

KALEXIS  
FAELANDS  
WOODS

METAMORPHIC  
HEART



## Table of Contents

Love is an Open Road.....	5
Metamorphic Heart – Information .....	8
Acknowledgements.....	10
Authors’ Notes .....	11
Metamorphic Heart.....	12
Prologue .....	13
Chapter One .....	15
Chapter Two.....	21
Chapter Three.....	26
Chapter Four .....	33
Chapter Five.....	38
Chapter Six.....	43
Chapter Seven .....	48
Chapter Eight .....	54
Chapter Nine .....	58
Chapter Ten.....	67
Chapter Eleven.....	71
Chapter Twelve.....	74
Chapter Thirteen .....	80
Chapter Fourteen.....	85
Chapter Fifteen.....	91
Chapter Sixteen.....	97
Chapter Seventeen .....	103
Chapter Eighteen.....	109
Chapter Nineteen .....	114
Chapter Twenty.....	120

Chapter Twenty-one..... 125

Chapter Twenty-two ..... 131

Chapter Twenty-three ..... 134

Chapter Twenty-four..... 141

Chapter Twenty-five ..... 147

Chapter Twenty-six..... 154

Chapter Twenty-seven ..... 162

Chapter Twenty-eight ..... 170

Chapter Twenty-nine ..... 175

Chapter Thirty ..... 181

Chapter Thirty-one..... 186

Chapter Thirty-two..... 192

Chapter Thirty-three..... 200

Chapter Thirty-four..... 204

Chapter Thirty-five ..... 212

Chapter Thirty-six..... 218

Chapter Thirty-seven ..... 225

Chapter Thirty-eight..... 230

Chapter Thirty-nine..... 235

Chapter Forty ..... 240

Chapter Forty-one ..... 248

Chapter Forty-two..... 253

Chapter Forty-three..... 260

Chapter Forty-four ..... 266

Chapter Forty-five..... 275

Chapter Forty-six ..... 283

Chapter Forty-seven..... 289

Chapter Forty-eight..... 298

Chapter Forty-nine ..... 305

Chapter Fifty .....311  
Epilogue .....318  
The Gods and Demigods.....329  
Inspirational Playlist .....330  
Author Bio .....331

# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## METAMORPHIC HEART

**By Alexis Woods and K.C. Faelan**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved worldwide.

This eBook may be distributed freely in its entirety courtesy of the Goodreads M/M Romance Group. This eBook may not be sold, manipulated or reproduced in any format without the express written permission of the author.

Metamorphic Heart  
Copyright © 2015 Alexis Woods and K.C. Faelan

Cover Art by Noah Homes

This ebook is published by the *M/M Romance Group* and is not directly endorsed by or affiliated with Goodreads Inc.

# METAMORPHIC HEART

By Alexis Woods and K.C. Faelan

## Photo Description

A virile, young Greek warrior kneels before a white marble column. He wears brown pteruges around his waist, bracers on his forearms and greaves on his lower legs. One arm is crossed over his body to grip the handle of his still-sheathed sword. His stare is intense and piercing, even as a host of green snakes slither down the column above his head.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*Around the museum, the streets were filled with the din of the city. Cars honked noisily, drunken revellers heckled and laughed. Somewhere in the darkness, the wail of a police siren called out.*

*Inside the museum it was quiet. Moonlight streamed in through a skylight, bathing the Grecian exhibit in a pearlescent glow. At the exhibit's centre was the sculpture of a young man, who was garbed in warrior gear. As the moon's luminescent beams danced across his muscular body, the statue began to change. The milky marble evaporated, replaced with the hue of tanned skin. The sculpture moved.*

*He was a statue no longer; he was a man once again.*

*The warrior sucked in a breath, filling his lungs for the first time in centuries. He blinked his eyes, and surveyed his surroundings.*

*The last thing he remembered was fighting the gorgon that had been plaguing his village. He was about to cut the monster's head off, and then... nothing.*

*That's when he realised how terrible his situation was. Those lucky enough to awaken from a gorgon's curse did not live for long. Inside his chest, his heart was still set in stone. The enigmatic energies that had revived him, would not sustain him for long. If he wished to restart his unbeating heart, he would have to find and kill the gorgon responsible for cursing him.*

*But first he needed to find himself an ally; someone to help him manoeuvre through the strange modern world...*

*Sincerely,*

*Dayton*



## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary, fantasy

**Tags:** 2 alpha males, bartender, explicit, slow burn, writer, warrior, mythology, Gods, stalking, tattoos, time travel

**Content Warnings:** violence, battle scenes

**Word Count:** 113,916

### Acknowledgements

First and Foremost—We’d like to thank the Goodreads M/M Romance Group, for not only putting together this event, but also because without your group, we, the authors, would never have “met.”

Then we need to send out some love and hugs to Debbie McGowan, our editor. A busy editor, publisher and writer herself, she took time out of her busy schedule to help polish up our story.

Before it got to Debbie though, we had a spectacular group of Beta readers: Wulf Godgluck, Eric Alan Westfall, Michelle, and Kristan. And we can’t forget Jonathan Penn. The dear man put up with us through quite a few crazy three-way Hangout sessions regarding wording and grammar.

We’d also like to thank Noah Homes for his time and skill in creating the great cover for Heart. Thanks, Noah.

Throughout Metamorphic Heart is a plethora of Greek words and terms. We had assisting us Astrid Kienitz, who provided us with the Greek translation for our longer passages of text, and she did an amazing job. Thank you, Astrid.

Last, but not least, to Dayton, who fired up our imaginations with his prompt. We thought Heart would require about 35k to complete, instead it ended up surpassing 112k, the longest story either of us has written.

*Authors' Notes*

Metamorphic Heart contains many of the Greek Gods of mythology. At the end of our story, is a list of all those contained therein and their relationships to the other Gods.

While writing our story, we utilized a Pinterest board for character and plot inspirations. You can find our board here: <https://www.pinterest.com/kcfaelan/metamorphic-heart/>

We've done our best to provide you, the reader, with enough information to understand the Greek words and terms as they stand in our story without providing a glossary of terms. As with any historical work, information is gained through research. However, at times, we may have deliberately overlooked or sacrificed some terminology and culture-isms for the sake of the story. Any errors within are "our" mistakes.

**METAMORPHIC HEART**  
**By Alexis Woods and K.C. Faelan**

## Prologue

Hermes gazed down upon the museum, watching a colorful parade of women escorted by equally flamboyant men enter the building under the light of the full moon. This place was one of his favorites: the statuary and jewels, paintings and artifacts of Late Antiquity. Here, history came alive. It was a passionate epoch, one of the greatest eras, when the Gods walked among men.

On winged sandals, he descended to the rooftop, peering through a skylight at Perseus, standing tall and erect. His sword was gripped firmly in one hand, with foul Medusa's severed head raised high in the other.

Hermes flew and landed yards away, beside another skylight, and looked into a gallery of frozen bodies. One in particular always drew his eye: a once-devout servant of the Gods stood immobile, his body bare but for the girded belt around his waist and xiphos held at the ready.

A shudder ran through Hermes, and he frowned.

*He is here.*

Hermes searched the shadows to no avail, until the moonlight dimmed and dropped away. He raised his eyes to view a massive line of gray clouds rolling swiftly across the night sky. Lightning flared in the distance. He huffed. Zeus was finally onboard, and, of course, Mister High-and-Mighty didn't bother to give him a little heads-up. No, just flashed his big, bright lights. Probably still angry with him for stealing his crown of oak leaves and almost losing it when he visited the Windy City. His father sure knew how to hold a grudge.

Another chilling frisson suddenly raced up his spine, and Hermes knew *he* was close.

Tonight it would begin.

\*\*\*\*\*

They gathered together in the hall, eagerly awaiting the start of tonight's entertainment. The weather outside had grown ominous, dark clouds, heavy with moisture, filled the sky above the museum. A jagged line of lightning blazed in the distance. A few seconds of silence were rapidly overwhelmed by a peal of thunder.

Above their heads, as they looked upwards to view Mother Nature's show through the skylights, another brilliant streak snaked down. The lightning

struck the array of antennas on the museum's roof. The electricity inside the building cut off, plunging the room into darkness save for what the heavens provided above them, and the small security lights scattered amid the displays. Thunder followed in a crashing boom, and the people cringed.

A few guards entered, calming the attendees, and instructing them to remain where they were until they were able to restart the grid. With hushed voices, the reenactors whispered among themselves, their tones worried. The darkness carried an ominous weight more oppressive than any of them had felt before. They dared not draw its attention with idle chitchat and loud voices. Only seconds before the dark pushed them into full-blown anxiety, the lights flickered and resumed their glow. The play could go on and the assembled crowd whooped and cheered.

But back inside the main office, the guards on duty were still distraught. The cameras had not come back to life. Frantic calls were made as, high above them, the clouds broke up and pulled away, scattering their raindrops and leaving the city air cleaner than it had been before. The stars twinkled in the heavens, and the moon peeked out from behind the fleeing clouds. One sure shaft of moonlight shone brightly down on the museum, penetrating through the multitude of skylights, and struck the statue of a Greek warrior, his sword held high, about to strike at some unknown foe.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter One

### *Saturday*

His sword clattered on the stone floor beside him as he fell to his knees. With his hands clasped to his chest, and his eyes squeezed shut, he willed himself to breathe deeply. Breath after sucked-in breath, the rhythmic thumping of his heart pulsed through his skin into his palms. His mouth a desert, arid and gritty, he worked his tongue over his teeth and gums, forcing saliva to pool and moisten the parched tissues. Swallowing, he felt the warm liquid slide down his scratchy throat. Drums pounded in his head, and he placed his fingertips on his throbbing temples, making tiny circles to relieve the ache.

He blinked open crusty eyelids and rubbed at his dry eyes with the back of his hands. His blurry vision cleared as moisture returned, and he stared down at the pteruges covering his thighs, finding himself awash in the light of the moon. He slid his palms along the hardened linen plates that had been no protection from... *What?* He couldn't remember. He patted his cheeks, assuring himself he was real and alive.

The moonbeams danced around him and he followed the path of one, halting at the pale legs not two lengths away. He followed the legs upwards, his muscles tensing, his mouth dropping open when he saw the broken torso they were attached to. No arms, half a head, and he slumped with relief; it was only a statue. He looked past the broken man to discover a whole room—an immense area—full of statuary and vases, each piece artfully placed, with tiny candle lights shining on them.

A shadow stole Selene's light; inky shades slipped over the gathered display, until once more Her moonlight covered him. Looking up, he found the full moon shone through a series of...

He cocked his head, squinting at the sight above him. *Windows in a roof?* Was he in the palace of a grand collector of stone sculpture? He searched until he found his sword and leaned to pick it up then stood, but moved too quickly. The rapid motion caused a burst of light-headedness, and he fell backwards to rest against another stone statue.

Slowly, he turned, finding a headless woman, her arms gracefully flowing out from her nearly naked form, the wrists ending in fingerless hands. He moved back a step, and then another, panning left and right to avoid knocking

into another statue or pedestal, amazed at the amount of marble and stone, metal and pottery. When he neared the center of the huge gallery, voices carried to him from a distance. His relaxed grip on the sword in his right hand was ready to tighten and attack, though he doubted it would be the statuary seeking vengeance on him.

Cool air blew on him and he shivered. Noticing the cold floor beneath his bare feet, his thoughts drifted to wonder how the archon of this magnificent palace was able to keep it cool.

He turned a corner and faced an immense painted cloth. Voices came from behind it, and with an ear cocked towards the muted tones, he strode forward. Hallways spanned to his right and left. He stopped to listen, and choosing the path to the right, he led with his left shoulder, stealthily slipping ahead.

Another corner, and he peeked around its edge. No citizen resided within the room; instead he found pedestal after pedestal, surrounded by the clearest, smoothest glass he'd ever seen, each shielding a piece of jewelry. He trailed his fingertips over its surface in amazement at how it protected its valuable possessions. He palmed his throat with his left hand and, finding the string still there, he sighed. Sliding his hand around to the back of his neck, he gently fingered the small ring, pulling it to the front where he could see it. A simple thing, truly: a band of gold, fitted with a gemstone of reddish-toned carnelian.

*Erasmus.*

His first and only love. He had given this to Erasmus, before he joined the archon's army at age eighteen, a symbol of his love that would endure during his military tenure—fulfilling his duty of service. Two and a half years later, he finally returned home to find his lover gone and the ring left for him. His stomach seized at the memory, and his heart ached anew. He never discovered what fate had befallen Erasmus, although he suspected his own father's cruel hand in the matter. The man had never been pleased to see his son enamored with a merchant's boy. No, his father wanted the dowry only his marrying a woman would provide.

The sharp *ting* of bronze striking bronze pierced his awareness. He strengthened his grip on his xiphos, the leaf-shaped, double-edged blade balanced perfectly in his hand. His commander had bestowed the weapon and a round shield on him when he finished his training. His father's wealth had allowed him to fine-tune the hilt and weight, so that the sword was an extension of his arm, and he wielded it with precision.



He flowed between the sheltered jewels, each step silently placed, his body centered. The grunts of men and clunks of weapons hitting shields grew louder as he paced forward. He spied the exit, stood with his back to the wall, and peeked into the corridor beyond.

A long hall stretched before him, archways dotting its length, and again he saw no one. Skirting the wall, he advanced through the first small area, gazing up into the eyes of a Mother Goddess, her cornucopia overflowing with stone fruit. The pings and clangs louder now, he halted inside the next passageway.

The rise and fall of voices—male and female—in the next room froze him in place. He craned his neck until he could see them. A flaxen-hair beauty faced him, her hair braided and piled atop her head, long, golden earrings dangling from her lobes. An ivory chiton adorned with many small gold ornaments reflected the light when she twisted her upper body back and forth. She appeared nervous, her hand squeezing the upper arm of the man who blocked the left side of her body. Her beauty bespoke her father's elevation in rank.

Was the warrior her *Kurios*, her guardian? Perhaps he was her brother, his hair a similar golden hue. He held his spear loosely, the bladed tip pointing upwards, a sword sheathed and attached to a baldric at his waist. A quiver of arrows hung from his hip and a bow draped over one shoulder.

*The fool's many weapons will get in his way.* He huffed watching them. Better to have one or two, than a third to encumber one's movement. He strained to hear what they said, but the low, garbled words made no sense to him. She seemed to be pleading with him. The man spun, spurning her, crossing his arms over his sculpted chest armor, the dark tassels of leather studded with bronze decoration. He watched the blond warrior reach up with a finger and push at dark-rimmed circles resting on his nose. *What are those?*

The woman's eyes narrowed, and she poked him before grabbing a handful of his hair and yanking his head back. He laughed, spinning back and hugging her. A brother indeed. She accepted the offer of his arm, and they strode further down the hallway.

He eased past the archway after a visual inspection showed no other citizen was present. Belatedly, he realized the sounds of fighting had halted. He stepped swiftly through the next arch and discovered two soldiers armored head-to-toe in black leather. Large rectangular shields were strapped to their left forearms and silvery sticks were firmly gripped in their right hands. Knees and elbows and heads were encased in shiny metal. Their heads were turned to stare after the siblings who'd passed by them with a nod.

Their intent gazes and strange armor and weaponry made him uneasy. He stepped back to avoid being seen. When they moved to follow the first two, he trailed after them, slipping behind various displays and statues to remain hidden. They paused in the fourth archway, but he hung back, taking a moment to look up at the statue within this room.

He sucked in a sharp breath, his body freezing. There—in front of him—bathed in moonlight, a face that snapped all his memories back into place. He ducked, spinning and covering his eyes, fearing for his life. Sounds raced through his mind: townspeople screaming as they ran in fear, the call for arms to be taken up, his father's demand he stay back, the hiss of snakes. Then silence. He cautiously uncovered his eyes and slowly straightened.

The last thing he remembered was the Gorgon revealing himself in the middle of their village square, taunting all of the local warriors to come and try to kill him. He'd raced home to grab his sword, circled around to approach the monster from behind, sure he was within striking distance when it turned and...

*Taras!* It took one look into the gleaming red gaze—the beautiful seafoam color lost—for his feet to freeze in place. He had only moments to take in his prior lover's viper-infested hair before his knees locked. Brief seconds to examine the ashen skin, and the sickly, greenish scales running up the monster's neck while everything below his waist became deadweight. A mere instant to see a single clawed finger raised, and hear his lover's words. *Because of you, Aleksandr, I will never love another. Now you shall never have it either.* Darkening sanguine orbs, Taras' eyes, Medon's eyes, bore into his, and then there was no more.

But here he was... And no voice taunted him. There was no hissing or screams of fear. He peeked up at the Gorgon's head and relief flooded him. It was another statue, another representation of a slice of his life. The nude warrior held the monster's head out like a trophy. And indeed it was. The Gorgon's feminine features registered in his mind, and he knew this must be Medusa and her conqueror, Perseus. The tale had been told many times, the minstrels had sung and praised fine Perseus, gifted by Hermes to defeat the foul demon created by Athena. If only Medusa had not figured out a way of creating more like her...

Taras had thought he was in love with him, but the boy knew nothing of love. *He* had loved. *His* heart had belonged to Erasmus, and when he was gone, he'd taken *his* capacity to love another with him. His heart had died when Erasmus disappeared. Even if he wanted, and he had not, he could never have

loved Taras. Unfortunately, Taras refused to accept he was nothing more than a fleeting dalliance.

A faint jingle of metal sounded, and he glanced around. He cursed under his breath. He'd allowed the two men to escape his view. Quickly he entered the next room, turning his head to the side, hoping to hear any sound of them. He let his gaze travel up the back of another statue and smiled. Two well-formed muscular globes faced back at him, and he wished momentarily they were flesh and blood, for they were surely a handful, tight and...

He yanked his mind back to the task at hand: finding those warriors and keeping them from doing harm.

He crossed the gallery, and hearing the rise and fall of voices in the distance, he crept carefully in that direction. His training instinctual: ears tuned in to the sounds around him, his eyes peeled for any movement, his muscles tensed and prepared for action. He halted, spotting the two fighters he'd been following standing in an alcove, relaxed, their strange weapons held loosely while they watched the activity in the room beyond.

As one, the two men, raised their swords and shields, crouched and began moving forward. He took one last look around him, confirming his solitary status, raised his own xiphos and followed. It took a single moment for him to notice the crowd—brightly dressed men and women, *must be Byzantines*, and more warriors and soldiers, swords strapped to their waists—to his left, all of them avidly watching the discussion between the woman and her Kurios. They appeared to be arguing, not paying mind to those observing them, which struck him as odd. Why were they allowing their disagreement to be aired in public?

Movement to his right drew his attention, and he immediately refocused on the two advancing on the woman and her brother-protector. He growled at the Kurios' incompetence, not seeing the coming attack. And why wasn't a citizen or fellow soldier pointing out the criminals? Did they wish the other two harm? He couldn't allow it.

Easing himself between citizens, he adopted their behavior, keeping a sharp eye on the two soldiers. Some muttered or nodded to him, smiled even, all allowing him to pass unmolested. He could hear the argument easily now, but even though the man and woman wore clothing he recognized, he couldn't understand a single word they spoke. He continually searched the area, keeping one eye on the two men and the other on those he passed, wary of hidden daggers and other pointed objects which might delay him. When he reached an

area several rows back from the raised platform upon which the siblings stood, the two men slid not quite so stealthily forward. Was he the only one who saw them? He glanced around... No, there... A Roman citizen leaned down to the child next to him and discreetly pointed at the two advancing menaces. The child grinned and nodded, one little fist curled tightly around a toy wooden sword.

A chorus of dread and fear rang out over the crowd. They oohed and gasped. He snapped his head around, his heart picking up speed, to see those foul villains holding the woman and her Kurios prisoner. He pushed forward through the mass of people and leapt upon the platform.

“**αλτ!**” he yelled.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Two

*What the hell? Where'd this guy come from? Kase scowled at the newcomer while the crowd cheered its approval. Helene wouldn't have cooked up some crazy scheme and not told me, would she? Although, I wouldn't put it past her.*

Kase threw off Jason's arms and jumped to the front of the stage. Gracefully, he pulled his sword from its sheath and brandished it in front of himself, more for distance than protection. *This guy looks like he's got mad skills; no way am I a match for him... if he's for real.*

"Stranger! Speak your name! Are you friend or foe?" he demanded, projecting his voice towards the audience. He seethed; he hated ad-libbing.

He glanced over to find Gregor shielding Helene, her eyes wide with surprise. *Okay, she didn't cook this up. If it's not her idea, then who's this lunatic crashing our play? He pursed his lips, observing the hot—no, make that smokin' hot—fighter focused on Jason and Gregor behind him more than himself. Which, crazily, pissed him off.*

When the man's attention shifted back to stare at Kase, his head cocked and the corner of his mouth twitched upwards, Kase felt the penetrating gaze like an arrow to his heart. His libido went wild, pulling him along for the ride. Kase openly admired the broad shoulders and muscled torso, the flexed biceps and military-regulation dark hair. He damned himself for having a preference; this guy covered all of his desired physical attributes to a T. Points deducted, of course, for disrupting the play he and Helene had worked on for months.

He saw the stranger's body stiffen, his gaze sliding to the right, and he pivoted, bringing his sword to a ready position. Kase turned his head, finding the fighter's line of sight zeroed in on Jason and Gregor, and Kase knew they were in trouble. The man's rapid words were unintelligible, but he heard Helene gasp. *Did she understand him? What does he want?* The guy ignored Kase now, crouched and fully focused on the two soldiers. He stepped carefully to the side, his sword swinging in a perfect arc, with a casual wrist flip Kase had never mastered.

"Stop!" Kase said, sheathing his sword. "We mean you no harm!" He held his hands up, now free of weapons, hoping to soothe the fighter. If this guy was a nutter, then he was apparently a nutter who knew his way around a sharp, pointy object.

He edged backwards, towards the trio on stage, catching a glimpse of Jason circling around to close in on the fighter. Kase was steps away from Gregor and Helene when a strong hand grabbed him and yanked him away from the safety of his friends. He shouted in surprise and lost his footing trying to twist away. Falling to the stage, he dragged the stranger down on top of him, and... *Holy!* The guy was in a full plank, his groin centered right over Kase's head. Kase's line of sight roamed under the stiffened cloth tassels, and he tilted his head to get a better look at the man's hefty package, peeking into the very loose underwear he was wearing when the guy's junk came closer. He huffed when his prize suddenly disappeared.

The grunts of fighters and the thudding crash of sword on sword, coupled with Helene's high-pitched screech, dragged Kase back to his senses. He rolled and pushed to his feet, facing the wide-eyed and staring crowd, their mouths gaped in disbelief, at the action on stage. Kase spun towards the fight, shocked at the sight that greeted him.

The swordsman wielded his blade skillfully, better than anyone Kase had seen before. Both Jason and Gregor defended themselves admirably, although it seemed the fighter was toying with his opponents, forcing them to slowly retreat, Helene hidden behind them. She crept sideways and slipped past her protectors, trying to avoid the fighter, but he lunged and grabbed her wrist, pulling her to him. She twisted from his loose grasp and ran into Kase's arms, where he enveloped her dramatically.

"What's going on?" she whispered, peering fearfully up at him, her voice trembling and angry at the same time.

"I have no idea, but Jason and Gregor don't stand a chance against whoever he is." Kase spun her, placing more distance between Helene and the unknown interloper. "Stay here." Kase turned back to witness the intruder taunt his friends with little thrusts of his sword. Then faster than he'd ever seen a fighter move, with a few swift cuts and parries, both Jason and Gregor were disarmed, their eyes wide with fright as the tip of a sword shifted and danced between their throats, not quite touching them.

*No, no, no! This isn't how the play is supposed to go!* Kase reached for his sword hilt, ready to unsheathe it and defend his friends, when the stranger whipped his attention to the crowd and dashed to the edge of the stage. The crowd gasped, a few in the front cringing, but most applauding and calling for more action. He peered out over the crowd, searching, Jason and Gregor completely forgotten. Kase glanced back at them, watching them sway on their feet, sweating and shaking, edging their way to Kase and Helene.

“Who the fuck is that?” Gregor whispered, his voice cracking.

Kase shook his head. “We don’t know. I’ve never seen him before. Whoever he is, I’m going to find out.” He took a step forward, halted when a small hand gripped his arm.

“Be careful, Kase. He might be crazy.” Her eyes were wide, their whites showing around the edges.

Kase flashed her a brief smile and, taking a deep breath, walked towards the guy, being sure to keep at a safe distance. He’d barely taken two steps, when the fighter jumped off the stage into the crowd. The audience stumbled back, parting as he trotted past them, and then they started to clap and give him pats on the back. *Just our luck, they think he’s part of the play. May as well go with it.*

“Wait! What’s your name?” Kase shouted after the man. As expected; no response. He turned to Helene and held his hands out to her, his voice raised above the noise. “Stay behind, my lady. I will find out who the hero is that saved us,” he proclaimed dramatically. A cheer went up from the crowd, and they made way for Kase to run after the unknown reenactor.

“Whoever he is, I’m going to strangle him once I catch him,” Kase muttered, running through the room and out the doorway. “He ruined six months of rehearsal in thirty seconds.” He paused upon entering a dark corridor, looking right and left. “Great, now which way did he go?” A shadow of movement caught his eye, traveling into the next gallery. Kase hurried, hoping it was the fighter, not wanting to lose sight of him.

“Hey! I know you’re in here,” he called into the darkness, slowing to a walk. “You’ve got a lot of explaining to do.” He hadn’t gone another yard when he was grabbed from behind and dragged behind a column. A large, broad hand slapped over Kase’s mouth, and he cursed. He struggled to get loose, but the man was strong, spinning Kase around and pressing his back to the column. The warrior closed the distance, his bare chest inches from Kase’s covered one, his hand once again over Kase’s mouth. Kase had the overwhelming urge to stick out his tongue and lick it just for spite, *and maybe just a little bit to taste.*

The fighter slowly removed his hand and shook his head. Kase opened his mouth to speak and the man leaned into him, aligning their bodies and placed his mouth next to Kase’s ear. “—*Isychía*,” he breathed out, barely loud enough to be heard. Kase moaned, closing his eyes, drinking in the sensation of lips close to his ear. Damn the stranger for finding one of his most sensitive erogenous zones so quickly.

Kase's hands had a mind of their own and raised to grasp the man's hips, gripping tightly to hold him in place. He looked up, the warrior a few inches taller, and into the deepest blue eyes he'd ever seen. Those eyes narrowed and a slight upwards tilt appeared at the corner of his mouth. Hips rolled forward into Kase's groin, sending a shock wave of pleasure through him.

He shook his head, needing to concentrate and not get distracted by someone who could turn out to be a head case. *Oh, what the hell...* He ignored the small voice in the back of his mind and ground back against the fighter, feeling the hard muscles pressed against him and, even through his stiffened armor, the steel pole lying underneath. His mind wandered to the scene on stage and his view of the man's impressive cock; only to be snapped back by the rapidly approaching tread of boots.

Both of them stilled and held their breaths. A beam of light slowly scanned the gallery. It ran across the floor, over and around statues and pillars. It flashed past their column, but hidden in its shadow, they remained undetected. The guard turned, the shuffling of his feet echoing loudly in the large quiet room. The light disappeared, along with the clumping of the guard's receding footsteps on the marble floor into another gallery.

Slowly, the grip on the leather baldric Kase wore lessened. The fighter snuck quick checks around the pillar, one fist clenched tightly around his sword's hilt. He took another quick glance, stopped and scrutinized Kase, his gaze traveling up and down his body, a faint smirk playing on his lips before it vanished, and he took off, on stealthy feet, in the direction of the shadow Kase spotted.

"Hey! Where you going?" Kase whispered loudly. The man ignored him. "Son of a bitch." *This guy is hot, but he's seriously beginning to piss me off.*

Kase hurried after him, keeping an eye out for the guards. He entered the next exhibit, the singular sound the soft panting from his own throat. *Thank God*, the clouds had cleared and there was enough light from the moon through the skylights, and the emergency lights placed along the walls, for him to see without a flashlight. That would surely garner the guards' attention. He stopped, his back against a wall to prevent the man from sneaking up on him again, and carefully scanned the room. He'd about given up when he spotted a form slip out from behind a statue to stand in front of another and sheathe his sword.

It was him.



No longer concerned with hiding his presence, Kase approached the fighter directly. He advanced from the side, with audible footfalls, not wishing to startle him. “Look, I don’t know what you think you were doing back there”—Kase pointed in the direction of the play—“but you ruined months of hard work.”

The warrior glanced at him then returned to stare up at the statue, ignoring Kase’s presence. His hands lifted to the back of his neck and removed some sort of necklace.

“Hey, I’m talking to you.” Kase grabbed the fighter’s arm, the solid muscles flexing as the warrior easily shrugged him off. He scowled at Kase and spoke in a foreign tongue, total gibberish to Kase’s ears. Kase frowned. *This guy doesn’t know when to quit.* “Show’s over, whoever you are. You can drop the act now. Speak English.”

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Three

Hermes? Here? *Thank the Gods.* These people were strange, and this place even stranger. That warrior however... *I could show him a thing or two...*

He shook the wayward thought free, needing to focus, and it never hurt to ask for a little celestial help. Hermes was his favorite among the Gods. Fleet of foot, strong and handsome, cunning and intelligent. Except he could not ask for help without offering something in return. The Gods were notorious for only helping those who gave a worthwhile sacrifice.

The Kurios had followed him; he knew the man was hidden nearby, but he chose to ignore him. He closed his eyes, stretching his senses, but didn't feel the spine-chilling tingle at the moment. Nothing had ever set his hackles rising like that icy frisson had. It pulled at him to follow. He'd lost its direction in the maze of rooms and the distraction of that hard body against his. Gods, he could get lost in those beautiful eyes—behind those odd circles resting on the Kurios' nose—they'd caught the reflection of light and the flecks of blue set in those grays had swallowed him quickly.

He slipped out from behind a statue of an intertwined couple missing several fingers and toes, moving quietly to stand in front of Hermes' image. The warrior appeared and spoke harshly in an odd tongue. He glared at him; the intrusion of the loud voice carried in the open space and might bring them to the attention of the vile menace—whatever it was—and the other torch wielder.

He hoped to gain Hermes' attention and favor, but what did he have to offer? Only what he loved most—what he desired least to give up—would be accepted. He ran his hand over his short hair and down the back, stuttering across the cord around his neck. *The ring!*

He sheathed his xiphos into the metal circle of his girded belt. Slowly, he reached up with both hands, took hold of the ring and cord, and lifted it over his head. It sat on his open palm, and he stared down at it remembering where and when and who, and allowed the emotions of love and loss to roll over him. Erasmus had been the one...

A large hand grabbed his forearm, pulling him from his reverie. The warrior spewed more unknown words. Although he didn't know what the Kurios was saying, he could decipher the underlying note of venom in the tone. The anger was palpable, and his grip surprisingly tight.

He shook the hand off and spat back, “**περιμένω!**” The man’s lips turned down and those keen eyes narrowed at him. He placed his palm on the center of the Kurios’ chest. The heart beating beneath his hand was strong and quick paced, the chest rising and falling with each intake of breath.

*He* spoke again, softer, trying to tell him with his tone to have patience since they could not communicate orally. “**περιμένω.**” *He* held the ring out, allowing the warrior to see it, and gestured to himself and then to Hermes statue.

The Kurios’ head tilted, his eyes darting between the ring and Hermes. A shrug followed, and he stepped back one pace, crossing his arms. *He* chuckled to himself at the man’s arrogance and intent to keep a close watch on him.

Reverently, he gazed at Hermes’s nude form: a flowing piece of cloth draped over one extended arm, the hand held out in front, palm partially open and held sideways, with enough space to hold a token within. He looked down at the ring, pinching it between his thumb and first finger, letting it catch and reflect the light. A small price to pay to gain divine help... if it worked.

He laid the ring onto the stone hand, wound the string around the fingers to hold it in place. Fisting his right hand over his heart, he drew in a long, steadying breath and blew it out, attempting to center both his mind and body. The words were there, on the tip of his tongue. He struggled to get them into order, to define what he needed and how to ask for help without dishonoring the God in the process. He hoped Hermes would understand his stumbling tongue and know what he needed even if his words came out twisted and wrong. And he hoped his offering was worthwhile. It was personal, and that was something the Gods valued above all else.

Ah... He had it now. He knew the Kurios would not understand, but it did not matter. This was his prayer... the prayer of a reverent follower. With one more deep breath in, he began:

*“O Hermes, favored son of Zeus,  
Heavenly Messenger, I honor you.  
O Giver of good fortune, let me extol you,  
Here I stand; I beseech you.  
With humility, I ask,  
Through the aid of your powers, grant me understanding,  
Quicken me in speech and conversation.*”

*Guard me and guide me,  
Steady my stumbling tongue.  
These things I ask and pray you hear my words.  
Say I, Aleksandr,  
Your loyal and devoted servant.”*

An explosion of light and sound blasted into him. He crashed to the floor; the force knocked the breath from him. His head cracked against the cold marble, sharp pain lanced through his skull, and stars sparked behind his eyes. He blinked in the near darkness, his vision blurred and his senses dulled except for the throbbing pain. *What in the Gods' names?* He clumsily rubbed at the back of his head, wincing when he made contact with the injury, and thankful he felt no blood.

A low grumble of pain, which did not come from him, caught his ear. *What was that?* Reflexively defending himself, he fumbled for his sword, but his muscles disobeyed, feeling weak and uncoordinated like a babe. He filled his lungs with deep breaths of air, and his mind focused, clearing of those distorted dots.

Lightning flashed above them, brightening the gallery momentarily, before darkness once more enshrouded it. A near burst of thunder rumbled, Zeus shaking the building with his power. Black shadows fled when tiny white torches flared to life, creating hazy outlines as they buzzed like an angry swarm of locusts. He heard another aching groan. *That was it!* He recalled the other warrior who'd been near him, surmising he must be injured too.

Aleksandr carefully turned his head towards the Kurios and found him rising shakily to his feet, adjusting the odd object on his face. Footsteps pounded closer, and the warrior snapped his head up, and they stared at each other. Again, he reached for his sword, but before he could pull it free the other man ran to him, launching himself onto his body and slapping his hand over Aleksandr's mouth.

Aleksandr's breath blew from his lungs at the unexpected weight upon his chest. He could barely breathe, let alone speak, the hand on his mouth pointless. Except he had a sudden intense desire to lick at the Kurios' palm, to savor the flavor of him.

“Shhh,” the warrior hushed him, shifting to straddle Aleksandr's legs and allowing him to draw in air. “You... keep...” The hand lifted, and one finger pressed to his lip. Aleksandr debated wrapping his tongue around the digit.

Instead he placed his hands on the man's thighs, spreading his fingers, curling the ends into the taut muscles. Their gazes met, and Aleksandr quirked the corner of his mouth up, arching his brows. He slid his palms roughly up the Kurios' legs and grabbed hold of his hips, pulling him down onto his groin and canting his own pelvis up to greet him.

A light passed overhead, and in the next moment strong hands clamped down on either side of his face, holding his head still, and the Kurios smashed his warm lips down on his.

His eyes flew open, shocked by the contact before sliding closed. He squeezed the man's hips and took control. Slipping a leg between the warrior's, he ground their groins together, ignoring the discomfort of the Kurios' dagger hilt jabbing into his side. The warrior gave back as good as Aleksandr was giving, and Aleksandr growled. He never craved a child in his bed. No, this was what he always desired. A strong, virile male, with lips like...

The bright light shone into their faces, and Aleksandr broke off the kiss, narrowing his eyes in anger at the interruption.

“Hey you...! ... mus... um. You... back to ... group.”

Aleksandr shifted to grip his sword at his waist, stopping when the warrior covered his hand with his own. He rocked to his feet and answered in the same strange language to the interrupter holding the torch which gave light with no flame.

“All... ...going.”

A hand was offered, and Aleksandr took hold of it. He was pulled to his feet, caught and steadied when he almost toppled, black spots dancing in front of his eyes. He squeezed his lids shut until the dots disappeared, opening them to see concern etched on the Kurios' face.

“...you okay?”

Aleksandr nodded, immediately regretting the move when it set off another round of painful splinters in his head.

“Let ... help you.” The man's warm hands settled on his body, one wrapping around his waist and pulling him close, the other one lifting, knuckles sliding down his cheek. Aleksandr turned his face to the Kurios. The sweet gesture and tiny smile felt misplaced, but he quickly realized the warrior, who winked, attempted to portray them as an affectionate couple caught in the act. He smiled back, swept up in the humor of the situation, and still riding the high of that blazing kiss.

They pivoted to leave, the man snagging hold of Aleksandr's left hand. Right before they would have stepped across the threshold into the next room, the guard called out to them. "Did you see...?"

The Kurios turned, squeezing Aleksandr's hand with his when Aleksandr tried to pull it free. The man raised his empty hand to point away from them. Aleksandr frowned and tried to pull his hand down. "No." His voice broke on the single word, and he surprised himself, the word sounding strange to his own ears.

"What? Why?" the Kurios whispered.

Aleksandr worked the sounds out of his mouth, amazed he could now understand the foreign words and could communicate in return. "*Dan-ger.*"

Eyes narrowed. "... let ... guard take care..."

Aleksandr shook his head and swayed. He closed his eyes as the wave of disorientation slammed him. Hands gripped him tighter.

"Come on."

Aleksandr was steered away, his mind running wild with the implications of his ability to converse with the Kurios in what must be the man's language. *How?* The touch of light fingers, like a delicate breeze whispering among the leaves of a summer tree, brushed Aleksandr's mind. *The Gods have favored you. Do not disappoint them.* He looked over his shoulder, his gaze drawn to Hermes' face. Like a bent branch snapping back into place, comprehension dawned, and he mouthed his grateful thanks.

They passed through another room, voices now a low hum in the distance. Tendrils of ice slithered down Aleksandr's spine, drawing him to the left; he halted, pivoting. He broke away from the Kurios' hold, pulling his xiphos free.

"What is it?" the warrior asked, his right hand resting on the ornate hilt of his sheathed dagger.

"Danger. Go." Aleksandr pointed towards the voices, towards safety for the man. Without waiting to see if the Kurios complied, he took off in the direction of the icy pull, which stayed just out of reach, taunting him, never letting him fall too far behind. He staggered through room after room, haphazardly zigzagging between pedestals and statues, resting in doorways, unwilling to give up the chase. The pounding of footsteps behind him had him spinning around, his vision blurring. He gritted his teeth, gripping his sword's handle with his left hand, and held his right arm out, palm extended.

The Kurios stopped, his fingers growing white around the hilt of his dagger. Aleksandr let go of his xiphos' handle and laid his hand over the Kurios'. The man stilled, observing Aleksandr with sharp scrutiny. Aleksandr placed his other palm on the Kurios' chest to stop him from getting closer. The gray eyes staring at him seemed to ask questions which Aleksandr couldn't answer, at least not yet.

“Go back. Stay safe.” Aleksandr pointed again.

“No.” The Kurios covered Aleksandr's hand with his own, pressing them into his chest. “Let me help. We have to stay together. Maintain our ... of being together. If ... guard finds us.”

“I must search,” Aleksandr tried to explain, swinging his xiphos out in an arc, towards the way he was traveling. “Danger.”

“...you said that. Let me help.”

“No.” Aleksandr stepped closer then shoved the man away, hoping when he stumbled back, he would fall and not follow. He spun and ran on.

He paused at an intersection of hallways, looking in all three directions. Large luminous yellow eyes blinked and stared at him, and he raised his arm to block the vision. A rectangle of white light appeared at the end of the hall, and an unearthly wail started. A shadow passed in front of the light and the pull faded. Aleksandr dropped his arm and raced towards the light, cringing at the loud noise, and pushed open what was revealed as a door. He burst out the other side, the angry siren still screaming at his escape.

He stopped dead on the spot, eyes wide with astonishment. His heart, beating rapidly from the run, thumped and pounded. Smooth mottled ivory and gray rock surrounded him, except for openings which gave view to millions of tiny squares of light, mostly white, but round reds and yellows, and streaks of other colors, blinked and blazed. Strange wheeled things, varying in colors and sizes, lined the walls, orange lines delineating spaces for each of those bizarre enclosed chariots.

A loud roar caught his attention, and he turned to see one of those things round a corner and come straight at him. Two ovals of light approached slowly, the eyes never blinking as they stared at Aleksandr. He readied his weapons, wondering how he would fight this dreadful dragon.

It stopped and a voice shouted, “Get out of the way, you...!”

Aleksandr cocked his head, eyes narrowed and brow furrowed. It sounded human. A hand pulled him out of the way of the beast which rolled past him,

still yelling. Although he didn't understand the words, the tone assured him it was surely a profanity. *Strange beast, indeed.*

He looked at the hand holding onto him and followed it up to the wrist, past the forearm and elbow, the muscled bicep, until he took in the Kurios' flushed face. Aleksandr would have assured his helper he was fine, but his attention was snatched away by a brilliant bolt of lightning streaked across the night sky. He strode towards a large rectangular opening and was stopped by a chest-high wall. The warrior kept pace behind him.

On reaching the barrier, he looked out, sucking in a sharp breath. His fingers numbed, and his xiphos slipped from his hand, clattering to the stone floor. He raised his arms to cover his eyes, blocking the strange sights from his view, while he tried to make sense of what he was seeing. Carefully, he lowered his arms, and peered out from behind them to stare up at the huge structures, lights aglow from a multitude of windows. On top, red lights blinked on and off as if signaling their presence. The noise crowded in around him. Thumping beats to music he'd never heard, the roars of those dragons massing, bleeps and honks of angry birds. He covered his ears and squeezed his eyes shut, stumbling backwards, panting, bent over in an attempt to catch his breath. He murmured prayers to Hermes, sure the God would see to his protection.

A gentle caress slid across his shoulder blades while soft words of ease were whispered into his ear. Hands guided him away from the wall; he let them take him. The Kurios would help him.

\*\*\*\*\*



## Chapter Four

“Hey. It’s okay. I’ve got you.” Kase cautiously helped the dazed man away from the wall. If he was having an episode of some kind, it wouldn’t hurt to be careful.

“Sword...” the fighter mumbled, leaning into Kase, shoulders hunched and chin tucked into his chest.

“I’ll get it,” Kase said, grateful the stranger wasn’t totally out of it, and was allowing Kase to help him. “Wait here.” He paused a moment to ensure the fighter wasn’t going to fall down then sped to the sword and picked it up, surprised by the superb balance of it. He’d love to try it out sometime, but right now, he needed to get some help. *Helene is going to kill me. Maybe she’s right. I don’t seem to have a self-preservation bone in my body. I’m a sucky warrior. I’m like the poster child for martyrdom, throwing myself on the blade.*

He looked up to see the gray-palored man struggling to control his breathing. He blinked open his eyes when Kase neared. “Thank you,” he said, his voice thick and rough, with maybe a twinge of pain.

*Screw the blade, this guy needs my help.* “You’re welcome.” Kase watched the man close his eyes again. “I don’t think you’re fit to drive home. Do you have someone who can come pick you up?”

The fighter opened his eyes. “I...” He halted, then shook his head, immediately following it with a tight-lipped wince as he grabbed at the back of it.

Kase frowned. “I suppose I can drive you home. Where do you live?”

The man turned to look at the skyline. “*Graecia.*”

“Graecia?” Kase asked surprised. “Do you mean Greece? If you do, you’re a long way from home. Are you staying at a hotel? I can take you back there.”

“What is *ho-tel*?”

*Seriously?* Kase stared at him. Did he hit his head that hard? *Maybe I should drop him at the police station, let them figure out what’s up with him?* But he knew he wouldn’t; besides, they needed to get out of here first. The alarm for the emergency door leading into the parking garage still buzzed loudly behind them, and he didn’t want the guards catching them.

“Come on, let’s go to my car.” He draped one of the man’s arms across his shoulders, and they stumbled and plodded their way to Kase’s silver hatchback, which had seen better days, and was luckily parked down this aisle.

Leaning the fighter against the rear passenger door, Kase reached into his pocket for his key fob. The loud beep echoed in the garage, and the man yelped, jumping away and lurching into the aisle, his eyes wide.

“Hey, it’s okay.” Kase held open his hand and showed him the keys. “It’s a key. I need it to unlock the doors.”

“Key?” The Greek inched forward, as skittish as a feral cat.

“Yes. Now I’m going to open the door so we can get inside.” He definitely needed to take things slow. Opening the passenger door, he stepped aside. “First, I’m going to put our swords in the trunk of the car, then I’ll get in on that”—he pointed—“side. You get in here and close the door.”

The man watched Kase fill the back of his car with their weapons. He didn’t step any closer until Kase had moved to the driver’s side, opened his door, and slid into the seat. Then he stuck his head in and looked around.

“See... just a place to sit.” Kase rubbed his palm on the seat cushion. “I’ll take us home.” *Well, I guess I know what I’m planning on doing the rest of the night.*

“Home?” the man asked hesitantly.

Kase smiled reassuringly, meanwhile telling himself he was an idiot to get in an enclosed space with a guy he didn’t know. “Yes, my home.” The man nodded and slid into the passenger seat. “Now close the door, slam it shut hard.” It was like talking to a child who’d never experienced riding in a car before.

He instructed his passenger on how to pull the strap down for the seat belt, took hold of the buckle and snapped it in, causing the guy to shudder and tightly grasp the belt crossing his chest. Kase started the engine, but before he backed out of the parking space, he glanced over to see the man’s pasty-white skin, the stricken expression, and trickles of sweat running down the side of his face; he was definitely in a state of shock. “Close your eyes and keep them closed until we get to my house. I think the less you see, the less the sights will bother you.”

The fighter nodded, leaned his head against the headrest, and closed his eyes. He transferred his grip to his thighs, his fingers turning white as he squeezed.

“So, I’m going to keep talking,” Kase said. “You can answer back or not, okay?”

“Okay,” came the whispered reply.

“Great. My name’s Kase. What’s yours?”

“Aleksandr.”

“Aleksandr,” Kase repeated, clicking the k sound, enthralled by the foreigner’s accent. “You said you’re from Greece?”

“Yes.”

“I’m from New York City. Born and bred.”

“Where is New York City?”

Kase laughed at the question, knowing he shouldn’t have, but it came out anyway. He looked over to find Aleksandr’s—Alek’s—face turned in his direction, his eyes still closed. “It’s here, where we are. This is New York.”

“Not *Graecia*?”

“Nope”—Kase smiled around the word, shaking his head in disbelief—“not by a long shot. About five thousand miles and across a big blue ocean.”

A long pause ensued before Alek spoke again, his tone hushed and awed. “Not possible. The Gods cannot...”

He trailed off, and Kase made a quick check to see Alek’s eyes open and staring at the ceiling of the car. *Gods?* What gods was he talking about? “Are you telling me you don’t know where you are?”

“If this is not *Graecia*, then no, I do not know.”

*Great... okay... amnesia?* “Do you know what year this is?” Kase asked cautiously, debating if maybe he should be heading for the hospital instead. This situation and conversation was getting odder by the minute. Kase rapidly flicked through the possibilities of what could be causing Alek’s odd behavior—other than the nasty bump to his head. He’d have to do further research. He took another quick look at Alek, and his pulse quickened. *An article about a strange amnesia that made a person think they were from another culture or civilization.* Would his editors go for it? Kase’s body thrummed with excitement. Almost nothing got him going faster than the scent of an unusual story and the research needed to complete it.

“Yes, it is ten summers past Archon Hadrian’s completion of Zeus’s temple.”

Kase wordlessly mouthed, “Whoa!” This was definitely bizarre. He composed himself. “If I remember my history correctly, Hadrian, assuming we are talking about the same Emperor, had the wall built in England that bears his name in the second century, like the year one hundred and twenty-five, I think. Today is Saturday, August first, two thousand and fifteen,” he said as blandly as possible.

“Two thousand...” Loud rapid breaths broke from Alek. “No. Not possible. Why would the Gods bring me here? I do not understand.”

Kase shot a worried look in Alek’s direction, saw the distress in the flexing of his hands, the tightening of his fists, causing his biceps to shift under his golden skin. Open palms tapped on muscled thighs, leaving Kase to loathe the fact he had to keep his eyes on the road.

Maybe taking Alek home wasn’t such a good idea. In either case, he needed to lock the guy’s sword away if he did. After Kase told him the year, Alek didn’t speak again. Instead, they rode, with Kase singing lullabies quietly in an attempt to soothe him as best he could. Twenty minutes later, thanks to the late evening traffic and the sudden storm clearing the roads, they reached his house, and Kase remotely opened the garage door. The building would have been beyond Kase’s means, had he not inherited from his parents when they decided to spend the rest of their retirement traveling the country in a large RV.

Once he parked inside, he depressed the remote to lower the garage door and got out. He raced around the front of the car and helped Alek, who was now in even more of a daze than when he got in. “We’re going to go through that door and into my ho—living quarters.” *Simple words, Kase. Make it easy for him.* “I’m going to turn on the lights so we can see.” Kase didn’t know if explaining everything helped Alek at all, but it didn’t seem to be hurting. He flicked on the kitchen light, startling Alek, who looked up, wide eyed, at the ceiling.

“How did you capture a small sun? Did you make an offering to Helios and he favored you?” Alek eyed Kase curiously.

“Um, no. It’s a lightbulb. We all have them, they run on electricity.”

“*E-lec-tri-city?*” Alek sounded out the long word, and Kase grinned. *So freaking cute!*

“Yes, it’s what runs the lights and all the appliances.”

“I do not understand these strange words of which you speak.”

“Don’t worry about it at the moment. Right now, I need to get changed and eat something. I’m guessing you’re hungry too.” A rumbling reply came from Alek’s stomach, and Kase smiled when Alek rubbed at his bare belly. “I’ll take that as a yes.” He led Alek through the kitchen and into the living room. “Here, sit on the couch. You can even lie down if you want. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Kase climbed the stairs to his second-floor bedroom at the front of the house. He looked down into the living room from the balcony and saw Alek stretched out on the couch, his right arm covering his eyes. *Poor guy.*

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Five

*Ah, Hermes, what are you doing to me? Thrown me two thousand years into the future... for what? I know, I know, you can not tell me, only guide me.*

Aleksandr rolled to a sitting position on the couch and looked around the room, swaying slightly. A leather satchel and paper with scribbled handwriting lay scattered on the low table in front of him. It seemed he was not the lone disciple of Hermes here, and in grateful thanks he sent another swift prayer skywards for his very attractive guide. He carefully turned around and fingered the woolen blanket lying across the back of the couch, and his eye caught sight of a picture on the wall of Kase and the girl from earlier.

A rhythmic clunking sound behind him had Aleksandr twisting around, and he steadied himself as a wave of dizziness overtook him. Kase was descending the stairs, a box in his hands. His eyes were drawn to the painted outline of a wing above Kase's ankle. *Fleet of foot.* He cocked his head, eyeing the contents of the box, amazed he could see them through the walls of the container, but the odd box couldn't hold his interest as much as Kase's strange new clothing. Aleksandr looked him up and down.

"Come on. Let's go into the dining room." Kase indicated with a nod of his head back in the direction of the sun room they had passed through when they arrived. Aleksandr rose slowly to his feet and followed Kase.

When they reached the dining room at the front of the house, Kase placed the box on the table and turned around. Aleksandr walked closer, eyeing his odd attire. Kase noticed the inspection and moved away from the table, letting his arms rest at his sides.

Aleksandr stepped to Kase's side and laid a fingertip on the thin strip of red fabric running over Kase's shoulder, and trailed it along the fabric's edge. He dipped into the center of Kase's back, and a shiver rippled through the man's body. He circled around behind Kase, inspecting his pale skin, light against Aleksandr's darker tone, and the freckles that dotted his flesh.

"What is this called?" Aleksandr breathed the question into Kase's ear as he moved around to the front, halting when he caught sight of the image of Hermes' staff decorating Kase's right upper arm.

"This?" Kase smoothed down his shirt, while Aleksandr explored the black representation of the dragon twined around a caduceus he'd discovered with his

fingers. A tint of red accented the wings of the dragon. “A tank top. What are you doing?”

“You have adorned yourself with these symbols. Is he your patron?”

“Who?” Kase asked, tilting his head to the side. “You mean Hermes?”

Aleksandr nodded. “Are you a disciple and pray to him too?”

Kase shrugged. “I suppose you could call me a disciple. He was the messenger of the gods. I’m a reporter, so I’m like the messenger to the people.”

*Blessed Hermes... my eternal gratitude.*

Even here, in this strange place, Hermes guided him, and delivered a companion who could help him navigate through this peculiar land. He inclined his head at Kase’s answer. “Praise to Hermes, most beloved by the storytellers.” He touched the image one more time with reverence, then let his hand slide down to Kase’s thighs, palming the hard muscle through the cloth. “And these? What are they called?”

“Board shorts.”

“Why are they bored? They should be quite happy to touch your...” Aleksandr ghosted his fingertips over Kase’s groin and then drew his hand away. When Kase looked up at him, Aleksandr arched a single brow and smirked.

“You seem to be recovering just fine.” Kase laughed. “Come. Sit. I want to look at that bump on your head.” He pulled out a chair and indicated for Aleksandr to sit on it.

He sat on the edge of the seat, unconsciously brushing his xiphos out of the way, distracted when he realized it wasn’t there. He twisted and looked up at Kase. “My sword?”

“Still in the car. It’s safe there. Now face forward.” He placed his hands on Aleksandr’s shoulders and turned him back around.

Aleksandr frowned; he would not be parted from his weapon. Not with whatever was out there... He pushed to his feet, swayed, and grabbed for the table to steady himself. “I must have my sword.”

“It’s okay, I told you it’s safe in the car.” Kase reached for his arm to pull him back onto the chair.

Aleksandr jerked away, took a step back, and snapped, “No. I must have it.” He glanced around him and spied the door to the room with the small sun and strode towards it. He heard a scrambling behind him.

“Hey, wait. You can’t get into the car without the keys, and I have them,” Kase said. Aleksandr spun to face him.

“Let’s make a deal,” Kase said. “You come back here and let me look at your head wound, and then we can get your sword from the trunk.”

Aleksandr debated about the delay, but then nodded. The sooner he acquiesced to Kase’s *deal* the sooner he would be reunited with his xiphos. He stepped back to the chair, brushing his chest along Kase’s as he slid past him. He huffed under his breath and smiled, hearing the quick gasp fall from Kase’s lips. No matter if thousands of years had passed, flirting was still a potent aphrodisiac.

He rearranged himself on the hard chair, placing his palms on his thighs, allowing his biceps to bulge and cant outwards. Light fingertips probed at the back of his head, pushing it forward. He bent his neck and grunted when Kase made contact with the injury.

“There’s a good-sized bump, but no blood. Would you like ice for it?”

“Ice?”

“Frozen water. Wait. I’ll get you some.” Kase paced back into the sun-filled room and opened up the top door on a large, silver chest almost as tall as Kase. His head disappeared from view, and Aleksandr could hear scratching and shuffling sounds. “Shoot,” Kase cursed, shaking out a hand. He pulled out a small tray and shut the door.

Aleksandr watched Kase hold the tray at both ends and twist his wrists. He heard a cracking sound and several small whitish cubes tumbled out onto the floor.

“Damn it,” Kase grumbled, setting the tray down, turning and bending over. Aleksandr leaned to the side in an effort to not miss the view of those *boreds* pulling tight across Kase’s ass. Kase straightened up and resumed fumbling with the tiny squares, finally coming back with a small cloth and five of them nestled inside.

He spread the cloth on the table in front of Aleksandr. “Ice.”

Aleksandr tentatively touched one, flicking it with his finger. He picked one up, allowing the chill to settle into his palm. “Once we marched through high mountains. There was... white powder there, it felt like this.”

Kase nodded. “Snow. It’s a type of ice. If I crushed this, it would look like snow.” He retrieved the cube from Aleksandr’s hand, put it back with the others, and wrapped the cloth around them. “Hold this against the bump.”



Aleksandr raised the bundle to the back of his head and settled it on the sore spot. When the cool temperature penetrated, the bump instantly felt better. He sighed in appreciation.

“Good?” Kase asked, a tiny smile lingering on his lips.

Aleksandr raised his eyes to meet Kase’s gaze. “Yes. Thank you. Now you will bring me my sword.”

Kase laughed. “Yes. Fine. A deal’s a deal. Wait here.”

Aleksandr grinned. Once he had his xiphos he could stop worrying about it. He followed Kase’s progress out of the sun and ice room, through the first door they’d entered by, until he disappeared from view. Beeps and thunks, and then Kase was back, carrying not only Aleksandr’s sword, but an assortment of other weapons including a winged staff. He laid the weapons on the table. Aleksandr rose and extracted his xiphos from the pile. He inspected the blade, running his fingertips along its sharp edge. Satisfied it hadn’t received any damage, he slipped it into the ring at his waist. He rolled his shoulders as the unexpected weight of tension fell from him.

“You are devout in your worship,” Aleksandr said, earning himself a questioning stare from Kase. He tapped the staff. “Although, I do not think he would be happy if you were pretending to be him.”

“Actually—” Kase’s cheeks flamed, and he looked away for a moment “—I got it for a play where I portrayed Hermes. He’s my favorite of the gods, like I said, but I don’t worship him as a god. You, however, prayed to him, gave him an offering.” Kase stared at Alek for a moment. “What did you give?”

Aleksandr glanced away, frowning at the invasive question. “It does not concern you.”

Kase huffed and stalked into the sun-globe room. “Fine. What are you in the mood to eat?”

Aleksandr resumed his seat, waving his right hand in the air. “Figs, almonds, bread, wine. Honey, if you have it.” He looked longingly upwards. “I rarely have honey.”

“Honey I can do. Bread and crackers, yes, but wine? Sorry, I’m out.” Kase turned and opened up the bottom half of the huge silver chest. He reached inside and pulled out two objects with bright red wrappings around their middles. “I’ve got something I think you’ll like.” He twisted off the top of one with his hands and brought it over, placing it on the table in front of Aleksandr.

“What is it?” Aleksandr eyed the dark bubbling water inside, not at all sure he wanted to try it.

“Soda.”

“*So-da?*” Aleksandr picked up the bottle, surprised by its light weight and malleable texture. He squeezed it experimentally. The dark liquid spurted, spilling out and coating his hand. He slammed the bottle down, sloshing more of it onto the table.

Kase’s laughter cut into his anger and embarrassment. “Hold up, big guy. Let me get a towel.” He snatched up a thick white tube, and Aleksandr watched Kase make quick work of tearing off sections of the tube and wiping up the mess.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Six

Kase dropped a fresh paper towel on the table—just in case—and sat back down. He unscrewed the cap from his bottle of cola and raised it to his lips. When he lowered it, he found Alek watching him closely. Alek raised his own bottle and studied the bubbles, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. Kase tamped down the urge to laugh, instead observing every slow movement Alek took as he raised the bottle to his mouth and wrapped his lips around the opening, gulping down a mouthful of soda. Alek sputtered, spewing soda over the tabletop, and coughed. He frowned and wiped his mouth across his forearm.

*I shouldn't laugh, I really shouldn't laugh.* Kase pressed his lips together, his body jiggling with suppressed mirth.

“Why do you wish to make a fool of me?” Alek glared at Kase.

“You’ve never had a soda before?” Kase asked in surprise.

Alek shook his head.

Kase blinked in disbelief. Was he going to have to teach Alek everything? Ordinary things he took for granted would need constant explaining. “I’m not trying to make a fool of you. I thought you were pretending you’d never had it before.” He took a sip of his soda. “The bubbles are what make you sneeze and cough. Don’t take a big gulp until you’re used to it. Start with small sips first.”

Alek nodded and raised the bottle to his lips again. In a few minutes, he’d downed the whole bottle, belched, and one side of his mouth quirked up. “It is sweet. I like it. Do you have more?”

Kase had watched every movement of Alek’s Adam’s apple as he swallowed his beverage, and now he sat mesmerized by that simple, bright smile. His heart rate escalated when the smile morphed into a full-blown grin, those dark-blue eyes scanning his face.

Alek leaned back, shifting his thighs further apart and lowered his voice. “Do you have more?” he asked again, rubbing his right hand on his firm abs, his gaze intense as it wandered down from Kase’s face to his chest and back up.

“Huh?” Kase shook himself out of his daze. “Yeah, sure. But only one more. Too much caffeine and you’ll be bouncing off the walls. Plus you won’t sleep tonight.” He got up and headed for the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator and stuck his head in... and didn’t move. He needed to cool down his libido. Sure, he hadn’t had more than a handful of one-night stands since—well,

since—he shook his head. Best not to think about it. He grabbed another soda and a bottle of water for himself.

“If you need anything else to drink, there’s water in the fridge too.” He held up his bottle. He opened the soda and handed it to Alek, who downed it in less than a minute, let out another huge belch, and grinned like a mischievous school boy. He started to jiggle his leg and wiggle in his chair.

“Great.” Kase sighed. “Looks like the caffeine high has already kicked in. I can’t wait until you crash. No more soda for you. Here, drink this water.” Alek’s grin disappeared, but he reached for the water and drank half of it.

“I am thirsty”—he looked up at Kase—“and hungry.” He flashed Kase another brilliant smile.

*Terrific... He already knows what works on me.* Kase shook his head and walked back to the kitchen. “Dinner coming right up.” *Better keep the food simple and bland since I have no idea what he can eat.* He opened the cabinets, pulling out plates, honey and crackers. He paused. *Honey might be a bad idea.* Kase shrugged to himself. *He’s already wired. May as well let him have some.* He followed with a jar of peanut butter and jelly, quickly making them each a sandwich. He added a handful of potato chips and a banana to each plate.

“Dinner is served.” Kase placed the assortment of food down in front of Alek and went back to collect his own. He returned to find Alek’s food untouched. *Looks like I’ll have to explain even this.*

“Peanut butter and jelly sandwich,” Kase explained, pulling apart the two slices of bread of his own PB&J. “The brown is a mashed nut and the purple stuff is preserved and sweetened fruit.”

“Sweet?” Alek murmured, dragging his forefinger through the jelly trickling out the side of his sandwich. He popped his finger into his mouth, his eyes shooting wide open and his cheeks sucking in as he savored the flavor. His spectacular grin appeared again after he withdrew the digit from his mouth. Mimicking Kase’s movements, he picked up the sandwich and took a large bite of it. Slowly he chewed, his lips parting and loud smacking noises escaping as he worked his tongue around to remove the tacky peanut butter.

“Sticky,” he mumbled, grabbing for the water and swishing it around in his mouth before swallowing.

“Yup.” Kase chuckled. “Peanut butter has a nasty habit of doing that. Do you like it?” Alek nodded enthusiastically. “Good. Those are potato chips, a

dried and salted vegetable, and I found you some honey, and crackers to put it on.” He pointed out each one.

Again those sapphire blues opened wide as Alek reached for the bottle of honey. He stared at the bottle, turning and twisting it. “What strange creature is this?”

“It’s a bear. Haven’t you seen them before?”

“I know the name ‘bear.’ Sharp teeth and claws, ferocious beasts that maul and kill.” Alek growled and raised his left hand, curling it into a clawlike appendage. Kase chuckled at the gesture. “This is no bear.”

“True. This is the tamed version, to not frighten little children.” Kase took the bottle from Alek’s hand and popped the yellow cap upwards. He tipped it over and drizzled some onto one of the crackers. “Go on,” he prompted Alek to eat it.

But Alek didn’t eat it, he picked up the cracker and proceeded to lick the honey off of it.

Kase just about died and went to heaven watching the sexy fighter’s tongue lap at the sweet nectar. *If only it was my—*

“More, please,” Alek pleaded, holding out the cracker. He licked the edge of his lower lip, the move drawing Kase’s attention away from the cracker and straight to Alek’s mouth.

*Geez Louise!* Kase held back a groan threatening to break free. How had this guy figured out his buttons so fast? “Here, give me your hand.” Kase held out his own, palm up. *I shouldn’t, I really shouldn’t, I know I’ll get more frustrated, but this is too good to pass up.* Alek put down the cracker and offered his hand. Grabbing hold of Alek’s wrist, he held it steady, then drizzled strings of the golden nectar of the gods along the man’s thick forefinger until it was coated. “There you go,” he said, his voice cracking. He released Alek’s hand and leaned back in his chair, ready for the show.

The corners of Alek’s mouth crooked up in a sly grin. Instead of bringing his finger to his lips, Alek leaned down, tongue extended, eyes raised to watch Kase’s expression, and proceeded to work his taste buds over every single honey-covered inch of his finger. Once he’d gotten off the heavy layer of gooey liquid, he stuck his finger in his mouth, thrust it in and out a few times, his attention riveted on Kase, before pulling it out with a pop.

And that wasn’t the only thing popping. Kase pressed his palm against his hard-on, devouring the sight of Alek’s tongue reaching out and lapping at the

honey, and his mouth wrapping tightly around his first finger. Kase licked at his own lips.

“Give me your hand,” Alek said, picking up the bottle of honey. An unmanly squeak slipped from Kase, his cheeks reddening, as he held out his hand to Alek, palm down. Alek twisted Kase’s forearm to flip his hand over and pulled it towards him. He unpeeled the bottle and let the sticky fluid drizzle onto Kase’s wrist. Again, Alek leaned forward and his talented tongue made another appearance. At first, Kase couldn’t feel the pressure of Alek’s tongue while he lapped off the honey, but once the thick sweetener was gone, he felt every single slick lick on his skin.

Alek straightened and raised Kase’s hand, pulling his arm taut. Lips were added to the mix, slurping and mouthing at his skin. Kase squirmed in his seat, squeezing and unsqueezing his thighs together. *Foreplay ratcheted up to a whole new level.* He panted as Alek worked his way up his forearm to the inside of his elbow, where he stopped to suck; Kase was sure he would leave a mark. He couldn’t stop the groan this time and writhed in his chair. Alek’s heated gaze bore into him, and his belly clenched in response.

Alek pulled back and ran his tongue across his lips. “My thanks,” he said, “for the honey. It was very... good.” Kase figured he would have melted if not for Alek’s coy smile and bright eyes holding him in place.

“You’re welcome,” he replied, breathless. He shivered himself to attention and caught sight of the bananas still resting on their plates. *Two could play at this game.* “Would you like to try something else?”

“Will it be as good as the honey?” Alek deadpanned, making Kase laugh.

“I think so.” Kase picked up the long, yellow fruit. “This is a banana. It’s a fruit.” He watched Alek pick the one up from his own plate and bring it to his mouth.

“No!” Kase halted him before Alek took a bite into the inedible skin. “You have to peel it first before you eat it, like this...”

He snapped off the end of the banana and slowly bent back the peel, dragging it down in a seductive caress. Like a slow strip tease, he revealed the other sides. He snuck a peek at Alek to find him leaning forward in his chair, his eyes narrowed and fixed on Kase’s motions, his lips parted. With the last side of the peel drawn back from the banana, Kase raised it to his mouth and wrapped his lips around the tip, feeding the long, pale fruit into his mouth. He pulled his head back and bit off the end.

Alek growled, and Kase smiled. He chewed and swallowed his mouthful.  
“Go on, try it.”

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Seven

Aleksandr knew what he'd started with his handsome guide, however, he truly hadn't expected for them to be hinting at acts of bedding using food as an accessory. Still, if lips could meet lips again, he'd be even happier.

He duplicated Kase's movements, peeling back the skin on the strange-looking fruit. He'd never seen one such a bright yellow color, or one with this long, arching shape, which reminded him of certain manly parts he'd like to wrap his lips around, minus the biting. That was cruel torture. *A little nibbling wouldn't be unwelcome though...*

Once he had the fruit revealed, he took a tentative lick, but couldn't get the full taste of it. He broke off a small part and rolled the piece around in his mouth, finally squishing it between his tongue and the roof of his mouth. The flavor burst on his taste buds, and he sucked hard on the mush.

He let it slide down his throat and took another larger bite. Then another, until it was quickly consumed.

"I guess you liked the banana," Kase said. Aleksandr looked at Kase, having briefly been lulled by the exotic flavor of the fruit, finding the man resting with his chin on his palm, elbow on the table.

"I did."

"Good. Let's clean up." Kase rose from his chair, picked up his plate, and moved into the room with the small sun. Aleksandr followed with his own plate, watching as Kase tossed the banana skin and other uneaten food into a short metallic box, with a white bag inside. It had been hidden behind a door beneath a wash basin.

"You throw away uneaten food?" Aleksandr asked.

Kase turned to him, his mouth open to reply, but snapped it shut when the loud strumming of a lyrical harp came from within his bored shorts.

*How could he store a song in his clothing?* Aleksandr watched intently as Kase extracted a small, thin black square, touched the front, raised it to his ear, and spoke into it.

"Hello, Helene." Kase rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "Yes, I'll be here tomorrow morning." He glanced at Aleksandr and screwed up his mouth. "No,



Helene, I won't go anywhere." The man paused to listen to the black square. "All right, later." He sighed and put the box on the food preparation area.

Kase caught Aleksandr staring at the flat object, and he tapped the corner of it. "This is a phone. I talk to people on it."

Aleksandr frowned. "You do not need a messenger?"

"This is the messenger." Kase took Aleksandr's plate from him and scraped the remains into the bag.

"A gift—" Overcome with the sudden urge to shed water, Aleksandr pressed the palm of his hand to the front of his groin. "—from Hermes?" He tried to distract himself and concentrate on Kase's answer, but the fullness in his belly built swiftly. He leaned against the edge of the long table top in the sun-globe room and his right knee shook uncontrollably, making his right leg bounce on the ball of his foot. His face pinched, lips pressed tightly together, he clenched and unclenched his fingers.

"What's wrong?" Kase asked, squinting at Aleksandr.

"I need to go."

"Go? Where?" Kase studied him, faint wrinkles forming between his brows. "Why?"

"Go." Aleksandr swept his hand in front of his groin. "I would rather not do it on your floor." He looked around the home, including the *andrōn* where he had lain on the "couch." A large upright rectangular window, made of the same clear glass he'd seen protecting the precious jewels earlier, led to the outside. A few weary-looking shrubs, lit by the moon, could provide privacy. "I could go behind that bush." He started towards the greenery.

"Hey, hey, the bathroom's next to the living room, on the left. It's under the stairs." Kase pointed, and Aleksandr ran in the direction indicated.

He halted inside the small bathing room trying to figure out where he was supposed to go. There was a low-placed bowl filled with fresh water for cleansing, which left the higher, empty one for urinating. He shrugged, the citizens of this future world did things oddly, but who was he to judge? He stood before the higher bowl, lifted the plates of his armor and fished his cock out of his loincloth. Practically on his tiptoes to make sure he didn't splash and ready to let go, he froze. His reflection, clearer than he'd ever seen it before, stared back at him. Suddenly, Kase appeared behind him.

“What are you doing?” Kase shouted.

“I have to go.” Aleksandr turned pleading eyes on Kase.

“Here.” Kase pointed at the bowl filled with water. “You go in here.”

“Praise the Gods...” Aleksandr rotated and stepped forward, pointing his cock and urinating into the bowl, although he didn’t care for the idea of contaminating the clean water with his body waste. As the release of water and tension flowed out of him, his shoulders dropped, and he sighed in relief.

Kase chuckled behind him. “Feel better?”

“Yes.” Aleksandr finished and tucked himself away. “What do you do with it? You have no servants to empty the water.”

“See the silver handle there?” Kase pointed to the stone box resting on the edge of the bowl.

Aleksandr turned around and touched it. “This?”

“Yeah, push it down.”

He did and watched water flood into the bowl from inside, a cyclone spun the contents and then they were sucked away. Fresh water poured in to replace the unclean. Aleksandr turned his head to peer at Kase, a smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

“*Katapliktikós...*” Aleksandr breathed, reaching over to press the lever again and watch the water swirl away once more. “Truly a gift from the Gods. Did they deign to inform us mortals how it works?”

“That’s enough.” Kase reached and pulled Aleksandr’s hand away from the lever. “Only flush the toilet if there’s something in it.” He glanced away and stared at the reflective wall, raising a hand to fuss at his hair.

Aleksandr’s curiosity peaked, and he stepped up behind Kase to see what he was staring at. Again he was caught off guard by their reflections. His darker skin and hair stood out in stark contrast next to Kase’s fair skin and golden locks. Aleksandr reached out to touch the cool surface, sliding his fingertips down the smooth texture, watching his own movements and absentmindedly pressing Kase into the elevated bowl.

Kase *oomphed* and Aleksandr leaned back, but did not let Kase escape the unintentional enclosure of his body and arms. He tipped his forehead to lie against the back of Kase’s head, dipping down to breathe hot air onto Kase’s

neck and earning himself another shiver from the man. He leaned lower and let his lips make contact with pinkish flesh, and stole a taste. Kase gasped, and Aleksandr smiled against the warm skin.

Too soon, Kase pushed back against him, and twisted out of Aleksandr's arms, stepping out of the small room. "Come on. I'm beat. I'll get some sheets and blankets, and you can crash on the couch."

"You are hurt?" Aleksandr grasped Kase's upper arm and spun him, looking him over. He hadn't seen any bruising earlier. *Perhaps beneath the tank and bores? Did I bite him too hard?* He inspected the area his lips had recently vacated.

"I'm fine. Tired, not *beat up*. Sorry, I forget you don't understand slang."

"I understand more of the meaning of your words than I did before. This is all..." Aleksandr couldn't think of the correct word he wanted.

"I get it," Kase saved him. "Different, new, strange, crazy, wild, awesome—"

"*Awe-some?*" Aleksandr interrupted. "Awe. Some. Yes, that is perfect. I am very much in awe of all of this." He spread his hands out, being sure to include Kase's body in the gesture.

"Yeah, well, all this—" Kase swept his hands down in front of his body—"is going to bed." Aleksandr's heart leapt in his chest; he could barely contain his eagerness to explore the rest of Kase's pale skin.

"You"—Kase poked Aleksandr in the chest—"are sleeping on the couch. Down here." He pointed at the oversized, soft-cushioned lounge. Aleksandr let his shoulders slump in disappointment. He heard Kase's chuckle, and he tilted his head, affecting his coyest smile.

Kase patted Aleksandr's shoulder. "You might as well come upstairs first. I'll find you a toothbrush and towel and let you wash up while I make up the couch for you."

"Tooth brush?"

Kase sighed. "Right. Silly me. Come on." And all Aleksandr could do was follow.

\*\*\*\*

It was too warm for any top layer, and after removing his armored belt and placing his xiphos on the floor below him, Aleksandr lay on his back, his left

hand tucked under his head, and stared up at the wide blades spinning in lazy circles above him as they moved the air, doing nothing to cool his desire. His gaze shifted to the balcony railing and the closed door to Kase's bedroom. As the memories of their first kiss and the playful eating were recalled, his cock hardened, and he slipped his right hand under his loincloth, sliding his fingertips along the engorged shaft.

Aleksandr chuckled. He hadn't had a lover in two thousand years and a reluctant one slept upstairs. How long would it take to convince the handsome Kase to change his mind? He contemplated the closed bedroom door again. What could he do to get himself into that room and into Kase's bed? He mulled over the possibilities, discarding each idea in turn until a sly grin stretched across his face.

He rolled off the couch, scooped up his belt and sword, and silently padded across the room. The rug covering the stairs was warm under his bare feet, worn down and smooth. No squeak of wood sounded as he ascended to the top.

Stealthily he snuck along the walkway to the bedroom, his senses alert. Standing in front of the door, he found it open a few fingers wide, and the sound of slow, calm breathing indicated Kase's deep slumber. He laid his palm on the door and gently pushed it halfway open, poking his head inside to survey the dark room. The shadowy motion and light, rhythmic thumping of another "fan"—as Kase had called it—whirled above the bed. Faint light ghosted in through the curtains hung over the large windows. Pushing the door open further, he crept into the room. Kase lay sprawled on his back, arms spread wide across a very large bed. Aleksandr had never seen a bed of such size before. It was big enough to sleep three men side by side. He narrowed his eyes. Did his guide invite many men into his bed? The idea irked Aleksandr and he clenched his jaw.

A large, snuffling snore broke from Kase, and Aleksandr stilled. Kase rolled to his side and faced the window; the light fabric draped around his legs tangled when he turned. Aleksandr shook his head. Kase would be dead ten times over, the way he slept so deeply. Kase rolled again, turning onto his stomach, pulling the cloth even more and exposing an ample slice of ivory skin where his loincloth arched up, exposing his rear.

Aleksandr took a step to the side and leaned back against the wall, bending his knees and sliding down to sit on the floor. Now that he could see Kase and watch over him, all thoughts of improper deeds floated away, and the full weight of the day and all of its strangeness and excitement settled on his

shoulders. Drowsiness pulled Aleksandr under, and soon his chin dropped to his chest, Hypnos claiming him into sleep's arms.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Eight

*Sunday*

The sun was too bright.

Aleksandr sighed and ducked his head into the warm flesh of the body in front of him, nuzzling down in an attempt to keep out the morning's rays. He tightened his arm around the torso of... He smiled, remembering how the night before he managed to sneak himself into Kase's bed.

The man slept like a new recruit who had been put through his paces. It hadn't taken much effort on his part to strip completely, quietly climb onto the soft bed, and curl up next to Kase. In fact, as soon as Aleksandr did, Kase had snuggled close and thrown a leg over him, trapping him next to his body. Aleksandr couldn't keep the smile off his face, and soon he was fast asleep again.

Now, with the early hour, the memories of yesterday in his head, and the heat from the body in his arms, his cock sprang to attention. Aleksandr lightly brushed his fingertips down Kase's chest, dipping into the crevices of defined abs, and sliding along the hard shaft he encountered covered by the loose loincloth. The fabric really did nothing to hide Kase's fine endowment.

*Now for a little friction...*

He adjusted the angle of his hips, sandwiching his erection between the globes of Kase's ass, and then gently pressed his pelvis forward.

"Hmm... Barry..." Kase moaned.

Aleksandr stilled, grimacing. He withdrew his hand, placed it on Kase's hip, and rolled him over. "Who is Barry?" he demanded, grumbling, his voice deep with an undercurrent of displeasure at being called another's name.

Kase startled, his eyes snapping open to stare into Aleksandr's. "What the hell?" he spat, pushing himself away from Aleksandr. "What do you think you're doing in my bed?"

"I am here because I desire you." Aleksandr pulled Kase back and tilted his head down to lick a path up Kase's neck.

"Fuck." Kase melted into him a moment before quickly rolling away and out of bed. "I didn't mean that." Kase faced away from him, hands on his hips, breathing hard.

Aleksandr took himself in hand and stroked in long glides. “Are you certain you do not wish to come and lay with me again?”

Kase turned to face him, his gaze drawn to Aleksandr’s slow jerks. His mouth dropped open with a sharp inhale. “Wow,” he breathed out. “That’s... rather impressive.”

Aleksandr smirked and lay back, thrusting his hips off the bed, his cock sliding through his closed fist. He turned his head towards Kase, noting the shifting of the man’s weight and the flexing of his thighs, and how his shaft pushed against the almost see-through covering, attempting to escape out the slit in the front. “I am quite good at pleasing my bedmates. No one has ever said I did not fulfill their expectations. And many have expounded on my virtues.”

“Expounded?” Kase squeaked, his hand drifting to slide along his erection.

Aleksandr sat up and moved to the edge of the bed, staring into Kase’s storm-gray eyes, the bits of blue and green sparkling. He wrapped his hand once more around his hard length. “I speak the truth.” He spread his thighs and showed off his wealth of attributes. He prided himself on his long, thick cock, the foreskin smoothly sliding over the head as he stroked. He allowed himself the groan of want, desire stirring at the sight before him. Need, like he hadn’t felt in a long time, filled him. “Come here,” he growled.

Kase’s eyes widened and then narrowed, his hands returning to his hips. “I don’t think so. Why don’t you come here?” he challenged.

Aleksandr shrugged and slipped off the bed, dropping to his knees, his eyes trained on the tent in Kase’s loincloth. Kase yelped and scrambled backwards like a new trainee in the Archon’s army. “Wait! No. I didn’t mean it. You,”—he waved his hands at Aleksandr in a shooing motion—“get back on the bed.” He spun and retreated into the bathing room.

Aleksandr frowned, watching Kase escape and leaving him bereft of a morning romp. Those had been the best times with Erasmus. With the sunlight creating a halo around his head, Aleksandr had loved him, adored him, pleased him, and he had received the same in return. Aleksandr exhaled, the fleeting memories quickly dulling the euphoric feeling he’d had moments before. He rose from the floor and circled the bed to retrieve his loincloth and sword.

He stepped into the undergarment, and debated about wearing the pteruges, when his gaze fell back on the bed. The off-white piece of fabric would

function well for a chiton. He pulled it from the bed and folded it in half lengthways, then a quarter down again. He wrapped it around his waist and grabbed Kase's belt from where it had been left rolled on the chest of drawers. Kase emerged from the bathing room just as Aleksandr managed to get the cloth draped correctly around him.

"What are you doing?" Kase's tone was more of a demand than a question.

Aleksandr glared at him. "I assumed since we were not remaining in bed, I should rise and dress."

"That's my sheet," Kase pointed out. "Take it off." He crossed his arms over his chest and frowned.

"And now it is my chiton. But if you insist." Aleksandr placed his hands on the buckle and began threading the leather back through.

"Wait, wait!" Kase stammered, holding out his hand to stop Aleksandr.

Aleksandr regarded Kase with an arched brow. "What would you have me wear?" he asked, dropping his voice seductively, not stopping his hands from undoing the belt. He let the belt fall, and the wad of fabric bunched at his waist. Aleksandr helped push it down with his thumbs, dragging his loincloth off with it, and let the makeshift chiton drop to the floor, leaving him in nothing but his skin.

Kase stared, his tongue snaking out to lick his lower lip. Aleksandr held his arms out to his side, allowing Kase's hungry gaze to travel up and down his body. Kase took a step forward and stopped, muttering, "What am I doing?" He quickly turned around. "Right. Clothes. Sorry. Look, you can't go naked. I'm sure I have something that will fit you." He moved to the chest and pulled out a drawer, withdrawing bores. "We need to go food shopping; might as well go clothes shopping too."

Another drawer was opened and more pieces of clothing were removed. Then Kase moved to a door and opened it. Aleksandr stepped up behind him and gaped at the array of colorful fabrics displayed on the racks.

"You must be very wealthy to have so much," Aleksandr murmured in awe, standing close to Kase's body.

"What?" Kase asked, bending and picking up two pairs of sandals, his ass bumping into Aleksandr's groin. Aleksandr pressed his hips forward, taking advantage of the opportunity presented. Kase rose slowly and twisted to look at Aleksandr, who grinned.



Kase, his lips pulled tight and cheeks tinted a faint pink, sidestepped around Aleksandr and laid the items on the bed. Aleksandr followed and fingered the clothing, admiring the fine weave and textures and designs woven into them.

“So many pieces of clothing and footwear. Even though my father’s business was profitable, we did not have more than two hands—” he turned to face Kase and held up his hands, fingers spread “—worth of chitons, a set of sandals for everyday and a set for formal occasions. Father had several ornamented chitons for parties, but...” Aleksandr trailed off, waving his hand to encompass the contents of the closet and then towards the chest of clothing.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Nine

Kase shook his head. Aleksandr was playing this Greek thing to the hilt. *Seriously? Wrapping a sheet around him for a chiton? He must have hit his head harder than I thought.*

“Here.” Kase tossed Alek the clothes. “Put those on while I go make breakfast.” The one T-shirt he’d held on to, he slipped over his head.

Alek stared down at the boxers, shorts and tank top in his hands. Kase huffed and stepped towards the doorway. As he crossed into the hallway, he heard Alek mutter, “But how?”

Kase halted and turned back around. “Are you serious?” Even his four-year-old nephew could dress himself. He frowned and went back, taking the clothes from Alek’s hands.

“These are boxers.” He laid them on the bed. “The slit goes in the front for your...” He motioned to his groin.

Alek smiled. “Ah, I understand. For when you wish to have quick access to impale your sword in a scabbard.” He mimicked grabbing hold of two hips and thrusting hard.

“No! That’s not what it’s for.” Kase felt his face heat. “It’s for when you have to use the toilet.”

“So it is never used for when you want to lie with another?” Alek asked innocently, his eyes searching Kase’s face.

“Well, um, actually...” Kase rubbed at his nape, and Alek grinned. Kase frowned; Alek was too smug for his own good. *Best to ignore him for now.* He placed the tank top beside the boxers. “The tag goes at the back of your neck.” He spread out the shorts next to it and pointed to the zipper. “Zipper in the front, pull the tab up once you’ve got them on—and I can’t believe I’m telling a grown man how to put on shorts.” He straightened. “Any questions, I’ll be in the kitchen making breakfast.” And before Alek could utter another word, he hurried out of the bedroom.

\*\*\*\*

Kase placed the last of the clean breakfast dishes away and headed to the couch and coffee table, where he’d left his laptop. They had at least an hour before he wanted to leave to shop for clothes for Alek and for this week’s

groceries. He sat down and set his computer on his lap. Hopefully, Alek would stay out of trouble long enough to allow him to do some research regarding ancient Greek culture. He typed into the search bar and was quickly absorbed in hunting down information. While scanning the headings, he heard the toilet flush. Kase looked towards the small bathroom. *When did Alek come downstairs?* He shrugged to himself and went back to his research. *Well, he can't get into too much trouble there, now that he knows how to use it.*

Navigating to a website which looked promising, Kase started to read. The toilet flushed once more. He raised his head to listen. "Alek, are you flushing the toilet again?" he called. No answer. Kase shook his head and went back to reading.

The toilet flushed a third time. Kase grumbled and shouted, "Alek! Stop that. I told you not to flush it unless it needed it." He set the laptop beside him and stood. He stepped towards the bathroom, pausing midstride at the sound of the doorbell. A rumble of aggravation rolled through his chest as he strode to the door, flinging it open. "What?" He glared at the woman standing on the other side, wearing her usual attire of jeans and a tee, this one proudly proclaiming, "Well behaved women rarely make history."

"Is that any way to talk to your BFF?" The blonde said, slipping around Kase and walking into the living room.

"Sorry," Kase mumbled.

"I've got a bone to pick with you, mister." She turned to him, scowling.

The toilet flushed. "For crying out loud. Will you stop it?" he yelled over Helene's head. Hurrying towards the bathroom, Kase ran smack into Alek's hulking form under the stairs.

"You told me not to flush unless there was something in it. I put something in it." Alek's eyes held mischief, Kase was sure of it.

Kase halted, staring at the beautiful, silly smile on Alek's handsome face. His heart sped up, and he swallowed, watching Alek's gaze travel across his face. His cheeks flamed, but he couldn't bring himself to look away, even hearing his friend's approach, while he committed that stubble-covered chin and the not-so-perfect nose to memory. And those eyes... he could get lost in their indigo depths.

"Well, well. Who's the cutie?" she asked from close behind Kase's shoulder. "He looks familiar."

Moving aside, Kase watched her look Alek up and down, and him stare back, an eyebrow cocked in amusement. “He’s a stray,” Kase said. “Someone I picked up at the museum.” He waved his hand between them. “Helene meet Aleksandr, Alek meet Helene.”

“Helene?” Alek asked. “You are a disciple of Aphrodite?” He looked down, his head tilting to take her in.

Helene rolled her shoulders back and stood toe-to-toe with Alek. “I worship no one. Besides—” she lifted her chin to meet Alek’s inspection “—if anyone is going to be worshipping, it better be him worshipping me.” She hooked her thumb and pointed it at her chest.

Kase walked back to the sofa, snickering. *That’s Helene, all right. Never afraid to stand up for herself.* He sat down and picked up his laptop.

“He’s not the guy who interrupted our play, is he?” she asked.

Kase looked up to watch what would likely turn into an entertaining conversation—it usually did where Helene was concerned—and nodded. “Yup, the one and only.”

Helene rounded on Alek, planting her hands on her hips. “Do you know how long we worked on the play? Do you realize all the training the guys had to do to put on the skit, and then you come in there and just... Just... ‘Wham, bam, thank you, ma’am!’”

Alek blinked in confusion. “What is ‘Wham, bam...’?”

“Oh, don’t play innocent with me, you play-destroying oaf.” She looked Alek up and down. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you’re the type that picks up women, then loves them and leaves them.”

Alek scoffed. “Women hold no interest for me,” he stated plainly, his gaze shifting to the couch where Kase sat watching their exchange.

“Ooooh, really?” Helene cooed. She spun around and grinned at Kase. “Did you hear him?”

Kase dropped his gaze to his screen. “Nope, didn’t hear a thing.”

“Ppplt, liar,” Helene said, her tone brooking no argument.

“Why do you cover yourself up?” Kase heard Alek ask. He looked up to find Alek’s brow wrinkling as he examined Helene’s dark-washed jeans.

“Do you mean my jeans?” She twisted her right leg and hip to the inside, allowing Alek a better look of the side. Alek nodded. “I like them,” she answered.

“Are you deformed?” Alek asked matter-of-factly.

*That comment is sure to get her riled up.* Kase snorted and pinched his lips together to keep from laughing.

“What?” she exclaimed.

“Are you misshapen in some way? Why else would you cover yourself?”

“I am not deformed,” Helene huffed at this new accusation. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

Alek shrugged. “The women in my *polis* wore next to nothing. They didn’t hide their bodies unless they were disfigured.”

“You’re really rude!” Helene turned to Kase, throwing her hands in the air. “This guy is unbelievable. I can’t... I have no words.”

Kase raised his brows. *No words. Score one for Alek.* “Yeah, well, he’s pretty unbelievable, all right.” Kase went back to reading the website.

Helene stomped closer and slapped his shoulder. “Pay attention.”

“I am.” Kase ignored her.

“No, you’re not. What are you doing?” She peered over his shoulder.

“Looking up information about the Greek sculpture collection at The Met.”

“Why?”

Kase stopped, glanced at Alek then back at Helene. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

Helene circled the couch to the left and plopped down next to Kase. “I can’t believe you brought him home,” she said, leaning her shoulder into his. Alek huffed behind them and stomped into the kitchen. “What’s up with that? Aphrodite? Seriously?”

Kase shrugged, and turned his head to peer at her. “I’m telling you, you won’t believe me.”

“Well, try me anyway.” She nudged him with her elbow.

He sighed. “Okay. I managed to catch up with him in the gallery of Greek statuary. Here, let me bring up a map of the museum.” He clicked a few links and a colorful map of The Metropolitan Museum of Art appeared. “This gray square here in the middle was where we were. This green area here is where we...” He trailed off as the ghost of the kiss swept over him.

“What?” Helene prodded him on the thigh, her nail jabbing him in an exposed area.

“Ow! Stop!” He swept her hand off his leg. “That hurt.”

“Aww, poor baby.” She made a kissy face at him. “Need me to kiss it better?” she teased.

A choked sound came from behind them, followed by a deep growl. Both Kase and Helene twisted to stare at Alek, who quickly looked away, and then turned to head for the kitchen.

“Someone’s jealous.”

Kase’s brow furrowed, narrowing his eyes at his best friend. “I’m not even going to dignify that with a response.”

“Ya just did, hot shot.” She laughed. “Now, tell me what happened.”

“You saw me run off after Alek. Well, he caught me following him and insisted I remain quiet. He looked like he was chasing after someone—or something—he considered dangerous.”

Alek grunted from the kitchen, but made no comment.

Kase continued. “He let me go then ran off again. We ended up in this gallery here.” He pointed to another section of the map. “It houses a statue of Hermes.”

“Supposed son of Zeus, Greek god of transitions, emissary, and messenger of the gods,” she interjected. “He’ll provide help to mortals, if he is pleased with their offering, and has been known to play tricks on the other gods.”

Kase nodded. “When I caught up to him, he was placing something in the statue’s hand. Then he prayed to it in another language.”

“He was praying to a statue of Hermes,” Helene said quietly. She pursed her lips. “That’s odd.”

“Yeah, and when he finished, there was an explosion of lightning and thunder and, I know this sounds crazy, but it felt like it came from the statue. It knocked both of us to the floor.” Kase swiped a hand across his face. Even in the retelling, it sounded unbelievable, and he’d experienced it.

“Alek was closest to the Hermes statue, and he got the worst of it. I recovered pretty quickly, but then I caught sight of a guard approaching, and Alek was reaching for his sword. I—” He stifled his next words; no way he was

going to tell her about the kiss. “The guard asked if I’d seen anyone, and I told him I saw a shadow and that’s all.”

Kase watched Helene’s eyes narrow. He quickly continued when he saw she wasn’t buying it. “The guard told us to get back with the rest of the group.”

Kase finished his story with a shrug and turned to Helene, waiting for her to process the information. She was silent a moment, tapping her fingers on his thigh.

“So what’s he doing here?”

*Nice of her to get straight to the most awkward part of the story.* “I had to bring him home since, it seemed, he didn’t have anywhere to go.”

“Really?” She grinned, and Kase cringed inside, her smile pushing his warning bells to high alert.

“I have another question then.” She ran her fingers across his arm. “Where did Alek crash? The couch? Or did you do the honorable thing and give up the bed?” She leaned forward to stare into Kase’s eyes, the corner of her mouth lifted in a mischievous grin.

Kase shook his head.

“We slept in the same bed,” Alek interjected from his place in the kitchen.

Helene squealed and twisted around to look at Alek, before turning back and opening her mouth to speak.

“Don’t say a word,” Kase said, drawing out his words in warning.

“Is something wrong with her?” Alek asked. “She squeals like a stuck boar.”

Kase laughed. “In a manner of speaking.”

Helene glowered at Alek, and then turned to hit Kase in the arm. “I refuse to be the brunt of a joke. I stopped by to see if you were all right, and to give you a piece of my mind for leaving me stranded.”

Kase patted Helene’s knee. “I’m sorry for leaving you, but it was an emergency. Last night was... strange, to say the least.”

“You’re not kidding. That storm came out of nowhere, I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“I have,” Alek interrupted.

Helene turned to look at Alek, still in the kitchen leaning against the wall, openly staring in their direction. “You have?” she asked.

“Yes.” Alek nodded. “When a heretic army destroyed one of Zeus’ temples, including a statue of him. The evening sky darkened, and lightning struck their camp many times over while they slept. They scattered in fear, without weapons, and we were able to slaughter the defilers as they ran in terror from Zeus’ wrath.”

Helene’s smile faltered, and she frowned at Kase. “That is...” She wrinkled her nose in disgust. “Is he for real?”

“I’m afraid so.”

She shook her head. “There’s something you’re not telling me. Finish your story.”

Kase pursed his lips and scratched at his chin. “After the lightning strike, Alek kept rubbing the back of his head. I found a lump there when he let me take a look. It wasn’t anything serious. Before we got tossed around, he wasn’t speaking English at all, didn’t even seem like he could understand what I was saying. After he hit his head though, he started speaking English, like a nonnative, and it’s rapidly improved. I don’t get it.” Kase ran a hand through his hair and grabbed at the back of his neck.

“You know, now that you mention it, I remember him speaking on stage.” She turned to Alek. “What language do you speak?”

“I am from Graecia,” Alek stated. Kase glanced over to see Alek leaning against the frame of the entrance to the kitchen. His heart skipped a beat as he took in the man’s stance. Alek arched his back, and his defined chest strained the tank top’s fabric. It definitely enhanced his attributes.

“It sounded familiar”—she nodded—“but I couldn’t place it. My flight routes don’t carry many Greek passengers. Besides, I don’t get much of a chance to practice the little Greek I do know when I’m working. I only know some basic words and phrases of the more popular languages.” She tapped her lip with her finger. “Let me think...”

“There’re stories in the Bible that mention a phenomenon called xenoglossy,” Helene said, bringing Kase’s attention back from admiring Alek to her. “It’s the ability to speak or write a language which a person has no natural means of knowing. Some parapsychologists and reincarnation researchers claim it exists, ’course there’s no scientific evidence.”



“I don’t know, maybe. It still sounds too unreal.” Kase placed his laptop on the table and leaned closer to speak quietly. “I’m not even sure who to ask for help with the language issue.”

“What about your neighbor, Mr. Daskalopolous? He sits out on his front steps a few houses down,” Helene whispered back. “He speaks Greek, doesn’t he?”

Kase slapped his forehead. “You’re right, why didn’t I think of him?”

Helene smirked. “Because I’m a genius, that’s why,” she said, poking him again in the thigh.

Kase grinned then grew serious once more. “What’s the weirdest, is how Alek totally believes he’s from Ancient Greece. He almost peed in my sink! I had to show him how to flush a toilet and use the handles to turn on the water. Then, this morning, I had to tell him how to put on shorts.” Kase leaned back, sinking into the cushions, and took Helene’s hand into his. “He feels like he needs to protect me, but he refused to tell me what he’s protecting me from. I think he came into my room last night to stand guard.”

“Hence the bed?” she said, combing back a lock of hair falling in his eyes.

“Hence the bed.”

“And?” Helene blinked repeatedly at him, feigning an innocence that looked all wrong on her.

“And nothing. Well... not nothing, but I’m keeping those deets to myself.” He blinked back at her and then zipped his mouth shut, tossing the imaginary key behind him.

Helene scrambled for it, twisting and half falling over the back of the couch, laughing. “Spoilsport,” she whined, bopping him on the head as she returned to her seat.

Another menacing growl came from the kitchen, and again they both glanced at Alek and watched him raise a small bowl to his lips and drink, studiously avoiding their gazes.

Helene twisted back around and grabbed Kase’s arm. “Protector, my ass. I think you’ve got yourself a real, live, Greek guardian angel.”

Kase laughed and cupped Helene’s cheeks, pulling her forward and planting a kiss on her forehead. He heard a loud snort, turned in the direction of the sound, and saw Alek emerge from the kitchen.

Alek stalked into the living room, circled the couch, and sat himself down on Kase's right side. He spread his knees wide, his leg touching Kase's, before he laid his hand on Kase's thigh.

"When do *we two* leave for the marketplace?" Alek asked, curling his fingers to caress Kase's skin.

Kase's breath hitched, doubly aware of Helene's presence beside him, her pointed stare down at Alek's hand on his leg, and the fingers lightly sliding through the hair on his thigh.

"Soon," Kase answered, openly admiring Alek's muscled forearm.

"Okaaay," Helene said. "Well, I'll be off. Don't bother getting up. I'll see myself out." She leaned in close to Kase's ear, rising to her feet, a hand planted on his shoulder. Kase cocked his head to hear her and caught the glare Alek speared her with. "Have fun with your guardian angel."

She grinned wickedly at Alek, who gripped Kase's thigh tightly. Kase shot a quick glance at Alek and noticed the tight set of his jaw.

Helene laughed and made for the door, letting herself out of the house.

"I was wrong," Alek grumbled. "Not Aphrodite at all. Truly, she must worship at Atë's feet. That mischievous Goddess has brought down many a man."

Kase chuckled with the thought that Alek might actually be right. He shut the lid of his laptop and rose to his feet. "Come on. Let's go shopping."

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Ten

Aleksandr trudged after Kase through the indoor food market, annoyed at Kase's insistence he leave his xiphos in the car once again. He wasn't completely vulnerable—he fought well with his hands—but give him a weapon and he ranked as one of the best soldiers in his *lochos*. His sword had become a natural extension of him, and, without its familiar weight on his hip, he fidgeted.

Their first stop, a visit to the clothing merchants, had vexed Aleksandr. Everywhere they traveled, he had to contend with the way many of the citizens looked at him. Especially the females who—some openly, some out of the corners of their eyes—ogled him. Several even trailed along behind them while Kase pawed through racks of clothes, pulling out items for him to try on. The women would hide behind the clothes when he turned around, feigning interest in whatever object they held in their hands. He itched to return to Kase's home.

The most enjoyable part of their excursion to the clothes market was the trying-on. He managed to trick Kase into the small enclosed area and stole a heated kiss. And the way Kase kept putting his warm hands on Aleksandr's body, slipping his fingers into the waistband to turn the leggings and adjust their fit or running his palms down Aleksandr's back and chest, smoothing the fabric... It made him smile many times throughout the day.

Giggling behind him garnered his attention. He turned his head to see two young girls with their heads together, phones like Kase's in their hands, and covering their mouths. Their shirts barely covered their torsos, and their shorts—not *boreds*, he reminded himself—were almost nonexistent. Aleksandr rolled his eyes and let out an annoyed sigh; they giggled louder.

"More disciples of Aphrodite," Aleksandr muttered, shaking his head and stuffing his hands into the pockets of his shorts.

"What?" Kase asked, turning his attention from the shelves of boxes to Aleksandr.

"Pretty little girls always worship Aphrodite."

Kase snorted and looked around Aleksandr's body at the young ladies. "Go on, girls," Kase said to them, shooing them away. "He's not interested." He turned back to make his selection.

The girls pouted at Aleksandr, gave timid waves and moved on. One even blew him a kiss before disappearing from sight.

“The women here are quite bold,” Aleksandr commented.

“Hmm.” Kase glanced at him. “Some are. Some aren’t.”

“Your Helene is.”

Kase chuckled. “Helene epitomizes bold. Girl doesn’t have a shy bone in her body. Really, I’m not sure how we became friends. Oh wait, that’s right, drama camp when she insisted I was her boyfriend for the entire six weeks, and all other girls must stay away, or they might wake up with some unwanted bed partners. Helene was particularly good at catching spiders.” He shivered and shook his head, tossing two small boxes with pictures of dark, almost black, squares on them into the red basket he had looped over his left arm. He moved down the aisle and stopped in front of another section filled with bottles.

“I have a feeling,” Kase said, “you’re going to devour all my honey.” He indicated one shelf. “What kind would you like to try?”

Aleksandr’s eyes widened at the sight of all the jars of sweetness. How could he choose? “What is the difference between these darker ones and the lighter ones?”

Kase shrugged. “I don’t know, maybe because they’re different flavors. This one”—he pointed to one glass jar—“is Wildflower.”

“How do you know?” Aleksandr asked, his curiosity piqued.

“Well, it says it right...” Kase trailed off, taking in Aleksandr’s expression. “You can’t read it?”

Aleksandr shook his head. “Hermes blessed me only with the gift of speech. No, that is not true. He brought you to me, to guide me.” He smiled and stepped closer, laying his hand on Kase’s shoulder and squeezing, enjoying the heat from Kase’s skin penetrating his palm.

Kase’s mouth dropped open. “I don’t even know how to respond.”

A sudden chill raced through Aleksandr, colder than even the squares of ice Kase offered him yesterday. His body tensed, and he tightened his grip on Kase, peering around.

“Hey! Ow. Can you let up a little?” Kase tried to duck out from under Aleksandr’s hand.

Aleksandr loosened his grasp, but stepped closer to Kase's back. "We must go." He swung his head to look up the aisle, sensing the icy touch from that direction. He shifted his hand from Kase's shoulder to his waist and pushed for him to move away from the strange feeling. He felt the man stiffen under his hand, refusing to budge. Aleksandr pushed again.

"But we're not done," Kase complained. "There's still a few more things I want to get."

Aleksandr prodded Kase once more, directing him back the way they'd come. *We must leave now! Does Kase not understand the danger?*

Kase took a few steps, then spun, placing his palm on Aleksandr's chest, stopping him. "What's going on?"

"It is here," Aleksandr murmured, sure if he voiced his fear loudly, it would bring whatever evil lurked swiftly upon them. "I need my sword."

Kase's eyes narrowed, and Aleksandr met that glare with a determined stare of his own. He would not relent; he needed to get Kase out of this market and safely back home.

"All right," Kase finally said, "we can leave, but I need to pay for what we already have."

Aleksandr nodded, and as Kase turned, he kept close, his hands flexing with his rising unease. Another breath of cold air passed over him, and he shuddered. He laid a hand on Kase's left shoulder, his thumb gliding across the skin at his nape, the contact of warm skin allaying some of his worry.

They entered a line with one gray-haired woman ahead of them. Kase emptied the contents of the basket onto the black area. Aleksandr was momentarily distracted by the way the items moved forward, starting and stopping of their own accord.

"Conveyor belt," Kase whispered, leaning back and into Aleksandr's body. Aleksandr nodded; the words meant nothing to him, he would ask later for an explanation. They must leave now. He strengthened his grip on Kase's shoulder.

"Well, aren't you two a cute couple?" the older woman remarked, grinning at them.

"Thank you, ma'am," Kase replied for both of them. Aleksandr's heart skipped a beat when Kase did not refute her claim. He watched the woman

hand several green slips of paper to the young man on the other side of the belt and receive others back, including a few metal pieces of varying colors. *Money*. The realization hit him hard. Kase had said they needed to pay for the food. Coins and gems he knew.

All thoughts of the strange feeling left him as he focused on the transaction occurring. The merchant picked up each item and a beep sounded. Once he beeped all the items, he told Kase the amount owed, and Kase pulled from his pocket a fold of leather he called a wallet. He had absently watched this process before at the clothing market, not truly understanding until now. Kase extracted a single green slip, handed it to the youth, and was given many back in return, plus a handful of coins.

Kase placed all their items in two white bags and handed one to Aleksandr to carry. He took hold of Aleksandr's other hand and led him from the market.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Eleven

Kase reclined on his pillows, leaning back on the headboard of his bed. His computer sat open and running on his lap, and he scanned the pictures of Greek ruins and artifacts filling the current site on the screen. Front and center, a sword—a xiphos—just like Alek’s.

Kase didn’t know what to believe anymore. After what happened in the grocery store, Alek opened up to him; believing danger existed, he wished to warn Kase. Then Alek told him what had to be the most bizarre story he’d ever heard: a Gorgon had turned him into a stone statue, and he awoke in the moonlight at the museum.

Kase grabbed at his hair, pulling the strands tight, and tilted his head back. He closed his eyes. The story was beyond belief, but how else could he explain the odd things about Alek?

He shut his laptop and moved it to the nightstand. Removing his glasses, he folded close the arms and set them next to the computer. He shifted down the bed, under a single sheet, and rolled to face the window, chewing on his bottom lip. Alek was a total mystery. The guy carried no identification on him, had no place to call home. And the way he didn’t know anything about the modern world... It all rang very wrong to Kase. Alek was definitely “off,” but he hadn’t made a single attempt to hurt Kase, just the imaginary danger he ran after. Maybe the mystery was part of his attraction to Alek. He could never turn down the challenge of deciphering a riddle.

He scrubbed at his tired eyes; research took a lot of concentration. He needed to get sleep if he expected to make sense of any information he found. Kase reached over to his nightstand, grabbed the remote for the fan light and pushed the button, turning off the light. He put the remote back on the table and pulled the sheet up to his waist, wrapped his arms around his pillow and closed his eyes.

\*\*\*\*

Kase snapped awake, startled by his own heavy breathing, thinking his allergies must be bad again to wake himself. He tossed off the sheet, too warm even with the fan’s cool breeze, and closed his eyes once more.

“*Snurrk.*”

Kase's eyes shot open. *What the?* He scanned the room, darkness hampering his already poor vision, except for the fading moonlight coming through the drapes. A dark form rested on the floor near the bedroom door. "Not again." Kase fumbled around on his nightstand for the remote, jabbed at the button, and light flooded the room. He picked up his glasses from the end table, adjusting them on his face.

Alek startled awake, grabbing for his sword, his bleary eyes locking on Kase, and Kase almost laughed. *Some warrior.*

"What are you doing?" Kase asked.

"I am standing guard," Alek mumbled, pushing to his feet. He opened the door and stuck his head out, checking the hall. He grunted, pulled back, and shut the door.

Kase pinched his lips together, holding in his laughter. *Priceless.* "A sleeping guard?"

"I was not sleeping. I was resting my eyes."

Kase stared at Alek.

Alek stared back.

"You win." Kase shook his head, slid to one side of the bed, and threw back the sheet. "Get in. But no funny business," he warned with a scowl.

"Why would I be funny?" Alek asked, smirking. He lay his sword next to the bed on the floor within easy reach.

"Hand me the remote." Kase pointed to it, and removed his glasses. He shut off the light and handed the device and glasses to Alek. "Put these on the table." Once Alek did that, Kase rolled over, showing his back to Alek.

Alek lay down and scooted close to Kase, spooning around him. He wrapped an arm around Kase, pulling him tight against his body.

Kase stilled. *I don't believe this guy!* He looked over his shoulder. "I told you, no funny business. What are you doing?"

"Sleeping."

"You're not sleeping. You've got your arm around me."

"You said no funny business. I am not being funny. This is how I sleep." Alek tightened his grip around Kase.



Kase snorted softly. “Great. There’s a comedian born every minute.” He sighed. “And a sucker too.” He blew out a long breath, closed his eyes and let sleep take him under.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Twelve

### *Monday*

Kase sat at his desk, overlooking the living room. He adjusted the glasses on his nose and hunched closer to the screen, reading the info about the warrior collection at the museum. It still didn't provide him with enough information about the statue Alek insisted was him.

After a surprisingly good night's sleep with Alek in his bed, Kase woke and decided a closed mind wouldn't help him find answers. He still had reservations, and believed the knock on Alek's head may have something to do with Alek's Gorgon story, but he was a reporter, and he'd give it his best shot at finding out the truth. Still...

The idea that anyone could be cursed into stone was make-believe, a myth, a legend written by storytellers to entertain the people. To even express a tiny modicum of belief would certify him "crazy." Kase leaned back in his chair and ran his hands down his face. He really should take a break, get up, and walk around. Instead, he turned his attention to the artistry below him, where Aleksandr smoothly worked with his xiphos. The way the blade sliced through the air, all clean lines and smooth arcs, was a thing of beauty, as was the man himself. Stripped down to nothing except his layered, hardened-linen skirt, he exuded power and confidence, and tanned skin and rippled abs.

Kase sighed, and absently rubbed his lips, remembering how the warrior's mouth had felt on his at the museum. Maybe he shouldn't have turned Alek down that first morning. Who was he kidding? He didn't want any entanglements. It was too soon after... He shook his head, not wanting to think about it.

Besides, from what he recalled about the ancient Greeks, same-sex relations consisted of a patron and a boy, and he was certainly no boy. Still, he'd seen the heat in Alek's eyes whenever he caught the man looking at him.

Kase brought up the image of the Young Hercules statue Alek swore was him and stared, really stared at it. Sure, the outfit was the same, including the weapon he insisted on carrying with him in the house, but gray stone versus flesh with its rippling muscles and dark hair was a big stretch for any imagination. He glanced from the screen to Alek and back again as Alek glided about the room. Kase pulled out his cell and recorded his movements. Alek's

skill with the blade was phenomenal; Kase envied the fighter's grace. Maybe he could share this with the group, and they could learn from the video. Kase watched the warrior's technique: precise and sure, with a fluidity he had yet to see matched by anyone at his practices.

Alek turned, stepping forward and centering himself. He spun his weapon high, as if preparing to cut off his opponent's head, and Kase's breath caught in his chest. *No, it couldn't be.* He backtracked the video and stopped it at the frame he wanted. He tapped his fingers on the screen, enlarging the image slightly, and lifted it to his computer monitor. His eyes widened. *Son of a...*

His gaze snapped from the cell phone image to his laptop, then down at the real flesh and blood copy standing in his living room, breathing hard. The exact same stance; except the expression on Alek's face was different. The mouth of the statue yawned open, yelling, and Alek's mouth in the photo was pressed firmly closed in concentration. The muscles were equally defined, in the same areas, tensed to the same degree.

Kase slumped back in his chair and stared at the image on his laptop. He ran an unsteady hand through his hair. Unless this was some elaborate farce put on by extremely talented artists, or some reality TV prank, Alek had somehow been turned into stone, and now he'd been restored to flesh and blood. What Alek told him was true, and now the Greek warrior was practicing combat moves in his home.

What a story this would make if he could prove it. Kase straightened up, his mind whirling. He'd have to think of a title first. *Flesh and Stone; Frozen in Time.* It'd be the story of a lifetime. Sure, some would call it a hoax; they'd write him off as one twist short of a slinky. His shoulders drooped. *But then what would happen to Alek?* He could barely function here, in this world; he was like a grown child. People would come along and take advantage of him or lock him up somewhere. No. Enticing and newsworthy as the story might be, he did have some morals, and his line was drawn at turning someone in for personal gain.

Kase closed his eyes to compose himself. Writing the story was out of the question. Still, there were questions to be answered, and he never was one to turn down the quest for answers and the first one was: why was Alek now returned to human form? Finding out was going to require a lot of research, and while the Internet was useful, some of the best information was found in the older texts housed at the library, volumes too old to pass from hand to hand, but over time, meticulously and carefully photocopied and duplicated to save for

researchers and the plain curious. He didn't have any urgent article deadlines, so they could go to the library. He gazed at Alek and wondered if he would like to see it. He'd surely compare it to one of the great libraries of his time; the New York Public Library was an adventure all unto itself. Kase knew Alek would find it fascinating.

Opening his eyes, Kase clicked through the website, looking for more images of The Young Hercules statue. As he did, a cold, prickly feeling tingled along the top of his spine. He massaged the back of his neck, and debated the need to see a physical therapist because he'd started to have these weird sensations. Maybe he'd tweaked something in one of his practice battle sessions.

Kase stretched his arms towards the ceiling and tilted his head to the left and right, in an attempt to work the kinks out. Lowering his arms, he reached for his mouse and frowned. A chilling frisson coursed down his back, accompanied by a strange hiss and slithering sound in the background. *What was that noise?* A long thin S-shaped shadow slid along his desk, and the undulating movement caught Kase's eye.

He twisted around to lo—

A hard, firm body crashed into his side, knocking him head over heels from his chair. He hit the floor with a hard thud and a loud grunt, landing on his stomach, his glasses flying from his face.

\*\*\*\*

Aleksandr let a low, protective growl rumble from his chest. *What was causing this strange feeling?* Once was unusual, twice coincidence, but three times now he'd felt it. He lay sprawled across Kase's body, keeping the man tucked under him as he stared out the window, eyes narrowed to try and discern any movement. The small courtyards attached to every building were pleasant enough, except they were easily accessible, a point of weakness in their defense. The odd tingling in his nape slowly dissipated, taking Aleksandr's rush with it, and bringing him back to the firm body below him.

"Get off me." Kase shoved upwards with his ass, attempting to dislodge him. The movement offered up Kase's tempting crease, and Aleksandr's cock stiffened. He fought the urge to grind down.

Kase stilled beneath him, twisted and rolled to his back. He got his hands in front of him and pushed at Aleksandr's chest. "You're crushing me, and—What the hell? Why did you do that?"

Aleksandr planted his elbows on the carpet on either side of Kase's shoulders and adjusted his knees so he straddled the man below him, keeping his bare feet locked on Kase's ankles. He pushed his torso up a few inches to look straight down into Kase's gray eyes, the color of storm clouds captured within a darker ring circling each pupil.

Muscles clenched in Kase's jaw, and he barely blinked as he stared back. Aleksandr struggled to keep a blank expression, but a tiny curl of a smile played at the corner of his mouth. He scanned Kase's body, head to hip, looking down between them. Kase squirmed, gripping Aleksandr's upper arms. Kase's body grazed against Aleksandr's pteruges which, in turn, shifted against his groin. Aleksandr's growl morphed to a groan.

He caught the flash of heat in Kase's eyes before it fled, quickly followed by a hard swallow. It was too soon. He would wait... for now.

Aleksandr sat tall on his knees, moved to the side, and helped pull Kase to a sitting position.

"I saw you rub your neck," he said. "You sensed something. Tell me what it felt like?"

"I don't know. I got this chill down my spine, and then..." Kase twisted and looked out the window.

"What?"

Kase glanced around, turned onto his knees and crawled, feeling around on the floor, until his hand landed on his glasses. He put them on, stood and walked to the window. Aleksandr rose, retrieved his sword from the floor, and followed him closely.

"There was this... shadow... Long and thin and bending. If I was at my family's cabin, I would have said it was a tree branch swaying in the window, but as you can see, there're no trees here." Kase placed his palms on the glass and, with his nose practically touching the window, peered out intently.

Now that the strange sensation had disappeared, Aleksandr no longer feared an attack. Instead, he worried about Kase's well-being. He stepped to Kase's right side, leaned his weapon against the sill, and observed the man's profile: the strange round pieces of glass he wore to see, perched on his straight, never-been-broken nose; the groomed eyebrows and hairstyle, even if it was slightly messed up from Aleksandr's success at keeping him safe. He reached up with his left hand and brushed back the golden lock falling over the eye closest to him.

Kase turned his head to look at him, allowing Aleksandr to slide his hand back into Kase's hair. Silky strands slid through his fingers, not at all coarse and thick, like his own. Flaxen hair was favored by the Greeks, a mark of favoritism by the Gods. Kase's golden tresses would have ensured him a profitable marriage, unlike Aleksandr's dark mass. He watched his own movements, not paying attention to anything other than the fine hair he gently stroked, until Kase's hand encircled his wrist.

Aleksandr's gaze shifted to meet Kase's. No spark of fear met him, only a bright aura that pulled at him. Kase's eyes closed, and it was all the invitation Aleksandr needed. He spread his fingers wide on the back of Kase's head and gently guided him forward. Aleksandr let his own eyes fall shut at the moment of impact, a soft landing on damp, full lips. The kisses were sweet, small pecks, their mouths parting to breathe and press, retreat, and move in again, and again.

Kase gripped Aleksandr's shoulders, his tongue licking and seeking entrance to Aleksandr's mouth. The tenderness was unexpected, as was the sudden cold chill lancing through his skull.

Aleksandr snapped his head back, wrapped his arms around Kase and dropped the both of them to the floor. He rolled them away from the window, hearing Kase yell, the sound muffled by his chest. He kept his eyes focused on the window and spotted the snakelike shadow waving and undulating across the glass. He cringed in horror at the appendage dashing forth to strike at the window. Low, malicious laughter followed, and he shuddered at the sound.

*I should have known...*

Aleksandr pushed to his knees, grabbed Kase's glasses and tossed them away. He pressed his hand to Kase's chest. "Stay here. Do not look." He sprang to his feet and snatched up his sword.

"Wait! What did you do that for? Where are my glasses?" Kase yelled after him as Aleksandr yanked open the door leading out to the small balcony and all but leapt down the entire set of stairs to the backyard. He reached the grass and looked to the left. He scanned the rooftops of the other homes around them and checked for movement behind the fences and foliage.

The scrape of a door sliding open and of heavy breathing sounded behind Aleksandr, and he spun around to find Kase approaching from the living room.

"What is it?" Kase asked, squinting into the distance. Aleksandr covered Kase's eyes with his free hand and growled.

He pushed Kase backwards into the house. “I told you not to look. He is here, and I can not let you get hurt. I need to find him.” Aleksandr kept pushing Kase until he hit the couch, and then tipped him over the back of it. While Kase struggled to right himself, Aleksandr raced outside and let his senses open up, directing him towards his goal. There... to the left: Medon.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Thirteen

Aleksandr ran through the yard and jumped the small fence, then another and another. He bypassed tiny, yapping dogs, scattering cats, and frightened birds, sending them up in flight. He ignored the angry calls from humans and dodged children kicking around balls and playing in boxes filled with sand, until he reached a dusty lot with the skeleton of a house, skidded to a stop, and looked around.

“And you call yourself a warrior,” tsked a chiding voice. “You can’t even find me.” A high-pitched, masculine chuckle echoed around the empty building and off the nearby homes, seeming to come from every direction at once. “Look behind you, mighty soldier,” the voice mocked.

Aleksandr spun, bringing his xiphos forward into a two-handed grip. A slender young man slithered out of the framework’s shadows and into the dim light, brilliant green eyes flashing with menace.

A bolt of fear chilled Aleksandr at the sight of those eyes again. He slammed his eyelids shut and pivoted to his right. Taking deep breaths to steady his runaway heartbeat, he tilted his sword and carefully cracked open his lids to catch Medon’s reflection in his sword’s blade. *How could a monster still remain handsome?* His lithe body and youthful appearance was what had attracted Aleksandr to him in the first place. Shockingly, he still retained his beauty despite turning into a monster. He no longer wore the clothes of their time, but of this new world—dressed all in black, dark glasses atop his head, thumbs hooked into loops on his pants. *Where are the snakes?*

“My dear Aleksandr”—his name rolled teasingly off Medon’s tongue—“how are you adjusting to your new life?” His mocking tone rang in the eerie silence around them. Medon raised one hand and studied his nails, blew on them and rubbed them against his long-sleeved black shirt.

Aleksandr cautiously considered the monster he’d once called Taras, his lover. The man he thought of as friend, who never held more of his heart than that. He shivered, recalling Taras had been changed by the vile Medusa, transformed into Medon, and was granted the power to turn men to stone.

*He turned me to stone.*

A cauldron of burning fire roiled in Aleksandr’s belly, creeping up into his heart. Hatred burst from it, ricocheting throughout his body and bubbling out his throat in a deep, rough growl.



Medon curled his upper lip, then flicked out the tip of his tongue. “I must say, I’m surprised the Gods set you free after all this time, especially after letting you remain petrified for centuries. No one has faith in them anymore. I thought they’d fade away into nothingness.”

The Gorgon scrutinized Aleksandr. “Hmm... Why you in particular? And why now?” Medon tapped his lips thoughtfully. “To top it off, Hermes granted you the power of speech. You prayed to him, gave him an offering, didn’t you? It must have been something quite precious. I wonder what it could have been?”

Words lodged in Aleksandr’s throat, choking him. He clenched his jaw, forcing back the scream of hatred struggling to break free at the mention of his offering, of Erasmus’ ring. His sword would speak for him; all he needed was an opening, a chance to finish off this foul creature. He must concentrate and not let the beast’s words sidetrack him. He must focus.

“I see you’ve found yourself a new boy already,” Medon continued blandly. “Have you broken his heart yet?” His voice turned colder, tongue sweeping over his full lips. “Or are you waiting for the right moment?”

An icy frisson snaked up Aleksandr’s back, and he suppressed a shiver of fear. “What do you want?” he asked, gritting his teeth.

Medon strode forward, flipping down those dark glasses he had perched on his head. He stopped outside of Aleksandr’s sword’s reach, his penetrating gaze now hidden by the reflective lens, allowing Aleksandr to see himself doubled in the small round circles. Kase said they were to keep out the sun; now they allowed Aleksandr to look at Medon without fear. He rolled his hunched shoulders back and dug the balls of his feet into the sandy ground for balance.

“The same thing I’ve always wanted. You, dead. Permanently. Of course, you suffering for all of eternity would work too.”

Aleksandr raised his weapon. Death wasn’t an option, nor would he allow Medon to turn him back to stone. But death would be preferable to still life. He adjusted his grip and stance again.

“The only one dying will be you, Medon,” he snarled. “Taras was destroyed when Medusa created you; you turned me to stone for two thousand years. How many suffered your demonic gaze and were broken, never to return to life?”

Medon scoffed. “Do you really think it’s that simple to kill me and lift the curse? Just lop off my head?” He ran a hand across his throat. “And here I

always thought you were smarter than me. I take it all back.” He stalked around him, and Aleksandr pivoted to follow his movements. “Read up on your history, Aleksandr. Especially the poetry.” Medon faced Aleksandr full-on and pointed directly at Aleksandr’s chest, his heart.

“The Gorgon comes, the Gorgon knows, seeking those whose hearts have froze, when bitterness will not let go...

“There’s more, however, I’ll leave you to figure it out on your own. I don’t want to make it too easy for you.” His lip curled. “Now if you’ll excuse me. I have some people to *see*.” Medon turned, his long strides carrying him swiftly back inside the skeletal house, its shadows providing numerous hiding places.

Aleksandr lunged to stop him, missed and chased him, weaving between the framework of the empty structure. He yelped, pain stabbing his bare soles, and he hopped around, pulling up short. Anger clouded his mind at the lost chance to land the killing blow to the treacherous monster. Lifting his foot, he found bits of metal sticking to his skin. He brushed them off, thankful they hadn’t broken his flesh and caused any bleeding. Glancing around at the gray stone floor, he spotted many more of those sharp, sticky pieces. He picked several up and examined them. They reminded him of pins, but were thicker and had ridges.

Carefully, he made his way out of the house, heading back to Kase’s. He reached the first fence and was met by a broad man with a gray-flecked beard and long hair, pulled back into a tail. The man’s down-turned lips and flushed face did not bode well for Aleksandr.

“Hey!” the man yelled, and Aleksandr approached with caution. “Stop right there. You’ve got to go around.” He pointed at the black road to Aleksandr’s right.

“My apologies,” Aleksandr replied, turning in the indicated direction.

“And put some clothes on,” the man called out as Aleksandr took the corner around the man’s home to take himself out of sight. He sheathed his xiphos, sure that Medon was done with him for the day, and set out on the white, partitioned walkway. He blushed at the catcalls he received from a handful of young women sitting on a set of stairs, drinking from bottles, and picked up his pace, jogging to Kase’s home.

Kase stood outside on the walkway, his agitation easy to spot. When he caught sight of Aleksandr, he rushed to him, his face in a scowl. “What the

hell's going on?" He slapped a hand to Aleksandr's chest, right above his heart. "Where'd you run off to?"

"Come quickly," Aleksandr commanded, grabbing Kase's hand and dragging him back inside. "There is much danger."

\*\*\*\*

Once inside the house, Aleksandr dropped Kase's hand and began pacing and muttering. "Gorgon... seeking... frozen hearts... bitterness."

"What happened?" Kase asked, stepping in front of Aleksandr and halting his steps.

Aleksandr balled his hands and anxiously stepped around Kase. "Must remember... Gorgon, seeking, frozen hearts, bitterness." A hand tightly grasped his arm, and Aleksandr jerked up his head to find Kase's worried gaze on him.

"Do you want me to write it down?"

"Write? Yes, yes. Quickly." He shoved at Kase's shoulder, pushing him to the eating table and grabbing at one of the pieces of paper stacked there. He pressed down on Kase's shoulders to get him to sit in the chair.

"Hold on, I need a pen."

Aleksandr growled at the delay, watching Kase dig within a drawer next to the large food box in the orbbed sun room and return to the table. Aleksandr tilted his head. "That is not bronze or bone?"

"No," Kase said, taking a seat and pulling the paper forward. "This is a pen. What do you want to remember?"

"Medon's words: The Gorgon comes and knows, seeking frozen hearts and bitterness." Aleksandr growled and pounded his fists on his thighs. "He made it rhyme."

"This Medon gave you a poem?" Kase asked, the pen moving smoothly across the paper.

"Yes!" Aleksandr pointed at him excitedly. "But what is the curse?" he mumbled, scrubbing a hand over his short hair as Kase quickly transcribed his words. "He said simply removing his head will not break the curse."

"Removing his head?" The pen halted in its path. "You have to kill him?"

"Of course," Aleksandr said, with an offhand wave, looking down at Kase. "He is the one who turned me to stone." He crossed his arms over his muscular chest. "While he lives, others will suffer a similar fate."

“Hang on. You’re saying a Gorgon is alive and well, and here? In New York City?” Kase’s voice rose. “How is that possible?” He peered up at Aleksandr.

“Yes... I have no reason to lie.” Aleksandr scowled. “Although I do not know why the Gods allowed him to live...”

Kase squinted his eyes and frowned. “Explain to me again who this Gorgon is?”

“His name is Medon.” Aleksandr couldn’t keep the contempt from his voice at saying the foul creature’s name.

Kase tapped the end of the pen on the paper. “Wait a second. Don’t you mean Medusa?”

Aleksandr shook his head and sighed, unfolding his arms and leaning to rest his palms on the edge of the table. “Medusa must have created him. Her blood contained powerful magic.”

Kase’s eyes widened. “Hold up. You’re telling me Medusa created a male Gorgon... with her blood?”

“Yes,” Aleksandr said dryly, straightening up.

Kase tossed his pen on the table and drummed his fingers on the wood. He leaned back in his chair, stared up at the ceiling and hummed. Suddenly, he shot up out of his seat.

He grinned madly at Aleksandr. “Time to do some research.”

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Fourteen

*Tuesday*

Kase blinked his eyes open. A warm breath puffed against the back of his neck, and a thick shaft pressed and rocked against his ass. He rolled forward, but Alek's arms tightened, holding him firmly in place. He sighed. The man was incorrigible—flirting and making all those innuendos. Okay, he had to admit, he flirted too. How could he not? Looking at Alek gave him a boner every time. Like now. He snuck a peek behind him, and he was overcome with the sudden urge to turn and kiss those luscious lips.

Why didn't he just give in? Why not have some fun? "*Because what will happen when he leaves and you're left alone again?*" asked a small voice in the back of Kase's mind. He didn't want to think about that; instead he diverted his gaze, towards the off-white drapes, taking in the growing daylight illuminating them.

Yesterday afternoon, he'd sat at his upstairs desk, researching information about Medon and the Greek curse on his laptop. Unsuccessfully, he reminded himself, because he couldn't stop watching Aleksandr work through his sword drills. Cuts and blocks, parries, lunges and spins, all with an ease Kase knew he would never master. Alek asked him many times to join him in practice, but he insisted he had too much research to do. Finally, Alek stopped asking and disappeared into the downstairs bathroom. He grew concerned when Alek didn't emerge for quite some time, and the sound of water running continued unabated. Kase got up to investigate.

He rapped on the door. "What are you doing in there?"

"Bathing," Alek had replied over the sound of the running water.

"Open the door."

The flow of water ceased and Alek opened the door, stark naked with a washcloth in hand. Water dotted every surface of his golden skin, caught in the hair of his groin and trailed between and around each defined abdominal muscle. Kase gaped at the godlike vision before him. He caught himself licking his lips, and stopped; *I shall not drool.*

He glanced down to see a puddle of water pooling at Alek's feet. "How you can get in so much trouble with water is unbelievable. Dry off and come with me." Kase led him upstairs to his full bath and proceeded to show Alek how

both the tub and shower worked. Then he'd gone back downstairs and dried the bathroom before returning to his computer. In the end, he'd only managed to find enough information to know they'd definitely have to make a trip to the New York Public Library today. There was one particular book he wanted to look at, and it couldn't be checked out.

A kiss and rub of skin to skin between Kase's shoulder blades indicated Alek's growing wakefulness. Alek sighed and pushed his groin harder against Kase's ass.

Kase patted Alek's arm. "Time to get up." Instead of Alek releasing him, he gathered him closer. "Hey, c'mon, let go."

Alek relented and opened his arms, and Kase scrambled out of bed.

"I do not understand your reluctance," Alek said.

Kase spun to face him, finding Alek flat on his back and staring up at the ceiling. "What are you talking about?"

Alek turned his head to look at him, his dark-blue eyes piercing. "You were willing to accept my kisses and affection before. Now you refuse my advances."

"I'm not refusing, I'm..." He trailed off, watching as Alek rolled onto his hand and knees and began crawling across the bed towards him. Kase took a step back. "I-I was helping to calm you at the store, you appeared uncomfortable. Then you surprised me at the window..." he trailed off.

Alek continued his slow advance.

"And," Kase hastily added, "I was trying to save you."

Alek halted, his brow arched. "Save me? From what?"

"Not what, whom. From the guard at the museum." Kase crossed his arms.

Alek sneered, shifting to sit on the edge of the bed. "I did not require saving, I am *Lochagos*, first in my *lochos*. The best of my men and quite able to defend myself from what counts for soldiers here in your time. Nothing more than batting away bugs." He stood, planted his feet wide and placed his hands on his hips, his fingers pointing to his prick. It drew Kase's gaze, the heavy hanging cock, swelling and rising to full attention. Alek stalked forward, his dick pointing straight at Kase like a heat-seeking missile.

Kase's heart pounded; his breath quickened. Alek rested his fingertips under Kase's chin and tilted it up until their gazes met. The warrior didn't ask, he

took. He leaned in and stole Kase's breath, hungrily licking inside Kase's parted lips. Kase slid his hands up Alek's chest, spread his fingers wide at the sides of Alek's head and pulled him in, slipping his own tongue out to dance with Alek's.

All too soon, Alek broke their kiss and placed his forehead to Kase's. Kase couldn't focus; he'd slipped into a daze at the touch of Aleksandr's lips, bringing to the surface longings he'd believed died off a year ago. Alek chuckled, and Kase snapped his head up, the laughter breaking the spell he'd fallen into.

He shoved Alek back and shook his head. "No. I..." He spun around and ran into the bathroom, locking the door behind him. "Damn it," he muttered, placing his hands on the edge of the sink and hanging his head. Alek was from Greece, *ancient Greece*. Besides it was too soon. He wasn't ready for this.

Kase turned on the cold water and splashed some on his face. He straightened, twisted the knob and snatched at the nearby hand towel, then peered at himself in the mirror, catching sight of his Caduceus staff tattoo.

"What have you gotten me into, Hermes?"

\*\*\*\*

Aleksandr waited some time for Kase to emerge from the bathing room. He scratched at his head and paced the floor. Their attraction was undeniable, and he could not puzzle out Kase's reluctance to be bedded. Perhaps Kase only took, was never taken. That would surely explain the man's resistance. Still, the way Kase melted under his touch...

He rolled his shoulders and stretched out his arms, loosening the well-worked muscles. With his belly grumbling, and Kase still locked in, Aleksandr descended the stairs to use the smaller bathing room and its toi-let. He grinned with gladness at this modern advance, surpassing the piss pots he'd grown up with or the rows of holes in the public bath houses.

The private bathing rooms and self-draining tub, the racks of clothing in Kase's closet, struck Aleksandr as *aristoi*. Kase's sparse, tiny home and well-worn car, however, were more of *metic* standards. *Although those golden tresses would have opened many doors*. He felt he should return the favor for the food and clothing, but what did he have to offer?

Body empty of water and hands cleaned and dried, Aleksandr stepped into the... *What did Kase call this room again?* He glanced up at the unlit sun-

globe. He moved to the switch and flicked it up. The glass ball came to life and brightened the room. He pushed the switch down and the room darkened. Up, light, down, dark.

“Ale!” Kase’s voice cut into his fun, and he grumbled, left the switch off and ambled into the dining area. He looked up the staircase to see Kase standing at the top, glasses set on a freshly shaved face, dressed in light-brown shorts and a bloodred shirt with a tiger and dragon crossing swords.

Kase pushed up his glasses, squeezing the bridge of his nose. He settled them back down and motioned for Aleksandr to come to him. “Come up, and I’ll give you some clothes.”

Aleksandr spread his arms wide. “Do you not prefer me like this?”

“It’s not a question of what I prefer, it’s what society requires. Despite your many ogling fans from our last shopping trip, public nudity is frowned upon except at certain events.”

Aleksandr paced up the steps. “The citizens are ashamed of their bodies. Even Helene covered herself, and she is almost as beautiful as Aphrodite, may the Goddess forgive me.”

“We’re not embarrassed by our bodies, not all of us anyway. Women are usually more self-conscious than men.” Kase slid out of the way when Aleksandr reached the top to allow him to pass by.

Aleksandr stopped in front of Kase. “Are you ashamed of your body?”

Kase pulled back in surprise. “What? Me? No, I’m not.”

Aleksandr let his gaze travel up and down Kase’s torso, admiring the way the shirt pulled tight across his broad chest. He raised his hand to run it down Kase’s arm, and felt a shiver course through Kase at his touch. He lowered his voice. “Then why do you cover yourself, even in the privacy of your own home? Unless it’s because I am here?” He tilted his head and raised a brow.

“I-I’m not,” Kase stuttered, but didn’t move away.

“I will not be bothered if you wish to walk naked in your own home.” The corner of Aleksandr’s mouth quirked up.

Kase rolled his eyes. “I bet you wouldn’t.” He slipped past Aleksandr and entered his bedroom. “Come on, I’ll get your clothes.”

Aleksandr smiled. Skittish like a flock of gulls. But like the ocean’s rolling tide, he would persist. Kase was not like other lovers he’d taken to bed. He was



intelligent, not afraid to answer back, strong in his opinions. Much like Eras...mus.

As Kase opened the *draw-ers* to pull out clothes, Aleksandr focused on the wing painted on Kase's leg. *Hermes, is this why you chose this man for me? A substitute for my first love?* Did Hermes wish to help ease his pain with Kase? There were many similarities between Kase and Erasmus, and, although he appreciated the God's help, he did not believe anyone could stop the ache in his heart for the loss of Erasmus, no matter how alike the two men were. He shook his head to cast off the depressing thoughts.

Kase turned to face him. "Your clothes..." He peered at Aleksandr a moment before tossing the garments on the bed and walking over. "Are you all right?" He brushed a hand down Aleksandr's arm.

Aleksandr nodded and gave a lopsided smile. "Yes. Old memories." He stepped around Kase to the bed and touched the clothing.

"Anything I can help with?" Kase asked gently.

Aleksandr glanced at him, then shook his head and turned back. He lifted the lightweight undergarment and spun it until the slit was facing the right way. He leaned down and stepped into it, hitching it up.

Did he want only the fleeting dalliance of bedding Kase? Aleksandr knew he could not easily give up his heart to another. Yet he couldn't deny his attraction to Kase: an unexplainable something drew him towards the man beyond his physical appeal.

Not that it mattered; Kase held him at arm's length. Was Kase keeping him away because he'd lost a lover too? Perhaps he was also determined to not make the same mistake again.

Kase's hand landed on Aleksandr's upper bicep as he straightened, strong fingers squeezing his arm. The warmth and comfort a balm on Aleksandr's heart.

"I'll go down and get breakfast ready while you finish dressing," Kase said, withdrawing his hand and allowing the cool air of the room to chill him. "We're going to the library today. There's a book I want to look at."

Aleksandr spun. "A library? Full of scrolls?"

Kase chuckled, turning to go. "Who knows? There are rooms of this library I've never even been in." He paused in the doorway. "I want to leave within the hour." He turned and stepped into the hallway.

*A library full of scrolls!* Aleksandr halted. *Ah, Hermes, but I can not read this world's language.* He sighed. Still, the opportunity to visit a large library was excitement enough, and he eagerly looked forward to seeing this place. Swiftly, he finished dressing, grabbed his sword, and rushed downstairs.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Fifteen

They walked several blocks and descended a set of stone stairs to a cavern below ground. Aleksandr fidgeted, missing his xiphos' weight on his hip. Kase again insisted he leave it behind. He moved close behind Kase, fingers twitching, fists clenching, eventually bumping into Kase's back.

Kase glanced over his shoulder at him, brow furrowed. He gave a small smile and reached back to take hold of Aleksandr's hand. Together, they wove their way between the mass of bodies. Kase pulled two small squares of paper from his messenger bag, gave one to Aleksandr and instructed him how to insert the paper card and push at the bar to get past the gate.

Such a small, inadequate, silly thing to keep citizens out, he thought, until he noticed the number of blue-uniformed, broad men, their eyes scanning the crowd, with their heavy black sticks hanging from their hips, and conceded even he would not want to take on several of those men empty-handed.

They boarded a metal box, filled with people, bars and seats. With no place to sit, Kase directed him to hold on to a pole. When the box shuddered forward, Aleksandr stumbled, and Kase's arms encircled him, a wry smile on the man's face. Aleksandr turned to his savior and widened his stance, the bar at his back held in a tight grip. He leaned forward to ask Kase questions about their mode of transportation, listening raptly to the answers.

At each stop, Aleksandr watched the citizens move on and off the *sub-way* and allowed Kase to pull him into two adjacent seats when they became available. They pressed together, two muscular men in the small seats. Aleksandr slipped his hand under Kase's elbow and lightly ran his fingertips along the smooth skin. Kase rested his hand on his own leg, his pinky reaching to rub at Aleksandr's thigh.

Kase nudged at his shoulder with his own and jerked his chin up. "Let's go, we have to change trains." He stood and held his hand out to Aleksandr, helping him rise from his seat by the window. They emerged into an even larger station, where Kase refused to give up his hand, dragging him up and down stairs and into another metal box.

Again, they stood. Aleksandr, prepared for the jolt of movement, pushed Kase against the pole and boxed him in, stepping close. Kase placed a hand on Aleksandr's chest, keeping space between their bodies, and shook his head.

Aleksandr frowned, narrowing his eyes. He leaned forward to speak. “Why not?”

“Men don’t usually display affection towards other men in public.”

Aleksandr frowned. “Another strange rule your people have.”

Kase glanced quickly around them then slid his hand down Aleksandr’s chest before withdrawing. “I’ll explain later.”

Aleksandr took a slight step back; he did not wish to cause Kase trouble and was rewarded with a faint smile from the man, which he answered with his own.

“Here’s our stop.” Kase pointed to the sliding doors. They joined the throngs exiting the box and onto the rock platform. Kase regained hold of Aleksandr’s hand and directed him to a long flight of stairs. Aleksandr halted, startled by the sight of people rising upwards without stepping.

Kase grinned. “Escalator. Wanna try?”

Aleksandr narrowed his eyes at the strange steps that appeared out of the floor and moved of their own accord, like a sea monster’s back as it rippled through the ocean.

“Watch how they get on. Lift your foot like you’re going to walk,” Kase said, his hand on the small of Aleksandr’s back. “Be sure not to stop.” He urged Alek forward.

Aleksandr raised his hands above the moving black railing, raised one foot and concentrated on the steps. One, two... His foot jerked forward and his body tilted swiftly backwards. He flailed his arms and grabbed for the rails, gripping them tightly. A warm hand braced his shoulders. Having caught his balance, Aleksandr cautiously twisted on the step and looked behind him at Kase.

Kase chuckled and patted his back. “That wasn’t so bad now, was it? When you get to the top, step off like you’re walking, or you’ll stumble again.”

Nodding, Aleksandr turned forward, peeking around the people to see when the top arrived. He didn’t like the way this object controlled his speed, or the way he was surrounded in front and in back by the crowd. It was not good for defense nor fighting. Enemies could lie in wait and, one by one, pick off the riders.

They reached the top and Aleksandr leapt. He wasn’t going to wait until the steps disappeared into the floor. He turned to see Kase easily step off.

“That’s certainly one way to hop off the escalator,” Kase said, drawing Aleksandr to the side. “Are you all right?”

Aleksandr nodded. “Yes. But next time we will take the stairs.”

The corner of Kase’s mouth twitched up in the little way it did when he was amused. “Okay, it’s a deal. Are you ready? We’re a couple of blocks from the library.”

The urge to reach up and run his thumb across Kase’s lips overcame Aleksandr. He held back, keeping his hands in place. “I am ready,” he said, regretting they were not at Kase’s home or somewhere private as they made their way into the heart of downtown New York City.

\*\*\*\*

Aleksandr gazed up at the lions guarding the entrance to the library.

“Patience and Fortitude,” Kase said beside him.

“What?”

“Those are their names. The lions: Patience and Fortitude.”

“Odd names, but I like them. Those ideals served us soldiers well.” He turned to look at Kase.

“Yes,” Kase said, gazing back. “I would think they would. Patience to learn the skills necessary to be a great warrior, learning to obey your commanders. Fortitude, courage and bravery in the face of adversity.”

“You are well versed,” Aleksandr said with admiration.

“It’s what I do, remember? I’m a writer, gotta have an impressive vocabulary.”

“You would be in great demand by our Archons. An emissary to Rome, perhaps?”

Kase grabbed hold of Aleksandr’s hand, pulling him up the stairs towards the entrance. He glanced back at Aleksandr as he opened the door, a teasing smile on his lips. “Only if you were my bodyguard.”

Aleksandr blinked, surprised at Kase’s statement, pleased he enjoyed his company. He grinned, slipping past Kase, close enough to touch, and entered the building. “I will make it so.”

\*\*\*\*

Aleksandr tapped his fingers against his thigh, rolled his shoulders and arched his back. He reclined in his chair and gazed around. Again. Several young men at a nearby table attracted his attention while they carried on a heated debate. Aleksandr admired their physical forms for some time, having no clue what they were discussing, until a discreet cough from Kase drew him from his observation.

“It’s not polite to stare,” Kase murmured, keeping his voice low as the library’s rules required.

Aleksandr thought it a silly law, but who was he to argue with the stern-looking—glasses perched on the end of her nose—*librari-an* seated behind a huge desk not far from where they were sitting. He’d caught her staring at him a few times and had smiled politely in return. Each time, she startled at seeing his grin, quickly turning her head away. He huffed. The women in this modern age feigned ignorance and attraction like the courtesans would have at home. He sighed with the recollection of watching friends dally and flirt with the women, men he would never see again. The loss ached and stole his breath.

“Why don’t you go look around,” Kase said, his hand resting on the open pages of the book before him. “This library is beautiful, and there are some incredible works of art.” Aleksandr nodded and rose. “Come back in a bit and meet me here. Wait if I’ve left the table. I may be retrieving another book or making copies.”

Aleksandr turned to go, halting at the feel of Kase’s hand catching hold of his. He looked back to see Kase smiling.

Kase raised his other hand and waved it upwards. “Don’t forget to look up at the painted ceilings, they’re quite remarkable. I could stare at them all day.”

“I will,” Aleksandr replied, squeezing Kase’s hand once before dropping it and heading out, pacing between the rows and rows of tables.

He meandered the halls and stacks, studied the architecture and paintings, reclined in a few padded chairs, tilting his head back to take in the inspiring artwork Kase had mentioned. The one of Prometheus giving fire to mankind held his interest for some time. Eventually, he decided to return to the room of tables and followed behind a large group of black-skinned men and women dressed in brightly colored clothes and headwear.

Aleksandr spotted Kase at the same table, head bent over his book, pencil in hand, scribbling notes on his paper. Did the man not know how delicious he looked doing something simple and ordinary like reading? He wanted to...

Kase lifted his head and rubbed the back of his neck, quickly glancing around. As he put his head back down, the slither of an icy breeze ran down Aleksandr's nape. He froze, not even breathing. Centering himself, he slowly pivoted in a full circle, his eyes sweeping the tables and the upper levels for anyone resembling Medon, or who wore those dark glasses. He could not sense the monster.

Breaking off his search, he strode rapidly to Kase's side and leaned down to speak urgently into his ear. "We're leaving. Now."

"What?"

The abrupt upward snap of Kase's head caught Aleksandr unaware, and he received a sharp strike to his chin.

"Ow," Kase moaned, rubbing at the spot of impact.

Aleksandr growled, ignoring the hurt to his chin, and yanked at Kase's bicep to haul him to his feet. "We must go."

Kase brushed at Aleksandr's hand, fighting off his grasp. "Stop. Let go of me," he hissed. "Why do we need to leave?"

Aleksandr pulled his hand away, and turned around to watch the room, his eyes scanning the citizens. "He is here."

"Who's here?" Kase asked. Aleksandr glanced down to see Kase's puzzled expression.

"Medon."

"Here?" Kase jerked his gaze around the library floor, before looking up at Aleksandr again. "How do you know?" he whispered.

"Do you not feel his chilling presence?" Aleksandr leaned closer to Kase's ear and lowered his voice, speaking with urgency. "You rubbed at your neck. I saw you, right before I felt him. It was the same at the house of statues and at your home."

"Wait! What?" Kase's eyes widened, his voice rising before he lowered it again. His words became hushed and rapid. "Are you telling me I'm sensing him too?"

Aleksandr searched the room again. "Yes. I believe you are. I thought he was after me, but now—I fear—he may be after you as well." He stared pointedly at Kase.

Kase's eyes grew even wider. He pushed back his chair and rose to his feet. "Let's go." He gathered the many papers he had scattered around the table and placed them into his messenger bag. He left the books on the table and strode quickly down one corridor. Aleksandr kept pace on his heels; there was no way he was going to let Kase out of his sight again.

Aleksandr's head swiveled, studying everyone they passed.

"We can go this way." Kase pointed and proceeded in the direction he indicated.

Aleksandr hurried to catch up, laying his hand on Kase's shoulder. "Did you find what we needed? About the curse?"

Kase's lips twisted, his response delayed, and Aleksandr did not like it. The news would be bad, he could almost taste it, feeling it drag at him. Kase patted his hand, then pulled it down, lacing their fingers together.

"I found more than I expected, but less than I hoped. I think it'd be better if we spoke about the matter at home though. Prying ears and all..."

Aleksandr nodded. Yes, it would not do for Medon to find out what Kase had learned. Still he fretted. Kase's reluctance to speak of it did not bode well, not well at all.

\*\*\*\*\*



## Chapter Sixteen

Kase turned the key in the lock and entered his house, Alek superglued to his hip. The warrior had stuck so close to him since sensing Medon at the library, they could've run a three-legged race. Disappointment and annoyance twisted together in Kase's gut. Medon's arrival cut short their trip, and now he had to make do with the few notes he'd written and the Internet searches he'd done.

He grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator, a bag of chips, and rushed up the stairs to his loft office, leaving Alek behind. Dropping his messenger bag on his desk, he popped the clips and flipped the flap up. He removed his notes and photocopies, then pulled out his chair and took a seat.

Kase fired up his computer, and grabbed a pencil from his desk drawer. They'd grabbed a quick bite to eat on their way home, and he didn't have to worry about dinner for a few more hours. Now it was time to work.

Focused on his notes, Kase didn't hear Alek climb the stairs, nor notice when he stopped by his desk until he spoke.

"Come, you need to practice." Alek's deep voice cut into Kase's concentration.

"Huh?" Kase peered up to find Alek shirtless and wearing his skirted armor, sword in hand.

"You need to practice," Alek repeated. "Medon is tracking you. You need to know how to defend yourself."

Kase turned back to his computer screen. "I need to do more research."

A large hand descended in front of the screen, blocking Kase's view. "No. You will practice now," Alek said firmly.

Kase leaned back in his chair and reached under his glasses to rub his eyes. "I appreciate the help, but this research on the poem has to get done. Besides, I don't think I'm anywhere near your skill level."

"Then I will teach you."

Kase folded his arms over his chest. "Are you always this stubborn?"

"This is not stubbornness." Alek leaned his leg against the desk, his cobalt gaze intense. "We have a common enemy. I have not trained for true combat in

many years. I served my time in the army and had been home more than five total years before I was...”

Alek glanced down to his sword in his hand. “It has been too long. I need a sparring partner if I am to be able to defeat him. And if your abilities match those of the men who fought me the night we met, you will be turned to stone before you even know Medon is there.”

He met Kase’s gaze with steel determination, leaned forward and squeezed Kase’s shoulder. “You must be prepared.”

Kase stared back. Alek didn’t blink. “You’re not going to stop harping on me about this, are you?” Kase tugged at his hair in annoyance.

“If you mean I’m not going to leave until you acquiesce, then you are correct.”

“Can I finish my water?” Kase asked, wagging his water bottle.

“No. People of your time are too soft,” Alek answered, straightening up. “Warriors must fight at a moment’s notice, not wait until after they eat or drink.”

“All right, all right. You win.” Kase raised his hands in surrender, leaned forward, and powered down his laptop. He pushed back his chair and got to his feet. “I don’t need to wear one of those leather skirts, do I?” He chuckled, motioning with his right hand for Alek to move ahead of him.

Alek dragged his gaze, eyes narrowed, slowly up and down Kase’s body. Kase rolled his shoulders under the close inspection. “No, your shorts are loose enough to allow freedom of movement.” He smiled slyly. “However, I won’t stop you if you wish to practice in the nude.”

Kase laughed and shook his head. “What shall we work on first?”

“Get your sword. We will work on form and footwork, I will need to evaluate your base of knowledge. Meet me in the back courtyard.” He strode off for the door opening to the second floor balcony, and the steps leading down into the back yard.

Not a chance would he spar with a real sword with Alek, especially after seeing the way he handled one. He stepped to his garb closet and gathered two of his swords—the rattan “blades” wrapped in duct tape—and his helm. Placing the steel helm on his head, he squatted and slipped his left forearm through the leather straps on a small shield.

He also left by the balcony, and walked down the stairs to the yard, looking for Alek. Not finding him, he called out. “Hey, Alek, I brought two other swords to u—”

The impact of a large body into his side sent him tumbling to the ground. The swords flew from his grasp and the helm fell off his head, taking his glasses with it. He couldn’t speak, couldn’t breathe. Heart racing, Kase lay there, gulping in large breaths. Finally, he collected enough of his wits to push off his shield and roll to his side. He found his glasses, put them back on, and looked up to see Alek towering above him. Anger burned in his chest.

“Shit! You scared the hell out of me!” Kase rose to his knees and sat back on his heels.

“Rule number one,” Alek said, lowering his sword. “Never let down your guard.” He pressed his lips firmly together, examining Kase’s torso and arms. He took two steps back and centered his body. “Get up.” Alek gestured with his hand then spun his sword in a lazy arc before assuming a ready posture.

Kase wiped at his forehead, slowly rising to his feet. A quick shove to his shoulder had him flat on his back again, a sword tip pointed at his chest. He crab-walked rapidly backwards.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” he yelled. Heat blazed through his body, and he broke out into a sweat.

“This is the second time I could have killed you,” Alek said, his gaze intense, his voice abrupt. “Now get up and guard yourself.” He backed away and twirled his sword, taking slow sidesteps around Kase.

Kase picked up one of the two wooden swords and readied himself. Alek lunged and Kase blocked it clumsily, his adrenaline overriding all his ability to think straight. “Stop. I can’t,” he complained loudly and pointed his weapon’s tip to the ground.

His hands shook in fear. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do.” Kase paused for a breath. “Look, I’ve only had a few lessons at a snail’s pace. Most of what I know is from theater, mock sword play. There’s no way I can keep up.”

“You can.” Alek slapped his hand on his thigh.

Kase shook his head, defeat washing over him. “I’m sorry, I can’t.” He looked at Alek still in his fighting stance. “You’re going to have to teach me slower.”

Alek straightened, appraised him for a moment and nodded. “Very well. Today I teach you the basics. Tomorrow we will see what you remember.” He sheathed his xiphos into the ring on his belt, picked up the second wooden sword, and made a few tentative swipes in the air. “We begin.”

\*\*\*\*

The hot August sun beat down relentlessly. Kase was sweating bullets as Alek ran him ragged, and, in no time at all, he’d had to discard his shirt. Footwork and arm positions, slow and fast strikes, wrist flips and hip twists. He’d asked for water, but Alek ignored him. He’d asked for a short break, instead Alek pressed him onward. His muscles eventually gave up, and he slumped to his knees, head hanging.

“Please, kill me now,” he muttered, earning a vicious snicker from his instructor.

“Yes. That is what would happen.” Alek crouched down in front of him, balancing easily on the balls of his feet, the weapon resting across his thighs. Kase glanced up at him, through his sweat-drenched bangs covering his eyes. Alek had a lazy grin, looking cool as a cucumber, handsome as ever, which both infuriated and aroused him. *Stupid adrenaline.*

“You performed better than many new recruits.” Alek gave him a nod of approval. “I am confident in your ability to learn. We will practice every day.”

Kase groaned and shut his eyes. A wave of dizziness overcame him, and he swayed. Alek’s hand slapped to his upper arm.

“*Me ton kuna!* Perhaps I worked you too hard. Let me assist you inside. Water and the cool air will help.” Alek hauled Kase to his feet and dragged him into the house. He was guided through the living room and kitchen and deposited onto one of the hard-backed, wooden dining chairs. He slumped forward, rested his arms on the table, and dropped his forehead onto his hands.

An icy chill to the back of his neck startled him upright. An open bottle of water hung before his eyes. He grabbed it and chugged back half its contents before pressing the bottle to his cheek. Another bottle was placed on the table before him, and then Alek came into view, easing himself into another chair.

He scanned Kase’s face and body, and pursed his lips. “Better?” he asked, head tilting.

“Yeah,” Kase replied. “I’ll be fine in a moment. Needed this.” He raised his water and then proceeded to drain the rest of it. He put the empty bottle aside

and reached for the next one. Alek's hand on his stopped him, and he looked up.

"Slow down. You will get sick if you drink too much, too fast."

"Damn. Yeah, you're right. Okay." The words sort of tumbled out of Kase's mouth, his brain on autopilot. He closed his eyes, feeling his body sway with exhaustion.

"Kase?"

The concerned edge in Alek's voice had him blinking his eyes open. "Yeah," he murmured.

"Drink a little more, then we should bathe."

Kase sipped at the full water bottle. As his body temperature dropped, he shivered in the cool breeze of the large ceiling fan. Tracks of sweat trailed down his overheated back. He glanced at his groin, his soaked boxers clung to his skin, and rode up his butt, chafing his crack. "I need to get out of these clothes."

He glanced at the kitchen wall clock above the doorway leading into the living room then pushed himself to stand, groaning loudly, his muscles protesting the movement. "I'll order us some dinner to be delivered, then shower. I'll be quick, then you can get in and be done before the food arrives."

He turned to the stairs, felt the faint contact of Alek's hand on his lower back. "I'm all right. You don't have to help me anymore," he reassured him.

Alek said nothing, only dropped his hand, keeping pace with Kase as he moved up the stairs, and Kase was oddly thankful. His tired frame made slow work of getting up the stairs, and he felt off-balance a few times, his right hand gripping onto the handrail tightly for support.

He found his cell still on the desk and speed-dialed his favorite pizza place, ordering a large meat pizza and some garlic bread with cheese. Alek shadowed him all the way into the bedroom, but allowed Kase to clean up in privacy. He stripped and stepped into a lukewarm shower, washing away the dirt, sweat and disorientation.

\*\*\*\*\*

Food and more water consumed, Kase sprawled on his stomach in the middle of the bed, his laptop running. He could barely keep his eyes open, and decided to stop, snapped the lid shut and slid his computer onto the floor.

Resting his cheek on the back of his sore hands, he closed his eyes. He heard Alek enter the room, could almost feel the way the man's gaze tracked over his body. His cock twitched, but even it was too tired to do anything more.

"Would you like me to rub your back?" Alek asked, stepping to the side of the bed.

Kase opened his eyes, finding a quite naked Alek standing nearby. He gave Alek a small smile, too exhausted to muster up even a halfhearted rise. "Hm. I certainly won't turn down your offer," he mumbled.

Alek scrambled up on the bed, and the mattress sank beneath his weight. He flung a leg over Kase and straddled his ass before sitting down. His warmth seeped into Kase's skin and his balls rubbed against Kase's glutes. Light fingers traced down Kase's back.

"You are a little red from the sun," Alek noted.

"Shoot. Sunburn, huh? There's a bottle of lotion in the dra—" Kase stopped himself from pointing at the nightstand drawer. Alek would surely ask too many questions about what he'd find. "In the bathroom, next to the sink. The large, tan one."

Alek moved off of him and retrieved the bottle, quickly settling himself back into the same position. "How do I get the *lo-tion* out?"

Kase chuckled. So many little things he took for granted. "Push down on the top, and the lotion will come out the end of the long, pointed tube."

The splash of cool liquid on his back was followed by an "Oh" from Alek. Two more lines of lotion painted him before he felt Alek lean forward and heard the slap of the bottle being placed on the nightstand. Strong fingers pushed and pulled at his weary muscles, the fingertips and heels of Alek's hands working out the knots and kinks. Gentle strokes down his back finished out the harder massage, and, before long, the strong rhythmic motions lulled him into a deep, peaceful sleep.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Seventeen

*Wednesday*

Kase dropped from a jog to a walk as they approached the block leading back home. Sweat dripped down his nose and around his eyes. He grabbed the hem of his shirt, yanking it up to wipe at his face. Hot weather sucked, but he needed to get out of his house and exercise. It helped clear his head and new ideas usually popped up. Besides, he needed to work out all the lactic acid he had stored in his muscles from the training session with Alek. He'd never trained so hard in his life. And he had to admit, he had one helluva an instructor.

"Do you remember it being this hot in Greece in August?" he asked, glancing at Alek, who'd insisted on jogging with him.

"Hotter," Alek replied, his gaze darting around.

Kase watched Alek scan the area. Alek had been on high alert since sensing Medon at the library yesterday. He'd also woken numerous times during the night, each time rising and checking the house before returning to bed. Alek's protective behavior was, although admirable, wreaking havoc on Kase's sleep schedule. He usually slept like a log, but now woke at the slightest sound or movement.

"Hi, Arrian," Kase called out as they approached an elderly man sitting on the front steps of his home. "How's the arthritis today?"

"Good morning, Kase," Arrian replied, his smile brightening his round face and light-blue eyes. He brushed back thinning gray hair from his forehead. "Eh, the joints are not so good lately."

He pushed himself to his feet with the help of his cane. "I've been trying to get more sun. There always seems to be a chill in the air lately. Maybe it's because I'm getting old." He turned slowly toward his stairs and placed a foot on the first step only to falter.

Alek and Kase raced forward, each grabbing hold of one of the man's arms before he fell. Alek wrapped his arm around Arrian's waist while Kase took his cane.

"*Efharistó*," Arrian said, smiling at Alek.

Alek's eyes widened and a tumble of what Kase assumed was Greek words rapidly spilled out.

Arrian's grin broadened. "You speak Greek, although an old form of it. My grandfather would have enjoyed speaking with you."

"I knew you were Greek," Kase said, "but I don't know much else about you; we always end up talking about what I'm doing."

Arrian chuckled as they helped him into the house. "There's a lot I can tell you about me."

Kase and Alek guided the older man into the living room. "You two boys look like you could use something refreshing to drink. There are sodas in the refrigerator if you'd like some." He sank into a plush, brocade wingback chair.

"*So-da?*" Alek asked, a smile forming. He shot a glance at Kase.

"Go on, and bring us some too," Kase said, pointing towards the kitchen before taking a seat on the floor. "Alek's addicted to the stuff. You won't be able to get rid of him now that you offered." He glanced around, noting the shelves upon shelves of books in the living room. *I'd love to get a closer look at those.*

"It is sweet," Alek said. He handed a bottle to Kase and Arrian, and then sat on the floor next to Kase.

Kase took the bottle and drew his attention back to the conversation.

"Your name is Alek?" Arrian asked.

Kase pulled the bottle away from his lips. "Sorry, that was rude of me. Arrian, this is Aleksandr. I call him Alek. Alek, Mr. Arrian Daskalopoulos."

"Aleksandr? Are you from Greece?"

"Yes, *kýrios*. I am." Alek inclined his head.

"Are you here for a visit?"

Alek opened his mouth to speak.

"Yes, he is," Kase interrupted, narrowing his eyes at Alek. "But we're not sure for how long." A silence settled between the men.

"I apologize," Arrian said. "It's really none of my business. I'm just excited to find someone your age who speaks Greek. Most of the Greek families, who've lived in our community for generations, don't speak the language any longer." A cloud of sadness passed across Arrian's features before he turned to Kase and switched the topic. "So what are you researching this week, Kase? Anything new and exciting?"



Kase laughed. “Well, actually—”

Alek broke in. “We went to the library yesterday to research a poem about the Gorgons.”

Kase turned to look at Alek, surprised at his eagerness to talk.

“A poem about the Gorgons?” Arrian asked excitedly, leaning forward in his chair.

*That’s right. Helene mentioned Arrian might be able to help us. There’s no harm in asking.* “I’m researching an ancient Greek legend about Medusa,” Kase said.

“Medusa, eh?” Arrian settled back in his chair and gazed off in the distance, running his palm over his mouth. He refocused on Kase. “I’ve always enjoyed the myths and legends. Did you know they always have a hidden grain of truth in them? It may be convoluted and disguised, but it is there.”

Alek belched and Kase furrowed his brows, giving a small shake of his head.

“Excuse me, *kýrios*,” Alek said. “I should drink water.”

Arrian waved off Alek’s apology. “Nonsense. That’s half the fun of drinking soda. Please help yourself.” He pointed in the direction of the refrigerator.

“Thank you.” Alek grinned and got up, returning with two more bottles.

“Now what were you saying about Medusa?” Arrian asked.

“One legend mentions Medusa could create Gorgons like herself. These Gorgons in turn were able to curse men with... Well, the translation I found said cold hearts and stone. Turning them to stone, I understand, and there was a line about the moon... The books there didn’t have all the information I needed, and I don’t think the author was exactly correct with his translation.” Kase scratched at his chin. “I’m not even really sure where to look next.”

“Hmm.” Arrian rubbed his fingers across his lips again then directed Kase’s attention to his full bookshelves. “As you can see, I have a great many books. Many are ancient Greek tomes I inherited from my grandfather. He was an avid scholar of knowledge. You are more than welcome to use them for your research.”

“Wow,” Kase breathed, taking in the dark-colored spines. “I had no idea you had such an extensive collection of antique historical books.”

“I bet you didn’t know I was a Professor of Mythology, or that I worked as a tour guide at the Met for many years either?” Arrian smirked.

Kase shook his head in awe, not believing his luck. “No, I had no idea, and we’ve spoken many times.”

“I don’t like to bother people about it. They often get a glazed look on their faces when I start to chatter away about Greek Gods, or Romans or Vikings or Celtic...” The corner of his mouth turned up, and he winked conspiratorially at Kase. “If you don’t mind the company of an old man, you are quite welcome to search my library and borrow whatever you need.”

“I... I don’t know what to say, except thank you,” Kase said. “This is an immense help.” He shot a look at Alek. “Although, I’ll likely need assistance in reading them. Alek prefers practicing his sword work to research.”

“Then Alek is welcome to practice in my backyard while you research, whenever you want.”

“Would today be too soon?” Kase asked eagerly. “I mean after we change out of our—” he pulled his damp tank top away from his body “—sweaty clothes. I’ll be happy to order us lunch in.”

A smile brightened Arrian’s face. “I like the sound of that. I may be a little rusty, but my brain is still firing on all cylinders. There’s nothing better than research, if I do say so myself.”

Kase grinned in return. “I heartily agree.” He stood and Alek followed.

“What of these *so-das*?” He looked longingly at the unopened ones.

“I’ll put them back; you can have them when you return,” Arrian said, holding out his hands, and accepting the bottles from Alek.

“Thank you, *daskalos*. We will bring more too.”

“Thanks, Arrian. We’ll see you in a bit,” Kase called back as he and Alek let themselves out the front door.

“Praise Hermes and his foresight to have you live close to a scholar,” Alek said, hopping down the stairs.

“Yes, and I didn’t even know it.” Kase led the way back to his home, shaking his head with wonder, and smiled. *A house full of history books, wow!*

Aleksandr sidestepped, keeping his body centered, eyeing his ghostly opponent and tensing to parry his attack. Block, shift, strike, slice. Again. Block, retreat, advance, lunge, cut. Again. He could hear his instructors calling the movements. Sweat trickled down the sides of his face, chest and arms, dripped beneath his pteruges, his grip slippery. He would kill him this time. There was no room for error. Only victory.

His skin, burnished in the hot sun, glistened with moisture. He paced to the back door of the kýrios' home and stood beneath the yellow- and white-striped tenting which shaded a wooden floor area. He breathed in deeply, catching his breath and calming his heart. He thought about how he would be enjoying this practice much more if he'd had Kase's ideal form to gaze upon.

Sadly, Kase was deep in study with the daskalos, reading more books. Aleksandr frowned, looking through the glass doorway. He understood Kase was helping him, although what a poem had to do with the curse he did not know. All he needed to do was behead Medon and all would be well, *except I will still be here, in this age, among these people who are not my own.*

Muscles worked to their limits, he was ready to head back and bathe, wash away the layers of hard-earned sweat. He tapped on the window to draw Kase's attention, motioning for the man to come forward once he looked up. Kase raised a hand, waved and then stuck his forefinger in the air. Aleksandr huffed, turning his back to the door to wait. A knee bounced, his fingers flexed, he rolled his shoulder and stretched his neck, and waited. He rotated to the glass entryway and tapped, louder this time and with far less patience. And again, he received a gesture of "wait."

Aleksandr harrumphed. He was tired and no longer wished to wait. He slid open the door, the cool air from inside washing over him. He paused inside the doorway, not wanting to dirty the kýrios' home.

Kase didn't even bother looking up, as he called out, "I need another minute."

Aleksandr pressed his lips into a thin line, and, spotting Kase's messenger bag a few steps away, moved to it. He rummaged inside, pulling out the set of keys to Kase's home. He'd watch the man use them several times to unlock his various doors; he would figure out which one was the right one.

He retreated out of the house, sliding closed the door, ignored Kase's "I'll be right there," and jogged around the house to the gate which he opened to the front. Picking up his pace, he pushed himself to run past the few double homes

separating Kase's from the kýrios' until he reached the front door. Inserting a golden key, he fumed at the key's refusal to turn. He pulled it out, fumbled them in his weary fingers, and tried the silver one next to the first. *Ah...* this one worked. Cool air and dim lighting greeted him as he stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

Aleksandr entered the room with the sun on the ceiling and opened the cold box with the large silver door. He stuck his head into its chilly interior and pulled out a bottle of water. The slick, cold bottle chilled his hand, and he cracked it open, taking a large mouthful. He held the water in his mouth a moment, letting it refresh and chill his palate, and moisten his gums. Before he'd even finished off the contents, he'd grabbed another and made his way up the stairs.

He stripped and, standing naked in front of the mirror, examined his face, red from exertion, and scrubbed at his scratchy cheeks. He'd seen Kase open the front of the mirror, revealing hidden shelves and a handled blade he'd used on his face. There was cream too...

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Eighteen

Kase pushed open his unlocked front door, stepped inside and stretched. Man, he was tired. Researching took a lot of concentration, and sometimes it was as exhausting as working out. Now where was Alek? He shouldn't have ignored the man the way he did. Kase found his keys tossed onto the table by the door and glanced up, checking out the living room. No Alek in sight. He turned left into the kitchen, and looked straight on into the dining room. Still, no Alek. He ascended the stairs, two at a time, and glanced around at the top. Not in the office. He stepped quickly into his bedroom, noticing the girded belt and sword lying on the floor, and then into the bathroom, pulling up short, irritation rising in his chest.

Alek reclined in the tub, sprawled really, a foot propped up on the bathtub's edge. He couldn't see Alek's face hidden behind the curtain, but he could see the puddles of water pooling against the tub on the floor, soaking the bathroom rug.

He caught sight of his frowning expression in the shaving-cream-splattered cabinet mirror. His razor lay in the bottom of the sink, resting in what Kase assumed was Alek's facial hair. *I don't believe this! He used my razor!* Kase halted. *Okay, take a deep breath, breathe. My fault, I should've thought to offer him one.*

The splash of water drew his attention back to Alek's long, toned calf resting out of the water. Toes curled and flexed, and water sloshed as a long, drawn-out moan sounded behind the curtain.

*Is he jac—?* Kase's eyes widened and then narrowed. *It doesn't change a thing, he's made a wreck of my bathroom.* "Alek!"

A loud *splash* shot water into the air and sloshed over the side of the tub. Alek's hand pushed back the curtain and his face appeared—speckled with tiny red smudges on his chin and neck which Kase suspected were dried blood—dark-blue eyes and mischievous smile included.

Kase halted at the side of the tub, his arms crossed. "I was going to apologize for ignoring you, but look at this mess." He waved a hand at the floor and sink. "You've made a complete wreck of my bathroom. I can't leave you alone for one minute, you find some way to get into trouble."

One of Alek's hands gripped the bathtub's edge, the other the bar attached to the wall, and he hauled himself out of the deep tub. Water cascaded down his

golden skin, a torrent of drops hitting the rippling surface. He held out his hand, palm up. “Help me?”

Kase hesitated, then stepped forward, and held out his right hand. Alek grabbed his wrist and pulled him forward, fisting his shirt. “What the...?” Kase exclaimed, caught by surprise. His toes impacted the base of the tub, his upper body continuing forward, colliding with Alek’s naked, wet chest. Large hands covered Kase’s ears, tilted his face up and damp lips pressed against his. Kase braced himself, curling his splayed fingers into hard muscles, gripping for balance. He relaxed into the languid kiss, Alek’s mouth slowly consuming his. Alek’s probing tongue sought entrance, and Kase stiffened, shoving himself away. He stepped back, glaring at the man and his annoying smirk.

“Feel better?” Alek asked, his smirk spreading into a grin.

Kase grabbed his hair and yanked. “How is *that* supposed to make me feel better?” He waved his arms at the floor and sink. “It doesn’t dry the floor or clean up the sink and the mess you made.”

He ground his teeth. “I’m exhausted, searching through dozens of books to help you, and this is what I find when I get home. Now”—he pierced Alek with a stern gaze—“I’m going downstairs to make *us* dinner. The least you can do is get this cleaned up before you come down.”

Alek raised a brow, but Kase ignored him, spun around and strode out the door, stomping down the stairs to the kitchen. *What should I expect from a guy who probably had slaves cleaning up after him? That’s probably all I am to him, a servant.* The idea he was nothing more than that irked Kase terribly.

\*\*\*\*

Kase pulled out the dinner plates and slammed the cabinet door shut, followed with yanking open the kitchen drawer and tossing the flatware on the counter. He was making enough noise to wake the dead, but he didn’t care. Alek’s behavior hit too close to home, reminding him too much of Barry’s, and his habit of taking him for granted. Helene was right; he was a martyr. Him and his stupid urge to help people only resulted in him getting taken advantage of. He should just get a dog. At least they appreciated people.

He finished making the patties, piled them on a plate, and placed them in the fridge until the grill was hot. He washed his hands and the soft padding of footsteps slapping across the kitchen floor caught his attention. Out of the corner of his eye Kase caught Alek entering with nothing on except for a revealing set of shorts, his dark hair still damp. Kase turned his back, pulling

out napkins from another drawer. He stilled at the light caress of fingertips on the back of his neck. *Not a chance, jerk.* Kase turned to the side, aiming for the dining room, but powerfully built arms trapped him against the counter and a warm breath blew over the back of his ear. He clenched his jaw. *Is this what Alek thought was an apology?* Offer sex, and he'd forget about the mess the man had made?

"You'd better have wiped up the floor," Kase said, his words clipped.

"Of course," Alek murmured, nuzzling behind his ear. "I have even put the wet cloths in your dirty basket for cleaning."

Kase let out a breath, some of his tension releasing. *That's something at least.*

Alek pressed closer, and wrapped his arms around Kase's waist. Heat seeped from Alek's body into Kase's back, and his clean scent urged him to close his eyes. Alek rubbed his erection against Kase's ass and nibbled on the junction between his neck and shoulder.

"Don't." Kase scowled, shrugging Alek off.

"Why not?" Strong hands landed on Kase's shoulders, and he was spun around. Alek's dark-blue eyes searched Kase's face. "I know you desire me as I desire you. Why do you resist?"

"It's not... It's..." Kase let out an exasperated huff. "You'd think I'd be able to spit it out, since my job is communication," he mumbled. He ran his fingers through his hair, tugging at it in frustration.

"Spit what out?"

Kase turned his head away and rubbed his face. He slipped away from Alek's hands and stepped around him, heading for the living room. He stooped over the coffee table, pulled open one of the four drawers, and rummaged in the back of it. His fingers closed around a cold metal frame and he removed it, shut the drawer, then straightened.

He gazed at the picture, or specifically, the dark-haired man whose arms wrapped around him. They were leaning against the boardwalk's railing in Coney Island. The beach, ocean, and clear blue sky lay behind them. He should have noticed the forced smile on his boyfr—ex-boyfriend's face.

"Who is he?" Alek asked, coming to stand beside him. Kase started and looked up at the handsome Greek, a frown marring his classic features.

“It’s a photograph of my ex-boyfriend, Barry, and me.” He handed the photo to Alek and stepped away towards the glass doors, watching a lone blackbird peck at the ground.

“*Pho-to-graph?*”

“Yes. A way of preserving memories, like drawings or art. I don’t know why I’ve kept it.”

“I see,” Alek murmured.

“I was crazy about him,” Kase continued. “Not just because he was hot; he was smart too.” He glanced back at Alek.

“Hot?” Alek’s eyelids shuttered halfway as he peered at Kase.

“Very attractive, fuckable, desirable.” Kase smirked at Alek’s curiosity about slang.

Kase grabbed at the hair on the back of his head. “A little over a year ago, I asked him to marry me... and he turned me down.” A stab of humiliation and pain lanced through Kase’s heart. He swallowed, his throat dry, and gazed out the window. “Turned out there was someone else. Someone who lived a more interesting lifestyle and was more ambitious. The day I asked him, he packed his bags and left.”

Kase gave a harsh bark of laughter and turned back to Alek. “I should’ve returned the ring, but I still have it too.”

“He is a fool,” Alex spat, placing the photo face down on the coffee table. He moved closer and laid a hand briefly on Kase’s shoulder.

Kase sighed. “Thanks. Even if he is, it doesn’t change things. He didn’t choose me. Loving him wasn’t enough.”

“Why do you keep this memento of him?” Alek waved at the photo.

Kase shrugged. “I can’t seem to let go, even though I want to.” Alek turned towards him and gazed into his eyes. “Like that sword.” He nodded toward the weapon hanging on the wall next to his small TV.

Alek strode to the displayed sword and studied it. “It is not well made.”

“I know,” Kase said flatly. “He wasn’t interested in my reenactments—he gave that to me after an argument. Every time I reach up to take it down, I can’t bring myself to do it. It’s like saying he’ll never come back. Which is stupid, he’s not going to. It’s still hard.”



Alek nodded. “I understand,” he said, returning to stand in front of Kase. “I too have loved another.”

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Nineteen

Aleksandr glanced past Kase to stare out the glass door into the courtyard. The dead grass covering it reminded him too much of his life without his first love. He sighed and then met Kase's blue-flecked grays, his relaxed expression open and accepting.

"His name was Erasmus," he began but then backtracked. "Our cultures are different. You are... scholar"—Aleksandr pointed to his head—"and know much of this already. While it was acceptable to take a male as a lover, it was expected I would want a young boy."

Aleksandr shuddered. "I have no interest in bedding children. My sole interest, Erasmus, was a year younger than I. We were together for a full turn of seasons before I departed for the army." Aleksandr smiled. "He accepted a token of my love, a red gemstone set into a ring, and promised me he would wait."

His smile faded. "But when I returned... He was gone. The ring was left for me with no explanation. I suspected"—anger bloomed, caught in his throat—"my father had a hand in his disappearance. He wanted wealth and expected me to marry a noble woman and gain her dowry for him."

He paced away from Kase a few steps and abruptly turned. "After Erasmus, I bedded many. One man, named Taras, more often than others. He refused to believe I wished only for his company in bed. He never had my heart. I was like your Barry, I crushed him. It is he who turned me to stone."

Kase's mouth dropped open. "You mean he's..."

Aleksandr nodded. "I do not know how he has survived all these years. My reappearance has attracted his attention." He ran his right hand over the top of his hair and palmed the back of his head. "He... He spoke of..." He tilted his head back and stared up at the ceiling fan spinning rapidly, the quick rotations mimicking the thumping of his heart.

"What?" Kase moved forward and laid his fingertips on Aleksandr's chest, atop his thudding heart.

Aleksandr looked down, taking in the open gray eyes, the streaks of blue and green radiating throughout, behind the black-rimmed glasses, the parted lips blowing warm breaths, the solid chin sporting a light beard, and the golden hair, brushed back in a messy tangle from his forehead. Kase was exquisite.

“What?” Kase asked again, brows dropping and furrowing into slight creases. Aleksandr raised his hands and laid his thumbs in the center of Kase’s forehead. He drew them out, trying to smooth them away. The corner of Kase’s mouth quirked up and the lines vanished. Aleksandr slid his fingers down to cup the sides of Kase’s head. He held this modern man in his hands, admired him for his intelligence and strength and beauty.

Kase’s hands rose to lie on his forearms. “What did Medon say?” he whispered.

Aleksandr shuddered, tightening his grip around Kase. “He asked after you... and now I fear for you, for your life, because I desire you. And *he* will not accept that. Ever.”

“I guess I’ll have to be careful then. You can’t watch me all the time.” Kase was silent for a moment. “You’ve said you desire me, and you’ve shown it,” he said quietly. “I need to know. Is it only because I’m useful to you?” Kase worried his bottom lip.

Aleksandr shook his head. “Your mind is quick, your arm is strong, your fortitude in the face of peril... You do not value yourself. I would deal harshly with this Barry for making you feel this way. You did not even know me, yet you helped me, brought me to your home, fed and clothed me. Why would I not desire you? You are handsome and clever and have opened yourself to the unbelievable. Even Hermes believes you are worthy. Can you not see why I wish to bed you?”

Kase opened his mouth to reply, but Aleksandr stalled him, pressing a finger to his lips.

“I... You...” Aleksandr touched his fingertips to his heart, and tapped there. “I am a soldier and am not good with words... like you.” Kase laid his hand on top of Aleksandr’s and stilled it. Aleksandr slipped free from underneath and captured Kase’s instead. He flattened both of their hands to his heart and slid them down his chest. Kase watched the descent, allowing Aleksandr to catch him off guard, leaning in and planting a single chaste kiss to Kase’s lips.

He drew back, moving his mouth closer to Kase’s ear. “Am I not as hot as your other lover?”

“Hotter,” Kase breathed. “Much hotter.”

“You desire me?” Aleksandr spoke softly into his ear, tickling the outer edge with his tongue.

Kase shuddered and nodded.

“Then choose me. Here and now, as I choose you.” He sucked Kase’s earlobe between his lips, biting gently on the soft flesh.

Kase whimpered, patting and pushing at Aleksandr’s shoulders. “Okay, okay, I do. I will. But after dinner, I’m starving.” Aleksandr released him and licked at his lips, grinning with the promise of an evening of passion. He motioned for Kase to lead the way to the kitchen.

\*\*\*\*

Aleksandr watched Kase pull ingredients from the silver box. “What is this box called again?” He snuck in behind Kase and laid his hands on the man’s hips.

Kase shot Aleksandr a quick grin before collecting more items. “We’re in the kitchen. This is the refrigerator. Oh, hey! They used to call it an icebox. That would be easier to remember.”

“Ice box. Yes, much easier. What are we having to eat tonight?” He leaned into Kase’s back when he straightened, pressing his groin into the man’s ass and sliding a hand down his arm to take hold of a large red, roundish food.

Kase wiggled and pushed back with his butt, slipping out from Aleksandr’s grasp. “Hamburgers with ‘the works’ and French fries. Do you like pickles?”

“Yes. What is this French?” He eyed the red bulbous thing in his hand.

“French fries. France? You know... No you don’t. It’s where Gaul is.”

“Gaul?”

“West across the sea and slightly north of your homeland.”

Aleksandr nodded, still inspecting the bloodred food. “I do not want this,” he said, sticking out his arm and handing it off to Kase.

“Tomato? Why?” Kase made his own visual inspection of the food.

“Red foods are poisonous. Everyone knows this.”

Kase slowly lifted his head, his eyes wide when they met Aleksandr’s. He blinked. “Red foods are what? Wait... Never mind. You’re right.” He opened up the little door and dropped the round food into the bag, looking after it a minute. “No, I can’t do it.” He reached into the bag and retrieved the red bulb. He turned to Aleksandr. “I love tomatoes. You don’t have to have any. More for me.” And he plunked it down on the counter.

Aleksandr laughed. "I have more for you." He stalked forward, but Kase stiff-armed his final approach.

"Stop right there, mister," Kase admonished him. "Here, I'll give you a job." He moved to another door and opened it, pulling out a large flat silver tray. He placed the tray on the stove and pushed some spots, resulting in tiny beeps. Symbols flashed on the display until Kase was satisfied with one combination.

"This is for the fries. Open the bag and spread the fries out in a single layer. Okay?"

"Oh-kay." He'd seen Kase open bags like this before, grabbing the sides and pulling. However he did not know how much strength to apply. When mild force failed, he used greater, and a hail of small yellow-brown sticks flew from the bag. Thankfully, most of them managed to fall onto the tray. It took several moments for Kase's laughter to abate and many more for Aleksandr's blush to vanish.

Large, floppy green leaves were arranged on a plate with white rings of onions, a food he recognized from his own time. They still made his eyes water. Small round rolls and square slices of a soft yellow cheese were added. Aleksandr insisted the red slices go on a separate plate, earning himself another round of chuckles from Kase.

The circles of meat Kase had already prepared were taken outside to cook over an open flame enclosed within a steel box. Kase walked back and forth many times to check on the various foods cooking. Aleksandr busied himself setting the plates, the eating implements Kase preferred, napkins, and bottles of so-da, on the table.

Kase brought in the *ham-burg-ers* on a plate just as the oven beeped. He placed the dish on the table and hurried to pull out the fries. Aleksandr leaned towards the food and inhaled the smoky scent of cooked meat. Eating any kind of meat in his time was a rare occurrence, yet here it was daily, and he heartily approved.

A bowl filled with the tanned sticks landed in front of him, and he watched Kase hurrying back into the kitchen and adding more items to the table in addition to the greens and rolls and cheese. He carried a white container from the ice box, and a bottle of thick red liquid which Aleksandr eyed with much skepticism.

Kase landed hard in his seat, a bead of sweat rolling down his temple. “Let’s eat.”

Aleksandr sat beside him and copied everything Kase did to prepare his ham-burg-er, minus anything red. He tried a French fry first, sinking his teeth into it before Kase could stop him, and he yelped at the unexpected heat striking his tongue. He quickly gulped some soda and frowned. He peeked up to see Kase covering his mouth, his body shaking with suppressed laughter. Aleksandr reached out and shoved him.

“Sorry,” Kase mumbled, trying to hide behind the large meat and roll sandwich he raised to his mouth. He pointed with his little finger at Aleksandr’s plate. “Go on. Try the burger.”

Aleksandr turned back to his meal, and picked up his *bur-ger*, taking a small taste. The bread gave way easily beneath his teeth, only to be met by the crisp onions, their sharpness surprising his tongue, which the creamy cheese tempered. The soothing greens countered the rich, smoky meat, and the roll held everything neatly together. He hummed his approval.

He did not touch the fries again until he saw Kase eat one. Tentatively, he placed one in his mouth, fearful of burning his tongue a second time. Instead he was rewarded with a crispy outside and a soft inside. He noticed tiny crystals on the surface of some parts of the fries, and those bites were even tastier. Salt, he realized, but fine particles where he was used to a clumpier version. Another precious commodity from his time reduced to mere everyday use. How many times had he heard his father say some slave was “not worth his salt?”

Kase picked up the white container and popped off its lid. He reached inside and withdrew a long green pickle, tapping it on the edge to remove some of the vinegar clinging to it. He held the container out to Aleksandr. “Want one?”

“Yes. Thank you.” Aleksandr pulled out one for himself, and placed it on his plate, letting the excess juice run off, while he wiped his fingers on the napkin. He’d grown quite fond of the sour vegetable while in the archon’s army. Aleksandr never believed his instructors’ praise of the mottled green pickle, claiming it would make him stronger. He ate them because he enjoyed how their juiciness and crunch always refreshed him after a long practice. They had also often been used in lewd comments and innuendos among the soldiers. He covered his mouth with a fist, trying to hide his mirth.

“What?” Kase asked, then licked at the pickle juice dribbling down a finger. Aleksandr noted the man had almost completely consumed his while he had been lost in his thoughts.

“I was remembering,” Aleksandr said, picking up his pickle and laying the tip against his bottom lip, slowly rubbing it back and forth. Kase’s eyes tracked the movement. “Pickles always remind me of...” Aleksandr deliberately trailed off, lifting the pickle and making an “O” with his lips. He gradually pushed the pickle inside his mouth, then pulled it out with a soft *pop*. Kase sucked in a sharp breath of air, his pupils dilated, and Aleksandr knew he had him hooked.

He repeated the torture, Kase’s gaze never leaving the vicinity of Aleksandr’s mouth. He snaked out his tongue and licked up the length of the pickle, gathering in its combination of salt and sour and wishing it was something sweet. He slowly lowered the pickle to his plate and picked up his bottle of soda. He sucked on the opening and neck of the bottle, sticking it far into his mouth and withdrawing it until he could safely sip. He raised his chin, tilted his head back to expose his throat and swallowed several mouthfuls.

Aleksandr lowered the bottle, ran his tongue over lower lip, and another adorable groan sounded from Kase. Unable to wait any longer, Aleksandr stood, reached forward and fisted the front of Kase’s shirt, hauling the man to his feet. “We are done eating, Kase.”

Kase nodded, his eye wide, and Aleksandr dragged him away from the table, through the kitchen, and up the stairs.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Twenty

Kase loosened Alek's grip on his shirt, lacing their fingers together, and the man's warm hand enclosed his. Alek pulled him through the kitchen and living room, and raced up the stairs, dragging Kase behind him. Every little lick of Alek's tongue as he wet his lips, and every movement of his mouth into a smile or smirk in his sidelong glances, hinted at Alek's anticipation and it ratcheted up Kase's own. He smiled at the way Alek kept turning his head to keep an eye trained on him as if he'd change his mind and run away at any moment. *Not this time.*

His heavy, rigid cock swayed with each of his steps, begging to be released and straining to escape the confines of his shorts, daring to sneak out the top of his waistband. Kase glanced at Alek's groin, and licked his lips at the Greek's erection tenting his loose pants. For the last four mornings he'd woken with that long, thick prick pressed to his ass, and seen it in all its glory many times. Now, he'd finally run his hands over the hard, heated flesh. No more denying himself. Finally he'd give in to the desire and temptation. No more fighting against the pull, and with his decision, a giant weight fell from his shoulders.

Alek drew him to the side of the bed, let go of his hand, and reached up to cup Kase's face in between them, holding him still. Warm lips descended on his, teasing and sucking at his mouth, begging for entrance.

Kase slid his hands up Alek's thick forearms and broad shoulders. He squeezed, kneading the muscular flesh there, then palmed the back of his neck, drawing Alek closer. Another lick of demand, and Kase opened his mouth, granting Alek entrance.

\*\*\*\*\*

Taking. He knew he was taking—demanding—but Aleksandr refused to allow himself not to. For days, he had desired Kase. For all the reasons he'd told the man earlier and more. He held any man that stood up for himself in high esteem. While Kase may have undervalued himself as a worthy companion, his compassion was a beauty to behold. Cunning and quick-witted, he held his own against Aleksandr's barrage of assaults, major and minor. He would succumb, then rise up and push him away. There was no allowance, no quarter to be given. Now he had Kase right where he wanted him. In his arms, in this room, and soon on this bed.



He ran his tongue along the front of Kase's straight teeth, licked inside, tasted the faint flavors of sour and salt. Shifting the placement of his lips, he pressed a hard kiss to Kase's cheek then chin, and Kase tilted back his head. The long expanse of pale skin invited Aleksandr to lick, and he did, long paths across the heat of Kase's throat. Aleksandr halted his hungry appreciation of Kase's delicious flesh momentarily in order to remove the glasses. He plucked them from Kase's face, and Kase smiled, taking his glasses back and bending to lay them on the small side table.

Aleksandr gathered Kase's warm hands in his, gazing down for a moment at their long-fingered, clean appearance, so unlike his own, work-beaten and scarred, before raising them into the air. There, he released him, sliding his fingertips down the outside of Kase's arms, down the sides of his slender torso, until he reached the hem of Kase's shirt. Slipping his fingers underneath the loose fabric, he gathered the edge and Kase bent forward, allowing him to tug the shirt off. He dropped the unwanted garment to the floor.

Kase straightened and pressed a hard kiss on Aleksandr's lips. Kase grabbed the waistband of his shorts and *box-ers*, wiggled, pulled and yanked them down until he'd shoved them past his knees. He let them drop to the floor and stepped out of them. Aleksandr raked his eyes up and down his beautiful form until he met Kase's gaze.

"Your turn next," Kase said, his smile lighting up his face.

Aleksandr couldn't get out of his clothes fast enough. He kicked the material away, grasped Kase's hips, and tugged him closer. Their cocks knocked heads, and he groaned at the impact, at the combination of discomfort and pleasure of hot, stretched skin sliding against his.

Kase moved forward, forcing Aleksandr to retreat. The back of his legs hit the bed and he fell, dragging Kase along with him. A twist of torso and pull of arms pinned Kase underneath him, wide-eyed and lips parted, drawing in short breaths of air. Aleksandr shifted, pushing his way between Kase's thighs. He shoved his legs apart, the force driving Kase's open. Kase moaned, drawing his knees up, his ass and entrance exposed for Aleksandr's view.

Aleksandr stopped, kneeling above Kase's naked form, and admired the pale beauty beneath him with a smile on his lips. He laid his fingertips on Kase's collar bone, followed the solid length out towards his shoulders and back in again. With a featherlight slide of the pads of his fingers trailing down, he traced the tightened dark-brown skin surrounding Kase's nipples, the nubs

peaked, demanding his caress. Downwards into the indents of defined abdominal muscles, he drifted his hand to circle around the perfect belly button. He followed the line of fine hair to find the treasure it held.

Kase's hand blocked his view, and Aleksandr growled, made to swipe it away, only to have his own captured and yanked downwards. Palms on his cheeks, dictated his direction, ordered him to kiss, and lick and suck. And he obeyed like the good soldier he was. He'd follow his commander, give all of himself to the cause, sacrifice all that he was.

Hands pushed his head downwards, tongue sweeping over blushing flesh and taut nipples, devouring the salt and the sweat, inhaling the scent and committing it to memory. Down again, lower, lost in the moans and whimpers, by Kase? By himself? It didn't matter.

He slid his hands underneath Kase, filling his palms with warm, firm muscular globes, globes he wished to see, to spread open and watch his cock sink into. But not now. Not this time.

He licked a broad path up Kase's thick shaft, swirled his tongue around the wide head, strangely naked with no foreskin to play with. Aleksandr focused on this new sensation of smoothness as he sucked the crown into his mouth, receiving his first taste of Kase's essence. The flavor burst on his tongue and, wanting more, he pressed with his lips in a tight circle, drawing upwards in hopes of gaining another drop.

A loud groan rumbled through Kase's body, and his hands clenched the sides of Aleksandr's head. Aleksandr pulled off, glancing up at Kase, taking in the quick rise and fall of his chest, the flush covering his pecs and throat, and grinned. He lifted Kase's full, flushed member with his right hand and caught Kase's attention with a lascivious lick of his lips. He drifted lower towards his goal, his mouth open, his eyes holding Kase's gaze, until his bottom lip touched the softest of flesh, and he rubbed the saliva-slick smoothness against his mouth. Snaking his tongue out into the slit, he lapped at the clear fluid he found there, smug in the knowledge he had caused it.

Refusing to deny himself any longer, he bent further, enveloping Kase's whole length in his mouth. Fingernails scratched at Aleksandr's scalp, and Kase bucked up, driving deeper inside Aleksandr's throat. He squeezed Kase's ass once, then let go and shifted his grip to Kase's hips, pressing down and holding him to the bed. He used all his skills on the delicious flesh laid out before him; to please Kase and drive him wild with passion. Aleksandr's firm hold loosened

on the sweat-slick skin, allowing Kase to pump his erection forcefully into Aleksandr's mouth.

Aleksandr's cock hung heavy between his spread thighs, the ache for release demanding attention. He ran his palm around the foreskin before gripping his neglected member, stroking and pulling the extra skin up and down. He brought himself closer and closer to spilling, and with each notch reached, sucked harder, pressing his tongue to the sensitive area underneath Kase's cockhead, urging the man to give him everything.

Grunts, moans and groans, breathy sounds of pleasure and excitement filled the room. Aleksandr hummed with each strangled sound he pulled from Kase, and Kase writhed every time Aleksandr purred in pleasure around his rock-hard length. He increased his rumbles, each stronger than the last, until he received a long, drawn out "ah" and a tighter grip on his head for his efforts. Kase's cock swelled in his mouth and a rapid tap landed upon his scalp, but Aleksandr would not surrender his place. *No*. He wanted it, and Kase *would* comply.

Aleksandr raised his hips and stroked himself firm and fast. He wrapped his left hand around Kase's balls and tugged lightly. Kase's hips thrust up, driving deep, filling Aleksandr's mouth. Held firm with the hard grip of Kase's hands on his head, Aleksandr had nowhere to go, and Kase pressed forward, slipping into his throat, spilling. Aleksandr fought the hold, pulling back far enough to catch the man's essence on his tongue, and swallowed it all. Faster and harder he jerked, releasing Kase from his mouth as his own phallus swelled in his grip. He relinquished his control to his body's pleasure, the pressure increasing, driving him higher, until he gave in to the release, slamming his eyes shut and letting the swell of euphoria spiral through him.

Heavy breaths and relaxed muscles brought him down from his high. He opened his eyes to meet Kase's warm, sleepy gaze and content smile. He took in the flushed skin of Kase's chest and the streaks of white lacing the man's belly. Aleksandr smirked at the mess he'd made, tracing one long line and extending it. This was one he didn't mind cleaning up. He slid off the bed, scooped up Kase's discarded shirt, and wiped up his release.

He dropped the dirty fabric to the floor and stood beside the bed. He ran the fingertips of his hand down Kase's thigh until Kase snatched it up and pulled him forward. Aleksandr crawled onto the bed, a feeling of satisfaction suffusing him, one he hadn't felt since... He sighed, laying down beside Kase and rubbing the side of his thumb across the man's cheek. Leaning in, he planted a single soft kiss on Kase's swollen, pink lips, then he rolled to his back and

pulled Kase in close. Kase threw an arm across his belly and laid his head on Aleksandr's chest. Desire taken and fulfilled, they closed their eyes and drifted into Hypnos' arms.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Twenty-one

Thursday

Kase finished his breakfast of eggs, toast, and bacon, eager to get an early start at Arrian's. He checked his phone for any possible news about the disappearance of the Young Hercules statue at The Met, and didn't find any... again. He'd checked every day since the reenactment, yet there was nothing. He wondered why they were keeping it on the down-low. The statue was a rather large object—he glanced at Alek, taking in his size. *How could someone not notice it was missing?* He wondered if The Met didn't want any embarrassment over the general public knowing it had "disappeared."

"*Daskalos* must be feeling better today," Alek said.

"What?" Kase looked up from his phone.

Alek nodded at someone out the window. "*Daskalos*. He is out for a walk."

Kase watched Arrian turn up the short walkway towards his house. He pushed back his chair, took his plate and cup to the kitchen sink and headed for the front door, Alek shadowing him, a step behind.

"Arrian," Kase exclaimed, pulling open the door to see his elderly neighbor and new research partner standing on his doorstep with two books in hand. "Please, come in."

"Good morning, Kase. *Kaliméra*, Aleksandr. I hope I didn't wake you boys."

"No, it's fine," Kase replied. "We just finished breakfast. I thought we decided we'd meet at your house this morning, what brings you here?"

"I received a phone call from my son. He asked if I would like to spend the day with him and my grandchildren. He's divorced, so I don't get to see them as often as I'd like. Have to take every chance I can get."

"I hope you have fun, although I'll miss having your help today."

"That's why I came over," Arrian said with a smile. "I have some time this morning before I must leave, so I brought you a couple of books I think will be helpful. I found another possibility for a translation."

"Great. Let's sit in the living room. I'll grab my notes and meet you there."

\*\*\*\*

An hour had passed with Kase and Arrian poring over the texts and his notes. Scribbles upon scribbles, cross-outs and lists. The combinations made no real sense; a jumble of words that didn't quite fit together.

Arrian rose from his seat, stretched, and moved to the glass door looking out into the backyard. Kase joined him there, and together they observed Alek going through his sword maneuvers in slow motion.

"I don't know if you're interested, but since we've been working on the Gorgon poem, I thought you might like to hear about a phone call I received last night," Arrian said, "from the Director of Acquisitions at the Met."

Kase startled and turned to stare at Arrian, who peered up into Kase's eyes.

"It appears a statue has gone missing from the museum's exhibit of Greek and Roman Art."

"Really?" Kase hoped he managed to keep a straight face. "What did he say?"

"He mentioned that last Saturday night, during a brief power outage, the statue of Young Hercules vanished. He is aware your reenactment group was there that evening, however, he doesn't believe anyone from your group was involved."

"Why doesn't he believe we're involved? Did they call the police? I didn't hear any mention of it on the news." Kase overflowed with questions.

"Your society is beneficial to them, and they had guards watching your group the whole time. They do not believe you would harm your relationship with them by pulling such a stunt."

*A stunt? If they only knew.* "Saturday night was wild with that storm and then the blackouts. We weren't even sure if we'd be able to put on our play."

"Yes, it was an unusual storm. The cell was centered over the museum, and the size of it... I watched on the news. It was huge. We could see the lightning from here."

Arrian paused a moment before continuing. "Moving a statue that size and weight is a major undertaking. The director told me whoever was responsible would have needed a truck and heavy equipment to move the statue. The parking lot cameras were working until they went out in the storm. No trucks, cranes or equipment were seen on the recordings. A pallet mover would have made noise, and the effort it takes to pad, crate, and remove the statue would

have required more time than the lights were out. The museum is stymied on how it disappeared.”

A loud battle cry from outside had them both turning to look at Alek. He stood poised to strike, and another roar poured from him. He swung his sword high and then descended in a powerful strike.

Arrian tapped a finger against his lips. “Your Aleksandr... After spending so many years among the statues, it’s odd how he reminds me of Young Hercules. He’s even wearing the pteruges like the statue.” Arrian shrugged. “Probably because he is Greek.” He grinned sheepishly. “Don’t pay any attention to the wild imaginings of an old man.”

Kase’s mouth hung open, and Arrian glanced at him, raising his eyebrows, before returning to watch Alek practice.

Arrian’s correct deduction about Alek unsettled Kase. He’d figured out Alek by observing his actions and clothes. *Should I tell him? What if he thinks I’m pulling his leg?*

Arrian laid a hand on Kase’s forearm, regaining his attention. “I’ve always respected the Gods, believed myths can come true. My family thinks I’m crazy.” Arrian shrugged again.

Kase cleared his throat. “Arrian”—he laid a hand over his neighbor’s—“if you’re crazy, then so am I.”

“What do you mean?” Arrian’s avid gaze bored into Kase, full of questions.

Kase sighed and returned to sit on the couch. “You’d better have a seat.” He waited for Arrian to sit before he began. “This is all going to sound strange. It sounds strange to me, and I was there.”

\*\*\*\*

Aleksandr sat bare chested at the dining table, a *pen-cell* in his hand and a white sheet of paper half-filled with drawings of arrows, hearts and moon circles. He’d seen Daskalos and Kase conversing in the andrōn while he practiced outside, and decided to take a short break to come inside, cool off, and find out if they had made any progress. When he walked in, the two men had immediately stopped talking and stared at him. He asked what was wrong, and Kase explained he had told Daskalos the truth of what had happened the night of the storm.

When Aleksandr had asked Daskalos what he thought, he had risen from the couch and moved to stand in front of Aleksandr. “I’m an old man,” Daskalos

said. “I’ve seen and learned much in my time, but I cannot tell you how excited I am to learn the ancient Greek legends are true.” He beamed up at Aleksandr. “When you have time, I would love for us to sit down and talk about your life.”

Aleksandr was relieved and surprised at Daskalos’ response—it was best if Daskalos knew the truth. He had agreed to speak about his home at some point, went to the ice box, and retrieved a *so-da*, then went back outside to practice.

He returned inside for lunch, after Daskalos had left, and questioned Kase on their progress. Had they discovered anything of use? Kase shook his head and said they were going around and around trying to decipher Medon’s puzzling words and the additional stanzas he had found in the library.

*The problem—Kase had reminded him—is that the recorded poem was written in some variant of Greek and only partially translated by the author. And according to Arrian, not very well.*

After his answer, Kase ate his lunch quickly and went back to studying the texts, immersing himself inside their pages, ignoring Aleksandr.

Aleksandr dropped the pen-cell to the table in frustration and picked up the lukewarm *so-da*. He drank it down, the sweetness playing along his taste buds. This caramel liquid was truly another gift from the Gods. And he liked the way it always gave him energy.

He heard Kase coming before he saw him; the shuffling gait of his leather slippers sliding on the floor gave him away. Kase had his nose almost to the page of the book he held up to his face, trying to read it. Aleksandr heard him growl something under his breath about missing glasses. He could not be sure what he mumbled, however, because he was distracted by Kase’s entrance without a shirt, his loose, tan shorts riding low on his hips and golden hair mussed. His pale skin went with his light-colored mane, and his defined abdominals begged for delineation by Aleksandr’s tongue.

Kase opened the ice box and pulled out a green apple, turned, and headed into the *andrōn*, not even noticing Aleksandr seated at the table. Kase’s flexed biceps and hunched shoulders pulled at the man’s shoulder blades and rounded his spine. Aleksandr’s fingers wiggled with the need to touch. After yesterday’s first taste, the urge to touch Kase had grown, and he needed to feel Kase’s body against his again.

Aleksandr quietly placed his bottle down and rose from the chair. He circled the table, a sly grin pulling at the corner of his mouth as he prowled out of the kitchen and closer to his prey. Kase had stopped at the couch, the back of it



impeding his forward movement. He continued to read the pages before him, completely unaware of Aleksandr's approach.

One step, two. Aleksandr raised his arms. Three steps, four. He froze when Kase looked up momentarily and mumbled, "Maybe..." Kase returned to his study; Aleksandr returned to his stalking. Five steps, six. He slid up alongside Kase's body and outlined the younger man's physique with his hands. Then...

Kase yelped, his whole body jolting and sending the book flying upwards. He stretched out towards the book, his fingertips skimming the edges as it fell unharmed to the couch cushions. Kase lay draped over the furniture back, his butt in the air.

With one of his hands on Kase's ass, the other wrapped around to the front, hanging on to those lovely abs, Aleksandr laughed at Kase's girlish shout and not-so-quick reflexes, moving in for the kill. He closed the space between them, sliding his hands up warm, smooth flesh. He thrust his groin into Kase's upturned ass, tilting his hips to knock the man forward. A swivel of his waist ground his hardness into the young man's crack. Aleksandr swore at these modern clothing. A simple lift of chiton at home would have given him full access to any man bent over for him.

\*\*\*\*

Kase braced his hands on the edge of the couch and pushed back. When he felt space between them, he spun, punching Alek's shoulder. "Seriously? Stop." He laid his hands above solid pectorals and shoved, but Alek held on, his arms around Kase and hot on the bare flesh of his lower back. He frowned, pressing his lips together.

Under other circumstances, he'd have dragged the man down with him, but with the seriousness of the situation, they couldn't waste time playing around. His gaze wandered to where his hands lay on the bronzed, muscled chest, dark nipples peeking between his fingers. Then again, what harm would it do to simply lean in and lick...? He snapped his eyes up to meet Alek's. "Where's your shirt?"

"I believe we decided clothes were optional inside your home," Alek said, finishing with a sly grin and a quick arch of his brows. "Besides, I am still wearing the shorts."

Kase glanced down to see that, indeed, Alek was wearing the mentioned item. "That was not what I said."

Alek shrugged. “Not needed anyway. I wish to practice, and I want you to join me.”

“I can’t.” He pushed again on the wall of muscles, and Alek let him go, trailing his rugged hands on Kase’s skin. “I’ve got more research to do.” He circled the couch and collected the fallen book. Alek followed, and once Kase had it, he plucked it away.

Kase threw up his hands and huffed. “Alek, give it back. Please.” He held out his right hand, palm up.

Alek held it out, then snatched it away. “No. You need to practice.” He turned and stepped towards the shelves of books, placing the book up high. He stood firm, arms crossed over his chest, blocking Kase’s path to the shelves. Kase narrowed his eyes; Alek still didn’t move.

“Don’t know if I can, I’m not sure where my glasses are.” Kase gave Alek his best innocent look.

“You left them beside the sink upstairs.”

“I did? Thanks.” Kase sidestepped left to get around Alek, but Alek moved with him, keeping him from going in the direction he wanted. “Do you mind?”

Alek pointed up the stairs to Kase’s right. “If you get your glasses, I will let you go”—he grinned and pointed towards the backyard and the two wooden swords leaning beside the glass door—“and then, we will practice.”

“Fine.” Kase rasped. “Let’s get this over with.”

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Twenty-two

Kase groaned as he stepped into the shower, the water cooling his overheated body. His muscles twinged and cramped with every little movement. Alek hadn't gone easy on him the way he had the first time, and he'd kept up the best he could. Fortunately, he'd done better, and Alek allowed him to call it quits after only an hour, when he insisted he couldn't afford to fall asleep again like the last time because of the research he needed to do. The man was still outside practicing.

He got out, refreshed after the quick shower, dried off and walked into his bedroom... naked. Kase chuckled, knowing Alek was missing the show and wouldn't be pleased. He plopped down on his bed, not quite ready to continue the intense research. A little relaxation was in order. He slipped on his glasses, flipped to his stomach, and opened his laptop. Clicking to his favorite online porn site, he searched through the new videos posted. *This one looks good.*

The screen filled with the image of two striking musclemen, the older man had a crew cut and the younger one longer hair. Crew-cut guy had his hand threaded into the younger man's locks, fondling the guy's balls and thick cock while tilting his head back.

Kase wet his lips, his groin growing heavy. He loved having his own hair grabbed, maybe he should ask Alek to do it? He canted his hips forward, grinding his erection into the soft downy comforter, hands gripping the sides of his laptop. His attention riveted to the action on screen, he jolted at the scratchy slide of the glass door downstairs opening and the thud when it closed.

"Fuck," he muttered, shooting a look at his partially opened door. Fumbling for the top of the computer, he snapped it shut. He rolled off the bed and hightailed it into a pair of shorts and one of his favorite archery T-shirts: *Go ahead and run, you'll only die tired.* Kase brushed back his hair with his fingers and stepped out of his room onto the walkway to find Alek heading towards him, a bottle of water in his hand.

"All done?" Kase asked with a smile, hoping his hard-on wasn't too noticeable, but with the way Alek's eyes were focused on his groin, he doubted it. *That's what I get for going commando.*

Alek nodded. "Yes. Enough for today, but more tomorrow... for both of us."

Kase shook his head. "I can't. I have to work."

"Work?" Alek frowned. "Writing is not your work?"

"Yes, it is. But it doesn't pay all the bills. I need another job, so I work Friday and Saturday afternoon and evening, at Mykonos."

"Mykonos? The island?" Alek's eyes widened in surprise.

Kase chuckled. "No, it's a gay bar not too far from here. There's a party this weekend, and I'm a bartender. Tomorrow I'm going in early to help with whatever needs to get done to ready it for the bar's annual Greek *Sumposium*."

"I am coming with you," Alek stated firmly.

"You don't have to. Stay home and practice or visit with Arrian. It's crowded, you won't like it, and I can't keep you company since I'm working. There's nothing for you to do."

"I am not going with you to talk. I am going to protect you." Alek gripped his sword's hilt at his waist.

Kase blinked in surprise. "From what?" He zeroed in on Alek's hand on his sword. "Or should I say who? You think Medon is going to show up?" Kase raised his eyes back to Alek's.

Alek nodded. "He can 'show up' anywhere."

"I hardly doubt he'll appear at a crowded bar. It gets pretty busy Friday night, and Saturday will be packed."

"I am still going with you."

Kase exhaled in defeat. "Fine, if that's the way you want it. I think you'll get bored, and you can't practice there." He stepped to the side and pointed to the first floor. "I'm gonna head down and order dinner while you use the shower. How does Chinese sound?"

Alek shrugged. "I do not know. If there is meat, I am sure I will like it."

Kase laughed. "I'll make sure there is plenty of meat. Go on and get washed up." He slipped past Alek, feeling the heat radiating off the soldier's skin. Inhaling the strong scent of sweat as he moved by, his cock attempted to touch, pushing on the stretchy, nylon fabric. It didn't help his libido at all when Alek's hand landed on his arm.

He was pulled back, and a fiery hand cupped at his nape. Lips descended on his. Quick, dirty and rough. And then he was let go to sway a second on his

feet. Alek tapped him under the chin, and Kase looked up to find him smirking. With a swift upwards lift of a brow, Alek pivoted abruptly and disappeared behind the bedroom door.

“Cocky Greek,” Kase muttered and turned to head downstairs.

\*\*\*\*\*

Kase managed to keep himself occupied for the half hour it took for the food to arrive. He’d expected Alek to have come downstairs by now—the shower had turned off over fifteen minutes ago. He frowned, wondering what trouble the man had gotten into this time. Ready to investigate with one foot on the steps, he was immediately thwarted by the doorbell. He yelled upstairs, “Dinner,” then stepped to the door, retrieving his wallet from the kitchen counter.

“Alek!” Kase hollered, walking into the kitchen, carrying the bag filled with cartons, his stomach rumbling, practically tasting the delicious tanginess of sweet and sour pork, spicy Kung Pao chicken, beef and mushroom, and more. *More than enough for a hungry warrior.* Kase grinned as he put the bags on the table.

*Now, where is he?* With his stomach grumbling and the aromas filling the air, he paced back to the steps. “Alek?”

*He better not be playing with the toilet again.* But he hadn’t heard the toilet flush while he’d waited. *What could he be doing that he isn’t coming down to eat?* He placed his hand on the railing and tapped his fingertips on the hard surface. Perplexed, he strode up the stairs and stopped before his mostly closed bedroom door. His eyes narrowed at the breathy sounds of men engaging in sexual acts drifting out from his room.

He placed his palm on the door and slowly pushed it open. There on the bed, on his stomach, was Alek. Naked. His ass on display, his fingers splayed and curled into the comforter. He lay before Kase’s open laptop, hips rising and falling, grinding his pelvis into the bed, watching the same video he’d seen. Kase’s first thought was, *how the hell did he turn it on?* Followed by a deep groan at the sight before him.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Twenty-three

Aleksandr started at the the low groan and twisted his upper body around to look behind him. He found Kase standing in the open doorway, his cheeks flushed. Aleksandr's vision narrowed, raking over Kase's body, taking in the flush of his skin and the hunger staring back at him from the storm-gray eyes. A half smile, half smirk formed on Aleksandr's lips. He darted his tongue out to tease his watcher, and was rewarded with Kase's mouth dropping open.

"I... uh... I've got dinner downstairs." Kase ogled Aleksandr's ass.

"I am hungry for only one thing at the moment," Aleksandr replied, his voice low and husky, continuing to rock his hips into the bed. He tilted his chin down and stared blatantly at Kase's crotch, eyeing the way the fabric pushed out.

Kase stepped to the end of the bed and laid his right hand on Aleksandr's calf. Aleksandr involuntarily flexed the muscle at the unexpected touch of Kase's heated palm. He sighed at the light touch trailing through the hair on his leg.

Aleksandr's chest reverberated with a combination of moan and growl. His ardor flamed, seeing those men pleasure one another, he wanted to share his passion with a man he held in high regard. He held out his left hand to Kase.

Kase slid his into Aleksandr's slightly larger one; his smooth fingers, so unlike his own calloused ones, glided across Aleksandr's rough skin. He tugged Kase forward, and Kase kneeled on the mattress at the foot of the bed.

Turning on his side, Aleksandr propped his head up on a fist. His heart pounded harder when Kase climbed farther onto the bed and trailed his warm palm up his leg, not stopping until he laid his hand on Aleksandr's ass to give it a quick squeeze. He enjoyed Kase's exploration of his bronzed skin, admiring the contrast of color between them. His body relaxed with the long trek Kase's gentle fingers took, sometimes detouring to explore a scar or blemish.

He, in turn, ran fingertips up Kase's thigh and under the edge of his shorts. "You are overdressed," he stated simply, arching a brow.

Kase grinned at him, and reached over his head to pull on the back of his T-shirt, careful to keep his glasses from falling off.

Aleksandr knelt in front of Kase. He slid his hands up the man's body, the toned muscles of his torso flexing beneath his palms, the heat radiating into

them. He helped to lift the garment off and shifted closer, wrapping his arms around Kase, drawing his strong, firm body to him and sliding his hands down the planes of Kase's back, the smooth skin passing beneath his palms, soft and supple. Nibbling at Kase's neck, he moved his hands lower until they reached the waistband of his lover's shorts, and then underneath, to grip and fill his palms with fine, rounded globes of flesh and muscle.

A loud slap and groan from the men in the picture box drew Aleksandr's attention back to them. He withdrew one hand from Kase's shorts and touched the surface.

"There are men trapped inside your *com-pu-ter* fucking. It is very... hot? Is that the right word?"

Kase chuckled. "Yeah, hot is perfect."

Aleksandr continued to observe the men, the older man giving it hard to the younger one from behind. "Did the Gods put them there? Is it a punishment or reward? To forever take your lover to bed, and yet always have others watching..."

Kase burst out laughing, and Aleksandr dragged his attention back to the man in his arms.

"I never thought of it like that," Kase said after composing himself. "No gods involved here. This is a video; it's like a play or... like a photograph or painting that moves. Someone took moving pictures of the men and put them in a place everyone can view them. There are others to choose from, and you can pick." He slid his finger around on a silver rectangle. Boxes filled the surface, each containing pictures of men engaged in a sexual act. Some boxes had one man, most had two, but a few had three or more.

"Orgies?" Aleksandr pointed to one box.

"A popular pastime for the Romans, I'm told," Kase noted.

"Hm." Aleksandr lifted his brows, and thought about that possibility. He shook his head, replaced his hand on Kase's ass, pushing the shorts down in the process, and squeezed. "Not for me."

"Not for me, either." Kase laid his hands on Aleksandr's shoulders and slid them down to rest on his upper arms. His grip tightened, thumbs gliding in small circles on the sensitive skin of Aleksandr's inner arms.

Aleksandr allowed a tiny hum of appreciation to escape. "Good. Please return to those two men. I was enjoying their coupling."

“All right.” Kase tapped and the men appeared again. “I restarted it from the beginning.” He lay down on his stomach on one side of the bed, leaving plenty of room for Aleksandr to lie beside him.

Side by side, they lay and watched. Aleksandr’s heart raced listening to the man beside him pant and make small moans of pleasure while rocking his groin into the mattress. He glanced over several times, observing Kase’s hooded lids and parted mouth, his tongue licking at his top lip. Finally unable to control himself, Aleksandr flipped to his back, took hold of Kase’s biceps and strong-armed the man to lie on top of him. Kase straddled him, lining up their thick, full sword lengths. Aleksandr cupped the sides of Kase’s face and drew him down.

Kase pushed against him, propping himself on his forearms on Aleksandr’s chest. He smirked, looking Aleksandr straight in the eye, leaned down, and pulled back. Aleksandr grumbled at the delay while he waited, mouth open and expecting pressure at any moment. When the teasing continued, he growled, leaned up and rolled them, pinning Kase beneath him. He grasped Kase’s hands, laced their fingers, and pressed them to the mattress above the man’s head, taking the kiss he wanted, hard and rough and wet.

Aleksandr lapped into Kase’s mouth, explored each corner, his tongue parried and counterattacked Kase’s fight for dominance. Conceding the battle, he moved to lay open-mouth kisses along Kase’s jaw. He shifted again, nuzzled under Kase’s ear, licked and nibbled on his earlobe, traced the shell with his tongue, listened to each gasp he caused as he inhaled the sweet scent of soap and shampoo, and the taste of salt on his skin...

Their cocks parried and thrust, fiery flesh to scorching skin, heads catching and both of them groaning in pleasure.

“In the drawer, there’s lube,” Kase breathed, pointing to the small bed table on Aleksandr’s side. “Can you grab it?”

Aleksandr shifted and reached, pulling open the drawer. “Wait!” Kase shouted in his ear, twisting to his side, and yanking on Aleksandr’s arm. Aleksandr pushed Kase’s hand away, having already seen the contents of the drawer. He rose to his knees and reached in, pulling out a large, flexible but firm, flesh-colored cock, veins prominently covering its surface. He scowled at it, squeezed it, then turned his scowl on Kase. “What is this? *Olisbos*?”

He moved off the bed and stood to face Kase. He raised an eyebrow, his lips pressed together a moment before he spoke. “I do not understand. You watch



other men fucking, and need *this*, when I offer you *this*.” He pointed from the mockery swinging between his fingers, then down at his rigid cock, standing upright, waiting for orders. He tossed the olisbos back into the drawer.

Kase flopped to his back, pushed his glasses up on his nose, and stared up at the ceiling. “Contrary to popular belief, not all men jump each other’s bones right off the bat.” He sighed. “I’m not the kind of guy that goes all in without knowing where I stand, at least somewhat anyway. I don’t know if I’m ready for any kind of relationship...” He frowned and turned his head to look at Aleksandr.

Aleksandr glanced at the pleasuring aid in the drawer. He rubbed at the base of his neck, then stared at the floor. Kase had told him of his reluctance, held him at arm’s length, denied his advances for days, and still he had attempted to thrust himself into the man’s bed... and his ass. He needed to strategically retreat, soothe Kase’s hurt feelings and work his way into the man’s good graces.

Aleksandr stepped closer to the bed, reached out, and slid the back of his fingers down Kase’s cheek. “My apologies, Kase. My desire for you made me forget what you told me. I do not want my eagerness to ruin our evening.”

He smoothed a few errant strands of Kase’s hair back. “I find it hard not to touch you and want to join with you. Perhaps... we could lie here and enjoy the *porneia* together?”

Kase smiled and wrapped his hand around Aleksandr’s wrist, halting his movements. “Yeah, we could do that, but—”

“No fucking,” Aleksandr interrupted, looking away, his shoulders slumping in defeat.

Kase tugged on his arm and greeted Aleksandr with a smirk. “Doesn’t mean there aren’t other ways to *enjoy* each other’s company.” He removed his glasses and placed them on the table and scooted back on the bed. Kase drew Aleksandr forward, pushing and prodding at him until he was back in the same position he’d been in before the drawer’s contents had twisted their evening out of control.

“Now,” Kase said, his hands lightly stroking Aleksandr’s thighs, “in the drawer, there’s lube.”

“Lubricant? Like olive oil?” Aleksandr asked, leaning over, pushing the olisbos to the side, and pulling out a small bottle. “This one?”

“That’s the one, and yes, like olive oil, but less messy.” Kase took the bottle from him and popped the top open.

“Good!” Aleksandr grinned. He held out his hand, thoughts running rampant of what they could do with this *lube*. Kase squirted a small amount onto his palm, and then some to his own hand which he curled around Aleksandr’s shaft. With each firm stroke of Kase’s hand, he hardened further, rejoicing in the touch of Kase’s warm grip.

Kase’s erection, full and neglected, waited for his touch. He pressed his slicked palm to that handsome cock, and slid his hand up and down, pulling faint whimpers from Kase’s throat. With each caress of flesh between their fingers, their breathing increased. Each swirl around the head brought an exhalation of air, each tightened grip, a gasp, and through it all a symphony of pleasure-filled moans. Aleksandr held back his release, unwilling to let go too soon, while Kase played a fine game of bringing him close to spilling.

“Aw, yeah! Right there!” shouted one of the men from the com-pu-ter, and Kase laughed, craning his neck to glance at the image, his hand no longer stroking.

“Let’s watch,” he said, turning back to Aleksandr and tapping his left thigh. Kase reached for his glasses and put them on.

Saved from spilling too soon, Aleksandr nodded. “All right.” He moved to his left, stretching out on his side.

“I want to watch you,” Kase whispered, sliding gentle fingers down Aleksandr’s arm. Aleksandr glanced up, searching Kase’s face, and found an eager expression of wide eyes and wet lips. The thought of those lips wrapped around him had him groaning and pressing hard on his groin to stop himself from releasing.

Through eyes half-closed, Aleksandr gazed longingly at Kase’s pale body. He eyed Kase’s exposed throat, looked farther upwards, and found Kase watching the *porneia*.

A deep-throated growl rumbled from him. He released his cock, threaded his fingers into Kase’s hair, and tilted his head back even more. Kase’s eyelids fluttered closed, and a whimper slipped from his lips. Aleksandr shifted closer and leaned in, licking a long path upwards starting from the hollow at the front of Kase’s throat and ending with a nip on his chin. Kase wrapped his arms around him, fingers digging hard into his back. He hooked a leg over Kase’s,

trapping his lower body, and nudged the man in his arms with his heel to come closer until their bodies pressed together, legs intertwined.

Aleksandr slid his left hand up to cradle Kase's cheek, heat radiating into his palm, to control the man's head movements. He tilted Kase's head back down and descended on the man's lips, demanding entrance.

Kase shut his mouth, denying him, a smothered laugh vibrating behind his closed lips.

Aleksandr pulled back, narrowing his eyes at the delighted mirth in Kase's own. Slowly, Aleksandr shook his head, quirking up the side of his mouth. An impish grin appeared on Kase's face, and he traced patterns against Aleksandr's skin as he squirmed beneath him.

Aleksandr swooped in, prying open Kase's mouth with his tongue. He licked inside, sucked Kase's tongue into his own mouth, and ground against him. Kase's throaty groan and hard grasp on his shoulder blades as he bucked up encouraged Aleksandr to go faster. Each knock and slick glide between them brought breathy moans of pleasure and panting, their sounds blending with the men in the box.

It wasn't enough. More. Aleksandr needed more. As if knowing his thoughts, Kase's hands wiggled between them, encircled and gripped their cocks, rubbing them together. Pure pleasure struck Aleksandr low, his abs clenching, groin tightening. He tilted his head back, exposing his own throat. Blunted teeth nipped at him, strong hands pulling, stroking, sliding. Aleksandr ground his teeth together, struggling to hold back, but with the way Kase played his body...

His release slammed into him, and he groaned, his body locking tight as he spilled. Exultation raced through him and warmth splattered on his belly. And then Kase's low moan escalated, and his body stiffened in Aleksandr's hands. Not wishing to miss a moment of Kase's impending orgasm, Aleksandr opened his eyes and looked down in time to see his lover—*his lover*—attain the height of rapture.

Kase arched, his chest pushing up into Aleksandr's. A deep flush bloomed on his cheeks, his mouth parted with a low, drawn-out moan, and Kase's release splashed high on Aleksandr's chest. Another groan passed Kase's swollen and red lips, the sound floating into Aleksandr's ears and sinking into his soul as he watched Kase relax, coming down from his euphoria.

Aleksandr smiled, and slid the side of his thumb across Kase's cheek. Kase blinked his eyes open, a soft smile on his lips. Aleksandr moved his thumb there, and Kase pressed kisses to it.

Kase chuckled, and Aleksandr tapped Kase on the lips. "What is funny, my *glykós*?"

Kase's brows raised in a lazy arch. "Glykós?"

"Sweet."

"Hm. I like it." Kase sighed sleepily and shifted languidly beneath him. "I was just thinking about dinner still sitting downstairs on the table. I'm too tired to move, but I should go put it in the fridge."

"Rest, my *glykós*. I will do it, and perhaps later we will rise and eat, and you will show me again how to use the warming box."

"Microwave oven," Kase replied, his words quiet and drawn out. "Okay. I'm going to close my eyes then." And they were shut before he'd even finished speaking.

Aleksandr chuckled quietly, untangled himself from Kase, and rolled off the bed to his feet. He wet a cloth in the bathroom and returned to the bedroom, placed a hand on Kase's chest, causing him to stir and waken. Aleksandr stroked the cloth over Kase, admiring the taut muscles of his lover's stomach, and immediately wished for a repeat of their bed sports. Instead, he covered Kase with the soft, fluffy blanket.

He closed the top on the picture box, the men frozen inside it, and moved it to the side table. Carefully, Aleksandr removed Kase's glasses where they perched awkwardly on his nose, and placed them atop the machine. He pressed a kiss to Kase's forehead. "Sleep well, dream well, my *glykós*," he whispered before padding silently down the stairs.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Twenty-four

*Friday*

Aleksandr forced himself to relax in his seat as Kase maneuvered his car through the streets. They were on their way to Mykonos. Finally out and seeing new things, he vibrated with excitement, but suppressed it so as not to distract Kase from his “driving.” He marveled at the heights of the buildings. They reminded him of the tales of Herkales, and his defeat of the Giants. Aleksandr entertained Kase with the myth of Porphyrion and Alkyoneus and stories about the shooting competitions among his fellow soldiers. Which reminded him...

“I saw your bow and arrows in the house,” Aleksandr said, glancing at Kase when they stopped at a red light. “I would like to borrow them. I am most skillful with my sword, but need to keep up my practice with the bow.”

Kase nodded and moved the car forward when the light turned green. “Sure. In fact, Sunday is our weekly practice for my medieval reenactment group. I’d like to get a few hours in before I head off on assignment. You’re welcome to come along. I’ll introduce you to those two ‘soldiers’ you were going to kill on stage.”

“I would like to join you,” Aleksandr said, his mind already drifting to the phone call Kase received this morning from his *boss*. Aleksandr tensed at the memory and dug his fingers into his thighs.

They drove in silence for a while, Kase watching the *traf-fic*, and Aleksandr growing more agitated with each passing minute.

“Can your boss not send someone else for your assignment?” Aleksandr blurted out, unable to stop himself from asking again, despite the numerous times he had already asked Kase that day. He did not like the idea of Kase working apart from him while Medon lurked around, and he especially did not want Kase out of their bed where he could not touch him. Aleksandr looked at Kase, hoping his answer might change.

Kase shook his head, his lips drawn in a tight line. “I told you, if I could, I would—there isn’t anyone else available to take this assignment on global warming. My boss doesn’t have another reporter to send. Besides, I enjoy assignments dealing with the environment.”

Aleksandr nodded absently; he would not ask anymore. He would make the best of it, even though the idea of Kase’s coming absence made his heart grow heavy.

Kase steered his car under a gate that rose on its own. Aleksandr leaned forward to watch. They passed beneath it, and he twisted in his seat to look out the back window at its descent. Kase grinned, and Aleksandr could see him shaking his head out of the corner of his eye.

He squeezed Kase's arm. "Do not make fun of me. Would your head not twist around if you appeared suddenly in my *polis*? I could show you our *toilets* in the bathhouses."

"I've seen pictures, that's good enough for me." Kase shivered and grimaced, pulling into a parking space.

Aleksandr laughed. "And at the baths we could wash each other." He caught Kase's eye and winked. They got out of the car, and Aleksandr met Kase at the back of it, drawing him closer, his hands on Kase's ass. "I would not be able to keep my hands off of your body. No one else shall be allowed to touch you."

Kase leaned against Aleksandr. "Possessive much?" he quipped with a cocky grin.

Aleksandr rested his forehead against Kase's, staring into those gray eyes; eyes like storm clouds, changing and drifting with the winds. "Very." He tilted his head and pressed his lips to Kase's. The kiss eased into a slow, drawn-out meeting of mouths, and Aleksandr reveled in the feel of warm, soft lips against his, Kase's hands squeezing his biceps, and the sound of a soft-toned moan of delight.

Kase pulled back first, resting their foreheads together again. "As much as I'd like this to continue, we better go. I'm late already." He slipped his hand into Aleksandr's and led him out of the dark interior of the garage and into the morning sunlight.

They walked down an alleyway until they reached a black door. Kase turned the knob, pulled it open and allowed Aleksandr to precede him. Aleksandr quickly took stock of the open area, shelves along one wall filled with colorful bottles and brown boxes in varying sizes.

"Kase? That you?" a voice carried to them from deeper inside.

"Yeah, Tristan. It's me," Kase called back. Aleksandr tensed, spotting a long, slender shadow approach before the man behind the voice appeared through another doorway. A full head shorter than Aleksandr, the young man strode in, one hand on a hip and the other pointing at Kase.

"You're late, mister, and..." Tristan's eyes grew wide and a grin stretched across his face. "Oh! Hello, tall, dark, and handsome. Have you come to keep

me company?” Tristan sidled up to Aleksandr and laid a hand on his chest, soft brown eyes blinking up at him. Aleksandr looked down at the long-fingered, pale hand, noting the neat appearance of his nails. He placed his hand over the top of Tristan’s and curled his fingers around it before pulling it off of his chest. He placed Tristan’s hand on the man’s own chest.

“I believe that belongs to you,” Aleksandr said flatly.

Tristan clicked his tongue. “Hm. Playing hard to get, huh?” He bit at his lip and shrugged. “More fun for me.” He glanced at Kase. “Meeting’s waiting on you, loverboy.” Tristan spun and exited the room.

Aleksandr looked at Kase and raised a brow.

“Sorry?” Kase shrugged. “Tristan is a notorious flirt.” He moved around Aleksandr and headed in the same direction of the young man. Aleksandr followed close behind. “I probably should’ve warned you about him, but I gotta say you handled him well. Don’t be surprised if he tries to come on to you again.” Kase spun and laid a hand on Aleksandr’s chest. “Can’t say I blame him for trying.” He grinned, turned back around and continued through the doorway.

\*\*\*\*\*

Aleksandr admired the mural in the hallway while he waited outside the room where Kase was meeting with his boss and coworkers. It was a depiction of the battle between Herakles and the Giants he’d recounted to Kase. White-bearded Zeus threw bolts of lightning, strong Herakles and Apollo pulled back horsebows to shoot the monsters with deadly aim. Even Dionysus attacked with vengeance for their attempt to take over Olympus. The Giants writhed in agony, curled into balls of pain.

The door opened, and a man not much older than Aleksandr stepped out. Wiry, and tall, his long dark hair was streaked with lines of gold, and tied back in a braided tail. He extended his hand to Aleksandr. “Name’s Branchus. I own Mykonos, tend bar most nights, and try to keep these hooligans from destroying the place.” He hooked his thumb over his shoulder at the assortment of men sitting around a table in the room behind him.

Aleksandr grasped Branchus’ hand firmly, surprised by both the man’s name and the strength in his grip. “Aleksandr.”

“Nice to meet you. I hear you’re keeping Kase company, but I can’t have you getting in his way while he’s working. However, if you don’t mind helping out... I could use a man with muscles. Got a big delivery coming in shortly.”

“I will help.” Aleksandr affirmed with a nod of his head.

“Great.” Branchus clapped him on the shoulder. “Kase can show you around until the delivery arrives, then it’s all arrows for the hunt.”

“Hunt?” Aleksandr frowned.

“Sorry.” Branchus laughed. “I meant everybody pitches in and works.”

“I will work.”

Branchus smiled and nodded. “I’m sure of it. Go on now and have a look around, I’ve got a couple of orders to place in my office.” He strode past Aleksandr and stepped into another room further down the hall.

“Alek!” Kase called to him from inside the room, waving for him to come in. He entered and stood beside Kase.

“You met Bran, let me introduce you to the rest of the guys. You already know Tristan, and this is Cooper.” Aleksandr shook hands with the dark-haired, bronzed and heavily muscled young man. “They’re our main servers for the tables. These two brutes here are our bouncers, Magnus and Vaughn. They work the front door and upstairs levels and take care of any rowdy guests.” Magnus and Vaughn—both broad, fit, and well over Aleksandr’s height—fisted their hands and bumped them together, then reached across the table to shake Aleksandr’s hand, while Kase continued talking. “There’ll probably be another bartender, two more servers, and another bouncer coming in tonight, I’ll introduce you to them when they arrive.”

“Be nice to have extra brawn to take in the order,” Magnus commented.

“Yeah, especially since Tristan is a scrawny little thing,” added Vaughn.

“Hey!” Tristan placed his hands on his waist and cocked a hip out. “I resemble that remark.”

In the laughter and banter that followed, Kase tapped Aleksandr on the arm and directed him out of the room. As they walked down the hall, hand in hand, the painting of Apollo and Herakles again drew Aleksandr’s attention. He stopped Kase, tugged him back, and pointed at the Gods on the wall.

Kase looked up at them, and then at Aleksandr. “You were telling me this story in the car. Your description brings this painting to life.” He gestured to include the whole mural.

Aleksandr inclined his head. “Thank you, but it is not why I stopped you. See, here is Apollo.” He pointed at the blond God pulling back a silver bow, a sunburst behind his head.



“Yeah.”

“Apollo and his son are both graced with the power of foresight.”

“And...”

“And Branchus is his son.”

Kase turned to stare at him. “You don’t seriously believe...” He blinked at Aleksandr. “Yes, yes, I guess you do.” He shook his head and moved closer.

“Alek,” he whispered, “you can’t say things like that. Even if he has the same name, and his bar is named after a Greek island, that doesn’t make him the son of a god who existed in mythology two thousand years ago.” His worried eyes searched Aleksandr’s. “People will think you’re...” Kase pointed his forefinger to his head and made a circular motion with it. “They’ll think you’re crazy... You can’t.” He turned and pulled Aleksandr after him.

“Yet you believe I am returned from stone,” Aleksandr chided under his breath. He waited for a response, but if Kase heard him, he didn’t answer.

As they reached a set of double doors, a loud buzzing pierced the quiet of the hallway, startling Aleksandr. Branchus stepped out from his office, spotting them.

“Tour’s off, boys,” he said, then yelled, “Order’s here,” before marching off towards the back entryway. Magnus, Vaughn, Tristan and Cooper entered the hall and slid past them.

“Com...ing?” Tristan asked, stretching out the word seductively, and coyly looking over his shoulder.

Kase waved him off. “We’ll be right there.” He squeezed Aleksandr’s hand. “I’m serious. Don’t say that about Branchus, to anyone.” Aleksandr nodded, conceding to Kase’s request.

\*\*\*\*

They finished putting away the first order when a second delivery arrived immediately after, keeping them busy. Aleksandr helped haul cases of wine and liquor, roll huge metal kegs, and carried a significant amount of stock up the stairs to the second floor, which looked completely different from the first floor except for the similar layout of the bar.

With less than an hour to opening, the cook, Eric, arrived. He threw together a quick lunch for everyone, and they gathered at the bar with glasses of *zithos*. He’d had something similar while in the army, but this...

“What did you say this was called again?” Aleksandr asked, holding up his glass of dark-brown liquid.

“Beer, or more specifically an English Porter,” Kase replied. “Do you like it?”

“Yes.” Aleksandr took another sip. “Much better than anything I remember. My father forbade us having *zithos* in our home. Wine, he insisted. I would labor all day for this... or so-da.”

“Soda?” Branchus asked. “Is that your favorite?”

“Yes.” Aleksandr nodded quickly. “It is sweet.”

His answer brought a round of laughter and smiles from Kase’s friends. Vaughn stood and slapped Aleksandr on the back. “I’m a ‘sweets’ man, myself.” The others also rose, plates in hand, and headed towards the kitchen.

Branchus held out his hands. “I’ll take those, Kase, if you want to give Aleksandr a quick tour.”

Kase took Aleksandr’s plate and handed it with his own to Branchus. “Thanks. We won’t be long.”

Branchus grinned, his amber eyes, shining like the setting sun, wrinkled at the corners. “I’ll hold you to it.”

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Twenty-five

“Come on,” Kase said, grabbing Alek’s hand and giving it a tug. “I’ll show you around upstairs.”

They took the stairs two at a time, until they reached the second-floor gaming room.

“You’ve been up here already helping out.” Kase looked at Alek, who nodded.

“But I do not know what all of this is.” Alek waved his free hand at the room.

“This is the game room. There’s the bar, of course, the pool table and the dartboard, plus the TVs.”

Alek released Kase’s hand and walked to the dartboard. “It’s a very small target. These are the weapons?” he asked, pointing at the darts stuck in the board. “They are like little spears. My men and I often gambled on who could throw their spear the farthest.”

Kase watched Alek pull one of the darts out and inspect the tip, testing the sharpness on the end of a finger. “They aren’t weapons, it’s a throwing game, and those are the darts. There’s a whole set of rules that goes with it, and there are even tournaments, but I don’t know much about the game.”

Alek nodded and turned to the pool table. “And this?” he asked, running his hand over its green surface.

“The purpose of pool is to get the balls into these pockets,” Kase answered, coming to stand beside Alek at the table. “The players use those cues to knock them in.” He pointed to the sticks lined up neatly in the racks on the wall. “Depending on what kind of game is played, the person needs to get the balls into the pockets in a certain order. If they miss, or shoot the wrong ball in, the other person playing gets their turn, or the shooter loses the game.”

Alek smirked, and before Kase could blink, Alek grabbed him by the waist with his large hands, spun him around and bent him over the table. He pressed him down with his body, his swelling cock settling into Kase’s crease. Warm breath brushed past Kase’s ear, and his eyelids fluttered closed.

“I can think of a much more interesting way to use this table,” Alek murmured, his voice deep and sensual. “And I know of only one ‘pocket’ I am

interested in filling with my ‘cue,’” he continued, grinding his hard prick against Kase’s ass.

Kase licked his lips, Alek’s fantasy playing through his mind. Hot as it was, he needed to get Alek’s mind off sex. Kase pushed himself up with his arms and took a step back, forcing Alek away. “I’d love to make your fantasy come true, but there’s no sex allowed here in the game room.” Alek dropped his arms from around him. Kase turned and suppressed a smile at the hurt-puppy-dog expression on Alek’s face. “This room is purely for relaxation and entertainment. Not everyone wants to listen to the music or be surrounded by the crowd downstairs.”

“Then what is the purpose of having a large fine table if it is used strictly for games?” Alek asked, his eyebrows arching up and down, in a comical state of confusion.

Kase wet his lips with his tongue. “I can show you a much ‘finer’ room that will be of interest to you. Up there,” he said, indicating another set of stairs near the bar.

“Bran lives on the third and fourth floors, so those levels are restricted. Only personal guests of his are allowed, and those with a golden passcard. He’s set aside a room on the third floor for ‘special activities.’” Kase watched Alek’s lips curl up and his eyes shine with interest. “When the party starts, a guard will sit here at the bottom of the steps and check passcards. He’ll let the people who have them proceed upstairs—plus, of course, we, the employees, can visit the upper levels.”

Alek grinned. “I would like to see this special room.” He motioned for Kase to ascend the stairs.

The top of the stairs opened onto a small, well-lit space. The sun streamed brightly through two windows facing the main street. A small couch and armchair with a side table between them sat beneath the windows. Past the furniture, another staircase rose upwards.

Kase looked out one of the windows and saw a line already forming for the bar, and it was still at least ten minutes till they opened. He knew what the crowd would be like tomorrow—absolutely crazy. Mykonos was a popular gay bar, and plenty of men were turned away each night once capacity was reached.

Kase turned left down a long hall. “The two doors on the right are Bran’s residence.” He stopped in front of a pair of doors on his left. “These doors however...” Kase took out his wallet, pulled out his golden swipe card and slid

it through the silver card reader on the wall. He turned the handle of the right door and pushed in when a green light blinked. Reaching to his right, he felt around on the wall for the light switches, flicking them on. He shut the door behind them and turned to watch Alek's face.

The warrior's eyes grew wide, his mouth dropping open as he swiveled his head side to side taking everything in, not stopping long on any one object. "A room for sex," he whispered, a huge grin spreading across his face.

Laughter bubbled in Kase's chest, threatening to break free, but he pinched his lips together and held it back. He watched Alek advance further into the room and turn in a circle to take it all in.

Alek rushed back to Kase's side and ran a hand down his arm, before clasping his hand. "We can use this, yes?" His bright smile reminded Kase of a kid waking up on Christmas Day.

"Sure we can, if you want to share or have everyone watch," Kase said, biting his lip again to keep from laughing.

Alek's smile faded. "I will not share you." He paused. "I will think about letting others watch, however." He turned away, released Kase's hand, and made a sweeping gesture at the room. "Tell me about all this." He rapidly strode to what was the largest bed Kase had ever seen, far bigger than a king-sized bed. Even after working at Mykonos for the last three years, the gargantuan bed still amazed him every time he saw it. Eight men could easily entertain themselves on it and still have room.

"I know this is the bed," Alek said, sitting and springing up and down on it a few times before standing up again.

"Yes. I'm guessing it was custom made for this room, I've no idea how he got it in here." Kase looked back at the double door. Even with both sides open, he couldn't fathom how they fit it through.

"What's in there?" Alek rose and pulled open the twin doors of a tall cupboard beside the bed, attached to the wall. "Sheets?"

"Yes." Kase nodded. "The rules are anyone who uses the bed, must change the sheets. The dirty ones go in that container next to the cupboard." He pointed to the large metal bin.

Alek nodded, distracted by a tray filled with colorful wrappers sitting on another table. He picked up one of the small square objects to examine it. "What is this?" He squinted at the packet. "There is a man's picture and something round and flat in it." He held it out for Kase to see.

Kase pursed his lips and walked over. Now he needed to explain condoms and have the safe-sex talk with Alek. *What am I? A health teacher?* This was something he'd never thought he'd have to explain to any man. He rubbed the back of his neck. "That's a... a condom."

Alek waited, watching Kase closely.

"It's used to prevent the transmission of sexual diseases."

Alek looked at it again and wrinkled his nose. "It is very small. How does it work?"

Kase coughed, his face heating, a prickly sensation rising up his neck and chest. He was going to have to show Alek. He reached for the packet and ripped it open. "You take the condom, pinch the tip, slip it over the end of your penis, then roll it down all the way to the base." He demonstrated on two fingers of his left hand stretching the condom around them, feeling like an idiot. "It stays on. It's also used for birth control."

Alek nodded. "I understand birth control. The women in my time took herbs to prevent it from happening. Although I don't think these would bring much pleasure for the men. They would not want to wear it." He looked at Kase for an explanation.

"Yeah, that's true. It happens even now, but they're necessary because of diseases, like gonorrhea." Kase stepped to the trash pail and pressed on the pedal to open the lid, tossing in the wrapper and condom. "Do you remember any of your men complaining about intense burning when they peed, or had pus coming from their...?" he pointed to his groin.

Alek's eyes widened. "Yes, many times. Some visited temples to pray to the Gods for help, others bathed in vinegar or cold water to realign their humors.

"Well, they had what we know now is called gonorrhea." Kase stuck his hands in his pockets and wandered back to Alek. "It's one of the diseases that gets passed around. I think I remember reading it was a big problem with prostitutes in ancient times."

"Yes. *Gonórrhoia*. Many soldiers grew ill after visiting with courtesans. I am not interested in women, perhaps that is why I did not catch it?" Alek shrugged.

"You've never had any problems? Ever?" Kase found that hard to believe.

Alek shook his head. "Not that I remember."

Kase continued. “Anyway, the condom helps cut down on people catching those kinds of diseases from each other. It’s not perfect, but it helps.”

“Will we have to use these *con-doms*?” Alek asked, drawing near.

Kase looked up into Alek’s eyes. “I... If we decide to... fuck, then yes.” Alek’s dark-blue eyes flashed with heat, and Kase’s gut clenched. Alek wanted him to cave. He knew if he did, he’d tumble over the waterfall, unable to escape the pull Alek had on his heart. And then, when the fight with the Gorgon ended, Alek would... Kase didn’t want to think about it. The tightrope he walked shredded dangerously thinner each day. He couldn’t let himself grow closer. But until the time came for Alek’s fight with Medon, he’d show the man a good time, all the while protecting his own heart.

Alek nodded, leaned forward. “I will do what is needed of me,” he said, his lips brushing lightly against Kase’s.

Kase turned his head abruptly away and cleared his throat. He continued with his tour of the room, walking to each section. “Here’s another smaller bed, and there are leather couches and chairs over there.” Kase walked to a corner of the room. “And this area’s for those who prefer a little rougher play.” Chains with dangling black cuffs for wrists and ankles hung from a wall. A padded leather spanking bench and wooden stock sat next to them. The last large item was an elevated padded table with large eye bolts spaced around the edges. Two smaller, movable metal stands with shelves and hooks stood in the area.

“Those do not interest me,” Alek said, approaching Kase, eyeing the implements and décor with disdain.

“Me neither,” Kase admitted. He pointed towards the opposite corner, where a small square room jutted out into the main play area. “Over there are toilets and a small shower. You don’t need to go down to the second floor to use the bathroom.” Alek nodded at his statement, and Kase turned and headed for the door.

“Come on, there’s still one place left to show you.” They exited the room, Kase making sure the lights were turned off and the door secured. He walked back to the small front area and made a left. A similar staircase, like the one they’d climbed to get to the third floor, rose to the next level. Kase led the way again, and at the top he stopped at a metal door and pushed it open. He moved to the side, allowing Alek to step through first.

The afternoon air brushed lightly across Kase’s skin as he strode out onto Mykonos’ hidden treasure. A light breeze cooled the heat of the summer sun,

making it a pleasant visit to the rooftop garden. Large planters with small fruit trees and an array of flowers brightened the space, along with ceramic pots filled with herbs, including rosemary, marjoram, oregano, mint, and many more, growing alongside the waist-high walls. Kase often found Cooper up here tending to the plants in his spare time. *He must have a green thumb because they always grow well.*

One small metal table with its chairs sat under a lemon tree for anyone wishing to spend their break on the roof, and a chimney rose off to one side near another wall covered with golden, flowering honeysuckle vines. The wall bisected the area and blocked the view into Bran's private garden. A warm, sweet scent of blooming flowers drifted on the air, creating a rooftop oasis.

"This is like *Graecia*," Alek said in awe, inspecting the herbs and running his fingers through the oregano.

"Yes, isn't it?" Kase walked up to the waist-high wall and looked over the edge. "It's safe up here. There's a fire escape ladder there"—he pointed it out—"and Bran's side has one too."

"We can visit this garden?" Alek asked.

"Yes. Employees, and whomever Bran gives the okay to."

Alek checked out the fire escape. "Can they not climb up the side?" He glanced at Kase.

Kase shrugged. "No one's ever tried, as far as I know."

Alek nodded and walked back to Kase. "It must be beautiful to sleep up here and see the stars." He sighed. "I miss that."

Kase smiled. "I think you'd have to go way outside the city to see the stars like you're used to. It's too bright here."

"Then we will go. I learned how to navigate by the stars. I will teach you." Alek sauntered over to stand in front of Kase, pulling him close. "After I kill Medon, we will have time to see and do much. And maybe even to try out the giant bed... when no one is around." Alek grinned and tightened his grip on Kase. Soft warm lips pressed against his, and he opened for Alek.

How easily he could fall for this man, losing himself in him. But the chance Alek would survive the coming fight was very low. He'd already lost once, and Kase knew enough mythology to know only one man had ever survived.

The outdoor speakers crackled on, and the first acoustic guitar chords of Howie Day's "Collide" reached their ears.



Kase pulled back. “Come on, that’s our cue the bar will be opening soon. We need to get down there for any last-minute instructions.” Alek released him, and the absence of his warm body and close presence chilled Kase. Already Alek’s mere letting go made Kase’s heart ache. He couldn’t bear any more pain; he must keep his distance, because their future was uncertain. Kase turned around and moved to the cardreader. He slid his passcard through it, and when he heard the click, pulled open the door, letting Alek enter first. The door closed automatically behind him, the slam almost as loud as the lock closing on his heart.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Twenty-six

“Kase! Get your fine ass down here already!”

Aleksandr tensed at Branchus’ booming tone. He laid a protective hand on Kase’s shoulder. Kase threw a half smile at him, twisting to acknowledge his presence. He reached up and patted the back of Aleksandr’s hand.

“I’m right here, Bran. No need to yell.”

“Sorry, didn’t see you two there.”

Aleksandr smirked. *Doubtful.*

“I ordered new shirts for everyone,” Branchus said. “They’re in the employee break room. Go get one for yourself and Aleksandr, and then leave him with Eric. You’ve got first shift behind the bar.”

“Will do.” Kase led Aleksandr back into the mural-painted hallway, walked to the end, and turned into the meeting room. Tall metal boxes and shelves ran along the far wall. Kase rummaged on one shelf and withdrew a black T-shirt, tossing it to him.

Aleksandr unraveled the material and admired the image. A helm of *Graecia* overlay a map of the island of Mykonos. “I like the picture,” he commented, glancing over at Kase and catching sight of a strip of bare skin as Kase pulled on a similar shirt.

Kase grinned. “Do you need help getting that on?” he asked suggestively.

Aleksandr returned the smile. “If you would like.” He crooked his first finger at him.

Kase approached with a smirk. He slipped his hands under the hem of Aleksandr’s tank top and lifted it off.

Gentle fingertips slid down Aleksandr’s chest, over a pert nipple, before withdrawing. Aleksandr shivered at the soft, smooth touch on his skin, and the anticipation of what those digits could do to the rest of his body.

Kase snapped the shirt out and grabbed the hem, opened, and held it up for Aleksandr.

Arms and head through holes, the backs of fingers caressed the sides of Aleksandr’s body as Kase drew the shirt down. Palms ran across his chest,

smoothing fabric that didn't need it. With each small touch, Aleksandr craved more.

"Looks good on you," Kase murmured.

Aleksandr's nipples showed prominently in the tight shirt, and his biceps strained against the short sleeves. He ran his hands down his own chest. "*Efcharistó.*"

"You're welcome." Kase smiled at Alek. "All right," he said, stepping away, "let's get you to Eric, and me out front, before Bran comes looking for us."

\*\*\*\*

Eric had Aleksandr shadow a server he introduced as Duncan. While Tristan and Cooper took the orders and waited on the customers, Duncan and he brought out the meals and cleaned off the tables.

Each time Aleksandr stepped into the main room of the bar, he sought out Kase, often catching his attention, and receiving a smile or wink. What Kase did not see, however, was him fending off Tristan's advances every time the younger man entered the kitchen.

A light touch on his arm, a brush of hip against his thigh, flirting banter in a voice that grated on Aleksandr's ears.

"Alek, honey, could you reach that box up there?" Tristan batted his eyes and pointed to a shelf high above his head. Aleksandr had reached up while Tristan reached out and squeezed Aleksandr's ass.

He had spun, slapping Tristan's hands away and shoved the desired box into the young man's chest. "Stop, Taras," he had growled.

"Honey," Tristan drawled, "the name is Trisstas, not Taras," and he had playfully patted Aleksandr's chest.

Tristan's words struck Aleksandr like a slap to the face. Vexed at putting Tristan in the same category as Taras, he stormed out of the kitchen, needing to escape and breathe.

*Gods...* Aleksandr stood in the hallway, facing the mural, his eyes jumping from God to God to God depicted on the wall.

*How could I have missed it?* The similarities between the two men were there. Tristan, like Taras, was unwilling to hear the truth behind Aleksandr's words. They spun each thing he said into something else, drew more meaning

from a simple smile or brush of arms than what it had intended. He had done himself—and Tristan—a disservice by not firmly telling the young man “no.”

He later returned to the kitchen, after gaining control over his anger, only to have Eric insist he take “fifteen.” He did not know what that meant, but he got the impression Eric wanted him out of his way for a while longer.

Aleksandr wandered to the front and sat at the bar, hoping for a few moments of Kase’s time. While he waited, he observed Branchus assisting Cooper with a large group of men. Aleksandr rose to help, but Branchus saw and waved him away. Turning back around, Aleksandr found Kase standing in front of him on the other side of the bar.

“Hey, handsome, come here often?” Kase winked, laying a small rectangle with the island’s image on it in front of Aleksandr. “What can I get you?”

Aleksandr tilted his head, regarding Kase’s silly grin. He tucked his chin down a little and coyly smiled. He placed his elbows on the countertop and leaned forward, Kase meeting him halfway for a chaste kiss. Aleksandr whispered against Kase’s lips, “You know what I want.”

Kase straightened and glanced away. When he looked back at Aleksandr, Kase bit at his bottom lip, a mischievous gleam in his eyes. “Oh, right, a glass of soda?”

Aleksandr leaned back in his chair, sliding his hands off the counter and into his lap, shoulders slumping. “Very well.”

“Aw. That’s not very cheerful,” Kase said, grabbing a clean glass from under the counter. He turned and pulled a small hose, depressing a lever to fill the glass.

“I’ll give you what you want...” Tristan’s sickly sweet voice cooed in Aleksandr’s ear. His smaller frame pushed into Aleksandr’s side, and his hand slid across Aleksandr’s back.

Kase placed the glass of so-da on the little square and chuckled.

Aleksandr stiffened at the greedy touch, pressing his lips tightly together, and barely suppressed the flames rising in his belly. He wanted to shove the annoying man away; instead he twisted and placed a hand on Tristan’s chest, forcing the man to step back. “You can not,” he sternly told Tristan.

“Okay,” Tristan chirped. “Maybe later?” And he sashayed off.

Kase continued to snicker, and Aleksandr glowered at him.

“What?” Kase widened his eyes and batted his eyelashes. “The man’s a notorious flirt. You’re doing great repelling his advances.”

“I need to drive him off,” Aleksandr growled. “There is only one I want to conquer.”

Kase blinked in surprise. “Now there’s an analogy I hadn’t thought of.”

“Kase,” Aleksandr shook his head, leaning in again and lowering his voice, “you do not understand. This is not a matter to jest. Tristan will not listen. He reminds me too much of Taras. He clings, he touches, he does not hear me say no.”

Aleksandr gripped the edge of the counter. “I do not wish to be cruel or hurt him, but he angers me.”

Kase stared at him, his smile fading. “I see.” Aleksandr watched Kase observe Tristan. Following his gaze, he spotted Tristan flirting with another patron. Kase turned back to Aleksandr. “I’ll handle it. You drink.” He pointed to the glass of so-da and walked away to help a new guest.

Aleksandr sipped at his drink, tapping his fingers on the counter. He did not want Kase to “handle it.” This was not his fight. He mulled over what he could say to Tristan to make him understand, but the words did not come.

“Two glasses of Pinot,” Tristan called, approaching the bar, angling for Aleksandr.

Aleksandr braced himself, ready to hold Tristan’s touch off, physically if not with words. When a few steps remained between them, he raised a hand at the same time Kase spoke.

“Tris?”

Tristan halted and turned towards Kase. “Yes?” Aleksandr shuddered at the overly innocent voice.

“A word,” Kase said, crooking a forefinger, and he leaned across the bar towards Tristan.

“Sure.” Tristan hopped up onto a bar stool and propped his chin in his hands, those eyelashes fluttering.

Kase sighed. “Look, I should have told you when I introduced you to Alek, but...” he glanced at Aleksandr. “Alek is my boyfriend.”

Aleksandr perked up, sitting straighter on the stool. He’d heard Kase use the word “boyfriend” before when he talked about “Barry.” He searched Kase’s

face for deception as he spoke to Tristan, and all he saw was honesty. A warm glow bloomed in his heart. Kase had held him away for days, but his feelings must have changed, because he wouldn't say it unless he meant it. He said "my" with a possessiveness that made Aleksandr want to reach over the bar, drag Kase to him, and kiss him so deeply, no one in Mykonos could misinterpret who Kase belonged to and who *he* belonged to. He ached to hold the man in his arms right now.

Tristan's eyes widened. "Oh! You mean you"—he pointed at Kase with the finger of one hand—"and him"—he pointed at Aleksandr with the finger of the other—"are doing the..." He rubbed his fingers together like starting a fire with sticks and grinned. "Why didn't you say so? Hands off from me then." He raised his palms up in a stop gesture.

Tristan turned to speak to Aleksandr. "I like to flirt, but I do have morals. I won't be the salad dressing in someone else's salad." He hopped off the stool and wagged his fingers. "I'll be back in a minute for that wine."

Aleksandr grinned and stood on the footrest attached to the bar, reaching out a hand for Kase, palm up. "Kase?"

Kase turned away, walking to the far end of the bar.

Aleksandr frowned. His heart thudded dully, falling to settle in his belly. A strange feeling of fullness lodged in his throat; bitterness lay on his tongue. *Did I have it wrong? Were Kase's words only that... words and nothing more?*

He watched Branchus step behind the counter, stop Kase, and whisper in his ear. He moved around Kase and reached for a black box on the back shelf and a drumbeat sounded, spiraling throughout the bar.

Aleksandr fell back onto the stool and dropped his head into his hands. He pressed the heels of his palms into his blurring eyes.

*Hermes, O' Hermes, guide me, please... Show me, tell me, I beg you. What can I do to bring him back?*

Two strong hands settled on his upper back and slid along his shoulder blades, warm breath blew on his ear. Aleksandr turned his head, and Kase's soft, moist lips collided with his. He twisted in his seat, spreading his legs and eased Kase forward, holding tightly to his hips. Joy sang through his soul with the kiss, but a tug of fear cried low in Aleksandr's gut. Would Kase pull away before Aleksandr was ready for him to do so?

Kase cupped Aleksandr's cheeks, steadying them both as tongues tangled and teeth nipped. Aleksandr glided his hands up Kase's torso, threading all of

his fingers into golden hair. He locked his hands in the thick mane, gently pulling Kase's head back, peppering Kase's face with kisses, until Kase laughed.

"Come on," Kase said, taking hold of Aleksandr's hands and drawing him off the stool. Kase led him towards the empty dance floor. "Bran suggested I teach you to slow dance."

"Slow dance?" Aleksandr's steps faltered.

"Yes." Kase grinned, reversed direction and pressed his chest to Aleksandr's. "Don't worry, I won't bite."

Aleksandr wrapped his arms around Kase's lower back, lips turning down into a pout. "What if I like it when you do?" he murmured.

"Then—" Kase said seductively, sliding his hands around Aleksandr's neck—"I promise to be gentle." He moved them towards the dance area, and Aleksandr followed him down the few steps to the expansive wooden floor.

"What do I do to slow dance?" Aleksandr's heart pounded, both in trepidation and excitement to be taught something new by Kase. He stepped in front of his lover and laid fingertips on the man's chest, gliding them down, watching their path travel over the picture on Kase's shirt.

"You stand like this. Maybe a little closer." Kase shortened the distance between them, laying his hands on Aleksandr's shoulders. Aleksandr, in turn, encircled Kase's slender body, placing his hands on the upper swell of a firm ass covered in rough cloth. He pulled Kase in tighter and groaned, feeling a hard cock press against his.

Kase leaned forward, Greek helm met Greek helm, and whispered in Aleksandr's ear, the soft puffs of air, caressing his skin. "Embrace the beat of the drums, the chords of the guitar. Listen to the words of the song, let your body move and respond. Feel me, here, in your arms. Feel me move, follow, or I'll follow you."

Aleksandr swallowed, the emotions rising and tightening his throat. Kase's quiet words, breathed into him, tugged at him, and he closed his eyes, opening himself to the music.

The steady *thump-da-thump* of low drumbeats settled around him, mimicking the beat of his heart. A stringed instrument, plucked, overlaid and countered, joined in to float his spirit higher. And then the lyrical voice of a man crooned words of needing to hold, wanting kisses and love, echoing Aleksandr's own desires.

Kase's hips swayed to the beat under Aleksandr's hands. He felt the slight side-to-side movements, Kase's groin and stiff shaft pressed against his, and he followed, allowing Kase's body to guide him. Kase's hands gripped and loosened their hold on his shoulders in time with the music, sliding upwards until his fingertips reached the back of Aleksandr's head. Nails scratched gently at his scalp, and he let a purring moan of pleasure escape.

"Like that?" Kase whispered, continuing the massage.

Aleksandr opened his eyes and nodded, staring into the wide gray eyes behind those black rims. He reached up and removed Kase's glasses, one-handedly folding in the skinny arms, and hooked them onto Kase's back pocket. He looked and studied, gliding the back of his knuckles along the smooth skin of Kase's cheek, memorizing each blue fleck, each green streak that resided in Kase's eyes.

"Kiss me," Aleksandr mimicked the lyrics in the music, saying, asking, demanding the kiss with gentle pressure, guiding Kase's cheek into the perfect position with his fingers. Kase's eyelids fell shut, his mouth parted, and Aleksandr's breath stalled. His lover was beautiful. He wet his lips and leaned in, sliding them along Kase's warm, pliant ones. His lids fell shut at the touch of their softness.

Kase released his hold on the back of Aleksandr's neck and brought his hands forward. Warm palms braced the sides of his head, guiding him closer. Aleksandr held on just as tight, one hand grasping a firm globe, the fingers of the other hand splayed against the center of Kase's back, feeling the muscles shift every time Kase moved. They were so close, he could feel Kase's heartbeat pounding in a rhythm much like his own.

Everything disappeared around Aleksandr; only Kase mattered. Aleksandr ran his tongue along Kase's, tasted the sweet so-da in his mouth, sucked in his tongue. He thrust his hips forward and Kase responded, rubbing against him.

Still too far apart, restrained by thick denim, he wanted Kase naked, beneath him, feeling him writhe in pleasure, tasting his sweat. Aleksandr tightened his hold, drawing Kase closer. The urge to take *tìn agápi tou gia*—his love's—hand and drag him from this wooden floor to some dark corner, or to the large bed upstairs, battled with his promise not to push Kase.

A faint press of hand against his chest, and Kase pulled back, licking and nipping at Aleksandr's lips, soothing the roughness of their kiss. The words of the song drifted away. Aleksandr drew slow circles with a palm on Kase's



upper back, slipped his fingers into the waistband of Kase's jeans, wishing for one more line of that song, the one which said "Kiss me."

The guitar faded out, taking Aleksandr's rush, calming his breath. The drumbeat continued with Aleksandr's heart keeping time. And then it was quiet. The music faded back into the blandness of before. But it wasn't like before. They had changed, here, on this dance floor. What hadn't been there before, now resided in both of them, or at least Aleksandr hoped.

Aleksandr leaned in for another kiss, but Kase abruptly turned away and fled the floor. Aleksandr frowned. *What did I do? Why has he run?* He slowly followed after Kase, walking towards the bar.

"Aleksandr," Branchus called from near the doors leading back to the kitchen.

"Yes?" Aleksandr tore his attention away from Kase, who wouldn't look at him, and instead was scrubbing the bar top viciously. He stepped towards Branchus.

"I'd like you to help Eric with setting out snack bowls in the game room," Branchus said kindly.

Aleksandr nodded and stopped when he neared Branchus. "What was that song? It was beautiful."

Branchus gave a small smile and laid a hand on Aleksandr's shoulder. "Yes, it is, isn't it? It's called, 'Kiss Me' by Ed Sheeran."

Aleksandr nodded and walked into the kitchen, still wondering why Kase had fled, and what he could do to bring him back.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Twenty-seven

Kase scrubbed down the bar until the dark wood reflected an image of his hand, and stacked the dirty glasses under the counter. Thank God, the evening crowd hadn't arrived yet. His emotions warred within him. The tug to embrace what Alek offered, to dive in headfirst even if only for a brief time, fought with his desperate attempts to keep his heart safe.

Reminded of the story of the Dutch boy sticking his thumb in the hole of the leaking dam, Kase imagined the cracks growing larger as he watched, helpless. The barrier would give way, and the roaring waters would tumble over him, sweeping him under, until he drowned in everything Alek.

The slow dance and fiery kiss nearly undid him. His nerves almost shattered, he'd barely made it off the dance floor, shaking and with tears threatening to flow at the emotions welling up inside. Once back at the bar, he relieved Bran.

Alek had wanted to talk, but luckily Bran called him to the kitchen, allowing Kase to avoid any heart-to-heart conversations for the time being. Now that he'd had time to think and calm down, guilt washed over him; he shouldn't have run off and treated Alek so rudely. His messed-up feelings weren't Alek's fault.

He'd just finished filling a drink order for Cooper when one of their regular customers arrived and plopped himself down on a stool at the bar. "Hi there, Miles," Kase said, giving the cute, brown-haired, blue-eyed man a smile, and sliding a coaster in front of him. "What can I get you to drink?"

"Something strong and keep them coming," Miles said, his voice hoarse.

Kase nodded and prepared a Jägerbomb then placed it on the counter in front of Miles, watching him down it in one gulp. "I think it might be better to drink it slower," Kase said, his smile fading.

"Nope." Miles shook his head and tapped the counter. "More."

Kase hesitated, giving Miles time to think about it. The man was a lightweight, this second one would leave him smashed. "Here you go." Kase placed a fresh set of Jägermeister and Red Bull in front of Miles, and again he swallowed it all in one go.

Kase frowned. It looked like Miles would need a ride home. "Is your boyfriend stopping by later and meeting you here?" he asked casually.

Alek walked up with a full tray of clean glasses, smiling, and Kase smiled back.

“Boyfriend? What boyfriend?” Miles slurred.

Kase turned around, giving Miles his undivided attention. “Huh? I thought you two were good. What happened?”

Miles broke into tears. “He dumped me, just like that.” Miles snapped his fingers, but only the dry whisper of skin against skin was heard, his fingers sliding by each other. “He texted me, said he found himself a sugar daddy and was moving out.” A choked sob erupted from Miles followed by another and another. Overcome, his shoulders jerked up and down as he fell apart, and when Kase set a box of tissues next to him, Miles plucked out a handful.

Alek inched closer to Kase. The touch of soft fingers brushed the back of his hand, and Kase entwined their fingers as they listened to the story. He glanced at Alek, and Alek squeezed their joined hands.

“I loved him, and he threw me away.” Miles sobbed. “I’m never going to love anyone again. I gave him my heart. But no more, no sir-ree,” he said, shaking his head. “I’m going to harden my heart—use them like he used me. No one’s ever getting close to me again.” He dropped his face into his hands and curled into himself as he wept.

Kase’s eyes widened. *No, it couldn’t be.* He snapped his head around to find Alek watching him, a quizzical expression on his face.

“What is it?” Alek asked, his smile hesitant.

Kase leaned in close to Alek, and spoke softly. “I think I figured out something.”

“I’m back, boys. How’s it going?” Bran glanced at Miles’ slumped appearance, and then he shot a look at Kase, raising his eyebrows.

“Miles’ boyfriend left him,” Kase whispered.

Bran grimaced.

“Can Alek and I take a break now?” Kase asked. “I need to speak to him about something.”

Bran nodded. “Sure, it’s slow, and I can handle the bar until you get back.”

“Thanks, Bran.” Kase led Alek out from behind the counter and hurried towards the stairs.

“Where are we going?” Alek asked, moving quicker to keep up.

“To the roof. We need to talk,” Kase said urgently.

They raced up the stairs until they reached the roof door. Kase pushed it open, and they walked outside, into Mykonos’ private garden.

Kase let go of Alek’s hand and started to pace, running his fingers through his hair. Alek stepped in front of him, grabbed his biceps, and brought him to a halt.

“What is going on? What are you thinking?” Alek cocked his head, frowning.

Kase rubbed a hand over his chin. “It’s Miles. He talked about hardening his heart. It reminded me of what Medon told you.”

“Yes, I remember.” Alek nodded, not yet letting go of Kase’s arms.

Kase chewed at his bottom lip. “Then I connected it to the poem.”

“What is the connection?”

“I think it’s in my notes. I took pictures and have them on my phone. It’s the first stanza.”

Alek sucked in a quick breath. “Truly?” He let go of Kase and moved to stand next to him. “Show me.”

“Okay.” Kase pulled out his cell phone and tapped the screen bringing up a photo of one of the notes from the library he’d taken and pointed to the first lines:

ὁ γοργὼ ἐκεῖ

ὁ γοργὼ ἀναγινῶσκει

“*O Gorgō ekei, O Gorgō anagignōskō,*” Alek read the lines aloud. “The Gorgon is here, the Gorgon knows.”

“Wait! You can read this?” Kase drew back, gawking at Alek.

Alek shrugged. “It is the writing of *Graecia*.” He peered at Kase, his eyes narrowing, his hands flexing and curling at his sides. “Did you think me a fool? An unschooled man? My family was *aristoi*, of high status, I was schooled and one does not become *Lochagos* without knowing how to read reports of troop movements, maps, supply lists.” He waved a hand in the air before letting his arm drop to his side.

Alek took a deep breath and let it out slowly, his tone gentled. “My writing, on the other hand...” He shrugged. “I was blessed to have a former scribe under me. He kept me sane.”

Kase nodded absentmindedly and looked down at the cell phone in his hand. *Bad handwriting isn't a reason for not helping with the translations, not since Alek knew how to read it.* Kase looked back up at Alek. “But that doesn't answer why you haven't offered to help us translate the poem.”

Alek sighed and took a step back. He crossed his arms, and lifted his chin, staring at Kase without a word.

*Crap.* He'd talked about puzzling the poem out, told Alek what he'd discovered, but he'd never shown him the photocopy he'd made of it from the library.

Kase slapped his palm over his face. “Fu—I can't believe I never asked for your help! I thought since you weren't interested in the research at the library, and you've been so focused on your sword practice, you didn't want to help. And I saw you couldn't read the labels in the store, I made a wrong assumption. We've wasted days going over this, and you were right here, the perfect translator.”

He held his hands out in front, directed at Alek. “I'm sorry. It wasn't because I thought you were stupid. It never occurred to me to check with you.” Kase carded his fingers through his hair. “If anyone is stupid, it's me, for not making the connection and asking for your help.” He shook his head.

Alek huffed and marched forward, stopping in front of Kase. He settled his hands on Kase's hips, leaned in, and kissed him on the forehead. “You are forgiven.”

Laughter bubbled up from Kase. “Thanks... I think.”

Alek circled to stand behind Kase and drew him close. “What is the rest of the poem you need to translate?” He nuzzled behind Kase's ear.

Kase leaned back into the warm strength of his lover and tilted his head sideways. Alek worked his way lower, his warm lips placing soft caresses over Kase's skin. “Are you trying to distract me?”

“No,” came the low reply, and a stiff rod ground against Kase's ass. He laughed and slapped at Alek's arm. “Come on, look at this, we have to get back to work soon.” He flipped through the photos, and found the copy of the poem he'd written down, then raised the cell phone up for Alek to read. “What does it say?” He pointed to another set of lines.

Ὅς διζεται ἦτορας κρυερα

Ἡνίκα πικρασμός θὺνει

Οὗτος ἀντεισοδιάζει τάρβον και μῖσον, ἄλγον και δύην

“*Hós dizētai etoras kruera. Hēnika pikrasmos thunō. Hoûtos anteisodiazei tarbon kai mison, algon kai duēn.*” Alek’s voice faltered midway.

“He seeks cold hearts, at the time when bitterness lasts, which brings in turn”—Alek pointed to each word as he translated—“fear, hate, pain and... despair?”

“You’re not sure?”

“That word is not translating for me. It is similar to much sadness or unhappiness.”

“Okay. That sounds about right for what Arrian and I figured out. How about these next two lines?” Kase thumbed up another screen and held his phone up for Alek to read the lines in question.

ἦτορ ἀσύγκλαστος και ἀπέρωτος

ἐγχρῆζει Ἀφροδίτης χάριν (~~ἐνῆες~~) ἵνα ἀνασῶζει

“*Ētor asugklastos kai aperōtos, egkhrēzei Aphroditēs kharin hina anasōzei.* Hardened and unloving hearts, have need of Aphrodite’s grace to recover. This word crossed out is *enēes*. It means kind. Aphrodite’s kind grace.” Alek tilted his head. “Blessing, perhaps? That one line can mean many things.”

Alek tapped on the screen, causing the words to enlarge, and he drew back. Then he grabbed Kase’s hand and brought the cell phone closer. “Interesting. It appears the scribe rewrote the words many times. The ink is smudged for this phrase referring to the Goddess, while the rest of the text is clear. I do not think the one who wrote this was sure of its meaning, therefore I do not trust that any of the other words are true.”

Kase felt Alek shrug.

“We will need the original poem in order to know if the scribe has the correct words.”

Kase nodded. “You’re much better at translation than Arrian and I.”

“Of course.”

“How modest,” Kase snorted.

“There is no need for modesty when it is the truth.” Alek nipped at Kase’s ear.

Kase turned around in Alek’s arms and glanced down at the phone. “It’s the part about the hardened hearts that tipped me off. What Miles said.”

He lifted his eyes to search Alek’s. “I keep thinking that’s why you were turned to stone,” Kase continued. “Not because you looked into Medon’s eyes, but because of...” He raised a hand and placed it over Alek’s heart. “How does your heart feel?” he asked quietly.

Alek tilted his head to the side, and Kase smiled at the endearing quirk of Alek’s body language.

“Lighter,” Alek said, gazing deep into Kase’s eyes. “Lighter than when I returned to life, and lighter the longer I am with you.” He leaned forward, placing a kiss to Kase’s lips then pulled back. “You need not worry. I will kill Medon, and the world will be free of the monster.” He ran his knuckles along Kase’s chin.

Kase shook his head. “I don’t think it’s that simple. My gut tells me there’s something else. Something in the poem we haven’t translated yet. It’s not going to be as easy as lopping off his head.”

“Then I will do it, whatever is required.” Alek ran his fingertips lightly over Kase’s cheek. “Don’t worry, my glykós, I will destroy him.”

The door to the rooftop garden opened, and they both turned to watch Magnus light a cigarette. He waved and they nodded.

“We have to get back to work,” Kase said, grabbing hold of Alek’s hand. “It’s probably getting busy down there already.” Kase turned, leading the way. He swiped his card through the card reader, opened the door, and they headed back to the first floor. Despite Alek’s reassurance, and his belief in Alek’s skills, Kase’s stomach still clenched at the poem’s unknown factor dangling like an anvil on a frayed rope over their heads.

\*\*\*\*

Aleksandr followed Kase down the stairs, admiring the view and needing to touch, but he held back, his worries returning threefold. Before Miles had shown up, every time Aleksandr had come out of the back rooms, Kase had refused to look at him or smile or wave. Each instance of Kase ignoring him was like a dagger to his heart, or a blow to his head which sent him reeling.

And then that poor soul with a broken heart arrived. His pain resounded within Aleksandr, and it had for Kase as well. Rejoined them, and up on the roof, Kase had allowed Aleksandr's embrace. Had Kase been angry with him and now all was forgiven? Or would he return to showing Aleksandr his back?

As Kase reached the door leading back into the bar, Aleksandr placed a hand on his shoulder and halted him. Kase looked back at him, his expression open and wondering.

"I..." Aleksandr began and stopped, unable to find the words to express his concern.

Kase turned and took hold of his hands. "Before you say anything, I need to apologize. I shouldn't have run off and ignored you after we danced." He sighed, glancing away. "Especially..." he looked up and straight into Aleksandr's eyes, "especially after dancing with you. That song... I've never felt like that, not even with Barry. It was overwhelming... It scared the hell out of me. It still scares the hell out of me. It feels too much, too fast."

Aleksandr shook a hand free and cupped the back of Kase's head. "I've got a sword to protect you."

Kase rolled his eyes. "There's an innuendo in all that sincerity," he said, his tone playful.

"I am sincere."

"I know you are. I feel it." He stepped closer to Aleksandr and laid a single kiss on his lips. "I expect more of your 'sincerity' and maybe your sword later. Perhaps we'll even have time tonight for another dance."

"I would like that," Aleksandr said, returning the favor of a lone, sweet kiss.

Kase rested his forehead against Aleksandr's for a moment more and then dropped his hands. He turned and headed out to the bar, and Aleksandr followed quietly behind.

\*\*\*\*

Branchus watched Kase and Aleksandr return from the roof. Kase pointed to the restrooms and Branchus nodded. He wiped at the glass in his hand with a towel, and held it up to the lights, then glanced at Aleksandr heading for the kitchen.

"What do you see, Branchus?" asked a thin, nondescript, sandy-haired man who nursed his drink.



Branchus faced the customer and shook his head. “The vision is unclear around him, but when the curtains deign to part, sometimes I see hints he will succeed, however...”

“However?” urged the man.

Branchus shrugged. “The mists shift and change. The final piece has not yet fallen into place, and if it doesn’t, then I fear he will not make it, and neither will the other.”

“Kase?”

Branchus nodded. “His heart is still wounded, and he protects it with a vengeance.”

The customer sighed. “Eros has explicit orders not to meddle, and Anteros is severely distraught the two may not get their happily ever after. He is driving all of us crazy with his constant wailing. He has set it upon himself to beg his mother to assist Kase in ‘seeing the light.’ She’s at her wit’s end.”

“Are we allowed to help beyond our hints?” Branchus asked.

The man shook his head. “An idea here, a nudge there, but that’s all.” He shrugged. “Aphrodite insists the two must find their own way to each other, we aren’t allowed to—” he wiggled his fingers in the air “—magically help them. And you know how my sister is when she’s not pleased. I don’t intend to cross her. I’ve managed to get myself into enough trouble with the family lately.”

“That hasn’t stopped you before, Uncle.” Branchus chuckled.

“True.” The man raised his glass in salute. “But with Medon involved I cannot. This is something that must be fixed by the person who helped bring it about.”

“You will be there for him, if...” Branchus asked.

“Yes.” The man nodded. “He is one of my most devoted followers, I would not forsake him.”

“Good, good.” A sad smile curled Branchus’ lips as he watched Aleksandr clear and wipe down a table. “Now all we can do is wait.”

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Twenty-eight

Aleksandr's body ached. He might as well have practiced all day the way his muscles bunched and pulled. Learning about modern life exhausted him in ways he couldn't have predicted. He longed for the heated pools at the bathhouse of his hometown and Kase behind him, massaging away the knots of pain with strong, practiced hands and scented oils.

He looked at Kase, his glasses striped with reflected light from the small mirror attached to the front window. A halo of lights danced atop the strands of his mussed golden hair when other cars passed.

Kase glanced at him, the corner of his mouth crooked up, before returning to watch the road. His faint grin tugged hard on Aleksandr's heart, fast becoming an addiction he did not want to give up. How many times had it been bestowed on him? How many more would there be? Tonight's smile, while Kase taught him to dance slow, arms around each other while the singer crooned "kiss me" had preceded the gentlest, most tender of kisses. Aleksandr's heart had leapt, his soul lifted.

Aleksandr breathed a sigh of relief when they pulled into the garage. Kase turned the key, and the car quieted to a tiny ticking sound. He watched Kase slump back in his seat and take several slow breaths before turning his head towards him. Kase's mouth quirked up again into a closed mouth smile.

"I am tired too," Aleksandr said. "I am lamenting the loss of my favorite bathhouse. Hot water to soak away my aches, your hands rubbing oil into my overworked muscles." He closed his eyes to better invoke the fantasy and rested his head against the top portion of the seat.

"Well, I've got a bath..." Kase offered.

Aleksandr heard the teasing lilt and snapped his eyes open. He turned his head to stare at Kase, and a grin slowly emerged on Aleksandr's face. Was there a hint of amorous action in that comment? Surprised and elated, he leaned forward, closing the distance between them. "Then we should adjourn to the bathing room," he whispered, reaching up to cup Kase's cheek, and sliding his thumb over Kase's soft lips.

Kase pursed his lips and kissed Aleksandr's thumb. That one small point of contact against that seductive mouth sent a jolt up his arm, through his body, and straight to his groin. *Gods, the man knows how to seduce me.*

“Shall we see if two will fit?” Aleksandr drew the question out with honeyed sweetness.

The smile that bloomed on Kase’s face, shined back at Aleksandr and stole his breath. His jeans tightened, his cock swelling and causing the material to pinch in places it shouldn’t, and all he could think about was hot water, steam, and a naked Kase between his legs.

Aleksandr snatched back his hand and pushed open the car door, stumbling in his haste to get out.

“Slow down.” Kase chuckled, still sitting inside. “Door’s locked anyway.”

Aleksandr leaned down to look back into the car, smiling at Kase with lifted brows. “Slow down? I think not. You offer me a chance to see you nude and think I will not be eager?” He held out his hand. “Hand me the keys, I will start the water.”

Kase removed the dangling set of keys from its slot, and Aleksandr had the fleeting thought of another type of key and another kind of slot. He groaned at the image in his mind.

“Fuck, that sound is sexy.” Kase placed the keys in Aleksandr’s hand, and hastily got out of the car. Aleksandr stood at the kitchen door, fumbling in his attempt to unlock it. Kase moved to stand behind him and slid his hands over Aleksandr’s shoulder blades in an arcing caress. Aleksandr turned the knob and stepped inside, Kase on his heels. A warm palm glided along Aleksandr’s body as Kase moved past him, headed into the living room, and up the stairs.

Aleksandr paused at the bottom of the stairs and stared after him, unsure why he delayed, thoughts tumbling of words said and actions done. And how his heart felt...

Lighter, he had said and meant it. With the return of breath to his body came the return of a cold and uncaring promise, a refusal of another love. Then Hermes set Kase in his path, his gentle guide—his glykós—who without thought for his own safety, took Aleksandr in and taught him to navigate this future world. He no longer resisted the urge to be near Kase, embrace the fiery heat and desire, feelings he thought he had lost, never to be reclaimed. He would do whatever it took to slay Medon, to do away with his oath. If he fell, Aleksandr was sure Medon would go after Kase next. His main concern was, above all else, to protect Kase. If he could think of any way to keep his lover safe, and remain alive in the process, he would take it. He had no room for failure.

A rush of water *swooshed* through the house's pipes, and Kase's voice called down to him from the small walkway above. "Coming?"

"Yes," Aleksandr replied, a smile on his lips. "On my way."

He took the stairs two at a time, thumping loudly, his thighs and calves propelling him upwards. When he arrived at the top, he reached for the hem of the Mykonos T-shirt and hauled it over his head. Next, the snap and zipper were undone as he hurried into the bedroom, catching a glimpse of a pale, rounded rear end disappearing into the bathing room. Aleksandr toed off his sandals and shoved the jeans and boxers down, glad to be free of the restrictive fabrics. He stretched his arms to the ceiling and tilted his head back.

Aleksandr took his time, bending this way and that, not sure if Kase was watching him, but hoping he was. He was proud of his body, had always kept himself fit and strong, knowing other men appreciated his efforts. The water ceased to flow, and the soft slaps of footsteps reached his ears. A low whistle sounded from near the doorway.

"Damn. Do you know how hot you look right now?" Kase asked.

Aleksandr finally deigned to take in Kase's stance, and found him leaning a shoulder against the door's frame. There, in naked glory, erection full and pointing towards him, stood a man worthy of his adoration. Not only in body, but mind and heart as well.

Kase straightened, watching Aleksandr pad towards him. Aleksandr took notice of Kase's fingers twitching at his sides, and the way his heated gaze roamed up and down Aleksandr's body, before he moved out of Aleksandr's way, allowing him to enter the tub first.

He tested the water with a tentative toe, then sunk his foot into its depths. A sigh escaped him at the promise of the water's tranquil touch. Aleksandr added a second foot, and then slowly lowered himself into the soothing warmth with a groan, waiting for the heat to work its magic, gently urging his sore muscles to release the aches and pains of the day. Now all he needed was his *glykós* to join him. With a teasing smile, he leaned back against the end of the tub and spread his legs, holding a hand out to Kase.

Kase took Aleksandr's hand, but motioned for him to move forward. Aleksandr scooted to the center, giving Kase room to step into the tub behind him. He sank into the hot water, placing his feet outside of Aleksandr's legs. Kase placed a hand on his breastbone and guided him to lean back against his

chest. Aleksandr closed his eyes while Kase sluiced hot water onto his body, letting it run in rivers of heat, followed by his tracing fingertips. He nuzzled into Aleksandr's neck, licking up errant drops and tasting the salt on his skin.

With deft pressure, Kase ghosted his palms over Aleksandr's chest, easing away the soreness of his upper body. Kase teased him, plucking and tweaking at his nipples, drawing them forth like a Siren's call, before working his fingers lower, tickling and pulling on the dark brown curling hairs at the base of Aleksandr's cock.

Aleksandr sighed, covering Kase's hand with his own and stilling his movements. The long hours at the bar, combined with the warmth of both Kase and the water, granted Hypnos' entry. Lethargy invaded, and if he wasn't exhausted, he would have allowed the light stroking to continue.

"No?" Kase whispered the word against Aleksandr's shoulder, following it with a kiss to his skin. "You changed your mind?"

Aleksandr rolled his head into Kase's neck, nudging the man's scratchy chin with his nose. "Tired," he murmured, resting his hands on Kase's thighs and closing his eyes.

Kase's light chuckle vibrated into Aleksandr's back, and he felt Kase shift around behind him. "I never would've thought you'd turn down sex for sleep, but I guess there's a first time for everything." His tone carried a hint of amusement. Strong hands and a soapy washcloth massaged his upper body, further relaxing him into a light doze. Water slid in small rivers down his skin, fingertips explored from his temples to around his ears, and skimmed the light growth of hair on his jaw.

"All right, my fierce, sleepy warrior," Kase whispered, rubbing his hands up and down Aleksandr's arms. "Let's get you into bed." He pushed gently on Aleksandr's back until he leaned forward, and rose from behind him. Kase grabbed a towel and dried himself, then stepped from the tub. He reached in front of Aleksandr and pressed down the handle to let the water drain.

Aleksandr pushed himself to his feet, his body heavy and sluggish. Kase helped him high-step out onto the bath mat. He let Kase dry him off, sported a silly grin when Kase rubbed the towel in certain areas while kneeling at his feet. His cock made a halfhearted attempt, but his sleepiness countered the proposal.

Kase shook his head and kissed the end of Aleksandr's erection, then stood, hung the towel, and pushed him into the bedroom. Aleksandr lifted the covers

and crawled in, turning over to take Kase into his arms. He breathed in deeply, tucking his nose against the skin of Kase's neck and inhaling its light, clean scent. Soon, the comfort of sleep called to him, and as he drifted from wakefulness into the twilight area before slumber, Aleksandr prayed to his Gods. To Hermes, to Aphrodite and to Eros. To any one of them willing to hear his plea, that he be allowed the chance to remain with Kase, holding him like this for the rest of their lives. He prayed until sleep took him.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Twenty-nine

*Saturday*

Kase took his time driving back to Mykonos, enjoying the cooler, summer air and the quiet of the city before the crowds grew to partake in the usual Saturday nightlife. The car's clock ticked over, moving on towards seven, when they needed to get there. All the employees had helped decorate the rooms and stock the bars in the late morning and early afternoon, then they'd returned home to relax, eat, and change into their costumes. Kase pulled into one of the parking spots of the garage, reserved and paid for by Bran—something Kase was always grateful for, because finding parking in the city was the pits.

They crossed the street and walked until they reached the club. Kase led Alek down the alley, past the catering trucks and the trays being taken in through the side door to Mykonos. He pulled Alek to the side, away from the caterers, who flew back and forth like bees carrying pollen to a hive. Alek was a feast for Kase's senses. He delighted in Alek's delectable tanned skin, his muscles shifting and flexing with each movement. He stepped close and wrapped his arms around Alek's warm, naked waist, appreciating the play of his toned physique beneath his fingertips.

"You ready?" he asked, staring into Alek's blue eyes, which darkened as Kase continued to caress his back.

"Yes, of course. Crowds do not frighten me." Alek glided his palms up and across Kase's shoulders, resting one hand at the nape of his neck, his fingers brushing lightly against Kase's skin.

"You say that now, but the parties here are crazy. Once we step in there—" he nodded towards the club "—we won't have time for each other until Bran tells us we can take a break. And we may not even have our breaks at the same time. In case that happens..." Kase laid his hand over Alek's heart. "I want a kiss that will last me until I can touch you again."

He tilted his head to the side, and Alek met his mouth. Not a gentle kiss, but one hungry and devouring. Alek wrapped an arm around his shoulder, restraining Kase against his body like a vise. He threaded his fingers into Kase's hair, tightening on his locks, not letting him pull back. God, how he loved that. He whimpered when Alek thrust his warm tongue inside his mouth. A strong thigh slid between his legs to press against his groin, and Kase didn't

resist the urge to press and rock against it. Alek broke off their kiss, nipping and licking his way to Kase's chin and neck. "Oh, fuck!"

A snicker sounded from behind them, and they stepped apart. Even in a daze, Kase still caught the dirty look Alek sent to whomever had laughed.

"Don't stop on my account," Magnus said, walking up to them. "Just checking to see if you two had arrived yet, and to let you know Bran wants to speak to everyone before we open the doors."

Kase nodded as he started to catch his breath. He sighed deeply. *That was some kiss.* "Thanks," he managed to say. "We'll be right there."

Magnus snorted and headed indoors. Kase turned to follow, stopping when Alek grabbed hold of his hips and pulled him back. Warm lips traced his ear, and he leaned back against his lover.

"Was that enough to last until we may touch again, my *glykós*?" Alek whispered. Kase shuddered when Alek licked his ear.

"Yeah," Kase squeaked out. "I think it will. Although now I'm going to be walking around with a hard-on for the rest of the evening." He could feel Alek's grin against his neck.

"Good. I want you to remember how this got here." A single finger trailed along Kase's hard length.

"Oh yeah, I'll remember," Kase said, stilling Alek's hand. He pulled out of Alek's grasp, entwined their fingers, and led the way inside. "Come on, we've got a party to attend."

\*\*\*\*

All the staff of Mykonos, even the guys who normally had Saturdays off, gathered at the bar, some sitting, some standing, ready for Bran's instructions and pep talk. Kase grabbed a seat on one of the barstools, and Alek came over to stand next to him.

Kase let his hand wander up under the feathered armor Alek wore. His hand met the thin strip of elastic around Alek's leg, part of the white satin jockstrap he'd insisted Alek wear for tonight. Kase snuck his hand up higher, and encountered a taut naked ass, the faint dusting of hair brushing against his palm. He couldn't resist and gave Alek's butt a firm squeeze. A choked moan met Kase's ears, and he glanced up to meet Alek's heated gaze. Alek stepped closer, pushing his ass into Kase's hand and clenching his glute. Now it was Kase's turn to stifle a groan.



“Okay, you heathens.” Bran marched out from the kitchen’s area wearing a flowing white, midhigh chiton. All his accessories, from the drape crossing from his shoulder to his waist, to the thick bracelets on his wrists and the sandals on his feet, were gold. They made his amber eyes appear even more golden. A woven wreath of fresh olive branches sat upon his head. “It’s time to get this chariot ready to fly.” The crew laughed. “You all know the drill. Mykonos employees and my special guests are allowed access to the third floor and roof. If the person doesn’t have a gold card, they aren’t allowed up. This is strict policy. The only special circumstance is in case of emergency, such as a fire, where we need to evacuate people via the roof. Does everyone understand?” He paused and looked around, making sure everyone nodded their heads.

“Good, next item.” He pointed to the elevated VIP sitting area along the wall overlooking the dance floor. “See that red curtain up there?”

Kase craned his neck. *That’s interesting.* He hadn’t noticed the curtain there yesterday.

“Nobody touch that. The area is to remain roped off until I give the okay. No one is to go up there at all: nada, no one, not even people with gold cards. You will stop anyone heading up there. It’s a surprise I had someone create especially for this event. So, no looking, no touching. I’ll unveil it during the party. Got it?” Once more, Bran made pointed eye contact with his employees.

“The catering company I hired is providing extra personnel to assist us. Our waiters, servers and busboys will be the main workers for the food and drinks, just don’t blow a gasket if someone is helping. Their staff will dress in simple chitons with black rope belts to make it easier to identify them.”

“Blow a gasket?” Alek muttered next to Kase.

“I’ll tell you later,” Kase whispered. Alek nodded and smiled down at him, flexing his glutes again. Kase hadn’t realized he still had his hand resting there.

“A couple more things. Joey quit yesterday.” A chorus of “What?” rose from the crew. Bran raised his hands for quiet. “Yes, I know, bad timing, but lucky for us, we have a new recruit, a regular customer who’s had some experience as a bartender. I’m sure you all know Miles.” He turned to look towards the far end of the bar, and everyone craned their necks to get a look at Miles. He gave a small wave and a nervous “hello.”

“I need everyone to give him any help he requires. I know I’m throwing him in the deep end and expecting him to swim, but I believe he’s got what it takes.

Maddox will be there to assist him most of the time anyway.” He turned to Miles. “And if you have any questions, come get Kase or me, we’ll help you.”

Kase waved at Miles and nodded. He hadn’t noticed Miles when they came in. *I wonder what’s the story behind him getting the job?*

“The photographer I hired will be on the second floor for pictures. You may have him take yours if you want, but don’t all go rushing off at once. Two at a time, max. The photographer, Noah, has all your names, and he knows you’re allowed to cut the line because you’re needed back here.

“That’s it. Any questions?” Bran looked around. When no one commented, he continued, “We open in thirty minutes, go take your breaks, relax, and then let’s get this show on the road. I foresee a fantastic night for all.” He clapped his hands together and everyone started to move.

“Kase, hold up,” Bran called out. “I want to speak with you.”

Kase slid off his stool, slipping his hand out from under Alek’s armor skirt as Bran approached.

“What’s up?” Kase asked.

“It’s Miles, I wanted to talk to you about him.” Bran leaned against one of the stools and crossed his arms.

“What happened?”

“Well, you already know how wasted he was in the bar last night. He was even more depressed after all the drinking, and I was afraid he’d do something stupid. I didn’t want to send him home alone, so I let him stay the night in the break room. He left before any of you arrived today and went home to pack. His jerk of an ex insisted he clear out his stuff immediately. Wished I’d seen that coming. Miles has been a good customer here for a long time. I consider him part of the family.” He shook his head sadly and let out a sigh.

“I sent Vaughn to help him pack,” Bran continued, “and his friend Noah—the photographer for tonight—also helped. Miles is staying at my place for a couple of days while Noah rearranges his apartment to make room for him.”

Kase nodded. Bran was a softie; he’d help any of his employees if they needed it.

Bran rubbed the back of his neck. “Anyway, he had some experience bartending while in college. I tested him on the basics, and he’s got those down pat. Then I tossed a few new ones at him, and he picked those up quick enough. He was nervous and had a hard time concentrating, but I’m thinking that will

take care of itself, once the party gets going.” Bran looked towards the entrance a moment before turning back to Kase. “I want you to check up on him every once in a while.”

“Okay, I can do that.”

“Great.” He clapped Kase on the shoulder and grinned. “As for you, Aleksandr, don’t be afraid to ask for help. There are no stupid questions here. I’d rather you ask if you don’t know, than guess and get it wrong.”

“I will ask.” Alek inclined his head.

“Good, good.” Bran nodded. “I have to say you two look fantastic. Don’t be surprised if you get multiple offers tonight.” He scrutinized their outfits, then waved a hand up and down in front of them. “And your costumes... I know you’re a reenactor, Kase. Is that what you normally wear?” Bran eyed the green leather vest minus shirt, Kase was wearing.

“This?” Kase smiled. “No. I have a complete outfit, but I thought this would be cooler for the party and bring in more tips.” He grinned.

Bran laughed. “That it will.” He turned to Alek. “You, on the other hand, look authentic.” Bran shook his head. “I’d swear it looks real.”

“It i—”

Kase pinched Alek’s thigh, and Alek glared at him. Out of the corner of his eye, Kase caught Bran stifling a smile, and he wondered what that was all about.

“Thank you.” Alek ran his hand over the feathered plates.

“Do you have any gear to go with the costumes?” Bran asked.

“Yes.” Kase nodded. “I have a few weapons—a sword and dagger—but I’m best with a bow and arrow.”

“I have my *xiphos*,” Alek added.

“A *xiphos*? That’s a sword, isn’t it? Glad you didn’t bring your weapons tonight. If you don’t mind bringing them here, I’d like to see them. Maybe next Friday when you work again? You can keep them in my office. No one goes in there.”

Kase hesitated replying, and before he could answer, Alek interrupted.

“Yes, we will do that.”

Bran smiled. “Eager to show your weapons?”

“I do not like leaving it behind.”

“Good.” Bran nodded. “I’m looking forward to seeing it.” He pushed off from the stool. “Aleksandr, Eric’s expecting you in the kitchen. And Kase,” he smirked, “get your last grope in while you can, then wash your hands.” Bran grinned and winked at him again before heading for the kitchen.

Kase coughed, his cheeks flaming, as he watched Bran walk away. “Well... That was rather embarrassing.”

“Not for me,” Alek said, pulling him close. “I am pleased he knows we are *koinolekhēis*... lovers. Together.”

“Now that you mention it, so am I.” Kase placed a light kiss on Alek’s lips. “Remember what Bran said. If you have any trouble with anything, or any of the guests, ask for help.”

Alek scoffed. “I have been into battle, this will be nothing.”

Kase patted Alek’s chest. “You haven’t seen anything yet. I’m serious, don’t be afraid to ask for help.”

Alek kissed Kase’s forehead. “I will, my *glykós*. Now I must attend to my duties.” He proceeded to walk away, only to turn and wink. “Don’t forget to wash your hands.”

“Cheeky Greek!” Kase called after Alek, and a deep laugh sounded, fading when Alek disappeared into the kitchen, the doors swinging shut behind him.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Thirty

Eros stood in the VIP section, examining the new mural painted on the wall. Two handsome nude men kissed, while fat little cherubs with bows flew around them, ready to shoot their arrows of love. He shook his head. Someone was not going to be happy with the depiction. A brush of air ruffled Eros' hair. Speaking of which...

"What are you doing here?" Eros asked the beautiful, golden-eyed young man standing next to him, his face framed with soft curls of brown hair. "Shouldn't you be with mother?"

"I could ask you the same thing, brother-mine." Anteros ogled the mass of magnificently sculpted men, many wearing short skirts of leather, or white chitons barely covering their assets, all the better to show off their physiques. "I heard Branchus was throwing another one of his Greek-themed parties." He bounced on his toes, a broad smile on his face. "And it looks as splendid as the last one."

"His parties never fail to attract the most beautiful of mortals," Eros answered.

A server in a midhigh, white chiton approached them with two drinks on a tray. "Compliments of the bartender, Branchus," he said, holding the tray out to them.

Eros and Anteros looked over at the crowded bar and spotted Branchus, who smiled and nodded. They dipped their heads in thanks and took the drinks.

"So, why are you here?" Anteros asked. "Shouldn't you be working?"

Eros sniffed at his brother's comment before taking a sip of his baklava-flavored martini. "I can 'work' anywhere. See those two." He indicated two men holding a friendly conversation by the dance floor. One man, his torso and arms covered with tattoos, was almost a foot taller than the other dark-haired man: a clean-shaven geek. Eros held up his hand and two miniature arrows appeared between his thumb and forefinger. He brought the arrows to his lips and kissed them before pointing them back at the men. He parted his fingers, and the arrows flew true, hitting both men in the chest.

The men stopped speaking and stared at each other. The shorter geek stepped closer, reached up and cupped a hand behind the tattooed man's neck, pulling him down for a kiss. The small gesture turned into heated groping with

nearby partygoers gawking. They drew apart, out of breath, finally noticing the plethora of men around them. The shorter man grabbed his partner's hand and dragged him through the crowd towards the exit.

Eros smirked. *Another happy couple.*

"Show-off," Anteros said, turning back to Eros. "So why are you here?" he asked again.

"I'm tasked to oversee Hermes. You know how he's always flouting the rules."

"Where is he?" Anteros spun back and scanned the crowd.

Eros nodded towards the bar. "He's talking to Branchus and keeping an eye on the two mortals at the same time."

Anteros spotted Hermes, and his jaw dropped open. "Oh Zeus! What is he wearing? And what in Hades did he do to his hair?"

Eros snickered. "What? You're not into a dark-and-handsome guy who wears fishnet stockings, garters, a leather miniskirt, and combat boots? And don't forget the winged mask." He tapped his nose. "He's incognito." Eros shot another look at Hermes at the bar and the men reaching out to caress him. "He's been drawing quite the crowd."

Anteros shook his head and grimaced. "I'm embarrassed to call him uncle sometimes. Why must he be so... so...?"

"You know him." Eros shrugged. "He's never been one to follow the rules."

Another soft breeze blew gently over Eros and Anteros.

"Hello, dear brothers. Having fun yet?" said an angelic, dark-haired young man, his skin of alabaster, eyes of the purest blue, and cupid-bow lips, full and sensual.

"Oh Zeus, not you too." Eros rolled his eyes.

"Hey! When have you ever known me to turn down a party overflowing with virile men?" Pothos spread his arms wide and draped them around his brothers' shoulders. "Especially the parties thrown by Branchus." He scanned the crowd. "Hmm. I see quite a few I'd like to plunder and plow tonight."

Pothos turned around and looked at the mural. He guffawed and wiped away a tear. "Did you see this?" he asked, pointing at the mural.

"Yes," Eros answered. "It's quite amusing."

Anteros turned and studied the mural, a frown forming on his boyish face. “I don’t find it amusing. He did that on purpose, you know.”

“Did what?” Pothos failed miserably in his attempt not to laugh.

“Drew me as a cherub, and not just one cherub, all of the cherubs, that’s what!” Anteros crossed his arms over his chest, his lips pursed in annoyance. “Do I look like a cherub to you?” He pointed at his body, the muscles firm and defined.

“You do have the curly hair.” Pothos reached up to ruffle Anteros’ brown mop.

“Cut it out!” Anteros swatted Pothos’ hand away. “It’s all Eros’ fault anyway.”

Eros turned back to Anteros, his eyes widening. “My fault? How is it my fault? He didn’t paint me as cherubim. If you hadn’t whined your way through Olympus, and gotten on everyone’s nerves regarding Aleksandr and Kase, perhaps Apollo wouldn’t have done it.”

“Lucky Eros was painted with the hunky guy,” Pothos interjected before scanning the crowd again. “You two go ahead and argue, I’m heading out to the dance floor. I’ve spotted a pair of twins I want to *know* better.” He winked at them before walking down the VIP steps and wading into the mob of dancers. Weaving his way among the scantily clad and undulating men, he stepped between two blonds, and soon they were all gyrating together.

“How is it my fault?” Eros repeated in disbelief.

Anteros gestured up and down Eros’ body. “You. What is it about you that make mortals think love is cute and sugary sweet?” He puckered his lips and smooched at Eros. “They end up thinking love is always ‘happily ever after,’ and other fairy-tale nonsense. You know as well as I, that it doesn’t always happen that way.”

“Here we go again.” Eros sighed and dropped his head back to stare at the ceiling before looking back at his brother.

“Why can’t you shoot a small arrow?” Anteros pleaded, holding up his thumb and forefinger a half inch apart. “A teeny-tiny one?”

“Stop it,” Eros scolded. “You know Mother has strictly forbidden me doing anything to help them. I *literally* can’t shoot Kase with an arrow even if I wanted.”

Anteros sulked. He reached over the railing, grabbed a drink from the tray of a passing waiter, and downed it in one gulp.

Eros slung his arm around Anteros' shoulders. "How about I let you pick the next couple to fall in love here, hm?" he asked gently. His twin, the God of Requited Love, was such a softie. He suffered if mortals did not gain their happily-ever-after endings. It was a good thing he wasn't stuck doing Himeros' job; he'd be miserable.

"I suppose," Anteros said. "Must it be between two who do not know each other?"

"No. Anyone you wish." Eros guessed if there were friends here, where one longed for the other, Anteros would pick those two to get together. He adored friends becoming lovers; tenderhearted and sentimental to a T. Eros grinned as he watched Anteros close his eyes, and felt Anteros' energy extend out over the crowd of men.

"The brown-haired one with dimples standing at the corner railing of the dance floor. He's pining for his best friend. He's loved him since they were teenagers, except he's too shy to say anything. See how he watches him?"

"Who's the friend?"

"That one." Anteros motioned with his chin towards a tall, fit and very attractive Asian, dressed like a Spartan warrior, with flowing red cape, standing nearby. He was surrounded by admiring men, all vying for his attention.

Eros studied the handsome soldier. If Mr. Dimples wasn't here, he would've taken the warrior up to the rumpus room for a few rounds himself. "Why hasn't he noticed his friend is in love with him?"

Anteros shrugged. "Too busy fulfilling his family's dreams and expectations. In fact, his friend brought him here as an early birthday present. Something for the two of them..." Anteros briefly closed his eyes once more and frowned. "His plan is not going as he expected."

"The soldier isn't out to his family?"

Anteros shook his head. "No, only to his friend. Too afraid."

"I think we can help this warrior find courage and love at the same time. First we need to get them near each other again, close enough to touch. I'll go flirt with Mr. Dimples, and get the warrior jealous—see how he keeps glancing over at Mr. Dimples? The warrior tenses any time someone talks to his friend. I



don't think he likes to share. He won't like his friend receiving my attention." Eros grinned. He loved his job. "You follow when the warrior walks back over."

"Can I use the arrow on him?" Anteros asked, his gaze hopeful.

Eros grinned. "Of course." He slapped his brother on the shoulder. "Come, we have another happy couple to bring together this evening."

They left the VIP section and headed towards their respective targets, waving at Hermes as he passed by them, making his way to one of the tables by the mural.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Thirty-one

If Aleksandr thought Friday night at Mykonos was busy, tonight was madness. He'd never seen so many people crammed into one place. Not even on the busiest day at the market. He and Kase did not have time to converse; they simply smiled at one another each time Aleksandr shuttled glasses back and forth from the kitchen to the bar. His work did not stop him noticing the many revelers, each one more stunning than the last, crowding the bar. Kase was surrounded by a sea of beautiful men, every man winking, blowing kisses and making "come hither" gestures at his *glykós*. Several attempted to get Aleksandr's attention, but one narrowed glare, or a simple "no," and they backed off.

"Hey, don't worry, handsome," Tristan said, back in the kitchen. "Kase will make better tips if he's friendly to the customers. It doesn't mean he's going home with them."

Aleksandr grunted, grabbed a clean tray of glasses and headed for the bar. When he got there, Kase was gone. He frantically looked around for him.

Branchus stepped up to Aleksandr. "I sent Kase on his break, you can take yours and join him. Thirty minutes. That'll give you time to relax and go up and get your pictures taken, if you want."

"Thank you." Aleksandr searched the crowd and spotted Kase up in the VIP area, waving his arms to get his attention. A tall, dark-haired man stood next to him, smiling and talking. Kase gestured excitedly; he appeared to be enjoying himself. Aleksandr scowled. "Who is the man in the winged mask with Kase?" he asked Branchus.

Branchus glanced over at the raised VIP section. "I can't say. But he's been getting a lot of attention from the men here. Seems he's having fun talking to Kase."

"Kase is not interested," Aleksandr growled and strode off, ignoring Branchus' chuckling. The revelers parted quickly as he headed towards the VIP stairs. He climbed up the steps and moved directly to Kase's side. Without a single word spoken, he slipped one arm around Kase's waist, and with his other hand cupped Kase's nape and drew him close. He pressed his lips to Kase's, demanding, and Kase opened for him. Aleksandr entered, sweeping his tongue over Kase's until his lover moaned into his mouth. Relieved at tasting his

glykós once again, and satisfied the stranger would have no doubts about who Kase belonged to, Aleksandr pulled away.

Kase smiled, reaching up to slide his palm down Aleksandr's chest. "It's good to see you too."

Aleksandr smiled back before turning to the man in the mask. "I am Aleksandr."

"Hermes."

"Hermes?" Aleksandr asked, gazing scornfully at the black attire the man wore. *A God would not wear that.* He frowned. "You mock him?"

Kase elbowed Aleksandr in the side. "It's a Greek party, he can call himself by a Greek god's name if he wants."

Aleksandr gave a curt nod, still unhappy the man would dishonor his favorite in such a way.

"I was talking with Kase about the new mural," Hermes said. "Have you seen it?"

Aleksandr stepped away to examine the large painting. Eros and the man depicted were as tall as he was. "It is lifelike. Except for the small Gods. Why are they small?" He turned around when he heard Hermes and Kase laughing.

"We were joking about that a moment ago," Hermes answered, "and trying to figure out which one is which."

Aleksandr turned back and tilted his head to observe the work of art once more. "The dark-haired one in the middle is Eros. He is kissing a mortal. The Gods flying about their heads are Anteros, Pothos and Himeros. Although—"

He tilted his head back the other way and scrutinized the painting some more. "All the small ones could be Anteros." Aleksandr shook his head. "I pray the man who painted this will not incur his wrath."

Hermes smiled. "You seem to know your Gods." He gestured at one of the tables. "Please join me. I'm interested in hearing what you have to say about them."

Aleksandr glanced at Kase then back at the man calling himself Hermes. Here was an opportunity to speak of the Gods, and his heart skipped a beat. Could he? Even though Kase had warned him not to speak of them. Kase said people would think him crazy if he did. He looked at his glykós hopefully, and

grinned when Kase nodded. They pulled out chairs from around the table and sat opposite Hermes.

“Help yourself to the snacks, I can’t possibly eat them all myself.” Hermes pointed to the bowls and plates on the table. “Would you like anything to drink?” he asked when Cooper, costumed in leather warrior attire, approached.

“A so-da?” Aleksandr asked before glancing at Kase.

Kase smiled politely and shook his head. “Thanks, but nothing for me. I have drinks behind the bar.”

Aleksandr draped his arm over Kase’s shoulders while Hermes placed the drink order with Cooper.

Hermes turned back to them, focusing on Aleksandr. “Do you believe in the Gods?”

Aleksandr pressed his lips together. He slid his thumb across Kase’s bare bicep to get his attention, wishing for his *glykós*’ consent. Kase shrugged, grabbed an olive and popped it into his mouth.

“Yes. I believe in the Gods and Goddesses.” Aleksandr blinked at the sudden glint of gold in Hermes’ eyes. When he looked closer, it was gone.

Hermes’ smile spread from ear to ear. “Fascinating! There aren’t many who believe in the ancient Greek deities nowadays.” He turned his gaze on Kase. “What about you? Do you believe, like Aleksandr?”

“Me?” Kase shook his head. “No. I believe in facts. In things I can feel, hear and taste with my senses.”

“I see.” Hermes stabbed an olive with a toothpick and popped it in his mouth. He chewed slowly, and after a moment he continued. “You can’t see air, yet know it exists.”

“I can feel it when the wind blows.”

“But if the wind doesn’t blow, would you know it existed?”

“True, but I have science and facts. I don’t need divine beings to explain what happens in my life or to determine how I should live it.”

“Then how do you explain what happened at the museum?” Aleksandr interjected. He flinched at the pinch to his leg and caught the slight shake of Kase’s head. Aleksandr snuck a look to find Hermes watching them closely, but he didn’t question.

Cooper returned to deliver their drinks. “Compliments of the bartender.” He set two so-das in front of Aleksandr and a clear drink with an olive in a cocktail glass in front of Hermes.

Aleksandr quickly downed the first glassful, suppressing the burp that wanted to escape. He grinned at Kase, who smiled back.

Hermes sipped his drink, letting out an appreciative moan. “If you believe in only tangible objects, how do you explain away love or any of the other emotions?” He set his glass on the table. “It’s true you feel them, although not in the way one does with the senses.”

“It sounds like you believe in them yourself,” Kase said.

Aleksandr stared at Hermes, holding his breath. Was he not alone in this modern world in his belief of the Gods? Was this man someone he could talk to about them without feeling like he had to hide a part of himself? He eagerly awaited the man’s answer.

Hermes smiled. “Actually, I do.”

Aleksandr almost shouted with happiness at finding someone who believed as he did. He glanced at Kase only to find him drawing circles on the tablecloth with his forefinger, his face expressionless.

Hermes laughed lightly. “It’s okay, Kase, I can see you do not agree. It is a difficult concept for people to believe in. However, you must admit that sometimes a person’s belief in a power greater than themselves can bring them comfort in times of need. I’m sure it does for Aleksandr.”

Aleksandr inclined his head. “That is true. I know I would not have survived in this new wor...” He paused. “This country, if not for Hermes’ help. He has guided me and brought me Kase.” Aleksandr rubbed his palm over his lover’s forearm, and then looked back at Hermes. “I am eternally grateful to him.”

Hermes faced Aleksandr. “And I believe he is honored by your loyalty and faith in him.” He bowed his head, and again a spark of gold—surely a reflection from the many flashing lights in the club—glittered in his eyes before disappearing.

A warmth spread in Aleksandr’s chest at the man’s words, and he sat up taller. “*Efcharistó.*”

Hermes turned back to Kase and continued. “Occasionally people need to go by feelings alone. Forget the five senses we know. Take off things like your

glasses.” He waved his hand at Kase. “Don’t look, feel with their gut, with their instincts. Go in blind and trust that sometimes not seeing is for the best, and events will work out in the end.”

“Maybe,” Kase replied. “But again, faith is an untouchable object. It doesn’t make anything happen except possibly help people feel like there is a purpose to their lives. Am I supposed to believe in something invisible? That’s bordering on superstition, which can make people dependent on finding the right ‘sign,’ or twist all manner of ‘signs’ into something malicious. No. Give me something concrete.”

*Signs?* Aleksandr stared at Kase. His lover denied the Gods’ existence, yet wore their signs. Yes, Kase believed, but refused to accept it. “You have markings of Hermes on your body.”

“That’s not the same.”

“You have tattoos of Hermes?” asked their table companion with interest.

Kase nodded. “One on my arm and one on my ankle.”

Hermes rested on his elbows and leaned forward. “You *do* believe in the Gods.”

“No, I don’t.” Kase paused and drummed his fingers on the table. “But I suppose if I was to believe in one, it’d probably be Hermes. Mythology says he was more interested in helping humans than any of the others. They were more concerned with their own lives and thought of humans as nothing more than playthings for their amusement.”

Kase grew quiet and looked at the mural. “That’s why people stopped believing. They found science to be more reliable than the gods. People need someone... or something they can count and rely on, and science is more predictable.” He shrugged.

Hermes sat back and sighed. “You may have a point there.”

They were all silent for a moment, listening to the deep, thrumming beat of the music and watching the dancers sway and grind, bodies pressed close, hands roaming to touch whoever was nearby.

“I believe love, even if it can’t be felt with the five senses, is as ‘real’ and reliable as anything you can tangibly sense,” Hermes said, breaking their silence. “A person can always count on love.”

Kase shook his head. “I don’t believe it. Too many people get tossed aside or hurt in the name of love. Parents abandon children who don’t meet their expectations, lovers cheat for someone better...” His voice trailed off.

“Is it true selfless love if that’s the case?” Hermes asked. “True love doesn’t shun, or require certain criteria to be met, in order for love to be given. Love endures through all circumstances.”

Kase sighed. “I wish I could believe that, but I have evidence it doesn’t.” He looked at Hermes, snuck a peek at Aleksandr, and proceeded to pluck at the white tablecloth. “I was in love at one point. He left and never came back.”

Aleksandr couldn’t bear the pain still haunting Kase’s voice. Even after their time together, he couldn’t remove the cruelty of Barry’s actions. However, he could help him forget. Aleksandr removed his arm from around Kase’s shoulder. He placed one hand on top of Kase’s, stilling the nervous fiddling. With the other, he lightly grasped Kase’s chin between his thumb and forefinger, guiding Kase’s face around to look at him.

He stared into Kase’s beautiful, storm-gray eyes and wished to wipe out all the pain the last wicked boyfriend had inflicted on his kind and caring lover. “I would always come for you, my *glykós*,” Aleksandr said with heartfelt conviction. “I will stay. Try to push me away; I will not go. I do not need, or want, anyone else. I will always be here for you. Always.”

Kase smiled sadly and shook his head. He raised his hand to stroke his thumb across Aleksandr’s lips. “You can’t promise me this. You don’t know what will happen. Things change. People change.”

A sharp pain pierced Aleksandr’s heart at Kase’s lack of faith in him. How could he convince Kase? “I promise here and now, I will. Believe me, *glykó mou*. I would protect you with my life. I would die for you.”

“God, don’t say that.” Kase’s pained whisper reached Aleksandr’s ears even above the din of music and revelers. Aleksandr couldn’t think of anything else to do, so he leaned in and poured his vow into his kiss, and an electric spark passed between their lips. Kase gasped in surprise and pulled away.

“Do not fear.” Aleksandr peered deep into Kase’s eyes. “I am not going anywhere. All will be well.”

Aleksandr glanced quickly at Hermes, who watched them with intense interest but didn’t say a word.

## Chapter Thirty-two

Kase retreated into his thoughts as he listened to the last strains of Lifehouse's "Hanging By A Moment" fade. *Those lyrics are hitting a little too close to home and Alek's promise... I can't expect him to keep a promise like that. But his conviction...* Kase flipped his hand under Alek's and twined their fingers. *I hope Alek is right.*

"Got a special request here," the DJ boomed out over the audio system. "This one is going out to Kase and Alek. Get on out here, boys."

Kase quickly turned his head in the direction of the stage. *A request? Why would someone put in a request? Couldn't they sit here a little longer?*

Alek rose with a broad smile and pulled him up. "Slow dance?" he asked with an arch of his brows.

"Yeah, all right," Kase replied, his heart lightening with a flash of memory from the night before.

Alek led Kase down the VIP steps, and down again to the dance floor, the music a rousing beat of drums. Voices cheered for them as they wove between the ranks of men undulating to the pounding rhythm. Hands reached out, fingers trailed along their bodies, along Alek's bare skin.

Kase brushed away the errant paws reaching out to touch his Alek. This man was *his*. Alek wasn't anything like Kase had expected. He was far more than a sculpted and bronzed warrior with Herculean strength and Adonis beauty. He had a protector's heart, caring and loving. Alek was a man Kase found hard to resist, not only on a physical level, but all levels. He was someone who'd worked his way into more and more of Kase's life and, he was discovering, into his heart.

"Ah, there they are," the DJ intoned. "A troublemaking imp thought this song would be perfect for you two. Here you go: Savage Garden's "Truly, Madly, Deeply."

Kase turned and faced his lover, staring into Alek's eyes, and found him staring back. The room darkened around them, and a strong pulse of notes, accented by a steady beat of cymbal and snare, filled the club. Kase slid his hands around Alek's neck while Alek's strong hands gripped his hips and drew him close. The singer's words echoed throughout the bar, but it was Alek's words that reverberated in his mind. *I'll come for you.* Alek had promised his



protection, to keep him safe even if it resulted in the ultimate sacrifice. Kase shivered and wrapped his arms around Alek, laying his head on Alek's shoulder.

Alek tightened his arms around him, one palm pressing his center back, the other his neck, fingers lightly rubbing at his scalp. Kase could hear Alek humming and murmuring the words to the song while their cheeks lay against each other, his breath blowing hot on Kase's ear. It didn't matter if Alek's words weren't quite right; they came from his heart. *Can I do the same? Could I someday offer Alek what he's offering me?*

As the song faded, Kase leaned back to peer into Alek's dark-blue eyes. *How did I get so lucky finding this man?* He cupped Alek's face and pulled him into a kiss, licking over his lips, driving his tongue into Alek's mouth, and he heard the passionate groan even above the din.

Alek gripped him tighter, pulling him closer. If there were bruises later, Kase didn't care. Deeper, demanding, fervently they kissed, until the sound of clapping and cheers rose around them. They pulled apart.

Kase, his heart thudding in his chest, stared into the burning gaze of his warrior. Desire, lust, and something more shone back at him. One part of Kase feared it, while the other pushed him towards what Alek offered. The small cracks that had appeared inside him with Alek's arrival in his life, widened, and fresh air passed through his heart, like rain refreshing and softening parched earth.

After so long, he was living again. He took a deep breath and let out a heartfelt sigh of gratitude. A chant of "Again, again" began, and they glanced around at the eager faces surrounding them. Kase grinned at the chant, and Alek grinned back before licking his lips and leaning in once more.

\*\*\*\*

Hermes watched Aleksandr and Kase take to the dance floor, where they proceeded to slow dance to the steady beat of Savage Garden. He had a special place in his heart for this band; their songs were always entertaining, truthful, and resounding. It was too bad they broke up. Satisfied with his conversation with the two, he rose from his seat and strolled to the bar. Men reached out to caress his body as he passed; he smiled at them, but didn't encourage them any further. He wasn't ready to partake in the revelry yet.

A patron hopped off a stool, and Hermes took his seat. Branchus spotted him and walked over.

“What can I get you, Uncle?” Branchus asked, placing a coaster on the counter in front of Hermes.

“Your choice, Branchus.” Hermes watched Branchus whip together a blue frothy drink, pour it into a long stemmed cocktail glass, add fruit wedges, and top the whole thing off with a Greek flag.

Branchus set the finished cocktail on Hermes’ coaster. “A Mount Olympus.” He winked.

Hermes grinned. “You love your job and life here, don’t you?” He waved his hand around at the bar and men.

“I do.” Branchus scanned the crowd. “Hey, Tristan,” he called, waving over the cute waiter, wearing a tiny warrior skirt studded with gold, and a red cape. “Help out here for ten minutes.”

“Okay, boss,” Tristan said, stepping behind the bar.

Hermes leaned across the counter to get closer to Branchus, and as he did, the din from the music faded to a dull thumping, pierced by intermittent shouts of euphoria. “Check on them for me, tell me what you see.”

Hermes observed the vacant stare that covered Branchus’ eyes whenever he traveled to a place the majority of Gods could not go. He followed the demigod’s line of sight as he stared above the rolling mass of men, to the warrior and his partner swaying slowly amongst the gyrating bodies around them on the dance floor. He turned back to watch Branchus and waited patiently. Visions were a tricky business, they took their time in revealing their secrets.

The glazed appearance vanished from Branchus’ eyes, and he turned back to Hermes with a smile. “Their future is—” His smile abruptly faded.

“What is it?”

“A dark shadow has appeared, hovering near Kase and one other. It reaches out to trap them both, drag them into its darkness.”

Hermes frowned. “Is Kase’s fear ensnaring him again? And who is the other?”

Branchus shook his head. “No. It’s an outside influence searching for a way in.”

“Is it *him*?” Hermes asked, suppressing the fury escalating inside him. It would not do to endanger the mortals.

“I believe so.”

Hermes turned as the song finished, hearing the cheers for Aleksandr and Kase to kiss. He watched them with a grin while they blocked out everyone else—absorbed in the world they’d created which contained only them—then pulled apart and left the dance floor hand in hand. They headed up the stairs to the second floor. He faced forward again. “Kase is—” He stilled, his body tensing.

“What is it?” Branchus asked, his brows drawn low over his eyes.

Hermes pulled his far-sight back within himself and set his glass on the bar. “Your vision is accurate again. You have an unwanted guest.”

Branchus stopped to concentrate, his eyes narrowing to mere slits. “The roof.” He stepped away from the counter. “I will go—”

“No. Stay and protect the front entrance. He will not come in that way if you are present. We will take care of him.” As Hermes finished speaking, Anteros, Eros and Pothos pushed their way through the crowd to the bar and surrounded him.

“He’s here,” Eros stated matter-of-factly.

Hermes nodded. “Yes.”

“Wait,” Branchus said. All the Gods turned towards him. “There’s someone else in danger tonight. His attention appears to be focused on an employee working upstairs.”

They waited for Branchus to continue.

“Miles. The bartender on the second floor. His ex dumped him yesterday. His heart is broken, and he is building a wall. He is more vulnerable than Kase at this time.”

Anteros closed his eyes. “I feel him. But unknown to Miles, he has an ally he’s disregarded for too long. Both could do with a little helpful nudge.” He opened his eyes and smiled at Hermes.

Hermes nodded at Anteros’ comment. “Stay with Miles, Kase and Aleksandr. Do not let them out of your sight or allow them to go to the roof.”

Anteros dipped his head in answer and set off for the stairs.

“Come with me,” Hermes said to the other two.

Hermes, Eros and Pothos stepped out to the rooftop garden, where Hermes noticed the distinct chill in the air. He closed and sealed the door behind them.

A slim form in black, his back towards them, hands shoved into his pockets, looked out at the cityscape.

The Gods waited, side by side until the figure turned and sauntered over to them. His dark glasses obscured his eyes and a sneer curled his lips.

“Well, well, well.” He inspected the trio as he strolled in front of them. “Three-to-one. A bit lopsided, don’t you think?” Medon halted in front of Hermes and placed his hands on his hips, fingers strumming against his body.

Hermes took a half step forward. “Why are you here?”

“Now that’s a rather silly question.” The man in black wandered back to the garden’s wall and peered over. “So many delicious men. So many hearts broken or breaking.” He waved his finger in the air, directing an invisible band to the hard rhythm of the music, and the screaming of the singers, piped through the rooftop’s speakers. “Pain...” Medon hummed along “...feel pain.”

He pivoted and approached Hermes again. “It’s intoxicating. Especially one in particular.” He flicked out his tongue, tasting the air. He took a deep breath and opened his mouth, letting out a long *ahhh*. “Miles, isn’t it? Fresh, new... vulnerable. A virgin heartbreak.”

He took a step to the side, eyeing the door; Pothos moved, blocking his way.

“Killjoys,” he remarked sullenly.

Hermes kept a close watch on Medon. The creature meandered around the rooftop, sometimes peering over the edge to check out the men waiting on the sidewalk and, at other times, sneaking glances at the door behind them.

“Tell me,” Medon said, stepping up to Eros and stopping a few feet in front of him. “Why are you concerned about these mortals who don’t believe in you?”

“They may not believe in me, but they believe in love,” Eros answered.

Medon strode away, then abruptly whirled back around. “I believed in love,” he snapped.

Eros shook his head. “At first your love was pure, but soon you believed only in possession.”

“I prayed to you! Believed in you! But you did nothing!” Medon yelled, pointing at the three Gods then slashing his hand through the air.

Eros stepped forward and crossed his arms over his chest. “You prayed to change Aleksandr’s heart so he would love you, rather than changing yourself in order for you to become a worthy partner. You also stopped believing in me.” Sadness laced his words.

“I stopped believing because you did nothing to help me,” Medon snarled. He paced back and forth in front of the Gods, the locks of his hair thickening and beginning to sway.

“True love doesn’t force or manipulate others to bend to its will. You know this.” Eros shook his head. “I may not have helped you in the way you wanted, but I would have helped and given you who you needed,” he replied calmly.

“What good would it have done, if you wouldn’t give me Aleksandr?” Medon froze, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. “You Gods are useless, worthless. No wonder man has forsaken you as I have.” He drew a shuddering breath. “There was only one who wished to help me.”

“And look what you turned into,” Hermes said in disgust, gesturing at him. “A Gorgon.”

“Better this, than dying from the pain of a broken heart,” Medon spat. “None of you deserve to be worshipped or remembered.”

Hermes narrowed his eyes. Medon was playing his games again and talking in circles. They were getting nowhere. “This conversation solves nothing. Leave here,” he ordered.

“And what if I refuse?” Medon lifted his chin in defiance.

Hermes blinked, and flashed forward to stand toe to toe with Medon. “Then I will interfere,” he stated, flat and cold.

Medon leapt back and whipped off his sunglasses, his eyes no longer a rich green, but glowing red, his voice a sibilant hiss. “You aren’t supposed to interfere!” he shouted.

Hermes shrugged. “I’ve never been one to follow the rules.” He raised his hand, and his staff appeared in his grasp. “Control yourself.”

Medon backed away, rage contorting his features as he headed for the waist-high wall surrounding the roof. He turned his back and looked over the edge. His hair grew longer, weaving around his head.

“Don’t even think about it,” Hermes ordered. He raised his hand and the wind whipped up, swirling around the beings on the roof.

Medon stopped, hunched, stiff and unmoving. He hissed loudly, the sound like a red-hot poker plunged into water. Slowly, the waving strands shortened and settled, leaving styled hair behind. He straightened, and the hissing faded away until it stopped. Medon rolled his shoulders and replaced his glasses before turning around, his composure in place, except for the muscles visibly twitching in his jaw. He sauntered forward a few paces.

“What do you want?” Medon asked flatly.

Hermes stilled the air. “You will stay away from here tonight. You will stay away from Miles, and any of the other men attending this party or waiting to join it.”

Medon hissed in defiance at the commands. “And what do I get out of it?”

Hermes did not wish to promise this, yet must. “We Gods and Goddesses will not interfere with the battle between you and Aleksandr.”

Medon appeared to consider the offer. “And Kase,” he added, a faint smile playing around his lips. “You will no longer meddle with him. Don’t think I don’t know you’re trying to help them with your hints,” he sneered. “Unless he turns into a ‘Believer,’ which I know—rules again—negates your promise not to help him. But I’m betting the little scholar is finding the idea of Greek Gods a hard pill to swallow. Your words carry no weight with him. Promising me this isn’t going to cost you anything.”

Hermes paused. *Could Kase succeed against Medon, where so many other men’s partners had not?* He knew the odds were not favorable, even with the help they had given thus far. The Gods were severely restricted in their assistance to modern mortals, because they did not believe in them. Medon, however, did not face such limits. His ability to twist and draw the darkness from humans was insidious.

*However, if Kase believed...*

Hermes slowly dipped his head in acknowledgement. He loathed the smile that broke out on Medon’s face.

“Good. We have a deal.” Medon ran his tongue over his lips and grinned. He pushed his hands in his pockets and looked to the sky. “It’s not even midnight yet, and the city is quite large and alive with action on a Saturday night. I think I’ll head to the theater district, see if I can find a tasty, little brokenhearted soul there. Have some fun and then take his heartache away—*forever.*” He laughed, deep and scratchy, the sound of a creature scurrying beneath dry leaves. Medon stepped into the shadow of the chimney and faded.

Hermes stood in silence as the chill vanished from the roof. Pothos and Eros stepped to his side.

“Do you think Aleksandr will succeed where the others have failed?” Pothos asked.

Hermes shook his head. “I do not know.”

“His heart is strong, and growing stronger,” Eros answered. “He is the best warrior of all the ones we have revived thus far.”

“True,” Hermes said, “but we all know it will take more than Aleksandr to defeat Medon.”

The three looked out at the sparkling city lights in silence.

Hermes sighed. “Come. Let us return to the party. Now that he will stay away, we can partake in the pleasures and distractions these mortals provide, and gift them with a night to remember.” With a wave of his hand, the door unlocked, and the Gods walked back inside.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Thirty-three

Magnus and Vaughn escorted the final lingering guest out the front door, throwing the locks closed under Branchus' watchful gaze. Aleksandr sat wearily on the bar stool, scanning the room's activities. He held a glass of water in a limp grip on his thigh, the cold condensation dripping onto his skin. His ears still rang from the pounding beat even though the loud music was now blessedly silent.

Branchus whooped with glee, the shout echoing in the near silence of the bar, followed by a hush except for the rattle of plates and glassware being collected. Branchus boomed out, "Gather 'round, everybody." Boots and sandals shuffled and clomped on the wooden dance floor as Mykonos' employees and the caterers gathered before the raised platform.

Aleksandr forced his body to move, to plant his feet on the floor and slide off the stool. A warm hand slid along his lower back, Kase's light touch tingling sensory points before gripping his waist. Kase moved around to the front, bumping a shoulder into his chest, and he turned his head to gaze into Kase's gray eyes. Aleksandr cupped Kase's cheek, running his thumb along the golden stubble starting to emerge.

"It is good to feel you in my arms, my *glykós*, but I fear the long day and longer night has caught up with me at last. I've no energy left for bed sports."

Kase nodded slowly. "No worries, I don't have much energy myself. Hopefully enough to get us home. Promise you'll help keep me awake for the drive?"

Aleksandr guided Kase forward into a kiss, tasting salt on Kase's skin and the flavors of citrus in his mouth. He hummed approval, languidly licking deeper into Kase's mouth, seeking more.

"Come on, lover boys," Tristan quipped, adding kissy noises. "Let's not keep Bran waiting."

They followed Tristan down the steps and waited with the rest of the crew, looking up at Branchus while he spoke to the DJ. Branchus turned and eyeballed each of them, making sure everyone was present. He held what Kase had called a *mic-ro-fone* in his hand, the device making Branchus' voice even louder.



“I want to thank everyone who busted their asses off tonight,” he said, speaking into the black stick. “You all did a fantastic job. Give yourselves a hand.” Everyone around Aleksandr clapped, so he did the same.

“As a thank you, I’m going to host a party here in a few weeks, for everyone that worked tonight, along with your partners.” Happy murmurs greeted the announcement. “I’ll also be inviting those of you here from the catering company. Your boss has given me your names and contact information. When I have more details, I’ll send you additional information.” More cheers went up from those servers and helpers.

“Go on and finish clearing up whatever you need to do. I’m sure you’re all ready to pack it in.” A few sighs of agreement answered him. “My guys, if you could hang for a few more minutes...”

The catering staff shuffled off, and Kase, Aleksandr and the rest of Mykonos’ employees waited, all looking exhausted. They gathered in a tighter circle, bumping fists and giving hugs. Branchus hopped down from the DJ’s stage and approached them.

“I want to repeat, thank you for all your hard work. You’re a great group of employees, and I’m proud to have you working for me.” Branchus walked from man to man, shaking hands, patting shoulders, and giving quick hugs as he spoke. When he reached Aleksandr, he placed a hand on his shoulder and leaned in. “Wait a moment for me?” he whispered. Aleksandr nodded.

“That said,” Branchus continued once he’d made the rounds, “don’t worry about cleaning up. The food is taken care of, and I’ve got a few guys coming in to do the dishes and scrub the place. The decorations can wait. You’ve all earned your rest. For those who work Sunday, I’ll see you around three. Thank you again, everyone, for another successful party. Time to wrap it up and go home.”

Kase turned to leave, but Aleksandr caught his arm and held him back. His lover arched an eyebrow in question at him and then shrugged before moving into Aleksandr’s arms, where he stole a kiss.

“You boys can’t keep your hands off each other, can you?” Branchus teased behind Kase.

Kase twisted and looked over his shoulder at Branchus. “If you had this, would you?”

“I’m certain I shouldn’t answer your question.” Branchus laughed. He turned to Aleksandr. “I wanted to tell you, Aleksandr, I thought you did

splendidly tonight, and if you'd like a permanent position, I could use a man with your talents. I think you'd make a great bouncer, and the men all like you."

Aleksandr grinned at the compliments and opened his mouth to reply when Kase cut him off.

"As long as those talents keep him vertical and on two feet..." Kase burst into hysterical giggles. "Oh God, I'm sorry. I'm stupid tired."

Branchus grinned and clapped him on the upper arm. "I see that. Go on and get out of here." He hooked his thumb towards the door. "Drive safe, I'll see you next Friday. Don't forget to bring in your bow, arrows, and *xiphos*."

"We won't forget. Come on, Alek." Kase grabbed his hand and hauled him away. "Let's go home."

\*\*\*\*

Aleksandr sank into the car's seat, leaned his head back, and promptly closed his eyes.

"Hey!" Kase poked him in the ribs. "You promised to keep me awake."

Aleksandr sighed and sat upright. "I did not say the words, but I will help." The hum of the car tires and the rhythm of Kase's voice threatened to lull him to sleep, and he fought against the pull. He listened and responded as Kase talked about the evening, recounting several humorous episodes at the bar. He twisted around to view Kase, tilting his head against the seat. Kase's face glowed from the lights of the passing cars, and Aleksandr smiled at the handsome visage.

The trip passed quickly, and before Aleksandr knew it, they'd pulled into Kase's garage. They sluggishly got out of the car and padded inside. Kase held on to the stairwell's railing and pulled himself up. Aleksandr placed a hand on Kase's taut ass, pushing him up the stairs. With a loud groan, Aleksandr stopped at the foot of the bed and collapsed face-first into the welcoming clutches of the *com-fort-er*.

Kase smacked his calf. "Get undressed," he ordered, and Aleksandr rolled over to comply. He fumbled with the buckle. *Even my fingers are tired*. Kase loosened the straps of Aleksandr's sandals and freed his feet, then Kase pushed his hands away and undid his buckle.

"Damn," Kase muttered, pulling Aleksandr's pteruges off of him. "Your jockstrap saw more action tonight than I did." He smiled. "The guys couldn't stop whistling after you flashed them in the employee break room."

Aleksandr could only manage a weak smile. *They may look, but not touch. Only Kase.* He wiggled his fingers “come hither” at Kase. “My arms need action.”

“And my body needs sleep,” Kase yawned in response, crawled over him, pulled back the puffy blanket and pushed Aleksandr to get underneath. The covers floated down and settled lightly against his skin, and Kase snuggled into his side, resting his head on Aleksandr’s chest.

“Yes...” Aleksandr sighed, eyes closing. “You are all I need.”

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Thirty-four

*Sunday*

Aleksandr, xiphos in hand, joined Kase at the back of the car, where he was pulling out their weapons. Kase handed him a loaner longbow, oddly bent, and a quiver full of arrows. His curiosity piqued, Aleksandr scanned the area as they walked across a large field, past modern ladies embroidering, and helmed and jacketed fencers in jeans, dueling. On the far side, three large man-sized targets were erected, and a dozen men and women drew back on bows, firing at the paper people.

A lithe, golden-haired woman dressed in blue jeans and a purple T-shirt turned towards them, laid her bow on the ground, then ran at them. She threw her arms around Kase's neck, hitting him with an audible thud. Aleksandr winced in sympathy.

"Where have you been?" Helene admonished, slapping Kase on the chest. Before Kase could even answer, Helene rounded on Aleksandr.

"You've been keeping my BFF busy. He doesn't call or text anymore," she whined. "I know, I know. I'm not around much either. Stupid cross-country flights."

Aleksandr coughed, stifling a humorous comment about her swiftly changing moods. From happy to mad to sad, back to angry, Helene was a whirlwind, but he liked her. She was bold and daring and spoke her mind. Unlike the women from his time, she did not let either of them get a word in, just continued speaking.

"I went from here to Portland, down to Austin, Chicago and Orlando. I even had enough time to visit with Mickey before we flew back to Chicago."

"How were your flights? Any crazy flyers?" Kase managed to squeeze in.

"Oh, you know." She waved her hand in the air. "Same ol', same ol'. Babies crying and passengers propping their knees and feet up against the seats in front of them because they don't want other people to lean back. I never thought I signed on to be an adult babysitter." She rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Well, come on. Let's practice." She spun on her heel and led them to a large group.

Kase greeted everyone and introduced Aleksandr to his friends.

Aleksandr leaned in close to Kase and lowered his voice. “Am I expected to remember each person’s name?”

“No.” Kase smiled. “I’ll make more personal introductions as we go. Do you want me to string your bow?”

Aleksandr frowned. “Why? Do you think I do not know how?”

“Not at all, go on, just be careful. These are probably not as heavy poundage-wise as you’re used to.”

“You fear my strength will break it?”

Kase snorted and ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah, actually I do.”

Aleksandr regarded Kase a moment, before handing him the bow. When Kase wrapped his hand around it, Aleksandr pulled the bow back, tugging Kase forward. “What is the rule here?”

“Rule?” Kase asked.

“Can I touch, may we kiss?”

Kase grinned. “Ah. Touches over clothes, and kisses, but no tongues.” He tilted the bow to the side and laid a single, chaste kiss on Aleksandr’s lips, before stepping back.

Aleksandr sighed in disappointment. “Very well.”

He watched Kase bend the bows, attach the strings, and buckle a quiver on his back. They moved to the line, and Kase explained the distances, including how many arrows to shoot. Aleksandr froze, his chest tightening, hands balling into fists, as he took in the images on the targets.

“Are my people the enemy that you put up pictures of us for target practice?” Aleksandr gritted his teeth.

“What?” Kase asked, his brows lifting and dropping in a complex dance of confusion.

Helene’s laughter rang out. “Seriously?” She covered her mouth with her hand, but continued to giggle.

Aleksandr glared at her. “Would you find it amusing if I placed your image at twenty paces and shot you full of arrows?”

Helene sobered, and she lowered her hand. “You’re right. I’m sorry. Really. They’re not meant to represent anyone in particular. Some weeks we shoot at

Royal Round targets or pictures of animals. Let me ask if the archery marshal has something different to put up.”

Aleksandr inclined his head as he spoke. “I am most grateful for the offer.”

A chorus of “Aw” swept through the archers. Helene’s cheeks flushed and she whirled, waving them off, striding to the far end of the line.

Kase stepped up to Aleksandr’s side and laid a hand on his lower back. “You’ll have to teach me that trick.”

Aleksandr tilted his head to look at Kase. “What trick?”

“Chivalry. It makes Helene blush.”

They smiled at each other, and Aleksandr stared into Kase’s eyes. He turned and swept up Kase’s hand then graciously bowed, bringing Kase’s hand to his lips. “Do you mean like this, my *glykós*?” he murmured against Kase’s skin.

His gaze still on Kase, Aleksandr caught the swift intake of Kase’s breath, the pinking of his cheeks, and the slip of his tongue as it came out to wet his lips. He shifted his gaze to look at Kase’s shorts and smiled at the appearance of a tent. He would have to remember the effect such a simple gesture had on his lover.

\*\*\*\*

New crude drawings were brought forward: a man with a large black hat, red feather plume and hooked hand, was placed at twenty paces, a Byzantine soldier with his layered armor at thirty, and a coiling, slender, three-headed green sea serpent at forty.

Nock, draw, release. His first arrows missed until he adjusted to the bow’s lighter poundage and style. The string pressed hard into his fingertips each time he pulled back. The bow jolted his arm when he let go, his bones vibrating at the movement. He winced twice when he’d forgotten his form, and the string thwacked his forearm, raising an immediate red welt.

Nock, draw, release. The rhythm returned to him and, like breathing, Aleksandr fell into it easily. Again and again, he laid arrow to string, positioned his fingers, drew back to anchor point... breathed in... breathed out... released. Soon every shot hit, and murmurs of approval brought a pleased smile to his lips.

After several rounds, Aleksandr laid aside his bow. “I am finished.” He handed the bow and belt quiver to Kase.

“Okay,” Kase said, taking them from Alek. “You can wander around if you’d like, or wait here while I take my turn.”

Aleksandr took a seat on the grass and watched Helene and Kase practice.

A series of crashes sounded behind him, and he twisted to see several fighters practicing with their wooden swords and metal shields. Two stood out among the rest—two whom Aleksandr recalled—and an unexpected anger rose within him. He seethed, a roiling anger rising in his gut and seizing hold of him. Lips pursed, he pushed to his feet, grabbed his xiphos, and stalked towards them.

“Hold! Hold!” Shouts followed Aleksandr; he would not hold. Not when there were traitors to deal with.

They saw him coming, dropped their swords—*The cowards!*—and fumbled, trying to pry off their helms. Hands held out in plea, eyes wide with fear. *As they should!*

“Alek! No! Wait! Alek!”

He heard Kase call his name, but he ignored him.

\*\*\*\*

Kase finished his last shot and turned to place his bow on the ground. He glanced to where Alek had been resting, planning on ambushing him with a kiss, but Alek was gone. A shout pulled his attention towards the fighters a short distance away, and there Kase spotted him. Even at this distance, Kase noticed the tense set of Alek’s shoulders and the way he held his sword away from his body.

He looked past Alek to see Gregor and Jason, scrambling to remove their helms and stepping backwards.

“Oh shit!”

“What?” Helene asked.

Kase shoved his bow at her and took off after Alek.

“Alek! No! Wait! Alek!” he yelled, charging towards the men. Fear shone in his friends’ eyes as they focused on Alek. Kase pulled up short and circled around him, approaching Alek from the left, non-sword side, making downwards motions with his hands.

“Whoa, slow down. What are you doing?” Kase attempted to keep his voice level and calm and not betray his anxiety.

Alek darted a glance at him before returning to eyeball Gregor and Jason. He snarled, pointing his sword at their chests. “These are the soldiers who threatened you and Helene that first night.”

“I need you to listen to me.” Kase worked his way between Alek and the “soldiers.” “These men are my friends, Jason and Gregor.”

Alek stepped to the side, and Kase rotated to face him, his hands held out.

“Friends do not attack friends.” Alek kept his eyes on the men.

Kase needed to catch Alek’s attention. “They do if we’re all in a play together, acting. They’re actors, like Helene and myself.” Out of the corner of his eye, Kase saw several of the fighters had moved in.

Alek shot a quick glance at Kase, then back at the men. “Actors? In a play?” He lowered his sword point to the ground. “Is this true?” He relaxed his stance and straightened.

“Yes,” Kase said, stepping towards Alek. “We practiced for six months to get the play in order, and then you showed up and destroyed it in thirty seconds.” He smiled at the memory.

Alek harrumphed. “It is not a very good play if the actors can not fight like true soldiers. A new recruit could have easily dispatched them.”

A round of laughter bubbled up from the crowd that had formed around them, and Kase blew out a sigh of relief.

\*\*\*\*

“Hey! What’s going on?” Helene yelled. Aleksandr raced to aid her as she approached, balancing Kase’s two bows and a quiver of arrows. She dumped the bows and quiver into his arms then stepped in front of Kase, hands on hips. “What am I? A pack mule?”

“Right, sorry,” Kase said sheepishly, reaching for his equipment. “Here, I’ll take those.” Aleksandr handed them to him.

Helene crossed her arms, sternly surveying the group of men, until her inspection fell back on Kase. “What’s going on?”

“Alek thought Gregor and Jason were enemy soldiers,” Kase said, scratching the back of his head. “I had to explain that the first time he saw us, we were acting in a play.”

“Oh.” She lowered her arms and turned to Aleksandr. “Doofus.” She poked him in the side, and he arched a brow. “They’re our friends. In our group, other



than fighting, Jason creates the most beautiful illumination, and Gregor...” Helene sidled closer, nudging Alek with her shoulder. “Gregor is a swordsmith.”

Aleksandr shifted his gaze from Helene to Gregor and back again. “Truly?”

“Hm.” She nodded. “Yeah, one of the best in the kingdom.”

He looked at Gregor again and caught the man eyeing his xiphos. When Gregor realized Alek was watching him, he approached slowly. Aleksandr scoffed at the man’s hesitant advancement.

“I was wondering if I could have a look at your sword?” Gregor asked once he reached them. He pointed at the xiphos.

“Of course.” Aleksandr presented the hilt to Gregor, allowing him to take his weapon. Gregor twisted and turned it, hefted and held it, much to Aleksandr’s amusement. It reminded him of all his times in the marketplace, going from merchant to merchant, in a vain attempt to find the perfect dagger for himself. In the end, he’d contracted with a well-known smith.

While Aleksandr watched Gregor test his sword’s balance, he asked Helene, “Did he not make the one Kase has hanging in his home?”

“That piece of crap,” Gregor interjected, running his finger along the edge of the sword. “Hell no!” He scowled. “I wouldn’t make such a worthless piece of steel, and I told Kase if he ever showed up to an event with it, I’d have to kill him.”

Aleksandr narrowed his eyes, his lips curling into a snarl. A low growl crawled up and out of his chest.

“Figure of speech, figure of speech,” Gregor rattled, moving backwards.

Aleksandr huffed and crossed his arms. “I would see one of yours.”

“Yeah, sure.” Gregor hooked his thumb over his shoulder. “I’ve got one by my bag. I’m working on the etching now, but the sword itself is made. I’ve got a file too, yours could use sharpening.”

“It would be helpful to borrow your tools, Kase has none. My thanks.” Aleksandr nodded.

Gregor led Aleksandr to a row of large black bags, armor and weapons strewn about. He pointed to a straight sword lying atop a dark-brown leather sheath. “Go ahead while I get the file.”

Aleksandr picked up Gregor's sword, and smiled. He adjusted his grip and held the blade out in front of him. A wrist flip whistled the weapon's path. He brought the sword up to his nose and looked down its length, noting the level lines; a finger along the blade's edge tested its sharpness. Aleksandr held it straight up and grinned at his reflection in the smooth finish.

He moved away, checking around to make sure the area was clear, and slowly began to run through his drill. The perfectly balanced sword sliced through the air as he struck and parried, lunged and sidestepped, spun and thrust. He sank into muscle memory, recalling the cadence of instructors, following their orders with precision strike and counterstrike.

Aleksandr slowed and stopped, his heart beating rapidly, not from exhaustion, but with excitement. He approached Gregor with a grin, elated at being able to handle such a fine weapon. Had he a blade like this in his hand... *Victory always!*

"Your craftsmanship is remarkable. If I had not such adoration for my xiphos—we have been through much—I would entreat you to trade." Aleksandr returned Gregor's sword to him.

Gregor grinned broadly at Aleksandr's compliment as he took his weapon back. "After watching you practice, I'm honored you think highly of my skill. Your swordsmanship is breathtaking. I've never seen anyone move like that. Like dancing with a sword."

Aleksandr inclined his head in thanks. "I had a *daskalos*, a teacher, who once described it as such. '*Know the dance, feel it, let it sink into your soul, then let it out to deal death to your enemy, dance upon his grave.*'"

Gregor nodded. "Exactly. I would love to train under your teacher."

"Ah," Aleksandr ran a hand over his short hair, "I am afraid he has been gone for many, many years." His attention caught on the sword in Gregor's hand. *Would he consider?* "Perhaps... Perhaps you and I might come to an agreement?"

Gregor took a step closer, focusing intently on Aleksandr. "What do you have in mind?"

"A sword such as this..." Aleksandr looked around for Kase and found him speaking with Helene and some other men. He lowered his voice. "For Kase, and in return I will teach you. But I do not wish him to know. It will be a surprise."

“A surprise, huh?” Gregor scratched his chin, then smiled. “I’m certain I’ll make out better in the deal.”

Aleksandr tilted his head and gave a small shrug. “Your skill is worthy of my time. We could start now?”

Gregor checked him up and down. “You don’t have any armor.”

Aleksandr scanned the other fighters. He pointed to one. “Would he lend me his armor?”

Gregor turned to look where Aleksandr pointed. “Bjorn? Probably, and we’ve got some loaner gear.”

“Show me.”

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Thirty-five

While Helene conversed with the other fighters, Kase stood beside her and kept a close eye on Alek. When he saw Alek walk away with Gregor, he grew concerned until Jason approached them grinning.

“You look like you’ve just won the lottery. What’s up?” Kase asked.

“We’re going to watch Alek whip Gregor’s butt. Want to join us?”

Kase shook his head and smiled. “No. I’ve a pretty good idea how that’ll end up.”

“Okay, talk to you later.” Jason hurried back to join the crowd beginning to gather.

Kase tugged on Helene’s arm and guided her away from the others. “Well, it looks like Alek can’t get into too much trouble now, although I feel sorry for Gregor.”

“Why?” Helene asked.

Kase shook his head, a smile playing about his lips. “You haven’t trained under Alek. I had aches in places I didn’t even know I had *places*.”

They wandered back to the target line, finding it almost empty of archers. Most of them had wandered in the direction of Gregor and Alek as they readied to “lay-on.”

“You sure you don’t want to watch?” Helene glanced back at the group around the fighters.

Kase shook his head. “No. I need to show you something and ask your opinion.”

“You know me, I’m always willing to give it, whether someone asks me or not.” Helene grinned. “What do you need?”

“Remember you suggested we ask Arrian, that’s Mr. Daskalopoulos, for help in translating?” Helene nodded. “He’s turning out to be a great help.”

“Told you I was a genius.” Helene smirked.

Kase pulled his phone from his pocket. “Yeah, well, I’m going to need you to not only be a genius, but open-minded. I don’t mean a little, but open ‘it’ll change your view on how the world works’ minded, because there’s something

I found out about Alek.” Kase huffed out a sharp breath. Helene had met many people in her travels, heard many viewpoints on life; he hoped she could accept this unfathomable concept.

Helene frowned. “Okay... You’re starting to worry me. Just spill it.”

“All right, but hear me out before you start asking questions.” Kase waited for Helene’s nod and once she gave it, he tapped up the picture of Young Hercules from *The Met*. “Look at this image closely, then I’m going to show you a video of Alek.”

She examined the image then looked at Kase. He pulled up the video of Alek practicing in his living room, pausing it on the one particular frame of Alek’s raised arm, and showed it to her.

Helene squinted, then her mouth dropped open. “Quick, show me the other.”

Kase did, then flipped it back again.

“Oh. My. Gawd! They look like twins!” She looked up at Kase, her eyes wide as saucers, and then pushed him aside to stare out at the group of spectators watching Gregor labor to keep up with Alek.

“Not twins. That statue is, or rather was, Alek,” Kase stated solemnly.

“Fuck me now,” she whispered. Helene laid a palm on her forehead. “You’ve got to be shittin’ me.” She looked up at Kase again. “This isn’t a joke, is it? ’Cause if it is, you’re going to find yourself in some deep caca, mister.”

Kase slowly shook his head. “No. I swear. That’s exactly how I felt when I figured it out. And... that’s not all.”

“There’s more?” Helene’s voice rose to a squeak.

“Yeah.” Kase indicated towards the grass. “You better sit down.” Once seated, he gave her a quick overview of what had happened—including Medon, the poem, the research, and enlisting Arrian’s help.

Helene flopped backwards onto the grass and threw an arm across her face, not speaking a word. After several minutes she righted herself. “And you didn’t tell me right away,” she scolded, poking Kase’s knee.

“How could I?” Kase spread his hands out. “You were away. This is the first chance I got.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Sorry.” She plucked at some blades of grass then looked up at Kase. “I haven’t heard anything on the news about a missing statue. I would’ve thought it’d be plastered all over the papers and TV by now.”

“I was wondering the same thing, but Arrian said the museum is keeping it on the down low. I’m guessing since we haven’t heard anything on the news, they still are. It’d be a big embarrassment to say they ‘lost’ a statue.”

“Wow. All that while I was gone.” She was silent for a moment. “What’s next?”

Kase held out his phone and showed her a photograph of the poem’s translation based on what Alek had told him. “I need your help on this first part of the poem. Alek translated it from my notes. He thinks there’s more to the poem, but we haven’t found it yet. Arrian still has other books we can check through; I’ve made plans to meet with him on Tuesday. Can’t do it tomorrow because my boss scheduled me to attend a conference on Global Warming down in D.C. I’m flying out tonight and won’t be back till late Monday.”

“Send me that photo.” Helene pulled out her phone. Once her phone pinged the picture’s arrival, she stuck it back in her pocket. “I’ll check it over while I’m away. If you get any more information, send it to me, and I mean immediately.” She poked him in the knee again. “Doesn’t matter what time of day or night. I mean it.”

Kase nodded, taking in Helene’s serious expression. “I will, and thanks.”

She smiled. “What are BFFs for?” Helene leaned forward, her grin widening. “Speaking of BFFs, how’s it going with Alek?”

Kase’s mouth dried and his stomach flipped. He leaned back and blinked. “Um.” Heat bloomed on his cheeks and a hot flush crept up his neck.

“A-ha!” Helene slapped her thighs and grinned from ear to ear. “I knew it’d only be a matter of time. Tell me... how is he?” She fluttered her eyelashes innocently.

“Nuh-uh.” Kase shook his head. “BFF or not, I’m not giving you any deets. You’ll just have to use your wild imagination.”

“Spoilsport.” Helene pushed to her feet and swiped her hands at her jeans, removing the clinging grass. “Okay, I’ll leave it for now. Want to practice some more?”

“Yes. I haven’t practiced without my glasses in a while. I should do that.”

They retrieved their bows and quivers, and Helene stepped closer, bumping him with her shoulder. “You’re going to draw a crowd, you know.”

“Don’t know why, I’m simply shooting arrows.”

“Stop being so modest. You’re shooting arrows almost blind when you take off your glasses.” They walked to the shooting line and faced the targets at twenty and thirty yards. “And you’re still better than everyone here.”

Kase turned his left shoulder to the full-sized Captain Hook and straddled the line. He removed his glasses and handed them to Helene.

“I’ll never figure out how you do it; how without seeing you still manage to nail the kill zone almost every time,” she said from behind him and to the side.

He shrugged. “All I can tell you is it’s instinctive. Without seeing, I rely on my gut to focus my aim. And then I trust it will land exactly where I want it.”

Kase pulled out an arrow from his back quiver and nocked it. He rolled his shoulders and relaxed them, already looking out towards the hazy form of the pirate at twenty yards. There was a difference between shooting blind and shooting as he was about to. With your eyes closed, there was nothing to focus on. With his fuzzy view of targets, he could shut out the visual distractions, and saw only the blob in front of him. He knew where the arrow needed to go, and made it so.

Arms and hands and fingertips, long used to archery practice, pulled each arrow, rolling and nocking it into position. Shoulder blades and triceps pulled, bicep and heel of hand pushed, locking in at anchor point. Hold still, breathe and release. Again and again, until his hand met empty air, every arrow loosed.

“Helene, could I have my glasses?” Kase held out his hand, and she placed them on it. He slid them on and was rewarded with seeing her huge smile. Fingers silently clapping as she bounced on her feet.

“Oh my God!” she squealed. “You didn’t miss once.”

Alek came up behind Kase. “I have never seen anyone shoot with such precision before,” he said with admiration.

“Hey.” Kase turned around. “I didn’t know you were there.”

The archery marshal called out, “Bows down” and “You may retrieve.” Kase walked forward to remove them, followed by Alek and Helene.

“I did not wish to disrupt your concentration,” Alek said when they neared the target. “None of the archers I knew could do what you did. They would beg to learn from you.”

“Thanks. I’m just lucky, I guess.” Kase shrugged before reaching to pull his tight cluster of arrows from the pirate’s chest.

“It is more than luck. Hermes has touched you with the ability to shoot true. I am honored you are my guide.” Alek lowered his voice and bent in to whisper. “And my *glykós*.” He brushed his lips along Kase’s ear, and Kase leaned towards the touch until Alek pulled away.

“Did you want to practice more?” Kase asked. “If not, I’d like to leave. I have to get ready for my trip, and I want us to spend some time together before I go.”

“I am ready to return home.”

Kase turned to find Helene watching them closely, a huge grin on her face. He pulled Helene in for a hug. “I’ll see you next week.”

Helene wrapped her arms around his neck. “Okay. Be careful and remember to send me any info you get,” she said firmly.

“I will.” Kase gave her a peck on the cheek and straightened up.

She turned to Alek. “You be careful too. And don’t you dare hurt Kase, or I will hunt you down.” Helene scowled at him, reached up and tugged on his collar. Alek bent his knees, and Helene stood on her tiptoes to place a kiss on his cheek.

Kase almost burst out laughing at the surprised look on Alek’s face. “See you next week.” He waved goodbye to Helene before walking to the car.

Alek didn’t speak a word until they got in the car and drove away. “She kissed me.”

This time Kase snickered. “That she did.”

“Why?” Alek pursed his lips and rubbed the spot.

“Because she’s Helene?” Kase shrugged. “She does what she does, and I don’t try to figure her out.”

Alek hummed in response.

“Why did she tell me to be careful?”

“Ah.” Kase stopped for a light. “While you were teaching Gregor, I told her everything that’s happened since you returned to life in the museum.” He glanced at Alek before the light turned green, and then back out the windshield. A sign for the local drugstore shone nearby, with an ad for prepaid cell phones in one of the windows. Kase decided right then and there to stop and purchase one for Alek before they got home.



Kase glanced over at Alek again. His long silence started to worry him.

“Everything?” Alek finally asked. “Including... us?”

Kase let out a relieved breath. Alek wasn't upset. “No, not the details of us. I told her about the poem, curse... Medon.”

“And did she believe you?”

“Yes. Although it took her a few minutes to get used to the idea.” Kase pulled into the parking lot of the drugstore and parked.

“What are we doing here?” Alek looked out the window.

“I'm going to buy you a phone, so we can talk while I'm away.” Kase unlatched his seat belt and opened the door. “It'll only take me a couple minutes. Feel free to wait in the car.”

“No. I will come with you.” The click of a latch and the door opening followed Alek's comment.

Kase let it go. His guardian refused to leave his side.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Thirty-six

Aleksandr held the small box in his hands, his thoughts drifting to Kase's imminent departure. This phone would become the only link between them once Kase left. A knot was building in his gut, and he swallowed hard. He gazed out the car's window and tried to think happy thoughts, like slow dancing at Mykonos and sharing a bath. Still the ache pulled at him.

Cars and houses and citizens zipped by; they meant little to him. Although he liked Branchus and the other men he had worked with at the club, they were not Kase. What would he do while Kase was gone? Practice yes, but what else? Aleksandr laid the box in his lap and drummed his fingers on his thighs.

Kase's hand covered and stilled his; the contact and warmth loosened the knot, though Aleksandr feared the anxiety would not leave him fully until Kase returned home tomorrow.

"You okay?" Kase asked, rubbing his palm gently on the back of Aleksandr's hand.

Aleksandr flipped his hand and twined their fingers, and lied. "I am well." He bit his tongue in retaliation for his deceit.

Kase glanced over at him a couple times before he spoke. "Okay. We're almost home."

The rest of the drive proceeded in silence, Aleksandr holding tight to Kase's hand, not yet ready for him to go.

\*\*\*\*

"Here, take the key and unlock the door." Kase handed Aleksandr the set and got out of the car. "I'll grab the bows and arrows."

Aleksandr reached into the back seat and removed his xiphos. The tightening in his gut eased even more once he had his sword in his hand. He stepped out and to the door, unlocking it and holding it open for Kase.

"Thank you, kind sir," Kase said as he passed by.

Aleksandr snagged his arm and stopped him. He moved to Kase's side, sliding his hand up to the back of his lover's neck.

"I shall have your thank you in kisses." He leaned in and led with his tongue, licking at Kase's lips and into his mouth.

Kase broke off, laughing. “I’ll give you plenty of thanks after I take a shower and order some food.” He hummed and bit his lip. “You know, I think I’m going to order some extra food for you, then you won’t have to worry about making dinner tomorrow.”

Aleksandr kissed Kase’s nose. “I will be fine.”

Kase stepped away, and placed the bows and arrows down on the kitchen counter. He returned and cupped Aleksandr’s cheeks. Kase’s heat seeped from his palms into chilled flesh Aleksandr did not realize he had, and he wished he had put down his xiphos as he wrapped his free arm around Kase’s waist.

Kase stared into Aleksandr’s eyes a moment before he patted one side of Aleksandr’s face. “Let me go take a shower, order, and then I will show you how to work the phone.” He wiggled out of Aleksandr’s arms and picked up the weapons. “I’ll only be a few minutes.” He headed out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

Aleksandr followed as far as the doorway, pausing to watch Kase’s legs and ass work to propel him upwards. He was struck by the memory of his hand on Kase’s ass, pushing him up the stairs. His skin warmed and his cock filled. The shorts pulled across his groin and his clothes stifled him. He yanked at them, removing his shirt and pushing the shorts and boxers down his legs. His muscles tensed, and he stretched and flexed. He wanted a long soak, but Kase was...

A smile spread across his face, and he placed a foot on the bottom stair, looking up at the bedroom door. Beyond that doorway, in the bathing room, his lover stood naked, water streaming down his body, hands raised as he worked them into those golden locks. And with that image filling his mind, Aleksandr sprinted up the stairs.

\*\*\*\*

Palm pressed to the door, Aleksandr pushed gently, letting it swing silently open. Once enough space existed for him to slip through, he did, and quietly closed the door behind him. He crept across the cool floor tiles towards the shower, his slow movement a marked contrast to his pulse, which raced from his run up the stairs. His heart skipped a beat envisioning his lover’s body on the other side of the curtain. The mental image of a naked Kase had gotten him half hard, the reality now brought his cock fully to life. He wrapped his right hand around the base and stroked upwards, stifling a groan.

Kase was facing away from him, his body obscured by the mottled curtain, but Aleksandr could see the pale globes well enough when Kase bent over to

wash his legs. Without further delay, Aleksandr stepped forward and slid back the curtain. Kase turned to face him, clutching his hands to his chest, and Aleksandr reached out to grip Kase's waist, unable to wait any longer to touch.

"Holy cow, you startled me," Kase gasped.

Aleksandr took full opportunity to wrap his arms around Kase and hold him tighter. He dipped his head and licked at Kase's earlobe. "I did not know cows were sacred to you."

Laughter burst from Kase. He laid his hands on the sides of Aleksandr's face and pulled him in for a quick kiss.

"I'm sorry, but sometimes you say some crazy things."

Aleksandr frowned. "I am not trying to be funny."

Kase's features softened. "I know," he said, leaning in to slide his lips against Aleksandr's. "You're like this breath of fresh air I didn't realize I'd needed."

"Perhaps, I am more..." Aleksandr whispered, that knot reforming low in his belly. "Perhaps I am the air you need to breathe, the touch you need to feel, the song you need to hear."

Kase stared into his eyes a long moment before he glanced away. "Perhaps," he whispered in reply. He picked up the bar of soap before meeting Aleksandr's gaze. "Would you like me to wash your back?"

"I will give you the honor of washing me," Aleksandr quipped.

"Ha!" Kase retorted. "You can wash yourself then." He playfully attempted to pull away.

Aleksandr smirked, refusing to relinquish his hold, and Kase eventually reached around his body to wash him. The bar of soap slid smoothly along his shoulder blades, and strong fingers massaged the suds into his skin.

Palms pressed firmly along his spine, the downwards slide a joy. Aleksandr tugged Kase closer, positioning his cock beside Kase's, and rotating his hips to grind their lengths together.

Their simultaneous groans were a chorus to his ears. He shifted his grip to Kase's waist, fingers spread and pressing into Kase's slick flesh. He leaned in and kissed his lover, curled his tongue, seductively seeking admittance. Kase let him enter, and they breathed in each other, harmonious desire rising.

Aleksandr pulled away and turned Kase. He took the wet skin of Kase's neck between his teeth and bit gently. With his tongue, he licked a broad path up the back of Kase's neck, behind his ear to lap at his earlobe.

"My turn," Aleksandr murmured, rubbing his cheek against Kase's as he pressed closer. The move forced Kase to brace himself on the wall. Aleksandr shuffled forward, his cock nestling between Kase's thighs.

"Give me the soap," he whispered, holding out his hand, and Kase placed it onto Aleksandr's open palm. He rubbed the bar between his hands, working up a lather before putting it on its ledge.

Blocking the water with his body, he laid his palms on Kase's shoulders, curled his fingers into the muscles, and worked his way downwards, kneading and massaging until the tense muscles loosened and relaxed beneath his insistent fingers. He cupped the cheeks of Kase's ass, squeezing firmly. One soapy hand slid into the crack, and all pretense of washing was tossed away when he aligned his rock-hard shaft into the cleft of Kase's ass.

Holding tight to Kase's hips, Aleksandr rocked forward, driving his cock up and down the soap-slicked path. Kase pushed his ass out, and Aleksandr reached to wrap his hand around Kase's erection. A moan spilled from Kase's lips.

Aleksandr's hand stroked in tandem to Kase's thrusts, and his own, as those heated globes of flesh surrounded his hard length.

Kase sawed his hips back and forth, driving his cock into Aleksandr's tight fist. He pressed his thumb to the top of Kase's shaft, letting his digit rub against the head's ridge.

He couldn't suppress the groan of pleasure, and didn't want to. He wanted Kase to hear him, know how he felt, and hear how he brought him to such heights of pleasure. He wanted to hear his lover in return, needed to be assured the man in his arms, in his hands, felt the same.

"Let me hear you, my *glykós*, let me see you in ecstasy," Aleksandr said, his voice honeyed and deep, his tempo slow. He matched it with his movements, drawing out the pleasure for both of them. A subtle twist, a languid slide of hand, a caress of cock.

Kase's moans of pleasure stoked the fire in Aleksandr's belly. The pressure in his groin increased, bliss spiraled upwards. He tightened his grip around Kase's shaft, and thrust harder against Kase's body. Kase's voice sang out, echoing off the tile walls, and he arched his back, spilling over Aleksandr's fist.

Aleksandr rejoiced, his voice mixing with Kase's, as he pulsed his release onto Kase's lower back.

Together they made a song worthy of the Gods.

\*\*\*\*

Aleksandr would have preferred to remain naked, but Kase handed him shorts, and he slipped them on without complaint. He despaired of Kase's addition of a T-shirt, resigned for the moment to the other man's modesty.

Kase picked up his cell phone and sat on the edge of the bed, the small device beeping as he rapidly tapped on its screen. Aleksandr walked over and sat down next to Kase. He moved closer and nuzzled into Kase's ear. "What are you doing, my *glykós*? If you need distraction, I can give it to you."

Kase snorted, his thumbs moving quicker. "I'm trying to order us a roast chicken dinner."

Aleksandr wrapped an arm around Kase's waist and kissed his lover's cheek. "I can think of something I would rather eat." Kase guffawed, and his shoulders jiggled in time. Aleksandr grinned, pleased with Kase's reaction.

Kase ceased his tapping. "There, all done," Kase said, turning to face Aleksandr. "Now my Greek warrior won't starve while I'm away."

"I'll starve for your attention," Aleksandr replied, looking into Kase's eyes.

Kase gave a small smile. "I'll only be gone overnight. I'll be back before you know it."

"Not soon enough, my *glykós*." Aleksandr pressed a tender kiss to the corner of Kase's mouth.

Kase raised his hand. Soft fingertips ghosted along Aleksandr's lips, and he kissed them. Kase smiled and patted Aleksandr's thigh. "Come on. We have at least thirty minutes before dinner arrives. I'll show you how to use the phone while we wait."

"Very well," Aleksandr said, disappointed he could not distract Kase longer. He reluctantly let go and followed Kase downstairs.

\*\*\*\*

"I have to register the phone and pay for some time so you can use this." Kase unplugged the new phone from the black cord that ran to the wall. He wagged the new phone at him. "It'll take a few minutes." He took a seat on the couch, opened his laptop, and got to work.

Aleksandr sat next to Kase and watched him. It was not only Kase's blond hair and handsome face that attracted Aleksandr, but also Kase's intense focus, his willingness to learn combat—even though he was not yet skilled—and his intelligence. He gave thanks once more to Hermes and prayed he would keep Kase safe while he was away.

“Okay, got it.” Kase leaned back into the couch and punched at the new phone before pulling out his own. He made a few more taps with his fingers, handed the new phone to Aleksandr, and leaned close.

Aleksandr, liking this much better, draped his arm across Kase's shoulders, drawing him nearer. He nibbled and licked along Kase's jaw until Kase poked his leg with a finger.

Dropping his phone, he grabbed for Kase's annoying poker. “You are learning a bad habit from Helene,” he said. “She does that too much.” Pulling on Kase's hand, he drew it to his lips and laid a kiss on the Kase's wrist.

“True, but you need to pay attention. I'm going to teach you how to answer this phone.”

“Very well.” Aleksandr pulled his arm back. He did want to talk to Kase when he was away; it was in his best interest to listen.

Kase proceeded to call him while they sat side by side on the couch. Once Aleksandr understood, Kase went up to his bedroom and called him once more.

A marching tune played on the phone in Aleksandr's hand. He swiped at the bar on the small square, like Kase had shown him, and raised the phone to his ear.

“Hey, hot stuff,” Kase said.

Aleksandr broke into a grin and looked up towards the bedroom door to find Kase looking down at him, a huge smile on his face.

“You are too far away from me, my *glykós*,” he said into the phone as he got to his feet and moved to stand beneath the upper walkway where Kase stood.

Kase leaned against the railing, switched his phone to his left hand and placed his right over his heart. “O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?”

Aleksandr frowned. “Romeo? Who is this Romeo you speak of?”

Kase chuckled and straightened up. “Don't worry, I don't know anyone named Romeo. It's a line from a play.”

Aleksandr harrumphed.

Kase made his way to the stairs and stepped slowly down them. “Do you think you can figure the phone out? Not too hard?”

Aleksandr walked to the foot of the stairs and waited as Kase made his way towards him. “If I can not remember, I will ask Daskalos.” He looked up to find Kase standing on the bottom step.

“Good idea,” Kase said, phone to his ear. “You can always visit him, and I can call you there. Don’t forget to take the phone with you, and when you get home, plug it in to recharge with the cord. And remember to take the house key if you decide to go to Arrian’s.”

Aleksandr nodded.

“Okay.” Kase pulled the phone from his ear and tapped the screen. “Let’s hang up, we don’t want to use any more minutes.”

Aleksandr looked down at his phone, pushed the button, and the light went off with a *bleep*. He looked up at Kase, and his lover wrapped his warm arms about his shoulders, pulling him close.

“I’ll call you when I get to the hotel tonight. That way, you’ll know I made it okay. Tomorrow I’ll try to call you around noon when we have lunch. No guarantees though, it might be earlier or later. I’m not sure when I’ll be free.”

“I wish I could go with you.” Aleksandr sighed and brushed a wayward lock of hair away from Kase’s forehead.

“I know. I’d drive, but it’d take too long. And without identification, you can’t fly. Flying is the best option.”

Aleksandr nodded. “Then I will eagerly await your call.”

The doorbell rang, and they both turned.

Kase kissed Aleksandr’s forehead, hopped to the floor and headed for the front door. “Dinner is here. Can you set the table?”

“As you wish,” Aleksandr said and headed to the kitchen.

\*\*\*\*



## Chapter Thirty-seven

The roast chicken dinner with vegetables, mashed potatoes and gravy was delicious. Aleksandr was glad Kase had ordered extra for him to have for tomorrow's dinner. All he'd need to do was heat up the potatoes and vegetables in the *mi-cro-wave*, which he had learned was easy to do.

With dinner finished, Kase readied himself to leave, and a heaviness settled on Aleksandr. Knowing Kase would soon be out of his sight, even for a day, created a dark hole inside that he'd carry around until Kase returned. In the meantime, Aleksandr trailed after Kase like a puppy, while Kase filled his bag with a few clothes and packed away his laptop.

Aleksandr followed Kase out to the garage and watched while Kase opened the car door, tossed his duffel bag onto the back seat, and deposited his laptop bag next to it. Aleksandr reached out and ran a hand down Kase's back.

Kase slammed the passenger door closed then turned around with a smile. "Hey, don't worry, I'll be back before you know it."

Aleksandr pulled Kase close, threading his fingers into Kase's golden hair, relishing in the feel of Kase's arms wrapping around him. "I can not help but worry. I do not trust Medon, and I do not know how far he will go to reach you."

"I'm going straight to the airport. I doubt he'll try to get me there."

"Close your eyes if you feel a chill," Aleksandr said, and Kase nodded. He stared into Kase's storm-gray eyes memorizing every blue and green fleck.

"Kiss me," he said, leaning towards Kase. Soft lips met his. The kiss, gentle at first, grew fiery as their tongues tangled in an attempt to remember the other's taste until they saw each other again tomorrow.

Kase pulled back and rested his forehead against Aleksandr's. "I gotta go. I'll call you when I get to the hotel." He laid one last small peck on Aleksandr's lips and patted him on the chest.

Aleksandr's throat tightened as Kase walked around to the other side of the car, opened the driver's door, and hopped in. The garage door slid upwards, and Kase started the car. Slowly, he backed out, and when he got to the driveway, Aleksandr spotted him waving behind the windshield. He waved back. The door creaked as it lowered, finally cutting off his view of Kase. Aleksandr

stood in the garage until the door met the floor and the light shut off before slowly turning to walk back into the house.

\*\*\*\*\*

The house was quiet except for the swish of the overhead fan, paddles spinning in repetitive circles. Aleksandr sat on the couch and stared at the blade hanging on the wall. He smiled, thinking of the deal he'd made with Gregor, and wondered how well the sword would come out. Of course if it was anything like his xiphos, or the blade he'd handled today, then Kase would love it. And he would enjoy teaching both Kase and Gregor the art of true sword fighting.

He looked down at the phone sitting on the table in front of him. He reached and poked at it, the screen lighting up with a picture of colorful swirls. Another poke and tiny bubbles appeared to float across the screen before fading out. Aleksandr prodded it again and again, mesmerized by the sight.

Moments passed, and he could no longer sit still. Aleksandr rose and stretched; he worked his body through some simple movements and debated about another round of practice. He rolled his shoulders and then his head, catching sight of the upstairs bedroom's open door. His body still tight, and mind unable to focus on any one thought for long, he knew of one sure method to relax.

Aleksandr padded up the stairs, his footsteps silent, entered the bedroom, and walked straight to the bathtub. He turned on the taps and tested the water's temperature before flicking up the metal lever to stop the drain. When he stepped back to strip, he caught sight of his reflection in the mirror. He ran a hand appreciatively over the scruff on his cheeks and chin, tilting and turning his head to examine himself. With an arch of his eyebrows, Aleksandr admitted vainly he was a handsome man. He rivaled those men at the club, and beat them in their attempts to lure his glykós away.

He pulled off his T-shirt and pushed down his shorts. Free of the fabric, and one eye on the rising level of water, he admired as much of himself as he could see in the mirror. He ran his hands down his body, pushing his fingertips into the firm muscles, sighing at the self-massage. Reaching to the back of his neck, he pressed repeatedly, feeling the muscles relax. Aleksandr turned and twisted, looking behind him into the mirror, but he could only see his back to the top of his ass. He smirked and slapped a cheek anyway before glancing at the tub.

When the water reached a good height, he stepped to the tub, and turned the taps off. He made sure he had a towel at the ready before sliding one foot into

the heated liquid. The warmth penetrated his foot and calf, and he groaned, as he submerged his body in the blessed heat.

“My Gods,” he whispered, sending a thankful prayer to whichever one created hot tubs, and tipped his head back against the wall. Aleksandr’s eyes closed on their own accord, and he let his thoughts drift to Kase. He wished he was here holding him again, and scooped some water onto his chest in an attempt to recreate their night in the tub. Much of it was a blur, however, with how tired he’d been after working that first day at Mykonos. Still, he remembered the gentle feel of Kase’s hands exploring his skin, the softness of the towel as he was patted dry, and the light drape of sheet as it was pulled over him.

He frowned, knowing the only pleasure he’d receive tonight would come from his own hand. Meanwhile, Kase was flying in a strange metal bird to another massive city... unprotected. His gut tightened, and helplessness overwhelmed him. He slapped at the water, raising a spray that caught on his eyelashes and beard.

*So much for relaxing.* He growled at his own lack of trust in the Gods, in Hermes, whom he suspected played some part in their ordeal, and at Medon, for causing all this disorder in the first place.

Aleksandr blew out a huge breath. *Enough! Kase will be fine. I must trust in Hermes’ protection.* He settled back into the hot water for many moments, letting the heat soak into his tense muscles, but soon restlessness fell upon him again. With his toes, he pushed down the lever to open the drain and watched the level slowly fall. He didn’t move out of the tub until the last whirlwind of water disappeared.

He rose and dried off, then wandered around the house naked, peeking into cabinets and closets with no real interest—it was something to bide the time until Kase called. He pulled open a door at the far end of Kase’s work room and found it filled with costumes. Kase’s green vest hung front and center, with a long hunter-green cape beside it. There were pants and rolls of fabric on hangers, colorful, fluffy shirts in a multitude of colors. On the floor were the black, buttoned boots Kase had worn, along with several pairs of leather-strapped sandals. A long metal pole caught Aleksandr’s eye, and he tugged it out, revealing the replica of Hermes’ staff. *Oh!*

A tiny smile crept onto his lips as he admired the Caduceus. He gripped the pole and made his way downstairs to the couch. He propped it in the far corner

between the cushions, laid his phone on the table, and took a seat opposite the staff. Aleksandr leaned against the padded arm and stared at the Caduceus. His mind settled, and he focused on his breathing. He let the memories of the days since he'd returned to the living float through him, and he zeroed in on each of those first moments experiencing this new world with Kase's guidance.

"*Efcharistó*, Hermes, for all your help. I pray I do not disappoint you in the coming days."

\*\*\*\*

The loud marching music with drums sounded on Aleksandr's phone, and he scrambled up from where he'd lain waiting for Kase's call, grabbing it off the table. He swiped his finger across the screen as Kase taunted him.

"Kase?" he breathed into the phone, anxiously awaiting his lover's voice.

"Hey there, handsome." Kase's warmth carried through to Aleksandr's ears.

Aleksandr smiled. "You are safe," he stated.

"Yup. It was a crowded flight, but no problems. Arrived on time." A muffled yawn interrupted Kase's comments. "What did you do after I left?"

"I took a bath and thought of you." Aleksandr held his breath. Did Kase think of him too?

"Hmm, a nice hot bath with you sounds good. We can do that when I get home."

"I would like that." Aleksandr heard Kase yawn again.

"Sorry. Flying always makes me tired, and I've got to get up early. I should probably hang up now before I fall asleep. I'll call you tomorrow afternoon, and maybe before I board the plane home. Okay?"

"Oh-kay," Aleksandr replied, disheartened.

"Don't worry, I'll be home soon. Night, Alek."

Aleksandr didn't want him to "hang up." "Night, Kase," he said roughly, holding the phone to his ear until he heard a click. He pulled the phone away to find the light had gone dark. He rubbed his free hand over his heart. Kase would be back tomorrow night, and he'd call in the afternoon.

Aleksandr pulled the cord out of the wall and brought it upstairs with him. He wanted the phone close by, in case his *glykós* called again. He stared at Kase's side of the bed, the space painful, visual reminder of the emptiness in

his heart with Kase's absence. Aleksandr lifted the covers and slid beneath the soft fabric to lie in his lover's spot. He placed his head on Kase's pillow and burrowed his face in, inhaling the fragrance of Kase's soap. It took some time for his heart to calm, but gradually with the familiar scent of his glykós surrounding him, and his arms wrapped around Kase's pillow, it was enough for Aleksandr to surrender to sleep.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Thirty-eight

*Monday*

Aleksandr lay on his back on the bed and once again pushed the button to check his phone. The numbers had two slashes and two circles side-by-side, nowhere near the time Kase would call.

He brought the phone to rest on his chest and stared at the ceiling. If he were a modern man, instead of a stranger to this world, there would be much for him to do. Before, he was always able to find others—Erasmus, fellow soldiers, even Taras—to keep him company and occupy his days with lovemaking, games or practices. Back then, life was full. All he'd done today was rise and eat and practice before taking a long bath.

He sighed in boredom, flipped onto his stomach, held the phone in front of him and punched the button again. Then he let out another huge sigh.

What could he do until he heard from his *glykós*? Life without Kase was empty; his chest ached with loneliness for his lover.

Aleksandr huffed and pushed up to sit on the edge of the bed. He would visit with Daskalos, as Kase had suggested.

He stood and went downstairs, tucking the phone into his shorts' pocket. When he reached the bottom, it occurred to Aleksandr he should bring a gift when visiting. He opened the ice box and retrieved the bottles of *so-da* in their carry box. Kase said drinking too much of it was not good for him. He "bounced," but he did not care. It gave him much energy.

He picked up the key to the house before he stepped outside, making sure the door was locked behind him. Kase entrusted him with the safety of his home.

It was a short walk to Daskalos' house, and soon Aleksandr hopped up the stairs, knocked, and waited. The curtains parted in the kitchen, and the elderly Greek man's smiling face looked out. He disappeared, and a moment later, Aleksandr heard a lock click, and the door was pulled open.

"Good morning, Aleksandr," Daskalos said, stepping aside to let Aleksandr enter. "It's good to see you." He shut the door and headed for the kitchen.

"*Kaliméra*, Daskalos," Aleksandr said, following him. "I brought *so-da*."

“You didn’t have to, but thank you.” Daskalos took the drinks and placed them on the counter, then opened a cupboard and pulled out a long yellow package. “I hope you can stay awhile today,” he said, smiling up at Aleksandr.

“I can.” Aleksandr waited, unsure of what to do. He usually practiced when he visited Daskalos, while he and Kase researched the books. He held his hands together behind his back, fingers fidgeting. “If there is work to be done, I can help.”

Daskalos chuckled. “There are no chores right now. I would, however, like your company. Maybe you can tell me about your life in Greece, if it doesn’t bother you to talk about it?”

“I would like that.”

“Good. Then let’s go into the living room and get comfortable. I’ve got some fig cookies for a snack; bring two bottles of your soda. Later, I’ll make us lunch.”

Aleksandr took a seat on the couch and answered Daskalos’ many questions. Daskalos’ eyes were large and bright, as he listened intently to all Aleksandr told him, thrilled to learn about life in ancient Greece. When the questions began to fade, Daskalos rose to use the bathing room, and Aleksandr pulled out his phone. Now the number read a slash and a curve, and he remembered it was the combination for when Kase would have lunch and would call. Yet his phone had not sung with music. He let out a loud sigh.

“Waiting for Kase to call?” Daskalos asked, returning to the living room.

“Yes.” Aleksandr inclined his head. “He said he would call at the midday meal, but he did not know exactly when that would be.”

“I’m sure he’ll call as soon as he’s able. In the meantime, why don’t I make us some lunch?”

“I know how to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches,” Aleksandr offered, rising from the couch and following Daskalos into the kitchen.

Daskalos grinned, shaking his head. “How about we have a traditional Greek *mesimeriano*? My son went to the market and picked up some groceries for me. Let’s see...”

Aleksandr’s mouth started to water watching his host place the items for lunch on the counter.

Daskalos rummaged around in the icebox. “We have feta, wheat and white bread. Grapes, figs, olives, and I made some hard-boiled eggs. I also have lentil soup, if you’d like. I can heat it in the microwave?” He looked up at Aleksandr.

“Yes.”

“And before I forget...” Daskalos opened the door of another cupboard and pulled out a jar filled with a thick golden liquid. “Honey.” He grinned.

Aleksandr beamed and licked his lips. “I like honey.”

“So do I. One of my great enjoyments is eating honey with cheese on bread or crackers.” He waved at the table. “Why don’t you take everything to the dining room? I’ll get some plates and wine.”

They settled into chairs and quietly enjoyed their meal. Once their hunger eased, Daskalos spoke.

“Aleksandr, while I appreciate you calling me Daskalos, I’d like it if you’d call me Arrian.”

“You are a teacher, it is only right I should use your title,” Aleksandr insisted, wiping his hands on a cloth napkin.

“True, but it’s been many years since I taught. Besides, today I am the student.”

Aleksandr inclined his head with a smile. “As you wish... Arrian.”

“Good,” Arrian slapped his hand lightly on the tabletop, “because I have many more questions for you.”

Aleksandr leaned back in his chair. “What else would you like to know?”

Arrian picked up his glass of wine and took a sip. Aleksandr watched him roll the liquid around in his mouth before swallowing. He could sense the hesitation in Arrian’s manner and tensed.

“Perhaps I’m being too forward...” Arrian began, “If I am, you may choose not to answer, but I’m curious.”

“About what?”

“How did you end up getting turned to stone?”

Aleksandr slumped back, thoughts of Erasmus crowding his mind. He dropped his chin to his chest, blowing out a long breath. After a few moments, he raised his head.



Arrian's posture remained relaxed as he returned Aleksandr's gaze. "You do not need to answer, Aleksandr, if it is too hard to speak of," he insisted, laying a hand on Aleksandr's arm.

"It is." Aleksandr reached for his own glass and took a hefty swallow of wine. "It is also a story you would appreciate.

"It was years before I met the one who would become Medon. There was a boy in my village, a merchant's son who, like you, took great delight in learning. When I left for my service in the army, I gave him a ring and asked him to wait for me, and he promised me he would. But upon my return, he was gone, and the ring left for me."

Arrian *ahhed*. "I'm sorry to hear that. What was his name?"

"Erasmus."

Arrian's eyes widened. "Erasmus," he repeated softly.

"Yes. Our love was not looked on with favor. You know of *erastēs* and *eromenos*?"

"The older male taking a young boy as a lover? Of course... Oh! You and Erasmus were the same age?"

"Nearly," Aleksandr replied before taking another sip of wine, effectively draining the glass. He placed his glass down and refilled it. "I was a year older. We'd known each other for many years before advancing our *friendship*." He arched a brow and gave Arrian a sly smile.

Arrian laughed. "Was he as handsome a man as your Kase?"

Aleksandr tsked. "How can I compare? Even now, my memory of Erasmus grows dim." He closed his eyes to better recall his first love, then opened them on a sigh. "I had great admiration for his golden curls, and he had a birthmark... here." He ran his knuckles along his own collar line, picturing it in his mind.

"What did it look like?"

"I used to tell him he was descended from Hermes. It looked like a bird's wing." Aleksandr huffed. "I guess he and Kase are more similar than I thought. Although Kase is more my match; Erasmus had no interest in wielding a weapon."

Arrian chuckled lightly along with him, pushing back his chair. When Aleksandr moved to rise with him, Arrian motioned him to stay. "There is

something I want to get. I'll be right back." Aleksandr watched him disappear, returning a few moments later with a wrapped bundle.

"Let's move to the living room." Arrian turned slightly. "I don't want to show you this here with all the food out."

Aleksandr stood and picked up his plate. "Shall I put everything away for you?"

"No," Arrian said, shaking his head. "Leave it. We'll clean up afterwards." He turned fully, and Aleksandr followed him through the kitchen and into the living room.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Thirty-nine

Arrian perched on the edge of the couch with the cloth-covered object in his lap. He patted the cushion next to him. “Come and sit.”

Aleksandr sat and watched Arrian divide the bundle in two. One half he placed in front of him on the small table, the other he put above it. He pulled white gloves from his pocket and put them on.

“I’ve not thought of these in years,” Arrian began, reaching out and reverently touching the first parcel. “I know these have been passed down through my family, from firstborn to firstborn for over a thousand years. Now, I think, they may be even older than that.” He drew the edges of fabric away to reveal a wooden box etched with an epsilon.

Arrian cleared his throat and rubbed at his lips. “Was there, by chance, another gift you gave to Erasmus?”

Aleksandr smiled broadly. “Yes,” he breathed. “I had a set of chiton pins made especially for him. Embossed with an alpha for me and an epsilon for him. Why do you ask?”

Arrian raised the lid of the box in answer. Nestled inside, on blue shiny fabric, were two oxidized brass hinged pins, each with an intertwined A and E. Aleksandr sucked in a breath in surprise and reached out to touch, only to be blocked by Arrian’s hand. *It couldn’t be!*

“I’m sorry. I know it may seem to be several years in the past for you, but if what you say is true, then these are two thousand years old,” Arrian explained as Aleksandr withdrew. “If you want to touch them, I’ll get you a pair of gloves.”

Aleksandr’s heart beat wildly. A reminder of Erasmus lay within reach. He clasped his shaking hands tightly in his lap, to keep from touching, and to keep Arrian from seeing the effect the pins had on him. “I apologize. I did not mean to cause harm. Besides, they no longer belong to me. Tell me how your family came to own them.”

“I will do better than tell you.” Arrian grinned. He unfolded the fabric around the second object to reveal a leather-bound book. The paper edges peeking out were frayed and discolored.

“My family’s story was recorded in this journal. This is not the original journal, of course. It would not have lasted two thousand years. My family has

diligently copied each word exactly as was written in the original when the current book reached the point of falling apart. We take great pride in preserving our family history with the highest accuracy. Be the events good or—” he shrugged “—not so good.”

Arrian ran his hand lightly over the book. “Our history records were started by Sophos, a *daskalos* like myself. We believe he was the grandson of Pantaleon, Erasmus’ *erastēs*, and was the one to start journaling the history and stories of our families.”

Arrian reversed the positions of the book and box; now the book lay in front. He carefully took hold of one corner and opened it.

“The beginning of the writings is about Pantaleon’s life, his wife and children, it even includes a family tree. That’s a diagram which shows a person’s lineage.”

“Like my father and mother and their families?” Aleksandr asked.

“Yes, exactly. My grandfather told me a story of receiving these pins from his father. His father was a bit of a romantic, a dreamer, and he loved to read stories from this book about our history. The stories start with Pantaleon, who was very sad following the death of his wife.”

Arrian turned several pages until he reached a certain one. He pointed to it. “Here is the story. It speaks of the man visiting a village and seeing the son of a merchant. The son, named Erasmus, had golden curls and a winged mark at his throat.”

Aleksandr gasped and leaned over. He mumbled the Greek words to himself as he read, covering his lips with his fingers.

When he reached the end of the page, he asked Arrian to turn it. Aleksandr choked back a cry, his heart jolted and stopped before it raced, threatening to burst from his chest. His vision narrowed to the full-page sketch of Erasmus exactly as Aleksandr remembered him. He stood to the side, resting a hand on the shoulder of an older man.

Aleksandr’s reached out to touch, hovering above the image, knowing he must not. Oh, how he wanted to! Here was the truth he had long searched for.

“The story continues that the merchant urged his son to leave because he feared for his son’s life. Something to do with another powerful family. And so, when the patron took an interest in him, his father sent him off, begging him to never return, for his own safety, or until the patriarch of that family no longer posed a threat.

“My family has always wondered about the letters on the clasps. We knew the epsilon stood for Erasmus, but we didn’t know who the alpha was for.” He paused and looked up at Aleksandr. “It was your name, wasn’t it? Alpha for Aleksandr?” He asked quietly.

Aleksandr nodded. “Yes.” His voice caught in his throat. “I cannot thank you enough for this.”

Arrian smiled. “Fate has chosen to weave her web around my family and you. Who knows why she chooses to ensnare mortal men in something like this.” He waved his hand at the journal and the box. “You have given me knowledge that my ancestors have searched for, for generations. I am grateful to you as well.”

*No.* Arrian and his family had gifted him far more. Showing him the pins he’d presented to Erasmus centuries ago, along with the story, was beyond measure. To convey these pieces of his family’s connection with Erasmus resurrected memories, pain and... love. They tore at him, and he feared he would drown. Instead, memories of the present, since his reawakening, competed with the pain and loss, pushing the old ache away and claiming their spots.

Aleksandr’s thoughts whirled with the tumbling emotions and memories, unable to settle. The Gods favored him now by answering a prayer he had long held: to learn what happened to Erasmus. He had hoped his lover had lived a good life. He had. He had found a worthy patron, someone more suited to him than a soldier. An older lover with wisdom, and the ability to give Erasmus all the things he craved, both intellectually, monetarily and—Aleksandr smiled—sexually.

He remembered fondly how Erasmus preferred to give up control to Aleksandr, which Aleksandr enjoyed. But once in a while, he wished Erasmus would have taken him. He had not been *eromenos* since his last patron had decided he was too old.

Aleksandr straightened. Would Kase desire to take charge? He assumed Kase did not wish to; he had always responded beautifully to Aleksandr’s advances. Still, it was something to discuss when Kase returned, which would be soon. *If only he would call.*

As if in answer to his wish, a beat of drums sounded. Aleksandr grinned with delight, knowing he too now had music coming from his pants like Kase. He jumped to his feet and dug the phone from his pocket.

“Kase?” he breathed.

An amused chuckle sounded in his ear. “Been waiting for my call?”

“Yes.” Aleksandr held the phone tightly to his ear, not wishing to miss any of Kase’s words. He looked up when Arrian rose from the couch.

Arrian pointed to himself, then to the kitchen. Aleksandr nodded, and Arrian walked away.

“What have you been doing today?”

Aleksandr paused. *How should I answer?* He could tell Kase about practicing and all he discovered about Erasmus. *No...* None of those could come before this.

“I have been missing you.”

Silence greeted Aleksandr’s statement. He pulled the phone away from his ear and checked if the light was still on. He brought it back to his ear. “Kase?”

The sound of throat clearing came over the phone. “I’m missing you too, Alek. More than I thought. I can’t wait to come home.”

Aleksandr grinned until his face hurt. *He misses me and wants to come home.* “What time will you be back?” *Soon, I hope.*

“Around eight o’clock this evening. The meeting broke for lunch and is expected to end at—”

“What does eight o’clock look like on the phone?”

Kase laughed at his urgent question. “The eight looks like two circles sitting on top of each other. Then the dots, then a circle and another circle. If you were at Arrian’s, I’d have you ask him to draw it for you.”

“I am visiting him; I will ask. We had lunch together, and he told me exciting news about Erasmus.” Aleksandr spoke rapidly.

“Erasmus?” Kase’s voice rose in surprise. “How is that possible?”

“The Gods have granted my wish to know how he fared.”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” Kase retorted.

“Yes, it does.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Kase sighed loudly. “It’s likely pure coincidence. Just because you believe it doesn’t make it true.” He paused. “However, if it gives you peace, I’m glad you found your answer, but you still didn’t answer my question.”

Aleksandr paced the living room. “I will tell and explain it to you once you are here.”

“I’d certainly like to hear it. Although, I’ll probably be tired when I get back. Don’t expect too much out of me.”

Aleksandr plopped on the couch and slouched. “Too tired?”

Kase snorted. “Someone’s eager.”

“Of course. I am always eager to share with you, my *glykós*.”

Kase hummed. “That sounds nice.” He sighed. “I have to go buy lunch before the summit resumes, but I wanted to call you first. If the meeting runs long, I may have to rush to the airport and won’t have time to call you. I’ll try though.”

Aleksandr tensed. “Be careful and wary of Medon. He prefers the dying light. If you feel his chill, do not look.”

“I’ll be careful. I want to get back to my bed, and my personal bed warmer.”

Aleksandr could not stop another grin from growing. He ached to touch Kase, wishing he was here and not on the phone many, many leagues away. “And I cannot wait to have you in my arms again.”

“See you soon, Alek. Bye.”

“Till then.” He waited for the beep. When it sounded, he pulled the phone away from his ear and shoved it in his pocket. He blew out a breath. His lover would soon be home.

The Gods had given Erasmus a second chance to find a worthy lover and for happiness. Here, in this time, they granted him a second chance of happiness with Kase. He would not reject their blessing.

Aleksandr rose from the couch and headed for the kitchen. He needed to ask Arrian what eight o’clock looked like.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Forty

Aleksandr sat at the dining table watching out the front window. He pressed the little button on his phone, seeing the screen light up with the current time. Arrian had taught him the marks of time, showing him what Kase meant when it reached eight o'clock. Aleksandr sighed when the numbers changed again, making Kase's arrival past due.

Two bright lights approached slowly, and he heard the garage door rise. He jumped out of his chair as the car's lights turned in. Aleksandr debated waiting or moving, gave in, and hurried to the kitchen door to the garage, and yanked it open.

Kase stood beside his car, holding onto the top of its door, gazing at him with a broad smile.

"You're a sight for sore eyes," Kase said. "Let me grab my bags." He bent back into the car while Aleksandr moved to his side.

"Sore? Let me help." Aleksandr took hold of Kase's bags and ushered him all the way into the living room with a hand on Kase's lower back. He needed to touch, to assure himself Medon had done no harm, that Kase was here with him, and soon in his arms.

"It's an expression," Kase said, turning to Aleksandr, "although I am tired."

"Very tired?" Aleksandr asked, a mixture of anxiousness and disappointment, hopeful anticipation slipping away. It must have come across in his voice because Kase laughed.

"No, I'll be all right. Nothing a shower won't help."

Aleksandr grinned and snagged Kase's hand, pulled him up the stairs and into the bedroom. He dropped Kase's bag to the floor and tugged him closer, sliding one hand to Kase's back and removing his lover's eyeglasses. He leaned and placed them on the table beside the bed before threading his fingers into Kase's hair, tilting his head.

Lips met lips, a slow kiss quickly morphing into urgent need. Aleksandr devoured, tasted, hunger growing but not for food. No, his desire now could only be sated with the flavor of Kase's mouth and flesh, the touch of skin to skin.



Aleksandr trailed fingers to the hem of Kase's T-shirt, slipped underneath and lifted it. They broke apart long enough for Aleksandr to tug off the annoying piece of clothing, which kept him from his lover's body.

Kase pulled back and stroked his fingertips down Aleksandr's chest. "I'm starting to like the fact you never wear a shirt. I mean 'good view,' and 'easy access.' What more could a guy want?"

"I can think of many things," Aleksandr replied, grabbing Kase's ass and pinning their groins together: Kase's long spear to his unbreakable sword.

"I'm sure you can," Kase teased and leaned in, pressing their lips together again, letting hands roam and tongues tangle.

Aleksandr shifted to kiss along the scruff at Kase's jaw, threaded his hands into Kase's hair, tipping his head to expose his throat. With mouth and lips and teeth, Aleksandr gently bit, nibbling on his glykós. He tasted and lapped, licking Kase clean. He'd get him dirty enough to require the shower, but later... much later.

Kase slipped his hands under the waistband of Aleksandr's shorts; blunt nails scratched at his skin. Palms flattened against his ass, and fingers curled, tips sliding into the cleft.

Aleksandr moaned as he straightened. He aligned Kase with the bed, and then pushed him to sprawl on his back on the mattress. Kase's legs spread apart, and Aleksandr wedged himself between them. He planted his hands on either side of his lover's head and stared long into those color-flecked gray eyes.

Kase reached up and cupped Aleksandr's cheeks, sliding the pads of his thumbs over Aleksandr's lips.

Aleksandr kissed them thrice before he spoke. "I missed you," he said, his voice low and rough.

Kase smiled up at him. "Did you now?" he teased.

Aleksandr nodded once and lowered himself, placing rough kisses and nipping at Kase's lips, and jaw and cheeks. He ended back at Kase's mouth, where he deepened the kiss, sliding his tongue along Kase's, licking at his teeth and palate, all the while, grinding his rock-hard shaft to the matching one hidden under Kase's shorts.

When he pushed up, Kase slid his hands between them, rubbing his palm hard along Aleksandr's cloth-covered cock. Aleksandr rocked into the touch

with a groan. He closed his eyes, drowning in his glykós' ministrations, the back and forth strokes sending wave after wave of pleasure through him.

He needed more, wanted nothing to block him from Kase's perfect body. Aleksandr moved off the bed and deftly removed Kase's sneakers and socks. Next, he leaned forward, reached for the button on Kase's shorts, and popped it open. With a quick pull, he had the zipper undone.

Kase lifted his hips, and Aleksandr grabbed the sides of Kase's shorts and boxers together. Careful not to hook his lover's staff on the band of the shorts, Aleksandr yanked them off. He didn't want to waste any more time; he needed to feel Kase's skin against his, wanted that hard, bare spear rubbing against his own.

Aleksandr felt Kase's fierce gaze on him while he stripped. He lifted his eyes to watch Kase move his way to the top of the bed, head to the pillows, before twisting and opening the drawer in his bedside table. He withdrew the bottle of lubricant and a small metallic square. Aleksandr, climbing back on the bed, halted in his advancement over Kase's body. He stared at the palm-sized object, recognizing it from their talk at the club.

If Aleksandr's heart beat fast before, it galloped now. Desire burned in his chest—his glykós wanted him. He would be the first to take Kase since the cruel lover cast him aside. He ached to give himself completely to Kase, to show him how he felt. Alive, after years of darkness. He scanned Kase's face, anxiously seeking confirmation as his lover turned onto his back.

The corners of Kase's mouth quirked up. "It seems I missed you too," he whispered, laying the lube and condom down. He reached for Aleksandr, pulling him closer. Their bodies aligned, chest to chest, cock to cock, legs intertwined.

Mouths met, tongues danced and played, drenched lips slipped and slid. Aleksandr nibbled on Kase's plump lips, his fingers threaded into Kase's hair. A firm squeeze to his ass had him moaning into Kase's mouth. The hair on Kase's legs tickled as they shifted and rubbed against each other.

Aleksandr pushed up and moved to Kase's left, letting his hand glide down Kase's chest. He swept his fingertips from right to left, catching nipples and breathy tones. Kase arched his back into Aleksandr's touch.

There was a golden trail to follow, and Aleksandr traveled its path. He formed an O with thumb and forefinger and slipped it over Kase's cockhead, gathering the large drop of fluid shining in the slit and simulating what was to come.

“Fuck, yeah,” Kase groaned, canting his hips upwards.

Aleksandr stayed and stroked, enjoying the feel of Kase’s stiff shaft in his hand, but he also selfishly wanted for himself. He rolled towards Kase, nuzzling his neck and behind his ear. Sucking on the fleshy earlobe earned him a louder groan.

“*Glykó mou,*” Aleksandr murmured into Kase’s ear.

“Yes,” Kase replied, his single word not much more than a breath of air.

Aleksandr continued to slide his fist up and down Kase’s hard length in a steady rhythm. “You are certain?” He would not force, only wanted what was freely given.

Kase slapped his hand to the bed and he came up with the bottle of lubricant. He shoved it to Aleksandr’s chest. Aleksandr took possession of the little bottle, and Kase cupped Aleksandr’s chin, directing their gazes to meet.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about you while I was away. I was horny as hell, and all I wanted was to come home.” He wrapped his hand around Aleksandr’s girth, and Aleksandr groaned with each firm tug, each push and pull, sliding his foreskin over and down the head of his shaft.

Aleksandr delved deep into Kase’s mouth, the resulting kiss hard and demanding... like his cock. Ready to take, but Kase was not. He planted his knees between Kase’s thighs and pushed against them, spreading them apart. He popped the top of the lubricant and drizzled it on his fingertips.

He glanced up to see Kase looking down his body, his tongue wetting his lower lip, and grabbing fistfuls of the blanket beneath them. Aleksandr leaned down and captured Kase’s mouth, taking control, sucking and biting at the plump flesh. Kase’s arms encircled him, fingertips trailing a random path across his shoulder blades. When those fingers ghosted down to slide into the cleft of his ass, Aleksandr reached between them and cradled Kase’s balls; his slick fingers rubbed gently at the smooth skin behind them. Aleksandr kissed his way down Kase’s throat, encouraging Kase to tilt his head back. His fingertips circled Kase’s entrance; once, twice, then one breached to the first knuckle.

Kase gasped, squeezing around the finger then squirmed, working himself down the digit until he could go no farther. Aleksandr withdrew and added a second finger. Kase clutched at his shoulders, gyrating and moaning.

The fire in Aleksandr’s belly grew, demanding he join with Kase in pleasure. He shifted to get his shaft closer, and his vision caught on the small

metallic square. Aleksandr drew his fingers from Kase's body and picked up the protection Kase insisted he use. He turned it over to see the off-white, flattened circle contained inside.

He leaned down and rubbed his nose along Kase's stubble-rough cheek. "Kase."

Kase hummed.

"You must do it." Aleksandr pressed the tiny packet into Kase's hand. Kase's hand closed around it, and his eyes slid open. He licked his lips, mouth opening and shutting. Aleksandr gazed down at Kase, elated at being the cause of his lover's disorientation, and ready to make him come undone. The condom in the packet was all that delayed him.

"Put it on me, *glykó mou*."

Kase blinked and nodded, bringing the small square up and tearing it open. He withdrew the pale circle and motioned for Aleksandr to move closer. Kase spread his arms, and Aleksandr straddled Kase's chest.

It looked to Aleksandr like his lover played with the needed cover, but before he could even ask, Kase gripped his shaft and stroked him. Aleksandr groaned, tilting his head back. Cool tightness wrapped around the head of his cock and he pressed forward. Kase's warm hand slid downwards, extending the condom over his ready shaft.

He looked down to see Kase finish smoothing the flexible material, pick up the lube, and squirt some on to his palm. His lover made a fist, and when he opened his hand, he lay it on Aleksandr's erection. Slick fingers wrapped around the base of his cock, slipping up and down. He sucked in his breath at Kase's tight grip.

Aleksandr squeezed his eyes shut and tightened his belly. The faint murmurs and 'fuck yeah, so hot' from Kase aroused Aleksandr, as did the firm strokes bringing him closer to the edge.

He opened his eyes and stared into Kase's, the pupils huge and surrounded by an edge of blue-sparked gray. Covering Kase's hand with his own, he spoke.

"I need to be inside you."

Kase nodded and released his hold on Aleksandr's shaft, allowing Aleksandr to shift backwards. With a hand under each of Kase's thighs, Aleksandr lifted them to expose Kase's entrance.

Aleksandr's gaze locked on to the head of his cock pressed against Kase's hole. It resisted at first, keeping him out. He pulled back and pushed against it again. Kase let out a long breath, and Aleksandr leaned in, groaning as he sheathed himself inside the tight grip. Blessed heat surrounded the head of his erection. He wanted to sink quicker, but he held still a moment longer, letting Kase adjust to his girth.

He started slow, gradually increased his thrusts, working his shaft into Kase, listening to his lover's quiet moans, and drinking in Kase's appearance. The faraway glaze of his gray eyes, lost in the sensations of their passion. His skin flushed with their pleasure, the glow growing and spreading to brighten his chest.

Aleksandr's heart hammered, his pulse a loud drum in his ears. A hard squeeze from Kase's ass gripped Aleksandr's cock, and he gasped, freezing in place at the breath-stealing tightness.

Kase reached for him, circled his hands around Aleksandr's neck, and drew him down. Their lips met in a demanding kiss, spoke without words of their mutual desire and passion. Tongues touched. Tasting, twirling and tangling.

Kase's right hand slid down Aleksandr's back, the warmth pressed into his skin. Downwards farther, fingertips drifted through the sweat erupting on Aleksandr's flesh. They traced along the edge of his spine, then dipped into the split of his rear. Fingers spread to pinpoint spots on the bottom of his ass, gripping the taut muscle. The left hand soon followed the path of the right until they both clung tightly to his cheeks.

With both of Kase's hands holding him, Aleksandr broke the kiss and drew back until he had pulled out almost all the way, only the tip remaining inside his *glykós*. He braced himself, one arm to either side of Kase's head, and canted his hips forward, driving his length deep in one full thrust.

Kase clutched at him with a gasp, his head tilted back to expose his throat. Aleksandr retreated, then pounded in again, and again, picking up the tempo.

Aleksandr dropped to his elbows, licking a broad swath up his lover's throat. When Kase tipped his chin down, Aleksandr dove for his mouth and sucked on his lips and tongue. Another tightening of Kase's inner walls had Aleksandr almost surrendering to the pleasure quicker than he wanted. He desired to have Kase reach his peak at the same time, and pulled away from Kase's sweet mouth to wrap a hand around his lover's perfect phallus.

Together they pumped, coordinated their movements. Aleksandr matched the rocking of his hips with the movement of his fist up and down Kase's cock, while Kase thrust up to meet Aleksandr's firm, strong strokes. Breathing hard, they licked at their dry lips, stared fiercely into each other's eyes. Kase's gaze flickered over Aleksandr, his fingers curling hard into the globes of Aleksandr's ass, and his gut tightened.

"Kase..." Aleksandr murmured.

Kase reached up and cupped Aleksandr's cheek, sliding a thumb along his lips. Aleksandr sucked the digit into his mouth, watched Kase close his eyes. A low groan started in his lover's chest, growing louder, until he threw back his head and came. Shots of pearly white fluid spouted from Kase's cock, splattering his chest and painting his belly. Aleksandr continued to stroke as more dripped onto his hand, thrilled at his *glykós'* beauty upon release, overjoyed he had been the one to make his lover fly.

Aleksandr's triumph spilled over to tingle down his spine, into his balls. With a few more thrusts, he let go of his lock on his body, and allowed the ecstasy to flow through him. His jaw tightened, and a deep growl slipped past his clenched teeth. He tilted his chin to his chest, his release pouring from him, exploding out of his shaft, and into the protection.

For many moments, Aleksandr held himself still, one hand still encircling Kase's softening length. He gave it a languid stroke, earning a gasp from his lover, and a hand stopping his movements. Aleksandr raised his head to see Kase's bright smile and returned it twofold.

Kase firmly held on to Aleksandr's ass, keeping him from withdrawing. He hauled himself up, and Aleksandr wrapped his hands around Kase to hold him. Their lips met once more with heat and hunger. Kase reached between them and grasped the base of Aleksandr's cock. Aleksandr broke the kiss and looked down at what Kase was doing.

"You have to hold the condom when you pull out," Kase whispered, a smile playing about his lips.

Aleksandr pushed Kase's hand away and held the protection in place. He lowered Kase to the bed and withdrew, both of them letting out a gasp at the small spike of unexpected pleasure. He removed the condom and held it up, inspecting the fluid filling the bottom, and beaming with pride at the amount.

Kase laughed. "Go throw it in the trash and bring me a towel." He waved towards the bathing room.

Aleksandr shrugged and did as he was told. He brought back both wet and dry cloths and wiped Kase's release from his belly. When he moved to return the cloths to the bathing room, Kase grabbed his arm.

"Drop them and come here." He tugged at Aleksandr.

Aleksandr grinned, letting the cloths fall to the floor. He lay beside his lover, and Kase rolled to snuggle into his side. Holding his glykós to him, Aleksandr sent another prayer skyward, this one full of thanks. His day had started dull, but even as he thought the words, happiness filled his heart, overflowed to turn his lips upwards. His worries for Erasmus had been eased by Arrian's revelation, and Kase had missed him, allowed Aleksandr to join with him.

He sighed and closed his eyes, letting the day's events drift through his mind again before Hypnos pushed him to sleep.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Forty-one

*Tuesday*

Kase sat in Arrian's backyard under an overhead trellis thick with flowering vines that blocked the sun's rays. Arrian and he were taking a break from their research to watch Alek practice. Even to Kase's less-than-expert eye, it looked like Alek's cuts and parries had grown quicker and more precise, his breathing more at ease. He also discovered Alek was a ham, smirking whenever he caught Kase watching him. How could he not when presented with a perfect specimen of a man?

"I have an idea," Arrian said, breaking into Kase's appreciation of Alek's form.

"What's that?" Kase turned to look at Arrian.

Arrian tapped his lip absentmindedly. "There is one book we haven't checked. It's full of fairy tales and legends."

"Fairy tales?" Kase asked, surprised. "Are you telling me the Greeks had books of fairy tales?"

Arrian chuckled. "Not exactly... It's what I call them. Fairy tales always start with 'once upon a time' and end in 'happily ever after.' Legends, however... They are more like horror and warning stories."

He got up from his seat. "My grandfather gave the book to me when I was a child. He read it to me a few times, not often though, because many of the stories are frightening for small children. I don't know how long he may have owned it. Since it was in very delicate condition, I decided to give it to The Met. They made a copy of the book for me. I'll bring it out here." He headed inside while Kase went back to watching Alek practice.

The sliding door scraped behind Kase, and he turned his head to find Arrian carrying a simple leather-bound book.

Arrian, now wearing his pair of reading glasses, sat down in his chair. Kase leaned closer as Arrian opened the book. The writing was miniscule. Without his own glasses he'd never be able to read it.

"Shall we get started?" Arrian asked. Kase nodded, remaining silent. He didn't want to distract Arrian's study. He could, at least, tell a poem from regular information by the way it appeared on a page.



The first half of the book revealed nothing new, simply a repeat of legends, myths and quests they'd seen in the other books they'd looked through. It was the second half that caught Arrian's attention. "I don't want to count our chickens too soon, but I think we might have something here." He glanced up, his eyes gleaming.

"What is it?" Kase whispered.

"This here—" Arrian pointed with his finger "—talks of one particular Gorgon—no name is given—who was able to turn mortal men into Gorgons themselves, if they met specific criteria and included... potions? Spells? Rituals? I'm not sure of this part."

"Does it say what kind of spells?" Kase asked eagerly.

"No, but..." Arrian raised his finger, "I'm not exactly sure since I can only read about half the words. We'll have to ask Aleksandr to translate it completely for us. It does mention something about death. If someone is dead or dying, they can be saved by the blood of the Gorgon if—" he followed the line with his finger, tracing above the page as he read "—the dying man drinks the blood which flows from the Gorgon's body. There's more added in between the lines. However, it's too small for me to read."

Kase drew back. "That's ridiculous. How can a monster restore life?"

"I don't know." Arrian shook his head. "How can they turn men to stone, or have a head full of snakes that can poison a man?" He peered over the rim of his spectacles at Kase.

Kase huffed out a breath. "What else does it say?"

Arrian flipped the page, stared, and then sucked in a sharp breath. "I think we've found what we're looking for, but we need to be absolutely certain." He looked at Kase and pursed his lips. "We'd better have Aleksandr come here and translate for us."

"Alek!" Kase called, twisting towards the handsome warrior.

Alek stopped midstrike, his arm dropping slowly to point his sword to the ground. "Yes?"

"Can you come here?" Kase waved his hand, motioning him forward.

Alek approached, laid his sword carefully on the ground, and grabbed the towel draped on the arm of Kase's chair. He wiped the sweat from his face and neck. "What is it?" he asked, slightly out of breath.

“I think I may have found the original poem in this book.” Arrian looked up from his seat. “We need your help to translate it.”

Alek nodded and knelt to get a closer look at the pages.

“Here’s what we need you to read.” Arrian pointed with his finger.

Kase waited with impatience. He chewed the inside of his mouth and watched the expressions flit across Alek’s face. Surprise, followed by an ever deepening frown, and the tightening of his jaw, the muscles visibly flexing. Finally, Alek finished reading and closed his eyes.

“Is it the one?” Kase whispered.

Alek opened his eyes and nodded once. “Yes,” he said, his voice thick and tremulous.

Kase looked at Arrian, and found him staring back, his eyes huge and unblinking. Kase turned to Alek. “Will you translate for us?”

Alek nodded again, his lips pressed into a tight line.

“Wait, let me record the reading.” Kase pulled his cell phone out of his pocket, quickly snapped a few photos of the poem, and then turned on the voice recorder. “Okay.”

Clearing his throat, Alek began to translate.

*“The Gorgon has come, the Gorgon knows.  
He seeks out cold hearts  
At the time when bitterness lingers.  
This brings in turn fear and hate, pain and misery.  
“Year by year, they await.  
When the moon shines bright, their fate begins.  
Hardened heart which knows not love  
Has need of love’s kind grace to recover.  
“Their hearts are cured if love goes first,  
Within two weeks perhaps they may break the curse  
But if they still have hearts of stone,  
They will die, love unknown.  
“Hardened heart, learn to love.  
Oh Eros, shoot arrows from above.  
One simple act, one small dart,  
Changes forever an altered heart.”*

The three men remained silent. Kase turned and stared at Alek, his face pale but determined, as he rose slowly to his feet.

“This poem is slightly different from the notes you showed me, yet I believe more accurate,” Alek said, his hands balling into fists at his sides.

“A fortnight,” whispered Arrian. “Oh, Aleksandr, I am so sorry.” His quiet comment had Kase glancing at Arrian to find his eyes glistening with unshed tears.

Kase rose from his chair and stepped closer to Alek. He touched Alek’s arm with his fingertips. “Do you want to go home?”

Alek nodded, turned, and picked up his sword.

Arrian stood. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help... Anything.”

Kase stepped forward and laid his hand on Arrian’s shoulder. He gave it a brief squeeze before letting go. “You’ve been a tremendous help already, Arrian. Thank you.” Kase then returned to Alek’s side, and together they rounded the corner of the house and left the backyard through the garden gate.

\*\*\*\*\*

Kase, with Alek trailing behind him, stepped into his home and headed for the kitchen. He pointed at the table. “Sit down. It’s lunchtime. I’ll make us something to eat.”

“No, I need to practice,” Alek said, turning to face the rear of the house.

Kase grabbed Alek’s arm in desperation. “Please. Sit.” He heard the plea in his voice. “You need to rehydrate and eat if you intend to practice more.”

The desire to keep Alek close overwhelmed him. *A fortnight*. Today was the eleventh day. Only three more days remained. He didn’t want to think about it, but he had to. The poem contained the clue to breaking the curse, and he had to figure it out. He must.

Alek nodded, tucked his sword into a corner, and shuffled to the table, touching objects along the way, looking at the overhead light and the oven as if memorizing details. He sat in the chair and stared out the window.

Pinching his lips together, Kase turned away and pulled out ingredients for a ham sandwich, grabbed the chips, and Alek’s favorite cola. *How can I ever drink soda again without thinking of him?*

When Kase finished making lunch, he served Alek first, then carried in his own plate. They ate in silence, their legs touching under the table.

Alek shoved his empty plate away and downed the rest of his soda. “I need to practice more if I am to kill Medon.” He pushed back his chair, and Kase grabbed for his hand when he walked by.

“Alek...” What could he say to ease his lover’s pain?

Alek gently brushed his knuckles—the touch, featherlight—down Kase’s face. Kase turned his head and kissed Alek’s hand.

“Do not worry, my *glykós*. I will kill Medon, and it will all be over,” he said quietly. Alek pulled his hand away and headed outside.

Kase watched his lover retrieve his sword and walk away, his head held high, his back strong and straight. He heard the slide of the glass door and the click as it shut.

Kase pulled out his phone and contemplated the black screen. There was more to killing Medon than simply cutting off his head—or whatever method Alek needed to use—and he was going to find the answer, with Helene’s help. He would send her the recording right now. Kase moved into the living room, took a seat on the couch where he could watch Alek through the glass, and turned on his phone.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Forty-two

Aleksandr spun and cut, sidestepped and blocked. He gave himself no time to think or rest, breaking only to drink the water Kase brought out to him and insisted he have. It was roughly an hour before darkness fell; soon he would stop.

The air grew cooler. Each breeze carried away the heat from his skin, but it could not take away the ache in his heart.

Kase slid open the door and called to him, “Hey, ready for me to make dinner?”

An icy chill ran down the back of Aleksandr’s neck. Even in the descending darkness, he could see Kase reach up to rub the back of his neck, the smile falling from his face.

“Inside now!” Aleksandr yelled, pointing to the house. “And do not look out!” He barely had time to see Kase race inside, slam the door shut and close the drapes, before he was off and running towards that bleak, soul-draining cold.

He hopped the fence to the front yard and halted, opening his senses to feel for Medon’s whereabouts. *There*. He raced to his left, down several streets, through an alley, behind a shop for cars. He stopped once more, his senses on high alert. His grip on his xiphos was steady, though his heart pounded. A freezing draft brushed across his right shoulder, and he spun to face it, straining to spot any movement in the shadows. He glimpsed a tall spot of blackness deep within its depths.

A thin, dark form walked out from behind a large metal box, his gait slow and predatory. Aleksandr raised his sword, tilting it to gather the little light left and gain an image of the Gorgon.

“Don’t worry, Sunshine,” Medon said, once within speaking distance. “I have no intention of turning you to stone today. The glasses are on.”

Aleksandr could see Medon tapping the edge of the sunglasses in the polish of his blade. Ambient light reflected off the silver ovals. Aleksandr turned to face him fully, shifting his grip on his xiphos.

Medon grinned, his smile sickly sweet. “First”—he clapped—“bravo. I see your helpers have found the poem.”

Aleksandr ground his teeth. *How could I not have sensed him?* “You are watching them.”

“Of course.” Medon nodded, the motion difficult to see in the growing darkness. “This is the *best* entertainment I’ve had in a long time.”

“I will kill you.”

*Tsk, tsk.* Medon clicked his tongue. “Sounds like no one has figured out the complete meaning of the poem yet. I’ve already told you killing me won’t work. You’ll still return to stone... Or I might decide to bite you instead.”

Medon struck his head forward, snapping his teeth together, and Aleksandr jerked back. He shot a quick look at the top of Medon’s head; the lack of snakes puzzled him.

Medon chuckled, running a hand over his hair. “I’ve got them trained. A person can learn quite a lot living as long as I have.”

“You are not a person,” Aleksandr said contemptuously. “Not anymore. You lost the right to call yourself that when—” he scanned up and down Medon’s form “—you became a monster.”

An ugly sneer spread and contorted Medon’s face, and the hiss of snakes assaulted Aleksandr’s ears. He took a step back and centered himself.

Medon inhaled deeply, covered his mouth with his hand, and the sound of the snakes ceased. “I’m not here to argue with you, my dear Aleksandr. I’ve come to offer you a deal.”

Aleksandr frowned. He trusted his lover to fulfill his promises when Kase offered him deals. But Medon... never. He held his tongue.

“What? Nothing to say? You don’t want to hear the deal I have for you?” Medon spread his arms wide, then lowered them. “It’ll be worth your while.”

He smiled again, a villainous grin, which curdled Aleksandr’s stomach. “Hm, well, since you aren’t walking away, I think you want to know what it is, so I’ll tell you.” He stuck his hands in his pockets.

“Remember that book you were all enamored with this afternoon? It mentioned Gorgons turning others into Gorgons.”

Aleksandr remained silent, confused by Medon’s words. He had not heard all of Kase and Arrian’s discussion while he practiced.

“Still not speaking? I’m guessing you don’t want to return to stone, and I can help you there.”

“I do not need your help.”

“Of course, not you.” Medon waved his hand. “Besides, I can grant you immunity. If you wish... It’s something that isn’t written in the book.”

Aleksandr’s curiosity got the better of him. “How?” he asked scornfully.

Medon smirked at Aleksandr’s question. “The book mentioned blood. You drink mine, and I can’t turn you to stone. As the mortals would say, ‘easy-peezy, lemon-squeezy.’”

“Then I will become Gorgon.”

“No.” Medon sighed. “There’s more to turning into one of us than drinking our blood. It’s a secret.” He raised a finger to his lips. “*Shhhhh!*” The sound came out like a hiss of snakes. Medon snickered. “In order for you to remain mortal, and not return to your stony countenance, hand Kase to me, and I will grant you your salvation.”

White-hot rage flared in Aleksandr’s gut. “NEVER!” He lunged at Medon, who easily sidestepped him.

“Such a shame.” Medon pouted. “All that practice, and you haven’t gotten any better.”

Aleksandr pivoted to face Medon. His fury seethed, and he yanked it back inside. Anger weakened him, and he could not afford to let it. He would wait until the right time. Now was not it. He blew out a long breath and composed himself.

“All you have to do is bring Kase to the roof—you know which one—an hour before sunset, this Friday. Leave him there for me. Once I give my oath on this, I can’t break it. Another one of those stupid rules even I have to follow.” He flicked his hand in the air.

“I will never bring him to you,” Aleksandr said flatly. “I would rather return to stone.”

Medon shrugged. “Either way, it’ll work for me. Think about it. When you become nothing but a piece of rock, where will that leave Kase? Here... with me.” Medon’s smirk grew more pronounced. “With no protector.”

He leaned forward and whispered. “However, you could be together. I can teach him how to control his instincts with you.”

“That is the deal?”

Medon smiled. “Very good, Aleksandr,” he mocked. “You’re adapting to modern life, you know the word. He would still be Gorgon. The need to turn others to stone whose hearts have frozen will draw him. He won’t be able to resist. But—” Medon raised a forefinger “—as long as you still love him, there will be no problem. Think... He’ll be beautiful forever, you’ll have your lover, and I’ll have a buddy.”

He stepped back. “I’ll also swear to leave you alone. No more tracking you down or trying to kill you.” Medon crossed his arms.

Aleksandr mulled over Medon’s words. He would not return to stone; he and Kase could be together. No more worrying about having to hunt down Medon. He shook his head vehemently. Kase would not want this.

“No.” Aleksandr glared at Medon.

Medon grinned and began circling around Aleksandr. “Ah, I can feel your hesitation, you’re thinking about it. You don’t want to leave Kase, he’ll be at my mercy without you. Perhaps I won’t turn him to my side. Maybe I’ll play with him first.”

He stopped in front of Aleksandr and dropped his voice. “I know ways to make a man suffer, make him beg for death, but force him to linger, unable to die. Kase has suffered heartache before. Do you want to do that to him again? I’ll spend years torturing him. Do you want to be the reason his heart breaks, and he goes insane?”

Medon shook his head. “It’s not a pretty sight when a once beautiful man forgets who and what he is, unable to speak a coherent word, huddled in a corner.”

Medon rubbed his hand along his chin as if thinking something over. “I wasn’t going to tell you, on the other hand, this might help you reach a decision: I’m not the only Gorgon. You die, and even if you kill me, with Kase’s hardened heart, the others will come looking for him. Who’s going to protect him then? You can’t. However, with what I’m offering you, you can. He’ll remain young and beautiful forever,” Medon taunted.

He raised his hand and ticked off each option on a finger. “You’ve got three choices. Hand Kase to me and both of you can live. You can kill me, you’ll die and the other Gorgons will come for your lover. Or you die and I live, with me playing with Kase until I grant him death. Ooh! Even better. I bet I can get him to fall in love with me before I kill him!” Medon’s gleeful grin struck fear into Aleksandr’s heart.



Aleksandr's stomach roiled, and he tamped down the rising nausea. Kase, in love with Medon! Never! Still some part of him sensed Medon could manipulate Kase into it, and Kase would forget him. His heart twisted in pain.

The Gorgon stepped back. "If you insist 'No' is your final answer... Enjoy this world while you can." He spread his arms wide and walked away backwards.

Aleksandr remained rooted to the spot, watching Medon fade into the shadows.

*Others?* He had never heard of Medusa's ability to create a Gorgon until he faced Medon in his polis. Could she have created more? If she had, they would surely come after Kase if he failed to kill Medon.

Medon implied Kase would remain young and beautiful, only crave the need to turn heartless men to stone. The idea of Kase becoming a Gorgon was abhorrent, but if it saved him...

Aleksandr straightened his shoulders. He must protect Kase. He must not die. He would have to win.

\*\*\*\*

Kase paced in the house, restraining himself once again from looking out the window or charging out the front door in search of Alek. He ran his hand through his hair. *Where is he?*

A knock sounded at the front door. "Kase, it is I, Aleksandr." Alek's voice sounded tired and defeated. Kase rushed to the door and threw it open. Alek walked in without a word.

Kase reached out and ran his hands over Alek's chest and arms. "What happened, are you all right?"

Alek wrapped his arms around Kase's waist and pulled him close, resting his head on Kase's shoulder. Kase brought up his hand and cupped it behind Alek's neck, stroking his neck in comfort.

"What is it? What happened?" he asked quietly.

Alek pulled away and walked to the living room. "Medon. He knows you and Arrian are helping with the poem."

Kase walked up beside Alek. "How does he know that? I haven't felt him around us."

Alek shook his head. “I do not know.” He removed his belt and xiphos and sat on the couch. “He also repeated that cutting off his head will not stop me from turning to stone. There is more to the poem.”

Walking around the couch, Kase sat next to Alek. “What else did he say?”

Alek opened his mouth to speak, searching Kase’s face, but then closed it again. “Nothing. He taunted me as usual and told me to enjoy the time I had left.” He shrugged.

As a reporter, Kase liked to think he had pretty good instincts and could tell when someone was evading a question. Alek was definitely evading, but pushing him for an answer right now wouldn’t help. Maybe getting a good night’s sleep would, and he could ask Alek tomorrow.

Alek rose from the couch. “I am going to bathe, I will come down after.” He headed for the stairs.

If that wasn’t a “leave me alone,” comment, Kase didn’t know what was. He stood and headed to the kitchen to make dinner. It was probably for the best. Alek had his world turned upside down today. He needed space, and Kase could give it to him. He’d talk to Alek later about his idea of going to the museum tomorrow morning and seeing the Hermes statue. There was something Kase needed to say to Hermes, and he wanted to do it in person.

\*\*\*\*

Kase bolted upright, his breath heavy and labored. He peered into the darkness, his heart pounding a million beats a second. He searched the room for the horrific glowing red eyes and the men turned into statues. *Wait...*

He blinked rapidly and ran his hand over his face. *It was only a dream.*

Alek sat up and threw back the covers, one foot already out of the bed. “What is it? Did you hear something?”

“No.” Kase reached out a hand to stop Alek. “Go back to sleep. I had a nightmare. Give me a few minutes to calm down.”

Alek drew his leg back under the covers and turned to him. “What was your nightmare?”

“It was nothing,” Kase replied, sliding down onto the bed and adjusting the covers around him. Alek did the same and rolled to his side. He pulled Kase to him, and Kase settled his head into the crook of Alek’s shoulder.

“It is not nothing if it wakes you in the middle of the night.”

Alek caressed his back, soothing him. Kase sighed. “It was a nightmare of red eyes and stone men.” The stroking stopped, then restarted.

“Do not worry, *agápi mou*. I will not fail.” Alek kissed Kase’s forehead and pulled him even tighter to his side. His gentle touch gradually slowed until it stopped, and Alek’s steady breathing indicated he’d fallen asleep. The rhythmic rise and fall of his chest, plus the warmth of Alek’s body, eventually lulled Kase back to sleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Forty-three

*Wednesday*

The soft thud of their footsteps echoed in Kase's ears as they made their way to the gallery containing Hermes' statue. He glanced at the people looking at the displays, their whispered voices strangely menacing. The middle of the week had always harbored a slow flow of visitors; Wednesdays lacked the bustle the museum would have on weekends. Still, Kase's palms sweat, and his heart beat a rapid staccato.

The symbolism of what he was about to do didn't elude him. He was ready to let go of his past, start anew, no matter how much time Alek and he had left together. He wanted to do this for Alek, who needed all the help he could get.

They walked into the gallery and halted. Kase scanned the room, spotting the security guards spaced out and keeping an eye on the visitors.

"Are you all right, *kardiá mou*?" Alek asked, stepping in front of him to look in his eyes. "You do not look well."

Kase flashed a quick smile. "I'm fine. I don't want to get caught, is all."

Alek frowned. "Why do you worry? We have come to see Hermes."

Kase shook his head. "Not exactly." He stuck his right hand in his pocket, wrapped his fingers around the ring and pulled it out. "I-I wanted to make an offering." His cheeks heated as he opened his fist and showed Aleksandr what lay on his open palm.

Alek's eyes widened, and he sucked in a breath. "That is the ring you wished to give to your previous lover?"

Kase nodded and stared down at it. "You said an offering had to mean something, and this has a lot of meaning. I'm ready to let go of that part of my life." He lifted his head and looked at Alek. "Do you think he'll hear me?"

Alek nodded, taking Kase's hand into his own, and closing Kase's fingers around the ring. "It is a good offering. He will hear you."

"Right. Okay. Guess I should get on with it then."

Second thoughts welled up in Kase. Didn't he tell the guy at the club he only believed in facts and the tangible? Not fate and mythological gods, or offerings to a divine presence he didn't believe existed.

Yet here he was. *Desperation breeds desperate measures, I'm bargaining for Alek's life. I don't want Alek to die or return to stone.* He could deal with Alek going back to Greece, or even to his own time, as long as Alek lived and was happy. He also knew he shouldn't put stipulations on his request.

Kase took a deep breath to steady his nerves, pulled back his shoulders and walked straight to the statue, with Alek close behind. He stopped and gazed up at the beautiful sculpture, amazed at the work and talent it must have taken to create. Kase looked at Alek to his left.

"Keep an eye out for the security guards. They might get suspicious. Warn me if one of them starts walking over." Alek dipped his head and made to move away, but Kase grabbed his arm. "Don't fight with them, just come back, and let me know."

"I will." Alek stepped away and pretended to look at the nearby artifacts.

Kase combed his empty hand through his hair and let out a breath. He stepped closer, peering at Hermes' outstretched palm and remembered Alek setting something in there the first night they met. The hand, turned on its side, left little space to set anything in it, except for the middle, ring and little fingers, which curled slightly inwards.

He cast another quick look around to check if any guards watched. Seeing them either engaged with visitors or facing elsewhere, he carefully set the ring in the curve of fingers, and hoped it didn't fall out. It appeared to stay without a problem, and Kase stepped back. He cleared his throat, clasped his hands in front of him, and bowed his head to pray.

"Hermes..." he murmured. "I've never been one to believe in or ask for help from God, or any god for that matter, but Alek believes in you, and I believe in him. Hopefully, you can look past my hypocrisy."

Kase shuffled his feet. "Besides, this prayer isn't for me, it's for Alek." He paused and took a deep breath in. "I'm guessing you know what's going on here. They'll end up fighting at some point; Alek has sworn to kill him.

"Please..." Kase gripped his hands tightly together. "Please protect Aleksandr, be there for him. I take back what I said before, this prayer is for me. I don't want him to turn to stone, or die."

He took a deep breath, and then let it out slowly. "I didn't think I'd ever fall for someone again. If you want to talk about stone hearts, look no further. But Alek... I feel for him in a way I never did for Barry."

Kase paused to wipe away the sudden moisture in his eyes. “Hermes, if you’re real and can help, then please give your strength to Alek, allow him to defeat Medon. If I have to ask for myself, then I ask for your guidance in doing what I must to protect him. He *is* my main concern. Please help him, help us.” Kase hung his head for several seconds before looking back up at the deity. “I guess...” Kase stood with his mouth open. What else could he say? He shook his head. “There’s nothing else. Thanks.”

He walked forward to the statue, peeking to see if the ring was still sitting in the statue’s hand, and found the wedding band still resting inside. He didn’t know what compelled him, but he reached out and, with his fingertips, lightly touched Hermes’ hand.

A zap of electricity coursed up Kase’s arm. The gallery lights flickered, and he yanked back his hand, shook it, and stuck his fingers in his mouth. *That stung! I didn’t know marble conducted electricity.* He stared up at the ceiling at the still flickering lights.

Alek quickly rushed to his side. “A guard is coming.”

Kase whirled around.

A stern-looking security guard approached them. “Excuse me, sirs. What were you doing to the statue?”

Kase tried to affect an innocent expression. “Nothing. I was just getting a closer look.”

“You aren’t supposed to touch the displays.” He walked around them and inspected Hermes’ statue, paying particular attention to the hand.

*No! He’ll find the ring!* Kase stepped forward, and he felt Alek press against his back. They both peered into the hand. *It’s gone!* Kase leaned back into Alek’s chest, his heart pounding with disbelief.

The guard faced them, his eyes narrowing as he stared at Kase. “What did you put in the statue’s hand, sir? I saw you touch it.”

“Nothing.” Kase shook his head. “I’ll admit I touched it, but that’s all.”

The guard looked around on the floor, and Kase did a quick, furtive search too. He didn’t spot the ring anywhere. He chewed on the inside of his mouth as the guard observed them quietly for a few moments.

“I think it would be best if you both left this area now. If you decide to stay, don’t touch anything else.”

“Yes, sir. We were just leaving.” Kase turned, grabbed Alek’s arm, and steered him out of the gallery.

“Hermes—” Alek began.

“Not now,” Kase whispered, hurrying for the exit. “Let’s get outside before we talk.” They sped down the front steps of the museum and stopped at the bottom.

Kase needed a distraction to give him time to think. He pointed to the left. “Do you want something to eat? There’s a hot dog vendor over there. I can buy lunch, and then we can sit at one of those tables under the trees.” He gestured towards the right.

Alek looked in the direction Kase indicated and rubbed his belly. “Yes, I am hungry.”

After what happened in the museum, Kase wasn’t interested in food, but he bought some for himself anyway. They carried their lunch to the group of trees and found an empty table. Kase sat, and Alek took a seat next to him.

“The ring must’ve fallen out and rolled somewhere,” Kase stated once they were seated. “There was a jolt of electricity—I felt it shoot up my arm. It must’ve been what caused the ring to drop loose.”

Kase nodded to no one in particular and unwrapped his hot dog. “That’s what it was. It couldn’t have been anything else.”

When Alek didn’t respond, Kase looked up from his food to find Alek watching him. “What?”

“Do you believe that?” Alek asked, tilting his head.

Kase turned back and stared down at his hot dog. “I don’t know.” He shrugged. “I guess.”

Alek’s warm fingers lifted Kase’s chin, turning his face towards him. “You do not believe your own words.”

Kase’s mind was a jumbled mess. He’d asked Hermes for protection and strength for Alek—he didn’t expect any special effects to go along with it. He grabbed hold of Alek’s hand and held on tight in an attempt to still his confusing thoughts.

“I don’t know what to believe. The ring was there, and then it wasn’t. We all looked. I didn’t hear it drop to the floor.” He twisted his mouth in thought. “I suppose it could’ve fallen when I was zapped and I didn’t hear it.”

Alek glanced towards the museum and back at Kase. “Do you remember the night I prayed to Hermes?”

Kase nodded.

“The same thing happened to you today. Hermes accepted your offering and honored you with his touch. The lights did not go out, but I saw them.” Alek opened and closed his empty hand rapidly in the air. “They went on and off, like when you flick that switch at your house.”

“It could’ve been an electrical malfunction. And it still doesn’t answer where the ring went. It has to be there on the floor somewhere.” Kase looked at the museum. “I should go back in and check to make sure.” He started to get up but stopped at Alek’s tight grip around his hand.

Alek sighed. “Hermes accepted your gift, *kardiá mou*. The ring is not in the museum, it is with him.”

Pulling his hand free, Kase propped his elbows on the table, dropping his forehead onto his palms. “My mind is fucked up right now. I hear what you’re saying, but I don’t know if I can deal with this.”

Kase lifted his head and picked at his hot dog bun. He paused to squint at Alek. “What was that you called me? Kardi moo?”

Alek chuckled lightly. “*Kardiá mou*. It means ‘my heart.’” He tapped two fingers to his breastbone and smiled. “Why can you not *deal* with this? You believe I returned from stone.”

Kase threaded his fingers into his hair, pulling on it, then settled his hands in his lap, shaking his head. “I don’t believe in God, or gods, because I don’t have physical proof.” Kase gave a small smile, and reclaimed Alek’s hand. “You, on the other hand, I’ve slept with, felt, touched, tasted. I have proof you exist. You’re sitting here with me.”

Kase pushed his food away, sighing. “If I believe what you’re saying about the gods, it’s beyond anything I’ve ever grown up with or believed in.” He extracted his hand from Alek’s grasp and waved his arms about. “It’s twisting my view of the world into something unrecognizable.

“If the gods are real, it means there isn’t one God, but multiple gods controlling our lives with rules and regulations, and all that other crap. We don’t need more gods to worship, and more people causing wars and hatred because of them, based on their rules. People have done unspeakable things in the name of religion...



“Ares, God of War. How many has he influenced? Has he whispered into a king’s or world leader’s ear and caused the genocide of millions?”

Kase pointed a finger at Alek, poking him in the chest. “You compared Helene to Atë, remember? Perhaps the Goddess of Mischief has incited a crime of passion, one lover killing another all for the sake of misunderstanding.”

He sighed. “I don’t want to worry about doing, or not doing, the right thing based on each different god’s requirements. I don’t want some *being* controlling my life. Better to believe they don’t exist. That way, even if they do, I have control, not them.”

Alek huffed and opened his soda. “They do not control our lives. They only offer help and guidance when asked and needed.”

Kase shook his head again. “You haven’t read the stories I have about them. The gods and goddesses constantly bickered, fought amongst themselves, and manipulated mortal lives for their amusement. They had jealous rages, with humans often ending up on the short end of the stick. And if humans didn’t do what they wanted, they were punished.”

Alek snorted. “That is like the rumors which circulate among the villages about family troubles. Some of it is true; most is contrived and created by the gossip mongers. I do not listen to them.” He bit into his hot dog.

“But you believe in the myth of Hercules overthrowing the Giants. How do you explain those events? Do you seriously believe the Giants died, and their testicles created some of the islands? Wasn’t that a war? And how do the Greek gods and goddesses figure into the current religious scheme of things? I’ll tell you one thing; there’s no way I’m getting into some philosophical debate with anyone on this topic.”

Kase shoved his hot dog towards Alek and crossed his arms on the table in front of him. “It’s too damn confusing, and I’m lost in all of it.” He lifted his hands, once again carding his fingers through his hair.

Alek pulled one of Kase’s hands down from his head. “I will help.” He lifted Kase’s hand and kissed the back of it. “Hermes heard your prayer. Whatever you asked for, he accepted your offering, pledging to help. Do not worry, my *glykós*, all will be well.”

Kase sincerely hoped Alek was right.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Forty-four

On the way home from the museum, they stopped at a grocery store, and Kase picked out items for dinner, along with more pickles and olives, since Alek had devoured every jarful in his house.

“Do you need help?” Alek asked while Kase put the food away in the kitchen.

“No, I got it,” Kase answered. Alek stepped up behind him and wrapped his arms around his waist. A gentle kiss landed on the back of his neck, and he smiled.

“What is wrong, my *glykós*?” Alek asked.

Kase shrugged. “I’m stressed about the museum, still having a hard time processing it, and it’s making me tired. I think I’ll take a nap.”

“I can join you.” Alek nuzzled behind Kase’s ear.

Kase smiled. “I’m sure I wouldn’t get any sleep if you did. I’m going to lie down on the couch. If you want to practice, you can keep an eye on me from the backyard.”

“That is a good idea. I will be sure not to make noise.” Alek released Kase. “I will go upstairs and change, but first...” He turned Kase around, cupped Kase’s cheeks, and kissed him deeply. “If you need me, I will come.”

“Okay.” Kase watched Alek leave the kitchen. He rubbed his hands over his face, sure once he rested everything would make more sense. Kase headed into the living room, pulled his cell phone out of his pocket, and set it on the coffee table. He fluffed up the pillows on the couch and lay down. He’d already started to drift off when he heard the faint scratch of the sliding glass door open and shut.

\*\*\*\*\*

A whimsical harpsichord intruded into Kase’s restless slumber. He forced his eyes open, recognizing the special tune he’d programmed for Helene. Kase righted himself on the sofa, reached for his phone, and turned it on.

“Hi, Helene,” he said yawning.

“Hey. Did I wake you?”

“Yeah, but that’s okay. It’s time I woke up.” Kase stretched an arm above his head. “What’s up?”

“I’m back in my hotel room for the night, and I had to call you right away.” Helene’s voice bubbled with exuberance, and Kase could picture her bouncing on her toes.

“Earlier, I was out with the girls, and Richie—he’s one of the new flight attendants. Anyway, I decided to ask them for help with the poem.”

Kase shot to his feet, instantly wide awake. “You did what?” He grabbed a fistful of hair and tugged. “Sheesh, Helene.”

“Don’t worry. I told them you needed help in deciphering the meaning of the poem for an article you’re writing.”

“Oh. Okay. Thanks.” Kase wandered over to the window and watched Alek practice.

“You’re welcome. And I have great news. I think we figured it out.”

“You did?” Kase’s excited voice must have carried into the backyard because Alek stopped and walked over. “Just a sec.” He motioned for Alek to come inside. Alek picked up his towel and wiped at the sweat on his face and neck before sliding open the door. Kase stepped back to let him in.

“What is it?” Alek asked, closing the door, then draping the towel around his neck.

“Is that Alek?” Helene asked.

“Yes. Hold on, I’m putting you on speakerphone, I want him to hear what you have to say.” Kase punched at his phone and then motioned for Alek to stand beside him.

“Can you hear me?” Helene’s voice projected high and tinny from the phone’s speaker.

“Yes, we can hear you.” Kase could also hear Helene moving around and then silence.

“I needed to grab the paper I wrote the poem on. Here’s the first part:

*“The Gorgon has come, the Gorgon knows.*

*He seeks out cold hearts*

*At the time when bitterness lingers.*

*This brings in turn fear, hate, pain and misery.*

“That’s pretty clear. The Gorgon searches out those people whose hearts have turned to stone. Metaphorically, at least. People who have closed off their

hearts to love. Maybe even harbor anger and hate for one reason or another. We figured that somehow a Gorgon can sense the emotional state of a person, especially the hurting heart. It attracts them, and they go after that person. I can tell you Richie went crazy about the idea. He claims he's an 'expert' in Gorgon mythology, and he's never even heard of such a thing about Gorgons. After the girls and I sat listening to him talk about them incessantly, I regretfully agree he probably is."

Helene paused. "I'm not gonna ask for details, but I'm guessing something like the frozen heart happened to Alek, otherwise he wouldn't have turned to stone."

Kase and Alek looked at each other, and Kase leaned closer to him, their arms brushing. He slid his hand into Alek's, lacing their fingers together.

"The next part seems to refer to when we were at the museum.

*"Year by year they await.*

*When the moon shines bright, their fate begins.*

"I remember looking up at the moon before we entered the museum, and thinking to myself how big and bright it was. I double-checked the moon's cycle on the Web, and that Saturday was the day after the full moon."

"Yes, you're right," Kase said. "When I went hunting for Alek in the museum, I could still see well enough, even with the lights off."

"I awoke in the moonlight," Alek added.

"And the 'year by year...'" She let out a huge sigh. "Well, we know how many those were." She paused, and Kase looked at Alek to see him with his eyes closed and lips drawn tight. Kase ran his knuckles down Alek's bicep, giving him a half smile when he opened his eyes.

"Now that we've gotten *that* out of the way"—her voice was light once again—"the next lines '*Hardened heart which knows not love, has need of love's kind grace to recover...*' Hold on, let me see where I wrote those notes."

Kase and Alek waited anxiously as they listened to Helene mumbling in the background.

"Okay. The girls, Richie and I all think these six lines refer to more than one person, not necessarily the one that returned from stone. I'll read the six lines together.

*“Hardened heart which knows not love,  
Has need of love’s kind grace to recover.  
“Their hearts are cured if love goes first,  
Within two weeks perhaps they may break the curse.  
But if they still have hearts of stone,  
They will die, love unknown.”*

The sound of her blowing her nose carried loudly over the cell phone. She cleared her throat. “We think all of those lines together, refer to the first person, and also to a second person. Someone who also has a hardened heart and needs to love again.”

Kase’s breath caught in his throat. *A second person?*

“For one thing, the poem says ‘their’ and ‘they.’ Now it could be referring to one person, the person who was turned into stone, but then Richie said something—How much have I told you about him?”

“Nothing other than what you mentioned tonight,” Kase answered.

“He’s a fanatical cosplayer. Specifically mythology, all kinds of world mythology, especially Greek. It was creepy how excited he got when I read the poem.”

“What did he say?” Kase fought to keep the impatience out of his voice.

“There were several things. Richie thinks it’s two people, because the poem mentions Eros—he’s the God also known as Cupid. Cupid usually had two people fall in love, not one. We all agreed the person with the curse had to fall in love again, and they had a fortnight—two weeks—to do it, or they would return to stone.

“Richie also tossed out the wild idea that although the Gorgons could turn people harboring a ‘hardened’ heart to stone, if the person fell in love and broke the curse, they couldn’t be turned to stone again, at least from looking at the Gorgon. Like some sort of immunity.”

Helene blew out a loud breath. “It all sounds pretty far-fetched to me, but I don’t know what’s in a person’s heart when they’re turned to stone.”

Kase swallowed the lump in his throat and licked at his lips. “Anything else.”

“Yes,” Helene croaked. “Sorry. The last three lines were the hardest for us to interpret. There are too many possibilities.

*“Oh Eros, shoot arrows from above.  
One simple act, one small dart,  
Changes forever an altered heart.”*

“We thought the ‘*Oh Eros, shoot arrows from above*’ could be a prayer of some kind, asking the god for help for the couple. Or it could mean the act of falling in love. Then again, it could be the literal shooting of an arrow, or as the poem mentions, ‘one small dart.’ It could be an arrow or dart, but whichever it is, the arrow or dart is significant, along with both people in the poem falling in love. The last three lines can refer to anyone involved in the curse, including the Gorgon... At least that’s what Richie thinks.”

Helene paused, and Kase held his breath, waiting for her to continue.

“He said whatever happens, the curse can’t be lifted completely without the people falling mutually in love.” Helene’s voice grew quieter. “If the second person doesn’t fall in love, then... Richie thinks it means the first person may die, and likely it means the other will also.” A loud snuffle sounded over the phone.

Kase’s mouth went dry. *The second person is me.* If he didn’t fall in love with Alek, then he would die too, and be the cause of Alek’s death. *No fucking pressure.*

Alek turned to face Kase, lifted his right hand and laid it on Kase’s cheek. He brought their joined hands to his heart, looking into Kase’s eyes and smiling gently.

“The part of one falling in love and defeating half of the curse has been fulfilled, *kardiá mou.*”

A squeal erupted from the phone. “Did Alek just say he’s fallen in love with you?”

Kase ignored Helene. *Did Alek say that?* His heart sped up, and he searched Alek’s face for any signs of deception.

Alek leaned forward and brushed a kiss on Kase’s lips. “Do not worry, I will not let anything happen to you.”

“What’s happening? Did you guys kiss?” Helene exclaimed excitedly. “You know you could always turn on the camera for video chatting. Hint, hint.”

Kase scrunched up his nose and laughed. “You’ll have to use your imagination, Helene.” He gazed into Alek’s blue eyes, and found openness and

trust. And the one thing Kase wasn't ready to give in return. He broke eye contact and directed his question at the phone.

"Did Richie have anything else to say about the Gorgons?"

"Yes, but are you sure you guys want me to talk about this right now? Break into your moment?"

Kase smiled, even though Helene couldn't see it, and gave Alek's hand a squeeze. "It's all right, go ahead."

"Okay. He got really excited about the blood of the Gorgon."

"Your friend Richie is rather perverse."

"Don't I know it. You should hear him wax poetic about vampires. Ugh." Helene vocally shivered.

"Arrian read about Gorgon blood having certain properties from the book we found the poem in," Kase said to get Helene back on track. "Something about saving a person's life."

"Yes, that's what Richie said too. Only he was more specific. If the blood from the right side of a Gorgon is given to a dead or dying person to drink, it will bring them back to life."

*Bring them back to life?* "That's crazy," Kase said.

"Not any more crazy than what he said next."

"Which was?"

"The blood from the left side of the Gorgon's body would cause a person to die."

"Huh." Kase looked at Alek and found him frowning. "What's the matter?"

Alek shook his head. "I cannot help but think to taste a Gorgon's blood would turn a man into a Gorgon."

Kase directed his question to Helene. "Did Richie say anything about that?"

"No. Nothing about turning a person into a Gorgon. If you want to talk to him, I'm sure he won't mind me giving you his number. He's a friendly guy and will talk your ears off about mythology. I'm pretty sure I can convince him to join the society."

"That's good. I was thinking of inviting Arrian to our next event too." Kase bit at his lips. "Were you able to figure anything out about how to kill the Gorgon?"

“No, although we tossed ideas around. The poem doesn’t mention anything about killing the Gorgon like Perseus did. We started thinking maybe it had to do with the arrow and dart, but an actual arrow from Cupid would be impossible. Then we figured if parts of the poem are metaphorical, then the arrow could be too. The arrow or dart could represent a symbol of Cupid or Eros—a symbol of love—which could be anything really: Cupid’s arrow, a wedding ring, or simply a red heart. It could also mean that once the couple falls in love, the curse is broken and the Gorgon would die.”

No one spoke, and the information lay like lead in Kase’s gut.

“Kase?” Helene asked. “You still there?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve one last note or, rather, a question we had about the Gorgon.”

“What’s that?”

“If the curse does involve all three of you, does it mean the Gorgon lives, dies or is transformed? We talked about it for a long time, but each idea only brought up more questions.”

If they couldn’t even guess the correct interpretation of the poem, how could he? Kase leaned his forehead on Alek’s shoulder. Alek slid his hands down Kase’s back, and he let the motion soothe him.

“Sorry I couldn’t be more help,” Helene said, her voice tight. Kase didn’t have to see her to know she was hurting, wanting to do more for him. He held the phone up.

“You were a great help, Helene. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. If you want to talk to Richie, let me know.”

“I will. And thanks again. You’re the best.”

“I know.” She giggled. “Hey, before we hang up, I just... I want to say... I love you.”

Kase’s vision blurred. “I love you too, Helene.” He cleared his throat. “I’ll see you when you get back.”

“You’d better. Bye, Kase; bye, Alek.”

“Goodbye, Helene,” Alek replied. “Thank you for your gracious assistance.”



“Stop... You’re going to make me blush.” They all laughed. “Bye,” Helene said again, and the phone clicked off.

“She is a good friend to you,” Alek said.

Kase nodded and looked at Alek. “And to you.”

“Yes, she is.” Alek held out his hand. “I am going to bathe. Come with me?”

His mind swirling with all the new information, Kase slipped his hand into Alek’s, and let the man who loved him take him upstairs.

\*\*\*\*

Aleksandr leaned in the doorway, watching Kase brush his teeth. Such a simple thing, taking care of one’s body. Taking care of another’s, however...

Joy tempered with desperation assaulted him, and he turned away, moving into the bedroom. If Helene’s explanation of the poem meant his love must be returned...

*Ah, Anteros. Have you an arrow like your brother? Kase speaks not the words, but the way he looks at me, touches me... Does he love me in return? It feels as though he does.*

“Alek,” Kase called to him.

He spun and stepped forward, laying his palms to Kase’s cheeks. He smoothed his thumbs over his glykós’ lips, gazed into those smoky depths.

Kase laid his hands on Aleksandr’s forearms, gripping with a strength he hadn’t felt before.

“Alek, I...” Kase trailed off, looking down at his feet.

Aleksandr despaired; Kase might never say the words, and where would that leave him? Them? At Medon’s mercy? He could not let that happen. He moved his right hand to the center of Kase’s chest, spreading his fingers wide. He could feel his love’s heart’s steady rhythm.

Aleksandr poured everything into his next words. “I am yours, *agápi mou*. Let me love you and love me in return.”

Kase’s gaze rose to meet his, flickered between Aleksandr’s eyes and mouth before falling to his hand on Kase’s chest. Kase lifted both of Aleksandr’s hands, clasped them between his own, and brought them to rest over his eyes as

if in prayer. After a moment, he lowered them to his mouth and placed a dozen kisses to Aleksandr's knuckles.

Aleksandr stepped back, leading his love to the bed. He drew back the blankets and climbed into the middle. Holding fast to Kase's hand, he gently directed him to lie down. He turned Kase to face him, threw a leg over his lover's, and ghosted his fingertips across Kase's warm skin.

Aleksandr smiled, inhaling his lover's warm, minty breath, and watching Kase's sleepy eyes try to stay open. They soon drifted shut, and the quiet of the house joined with Kase's slow and steady breathing.

"*S'agapó*, I love you," he whispered, doubting Kase heard him, still needing to say the words. "Love me in return."

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Forty-five

*Thursday*

This dream was *hotter* than the last one. Kase groaned and tilted his hips higher, driving deep into Alek's warm, wet mouth. Kase snapped his eyes open at the sudden slap of hands to his thighs. Moist suction pulled at his cock, a tongue pressed to the crown.

Kase sagged, reached down and petted Alek's head. *What a way to wake up...* Thoughts scattered as Alek worked him, bringing him to peak quicker than he expected.

Alek's smiling face popped into view, lips landed on his, and he tasted himself on Alek's tongue. Before Kase could stop him, Alek pushed up and climbed out of bed. Naked, he strolled to the bathroom, his cock parallel to the floor. Kase rolled to his side to watch him and waited for him to reappear.

"Rise and dress, my beloved," Alek called from the doorway.

"What?" Kase's mind, content and filled with pleasant endorphins, stumbled in comprehension. "Come back to bed," he mumbled.

Alek stalked closer, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "Why?"

Kase reached out and snagged Alek, pulling him down to the bed and crawling on top.

"My turn."

\*\*\*\*

Aleksandr's body shook with laughter. This day with his love filled him with joy. The closeness, the touches and the companionship all brought him peace.

Bed sports had moved to playtime in the tub. Then, together, they had prepared food and eaten. Kase insisted on showing him more of the modern world. *T-V* and com-pu-ter games. He played music. They slow danced and kissed. Kase tried to teach him some "moves," but after tripping over his own feet, Aleksandr decided he would keep his moves to those of a fighting nature.

Which brought them to now. They had donned armor, Kase covered in a silver metal helm, breastplate, and cups around his elbows and knees. He tried to insist on Alek wearing more than his simple pteruges, but what more did he

need? Armor would not make a difference; skill was required. Still, Kase pressed, and he gave in, wearing a helm similar to one he might have worn before.

\*\*\*\*

The blow landed with a dull thud on Alek's hip.

Kase stepped back, his breaths deep and rapid. *I can't believe it. I actually got through.* Distracted, he flinched as a jab landed in the middle of his chest. The cushioned tip of the wooden sword pressed against his armor-covered breastbone, and Kase stared down at it. He followed up the length of fake blade to see Alek smiling at him, eyes scrunched in amusement.

Alek tapped the point again to Kase's chest. "Very good. You have improved."

Kase grinned. "Thanks, I think. It was probably luck more than anything."

Alek's smile fell along with the tip of the sword. "You doubt yourself. You must believe in your abilities, have confidence."

"Confidence?" Kase smirked, dropping his sword and gauntlets to the ground before unbuckling his helm. He lifted it off, the passing air cooling his sweaty head. Kase stepped into Alek's personal space and placed a hand on his lover's bare chest, feeling the heat pouring off of Alek's skin and the rapid beat of his heart beneath his palm.

"Yes," Alek whispered. He reached up with his left hand and removed the borrowed helm.

Kase slid his hand around to Alek's nape and caressed the hot flesh. He squeezed and gave Alek a shake, pulling him closer until their lips almost touched.

"Let me show you my confidence and ability," he murmured against Alek's warm lips.

Alek's eyes widened, and he bit at the corner of his mouth. "Yes."

Kase placed a quick teasing kiss at first and drew away. Alek stared back, his gaze heated, pupils already dilated. Diving forward, Kase demanded more, nipping and biting at Alek's lower lip. He clasped Alek against him, not letting him escape. The thunk of Alek's sword and helmet hitting the ground reached his ears, and Alek grabbed his hips in a firm grip. Kase answered with a sharp thrust of his groin against Alek's.

Refusing to break their kiss, Kase stepped backwards, leading his warrior towards the house. He reached behind him and attempted to open the sliding door without looking, finally breaking away to turn and tug at the handle. Alek pressed against his back, slipping mischievous hands up under Kase's shirt, and Kase fumbled at the door. He squirmed as Alek dragged his fingers across his belly.

With a hard tug, Kase finally slid the door open, and they stumbled inside. Alek turned to close it, his back to Kase, and Kase moved in at the click of the door's lock engaging, shoving Alek against the glass and thrusting his hips forward. He ran his nose along Alek's neck, the scent of sweat filling his nostrils, before tasting Alek's delicious salty skin. Reaching the junction of Alek's neck and shoulder, Kase bit down, drawing a deep, throaty growl from his lover. Alek clamped his hand down on the back of Kase's head, holding him there. He lapped at the bitten spot and nibbled on the hot flesh, while quiet grunts and moans escaped Alek's throat.

Kase slid his hands around Alek's waist and untied the feathered plates of armor. He wanted Alek devoid of defenses, full access granted. The armor fell to the floor, and Kase palmed Alek's rigid cock tenting the cotton boxers he wore. He wrapped his fingers around Alek's shaft, outlining it against the light fabric, and stroked it once before slipping his thumbs into the boxer's waistband. One step back, one downwards push, and they joined the armor on the ground.

Alek placed his hands flat on the glass door, stepped out of the boxers around his feet, then looked over his shoulder at Kase, a sly smile gracing his lips.

Kase took in Alek's ripped body, from the top of his head down to his feet, before returning to Alek's muscular ass. He muttered an appreciative, "Mm, yum," before he stepped closer and grasped the fine globes, filling his hands. Kase cupped and squeezed, digging his fingers into the hard muscles. He plastered himself to Alek's back and squeezed harder, then sucked Alek's soft earlobe into his mouth, inhaling his warrior's scent.

Kase stepped back abruptly and tapped the inside of Alek's legs with his foot, nudging him to widen his stance. Alek shuffled his feet further apart, rolling his head up and then dropping it, chin to chest, his shoulders slumping forward. Kase ran his hand down Alek's spine, his fingers bumping over each vertebrae. He reached Alek's tailbone, and didn't stop, continuing lower, sliding a finger into the sweat-slick crease. Alek pushed his butt out, a low gasp

leaving his throat, and Kase grinned. He took a single step to the left and drew back his right hand.

*Smack!*

The slap rang loud and clear, and Alek jerked, grunting on impact. He twisted and glared; Kase smiled, leaned into Alek, and cupped his face, then rotated Alek around a little towards him. He pressed his mouth hard to Alek's, demanding entrance, and his lover opened for him, moaning into his mouth as Kase invaded. His heartbeat escalated, and he reached down between them to adjust himself.

He never expected Alek to give up the top spot. This side of his lover thrilled Kase. It was one he could get behind, literally. But if Alek wanted this, Kase wanted them face to face, wanted to see every expression crossing Alek's features.

Kase pulled away and looked down at Alek's impressive erection, a large clear bead of fluid hanging at the tip. He wrapped a hand around its girth, stroking from base to tip, letting the silky skin slide along his palm. Alek's breath stuttered, and Kase gazed into his eyes. The eager heat he saw there had him tensing his abs, his cock already painfully hard. He repeated the stroke and earned himself a tiny mewl of anxious expectation.

"Let's take this upstairs," Kase said with a final tug on Alek's dick before letting go. He turned and strode across the room, ripping at Velcro and letting each piece of his armor fall as he went, leaving a trail for one hot, naked Greek to follow.

\*\*\*\*

Aleksandr held his breath, avidly watching the removal of layers to reveal the man beneath. His fighter, his lover.

He pressed his fisted right hand to his pounding heart then raised it to the sky. He drew in one deep breath and blew it out slowly.

*Praise to you, Eros. Praise to you, Hermes. I am forever in your debt.*

No matter what befell him in his fight against Medon, Kase had broken away the rock encasing his heart. He loved again.

\*\*\*\*

Kase sat on the edge of the bed, untying his steel-toe boots, waiting for Alek to appear and wondering if he'd changed his mind. A moment later, Alek knelt

at his feet, pushing away his hands and helping him remove his boots. Kase dragged his fingers through Alek's short hair, the damp strands sticking every which way, and tried to tame the wild mane into some semblance of order. He noted how much longer it was than it had been thirteen nights ago when they'd first met.

*Fortnight* reared its ugly head, and Kase tamped down the panic twisting his gut. Tonight needed to be about them. Together, and loving one another.

The words bubbled up, yet he couldn't bring himself to say them. *How can I? How did I fall so fast and deep?* But he had. Did. The wall he'd erected had shattered and tumbled, the bits of rubble ground to nothingness beneath the heel of Alek's love for him.

Kase slid his fingertips under Alek's chin and raised his head. He reached out and grabbed hold of Alek's biceps, guided him to stand, and directed him to the bed.

Alek stopped and carefully removed Kase's glasses, folding them closed, and laying them on the nightstand before crawling onto the mattress. He rolled onto his back, spreading himself in the center, waiting and still, except for his twitching fingers, the nails scratching at the comforter.

Kase climbed up after Alek and knelt between his lover's thighs. He reached up, and with a gentle touch, traced the lines of Alek's beautiful body. He studied the paths of veins, inspected the freckles, drank in the hard planes of muscles, and worshipped skin and nipples. He needed to memorize it all...

"I..." Kase stopped and moistened his lips.

Alek shifted on the bed, and Kase held still as Alek reached and pushed back the bangs covering his forehead.

Kase lifted his head, meeting Alek's gaze. The tenderness Kase saw strengthened him. "I don't want to lose you."

"It will not be because I have gone willingly. You know this." Alek's fingertips trailed down Kase's cheek and stopped at his lips.

Kase kissed the calloused pads. "I know, but—"

Alek's fingers pushed on Kase's mouth, silencing his words. "You know this," he repeated.

Kase swallowed his words and nodded. He had to trust in Fate, and the Gods... and in their love for each other.

Aleksandr watched the single tear form at the corner of Kase's eye. He thumbed it away, swiping the moisture and sorrow aside, and smiled up at his love.

He could not force Kase to speak the words he knew hid themselves in Kase's heart. They shone from his love's storm-gray eyes, reflected in each green fleck, every streak of blue. He felt them in the grip of Kase's hands on his body, in the gentle press of his glykós' lips to his skin.

Aleksandr held them all close, locked them in his heart and mind. And he silently honored Anteros with profuse gratitude. His love was returned.

\*\*\*\*

Kase captured Alek's thumb and brought it to his mouth. He placed a single kiss to the pad, tasting his salty tear. Conflict warred in him. His heart urged him to speak its truth, but despite Alek's assurances, he still couldn't silence the fear hovering in the background, whispering to him of loss, of love stolen. He'd received a second chance with Alek, however, there were no guarantees. What if love was snatched away from him again? How much pain could a heart take before it finally shattered, unable to mend?

He sighed. If he wasn't capable of uttering the words that needed to be spoken, he'd lavish the pledge of devotion residing in his heart on his warrior instead.

Kase wrapped his hand around Alek's, making sure he had his lover's undivided attention. He sucked Alek's thumb into his mouth, swirling his tongue around the digit and licking at the ridges. Alek moistened his parted lips, his gaze zeroed in on Kase's motions. With that cue, Kase released Alek's thumb and leaned down, brushing his mouth across Alek's, then he delved deep inside. He moaned as their tongues met, pushing and chasing, playing tag.

He shifted, sinking lower, pressing their bodies together, chest to chest, abs to abs, thigh to thigh. Alek's rigid rod and his own hardened dick, lay side by side, hot between them. Kase thrust his hips forward once, grinding his pelvis down, and Alek's low groan vibrated against Kase's chest. He pulled back and thrust again, moaning in approval when Alek kneaded his strong fingers into his ass and held him in place, sandwiching their cocks together.

Again and again, Kase pressed down hard, rubbing their pricks, one against the other, until Alek pushed him away, his breath labored and eyes glazed. He reached for the bedside table drawer. Kase caught his hand, pulled it back.



“Let me.”

Alek nodded, and Kase slid open the drawer, extracted the bottle of lubricant and a condom. Supplies ready, he shifted to kneel between Alek’s knees. Alek’s strong thighs parted in invitation, and Kase sucked in a breath at the tempting sight. He took in Alek’s muscular chest, down his corded arms to his hands, gripping the comforter in tight fists.

Kase frowned. *Something’s wrong?* He tossed the condom and lube onto the bed and braced himself over Alek.

“Have you ever?” he whispered, gazing into those exquisite blues holding him spellbound.

Alek’s hands settled on Kase’s hips, slid upwards along his ribs, chest and throat, until they cupped the sides of his face. “When I was *erômenos*, beloved by Nicodemos. Before Erasmus and I were together. A very long time ago.”

He drew Kase down, placed languid kisses to his mouth and jaw. Swiped a path with his tongue from ear to lips, and spoke against Kase’s skin. “And now I will again.”

Kase’s breath snagged in his throat, and he withdrew a few inches before diving for Alek’s lips. Their kiss turned hard in an instant, and he drove his tongue in deep, slipping over Alek’s, and traced the features inside his mouth.

He got lost in tasting Alek, but soon he wanted more, and he forced himself to break off. He skimmed his mouth along Alek’s chin, down his neck, the barely there stubble teasing his sensitized lips.

Working his way lower, he licked Alek’s heated flesh, giving equal consideration to both toned pecs. Dark nipples stood erect, calling for attention, and Kase circled his tongue around each one, sucking and nipping, drawing small whimpers from Alek’s throat. Kase sealed his lips around a pointed bud and pulled. Alek cried out, arching his back. Kase took his movement as invitation, biting down, and a deep groan rose from within Alek’s chest.

Kase let go, moving down to the trail leading to Alek’s impressive cock. He rubbed his face into the thick hair, enjoying the rough scraping against his skin. He lipped at the edges of Alek’s belly button and drove his tongue inside, which earned him a shiver and shout of laughter. He looked up to see Alek’s broad smile, his eyes shining and baring all his heart to Kase. A knot caught in Kase’s throat. He hoped Alek could see how he felt.

Aleksandr reached for Kase, drew him up. Kase's long shaft slid along his lower body, and their mouths met in a hard lock of lips. With his tongue as the key, Kase gained admittance. Aleksandr granted it easily, knew he would give Kase anything he wanted. His body thrummed in anticipation. To give his lover this... Himself.

*“Kardiá mou,”* he whispered.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Forty-six

*My heart*, Kase translated, and his own lurched, threatening to jump from his chest and into Alek's hands. *He owns my heart*. Moisture welled in Kase's eyes and he blinked it away. Ducking his head, Kase shifted and planted kisses to Alek's breastbone. He placed his ear to Alek's chest, and the steady *lub-dub* soothed him. Alek's fingers, powerful enough to grip a sword in combat, gently combed through his hair while he listened.

Kase raised his head and returned to his downwards journey. He inspected his warrior's ripped torso, kissing each brown freckle, tracing each rippled scar, using his tongue to compare the textures of smooth and healed skin. Alek jolted when Kase gripped his hips, and Kase took notice of the mottled flesh beneath his hand from his earlier successful strike. He grinned up at Alek. "Let me kiss it better," he murmured and with due diligence, kissed and licked the bruise until Alek's panting grew louder, and he wiggled on the bed, raising his hip towards Kase's mouth for more.

He would've continued, except another goal beckoned. He mouthed at Alek's warm, bronzed skin, lapping his way down into the junction of body and thigh, tasting the dried sweat, and breathing in the increasingly heavy aroma the lower he ventured. He nuzzled at Alek's groin, coaxing him to spread his legs. Kase dipped and eyed the heavy hanging balls in front of him. He flicked out his tongue, teasing them, and Alek parted his legs farther, angling his hips up. Once Kase had Alek's sac good and wet, he suckled a ball into his mouth and rolled it, drawing a loud moan and more squirming from Alek.

Kase slipped his hands under Alek's thighs and pushed them up, giving him access to his goal. Alek helped, grabbing behind his knees. Kase slid his palms down to Alek's ass, spreading the muscular butt cheeks and spying the clenched entrance. He pressed his face into Alek's crease, kissed his hole, then drew back, licking a long swath over it, continuing until he reached behind Alek's balls.

His lover arched his back and groaned. Alek's sounds of pleasure sent sparks of heat to Kase's groin, and he speared Alek's hole harder and deeper. He watched Alek writhe with each lap at the puckered flesh, enticing it to relax. Kase pawed around on the bed for the bottle of lube, came up with it, and popped the lid open, pouring some on his fingers. Forefinger replaced tongue as he shifted upwards and took Alek's sizeable prick in his mouth, swallowing him whole, and savoring the salty precum.

Each throaty growl, each groan and utterance from Alek, each drip of essence into his mouth, spurred Kase on. He massaged at the entrance with one hand, wrapped the base of Alek's cock with his other, and stroked, working in tandem to distract Alek as he slipped his finger inside.

“Yes,” Alek purred and hummed.

Kase inched his digit in and out of Alek's hole, pushed down to stretch his lover open. Heat surrounded his finger, and soon it would wrap around his dick. The mere thought of that strong grip around him caused his cock to twitch. Needing more lube, he relinquished his hold on Alek's shaft, and sucking hard on the crown, grabbed for the bottle and added more slick to Alek's hole.

Alek groaned, grasped and pulled at the comforter while Kase teased and prepared him. When Kase had inserted three fingers, he looked at Alek to find him with eyes closed, slack jawed, and cheeks tinted pink.

Kase released Alek from his mouth, withdrew his fingers, and tore open the condom, quickly smoothing it on. He tugged on his prick, leaned forward, and lined up, snug against Alek's entrance. Heart hammering in his chest, he took one deep breath and met Alek's lidded gaze as he pushed in.

Alek raised his hands, slapped them onto Kase's biceps, wrapping his fingers around them and holding on. Kase gritted his teeth at both Alek's intense grip and his cockhead slipping past the first ring of muscle, then the second. He paused, gasping at the heat of Alek's channel around the crown. A spike of pleasure shot up Kase's spine, and he threw back his head with a deep-throated groan.

\*\*\*\*

Aleksandr's belly clenched with Kase's girth filling him. He held fast to his lover's arms, willing his body to relax and accept. Too long had it been...

He raised his eyes at Kase's growl, rumbled a pleased moan at his glykós' delight. Kase's head dropped and their gazes met. With infinite slowness, Kase eased forward and leaned down, pressing their lips together again.

Aleksandr slid his hands into Kase's hair, tugging on the strands while their tongues battled. They attacked and retreated, domain gained and lost. He relented under Kase's incursion, his muscles relaxed and allowed the advancement.

Bit by bit, Kase slid into him, until he could go no farther.

\*\*\*\*

Kase panted into Alek's mouth, kissing him hard. Alek's body pulsed around his cock, drawing quiet moans from his lips. He bottomed out, flush to the warmth of Alek's ass, encased in his heat. Kase pushed up on his elbows and forced his eyes open, yearning to see his lover beneath him.

He withdrew slowly, his gaze fastened onto Alek, committing to memory every expression that flitted across his warrior's face. Alek's mouth dropped open as Kase inched back in. Another squeeze around his dick, and he gasped. Pleasure spiraled higher and he froze, holding his breath. He refused to come too soon and silently cursed that it might happen faster than he desired. He wanted Alek to come with him.

Alek shifted beneath him, gliding his roughened palms up and down Kase's arms. His bright eyes and smile grabbed hold of Kase's heart. His words stole it away forever.

"Love me, *kardiá mou*," Alek murmured.

Kase sucked in a breath. Alek's love washed over him, pulled him beneath its waves, drowning him, carrying him away. He didn't fight, instead he welcomed it, giving himself completely to Alek.

He took in another deep, shaky breath to regain his composure then focused his attention on Alek's face. With one fluid motion, he pulled back and thrust, pressing himself deep inside, their groans filling the air. Submerging himself inside Alek, and letting his lover envelop him, embrace him, Kase let go.

Alek dug his heels into Kase's ass, drawing him closer, and his hands shifted higher up to Kase's shoulder blades, tugging at him, rocking him. Without words, begging him to move.

Kase didn't waste time. He shifted his angle until he stroked that sweet spot, and Alek shouted, his head thrown back. Soon nothing but their gasps, grunts and exclamations reverberated in the room. Alek's cries of pleasure penetrated Kase to the core; weaving tendrils throughout his body, imprinting Alek's essence onto every molecule of his being. An invisible tattoo, a symbol of his lover, one he would carry for the rest of his life. Kase locked eyes with Alek, his lover's pupils fully blown. Their breaths, hot and fast, in sync, heat rolled off their skin. They raced for the finish, Kase pounding into Alek.

Alek canted up his hips, meeting every thrust. The slap of flesh melded with the blood roaring in Kase's ears. Alek's grunts and growls added to the mix, flaming Kase's desire higher.

Kase groaned as Alek threaded his fingers into his hair and gripped it tight, tilting his head back, and exposing his throat. His lover licked up his neck, the warm tongue claiming Kase's attention. Alek stopped to nibble at the junction of Kase's shoulder and neck, and Kase held his breath. Teeth bit into flesh and Kase's hips jerked.

Urgency wove itself up his body, and his balls tightened further. The pressure increased, rising higher into his groin, reaching up into his stomach, pressing harder. He slammed his cock into Alek, tearing cries and yells from his lover's throat. Sweat tracked down Kase's body, and his wild thrusts slapped loudly against Alek's skin. He couldn't hold back, he hoped Alek was close. Kase picked up his pace. Up he climbed; his pounding erratic, frantic. Higher he flew, soaring until he reached the peak.

His orgasm overtook him, and he shattered. He froze, his cock pulsing jet after jet, his hips jerking in time until the waves slowed, then stopped. Weakened, he crashed to Alek's chest, sucking in air, his heart hammering. Powerful arms wrapped him, held him close. Kase could feel Alek's rapid heart beat against his own.

Kase was momentarily disappointed in his failure to get Alek off, until stickiness on his chest and stomach captured his attention. He lifted his head and looked down between them, smiling.

\*\*\*\*

Aleksandr's quiet laughter shook his body and his lover's atop him. He tightened his hold around Kase, and kissed the top of his head. "All is well, *agápi mou*," he whispered into Kase's hair.

He smoothed his hands down Kase's back. Letting fingertips slip along slick skin, he sighed, sated and sleepy, and heard it repeated from the man in his arms.

After a few moments, Kase pushed up and reached between them, withdrawing from Aleksandr's body. Together they gasped as he slipped free, and Aleksandr let his body go limp. Kase left and returned, wiped Aleksandr's release from his skin, then crawled back into bed, draping himself along Aleksandr's left side.

"Thank you," Kase murmured. He pressed his lips to Aleksandr's throat.

"I believe I should be the one offering thanks," Aleksandr replied, rolling to face him. He swept back a lock of golden hair from Kase's eyes and traced wavy lines on Kase's cheek.

Kase's sudden huge grin was mesmerizing; Aleksandr had to smile in return.

“What is it, *kardiá mou*?”

“You're very welcome, but that wasn't all I was thanking you for. I... ah...” Kase stopped and let out a long slow breath. “These past two weeks have been amazing... Eye-opening, in fact, in more ways than one.” He paused again, raised his hand and rested it over Aleksandr's heart, the warmth penetrating Aleksandr's skin.

“I thought I'd never find somebody I could trust enough to be with again,” Kase continued quietly. “As much as you learned from me, I've learned from you.” He sighed. “Thank you for teaching me and loving me, and...” Kase huffed. “I don't even know if I'm making sense right now. My brain is mush.”

Aleksandr laughed gently and drew Kase into his chest. “Sleep then, my love. Rest, and I will be here when you waken.”

“Sounds perfect,” Kase murmured, snuggling deeper into Aleksandr's warmth.

\*\*\*\*

The sun dipped low on the horizon when they rose from bed and showered. The close contact which had started their day resumed, less frantic, more affectionate. Languid slides of soapy hands washed, tender pats of soft towels dried.

Aleksandr playfully teased Kase about wearing clothes again, bartered him down to loose shorts and nothing else. They descended to the kitchen and prepared dinner. Glasses of wine were poured and drunk as they sat side by side at the table, eating and talking. Before they retired to the *andrōn*, Kase had him retrieve his phone, and instructed him on how to take *pho-to-graphs*. Pictures of coy looks and silly *sel-fies* soon filled his “gallery.” His favorite was of them sharing a sweet kiss. They cuddled close on the couch, and continued to talk about themselves and their life and family. Secrets were revealed and foolish tales of childhood adventures told.

Long into the night they spoke, until Hypnos wove his spell around them. They pulled themselves up the stairs to brush at teeth and fall into bed. With Kase's back to his chest and their fingers laced, Aleksandr closed his eyes and prayed to any of the Gods who would listen. He begged for more days like today, more time to learn this new world, and, above all else, for more time to

love Kase. He repeated his prayer again and again, only ceasing when sleep stole over him.

\*\*\*\*



## Chapter Forty-seven

### *Friday*

Kase pushed open the garden roof door and dragged Alek through. He couldn't stop the grin from growing on his face. Sunset was still a half hour away, and Medon hadn't shown yet. The chance he'd appear this close to nightfall, and here, where they worked, was unlikely. Alek hadn't mentioned any stiffness in his legs or that he felt cold; likely symptoms that he might be returning to stone. It allowed Kase to believe the interpretation of the poem that 'the couple' needed to fall in love for the curse to break must be true. Kase was eager to get home, his body thrumming in anticipation whenever he thought about celebrating tonight.

He turned around, grabbed Alek's other hand, and walked backwards, pulling him along. Alek's pensive gaze and uncharacteristic silence today concerned him.

"Come on, don't look so gloomy. We may not see the sun actually set, but the cloud colors will be fantastic." He grinned, but it faded at the sight of Alek's downcast expression. "Don't worry; I think the curse is broken."

Alek gave a small, sad smile. "I hope you are right, but a warrior does not let down his guard. I will not be satisfied until we are safe at home and in bed."

Kase tugged Alek closer until they stood toe to toe. "I have some ideas of what we can do when we get there." He waggled his eyebrows, hoping to pull a laugh, or at least a more enthusiastic grin from his lover, and was rewarded with one.

"Then I have something to look forward to for the rest of the evening." Alek wrapped his arms around Kase, pulled him to his chest and claimed his mouth. He drew back to rest his forehead against Kase's. "I do not know how I would have survived without you and your guidance in this world. I will forever be in your debt."

Kase slapped him on the chest. "Hey, you're getting morose again. You wanted to see the sunset, and this is a great time." He turned around in Alek's arms and rested against Alek's broad chest. Kase covered Alek's forearms and hands with his own, allowing his lover's warmth to block the light breeze. "The sunset is especially colorful if you watch the clouds in the mirrored windows of that building down the street. It's double the effect."

Soft lips kissed and caressed Kase's neck, and he leaned his head back on Alek's shoulder.

"Truly a sight to behold," Alek murmured. "The colors and reflection... and you. You fill my days, and my nights, with light."

"You have a poet's heart." Kase smiled at no one in particular. *Could anything be more perfect than this moment?* He was distracted from his thoughts by the sudden jiggling of Alek behind him. Kase twisted to look over his shoulder at Alek. "What's wrong?"

"Too much so-da." Alek let Kase go and stepped away, gesturing to his groin. "I need to..."

Kase laughed, withdrew his wallet from his shorts, and pulled out his gold card. "You really need to cut back on drinking that stuff, or at least switch to diet. It's not good for you." He held out the card to Alek. "Here, use the bathroom in the playroom, then you won't have to go all the way to the second floor."

Alek stretched out his hand, hesitated, then took it. He shoved the card into his pocket, stepped forward, cupped Kase's face between his hands, and kissed him deeply. "*Kardiá mou.*" His eyes searched Kase's face as if memorizing every detail.

Kase shook his head and chuckled. "Go on, don't be so dramatic. It'll only take a couple minutes, you're not going away forever." Alek gave him another quick peck, and Kase watched him walk to the roof door, slide the card key through the reader and head downstairs, the door automatically slamming shut and locking behind him.

The breeze picked up and Kase glanced at the sky. It was still mostly clear, but the cumulus continued to gather, thicker and darker. The pretty pink and golds from the setting sun no longer reflected on their white surfaces.

The Jason Mraz song "I'm Yours," which spoke of fate and love, had been playing when they stepped into the garden. It ended, and there was a short pause before the next song ripped forth from the rooftop speakers. Loud electric guitars strummed out a series of chords, and was soon joined by a lone vocalist and a thumping drumbeat. Kase recognized the song as "Dance with the Devil" by Breaking Benjamin from when he attended a concert with Helene.

A blast of cold air swept across the roof, and Kase rubbed the back of his neck. "I've got to talk to Bran about his choice of music. It's not the most optimistic piece he could choose."

“Oh, but I quite like it,” a low, smooth voice sounded from close behind Kase.

Kase froze—not even a breath passed his lips—except for his heart, which threatened to burst from his chest. *No! It’s not possible!*

“Hello, Kase. I’ve been waiting for you,” Medon cooed. The sun vanished and the wind picked up, swirling dust around the roof and making the leaves shiver on the trees. “I’m glad Aleksandr kept up his half of the deal.”

*Deal? What deal?* Kase swallowed, the sound overly loud to his own ears. He had to get to the door, but his body didn’t respond.

A cold palm landed in the center of Kase’s back. He stumbled at the hard shove forward and stuck out his hands before he crashed into the rooftop door.

“I know what you’re thinking.” Medon sounded bored. “Mortals always think of trying to escape when I appear. Or else they try to kill me. Go on, try the door, but it won’t do you any good.”

Without the door key, Kase wouldn’t be able to get out. He knew that much, but he grasped the latch anyway and yanked. It didn’t budge.

“Told you so.”

A bitter chill ran down Kase’s back and slow footsteps approached behind him. Kase stilled.

“He’s not coming back.”

Kase shivered. Frosty puffs of air brushed across the back of his neck, and a finger—or something—traced across his shoulders. Kase squeezed his eyes shut. *Don’t look, don’t look.*

“We made a deal, Aleksandr and I.” Medon’s voice rose and fell hypnotically. “His life for yours.”

Another *something* swept across Kase’s back. He shook his head and swallowed. “No... Alek wouldn’t. He loves me.” Medon moved closer to Kase’s left side, and he turned his head away.

“Really? Are you sure? He knew I would be here; I told him Tuesday when we spoke. Didn’t he tell you we talked?”

*Alek would never do that to me.* Anger flared to life in Kase’s belly. “He did, but I know he wouldn’t make a deal with you.”

“Do you? Aleksandr isn’t like you; he’s a soldier. He knows when the odds are against him, and when it’s time to extend an olive branch.” Medon hissed. “He waved his white flag.”

An icy hand clamped around Kase’s neck and he gasped. Frigid lips brushed his ear.

“I bet he left out the most important part of our chat when you talked, just like I’ve known him to do when he’s hiding something.”

Kase opened his eyes in surprise. *Alek had clammed up when he got back that night. I knew he was shutting me out.*

Medon chuckled, shook Kase by the neck and let go, stepping away. Kase rubbed at the numbed skin, warming it up.

“That’s what I thought. Your faithful lover lied to you. I told him to bring you here. In return, I’d stop chasing him and ensure he wouldn’t die. You, my lovely friend, are the payment.”

Medon’s footsteps receded, and his voice came from a further distance. “You’re blinded by him. You refuse to see how he uses you. You’re an intelligent man, Kase. Your intellect has always served you well, but you’ve tossed it aside for Aleksandr. That was my mistake too. He tricked us both.”

“No, that isn’t true. He’s not using me,” Kase insisted. *Hermes... Please, I need your help!*

“My dear Kase. Are you really that blind to Aleksandr’s treatment of you?”

A memory, like a breeze, tickled at the back of Kase’s mind.

“Your feelings cloud your judgment,” Medon continued. “Let go of your attachment.”

Words spoken at Saturday’s party came back with sharp recall: *Occasionally people need to go by feelings alone. Forget the five senses we know. Take off things like your glasses.*

*That’s it! Don’t look!* Kase raised shaking hands to his face, removed his glasses, and everything around him blurred. He shoved the glasses quickly into his pants pocket. *I hope this works, or else when Alek gets back, I’m the one who’ll be stone.*

Loud steps stomped up behind him, and a hand grasped his arm, the nails biting into his flesh. He stumbled as he was jerked backwards and yanked around to face Medon.

“Are you listening to me?” Medon hissed.

Kase blinked. A blob stared back at him. At least it looked like a blob. A fuzzy oval with a blurry silver bar across the upper part of its face, which were probably sunglasses. The hazy, pale glob came closer.

“This is interesting,” Medon said quietly, stepping nearer. “Why aren’t you afraid of what you’ll see?”

Tremors shook Kase’s body, and although he tensed, he couldn’t stop them. He made out Medon reaching up to his sunglasses and pulling them off his face. *I might die of a heart attack before he gets the chance to turn me into stone.*

*Alek... Where are you? Please, I need you!* Kase wanted to run, but where would he go? He could try for the fire escape, but Medon would capture him before he’d taken half a dozen steps.

Kase continued to stare at Medon’s blurred features, unable to look away. This could be the end for him, the last thing he saw before he turned to stone. For a moment, Medon’s face remained the same, then a faint reddish glow appeared in the area where his eyes would normally be. Except, they didn’t look like eyes, they too were just blobs of color, floating dimly lit red balls, that tilted left then right as Medon moved his head around.

Medon sputtered then broke into a peal of uncontrolled laughter. Kase flinched, unpleasant memories of childhood bullies making fun of “the four-eyed kid” flashed through his mind. Bullies who stole his glasses and ran away with them or hid them. In grade school, he got into the habit of leaving them with a teacher when he had recess, which meant he couldn’t play any of the games because no one ever wanted someone on their team who couldn’t see. That was when he’d started to go away by himself to find a quiet place and read. He should’ve been over the hurt by now.

The Gorgon’s laughter rang across the roof. He stumbled back, hooting and pointing, at least, Kase thought it was pointing at him.

“Y-you-you’re as blind as a mole rat!” Another howl of laughter erupted from Medon. “You’re defective! No wonder Aleksandr doesn’t want you!” He danced across the rooftop.

A stab of pain lanced Kase’s heart. *It isn’t true! Alek loves me.* He knew it. Then why did Medon’s words confuse him? Make him doubt?

“Oh my. You should have been immobilized for a short while with that look, but nothing happened.” Medon sighed and gained control of himself.

“Now I know why Aleksandr is with you. He’s using you for his urges, and I know all about his urges. We were lovers for many years. He has a very healthy sex drive. Always revving to go. He has one hell of a stick shift.

“And playtime in the bath... Now that was special. His hands all over me, washing me...”

Kase squeezed his eyes shut, choking back the bile threatening to spew forth at the images of Alek and Medon having sex.

“I bet he even sweet talked his way into your bed. He told you how special you are, didn’t he? Let me guess...” Medon’s hazy form strode back and forth in front of Kase. “He’s got a favorite line about how Hermes finds you worthwhile.” He stalked closer, and Kase sagged in relief when he saw the silver strip over his eyes again. “It’s his favorite pick-up line. He used it many times back in our village, and I always found it funny how many men fell for it.”

The smirk in Medon’s voice rang loud and clear to Kase’s ears. *How could he know?* His stomach twisted, and he ground his teeth. “It doesn’t mean a thing.”

“You know I’m right; I feel it in you. How about if I give you more proof?” Medon stopped in front of Kase. “Aleksandr likes challenges. I’m guessing you didn’t give in to him right away? He would have loved that and found a way to get into your bed. Let’s see... you invited him in by the second night. No, wait! He snuck into your bed the first night. Am I right?”

Kase flinched. “That’s not how it was,” he protested feebly before he could stop himself. “He wouldn’t play that game with me.”

“No need to cover for him, Kase, I know his tricks. He’s very clever. I’d resist him, and he loved the game, the chase. Mmm, the sex was exceptional afterwards.”

Kase’s stomach roiled. *I’m going to vomit.* He choked it back.

Medon’s fingers waved in Kase’s face. “Now that he’s conquered you, he’s grown tired of the game and left. You’re expendable.”

Kase drew back from the movement. “He wouldn’t do that,” he whispered, his voice shaky and unconvincing. *Would he?* Kase’s legs shook violently, and he gulped in deep breaths of air to steady himself.

“He’s left you.” Medon circled around behind him, leaned closer, his breath blowing cold on Kase’s ear as he whispered, “Just like Barry.”

Kase froze. “H-how—”

“How do I know? Is that your question?” Medon returned to stand in front of him again; his slender, distorted form tilted its head.

Kase nodded, tears forming in his eyes. Alek was supposed to be different. He trusted Alek.

Medon’s voice held triumph. “You read the poem. ‘The Gorgon comes, the Gorgon knows, seeking out the hearts that froze.’”

“But my heart isn’t frozen,” Kase breathed out, unsure of his answer even as he spoke.

“You,” Medon leaned in, he lowered his voice and poked Kase in the chest over his heart, “have a frozen heart.”

Kase stepped back at the touch and shook his head. “I don’t, I’m in love with Alek.”

“Really? You’re still in love with him even after he betrayed you and left you up here with me? As a trade? Your life for his? After I proved he played his games?” Medon tilted his head to the side, a sneer pulling up the corner of his mouth. He brought his hand to his lips and traced them with a forefinger. He stood so close, the motion wasn’t hard for Kase to misinterpret. Medon lowered his hand. “If you loved him, you would have told him. Love can’t remain silent. But you haven’t, have you? That’s because you aren’t in love with him. You’ve always held a part of your heart back. You sensed how Aleksandr was playing you, using you.”

Kase brought his hand up to his chest and covered his heart, clutching at his shirt. Protecting it. His heart cringed; Medon’s words were knives, slashing at it, chopping his heart to pieces, bleeding and weakening him. It hurt a thousand times worse than when Barry walked out.

“He wou-wouldn’t do that,” Kase hiccuped.

“No? Then where is he?” Medon threw his arms out and made a dramatic circle. “Show me where he is.”

Kase cast an unfocused glance at the closed door, praying it would open. But it didn’t. He gazed wildly around the roof, frantically hoping Alek would materialize out of thin air. But he didn’t.

If Alek had left him here with Medon, he’d have to save himself. Kase kept his eye on the Gorgon and slowly edged his way towards the fire escape. Medon stepped in front of him and he stopped abruptly.

“He wouldn’t betray me,” Kase replied quietly even though inside he’d fallen into a dark pit.

“Of course he would. He has.” Medon’s voice dripped with venom. “He did it to me, and now he’s done it to you. I can feel you know this.”

Kase dropped his head and shook it. But he couldn’t bring up anything in defense of Alek. He’d left him up here alone for far too long. Kase startled as Medon spoke again, his tone gentle.

“You don’t have to suffer the pain.”

Kase jerked up his head and stared at Medon, frowning. “I’d rather not turn to stone.”

“Oh no, I have a much better idea. A deal you might like.”

Kase inhaled, his breath ragged, and looked away. “Go away. You got what you wanted. You proved Alek was using me, and he isn’t coming back.”

As soon as Kase finished speaking, “Dance with the Devil” ended, and another song was piped through the outdoor speakers. It was the one Alek and he had danced to: “Truly, Madly, Deeply.” The one that spoke of Alek’s love for him.

Memories of the *Sumposium* party with Alek and talking to the masked guest raced through Kase’s mind.

*“I would always come for you, my glykós.”*

Another—

*“I will stay. Try to push me away; I will not go. I do not need, or want, anyone else. I will always be here for you. Always.”*

And another—

*“I promise here and now, I will. Believe me, glykó mou. I would protect you with my life. I would die for you.”*

Alek’s warm, tight grip around him as they danced to this song. His vow that he would always be here for him, and Alek’s kiss that sealed that promise.

Kase pinched his lips together and blinked rapidly. No, the Alek he knew wouldn’t lie to him. Alek’s actions and words all conveyed his love for him. Medon was the one lying and twisting words and memories. Kase straightened his shoulders. Until Alek returned, he’d remain strong and have faith. Even if Medon turned him to stone, he’d turn to stone thinking of his lover, not the fear that Alek had left him or he was unloved.



Kase planted his feet and steadied his stance. “No. No deals. You can turn me to stone, because I have no intention of making any sort of deal with you,” he declared. He would resist Medon until Alek came for him.

A violent hiss of snakes erupted from atop Medon’s head. Writhing tentacles stretched out from him and reached for Kase, caressing his skin, their touch as cold as Medon’s hands.

“Wrong answer, Kase,” Medon spat. “Now the next option goes into effect, and I know you’re not going to like it.” A rush of wind blew around them, and the snakes whipped and hissed in its current, only to be drowned in a loud rumble of thunder. Medon tilted his head back and growled at the sky.

Kase had no doubts he’d despise all of Medon’s options. He squeezed his eyes shut and prayed to Hermes for strength as Medon spewed more curses and lies at him. And he held tight to his memories of Alek while the Gorgon’s snakes hissed in his ear, slithered up his neck, and stroked his cheek.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Forty-eight

Aleksandr lowered the bow over his head, the staff on his back, the string across his chest. He snatched up the quiver of arrows in his left hand and his xiphos in his right.

“Use the fire escape on the opposite side of the loading dock. The near one leads to my private quarters, and you will not be able to get to him from there.”

Aleksandr spun to face Branchus. He gave a single nod and slid past him, heading for the bar’s side door. Once in the alley, he looked up at the darkening sky, and growled in anger. “I do not know which of you brought this upon me. Should I lift up my arms in gratitude? Should I curse you for putting Kase and I in the middle of this madness? You gave me new life and dare to snatch it away. I will not allow it!”

Aleksandr raced around the back of the bar to the metal staircase Branchus told him to use. He swiftly climbed its winding lengths, his legs pumping, his breathing harsh with the exertion. He paused at the top, his head not yet over the wall’s height, and took several deep breaths. He looped the strap of the quiver over a shoulder and cautiously peeked above the edge, straining to hear the words of Medon and Kase. Medon’s back was to him, and he could see Kase’s pale face. His eyes were squeezed shut as waving tendrils of Medon’s hair—a nest of snakes—caressed his cheek.

A jolt of fear flashed up Aleksandr’s spine, freezing him in place, and forcing him to watch the exchange between his prior lover and Kase, his greatest love. Medon jested and teased, bullied and intimidated. His words were scornful and twisted. Through it all Kase held steady, and seeing his glykós’ strength affirmed his own.

A strong gust of wind pushed at him, and he gripped the railing tightly with his left hand. One deep breath in and he slipped silently over the wall, landing softly on the rooftop. He looked to the left, at the table, chairs, and large potted tree with its bright-yellow fruit. A shadowed area lay behind the table; Aleksandr padded in that direction, keeping Kase and Medon in view. He scouted out the area in front of him for obstacles. Finding it clear, he stepped forward and found himself tripping over a cord directly underfoot. Aleksandr fell, catching himself on his hands. His xiphos clattered to the rooftop an arm’s length away. He grimaced from the impact.

“Well, well, well. Joining us, my dear Aleksandr?” Medon tilted his head and pursed his lips. “I must say I’m disappointed. I expected you to live up to your end of our bargain.”

Aleksandr reached out and pulled his sword to him. He scooped up the hilt and bent his wrist to catch Medon’s reflection in the blade. With the sky turning dark gray behind him, Medon’s black clothing helped him blend into the background, making it hard to discern his form.

He pushed to his feet and swiped away the grit clinging to the heels of his hands. Aleksandr kept Medon’s image in the flat of the blade, watching the Gorgon glide closer. His head of snakes weaved and hissed, the writhing mass horrific. Aleksandr dreaded seeing Medon’s unaltered image; the last time he had, he had not seen or felt the sun on his skin for two thousand years. Aleksandr’s heart struggled against the tight fingers of panic the memory evoked.

“A bow and arrow? Really, my love?” Medon tsked. “You’re a fighter, not an archer. Do you think you can defeat me with that?”

Medon’s taunt cut through the miasma of fear, jolting Aleksandr to move. He dropped to one knee and laid the quiver down, thumbed the bow’s string and pulled it over his head. He placed the bow beside the quiver and rose.

“I don’t know how you’ll even use it,” Medon continued to rant. “You have to be looking at what you’re shooting.” He grabbed the arms of his reflective glasses and wiggled them once before putting his hands on his hips.

Aleksandr drew back and raised his forearm to prevent Medon’s poisonous glare from reaching him. He caught sight of Kase moving sideways towards the fire escape, his back plastered to the wall, the steps sliding and tentative. Aleksandr needed to keep Medon distracted, and give Kase a chance to escape. He needed to find Medon’s Achilles’ heel. Aleksandr listened to the furious hissing of the snakes.

*Of course. Anger is Medon’s weakness.*

“I do not understand, Taras. Why are you doing this?” Aleksandr asked. He kept his tone disarmingly plaintive and helpless.

“Taras?” Medon’s wicked laugh sent an icy frisson down Aleksandr’s spine. “There is no Taras here. He’s been dead for millennia. Only Medon exists... Me!” He slapped his chest.

Aleksandr regarded Medon thoughtfully and risked a quick, cautious glance at Kase, observing his continued slow movements along the wall.

“You say you love me, Taras, yet aim to harm me,” Aleksandr continued in a light tone, blinking in false, wide-eyed innocence.

The snakes thrashed, and Medon’s lips pressed tight into a thin line. “How dare you continue to use that name? How dare you question my love? I loved you.” His voice rose in pitch, a forefinger pointing straight at Aleksandr, and he paced forward. “You didn’t want me. You tossed me aside.”

Aleksandr took a step back, then another, squeezing himself between the table and chair and the row of planters as the Gorgon prowled forward.

Medon curled his lip in a snarl, continuing to advance. “I walked away from you the other times we met, but not this time. I will not let you leave here alive.”

Medon grabbed his glasses and whipped them off. Luminous red eyes bore into Aleksandr’s. Instinctively, Aleksandr raised his arm to block the view, a bolt of terror rooting him.

*Move!* The single word demanded in his mind, and a blast of wind assailed him from the right, forcing him to pitch sideways. When he looked up, he again locked eyes with Medon’s glowing glare...

And he still breathed, still felt his heart beat, his limbs moved...

*How is this possible?* The phone conversation with Helene raced through Aleksandr’s mind, then careened to a halt. *Of course!* Helene had spoken of Richie’s clever idea: once the curse was broken, he should have no fear of reverting to stone if he laid eyes on a Gorgon.

Inside Aleksandr preened. Outside his face betrayed nothing. *Because I love, I am immune to Medon’s evil. He can not turn me.* Facing the Gorgon, he dropped his arm and watched Medon’s smirk transform into a frown.

Aleksandr stomped his feet and grinned. He arched a brow at Medon and adjusted his grip on his xiphos’ hilt. Walking backwards, he motioned for the Gorgon to come to him.

Shock and disbelief flashed across Medon’s features until he straightened, unmoving except for his clenching fists. He spat out his words as his snakes hissed loudly in agitation. “You... You... How?”

Aleksandr held silent. *Not giving Taras the answer will surely provoke him.* He smirked and regarded Medon coolly.

The Gorgon curled his lip and raised his right hand to the side of his head, his fist hovering over the mass of wriggling serpents. With a sharp snap of his wrist he opened his fist and a single snake sped from his head towards Aleksandr.

Aleksandr swiftly brought his xiphos up to block the reptile from striking him. His blade slashed through the creature's body, and it burst into a cloud of dust.

"Hm." Aleksandr casually blew the gray puff away, and backed up another few steps. He needed to lead Medon away from Kase.

When the Gorgon did not follow, Aleksandr spoke in a low voice. "I know how."

Medon eyebrows shot up, and he stepped closer, cocking his head to better hear Aleksandr. "Tell me," the Gorgon demanded.

Aleksandr shrugged. "No."

A roar spewed from Medon. He raised both hands in fists to his writhing pets and threw two snakes, their bodies like arrows, anxious to strike.

Aleksandr sidestepped and turned, bringing his blade up and then down through the serpents, sending up another explosion of gray dust. He glanced to the side and saw he was close to the wall at the front of the bar.

"*Skatá*," he swore under his breath. If the snakes missed him, they'd sail past the edge and strike the citizens below. He could not allow innocent bystanders to be injured.

Aleksandr chanced another quick check on Kase's progress and, squinting into the blustery wind, found him nearing the fire escape. Needing to draw Medon closer, he called conspiratorially, "Come near, and I will tell you."

Medon's eyes widened, then narrowed. He stepped forward. "You think to trick me, Aleksandr. You don't know."

"I do, Taras." Aleksandr pitched his voice even lower, making it difficult for Medon to hear over the swirling wind.

The Gorgon edged closer, reaching the corner of the roof, and turned to face Aleksandr. "Then tell me," he ordered, planting his feet.

"Do you not understand your own poem, Taras?" Aleksandr chided.

Medon snorted and shook his head. "Of course I do."

“Then tell me what this means: A hardened heart which knows not love, needs love’s kind grace to recover.”

“It means nothing!”

Aleksandr shook his head. “It means everything. Tell me. I know you can sense the answer.”

Medon took one step, leaning towards Aleksandr. He could practically hear the Gorgon repeating the lines in his mind.

Medon stiffened, his face turning a bright shade of red. He abruptly straightened. “No! It’s not possible. You cannot!”

“It is true.” Aleksandr nodded. “I rejoice and thank the Gods, my heart is no longer trapped by stone. What you hoped I would do when we were *koinolekhēis*, long ago, I have done. I love again, Taras... Only, it is not you.”

Violent, outraged high-pitched hisses and spits arose from Medon and the serpents whipping around his head. Aleksandr cringed at the wails, and he caught sight of Kase squatting next to the ladder.

“You”—the Gorgon pointed a forefinger at Aleksandr’s chest—“may not turn to stone by looking at me anymore, but my pets are quite capable of doing the job for me.” He raised his hands once more to the sides of his head and let forth a hiss of laughter.

Medon’s lips bowed in an devilish grin. “On guard, Aleksandr.”

\*\*\*\*

Kase plastered himself to the wall. *A bow? He brought my bow?*

He jerked his head in the direction of Alek’s dark form, saw him hunkered down near the table. Kase listened as Alek distracted Medon, and they moved away from the fire escape. Pressing his back against the wall, he slowly sidled along it to where he thought Alek had left his bow. As soon as Medon got far enough away, Kase dropped and scrambled towards the fire escape on his hands and knees. Particles of dirt swirled on the wind, catching in his eyes and irritating them. Stone dug into the soft flesh of his palms, stabbing at him through the knees of his jeans.

*I can’t see a fucking thing.*

He squinted and scanned the rooftop pavement, making out the blurry shapes of pots, foliage and cords for the tree lights. His bow and quivers must be nearby, their shape easy enough to spot. There, by the tree, something long

lay on the ground. Over the yells and grunts of Alek, a loud hiss caught his ear, and he looked to his right, just in time to see something shooting towards him. He flattened to his stomach and rolled until he hit the wall.

Alek shouted, Medon screamed, and Kase looked up to find them shifting positions again. Shaking, Kase hurried and rose to his hands and knees again then scuttled towards the weapons lying on the ground.

He reached out and his fingers clasped around his bow. A calmness took hold in his core and battled with the giant butterflies in his stomach. He took a deep breath, but still his hands shook from the adrenaline coursing through his system.

Despite the life-threatening situation, Kase couldn't help but admire Alek as he cleaved and slashed, fending off the attack. Every snake Medon sent burst into ash with each swift slice of Alek's blade. Kase ground his teeth at Medon's never ending supply of serpents. Alek couldn't keep up the pace forever. He had to help him. He had to shoot Medon.

\*\*\*\*

Aleksandr spun his xiphos in arcs and slices as the Gorgon rapidly sent snake after snake streaking across the roof. A group of four were launched at him, but instead of cutting them down, he dropped to the rooftop, letting them fly overhead. A discordant chorus of shrieks came from behind him, and Aleksandr twisted to look. The same gray cloud of smoke drifted in the air several body lengths back. Aleksandr rose to his feet, sending a triumphant grin at Medon; the snakes could only go so far before they disintegrated.

Medon howled, his mouth dropping open, revealing needle-sharp fangs. "I will destroy you!"

A blast of light striped the sky, illuminating the roiling clouds. A *boom* followed on its heels. The Gorgon tilted his head back and laughed, wagging his finger at the heavens. "You aren't invited to our private party, Zeus. Hermes gave his word."

Lightning streaked through the clouds, and thunder rattled the air around them. Medon smirked.

Aleksandr's breath caught in his throat. He would receive no help from Hermes.

*It matters not.* Aleksandr pushed to his feet. He was not alone in defeating the monster. He had Kase. He looked at Kase kneeling behind the table and chairs, his bow in his hand.

Medon followed Aleksandr's gaze, and his mouth twisted into an evil smile. "Oh, my dear Kase," the Gorgon said, his fist raised to send another snake, this one intended for Aleksandr's love.

He watched in horror as Medon stalked towards Kase. Aleksandr growled, edging his way along Branchus' vine-covered wall, his arms extended outwards. "Leave him, Taras!" Aleksandr continued to move towards the door leading down to the bar, projecting his voice. "He can not harm you." His back brushed into the honeysuckle, throwing their sweet fragrance into the air. When Medon did not follow, he moved forward with the intent to intercept the monster and his poisonous pets. "It is me you want."

Medon's head swiveled to look at him. He straightened, rolled his shoulders, and returned to focus on Kase. A vicious chuckle rent the storm-laden air. "Blind as a bat," he sneered, eyeing Kase's huddled form. "A perfect target." Medon released the snake.

"No!" Aleksandr screamed, racing forward and cutting the serpent down in midair. He faced the Gorgon, thrusting his sword at the monster's chest.

Medon backpedaled from Aleksandr's advance. His wrists snapped again and again, sending dozens of hissing snakes, only to have them decimated by a flurry of sweeping cuts.

Back and forth they battled, Aleksandr attacked until Medon retreated, colliding with the table and chairs Kase had hidden behind, sending them crashing to the ground.

In fear for Kase, Aleksandr backed off, scanning the area and spotting Kase safely behind another pot further down the wall. He retreated, drawing the Gorgon away from the fallen table. He didn't let out a breath until Kase returned safely to his previous hiding spot.

\*\*\*\*



## Chapter Forty-nine

Kase hurried back to shield himself behind the overturned table. *That was too close.* He knelt down and pulled an arrow from the quiver, and then he turned to watch Alek battle the Gorgon. He'd never shot blind from an active position; he'd always had time to steady himself during calm winds. The winds here on the roof whipped around them, tossing his hair into his eyes and pulling at his clothes.

Another blast of light brightened the dark clouds and thunder rumbled overhead.

Kase followed the motion of the constantly moving men. Medon's thin form, his head covered with the long writhing, blurry snakes, was easy to distinguish from Alek's muscular body. He didn't need glasses to tell him who was who.

All he needed was to time his shot right. *But how am I going to shoot accurately in this wind?* His best chance of hitting Medon, without shooting Alek, was to aim for Medon's side. That made for a smaller target, but it was the only option. Kase warily rose to his feet, hunching over, ready to dive to the ground if another viper was flung his way.

Alek must've seen him hunched behind the tree for he taunted Medon, luring him away from Kase's hiding spot. Kase blew out a quick breath of relief when Medon redirected his attention. Alek continued backing up, and once Medon reached the center of the roof, Alek ran along the rear wall, pivoted and cut in front of Kase, blocking Medon from getting any closer to him.

Medon hissed and hurtled another spear-straight snake. It streaked towards Kase, but Alek struck down the venomous creature.

Kase had to take a chance. If he didn't, both of them would die. And if he didn't make it and Alek did, then Arrian and Branchus would help Alek. Even Helene would help him. He couldn't waste any more time, because the right time might never come.

Crouching, Kase edged around the wrought iron table and chairs that Alek and Medon had knocked over in their battle. He needed better footing. Now if there was a way to let Alek know what he needed...

"Alek," Kase whispered as loud as he dared. "I need more room."

Alek gave a curt nod then yelled and darted to his right, towards the locked doorway, drawing Medon's attention. Medon shifted, presenting his right side to Kase. This was the best shot he was ever going to get.

Kase bolted to his feet, his heart hammering. Years of practice stood him well, and his body responded to his intention, locking into his stance. He pushed the staff of the bow with his left hand while simultaneously drawing back on the string with his right as he raised his bow and sighted on his target, the wind howling and whipping around them. A prayer flew from Kase's heart. *Hermes, if you can hear me, I could use some help with the wind. I can only do so much.*

A touch of fingers brushed across Kase's mind, and the swirling wind stilled, debris once caught in its spiral settled to the ground. Alek and Medon froze, looking around them.

Kase narrowed his vision to Medon's right side. *Whatever happens...* Kase needed to speak the words, not just think them. He needed to hear his own voice say them, feel the vibration in his throat, taste the words on his lips and tongue. "I love you, Aleksandr," he whispered.

With a soft exhale, Kase released his hold on the string, letting it slip from his fingers, and the arrow flew. The *whisp* of its release and the *twang* of the bow's string were loud in the silence of the roof.

Reality stuttered, shifted. Time slowed and Kase's perception split in two. One of him frowned, as he watched the arrow fly, a golden light emanating from it. The glow spread into a brilliant aura around the arrow, turning it into a shining missile. Its tail feathers, a fire of blazing gold, were edged in red. Sparks flew in the arrow's wake as it sped through the air towards its target. This part of Kase thought his lack of glasses caused the optical illusion; the other part of him stood aside, watching himself, Medon and Alek.

Medon screamed, his mouth opening in a wide maw, as the golden arrow blazed its way towards him. His eyes narrowed on Kase, and half of Kase saw it while the other half watched the arrow. A large viper shot from Medon's head straight at him, all in slow motion. *I need to write an article about the illusion of time slowing when in crisis—if I live through this.*

Kase flinched at the snake speeding towards him, and stumbled backwards. His foot hit metal with a dull thud, tangling in the leg of one of the overturned chairs. No fear or surprise coursed through him; somehow he already knew the outcome of the fall before it happened. He flailed his arms, sending his bow

flying and crashing over the chair. Stars erupted in his vision at the sharp smack of his head against the wall, and he yelped. Alek yelled in the distance, and Kase turned his head in time to see Alek's form poised, sword arm raised, a long thick snake-form streaking out from Medon's head, and his arrow a foot from its target. *Funny. Why is the arrow still airborne?* wondered a small voice in his head.

Arrow and viper bore down on their targets.

The snake latched its jaws into Alek's right side beneath his upraised arm, and he roared. The snake's head tore the T-shirt and ripped at Alek's flesh. His sword dropped, clattering to the rooftop.

Kase screamed. Time snapped back into place.

Medon shrieked an unearthly sound that scratched and clawed at Kase's ears and slashed over his skin to leave him shaking and gasping for breath. He shot a glance at Medon, the now ordinary looking arrow piercing the monster's flesh, imbedded deep. The snake in Alek's side let go, recoiling to its owner, withering into a cloud of dust on its way. Medon grabbed his head, falling to his knees, the serpents in his fists bursting into dust around him.

*No, Alek, no! We won. Hermes please... No!* Kase rolled to his hands and knees, braced a foot under him, pushed up and fell. Dizziness assailed him and the world tilted; he tipped to the side, tried to get up again but dropped to his knees. Unable to stand, he crawled towards Alek. Shooting fearful glances at a writhing, snakeless Medon, the vipers nothing more than ash, he made his way through Alek's spilled blood to reach his convulsing body.

"Don't you dare die on me!" Kase yelled, pressing his hand against the torn gouge in Alek's side, a flap of flesh hanging from his body where the viper had bitten him. Sticky blood coated Kase's hand as Alek's seizure slowed until he stilled. "Alek! No! You hear me?" he choked out. "Stuff your noble warrior vow. Don't die, please!"

Panic overwhelmed Kase: he couldn't breathe, his mind clouded. "Think, think!" he screamed. "What do I do?" The violent pounding of his heart and the rush of blood roaring in his ears were the only answers to his question.

\*\*\*\*\*

Aleksandr roared in agony. The serpent's poison burned deep into his side, searing through his veins and muscles. It invaded his torso and sped through his limbs. Heaviness and wild tremors took control of his sword arm. His grip failed, and his xiphos fell from his grasp, clattering to the rooftop.

Kase's scream jerked Aleksandr's attention away from his own pain. *Not Kase, no!* He willed himself to move and reach Kase. But he couldn't; his muscles refused his orders, and he collapsed to his knees. Another violent convulsion sent him crashing to his back. His head cracked against the rooftop, and his vision darkened, his mind blanked, unable to comprehend what was happening to him. Aleksandr's back arched off the rooftop, a vicious contortion gripping his muscles and freezing him in place. His body stilled and settled, then spasmed anew as the nonstop contractions started again. His vision refocused, and he stared at the dark clouds, his body his enemy, tearing him in different directions until his feet grew rigid, not even the seizures making them move. Stiffness crept up his legs like the first time, long ago. *No!*

The uncontrollable movements ripped through the rest of him, yet he remained aware, unable to stop the involuntary jerks. Each one amplified the lethal bite and its poison, spreading it faster through his system. Aleksandr held back a call for death to take him. He would not; he must live for Kase, to protect him... to love him. He couldn't leave his glykós.

Screams caught in his throat as wave after wave of searing misery speared him, the white hot agony turning an icy cold, and he couldn't feel his feet any longer. Aleksandr stared up at the oppressive sky with its ominous dark clouds, unable to turn his head. A leaden weight crept through him, and as the convulsions slowed, his breathing grew labored.

Aleksandr caught sight of Kase crawling up next to him. His love wailed in grief; his words were muffled, but Aleksandr understood enough to try and answer Kase's desperate question.

He strained to speak. "H-H-ne po-m..." he whispered. He tried again, but Kase did not hear him.

Nothing he experienced could compare to the torment raging in his heart, aching to comfort his love and not able to hold him. He did not want to believe he might not make it through the battle after all.

Although the riotous winds had stopped, the light touch of a breeze brushed across Aleksandr's face, and a golden light appeared to his right. The aura shifted and turned solid, revealing Hermes, kneeling beside him, his forearm draped over a raised knee.

Kase cried, and Aleksandr cried for him, unable to tell his brave archer that Hermes was here, and no matter what, he would be fine.

"*Do you love him?*" Hermes' melodious voice resounded loud and clear inside Aleksandr's head.

If Aleksandr could have frowned he would have. *“You question my love for him?”*

Hermes chuckled. *“I need to hear you say it. Do you love Kase?”*

Aleksandr tried to nod, but his neck muscles were numb and locked. *“With all my heart and soul,”* he answered in his mind. *“I would die for him.”*

Hermes smiled, and the light surrounding him grew brighter. *“Always my valiant, noble warrior. But I am not here to take you away yet, unless you wish it.”*

*“What do you mean?”* Aleksandr ran Hermes’ statement over in his mind again. *“I can live?”*

*“Yes, but you must resist the call of Elysium,”* Hermes warned. *“They desire to welcome you because of your bravery and your selfless love. If you agree to go with them, if you accept, I can not reverse your death.”*

Kase shouted and Hermes looked at Kase’s back. *“He asks for my help, your Kase. He made a good offering. I am glad he believes.”*

Hermes leaned towards Kase and spoke in his ear, the words ringing clear in Aleksandr’s mind. *“Remember Helene’s phone call. Remember what Richie said about Gorgon blood. The right side.”*

Kase stopped crying, straightened and looked over at Medon. He pushed up from the pavement, but slipped in the blood. Tried again and failed. He got to his hands and knees. Muttering something, he crawled away. Aleksandr still couldn’t understand Kase’s words, only Hermes.

Aleksandr strained to breathe, and as he did, faint chords of music drifted into his consciousness. Harmonious voices undulated, rocking him, like drifting on his back in a still, clear blue ocean. It was nothing like the stories he knew of a dark underworld after death.

*“Do you wish to live?”*

Distracted by the calming music, Aleksandr found it difficult to focus on Hermes’ words. He drew his mind back. *“Why does death sound different from what I have read and been told?”*

Hermes chuckled. *“Because, my brave warrior, as you have stated to Kase yourself, many myths are merely rumors. You will not travel to the Underworld, to my uncle’s realm, as you imagine it, but to a more glorious place beyond it.”*

He moved closer to Aleksandr, his expression earnest. *“Aleksandr. You must listen,”* Hermes urged. *“I can only hold off on carrying you to Elysium for so long. You must make a choice and answer.”*

Aleksandr strained to catch more of the soothing music calling to him. He dragged his attention back to Hermes. He couldn't leave Kase. Not *his glykós, his sweet, his heart.* *“I wish to live,”* his mind whispered.

*“Even if life here will not be easy?”*

*“It does not matter, for Kase will be with me.”*

Hermes looked off in the direction Kase had crawled. He nodded. *“Then hold on to your love for him. Let it anchor you to this world and the now, else you will be called away. Hold strong, brave warrior.”* Hermes stood. *“If you live, I will bestow upon you another gift.”* He stepped back, a breeze swirled across Aleksandr, and the light holding back the darkness disappeared.

He stared up at the clouds again, and strained to keep his eyelids—the one part of his body he had control over—open. The music grew louder, murmurs of rest, peace, and now the added voices of warriors called to him, inviting him to join with them in comradery and games. He wanted to hang on, but the cold enveloped him, and he couldn't get enough air. Weariness shrouded his body like a heavy cloak, and he struggled against its weight. The peaceful music and voices promised relief, friendship and eternal happiness.

*Not without Kase. I could never be happy without him.* Aleksandr's eyelids grew heavy. *Agápi mou.* He let them close.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Fifty

Kase scrambled over to Medon. “Right side. Right side.” Dark red blood oozed from the arrow’s entry point and coated the area beneath the Gorgon. A quick look at Medon’s face showed him the creature’s eyes were closed. His chest rattled as he breathed.

Kase reached out with shaking hands, casting glances at Medon in case he moved. Cupping his right hand, fingers pressed tightly together, he held it against Medon’s cold skin, letting the blood flow into his palm. “Come on, come on,” he muttered. His palm filled and Kase broke away, crawling back on three limbs, his hand raised, praying he didn’t lose a drop.

He knelt close to Alek’s shoulder, his jeans soaked through with his lover’s and the Gorgon’s blood. Kase slid his left hand under Alek’s neck and lifted. Alek’s neck barely bent. “No, no, no. Not yet.”

He pulled harder on Alek, and brought his blood-filled hand to Alek’s partially open mouth. “Drink this. I know it’s disgusting, but it’ll save you.” Carefully he poured, not wanting to waste a drop. When he was done, he smeared the rest over Alek’s lips and pressed up on his chin, closing his mouth and keeping the blood inside.

Kase leaned close to Alek’s ear. He tried to speak, but words failed to leave his dry, parched mouth. Wetting his lips, he tried again. “You have to stay with me, Alek. I love you.” He pressed his fingers to his lips and sobbed. “I have to show you Coney Island, everyone’s got to see it once. I’ll take you up on the Ferris wheel, and you can win a bunch of crap prizes for me in the games.”

A broken laugh cracked from his throat. He dropped his head onto Alek’s shoulder. “Please, Alek, stay with me,” he begged.

A shudder coursed through Alek’s body, and Kase jerked up, staring at his lover’s face. Alek convulsed again as Kase watched on in horror.

*This can’t be it. You can’t die!*

Gurgles burst from Alek’s throat and saliva drooled from his mouth, clearing out the remaining blood. He tensed and jerked repeatedly, until the convulsions lessened and stopped. Alek’s chest stilled.

Kase slapped his bloodied palm over his mouth, tasted the iron and scrubbed at his face with the back of his hand. *I failed.* He sagged in defeat,

head bowed over Alek's body. Claws of guilt raked at Kase's heart. *I never told him I loved him.* Anguished sobs emerged from deep inside Kase, and he didn't hold them back.

A ragged inhale startled Kase, and he snapped open his eyes to see Alek's chest arc. His lungs expanded, and then he collapsed back to the ground on the stuttered exhale. Kase tensed, holding his breath waiting for whatever came next. He was rewarded with Alek's deep groan, a sound of hurt, but music to Kase's ears, and his eyes brimmed with tears again as he watched Alek start to breathe. The rise and fall of Alek's chest was barely visible at first, but breath after breath grew deeper, fuller.

Kase laughed, an uncontrollable, hysterical laugh of happiness. He bent over, peppering Alek's face and lips with kisses. Looking down at Alek's side, Kase saw the flow of blood had slowed to a trickle. He pressed the flap of skin back to Alek's body, and it oddly stayed in place. Kase held Alek's hand, needing to touch, to reassure himself Alek was safe, that he was going to live. He didn't want to leave Alek, but he needed to get him help. Who would understand? And how would he explain what happened?

Bran was the closest, and Kase could count on his help. He needed to call him.

He reached into his jeans pocket for his phone and pulled it out. Kase sighed. The screen was shattered, probably from his fall over the chairs. He poked at it, but no lights came on. His next option was to yell over the roof and have someone fetch Bran. No way could he get the police involved—how would he explain all this? The last option was to take the fire escape himself and leave Alek up here. He glanced down at Alek again and took in his lover's pale skin, a far cry from his usual tanned and vibrant complexion.

He'd have to risk leaving, as long as Medon was no longer a threat. Kase squinted in the Gorgon's direction. *Bet my glasses are broken too.* He reached into another pocket and withdrew them, shaking his head at the undamaged frame and lenses. *Figures, it's the more expensive item that needs replacing.*

He slipped on his glasses and glanced over at Medon. Despite Medon being a monster, he did save Alek's life. The Gorgon appeared to not have moved, and his death rattle had grown louder.

Kase looked down at Alek, his lover's breathing eased, but still unconscious. The poem had been right so far. Love had prevailed. And Richie with his obsession with Gorgons had interpreted most of the poem correctly. It was an arrow that defeated the Gorgon. What else had Helene said?



*“If the curse does involve all three of you, does it mean the Gorgon lives, dies or is transformed?”*

Kase stilled. *“Transformed.”* Medon saved Alek’s life. Love broke the curse. Medon was cursed, just like Alek. Kase whipped his head around to stare at the Gorgon. If love destroyed Medon’s curse on Alek, could he also be transformed by love? Could Alek’s blood save Medon, and he become Taras again? *Can Taras be saved by Alek’s love for me?*

Kase released Alek’s hand, brushing and rubbing the dried blood from his palm onto his jeans. He bent down, peering close at Alek’s side. The blood was thickening and barely any trickled out the jagged wound. Kase scraped his hand along Alek’s side, collecting the drying blood and wiped his fingers along the fresh rivulet. *Helene is going to think I’m fully certified insane for trying to save a maniac who’s determined to kill us. Maybe I am. But...* He looked at Medon again... *we were given a second chance.*

As before, Kase made his way over to Medon, this time with Alek’s blood in his palm and coating his fingers. He slowed his pace as he neared the Gorgon, watching for any sign of movement, but there was none except the even shallower and more intermittent breaths. Kneeling by his side, Kase brought his palm to Medon’s lips. He murmured a silent prayer to Hermes for help and hoped he wasn’t making a huge mistake. He tilted his hand, but the thick blood wouldn’t flow. With his other hand, Kase scraped off the blood, pressing it into the Gorgon’s parted mouth. He smeared the remains on Medon’s lips and closed his mouth. Once more, Kase wiped his hands on his saturated jeans and made his way back to Alek’s side to wait.

For almost a minute nothing happened, then a sharp jerk convulsed Medon’s body, and he arched, stiffening. A low wail wavered from his throat, escalating higher and higher, until an ear-shattering scream rent the air. The wind which had calmed, whipped up, swirling around the roof, into tighter circles centering around Medon. His shriek of pain and despair—for that’s all Kase could compare it to—tore at Kase’s heart in sympathy. Alek moaned, and Kase looked down at him. His lover tossed his head, then quieted, falling into what appeared to be sleep.

Medon’s cry turned into gibberish, the gibberish into words. *“Wh-wh-h-ha-have you d-done? Nooooo!”* Medon howled in agony. *“Let me die. Nooo!”* He sobbed. *“Too much pain!”*

Kase watched the wind yank the arrow from Medon’s side with invisible fingers and tear at his clothes, snatching them up and ripping them from his body. *Hermes? What have I done?*

He cringed against Alek. He'd thought he'd helped, instead his actions caused pain. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he muttered. *I should've never...* He clasped a hand over his mouth. *I had no right to make this choice for him. I'm sorry.*

The wind calmed, and where Medon had lain, a naked man lay curled in a fetal position. Howling sobs wracked his body, heaving with each violent, jolting cry.

The rooftop door crashed open, and Kase startled, peering in the direction of the sound. Bran stepped out and stopped, planting his fists on his hips.

"Well, this was unexpected," said a voice from Medon's direction.

Kase whipped his head towards the voice and his eyes widened. *Who the hell is that, and how did he get up here?* Kase stared in awe at the person—his hair a brilliant gold—as he bent over Medon's wretched, curled form.

"If I've told you once, I've said it a thousand times, don't underestimate us mortals, Uncle," Bran growled.

A loud sigh came from the other man. "Yes, Branchus, you have, but you forget you aren't mortal." The man straightened.

Bran snorted. "I'm not a God either. I'm only a seer with lofty relatives." He turned and Kase watched him approach.

Bran squatted down next to Kase. "Can I see?" he asked gently.

Speechless, Kase let go of Alek's hand and moved farther up towards his head, resting his palm on Alek's shoulder. *Alek was right. Bran is one of them, and I never suspected.*

After a few moments of silent inspection, Bran let out a whoosh of air. "He'll live, but I need to take him inside and have our people look at him. We can't take him to the hospital." Bran regarded Kase with warmth in his gaze. "You understand that, Kase?"

Kase broke into tears and nodded. *Alek was going to be all right!* A hand landed on his shoulder. "You'll both stay at my place until he's fit to leave." Bran patted him then stood.

Bran addressed the other man. "I'm going to take Alek into my home, and Kase is coming with me."

"Wait. I have some questions for Kase."

“Hurry it up, Hermes,” Bran barked.

Kase stroked light fingers down Alek’s face. *He’ll live.* His shoulders sagged, he breathed easier, and then he frowned as the name Bran said registered.

*Hermes?*

“Kase.”

Kase tore his attention away from Alek. Hermes stood over Medon’s body, and Kase let his gaze travel up and down his form. *He doesn’t look like anything I expected, except for the gold hair. I don’t see a staff or wings anywhere.* “What?”

“Why did you help Taras?”

“Taras? Don’t you mean Medon?”

“No, I mean Taras. He is no longer a Gorgon. I don’t understand why you took the chance to help him. I don’t even know how you knew Aleksandr’s blood would work, or even why it worked.”

“What do you mean you don’t know why it worked?” Kase asked, perplexed. “You’re one of the Gods, you should know.”

“Yes, I am. But what you did was... unexpected.”

Kase was silent as he wracked his brain to figure out how to explain it. “Alek and I... We were given a second chance. Medon was human once. He made a mistake. We all do. Why shouldn’t he get a second chance?” He looked down at Alek and then back at Hermes. “I don’t know if I did the right thing, taking his choice away. He screamed he wanted to die.”

“Even after the pain and horror he’s caused, you wanted to give him a second chance?”

“It’s called compassion, Uncle.” Bran broke in. “It has nothing to do with offerings, or if mortals do the right rituals. It’s something we do out of love, without selfish reasons or ulterior motives. It’s unconditional love.”

“And you think that’s what Kase did?” Hermes asked.

“Of course, and you know it.” Bran snorted. “There’s something bigger out there than even the Gods. I can’t tell you what it is, but our family and mortals are mere specks compared to what it and Love can do.”

Silence hung in the air. “You are right, Branchus. *We* still have much to learn.” Hermes sighed.

“Can you help Taras?” Kase interrupted.

“It will not be easy for him.” Hermes looked down at Taras’ still form. His cries had softened to whimpers. “He will need to experience the consequences of his actions.”

“Life’s never easy,” Kase said. He hoped Taras found redemption.

He wondered if he should offer help or *something*; after all, he was responsible for Taras’ return to mortality. Even after everything, he didn’t want Taras to suffer alone. “If... If he needs assistance at some point, and he’s not a danger to Alek or me, I’m willing to lend a hand.”

Bran sucked in a breath. “Do you know what you’re saying? He may need your help. Do you wish to entwine your life with Taras’ again? The curse is broken, no other Gorgons will come after either you or Aleksandr.”

“Other Gorgons?” Kase squeaked.

“I’ll explain later,” Bran replied.

“What say you about helping Taras?” Hermes asked.

Kase thought. It was the right thing to do, but... “If it was just me, I’d say yes. But I have to consider Alek and my friends.” He looked up at Bran. “What do you think? Is it the right thing to do?”

Bran was silent. “Sometime in the future he might need your aid, desperately. It depends on the choices he makes. You may not even recognize him when you meet him. I can’t *see* when, or even if, this will happen, but I can feel that, once again, your compassion will be his salvation if it does.”

“Branchus is right,” Hermes chimed in. “The thing you mistakenly call ‘martyrdom’ in yourself, is your greatest gift: the desire to help and care for people. Do not look down upon yourself for it.”

“Then my answer is yes,” Kase replied with conviction.

“Have you asked all your questions, Uncle? I want to get Aleksandr inside.”

“Yes.”

Bran knelt, worked his arms under Alek’s body, and lifted him in one easy movement.

Kase looked over at Hermes one more time before following Bran. “What’s going to happen to Taras? You aren’t going to hurt him, are you?”

“Don’t worry,” Hermes said. “We’ll take care of him. We’re not as cruel and capricious as the myths and legends have made us out to be. We won’t hurt him. Go. Live your lives. The curse is broken. You are safe.”

Kase nodded. He pushed to his feet, careful of his balance on the blood-slicked rooftop, and followed after Bran, who headed for his honeysuckle fence.

*Why is Bran going this way?* “Wait...” Kase said, reaching out a hand, but before he touched the man, the foliage shivered and the fence parted. Bran stepped through the opening into his patio. Kase blinked and slowed, his hesitant steps taking him to the other side. A rustle of leaves sounded, and when he looked behind him, he found the gate had closed.

He turned back around to see Bran walking into his home. Kase stopped in the doorway and watched Bran carry Alek down a hallway. *Arrian and Helene are going to die when I tell them everything that’s happened.*

A small voice inside him whispered as he stepped over the threshold. *Welcome to a whole new world, Kase.*

\*\*\*\*

## Epilogue

*Sunday*

The car rocked over the field, and Aleksandr gripped the inside door handle to keep his body from jolting while Kase maneuvered the car amid the others haphazardly positioned at the field's edge. Once parked, Aleksandr pushed open the car door and winced. He pressed a hand to his ribs.

"Wait, I'll help you." Kase got out, slammed the door, and raced around the front of his car.

"I can do it," Aleksandr growled even as he accepted Kase's offered hand. He placed his right foot on the ground and rose with a groan.

Kase laid his palm on Aleksandr's cheek. "Of course you can, my very strong, brave, loving and still recovering warrior."

Aleksandr grinned at Kase's description of him. "As you wish."

"Thanks, Westley, but I'm no Buttercup."

Aleksandr tilted his head. "Buttercup?"

"It's—"

"Kase!" Helene's shout cut off Kase's explanation. They turned to see her barreling towards them. Aleksandr shifted back into the protective shelter of the open car door, letting his lover bear the brunt of Helene's greeting. She launched herself at Kase, jumping into his arms. He *oomphed*, but held on, twirling her in a circle, and laughed. He stopped and set her down.

"What the hell, Kase?" Helene leaned back and smacked him on his arm. "Where have you been? All I get is this cryptic message to make sure I meet you here, and—"

"Slow down," Kase said, squeezing her into another tight hug.

"Good afternoon, Kase. *Kalispera*, Aleksandr," Arrian called to them, walking slowly over the uneven field. Beside him was Gregor, who gave Aleksandr a little salute and a welcoming smile.

Helene stepped to the side, allowing Arrian and Gregor to shake hands with Kase and Aleksandr.

"Arrian," Kase said, "I'm surprised to see you. Helene and I were talking the other day about inviting you to one of our events."

“That’s what I was going to tell you,” Helene interjected. “I got this message that said I should make sure to be here today, and it made me nervous. I went to your house to check on you, and Arrian was already there knocking on your door. He’d gotten a note too.” Helene was almost out of breath by the time she finished speaking. She looked at Aleksandr, her eyes narrowing. Her head tilted, and she pushed through the men to stand in front of him.

“What happened?” she demanded of him. “Are you okay?”

Kase answered for him. “Food poisoning.”

Helene slowly turned her head to look at Kase, her mouth set in a frown. “I don’t—”

“We’ll tell you about it later,” Kase interrupted, and gave Helene a wink. Her eyes widened.

“Okay.” She poked him in the chest. “You better.”

“I’d also like to hear the story,” Arrian added. “You boys have become dear to my heart over these last two weeks.” He laid a hand on Kase’s shoulder.

Aleksandr’s breath caught, his heart warming at Arrian’s words. He gently guided Helene back, and stepped close to Arrian, pulling the elderly man into an embrace. “*Efcharistó*. May I call you *Thios*?”

“Uncle?” Arrian asked, moving out of Aleksandr’s arms, and Aleksandr nodded. “I’d be honored if you did.” He crooked a finger at Aleksandr, and he leaned down to hear his new uncle whisper, “Although with our history, perhaps I should be calling you uncle.” He laughed at his own joke, patting Aleksandr on the arm.

Aleksandr grinned and shook his head. “I also wish to ask a favor. I may have need of your assistance in another matter.”

“In any way that I can, *Anipsiós*, my dear nephew, simply ask. Let me know when you wish to discuss it, and we can get together.”

“Thank you, *Thios*.” Aleksandr inclined his head.

“Alek,” Gregor said, stepping up beside him. Aleksandr turned his attention to the armored fighter. “It is done.”

Aleksandr stared in disbelief at the craftsman. “Truly?”

Gregor shrugged. “I was inspired.”

“Hephaestus has favored you, my friend.” Aleksandr extended his arm to Gregor, and they clasped hand to elbow.

“From your mouth to his ears. He always was my favorite. Come find me later?”

Aleksandr inclined his head and watched Gregor walk back towards the fighters gearing up to practice.

The car door clunked shut behind him, and Aleksandr turned to find Kase pulling out two chairs from the rear compartment. Helene had grabbed the large picnic basket and was in the middle of speaking.

“...since we were both *invited* to be here, I offered Arrian a ride.”

“That was *sweet* of you,” Kase replied with a tightly pressed smile, his shoulders shaking.

Helene punched him on the arm. “Jerk. I can be sweet.”

Kase let the laughter out in a burst, backpedaling from her assault. “Truce, truce.”

Helene danced around, waving her free arm. “Victory is mine.”

“Helene,” Aleksandr called to her, stopping her in her tracks.

“Yeah?”

Aleksandr moved to stand next to Kase and wrapped his hand around Kase’s bicep. He arched a brow and gloated, “Spoils of war are mine.”

“Fine,” she pouted. “You can have him. Hey, did Arrian tell you he already found something he wants to do?”

Aleksandr shook his head at another one of Helene’s quick shifts of conversation. Kase turned them towards the archery range, and they walked at Aleksandr’s slow pace. Arrian fell into step beside him.

“It seems your group has need of a bard, and it occurred to me that I have a wealth of stories at my fingertips. Of course, I have my teaching skills to help. Perhaps your members might be interested in learning the Greek language?”

“I don’t know about the language, although it’s possible some people will be interested,” Kase answered, “but the culture and myths, and the Gods, I’m sure they would. There’s been an upsurge lately in learning about the medieval Roman and Greek societies. Your knowledge and resources would be a boon to many researchers.”

Arrian nodded. “Then I’ll be sure to offer whatever I can. By the way, I received a call from the director at The Met.”



Kase, Aleksandr and Helene all turned to look at Arrian. “What did they say?” Kase asked.

The corner of Arrian’s mouth quirked up. “The official line is the statue was removed because they are going to display rotating artifacts from their collection and other countries. They aren’t sure how long they plan on doing this, so ‘Young Hercules’ was pulled from the gallery to make room. It was a spur of the moment decision, and no timetable has been determined on when it will be returned. And that is the explanation they are sticking with.” Arrian shrugged.

Kase let out a loud breath and looked at Aleksandr. “That’s one less thing we have to worry about.”

They stopped beneath the shade of a tall, leafy tree, and Kase began to unfold the chairs when a loud, deep voice boomed.

“Kase! Aleksandr!”

They turned to find Branchus striding across the field towards them. He was dressed in jeans and a Mykonos tee, and had a large leather satchel at his hip, the strap cutting diagonally across his chest.

“Bran? What are you doing here?” Kase asked in disbelief. He shook Branchus’ outstretched hand once the man reached their group.

“I received an invitation.” He grinned broadly.

“You too?” Helene piped up, coming to stand next to Kase.

Branchus inclined his head, then swept up Helene’s hand and bowed low over it. “The Lady Helene, I presume.”

Pink bloomed bright on Helene’s cheeks as she nodded.

“Kase speaks of you often.” He leaned in conspiratorially, but still spoke loud enough for them all to hear. “Usually about how you’ve managed to embarrass him in some awful way. I look forward to hearing more tales... personally.”

“Bran...” Kase groaned. “Really?”

Branchus’ low chuckle rolled over Aleksandr, warming him through and relaxing muscles he had not realized were tense. When the bar owner turned to face him, Aleksandr noted a spark of gold flitting through his amber eyes.

“Hello, Aleksandr. How are you feeling today?” He held out his hand, but Aleksandr gripped him at the elbow instead, as he had done to Gregor. The

demigod had helped him defeat Medon, allowing him to stay mortal and with his love. He'd taken him and Kase into his home after the battle, brought in healers and nursed him back to health. Much still remained to be completed in order for Aleksandr to settle in his new life. Branchus would help him acquire "papers" for his new identity in this world. He would forever be in the seer's debt.

Branchus grasped Aleksandr's forearm and met Aleksandr's gaze with a wide grin.

Aleksandr stepped to the side and indicated Arrian. "Branchus, I would like you to meet my uncle, Arrian."

"I am honored to meet you, *daskalos*," Branchus said, with a slight bow, his eyes again glinting.

Arrian gasped, his eyes widening. "Branchus, as in Apollo's son?"

Branchus inclined his head, stepped closer and lowered his voice. "Father is quite proud of you. Your wealth of knowledge and willingness to share reflects well on him, and you.

"Because of your generosity, we wish to bestow a gift in thanks for your aid to Aleksandr and Kase. A token to ease the pain in your joints. It will not cure your arthritis, but will greatly relieve it. When you need more, inform me, and I will see to it that it is replenished." He reached into the bag at his hip, pulled out a white jar and held it out. Arrian stood speechless, blinking up at Branchus, making no move to take the jar from him.

"*Thios*?" Aleksandr turned a worried eye on his new "uncle."

"A—Ap—" Arrian shook his head then straightened his shoulders. He took a deep breath in, and accepted the jar from Branchus. "Did you say Apollo's proud of me?" he implored, his voice a mere whisper.

Branchus nodded.

Arrian tilted his head back and stared up into the sky. A tiny burst of laughter spilt from his lips. Then another, and another, until pure laughter filled the air. Then silence, only the shaking of Arrian's body as he covered his mouth, tears spilling from his eyes. "Thank you, thank you, Branchus. For the salve, and for proving a crazy old man, sane." He brushed the tears away, his smile brilliant.

Aleksandr's heart warmed to see his uncle happy. He swept his gaze over Kase and Helene's friends. Gregor's wild arm movements caught his eye, and he waved for Aleksandr to come over. Aleksandr raised his hand in reply.

“What does Gregor want?” Kase asked, giving their joined hands a shake before letting go.

“He wishes to speak with me regarding his training.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“No.”

“Damn,” Kase whispered, leaning closer. “I was hoping you’d save me from Helene. She’s gonna keep poking at me to tell her what happened.”

“Tell her, *agápi mou*, but do not let her ‘poke’ you. That is for me to do.”

“And... thank you very much for that image. Now you go see Gregor, and I’ll go think unpleasant thoughts to get my dick to behave.” He reached down and adjusted himself.

Aleksandr snickered and made his way to Gregor. They knelt on the ground, their backs to Kase, and Gregor withdrew the blade from a length of black fabric.

Aleksandr sucked in a quick breath. He took the sword from Gregor’s hands and inspected the etching near the hilt. A stylized representation of Hermes’ caduceus, snakes twisting about a globed staff, lay in gray upon the high metallic shine of blade.

“What do you think?” Gregor asked.

Aleksandr turned his head to look at Gregor, smiling from ear to ear. “Hephaestus has graced you. His hand has touched you, his voice inspired you.”

Gregor rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah, about that. It was crazy.” He rested his hands on his knees. “I was in bed, drifting off, when that design—” he pointed at the sword “—flashed into my head. And I don’t mean part of the design, I mean all of it, like I was staring at a picture on a laptop. I jumped out of bed and sketched it out, then I couldn’t get back to sleep, my mind and body were fired up. I started working on it immediately.

“I don’t know where I got the energy because, over the next few days, I totaled about four hours sleep and only grabbed bites to eat.” He shook his head. “I’ve designed and created swords for years, but this is the first time I’ve submerged into a project like I was... possessed by some...”

He spread his hands out. “I don’t know how to explain it. It was crazy, surreal and wonderful all at the same time.” Gregor let his arms drop back to

rest on his thighs. “If I hadn’t promised this to you, I would keep it for myself.” He smiled clapping Aleksandr on the shoulder. “I know Kase will like it.”

“He will not like it; he will love it,” Aleksandr replied and Gregor laughed. “You have produced another magnificent weapon and are a worthy disciple of Hephaestus. You have my sincerest gratitude.”

“I still think I’m getting the better deal with you tutoring me. Since you aren’t armoring up today, think you can coach me from the sidelines?”

“If you mean, give you instruction from the edge of the list field, then yes, but I would like to present this fine blade to Kase first. I am sure he will want to thank you too.”

“Okay, I’ll do some slow warm-up work with a few of the other fighters. Shall I wrap the sword back up for you?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Gregor rewrapped the weapon, and Aleksandr rose and returned to Kase, carrying it with both hands. Despite his confidence over the gift, Aleksandr’s heart thundered, but not with fear, with excitement.

*Hermes, I pray Kase understands this is more than just a sword.*

Kase eyed him skeptically as he approached, sitting up straighter in his chair. “What’s that?”

Aleksandr stopped in front of Kase’s chair and looked down at his love. Helene sidled up to stand beside Kase. “Helene?”

“What is it?” she asked, bouncing with curiosity.

Aleksandr motioned for her to come forward with a jerk of his head, and when she did he bent close to her ear. “Would you please gather the others around?”

Helene nodded, turned, lifted her fingers to her lips, and let out a high-pitched whistle. Aleksandr flinched at the sound and spotted everyone looking in their direction.

“O’Yea! O’Yea!!” Helene projected her voice for all to hear. “Gather round everyone!” She waved her arms to draw them in.

Aleksandr watched as men and women, old and young, moved towards them. Some were dressed in modern clothing, some in armor or fencing attire. There were quivers on backs, hands filled with helms and embroidery. All came

to hear and see, their voices a cacophony as they talked over each other while forming a wide circle around Aleksandr, Kase and Helene.

“Quiet down, everyone,” Helene shouted. Murmurs settled to silence around Aleksandr: the rustling of the trees and the singing of the birds the only accompaniment to his presentation.

Aleksandr dropped to one knee before Kase and laid the bundle on the ground. With two hands he peeled back the upper flap of cloth. He could sense the crowd shift and move in closer as he unwrapped the weapon. Grabbing the edges of the bottom flap, he slowly pulled it back to reveal the glistening sword, the sun sparkling off the gleaming metal.

A gasp swept through the crowd. Aleksandr slipped one hand beneath the blade and the other beneath the hilt. He lifted it from the cloth, his heart beating wildly in his chest, the heart which Kase held in his hands. *Will he understand?*

Aleksandr lifted his head to meet Kase’s intense gray-eyed gaze. He took a deep breath. “My love, *kardiá mou*, should have a weapon worthy of his strength.” Aleksandr stretched out his arms and presented the sword to Kase, never breaking eye contact.

Kase tilted his head, the corner of his mouth turning up. He rose out of his chair—Helene pulled it out of his way—and knelt down in front of Aleksandr, covering his hands with his own.

Aleksandr stared into Kase’s eyes, and the crowd vanished around him. “I give praise to Hermes, and the Gods and Goddesses who have blessed us and granted me another chance at love. A wish fulfilled, one I thought would never come to pass, a dream come true.”

Kase gazed back at him. “I thank Hermes and the Gods and Goddesses for bringing you to me, and showing me that I could love again.” He tugged Aleksandr forward and kissed him, and a rousing cheer went up around them.

They parted, and Aleksandr knew his happiness mirrored the joy on Kase’s face.

Kase looked down at the sword they held together, inspecting it. He ran his fingertips lightly over the blade and traced the etching. “This is stunning. I’ve never seen a finer sword. Thank you,” he murmured.

Kase relieved Aleksandr of the blade, placed it on the fabric, and moved the bundle to the side. He knee-walked closer, and laid his hands on Aleksandr’s shoulders. He slid one palm up to the side of Alek’s neck, and leaned forward to whisper in his ear, “My sword wasn’t good enough?”

Aleksandr chuckled. “I believe more training is required before I can properly assess your ‘sword’. It will most likely require a lifetime.”

Kase laughed. “Fuck yeah. A lifetime suits me just fine.”

And they sealed the deal with a soul-binding kiss.

\*\*\*\*

The cheers of the people grew quieter as Branchus stepped away and walked to the nearby trees. He’d spotted a lone figure watching the event.

“Uncle, I’m surprised to see you here.” Branchus approached the dark-haired man leaning against a stately oak away from the crowd surrounding Kase and Aleksandr. The man wore blue jeans and a dark-green T-shirt adorned with various coats of arms.

“I wanted to see how Aleksandr fared.”

Branchus huffed. “Is that all?”

Hermes’ eyes sparked with flecks of gold. “You know me well, dear nephew.”

“Millennia,” Branchus replied dryly.

Hermes clapped him on the shoulder, laughing quietly. “Yes, there is more. Do you need any assistance in acquiring the necessary papers for Aleksandr? I want his backstory to be secure, so he will not incur any problems with your mortal government.”

“I have it well in hand but will call on you if I should need your aid. Aleksandr and I have discussed the matter, and he has already taken steps to ensure its success.”

“What will his story be?” Hermes asked.

“A long-lost relative of Arrian’s. He came here from Greece seeking family. He plans on speaking with Arrian, and we believe he will agree to help.”

“Of course, the *daskalos* adores Aleksandr.”

“As do you.”

“I admit I’ve a soft spot in my heart for him. How could I not? He speaks to me daily, I’ve not had that joy in a very long time.”

“And soon others, like Kase and Helene and Arrian.” Branchus caught sight of the *daskalos* seated on a chair, surrounded by children sitting on the grass. He gestured animatedly, and even from this distance, Branchus could hear the

young ones ‘ooh’. “Arrian is wise; the family could learn a thing or two from him,” he commented.

Hermes nodded. “Perhaps we should invite him to join us on Olympus?”

“Not so fast, Uncle. He has family and Aleksandr, and I foresee a long and fruitful life in front of him. One filled with the love of family and friends, world travel and fame for his boundless knowledge of mythology which will experience a surge of interest. He will receive the respect he deserves.”

Hermes sighed and stuck his thumbs in the pockets of his jeans, letting his fingers dangle and strike his upper thigh. “I am happy for him, although I would have enjoyed the *daskalos*’ company. Very well then, much later.”

He looked back towards the crowd and Branchus followed his gaze. “What of Aleksandr and Kase? What do you see for them?”

Branchus stared off into the distance and let the visions pass before him, each as clear and vibrant as the next. “It is as I suspected. The people they touch, and bring into their lives throughout their days, will be blessed by their kindness.”

“And their love?” Hermes asked.

“A love envied and told in tales long after they have joined the stars. An inspiration for lovers. Elysium is already planning a grand party for when they arrive, but they wish Aleksandr and Kase long and joyous lives until it is their time. The Gods and Goddesses owe Aleksandr and Kase many thanks.”

“That we do,” Hermes replied.

“I heard through the family grapevine that you bestowed another gift upon Aleksandr.” Branchus cocked an eyebrow at his Uncle. Hermes could be quite secretive when he wanted to be.

A smirk played on Hermes’ lips. “Yes, I have, or rather will. I was waiting for after today’s ceremony. Call it a ‘joining gift’.” He paused.

“Well? Don’t keep me waiting,” Branchus urged.

Hermes laughed. “I am giving Aleksandr the ability to read English. He deserves far more, but this will make his life easier. He will need it.”

“I’d say ‘Praise, Hermes’ if you weren’t my Uncle,” Branchus replied, “but you already have enough of a swelled head.”

Hermes punched Branchus in the arm. “And that is why you are my favorite nephew. You are never afraid to take me down a peg or two.”

Branchus snorted and turned his attention back to Kase and Aleksandr. Aleksandr and Kase sat in their chairs while Gregor and Jason stood in front of them. The warrior shouted instructions, and his students did their best to follow his commands. They had a way to go, but in the end, they would become two of the best fighters in the society. Branchus still planned on offering Aleksandr a position at Mykonos and any help he needed in adjusting to modern life.

“I think Anteros will approve of the outcome.” Branchus chuckled.

Hermes raised his hands in praise. “And the halls of Olympus will ring with Anteros’ cries of joy rather than his wails of grief for the two lovers.”

Branchus laughed. “Yes indeed, at least until the next fated couple comes along.”

“Please, let me live in my state of bliss for a little while longer.”

Branchus rolled his eyes. “In the meantime, I will leave you with the end of the story as Anteros wishes and how the *daskalos*’ will tell the tale from now on.”

“And what is that, my nephew?”

“The courageous warriors fought the evil Gorgon, defeating it in the end, but not without the near death of the soldier. Only *agápi tis kardiás tou*, his heart’s love, and bravery, saved him. Their souls bound together for all eternity in joy and love, Aleksandr and Kase lived ‘happily ever after’.”

“I approve.” Hermes stepped away from the tree. “A story worthy of the Gods.”

Together they observed the two men—Kase leaning across and kissing Aleksandr—before Hermes turned to Branchus. “I may stop by the club tonight.”

“You know you’re always welcome.”

Hermes nodded and disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Branchus walked back towards the group of reenactors, halting and drawing in a deep breath as another vision slipped past. A smile graced his lips, and he murmured, “Happily ever after.” *As it should be.*

## φινίρισμα

(Finírisma – Finish)



## **The Gods and Demigods: (in order of name appearance)**

*Hermes* – Messenger of the Gods, Son of Zeus, Brother of Aphrodite, Half brother of Apollo, Uncle of Branchus, Nephew of Hades

*Zeus* – God of Sky and Thunder

*Selene* – Goddess of the Moon

*Perseus* – Demigod – Son of Zeus, Slayer of Medusa

*Hypnos* – God of Sleep

*Aphrodite* – Goddess of Love, Beauty, Pleasure and Procreation, Daughter of Zeus, Sister of Hermes, Mother of Eros, Anteros, Pothos and Himeros

*Atë* – Goddess of discord and mischief

*Apollo* – God of Art, Oracles, Archery, Medicine, Sun and Knowledge – Son of Zeus, Half brother of Hermes

*Branchus* – Demigod – Son of Apollo, Nephew of Hermes

*Eros* – God of Love, Son of Aphrodite, Twin brother to Anteros, Brother of Pothos and Himeros

*Anteros* – God of Reciprocal Love and Avenger of Unrequited Love, Son of Aphrodite, Twin brother of Eros

*Pothos* – God of Sexual Longing or Passion, Son of Aphrodite, Brother of Eros, Anteros and Himeros

*Himeros* – God of Sexual Desire and Unrequited Love, Son of Aphrodite, Brother of Eros, Anteros and Pothos

*Hades* – God of the Underworld, Brother of Zeus, Uncle to Hermes

*Hephaestus* – God of Blacksmiths, Sculptors, Metallurgy

## **Inspirational Playlist**

David Cook – “Wicked Game” (Before our story begins – Taras)

Howie Day – “Collide” (Chapter 25 – Rooftop – Aleksandr and Kase)

Ed Sheeran – “Kiss Me” (Chapter 26 – First slow dance – Aleksandr and Kase)

Lifehouse – “Hanging By A Moment” (Chapter 32 – Mykonos)

Savage Garden – “Truly, Madly, Deeply” (Chapter 32 – Second slow dance – Aleksandr and Kase)

Three Days Grace – “Pain” (Chapter 32 – Rooftop – Medon)

Jason Mraz – “I’m Yours” (Chapter 47 – Rooftop – Kase and Aleksandr)

Breaking Benjamin – “Dance with the Devil” (Chapter 47 – Rooftop – Medon)

Savage Garden – “Truly, Madly, Deeply” (Chapter 47 – Rooftop – Kase and Medon)

The Dark Knight Rises Soundtrack – “Main Theme” (Chapters 48 and 49 – Rooftop battle – Aleksandr, Kase and Medon)

American Authors – “Best Day of My Life” (Epilogue – Aleksandr and Kase – Alexis’ choice)

Beatles – “Here Comes the Sun” (Epilogue – Kase and Alek – KC’s choice)

Enya – “Echoes in Rain” (Epilogue – Hermes and Branchus)

## Author Bio

### KC Faelan

*KC is a writer of M/M and LGBT Fiction. Her stories are character driven, with a touch of humor, romance, and all the fun that entails. She believes in HEAs, or at least a strong HFN, where the characters in her stories must work for their HEA, but in the end get their love match. KC loves food and will often incorporate scenes of cooking or eating in the stories she writes. She enjoys relaxing with a good book, her favorite genre being M/M, but she reads many others, such as: Fantasy, Paranormal and Sci-Fi.*

*This year she contributed two stories in the Love is an Open Road event, the other being Top Floor, a story set in the 1920s. Metamorphic Heart is the first book she's cowritten.*

*KC lives in Northern California with her husband and two rescue birds.*

*Also by K.C. Faelan:*

*If At First You Don't Succeed*

*A Little Christmas Magic*

*Aligning North*

*Top Floor*

### Alexis Woods

*Me? Well, I do a bit of everything. Read, write and beta top the list, of course. I'm a licensed drug-pusher by day, and a homework checker by night to three amazing children. If I'm lucky, my husband lays off the gaming soon enough in the evenings to crawl into bed and snuggle up for back rubs. I recreate the medieval ages with the Society of Creative Anachronism and guide young ladies on their path to become leaders with the Girl Scouts.*

*It has been one incredible year since I participated in last year's Don't Read in the Closet with Starlight and Constellation: Gemini. Opening Day, the first M/M story I ever wrote, was published along with two more to create my Southern Jersey Shores series and Lion's Hero, a YA angel/human Chanukah story. Follow-up stories are in the works.*

*The most amazing part of all of this: the friends I've made around the world: South Africa, Romania, Australia, Sweden and Great Britain. And those far across the United States: from my home in southern New Jersey clear to the*

*North, South, and West with many inbetween. A true four corners, full of color and life.*

*Additional Titles:*

*Southern Jersey Shores series:* Opening Day, Evading Exodus, Ultimate Summer

*Chosen Angels series:* Lion's Hero

*Free to read:* Starlight and Constellation: Gemini (*by request, GR members only*) and MOONDRAKE

## **Contact & Media Info**

*KC Faelan*

[Email](#) | [Blog](#) | [Goodreads](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Pinterest](#)

*Alexis Woods*

[Email](#) | [Goodreads](#) | [Google+](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Pinterest](#)