasion, out of necessity more than any particular affection.

Pan looks indignant. "I don't fuck the prisoners."

"Who said I was talking about prisoners? What you boys get up to in your time off is none of my business, but I don't need Cerby's noses to be able to tell who's been fucked recently. I *am* still a dragon."

"Enough, you two," I snap. "Get on with it."

Pan pulls his glare from Campe and looks at me again. "Nemea—the girl on Bear Island—summoned me. She crafted a replica of my cock out of void glass and used it under a full moon. I think she must have started working on it early in the day because I had this feeling I couldn't shake. I was too pent up to concentrate on my patrol, so I took a short break—a few minutes, no more—just to relieve some tension. I didn't think I was *that* close to the Titans' pit, but I guess I didn't account for the epic range my dick has." He shoots a grin at Campe.

Campe scoffs and I eye them both, mentally urging them to behave. Asterius snorts softly and shakes his head, gesturing at Pan. "Despite the gods' efforts to neutralize the Titans, my grandfather's power was never fully quenched after the war

ended and we locked them up. We just hoped that pit was deep enough and strong enough to contain them. Your seed must have been all Hyperion needed to generate life. And if the others are regaining their power, either Crius or Iapetus could have provided enough moisture and nutrients to grow the vine they used to climb out.”

I nod to the big minotaur then pin my gaze on Pan. The accusatory glare he sends back makes my insides twist. We shared something profound earlier. Something we’ll have to address at some point, but now is not the time. “Cerberus, you’re on patrol while the rest of us come up with a strategy to hunt down and capture those assholes. I’d like to have a strategy for how to manage our visit with Chaos as well.”

Cerberus woofs and lopes off while the rest of us start toward the barracks and the nexus of Tartarus. The prison is a multitude of tall spires resting above a hidden labyrinth of a dungeon, honeycombed with more cells. They’re all situated around a massive circular tower with long bridges extending from the center out to the nearest circle of spires. They web back and forth across the space, extending all the way to the floor. Arch-covered bridges divide it into eight sectors, each under the watch of one of the guards.

At least the patrols *were* divided up between eight guards until three years ago when my most powerful guard, my youngest brother Typhon, was put out of commission in that pointless battle we had to fight on Bear Island.

I don’t question Chaos when he demands I hunt someone on his behalf; I just do the job. That particular job wound up pitting us against a small squad of higher races soldiers—men I’d been friends with once upon a time—and the newest goddess among the ranks of deities. It was a painful,

humiliating loss that Chaos just waved off like it was nothing, but thinking about it still stings.

Typhon came when called, only to be soundly spanked by said goddess and all her mates and minions. He's impossible to kill, but still lost a few heads that have taken ages to grow back. I doubt the Titans would have risked an escape if he'd been the one guarding the gates that day. He shouldn't have been in *this* fight, though, despite how energized he may have been after his outing with me. I need him at full strength if we're going to go head-to-head with the Titans, which at this point is an inevitability.

We need help. The problem is finding trustworthy criminals isn't an easy task, and considering almost no one is allowed *out* of this place once they're in it, it isn't the type of job I can easily recruit from outside to fill the positions. There are other guards here besides these eight, but none I'm willing to pull away from their current duties. The Furies are too busy meting out justice for those wronged by their loved ones, and the Hecatoncheires are equipped for little more than standing watch over the sole prisoner they've been assigned to. I should pick a few of the more well-mannered prisoners to conscript as guards to help pick up some of the slack. Perhaps I'll consider that after I've tackled the meeting with my boss.

Alcides catches up to me ahead of the others as we descend the steps that spiral around the outer wall of the tower. He clears his throat, and I nod to indicate I'm listening.

"Pan said he was summoned by someone named Nemea. Did I hear that right?"

"You did." The back of my brain tingles, a sign that Pan is alert to our conversation. I don't want to get into it with him again just yet. I already know what he'll say.

“Who is she?” Alcides asks, the tightness in his voice making me turn to look at him. He’s focused on the ground ahead of us, but his knuckles have gone white against the hilt of his club. The lion’s head still attached to fur cloak draped over his shoulders stares at me as if daring me to lie.

“No connection to the Nemea of your past, if that’s what you’re asking.”

He nods, but his jaw spasms and suspicion radiates off him. “You know I don’t like to use the F-word here, boss, but I can’t help but wonder if this means something. Pan getting summoned out of Tartarus—to Bear Island, of all places—then you going after him. Both of you reek of sex with the same woman, a woman whose scent is familiar to me, though I have no idea why. All I know is that I *know* it. How do you know that...” He leans closer and drops his voice to a whisper. “... *Fate* doesn’t have something to do with this?”

An icy chill runs down my spine at the mention of Fate, despite the conclusion I came to right before joining Pan in Nemea’s bed. There aren’t a lot of ways I could have broken through the barrier and stepped foot on Bear Island after being banned from the place, but I’m not about to admit it to him.

“If that’s true, it doesn’t change what we need to do right now. Who knows where Hyperion and his brothers are? We need to find them and subdue them before they can do the kind of damage they were set on before we locked them up the first time.”

The worried look in his eyes intensifies. He’s one of the few guards who I can’t easily read unless we’re merged. I still occasionally get the vaguest of impressions of what each of my guards are feeling, though. Alcides’ worries have nothing to do with the Titans and everything to do with the woman I

left behind, whose essence still lingers on mine and Pan's bodies.

“She's safe as long as she stays where she is—no one but those fated to tread upon Bear Island can get to her. That may not satisfy your concerns, but you saw the results of the battle we fought there. Even if the Titans did manage to access the island somehow, they'd have Deva to contend with. No one in their right minds would want to tangle with a goddess as powerful as her.”

Alcides grunts in agreement. “The Chimera is a fearsome creature. I've fought her kind before, and the battles were hard-won. The only fight I ever lost was against you. I believe this is where I was meant to be.”

Despite being soundly beaten, he has never seemed bitter about the fight that landed him in this place. As the half-human son of Zeus, Alcides suffered a multitude of abuses at the hands of the gods. The most tragic of them all is something I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. But as the son of Zeus, he also could not die and be rid of the torment of having been driven mad for sport and forced to murder his own wife and children.

After doing his penance of performing like a trick pony for the gods over several trials, he dropped off the map and could only occasionally be found slumming in the seediest gambling dens on the outskirts of civilization. It was in one of these dens where I was acting as bouncer, ever at Chaos' beck and call, that I came across him, drunk at a table and barely recognizable. He'd caught another man cheating and picked a fight, but that fight wasn't enough to satisfy his self-destructive needs. As the peacekeeper at the establishment, I had the job of subduing him. His misery was so profound that

when I beat him, he begged for death, sure that if anyone could do the job, I could.

A demigod like him was too valuable to kill, so I made him an offer, and he's been one of my most loyal guards ever since.

We reach the massive stone doors of the war room and Alcides pushes them open, holding them for the rest of the group to file through into the main chamber. Each of their sleeping quarters take up a floor of the central tower, with mine at the top below the gates and the war room just below. This is the only room with doors. Given the armory's contained within, it's a matter of security.

The group circles the round table in the center, and I wave a hand to summon a translucent orb above the table. The violet magic coalesces into a three-dimension image of the Earth spinning slowly on its axis between us.

"When I reached Bear Island, there was no sign of the Titans," Pan offers. "Nemea hadn't seen any sign of them, either."

Alcides lets out a breath, his relief easing some of my own tension, but not much.

"I'm surprised you thought to ask," Campe says, smirking at the faun who extends his middle finger to her. Campe chuckles.

I disregard the bickering, focusing on zooming in on the island and rotating and lowering the sphere until that one tiny part of it fills the table between us. There are more buildings than there were when we first visited, and more residents. A trio of pitch-black spots coalesce as dragons, patrolling the air above. They have Shadows guarding the place now, in

addition to the fate barrier. They aren't sparing any effort to protect the place. Which makes it all the stranger that Pan and I both managed to get in and out without incident. I zoom out again, viewing it from a distance so we can see the protective barrier of fate magic that encompasses it.

“That only means they're likely not tied to any of the residents there, so it remains a safe haven from them for now. It rules out only one of millions of potential locations. If you were a Titan, where would you go?” I glance around at each of my guards.

Chrysaor snorts and smirks at the others, his lips pulling back from his short tusks. “If I got out, I'd do exactly what the two of *you* just did—try to get laid. By the way, next time, you'd better invite me along for the ride.”

I hear murmurs of agreement from the others. Even Cerberus, whose awareness is linked to mine for the meeting while he patrols, chuffs softly.

Having eight horny guards sharing space in my consciousness on a daily basis is hard enough. They don't always warn me when they're going to take center stage, so I do my best to maintain a tight hold on my psyche when I have business that keeps me on the outside. Sometimes a man's business is his alone, after all.

But something tells me this particular business might not be just mine or Pan's. Typhon's presence lingers in the back of my mind, more focused on the conversation than he's been since before his injuries. Alcides' scowl at the others makes me take another look around at all of them. Each and every one is fixated on the glowing island in the Pacific Northwest of the United States.

The one place we know the Titans *can't* be. Which is also the place I feel drawn to the most.

8

VESH



“And where were you when this jailbreak occurred?” Chaos leans back in his cushy desk chair, staring idly out at the enormous fountain in front of the casino. The light and water show is in full swing beyond the windows, and he’s fixated on it. It’s almost as if he’s bored by my news that four of the most dangerous creatures in existence have liberated themselves from my custody.

“I was here at the Pandemonium, where I always am. You already know this. And I wasn’t aware of the breach because the casino’s security demanded most of my attention last night.”

“Hmm,” he murmurs, steepling his fingers beneath his chin. How he manages to sound judgmental in a single syllable is beyond me. “Are your guards not pulling their weight? Typhon alone should be able to handle an unruly Titan or two.”

I grit my teeth. “Typhon is still recovering from the *last* mission you sent us on, in case you’ve forgotten.” The arms of the chair creak under my tightening grip, and it’s all I can do not to critique Chaos’ demands that led us into that fight to begin with. His power might extend to every corner of

existence, but Chaos himself lives in his own little bubble. Nothing seems to matter to him beyond his unending rivalry with Fate, and when he isn't obsessing over that, he fixates on the workings of the casino and his relationship with his new bride.

“Which you *failed*,” he says, barely turning his head to glance at me. He idly reaches out to the bowl of foil-wrapped chocolates on one side of his desk, unwraps one, and pops it into his mouth. The foil flutters to the surface of his desk to join a loose pile of previous wrappers that have accumulated like autumn leaves on top of his blotter.

A dozen retorts boil up to the tip of my tongue, only a few of them from my own mind. I hold them all back, opting to change the subject. “Pan attempted to hold them back, but wasn't a match for all four. He lost his horns in the process.”

Chaos gives a slight nod as he slowly chews his candy, then swallows and shifts his attention out a different window, to the rooftop patio that adjoins both his office and his penthouse apartment next door. His mate, Sybil, is relaxing in a bikini on a floating lounge chair in the pool, the bright Nevada sun glinting off her translucent wet skin. One leg trails into the water, but the leg doesn't end in a foot—instead a tentacle-like tail extends several feet down from her knee, slowly rotating to propel her in a lazy circle around the surface of the water.

“You should probably go after them,” Chaos says distractedly.

No shit.

“Sir, I think we need to consider the possibility of a different kind of breach. The prison should be impenetrable.

Something weakened the doors. There are signs of fate magic at work.”

His head snaps around so fast my vision swims when he pins me with a look. “What did you say?” His very voice resonates deep inside my mind, and all the guards lurking with their ears to the door of this conversation stagger back and disappear from my awareness.

Fucking hell. I wanted his attention, but I never want *this* level of attention from my maker. It’s painful when Chaos focuses his attention entirely on *you* even for a second.

But the cat is out of the bag. “Fate, sir. Ever since you ordered me to go after Andrew Vincent when we caught him counting cards three years ago, things have been off. Typhon is still out of commission, so I’m short-staffed, and... well, I don’t want to discount the possibility that that fight on Bear Island just riled Fate up even more, even though we lost. That Fate might be trying to get under your skin.”

And Fate’s getting to Chaos by getting under *my* skin. The problem is, even knowing this is probably what’s happening, I can’t stop thinking about Nemea. Fate and Chaos have been at odds since the beginning of time, but their grudge match has reached new heights within the past several years. Meanwhile, everyone in the world gets caught in their tangled mess.

I used to believe I was immune. Chaos *made* me, after all; surely that made me strong enough to avoid Fate’s meddling. The guy is still in complete denial about how he managed to get hooked up with Sybil, though. Fate may not have directly chosen the primordial demigoddess whose hip Chaos has been attached to for nearly four years now, but the goddess we fought on that island was directly involved, which means fate magic brought the pair together.

“Fate magic,” I repeat. “Shit’s been happening that can’t be explained any other way. If you’re not doing it, then we can’t rule out that Fate is involved.”

“*Fate.*” The word drips like acid off his tongue, another resonant vibration accompanying it that makes goosebumps rise on my skin. I clench my teeth, holding his steady glare. “And how, pray tell, do you think I could have *missed* such an offense occurring in my own domain?”

I blink at him, stunned by his obtuseness, then glance past his shoulder through the window that overlooks his pool. Sybil is still slowly floating around, a cocktail in one hand with a straw to her lips. Her other hand applies sunscreen to her exposed, green-tinged skin while a second tentacle holds a book in front of her face. I’m not about to outright accuse my own maker of being oblivious, but the evidence speaks for itself.

Or it should, anyway.

A blur of expensive suit rounds the desk and my chair tips, landing so hard on the floor air rushes from my lungs. I can’t take in another breath because his hand is wrapped around my throat, pinning me to the plush carpet.

“You would be wise not to speak ill of my mate.”

My eyebrows lift and I manage to rasp out a rough, “Fate magic at work. ‘S all I’m saying.”

Maybe I’m a fool, but if I’m right about this hunch, I need to go find Fate and get some answers, which I’m not about to do without my boss’ leave. I’m not afraid to speak my mind around him, but going against his wishes is entirely different.

Half a dozen voices clamor inside my head in irritation while my vision grows darker. “*Tell him about Nemea and*

he'll believe you," Pan says.

"Never. He's the last person we should tell about her."

"He can help us protect her," he insists.

"He'll just try to use her against Fate if he knows."

Pan has no response to that, because he knows I'm right—the escaped Titans would drop in priority if Chaos thought he had a way to put one over on Fate for once.

I struggle to remain conscious, continuing to stare him down, but this is a game I will never win. His irises split into shards that fly into a void, sucking me in. The world falls away, leaving me spinning into the very void whence I originated.

When I finally manage to snap back into my body, I'm standing in a different part of the office with a chocolatey sweet taste coating my tongue and a belch that tastes of cinnamon liquor burning its way up my aching throat. Sybil has moved to a chaise beside the pool and is flipping through a magazine, the sun having advanced across the sky far enough to cast a little shade beneath the umbrellas. It's been at least an hour since I arrived, but I only remember fifteen minutes of the visit.

"What the fuck did you assholes do?" I gripe to the entities in residence in my head, aiming most of my ire at Pan.

"You never let us have a say. Can you blame us for taking over? The faun was right," Chrysaor says. The murmurs of agreement from the others sound like bees buzzing at the back of my skull.

"Fuck. Don't listen to them," I mutter.

Chaos chuckles and I turn, finding him relaxed on the leather sofa behind me, all the way across the office from his desk, with an ankle propped on one knee. “My discussion with them was quite illuminating. I want you to bring her to me.”

I clench my teeth. “No.”

“It took some effort to get them to stop bickering, but once they did, we managed to get to the heart of things. I believe you may be right about Fate, if what your guards say is true. You were able to breach Bear Island’s protective barrier with ease because *she* summoned you. But whether Fate had a hand in the Titans’ escape is immaterial. Whatever she is, Nemea is part of the battle now, so I intend to take advantage of whatever she represents, fated or not. You *will* bring her to me where I can control what effect she has on this development, either by neutralizing her or turning her into another weapon in my arsenal. Tipping the balance, as it were. Meanwhile, you need to return to your guards and work on becoming a more cohesive team so you can prevail in the coming fight.”

I’m too angry to question whether he’s talking about fighting the Titans, or Fate themselves. I restrain my urge to vocally object. I won’t show my cards, but over my rotting corpse will I simply hand Nemea over to him.

I tap my temple. “We have cohesion. My guards are all right up here. We couldn’t *be* any more fucking *cohesive*.”

He lifts an eyebrow and taps on his raised knee. “You missed Hyperion and his brothers’ escape. You aren’t attuned enough to what goes on inside your own head, Vesh. In the human world, that would call for therapy. But I know you’re not likely to agree to go talk to someone, so I’m ordering you to bring the girl to me so I can determine for myself whether she’s any threat. That way if she is, I can ensure we use her to

our advantage. And perhaps she'll serve as incentive for you to get your head on straight."

We engage in another staring match until I turn away before he can suck me under again. But I know better than to agree to anything. The second Nemea leaves the island, she'll be at risk, especially if I bring her here. The one saving grace is that Chaos knows he can't just go get her, otherwise he would. Bear Island is as off-limits to him as it should have been to me and Pan.

"We need to have a serious discussion about boundaries," I say to the hooligans in my head as I head back to my apartment.

"He's right, and you know it," Pan says. *"What do you even remember about that night? I can tell you exactly where I was, and where I wound up after. Where were you?"*

I was at the Pandemonium, of course, the massive resort casino in Las Vegas which is the seat of power for one of the strongest primordials in existence. It's a far cry from the gambling dens in Greece during the early days of my service to Chaos, but it stretches me thin to handle security for the place, even with the help of the others. We can't be everywhere at once, so the casino is typically staffed with either human or higher races security, and I only pull out the powers of Tartarus in emergencies.

But two nights ago, we had a particularly belligerent dragon shifter who refused to be subdued after hitting the free flowing drinks and the craps table for about twelve hours straight. Despite his slight build, he proved too much for the normal guards, and since Typhon is still recuperating, I didn't want to call on the prison guards to help and risk leaving the prison too lightly guarded.

None of the prison's other staff besides can leave their posts for more than the briefest of breaks to take over. The Titans may be the most dangerous of the inmates, but there are others who come close, including a fifth Titan who was given his own dedicated cell and punishment after a particularly egregious slight to the gods eons ago.

I had no reason to expect I'd need any help with a single unruly dragon. He wasn't even a red one, who are known for their tempers and ability to rile up a crowd. In fact, I believe he was purple, which is a color normally reserved for female dragons. My recollection after the fact makes me doubt the events right down to the gender of the creature I had to subdue, and my head throbs with the effort of remembering. He—or she, or they—were in their human form, with a cocky smile and wild purple hair. The dice had come up box cars for the sixth time in a row when I made it down to the floor to escort them out. After exiting, they took a swing at me, and the next thing I remembered was waking up face-down in the fountain, several human staff frantically trying to drag me out of the water.

I knew better than to blame the dragon for the blackout. I *don't* black out, for one thing. Nothing—literally *nothing* in the mortal world—can lay me out like that. It takes the power of a god, or a primordial like Chaos himself, to do that kind of damage, and since we hadn't clocked any gods visiting the Pandemonium that night, that left the likelihood of the damage coming from *inside* my head.

And of course once Typhon's calls got through and I delved inward to investigate, I discovered my remaining guards embroiled in a battle like I haven't seen since that fateful night on Bear Island.

Would I have withstood it if I'd been more attuned to the others? I have no idea. Most of them are more nuisance than they're any help lately. But I suppose I've grown complacent over the years working security in an establishment largely frequented by mortals. As for the prison, it pretty much runs itself, leaving my team and I to simply oversee that things don't change. It takes very little actual effort to stay on top of things, and the mortal guards of the Pandemonium are paid well enough to handle most issues, so I've enjoyed my solitude.

But that's no longer enough. I let down my guard, and so did the others, and now we have to pick up the pieces.

What's worse is that I gave into the carnal need that overtook me when Typhon and I tracked down Pan and found him balls-deep in that woman, a woman whose entire essence matched my ideal so perfectly I didn't even hesitate to take her.

In all the eons of my existence, it has never once occurred to me that I could have a mate. I'm not the kind of creature that gets to find love, much less a partner who makes sense. But if Chaos can find one, doesn't it stand to reason that I could too?

And for that matter, all the misfits and outcasts that I share mental space with?

"Get out of my head, you guys," I snap when that last errant thought crosses my mind—a thought that did *not* come from me.

"We're kind of trapped in here. You know this, boss," Asterius says.

“But we agree with you,” Chrysaor adds. “And we agree with Chaos. We want to meet her.”

“She isn’t yours.”

The thought escapes before I can rein it in. They don’t exactly respond, but I receive an impression of mixed irritation and displeasure, of betrayal and dejectedness, and eventually Campe responds with, *“Fuck you, I’ll be the judge of who is for me and who isn’t. Besides, it’d be pretty fucking difficult if our mates were nine different people. One just simplifies things so much, don’t you think?”*

“Why in the world would you want to share?” I ask out loud, even though I’ve already accepted the fact that Nemea is likely fated for both me and Pan, and Typhon too, since both Typhon and I were allowed through the barrier to retrieve the missing satyr. I’m not so insensitive as to suggest that it’s foolish for them to even think they could have mates when it’s as surprising to me as it is to anyone. Plus, Alcides seems convinced she’s meant for him simply by virtue of her name. “If I bring her to him, your chances of ever meeting her disappear.”

They back off at that, and I am vaguely aware of more subdued conferring going on between them. I could listen in, but I’m too irritated to focus on them.

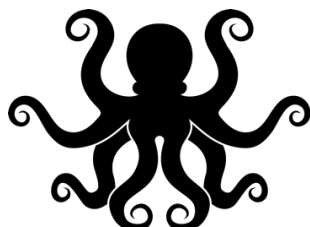
Fate’s fingerprints are all over this, but I’m honestly relieved that Chaos’ request precludes me from meeting with his rival. I still reject his alternative of bringing Nemea to him for safe keeping. There has to be a better, *safer* option for her. Leaving her on the island made sense, but now that he knows about her I’m not so sure. If she’s strong enough to draw two gods to her, I can’t discount the possibility she could draw something worse to her if she tries again.

“There is one place that’s safer,” Asterius murmurs. “One place where she will be well-guarded, and the one place you know neither the Titans nor Chaos will visit.”

The one place only I control.

9

NEMEA



I peer through safety goggles at the contraption of glass tubes and flasks, watching the Bunsen burner flame as my custom scent distills. My classmates are each at their own tables, performing their own chemistry experiments to fill their perfume flacons. I won't be able to test it until it's finished and cooled. It could smell like crap, for all I know. No aroma can make it through the filtered mask I have strapped over my nose and mouth, though, so right now all I smell is my own minty breath.

Our alchemy instructor, a dark-skinned nymph named Clio, leisurely makes her rounds, maskless. I suppose her nose is powerful enough to filter itself and not get confused by all the different scents that must be flying around.

Clio raises an eyebrow when she reaches my bench.

"I know it's probably weird to use... uh... bodily secretions for perfume," I say.

Clio smiles and shakes her head. "It's actually quite common. Animal secretions have been used for centuries. Why not human? Or..." She sniffs the air closer to the flask over the flame, which has started steaming. "Satyr? Where did you get satyr semen? That can't be..."

I shrug, having no idea how to explain it to her. I didn't even know what it came from myself, but considering the images I'd sketched prior to crafting the dildo for my ritual, it makes sense. I'm about to ask her to clarify, but frown as she leans close, inhaling deeply from the receptacle which has just started to capture the slowly dripping cooled distillate.

She catches me staring in disbelief and clears her throat, stepping back from my workbench.

“Nemea, there are only five living satyrs of maturity alive today, aside from the Dionarch and Dionysus himself. All of them are bound to mates—three of them to *one woman*.” Her lip curls as if she finds the idea distasteful, even though it seems pretty common in the higher races' world for women to wind up with more than one mate. “What you have in there should not exist.”

“Well, you must be wrong about that, because it does. I'd tell you happily how I got it, if I could remember.”

She studies me with a frown for a moment, her blue-green eyes swirling hypnotically. I feel a little woozy holding her gaze and mentally push back against it. She blinks and tilts her head back slightly.

“Interesting. You're not like the other students. If you're missing time, I might be able to help you fill in the blanks.”

I narrow my eyes. “You're nymphaea. That means you need bodily fluids to read my mind or something, doesn't it? You just want to know why I have satyr jizz.”

She presses her lips together. “All of that is true, but if there's another satyr out there, my entire race would love to know who he is, and more importantly, where he's been for the last few centuries. The males of my race were nearly rendered

extinct. We couldn't produce male offspring for over a thousand years."

"But you could still have babies..."

"With human men, yes. But only daughters. Once we opened up the Haven to the other higher races, we finally began having male children again. But many nymphs would prefer a satyr over a dragon, urasa, or turul."

I clench my jaw. Before I can control myself, I blurt, "Well, this one's mine."

Clio's head snaps back as if I've smacked her. Her mouth opens slightly and she shoves her hands into the pockets of the gossamer shawl that drapes over her shoulders. "I see. I have no intention of stealing him from you. I have a mate of my own, but we are both women and wish for a child. If there is a way to have that even if it means asking someone else's mate for a contribution, we are obligated to try for the sake of our race's survival."

My belly roils as her speech continues and my possessiveness is replaced by guilt. I've seen Clio and her wife together in the dining hall and around campus. The other nymph is a member of the island's security team.

Realizing there are likely even more nymphs who might be after what I have gives me an uncontrollable urge to take my semen sample and run away. But logic urges me to be sympathetic to her plight. All she wants is a child.

I sigh. "I'm sorry. If I knew how to help, I would, but I'm not sure what I can do."

She tilts her chin to my project. "When you're finished distilling and decanting, let me have a small taste. I can learn more by tasting than I can by smelling. I might be able to help

you fill in some blanks, and it would give me better insight about the male you were with.”

“I think I can manage that.” I give her a contrite smile and she rests a hand on my upper arm, squeezing lightly in gratitude before moving on to the next student. The possessive urge dissipates in the face of my desire to understand what’s happening to me. I’m just as eager as Clio to know who the hell he is.

I stare at the dripping liquid, marveling at how much power can exist in such a small volume. It takes another hour before it’s finished, and I spend the time embellishing the sketches I started the other night, then begin a new one that evolves into a fantastical architectural drawing of a sprawling city of spires. I’m not sure where the idea originated until I recall the glass globe still stashed in my satchel that I grabbed from the tree in the courtyard several nights ago. I don’t dare pull it out to inspect it now, but I can picture the scene within the globe easily, especially because what I saw has made it onto the paper with such mindless effort I may as well have been doodling.

A shadow falls across my page, and I turn to see Clio observing with a frown. I give her a questioning look, my insides tangled with uncertainty. Is she judging me? After what she told me, I get her interest in my project, but my sketches are unrelated. At least I think so, though I’m not really sure of anything anymore.

She doesn’t comment on the sketch, though. She tilts her chin at the flask of distilled liquid, a layer of shimmering iridescent oils floating on top of the water. “You’re ready to decant.”

The scent reaches me the second I turn the tiny spigot that drains the top layer off the liquid in the flask. It perfectly mirrors the flavor when I tasted it myself after waking up the other evening. I hold my flacon beneath the spigot, excited to test the stuff to see if it works. Clio watches avidly, waiting until I'm finished. After my flacon is full, only the faintest glimmer of oil remains on the surface of the water.

“How much do you need?” I ask, holding my flacon up.

She shakes her head and gestures to the remaining liquid. “What’s left in there should have enough of a trace, if the power is as strong as I hope.”

I cap my flacon and drape the chain around my neck. I’ll go back to the cabin later to see what kind of damage I can do out of the way of the school.

Clio reaches for a clean beaker and sets it beneath the lower spigot attached to the side of the collection flask, turns the knob, and captures a few drops of the water. Her nostrils flare when she brings it up to sniff, swirling it in the vessel like she’s a sommelier about to taste a fine wine. But she doesn’t drink; instead she daintily dips a fingertip in, then touches it to the tip of her tongue.

’Fascinated, I watch her face transform. Her eyes close, and a deep crease appears between her eyebrows as she goes completely still. Then her nostrils flare again and her eyes fly open. She stares at me in shock, irises spinning whirlpools of turquoise.

“What have you done, Nemea?”

My eyes widen and I tense. “What do you mean? I just did the assignment!”

Pressure bears down within my head, growing tighter the faster her eyes spin. I scramble back, shaking my head, but she advances. Her features twist into an accusatory grimace and the pressure in my head strengthens then splits, like fingers digging into my very thoughts.

“How are you in my head?” I cry, stumbling back into another student’s workbench, causing the glass flasks and tubes to topple and crash. My classmate shrieks in dismay. I’m dimly aware of all the other students staring at us as Clio continues toward me.

“Your essence is mixed with theirs. The creature you fucked does not belong on this island. If you brought him here, you may have doomed us all.”

“But I thought you *wanted* him!”

The grip she has on my mind tightens, forcing me to my knees. “It isn’t him my sisters and I seek, but the other one. There are two male essences mixed with yours. One is a prisoner. The other is his warden. Where is Pan, Nemea? What have you done with him?”

“I don’t know! I don’t remember!” I tangle my fingers into my hair, squeezing my head, desperate to push her out, to eject her groping tendrils from my mind. “Get out of my head! Get out! Get out!”

A scream rises from deep within me and my vision shatters into a kaleidoscope. Her face and swirling eyes are reflected as if on a hundred shards of a broken mirror. When the sound blasts out of me, the world shatters too.

IO

NEMEA



My ears ring with the discordant sounds of breaking glass and screams. Clio is on her knees a few feet away, one hand on the ground, the other reaching out to me, her face a mask of shock.

I don't want to hurt her, but she's hurting *me*. My head throbs with the pain of her grip, my vision pulsing with each squeeze. Images flash through my mind of two of the faces from my sketchbook, but they aren't sketches—they're real men. One with glowing ultraviolet veins beneath his skin, another with a beard and broken horns beginning to regrow. The memory of scents and sensations glimmer around those two images. Then they disappear in a flash of pain.

I grit my teeth and push back against her grip, a rasping cry scraping out of my throat until *something* surges forth from deep within, emerging like a tidal wave.

Whatever it is hits her and her entire body flies back, slamming into the wall all the way across the room.

More glass shatters, and footsteps pound across the floor as the other students flee. I collapse into sobs of relief now that Clio has released my mind. But along with her grasp, I've also lost sight of the memories she dredged up. I clench my eyes

shut, desperately reaching for those missing hours. I have to get them back.

My relief is short-lived. A moment later, several heavy footfalls come thundering down the path to the building we're in.

"Clio!" The feminine voice jolts me up, and a woman wearing snug leathers runs past in a blur, leaving a wake of ocean scent. She kneels at Clio's side, and I stare, bleary-eyed.

"Ephyra," Clio whispers. "She knows where Pan is."

"Bullshit," Ephyra says, glancing back at me, her eyes wide.

I shake my head. "I don't..." I begin, but I'm not sure it's the truth. The memory is faint enough to be a half-forgotten dream, but it's there in pieces.

I don't have time to finish answering, because a pair of big hands grab me beneath the arms and haul me up, then spin me to face the door.

"You're coming with us, Miss Jones." My head throbs when I turn to look up at the enormous man who holds my upper arm in a firm grip. Errol, one of the hot-as-fuck Shadow dragons who guard this island, is the one who grabbed me. His two partners, Razik and Salem, both stand grim-faced on either side of the door as he pushes me through. I stumble over the threshold into the open air, stomach churning over how low I've fallen.

"I didn't mean to hurt her," I say, my eyes blurring with tears. I try to lift a hand to wipe them, only to find my wrists bound by a dark shadow that vaguely resembles handcuffs.

"You can tell us all about it in a minute. Catch your breath."

“Where should we put her? We don’t exactly have a holding cell. We’ve never needed one,” Salem says. He’s the quiet, intense Shadow.

“As far from the glass studio as possible,” Razik says. He ponders for a moment, then seems to come to a conclusion. Suddenly all three of them shift, and I’m no longer gripped by a hand, but an enormous dragon talon that curls around my shoulder. A second talon scoops me up from behind, the other closing around me like a cage before he lifts me up into the air.

“What the fuck?” I scream, struggling against the grip of the two claws I’m sandwiched between. Errol rises over the treetops and sails through the air. Nausea surges through me for a moment before the chilly wind obliterates it, replacing it with a rush of adrenaline. Ahead of us, the other two dragons fly erratically. One lets out a frustrated roar, then they drop back. I crane my neck to look behind us just as one of the others veers away, heading toward the main office.

“You need to calm down,” comes a deep, resonant voice that vibrates all the way through the talons holding me. “I won’t drop you, but you’re interfering with the wind, which makes it difficult to fly.”

“Where are you taking me?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer, and I do my best to rein in my panic. Watching the island sail by beneath us is a sight, so I focus on the scenery, heart jumping when we pass over the ruined cabin. I blink, almost positive I saw a dark figure walking up the beach, but we flew past too fast for me to be sure.

We fly beyond the northern tip of the island and past a cliff jutting out into the water before Errol tilts against the air currents and turns.

What I see next is a breathtaking view of a beautiful villa carved into the stony cliffs. I marvel at the intricate construction that only becomes more detailed as we close in on a wide balcony spanning the stone face, opening into a dark interior. He slows to a hover above the balcony, holding me while his partner swoops down, shifting into Salem a few feet above the balcony and landing naked and agilely as a cat. Black smoke flows from his mouth and nose, weaving itself into clothing around his muscular frame. I'm a little sad he covered up, but less so when he reaches out both arms to take me from Errol's grip.

Hell, I'll take what male contact I can get, even if they're now my jailers.

"Where are we?" I ask, staring up into Salem's eyes as he sets me carefully on my feet. Errol lands beside us and strides into the darkness. He doesn't bother conjuring clothes for himself, so I enjoy the view of his naked butt until a glowing female figure joins him, giving me a pointed look and a raised eyebrow.

I snap my gaze back to Salem's face. He smirks.

"As far from campus as we can get you, for now. So *you're* the reason things have been going haywire all week, aren't you?"

"I'm sorry?" I give him a chagrined smile. "I wish I knew why. Or how to stop it..."

"Welcome to our home," the woman says, interrupting. She approaches with cautious footsteps, red-gold flames flaring from the corners of her eyes for a moment before receding. Heat builds in the air as she draws nearer, and I take a step back, beginning to sweat.

“I’m Benedetta,” she says, stopping at the threshold to the balcony. “We haven’t met yet, but I’m usually found in the glass studio when I’m on campus. I teach the framework classes in the summer and autumn sessions, then take winter and spring off.”

My mouth drops open. “You’re the phoenix! I’ve heard about you.” She’s just as intimidatingly strong and beautiful as the two dragons standing on either side of us. I feel like a troll in the presence of all her fiery, glowing brilliance. Her hair occasionally flickers with a cascade of flames, but is otherwise an ashy silver-black against her luminous skin.

“We need to keep Nemea here for the time being,” Errol says. “At least until we can figure out how to counteract her power.”

“What is your power?” Benedetta asks.

“I...” I wince, hating how it sounds, then take a breath and spit it out. “I think it’s chaos. I think that’s why things keep breaking on campus. But it didn’t start until a few days ago.”

“And you’re having trouble controlling it, I gather,” she says, her mouth dipping in a concerned frown.

A sudden flood of desperate, confused emotions fill me, choking me to the point I can’t respond. I hastily wipe a tear from my eye as I nod, wrapping both arms around my midsection, struggling to swallow back the anguish.

“Oh no. Come sit,” she says, gesturing for me to follow her. She leads me into the dark interior. Hidden sconces along the walls flame to life with a wave of her hand, illuminating the cozy space in a warm glow. The flames reveal a comfortable sitting area of wood furniture. There are no cushions, but when I sit, I realize the chair isn’t wood at all—

it's cold, sculpted iron, contoured perfectly to the shape of a human backside. It's also polished to a gleaming shine, though lightly patinaed with rust, which accounts for the color.

“When you're flammable, you can't exactly live in a house made of kindling,” Benedetta says, settling in the chair across from me. A low table rests between us. The two men remain on the balcony, guarding us like a pair of dark sentinels. “I've learned to control it when I'm teaching, but I prefer not to take chances in my own home.”

“I suppose having dragons for mates helps,” I offer. “They're fireproof, right?”

“That they are. They also resurrected me. If not for their fire, I wouldn't be alive today. They found my soul trapped in a globe on the tree in the campus courtyard, and somehow managed to find a way to release me from it. I've never regretted my powers, but living with them has required certain sacrifices.”

She gestures to the industrial decor of this room. I peer around, admiring the rustic look of the stone, in contrast to deliberate the angles and lines, and an even, patterned texture etched into the walls and floors that resembles wallpaper and wood grain.

I register something she said and frown at her. “How did you wind up in a globe on that tree?”

She shakes her head and shrugs. “Fate? That's the only explanation I have. I was killed by dragon fire more than a thousand years ago. When someone dies by dragon fire, their soul is sent to the Ashes, and from the Ashes can be resurrected as a phoenix, if found by the right mates. Fate magic brought April and her mates together when she was creating the original sculpture, and when they planted it on this

island, its roots grew deep, touching all the magical realms: the Dragon Glade, the Ursa Sanctuary, the Nymphaea Haven, and the Turul Enclaves. I think it must have also reached the realm of the gods, the realm of Ashes, and who knows how many other magical realms. Somehow it found my soul and pulled me back to the realm of the living where my Shadows found me.”

She smiles adoringly in the direction of the two dragons. I’m uncomfortably aware of their missing third, Razik, who no doubt went to their boss to report on my misbehavior.

“I’m getting kicked off the island, aren’t I?”

The three of them share a worried look and Benedetta presses her lips tight, smoothing her hands along the tops of her thighs. She’s wearing what look like normal clothes—black jeans and a loose pink blouse—but they shimmer when her hands pass over them—yet more evidence of the level of power the higher races possess if they can conjure clothing that’s impermeable to fire.

“I don’t think we should jump to conclusions,” Benedetta says. “I’m still here, after all.”

“Not that we’d have let them expel you,” Errol says.

“And I don’t think we need to expel Nemea, either,” she says. “This is the best place for you to learn to control your power. If you’re here, it’s because you’re meant to be here.”

“But I can’t be *there*,” I say, pointing vaguely in the direction of the school. “So who’s going to teach me? What kind of creature uses chaos magic and knows how to help me control it?”

They all share more looks, more frowns.

“You don’t even know how it works, do you?” I ask.

Benedetta takes a deep breath, slowly shaking her head. “No, but there aren’t many other phoenixes in the world either. The only other one I’ve met was almost as new to the power as I am. The best she and I can do is compare notes when we’re together. I learned control mostly through practice and focus. For some of the Bloodline, that’s the only option. If we have to build you your own studio in a corner of the island so you can have a place to learn, we will.”

Despite how optimistic she sounds, I can’t help but remember the state I left the cabin in. I don’t remember how I did it, but I’m positive it was my fault somehow. What building is going to withstand my fuckups?

I cross my arms, torn between thanking her for how kind she’s being and my skepticism that there’s any hope for me at all. My lip begins to quiver as the hopelessness takes hold again. I absently reach up and clasp the small bottle still dangling between my breasts and squeeze. This was supposed to give me answers. Maybe it still can. The missing time must hold some truth for me.

“We’ll figure it out, Nemea,” Benedetta says again, her tone more comforting as she stands. “I’m going to make some tea and we can talk more, at least until the others get here.”

“Then what happens?” I ask, craning my neck to watch her walk to a staircase near the far wall. She pauses and looks at her two mates.

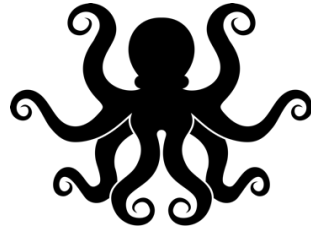
“I’m not sure, but we want to help, don’t we?”

The two men stare back without answering. They’re probably chatting telepathically, like dragons do. At least it’s clear that *some* kind of exchange occurs, because Errol finally tears his gaze away from her to look at me.

“I’ll be straight with you: the security of this island is our job. If your presence here jeopardizes that, we’re obligated to handle it. But the decision isn’t ours to make. When Cassandra and April get here, it’s up to them.”

II

NEMEA



“I feel like you want to lock me up or something,” I say, barely able to hold back my panic. The lights flicker and I dart my gaze to the nearest wall sconce. It’s not even electric. Why is this happening to me?

Benedetta frowns at the lights, her eyes flickering as though reflecting the flames, though they’re obscured by translucent stone. The two dragons take a cautious step toward me.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know how to stop it.”

She holds up a hand to stop the men. “You’re safe here. We won’t lock you up. We just want to protect the other students and staff at the school.”

I swallow back tears again, though one escapes and slides down my cheek. Letting out a shaky sigh, I wipe it away and give Erroll a pleading look. “Is Clio going to be okay? I didn’t mean to hurt her. She got in my head.” I raise a hand to my head, grimacing as I recall the probing invasion, like fingers sinking into my brain.

His gaze goes distant, and a second later, he nods. “Razik says she’s just bruised and shaken up. He relayed her sincere

apologies for what she did. I guess...” He pauses and frowns. “She evidently thought you wanted her to help unblock your lost memories? What lost memories?”

I reflexively wrap my hand around the flacon resting between my breasts. “I think I summoned a god a few nights ago, but I don’t remember any of it.” The bearded face flashes through my mind again, and I frown. “She said she would help, but I wasn’t ready for what she did. I didn’t know it would feel like that. I had no warning, then she was just clawing at my brain.”

I recall the weird expression she had when she saw my sketches and my heart leaps. “Where’s my sketchbook? And my bag?” I scramble to my feet up and rush to the balcony, staring out at nothing but water and the vague outline of a landmass miles across it. “I need my bag.”

Salem rests a hand on my shoulder, squeezing as if he thinks I might jump. I take a step back and brush him off, then turn to face the three of them.

“Listen, I might be desperate, but I’m not crazy. Something happened to me three nights ago that... *activated* me, I guess. I don’t remember what, but I have something in my bag that I need to help me figure it all out. Along with this.” I lift the perfume bottle up. “If you guys really want to help me, I need my bag. And someplace safe to think about all this.”

Benedetta rises. “Nemea, St. George was created to help members of the Bloodline learn their powers. You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t meant to be. We’re all invested in helping. You can trust us. This *is* a safe space.”

“But I still don’t really know the answer! I think the power I have is... is *chaos*. But I don’t know what that means, or

how to use it or control it.”

The two men share a worried look, but don't show any other reaction, though I get the sense their silence means they're madly relaying our conversation to their partner, Razik, who is no doubt at this moment telling their boss everything. I'm not sure if I have any choice but to trust them, though.

Benedetta takes a few steps closer and gestures to the small bottle I'm gripping white-knuckled against my chest. “May I see?”

I reluctantly release the bottle, but she doesn't come closer. The heat radiating off her makes me realize why. She doesn't want to burn me. I lift the chain over my head and hold it out. She gently grasps the small vessel between her fingers. An orange glow appears where her fingertips touch the object, growing brighter every second.

I'm still holding the chain, so I tug it from her grasp right as the silver filigree starts to melt. “You'll ruin it! Jesus, what is *up* with you people trying to break my shit? At least for me it's involuntary.”

She presses her lips together. “The metal, yes. But touch the glass. That isn't normal glass. Did you create that, or did you find it?”

“I made it.” I drape the chain back around my neck. It's still hot from the heat conducted through the metal, but the bottle itself feels no warmer. “Well, I found the material, but molded it into this, then added the silver filigree.” I hesitate for a second, glancing between her and the two Shadow dragons standing guard. “It's the third thing I made from the same strange glass I found on the beach. I have more of it in my bag, if you want to see.”

“Razik has retrieved your things. He’ll bring them,” Errol says.

“I’d like to try something. If I may?” Benedetta takes a step closer. I frown at her outstretched hand. “Will you take my hand? I just want to see how much heat you can withstand. If I’m right, then I might have a theory about your powers.”

I swallow and lift my hand, stretching it out to her. My heart pounds as her hand clasps around mine. She’s just pleasantly warm, though, so I let out a breath, gaze shifting between her face and our clasped hands. After a moment her hand begins to glow the way it did when she held my perfume bottle. The heat intensifies, and I brace myself for a burn, but it doesn’t come. Despite the glow eventually becoming a blinding white and sweat breaking out on my forehead and neck, trickling uncomfortably between my breasts, it never hurts.

She lifts an eyebrow at me and I smirk, excited by this discovery. “Gimme all you got,” I say, grinning.

“I don’t think that would be wise,” Salem says, stepping in and wrapping his big hand around both of ours, gently urging us apart. “If she burns out, we won’t see her for several months, and Errol gets really pissy when she’s gone.”

I frown, letting my hand drop to my side, experimentally flexing my fingers. They feel warm, and I also feel oddly energized. “That actually happens to you?”

Benedetta shrugs. “I am a phoenix; it goes with the territory—something I learned the hard way when I was teaching myself my limits. But since then, I’ve learned I can go a couple years at least, as long as I’m careful. But more to the point, you withstood heat that could melt metal without flinching. That suggests there *is* dragon blood in you, at the

very least. The fact that you're adept at ... Did you say you molded the glass you found? You didn't melt it and cast it?"

"With these two hands," I say, lifting them and wagging all my fingers.

She glances at Salem, who remains standing beside us. "Ursa," he says.

"Glass is technically a liquid," she says. "So I'm thinking Nymphaea."

"Or both," Errol offers, coming around to stand on our other side, staring at me with more interest than before. "She affected the wind currents while we were in the air too."

Benedetta's eyes light up. "Do you know what a chimera is?" she asks.

I blink at her. "The mythical beast that's part lion, part goat, part snake?"

She waves a hand. "That's an outdated interpretation based on a fleeting encounter. They are rare, and it's said they can take the forms of animals. Deva Rainsong is the first chimera to have been born in millennia, though she was supposedly created in a lab. I'm curious about your origins, because you may be one too."

"Deva... the goddess?" I ask, eyes going wide. She's a legend on the island, and not just because of her origin story; many students report having learned of St. George after listening to the music Deva plays with her band, Fate's Fools. It's the favorite music played in pretty much every studio on the island. The other rumor is that she controls invisible creatures called fate hounds who lead us to our fated mates.

Benedetta nods and raises her eyebrows expectantly. I push air out past my lips and shake my head. "I'm nothing special.

My maternal grandparents were Makah, but I didn't grow up with them. I never really knew them."

When Benedetta frowns, Salem explains, "They're a native tribe. Most North American native tribes are tied to the ura, but some are more attuned to other elements and other higher races. The Makah are known for their affinity with all the elements."

Her eyes light up again and my stomach flips. "I thought my bloodline was from that nymph who went mad thousands of years ago and did all those awful experiments on the higher races, forcing them to breed and stuff."

"That's how most human members of the bloodline come by their powers, yes. The nymph-who-shall-not-be-named infused humans with the blood of the higher races, hoping to create an immortal vessel for her own soul. She wanted to achieve godhood herself. Deva Rainsong was at the center of it, bred for it. She was supposed to be that vessel, but the leaders of the higher races banded together and managed to destroy the nymph before she could possess her. But the humans she experimented on over the centuries passed those traits down to their offspring, so there are thousands of Bloodline humans in the world today. It's odd, though, because if your bloodline is natural, passed down through generations of an Indigenous people's communion with the elements, why would you have the powers of chaos?"

"I take it Deva doesn't?" I ask, unsure where she's going with her line of thought. It wasn't like I got to choose.

"Deva possesses fate magic. Fate and Chaos are two sides of the same coin, though—two elements all their own." She nods enthusiastically and starts to pace, waving her hands as she talks. Flames occasionally trail from her fingertips, and I

watch in fascination. “Perhaps that means one or the other would manifest when all four of the other elements are present. And since there must be balance, chaos is what manifested in you.”

“Okay, so what the fuck do I do with it?” My voice comes out shrill, and Benedetta stops pacing and turns to look at me.

Her eyes are literally aflame with her excitement when she says, “Everything. Chaos can do *everything*.”

I2

VESH



I step onto Bear Island again without issue, though my spine tingles with awareness of the fate magic surrounding the place as I pass through the barrier. This side of the island is far enough from the school that I doubt I'll be seen. Still, I opt to obscure myself from sight. I don't want to catch the eye of any of those Shadows I saw patrolling.

On my last visit a few days ago, I didn't have time to fuck around; I flew straight to the cabin where Pan and Nemea were fucking. This time I pause on the beach, when the sun glints off several small shards of void glass delivered by the tide. Any signs of footsteps have been washed away by a recent rain, but the rain couldn't wash away the evidence of the magic that lingers. Brighter on this spot in particular, right at the edge of the water where the splinters of void glass darken the sand to black.

I stretch a hand out toward that spot, drawing the pieces into me with a thought. It won't do to let the pieces remain here. Any evidence that I've been here could act as a beacon to the escaped Titans if they're at all set on retribution.

Despite the fate magic protecting the place, I can't count on that holding up to them either. They managed to get

through *my* doors, after all. Doors that should have been impenetrable to *anyone*, no matter their status.

My gut twists with urgency, even though I know this is still the second safest place for Nemea to be right now. I will retrieve her later, after I tidy up.

I amplify my power by degrees, closing my eyes to reach out to any other fragments that have been left behind in this place. When Typhon lost his heads, they fell into the water, shattering against the ocean floor into larger chunks of void glass. Other pieces of my clones that Pan's magic created still remain at the site of that battle. I don't dare visit that site personally, though, since it's within sight of the buildings. I can cloak myself well enough, but now that this place is a school for Bloodline humans, I can't take the risk that any of the students or teachers possess powers that can detect me.

My focus submerges beneath the water instead, taking the scenic route to find those other pieces. The shards on the shore creep beneath the sand toward the water like burrowing crabs, meeting up with the larger pieces in the deeps. Then in a solid mass, they shoot like a torpedo around the edge of the island, emerging and hurtling toward me through the air. I hold my hand overhead, summoning a churning vortex of my magic that sucks the remaining void glass back into me. The return of the lost matter will help fortify my walls even more.

The task complete, I turn and walk up the beach toward the rubble that was once a cabin. I doubt she's here—if she were, I would sense her. But I want to indulge for a moment in the memory.

When I step onto the porch, I can see the signs of passage; someone *did* come after the place fell. A faint path has been cleared through the mess, and a rudimentary small shelter

made of the rubble rests over the ruined sofa. I follow it and peek beneath a slab of splintered roof leaning on a broken beam. A tiny gray mouse peers out at me, whiskers quivering around her pink nose as her babies squirm against her belly.

I can't help but smile. Life persists amid chaos. The argument could be made that life *is* chaos and that Fate's designs are the artificial part. Left to its own devices, life would find its own patterns, but none of them would be the least bit predictable.

"What did you do here after I left, naughty Nemea?" I muse, following the path toward the still-standing door frame. The ruined bed is the only clear area in what remains of the bedroom.

The sense of her is strongest in this room. Her magic and her scent permeate the air, vying for attention against the earthy aromas of the forest that will overtake these ruins if no one comes to rebuild. Chaos at work.

Insistent pressure pokes at the back of my mind. Irritated by the intrusion, I push back, only to have a second consciousness flare brighter, a face beyond glass, seen but not heard until I open the window to the world inside my head.

It's Pan's face, and his voice interrupting my thoughts.

"You couldn't resist revisiting the scene of the crime, could you?"

"I didn't invite you to join me," I mutter.

"I was there the first time, asshole. You don't think your memories called to me? We're both equally bound to her now. I can sense her even more than you, I bet. Which means she tasted me after we left."

My head lifts and turns, moving despite my desire to keep envisioning the sight of her on the bed, riding Pan's cock. But his singular focus won't be denied, and when one of my guards *wants* something badly enough, it's tricky to keep them from invading. Despite the impenetrability of the prison, I'm still at their mercy far too often. They can't get out without the help of outside forces, but that doesn't stop them from taking the wheel when I'm distracted.

"She's to the north now," he says. *"You're planning to bring her here, aren't you?"*

"That's the idea. This place is protected by fate magic, but I don't want to take the chance that either the Titans or Chaos can get through. I want her close."

A shiver of excitement telegraphs from his consciousness through my body, and my cock goes stiff. I let out a sigh. "She will be under our *protection*. She won't be there for your entertainment, or any of the others', for that matter. I forbid all of you from taking advantage of her. We need to focus on finding the Titans."

"You know at some point we're going to have to stop talking about it and actually do the thing."

"I don't have a fucking window into their minds." That's an understatement; as the manifestation of the realm itself, I have always been able to sense every last prisoner locked inside me—except for those four. Every day, I relied on the other guards to confirm whether those prisoners were still in residence, meaning I'm the *last* person Pan should be grilling about this. "Tell me where *you* think four Titans would go after escaping from prison and we'll go there first."

A second presence perks up with a rude chuckle.

“I already know your opinion, Chrysaor,” I snap, cutting him off. “It still doesn’t help us locate them. Until they make themselves known, it’s a waste of energy to start searching. My concern is for Nemea right now. Keeping her out of Chaos’ clutches is paramount. I won’t allow her to be used as a pawn in his pissing match with Fate.”

“Fair enough, boss. So, is this the place where you two did the deed?”

My head swivels, compelled by Chrysaor’s curiosity now. He lets out a low whistle as he takes in the rubble surrounding the bed. Something catches my eye and I reclaim control, stepping toward the bed and crouching down at its edge. I lift the rumpled bedsheet and peer through a jagged hole that has been cut into the center.

My nose twitches, and Chrysaor’s interest piques. *“Hold it closer so I can smell her.”*

I bring the fabric to my nose and inhale. My own sense of smell is average for a god, but Chrysaor’s is far more sensitive. He emits a hungry rumble, and my dick hardens again.

“You guys are making me doubt the wisdom of bringing her inside,” I mutter, nose filled with the pungent scents of all our juices intermingling on the edges of the cloth.

“We can control ourselves,” Pan insists. *“It’s safer for her to be with us.”*

I frown at the hole. What would compel her to keep this particular patch of cloth? I erased her memory of our encounter.

Campe chimes in this time. *“But did you fill in the blanks?”*

“What do you mean?”

She gives an exasperated huff, forcing an involuntary breath through my own lips. *“You erased her memory of her entire encounter, which must have spanned from the moment she found Pan to after the pair of you disappeared. Did you replace those hours with something plausible to fill in the blanks?”*

“Fuck.”

A chorus of laughter and taunts echoes in my head. I slam the window shut.

I should have been more careful, but what’s done is done. I’m planning to retrieve her anyway, so she’ll need her memories returned to some degree. The fact that she saved a piece of fabric soaked with evidence of our joining is troubling, though. Pan’s spunk was powerful enough to help four Titans escape their prison; there’s no telling what kind of trouble a curious young woman might get into with a sample of it, especially one brimming with as much power as Nemea.

I step out of the cabin again to the sight of several enormous shadows flying overhead: a black dragon followed by three white ones, and with passengers on their backs. Shit. She’s going to have an army of Shadows and Guardians around her. I’ll have to think about the best way to approach.

“Plan on groveling, boss—that’s the only way I see you getting her out of there without a fight.” Alcides’ reasoned tone breaks through.

“Not that we won’t come if Typhon’s up to it.”

“I’m not dragging him into another fight so soon—or any of you. With luck, this can be handled peacefully.” I take a breath, coming to a decision. “And if anything, we’re going to

need more allies to deal with the Titans. I'm going to view this as an opportunity.”

I3

NEMEA



Wind picks up beyond the balcony, gusting through and whipping my hair around my face. I've barely had a moment to process Benedetta's words when the sky darkens with four enormous dragons. The black one swoops close and shifts into Razik just as he reaches the balcony railing. I get a rather interesting eyeful of his tattooed and pierced nakedness as he lands on bare feet. The dude is rocking some sexy hardware in all sorts of interesting places. I don't usually get to see them in all their glory, since they have a rooftop landing pad on campus and tend not to shift when around the students.

When Razik steps close to me and holds something out, my eyes shoot to his face and my cheeks heat. "Your bag, Miss Jones," he says with a smirk. Black smoke flows out of his nose and mouth, coalescing around him into a black T-shirt, black jeans, and black shit-kickers.

"Thanks," I mumble, taking it from him. It's still as heavy as it was, but I carefully pat the outside, relieved when I feel the smooth orb of the glass globe inside it.

The other three new arrivals are white dragons, who I guess must be April Vincent's three mates. The fact that April

rides one is a dead giveaway. Her mom and dad, Cassandra and Andrew, are astride the backs of each of the others. They hover, taking turns landing long enough for their passengers to dismount before shifting.

For a few seconds, the sheer quantity of hot, naked men would be enough to make me blush even more, except all I can think about is the satyr who monopolizes that one sliver of memory I managed to reclaim. And the *other* man who I can't even properly describe, other than knowing he was more beautiful than any of the men in front of me now.

These women are lucky as hell, though with the little I've learned about them, they hold their own with the men who adore them. Even though finding a partner was never on my radar when I came to St. George, I feel a pang of longing for some of what they have. I clutch the perfume bottle again, hoping it can help once I have a moment alone to test it. Only a small part of me reminds me that it's *answers* I want, not a boyfriend, or a mate, or whatever.

A cloud of shimmering white smoke swirls around the party and the men step through it, fully clothed now. April moves closer, eyeing me warily. Her blonde curls frame her face like a lion's mane, her tan skin glowing.

"I don't think we've officially met. Nemea, is it?" she asks. Her mother, a dark-haired woman with a severe expression, strides forward and grabs her by the elbow, keeping her from coming closer.

"You don't know what she's capable of. Stay back."

Heat flares at my back and Benedetta moves to my side. "She's not dangerous, Cassandra. Not unless we antagonize her. It's our job to help her understand her power, same as any

other student at St. George. If you can do it for me, you can do it for her.”

Cassandra curtly shakes her head. “You don’t understand—you weren’t here when we fought the beasts trying to take April away.” She moves in front of her daughter, her voice tight with emotion. “They would have succeeded if Deva hadn’t arrived to stop them.”

“Give her a break, Cassie.” Andrew saunters up, far more relaxed than his wife. He shifts his gaze to me, eyes narrowing briefly. He’s Bloodline like the rest of his family, but like most Bloodline, he can’t shift into an animal form. I still get the faintest whiff of musky animal from him beneath the scent of fresh-cut wood that typically lingers around a lot of the ursa who reside on the island. My instincts tell me it’s ursa blood, and I take a deeper breath.

Other aromas filter into my sinuses, and I grow dizzy for a split-second trying to process all of them. The most prevalent is the spicy cinder scent that I’m sure must be the dragons, then a brighter, slightly floral scent that I immediately associate with Benedetta, who still stands close to me. And I can pick out each of the three Bloodline scents too: the earthy musk of Andrew’s ursa blood, a softer charcoal scent from Cassandra with an underlying crispness... is that nymphaea? Thinking back to this afternoon and what I thought was Clio’s perfume, I think that must be it. April’s scent is warm and sweet, part earth, part char, like slightly overbaked cookies.

Before I can completely process this amplification of my senses, a sneeze tickles my nose and I turn away, burying my face in my elbow before it blasts forth.

“Bless you,” Andrew says.

“Thanks,” I say, smiling at him and shaking my head at his proffered handkerchief.

He continues sizing me up. “You look harmless. If I can hazard a guess, you were just exercising your nature and things didn’t go as planned. Same thing happened to me a few years back. It’s why those Pandemonium thugs were chasing me to begin with. My one regret is that they thought they could use my daughter as leverage.”

“Pandemonium thugs?” I ask.

“Old friends of ours. Enemies now, I guess,” Stuart, one of April’s dragon mates, says. “We used to be bodyguards for the singer in residence at the Pandemonium Resort in Las Vegas. The owner and his chief of security went a little overboard when they caught Andrew counting cards. It didn’t end well for them.” He crosses his arms and tilts his chin into the room. “Is there somewhere we can all sit and chat for a bit? This is turning into a bit of a delicate situation, so I want to make sure we’re all comfortable.”

He eyes me warily, and I get the sense what he wants is a location that’s more *enclosed* in case I get it in my head to bolt. My stomach sinks like a stone. I’m definitely in trouble based on the looks Stuart and the other two white dragons are giving me. At least Gray looks more concerned than suspicious, but he always struck me as the nice one of April’s dragon mates.

Benedetta walks ahead of us to a solid, shadowy wall of stone that blocks off a wide set of stairs which was hidden from view while we were seated earlier. She descends, and I wait to see what the others will do. Razik, Errol, and Salem follow immediately after, but April and her entire crew stand waiting.

“After you,” Cassandra says, mistrust flowing off her in waves. Jesus, I can’t win with this woman. I am *so* about to get voted off the island.

I turn and walk down the steps, expecting the cold darkness of a cave, but find the stairwell warm and well-lit with more flaming sconces. It ends in a vast, open space hewn out of the stone cliff. Stone columns are situated every thirty feet or so, with more flaming sconces attached, along with a multitude of beautiful works of art. Several walls feature shelves with more art. The room is divided by metal folding screens, but it looks like this entire cave makes up their living space. Razik and Salem head in, stationing themselves by a large stone slab of a dining table while Errol waits with Benedetta just inside the entry.

“There’s more seating in here for everyone, at least,” Benedetta says with a hint of apology.

“I’ll go fetch us some refreshments,” Errol says, giving me a warm smile and a nod before turning and striding to the kitchen.

I enter the room, marveling at how much work this must have taken, though with enough skilled ursa and dragon craftsmen, perhaps it wasn’t as difficult as it seems. But even the kitchen is devoid of anything resembling electronics. Errol flips the latch on a stone door and swings it open, revealing food and drinks within, and retrieves a pitcher and brings it to the table. Then he returns and fetches enough glasses from the glass-fronted steel and stone cabinets to serve everyone.

I stare for a moment, then head for the chair Razik holds out for me.

“How does that fridge even work?” I ask, settling in the seat.

“I can absorb heat from my environment,” Benedetta says, gesturing down to her bare feet on the stone floor. “It took some practice, but I learned how to focus enough to divert thermal energy from one place to the other. Since this entire place is basically one enormous rock, I can control all the thermal energy inside it. Basically all the lights are what keep our food cold.”

“Rad,” I drawl, staring around the place with new interest.

I’m distracted when the rest of the group enters and take seats around the table. I’m at one end, the focus of all of them, which is not the least bit uncomfortable. I’m grateful when Errol sets a dewy glass in front of me, and I take a long swallow of ice-cold water so I don’t have to meet anyone’s eyes just yet.

I’ve got to get it over with, though. I set down the glass finally and sigh. “All right, lay it on me. Do I need to pack up my things and catch the ferry off the island this afternoon?”

“Gosh, I hope not,” April says. “Nemea, I founded this school for people like us. You’re here because you belong here. We just need to figure out how to keep you safe while still helping you learn to control your powers.”

“Keep *me* safe? I thought you wanted to keep everyone else safe *from* me.”

She exchanges a glance with Cassandra and Andrew, who are both frowning. Goosebumps rise on my arms despite the warmth of the room. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Benedetta and her three Shadows shoot confused looks at April too. Razik leans forward in his seat. “If she was in danger, we should have been informed. We might have handled things differently.”

April looks sheepish. Cassandra just clenches her jaw and crosses her arms. “When you relayed to us the conclusion that Nemea is a chimera, everything changed. We haven’t had time to decide *what* should be done yet, but that fact alone puts her at great risk.”

“Why does that make me so special?”

April sighs. “Because *I’m* a chimera too, and I’m probably not even as strong as you. Any member of the bloodline who carries a mix of two or more of the higher races’ bloodlines qualifies.

“When I first discovered my power, I was hunted for it.” She glances at Andrew, who is frowning at her. “Dad, it wasn’t your fault. The second Chaos learned I existed, he stopped caring about you and whatever you did at his casino. He wanted me because of what I am, and there’s a high likelihood if he learns Nemea exists, he’ll want her too.”

My heart begins to race and a chill seeps through my body. My breath catches in my throat. “Did... Did you say *Chaos*?”

Pressure pounds at the base of my skull. A high-pitched whine fills my ears, and a second later, every single glass vessel on the table shatters.

I4

NEMEA



April's three dragon mates leap up and haul her back from the table amid her cries of protest. I blink at the mess of colored glass shards and wetness coating the stone tabletop. My head is still buzzing, and I grip the edge of the table so hard my knuckles turn white.

Through the din still blaring in my head, I hear my name. It isn't until intense heat pulses through my forearm that I jerk my head up to see Benedetta standing at my side, one hand clutching my wrist, white flames licking out from where our skin comes in contact.

But she doesn't look angry. Nothing but deep concern etches her pretty features.

"I'm sorry," I breathe. "I didn't... I didn't mean to."

"It's all right, honey. Can you take a deep breath and try to calm down for us? We aren't going to hurt you. No one is going to hurt you."

I swallow and force myself to release my grip on the table. My hands are shaking. "Is Chaos a person? Or a god? Or something else? I thought it was just... like... a *force*. Because I'm pretty sure my magic is chaos."

April brushes off her three overprotective dragons. Stuart finally relaxes and dips his chin. “Chaos is a force. He is also a primordial being. He’s like a god. Fate is his counterpart. Fate follows a strict code, loves rules, loves *enforcing* the rules, and has a pack of magical hounds that carry out their bidding. Chaos, as you might expect, is the opposite, and his hounds are smarter and far more dangerous.”

“So... Fate is a person too, I take it? And a force? Please don’t tell me they’re coming after me too.”

The three pale-haired dragons remain standing, on alert, which is oddly more comforting than it should be. Gray picks up the thread, nodding, then chuckling ruefully. “Fate and Chaos have a bit of a complicated, highly competitive history. Their competition became apparent thanks to another prominent chimera named Deva Rainsong. You may have heard of her.”

“Who hasn’t?” I give a nervous laugh because her name keeps coming up. Not that it’s not cool being compared to a goddess, but I don’t think I’ll ever be able to live up to the reverence she gets from pretty much everyone.

Gray nods and lifts his gaze to the ceiling, slipping his fingers into his pockets as he rocks back on his heels. “She’s also imbued with fate magic. When she was coming into her power, Chaos tried to recruit her and failed. And he *hates* to lose—but so does Fate.” His jaw spasms and his eyes flash with anger. “*They* nearly killed someone close to us: our principal at the time. We used to serve as bodyguards to a singer in residence at the Pandemonium Casino, which Chaos calls home. So we’re not exactly fans of either one here at the school.”

“But doesn’t Fate protect this island? The barrier...”

“Was created by Deva and her mates after we were attacked several years ago,” April says. “She’s close to Fate, but it’s *her* fate hounds who help the bloodline find their mates, not Fate’s. Several years ago, Fate wanted to eradicate the bloodline entirely. We were loose threads in their grand tapestry that needed to be snipped. Since Deva was one of us, she stepped in and protected us. Took us under her wing and vowed to take over matching us with our fated mates since Fate couldn’t. She assigned two of her hounds specifically to this school. You can’t see them, but they’re there. If you’re here, one of them led you here. And for anyone who has found a mate at this school, I can guarantee one of the fate hounds nudged them together. They sent me Gray.” She gives the silver-haired man an affectionate look. His troubled expression eases into a warm smile. “And then *all* his friends came too... Trust me, I never expected to have six mates, but there’s no doubt in my mind we were meant to be together.”

“But why do you think Chaos is after me?”

“Because he won’t rest until he has his own chimera to control,” Gray says. “Forget the fact that Fate doesn’t *control* Deva—Chaos doesn’t see it that way. And if you possess chaos magic, the odds are even higher that he’ll catch wind of your existence and come after you.”

“He already knows,” comes a deep voice that reverberates through the entire room. The air near the stairwell shimmers, sparking with jagged flashes of violet lightning. My heart leaps into my throat. That effect is so familiar.

Then a man appears. He’s a hulking figure with broad shoulders, dressed in a heavy black leather overcoat that looks like it’s been through a war or three. Beneath it he’s wearing

dark, well-fitted clothing, his shirt unbuttoned just far enough to show that his bulk is all muscle.

All hell breaks loose as the six dragons surge toward him, half-shifting. I see nothing but a blur of horns, wings, and talons as they surround the newcomer.

I leap up in alarm when they all breathe fire at the man. “No! Don’t hurt him!” I cry, not even sure why I feel the need to defend this stranger. But when the flames dissipate, the man looks unharmed. A faint violet bubble shimmers around him.

Then he turns his head and his eyes lock onto mine. “Hello, Nemea. I’ve come to take you home.”

“Home?” I frown at him, an image flashing through my mind of the run-down housing development outside the city where I grew up. The place I spent the last few years trying to escape. Home is the *last* place I want to go.

I didn’t have the grades or money for college, and I’d been resigned to being stuck there with the only job prospect working in a shipping warehouse with the rest of my small hometown. I got a wild hair up my ass to hitchhike into the city a year ago, hooked up with a caravan of nomadic van dwellers, and finally made it to the coast. Taking shelter in one of Seattle’s multitude of coffee shops, I overheard two people talking about attending an amazing art school and sort of shadowed them until I wound up on the very ferry that brought me to Bear Island, and by extension, St. George. I spent the next week expecting to be called out on sneaking into the school, but everyone was nothing but welcoming.

This school has felt more like home to me than any other place I’ve been. Until now, anyway.

“Who *are* you?” I whisper, staring at him.

“Remember those hounds I mentioned that Chaos controls? He’s the worst of them,” Stuart says, advancing on him. The other five dragons have surrounded him, but he doesn’t seem the least bit nervous about the level of hostility in the air. “He’s the reason the barrier was created in the first place. How did you get through it, Vesh?”

I push my chair back and slowly stand, unable to tear my eyes away from his gaze but acutely aware of the low, aching throb between my legs. I *know* him, but I can’t remember how.

“Vesh,” I whisper. “Have we met?”

“Impossible. He’s not allowed on this island,” Cassandra says, striding over to plant herself right in front of him. “And he’s going to *leave* before we summon Deva. You know she’ll come if we inform her you’ve invaded again.”

Vesh smirks and holds up both hands. “Now, now, Cassie, a visit by one man hardly counts as an invasion. Besides, doesn’t the fact that I made it through your flimsy barrier suggest I’m *meant* to be here? What is it you all love to say so often... ‘You can’t fight Fate’? Well maybe Fate’s the one who brought me here. Who am I to argue?”

He pins me with another look that makes my stomach turn a flip. I lick dry lips, dimly regretting the earlier accident with the glasses. I could use a big glass of ice water right about now. Hell, an ice-cold shower wouldn’t hurt.

“I don’t give a fuck how you got here,” Cassandra snaps, a dark glow emanating from the fists she has clenched at her sides. “You’re going to turn around and leave now or regret it.”

“Mom, don’t antagonize him, please,” April begs. She stands against her father’s side, his big arm curled protectively

around her. Benedetta stands at my side, her skin incandescent with her inner fire.

“Why do they all hate you?” I ask.

“We just explained it to you,” Cassandra says.

“Well, I want to hear it from *him*,” I snap, striding closer. I push through two of the dragons to face the newcomer. “What did you do to them?”

“Nothing they couldn’t recover from.” He studies my face for a beat, sees my determination, and sighs. “I was following orders. My boss isn’t exactly someone you can defy without serious repercussions. He wanted her.” He points in April’s direction. “And now he wants you.”

I blink. “And you’re here to take me to him, is that it?”

“Not a fucking chance. He can’t have you because you’re *mine*.” His gaze bores into mine so fiercely I feel it down to my toes.

My eyebrows lift and I open my mouth, but I’m almost breathless from the intensity of his look and my words come out in a near-whisper. “The hell you say.”

“Someone needs to go get Deva,” Cassandra says, glancing around at the dragons.

“He’s kind of blocking the only way out, in case you missed it,” Razik replies.

The dragons remain silent, but the *looks* flying back and forth suggest they’re talking up a storm among themselves. The fact that Razik showed up with my things after I’d informed Errol I wanted them tells me they can communicate across distances. Are there other dragons in residence at the

school? I think one of the guest artists might be one. Surely they can get a message out if they want to.

Vesh tuts when he catches the volley of looks. “I didn’t want to have to do this, but you guys are giving me no choice.” He lifts both hands, and Cassandra lets out a yell, raising hers at the same time. She unleashes twin bolts of black that merge into a pointed projectile aimed at Vesh’s head.

But it doesn’t reach him. Vesh brings his hands together in a clap that reverberates through the cliffside. The resulting echo leaves me quivering and breathless, but the silence after it fades is what stuns me the most.

Cassandra’s magic spear remains suspended in mid-air about a foot from Vesh’s head. Her hands are still outstretched, but she is as still as stone. I glance around at the others, and none of them are moving either, not even to breathe.

“What did you do to them?”

Vesh’s shimmering purple bubble dissipates and he steps past me, pushing through the wall of dragons surrounding him. I follow.

“Just a little temporary petrification. It’ll wear off soon, so we need to hurry.” He carefully steps past Cassandra, frowning at her. “I’d hoped we could have a *reasonable* discussion—there are things they need to know—but getting you someplace safe is more important.” He glances around and sighs. “Not a paper and pen in sight.”

“Kind of difficult to keep stuff like that in the home of a phoenix,” I say, crossing my arms. “What makes you think I want to go with you? I should be plenty safe right here.”

He scrutinizes the carnage on the table and raises an eyebrow at me. “I would venture that you have no understanding of what’s happening to you, no idea how to use the power awakening inside you. Which means you’re a danger to anyone until you learn. No matter how many platitudes they blew up your pretty ass, they’re still terrified of you.”

I press my lips together, not sure how to respond, mostly because he’s right. “And I suppose *you* can actually deliver on that promise? What place is safer than an island protected by a fate bubble?”

“One second,” he says, holding up a finger. Then he waves a hand at the broken glass and puddles covering the table. The shards lift into the air, then come back down, pointed ends scratching grooves into the stone tabletop while the water glides back and forth, washing away the grit left behind.

I stare in wonder while words begin to appear in the stone surface. But when I read them, a prickly chill works its way up my spine.

TARTARUS HAS BEEN BREACHED, so forgive me if I didn't want to stay and have a tussle. Between hunting for four escaped Titans and fending off a boss who doesn't take no for an answer, I thought it would be more efficient to just take Nemea where we all know she'll be safest. Chaos won't get near her; that I promise you.

And if you could get the word out about the Titans, that would be swell. If you find them, don't engage. Just send word via the usual channels.

He pauses to re-read, nods, then sets the glass to the next line.

Yours Truly, Vesh

“YOURS TRULY? SERIOUSLY?” I stare at him in astonishment.

“I just wanted to sound as sincere as possible.”

“I think ‘sincerely’ would have done the job.”

“Too late to erase it,” he says, turning to me. “Now, are you ready to go?”

“Go *where*, exactly? You said *home* before. But where is home for you?”

He glances at the ceiling for a beat. “It would take too long to explain.”

“You worried their petrification will wear off and they’ll tackle you?” I cross my arms and dig in my heels.

He scrubs a hand through his short, dark hair, and I catch a glimpse of glowing rune-like designs running up the insides of his forearms.

“Tartarus is where we’re going. But we aren’t exactly traveling, because I’m already here—I am Tartarus. Vesh is just the name they call this version of me.” He gestures down his body with one hand.

I take a moment, feeling a spark of triumph that mine and Rachel’s deep dive into Greek mythology the other night wasn’t completely off-base. I wonder how much more we got right?

“Tartarus, the mythological divine prison? You think I want to go to *prison*?”

His jaw spasms and he glowers. “Not as an inmate. You don’t understand the power of the creatures who will soon start hunting you. If Chaos already knows you exist, it’s a matter of time before Fate finds out and they’re both racing to get to you first. Not to mention if the Titans themselves learn of your existence, you’ll be in even greater danger. The prison is safe because no one wants to go there, and I’m the only easy way inside.”

Despite my conviction that he has the answers I need, the gaps in my memory only leave room for uncertainty. I cross my arms. “I won’t let you prey on my desire to learn how to use my powers. I’m already missing an entire day after trying to take matters into my own hands.” I stop myself before oversharing the fact that I don’t exactly trust my own decisions lately.

His lips tighten and he takes a step closer. “If I return your memories, will you agree to let me protect you?” he says in a low, impatient tone.

“Do I have a choice?” I ask, having to crane my neck to look up at him. Holy fuck, this man is as big as April’s dragon mates, and his proximity sends what feel like electric currents skittering all over my skin.

He smirks. “No, but I’d prefer it if I don’t have to force you.” His nostrils flare and his gaze dips to the perfume bottle dangling between my breasts. “What is this?” he purrs, one eyebrow lifting as he skates a fingertip down my chest beneath the chain to lift the bottle up.

My cheeks heat even as the rest of me goes molten, though for different reasons. “I was hoping to summon... well, *you*, I

think? Because the first time I tried, I think it unlocked my power, but I have no memory of what happened. I want to remember. I don't even know if it'll work."

Vesh gives a slow, knowing smile and carefully removes the stopper from the bottle. "Ah, this is a very special blend," he says as he breathes in the scent. "It contains notes of lust, rapture, and wild abandon. Such a potent combination."

He replaces the stopper and lets out a soft sigh. "This fragrance is quite powerful," he says slowly, looking into my eyes with unmistakable intensity. "It's capable of unlocking more than just the doors to your lost memories. All it needs is a measure of the power you have within you now, focused with the right intent, along with a little physical push, which I can give you."

"You're saying I could have freed those memories on my own?"

"Possibly. And I will teach you how, if you agree to come with me."

He holds a hand out to me, palm up. Even though I know his offer is merely a formality, I appreciate that he asked—that I have the illusion of being given a choice. But I still feel compelled to ask one question.

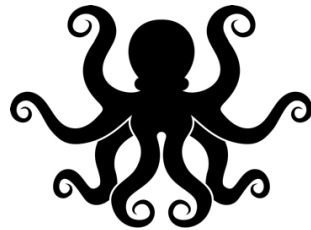
"If I don't like what my memories show me, will you allow me to leave? If... they're bad, I mean." *If they show me I was harmed.*

He frowns then slowly nods. "I won't stand in your way if you choose to go once you reclaim what you lost."

Taking a deep, fortifying breath, I place my hand atop his. "Then I'll go with you."

I5

ERIKA



L *itochoro, Greece*
Mount Olympus

ROUGH STONE CHAFES my hips and belly and pebbles clatter to the ground as I cling to the boulder in front of me. Geva nuzzles my ear, pinching one nipple while he yanks my pants down from behind and lines himself up between my cheeks.

“You’re so fucking wet,” he says, his cockhead probing between my thighs.

“I know. Hurry up, we don’t have much time. I need you.”

“Every fucking time,” he says, letting out a chuckle before finding my opening and pushing deep with one perfect, hard thrust. I have to bite my lip to suppress a cry of pure pleasure. Every fucking time. But I can’t help it if unearthing ancient hidden temples makes me too horny to fucking think straight.

“I need more,” I breathe.

He groans a protest.

“Just a little bit, please! You can conjure new clothes.”

“But I *like* these clothes.”

I tilt my head back and give him my best puppy dog eyes. He growls and captures my mouth in a brutal kiss, then his body begins to grow. His shirt seams rip as his torso swells to nearly double, his skin erupting in dark red scales. He pulls out for the briefest moment amid my angry protests, shoves his pants down farther, then lines himself up again. When he shoves into me this time, he’s twice the size he was before, and I clamp my knuckles between my teeth and bite down to keep from crying out in ecstasy.

“Is this what you wanted?” he murmurs into my ear. “You want a big, thick dragon cock spreading you wide open, don’t you? You want to be used. Fucked raw into the side of this mountain. You want my seed flooding out of your tight pussy when I’m done.”

“God, yes. Fuck me harder, you beautiful beast. Come inside me. Put a baby in me again.”

That elicits a deeper groan, and I know he’s lost—making babies is what gets *him* going. He wraps both arms around me, buries his face against my neck, and ruts against me hard enough to make lewd smacking sounds echo through the campsite.

Somewhere on the other side beyond our tents someone turns up music, but not before I hear a loud wolf-whistle from someone on my team. Thankfully Gabby’s a sound sleeper. As the child of an explorer, being able to sleep wherever and whenever she can is a necessary skill.

I reach up behind to clamp my hands at the back of his neck, holding on for dear life while he slams into me, my body clutched to his in the vise of his arms. He lets out several deep,

bone-shaking grunts, then spills inside me, his enormous cock pulsing so hard I feel it up to my diaphragm.

“Mmmsorry,” he mumbles, half-coherent. “Didn’t mean to finish first. I’ll fix it.”

He only takes a couple breaths before pulling out and spinning me around. He drops to his knees and hooks both arms behind my thighs, shoving me up against the rock again and pressing his mouth to my flooded pussy. I grab hold of his horns and hold on for the ride.

His talented tongue plunges into me, every bit as filling as his cock was, but even more agile. He tickles my cervix, then pulls out and laps at my clit before sucking it between his lips.

I arch my back with a stifled cry and grab my breasts, tweaking my own nipples while he finishes me with swift, slapping lashes of his tongue that send me into spasms of bliss.

I’m a spent mess when he’s done, grateful that he remains on his knees supporting me as I lay back against the rough, angled rock and catch my breath. He continues to lick me clean, then sighs and peers up at me from between my legs.

I gaze down with a satisfied smile, eyebrows rising when I see his attention fixated on the glowing dragon mark pulsing just below my navel. His hopeful look slays me, and I thread my fingers through his thick red hair.

“It’ll happen,” I say. “Gabby’s been begging for a sibling, so we *all* want it. And since Gabby’s done so well on these digs, we already know it won’t interfere with work.”

His hopeful look turns to a frown. “I wish you would stop long enough to give birth, at least.” He releases me carefully, standing again. Once upright, he shrinks back to his human

size and pulls up his pants, then examines the torn tatters of his shirt before shrugging out of it and tying it around his waist.

“Gabby came a week early; I’d have been in a hospital otherwise. You *know* I wouldn’t have willingly chosen to give birth in a tent on the edge of the Sahara Desert. Plus dragon babies are durable.”

“They are at that,” he concedes, a smile gracing his full lips, betraying his adoration for our six-year-old daughter who is asleep inside our tent right now.

The music has been turned back down and faint voices reach us from the center of camp as we stroll hand-in-hand through the shadows. Thea, Camille, and Eben sit by our campfire, chatting. Their three dragon mates are taking turns standing guard at our dig site or patrolling from the air. The ornate marble and gold door we unearthed just before dusk is far too valuable to risk some treasure hunter finding and looting it, not to mention whatever lies beneath the mountain behind it. Tomorrow we’ll find out if we can open it, though having dealt with other magical temples over the years, I’m sure it won’t be straightforward. I’m prepared to have to embark on another quest just to find the key, but the search is half the adventure. I already have a few leads to follow up.

I’m mentally preparing a retort to whatever lewd comment Eben’s bound to make when a loud trumpeting fills the air. The others’ eyes go wide and they tilt their faces to the sky.

“Aurin’s sounding the alarm,” Dimitri yells. “Someone’s at the dig!”

I turn to run the other direction and Geva grabs my arm, scowling at me. “Gabby,” he says. In a panic, I look between him and our tent.

“I’ll stay with Gabby. You guys go!” Thea yells.

Shooting her a grateful look and a nod, I sprint down the path to the dig. Before I get ten yards, stones clatter behind me and thunderous wingbeats sound overhead. The next thing I know, my upper arms and shoulders are clutched in giant dragon talons and I’m sailing over Mytikas Peak, around to the dig site.

“What if the trespassers are human?” I yell up to him. It wouldn’t be wise to have a bunch of dragons swoop in if it’s just a few harmless treasure hunters who don’t even know dragons exist.

“They aren’t. Not if Aurin sounded the alarm from the air.” His voice resonates inside my mind as he holds me tight and circles without landing so we can scope out what’s happening below.

Bright light fills the excavation, but the brightest source is not the floodlights, which I’m sure we turned off when we left late in the evening. A standoff is under way below us, involving what looks like four large men trapped between two enormous dragons—golden Aurik and the huge white Guardian, Roka. Aurin lands nearby to flank the intruders, gilt fire flowing from her mouth as she lifts her wings threateningly.

The source of the light appears to be one of the men, whose skin is glowing so bright it nearly obscures his entire shape.

“Put me down!” I yell, smacking at Geva’s claws.

He descends in an arc, carefully depositing me on the dusty wooden platform just above the excavation where two darkened floodlights aim down at the scene. I flip the switch,

shining them below while Geva lands, caging the trespassers in even more.

“This is a private dig site!” I yell. “You have no business here. Leave now, or I’ll have them tear you to shreds!”

The glowing man in front turns to me, his brilliance fading enough that I can make out his features, as well as those of the trio standing behind him. They’re each as handsome as gods, their stature nearly head-high to Aurin, the smallest of the four dragons. This puts them at nearly eight feet tall.

And they’re fucking ripped, their simple tattered gray loincloths leaving very little to the imagination. Now that the lead man isn’t blinding me with his light, I can tell the glow emanates from an angular symbol in the center of his chest. Each of the other men carry similar symbols. They spark a memory that makes my stomach turn a flip.

“This place belongs to me and my brothers,” the man says, his voice resonating enough to carry all the way to where I stand about a hundred yards above.

“The hell it does. It belongs to Greece. It’s been buried for thousands of years!”

Footsteps pound up the path and Camille, Eben, and Dimitri arrive, skidding to a stop at the platform before slowly joining me by the railing. “What the fuck?” Eben mutters under his breath. I dart a look at him, silently pleading him to keep quiet.

“You have no idea what you have uncovered, do you?” the glowing man asks.

I glance around at the dragons. Does he even see them? He doesn’t seem surprised by their presence, but he hasn’t tried to fight back. If these men are who I think they are, they should

be powerful enough to beat a few dragons. And the very presence of said dragons should clue him in that I know exactly what I just dug up.

“Who the hell are you?” I yell.

“We are the ones who *built* this place. We are the ones who spawned the so-called *gods* who usurped us, imprisoned us, and claimed Mount Olympus as their seat of power. I am Hyperion. These are my brothers, Coeus, Iapetus, and Crius. We are the Titans. Where are your gods now, little human? Don’t tell me you worship these scaled creatures even more generations removed from the former residents of this mountain.”

His voice booms up at me, the vibrations making my teeth hurt. Geva eyes me, his voice clear in my head. *“If what he says is true, we may have a fight on our hands.”*

“If you are really Titans, why haven’t you already put us in our place and claimed this temple?”

Twin puffs of flaming smoke rise from Geva’s nostrils. *“Don’t taunt the fucker.”*

“Don’t give him any ammo, Erika,” Dimitri warns.

“Have it your way,” Hyperion says.

The three other Titans move quickly, and all four dragons roar and let loose fire into the center of their circle. An explosion rocks the air as the Titans blast the dragons back against the sides of the excavation.

Aurin’s back cracks against the heavy support posts of the platform, making it shudder. Eben grabs Camille and Dimitri grabs me, pulling me off the platform onto solid ground as a skirmish ensues below. The dragons are stunned for a moment,

but shake it off, charging back in, each leaping atop one of the Titans.

It's impossible to follow, but I keep my attention glued to Geva, who has Hyperion grappled as he snaps at his neck with fiery bites. Hyperion swings with a fist to Geva's jaw and slams a knee into his gut, making him scabble back. Geva wheezes and shakes his head before charging again, sharp talons extended and fire spewing from his mouth.

The long-suffering look on Hyperion's face worries me, as if the dragons are merely an unforeseen annoyance. His fist glows brighter when Geva reaches him, and this time the punch is harder, sending Geva sailing up into the air, wings twisting before crashing onto the platform in front of me with a sickening crunch.

"Geva!" I cry out in alarm and run to him. Dimitri yells a warning, grabbing hold of my arm, but I'm not about to let him keep me from my mate. Too late I hear the crack of wood as the beams beneath the platform splinter. The world tilts, and I grab hold of Geva's neck as the platform collapses with a jolt that makes my stomach fly into my throat.

When the platform settles, it's quiet, but bright as day. My stomach is upside-down when I kneel at Geva's side, skittering my hands over his big, red-scaled face. His eyes are closed and he's completely, heart-wrenchingly still.

"Baby, wake up. Don't you dare fucking leave me!" I'm dimly aware of Dimitri, Eben, and Camille yelling their dragons' names while they frantically climb down the broken staircase and run to their unconscious mates.

Gritting my teeth, I stare up at the source of the sun-bright glow above us. All four Titans hover in the air high above, Hyperion's light nearly blinding.

“If you killed him, or *any* of them, I will hunt you down and destroy you!” I yell.

“They’re merely unconscious, but that can change if you fail to give me what I want. Give me the key to those doors and they will live,” he replies, gesturing toward the gleaming golden doors that my team and I recently uncovered.

My gut twists and I shake my head. “We just discovered them. We don’t have a key.” It’s not a lie, but I won’t make this easy for them if I can help it.

The black-haired one named Coeus floats forward. “You’re hiding something. You know there is a key, but have yet to acquire it, don’t you?”

My nostrils flare. Fucking precognitive fuck. “Fine. Yes, I have a lead on the key.” I ponder for a moment and tilt my head. “But if my research about the Titans is correct, it isn’t in a place you’ll want to go. I have a better chance of getting it myself than you do.”

Hyperion makes a subtle gesture to the silver-haired Titan beside him. Iapetus nods and floats lower, spreads out his hands, and crackling bolts of lightning shoot out of his fingers in four directions, hitting each of the dragons.

I yelp and jump back, as do Camille, Eben, and Dimitri. But shock stuns me nonetheless, because where Geva lay unconscious a moment ago, there now rests a giant red-scaled egg. The other three dragons have disappeared as well. Where the twins rested are a pair of golden eggs, and where Roka lay is an enormous white egg.

“Don’t worry, your mates live,” Hyperion says, a hint of humor in his voice. “But if you want them returned to their current age, you *will* acquire the key for us. You have one

week before we return to claim what we seek. If you fail, my brother will age your mates to the opposite extreme.”

All four of them disappear in a clap of thunder and blast of light that leaves my ears ringing and my eyes burning. The concussion and resulting shift in air pressure causes the cloud cover over the mountain to let loose, and we find ourselves drenched in torrential rains.

“Erika, what the fuck do we do?” Dimitri calls, his voice pure agony where he stands between the pair of eggs containing his twins. The two dragons saved him from the brink of suicide seven years ago when we first discovered the ancient dragon temple on a Sumatran island after months of hunting.

Camille clings to Roka’s egg while Eben rests a hand on her shoulder. The two of them pined for each other from afar until Camille awakened the big Guardian and he claimed them both as his mates.

I’m torn between grief and rage. “We still have them. They’re still alive. But I’ll be damned if I let those Titan fucks get away with this. Eben, stay with them. Dimitri, Thea needs to hear about what happened from you. Camille, we have some calls to make. We’re calling in every goddamn higher races favor we can to help figure this out.”

Dimitri is stone-faced as he helps me and Camille climb out of the dig site up the rickety stairs. Camille swipes tears from her eyes, only for them to be replaced by raindrops.

“Did either of you know the Titans were real?” she asks, trudging up the muddy path back to camp.

“Yes, they came up a few times in our research,” Dimitri says. “Thea knows more, but what I know is that they’ve been

imprisoned since before the dragon race was born.”

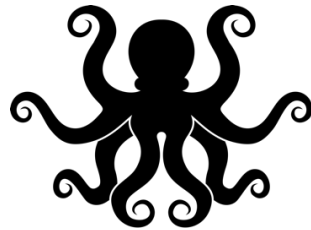
“So they’ve escaped, and they want what’s inside the temple,” I say. “Whatever it is must be big for creatures as powerful as them.”

“Big enough that we probably shouldn’t let them have it, right?” Camille asks.

“Not a fucking chance.” I clench my fists, steeling myself for the conversation I’ll have to have with my daughter about what just happened to her father.

I6

VESH



Nemea's hand is callused, her grip strong. Determination bleeds through our touch, sending a pang of faint guilt through me. I wasn't lying when I said I wouldn't stand in her way if she chose to leave, but I didn't say I would help her, and she won't have a way out unless I do.

"Hold onto me," I say. "Traveling inside me is usually disorienting the first time."

I pull her close, willing my body to chill when she obediently molds herself to my side, all her soft curves a contrast to the roughness of her hands and her attitude.

I *have* her, I realize. Not just in my grasp, but allowing me to take her to the heart of my being.

"I want you all to make yourselves scarce when I arrive," I demand just before tightening my hold on her and closing my eyes to begin the journey inward. Only the faintest echo of protests reaches me once the trip begins.

It's instantaneous for me when I'm alone, but isn't so easy when I have a passenger who isn't already attuned to the prison. And yet I meet surprisingly little resistance with

Nemea in my arms. We land without incident on the entry bridge just before the massive, recently mended doors. It's as if my heart of hearts *wants* her inside, which shouldn't surprise me as much as it does.

She still clutches me tight, both arms encircling my waist. Her face is pressed into my shoulder, one black-rimmed eye cautiously peeking out. Her satchel bumps against my side with a faint clank, the sound sparking awareness. She has pieces of *me* in that bag. She probably has that dildo she crafted too—the replica of Pan's cock, molded from my flesh. What other surprises will she reveal while she's here?

“Are we there yet?” she asks in a near whisper, then looks up at me. I haven't released her yet, and I'm loath to let her go, but I relax my grip nonetheless.

“Welcome to Tartarus, Nemea,” I say.

“The way you talked, I thought it would be a rougher ride.” She peers up at me with a smirk.

“I guess you were meant to be here,” I say before I can think.

She blinks, then steps away and gazes around, turning slowly as she takes in the landscape. I look too, seeing my own heart through new eyes, and for the first time in my life, I have doubts about its appearance.

I am a prison, not a resort, so my interior *shouldn't* look comfortable. But I want *her* to be comfortable so she's not inclined to leave.

But what I see isn't disappointment. Her eyes are wide, her mouth open in astonishment.

The bridge we stand on is at one of the highest points in the center of the prison, leading away from the doors to extend

several hundred yards in a straight shot to the outer arc of bridges circumscribing the place in a descending double-helix spiral. Other bridges join the outer spirals with the central tower we're currently standing at the top of, making it look suspended in a vast web of dark stone and glass. Spires of stacked cells rise along the outer edges of the circles, and the very bottom is a honeycomb of deep pits where the worst of our inmates are imprisoned.

My heart pounds as I wait for her to speak. All the others lurk at the back of my mind with bated breath. At least they obeyed me and didn't show up in person to greet her.

"Wow. It's more spectacular than I even imagined."

My eyebrows lift. "You imagined the prison?"

She turns back to me and nods, then flips open her bag and pulls out a large pad of paper. As she pages through, I catch glimpses of sketches of each of my guards. Then she finally lands on an architectural drawing and holds it up for me to view.

"I got pretty close, didn't I? Though I think this helped." She looks down and plunges her hand back into her satchel, pulling out a glass globe this time. My stomach drops when I see a tiny replica of the prison rendered in perfect detail within.

"Where did you get this?"

"Globes like this grow on a tree at the school. I accidentally broke a bunch of them the other day, but this one didn't break. I think I was meant to find it."

I reach for it, and she lets me take it from her. My pulse quickens as I study it, thinking at first that it's just a very detailed diorama of Tartarus. But when I rotate it in my palm, I

forget to breathe, because standing on the uppermost bridge in front of the doors are two tiny figures: a beautiful dark-haired woman and a man in a black trench coat.

Us.

Tense anger grips me through a wave of dizziness. There are too many security risks all rolled into one in this woman. I manifest a vortex from my hand, sucking the globe into a safe secret chamber deep within the bowels of the prison. If an object this powerful manifested in her world for her to find, that means she's probably capable of creating more of them.

“Hey! What the fuck? Why didn't you just give it back to me?”

“Because it's too dangerous for you to keep.”

“Why? What is it?”

“A portal. This place is the most difficult prison in the universe to escape from or to get into. But that globe would offer a way in to anyone who held it. I stored it somewhere safe, but if it ever left this place, it would compromise security here.” As would Nemea herself.

“Didn't you *just* have a jailbreak? Doesn't sound all that secure if someone got out.”

I grit my teeth. “That was the only breach that has ever occurred. A perfect storm of circumstances led to it, including you and your little *ritual*.” I grab her by the arm, second-guessing my plans for her while she's here. There may not be any inmates as powerful as the Titans, but there are thousands that are more terrifying, and enough forces with ill intent on the outside that would love a way in to liberate a few of them. Her power is still growing, and I have no idea how much

damage she could do if given free rein of the place. And after this discovery, she absolutely cannot be allowed to leave.

She stumbles along with an indignant protest as I lead her to one rail of the bridge a few yards down. A black iron gate opens onto a staircase attached to the side of the tower descending around the outside.

“What the hell are you doing? I came with you willingly! You promised you’d help me regain my lost memories—help me understand my powers. You promised you would *protect* me!”

“Maybe I changed my mind,” I snap. I’m tempted to banish her to a cell right now. Safer for everyone if she’s locked away. Fewer opportunities for distraction, especially when we need to focus on finding the Titans.

We reach the next floor, which holds my own quarters. I push her through the wide archway that leads to a circular outer corridor, then an inner arch that opens into the main chamber. I propel her toward the bed in the very center of the room. I can add a proper door to the outer entry and lock her in here until I decide what to do with her long-term.

Before we reach the bed, she digs her heels in and swings around to face me, smacking both palms against my chest as hard as she can. “Vesh, no! Don’t fucking push me around! I came when you asked. I’m here. I’ll do whatever the fuck you want, if you just honor our goddamn agreement! Return my memories, okay? Help me learn my powers and I’ll do *anything!*”

She emphasizes her words with hard, repetitive smacks against my chest, each one making me blink in shock. It *hurts*. Not once in my life have I been in a fight with a human where they were able to cause me pain. Usually I’m able to subdue

them quite handily before they even get any blows in, but even when one has been lucky enough to land a blow, they've felt like little more than a tickle. But not only is she bruising me with every smack, the tower itself shudders with each blow.

I finally come to my senses and grab her wrists with both hands. "Stop it."

"Tell me why you changed your mind." She yanks her hands out of my grasp, crosses her arms, and glares up at me.

"You're too dangerous to let roam free here."

She looks hurt, and Pan's voice fills my head in response. "*Ouch. Could you be any more insensitive? Just give her what she wants.*"

"I have a feeling that'll make things worse. You felt how powerful she is."

In a shaky voice, Nemea says, "Maybe if you taught me how my powers work, I could control them better. And maybe if you—I don't know—showed me a little fucking *trust*, I'd try not to let you down. I trusted you enough to let you bring me to a prison, for fuck's sakes. I trusted you enough to believe you wouldn't *actually* lock me up. I'm pretty fucking sure Cassandra would've done that on the island, so maybe I should've just stayed there instead."

I heave a sigh and rake both hands through my hair. "Cassandra wouldn't have been able to contain you. Have a seat and I'll give you what you asked for." I gesture to the bed, then turn, shrugging out of my coat and tossing it over one of the large folding screens that separates the central area with the bed from the rest of the room. Then I drag over a footlocker and sit facing her where she's perched on the end of

my bed, still glaring at me with her arms crossed over her chest.

While I stare at her, I begin rolling up my sleeves, huffing as I try to decide how this should go.

“You’re stalling,” Pan accuses. *“You know what she needs to do. It’s what we both want. I think you’re just afraid of how she’ll react when she remembers what happened. When she figures out that you’re the one who took her memories to begin with.”*

He has a point, so I mentally seal the outer walls of my chamber to prevent any escape when she learns the truth. I can sense Pan’s eyes rolling in response.

“Open the bottle,” I say, dropping my gaze to the small piece of me that dangles between her breasts.

“Who were you talking to?” she asks, rather than following my command.

“Nobody. Do as I say if you want answers, Nemea.”

“I see the way your expression shifts sometimes—it’s just like the dragons’ when they’re telepathically communicating with each other. But I know you’re not a dragon. You were having a mental conversation just now with someone. Who was it? Who else knows I’m here? If they’re involved, I deserve to know who they are and what they know about me.”

I suppress the frustrated growl, but I can’t ignore the excited murmurs from the others demanding I tell her about all of them.

“It’s too soon,” I say, partly to my guards and partly to Nemea. “But you’re right, there are others who you will meet in time.”

“Are they the ones from my sketchbook? I saw you looking when I flipped through earlier.”

“Do you want your memories returned or not? Let’s tackle one demand at a time here, shall we?”

My frustration bleeds into my tone, and she raises an eyebrow and smirks. “Fine, have it your way.” She clasps the perfume bottle in one hand and removes the stopper. “Now what?”

“Channel your magic into it. I think you know how, considering you were able to craft that container to begin with.”

She nods, nostrils flaring as she raises it aloft in both hands. The scents from inside seep into the air, so potent I can see a faint glimmer of power from the essence alone. She closes her eyes and focuses, and fuck me if the void glass doesn’t start to glow and become malleable under her touch.

Twin tendrils of smoke rise from the opening, green and violet entwined. She inhales some, but it will take all of it to restore the memories I took from her, along with a physical element replicating some of them. She can give it to herself, or I can give it to her, but I’m not sure which is the better option.

“I can give it to her too,” Pan offers. *“Let me come up there. We can both help her.”*

“Not a fucking chance,” I mutter, which catches her attention. Her eyes widen and she points at me.

“See! I knew you were talking to someone. Who is it?”

I close my eyes in the hope of reclaiming some patience. But Pan’s offer to help remains at the back of my mind... mostly because his mental begging doesn’t stop. But even if

she doesn't choose the second option, I'll appreciate the help if she's angry after her memories return.

"Fine! You both win. Nemea, the surest way to reclaim your memories is to repeat the experience. There are two options, and the perfume is important regardless of which one you choose. I am giving you a choice." I turn toward the entry hall where I can sense Pan standing just beyond my sealed doorway. I open it, and his heavy hooves clop across the hard floor.

Nemea's brows draw inward when she turns toward the inner doorway, then her eyes go wide when Pan appears in the inner arch. She reaches for her sketchpad and flips open to a page, stares at it, then points at him. "It's you! You're Pan!"

The faun chuckles. "In the flesh. It's good to see you again." I peer over my shoulder and find him leaning in the doorway, his gaze hungrily taking her in. He shifts his attention to me and gestures. "Do go on. Tell her what her choices are."

I lift a hand and wave it at her satchel which rests on the floor by her feet. The flap opens and the shards of void glass shift and rise on my gesture. I direct them into the air between us, and the dozen or so shards revolve in a glimmering circle, her dildo the largest of the bunch hovering in the center. With a twitch of my finger, the broken shards turn ninety degrees and shoot into my flesh. Nemea gasps and covers her mouth, but when she sees I'm unhurt, she blinks and drops her hand.

"How did that not hurt you?"

"Because those shards were all pieces of me. Of this prison." I gaze around at the dark walls that glow faintly now that some of the power that crafted them has returned to me. "I was just reclaiming some of my own flesh."

The dildo remains hovering between us.

“But not that one?” she asks, cheeks pinking faintly.

“That’s one part of me that belongs to you now. And it can help you reclaim your memories if you repeat your ritual with it. What you’ll need to do is anoint yourself with the essence in the bottle. Pour it onto your chest. Then use the object as you did the first time.”

She swallows, her gaze darting to Pan. Her cheeks glow brighter, but I don’t need to look at him to know he’s grinning.

“You said there were two options. What’s the second one?” she asks, returning her gaze to me.

“The second is to repeat what happened at the *end* of your lost memories.”

“And I suppose you know what that was?”

Pan lets out a throaty laugh and clops closer. “We should. We were there.”

Nemea bites her lower lip, eyes shifting between each of us. When she releases her lip, it springs from her teeth redder than before and slightly wet, making my mouth water with the urge to kiss her.

“So Rachel was right—you really *did* smash and dash, didn’t you? But both of you? How the hell could I not remember *that*? How do I know you aren’t lying trying to get me to fuck you both for the first time?”

“You still have option one,” I say.

“And I still have this.” Pan moves to my side and holds out his hand. Looped around two fingers is a thick band of silver with a void glass gemstone set atop it.

I7

NEMEA



I stare at the silver cock ring I made just a few days ago. I thought I'd lost the thing, but this makes so much more sense somehow.

There are pieces I should be able to put together, but they just aren't there. Pan—*the* Pan—has the cock ring. That was made for him. How he came into possession of it is no doubt part of what I'm missing, but all I'm left with is an undeniable urge to climb the big, beefy satyr like a tree.

I'm so fucking conflicted right now. I want my memories back, but if what Vesh and Pan suggest is true, I had some kind of crazy menage with them and they made me forget. I should be pissed, right?

But I'm just too damn fascinated by everything that's happening that I can't bring myself to be upset. I gingerly slide the jeweled ring off Pan's fingers and reach up, dropping it over the tip of the void glass dildo that remains suspended in front of me. It slides down with a little clink, coming to rest at the very base.

"For the record, I wouldn't have let him erase your memories if I knew that's what he was going to do," Pan says.

“If you both were there, you could just tell me what happened and we wouldn’t have to relive it,” I suggest.

“I’m fine with that,” Vesh says. “But would it really be enough for you?”

He gives me an earnest look, and I absently rub my wrists where he grabbed me earlier. The heat of his hands lingers in tingling cuffs that haven’t disappeared since I made him release me. Being close to him on the trip here felt good. It felt *right*. And neither of them are looking at me like they’re hoping to nail me right now. They both look a little worried, but maybe it’s because of what Vesh said earlier—that I’m *dangerous*. Based on Vesh’s expression at the time, I know it was my fault the place shook like we were experiencing a minor earthquake.

I glance between them, heart pounding. Not with fear, though; no, that would make too much fucking sense, wouldn’t it?

Psychologists say that your body remembers trauma even if your mind blocks it out. Does the same thing apply to pleasure? If they both fucked me stupid, and I *liked it*, is the coiled desire deep in my belly my body’s memory of the experience and desire to revisit it?

I try to form some sort of pros and cons list in my head, but the hovering void glass dick is too goddamn distracting. I sketched it—and its owner—the night before crafting it, then rubbed one out while staring at the sketch. And the first night I got to *use* it is still a vivid memory, even if what happened immediately afterward is gone.

Without even realizing I’m going to do it, I grab the thing and push back onto the bed.

“You promise this will work?” I ask, dropping the dildo on one pillow before leaning down to start unbuckling my bootstraps.

Both of them stare at me for a beat before Vesh slowly nods and rises. “Yes. We’ll let you have some privacy. Just remember to use the essence.”

“No. You’re not leaving me alone in here. I don’t trust you not to lock me in. You’re both going to stay and watch.”

Pan takes a hopeful step closer and Vesh reclaims his seat on the footlocker.

“Whatever you wish,” Vesh says.

“You know, if we’re going to be here anyway, we could help,” Pan says with a smirk. That’s when I notice the luxurious dark fur covering his hips and groin swells in front, making it clear it isn’t actual pants.

A smooth, round, dark pink thing protrudes ever so slightly a few inches below his navel at the peak of a thick ridge beneath the fur. A sheath—a fur-covered sheath that protects his hardening cock.

I stare unabashedly while I pull off my boots, fascinated by the way his cock gradually protrudes as it grows harder.

I force my gaze to his face, warmth pooling deep in response to the raw hunger in his eyes. My nipples prick against my bra when I grab the hem of my top and pull it over my head, then meet his gaze.

“I want to see your faces when I get my memories back. Then we can talk about what happens after.”

“Can I at least have the ring back? You made it for me, after all.”

I finish sliding off my pants and grab the dildo to retrieve the ring, which I toss back to him. For a moment I feel like I'm in a reverse Cinderella story, waiting for him to put it on to see if it fits. His cock and lightly fur-covered balls are fully visible now, and he slides the silver ring over his tip and down. It fits exactly as it fit the dildo, until he gets to the base. It's meant to sit behind his balls, though, and for a moment, I think I must be wrong. But another errant memory flits just out of reach in my mind when he squeezes himself just enough to soften so he can fit both supple orbs through the wide circle. Then he looks at me and strokes himself back to full hardness, one eyebrow lifted as if he's amused by my fascination.

“Don't stop on my account.”

I drop the dildo to the bed beside me so I can shed my bra and panties. I hazard a glance at Vesh, belly fluttering with a strange tangle of anticipation and uncertainty. He's sitting with his elbows on his knees, attention fixed on me. But other than the dark sparks in his eyes, there is no other sign that me getting naked is affecting him. At least not until I push my panties down my legs and he casually reaches out to pluck them off my right foot.

He lifts an eyebrow as he dangles my panties from one finger, staring at the sodden patch in the crotch. They're black lace except for that small triangle of cotton, which is obviously saturated with my arousal, so much so it glistens.

“What?” I ask in a throaty tone. “I'm *not* scared of either of you.”

“This is quite the opposite of scared, Nemea.”

“Should I be scared?” I challenge.

He tilts his head and twists his mouth to one side. “Not scared, no. But perhaps not so enthusiastic, either. We aren’t what you would call good people.”

“Is there something wrong with being enthusiastic about getting myself off?” I pick up the dildo and scoot back against the pillows a little farther so I’m sitting up while I spread my legs. I bite my lower lip as I cut my gaze to Pan where he still stands a few feet from the bed, his huge cock standing proud. The dildo has the exact same size, shape, and gentle curve to it as the real thing it was modeled after. The real one is fucking resplendent with the shining cock-ring at its base.

And he’s *right here*. I could have him in the flesh if I just asked. But I still don’t want to ask. This may be the last time I can assert any power of my own until I learn to actually *use* my real power. I don’t want to waste it.

I tear my gaze away from Pan’s glorious shaft and grip the open perfume bottle between two fingers. Keeping my gaze on Vesh I tilt it and trickle the contents out slowly. The fluid inside has an iridescent glow it didn’t have when I put it in the bottle, and it tingles when it lands on my skin, trickling down over my breasts. The mix of earthy and spicy hits my nostrils and I inhale deeply, my body tingling with deeper arousal when the scent seeps in.

I lean back slightly to keep the perfume from flowing off entirely and push my breasts together so it pools between them.

Vesh’s gaze drops, fixing on my cleavage. He tilts his chin up a little. “Rub it into your breasts.”

“Why? Because it needs to soak into my skin to work?”

He smirks. “Because I want to watch you coat your tits in my semen, Nemea. My essence, Pan’s essence, and yours. All three are distilled together in that bottle. It embodies our joining. It will help you restore what you lost.”

“What you took from me,” I say, glaring at him even as I swipe a finger between my breasts and coat each nipple in the fluid. I tease one, then the other, until they’re both hard, then release my breasts and push both hands up between them, sliding through the slick fluid. The now empty bottle bumps to the side, but I leave it on. Now that I know it’s part of *him*, I don’t intend to take it off.

“What I took from you,” he relents.

“Is this *really* the only way to get my memories back? Can’t you just snap your fingers and make it happen?”

“It could damage your mind if I did that. Better to ease them back into you through sensory prompts. Breathe.”

I take another deep breath as I massage my breasts, aware of my audience of two and the way the scents I’m bathing in evoke both of them so well. I feel the memories, but can’t see them yet, as if they’re obscured behind a heavy curtain, whispering to each other.

The dildo bumps against my thigh, and without looking at it, I heft it in one hand and rest it between my breasts before resuming my slow massage. A dribble of liquid makes it down my belly to pool in my navel, the tickle of it arousing me more. I grip the dildo and draw the tip down my sternum to my navel, coating the bulbous head in the liquid before lowering it between my thighs. Then I rest the tip between my folds, twisting it to coat it in my juices before rubbing it around in circles over my clit. I’m hyperaware of their gazes

on me, and of the fact that I've never done something like this before. Not that I've ever had the opportunity to.

Except I *have*. Just a few days ago, if what they say is true. And hell yes, I want to remember it if it's true. If it did happen, and if I'm letting it happen again, what does that say about me?

That you have nothing to be ashamed of, I tell myself. Only that I didn't take their bait and agree to fuck them when I don't have to. I can get what I want this way. And the fact that I would happily fuck them only makes forcing them to watch even hotter.

It only takes a few rubs of my clit before I need a breather, but I'm determined to torture them a little before I finish. I slide the dildo down and press it to my opening. I remember this part at least, but it isn't quite right. The first time I used it I wasn't lying down. So I sit up and shift onto my knees, then reposition the dildo between my thighs. It's big enough that I only have to lower myself a little before it's braced between me and the bed. I try to release my grip to drop lower and push onto it, but the curve makes it slide up through my folds until it wobbles and nearly falls. I reach down to grab it.

"Pan, help her hold it still," Vesh says.

"Sure thing, boss." He steps closer, and I shake my head.

"I can do it."

"I have no doubt," Vesh says. "But I'd like to watch you enjoy yourself without having to worry about logistics. Let him help."

"That would defeat the purpose of making you watch."

Pan halts, then shifts around to the foot of the bed to stand beside Vesh. "Maybe your brother can help."

Brother? My eyes widen.

Vesh's eyebrows lift and he glances around the room. "Erebus, come out. I know you're here."

Nothing happens, and the two of them look at each other. "I guess he obeyed your orders for once," Pan says.

Vesh's gaze shifts to the distance, his eyes unfocusing just like they did when I was positive the two of them were telepathically communicating. A moment later the room darkens, a faint shadow gliding around the walls and floor, then stilling.

"Nemea, meet Erebus. Since he wasn't present during the event you're trying to remember, would you allow him to help?"

"I don't see anyone..." I begin, but then the shadows shift and take the vague shape of a large man just to one side of Vesh. He raises a hand and waves.

"You just *invited* him in to watch?" I ask, incredulous.

"Not just watch. He'll help, since you're so intent on masturbating while Pan and I watch. I can ask him to leave if you're uncomfortable." He glances at my bag where it lies on the foot of the bed. Erebus was one of the sketches in my sketchpad, and he knows it.

I sit back on my heels, the dildo forgotten between my knees. "How many of them are here? Are you going to invite *them* to help too?"

"If you wish, though I don't think there's room on my bed for all of them. But they are already watching."

Panicked, I stare around the windowless room. One side features a wide window overlooking the web of dark bridges

surrounding the tower. Bright torches line them, attached to support columns. But I see no one hovering outside looking in. Confused, I return my gaze to Vesh, and he taps his temple.

“I *am* the prison, Nemea. They are inside me.”

“But we’re in the prison, aren’t we?”

He shrugs. “It works how it works. I embody the place, and the place embodies me. What matters is that all my guards are linked to me and will do my bidding. Do you want more of them here in the flesh? I can introduce you to them all now without even bringing them into the room.”

I have to sit and let that process for a moment, and it’s a fucking *struggle* to push back the sense of pure desire and get to the root of what I actually want. A fucking *audience*. Not just the two men whose presence is tied to my memories, but more. One is already here, but his presence is perhaps the easiest to overlook.

The fact that I’m even more turned on is what finally clinches the decision. I guess I’m a bit of an exhibitionist.

“How many?”

“I think you know the answer,” Vesh says.

Right. I sketched all of them. All *nine* of them.

“And they all want to watch?”

He tilts his gaze to the ceiling for a beat as if counting in his head, then nods and chuckles. “Unequivocally.”

“Wasn’t one of them a woman?”

“Campe? Yes. But she’s a dragon, so...” He shrugs.

I sit quietly, staring at him and over the course of several seconds I’m positive his eye color changes, shifting from the

strange sparking ultraviolet through several other colors before returning to its original shade.

“What’s going on inside your head?” I ask, awed.

“A lot of intense curiosity about you. But I asked them to stay silent and scarce so as not to frighten you. I suppose we didn’t need to worry about that as much as I thought, did we?”

“I have a pretty strong constitution,” I say.

“Of that, I have no doubt. But I’ve just been reminded that we’re here for a specific purpose, and they ask that you get on with it.”

I blink at him, my cheeks heating. I’m suddenly overcome by stage fright now that I know my audience is four times the size I thought. And a few of the creatures watching aren’t anything close to human, if my sketches are accurate.

The shadow by Vesh’s side becomes slightly more solid. Just enough that I can make out facial features and a vaguely male shape with broad shoulders and a muscled torso. No dick, though, which I should not be disappointed about. But my staring doesn’t go unnoticed, because he cups his groin then makes a series of hand gestures.

“Did he just sign to me? What did he say?” I ask, turning to Vesh.

“Erebus is mute, but he can hear you. He asked if it would make you more comfortable if he showed his true shape, or if there’s another shape you’d like. He’s basically liquid, so he can be anything.”

“I think I already know what he looks like. I want honesty here. I want the truth.” I look at Erebus, who nods, his body solidifying further. The results are more disconcerting than I expected. He’s so dark I feel like I’m staring into a void rather

than looking at a man. If not for reflections of iridescent light here and there, I'd believe he was no more than a man-shaped opening in the universe.

But his shape is more concrete now, with sharply defined cheekbones, a square jaw, and pointed ears. His body is lithe and muscular, his strength evident in the flex of his muscles. There are other features that should frighten me, such as his fingers tipped in sharp claws, his oddly angled legs that look like they belong to a beast, and the sharp spurs protruding from his elbows, wrists, ankles, and vertebrae. And of course now he has a cock, and it's enormous, with spurs of its own running the length of it. All of it flickers in and out of focus, like he's a mirage fabricated by my delirious mind.

But when he comes forward and bows, then climbs onto the bed, it's clear he has mass. He pauses in front of me, points at himself then the spot behind me.

“Um, sure. I suppose it makes sense for you to be there.”

My skin prickles as he moves into position. He doesn't touch me, though, and when Vesh's attention shifts past my shoulder, I crane my neck to find Erebus signing again.

Vesh nods. “May he touch you?”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

When he signs instead of touching me, I look at Vesh again. He frowns and shakes his head.

“You have chaos in you, Nemea. If you allow it, he can speak into your mind. That will make this easier.”

“Will it hurt?” I ask, only vaguely aware of the disconnect: I'm not afraid of being naked in a room with three strange, god-like creatures. What I'm afraid of is having my mind invaded again. I swallow and glance over my shoulder. “Not

that I don't trust you... I mean, I shouldn't, but I do... It's just that a few hours ago, I had someone else in my head, and it did *not* go well."

Erebus shakes his head and raises a hand, cupping my jaw with the gentlest touch before sliding his other arm around my waist to pull me back against him. I let out a soft gasp as he cradles me against his chest, then brings his mouth down to mine. His kiss is firm and skilled, and entirely focused. His fingertips tighten against my chin, urging me to give, so I open for him with a soft sigh, finally relaxing against him. He slides his tongue between my lips, and it *feels* like he moans, but I realize the sound is entirely in my head.

Tentatively, I mentally reach out. "*Are you here? Was a kiss all you needed?*"

"As long as you trust me enough to let me in, that is all I need. You don't need to do this for them, Nemea."

"It isn't for them. It's for me. I need to remember. Will you help me?"

"Touching you is a privilege. I will do whatever you wish. But this is the only time I'll fuck you without using my own cock."

I swallow and pull back from the kiss, gazing up into the most intense eyes I've ever seen. This close I can see the subtler details in his features, the earnestness in his gaze. My stomach flips, because it's crystal-clear that he means what he says.

"We might need to work up to that, okay? For now, just stick to the dildo."

He nods and gives me a knowing smile before tilting his chin forward. "*Hands and knees. Your body belongs to me for*

the next little while. You can tell me to stop when the memories return, or we can keep going. It's entirely up to you. And if you want more than a glass phallus in your dripping wet cunt, there are many who will oblige."

I8

NEMEA



So I guess chaos makes you a sex fiend. Or maybe I was always this horny and it's only coming out now that I have willing partners who will indulge me. Actually, that's not true; there have been plenty of willing partners—I was the one who wasn't willing.

Despite a promiscuous youth, I was more interested in trying new things than I was in actually getting off from it. For the most part, I just flat-out wasn't *interested* in sex beyond more than an abstract concept until I got to St. George. I even thought I might be asexual for a while there. But when the idea to start drawing dicks popped into my head during my jewelry-making class, the urges kind of never went away.

Erebus is gentle when he presses a hand between my shoulder blades, and I obey, dropping down to support myself with both hands against the mattress. I close my eyes and fixate on the dark, silky texture of the quilted duvet, clutching it in my fists in anticipation as Erebus slides the hand down my back, the sharp tips of his fingers scratching lightly until he reaches my ass. He grips one cheek and glides the pad of one of his other fingers down my crack over my rear hole, then along the slick crease of my pussy. The image I sketched of

him hovers in my mind, an odd counterpoint to the way he's making me feel right now. He's objectively scary as fuck, but I'm far from frightened. His touch lights me up, almost as much as the way Vesh watches, his gaze hooded while he takes everything in.

"You are so ready right now. What I could do with this pussy if you let me have my way with you."

Erebus' gruff tone makes me shiver. *"You know what to do. So do it."*

A deep laugh reverberates inside my head, filled with promise and filthy, filthy intention. For someone so gentle and considerate, he sure is a dirty boy.

"You have no idea," he murmurs, and I flush at the realization that he's still listening.

"Now that you're in my head, how do I get you out?"

"Focus and practice. Or just ask. But every time I say something dirty, you get a little wetter. So the more I know, the better it will feel."

I mentally surrender when I feel the smooth hardness of the dildo glide up my inner thigh. He presses it against my pussy, sliding it back and forth against my slickness until it parts my lips wide and the surface glides directly against my clit. I gasp and clutch the blankets.

"I think you are as dirty as I am, aren't you? Perhaps dirtier. You're imagining me using my own cock on you. Nailing you to my brother's bed with it while he and the faun watch and wish they were me. All you have to do is ask, Nemea."

I flash an inarticulate thought that amounts to "just do what you're doing"—I'm too far beyond words right now to

be that explicit, but I trust that he'll get the idea. But his fingers in my hair tugging my head back remind me that I have an audience.

When I open my eyes, I'm greeted by two sets of very hungry expressions. Pan is fisting his cock with one hand, stroking himself with absolutely no shame. But Vesh looks wound so tight he might explode. He's still leaning forward, so I can't see if he's aroused, but the absoluteness of his focus on me speaks volumes. I wish I could get inside *his* head to know what's going through it.

"You are already inside his head," Erebus says. He glides the dildo across my clit one more time before shifting his grip on my ass to spread me wider, then presses the tip of the object to my aching opening.

"Not what I mean."

"He keeps his own counsel when it comes to feelings. But it isn't hard to tell they're both immensely jealous of me right now. Because I get to do this to you. Though it's possible they both feel it. The toy is a perfect replica of Pan's cock, crafted out of my brother's flesh. So maybe they are in fact both fucking you without even being in this bed."

He pushes the dildo slowly into me, and my mouth drops open at the deliciousness of the stretch. I force myself to keep my eyes open and watch both the other men watching me. If they were both present the first time, how did we do it? Did they take turns? Did they spit-roast me? My mouth waters when I glance at Pan's cock. Maybe I tasted him.

But then I lift my gaze to his face and he's licking his lips. Maybe *he* tasted *me*.

His gaze fixes on mine, and a brief wave of dizziness overtakes me before I focus again and realize there's something weird going on with his eyes. The irises look like blue whirlpools. Just like Clio's before her grasp took hold of my brain. When I stare for a few seconds, I sense a slight pressure at the back of my skull, but it isn't painful or unpleasant the way it was when Clio did it.

Erebus answers my unspoken question before I can articulate it. *"You can let him in too, if you wish. The fact that you two are mentally connected suggests you melded with him. So he wasn't lying about being with you, was he? You tasted each other."*

"Sounds like you're the one who's jealous now," I say.

"Shouldn't I be? I want to taste you, Nemea. Is it so hard to fathom that we all want to taste you?"

"Then taste me."

My impulsive urges are off the charts. I'm on the verge of begging them all to fuck me, but sticking to the plan is more important. I need my memories back.

The one urge slips through though, and Erebus responds. The bed shifts, and the next thing I know, he's lying on his back with his head between my thighs, one hand still slowly plunging the dildo into me.

"Oh, not fair," Pan grumbles.

"What, did you forget what I tasted like already?" I taunt. I'm not quite ready to do a mental dance with him—not until I remember all of what we did together—so it'll have to remain above-board and out loud for now.

He smirks. *"I will never forget what you taste like, Nemea."*

His expression is pure, raw hunger, but when Erebus pulls my hips down over his face and his tongue sweeps through my wetness, then twirls around my clit. I shudder and a moan escapes me. My eyelids flutter closed for just a second while I enjoy the combination of being stretched to the brink while an extremely talented mouth works my pussy over.

When I open my eyes, I meet Vesh's gaze, his eyes now fractured into half a dozen fragments. They're all witnessing my undoing right now. I mentally flip through my sketches, taking a moment to imagine each one sitting in front of me.

"Who is watching now?" I ask, studying Vesh's gaze and hoping one of them responds. "Tell me what you would do if you were here. I want to talk to each of you."

Vesh frowns. "Nemea, don't encourage them," he warns.

"Then *you* tell me what you would do. Besides just fuck me."

I'm breathless now, my hips rocking ever so slightly of their own accord to match the rhythm of Erebus' tongue. He's taking his time, which is both torture and heaven.

Vesh shakes his head, then goes utterly still for a beat before his entire body shudders and he stands. But as I stare up his body, my gaze keeps going. It's as if he's grown a foot and his shoulders are wider, his body stockier, his expression more predatory. It's still *him*, but *not*. A set of enormous, ghostly horns hover on either side of his head and I swear a golden hoop has appeared through his nose, flickering with some light that doesn't exist in this room.

In a thick voice, he says, "I would chase you through all of Tartarus until I caught you, then claim that pretty mouth of yours and make you swallow my cock all the way down. I'd

fuck all your holes until you beg me to stop, then spill my seed across your luscious tits and make Cerberus lick it off.” He tilts his head and smirks. “Then I’d probably fuck him too.”

“Fuck,” I whisper, somehow hotter despite the fact that I believe every word he just said, and it does scare me a little.

But there’s no time for the conversation to continue. The apparition of Asterius flashes out of existence and is replaced by a handsome face with two small tusks jutting up from his lower jaw. Feathered wings have sprouted from Vesh’s back, and on his head stands a mohawk of golden spikey hair. This must be Chrysaor.

“I would bury my face between your thighs and eat your ass and pussy until you beg me for mercy. I could show you now—just say the word, pretty girl, and that can be my face you’re sitting on.”

“What if the others fuck me first?” I ask.

He lets out an amused grunt and grins. “Even better. The more of their creamy mess that’s dripping out of you, the tastier you will be. I would devour you.”

Before he can say more, his wings disappear and the face transforms again, only there are three vaguely canine heads superimposed over Vesh’s. They flicker and merge, transforming into a scruffy, but strikingly handsome face with a wicked grin. “Asterius only *thinks* I’d let him fuck me. I’d lie back and let you ride one of my cocks while he and Chrysaor suck the other two.”

My eyes widen. “You have three cocks?”

“In my human form. But if you prefer one, I can fuck you doggystyle and knot you until you scream.” His three wolfish

heads return, tongues lolling out of two while the third licks his chops like I'm a prime piece of meat.

Vesh's mouth twists into a sneer and a woman's voice snaps, "Fuck off, mutt. All of you assholes are fucking crude. She deserves better."

The face that superimposes itself over Vesh's next is stunningly beautiful, the eyes flashing with inner light. This is the dragon, Campe. Her voice turns into a purr as she cocks her hip and eases closer.

"And I could give you so much better. You think Shadow Boy's tongue is nice? You've never had a dragon tongue. I can please you like none of these men could ever hope to."

Suddenly all the translucent shapes that flickered into being converge, and Vesh's body shudders. His facial features shift and undulate, irate voices bickering incoherently using his mouth. Finally, he clenches his fists and plants his feet wide.

"Enough!" he yells, the command reverberating all the way to my toes in a way that makes *my* body shudder, and I nearly climax. I probably would have, except Erebus goes completely still beneath me, the sharp points of one hand digging harder into my hip.

I stare up at Vesh, heart pounding and body alive with a stronger craving for a man than I've ever felt before. I want *him* to tell me what he would do to me.

Except no, that's not what I want. What I want is for him to just *do* it. I want him to shed all that heavy clothing and bare himself to me, to show me what it means to have chaos inside me.

“You need to come, Nemea. If you’re not getting there with my brother’s help, I’ll get you there.”

I’m too shocked to speak. He glances down between my thighs and Erebus silently fades into shadow below me. The dildo slips out with a faint squelch, falling with a thump to the bed. Vesh climbs on, still clothed, and grabs me around the waist, hauling me up and lying down with me clamped against his chest, one arm hooked beneath me. He grabs the dildo, then hooks his arm beneath my knee. He presses his face to my neck and inhales deeply, then emits a rough groan against my shoulder.

“Touch yourself while I fuck you with this thing. We’re going to finish this now.”

I drop a hand between my thighs, shivering when he pushes the dildo back into me and starts fucking me with it in earnest.

“You know what I would do to you, Nemea?” he murmurs through the sloppy noise of invading my soaked pussy with the giant toy. “I would do everything they said and more. No part of your body is sacred; the second you give yourself to me, you are *all* mine—every inch. I will own you and use you however I see fit.”

Pan clears his throat, and in a gruff voice says, “You forget I saw her first.”

I stare up at Pan through a haze of pleasure, fingers rapidly rubbing at my clit. I’m right at the edge, so close I might go over any second. He’s back at the side of the bed, stroking his cock with more fervor now.

I moan and arch my back, then stop touching myself to reach for him. “I want to taste you.”

Before I can articulate more, Vesh slips his free hand between my thighs and takes over teasing my clit. Pan crawls onto the bed and kneels beside me, taking my hand and wrapping it around the base of his thick shaft.

“I’m close, little nymph. If you use your tongue, I’ll shoot my load all over those pretty tits.”

As if to illustrate, he reaches down and grabs one of my breasts, squeezing and pinching my nipple. The touch sends a fresh wave of the scent to inundate my nose, and the tactile sensation sends a shock of pleasure through me, shoving me even closer to climax. But I hold it back because I want to taste him on my tongue when I come.

I squeeze his cock and push myself up on one elbow so I can reach him, extending my tongue while I pull his cock level so I can taste. When I slide my hand up his shaft, he grips the base to help. His chest is heaving, his face flushed. And when I trail the tip of my tongue up along his length, he throws his head back with a roar.

Hot, thick ribbons of cum shoot from his tip, hit my shoulder, then land on my cheek and finally on my mouth when I aim him at my lips. I bring his tip down to my mouth and wrap my lips around him for the last few spurts, which fill my mouth with a flavor that’s a mix of sweet and bitter, but that sets my tastebuds alight and warms my belly when I swallow. Pleasure cascades through me like a deep buzz from a shot of whiskey. It travels from my clit up, and from my tongue down, converging in my very core and exploding in a wash of brilliant sensation.

I release his cock from my mouth and let out a cry, reaching back with my free hand to clutch at Vesh, fingers clawing at the supple leather of his trousers.

“Good girl. Come for us. Tell us what you remember, Nemea,” Vesh murmurs into my ear, still stroking with one hand while he pistons the dildo into me. I briefly wish it was him again and that Pan was beneath me like before, both of them fucking me at the same time.

The memory is no more than a vague combination of sensory recollections. But soon the orgasm fades, leaving behind the visuals as clear as day, along with all the sensations that went along with them.

Every last moment of that day comes back.

I9

NEMEA



“Not enough,” I growl, pushing myself up onto my knees. I shove Vesh’s hand away and pull out the dildo, tossing it aside, then grab Pan by the neck and pull him down. His eyes go wide in surprise at first, then with a groan he gives in, hauling me against him as we kiss. He’s still hard, and with the dildo gone, I need to be filled again.

I roll over to face Vesh, delirious with the buzz of my orgasm. I kiss him and he groans, kissing me back hard. When I pull back, I spy a streak of Pan’s semen on his cheek and impulsively lean close and extend my tongue, licking it off in a long swipe. Vesh shifts backward slightly, perplexed.

“Didn’t want any of his come to go to waste,” I say.

He swipes a hand over his cheek and looks at his fingers, then shakes his head with a chuckle. But I’m already tearing open his shirt and pants and reaching inside for his cock.

“We’re doing it again,” I announce. “Just like before. Now that I remember, I want it all fresh. I want to do it knowing who you are and what it means.”

He doesn’t move, watching me with mild amusement as I undress him. “What do you think it means?”

He shrugs out of his shirt, and I toss it off the bed, then move down his body, gripping his pants to yank them off. He kicks off heavy black boots that are even more badass than mine, but come off way more easily, just in time for me to peel his pants off his long, muscular legs.

I pause to take him in from top to toe and almost whimper at how perfect he is. He is clearly *not* human, though. His body is cut like a diamond, all muscular and angled and hairless, with veins that glow violet beneath his pale skin. Of course there are even more within his veiny, engorged cock, which make it light up like a beacon.

He doesn't let me ogle him for long, rising and looming over me. He cups my face and bends to kiss me long and deep, his hunger so strong I can taste it on his tongue. To be wanted this much by someone is a new sensation, and when Pan slides his arm around me and I turn, only for him to kiss me with just as much fervor, it makes me dizzy with fresh need.

I don't even *know* these men. They were strangers the first time we fucked, and they're still strangers. Except I'm covered in their essence, distilled and concentrated into a potent magical brew that now coats my upper body, seeps into my pores, and into my blood just like their kisses and caresses. Because deep down, I know they belong there, that my body—my very *soul*—knows them on a level I may never quite comprehend. And joining with them physically is the only way I know how to affirm that connection.

I let Pan pull me tight against him for only a moment before I push him to the bed. He goes willingly, chuckling against my mouth as I straddle him and position him where the dildo was only moments before. I sink with a gasp, then a

moan, flattening my hands against his chest and staring down into his eyes.

“This is what we did, isn’t it? After you tasted me and told me I’m made of chaos, I fucked you like this.” I bite my lower lip and close my eyes, savoring the more flexible warmth of his cock inside me. It fills me even more perfectly than the replica.

More of the memory slides in, and I open my eyes to look at Vesh, who stares at us both with hooded eyes. His irises are pure ultraviolet now, with none of the fractured, multicolored look. It’s just him.

“Why don’t you join him?”

“You remember,” he says, the briefest flash of joy crossing his face before he goes serious again. “I hardly need to if you already remember.”

“I don’t fucking care. I need you to fuck me like before. I want a fresh memory of what we did together. Remind me of what I am. What I can do.”

His gaze tracks around the room and he frowns. “You also remember you destroyed the building we were in. I’m kind of partial to this place, considering it’s literally *me*.”

“Then show me how not to break the world while we fuck.”

Vesh narrows his eyes and nods, then rises and moves into position behind me. I crane my head to take him in, wanting to commit to memory the sight of this man in all his glory. He’s at my back then, straddling Pan’s legs and wrapping his arms around my torso while I ride the god who answered my summon. That my ritual didn’t fail after all is still sinking in;

all I know is that it feels *good* to finally know without a shadow of a doubt where I belong.

Cupping my breasts, he presses his mouth to my ear. “Bend over so we can both fill that tight pussy. I want to hear you scream loud enough to tear down the walls.”

I let out a throaty chuckle. “I thought you didn’t want me tearing down your walls.”

“I can survive one or two for you.”

Pan pulls me down, and I close my eyes when he kisses me, his cock sliding out. Then both their thick tips are pressed together, nudging at my opening again. The best part is that I remember how good it felt the first time, and how right. Objectively I should be surprised that they even fit, but somehow wanting it makes it work.

I cling to Pan, and he holds me tight as they push inside me in tandem, the stretch mind-blowingly delicious. I surrender then, mentally proclaiming, “*I am yours. Do whatever you wish to me.*” Impulsively I reach for Erebus with my thoughts too. He doesn’t appear in solid form, but I feel him nonetheless, as darkness descends over the three of us, caressing every inch of my body. Sometimes his sharp nails bite into my skin; sometimes a warm, velvety tongue glides over a sensitive part of me. He grows more solid in front of me, a darker shape on his knees above Pan’s head. He gently wraps taloned fingertips around the back of my head, holding me level with his groin, and his frighteningly large and spiny cock stands erect right before my eyes.

“*Take me into your mouth, Nemea. I want you to taste my essence.*”

I open willingly, more curious than frightened of the barbs protruding from the column of his shaft on four sides. When he pushes in, the nubs turn out to be firm, but flexible, tickling my tongue and the sides and roof of my mouth. I suck gingerly, moaning when he skates his sharp fingertips through my hair, tickling along my scalp, then tightening his hold on my roots and guiding my head as I bob up and down. The barbs bump past my teeth without catching, and each time they do, he lets out a rough groan. So I find the line of protrusions along the bottom of his cock and focus on it with my tongue, making sure to apply pressure every time he moves. He grips my head tighter.

“This only makes me want you more, Nemea. I will have you to myself just once. Vesh and Pan can’t watch you constantly.”

I keep one hand braced on Pan’s chest and hold onto Erebus’ hip with the other. Dark, shadowy tentacles flow out of Erebus and tease over my body, tickling every sensitive spot that isn’t already filled or being touched by the others. The sense of being bound up in pleasure pushes me closer and closer to the edge. When one of the many tickling appendages probes between my ass cheeks and pushes inside, I lose it.

And time stops.

Everything freezes. My entire body goes still, Erebus is mid-stroke, his pull on my hair still a sharp sensation among many. And my orgasm remains poised at the very pinprick point of plummeting off the edge.

“This is where you need to focus your power, Nemea,” Vesh says. He keeps moving, slowly but deliberately, while I remain paralyzed with the other two men inside me. This was

what he did to the others when he came to get me at the school.

“*How?*” I mentally cry.

“Feel it inside you. Down past the pleasure, past your climax—that power that’s inside you that Campe would devour, were she here. That power that shattered the cabin into pieces when we fucked the first time. Grab hold of it. Rein it in. Focus it and store it away. You must learn to harness it before you can learn to use it.”

It’s a struggle and a half, but I force myself to find the magic flaring bright beneath the surface of my orgasm. It’s a living thing, a brilliant spark burning ever brighter like a fuse traveling to a bomb. It’s a challenge, but I focus with all my might, the effort growing difficult when Vesh fucks me harder, squeezing my ass as he changes his angle. His cock presses Pan’s right against my G-spot, and my paralysis fades the tiniest bit. I grunt around Erebus, nearly losing my grip on the power that’s barely in my grasp as it is.

“I’m going to let them go. Hold onto it, Nemea. Hold on with all you’ve got.”

The world snaps back into frenzied motion, all three men thrusting and grabbing and invading, their cocks and fingers daring me to lose myself.

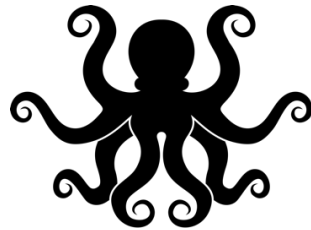
And fuck, do I want to just let go, because it all feels so good. But the power is within my grasp, and there is *so much* of it. I mentally wrap myself around it and hold on for dear life while my body gives into the others. The power flares bright when my orgasm takes hold, but I *have* it. I squeeze tight, pushing it back down deep, as if I’m sliding a bullet into a chamber for later. It clicks into place, and I finally relax and let loose, my body spasming as I cry out around the cock in

my mouth. Erebus pulls free and strokes himself to completion against my lower lip, his semen spilling onto my tongue. Some part of him is still plunging in and out of my ass, the sensation prolonging my already intense orgasm as the other two spill deep into me.

The second Erebus releases my head, I collapse onto Pan's chest. Vesh pulls out of me slowly, then gets up and pads round the bed. He touches my chin just the way he did the last time we did this. But I remember now.

“Don't you dare make me forget,” I say, half-slurring.

“Never again,” he says, bending down to kiss me. When he pulls back, he glides his thumb over my cum-painted lips. I stare up at him in wonder, drinking him in and barely listening to what he says next. “But Pan and Erebus need to get back to work, and you need to sleep. I'll properly introduce you to the others in the morning. Goodnight, Nemea.”



I step out of my room, Pan and Erebus at my heels, and find Alcides planted just beyond the door, feet wide and arms crossed. “There’s been a sighting, boss.”

I’m still buzzed from fucking Nemea, so it takes a beat for me to mentally grasp what he’s referring to. When I do, I nod. “Whoever is off-duty, meet me in the war room.”

Erebus takes his leave to cover the prison, a deep darkness settling over the lower levels. When my brother is on duty, the prisoners know nothing will go unseen, despite the absolute darkness. This allows the rest of the guards to join me.

Six sets of eyes watch me while I stare at the globe over our meeting table.

“Of course it was Greece,” Alcides says. “We should have called in a favor and had someone stationed there, waiting to bring them in. Olympus was always their goal before the war that put them away.”

“That presumes we *have* favors to call in,” Chrysaor says with a snort.

“Are we bringing in the higher races now?” Campe asks. “The cat’s kind of out of the bag at this point.”

“I never expected the Titans’ escape to remain a secret. We’ll need the higher races’ help, and it was only a matter of time before the dragons, at the very least, became aware of the situation. It saved me the trouble of raising the alarm myself when I had more important things to attend to.” I glance at the ceiling, my body still tingling after being buried inside Nemea for the second time.

None of my guards disagree about my priorities, which is more concerning than it should be. But I’m not wrong; the higher races don’t like me. The reminder that if they behave badly enough they could wind up under my thumb doesn’t sit well, but it forces them to handle their own shit so I don’t have to. Hell, they’ve even put down one of Hyperion’s other brothers who managed to slip out of my grasp and find a seat among the gods. Learning that Ouranos finally suffered his long-deserved punishment was a relief.

It isn’t my job to have an opinion on who breaks the rules, though. I am neither judge nor jury; I am merely the warden for those who get put away. Whether they deserved their sentences is not for me to decide.

I’m not ready to examine the implications of us all being in agreement for once, the dick-swinging bickering of earlier notwithstanding.

I wave my hand at the map and the globe expands until we’re viewing an aerial topographic image of the mountain range near Litochoro, Greece—the seat of the gods, once upon a time.

“Wow, they stepped up fast for dragons,” Cerberus says, leaning over to peer at the zoomed-in view of an archaeological dig site teeming with black and white dragons.

Alcides lets out a disconcerted grunt. “They should have left the place buried.”

“We’re lucky they were there, or our job would be a lot more difficult.” I cross my arms, scowling at the scene.

“They can’t open the doors, can they?” Cerberus asks.

“No. Not without the key,” I say.

“And where’s the key?”

I grit my teeth. “It’s safe, for now.”

The others stare at me expectantly. “You know we’re on your side, boss,” Alcides murmurs.

I take a deep breath. “It’s in two pieces. Chaos holds half, Fate holds the other. Suffice to say I don’t see the two of them teaming up and allowing the Titans into the Halls of Olympus when it would disturb the status quo. They’d have to worry about something *other* than themselves for once.”

“Fair enough,” Alcides says. “But if either of them can be manipulated into giving up control of their piece, we might be in trouble.”

“Who else knows they hold the key?” Campe asks.

“A handful of gods who want the Titans in power even less. And the Realm of the Gods is as off-limits to the Titans as Olympus is right now.”

“We need to track them down while they’re weak. Let’s start with Olympus. I need Cerberus, Chrysaor, Alcides, and Pan with me.”

Alcides stiffens and clenches his fists. “Boss... Going back there...”

“We aren’t going in. Not without the key,” I tell him, hoping it’ll soften some of his reticence.

He winces, but closes his eyes, takes a breath, and nods. “Fine.”

“Good. I need Campe on standby on the off-chance we need to do some dragon diplomacy.”

Campe frowns and shakes her head. “I haven’t interacted with my own race since my sister sold me out and had me sent here. I doubt my voice would hold any weight, even if they could remember who I am. Or who I used to be.”

“Your voice is what we’d need, not your significance to them. You still sound like your sister, and that’s all that matters.”

Her expression turns incredulous. “You want me to do the very thing that got me locked up to begin with? I’m not impersonating the fucking *Mother Dragon* again. Are you fucking kidding?”

I pin her with a stare. “She can’t touch you here, Campe. You are *all* under my protection. Not a single god can touch you—not even Chaos or Fate.”

Alcides raises an eyebrow and gives me a dubious stare. My stomach churns.

“She’s here now,” I say under my breath. “So if Fate really is acting on me... on *us*... hopefully we can keep any damage contained. Maintaining the integrity of the prison is a priority, but it also means I have to do something I’d hoped to avoid. I need to check in with both Chaos and Fate to ensure they don’t do anything stupid.” Chaos may be my boss where matters of the prison are concerned, but now that we know what the

Titans' target is, this goes well beyond maintaining the security of this place.

That announcement makes all of them blanch. They're used to dealing with Chaos since he's the creature we technically report to, though when they aren't called upon for a major job, they really just visit for chocolate and booze when he shuts me down, then proceed to tell him way too many secrets for my comfort.

But Fate is another story. The androgynous primordial is a devious fucker with a pack of hounds who could likely tear any of them to shreds if they looked at them sideways.

But I can't take a chance that the Titans can somehow manipulate either of them into giving up control of their piece of the key.

"I'll be in touch," I tell them. "Get back to work until I need you. Erebus will keep an eye on the girl."

The tension that rises when I mention Nemea again is palpable as I teleport to the mortal world. It lingers like a knot in my gut that just gets tighter. Perhaps Chaos was right about our level of synchronicity. We may all be on board with Nemea's significance to us, but that doesn't mean we'll agree on what to do with her. Other than bed her, anyway, but even that thought triggered a fight when I let them in earlier.

I arrive in a shadowy olive grove on the outskirts of Litochoro and pause to get my bearings. It's been eons since I stepped foot here, and the landscape has changed. Standing within sight of Olympus, I can pinpoint from memory the best location to approach from, and just hope there are no dragons patrolling from the air when I land. They won't venture beyond the mountain itself, at least, to avoid being seen by any humans, so when I arrive at the next landing spot, it's silent

and dark, but close enough for me to scent the campfire of the archaeological team who uncovered the temple doors.

The fact that they have a team of dragons suggests it's the same group who awakened the most recent dragon brood from hibernation. I'm only alert to these events because young dragons are typically hellraisers, and after spending five centuries effectively imprisoned, it's no surprise when they misbehave. I don't usually have to intervene, but every so often the dragon race's enforcers need me to pop in just to give the troublemakers incentive to straighten up. There's nothing like the threat of a proper supernatural prison to scare them straight.

But I'm not expected tonight, so I need to tread carefully.

I teleport to a thicket of shadows at the edge of the camp and listen for a moment. Conversation is subdued, so when I stride out of the darkness, everyone leaps up. One of the two blond human men starts to call out, but I hold up a hand.

"Please don't sound the alarm. I'm only here to talk."

"Who the fuck are you?" the man asks. "Why shouldn't I report you? Are you with those fuckers who tried to break into the temple last night?"

"In a sense, but I'm only trying to capture them and put them back where they belong."

A beautiful auburn-haired woman pushes through the two men. She glances back and gestures for them to stand down. "I've got this, guys." Then she strides right up to me. "You're the warden, aren't you? Do you have a name, or are you just Tartarus?"

She looks haggard up close, but she's alive. The fact that the Titans were here, then left without leaving a body count

suggests they want something from her. She also has the scent of dragon around her, but I don't see a single sign of a dragon at the camp. Not until a little girl scampers out of a nearby tent, red curls bouncing.

“Mama, you said you'd stay with me tonight, but I woke up and you were gone!”

The little girl's eyes flash with red inner light, and her mother gracefully swoops her up in her arms, focus shifting entirely to the girl.

“Gabby, honey, we have a visitor I need to talk to. I promise you'll be safe if you stay in the tent.”

“I don't want to be alone,” the girl whines. “I want Papa.”

“I know baby. So do I.”

“You're Erika Rosencrans, aren't you? Where is the girl's father?” I ask.

The woman stares at me for a beat, distrust emanating from her and her companions in waves.

I take a breath, deciding to try a different approach and hope my reputation doesn't precede me. “They call me Vesh. I serve multiple roles. In this world, I'm a Scion of Chaos. My brothers and I oversee security for Chaos at his casino in the city you know as Las Vegas.”

“Pandemonium,” one of the blond men says. I know Erika by reputation, but it takes a moment to recall the names of her companions. This one is either Eben or Dimitri; I'm guessing it's Eben due to his American accent. “I've been there. It's a popular vacation spot for dragons.”

“Yes, it is. But my other role, the one you referenced a moment ago, is warden of the prison where the higher races

and other magical creatures get sent when they break the law—at least the ones whose transgressions are so great their own races don't have a sufficient means of punishment.”

She looks past me and narrows her eyes. “You're just one man hunting four Titans? Color me skeptical that you can get the job done. They put down four dragons without effort—threatened to kill them if I don't give them what they want.”

“I contain multitudes, Ms. Rosencrans. What you see looks like a human man, but I was never human. I was born before the higher races existed—before *humanity* existed. I am not just an individual, either, but an entire realm to which the worst of the worst creatures are sent to rot. Most never get out; this jailbreak is a highly unusual occurrence. But I also have a crew of powerful guards at my disposal who will help me track and capture the escaped convicts.”

She eyes me up and down. “Prove it.”

I grit my teeth, but nod, mentally calling on Pan for his aid first. It's his unique power that allows the others to fight side by side. His mind slides into mine like a hand into a glove. The two of us fit well together, and I can't help but be reminded of how we fit inside Nemea mere hours ago.

“Stop that or she'll see a side of us we don't want her to see, brother,” Pan says.

“At attention,” I say, ignoring the faun. I sense the other four close. Campe hesitates.

“If you want me to show myself, they'll know I'm not my sister,” she says.

“I don't think that matters now.”

“Give me room,” I say, stepping back a pace to allow the others to join me. Then I hand the reins over to Pan.

His power swells within me like a rising tide. It's a familiar feeling, and a trick we've used hundreds, if not thousands of times, but it still catches me by surprise. Just when I feel like I might burst, the sensation breaks. I blink and look to my right where a replica of my body stands, eyes glinting with Pan's wicked glee. He takes it one step further and transforms my features and clothing to show his own face and body.

Then he closes his eyes and concentrates and splits again. The new copy of him drops to all fours, becoming the three-headed Cerberus who lets out three gruff barks. Once again Pan replicates, and it's Chrysaor's turn to appear, but in his semi-human shape, with his tusked underbite, mohawk, and resplendent dove-gray wings. Then Alcides takes shape from the next copy, and finally Campe.

"This is only part of my squad," I say. "There are three others."

Erika's entire team stares, wide-eyed. The little girl bounces in her mother's arms. "Mama, he's like an *amoeba*!"

Her mother chuckles. "Yes, sweetie, he is, isn't he?" She gives me an apologetic look. "She just started learning about microorganisms and asexual reproduction. Still, we had four court dragons who were no match for the Titans last night. I hope you're packing more power."

Pan takes a step forward. "You seem like a well-informed woman..." He trails off when a petite dark-haired woman nudges Erika's elbow and then whispers in her ear. Erika's eyebrows rise and she looks at Pan more closely. When the woman points at Alcides, Erika's mouth drops open.

Erika clears her throat. "You'll have to forgive me. My skepticism got the better of me and I wasn't putting together

all the pieces. You guys are a veritable who's who from Greek lore, aren't you? You're Pan, right? You were there when the Titans were sent to Tartarus the first time."

"At your service," Pan says with a tilt of his head. "I was instrumental in putting them away, yes."

"*Braggart,*" Cerberus taunts. Pan shushes him with a gesture.

Erika steps down the line. "And you're Cerberus." She hangs back until the slavering mutt sits and wags his tail. Despite being dwarfed by the enormous guard dog who is a head taller than a normal human man, Erika steps closer and lets her daughter reach up to pat each of his three heads.

"Good doggie," Gabby says, bouncing slightly in her mother's arms.

"Chrysaor, I presume?" Erika says, turning to my next guard. "Brother of Pegasus, born from the blood of Medusa."

Chrysaor nods.

"Your mother got a raw deal, by the way."

Chrysaor snorts. "Don't I know it. Her murderer saw justice eventually, but not before some other poor fool lost a parent."

Erika presses her lips tight. "I know what it means to lose a parent. I lost both of mine too soon." She reaches out and squeezes his shoulder, and I'm almost positive I see a glint of moisture in Chrysaor's eyes.

She moves along and pauses before Alcides, studying his massive frame and bearded face for a moment before her gaze drops to the lion hide draped over his shoulders.

"Herakles?"

“I prefer Alcides. It is the name my mother gave me,” he says.

“This is your home, isn’t it? The temple, I mean.”

Alcides’ jaw spasms before he bites out, “Olympus was my father’s home. Tartarus is home to me now.”

He doesn’t elaborate, and Erika studies him for a moment longer before saying, “Daddy issues—I got it,” in a quiet voice and patting him on the arm, then taking a couple more steps to face Campe.

She studies Campe for a few seconds, then tilts her head and smiles. “You’re a dragon,” she says. “How did you wind up with this motley crew? I’ve never heard of any dragons who guard Tartarus.”

“Not surprising. My kind probably don’t speak of me.”

“What’s your name?”

“Campe.”

Erika’s eyebrows lift. “Oh, I *have* heard of you, but I don’t think I ever put it together that you were a higher races dragon. Where do you fit in the lineage?”

Campe clenches her jaw and darts a look at me.

“*Tell her the truth. We want her to trust us,*” I advise.

“*I’m not convinced the truth will help with that,*” she retorts. But after a slight mental push she huffs. “*Have it your way, boss.*”

“At the top, actually. The one you know as the Mother Dragon is my sister. I’m not the only dragon in Tartarus, though; Vesh’s brother Typhon is more powerful. And we’re

also missing Asterius and Erebus, who are back overseeing things in the prison so we can be here.”

Erika holds up a hand. “Hold on. Back up. The Mother Dragon has a *sister*?”

“I wouldn’t say she claims me anymore. I have, as you say, *fallen from grace*. We don’t speak.”

Erika regards Campe with more intensity, taking in her leather armor and her hand on the hilt of a large sword. She fights well in her human form, which is often required in the tight quarters of a prison.

“But you’re here and she isn’t. That says a lot more about her, I would think. As *gods* go, pretty much all of them are shit at answering prayers. You would think that when four Court dragons are harmed, *someone* among the fucking pantheon who created the higher races would give a shit, but no one has come. Deva Rainsong is the only one who bothers with mortals anymore, but she’s been called to handle a different problem on some island off the coast of Seattle. You all are gods or demigods, and you actually showed up.”

Her voice is tight with pent-up fury, and her eyes flash as she scans the group, then paces back to face me. “You’re here to help, so tell me what I can do to help *you*.”

I take a beat before asking, “Gabby’s father was one of the dragons, wasn’t he? And they left him alive?”

She winces, then takes a deep breath. “In a sense. Follow me and I’ll show you.”

She leads me to a muddy path, and I stride forward beside her, the others falling into step behind me with the two human men uncomfortably close to my elbows. After a brief hike, we reach the dig site I saw on my map, with a dozen Shadow and

Guardian dragons stationed around the perimeter. Some fly in a circuit overhead. A handful are in their human forms, rebuilding a broken scaffolding and staircase. But I can see what happened when we reach the edge of the dig. Down in the mud at the bottom rest four eggs that have been dragged together within the confines of a heavily guarded fence: two golden eggs, one copper-red, and one silver-white.

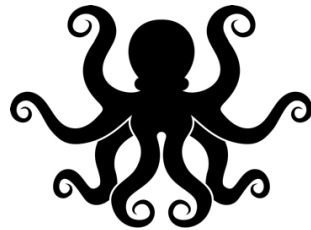
“Iapetus is the only one with the power to affect the age of a mortal,” Pan says.

My jaw twitches.

“You don’t look surprised,” Erika says sardonically.

“I’m surprised they left you alive.”

“They had no choice, considering they want to get into that temple. Because I know how to get the key.”



Waking up feeling freshly fucked is so much nicer when you can actually *remember* the fucking. I luxuriate in the soreness of my naked body contrasted with the decadent softness of the silken covers that encompass me. Copious wetness coats my inner thighs, something I would have normally not been able to sleep with, but now all it does is remind me of how I managed to fit two enormous cocks inside me. And I *loved* it. I may have loved it even more the second time than the first, now that I can actually remember it.

I pull the covers over my head to savor this feeling a little longer, rolling onto my side and touching my fingers to my lips, which are as pleasantly tender as the rest of me. I sucked off a god with *really* weird dick last night. I still remember the sweetly salty taste of him, and the sensation of power filling my belly when I swallowed. Licking my lips, I taste remnants of Erebus, bringing the memory back fresh and vivid. My pussy gets wetter, if that's even possible, but my stomach growls at the same time, and a wave of dizziness washes over me, obliterating my arousal entirely.

With a groan I roll onto my back and toss the covers off my head. I get my bearings staring up into the peak of a canopy that drapes down from a single circular point to the four carved bedposts around me. It's all black silk.

Every inch of the bedding matches, though looking closer at it, I suspect it isn't silk at all. Like the void glass that I've become well acquainted with, the fabric has an iridescent sheen like an oil slick. Though upon looking closer, I realize it isn't a surface effect at all; the threads shimmer with inner light just the way the glass did when I touched it.

But only when I touch it. I smooth my hand over the cover and watch in fascination as the threads shimmer beneath my palm, fading back to black when I lift my hand.

I thought I'd seen everything when I learned of the existence of the higher races and found myself on an island where they were regular residents. But despite the presence of actual dragons, life on Bear Island was comfortingly mundane. They were just people, living their lives, teaching crafts at an exclusive craft school—one among many, though the only one that catered to non-humans.

Occasionally I'd hear mention of gods and goddesses, of the origins of the higher races, but it was all still a very abstract idea to me.

But now... I'm in actual fucking *Tartarus*. Which, it turns out, isn't just a place, but a man. A man who has been inside me twice.

I sit up and stare around the room. And I guess I'm inside *him* right now? Can he feel me? Can he hear my thoughts?

I think for a moment, then project, "*What's a girl got to do to get some morning nookie?*"

"She has but to ask," comes a familiar voice, but it doesn't belong to Vesh.

Erebus materializes at the foot of the bed, eerily handsome and as terrifying as ever. He's in dark, ornate armor now, which makes him even more intimidating. But the hungry look in his eyes shatters the sinister impression.

"I was talking to him, actually," I say, annoyed by my slurring words. The room wobbles again, and I blink my eyes and shake my head, which throbs like I have a hangover. My vision clears. "Where is he?"

"Hunting down the Titans. I am happy to see to any of your needs."

"I think..." I trail off, my stomach churning and my vision blurring. "I think I need food."

He disappears, and I blink at the space where he stood, wondering if my delirious brain conjured him. It's too much of a challenge to remain upright with the room spinning, so I flop back on the pillows with a sigh. I guess I'll have to figure this out myself.

How the hell do I have a hangover? I didn't drink a drop of alcohol yesterday. I rally after a moment, manage to sit up and swing my legs over the edge of the bed, and wait for the throbbing to subside.

The floor is a smooth, matte black, and I experimentally press the soles of my feet to it, then move them. The surface glows with faintly purple footprints before fading back to black. The room itself is a strange mix of luxurious and spartan. There are no rugs, and very little furniture; the huge four-poster bed, two simple tables for nightstands, and the ornate divider screen are some of the most beautiful pieces

I've ever seen. Not to mention the bedding felt like sleeping on a cloud.

But something is missing, and it takes me a moment to realize what's *not* there. A bathroom. There's no bathroom here. So... where the fuck do I pee?

I ponder this question, trying to gauge the level of need in my bladder. Maybe this is some medieval realm and they use chamber pots? I peek under the bed, but see nothing—not even a dust bunny—then decide I can probably hold out long enough to find an answer. I spy a large onyx-colored glass on one of the nightstands and peek into it, sniffing. It smells like nothing, so I down the entire glass of what turns out to be delicious, cool water in several gulps.

Oh fuck, was I thirsty. But I probably need to find that bathroom sooner rather than later now.

My stomach is still achy from a lack of food, but at least the room is no longer spinning. I rise and pad around looking for my clothes, locate my boots at the foot of the bed by the footlocker Vesh sat on last night, but the rest of my clothes have disappeared.

“Seriously? You guys stole my clothes? What the fuck?”

Miffed, I start toward the wall blocking the door. Halfway there I stop, stalk back to the bed, and yank the sheet off and wrap it around me, then stomp back toward the doorway. I round the wall and smack face first into a giant, muscular chest.

“Oof,” says the enormous man I rammed into. I stumble back, stunned, then crane my head back as far as it will go to peer up at the beast blocking my path.

He's tan and beefy, with features just outside the realm of human. He has a broad, square jaw and wide mouth with full lips, above which rests a wide nose struck through with a thick golden hoop dangling from his septum. His forehead from his hairline down to his eyebrows has an intricate patterned texture like he's been branded with the most ornate brand. And his heavy, ornamented brows shade deep-set eyes filled with faint surprise. But the most breathtaking of his features are the horns that rise from either side of his skull. The patterns on his forehead continue halfway up the length of the thick, majestic ivory coils, tapering to dark points, and come close to grazing both sides of this hallway we find ourselves at a standoff in.

Even though I saw his features superimposed over Vesh's last night, that image doesn't hold a candle to the minotaur in the flesh. I stagger back, more from awe and fascination than fear. He steps back too, one heavy cloven hoof thumping hard against the floor behind him.

"I'm so sorry," he says in a voice even deeper and more resonant than the one I heard last night. "I was only coming to bring you breakfast. Erebus said you were awake and hungry." He holds up a basket that appears absurdly dainty dangling off one finger, even though it's about double the size of my satchel.

"Oh, uh, thanks? I was just going to find a bathroom. Doesn't this guy, you know, poop?"

He frowns and glances past me, then slowly shakes his head. "Primordials don't defecate. But if you need to relieve yourself, you are welcome to use my lavatory. It's on the lowest level, by the kitchen."

I pull the sheet tighter around my torso and meet his gaze. "Any idea where my clothes wound up?"

He peers down at me. “The laundry, most likely. We can visit it after your other needs are seen to. Follow me.”

He gestures to the doorway with the basket and I exit, eyeing him warily, but he only stands back, dropping his gaze as I slip past. It’s almost as if he’s embarrassed by the way he talked to me last night. Assuming that was really him.

The savory aromas of whatever is in the basket fill the corridor between us as we walk and my stomach lets out an unholy growl that surprises us both.

He chuckles. “Vesh should have fed you something more substantial than his seed. I will have to reiterate the importance of proper nourishment for human guests. We didn’t exactly have much time to prepare for your presence, though, so my apologies.”

My cheeks warm, but I’m not sure whether to be embarrassed or correct him, because Vesh is the only one who *didn’t* come in... or at least near... my mouth. In fact, Pan’s and Erebus’ cum was the *only* thing I imbibed last night. Could that be the cause of this unholy headache?

“So I guess you’re the lucky one who got saddled with taking care of me? Is Vesh prepping for my training or something?”

“Most of the guards are busy chasing a lead on Hyperion and his brothers. Erebus is overseeing the prison, and I am overseeing you. I haven’t been informed about any training, though.”

I don’t respond, distracted by the scent of food, the ache in my head warring with the clench in my belly and the discomfort in my bladder as he leads me down a winding staircase with a dizzying view of the bottom of the tower.

We're about ten stories up, I think, and the view is more spectacular than what I'd envisioned when I sketched the place. Every landing has a gate leading to a bridge that connects to tall spire, with arcing bridges fanning out that link to still more spires in a vast network that extends as far as I can see. Every jutting black structure is a precarious, spiraling spire of void glass, with mesh grates in the sides covering what I realize with a shock must be cells containing inmates. Far below us, the ground is a honeycomb of pits covered in obsidian grates, each of which gleams with violet light.

I can't even fathom the scale as high up as we are. The tower we're currently descending seems to rest on the peak of a mountain of more dark glass with perfectly straight, smooth slopes.

"This is all him, isn't it?" I marvel, sliding my palm along the smooth railing that borders the stairs as we descend, Asterius just behind me.

"If you mean the prison, yes. Tartarus and Vesh are one entity, and many. All the residents are part of him while we are here. Symbiotes, after a fashion."

"So how did anyone escape if they were part of him? Wouldn't he have known and been able to stop it?"

"If it were that easy, he wouldn't need guards."

I pause a step below him and look back, perplexed.

He shakes his head and gestures at my body. "Tell me what is happening inside you right now, Nemea. What does your *awareness* tell you of what is occurring within your body? Can you pinpoint individual cells and their desires, their locations? Can you control them?"

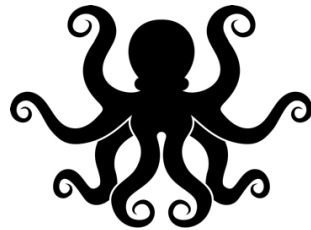
My mouth drops open and I blink, taking his point. “I need a piss and a meal, and that’s pretty much all I’m immediately aware of.” I’m also horny again, thanks to the lingering wetness between my legs, but I’m not mentioning that to him. I wiped up as much as I could, but gravity has been at work on this walk. Those two filled me to the brim last night, and it’s got to go somewhere. So my thighs glide against each other with every step, and the memory of what Asterius said he’d do to me last night plays back on repeat in my head. God, I hope we’re not mentally linked the way I am with Erebus.

“*Are you listening?*” I project, half to Asterius and half to the dark creature I sucked off last night, hoping only one of them responds.

“*Only when you ask,*” comes Erebus’ deep, velvety voice. “*My attention does have its limits, and most of it is occupied with the prison at the moment. Do you need me?*”

I sigh. At least that’s one less thing to worry about. And it is weirdly comforting to know that he’s within easy reach. “*No. I was just curious whether you were paying attention to my conversation with Asterius. I can trust him, right?*”

It feels like a redundant question, because I believe I can trust all of them. But it still soothes me when he says, “*Yes. You are precious to all of us, Nemea.*”



“Here we are,” Asterius says when we reach a lower landing after descending for several minutes. The stairs continue down from here, widening as they plunge into darkness somewhere below the tower.

“I thought you said your quarters were the lowest level?” I ask, peering farther into the depths.

“The lowest above-ground. The caverns below are where the baths are. We’ll head down there when you’re ready.”

He gestures to an open archway similar to the one that led into Vesh’s quarters high above. There is no door here, either, just a wall that curves inward, forming a corridor that extends several yards before opening into another. This one is straight, dividing the lowest level into two halves. On one side is the biggest kitchen I’ve ever seen, bustling with activity... except there’s no one here. Yet every surface is occupied with chopping knives, bowls with spoons steadily mixing, and several fires burning in huge fireplaces with enormous steaming cauldrons hanging above, slowly being stirred by paddles moved by no one.

I gawk at it for a moment before realizing that Asterius has moved ahead and stopped farther down in front of another

open archway, watching me patiently.

“How does that work?”

“Autonomic function of the prison’s needs,” he says. When I only stare, he raises his eyebrows. “It means...”

“I know what it means. I guess I’m just surprised you’d use such a technical term for what looks like magic to me.”

“Clarke’s Third Law might apply, though it technically *is* magic, not technology.” He smiles at me, revealing a row of sharp teeth reminding me of one of the myths Rachel read to me the night we did our deep-dive. The legend featured a minotaur who supposedly ate human flesh. But despite the teeth and the sheer size of him, he’s less frightening to me than Erebus should be.

“How does that one go? Something about how any sufficiently advanced technology is...”

“Indistinguishable from magic,” he finishes with a smile and a nod. I walk toward him, marveling. “But it is more accurately simple physiology, just of a magical being.”

“And that being is Tartarus—Vesh?”

“Yes.”

“You aren’t what I expected,” I say. “None of you are, but you’re especially surprising.”

He gives a tiny shrug that on his frame resembles an enormous boulder shifting enough to cause an avalanche. “When you have an eternity, you must fill it somehow. I fill it with books.”

He turns and steps through the big doorway, and my stomach does a little somersault. I suppose it hadn’t registered until now because I’m not properly dressed, but Asterius is

wearing even less than I am. The simplest swath of a loincloth bands his hips, fabric draping down between his thighs in front and in back, and that's pretty much it. His massive, muscular wall of a back flexes as he walks, causing his myriad scars to catch the light. His dark skin might have made it easy to overlook his relative nakedness, but I see it all now, and it's *affecting* me.

I swallow and shake off the overwhelming urge to eat *him* and not whatever he has stashed in that basket. Scampering to catch up, I stop short right inside the doorway.

“Whoa, you were being literal about the books, weren't you?”

The room I just stepped into is a vast library with shelves lining every wall and free-standing in rows upon rows from floor to ceiling. Books and scrolls and stone tablets from every era are stacked in corners and leaning against the lower shelves.

Asterius leads me farther in where he turns down an aisle that runs perpendicular to the entry, cutting down the middle of the shelves. At the end is a large window, its panes divided by a grid of black void glass, overlooking the prison. A pair of French doors set in the center offers easy access to a wide balcony just beyond.

This end of the room is free of shelves, with ornate rugs covering the floor, a huge bed against the wall on one side, and another arched doorway in the wall opposite, with a large book-strewn table in between in front of the windows.

Asterius points at the doorway. “The lavatory is in there. I will set the table for you to eat.”

He sets the basket down, and I head to his lavatory while he gets to work relocating all the books. There isn't much here besides a counter too high for me to reach and wide basin of a sink, which appears to have a proper faucet with knobs and a spout and all—made of void glass, of course. There's also a shelf of toiletries that serves as a partition to a smaller chamber beyond, which holds a very large toilet. It's carved from the same black, glassy stone the tower is crafted from, and is designed for a larger creature than me.

I try to hike up the sheet while pondering how to climb onto the thing. Like the other room, this one has stacks of books scattered along the walls, some on actual shelves, but many just piled on the floor. I grab a couple piles and scoot them to the toilet, peeking at the titles.

What does a minotaur read while he's on the can?

Most of it looks like boring military strategy stuff. There's a book on ancient weaponry. A book of Homeric verses. And one heavily dog-eared book about a morning glory farm, which seems an odd thing to be thrown into the mix.

I don't have the patience to look closer, so I hop up onto the books and peer past the rim. Surprisingly the basin is pristine and filled halfway with water, so I relieve myself with a sigh.

I'm craning my head around to look for toilet paper when warm water jets against my ass from the rear of the toilet, making me yelp in surprise.

“Oh my god, you have a bidet?”

A deep chuckle reaches me from beyond the chamber. “Just wait,” Asterius says.

A second after the warm water stream stops dousing my nethers, heated air takes its place, drying me off. I groan in satisfaction. It's not arousing, per se; it just feels really good to be clean and dry down there.

When I return to the room, he's cleared off the table, draped a cloth over it, and laid the food out for me. Then he actually bows and pulls out a chair for me to sit.

The sheet trails behind me along the floor like the train of a fancy gown as I walk to the table, and I tip my head in amusement when I sit. "I might get spoiled with all this pampering.""

"It's not the most comfortable place to live, but we've had centuries to improve the place with enough small pleasures that we have few complaints." He lays a napkin across my lap and scoots my chair close to the table, then pulls another chair close and sits. His chair is larger, and that's when I realize the table has shrunk since I entered, and the chair I'm sitting in as well.

"I know you didn't build a whole new set of furniture just for me in the past five minutes. So... what flavor of magic do you have?"

My own mention of *flavors* makes my mouth water, and I grab the fork and dig into the sumptuous breakfast on the plate in front of me while I wait for him to answer. I start with a big bite of buttered toast before focusing on the eggs, bacon, and sausage. A bowl of oatmeal sits to one side, and a bowl of fresh berries to the other. Another platter rests in the center of the table, laden with fresh pastries. Everything is warm and aromatic, and my belly is so fucking happy once I get food into it. My tastebuds are practically orgasming from the first

bite of crispy toast and rich, creamy butter. I let out a moan that halts Asterius from saying whatever he was about to say.

He lifts an eyebrow and tilts his head, his mouth curving into a pleased smile with just a hint of more salacious interest.

“I’m sorry, this is just so fucking delicious. And to think it’s prison food. Do you always eat like this here?”

“The guards eat whatever they like. The kitchen delivers to their rooms. Your presence was a special occasion, so I thought you would like a more personal introduction. In the future, you just need to express the desire and it will be fulfilled—within reason.”

“The inmates aren’t so lucky, I assume?”

“They get nourishment dispensed via tubes into each of the cells. We aren’t running a hotel. The comforts of Tartarus’ heart do not extend to the prison beyond.”

“Fair enough. So tell me, is it your magic that does all this?” I gesture at the table and chair, and then the prison beyond the windows.

He shakes his head. “This is Tartarus. Chaos magic can do anything the wielder wishes.”

I reach for the tall glass of orange juice and take a long swallow, moaning again when the sweetness of fresh, ripe citrus hits my tongue. He watches in amusement while I catch my breath for my next question.

“Do you have chaos magic? Or is it elemental like that of the higher races?”

“My magic functions similarly to the ursa’s, but more limited. I can manipulate weapons—metal, stone, wood, and bone. Explosives too. While I am in Tartarus, I can also draw

on the power of the prison. While it listens to all the guards and obeys our needs, I have a connection the others lack which allows me to be tuned into the inner workings and maintain them. A little extra oversight.”

“So you’re the custodian. And the librarian?” I gaze at the row upon row of shelves filled with books.

“I take pride in my position here,” he says with a wary frown.

“Of course. I didn’t mean to suggest you’re *only* some lowly janitor or something. I don’t exactly have anything to be proud of, so I can’t talk anyway.”

His frown deepens and he sits up straighter, wariness replaced by concern. “You are here, Nemea,” he says in a deep voice that tickles my eardrums. “That makes you immeasurably rare.”

I wince and shake my head. “But I’m not. I’m a nobody. I still feel like I lucked into winding up on that island, at that school, because my life up until that point was utter shit. And I’m not even a good person, which might make up for it. I didn’t even *try* to stay in my community and help fend off the corporate shills who wanted to come indenture everyone into working for them in their stupid distribution center. I could’ve at least tried...”

I trail off when the despair weighs me down enough that it becomes too much of an effort to speak. I just stare off through the windows, abstractly aware of the fact that I’m in an actual *prison* which feels more like home than the home I escaped from, and I’ve barely even been here for a day.

“It wasn’t luck, Nemea. It was...” He pauses to look over his shoulder as if someone might overhear, then leans closer,

which makes me lean closer over my empty plate. “It was *Fate*.”

I’m tempted to laugh at how absurd his manner is right now, except I’ve heard enough about Fate over the past few weeks at St. George that I should probably take him seriously.

I lean closer and whisper back, “So fucking what?”

Asterius blinks and sits back, staring at me in shock for a moment before a chuckle escapes, gradually transforming into an all-out belly roll of a laugh. I stare, open-mouthed and awed by his ... *everything*. He’s huge, intimidating, and so loud the windows vibrate. But I feel the laugh down to my bones. Deeper.

In the midst of it, I realize I’m wet again because of this big lug’s laugh. There’s no logic to it. I mean, he is objectively a total snack—or more like a whole five-course meal, if I’m being honest. Even the monstrous angularity of his face is beautiful the more I look at it. His features are super expressive, the designs on his forehead enhancing every expression, and his amusement contagious. His abs tense with each guffaw, and I just sit with my chin propped on my hand and take him in.

Finally he heaves a breath and wipes his eyes, then looks at me, still smiling. I smile back.

“Why did you whisper?” I ask.

He rests a hand on the tabletop, tapping his fingers in a light rhythm. “Because Tartarus is Chaos’ creation, and Fate and Chaos are not friends. So to suggest that Fate had a hand in bringing you here would not go over well.” He lifts his gaze to the ceiling, pressing his lips in a tight line before dropping his gaze back to mine. “But the signs are hard to ignore. You

called to Pan and Vesh. Typhon too. You've already bedded four of the guards without hesitation. Most of the others responded to you last night when you asked for us. We would have all had our turns, if you'd invited us to."

Fuck, now he's talking about last night, a topic I sort of hoped we could avoid if only because thinking about what he said to me makes me want it to happen. I bite my lip, then decide I don't want the rest of my breakfast to go to waste and pull the bowl of berries close as a distraction. I pick up a fat, ripe blueberry and pop it into my mouth, savoring the tart sweetness that explodes on my tongue when I bite down.

After chewing a moment, I find the courage to voice my concerns. "I wanted it all, in the moment. But don't want to become some depraved creature that only wants to be fucked, even if that's all I can think about right now. That isn't an invitation, by the way." I shake my head, then frown. "Wait, you say I bedded *four* of you? There were only three by my count—Vesh, Pan, and Erebus. And I didn't even fuck Erebus."

Asterius lifts an eyebrow. "He fucked you. The rest of us were privy to pieces of it, when Vesh allowed us to peek. But his eyes weren't open the entire time."

My cheeks warm. "He did fuck my mouth, I guess." I recall the other things he did with parts of himself that couldn't quite be considered fingers, and my core clenches involuntarily. "But who was the fourth?"

"Typhon was there the first time," he says. "I grant you that you probably weren't aware of his presence, since he was only riding along in Vesh's mind, but I guarantee you he remembers. The Brothers Bane are close. Their fraternal bond allows a truer experience when they're merged, so he would

have experienced everything his brother felt as if feeling it himself.”

“I don’t know what that means. Who are the Brothers Bane?”

“The three Scions of Chaos: Tartarus, Erebus, and Typhon.”

“Why haven’t I met Typhon yet? He didn’t introduce himself last night. And someone else was missing too.” I kick myself for leaving my satchel and sketchbook behind, but I know there were nine figures I sketched, and so far I’ve only met four in person, and three more through Vesh. There are two who I haven’t met yet.

Asterius nods. “That would have been Alcides. He’s... solitary. You’ll meet him soon enough. The other of course is Typhon. Are you finished with your breakfast? Because I can take you to meet Typhon now. His quarters happen to adjoin the baths, so we are headed there next anyway. But I warn you, he is the only one of us who is not capable of a humanoid shape. He is quite terrifying the first time you lay eyes on him.”

My heart pounds as I recall the fearsome image I sketched of a draconic beast with a hundred heads. But I only had an image in my head with no scale of reference. And evidently this creature already has carnal knowledge of me, yet I never even realized he was there.

I give a hesitant nod and Asterius frowns. “You really don’t need to fear him, Nemea.”

“It isn’t that,” I begin, glancing down at my empty plate. “I’m just trying to reconcile the things you said to me last

night with how you are now.” I wave a hand in his general direction.

His wide nostrils flare, steam coating the thick gold of his septum ring for a moment before fading. His look is inscrutable as he takes me in, but it makes my skin prickle with awareness all the same.

“Last night you asked a question, which we each answered honestly. We will never lie to you.”

“So you would really do all those things you said.”

He cocks his head, his eyes narrowing. “When you are truly ready, yes.”

I’m not sure if the slight ease of tension is relief or disappointment, but I move on. “Even the last part? You said...”

He grins wickedly. “I said I’d make Cerberus lick my cum off your tits, and then fuck him. Yes I meant that, but he’d probably put up a fight.” When my eyes widen in alarm, he shakes his head. “He’d beg me for it soon enough. Trust me, it’s a game we used to play.”

“So you basically all fuck each other here. I guess you need an outlet if you’re stuck here for eternity.”

With a deep chuckle, he sits back in his chair, making it creak. “We’ve lived together here for centuries, so we’re a bit of an incestuous little family, but no, we don’t actually have wild orgies among ourselves, if that’s what you’re imagining. Familiarity breeds boredom, and it’s usually just Cerberus, Pan, Chrysaor, and myself who play from time to time. The others have little interest. Your presence is likely to shift the balance a bit, but we’ll adapt.”

“Shift it how, exactly?” I try to ignore the voice in my head that keeps asking why I’m so special. I’m suddenly painfully aware of how focused they’ve all been on me since I arrived, aside from the fact that most of them are absent. But I’m a little grateful for that, since it means I can get to know Asterius one on one today. And maybe Typhon and Erebus, if there’s time.

His expression grows serious and his lips twist to the side as if he’s trying to decide how much to divulge. Eventually he sighs and shakes his head. “We used to work well together, but for the past three years, things have been... strained. Tensions are high, and after this breach, a lot of blame has been passed around. We’re professionals, so we try not to let it affect our work, but we’re not at our best. You’re a sorely needed distraction, and the first time we’ve all agreed on something in a while. I’m not the only one who believes Fate sent you to us.”

“So my being here is going to interfere with your fun time with the others?”

“We haven’t played in some time, actually. But Vesh allows us liberty to visit the Pandemonium when Pan is up for it, so we didn’t only fuck each other. The faun’s powers are the only way we get an opportunity to leave Tartarus. The others are outside now—not for fun, but for work. Someone must remain behind to manage the prison so that usually falls to Erebus, Typhon, and myself. But now that you’re here, I have a feeling we’ll all crave outings far less often.”

“I’m not staying,” I blurt. “I mean, Vesh promised he’d teach me to use my powers, but there’s no way I can stay here permanently. I don’t belong here.”



I second-guess my words the second they're out. What the hell do I have to return to, other than the human world in general? And this place already feels like home. I stare out the windows again, marveling at the stark beauty. But as beautiful as it is, it's also very much a prison of monochrome color and static shapes.

“Can I see more of it before we go to the baths?”

“You wish to see the prison?” He frowns at me as if I've asked to have nails jabbed into my eyes.

“I have a connection to this place, don't I? I want to learn more about it. About *him*. About all of you.”

Asterius hesitates for a moment before finally nodding. “Very well. But I must warn you, some of the sights here are not for the faint of heart. What you see beyond these windows is only the surface.”

Rather than lead me back through the library, he walks to the glass doors, stopping with his hand on the knob. Then he reaches for me. I secure the black bedsheet more tightly around my chest then take his hand.

“Hold onto me. It’s easy to get lost in this place, but I know shortcuts.”

He pushes the doors wide, but the view on the other side is nothing like the vista we’d been enjoying from the breakfast table. Beyond the opening is a dark, torchlit corridor; the kind of image I’d expect to see in a prison or a dungeon. The stench hits me first, followed by the sounds of agony and torment echoing off the walls.

“It’s all an illusion, isn’t it? Out there?”

Asterius shrugs. “Not exactly. There is little physical permanence to the architecture. What you see through the windows is one truth; the interior is another. You thought it beautiful, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” I think of Vesh’s strange beauty despite my impression that there is deep-seated darkness inside him. Then I remind myself that we *are* inside him; this is an even deeper layer to his darkness.

As we continue down the twisting corridors, the weight of the prisoners’ despair and hangs thick and acrid in the air. Asterius gives me a cautious glance when we reach the first door, and I nod. I’m ready to see it all.

The carved void glass door swings open and we enter a large, circular room with a group of prisoners chained in the center.

“The Furies,” he says, gesturing at a group of terrifying women with black wings and snakes for hair who pace around the chained subjects.

The prisoners cower as the Furies descend upon them, their maniacal laughter reverberating off the wet stone walls. Their whips and daggers spew forth a flurry of sparks with

each crack and slice, flaying the skin off their victims while they're still alive.

Asterius squeezes my hand and I hold on tighter, horror roiling in my gut alongside fascination. "What were their crimes?" I manage to ask.

"These are convicts who committed horrific acts against their loved ones. Parents, siblings, spouses, and lovers begged for vengeance against them, and the Furies answered."

I wince when all the Furies strike again as one, whips blurring through the air and searing stripes into the skin of their victims. It's terrifying, but validating to know that justice is being served.

He steers me out to the corridor again, then through another door and onto a ledge with a wrought iron railing like the ones on the tower's exterior. The ledge overlooks a deep pit.

"The Hecatoncheires." Asterius indicates a trio of massive, hundred-handed giants standing guard around a large boulder with a huge eagle perched atop it, wings outstretched enough to obscure whoever is chained to the rock. All I see are blood-drenched legs hanging down one side, though the man's screams are deafening. "They are guards like myself and the others, with the singular purpose of overseeing one prisoner's punishment."

"Who is he?" I whisper, nerves frayed from the level of torment in this room alone.

"Prometheus. He gave technology to humanity, and the gods sentenced him here for the offense."

"That doesn't sound all that just. Technology is awesome."

Asterius twitches a shoulder and snorts. “The laws are the gods’ domain. We just carry out the sentences for those who break them.”

I linger, staring down at the gruesome scene. The giant, muscular, naked man chained to the rock has finally fallen unconscious, the sounds in the room limited to the fleshy pecking and ripping of the eagle. It swallows the last morsel and then flies away, disappearing into the darkness above. I stare after it into a void that I thought was a solid stone ceiling, but isn’t. Gazing into it makes me dizzy, so I look again at the captive Titan below.

The giant, open wound in the middle of his torso is already closing, and I catch a glimpse of a perfectly intact liver before the flesh mends, leaving nothing but well-defined abdominal muscles. Without the blood and the eagle obscuring him, I can take him in. He’s beautiful, powerful, his skin luminescent. When his body shifts and betrays his alertness, my gaze darts to his face.

“Free me, Nemea,” he whispers, glowing amber eyes locking onto mine. “You know my sentence is unjust. Free me, and I will be in your debt until the end of time.”

I hold his gaze for the briefest second before I’m startled by the predatorial battle cry of the eagle who descends from the void again, its wings blocking my view of him. The next sound out of his mouth is cry of pure agony as the beast rips into him once more.

I spin on my heel, nauseous and confused. Asterius steps aside as I push back into the corridor, breathing heavily and bracing my hands on the cold stone, struggling not to retch.

Asterius’ big hand rests against my back, stroking lightly. “I did warn you it would not be pretty.”

I let out a shaky laugh. “I know. Did you hear what he said?”

“Don’t let it affect you. Many of them beg. Many are too far gone and barely notice when we enter.”

“And the heta—hecatoncha—”

“Hecatoncheires.”

“Yes, them... are they like you? Guards?”

“Some of the inmates have dedicated guards or torturers. They are lower in rank. The guards you met all live together in the tower and answer to Tartarus himself. The other guards you see answer to us.”

I frown. “The Titans who escaped, didn’t they have dedicated guards too?”

He snorts, then sighs. “Yes. Typhon is normally their guard, but he was gravely injured and still recuperating so the rest of us guarded them in shifts. They were locked away in the darkest, deepest, most secure pit in the place, which should have held them regardless. It was an unfortunate convergence of events that led to their escape.”

One of his dark, bushy eyebrows twitches slightly as he looks askance at me.

“You think I had something to do with it, didn’t you?” I ask.

“What I think doesn’t matter now. What’s done is done.”

My nausea has faded, irritation taking its place. I glare up at him. “Say whatever the fuck you were thinking. Don’t lie to me.”

He props his hands on his linen-wrapped hips and twitches his nose, septum ring swinging a little with the motion. “What I think is that you held the end of a thread of Fate that somehow reached all the way into this place to us. It found Pan first and caused a domino effect that resulted in the most dangerous inmates within the prison escaping. I don’t hold you responsible—if anyone is at fault, it’s Fate—but blaming Fate is like blaming the Earth for turning. We just never believed Fate magic could penetrate all the way into this prison.”

“You’re not mad at all?”

He looks at the ceiling, then back at me and shakes his head, chuckling softly. “I can’t be. Their escape is a dangerous mistake we will have to remedy, but it brought you to us. For that, I will never be angry.”

He lifts a big hand to brush fingertips over my cheek. The gentle touch causes a fluttering sensation in my chest that descends, becoming a low throb between my legs. I blink rapidly and take a step back.

“Um, I think I’m ready to see more. Shall we?”

He huffs and backs up a step too, looking a little chastened. I want to apologize for what he must have perceived as rejection, but was really just me trying to get a handle on my raging libido. I want to climb him and fuck him, but don’t want to get distracted just yet. There’s too much to learn about this place still. Too much to understand.

“After you,” he says, gesturing down the corridor.



The next room flips my opinion on its head again. Here is another large man chained to a rock with a pair of vultures pecking at his liver while his head lolls to one side. Bloodshot eyes pass over me, unfocused, yet pleading for relief.

“Tityos, son of Zeus and Elara, suffers eternal punishment for attempting to rape Leto,” Asterius explains. “Like Prometheus, his liver regenerates for the vultures to continue feasting on.”

I can get behind a rapist being punished, but someone who tried to uplift humanity? That still feels excessive and unwarranted.

I shudder at the gruesome sight, but what did I expect? We are a level removed from Hell—or Hades, I guess. At least Asterius doesn’t seem to take pleasure in the violence on display.

His jaw is set and his gaze is hard when we move to the next room. Inside, another deep pit yawns, but this one features a steep ramp extending down from the ledge we stand on all the way to the floor. The inmate within could easily escape if he just climbed up.

Several yards below, however, I see a huge round boulder being rolled inch by inch up the incline, its mass obscuring whoever's rolling it.

“Sisyphus, king of Corinth, was punished for imprisoning Hades and disrupting the natural order of life and death,” Asterius says. “He is condemned to push that boulder up the hill for all eternity, but it always rolls back down before he reaches the top.”

And true to his word, the boulder shifts mere inches from the top, topples to the side, and rolls back to the bottom again. The man behind lets out a curse as he stares after it in defeat. He looks up at us then, his dismay still etched on his face. He's so close to us I could reach out and give him a hand up, but he shakes his head.

“I can't,” he says in a strained voice, backing up as if in fear before turning and running back down the ramp to the bottom to resume his futile task.

“Why doesn't he just leave?” I ask when we exit the cell. “He was so close.”

“He's compelled to complete his task and may not leave until it's done.”

“He'll never succeed, will he?”

“He has been here for eons. Without divine intervention, it is unlikely.”

The next two rooms feature equally futile torments for the inmates within. One contains Tantalus, who Asterius informs me tried to feed his own son's flesh to the gods. For his crime, he's condemned to stand in a pool of water beneath a tree with beautiful fruit just out of reach. Each time he attempts to drink

or eat from the tree, the water recedes or the branches rise too high for him to grab.

The other is a man bound to a flaming disc that spins eternally in a darkened room. “To Ixion, it is as if he’s eternally spinning through a void,” Asterius explains. “This is his punishment for attempting to seduce the goddess Hera.”

The next room is not even a cell; it’s a vast landscape featuring a worn and muddy path that disappears down a slope into the distance, ending at the shores of a wide river. A long line of women in tattered robes trek the path, carrying pitchers attached to yokes upon their shoulders.

From our vantage atop the hill, I count forty-nine women who take turns filling their vessels in the river then turn and make the trip back up the hill to a well a few feet away from the cell door. But along the way, the earthenware jars all begin to leak, water streaming out the bottoms while they walk. Yet they don’t stop to patch them, and by the time each one reaches the well to tip their jars and empty them, not a drop of water remains to fill the well.

“The Danaids,” Asterius says in a low voice. “They murdered their husbands on their wedding night, and now they must fill these pitchers with water from the river Styx and transfer it into this well. When the well is full, their sentence is complete.”

“But their vessels leak. This is just as bad as Sisyphus. Maybe he deserved his sentence, but do these women deserve theirs?”

Exhaustion and defeat are etched on each woman’s face when she reaches the well only to find her pitcher empty. I step forward and touch one on the arm. “Excuse me, but did you murder your husband?”

She glances fearfully at Asterius, who nods her way, permitting her to answer.

“My sisters and I were taken unwillingly and forced to wed and lie with our uncle’s sons. Our father told us the only way to be free of them was to kill them, so we did. All of us but one are here paying for the crime.”

“That’s awful.” I turn to Asterius. “Seriously? These women were *forced* into marriage and *raped* by their own cousins. How is this justice?”

Asterius just gives me a helpless look, and I huff and push past him back through the door. “I know, you’re just doing your fucking job. You guys have been living under a fucking rock if you think this kind of shit still flies in the twenty-first century. Get with the fucking program.”

“I’m sorry, Nemea.” He rests a gentle hand on my shoulder, his big palm engulfing me. It’s a comfort, and I don’t pull away this time, but he doesn’t linger.

Finally we reach another large, circular room with a deep, dark pit, yet this one is empty, the heavy grate that once covered it thrown back. A thick vine climbs out of it, lush with leaves and beautiful, aromatic flowers.

“This was where Hyperion and his brothers were held. They managed to break their chains and climb out, thanks to Pan’s carelessness.”

“And thanks to my influence. What exactly did he do? He never told me what really happened that day. I just remember how damaged he was when I found him. His horns were nothing but bloody stumps.”

“It’s rather crude,” he says, casting me a sidelong look. I raise an eyebrow.

“Don’t tell me you’re too proper to tell me all of a sudden.”

He snorts and shakes his head. “He was complaining all day about needing to blow off steam—begging Vesh for an outing or bothering me and the others for a romp. When we said no, he took matters into his own hands just a little too close to this pit.”

He walks around the rim to where the vine emerges. Obscured behind the foliage is a low bench resting beside a pulley and a bucket that still contains what looks like a moldy bread crust.

“So he sat here and jerked off, is what you’re saying?”

“His semen possesses powerful magic. It looks like it grew through Hyperion’s shackles, breaking the chains, which enabled him to release his brothers, and then the vine provided a way for them to climb out. The shackles themselves were impervious to their own magic, but not Pan’s.”

“So what I’m hearing is that if he’d gotten laid by one of you, none of this would’ve happened.”

Asterius huffs and stares down into the pit. “Perhaps, but none of us were in the mood for his antics. When we encourage him, we wind up distracted.”

I don’t push, because what’s done is done. I just stare into the darkness below and heave a sigh. After seeing the conflicting messages about who was deserving of their sentences, I have to ask.

“Do you think they deserved their punishment?”

He pauses for a moment, considering his words as he looks into my eyes. “Perhaps they did. But sometimes the gods can be too heavy-handed; punishment should fit the crime, not

exceed it. I see your point about some of the others—Prometheus and the Danaids. Maybe Sisyphus too. But the Titans went to war with the gods. This was an appropriate sentence for them, all things considered. That I'm related to one of them should not affect my opinion on the matter."

My eyebrows lift. "Hold up, you're related to a Titan? It sounds like you're trying to convince yourself that you shouldn't care when you clearly do."

He shifts his gaze back to the pit and takes a deep breath. "I was never assigned to guard them myself because Vesh worried my blood ties might allow Hyperion to influence me—he is my great-grandfather. I take my job seriously, though. I was freed from my own prison to serve Tartarus. I would not jeopardize that honor, no matter who I was assigned to guard. The Danaids... I would sooner free them than any of the others."

"Then why don't you?" I ask.

"Nemea, we are already in dire straits after the Titans' escape. Perhaps once we've recaptured them, we can address your concerns with Vesh. I don't know if there is any way to reverse the sentences of any of the inmates, but if there is, he would know."

It will have to be enough for now. I let him lead me back down the dank and grim corridor, numb to the sounds of torment that fill the air. When we reach the doors leading back into the library and step through, he closes them firmly behind us, throwing the lock and blocking out the noise completely.

Despite the peaceful silence of this library, I'm still troubled by what I witnessed and the conflict weighing my heart, so I sit at the table again, face buried in my hands as I try to process it all.

Asterius reclaims his seat beside me and sits in silence. His big, warm presence is an odd comfort, and I allow myself to set the burdens aside for now. I need to learn who I am and what I'm capable of before I go trying to help the unfortunate souls unjustly imprisoned here. Perhaps when I have more practice, I'll have earned enough respect from the other guards that my opinion will carry some weight.

Vesh is the one I really need to work on.

A warm sensation glides against my shoulder, and I look down to find Asterius tracing one big finger along the edge of my tattoo. The octopus covers my entire side, its arms wrapping around me. Two of the tentacles twine up over my breast in front and my shoulder blade in back to meet along the top of my shoulder, where they taper up along the column of my neck.

His touch is soft, his expression curious. "Is this what I think? An octopus?" He lifts his finger and reaches for the empty perfume bottle that still hangs against my chest. "Like this?"

He lifts the bottle gently by its chain. I look down at the tiny object and the octopus wrapped around it, a mirror of the design that holds me in its grasp.

"Yes. It's a symbol of creativity, adaptability... escape. I've just always been fascinated by them. I grew up inland, but the first time we visited Seattle when I was a kid, we went to the aquarium. They had this little octopus named Inky in a tank there who I just sat and watched goof around for hours. It was like he was performing just for me.

"Later on, I heard that he'd escaped—crawled right out of his tank and went down a tiny little drain that led all the way to the ocean. How cool is that? Ever since, I couldn't get the

idea of *escape* out of my head. Because if he could do it, maybe I could too.” I shrug and give him a crooked smile, but he’s studying me intently enough to make my hair stand on end.

I swallow when the parallel hits me. There are nine of them, not eight, but Vesh is obviously the leader—the body with eight individual arms.

“I know it’s soon yet, but this can be home to you too,” he says without addressing the implications of my chosen symbol—my totem. “Give us a chance, Nemea.”

The earnest look in his eyes makes my insides tangle with longing. To belong, to have a family that actually wants me around... That day at the aquarium, I didn’t move from that spot by the cephalopod tank the entire time. Yet when my mother found me, she yelled at me for running off, then punished me as if she hadn’t been the one to abandon me all day while she and her boyfriend got high in the restroom and entertained themselves with the other exhibits.

I grasp Asterius’ hand and lift it, pressing my cheek into his palm. His long fingers curl around, threading through my hair to cradle the back of my head. I close my eyes, simply absorbing his warmth and tenderness. When he moves, I open my eyes again to see him slip out of his chair, careful to maintain contact as he lowers himself to his knees in front of me.

“If you asked me now what I would do, it would be different than last night. You were a temptation then. You wanted us to say filthy things, so that’s what we offered. But that isn’t all we are.”

I swallow thickly, looking up into his dark eyes. They’re a rich brown with flecks of gold and green, and so soulful I can’t

help but believe him—trust him.

“What would you do now?”

He doesn't answer me with words. Instead, he lowers his mouth to mine and takes my breath away with a gentle kiss. The warmth and tenderness of it shatters the desire I've felt all morning, replacing it with a longing even deeper and sweeter—a hunger that's in the process of being fed.

I moan against his mouth and slip my arms around his thick neck, sliding off my seat only to find myself caught by his free arm, his hand easily cupping my ass to pull me against him.

When we break our kiss, I whisper, “Why don't you take me to that big bed of yours and make love to me?”

A deep rumble rises in his chest and he shakes his head. “I have a better idea.”

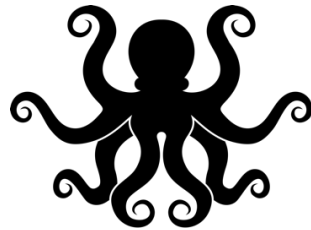
He releases my head and hooks his arm beneath my legs, standing with me cradled against his chest. When he strides down the aisle between the books, I look up at him.

“Where are you taking me?”

He meets my gaze before tilting his chin toward the door. “You still need a bath.”

My entire body warms at the suggestion, but I laugh. “I didn't realize I was that offensive.”

He chuckles. “You smell delicious, but as nice as it would be to have you all to myself, I won't hog you. I want you to meet Typhon before the others return and make demands on your attention.”



“There’s no counteracting their magic?” asks the pretty blonde woman Erika introduced as Camille. She’s standing within the fenced enclosure, both hands resting on the silver egg, her expression anxious. Half a dozen thick-necked Guardians stand sentinel around the exterior of the enclosure, and still more circle overhead in their dragon forms.

When we descended to the dig site, a dark-haired dragon in black joined us: Kol, the Queen’s Shadow, head of security and spymaster for the dragon race. He doesn’t bother introducing himself because we are already well-acquainted. Anytime a dragon acts up within the walls of Pandemonium, he’s the one we call to retrieve the offending party.

He stands at Erika’s elbow, watching us warily.

“We could speed up the gestation process,” Pan says. “But once they hatch, it’s too late to reverse, and there’s no way to instantly return them to the exact age they were in before they regressed. They would need to be raised from hatchlings, and dragons take centuries to fully mature and come into their power. They wouldn’t be the same as you remember by the end of it.”

“Only Iapetus can completely undo what he’s done,” I say. “But under no circumstances should you give them the key.”

“We can’t leave them like this!” Erika argues. “They’re our *mates*.”

Her daughter is inside the enclosure, kneeling on the ground and talking to the big copper egg that contains her father. It sounds like she’s telling him a bedtime story.

Alcides clears his throat. “There may be a way, but only if we get the key.”

I clench my jaw and shoot him a warning look. He mentally apologizes just as Erika jumps on the offer of hope.

“Tell me.”

“When we captured and imprisoned the Titans, we drained their essence into vessels and locked them away inside the temple. All we need to release the curse on these dragons is to retrieve the vessel containing Iapetus’ essence.”

“Those fuckers didn’t *look* like they’d been drained,” Eben says.

Alcides frowns and shakes his head. “They’ve been imprisoned for thousands of years. Even in the darkness of the lowest reaches of Tartarus, we can’t prevent them from regenerating. But they are still not at full strength; if they were, they would not need the key to enter the temple. They could merely break down the doors.”

I wince, because they *did* manage to break down my doors, which should *not* have happened. I’m only grateful that the temple has no living residents, so Fate’s threads can’t penetrate.

“If they can do this with what they have, what are they like at full power?” Erika asks.

“Strong enough to challenge the gods,” I say. “Which we don’t want to risk because there’s no guarantee any of them will be around to fight back. We don’t know what the Titans’ endgame is beyond reclaiming their full power, but it won’t be pretty.”

I don’t disguise the bitterness in my tone, and Erika lifts an eyebrow. Kol finally makes a noise, if only to scoff, but it’s evident he agrees with me.

“Noted. But you guys think *you* can take them down?” Erika challenges.

“At their current strength, yes. This is why we must not open that temple and risk them acquiring what’s inside.”

Erika’s nostrils flare and she turns to face me fully, arms crossed. She gives me an intense, calculating look, and my stomach clenches.

“I don’t like that look, boss,” Chrysaor says.

“Neither do I, especially because she’s desperate.”

“Not any more desperate than we are,” Campe says.

“I have a proposition for you.”

“Erika...” Kol warns. “If you’re about to say what I think, don’t. We can find another way.”

“It’s the only way, and you know it.”

Erika holds my gaze with more intensity than most humans can manage. I remind myself she mated a Red dragon prince, which proves she has the mettle to stand with us. Or to be a thorn in my side, if she gives into Hyperion’s demand.

“I’m listening,” I say cautiously.

“The Titans want me to deliver the key. And you want them. Help me get the key and we can use it as bait to lure them into an ambush. You guys take them down, lock them up again. Then let us open the temple and release our mates from this curse. We both win.”

“Getting the key won’t be easy. You already know where it is, so you should have expected as much.”

“I’m good at acquiring keys to ancient temples. This one’s no different. The only reason I didn’t already have the key was because I didn’t quite believe this place existed. I didn’t want to go poking a couple gods for it if it didn’t exist. But now that I’ve uncovered the door, I know what we need to do to open it.”

“So please share what your plan was. I’m curious how well-prepared you were before I got here.”

She cocks her head. “How do I know you’re not fishing for the answers yourself?”

“Because I helped create the key. Don’t forget we were all there when this door was locked and the key split into two pieces. Tell me how you planned to secure both.”

She straightens and drops her hands to her sides. “What I know is that the two halves of the key are guarded by two of the most powerful creatures in existence. They will no doubt make us work for each fragment. I happen to be close friends with Deva Rainsong, who has already agreed to get me an audience with Fate. As for Chaos, I figure he still owes her a favor too. At the very least, it’ll get me in front of him and we can go from there.”

“So you’re relying on their goodwill toward a woman who stole from them both. Are you sure you want that association?”

Her brows draw together in confusion. “She’s the best chance we’ve got.”

“I’m sorry, but Deva was never a good option. While Fate may hold some favor for her, getting an audience with them is the easy part. As for Chaos, trust me when I tell you Deva’s goodwill with him has been spent. And that still doesn’t illuminate how you planned to talk them into giving you the fragments.”

“I’m resourceful,” she snaps. “And I don’t back down from a challenge.”

“Considering we don’t actually need you or your team, it will be safer if you let us handle things.” I scan her team, who all look on intently. There are a handful of dragons hanging back, but the core of her team are the human mates of the four dragons who were cursed.

For the first time, proof of her desperation creeps into her expression. She darts a look back at her daughter beside the giant egg holding her mate, then gives me a pleading look.

“You need me because the Titans made the bargain with me. They return here in a week, and I’m guessing you don’t want to advertise your presence if you want to get the jump on them.” Her voice drops low. “And I would owe you a favor.”

I’m almost convinced I misheard her last words, but my hearing is too sharp. “I’m sorry, why would I need anything from you once this is over?”

Her scowl intensifies. “I know you probably think I’m useless, but believe it or not, I have connections. I may not be

able to offer much besides the bargain I was forced into with those assholes, but if you let me join you, I will owe you. Whatever I can do for you, anything you want..." She lifts her chin and her eyes darken, conveying that she means *anything*. "All you have to do is ask."

Kol's dark eyes flash and he steps close, whispering a warning in her ear.

I expect at least Chrysaor or Cerberus to make lewd comments, but none of my guards make a peep in response to her very clear offer of her body in exchange for our help.

"Should I be concerned?" I ask.

"She doesn't really want us to take her up on her offer," Pan says. *"Besides, we have Nemea."*

I'm tempted to argue that they don't *have* Nemea—she's not *theirs*—except I know better. The second Pan wound up on that island and Fate's magic shattered my doors, there was no keeping the threads from reaching my other guards. It's been obvious since Typhon's ride-along when I went to retrieve the faun from Nemea's embrace. If my youngest brother can be affected by her, it's no wonder the others are too. And they were all too willing to introduce themselves last night. All but Typhon and Alcides, but I don't doubt they're just as affected by Nemea as the others.

I sigh and shake my head. "We would never ask anything of you that you did not want to give. But if you are as well connected among the higher races as you say, we may find a use for you. As for this particular task, Fate and Chaos are ancient, immensely powerful primordial beings. There's no predicting what they will demand in exchange for the key to the temple. It won't be pleasant, either way, and it very well might be deadly. So keep that in mind."

Erika's expression hardens and she nods.

"Someone should stay here at least," Camille says, clearly possessing less headstrong recklessness than her boss.

"You should *all* stay here," I snap, then realize my demand is only going to make the hot-tempered woman dig her heels in.

Her eyes flash with determination, and we stare each other down for several seconds before Campe gives me a mental nudge.

"I like this one. She'll fit in well."

Nostrils flaring with a breath, I nod. "You come alone. We leave now."

"We leave when I can gather my things and say goodbye to my daughter," she counters. She narrows her eyes in a challenge for me to argue. Campe chuckles.

"Hurry up, then. We don't have time to waste."

She enters the enclosure and squats beside her daughter. A moment later, the little girl is in her arms and Erika carries her out, giving her a peck on the cheek before handing her off to Kol. "You're going to visit your cousin Astrid. Would you like that? And when you come home, Papa will be back."

"You promise?" the girl says, her lower lip quivering.

Erika gives Kol a pleading look and he squeezes the girl tighter.

"Astrid can't wait to play with you, Gabby. Did you know she has a new kitten?"

This makes the child's eyes light up and gives Erika the opening she needs to depart.

“Erika,” Kol calls after her. She turns back, and he says simply, “Be careful.”

She gives a curt nod and barely looks at us as she passes by to climb out of the dig site.

“On me,” I murmur, and the others converge, stepping into my body one by one as we walk until I’m whole once more. Their consciousnesses still lurk in my head, but their bodies have returned to the prison. Rather than walk, I transport myself in a blink to the campsite to wait for Erika to prepare for the trip.

She catches up and glares at me when she finds me leaning casually against the table in her command tent, poking at the dig site plans and notes that are scattered around. She disappears into her tent, then emerges a moment later, slipping on a leather jacket as she stomps across the campsite to me. I’m flipping through a soft, leather-bound journal, scanning a year’s worth of notes about her search for this place. She has information no human should be privy to, so I regard her with fresh respect.

My appraising look only makes her scowl harder. “You aren’t earning any points going through my research.” She snatches the journal out of my hand and stuffs it into her satchel, a drab canvas thing that looks a lot like the one Nemea carries.

“Just wanted to know a little more about the woman I’m trusting to help lure the Titans into a trap.”

“The only thing you need to know is that I’m seeing this through to the end. So I’m guessing we’re heading to Vegas first?”

“We see Fate first.”

“Don’t you work for Chaos? I figured he’d be the easy one for you.”

I grimace. “I already know what he’s going to ask for.”

Her eyebrows lift, but I avoid meeting her gaze. After a second, she lets out a soft snort. “I see how it is. Well, hopefully you come to your senses by the time we get to him. I’m ready to go.”

I hold out my hand, and she takes it. A second later, we’re standing in an empty waiting room. It’s a perfect cube of iridescent lavender walls with picture windows in the centers of three of them. Beyond each window, the view is a vast expanse of rolling fields, with perfect rows of trees loaded with white blossoms. Two low armchairs rest in the very middle of the room, facing a closed door.

Erika releases my hand and cranes her head around, taking it all in. “This can’t be real, can it?”

“It is, but it is not on the mortal plane. Only a handful of creatures know how to reach this place.”

She strides to the door and grabs the knob, rattling it. “It’s locked. So what do we do now? Were we supposed to make an appointment or something?”

“Fate doesn’t have a secretary. Now we wait.”



The staircase at the bottom of the tower gradually widens as we descend, until it disappears into an immense cave, curving lazily into the darkness. Moist warmth radiates out of the opening, which is big enough for a creature ten times the size of Asterius to move easily through.

My pulse quickens when we step into the shadows and are greeted by the pleasant sounds of falling water, but we aren't in darkness for long. Only a few steps down, torches flame to life along the walls, lighting our way.

"That's a neat trick. Did you do that?"

"The prison anticipates our needs," Asterius says, his deep voice vibrating his chest where my ear rests against it.

I'm not sure what to expect, but after my tour of the bowels of this place, it definitely isn't the wonderland of translucent crystalline structures glowing in the darkness once we reach the bottom. More torches come to life, lining row after row of perfectly smooth columns that rise up from a polished reflective surface like ribbons of diamond and precious stone that have been melted down and remolded. But it isn't until Asterius keeps descending, sending ripples across

the water below that I realize it isn't a floor, but water he's walking into.

He continues down until the water reaches his waist and the floor beneath seems to even out. I stare into the vastness of the cavern, hoping to catch a glimpse of Typhon, but see no sign.

"Where is he?" I whisper.

Asterius continues through the water until he reaches a ledge on the other side with a torchlit alcove. It's steamier on this side, and I trail my fingers into the water, finding it bathwater warm. He pauses and sets me on the ledge where my feet dangle into the water.

"He's still healing from a battle we fought three years ago, so he's asleep, but he'll likely rouse now that we're here."

"Three years ago." I look up at him with a frown. "That was when the attack on Bear Island happened. It's taken that long for him to heal?"

He strides up out of the water, his cotton loincloth soaked and clinging to every contour of his groin. I try to keep from staring, but the man is *packing*. I avert my gaze to the water as he heads for the shelves I caught a glimpse of in the alcove. When he returns, he's holding several little bottles, a combination of spicy, flowery aromas drifting from them.

"He lost three heads that day. Regenerating each one is akin to gestating a baby. It takes time and significant energy." He holds up one of the bottles and removes a cork stopper. "Would you prefer to wash yourself, or will you allow me the honor?"

"Three *heads*?" I gape at him. "How many does he have?"

“One hundred. Only one of them has executive function, though, so the rest are more like extra limbs.” He sets down all but one of the bottles, then moves in front of me. I’m still trying to wrap my head—my *only* head—around the idea of a creature with that many. I can picture the sketch I made, but it hadn’t really sunk in that he had a whole, actual hundred of them, or that he could lose a few and still function.

Asterius is smirking when he pours a thick, amber liquid into one palm, sets down the bottle, then reaches beneath the water to lift one of my feet. “I hope I didn’t break your brain.”

My mouth snaps shut and I narrow my eyes at him. “Are you serious? After all this, you think *that* would send me over the edge?” I wave a hand at the cavern and glance up at the ceiling beyond which the tower lies, and the prison, wherever those cells actually exist. “It’s hard to deny that gods are a thing after living at St. George for a few weeks, but until now they’ve... *you’ve*... just been abstract concepts. But now... I mean, you’re a minotaur, and you’re giving me a foot massage. Last night I had a three-way with Pan, Tartarus, and Erebus. And I know who the others are too, at least mostly.”

“I can answer any questions you have about the others, if you’d like.”

He’s lathered up my foot so well I can’t see my toes and is rubbing the sole with his thumb in a way that makes me melt. I look up into his face and he meets my gaze, eyebrows lifting.

“I want to know about you first,” I say, pausing to recall the stories from the books I only just read. “Why are you even here? I thought you were killed by some Greek champion who used breadcrumbs or something to find you in the center of a labyrinth.”

His expression shutters and he shifts his focus back to my foot, rinsing it off with palmfuls of water. Then he lifts my other foot without responding.

“So I take it that’s either not true, or it’s a sore spot.”

He snorts, a puff of steam billowing from his nostrils. “History is written by the victors,” he says. “Theseus is also full of shit. There were no witnesses in the center of the labyrinth that day. Not one of the Athenians I supposedly held hostage was smart enough to reach the center, or to get back out again. Once he arrived to mount a rescue, they’d been dead for days. I can still smell their corpses rotting around every corner. Theseus and I did fight, and I nearly beat him, but he begged a boon of the gods at the last minute and sent me here, then returned claiming he’d won.”

“What a dick.”

He lets out a mirthless chuckle. “The only bright point is that Vesh knows the truth of every trial the residents of Tartarus endured. Those of us who he chose as his guards were all prisoners at first, save for Alcides and his brothers. We were all sentenced to this place for some misdeed or crime that we didn’t commit, or that we were unfairly convicted of. Vesh allowed us to serve out our sentences as guards instead of locked in cages.”

“What was Pan’s crime?” I blurt.

“Fucking the wrong woman.” He rolls his eyes.

I bark out a laugh. “I’m sorry, but I’m not surprised. Who did he fuck?”

“We do not speak her name here, for multiple reasons. But suffice to say he was the victim of a vengeful goddess. She chose him as the method to get even with a cheating husband.”

“Oh god, that doesn’t exactly narrow it down.”

“It’s exactly who you think,” he says, frowning.

I shudder, thinking of the prisoner above who was sentenced to an eternity spinning on a flaming wheel for trying to seduce the same goddess.

“How can he cherry pick who he lets out to serve as guards? There are so many others whose punishment far from fits their crimes. You as much as admitted it.”

He hums in agreement and gives me a solemn look. “We all know, Nemea. We live here. We’ve guarded those convicted of crimes against the gods for an eternity already. Pan was released thanks to his help vanquishing the Titans, so the gods owed him a favor. But Vesh can only do so much without bringing their wrath down on his head. He won’t risk destroying the fragile balance we’ve already found here. Maybe he could release one more—one powerful enough to help guard the Titans once we capture them—but not all of them. Not all at once.”

I want to argue more—I’m still indignant over what I witnessed—but he’s working my Achilles tendon so perfectly, I moan and lean back on my hands.

“I’m not done talking about this,” I say.

He chuckles. “I didn’t think so. There are pillows behind you. Hold still.”

He shifts forward and reaches across me, his big body arching above me. He grabs two big, fluffy pillows and rests them on the floor at my back. His hips push between my knees, forcing me to part wide, and I bite my lip, looking down between us to where his groin comes within an inch of grazing against mine.

“Won’t they get wet?” I ask, referring to the pillows, but thinking about something else entirely.

“Yes, but don’t worry about it. They’re there for your comfort. Everything in this place can be easily replaced if it gets soiled.”

“Except me. Though you’re doing an amazing job so far of cleaning me up. Very thorough.”

I lie back, pulling the bedsheet tighter around my torso despite knowing it’ll have to come off if I’m going to let him wash *all* of me.

He stands up straight again, his gaze sliding over me. Then he shakes his head. “I’ve barely begun. And since you are irreplaceable, you can trust I will be extra thorough. But you need to bare yourself to me for me to do my job, Nemea. You did not seem shy last night, so what is holding you back now?”

My mouth has gone dry, and I feel exposed even though I’m still covered, the only bare skin my arms, shoulders, and my very clean lower legs dangling in the water.

“Can I have something to drink?” I blurt, hoping for a reprieve from the intensity of his look.

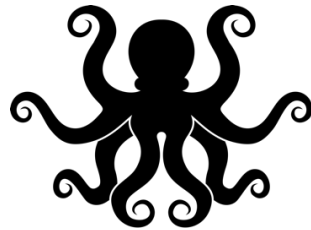
He nods without taking his eyes off mine, then tilts his head slightly to the side. I turn to see a tall, black crystal glass sweating with dewy moisture that wasn’t there a moment ago. I rise to reach it, but then a silver straw appears. I gasp, smiling at Asterius.

“You or this place?” I ask, scooting the glass closer and taking a sip through the straw. It’s lightly sweet and citrusy, like lemonade, but more refreshing somehow.

“A little of both,” he says. He reaches up to hook a finger between the sheet and my chest and tugs. “Can I uncover you

now?”

Fortified by the beverage, I sit up, shaking my head as I crane my neck to look up at him. I hook my fingers into the top of his loincloth, excited by the way his firm lower belly quivers beneath my knuckles. “Only if you let me undress you first.”



Dredging up ancient memories like the day I was sent to this prison would normally destroy my mood for at least a week, but every touch of this morsel of a woman sends that bitter memory even farther from my mind. From the moment I was first allowed to see her, thighs spread across Erebus' face, her scent filling the air, I've thought of nothing more than having her. But too many of our sentences to this prison were a result of being forced to go places and do things against our will. I can't speak for the others, but I believe we all want *this* woman to want us, to come to us each under her own power.

Last night was only the first taste of what it would be like to belong to her, and to have her belong to us. Looking down into her eyes now while she begs to undress me is more perfect than I could have dreamed. Her eyes are dark, the charcoal-shaded smudges around them making the subtle glow of her irises even more prominent. Damp tendrils of her hair cling to the sides of her cheek and her throat, accenting her pale skin and the inked design on one side of her body, and her veins pulse beneath with the subtlest illumination.

She probably isn't aware of the power lurking inside her, of the threads of both Chaos and Fate that bind her to this place, to us. Staring into her eyes makes my skin prickle with goosebumps, and my belly spasms against her touch, cock rousing before she's even let it loose.

I lower my hands to my sides and stretch them out facing her. It's shallow here, so the water barely clears the tops of my thighs. She has easy access, and I am utterly at her mercy.

"You may do as you wish."

She swallows and licks her lips as she looks down where her hands fumble with the wet knot of the loincloth that hugs my hips. It's securely bound, tied snugly enough to ensure it doesn't come loose in the middle of a fight, so she struggles and curses.

"Sorry, I thought this would be easier."

"Use your power," I say. "Chaos is undoing. You could think my clothes off, if you focus."

"I haven't had a proper lesson yet. I've only used it with that stupid dildo so far. Vesh showed me how to hold onto it last night, but that wasn't easy."

I reach for the bottle hanging against her chest. "This is your creation, isn't it?"

"Right, that too. Let me try."

She closes her eyes and inhales a deep breath, her chest swelling as her lungs fill. The ink of her tattoo subtly begins to writhe over her skin. The deeper she focuses, the more definition the octopus acquires until one of its arms reaches out, tip probing like an extra finger between the layers of the knot beneath my navel. She's focused despite not opening her eyes, so I don't think she's aware of the way her magic has

manifested, but it takes only a slight tug of the magical tendril before the knot gives and her fingers do the rest. She opens her eyes just as the octopus fades back into her skin, then flashes me a triumphant smile.

“I knew you could do it,” I say.

“It was just a matter of wanting it enough, I guess.” She gives me a coy smile as she unwraps the cloth from around my hips and pushes it off into the water. My cock stiffens further, and her eyes widen as it grows to full hardness between us, the ache in my balls growing too.

Ever since last night, I’ve endured the growing intensity of my need for her. I’m not as impulsive as Pan to go off to an inconvenient corner of the prison and manage my own pleasure, plus I’d hoped that time alone with her would lead to this moment. But I would be lying if I said I wasn’t a little desperate for release right about now.

“Holy wow,” she mutters. “You’re ... beautiful.” She’s staring at my cock, and for a moment I’m sure I see shock in her eyes, but she recovers quickly. When she sees my frown, she shakes her head. “I don’t know why I expected you to look human everywhere else because you aren’t, are you?”

“I was sired by a bull, but my mother was sired by a Titan. I can’t attribute the shape to either side, though. You can look, I don’t mind.”

Her cheeks flush when she drops her gaze to my throbbing cock again, her eyes wide with fascination. It should feel discomfiting to have a woman staring with such open wonder at such a private part of me, but it only arouses me further. I want to invite her to touch me, to run her hand over my length, to trace the groove that runs the underside, and the ridge along the top. My tapered shape will make it easier for her to take

me a little at a time, allow me to fuck her even deeper once she's ready.

She finally tears her eyes away and looks up at me. She rises to her feet on the ledge so our height difference lessens, then holds her arms out perpendicular to her sides. "Your turn."

It takes only a tiny tug for me to divest her of the bed sheet. I take her in, nostrils flaring at the sight of her curves bared for me to see. Her tattoo clings to her protectively, and I reach out and gently stroke the head of the octopus on her ribcage, as if to assure the creature I mean her no harm. Nemea shudders, then relaxes. The tattoo relaxes too, though it remains aware, its eyes peering from her ribcage, watchful.

She dips and picks up the bottle of soap. "May I?" she asks, gesturing to me.

I regain my senses and clear my throat. "No. We came down here for your bath, not mine. I should finish what I started." I look up to the ceiling, mentally envisioning what I need. As always, Tartarus responds. A narrow column of void glass descends from the ceiling high above, spreading out in a disc over our heads. A second later, tiny holes appear and heated water streams out over us both.

Nemea lets out a soft gasp and stares up. "Was that there before?"

"Nope. It appeared at my command. I told you, Tartarus anticipates our needs."

She sighs and tilts her face up to the shower, her body relaxing even more. With a small mental nudge from me, the water ebbs. I pour some soap into my palm, lathering it between my hands.

“Hey,” Nemea says, frowning up at the ceiling when the shower fades to nothing.

“It’ll return when it’s time to rinse,” I tell her. I rest my soapy hands atop her shoulders first, then slide them down over her arms and back up to spread the suds. She stares wide-eyed at me, her wonder from the first time we came face to face returning. Her gaze slides over my horns and down my face. I feared she’d be frightened of me when I walked into her room this morning, so I made every effort to avoid seeming too intimidating. It seems I shouldn’t have worried after all.

She lets out a sigh when I dig my fingertips into her muscles, massaging her shoulders, then her biceps. I work the lather into each of her hands with as much diligence as I washed her feet. Her breasts and the rest of her torso beckon, still soap-free and glistening with water. My mouth waters as I imagine the taste and texture of her on my tongue. Erebus refused to share a single detail of his experience last night—having his tongue inside her, then having her mouth wrapped around his cock. All he would say was that she didn’t disappoint.

She grows more pliant when I slide my hands down her sides and step closer, peering down at her. She cranes her head back, lips parting, and the column of her throat ripples with a swallow.

“I’d like to wash your intimate parts now,” I say, my voice a deeper growl than I intend. A shiver cascades through her beneath my hands where they rest on her hips.

“I’d like that,” she breathes with a nod.

Bending, I reach for the soap again, along with a soft cloth which I dip into the water. While I do, the shower comes to life, rinsing away the soap and wetting her skin. I drape the

cloth over my shoulder for now and lather up a second time, then cup both her full, beautiful breasts in my hands. I leave the shower on, enjoying the way her skin grows slick under my touch.

She lets her head fall back and sighs when I rub the soap in, massaging gently with my palms. Then I cup both breasts again and swipe my thumbs over her hard nipples. She lets out a moan that echoes through the cavern.

Deep below, I sense a shift. Typhon is rousing, but Nemea doesn't seem aware of the change. I send him a mental warning to take his time. She hasn't run screaming from any of us yet, and Erebus even showed her his true form, but Typhon is not like the rest of us.

I lift her breasts and rub her nipples again, enjoying the way her body quivers. She opens her eyes, looking up at me from beneath half-lowered lids. Her dark lashes are wet and her irises glow even brighter now.

“Do you feel the power inside you, Nemea? Because I can see it coming to the surface. It's beautiful.”

She looks drunk from my touch, which makes me want her even more, but then she opens her eyes a little wider, her brows drawing together. “What do you mean?”

“It's in your blood.” I lift one of her hands and turn her palm up, then trace the line of a vein in her forearm from wrist to elbow that pulses with the subtlest glow beneath her skin.

She stares down at her arm in disbelief, then smiles up at me. “Why is it happening now? Is it you? Are you doing it?”

“Not directly. You've used your power before, though. What do you remember about the times it manifested?”

I crouch and begin soaping her legs from the knees up, waiting for her to answer.

“There was literally nothing before the ritual.” She looks down at me and adds, “The one that summoned Pan to me. Then ...” Her eyes widen. “Oh, fuck. That was me. I’m the reason the cabin was destroyed.”

“Were you angry when it happened?”

“No.” She shakes her head, her mouth dropping open. “I was being fucked. I was having the best sex of my life up to that point.”

She frowns again, thinking. I dip the cloth in the water and gently scrub her upper thighs with it, then move up over her hips and across her pelvis, letting soapy water cascade over her mound. She’s lost in thought, so I limit my touch to less sensitive areas, despite how I ache to show her how good the sex can be if she’s riding my cock.

“Were there other times it came out?” I prompt.

Nemea swallows and nods. “When I was upset. Windows would break. The electricity would go out. And I might have caused potatoes to sprout. Could that have been me?”

“Chaos magic is all things,” I tell her. “Creation and destruction.”

“But it was a surge in emotion that brought it to the surface. And last night, Vesh made me hold it in. I want to try that again—to store it up. I can feel it in me now, but I also feel like I have room for more. Can you help me try again?”

“It would be my honor. What would you like me to do?”

A wicked smile spreads across her face. “Keep doing what you’re doing, and don’t hold back.”

I let out a pleased chuckle. “It would be my pleasure. But I should warn you, we may have an audience soon.”

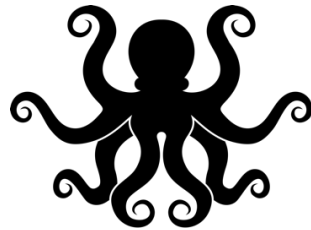
Her eyes widen and she whispers, “Is he awake?”

I nod. “He’s curious, but doesn’t want to frighten you.”

“Tell him he’s welcome to join us.”

“To watch, you mean?” I ask, sure she doesn’t mean what I think.

She shrugs, and her veins pulse brighter. “Let’s see what happens.”



Now that I'm aware of it, I can't ignore the power surging through my veins. It seems to come from some deep part of me, welling up from darkness, from the origin of everything. As if a portal opened up to the entire universe and it's trickling in bit by bit.

Asterius watches closely, and I can sense he's taking care to pay attention to my magic as much as I am. But when he skims his fingertips down my belly and grazes them over my mound, I shudder, and the entire cavern shudders too.

He glances up, frowning.

"I'm sorry. I'll try not to do that."

"I don't think that was you," he says.

That's when I notice ripples skimming over the surface of the water, lapping at his torso where he kneels chest-deep in the water. They become waves within a moment, and I find myself holding my breath. But a deeper craving takes hold—the same craving I had last night when Asterius and the others started to introduce themselves. My inner exhibitionist rejoices, and I glance down at the horned man on his knees before me.

“Don’t stop.”

He nods and drags the wet cloth off his shoulder, dips it in the water, then raises it again. Water cascades from the cloth when he glides it up between my thighs. He parts me gently and I widen my stance, breathing faster as he rubs the cloth lightly between my folds.

“Do you want soap?” he asks, and I’m almost too preoccupied with anticipation to register. “It’s very mild,” he adds when I look down.

“Okay.” Then my attention returns to the shadows and reflections of torchlight rippling across the water. The cavern is so massive I can’t see the other side, but unless I’m imagining things, there’s a turn in the darkness far ahead, and whatever is in here with us is coming closer.

The floral scent of the soap reaches my nostrils again, and this time Asterius glides soapy hands up my inner thighs and doesn’t stop. He pushes the edge of his hand against my folds, parting me, then gliding his slippery fingers through my channel. I let out a gasp, stepping wider still, but otherwise avoid moving—the anticipation is too exciting.

It’s just the edge of his finger, but the friction against my clit sends jolts of pleasure through me with every bump of a knuckle gliding over it. He pushes all the way to the back, rubbing gently between my ass cheeks and over my sensitive rear hole before gliding the soapy digit forward again. I’m panting when he does it again, and again, and with each stroke between my thighs, the waves crest higher around us, tremors accompanying each lap against my feet.

The rhythm is disconcertingly in sync with the beating of my heart, which seems to be concentrated in my core. It

grows, then ebbs when I'm sure I see a massive shadow loom against the far wall, just past the corner.

Then it stops, the waves subsiding. Asterius drops his hand into the water and lifts the cloth again.

"Why did you stop?" I ask, breathless.

He glances over his shoulder, then nods and looks up at me.

But he doesn't speak. Instead I hear Erebus in my mind.

"Typhon requests permission to speak before he shows himself to you. You'll need to reach out to him, because he can't kiss you the way I could. But he is open; all you need to do is find him."

Asterius begins the utterly distracting process of rinsing the soap off my pussy while I attempt to close my eyes and focus. I reach out my mind the way I did when I sought out Erebus earlier. I can sense his dark presence, a silent observer in a mental corridor, but move past him, seeking a more prominent presence farther away.

What I find is confusing at first. The presence reaching out to me *feels* enormous, but the image projected to my mind is just a man. A very handsome, very *young* man. He's dressed in nothing but a simple loincloth-style wrap like Asterius wore, and he's fit and handsome, but with a lean, lithe body still soft around the edges like he's just barely hitting adulthood. He's almost angelic in appearance, with golden curls and blue eyes, and he looks positively anxious.

"You don't have to be afraid," I find myself saying, which is ridiculous because *I'm* the one who should probably be scared.

“I have waited a long time to meet you. I don’t want to mess up,” he replies, his voice smooth, but deep.

“If what I’ve been told is true, we’ve already met.” I move closer, closing the mental distance. He’s only a little taller than me, so it’s easy to meet his gaze.

He studies me with uncertainty, then lifts a hand and traces my cheekbone with one finger, gliding it down to my chin. *“You are more beautiful than I remember.”*

“I don’t even know if what you see is really me. I’m pretty sure this isn’t you, is it? It’s just a mental projection.”

We both take in his shape, and he shakes his head. *“No, but I’ve had centuries of practice creating the ideal human shape I would assume, if I could.”*

“I thought you were a dragon. Can’t dragons take a human shape?”

“I am a dragon, and more, but that magic has eluded me. This is why I wanted to speak with you this way—to give you a chance to know me as something other than the monstrous shape you’ll see when you open your eyes. And if you still want me, this is what I will show you when we are connected mind to mind.”

“I’ve learned that it takes a lot to frighten me,” I say. *“Let me see you, Ty.”*

With that, I open my eyes and wait, staring into the distance. Asterius has stopped touching me and stands, then turns to sit on the ledge I’m still standing on, the warm water cascading over us from above. My pussy tingles and throbs; he left me hanging, but I’m not bothered. I kind of love that we have the freedom to take this slow, that I have no obligations at the moment, other than getting to know these creatures

whose images I managed to conjure from my mind before I even learned they were real. There is no real urgency other than my desire to understand them and my place in this world.

“That may change once Vesh tracks down our quarry, so don’t get too comfortable,” Erebus warns, but I brush him off.

“Let me enjoy this, okay?”

When Typhon finally appears, I hold my breath. The shadow on the wall behind him confused me with its mass of darkness and writhing shapes, but then his heads come into view, followed by his enormous, magnificent body. His tallest head nearly reaches the cavern ceiling, an enormous dark green dragon head on a thick, scaled neck. His slitted eyes meet mine and he dips slightly, as if bowing.

Then the writhing mass of smaller, serpentine heads appear, and I think my brain breaks. I inhale a sharp breath and grab hold of the horn at hand beside me.

“Sorry—sorry,” I blurt when Asterius glances up at me. “I’m not scared,” I call when Typhon retreats a step. “Just ... a little surprised. You’re beautiful. You’re... *resplendent*.”

The torchlight glints off his shiny scales, and the jewel-like effect is truly dazzling. Every one of his heads is a different color, some shimmering with a spectrum. Every pair of eyes that watch me are a different color too, and they are *all* fixed on me.

The effect is electrifying, and I absently stroke my palm up Asterius’ thick horn, aware of the tactile rush. He casually wraps his hand around my ankle and slides his hand up my leg.

“Shall we get back to what we were doing?” he inquires.

“Wait,” I tell him, then to Typhon, I say, “Please come closer. I trust you.”

I step down into the water, letting out a little yelp of surprise when I discover it’s not as shallow as I thought, but my head and shoulders are still above the surface at least. It’s easier to swim, though, so I breaststroke across the span of water between us.

The closer I get, the harder my heart pounds, and I slow and rest my feet on the floor a few yards away from Typhon’s legs; any closer and I’ll be underneath his heads.

“You’re huge,” I say, striding a little closer. “I’ve seen dragons, and they’re big, but I’ve never seen one *this* big. Not even Stuart, Gray, or Murdoc, and they’re Guardians. They’re supposed to be the biggest, aren’t they?”

“I am not just any dragon.”

I startle when his voice emerges, rumbling and resonant from somewhere deep in his chest. “You can talk like this?” I ask.

His central head—his largest, and the only one that looks like a proper dragon head, complete with beautiful green-black horns—tilts and lowers to my level. All the others twist and writhe above me, reptilian eyes blinking, forked tongues darting out to taste the air.

“Like I said, I’m not just any dragon—I am a creation of Chaos. He made me in his attempt to seduce the Mother Dragon, to birth a new race with her. I was meant to be a gift, to show the majesty of what they could create together, but she rejected me. She rejected him, and Fate was offered the honor instead. And now he’s mated to the Mother Dragon’s daughter, so I suppose that’s justice.”

“I suppose it is,” I say with a smile. I reach out, and he lowers his head farther, stretching to let me touch the end of his nose. He’s smooth and butter-soft, his eyelids dropping when I stroke my palm up the center of his snout and back down. He lets out a rumble of pleasure.

“You are the first female in thousands of years to touch me.”

“You deserve to be touched. Everyone deserves to be touched, if that’s what they crave.”

I reach out with my other hand and slide both along his lower jaw. He tilts his head, the shift disconcerting because it’s bigger than my entire body, but I can still sense the young man within him. A warm gust of steamy air puffs out of his nostrils, sending ripples across the water. He tilts his head when I step back, and one of his enormous eyes takes me in. I’m perfectly reflected in the dark pupil—every last, naked inch. Even though I’m mostly submerged, the water is clear enough that nothing is left to the imagination.

I take another step back. “Do you like what you see?”

“Yes. But I liked being inside you more. If only my brother were here so I could borrow his body. I would love to fuck you again, to feel you shatter the world when you come.”

My body becomes a furnace of need again. The ache between my thighs had subsided, but returns now with a vengeance.

“I think we can find other ways to satisfy each other, don’t you? I’m willing to try.”

His big eyes brighten perceptibly. “You would... *experiment*... with me?”

My belly does a flip in anticipation of what I'm about to do. I glance back at Asterius, who's sitting on the ledge, simply watching. He's no longer hard, but his hungry look suggests that won't last long. I take a good long look at him anyway—at his large, muscle-bound body, brown skin glistening with moisture—at his angular face, so human in some ways, but so primal in others—and at his majestic horns, arcing up toward the high ceiling. The shower still streams down onto the stone behind him, splattering against his back.

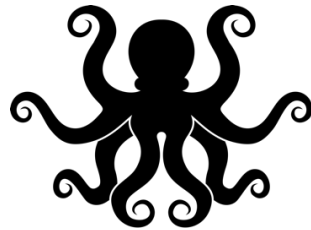
He's waiting for me, but I'm still processing this situation. I'm about to climb him like a tree and fuck him while a creature conceived by Chaos watches us. And I'm so fucking turned on by the idea that the ache in my core borders on painful.

The second I turn and wade back toward Asterius, he sits up straighter, his cock rousing as if it had been patiently waiting for me to make a move.

He starts to stand when I get close, and I shake my head. “You just sit right there.”

“As you wish,” he says. “And what should Typhon do?”

I look back at the monster behind me. He watches with focused interest, his big central head stretching forward. “A creature as big and beautiful as he is can do whatever he wants.”



“They could at least have magazines or something,” Erika says, pacing the room for the third time. “I’m not very good at just sitting. How long is this going to take?”

“It takes as long as it takes.”

“We’re on a timeline, in case you missed it.”

“Time is irrelevant here. We’ll be fine.”

She relaxes a little, then sits with a huff, staring out the big window at the scenery. Nothing but uniform rows of white-flowered trees stretch into infinity among a field of luminescent, lavender-tinted grass. She makes a sound of disgust, then looks at me.

“I hate the smell of lavender. Are you sure you didn’t bring me to Hell or the Underworld or something, and this is my punishment?”

“The Underworld isn’t this boring.”

She lets out a snort. “Good to know.”

We sit in silence for several minutes before she breaks it. “So what’s your plan for beating them once we get the key?”

Her question jolts me out of my musing over what I'll find when I get back to the prison. Nemea will want lessons, and perhaps I can convince her all the lessons require edging like last night's did.

I blink and turn to Erika. She raises an eyebrow. "You *do* have a plan, right?"

"Yes," I snap. "We'll beat them the same way we beat them the last time."

"That's it? You don't think they'll be prepared for whatever that is?"

"We can adapt. It's also been thousands of years since the last time we fought. We have all gained power, and there are more of us than there were then."

"But you don't have any of the original gods along for the ride, or Prometheus. Didn't he help the first time?"

I clench my jaw, because she's right; my squad may be bigger, but we weren't the only ones fighting the Titans the first time. Many of our allies during the first conflict have scattered to the winds, and it would take far longer than a week to gather them. But we have something we didn't have the first time—we have Nemea, and if the glimmers of fledgling powers she exhibited are any indication, she will be a force to be reckoned with when she's learned how to use them.

"I have something more powerful." *Potentially.*

The reminder agitates me, and I stand. Training Nemea shouldn't wait, but neither could this. I should have at least enlisted Erebus to begin her training, or Typhon. Either of my brothers could connect to her magic, even help her control it. Hopefully *not* the way I intend to teach her, though.

I pace to the door to Fate's office, then back across the waiting room to the window, staring out, unseeing. Superimposed over my field of vision is the shape of the ink trailing over Nemea's side while I buried my cock into her alongside Pan's. The curve of her spine as she arched her back with pleasure. The rough cry she let out when she came.

What is she doing now? I mentally reach within, something I normally only do when my guards sound an alarm. What I find causes an involuntary grunt to rise from my chest, as if I've just been punched.

I shut down my reach as if slamming a door and fix my gaze on the infinite horizon. It fades to a thin line of shimmering silver at the farthest distance, like a mirage. But the mark of sensation and beauty that greeted me a second ago is still etched against the backdrop, and heat has flooded my body.

Erika clears her throat, and I tear my eyes from the vista. She has one eyebrow lifted and pointedly lowers her gaze to my crotch, then raises it again. "Clearly you like lavender more than I do. I guess everyone has their kink."

It isn't until she draws attention to it that I realize how painfully hard I am. I close my coat around my waist and button it.

"It has nothing to do with this place, I promise."

I sit again, burying my face in my hands. I *left* her. What did I expect would happen? I know the others want her as badly as I do; not one of them was shy about sharing their excitement for her arrival. Asterius only stayed behind because I didn't need him on this part of the mission. He's more self-contained than the rest, but even he is affected by her. His

eagerness to answer her invitation last night was evidence enough of that.

And now all of them are back in the prison. Well, at least they weren't *all* with her in the scene I witnessed—just Asterius and Typhon.

“Want to talk about it?” Erika asks, leaning her elbows on her knees. She's in the chair across the room from me, giving me a concerned look.

I glance at the door again, mentally cursing the being that holds court on the other side. She turns her head to follow my gaze, then turns back.

“It's got something to do with Fate, I'm guessing. Directly or indirectly?” Her eyebrows lift as it dawns on her. “It's a woman, isn't it?”

I narrow my eyes. “I get that you're bored, but my love life isn't for your amusement.”

She raises her hands. “Fuck me for caring. I just know bottling things up is never the best solution.”

She crosses her arms and tilts her head back until it thunks against the wall behind her, then sighs heavily. In a musing tone she says, “When I was a teenager, I started having these crazy dreams—sex dreams. I didn't know what the fuck they meant, only that they were more real than life sometimes. This man ... this beautiful red-haired man was in all of them. Over the years they only got more detailed, more intense. The dream I had the night my father died... that was the first time my lover and I went all the way.”

“You mean you fucked,” I say, trying to decide whether to tell her I'm not interested in her story, but the woman *is* interesting, so I let her continue. I need a distraction.

“Yep. I lost my virginity to a dream. That’s all it was, or so I told myself. But it happened so regularly that it started to feel real.

“And then my dream lover started telling me to find him. Somehow, I knew that my dad’s research was the key. He gave me this before he died...” She raises a hand, fingering a small red jade dragon charm resting in the hollow of her throat. “He believed dragons were real, and he’d spent his entire life hunting for them. So his life’s work became my life’s work.

“Yet somehow even making it to the end, walking into that temple where they all slept, I still clung to some fragment of my scientist’s sensibilities. That magic wasn’t real, that what we’d found was just some ancient ruin filled with treasure. Well, they weren’t ruins for one thing, and the treasure inside wasn’t the gold and jewels, though we found a shitload of that too.

“It was *him*. And it wasn’t until he was actually inside me for the first time that it became crystal-clear that everything I believed until that moment was bullshit. Every supposedly *rational* belief I had about how things *should* work was just blown out of the water by how he made me feel.

“It wasn’t until later that I learned about Fate and Chaos and all the other gods and creatures that are part of this world. But none of that mattered; whether some higher power orchestrated our relationship is inconsequential, because Geva is *mine*. I know it deep in the nucleus of every cell in my body.

“But I get it—rejecting the pull when you’ve never felt it before is natural. I witnessed my entire team go through the same thing when we opened the temple. Corey—my tech—was the hardest to convince. But we belonged to them, and

them to us. And not once in the past seven years have any of us regretted making the choice to give in to our fates.”

I grit my teeth through her entire tale, gradually relaxing as confusion sets in. This can't be why I'm so frustrated, can it?

“It isn't that simple.”

She leans forward again. “Isn't it? We're here, and I don't think your agitation is about what we're here to do. I think it's about who we're here to see. You're not used to dealing with Fate, which is an extremely rare thing for someone in your position. I'm well-acquainted with how the higher races work. I've spent the last five years learning whatever I can about them, including their histories. I've even managed to get into the libraries in the ursa Sanctuary.”

This catches my attention. “That's how you learned about the key, isn't it?”

She waves a hand. “That can wait. But one thing that was clear was the divide between Fate and Chaos. And since Chaos is your boss, I'm guessing you aren't used to being under Fate's influence, so being inexplicably drawn to someone like this is new to you.”

I start to object to her assessment of what's going on, but stop. I heave a sigh and shake my head. “It still isn't that simple. It's true that I'm drawn to someone; she might even be the answer to how we beat the Titans. But I'm not the only one drawn to her. The others... my guards... they are part of me. And they are all drawn to her. Right now, they're all there, where she is. And I'm not.”

Erika laughs. I scowl.

“Oh, you poor, poor bastard. You don't like sharing, do you?”

I grit my teeth and glare, but she's not wrong.

She sits back, continuing to chuckle and shake her head. "What's she doing now? I assume you have a telepathic link to what's going on and that's what got you so riled up. She's fucking one of them, isn't she?"

"Asterius," I growl. "Or she was about to. While my brother looked on with all *two hundred eyes*."

Her eyes widen. "Typhon's watching her fuck the minotaur?" A salacious smile spreads across her face and she rubs her palms on her thighs.

"What?" I snap.

"He has a hundred heads, right?"

"Yes, why?"

"That means he has a hundred *tongues*. She is one lucky, *lucky* girl."

"You aren't helping."

"Oh, sweetie, I'm sorry you're stuck here with me, but if you brought her home with you and there are... what, nine of you?... you need to loosen up about who gets her when. It's her choice, so all of you will need to be on board with not having her while others do. That includes you. But I suggest making time to be alone together whenever you can."

"How do you do it? Dragons are polyamorous by nature, aren't they?"

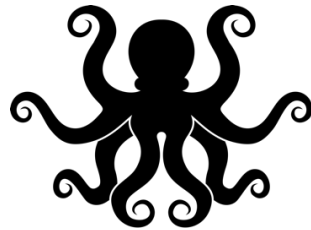
"Me? Honey, I don't *share* the way you think. Geva is all mine. When we play, we do it as a couple, and when we're home it's just us and our kid. If you want advice on how to be in a harem, you'll need to ask someone else. Deva Rainsong or April Vincent may be able to help, or their mates."

My grimace makes her lift an eyebrow.

“They aren’t exactly my biggest fans,” I say. “That island you said Deva’s busy with? She’s there because of me. Because that’s where Nemea—the woman we were just talking about—was until yesterday, when I went to fetch her.” I pause, and when Erika frowns, I hastily add, “For her protection. Chaos wants her, and if the Titans find out she exists, they could use her for leverage. Tartarus is the safest place for her, even if she *is* getting railed by my guards.”

“Hey, as long as she’s consenting, that all sounds fine to me. She is consenting, isn’t she?”

“Of course. She came willingly. If anything, I have a feeling my guards won’t know what hit them.”



The cavern rumbles when I reach Asterius. He frowns as he stares around at the space, at the water rippling around me, and the stream of water from above halts before starting again. Typhon is here and hasn't moved, but there's a deep throbbing inside me that is more than just arousal.

Looking straight at me, Asterius says, "I believe that was you, Nemea. Try to control your power if you can."

"It helps if I have something to focus on." I move between his big thighs and wrap both hands around his girth, making an effort to channel the magic inside into that deep well Vesh helped me seek out last night.

Asterius groans and leans back, propping himself on his hands. The water hits his head, cascading down over his shoulders and through the hair dusting his chest, slicking it flat again. My mouth goes dry just watching him move. His abdominal muscles tighten and flex when I squeeze his cock and slide my hands up the massive length.

He's thicker at the base, so thick it takes both hands to fully encircle him, but his shaft tapers almost to a point. When I reach his tip, I use only one hand, his cockhead about the

thickness of one of his thumbs and weeping with his arousal. A thick ridge of muscle runs along the top of his shaft, and there's a groove in the underside just right for me to fit my thumb into. I experimentally stroke back down with one hand, rubbing my thumb gently into the groove.

"Nemea," he groans, "you torture me."

"I can't help if I'm curious," I say with a smirk. "Are all of you different like this? I saw Erebus last night. He was *very* different."

Asterius' brow creases with slight irritation, which shifts to pleasure when I give his cock a squeeze to emphasize my desperate interest to learn more about all the guards.

"Hmm, let's see," he says, smiling slightly now that he's surrendered to my curiosity. "Erebus has a spiny cock, which you saw. Pan's is curved, but otherwise average. Cerberus has three, and one of them knots. Alcides' is human-shaped, but he's hung like a god. Chrysaor's is ridged in a spiral, like mine, but ... twisted. Vesh's cock is ..."

He pauses and lets out a groan when I reward him for his openness with a gentle stroke.

Deciding to help, I finish the thought. "Vesh's cock somehow fits perfectly inside me, along with Pan's. How does that even work?"

"Chaos can take any shape it needs. I'm sure your pussy adapted to some degree too."

"Does Campe have anything special?"

"Her tongue, and she tastes like ambrosia when she comes."

This makes me pause, and he opens his eyes, affording me an embarrassed tilt of his mouth.

“So you guys really *are* all intimately acquainted.”

“It isn’t a regular occurrence. It’s been centuries, in fact, since we’ve cared about sex much at all. Campe refuels when one of us allows her to be in the room while we’re ... ah... engaged in self-care. Sometimes she returns the favor.”

“Mutual masturbation, but not fucking?”

“It’s maintenance, at our age. Fucking takes more effort.”

“This isn’t maintenance right now, is it?”

Asterius sits up and hooks an arm around me, hauling me close. The next thing I know, his mouth covers mine, his tongue delving deep. I whimper and sling my arms around his neck, body going slack when he slides his mouth to my neck.

“This is a dream come true. You’ve awakened all of us to the possibility of more—to the possibility of something deeper than lust and simple gratification. We haven’t shared something so profound in thousands of years. You are a *gift*, Nemea, and one we will treasure.”

The flutter in my belly rivals the pulsing between my thighs. I’m awash in electric sensation that’s rooted even deeper than my desire for touch. If what he says is true, it’s more than I ever imagined possible.

I arch back in his embrace when he dips his head and wraps his lips around one nipple. Intense pleasure cascades through me, tangling with the throb of magic and the excitement of belonging somewhere for the first time in my life.

A gust of hot air ruffles my wet hair, and when I crane my neck, Typhon is mere inches away, so close I see both Asterius and myself reflected in his big eyes while dozens upon dozens of smaller pairs look on. The carnal embrace Asterius and I are in is striking in its intensity, my face awash in pure pleasure, his focused and intent on giving me that pleasure.

He drops a hand between my thighs and strokes me once, then groans when he finds me soaked and hot.

“I need to be inside you,” he says. “Come.”

He rises, and in one smooth motion lifts me and turns, placing me on the ledge he sat on beneath the still falling water. The heat of it flows over me, but when he arranges several pillows and sits again, I’m not sure what he intends. The water flow lessens to a trickle, then stops, and Asterius reaches out a hand, leading me close when I take it. When he lies back, I get the idea.

His cock stands nearly vertical, which is impressive, but maybe only possible due to its unusual shape. I step one foot across his hip and stand above him, looking down.

“Do you want me like this?”

He reaches for another pillow with one hand and tucks it under his head. “I want you however you want to give yourself. But you might ask him what he wants too.” He tilts his chin toward Typhon.

I peek back again where Typhon watches from a few feet away. He cocks his largest head, all the others mimicking the movement, then shifts forward on his enormous legs.

“Let me assist.”

The next thing I know, ninety-nine snakes are hovering around me, their tongues darting out to taste the air. They

don't touch me at first, but I watch in fascination as they pull more pillows around us. Then one nudges me with its nose, urging me to turn.

“You want me to look at you?”

“Yes,” he says. “I want to watch your face when he fills you. May I?”

I turn when the snake bumps my hip again, its tongue darting out in a ticklish sweep that makes me gasp.

Typhon cocks his head again. “Do my heads disgust you?”

“What? No! You just surprised me. It didn't feel bad. You can do it again, if you want.”

An interested rumble fills the air and more of the heads focus on me, their many tongues flickering so fast the breeze they generate cools my skin.

They close in, and I brace myself, but Typhon must sense my apprehension, because he backs off and only one arcs in, slitted eyes watching as it tickles its tongue along my collarbone and down between my breasts, then flicks against one nipple. The sensation is different than Asterius sucking, but it feels good.

“Would you like more?” Typhon asks, still watching with his central head.

“Yes, please.”

He lets out a deep chuckle. “So polite. Will you say please when you're aching for more?”

A breath escapes me when a second snake attends to my other breast, and still more circle as if stalking my naked body, waiting for the right moment to attack. I am at his mercy now.

“Probably.”

When Asterius grips my hips with both hands, I look over my shoulder. His giant horns are at eye-level, his face only a little lower. I give him an apologetic smile that falters when another tongue begins tickling its way down my belly.

“D-Does he do this often?”

“Never,” Asterius says. “How can I compete with one hundred tongues?”

I twist and crouch just enough to hook an arm around his neck and press my mouth to his. He groans when our tongues tangle. I hold his tongue between my lips and suck gently until he groans again, then release him and trace a line down the side of his face and over his lower lip. “You really have to ask?”

His eyes narrow and a wicked smile spreads across his face. “Stand and face him again.”

I obey, though my knees are going weak from the attention despite the short reprieve. Typhon’s teasing is light and gentle, bordering on torture. But there are tongues fluttering along every limb now, darting against my torso, my nipples, and a few so close to my core I can’t think straight.

The first time one flicks lightly against my clit, I moan and my knees nearly buckle. Asterius presses a big hand against the center of my back.

“Bend over. Let him support you.”

This is crazy. It must be some insane pornographic dream my depraved brain conjured up and I’m still asleep. But it feels too good to fight.

I do as Asterius commands, blindly reaching. Several long, scaled heads glide through the air in front of me from either direction, weaving themselves together just beneath my torso to support me. I'm able to lay across them, my weight easily supported. But then one disappears and my breasts fall through the gap, only to be instantly attended by what feels like half a dozen tongues flicking against my nipples.

But they're no comparison to the single thick, wet tongue that teases between my ass cheeks when Asterius parts me and laps at my rear opening.

"Oh god," I moan.

When I close my eyes, he's there—the beautiful, golden young man Typhon showed me. He's close enough to touch, but I'm too tangled in pleasure to do or say anything. Tongues have made their way between my thighs, teasing my folds apart and sliding through my juices, tickling my clit in the most delicious way.

In the shadows of my mind, he steps close and lifts a hand, pushing my hair behind my ear, then cupping my cheek. He leans in and kisses me, and the sensation is every bit as perfect as if it were real and not just in my head.

"You can tell me what you want telepathically, if it's easier," he says.

"I want whatever you want."

"Your pleasure is everything to me, Nemea. I want you to release it into me. If I'm anything like other dragons, I want to be able to make love to you like a man does. I want to see if your power will let me shift."

"Then make me come and we can find out."

“I will. But I’m going to take my time. And I want to make sure Asterius is satisfied too. Please don’t fight me, and I promise you won’t regret it.”

Don’t fight him? At first I’m not sure what he means, but then the platform of snake necks I’m lying on twists and lifts. My legs leave the ground, and more scaled necks slither around my calves and thighs. More still curve around my back, beneath my armpits. I cling to whatever I can with both hands, but despite the shifting movements, Typhon never lets me go.

The world tilts, and I open my eyes to a dizzying rush of movement around me. Every one of my limbs is held by a giant snake, their soft scales sliding against me. Tongues continue teasing at all my delicate places, including the thicker, wetter one busy licking between my ass cheeks.

Asterius groans, and I try to see beyond all of Typhon’s heads to where he is. All I can find is the view between my legs where another snake is teasing its tongue along the underside of Asterius’ cock.

Typhon moves me again, pulling me away from Asterius for a moment. His big head is intent on me while all the smaller ones slither around, manipulating my limbs. I feel like a doll being posed, my arms stretched out perpendicular to my sides and my legs splayed wide, my knees bent. But he never ceases the relentless teasing of my nipples and my clit, so I’m not coherent enough to ask. It doesn’t hurt; everything he does feels good. His grip on me is firm, but gentle, and the way he cradles me is almost tender.

Finally he lets up just enough for me to blurt out, “Am I just a toy to you?” then laugh through the intense pleasure.

His giant eyelids blink and he shakes his big head. “You are everything to me, Nemea. Let me give you pleasure.”

I watch him, vision hazy from being teased. My pussy feels hot and heavy and swollen, and I could come at any second. It occurs to me that he’s drawing it out the way I’ve heard dragons will with their partners, to intensify the flood of power when orgasm finally hits. I’m holding onto the power inside me just the way Vesh showed me last night, holding back from release. Now that I know *he* wants to be the target, at least I know where to focus when I can’t hold on any longer.

“Let me taste her while you’re carrying her around,” Asterius says. “Just a little higher and I can.”

Okay, now I’m definitely feeling like a toy, but I also don’t really care.

Typhon tilts me so my ass is in the air, my spread core exposed. Asterius grips the backs of my thighs with both big hands and runs his thumbs down my slick labia, pulling me apart. Then his glorious tongue is there, swiping through from clit to ass. He buries his face against me, nose pressed between my cheeks as he plunges his tongue in then back out before swirling it against my asshole one last time.

I’m dizzy from the intensity of his attention, and the abrupt halt it comes to makes me want to beg for him not to stop. But Typhon’s already repositioning me, angling me just enough that I’m not staring at the water below. I’m able to look into his eyes again, and I’m about to jokingly ask what happens next when I feel Asterius grip my hips again. I glance back to see him standing right behind me, his angular face flushed and his attention wholly focused on where he’s aiming his cock.

“Fucking finally,” I mutter, which makes the minotaur chuckle.

“You can say that again.”

Thankfully he wastes no time plunging his cock into me. I’m so slick and aching, it’s like pouring cold water on a burn. We both let out desperate groans of relief, and I let my head drop against the scaled snake neck under me.

Typhon hums with interest, retreating his tongues from my nipples and clit for the moment, which is both a relief and disappointing, but allows me to regain enough coherence to focus on Asterius, because something is happening while he fucks me. He plunges deep, the tapered tip of his cock bottoming out against my cervix, but it doesn’t stop there. At first my abdomen clenches and cramps at the invasion, but then I feel something deeper relax and open.

“That’s right, let me in deep, Nemea,” Asterius says in a purr. “Let me in all the way.”

I dig my nails ineffectually into Typhon’s scales and whimper. I want to get away, but I also want more. I don’t quite understand what’s going on.

“What are you doing to me?”

“Fucking you the way you deserve to be fucked, beautiful. All the way to your soul.”

He pulls out and slides back in, going deeper this time—too deep. But this time I don’t feel the bruising jab against my cervix. My body has betrayed me. I feel spread open in a way I never have, not even when Pan and Vesh were sharing me, both their cocks stretching my pussy almost to its limit. Asterius pushes the boundaries of my body and my mind. My organs seem to obey his command the way the prison does, my very womb opening to let him in.

But it no longer hurts. The sensation is a deeper invasion of pleasure than a mere stroke against my G-spot. When he pulls out next, I ache so much I cry out a protest.

“More, please, please don’t stop!”

“Never,” he growls, slamming in all the way to the hilt. I scream and arch my back, feeling my belly extend against the scaled flesh beneath me. And he does it again, and again, and again. Every plunge drives my body to its very limit and then past it, expanding my very consciousness as he fills me to the brim with his talented cock. When Typhon resumes his attention, I’m lost, only able to disappear within where the last shred of my sanity lies cradled in the arms of the beautiful young man. He kisses me and fondles me gently.

“You are beautiful when you surrender. Someday I will fill your sweet cunt like he is right now.”

“You’re beautiful the way you are. Why change?” I murmur, distracted by the many tongues now flicking over my skin again. One has slipped between my ass cheeks, another has returned to teasing my clit, and still more are lighting up every other nerve ending on the surface of my body while Asterius wakes up pleasure centers I never knew existed.

“Because I want to be inside you, Nemea. With my own cock, with my own body.”

“If Asterius can do this to me, maybe you can too?”

I remember what Asterius said mere moments ago: *Chaos can take any shape it needs*. Is this why I can take him all the way inside me? Can I take another shape too? And if I can, maybe Typhon can too. Maybe all we need to do is try.

I tug my arms free and lift myself up, grunting and nearly losing consciousness from the wicked fucking Asterius is

giving me. I reach for Typhon's giant head, and he tilts down so I can touch him.

"Meet me halfway, lover," I say. "We are made of Chaos. We can be anything we want."

A hand tangles in my hair and yanks me back. I gasp, arching into the painful pull. Asterius presses his lips to my ear.

"Not yet. You're mine until I'm finished. I want to feel you come around my cock, Nemea."

I'm unprepared for the rough treatment from a man who was so gentle before, but at the same time, it lights me up again. I swallow harshly and try to nod, but he holds my head too firmly for me to move, so I surrender again, closing my eyes and falling into the rhythm of his fucking, aware of the way my body jolts and jiggles with every thrust.

"We will have time," Typhon says as he takes pity on me and adds still more tongues. There are multiple flicking appendages teasing my nipples, others tickling the flesh of my breasts. There are at least three taking turns on my clit from different angles, and there are three taking turns plunging into my ass.

The pain of Asterius pulling my hair only enhances every other point of pleasure, especially the depth of his cock, rubbing at tender tissue that has never been touched before.

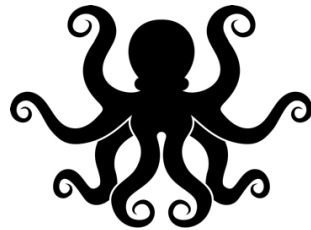
I'm incoherent and wholly out of control of my own body when the first spasm hits like a small wave. A whimper escapes me, then a moan, then a pleading cry, though I'm not sure whether it's for them to stop or keep going.

It doesn't matter, because neither of them stop. Asterius urges me on, his mouth brushing my ear and his tongue tracing

the outer shell. “That’s right, grip me hard with your pussy, Nemea. I want you to milk my cock dry. I want to smell my seed dripping out of you for a week.”

That’s all it takes to send me over the edge. Typhon rumbles in excitement, his mouth opening slightly and an enormous pink tongue sliding out. It’s as wide as my entire hand when it snakes between my thighs, the other heads parting for him to taste me when I come.

And it’s only then when, out of the corner of one eye, I realize there are five others watching us, standing patiently in the water as if waiting their turns.



Whatever's happening in the prison is so intense and frenetic I can feel it without even looking. It has to be Typhon; the brief scene I witnessed when I did peek was him teasing Nemea with several of his smaller snake tongues while Asterius looked on, hard and ready to fuck her. I should be comforted by the fact that she wasn't terrified of my brother, but that should be no surprise since Erebus didn't frighten her at all last night when he showed her his true shape.

I'm itching to leave this waiting room and get back to her, so I barely notice when the door finally swings open.

Erika stands and looks back at me. "Well, are we doing this or not?"

My stomach clenches for a different reason, and I rise, willing my arousal back into submission before I meet with the reason for my state of mind.

I follow Erika through the door, which swings shut behind us, leaving us trapped and facing one of the most powerful beings in all of existence. I've only faced Fate themselves on a handful of occasions, and every time was put off by the utter irreverence in their expression. This moment is no different.

They sit behind a desk carved from a single piece of pale lavender-hued wood, their beautiful face a disconcertingly perfect balance between masculine and feminine. It takes a brief moment of squinting before I decide the unnerving part isn't their androgyny at all; it's because they are as symmetrical in features as Chaos is asymmetrical. The realization makes me wonder which of them has the greater capacity for destruction, because nothing in the universe can be *that* perfect, and trying to force it to be goes against the laws of nature.

Fate smirks. "You presume some level of perfection is not possible in nature. You are wrong. Symmetry exists everywhere, not just in physical forms. As does asymmetry. In fact, I'm entertained right now by the symmetry of your arrival with the shift in balance I felt in my tapestry just moments ago. Though it may have been hours or even days, by your measure."

When Erika and I share a confused look, Fate shakes their head and waves their hands at the chairs facing the desk. "Please sit. We have much to discuss."

"I need you to explain," I say, opting to stand while Erika settles into one of the armchairs. I cross my arms and plant my feet, irritated by the fact that I'm still only eye-level with the creature sitting across the desk from me. Why are all primordials so huge in their native realms?

A flash of irritation crosses Fate's face. I'm briefly gratified that they're capable of losing their composure, if even just for a moment. But in that moment I have a flash of recognition that makes my blood boil. The flash of violet light within those eyes coupled with the twist of their mouth is

exactly like the creature that decked me outside the Pandemonium the night of the Titans' escape.

I grit my teeth because I don't want to admit my mistake: that Fate managed to infiltrate the casino undetected is *my* fault. That they were likely there to get to me just adds salt to the wound. Instead I just bite my tongue and let them talk.

"I warned Deva that allowing the Bloodline to persist could throw things out of balance. So far the rise in higher races magic flowing around unchecked hasn't been difficult to manage. She and the fate hounds I gave her do a fine job of finding them mates, so symmetry is maintained. Drawing the stragglers to that island helps keep them contained. But all it takes is *one* with a sufficiently diverse mix of power to throw everything off."

"You mean Nemea, don't you? What do you know about her?"

"Just that she possesses a disproportionate level of chaos magic. Catastrophic levels, in fact. And I had to step in to ensure that once she discovered it, it didn't destroy the world. There was only one way to neutralize her without outright killing her. And killing Bloodline is something I promised Deva I would no longer resort to."

"So you chose me and my guards to be her *balance*, is that it? Do you have any idea what your meddling has caused? Your attack weakened me, my doors were shattered, and four Titans escaped the prison."

"I only chose you, Tartarus. But my threads extend deep when they seek balance. If your power alone was not a sufficient counterweight to hers, my threads would tie her to others as well—as many as it takes to find an even match. As her power grows, there may be more."

Fate gazes at me unblinking, face calm again, and their utter lack of expression causes fury to surge forth. I stride to the desk and slam a fist down on top of it. The crack reverberates through the room, making Erika jump and utter a soft curse.

“Your actions have consequences. I demand you help us fix this. You’re so concerned about balance, give us your half of the key to Olympus so we can capture the Titans.”

They raise one perfect purple eyebrow, the smirk returning. “What if I don’t?”

“Are you telling me you don’t already know exactly what will happen if you don’t?”

“I only know the path that maintains order. You *think* life is messy, that Chaos reigns in all arenas. What you don’t realize is that my power finds the path through the mess that allows life to persist. If not for me, atoms would not find enough cohesion to form molecules, and molecules would be unable to form chemical bonds to create organisms. It may not look like order to the untrained eye, but it is. The Titans were meant to escape. I have a plan for them. You won’t beat them yet because that isn’t part of the plan.”

“Fuck that,” Erika snarls from behind me. She remains seated, but shoots me a glare and tilts her head to the other chair as if to say, “*Quit antagonizing them and sit the fuck down.*”

Fate redirects their attention to her. “What makes you think you have any influence over the outcome? What will be will be, Ms. Rosencrans.”

“Fine. I honestly don’t give a flying fuck what happens to the Titans. All I want is that key. I need it to make Iapetus

release the curse he placed on my team. Hopefully *that* won't disturb your precious balance."

Fate studies us both for a long moment, and while they do, the light around us shifts eerily. A disconcerting chill travels down my spine when I glance through the window behind them. The grassy tree-lined field is alive with luminescent filaments rising into the air, twisting and weaving together in all directions. It forms a living tapestry displaying a familiar scene of the gates to Olympus.

Erika's intake of breath makes me look at her, and the shock on her face is palpable. When I look back, I realize what she's reacting to. Woven into the scene on the tapestry is her own body lying broken in the mud, a wild-eyed red dragon breathing flames at everything in sight. The Titans easily subdue him, and he soon falls when a single lightning bolt from Crius hits him in the chest.

Something is off with the scene, though I can't put my finger on it. But it smells like a lie, either way. "Don't believe what you see, Erika. This is just one of many possibilities. If anyone can influence Fate, it's Chaos. When we go to retrieve the other half, we can appeal to him to ensure what you see there doesn't happen." To Fate, I add, "We will take our chances."

"You should not put so much faith in the creature who made you, Tartarus. But if this is what you want, I only request one thing in return: If you win, I want access to the prison."

"Impossible. Not even Chaos is allowed inside."

"This is my price."

"Why would you even want that? There's nothing there but the worst creatures that ever existed."

Fate tuts softly. “Not even you believe that. Your own guards are a testament to your lack of faith in the ability of the gods to deliver justice. All I want is free access so I don’t have to break down your doors the next time I need to create balance among the Bloodline. But if it helps, your prison won’t be the only place I look.”

“Say yes,” Erika says. “Please just say yes.”

I’m clenching my teeth so hard my jaw spasms. But I’ve already experienced the alternative, and I’m not so foolish to believe Fate can’t do it again if they desire.

“Fine. Now give us the key.”

Without a word, Fate holds out their hand to me and an object materializes within the delicate grip of their fingers. It’s a semicircular piece of gold about as wide as my fist, with raised nodules and holes that form part of a pattern.

I take it and slip it into the inner pocket of my coat. Then I turn and reach for Erika’s outstretched hand, drawing my power in to teleport the second we touch.

When we land in the middle of her camp a moment later, I retrieve the half of the key and hand it to her.

“I have business to see to in the prison,” I say. “I will return in a day and we can get the other half.”

She gives me a knowing smirk. “Good luck. If what Fate said is true, you’ve got your hands full with her.”



I lose consciousness briefly at the peak of my orgasm, but come to just as Asterius slips out of me. Typhon's still cradling me with his many snake heads, my body limply draped over several scaled necks. I'm face-down and turn my head to see if I imagined the others. They're all there, gaping at me in shock.

For the briefest moment, I think I've gone too far, and my belly twists. I can only imagine how depraved this must appear. I've just been fucked stupid by a creature who is half bull with a cock the size of my arm. And even though the tremors of my orgasm are still making me quiver, I want more.

"Well, don't just stand there, Ty, let us get a good look at the mess you two made of our girl," Pan says, taking a step closer. His eyes are bright with interest and he's smiling, so I guess this is a good sign.

When I study the others, their shock is fading into a deeper interest—except for the big, bearded man who I still haven't been properly introduced to.

Alcides frowns and averts his gaze when I look at him. His cheeks redden and he strides away without a word, disappearing up the wide staircase into the light above.

“What’s his deal?” I try to say, and only manage a mushy, slurred inquiring noise.

Pan looks after him. “Ignore that bastard. He’s just mad he didn’t get to you first.”

Something tells me it’s more complicated than that, but one of Ty’s many tongues randomly flicks against my clit, and I moan and tilt my hips. I shouldn’t greet them all like this; it’s the first time I’m meeting them face to face. My spread and dripping pussy shouldn’t be the first thing they see. But I’m still too drunk on pleasure to move.

The others don’t seem inclined to leave, but haven’t made any moves either.

But then *he* arrives. The moment Vesh’s silhouette appears at the top of the steps, the power in my veins reaches for him. It isn’t just a sensation of need; it’s a visible, ghost-like purple wisp that flows out of me, leaving a tethered sensation in the center of my chest as it seeks him.

He strides down toward the group and they part, looking to him for direction. I try to rise onto my hands, but my arms feel weak, the power weighing me down.

“I... I’m sorry?” I say, not sure why I’m apologizing for anything.

“Bring her here, little brother,” he commands, and Typhon turns, carrying me through the water to the others. It’s a strange sensation lying on a hammock of snakes that flex and adjust to his movements with every step while his huge dragon head looms above. And it’s even more disconcerting when he pauses and it’s my ass facing the others full-on.

“What have we here?” Vesh says, coming closer. He stops at my side, reaching across the snakes to push a damp lock of

hair behind my ear. The gesture makes me relax, and I afford him an exhausted smile. “You look well and thoroughly fucked, Nemea. Was last night not enough for you?”

“I guess not? I don’t quite understand what’s happening to me.”

“Fate happened, my love. How many of us is it now? Three?”

“If you mean how many of you have fucked me and not just teased me, that sounds right.” I wish I knew what he meant about Fate, but despite my confusion, it makes some strange sense. How many will it take? Three sounds like a lot, but at the same time, it’s nowhere close to enough.

Vesh coasts his big hand down my back, and I sigh, letting my eyes fall shut under the pleasant sensation of his touch. Some of the pulsing, swollen sensation in my body dissipates as if he’s drawing it into himself.

“I need more, I think.” I open my eyes and meet his gaze. He frowns with concern.

“I think so too. We’re going to give you everything we have until you tell us you’ve had enough. Then we’ll know how powerful you really are.”

“If I gain enough power, will he be able to fuck me too?” I tilt my head back as far as I can to look up into Typhon’s wide green eyes.

“If that’s your wish, I can teach you how to make it a reality,” Vesh says. He slowly caresses my back and slides his hand down over my ass. “But first, I think we need to see how much more power you can take.”

I gasp as he plunges two fingers into me, my hips lifting involuntarily to push back against him.

I groan when he strokes me and turn a fevered gaze to him. “Why is this happening to me? I don’t understand.”

“You’re a mystery to all of us, Nemea. But if I have to guess, ever since you summoned Pan, your powers have been seeking balance. With each new partner, your well deepens, making you crave to be filled again. Asterius only primed you to need more. So tell me, my love: which of us would you like next?”

“I want you,” I whisper, stretching out a hand and twisting his collar in my fist to pull him close to my face. He continues to idly finger-fuck me, his thrusts squelching into the dripping mess Asterius left behind. But he relents, leaning down and capturing my mouth with his in a kiss so deep it makes me think he’s taking sustenance from me.

“You left me alone,” I whine when we part. He rests his forehead against mine, panting slightly.

“I had business that couldn’t be delayed, but I’m here now. I have a day to see to your needs, and then I’ll have to leave again. But you won’t be alone. Someone will be with you at all times, I promise.”

“But you’re supposed to teach me.”

“And I will. But learning the limits of your power comes first. Let’s see if we can find them.”

He removes his fingers from me and moves around behind. Typhon shifts the snakes beneath me, two of them wrapping around my thighs again and parting me just a little wider. I groan at how much more exposed I feel with even that slight change in position. Craning my head over my shoulder, I see Vesh plant his feet wide and unbuckle his belt. His eyes flash

with violet light, and the sparking magical mist I saw that first morning surrounds him.

I bite my lip when he takes out his thick, hard cock, its veins pulsing with inner light. My clit throbs in response, my own pulse sending a shimmering cascade of light through my veins. I'm too aroused to marvel at this new change Asterius first showed me. My blood is filled with the magic. It calls out to Vesh—to the others too. And when he thrusts home, my body lights up even brighter with the pleasure of it.

He lets out a long, rough groan of relief, as if he's needed this for days. I feel the same way, even though it's been mere moments since I was filled.

He isn't as big as Asterius, but he's just as thick, and the sensation when he fucks me is different. Every part of my body is more sensitive under his touch. He grabs my ass, leaving behind a fiery need in the shape of his palm prints. I cling to Typhon's scales as I rise onto my knees, pushing back against Vesh's every thrust.

Like before, Typhon slips as many snake heads beneath me as he can, teasing my nipples and clit until I'm soaring on the cloud of pleasure, and when Vesh's climax hits, mine follows close behind.

I drop my head to the pillow of snakes, breathing heavily with my ass still in the air and his cock buried deep. Vesh heaves a long breath then pulls out slowly. Hot fluid trickles down my inner thigh.

"She needs more," Typhon announces. "I can taste her emptiness still." His voice is a velvet caress across my skin, and when I close my eyes, the young man still cradles me in his arms, gazing adoringly down at me.

“I’m here for this,” I hear Pan say.

“No, brother. You’ve already had her. She needs someone new.”

I don’t know all their voices well enough to recognize this one, so I open my eyes. Chrysaor gazes back at me with bright eyes, looking like he might burst from excitement. He steps forward, pushing Pan back with a palm to his chest. Pan gives him a good-natured scowl, but doesn’t object.

Before he can reach me, the entire cavern goes dark, and for a split-second, I think I’ve gone blind. Then a voice reverberates through my mind. “*No. It’s my turn.*”

When the darkness fades, Erebus is standing beside me, glaring at the others and challenging them to test him.

Chrysaor stops and steps back, raising his hands. “I’ll wait my turn. She’s all yours.”

Vesh snaps his fingers. “Anyone who isn’t my brothers, get back to work. I’ll call you if Nemea needs you.”

Chrysaor’s nostrils flare and he turns a hurt expression to Vesh. “She can take more than two of us at once.”

“Last night was different. There’s something happening to her now, and I need to make sure she isn’t overstimulated.”

I shoot Chrysaor an apologetic expression in response to his lingering gaze. He gives me a resigned shrug. Then he turns and trudges away with the others.

Campe remains behind, a concerned look on her face. “Boss, I can help. This need of hers ... as a chimera, she must have a potent combination of nymphaea and ursa blood, and dragon too, given the way she absorbed your power a moment ago. I can help relieve the pressure if it gets to be too much.”

“My brothers and I can handle her, but thank you, Campe.”

She turns to me then, closing the distance and touching my chin lightly with her index finger. “Call my name if you ever need me, Nemea. I will hear you. I know the Brothers Bane will take care of you, but don’t hesitate to tell them to stop the moment you’ve had enough, okay?”

I nod, grateful for her tenderness. Everything they’ve done so far has made me feel safe and cared for, which is the only reason I’m content to just lie here and let Typhon hold me. His snakes subtly shift beneath me every few seconds, rearranging themselves both for his comfort and mine. When Campe disappears up the steps, he moves again, but this time I’m tilted vertical, supported on all sides.

“I want to face you while we fuck. I want to see your face when I make you come. I want to hear you cry my name.” Erebus coasts a shadowy hand over my shoulder and down my arm as I allow Typhon to reposition me. When he pauses, I’m in a semi-reclined position, my ass supported on one thick, scaled neck while several others restrain my thighs to keep me spread.

My breath catches when I’m faced with Erebus in all his dark and spiny glory. He watches me for a moment, as if bracing himself for me to object to his presence. Seeing him again is not scary so much as a subtle shock, like stepping into a hot bath after being outside on a cold day.

I ease into his appearance, but once I’ve taken him in from head to toe, with all his angular, dark muscles and inky protrusions, I meet his gaze again.

“You’re beautiful, Erebus. I want you inside me now, please.”



I can't help the desperation that creeps into my voice, because I was aching to be filled again the entire time they were deciding who would get to fuck me next. My entire body is one big, throbbing nerve. Why is this happening to me? Was Benedetta right? Is it because of the mix of blood running through my veins?

At the moment, all I care about is the monstrous man closing the distance between us. His eyes are jet-black orbs, but somehow it's clear he's wholly focused on me. His chin tilts and his eyelids lower, taking me in when he slides between my knees, resting his taloned hands on my thighs.

"May I kiss you?" His dark eyebrows lift when the question filters into my mind.

I let out a laugh. "I just asked you to fuck me. Of course you can kiss me."

His smile transforms his sinister appearance into something almost wholesome, and my heart melts. Have these creatures had any love at all these past centuries locked away in this prison? They're a family, but despite sharing a home, I haven't seen much between them in the way of camaraderie,

aside from Asterius suggesting that they used to fuck on occasion.

I withdraw a hand from the small snake that loosely restrains me and raise it to reach for Erebus as he dips his head. He's utterly silent, but when his lips meet mine and I drift my fingertips over his smooth cheek, a tremor coasts through his entire body. With my other hand I reach between his legs, gripping his spined shaft and letting my palm bump up over the protrusions, then back down again. I tug him closer, and he moves with fluid grace, sinking against me.

He pulls away from the kiss and looks down between us where I'm aiming his tip at my dripping core. Even his breaths are silent and airless, but he's breathing nonetheless, his big chest rising and falling quicker as he sinks slowly into me.

"Like this?" I ask, looking up at him, breathless myself when his cock is finally seated and it feels like every one of those fleshy nodules is pulsing against my inner walls. A ridge of them remains outside my opening, lightly rubbing against my clit when he begins to move.

His expression transforms, his sharp-toothed grin turning feral. My heart skips a beat, but I surrender when he grabs both my wrists and lifts them over my head, capturing my mouth again in a hungry kiss.

"Watching the others fuck your perfect pussy is torture, Nemea. I've ached for this ever since my brother revealed your existence to us."

He slides out and slams deep again, the hard thrust making me cry out in surprise. "You don't mind that I'm a mess from the others?"

“It’s just Asterius and Vesh, and maybe a little of Pan left from last night. But I would take you however I could have you.”

On his next thrust, I groan from the intensity of sensation filling me. He’s not as thick or long as the other two, but the spines on his cock somehow manage to massage parts of my core the others couldn’t reach. The swelling sensation in my blood rises again with each thrust, and I clench my eyes tighter shut in an effort to control it.

The light scrape of nails along my jaw sends me even farther beyond the point of no return, and with them comes the pleasant, familiar stroke of small tongues against my nipples. Typhon is getting in on the action again.

“Open your eyes, Nemea. Look at me while I fuck you.”

I obey, struck suddenly by the alien beauty of the creature buried inside me. He still has one hand restraining my wrists, but the other cups my cheek.

“You can relax. Let the power flow out of you and push it into me. Push it into Typhon. If you need him, Vesh is here to take some too. Let us be your vessels.”

I let go by increments, terrified of breaking this entire place if I release too much, but Erebus continues to coax me with his words and his strokes. With each thrust, my power surges, and it’s as if he takes some with him every time he withdraws. I give in to the rhythm, surrendering to the ebb and flow of magic rising and falling inside me.

Vesh still watches from the side, and I send him a pleading look. I don’t know if they’re enough, the two who hold me. He seems to read my worry and steps close again. He cups my cheek and bends to kiss me.

“I’ve got you, my love. My fate,” he says, staring into my eyes for a beat before lowering his head to my breast to replace one of Typhon’s tongues with his own. I sigh at the difference in sensation, his lips around my nipple a contrast to the small forked tongue flicking at the other one.

With all three of them surrounding me, I finally allow myself to let go completely. I relax and open to them. What did Asterius call them? The Brothers Bane. They are so in sync while they touch me, despite being so very different.

The release of power is as gratifying as a small orgasm, but as soon as the pressure eases it builds once again, even more quickly this time. The ground shakes beneath us and my eyes go wide.

“Oh god, why is this happening?”

“It might mean we are not enough. I can call the others back,” Erebus says, his brows drawing down in concern.

“No. I need to learn to control it. Help me.”

“Squeeze me with your inner muscles as hard as you can, then release.”

I do as he suggests, clamping down as hard as I can. The shaking fades and stops, but the increased sensation makes me gasp and his body vibrates again, his mouth falling open in a silent cry. He grins and fucks me faster as I relax, then clench again. The act allows me to focus not only on the pleasure, but on controlling my body’s reaction to it. Now even though I feel the power enter me, I can hold it in and release it with each tightening of my walls.

Erebus bends to kiss me, displacing Vesh from my breast.

“You have the same power in your mind,” Vesh says. He curls his fingers around the back of my head, and when Erebus

releases me from the kiss, his brother leans in, pressing his lips to the center of my forehead. “You can contain it all with a thought. Try holding it in your head while you let your body go. Let yourself come for us, Nemea, but don’t let the power go.”

I let out an anguished cry, because I want to let go completely. I’m so wound up I’m ready to burst, but I do as he says. I try to envision the same clenching like a shutter closing in my mind, even as I relax my body and give in to the delicious strokes of the spined cock inside me.

Erebus slams deep again and holds himself there, twisting his hips so the external spines hit me just right on my clit and ass.

“Oh, fuck yes, like that,” I say. “I’m so close.”

He does it again, and I’m sure the spine in front starts to move on its own, rubbing in circles when it contacts my clit. I look down when he pulls out again, his dark, spiny cock coated in a creamy mix of all the juices I’m filled with.

“You like seeing me covered in all the others, don’t you? Your pulse is even faster now than before. Come on my cock. Milk me dry, Nemea. Are you ready for me to fill you up?”

I let out a desperate whine as I nod. I’m so ready. My body is at the razor’s edge, and when he thrusts hard and deep once more, that insidious spine hits my clit exactly right, and I lose hold on everything.

I let out an involuntary cry that grows louder when I feel Erebus’ cock spasm inside me. He keeps moving, but only in incremental little circles of his hip, rubbing the spine on me while his cock continues to fill me up. We’re both watching where we’re joined and each time he pulls out, milky fluid

escapes, dripping down my ass and onto Typhon where he still holds me from beneath.

“I want to taste,” I say, compelled by a strange urge to swallow our mixed essence.

Erebus lifts his gaze to me, then looks at Vesh, his eyebrows raised.

“Is that bad? I tasted what you and Pan left behind that first night.”

Vesh smirks. “Not bad, but the compulsion to taste your partner’s essence is a nymphaea trait, particularly when they couple with their fated mate. It forms the beginning of a bond the first time. Each subsequent taste deepens the bond.”

“Then I definitely want to,” I say, looking into his eyes, then at Erebus, who is still breathing heavily. He starts to pull out of me, but Vesh stops him.

“Wait. We want to give her as much as we can.” He lifts a hand, a dark ultraviolet vortex spinning on his palm. A second later, a small, faceted black goblet appears held between his fingers. He nods at Erebus, then lowers the glass beneath his brother’s cock. “Now.”

When Erebus slips out of me, a flood of milky white fluid streams out, nearly filling the glass.

Typhon rumbles softly, his big dragon head peering down over my body so I’m shadowed and looking up at the underside of his jaw. He pulls back to meet my gaze.

“I would like to add mine, if you intend to taste it. I may not be able to make love to you the way the others can, but if we can bond without coupling, I would like to try.”

I'm finally sated enough to find my balance, so I turn over and rise onto my knees to face him. His nostrils flare, and he dips his head for me to place my hands on either side of his jaw.

"I'm willing to try too. What do you need me to do?"

"Hold the goblet and catch what I release. I am going to put you down now."

He lowers the hammock of entwined snake heads and I slip off into the water, then step up onto the stairs beside Vesh. He hands me the goblet, then backs up a few paces. When I watch him with a confused look, he shrugs. "You're naked. You can just wash it off when he's done."

Erebus leans in and presses a quick peck to my cheek, then disappears into a cloud of black smoke that fades into nothingness.

"Watching my brothers masturbate is not my favorite pastime. I see enough depravity here as it is," he announces into my mind after he's gone.

I roll my eyes. "You just participated in some of it."

I peek past the rim of the goblet and sniff, but the contents smell vaguely like citrus or peaches, or some other type of fruit. Hopefully it tastes okay.

Typhon shifts then, the movements impossible to miss when the water laps against my feet on the steps. When I look, he rises up onto his haunches, and for the first time since meeting him, I see what he hides between his hind legs. A wet, glistening, iridescent purple tree trunk of a cock juts out, thicker than one of my legs and as long as I am tall. The tip is shaped like an inverted heart, slanted with the tip toward me, a long slit at the bottom.

My eyes widen at the sight and he hesitates, head tilting. “I am hideous, aren’t I?”

“Oh, god no. You’re magnificent. How do you... um... masturbate?”

He leans back farther, supporting himself on his haunches with his massive tail curling around for additional stability. Then half of his hundred snake-like heads writhe around, seeming to stretch and lengthen to reach down to his cock. He drops one taloned foreclaw to the base of his cock, angling it a little higher. It’s enough to meet the flicking tongues of all the small mouths that begin to twist and writhe around his shaft, licking the entire length.

Mesmerized, I step into the water and wade closer. The water at this end of the cavern is shallower, reaching only mid-thigh, so it’s easy to reach him. I shift my gaze between his cock and his primary head. He’s watching me, his normally narrow pupils blown wide and his mouth open. His large, forked tongue flicks out to taste the air.

“You’re aroused again. I can taste you from here.”

“I guess the sight of such a beautiful cock does it for me,” I say, smiling as I reach him. When I reach out a hand to his cock, the snakes part to make room, and Typhon widens his stance, lowering himself so my face is level with the head of his shaft. Up close I can see the faintest scaled texture of his cock, and when I touch it, it feels more like velvet than skin. I glide my palm along the surface, marveling at the way the color shifts just the way Vesh’s bedsheets did this morning, the way the floor of this very prison did.

Typhon releases a rumbling groan and the entire shaft of muscle in front of me pulses.

“Does this feel good?”

“Your touch feels different than my own. Better.”

“Can you hold this for me?” I ask, holding the goblet up. He coils one smallish snake head around it, keeping it steady so it doesn't spill. Then I return to his shaft with both hands, splaying my fingers and wrapping them as far across his breadth as I can. Then I stroke all the way to the tip, letting my thumbs sink into the long slit when I reach it.

“Nemea...” he exhales on a groan.

“What feels good?” I ask, too fascinated by his reactions now to stop. When I touch him, my palms warm the way they did when I was crafting the dildo replica of Pan's cock, and the core of my being thrums with the power I've accumulated.

“Your touch. Especially when you tease the slit.”

“Right here?” I wrap one hand around the back of his shaft below the tip, pulling it closer while I rub the palm of my other hand along the edges of his slit. Clear, viscous fluid emerges, making him slick. The opening itself is about as long as my hand, so it's easy to slide my fingertips in and tease both sides at once.

He rumbles his pleasure, and half a dozen snake heads drift around my body. “May I pleasure you again?”

The tongues flit a millimeter from my skin, causing goosebumps to rise all over me, but my clit throbs in response to his offer.

“As much as I'd love that, this is about you. I want to help make you come, Ty. Tell me what I can do.”

He lowers his largest head close, nuzzling against the side of my head. His warm breath sends a cascade of pleasant heat

through me.

“Put your hand inside. Fuck my cock with it.”

I halt and look at him. “Won’t that hurt?”

“Not when I’m this hard and so turned on I’m about to come already. You can feel how slick I am.”

“I can. Is this normal?”

“No. This is not normal, but normal is boring. I can’t fuck you, so I want you to fuck me.”

Gulping, I redirect my attention to the slit again. Impulsively I lean close and press my mouth against his tip, kissing right at the edge on one side of the slit. I dart my tongue out and run it along the edge, tasting him while I continue stroking with the other hand.

He continues nuzzling my head, and the snakes coast around both me and his cock, encompassing us both. Then the light dims and I look up to find two massive wings stretched around us, blocking us from view of anyone who might still be watching. I think Vesh was the only one who remained behind, but not even he matters now.

I slip my fingers into his slit again, no deeper than I did the first time, then back out, keeping my cheek against the sticky wetness just beside. His dozens of small tongues start licking parts of his shaft once more, but their activity is slower than before, and their eyes all focus entirely on me.

I push my body against his shaft as close as I can, hugging it to me while I touch the tip, swirling my fingers inside his slit. He huffs another rumbling noise against my shoulder, his breath making my nipples harden. When I spiral my hand a little deeper, his groan deepens too and he thrusts slowly up, the motion nearly pushing him out of reach.

“Don’t move or I can’t do this,” I caution.

“Wrap your legs around my base. I can support you.”

His base is as thick as a man’s waist, so it’s comfortable enough when I curl first one knee around him, then the other. It’s oddly comfortable even once he slides another snake beneath my ass. Then he lifts me a little more, positioning me at the perfect height to focus entirely on my task.

“This is so crazy,” I say, laughing as he huffs a pleased breath against me again.

This time the rumble that vibrates through him is more of a laugh. “But you’re enjoying it. Do you really take pleasure in making me feel good?”

“You know I do. I can’t exactly hide it.” To prove my point, I tilt my hips against the base of his cock, sliding my wetness against his skin. The friction sends a jolt of pleasure through me that makes an involuntary breath escape.

He hums in response. “I will take care of you after. I will take care of you always, Nemea.”

The promise warms me, and I rest my cheek against his cockhead again, stroking his slit before slipping my hand between the slick, fleshy sides. His breath gusts faster when I push deeper, finding him wet all the way in, and even hotter the deeper I go.

I slide my arm up to the elbow and back out. When I remove it, he lets out a gust of breath, but I push my hand back in immediately, eliciting another humming rumble from him as he tilts his hips up involuntarily, lifting me along with his cock.

“This feels good, doesn’t it, big boy? Who knew I’d be fucking a dragon’s cock with my whole arm?”

“Deeper,” he rumbles when I reach my elbow again and start to pull out. But I don’t have a comfortable angle to slide much deeper than my elbow.

I release my legs and stand, placing one foot, then the other on the snake that was supporting me. With a few feet of height, I can push in even more. His cock pulses, the entire channel tightening, then releasing around my arm. It’s uncomfortable at first, and for a second my heartbeat speeds up when I worry whether he might crush me, but something tells me none of these creatures could hurt me at all, nor would they.

So I keep going. I push all the way to my armpit, then slowly pull out, clenching my hand into a fist as I withdraw. Experimentally I reach for some of the power deep inside me and push a measure out through my limb when I push it back in, focusing on pleasure and nothing else. It has the desired effect; Typhon’s cock pulses and his big wings shiver around us.

“So good,” he rumbles, his voice deep and hungry.

“You’re so magnificent, Ty. So big and beautiful. I want to make you come. I want to be covered in you, head to toe. Then I want you to tongue me until I scream.”

He shudders, and this time it’s the voice in my head that urges “*faster*,” so I obey. He raises me up, and I bend over at the waist so I can fuck his shaft in quick, body twisting punches of my entire arm. His breaths gust faster and harder against my back and small tongues coast up my inner thighs. This time I don’t stop him. I can sense he’s close, and if tasting me pushes him over, then I’m all for it.

“Taste my pussy, if that’s what you want. Fuck yes, like that.”

I'm growing winded, but half of it is from the pleasure coursing through me from simply using my power, even if it's only an incremental release. For the first time, I get the sense of how it should feel when I control it, and it gives me a heady rush, both of realizing that I can *do* this, and that I can do it to make this enormous, terrifying creature mine.

"I have been yours since we met, Nemea. Even though you didn't know I was there."

He directs more tongues between my thighs, and a couple of the snake heads nudge my cheeks apart, allowing them to find my wet opening and tease around it. Then he's tongue-fucking me while I fist his cock's deep channel. I'm sweating from exertion, but he's close, and I'm getting close fast too. I feel it begin a few seconds before it happens; he lets out a groan and his cock spasms again, tightening hard around my arm once more. There is a cascade of flutters deep inside his cock, and he heats exponentially. I slide my arm out with the hot fluid welling forth just behind it.

He raises his head toward the ceiling and stretches his enormous wings wide, letting out a bellow that shakes the ground as a fountain of semen geysers up out of the opening I just had my arm deep inside. One of the snakes swoops in, still holding the goblet like a dutiful servant, and catches a splash of it easily. I'm still bent over, too wound up from the tongues teasing me to stand upright, and too electrified from the immense power that just surged through his skin and into me. I just turn my head and watch as the giant flood of cum splashes back down on my back, coating me in hot, creamy, viscous goo.

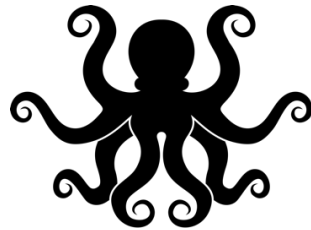
The snake heads not occupied writhe and twist in ecstasy along with his primary dragon head, but the second his climax

subsides, he levels his gaze at me.

“Come for me now, Nemea. Let me taste you again.”

I can only moan and push my hips back against the delicious flicking of small tongues. The flood of fresh power has me weak and overstimulated, so it only takes a few seconds of talented tonguing across my abused clit to send me over the edge.

And when my climax fades, so do I.



“What should I do?” Typhon asks, his wings vibrating with concern over the limp woman cradled against his softening cock. He slithers more of his snake heads around her body, cradling her gently. Nemea is knocked out, but her breathing is steady and deep.

I suppress a chuckle, and he squints at me with one big dragon eye and a dozen or so smaller ones. “She’s fine, brother,” I assure him. “Just exhausted. Help me clean her up and I’ll put her to bed.”

It takes only a small surge of chaos magic to pull every last trace of my brother’s semen off Nemea’s skin. I leave behind what still lingers between her thighs—she might want a reminder, and I don’t want to be that invasive.

Then he relinquishes her to me. Cradled in my arms, she is the picture of peace and contentment. That she can feel so comfortable here as to let her guard down tugs at my heart in a way I’ve never experienced. After a moment, I realize both my brother and I are still gazing adoringly at her.

Typhon heaves a long breath that ruffles my hair and lies down in the shallow water, folding his wings against his back.

He's still looking at her with all two hundred eyes. "Is she real?" he says, his question tinged with awe.

"She is very real. And she's ours."

"I felt her power while she pleased me. She used it on me. It's what made me come at the end. I wonder if she could give me enough all at once to allow me to shift."

I lift my eyebrows and look at him. He still stares at her, such hope filling his eyes, the effect magnified one hundred times. My heart clenches for my little brother, created in a jealous fit by Chaos to try to win a woman—one who proceeded to breed with Fate to create the dragon race. After the rejection, Chaos sent Typhon to the depths of my darkest dungeon because the sight of him was too much a signal of his failure to mate the Mother Dragon. Erika's assessment of Alcides was right, but he is far from the only one with daddy issues among my guards.

But Typhon is still a dragon at heart, and since all dragons can shift into a human form, that ability is all he's wished for since he first met Campe and learned what she can do. The problem is his size; he's capable of magic similar to mine—every one of his heads can emit a blast of chaos destructive enough to raze entire cities—but the power only flows *through* him. It needs to live within him long enough for him to alter his own shape.

"Perhaps, brother. If she is truly bound to us as a soul mate would be, she may be able to help you. I think her willingness to drink *that* tells us she is close." I gesture to the goblet one of his snakes still holds aloft a few feet away. "Why don't you send that to my quarters for her when she wakes up?"

He aims one of his small heads at the goblet and opens its mouth. A dark violet vortex opens in front of it, and the goblet

disappears. When the snake closes its mouth, I frown.

“Typhon, what happened to your head?”

“Which one?”

I’m staring at the one he just used to open the vortex, which I’m almost positive is the same one that was barely able to hold itself up yesterday. I study the others, but they all look whole and healthy. This one looks like all the rest.

“Did you regain your strength in the injured one overnight?”

He tilts his central head down, peering into the eyes of the snake in question. His tail swishes in excitement and his wings quiver against his back.

“No, it was still weak just this morning. Until she came. Until she *came*, brother. I could feel her power every time she climaxed. Taste it when it flowed into me, even when she wasn’t *giving* it to me. Does that mean she healed me?”

I bark out a laugh, then clamp my mouth shut when Nemea stirs, her head shifting against my shoulder. But she doesn’t wake.

“I think she must have, whether she intended it or not. She is a wonder, isn’t she? We’ll need to help her hone her power, strengthen it. We’re going to need her to take down the Titans. We have six days. Will you help train her while I am away?”

“It would be my pleasure.”

“Now go rest. You must be tired after all that too.”

“I am invigorated. I might go fly a bit; I have been resting long enough. It will feel good to get back to work.”

He stretches his wings and lifts his central head high. All the smaller heads twist and writhe in excitement. His enthusiasm is infectious, but my own excitement doesn't last long when we part ways at the cavern's wide opening. He lifts into the air, enormous wings carrying him high into the shimmering sky above and out over the prison towers. When I resume my climb to my quarters, the dread sinks deep into my gut.

I have to meet *him* next. To think I was more afraid of meeting Fate than my own sire. Fate's request in exchange for their half of the key was not ideal, but after realizing what Fate really desires, I'm less concerned about the consequences. Besides, their intentions brought Nemea to me.

Chaos, however, will only ask for one thing, and it's the one thing I won't want to give.

I stew on this until I reach my room and lay her down on the bed. The prison's magic—my magic—automatically summons a fresh cover that slides up over her, replacing the missing one. On the table beside the bed rests the goblet filled to the brim with the cocktail of semen we saved from her adventure. That she even wants it suggests she's come to a deeper understanding of the magic at work here. Imbibing the mixture will bind her even closer with those of us who contributed.

It's strange to me that among all the higher races, only the Nymphaea still observe that particular custom. But then they glean more from bodily fluids than the other races, save for primordials and gods.

No wonder Chrysaor, Cerberus, and Campe all looked so dejected when I sent them away. They will have to wait their turns. Alcides will come to her in his own time.

I should return to Erika and get the next part of our quest over with. But watching Nemea sleep has me frozen. She's snoring softly, her veins faintly pulsing with inner light. Her octopus tattoo shimmers with its own glow, one of the tentacles that curls around her upper arm seeming to writhe and curl possessively around her biceps. I tilt my head, watching it, but it goes still.

I envy the creature for its proximity to her, and in a rare fit of impulsivity, I strip down to my skin, then climb into bed beside her. Slipping carefully beneath the covers, I slide close and drift my arm across her belly. She emits a soft sigh and rolls onto her side, scooting back against me. Her soft, round ass presses right against my cock, and I freeze, heart pounding as arousal makes it perk up.

I curse myself for stripping entirely. This wasn't what I wanted. I merely desired contact. But it only takes a minor output of power to cover my hips in a pair of briefs, securing my errant cock away from Nemea's perfect ass.

I remain propped on one elbow, staring down at her for several moments, still not quite trusting my good fortune. I don't even realize her breathing rhythm has changed until she lets out a sigh.

"Vesh, will you just lie down and hold me already? Quit staring like a creep."

I blink, then can't suppress a laugh. "Does it bother you that I'm so enthralled by your very presence?"

"You act like you don't even know how to snuggle. I pity the poor women you've slept with in the past."

"I don't sleep, so I've never actually *slept* with a woman before," I admit.

Her comment tugs at some part of me who has longed for this very moment without realizing it. I lift my free hand and drift my fingertips over her temple, hooking her hair behind her ear. She sighs, and her eyelids flutter open as she turns her head just enough to give me a sidelong look.

She frowns. “Then why do you have a bed? Or is this just for fucking?”

“This bed has only existed since you arrived.”

She swallows as she absorbs this information, and we regard each other in silence for a moment. Then she says, “Am I the first woman you’ve ever brought back here?”

“You’re the only woman I’ve ever allowed inside me who wasn’t destined for a locked cell or pit. And if you’re curious about whom I fuck and where, I’ve always restricted that kind of fun to whatever brothel I found the woman at. In recent years, it happens at the casino.”

She frowns. “The Pandemonium. You still work there even though you’re responsible for all of this?” Her gaze flits around the room, but her look encompasses all of the prison.

“I don’t really have a choice. Chaos is my master, so my guards and I do his bidding. Even if it means keeping the peace at a modern gambling den in the mortal world.”

“But yesterday you said he already knew about me, so you were taking me here to protect me from him. You’re defying his wishes, aren’t you? So you *do* have a choice.”

“I don’t make a habit of defying him, but you’re right. I’m not technically compelled to do what he says. My very nature wouldn’t allow it. But to defy him can be dangerous. If he learns I have you, it won’t go well.”

“Would he hurt you?” she asks, her voice tight with worry.

I'm struck by her concern and give her a slight smile. "He can cause me pain, yes, but it would hurt far worse to lose you now that I've found you, Nemea. I'm willing to risk it."

A million questions fill her gaze, and she chews over them for another moment before coming to some personal conclusion, then sighing and turning away without asking anything more. She pushes her butt back again and grabs my wrist, placing my hand over her bare breast. She's warm and soft, and all I want to do is sink into her. My life is cold and hard on good days, but it needs to be; I am the very embodiment of justice and condemnation. I'm not even sure I know how to be tender, but something about her compels me to try.

"Well, this is how snuggling works. You hold me, and we sleep like this. Or I sleep, since you don't, but we just... exist... together... touching." She drawls out each word, her voice growing fainter before her breathing slows again as she drifts off.

"We will do more than merely exist together, Nemea," I whisper, then dip my head to press a kiss against the dark ink covering her shoulder. This time I'm positive I see movement. Curious, I pull the covers back until the side of her body is revealed, along with the face of the octopus. Big, dark eyes with horizontal slits stare up at me, watchful and cautious. I chuckle.

"You don't sleep either, do you, friend? Well, between the two of us, we can watch over her always."



A heavy arm is draped over me when I wake, the hand attached to it lightly cupping my breast. It takes only a moment for the events from earlier to filter back through my memory, and I smile, thinking of the last conversation I had with Vesh. He's risking the wrath of *Chaos* to have me here.

But even more astounding is the fact that he stayed. Mr. I-Don't-Sleep actually stayed and *slept* with me. He even spooned me, which I could definitely not have predicted. His dark and broody demeanor did not suggest he'd be inclined to such tenderness. But it feels *really* good. I sigh and just enjoy it for a few more moments before taking stock.

I have no way to gauge time in this place, but I feel rested. It's dark in the room, but faint light rises from an unknown source. A tickling awareness in the back of my mind suggests it isn't just any light; Erebus has been here watching and senses I'm awake.

"*Were you here the whole time we slept?*" I ask, reaching out for the now familiar entity who's turned darkness into a comfort, not just a cold and lonely place to wallow in while longing for a different life.

“Yes. I admit I was more concerned about my brother, though. He hasn’t slept in a few thousand years. This is highly irregular.”

Vesh’s breathing is still deep and even, his arm limp and heavy across my side. I carefully roll over to face him, pushing up onto one elbow. The once severe, intimidating face is smoothed and peaceful, not a line in sight besides a faint dimple in one cheek. The indentation makes it look like he’s smirking about something, and it gives him a playful demeanor he doesn’t have when awake.

“Can you read his thoughts? See his dreams?”

“No, but you could, if you bonded fully with him. You could have the same with Typhon too. And Asterius. All you need to do is drink that.”

I crane my neck to look as a silent swirl of darkness spirals around my head toward the night stand, clearing away to reveal the dark goblet resting there, filled to the brim with milky liquid.

“I’ve already swallowed your semen. Is that why I can speak with you like this so easily? I thought our first kiss did that.”

“It did. Then a deeper bond was formed when you tasted me for the first time. You’ve tasted Pan too, but he’s too chastened to try to reach out to you. We are yours now, Nemea, and you are ours. Fate brought us together for some reason we still can’t discern, but the bond will make us all stronger and will help you control and understand your powers. Drink.”

I wrinkle my nose. How long has that been there? But I’m curious, so I carefully roll over again and sit up, swinging my legs off the edge of the bed. I remember several hushed

conversations with Rachel, Simon, and Audra, relaying rumors about how dragon jizz tastes like ambrosia. Audra mentioned that she'd *heard* ursa semen tasted like honey butter, and in retrospect, I'm pretty sure she was speaking from experience. Does god spunk taste good too?

"I know you're there," I whisper. "Judging me for hesitating."

Silent laughter filters through my mind. *"Take your time. I can't speak to the flavor myself, but the prison naturally preserves anything perishable. Not that it would go bad; blood and the fertile essences of gods and demigods keeps forever."*

I suppose that's a relief. At least this stuff is shelf stable.

I reach for the goblet and lift it to my nose, taking a careful whiff. It smells faintly like licorice, but the aroma shifts to berries on the second sniff, then something else enticingly herbal. I dip a fingertip in and lick it. The flavor of strawberry ice cream floods my tongue, and my stomach rumbles at the sweetness.

I suddenly get the sense I'm being observed by more than just Erebus lingering in the darkness.

"*Who is there?*" I ask, reaching out with my mind to whomever is listening.

"*I am here,*" comes the voice of Typhon first. Then a lewd flash of the void glass dildo gives away Pan's presence. A more cautious, respectful impression sinks into my mind and Asterius says, "*I am here too.*"

"*And drinking this will strengthen the bond between us? Is this how you bonded with Vesh the first time?*"

A mix of horror and laughter reverberates through my mind. Then Pan's deep, melodic voice says, "*Live inside a*

man long enough, and you will be bonded to him whether you like it or not. We will not be inside you in quite the same way, Nemea. This is a very different sort of bond—a mate bond.”

I take a deep breath, having sensed that’s what this means, but needing to hear it to know for sure.

A mate bond.

Simply being drawn together by Fate wasn’t enough on its own. But I can already sense my power reaching out to them all, even the ones I haven’t been intimate with yet. It reached for them before I even knew what it was—my sketchbook is testament to that.

But *nine* mates? Is that even humanly possible?

“You aren’t strictly human,” Asterius reminds me. *“You never were.”*

“I know. I’m Bloodline, but it’s never been completely clear what that means.”

“Drink, and then you can come down to the library for a history lesson,” Asterius says.

“Any chance that can include actually getting to know all of you with my clothes on?”

I sense laughter through the bond, strongest from Pan and Erebus, whose seed I actually swallowed quite a bit of already. It’s fainter from Asterius and Typhon. And through the link, I can easily sense that the two I’m closer connected to are *very* keen on the idea of me being naked more often than not.

“Well, bottoms up.” I clutch the goblet in both hands and bring it to my lips. The aroma is now toasted pecans and caramel, like it’s making its way through a coffee shop menu. The instant it hits my tongue, I taste coffee and nearly choke

from surprise. But it's tasty, so I gulp it all down in several swallows. It's cool and thick, but goes down easily.

When I empty the goblet, I lick my lips and an involuntary belch escapes. Vesh stirs behind me at the sound. I peek over my shoulder, chagrined.

“Sorry.”

He lifts his eyebrows and gives me a sleepy smile. The man is downright adorable, all mussed with a pillow indentation on one cheek.

“You drank it. I was worried you wouldn't.”

“It tasted pretty good, actually. I didn't think it would.”

His brows scrunch together. “What did it taste like?”

“Like a Frappuccino. Why? Should it not have tasted like that?”

“It's semen. It typically tastes like semen. But the prison anticipates the needs of its residents, so I'm assuming it altered the flavor for you.”

I stare into the goblet, frowning and trying to decide whether I should be grossed out. But I feel fine. Better than fine, in fact.

I set the goblet down and Vesh reaches for it, absorbing it into himself the way he did the shards of void glass when I arrived.

He scoots closer and props himself on one elbow, drifting his fingertips up my spine. “How do you feel?”

Closing my eyes, I take stock again. I enter the increasingly familiar dark landscape where I greeted Typhon earlier and find the handsome young man waiting with a huge

smile. But this time, it's more than a sense of his presence that I feel. My limbs tingle with the immensity of his power, the space we share luminescent with it.

Then it's as if doors open around me, swinging wide before falling away to expand this mental space. On one side I find Asterius, waiting like a solid, watchful sentinel. On the other is Pan, in a space I sense was there all along just waiting for me to discover.

I don't need to look to know the other two are waiting behind me; I can simply close my eyes and feel both Vesh and Erebus looming larger than the other two, their power as potent and affecting as Typhon's. Between the three of them, the landscape is altered, becoming more than just a nondescript space that was once empty and black. The darkness acquires weight, architecture blooming from the earth like a garden, except where Pan stands an actual garden appears, complete with a trellis of roses arching over him.

The most surprising thing is the excitement I sense from the five of them. I turn and find Vesh standing to one side, and on the other is a man I almost don't recognize.

"*Erebus?*" I walk toward the imposing, armored man with dark skin and black hair flowing around his shoulders. The black armor covering his body is ornate, with gold designs etched all over it, glimmering with light that is the antithesis of who he is, but perhaps a better reflection of the state of his soul. He has human features here, though, not the angular visage he shows when he isn't simply pure darkness.

"*It's me.*" He looks down at me, then at Vesh, both of them wide-eyed with wonder. "*I don't know what I expected, but it isn't this.*" He waves his arm at the entire scene, encompassing the other men and the elaborate palace still forming in the

distance past the garden. *“Or them. You’re connecting us even deeper to one another, Nemea. I didn’t think that was possible.”*

A touch against my shoulder makes me turn, and finding no one there, I realize it happened in the real world. I open my eyes and turn to Vesh, only to have my face gripped between both his hands before his mouth lands on mine. His kiss is intense, the sheer gratitude in it confounding. When he pulls back, he stares into my eyes.

“Thank you. I always believed we were as strong as we could get as a team, but you are making us even stronger.”

“Um, you’re welcome, I think? I admit I don’t really understand any of this, but I’m excited about it too. Just as long as it doesn’t mean you all spy on me on the toilet or anything.”

He chuckles and shakes his head, then reaches up and taps my temple lightly with a fingertip. “You’re in control up here, Nemea. You can create the environment *you* choose, and we will exist within it at your whim. Think of it as your own personal Tartarus.”

“Are the others very upset that they haven’t been included yet? They know they will be, right?”

His brows twitch and his fingers tighten possessively on my hip. “You don’t have to...”

I cut him off. “Yes, I do. I’ve spent years trying to figure out who I am, what my purpose is—if anything. I’ve had this gaping hole in my soul ever since the night I learned I was Bloodline, but never knew what it meant. It turns out that this is what I’ve been searching for. *You* are what I’ve been searching for. All of you. For the first time since that night, I

feel... calm. Like I actually *fit*. We *are* a puzzle, the ten of us, and even though five mates sounds like a lot as it is, I know I'm not close to finished yet. Just look..."

I clench my eyes shut and drop into my personal sanctum. It feels like home, knowing it's mine and that I can invite them to it or not. I spin until Vesh appears, noticing while I do that the others are now absent. Pan's garden remains, though, and I wonder if there's a library somewhere within that still-growing palace where Asterius might retreat if he chooses.

But there is still a swath of blank emptiness on one side that I could only feel in the outside world, but is actually visible in here. There is only the barest glimmer of other doorways, with dark keyholes waiting for me to unlock them. I don't know whether they know they already have a place waiting for them here, but I intend to show it to them soon.

I open my eyes again to the real Vesh, who watches me with consternation. He harumphs, and I squint at him.

"You're jealous, aren't you?"

"No."

I grin. "You know Pan found me first."

"*That's what I said!*" comes a strident voice in my head. I can't help but laugh at the indignation I feel through my bond with the satyr in stark contrast to the irritation on Vesh's face.

"Don't remind me," Vesh grumbles.

"You sure didn't seem to mind being mashed up against his dick inside my pussy," I tease, gratified when his cheeks actually redden. "Maybe we should revisit the whole scenario that started this again."

He gives me a heated look, and I sense Pan's avid interest, though it's tinged with caution. I send an inquisitive thought his way.

"*I am on my shift,*" he explains. "*Besides, I don't want the others to think you're playing favorites.*"

Vesh sighs. "As much as I'd love it—and am *not* jealous—I have a meeting to get to. If we're going to recapture the Titans, this is crucial."

"What can I do?" I ask, sitting up straighter as he pushes past me and stands. I get one brief, delicious glimpse of his naked body and all its coiled, ropey muscles accented by dark hair and whorls of iridescent purple tattoos. His usual outfit of black materializes around him as he turns to look down at me.

"Practice holding onto your magic and bond with the others. I'll be back when I can."

With that, he disappears.

I flop back on the bed with a frustrated sigh, staring at the ceiling while I try to decide what to do. "Bond with the others" means the ones I haven't bonded with yet. I've barely even *met* them, yet I'm certain this is the right path. And except for the one they call Alcides, I'm pretty sure the other three feel the same way.

But Asterius promised me answers to a question I've had for a long time. How did the Bloodline even come to be?

"Right. History lessons it is," I say as I sit up. Before I can even waste a thought on it, my clothes appear on the bed beside me, neatly folded and smelling fresh and clean. I wonder if I can do what Vesh did when he dressed himself?

Instead of manually putting on my clothes, I stand and stare at them, willing them to just *appear* on my body.

All I get is the strongest impression of amusement coming from the shadows. I huff and grab my pants, stuffing each leg in.

“You don’t have to laugh at me,” I snipe.

“I’m not laughing. Perhaps you can learn to use your magic as he does. I suggest starting smaller. And remember the magic comes from within you, not from without you.”

I’m not sure how to interpret that yet, so decide to tackle one thing at a time as I head out the door and down the staircase outside the tower, aiming for the library below.



“You look refreshed,” Erika comments when I appear at her camp to retrieve her for our next task. She’s seated under the command canopy with a stainless steel travel mug in one hand and the first half of the key in the other. On the table in front of her is a notebook with a detailed pencil sketch of the complete key and several notes jotted around it. It looks old, though, not recent.

“Mm,” I say noncommittally. “Research notes?”

“*Private* research notes.” She snaps the notebook shut and stands. “Shall we?”

I glance around, noting the camp is empty. “Where is everyone else? Down at the dig site?”

“Gabby won’t leave her father’s side. It’s a muddy mess after the rains, but my team is building some platforms so we can move camp down there at least until this is over. You know the key itself isn’t enough, right? The key requires a drop of blood from one of the residents of Olympus.” She holds the jagged-edged semicircle up as she threads a chain through one of its holes, then drapes it over her neck. It hangs like a heavy medallion against her breastbone.

“That won’t be an issue.”

She studies me for a beat. “You mean your guard Alcides, right? But he wasn’t here in the flesh. I’m guessing if we pricked his finger the next time he showed up, it would be *your* blood that came out. Am I wrong? And if I’m not mistaken, you’re too old to be a descendant of one of the twelve gods who lived here.”

I take a calming breath. “You’re not wrong. But he will come in the flesh if I ask.”

“And how goes it with your secret weapon? Nemea, was it? You look like you relieved some of that tension you were carrying yesterday.” She gives me a subtle smirk.

I narrow my eyes and shake my head. “We’re not talking about her.”

I take hold of her upper arm when she reaches me, then teleport us to the Pandemonium. She wrenches out of my grip as soon as she lands and rounds on me. “I want to meet her in person.”

“No.”

I push past her to the door to the room I landed us in. I have my own small apartment in the resort, which gives me a location to come and go to avoid notice.

“Does she know you’ve imprisoned her?”

“She’s safer there. No one can get to her.”

“Safer? In a prison? Where the absolute *worst* dregs of the supernatural get sent to remain for eternity—unless they break out, of course? It’s *your* fault we’re in this fucking position. You should be using every goddamn tool you can to get us out of it.”

We exit, and I stalk down the hallway with Erika on my heels. When we reach the elevators, I spin and face her, glowering.

“She. Is. *Safer. Here.*” I tap my temple, acutely aware of Nemea’s presence within me. It only takes a sliver of my awareness to find her in Asterius’ library, listening to him talk as he hunts down the tomes that can answer all her questions.

“Safer from *what?* The Titans you plan to aim her at the second she can fight? Safer from your fucking *control?*”

“We need to go.” I step into the elevator and swipe my keycard, then press the button for the penthouse.

“If you care one iota about this woman, don’t fucking lie to her, and don’t isolate her, or you’ll regret it,” she mutters, and I can feel her piercing glare burrowing into the back of my head.

I tilt my head back and sigh at the ceiling. “She wouldn’t have come if I told her she couldn’t *leave* again. And it’s the only way I can keep *him* away from her.”

“Him?” she asks, frowning. “Him who?”

I twist to look back at her. The key-half glimmers against her chest, and I glance down at it meaningfully. She looks down too, then presses her lips into a tight line, recognition filling her gaze when she returns it to me.

“But you agreed to give Fate access to Tartarus in exchange for this. How is that keeping her safe from him? Plus, Fate’s not a *he...*” She trails off and glances at the rising elevator numbers. “You don’t mean Fate, do you?”

I shake my head. “Fate’s damage is already done. They’re the reason we found her to begin with.” I hate the way emotion tightens my throat as I think about how she became ours. I

don't get overwhelmed this way about anything. "Now I need to keep her safe until she's ready to fight with us. Fair warning that bargaining for the other half of that is going to be tricky, though." I point at the key-half, and she looks down at it, hefting it gently in her palm.

"We'll just have to be clever, I guess."

The elevator doors slide open then, and I nod in thanks before I step out into the lobby of Chaos' penthouse. It's a wide corridor with a couple potted plants and a narrow table beneath a mirror, but no other furniture. His office doors are to the right, the apartment he resides in to the left. I go right, stepping through the door to the reception area where his assistant, Sergio, stands behind a sleek ebony desk, glowering at a printer.

"He's waiting for you and Ms. Rosencrans," he says in a tense, harried tone, barely shifting his attention away from the machine. He doesn't even blink at the fact that I have a companion today. Of course Chaos is already aware of our visit, despite me not sending word.

"How does he know we're coming?" Erika whispers before we reach the inner door.

"His mate is an oracle. She can see the future."

I push the door open, gritting my teeth in anticipation of this meeting. I'm greeted by a smiling man in a chef's jacket standing behind a counter stacked with bowls and spoons and...waffle cones?

"Ice cream?" he asks, holding up a scoop and an empty cone.

Erika stops and looks at me, eyebrows raised.

"He has a sweet tooth," I explain.

“You’ve arrived just in time!” A booming voice says from across the room. We both turn toward the big desk at the far end to find Chaos rising from it. He’s dressed in his usual dark suit with the most obnoxious necktie that looks like a prismatic dragon puked all over it. He comes around to greet us, smiling his crooked smile at Erika as he takes her hand between both of his and squeezes.

“Ms. Rosencrans, I’ve heard so much about you! You are a legend among the higher races and gods alike. We have our eye on you, young lady.” His eyes sparkle with amusement, but Erika doesn’t smile back.

“I’m not sure whether I should be honored or terrified,” she quips. Chaos just chuckles and pats her arm.

His smile fades to a more serious tilt of his mouth when he greets me.

“It’s been too long, Vesh. Too long.”

“I literally saw you less than a week ago. You know I’ve been busy.”

“Under the circumstances, I would expect a report.” He turns dismissively and returns to Erika, hooking an arm around her waist and pulling her toward the ice cream bar. “You must have an ice cream sundae while we chat. We have gourmet gelato with freshly made Belgian chocolate sprinkles and caramel sauce, along with a myriad other toppings—ice cream in any flavor your heart desires.”

Erika’s shoulders tighten and she darts an alarmed look back at me. I give a slight, apologetic shake of my head, and she rolls her eyes.

“I’m actually good, thank you.”

Without missing a beat, he steers her toward the arrangement of sofas on the other side of the room, then returns to the ice cream to order himself a large bowl. I don't miss the fact that he doesn't offer any to me, not that I'd have taken him up on it. That thought is accompanied by a palpable sense of disappointment from within.

"Get back to work, Chrysaor," I mentally chide.

"If I can't have her, the least you can give me is a taste of something almost as sweet."

"Give her time," I say, throwing him a bone despite my possessive nature making me itch to say it. *"She's going to need all of us before long."*

Mollified for now, he fades back into the recesses of my mind, returning to whatever duties he was distracted from by the prospect of sweets.

I sit in an armchair near the sofa Erika is perched on. She leans over and whispers, "Is he always like this?"

"Perpetually. Makes it difficult to read his moods. Be careful about meeting his gaze—he's tricky."

I keep my eyes on Chaos while I speak in a low tone, sitting back when he turns to stride over to us, already spooning a large bite of fudge and sprinkle-covered ice cream into his mouth.

"We need the other half of the key to Olympus," Erika says as he's taking his seat. He halts halfway, lifting his eyes to her, before easing down the rest of the way. But he says nothing. He merely digs into the bowl, savoring several more bites while we wait for him to respond.

"I presume when you say *other half* that means you've already secured the first half from Fate?" He eyes us both as

he licks his lips, then inserts another big spoonful into his mouth.

Erika tugs at the chain around her neck, pulling the half-moon disc out from beneath her shirt.

Chaos hums and shifts his gaze to me. “That must have cost you.”

“No more than I’ve already paid.”

He narrows his eyes. “It was Fate after all, wasn’t it? I had a feeling the old bastard would sink their threads into what’s mine before too long.”

I ignore the possessive comment and glance out the window where Sybil is yet again floating in the pool. He narrows his eyes at me, daring me to accuse him of benefiting from fate magic again, but I learned my lesson the last time.

He waves a hand and sighs. “I behaved rashly before. I know what you think about how Sybil and I found each other, but Deva’s hounds aren’t beholden to Fate; they merely connected two primordials who otherwise may not have found each other. It was as straightforward a match as there ever was. Yours is more complex, more intricate, considering all the pieces involved. It has the marks of Fate all over it, right down to the shattering of your doors.

“Let me guess... Fate wanted access, didn’t they? That’s what you traded. But did you consider *why* they want access? It isn’t to ensure proper security is observed. They need *souls*. They are weaving a new tapestry and need more souls to fill in the details. What *are* they scheming, do you think?”

“I honestly don’t care at this stage. My job is to capture four escaped Titans. That’s it.”

“Hmm, single-minded as always.” He smirks at me as if he’s made a joke. Beside me, Erika chuckles.

“The dick actually has a sense of humor,” Campe comments.

“You should care very much,” Chaos continues. “If Fate has their way, you may be out of a job before long.”

“I hardly see why that should bother me.” It does, in fact, bother me, but I don’t have the luxury of examining the ramifications of the bargain I made with Fate yet. I figure I’ll cross that bridge when I get there. Fate may have succeeded in breaking down my doors, but that was only a temporary breach. No one will be able to leave the prison without my permission, regardless of how much access Fate has.

“What do you intend to do once you gain access to Olympus? Tell me your plan and I’ll consider whether to give you the other half of the key.”

I take a breath and glance at Erika, who sits forward and says, “We want to use the key as bait. I told the Titans I knew how to get it. They are returning in a few more days to make the trade—releasing my mate and the other dragons from their curse in exchange. But we plan to open the temple before they come back, to find whatever power is inside that we can use to beat them. The power that was taken from them when they were incarcerated should be sufficient to use against them.”

Chaos lifts his brows and looks at me again. “And who would wield this power? Not many are capable of harnessing the power of a Titan. Vesh and his brothers might be, but there are four Titans and only three of them. Who would wield the power of the fourth one, hmm?”

He lifts an eyebrow at me before returning his gaze to Erika, who is giving me a pointed look now.

“Just say what you want,” I snap.

He chuckles, the sound grating against my very bones. “You already know what I want, dear boy. I want her even more now that Sybil has told me what she is—a chimera who can harness the power of chaos is a rare creature indeed, and the perfect balance to even the odds against Fate. You also know you have no choice but to give her to me. If you want her to be strong enough to take down the Titans, she’ll need my help. No one else is capable of controlling her power if it goes awry. Not even you.”

“My brothers and I will manage just fine,” I say. “You can’t have her.”

He tuts as he takes another bite of mostly melted ice cream, scraping the bowl with his spoon to finish off his treat. The bowl vanishes from his hand once he’s finished. “Are you sure you really want to test your luck? Without proper safeguards, she can destroy you, Tartarus. Are you really willing to risk your carefully constructed walls crumbling and releasing all the horrors that lurk within? Some may not be all that bad, sure, but you can’t deny most of the residents earned their place there. I’m offering you the best solution.”

“The Titans were the strongest. I’m confident I can contain any of the others if something happens.”

“I never knew you to be so reckless. My request is simple: the key for the girl.”

“And I said your request is *denied*. Name another price because you’re never getting her.”

He just stares at me without blinking, his gaze shifting disconcertingly. Before he can infiltrate my head and get to my guards, I stand, averting my gaze.

“We’re done here. Let’s go.” I stalk to the door. When Erika doesn’t immediately follow, I turn back, careful to look only at her. “Are you coming?”

Erika remains seated, her arms crossed, glaring daggers at both me and Chaos in turn. “Is that really the only bargain that can be struck here?”

I can’t see the look he gives her, but her deepening scowl suggests he isn’t budging with her any more than he did with me. “She will come to me. When she does, the key is yours.”

“You’re wrong,” I snap. “I will *never* let you get your hands on her. *Never.*”

But Erika’s nod suggests she actually believes the fucker. She rises and strides toward me, pacified by their exchange, which rankles. She can’t believe him, can she?

When she reaches me, I don’t waste any time. I grip her arm and send us back to her camp.

She pulls away and stalks to her command tent, turning to me at the step up onto the wooden platform. “Why can’t you just let him help? My daughter is starting to display her dragon abilities, so she needs a strong role model to show her how they work. If... What’s her name?”

“Nemea,” I say, pacing away and scrubbing my hands over my face. I’m barely hearing her, too desperate to think of some other leverage to get Chaos to give us the temple key.

“If Nemea needs someone that powerful to help her understand her power, which will help *us* beat the Titans, why won’t you let him help her?”

“Because he has no regard for humanity. He has no regard for anything but his own agenda. He’ll *use* her. The only thing he’s ever cared about is his incessant feud with Fate. He might help her, sure, but if he gets his hands on her, I don’t know if we’ll ever get her back. I can’t risk it.”

For once all the voices in my head are in agreement, which gives me a strange sense of stability.

Erika is frowning at me, though, and I can’t interpret her steady, assessing look.

“You need to give her the choice. Leaving her in the dark about all this, when she is at the very core of it isn’t fair.”

I clench my jaw, my voice going rough when I sense a couple of my guards wavering in the wake of Erika’s point-blank argument. “I can’t risk losing her.”

“Don’t you think it’s a risk you’re going to have to take, for her sake?”



“So the Bloodline aren’t actually descended from the gods at all?” I ask. I’m frowning at a relatively new volume Asterius pulled off the top of one of the many stacks of books scattered near the table. This one chronicles the recent past since an event referred to as the Sixth Ascension of dragons that occurred seven years ago.

Asterius looks up from the tome he’s engrossed in, peering at me over a set of antique spectacles that give all sorts of sexy professor vibes despite looking comical on his bullish features.

“You possess the blood of a god, but only thanks to his intervention at the end of the war with the Lamia,” Asterius explains. “The Lamia craved immortality and bred herself a soulless vessel: Deva Rainsong, a creature possessing all the qualities of an immortal. But when Deva was taken from her, she waged war on the higher races.

“At the end, Dionysus made a bargain with the Lamia. With Gaia’s help, a new immortal vessel was created from his very blood, shed on the shores of the Haven. But once the Lamia inhabited that vessel, Dionysus took control.”

My eyes widen and I reach for one of the other books I pored over earlier, one detailing the laws of the nymphaea. All

the higher races have strict laws about the treatment of their blood, but the nymphaea are especially strict, and since Dionysus was the father of the entire race, his blood probably falls under the same laws.

“She was nymphaea, wasn’t she? Didn’t they outlaw blood melding because of her? Because if one of them has ill intentions, they can essentially mind control anyone who drinks their blood?”

“Indeed. She forgot this because she assumed as the newly created child of a god, that would no longer apply. But, with a few exceptions, only a god’s children who are *born* from a mated union have complete autonomy. Her new body was not born, but created directly from the god’s blood. This was the loophole that allowed the higher races to finally beat her.

“But Dionysus did not stop with her. She had tainted generations of humanity going back thousands of years. To ensure her corruption was snuffed out for good, the god sacrificed all of his life’s blood to subsume any trace of hers throughout the world.”

My mouth drops open at the implication. “The Bloodline came from *her*?”

He nods sagely. “She experimented for millennia trying to create her perfect vessel. In the process, she infused human after human with the blood of the higher races, along with her own blood to maintain control over them while she tested different combinations. Those humans procreated, and their bloodlines expanded. Some interbred, such as within specific ethnic communities, creating stronger, more saturated bloodlines. But when the Lamia was killed, all of them—down to the smallest child alive—were infused with the blood of Dionysus.”

I swallow harshly, realizing he's suggesting the Makah likely have a stronger concentration of higher races blood due to how insular our tribes are.

"This is why I am the way I am, isn't it?" I whisper. "Is my link to him the reason I basically want to fuck *all the time*?"

He lifts an eyebrow and smirks. "Perhaps. But such desires are also quite common when members of the higher races find their true and fated mates. We instinctively seek to bond."

I glance down at his lap, but the book he was reading is covering his groin. I need to get my mind off sex if I can. Taking a deep breath, I shift my focus back to the book in front of me, working to focus on the words and forgetting the thread of our conversation entirely.

After a moment of silently staring at the same sentence, I ask, "When will the others be off duty?"

"Which others?"

"The ones I haven't bonded with yet."

"Erebus, Pan, and I will relieve them in a few hours. But if you'd like, we can take a walk now and visit them while they patrol."

"I won't be a distraction, will I?"

"Most of our tasks are tedious and monotonous, not dangerous. If you're looking for a safe distraction, it might be the ideal time."

"Then yes. I'd like the walk."

He rises and reaches a hand out to me. I take it and let him lead me to the glass doors, bracing myself for the contrast of dissonant sounds of torment that echo through the corridors when they open.

It's far less jarring this time than it was the day before. I recognize the sounds too, from the rhythmic whip cracks and singing slices coming from the chamber where the Furies do their work, to the keening calls of the eagle and the vultures pecking at the livers of Prometheus and Tityos, to the clank of empty jars being tipped over the well where the Danaids serve their sentence.

The first of the guards we find is Chrysaor, striding toward us when we round a bend in the labyrinth of corridors. His face lights up when he sees me and I wave, my heartrate picking up as the distance between us shrinks.

I take the opportunity to look at him, since I was somewhat distracted the last time we were in a room together for real, what with being tormented to distraction by Typhon's many tongues. Chrysaor is as big as Asterius, with mostly human features aside from a pair of enormous dove gray wings that lay folded against his muscular shoulders, and a pair of ivory tusks that jut up from his lower jaw, ending just level with his nostrils. His head is shaved on both sides, the remaining luminous blond hair teased into spikes. He's wearing an armored kilt of leather and heavy boots, though he's otherwise bare-skinned, his toned muscles glistening with a sheen of sweat. When his smile widens, his tusks seem to lengthen.

"Well, well, have I finally earned a proper introduction, lovely Nemea?" He gives Asterius an accusatory look, and the minotaur huffs and crosses his arms.

"My commitment is to her comfort, Chrysaor. You know this."

"I would have volunteered, given the chance," Chrysaor says, then sighs. "But I get it. We're stretched thin, and you're better at hospitality than the rest of us by a longshot."

“It isn’t that I didn’t want to meet you,” I say. “I’ve just been preoccupied. I’m hoping to remedy that now, though.”

I remember Vesh’s parting words suggesting I bond with the others, but this is obviously not the time or place. Still, with Chrysaor standing only a few feet away, resplendent with his golden skin and heated gaze, I can’t help but recall the filthy things he said my first night here and idly wonder if his tusks would get in the way if I sat on his face.

He tilts his head and narrows his eyes, a knowing smile spreading across his face. “You look a little preoccupied now, pretty girl.” He takes a step closer then leans in, heat radiating off him and my skin prickling as his breath drifts across my ear. “Perhaps thinking about my promise to you, huh? I meant every word.”

My breath hitches and my core heats and tingles. He takes a deep inhale before leaning back, his nostrils flaring. Then he lets out a low groan and turns a pleading gaze to Asterius.

“Have mercy, brother. It’s unfair that you get to spend so much time with her while the rest of us have to wait. You and the brothers, and that fucking *faun*.” His nose crinkles with irritation, but I don’t sense anything more acrid than indignation when he refers to Pan.

“To be fair, I needed him to help regain my memories,” I say.

He sighs again. “Right. Which wasn’t his fault. Nor was it mine. But alas, I can’t stay to chat. Perhaps we can find time to get to know each other when my shift ends.”

He glances at Asterius before pushing between us, pausing just long enough to bend and kiss my cheek, then heave a dejected sigh.

Asterius tenses, then grumbles a soft curse before turning.

“Fine. You win!” Asterius calls. “I’ll take the rest of your shift under one condition.”

Chrysaor’s eyes light up when he turns back to us, his excitement palpable. “Anything,” he breathes.

“Take her to meet the other three. They’ve earned it every bit as much as you, and there’s no telling what task Vesh will have for us once he returns. Hopefully he’s made headway on capturing the Titans.”

He looks down at me then, gently gripping my shoulders. “Remember, you aren’t obligated to bond with them if you don’t want to. You can take as much time as you need.”

“I think I can handle them. Besides, every time I bond with one of you, it increases my power. I felt it when I was with Typhon yesterday and jerked him off.”

A soft, strangled cough sounds from behind me as I lean on tiptoes to kiss Asterius before turning back to Chrysaor.

“I’m all yours, I guess?”



Chrysaor holds his elbow out and I hook my arm through it. He's quiet and tense for the first few strides before clearing his throat. "Did you say you jerked off the big guy yesterday?"

"Yes. My arm is still tired." I laugh and glance up at him, but stop walking at his look of consternation. "Is that... bad?"

His eyebrows shoot up and he hurriedly shakes his head. "No. I just have never heard of anyone doing it *for* him. Usually he takes care of himself. I've got big hands, but not *that* big." He stretches both big, callused hands out in front of him and looks at them, flexing his fingers, then gestures as if he's wrapping his hands around a tree trunk and makes a jerking-off motion. He smirks when he drops his hands.

I chuckle, then shrug, more aware of the ache in the arm I used to do the deed than I was before. "Big guys deserve love too. Besides, after all the times he made *me* come, he earned it. It was also a good excuse to practice control of my magic."

Chrysaor's back to frowning, but he looks more confused than disturbed.

“I didn’t grow a bigger hand, if that’s what you’re thinking. I, um...” I crinkle my brow, not sure how to explain. Instead I make a fist with my right hand, curve my left arm around in an arc mimicking the size of Typhon’s cock, then mime pushing my fist down the length of it. To my surprise, a bolt of purple light the shape of my arm echoes out the end of my fist for several iterations.

“Wow, I didn’t know I could do that,” I marvel.

Chrysaor watches raptly, his mouth dropping open. I can almost see the gears turning as he envisions the scene. Then he grins and lets out a laugh, clapping his hands. “Holy shit. He liked that? I guess it makes sense, considering the size difference, and I’m a little sad I didn’t think of it.”

“You’re not weirded out?” I ask.

He chuckles. “It takes a lot to shock us. Come on, I have something to show you.”

We reach the end of the corridor, as well as the door Asterius and I entered through. I expect to wind up in the library when Chrysaor pushes it open, but instead find myself on a different platform looking into a similarly large room, only this one is quite different.

Where Asterius’ quarters sported a bed, Chrysaor’s has a sleek bar of shining void glass with floor-to-ceiling shelves of bottles glinting like jewels from lights shining through them. One shelf on either side of the bottles is reserved for sparkling glassware of every shape and color, with a lower middle shelf holding silver barware. The front of the bar sports a row of worn barstools of the same material.

Beyond the bar is an open space, the floor worn in patterns. Along the wall and spread around the room are

burlap-encased dummies that have straw jutting out of their joints, some of the stuffing scattered on the floor around them. On the opposite wall are racks of weapons and armors, displayed with obvious reverence and care and all polished to a shine. The walls on either side feature enormous murals of vicious battles fought. With only a glance, I can recognize a few distinct characters among the fray, including a shimmering winged horse on one wall while the opposite wall sports a winged armored boar.

“That’s you, isn’t it?” I ask, stepping closer to that side and craning my neck to peer up at the impressive artwork.

“It is. And my brother on the other side.” He points at the opposite wall with a wistful, almost sad smile.

I study his profile, its perfection interrupted only by the brutal tusks jutting up from his lower lip. His jaw spasms and he looks at me, apologetic.

“I don’t know what you’ve heard about him, but it’s all a lie,” he says.

I glance up at the magnificent image of the winged horse. “Pegasus? I really don’t know the story.” Mine and Rachel’s dive into mythology stayed pretty focused on the specific characters I’d sketched, so we skipped all the others.

His shoulders tighten as if bracing himself. In a measured tone he says, “What is written claims that Bellerophon tamed him with a magic bridle, rode him to Olympus, got knocked off, and Pegasus remained to carry Zeus’s thunderbolts. When he died he was honored by becoming a constellation in the heavens.”

“I take it that’s the lie.”

His eyes flash with anger and he nods. “The *truth* is that he was enslaved by the gods, forced into servitude like a beast. He was like me... he could transform into a man if he wished, but the bridle trapped him in his equine form. I tried to help him escape, but I failed him.”

Chrysaor’s voice goes ragged and tight, his eyes reddening. He clenches his teeth, and I can’t help but close the distance and plant myself in front of him, raising my hands to his cheeks.

He stares at the mural of Pegasus for a moment longer, then looks down at me, almost pleading. “I failed him. He was killed, and I was cast to Tartarus to serve out my sentence for daring to defy the gods. I see his constellation sometimes when Typhon lets me share his view of the sky, but it gives me no solace, not when I know how he died.”

“How long has it been?”

He shakes his head, staring at the mural again. “Time has little meaning in this place. At least three thousand years. Probably longer. I distract myself, either entertaining the others or training.” He gestures at the bar, then at the weapons and armor lined with museum precision along the wall.

Then he drops his gaze to his booted feet, and in a lower voice says, “I have gained perspective since, but while I was still hurting, I went through a body disfigurement phase. I wanted my wings and tusks gone, so I made Alcides cut my wings off and yank out my tusks, but they only grew back the next time I shifted.”

He wanders to a comfortable sitting area at the far end of the room that faces the bed standing as a centerpiece in this end of the room. The enormous, circular bed is neatly made with a cushioned headboard and huge, fluffy pillows in shades

of gold and silver. Across the bed from where we sit are more shelves flanking half a dozen mirrors. On the shelves are an assortment of elaborate masks hewn from different materials, some with horns, some with feathers, some horrific and monstrous and others whimsical and fun. I want to ask him about everything here, when I can.

What I want most is to know him, though, so I move toward the empty chair, but he grabs my wrist and pulls me onto his lap instead.

“Is this okay?” he asks, slinging an arm around my waist as I steady myself with my hands against his broad shoulders. He’s warm and smells like earth and spice. “I won’t make you do anything you don’t want to do.”

“I trust you,” I say with an indulgent smile. “You saw how much I trusted Typhon and Asterius yesterday. I trust you just as much. We also don’t have to do anything *you* don’t want to do. So what do you *want* to do?”

“Just hold you right now, because I have a feeling I’ll have few opportunities to have you to myself.”

I slide my arms around his neck, knuckles brushing against the softest feathers at the base of his wings where they merge with his shoulder blades. His eyes are an unusual gold-green color that shimmers from within. I lean in as he places a palm against my cheek, guiding me into a tender kiss that turns deeper, though I pull away with a laugh, finding it tricky to navigate his tusks.

He grunts and his mouth tilts in an apologetic smile. “You see why I wanted them gone.”

“Nonsense. I’ll get used to them.” I rub my thumb along his full lower lip and up one tusk. He runs his tongue along the

length of the other side of it, the agile muscle pointing when it reaches the tip. I can't help but stare, because his tongue is *long*. Not only that, a small void glass barbell runs through it halfway down. When he pulls it back into his mouth and I return my gaze to his, my cheeks immediately heat at the amused look he's giving me.

I clear my throat. "Tell me more about your body *modification* phase. I think I can relate, since I went through one of my own. Not quite to the extreme of cutting off body parts, but I shaved my head and got a tattoo. I almost got my nipples and clit pierced, but chickened out."

"That must have been some time ago," he comments, coiling a strand of my hair around his index finger. It's long now, nearly covering my breasts in an unruly mess of black waves.

"Maybe next time I'll get a do like yours." I reach up and touch one of the points of his hair. "And your wings are fucking gorgeous. Why in the world would you want to get rid of those?" I reach out and stroke the edge of one, which quivers, making all the tiny feathers glimmer as if made of silver.

"Because they reminded me of my brother. I wasn't able to save him, so I felt like I didn't deserve that kind of power. But demigods don't have the luxury of removing an entire body part, so I make do with altering the ones I have."

I lift one eyebrow. "Okay, now I'm a little scared of what exactly you wanted to show me."

"No need to be afraid, pretty girl. Not if you've already sounded the big guy."

I'm not sure what he means, but I don't have time to ask. He nudges me off his lap, and I shift back to sit on the bed as he stands. He glances down his torso, then peers at me from beneath his lashes.

"Do you mind if I show you?"

"Are you fucking kidding? I'd be mad if you didn't now!"

His mouth tilts up on one side, and he gives an endearingly nervous chuckle. "Here goes. I know you're probably used to human-shaped dicks. Mine's a little different, even without all the, um, *extras*. But it's really nothing. I mean, Cerberus is the one you should be scared of, if any of us."

"Because he has three dicks," I deadpan, leaning back and preparing to enjoy the show.

Chrysaor unbuckles the enormous belt that holds his sword at his hip and carefully rests it on the chair behind him. His leather kilt has laced panels on the front of either hip, and he's taking his sweet time loosening them.

He looks up at me, eyebrows raised.

"I haven't seen them, but Asterius told me. You guys kind of talk about your dicks an awful lot, you know? I'm not a delicate flower, Chry. You won't scare me off."

He pauses, his gaze filling with abject wonder. He leans toward me, and for a second I think he's about to fall to his knees, but he straightens and grins, his eyes lighting up from within. "You are perfect, aren't you?"

"Bite your tongue," I say. "This chaos beast considers the idea of *perfect* to be an insult." I point at myself with one thumb and smirk at him.

“Noted.” He shakes his head as he returns to his task. It takes another minute before the considerably secure laces are loosened enough for his kilt to slide down his hips. I bite my lip as it drops a couple inches, snagging on the bulky muscles of his Adonis belt.

“You could just lift it, couldn’t you?” I ask, then swallow because my mouth has gone dry with anticipation.

He frowns and looks like he’s second-guessing himself. “Should’ve taken off my boots too, I guess.” He lifts one booted foot, the leather buckles on it as complicated as the ones on mine.

“I mean, you can still take it off without removing your boots, unlike me.” I glance down where my black jeans are tucked into my boots.

He hooks his thumbs into the top and pushes, his eyes fixed on me. The act of this huge man stripping is more erotic than it has any right to be, and I think I have some idea why men like a strip tease so much. He’s all hard, flexing, golden muscles, every bit as god-like as the majestic images on his mural. He finally gets the kilt down his knees and remains bent over as he steps out of it, planting both his feet carefully in front and rising to his full height once more. He unfolds slowly, and my pulse thrums all the way down to my core as he’s revealed in all his glory.

I swallow again, indulging myself by perusing what he’s showing me, but I take my sweet time. Unlike Asterius, whose scars were evident, Chrysaor is absolutely flawless. His tan thighs flex as if my gaze makes him tense, and when I shift it higher, I can’t help but exhale a small, surprised gasp.

“Was that good or bad?” he murmurs.

I can't answer, because I'm too fascinated. His cock is erect, which was the biggest reason he had a challenging time getting his kilt off. Not only is he huge, though, he's shaped like someone took his shaft and twisted it. It's actually not that different than the image of the tower I saw in the little glass globe Vesh stole from me, with its dual staircases twisting around the outside. Only Chrysaor's cock has a shining black ladder of barbells winding all the way around through the ridge that coils around his shaft. At the very tip is a hoop that lays against the tip, only it doesn't look attached to his flesh. It looks like it's linked to a rod that goes *inside his cock*.

"Come here, I need to see this up close." I wave him toward me. He hesitates, and I look up at his face. The worry I see there makes me laugh. "It's good. I'm fucking fascinated. Can I touch?"

"Only if I get to touch you too."

"In a minute," I say, too distracted by the work of art he just revealed to say more.

He chuckles and closes the distance between us, his enormous dick somehow remaining completely stationary and rigid as he moves.

"I hope I don't regret showing you," he says when I reach for him. I give him a wry look.

"You made a big deal out of showing me. You must have expected I would want to know all there is to know about it. But for the record, I fucking *love* this."

With the tip of one finger, I gently trace the center of the winding, laddered ridge that coils around his cock. He lets out a shudder and flexes his fists at his sides.

"Good?" I ask, lifting an eyebrow and smirking at him.

“Fuck, yes,” he breathes.

“What’s this?” I ask, peering up at him as I toy with the hoop at the end.

“It’s a sound rod. Or a penis plug. It’s what I wanted to show you. What you did to Ty was sounding, and I love it, which is why I’m mad I didn’t think of it for him.”

What I did to Ty was a strange stroke of inspiration and completely unexpected, but he asked me for it, so who was I to deny him pleasure? Staring at Chrysaor’s jewelry gives me another surge of inspiration. I want to make him come. I want to wear him like I wore the others. To taste him like I tasted the others. What the fuck is happening to me?

“You know, I honestly never thought of myself as kinky, but you guys are opening up my mind. This is fucking bonkers. Does it feel good when you fuck? Or is it more for my pleasure?”

“A little of both. The plug has to come out first, though. It’s more for my fun and it might hurt you if it’s still in when I’m inside you.”

“Like when you jerk off,” I say.

His cheeks darken. “I didn’t know when I’d get to be with you. I didn’t want to spend another day frustrated.”

“Show me how you do it.”

He spits in his palm and wraps his hand around his cock while I sit back. When he strokes himself, he moves his hand in a twisting motion, like his palm is threaded and his cock is an actual screw. His cockhead swells with each stroke, the opening widening just a little and showing more of the void glass shaft that fills it.

I remember what I did to Typhon that made him roar, and I reach out. “Can I?” I ask, hooking my index finger through the hoop at the end of the rod.

When I touch it, my intention sparks against the glass, and Chrysaor pauses his stroking to let out a moan.

“Fuck, what was that?” he asks.

“I told you I used my power on Ty. I want to see if I can do it on you, albeit on a smaller scale. Will you let me?”

He drops his hands to his sides and steps even closer, planting his feet on either side of mine. I meet his gaze and am struck by the wonder still filling his eyes. He touches my cheek as if trying to convince himself I’m real. I’ve given up on wondering if this is a dream. As long as I’m enjoying myself, I don’t want to wake up.

I wrap one hand around his shaft, though I can only really enclose him halfway, and begin gently stroking him the way he stroked himself, twisting as I run my hand up his shaft. I grip the hoop with thumb and forefinger and slowly slide the plug out of his penis. There’s the tiniest resistance before a spherical bulge in the rod comes free of his opening, followed by another, then another. The entire rigid, six-inch length of it is lined with the balls, which must add an interesting layer of sensation.

When I push it back in, I draw a small measure of that magic from inside me and focus it on the tip of my finger. It comes more easily now, obeying my command. The smooth rod easily conducts the power, beginning to glow as it disappears back inside Chrysaor’s cock.

Chrysaor jolts and lets out a gasp, his hand flying to my shoulder. “A-again. That was nice. Give me more this time.”

I lean in and run my tongue around the velvety tip of his cock, tasting him as I pull the plug out, enjoying the bump-bump-bump of it exiting his opening, which mirrors the bump-bump-bump of my fingers over the barbells lining his shaft.

“Will this make you come?”

“You bet your fucking life.” He’s breathing heavily already as I repeat the process, adding more power as he requested. His hand moves from my shoulder up to cup the back of my head, fingers tangling in my hair.

“Good, because I want to taste you,” I say, my voice throaty. I lick his head once then glide my tongue a few inches around his shaft along the pierced ridge.

He groans when I shove the plug back in for the third time, pushing even more magic with it.

“If that’s what you want, when you pull it out next, leave it out and use your tongue in the hole.”

My mouth is actually watering, and my pussy is as wet as it’s ever been when I shift closer, gripping him a little tighter as I stroke. I keep my mouth on his tip this time as I pull the rod out, covering his tip when I remove it completely. He takes the rod from me, tossing it to the bed, then grabs my free hand and places it on his cock opposite my other.

“Fuck yes, suck me, Nemea. Squeeze my cock and suck my cum right out of me. Fuck!”

I stroke him fast with both hands, sucking on his cockhead and pushing my tongue into the opening left by the plug. The second I plunge it in, I taste his climax surging forth. He holds my head in both hands, gently restraining me as I take him, teeth bumping against the top barbell as his essence washes across my tongue. I moan at the flavor, something between

sweet and musky, definitely not altered by the magic of this place to taste like fancy coffee drinks. But I love it, and I swallow every drop while he spasms in my hands.

He's slow to release me, and I peer up at him with my mouth still attached to his cock. He's breathing heavily, his eyes wide with astonishment.

"I think I love you," he breathes, shifting his hand to more gently cradle my head and slide his fingers into my hair.

The admission warms me more than I expected, and a knot of longing forms in my belly. It isn't horniness that grips me then, but the unfamiliar craving for tenderness, for touch, for intimacy of a different kind. I felt a glimmer of it this morning waking up in Vesh's arms, but when Chrysaor says those words and looks at me with such intensity, for the first time, I really *feel* it. And I want more than anything to find out if I feel it for all of them.

But for now, I want to give him what he seems to want the most: all of me to himself, if only for a little while.

"Then make love to me now, Chrysaor."



When you've been broken for so long, it's strange to finally feel whole again. Staring down at Nemea's big, dark eyes that look so earnestly back at me, I feel complete for the first time in my entire long life. She's glowing and gorgeous, my power filling her as if she's a dragon soaking up the magic from my orgasm. Didn't Vesh say she was a chimera? Which means she must be part dragon, which explains some of why her need for us has such a strong physical aspect. My need for her is just as strong on many levels.

I lift a hand and brush my thumb across her lower lip, gathering the droplet of my semen that still lingers at the corner. Grazing the moisture across her supple pink flesh, I'm somehow not prepared for her to dart her tongue out and taste, then grab my hand and pull my thumb fully into her mouth. It only takes one gentle suck for my cock to harden again.

I'd happily bend her over and nail her like a void demon, I'm that eager to be inside her. But after our exchange, that would be wholly inappropriate.

"I'm going to make love to you. But first we need to get you undressed."

It takes serious restraint to retrieve my thumb from her mouth, which I do with a sigh. I bend and start to unbuckle my boots, feeling supremely silly that I left them on. Her light touch on my shoulder makes me pause.

“Leave them on, they’re hot.”

My eyebrows shoot up and I smirk. “You’re into me in nothing but boots?”

“I like hardware on a guy, I guess.” She gestures to the many darkened iron buckles that line my boots, as well as the pair of daggers sheathed on either one. The way her gaze skims up my dick again emphasizes how much she likes my *other* hardware too.

“Whatever my pretty girl desires,” I say.

I reach for the hem of her shirt, and she obediently lifts her arms for me to pull it over her head. Then I squat and begin unbuckling her boots. I’d leave them on her too, but her pants are tucked into them, so they have to go. They’re flimsier than mine, but their hardware is no less elaborate, minus any weapons.

“We’ll have to get you some sturdier boots if you’re going to be fighting with us. These look nice, but aren’t quite practical. Are they even real leather?” I peer inside one when I get it off her, eyeing the fabric layer adhered to its interior.

“Pleather,” she says. “Much cheaper than the real thing. So does this mean I’m actually going to get to join a fight?”

I curse inwardly for suggesting it. I have no idea what Vesh’s plans are for her, but if she’s this talented with her magic in the bedroom after only a couple days, it won’t take long for her to be ready to join us when we face off against the Titans.

“Makes sense to be prepared,” I say. “The kind of focus you had when you used your power on me a moment ago suggests you’re already figuring things out. The fact that you’re intuitively using it in non-combat situations is especially promising.”

“You mean like for sex? You liked what I did? It felt like manifesting an extension of whatever I was touching. Like your little rod thingie.” She glances to the side and finds my *little rod thingie*, then hooks the hoop over her finger, dangling the shining void glass sounding plug off it while she leans back and smiles down at me.

My breath leaves my lungs and I stop unbuckling her other boot for a moment just to absorb her presence. She’s still wearing a black brassiere, her full breasts lush and round, her hard nipples jutting against the lace. So delicate a garment for a woman who is decidedly *not* delicate after the things I’ve seen her do thus far. I get a better view of the splotch of purple I saw on her side the day before, and the intricate detail of the large octopus is astonishing. It’s almost as if it watches me, guarding its mistress.

Returning to my task, I yank off her other boot and set it by the first, then reach for her buttons. She leans back farther, tilting her hips up and biting her lip.

“I loved what you did,” I finally answer. “But I’d like to take this slowly. Prove to you how much it means to me that you’re even here.”

I get her pants off and look at her from where I’m kneeling. We are at eye-level, and she sits forward again, scooting to the edge of my bed while she holds my gaze. She’s looking at me so intently, I feel her boring into my soul. My

vision shifts strangely under her scrutiny, and I rock back, disconcerted for a moment.

“Do you feel that?” she whispers. “I almost forgot to test our bond now that I’ve tasted you. But it’s there, isn’t it?”

“Don’t...” I blurt, stomach lurching at the sliding sensation that’s taking over me, like my mind has slipped out from under me and is skidding down into an abyss.

I scramble back and wind up on my ass, blinking up at her. She stares with wide-eyed concern. “I—I’m sorry. I thought you’d want to be bonded too.”

Confusion sends a wash of clammy prickles over my body, and I do my best to shake it off and sit up again. “I do. But that felt like...” *Like being dragged to Tartarus the first time.*

“Did I do it wrong? With the others, I just opened my mind, and they were *there*. They’re not right now, but they can come and go. Maybe I pulled too hard? I just want to do this right.”

Her voice wavers, and my stomach sinks at the disappointment in her tone. I return to my knees and rest my hands on her thighs. “I doubt it was you. And hell yes, I want to be bonded with you, but can we put that on hold for now? I just want to be *here* with you. Let me make you feel good, pretty girl.”

I smirk and raise an eyebrow at her as I slide my hands higher up her thighs and lean between her knees. The vertigo she caused disappears when I’m in contact with her and I let out a slow breath of relief. I slide my arms around her torso, and she hooks both her arms around my neck, closing in for a tight embrace.

It's unexpectedly desperate, not the embrace of a woman craving sex, but of one craving simple *touch*, which is a desire I know all too well. She presses her face into my neck and inhales deeply, then heaves a shuddering sigh, holding me even tighter.

"What is it?" I ask, lifting a hand to stroke her hair.

"I don't know what I'm doing here," she whispers. "I'm just trying to go with it, but I'm not used to feeling *useless*. At home all I did was work, which was one of the reasons I left. At the school I worked too, but it was the first time in my life I felt like that work was all for *me* and not a response to the expectations of my elders. For the first time, I was part of a community that placed more focus on individual goals, but it was still a community, you know? A family."

I don't actually know, but I hold her tighter and make what I hope are understanding sounds. "You aren't useless," I offer.

She huffs and pulls back, a dark scowl marring her pretty features. "Ugh, seriously? All I've done since I've been here is fuck. Not that it hasn't been mind-blowing every time, but I want to *do* something. Train me. Put me to work. Make me feel like I'm making a difference."

I raise my eyebrows at this and I drop my gaze to her barely covered breasts and soaked panties. "Not the sort of begging I'd have hoped for the first time in thousands of years I get a girl into my bed."

She lets out an ironic snort, her shoulders sagging. "I know, right? I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. This is something I can absolutely help with, but it seems to me that you have been practicing and training *during* sex, and it's working for you."

I look at the ceiling trying to find the words to explain why this is significant. When it comes to me, I look into her eyes again.

“Focus during distraction is a crucial skill during a fight. When emotions are high, being able to perform despite fear of death is important. Testing your magic in the middle of sex is just the opposite side of the coin. Fighting, after all, is not all that different from fucking. It can be a dance. Emotions are often high. In a good fight—or bad, depending on perspective—you’re connected to your opponent in a very visceral way. The same goes for sex.”

She tilts her head and gives me a dubious look. “I don’t need talking into it, if that’s what you’re trying to do here.”

I let out a laugh. “I promise it’s not a line. I felt it firsthand. Not to mention if you got the big guy off with your magic, that had to take serious skill and focus. So until you’ve bonded with all of us maybe consider every tryst an opportunity to test your magic. Or we can get dressed again and go hit the dummies for a bit. I might have a sword you can wield.”

She stares at my practice space for a moment, then back at me. Lifting her hands to my face, she looks intently into my eyes. “I don’t just want to fuck you, Chry. I want to bond with you. I want us inside each other the way I am with Vesh and Pan and Erebus and Asterius and Typhon. Every time I’ve been with them has been one of the deepest, most intimate experiences of my life. I want to figure out how to do that with you in a way that doesn’t make you want to run away.”

I frown down at her, trying to get a grip on her shifting desires. “Which is it? Do you want to become one of us, just a useful cog in this fucked-up machine we live in? Or do you

want to be more? Because if it's really bonding you want before anything else, we aren't going to leave this room until that happens. We aren't going to leave this *bed* until I figure out how to let you inside me without freaking out."

I swallow at her apprehensive look, then her eyes brighten and a mischievous glint joins the light within her. "For the nymphaea, it's the *exchange* that's necessary, isn't it? And so far, I've just tasted *you*. Maybe all you need is to taste me back?"

"This I can do," I say, marveling at her wicked mind.

I lean in to kiss her again while I push the straps off her shoulders and tug the front of her bra down, then descend on her breasts, sucking one nipple to a rigid peak before switching to the other. She reaches behind her back and her bra suddenly falls free, giving me full access to both her luscious mounds. Nemea leans back on her elbows and thrusts her chest up, moaning when I devote my full attention to them both for several seconds. Then she sighs as I begin to kiss my way down her belly.

My hands are wrapped around both sides of her waist, and something shifts oddly beneath one. A second later the sensation moves, and *something* slides around my wrist, tugging my hand lower.

"What the fuck?" I mutter, sitting back and staring down at the violet tentacle wrapped around my wrist.

"Hmm?" Nemea glances down at me through lowered lashes, her gaze fevered.

"Care to explain?" I ask, looking pointedly at the octopus rising halfway out of her flesh to try to guide my hand...

where? It tugs farther and places my palm right over her mound.

Nemea looks confused for a second. Then her eyes widen and she goes absolutely still, staring in disbelief at her tattoo that has just come alive. Her mouth drops open and she rolls to the side a little, twisting to stare more intently at it.

“That’s my tattoo. What the fuck?”

“Your tattoo seems to have a mind of its own.” I rest my palm where the tentacle just placed it and press the heel of my hand against her. She lets out a gasp.

“I was just thinking how I couldn’t wait until you got my panties off.”

“Ah, so it *is* obeying your will. Then I guess I’d better do what it wants.”

I hook my fingers into her waistband and tug while two of the tentacles assist by grabbing the panties at either hip and pushing. They splay across her belly, coiling and uncoiling in what seems to be an impatient gesture.

“I don’t know. This is so fucking weird,” she muses. “I should be totally freaking out, shouldn’t I?”

“It’s *your* tattoo,” I offer with a shrug. I toss her panties aside and push her knees wider. The two helpful tentacles move to the center again and Nemea inhales sharply when they part her folds, displaying her swollen clit for me.

The other six arms are still static, two-dimensional designs coiling up her side and along the column of her throat, but the three-dimensional eyes of the creature blink at me as if to say, “*Here it is, idiot.*”

I chuckle at it and delicately remove the small appendages from her nethers. One wraps itself around my finger before retreating.

“I know what I’m doing, I promise,” I tell it. I part her with my fingers, then lower my mouth to her glistening core, capture her swollen clit between my lips, and suck.

“Oh, fuck yes you do,” she breathes, tilting her hips up against me. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the tentacles move. This time they wrap around my head, applying the slightest pressure.

I don’t really care anymore, though. She tastes like heaven, and I indulge, flicking my tongue over her clit before plunging it deep inside her. I can taste remnants of the others on her, which arouses me further. It’s been a long time since we’ve been in a sharing frame of mind. Perhaps if we’d been more attuned to each other three years ago, we’d have won that fight against the goddess. Tasting them on her means we’re finally *sharing* again, which is everything.

She’s already so primed it takes a few flicks of my tongue before she’s writhing and crying out with her climax. I peer up at her, flexing my tongue against her clit before pushing it inside and pressing the tip into her G-spot, loving the way her channel tightens around me in dozens of small spasms, her delicious fluid gushing over my tastebuds. The little octopus’ arms coil and release over and over.

Before she can come down entirely, I hook both arms beneath her thighs, sliding my hands up to her lower back. I lift her then, keeping her splayed open and hold her against my mouth as I rise to my feet and climb all the way onto the bed. The octopus holds onto my head and she manages to stay

balanced, a laugh escaping her before I lay her down again and move up to hover over her.

She's smiling up at me, then glances down between us.

"He's into this, I guess," she says.

"He's part of you so I would hope so."

The octopus has more tentacles out, two of them pushing her breasts together while two more spread her open again. A fifth and sixth tentacle reach for my cock and aim me right at her sopping slit.

I jerk in surprise when they coil around me, but it feels good, so I go with it. She bites her lower lip eagerly and raises her legs, sliding them across my hips and digging her heels in the slightest bit, but the tentacles' pull on my shaft is more than enough for me to know what she's after.

Her clit is a hard bud at the top of her opening, even more pronounced when I press my tip against her and stretch her wide as I push in. I'm compelled to watch myself disappear into her, if only because this moment is monumental. She's mine—a mate made for me. It doesn't even matter that she's for all of us; I love my fellow guards of Tartarus. But the fact that she belongs *here* with us means everything.

My piercings bump past the edges of her flesh one by one, and when I'm halfway in and still moving, she lets out a soft moan.

"Oh, that's good. I didn't expect to be able to feel it so much."

"You like?" I pull out just a little and push back in, watching her face now. She's flushed and beautiful, and the tiny thrust of her hips gives me my answer.

Looking into her eyes, I realize what she meant about wanting to bond. Being buried inside her with my cock isn't enough. Now that I've tasted her too, maybe that's enough to have it all?

Plunging in and out of her is a rhythm that's easy to find without thought. Our bodies are in sync, moving in response to our desires. Our minds, however, are separate, and that needs to change.

Holding Nemea's gaze, I tentatively drop my mental barriers and explore, reaching for her in that space she tried to bring me to before. It feels less like an abyss now than a simple portal into the unknown, but when she realizes I'm there, she eagerly opens up for me, and what I see inside her is a wonderland, I'm more than happy to step into.

My body shudders with pleasure as my orgasm takes me unaware, her body spasming and her cries filling my ears at the same time. I roll us onto our sides, hooking her leg over my hip and pushing into her one last time. Then I just hold her tight against me and surrender.



The others arrive when Chrysaor joins us within my sanctuary. As if sensing his arrival, they all come out to greet him. It's like a heartfelt reunion between friends who haven't seen each other in ages, the way they share hugs and congratulations. Asterius and Pan release him and he turns, laughing out loud when he sees Typhon in his human form. He hauls the young man into a rough hug.

"I knew you had it in you, buddy. This is a good look." Then he looks around in his wide-eyed, appreciative way. "This is like the prison, except not oppressive. I like it."

Erebus merely watches from the side, giving me a slight nod of approval and a silent mental promise that he has no intention of staying away for long. I get the sense he wants to give the others a chance to bond with me first.

They don't linger long, though. Each of them makes apologies for having tasks to complete, then disappears. Vesh is noticeably absent, and I suppress a pang of disappointment that borders on resentment. After waking up in his arms, I thought I might finally get more of his attention.

I shouldn't be upset. There's a crisis underway, and I need to do my part to be ready when it comes time to fight. What

Chrysaor said is true: bonding with them is how I prepare. With this new connection, it's as we've dug the well of potential power even deeper, and I can feel it filling while we lie in his bed, still entwined. I don't know what I can do with it in a fight, but this is all a good start.

When it's just myself and Chrysaor left in my sanctuary, I look up at him. "This isn't so bad, is it, now that you're here?"

"It's beyond wonderful. Is this all you?" He turns to look over his shoulder at the elaborate temple that appeared beside the ones dedicated to my other mates, all situated around a central square. A statue of Pegasus rests in the center in a place of honor, and the remainder of the interior resembles Chrysaor's room with its weapons and practice dummies.

"I think some of it must be you. You're part of me now."

He studies me for a beat before closing the distance and kissing me. When I open my eyes, we're back in his bed, my mental sanctuary a mere glimmer in my imagination.

"What does *he* think about all this?" he asks, tapping my temple.

I raise my eyebrows. "Vesh? I don't know. He seemed fine with it when I discovered it this morning. Should it bother him?"

"I guess not. It's just that it means you're much more like him than we realized." He frowns as if a thought just occurred to him.

"What is it?" I ask.

"What if this means you can't stay? If you're that powerful at the end of this that you can manifest your own domain, what if it means you can't coexist here with us? What if you outgrow him and he has to let you leave?"

“What do you mean *let* me leave? If I need to go, I just go, but this will always be there. You and the others will always be there.” I tap my head, then frown when the look on his face registers. He’s wincing as if he’s just said something he shouldn’t have, and the emotions running down our newly created bond suggest he regrets his words.

When he doesn’t answer, I pull away and sit up, staring down at him when he rolls onto his back. His wings flex and his upper body elevates slightly as he reaches for me, but I pull back.

“What did you mean, Chry?” I press.

He grimaces, then sighs. “Nemea, no one *just leaves* Tartarus. This is a prison, in case you missed it. Not just for the actual inmates, but for the guards too.”

A pit opens in my gut that feels nothing like that deep well filling with power. This one is dark and cold, and filled only with betrayal. I really hope he’s wrong. “But he took some of you with him yesterday. You were gone.”

“We weren’t here, but we weren’t outside the prison either. When he summons us for an excursion, we’re effectively outside, but our bodies rest in a sort of limbo while we inhabit copies of him. He has the power to send us back at his whim. We don’t actually exist in the world on our own. Pan’s the only one of us who has actually escaped in our entire time here, and that didn’t last long.”

His upper lip makes a slight twitch against one of his tusks and his gaze darts away for a second. Through our bond, I can sense him carefully walling off a thought.

“What is it?” I demand. “What are you hiding? If I’m going to keep trusting any of you, I need to know.”

He sits up all the way, his big wings shuddering and straightening themselves against his back again. His gaze has turned wary and he glances at the door to the prison as if wishing for someone to rescue him from this conversation. The look pisses me off, but I bite my tongue.

“Was I really just brought here to be everyone’s fuck toy?” I snap. “Tell me the truth!” His hesitance to talk is making me frantic, my voice turning shrill. Have I made a monumental mistake coming here?

His eyes widen and his head snaps back around to look at me. “What? No! We were all surprised by your very existence. None of us believed we could ever have a fated mate, yet here you are. You are not a slave, Nemea. If I could help you leave, I would, though it would break my fucking heart. But it isn’t within my power.”

His voice breaks and his eyes go glassy, but it does little to assuage my rising agitation. Did Vesh really lie to me when he said I could leave whenever I wanted to?

“What are you holding back?” I grit out, chilled to the bone as I brace myself for his answer.

He winces again when I glare at him, and that’s when the entire prison seems to shudder. I blink in alarm, because I’m almost positive it isn’t me; I’ve managed to gain enough control over my power not to cause earthquakes without meaning to.

“He’s afraid you’ll hate him for keeping it from you,” comes Typhon’s resonant voice within my head, the shaking subsiding once he speaks. *“There are three of us, besides Vesh, who are capable of leaving. We just choose to stay because there is nothing in the human world for us.”*

I refocus on Chrysaor. “Typhon told me three of you are able to leave. Which of you can go? Are you one of the three?”

He clenches his jaw and he shakes his head, then closes his eyes and takes a deep, fortifying breath. “The Brothers Bane can leave if they choose—Vesh, of course, since he *is* the prison, and Typhon and Erebus. The third is Alcides, who was never a prisoner to begin with, unlike the rest of us. Myself and the other guards were conscripted.”

“Did you know he was keeping me here?” I yell, directing the thought as forcefully as I can at the two brothers as well as Vesh, wherever the fuck *he* is right now. All I know is he’s not *here*, and the fact that he kept this from me leaves me hot with rage.

No one answers, but I guess it was a rhetorical question. They must have known. Typhon projects back regret and disappointment, and I soften my harsh thoughts toward him. He didn’t know. That’s something, at least.

I stare at Chrysaor accusingly, only slightly moved by the hurt in his eyes. “Did you know he told me I could leave whenever I wanted? Well, now I want to go.” I raise my head again and yell at the top of my voice. “Did you hear me, you asshole? Now I want to go! Take me the fuck home!”

Still no answer, but I can sense alarm and uncertainty from my bond with the others.

I scramble off the bed and hurriedly dress.

I fucking hate feeling this way—helpless, trapped. This is the one thing I never wanted to feel again, and for a brief moment, I believed I finally had all the choices in the world.

All the fucking *freedom*. Or was on my way to claiming it. But I guess it was all just another fucking lie.

I head back the way we came in as Chrysaor scrambles off the bed, calling after me. When I fling the glass door open and am faced with the winding dungeon corridor, I curse and slam it shut again. The glass vibrates under the force, but doesn't shatter, though part of me wishes it had.

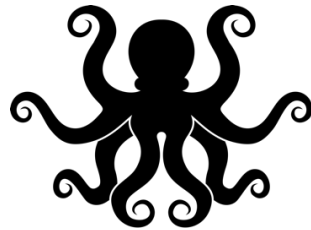
“Where's the fucking way out?” I snap, pacing back the other direction. Asterius led me through a different door when we first entered his chambers, so I go back past Chrysaor's bed and the wall containing his collection of intricate masks. I recognize a few as representations of the other guards. Were they all hiding behind masks? Is it uncharitable of me for thinking that when I haven't even *met* them all?

I find the door just as he catches up to me. He grabs my arm. “Nemea, don't. You can't leave. Please, don't leave.”

“The fuck I can't. Watch me.” I yank my arm out of his grasp and slam my hand against his chest. He goes flying halfway back across the room, stunned and frantically flapping his wings to keep from falling flat on his ass. I turn back to the open entry—just like Asterius' room, there's not a proper door, just a wall that obscures an open entryway. Beyond that is a corridor leading to the stairs.

I'm running when I reach them, heading up and winding around and around toward the top. I'm not even winded by the time I reach Vesh's room. I grab my bag and head up the stairs again, toward the uppermost bridge and the monolithic black doors I saw when I first arrived.

If there are doors, then there *must* be a way out.



Darkness swirls in denser and denser tendrils around me as I climb to the top of the tower.

“You don’t understand what you’re about to do. Go back, Nemea.” Erebus is in my head, his voice insistent, but I ignore him. He doesn’t try to stop me, though I know he’s likely strong enough to.

If there are doors, that means there’s a way out, and I intend to walk through them and leave. Let Vesh come find me, assuming I matter that much to them.

I push through the iron gate at the top, and the doors are within sight. They pulse with an eerie purple glow, and the magic protecting them makes the air feel thick when I step off the stairs.

Last chance, asshole, I project, already pulling power from within me to do whatever I can to unlock those giant doors.

I’m so focused on the enormity of them I almost miss the big man standing halfway between me and my escape. He’s not quite as massive as the others, but nearly so, with bulky, rippling muscles shining golden despite the purple light filling the area around him. He’s dressed similar to Chrysaor in a

leather kilt with heavy boots, and across his shoulders is a cloak made from animal hide with a thick, bushy collar of golden fur that mingles with his mane of darker hair. I almost don't see the eyes of the lion's head staring back at me from within that mass of fur. A giant club rests on the opposite fur-covered shoulder, his feet are planted wide, and he watches me approach with piercing amber eyes.

I slow my pace, glancing between him and my destination. I haven't met him yet. Not even the first night when some of the guards spoke through Vesh to introduce themselves. And he was the only one of the group who turned and left the moment they all arrived in the cavern to witness my undoing at the hands of Asterius and Typhon, before Vesh and Erebus took over fucking me.

"Alcides," I say, meeting and holding his steady gaze. "You wouldn't keep me here against my will, would you?"

"It is not my call. But one thing I do know is that you are not going through those doors. You don't know what lies beyond."

"Freedom lies beyond, and that's all I care about. Whatever else is out there I can deal with."

He shakes his head. "I won't let you breach the doors. The last time they broke, the prison was nearly overrun by the demons that live on the other side. We held them back, but only barely. Without Vesh here, we may not last. The prison would be compromised."

Demons? I glance at the doors, less certain now about my plan. I haven't used my power in a fight yet, only accidentally when I felt antagonized. And I'm *not* a fighter; Chrysaor gave me a chance to test my powers in combat practice today, but I was too busy playing with his dick to take him up on it. I have

to suppress the tangled regret of how I left him after the lovely afternoon we spent together, before I learned I was as much a prisoner as the Danaids.

The sick feeling of helplessness threatens to fill me again. I need to get out.

“You don’t understand—I *have* to go. If I can’t leave, I don’t know what will happen.”

The tower shudders beneath us, the lurch coinciding with another wrench of panic filling my gut. I should try to control it, but right now, all I care about is being set free.

“I have a fair idea of what you are capable of, Nemea. Let’s talk about it.”

“Aren’t you known for getting shit done? I don’t know if I’m in the mood for talking.” My voice is strained, and I take another step closer. He raises the club from his shoulder, hefting it in one hand before dropping the end to rest between his feet, both his hands wrapped around its grip.

“I do what needs to be done. If I need to subdue you, I will. I don’t think our needs would be served by provoking you, but I can’t let you leave, either.”

“He lied to me. I thought he wanted to help me,” I say, my voice cracking and my shoulders sagging. I’m slowly losing my fight with the tangled rage and panic inside me. It unravels, leaving me raw and barren and barely able to stand in the wake of the deceit. “I thought coming here would set me free. That I’d learn what I am and that would mean I finally had choices. I know it’s stupid, but I believed him when he said I could go if I wanted to.”

“I doubt that’s what he said. Vesh doesn’t lie. He likes to stretch the truth when it suits him, though.” He looks

disappointed.

“Does it matter what he said if he knew what meaning I would take from it?” I flick my gaze to one side, then the other, frantic to calculate some path around him. I don’t want to hurt him—I don’t want to hurt *anyone*—but I need to get to that gate.

The sounds of voices calling up the tower sends me into a full-blown panic. A discordant screech like nails down a chalkboard fills the air as I bolt, randomly picking a direction and hoping I’m fast enough to get by him. My vision tunnels around the gate looming too far away to reach, but the need to simply be *elsewhere* is too great. I lunge, thinking I’m finally going to make it when something massive hooks around my waist and hauls me back.

The breath leaves my lungs under the force of whatever grabbed me. It’s an arm. *His* arm, its iron weight curled tight around my waist, the other clamping over my chest as I lurch and buck, feet flailing in the air in front of me.

“Let me go!”

“Don’t do this,” he says. “Calm down. If you don’t want him to come running and lock this place down, you’ll take a breath and get yourself under control. And believe me, he will come. If he didn’t want you to leave, you won’t be getting out of here anytime soon. And if he thinks you’re a flight risk, you can be damn sure he’ll lock you down even harder.”

Another tremor courses up the tower, shaking through my belly strongly enough to induce nausea. I don’t want to be like this—out of control, destructive, on the verge of dismantling something I first thought beautiful when I arrived.

Not that I could, could I? Do I even want to test my power this way?

My stomach sinks with the conviction that I *don't* want this. The people here have done nothing wrong. They don't need to be punished for something their warden did.

With my surrender, the power that had flowed out of me reverses course, sucked back in with the slightest force of will, back through the fissures that appeared in my trust at learning I'd been betrayed. The cracks leave me aching and raw, and a defeated sob escapes as I slump in Alcides' arms. But the vibrations of the bridge beneath my feet ebb and finally still.

“Please don't make me stay.”

“If I'm not mistaken, you seemed to be enjoying yourself so far. You've bonded with most of the guards already—not that you had much choice in that either.” He mutters the last bit almost derisively.

“What do you mean?” I ask, staring blankly at the doors that taunt me with their very presence, as unreachable now as my own agency.

He heaves a gruff sigh and turns me in his arms, keeping one big, muscular bicep hooked firmly around my shoulders. Alcides tips my chin up with one finger and stares into my eyes. My breath catches at the glow of power flickering behind his irises, but more so at the handsome face my sketches did not do justice to. His hardened features have rough edges that seem to spite his otherwise divine beauty; a perfect square jaw left unshaved, high cheekbones smudged with dirt and sweat, dark chestnut hair dulled with dust and grime. His sharp gaze and straight white teeth give away the perfection obscured beneath the mess. The only thing clean about him is the intricate golden belt around his waist.

“We thought we were immune to Fate here, Nemea. We *all* believed we had control of our lives, despite living in a prison. I am here because I chose to be. Because I deserved to be. And we *are* given choices here. Even though they are empty, meaningless choices, it’s enough to maintain the illusion that our lives are our own. Enough to allow us to keep lying to ourselves. But we all need the lie to survive. You...” He swallows and exhales sharply, shaking his head. “You are the first taste of truth we’ve had in thousands of years, and none of us care that you are nothing but another lie, albeit wearing prettier skin.”

He pauses and darts a glance over his shoulder, his eyes narrowing briefly. The footsteps banging up the staircase slow, then halt. But I don’t hear them retreat. Part of me wants to open my mind to reach for the ones I’m bound to, to find out what he might have communicated to make them stop. But I’m too ashamed of my absolute terror at being trapped here to face them, even within the sanctuary I crafted in my mind. I opened up to them, trusted them, but every instinct in me now wants to run from them.

A shadow passes overhead and I look up, gasping at the shape of the enormous dragon high above. My heart somersaults when it turns and I catch sight of the writhing snakes twisting in the air around the bigger head. Then that head cranes around and focuses on me as Typhon banks in the air, then glides down to land on the bridge behind Alcides, as graceful as if he were no heavier than a feather, despite being as big as a house.

He dips his head to me when he lands. “Even I would not venture through those gates, Nemea. What my brother did was wrong, but I wish you would stay. We all wish you would stay.”

As if on cue, Asterius, Chrysaor, and Pan emerge quietly onto the platform from the staircase, all of them watchful and concerned. They don't reach for me mentally, but I can sense their desperation through our bonds. What they don't realize—or maybe they do—is that I'm every bit as desperate to be free as they are for me to stay.

Darkness descends around us, coasting gently against my skin as Erebus whispers in my mind, *"I did not know he lied to you, Nemea. He will answer for it when he returns."*

I blink up at Alcides. "None of you knew what he did, did you? How he lied to me?"

"It was a lie of omission," Typhon says.

I turn to him. "That doesn't excuse it."

"No, it doesn't. But it does not mean he meant to force you to remain. It only means he didn't want to make it easy for you to go. We all want you here. We all *need* you here, perhaps him the most. I was in his mind when he arrived with you. What he said was that if you changed your mind, he would not stand in your way if you chose to leave once you reclaimed your lost memories. He neglected to reveal that there is no exit to this place for most of us. You brought with you a possible way out, but he hid it away."

"The globe," I say, remembering it for the first time since I arrived. "Where is it?"

"Only Vesh knows. It's beyond our reach now," Erebus whispers in my mind. *"But I saw it when he inspected it. It is not a way out, but a way in. It was a security risk either way, and he was right to hide it."*

My heart sinks, but I remember what Chrysaor told me when I was with him. I look at Alcides who still has an iron

grip on me. “But *you* can take me out, can’t you? You know how.”

His hold on me tightens, pulling me closer to his big, hard body, the scent of salty sweat and ozone filling my nose and sending a rush of adrenaline through me, but this time it’s from arousal, not fear. I blink rapidly and struggle to tamp it down. I don’t need another reminder of how I’m already tethered in some way to all the guards of Tartarus, even if I’m not yet bound to them. I can’t get distracted when I’m on the verge of being able to leave.

His clenched jaw and piercing gaze suggest he isn’t the least bit fazed by my closeness. He bares his teeth and shakes his head.

“Vesh saved me from myself when he brought me here. I have not left this place since I arrived, Nemea. What makes you think I would break my vow to serve Tartarus for the rest of my days?”

“Please,” I whisper, some of my earlier panic threatening to rise once more. The bridge shudders and I close my eyes, hoping I don’t lose the will to hold onto this immense build-up of power that’s threatening to boil over at any second.

“Take her and go, Alcides,” Typhon rumbles. “She needs to be free of this place or she’ll bring it down around us all. Ultimately that will serve Tartarus as well as her remaining. You are the only one of us who has a chance to hide her out there. I can continue diverting my brother’s attention. Erebus will help.”

Alcides shakes his head. “I won’t hide from him. I won’t betray him that way.”

My heart sinks, and the bridge lurches dangerously along with it.

Alcides tilts my chin up with his index finger. “Nemea. I didn’t say I wouldn’t help you. I will do whatever is right, come what may. Will you let me take you out of here and protect you?”

Startled by this unexpected turn, I gape for a moment before nodding.

He cranes his head back and bellows, “Vesh! What I do is not a reflection on my loyalty to you! You of all people should understand why I must do this. If you wish to talk, you know where to find us!”

He looks at me. “Are you ready to go?”

I take a shaky breath and peer past his shoulder at the audience waiting near the steps, at Typhon who looms over them a few yards to one side. The shadows around us coalesce into Erebus in all his black and spiny glory. They’re all here now, even Cerberus in his three-headed canine form, and Campe looking every bit the dragon goddess she is. Alcides shifts around me to face them, one arm still slung around my waist, holding tight. Where his grip felt constricting before, now it grounds me, giving me the courage to face the others.

“I’m sorry,” I say to them all. “It isn’t about you. Any of you. I hope you know that. And I wish...” My throat tightens and tears spring to my eyes. I can already feel my tethers to them pulling taut even though I haven’t left yet. “I wish I could take all of you with me. To finish what we started.”

Cerberus rises onto his hind feet. His three big canine heads merge as he shifts into a muscular man with dark hair shorn close to his scalp, as well as a short beard. Campe

glances down at his naked hips and trio of thick dangling cocks. She rolls her eyes and shakes her head, then exhales a smoky breath that wraps around his hips, solidifying into a loincloth like the one Asterius wears.

Ignoring her, Cerberus tilts his chin toward Alcides. “You know I should stop you, brother.”

“Yes, but I know you won’t. None of you will.” Alcides stares at them each in turn.

“Damn straight,” Campe says. “Now go before he turns you into a prisoner like the rest of us.”

Erebus’ dark eyes fix on me. His voice slips into my mind, tickling my ears from the inside. *“Leave us now, but know we are still part of you. We will never be far now that we are bound. And if you ever need me out there, I will come without hesitation.”*

“Hold onto me,” Alcides whispers. Then without another warning, the floor drops out from beneath my feet and we’re hurtling through the air. Thunder cracks deafeningly around us and my stomach drops so fast I’m left breathless, but I hold on tight, hoping like hell that I didn’t just sentence myself to an even worse fate.



“You’re sure he keeps the key in the casino vault?” Erika asks. “Big powerful being like him uses a human security system to protect his shit?”

“It’s not secured by normal human alarms or security measures. Getting in is only the first step. There will be trials and tricks to overcome to reach the innermost chamber, which is the most likely place where Chaos keeps the key. But between my guards and myself, I’m confident we can retrieve it.”

She leans back in her chair and props her booted feet on the table of her command tent, crossing them at the ankles. The look she gives me is dubious, which irks me, but I choose to ignore it.

“The sooner we get started on the plan, the quicker we’ll have it in our possession. I’ll return to the prison and meet with the others to delegate.”

A wide grin spreads across her face. “Wait’ll my team hears what we’re up to. An actual casino heist.”

“*You* aren’t going to be up to anything—my team and I will handle this. We’ll have the key for you by week’s end.”

She gives me an irritated glare, then sighs. “Fine. You know what’s best. But I want to hear the plan before you begin. If we can offer any help, whether it’s a diversion or some dragon breath, I can call in favors. I’m not completely helpless, you know. I do have friends in high places.”

I’m about to respond that it won’t be necessary when I’m rocked by a voice loud as thunder inside my head. What the voice says slices through me and sticks like a knife to the gut.

“I have to go.”

I’m barely aware of Erika jumping up in alarm, asking if everything is okay before I retreat inward to the prison and hope like hell that I’m not too late.



THEY’RE all waiting for me when I arrive on the uppermost bridge, before the doors.

All but one.

Alcides’ absence cuts deep, almost as deep as Nemea’s. But it’s Pan’s fist to my face that causes the real pain.

He leaped before I had a chance to gain my bearings, knocking me over and smashing knuckles against my cheeks and jaw over and over.

“You motherfucker. She’s gone, and it’s *your* fucking fault for not being straight with her from the start! What the fuck were you thinking? That she’d just happily hang around without being able to leave?”

“She could leave whenever she wanted,” I try to say, but the words are hard to enunciate around broken teeth, a sliced

tongue, and a jaw thrown out of socket.

“What? I couldn’t understand you, asshole!” Pan yells, giving my head one last solid punch before rising onto his hooves and staring down at me, nostrils flared and chest heaving. He shakes both his hands at his sides, flexing his bruised fingers.

I sit up, blinking back the pain and willing my teeth out of my throat and back into their sockets. I readjust my jaw with one hand until it pops back into place.

“I said she could leave whenever she wanted. She always had the power to go. She just needed to find it within her.”

“Oh really?” Campe says, striding forward to loom above me beside Pan. “Did you bother to tell *her* that?”

I shake my head and wince when fresh pain spikes down my spine. “No, and I realize my mistake now. I was a fool to think she would be reasonable and just ask when the time came, or find her own way to the answer.”

I rise to my feet only for Campe’s fist to slam into my jaw, sending me reeling again. She grabs hold of my hair and yanks my head back, holding tight with surprising strength, her mouth pressed to my ear.

“You didn’t tell her, asshole. And now she’s *gone*. What exactly are you going to do to get her back? We *need* her.”

The tinge of desperation in her voice chastens me more than it should. I drop my shoulders and close my eyes.

“I’m sorry, Campe. I’ve made a mess of things. Even worse, we need Alcides if we’re going to get into that temple once we get the key. I expected Nemea to try to escape... practically counted on it. I hoped she’d use her powers to get

out, not convince him to take her. He hadn't even bonded her yet, had he?"

My apology makes her loosen her hold on my head and she steps back, turning to the others. "Which of you fucks were the last to bed her?" she snaps.

The anguish on Chrysaor's face is enough of an answer, not to mention the haphazard state of his clothing for a man who is normally highly disciplined about his kit. He isn't even wearing his sword belt, and his normally rigidly vertical spiky hairdo is askew.

"She didn't bond Alcides, if that's what you're wondering," Chrysaor says. "I don't know what possessed him to take her."

I take a steadying breath, my gaze sweeping over Erebus. "You hid her from me. I could have been here to stop her if you'd sounded the alarm."

His spines seem to lengthen and he bares his sharp teeth. *"You hid the truth from her, brother. I hid her to give her a chance to find her freedom, or at least calm down. You didn't feel the level of terror in her when she believed she was trapped. All of us either felt it or saw it. Alcides acted exactly how you would expect, under the circumstances."*

"He'll keep her safe," I say, almost to myself. My chest tightens with regret and maybe a little shame over disappointing the others. They are feelings I'm unaccustomed to, but leave my mental barriers lowered so they can absorb them along with me.

Campe snorts derisively as if the sentiment is too little, too late. Cerberus shakes his head and drops to all fours, returning

to his canine form. But they all look to me for more, making me feel even less worthy of being their leader.

“Not to put too fine a point on it, boss, but what next?” Pan says, calm now that he’s taken out his aggression on my face.

“We get back to work,” I grudgingly say, striding through them to the stairs. They fall into line behind me, converging around the table in the war room.

Once they’re assembled, I sweep my hand over the shimmering surface, then gesture toward the ceiling.

Our target appears in violet three-dimensional light, a monolith of architectural beauty with a massive fountain spanning the entire front of the building.

The others murmur in surprise as the image rotates between us.

“The Pandemonium,” I say.

“We’re well acquainted with the place,” Pan says. “I don’t get it. This is where we *work* when we’re not here.”

“This is where the other half of the key to Olympus is.”

“So your appeal to Chaos failed, I take it?” Asterius says without a hint of accusation.

“None of you expected him to say yes, did you? There is only one thing he wants, and now we don’t even have her so we couldn’t make that trade if we wanted to.”

Cerberus claps his hands with glee. “Fuck yes. We’re going to break in and *take it*.”



“Are you okay?”

My ears are ringing from the trip, but I hear Alcides clearly despite his low tone. He holds me tight against him, and I don’t answer at first because I’m still getting my bearings, taking stock of myself and willing the swell of magic back down into the depths of the well inside me. It’s deeper now than it was, thanks to bonding with Chrysaor. The magic subsides more easily now that I’m not in the prison. But I’m not prepared to open the door to that other part of me where my bond with the others exists and face them all just yet.

He releases his hold on me, sliding one hand up to my shoulder and tipping my chin up with a finger.

“Nemea, are you okay? I haven’t had to travel that way in ages, and not with a passenger for even longer. The last time was when I brought Cerberus to the prison.”

“I wanted to ask about that,” I say. “None of the stories I’ve read are close to reality, are they?”

His expression remains serious and I realize I didn’t answer his question. I pat his chest, a bare, solid swath of muscle. “I’m good. Where did you take me?”

For the first time, I take in our surroundings. It's a dark night so there isn't much to see besides the starry sky that stretches above us. A soft, temperate breeze rustles through the leaves of what looks like a hedge beside us.

“The first place that made sense—your namesake.”

It takes a moment for my eyes to focus, and I look around. We're on a hilltop beside ruins of some sort. A couple broken columns loom nearby, along with a couple others lying in pieces on the ground, their shapes not much more than shadows, though I can clearly make out the details if I focus. Beyond them snaking down the hillside are rows upon rows of bushes.

“A vineyard named after me?”

He shakes his head. “A village that *you* were named for. Welcome to Nemea, Nemea.”

“What village?” I ask, looking around us. I see nothing but grapevines stretching for miles. Far in the distance there's a building lit by a bare bulb above a large wooden door, but it looks like no more than a barn built of stone with darkened holes for windows. I don't even hear the sounds of civilization.

“It's a couple miles that way.” He points in the opposite direction. “But my father's temple is here, which is why I can travel here.” He kicks a hunk of marble and it sails off into the darkness, landing with a soft thunk several seconds later. He starts walking in that direction, and I follow after giving the ruined temple one last glance.

“Doesn't look like he gets worshipped much here, does he?”

He lets out a mirthless chuckle. “The new residents aren’t what you would call fans of his. Though I guess they’re not that new anymore.”

“But they’re fans of yours?”

I’m walking fast to keep up with his long strides. He doesn’t answer and when I reach him finally and look up, he’s frowning.

“They *are* friends, right?”

“I wouldn’t go that far. They’re reluctant allies, if anything. But I have something they want, which I intend to use to buy your protection.”

I stop short. “I don’t want protection—I want freedom. I thought you understood that.”

He walks on a few more steps before realizing I’m not with him. When he turns back, I cross my arms.

His lips tighten into a hard line as he strides back to me, placing his hands on his hips.

“You need protection. Chaos might not come for you himself, but if the Titans discover you exist, they *will*. You need to be in a place where you’ll be protected. Since you refuse to stay in Tartarus, this is that place.”

“A random village in rural Greece is the safest place for me? Seriously?”

“It isn’t random; I’m well-acquainted with the area. But it isn’t the location that makes it safe. It’s the residents.”

“Who are they? Gods?”

“Something like that.”

He turns around without elaborating and heads off down the row, forcing me to jog to catch up with him again. We walk in tense silence for several minutes while I try to decide whether it's my fault for not seeking him out earlier and getting to know him. The tension between us crackles with power that he *has* to feel.

“Why didn't you introduce yourself when the others did my first night there?” I ask, hoping to understand whether I missed an opportunity, or if there never was one to begin with. It wasn't as if I had a lot of time in the prison—just two nights, though it feels like an entire lifetime has passed after all that's happened.

“Didn't get the chance. The others misbehaved and Vesh locked us out after that. I guess he wanted you to himself.”

“He wasn't the only one with me.”

“He'll never shut out his brothers. That includes Pan, despite the faun's fuckups.”

“You can't blame him for me summoning him.”

“Are you taking responsibility for it? Because it isn't your fault, either. But I'm talking about other things, not the recent clusterfuck. That he does what he does isn't the point; Vesh prizes the faun for his power. We all do, really. Without Pan's abilities, we wouldn't get to leave the prison at all.”

“How is it not my fault? I'm the one who summoned him. I'm the reason the Titans escaped. I thought me getting a grasp on my powers was so important because you guys needed my help to capture them.”

“There are stronger powers at work here than what you exerted in your little ritual that night. Fate magic only needs the slightest opening to get in and wreak havoc.”

He's so matter-of-fact I can't figure out whether he's mad about it all or not.

"Doesn't that piss you off?"

"Doesn't what piss me off?"

I wave my hands. "Any of it. Pan, Vesh. Fate. Chaos." I trail off, thinking "*me*," but not saying it. Instead, I latch onto one of the few bits of trivia about him that I recall from the books, thinking it a super tragic story. "I mean, if Fate really is the one in control, how are you not pissed as fuck about what they did to you?"

"Fate has done nothing to me. I've been unreachable to them for more than a thousand years. I have nothing to be pissed about."

"I meant before that. If Fate is involved in this..." I wave my hand between us, and when he raises an eyebrow at me, my skin heats. I clear my throat. "You know what I mean. Fate is the reason Vesh could get to me. Fate is the reason I couldn't stop myself with the others. And why you and I have this... this tether between us even though we haven't acted on it. If that's there, that means everything, every event or choice up to this moment was influenced by Fate. And considering what happened to you before, why aren't you pissed as hell? At least assuming what I read really happened."

He lifts his brows and nods. "Ah. I think you're assuming that the powers of Fate are always at work in every aspect of our lives and have been all along. They aren't, and they haven't. The gods are often immune to Fate. I was too, until very recently."

"So what happened with your family...?" I don't know how to broach the topic, let alone whether I even should, so I

let the rest of that inquiry hang.

“Actually happened. But it was a result of someone *other* than Fate being a manipulative monster in my life. You may have noticed I don’t use the name most texts refer to me by, assuming you’ve read some of the modern works that exist. Asterius keeps copies in his library, so we’re all well aware of the various accounts of our histories, most of which only get a fraction of the details right.”

“They call you Herakles, not Alcides.”

He winces. “Yeah, that one. It isn’t my birth name—it’s the name my father gave me in some misguided wish to appease his wife. She’s the harpy who drove me to madness and made me murder my family. Fate had nothing to do with it. I’ve never liked Herakles and have always preferred going by the name my mother gave me.”

“That’s fair. For what it’s worth I’m sorry she did that to you. It’s fucking awful.”

“It was a very long time ago. I never believed I’d have a second chance at a life, or even if I deserved one. Vesh gave me that chance. I’ve been proud to be part of his team ever since.”

“Does he know where we are? Do you think he’ll come after me?”

“You don’t need to fear him, Nemea.”

“I don’t. That’s not why I asked.” I huff out a breath, hating myself a little for hoping he *does* come after me, to apologize, if nothing else.

“He can reach out to me. I’m not going to shut him out or hide, but he has to make an effort to reach me, unlike the

others who are easier for him to access. You have the ability to contact him too, if you want, through your bond.”

“I know,” I say softly. “I’m not ready to yet. I hope the others don’t hate me.”

“We would never hate you. You are part of us, even the ones you haven’t bonded yet.”

I’m not sure, but I think I hear a hint of tenderness in his tone, but I try not to let it go to my head. For the first time in the past forty-eight hours, I don’t feel like I’m controlled by my libido, so I’m happy for the clarity. But just as I start to enjoy the peaceful night and the breeze sweeping down the rows of the vineyard, his hand brushes mine and sends my pulse racing. I swallow the rush and take a deep, steadying breath.

“It isn’t just you,” he says after a moment. When I don’t respond, he continues. “I didn’t greet you the first night because I was afraid, not because Vesh took over. He gave me the opening but I ... I choked. He covered for me.”

I stare up at him, wide-eyed with surprise. “No shit? What about the next day? I was a little preoccupied, but I didn’t miss when you basically ran out of the cavern before the others. I can only imagine what the whole scene looked like.” I laugh softly to myself.

He makes a low, gruff sound. “I liked what I saw. I just wasn’t ready for it. I haven’t been with a woman since my trials ended. I don’t indulge the way the others like to with one another. I’m out of practice with all of it. And it’s one thing to know we’re fated, but it’s quite another to process that you’re fated for the others and happily fucking them too. I’ve never shared before, either. What if you like them more? What if I’ve forgotten how? What if I hurt you?”

“That’s a lot of self-doubt to unpack,” I say, then reach for his hand and thread my fingers through his. “But despite what you saw, I’m in no rush. Maybe it’s better this way? At the very least, we can take our time.”

He makes a sound of actual doubt that makes me look at him again.

“I can’t stay long—a few days until you get settled in, at most. But they’ll need me to open Olympus, once they get the key. After that, if we can’t subdue the Titans easily with whatever power we secure from inside, then I don’t know when I’ll be able to return.”

“I thought you needed me for that. Aren’t you going to stay and train me?”

“If everything goes well, I won’t be the one training you.”

Before I can ask him to elaborate, we reach the edge of the vineyard and come out onto a narrow dirt road. The scent of grapes fades as we follow the road, replaced by the scent of horses and hay. Alcides sticks to the edge of the road, moving with more caution. He lets go of my hand and carefully urges me behind him.

“Stay close,” he whispers. I nod, opting not to question him if he thinks we might be in danger. All I hear are the faint sounds of horses somewhere in the distance. We continue on, slowing when we reach a drop-off in the middle of the road.

Alcides reaches back, gripping the side of my hip and urging me off the edge into the tall grass as we pass what looks like a giant pit. It’s at least fifteen feet wide and deep enough that I can’t see the bottom, but when we pass by and I look down, I realize it’s half-filled with water, reflecting the starlit sky above.

“Why is there a big pit in the middle of the road?” I whisper. Alcides shushes me and motions for us to keep moving.

Not much farther along, the way is blocked by a wall, and I start to form a full picture. One side is covered in dangling ropes, and when we pass it, I look back to see hand-holds peppering the vertical surface. The next obstacle is another pit with a giant cargo net stretched in a slant across it.

Has he brought me to some crazy survivalist compound? How in the hell would he know such people being stuck in the prison so long? But they haven't actually been stuck there, have they? They get out, just not *out-out*. Whatever magic Pan has is how they leave, so they must have connections outside. Though if he's being this weird about approaching this place, I'm guessing he hasn't spoken to these people in a while.

The obstacles continue, looking a little less and less daunting as we go. Soon the road intersects with another, and the scent of horses grows stronger. The barn comes into view after a few more minutes, a big, white-plastered stone building with the phases of the moon carved in the wide wooden doors that hang across the front. Just beyond it is a cozy cluster of buildings, some dark, some with windows lit. It reminds me of St. George with its welcoming warmth, which is hard to reconcile with the intense obstacle course we just passed and Alcides' cautious approach.

We keep to the shadows, and he waves me to speed up as we dart to the side of the barn. All this cloak and dagger shit is wearing on my nerves, so I tap him on the shoulder when he reaches the corner. He looks back at me with a stern expression.

“What gives? Why aren't we just knocking on the door?”

“At this time of night, it’ll get us shot. Just trust me and stay clo—”

He doesn’t get a chance to finish. A shadow appears behind him, and before I can cry out a warning, someone snakes their arm around my throat in a chokehold. I struggle, reaching for Alcides and the power within me, but a few seconds later, my entire world goes dark.

To be continued...



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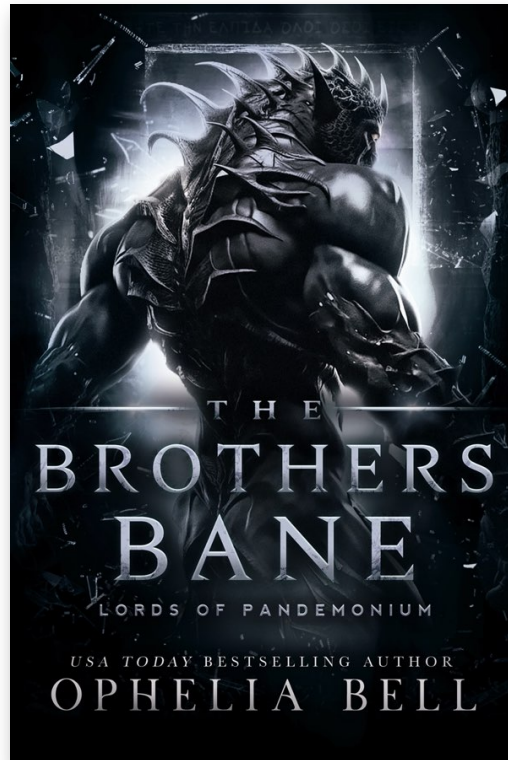
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THE BROTHERS BANE

Chapter 1

Nemea

“WHO ARE YOU, and why are you here?”

It’s a woman’s voice, smooth and lightly accented. I’ve barely come to after being unconscious for who knows how long. I turn my head toward the demand, straining to see through the fabric of the bag over my head. It’s rough against my cheek and smells of fresh bud, which is oddly calming. My wrists are bound, the hard plastic of zip ties digging into my flesh.

I’m about to answer when Alcides’ voice cuts in.

“You know who I am, Antiope. I have a bargain for Hippolyta. She’ll want to talk.”

There’s a soft, derisive snort and a handful of chuckles around me that cease after a sharp, “Shh!”

“You really think after *all this time* she’ll want to see you? You are a fool, Herakles.”

I wince. “Don’t call him that.”

Footsteps approach from the side, and I crane my head to follow the sound as they come around to the front. The bag is snatched off my head, the scent of pot replaced by the warring aromas of hay, manure, and sharply pungent body odor. A dark-haired woman with wise amber eyes bends down and peers into my face.

“And what is *your* name?”

I clench my jaw, holding her gaze. “Nemea.”

Her eyebrows shoot up, and she straightens and crosses her arms. She’s a tall, olive-skinned woman with hair shorn close to her skull everywhere except the top, where it stands in unruly spikes. She’s clad in black cargo pants, a black tank top, and boots. I abstractly think she and Cassandra Vincent would have a lot in common.

“Nemea,” she drawls, cocking her head and narrowing her eyes as she looks me over. “I don’t believe you, but okay.”

“It’s my name, and Alcides is *his* name,” I snap, a tremor cascading through the earth beneath us causing the lights to swing like pendulums above. I grit my teeth and clench my eyes shut, willing the magic back.

“Whoa, don’t piss her off, Antiope,” comments one of the other women.

“I’m sorry,” I say when I open my eyes again. But Antiope eyes me with a measure of respect now.

“*Sorry*, she says.” She snorts again, then looks at the others as if it’s a joke. “Where did you come from, Nemea? And why are you keeping company with this thieving bastard?” She jabs a thumb over her shoulder at Alcides, who is bound to the chair across from me, bag still secured over his head.

“I didn’t steal it,” Alcides grumbles. “She gave it to me.”

“You think I’m talking about the fucking belt, don’t you?” Antiope says over her shoulder. “You took my sister’s self-respect when you left. It took her *centuries* to get over you. Now you show up with your new hussy and want to chat. Why should I do anything but kick you the fuck out?”

“You brought me to your *ex*?” I ask, incredulous.

“Take this fucking bag off my head so we can talk, Antiope,” Alcides snaps. “I’m not here to fight. Nemea needs your help, and I’m here to bargain for the belt in exchange for you protecting and training her.”

Antiope turns and snatches the bag off his head, leaving his hair a wild mess. He blinks rapidly, gaze darting around the room before landing on me. He does a quick scan before some of his tension eases. The relief in his eyes at seeing me whole makes me want to go to him. I try to rise, only to find my ankles are bound to the chair legs.

“Protect her from what—the four Titans who somehow got loose from their prison? Or something else? Tell me everything, and I’ll consider bringing my sister in to talk. You might start by explaining why you left in the first place and where you’ve been all this time.”

“Hippolyta knew I was a mess when we were together. I was in no state for a relationship. I’m not trying to excuse how I behaved—I was an asshole—but I needed to complete the fucking labors so I could move on with my poor excuse for a life. When I was done, I dug myself a deep pit and hid inside until Tartarus found me and gave me a purpose. I’ve been working for him since.”

Antiope cocks her head, not a shred of sympathy showing on her face. Then she tilts her head to me. “And where does she fit in?”

Alcides stares at me for a beat, swallows, then looks Antiope directly in the eyes. “She’s my fate, Antiope. And she needs a place to stay that *isn’t* Tartarus, because he tried to trap her inside his prison. She can’t go home, either; it isn’t safe

there for her anymore. Chaos is seeking her, and if the Titans learn of her existence and her link to Tartarus...”

“What is her link to Tartarus?” she digs.

“They’re all my mates,” I interject, tired of being left out of the interrogation. “All the guards, and Vesh too.”

A chorus of murmurs erupts from around us, some carrying shock, others awe. Some seem oddly pitying.

Alcides takes a breath, measuring his words. “You can protect her here. I’ve heard stories about this place over the centuries—how you take in damaged women and rehabilitate them, protect them from abusers, help them learn to protect, even respect, themselves. Nemea needs you.”

“Hey,” I say, frowning. “I’ve got plenty self-respect.”

He shifts his gaze to me. “You asked for my help. I’m giving it to you.”

We share a charged look that makes me wish I’d had a chance to bond with him before all this. If I had, we’d have a telepathic link like I do with the others.

Experimentally I test my connection to Erebus, shifting my attention inward and reaching for his dark, velvety presence. He immediately responds. *“I cannot come to you where you are; only women are allowed in that place. I’m trying to convince Vesh to release Campe to join you. You should avoid reaching for me unless you are completely alone in the dark. Any other time and they will know.”*

I don’t respond in case it gets me or Alcides in trouble, but Erebus’ warning doesn’t sit well. Will this place prove just another form of isolation?

“Cut her bindings,” Antiope says, gesturing to one of the other women, who steps close as she unsheathes a large hunting knife from her belt, then squats.

As she cuts my bindings I take in my surroundings for the first time. We’re in a large cinderblock barn with high rafters and horse stables around the perimeter. Balconies wrap around above the stables, and a few women lean on the wooden railing, looking down from above, all similarly clad in dark cargo gear like they’re all mercenaries or soldiers. The far end of the space beyond Alcides is wide open and occupied by what appears to be a fighting ring.

The woman kneeling in front of me finishes cutting my zip ties.

“What is this place?” I ask her.

She glances over her shoulder. “It’s a barn.”

I narrow my eyes, and she smirks, continuing. “The Nemean Boxing Club, officially. Unofficially, it’s a women’s shelter, a vineyard, a winery, a pot farm, and a survival training camp.”

“And her?” I ask under my breath, rubbing my wrists and glancing sidelong at Antiope, who stands watch with her arms crossed while Alcides and I are released. They only cut his ankles free of the chair, though, leaving his wrists bound. Two other women flank him and pull him to his feet.

“Antiope, also known as Princess Battleaxe. I’d say her bark is worse than her bite, but it really isn’t.”

“I meant *what* is she? She and Alcides seem to go back centuries. I know he’s a demigod.”

“You’re not mortal. Don’t you know already?”

I stare back blankly, hesitating to admit my mundane origins and lack of knowledge about this world. “Uh... pretend I don’t.”

“We’re Amazons.”

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ABOUT OPHELIA BELL

Ophelia Bell loves a good bad-boy and especially strong women in her stories. Women who aren't apologetic about enjoying sex and bad boys who don't mind being with a woman who's in charge, at least on the surface, because pretty much anything goes in the bedroom.

Ophelia grew up on a rural farm in North Carolina and now lives in Los Angeles with her own tattooed bad-boy husband and six attention-whoring cats.

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