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GODS AND FROGS OH MY!



CRYMSYN HART

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Gods and Frogs, Oh My!
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GODS AND FROGS, OH MY!

BY

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Prologue

“Are you thinking about the orange penis you conjured again?”

Kalliope turned from the window and looked at Morgaine. She was petite, hardly more than five two, with long, dark hair and piercing green eyes. Those eyes held a lot of wisdom Kalliope was trying to learn. She had met the sorceress when her coven sisters brought her over to the apartment. Morgaine had been disguised as the Goth chick from hell. After the circle, Kalliope had lost a batch of candles due to some unknown explosion. She was still scraping bits of wax off the ceiling from that night. Once the sorceress had helped her hone her magick, they had become fast friends. “What? No! I was not thinking about Lugh,” she replied.

“I didn’t ask you about Lugh. See! You’re not paying attention to me again!”

“I was too—I-I was just thinking. Did you ask me about an orange? I thought you were showing me astrology.”

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Morgaine threw up her hands. “I’m trying, but you’re still discovering ways at being a magickal pain in my ass.”

“I can’t help it if my brain doesn’t wrap around the movements of the planets. I’m lucky I passed Math 101 in college.” Kalliope studied the starcharts laid out on the table. They were gibberish to her. All the lines, mapping the constellations and planets, appeared to be some 3-D picture. When she was a kid, math was her worst subject. She was a whiz at making candles and crafts, which was how she made her living, but anything technical was way beyond her scope.

“None of this makes any sense. Why do I need to learn this again?” She swept her arm over the diagrams.

“Any good witch needs to know the movements of the stars, especially now that you’re a full fledged witch.”

Kalliope stared at Morgaine. Now that she was magickal, every imp, fairy, troll, etc. in the world was knocking on her door for something or other. Thank God she had an ex-goddess living with her to fend them off.

“Are the stars going to predict when I’m going to have some free time? Can they tell me when I’ll have time to do my hair again?”

Morgaine glanced at her. “Any dye job you get won’t cover up the red. You’re magickal now. Unless you want to do a glamour on your hair, it’s not going to change by any mortal

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means. Besides, the red looks good on you. I thought Lugh liked it.”

“Great. There goes all the hair dye I just bought. He does, but —”

“Oh no! It can’t be!” Morgaine’s finger traced over a line connecting two planets.

When Kalliope took a closer look, the map burst into flames. “I didn’t do it. I swear,” she said, fanning away the smoke away. The drawing was a complete loss. Nothing else on the table was touched.

“I know you didn’t. At least you’ve gotten past the point that whenever you cast spells something explodes.”

“What was that all about?”

Morgaine grabbed an oversized book and flipped through the brittle pages. She laid it flat on the table and ran her finger over an entry. The words rearranged themselves into English. She read the entry over the sorceress’s shoulder. A short paragraph told about the Furies, goddesses who were imprisoned in the Underworld. If unleashed, they spilled wrath on those who broke natural law. Underneath the entry was a picture of women with big bat wings, serpents for hair, and the feet of a dog. “Those chicks look *real* friendly. Who are they?”

Morgaine closed the book. “They’re bad news. That’s what. Nothing you have to worry about.”

“But—”

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“Why don’t we forget about the astrology for now and focus on your spell casting?”

“You know I hate to do spells.”

“What kind of a witch hates to do spells? What’s the point of you having magick? I give up!” The sorceress grabbed the book and walked out of the room. The air rippled where she disappeared. Probably back to her apartment in the real world. Kalliope went to follow.

“You rang?”

Kalliope turned to the familiar voice to find Lugh, naked as usual and very happy to see her. She giggled and thanked the gods for the fiery accident that drove Morgaine away and summoned the sun god.

“When will you ever cover that thing up?” she asked, forgetting about the debacle with her friend.

“You know you love it!” Lugh gave her one of his beaming smiles, almost blinding her. The god took her in his arms and kissed her. Once their lips touched, warmth flooded her system. Her toes curled. She had to pull away to keep from being overwhelmed. He put a whammy on her every time he caressed her. She had to concentrate not to tumble into an orgasm. She looked up at him, breathless, feeling flushed.

“You have *got* to stop doing that!”

“Doing what?” He innocently batted his eyes at her.

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She hit him lightly on the chest, making the god smile even more. Before she knew it, Kalliope was falling and landing atop something luxuriously soft. When she looked around, she was surrounded by mounds of pillows. Lugh loved to wow her. Knowing him he had conjured them out of thin air. A shiver ran through her when her clothes vanished making her naked as well.

“You just love doing that to me, don’t you?”

“Oh yes,” he whispered against the curve of her neck.

“And so much more.”

What am I going to do with you? she thought.

Anything you want, he answered.

CHAPTER ONE

“Aaachoo!” Kalliope sneezed. There was slight vibration underneath her. *That’s strange. Did the couch just jump?*

“Bless you,” said one of the expectant mothers sitting next to her.

“Thanks.” She dabbed her nose.

Theresa caught Kalliope’s eye and smiled sympathetically. She took in the eight women who were all very pregnant, each one of them ready to pop, including Theresa.

Her best friend had come to her at the last minute, saying her shop was still drying from paint and the fumes would knock out the other women. Home wasn’t good either because Stan was having poker night, which would turn into the boys playing drunken twister and ending up passed out in Theresa’s clothes and makeup. She couldn’t turn down her coven sister/best friend. Not when Kalliope was the backup if Theresa went into labor. She even had a small suitcase of her friend’s stuff in her car, just in case.

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Kalliope tried to smile at her friend who came back into the living room carrying the third refill tray of goodies which included chocolate, pickles, whipped cream, peanut butter covered bananas, and sardines. *Yuck!* The combination turned her stomach. From the amount the women ate, it was a good thing her kitchen magickally self-stocked itself because of Lugh. If she wanted anything, all she had to do was write it on the list on the fridge and it showed up. Okay, some things were still screwy. She never wound up with her favorite ice cream, which was chocolate chocolate chip cookie dough. The invisible grocer gave her chocolate chip instead. Kalliope wasn't complaining.

“So ladies, does everyone have their nurseries ready to go?” Theresa set down the tray.

“Oh yeah. Mine is all done in blue with white, puffy clouds.”

“Mine is Disney. What's yours, Theresa?”

“Aaachoo!” Kalliope sneezed again.

“I think the baby kicked.”

“Yeah mine too.” There were other agreeing nods from the group.

Her eyes widened when she spied the chair next to her floating with a pregnant woman in it who didn't seem to notice she was a few inches off the ground. Theresa followed Kalliope's gaze. The chair fell.

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“Wow, those pickles must be getting to the baby,” said the resident of the chair when it landed.

Theresa grabbed Kalliope and dragged into her bedroom. “Excuse me, ladies. Help yourself to the goodies.” The snacks were already half gone.

“Kal, is there something you’re not telling me?” Theresa asked, sitting down on the bed.

Kalliope took a tissue from her bureau and blew her nose. “Nope. Nothing that I can think of.”

“So, the chair levitated all on its own without you knowing about it?”

“Thanks, Ter! You think I made it hover on purpose? Yes. I really want to scare a bunch of pregnant women who are eating me out of house and home. No offense.”

“Sorry. I thought you had the magick stuff under control. None of your spells are exploding again, are they?” Theresa patted her belly.

After three miscarriages, Theresa was finally having a baby. Her New Age shop was booming. Now that Kalliope was a witch, the magick rubbed off on her coven sisters also. This would explain why Anna and Adele had both won two-week vacations to Mexico on different radio stations and ended up at the same hotel.

“So if this wasn’t planned, what’s causing it?”

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Kalliope shrugged. “Achoo.” At the end of the sneeze, the bed drifted off the ground before landing with a loud thud.

“I think you’re coming down with something. Has Lugh been taking you skinny dipping again?”

Kalliope blushed. “He—we—yes, but only for a little bit last night. I had to get out of the water because I thought something bit me. Lugh swore there was no fish, but something nibbled my butt.”

“I’m sure that something *bit* you all right. It’s the *love* bug! When are we going to meet him anyway?”

Kalliope went to sneeze again. The bed shuddered. She stopped the sneeze and looked innocently at her friend. Theresa let out a sigh. “You will. I promise. He just—it’s hard to get him in clothes. Besides—”

“He likes to keep you all to himself. At least he’s not like Quince. Did I tell you he came into the shop the other day?”

“Was he with the tits with legs?”

Her friend nodded.

“Great. Glad to hear the ass is doing well. Yes, I think you’re right. I’m coming down with some-some-achhoo!” Kalliope sniffled. This time her whole bedroom suite rose about a foot off the ground. It shook the apartment when it landed.

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“I’m going to get the girls and tell them you aren’t feeling well. I don’t think they would understand levitating furniture. God forbid me trying to explain your re-stocking kitchen cabinets.”

“Thanks, Theresa. I’m sorry. I guess when witches get sick, funky things start to happen. I’ll ask Flidais when she gets back from Avalon. How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay. She’s kicking up a storm today. I can’t wait. I-I—” Her friend broke into tears. Kalliope gave her a hug. She knew how long and hard Theresa had tried for their child.

“I know, hon. Everything will be fine. I promise. I’ll make sure there will be fairies there when you bring them home. How does that sound?”

“I thought you said fairies were nasty little creatures with furry tails.”

“Okay, so I’ll get something else for the babies. Promise. You name it. I’ll get it.”

“You’re serious.”

Kalliope nodded.

“Hmm. I’ll have to think of something good. And why do you keep on insisting I’m having twins? You’ve seen the sonograms. There is only *uno*. Only one baby.”

“I’m just telling you what I see. You got two buns in your oven. I don’t care what the docs are telling you.”

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“Whatever. Crazy.” Her friend got up off the bed and headed out the door. In a few minutes, Kalliope heard the group waddling out, and her front door closed.

Once the latch clicked, Kalliope let out another sneeze. When the bed landed, a tingle seized her back. She had to bite her lip because she was flushed. When she felt her forehead, she wasn’t hot. Her body craved Lugh in a very naughty way that would make her do erotic things to him.

In her mind, she took his engorged manhood between her lips. He moaned low in his throat while her tongue stroked his silky shaft. He tensed against her. She grabbed the round muscles of his butt. Right when he was about to come, she gave him one last, long, tantalizing lick, tracing the enlarged vein of his penis. Then she released him from her mouth, leaving him on the brink of wanting her so badly it hurt. After she stood, she gently took his bottom lip between her teeth and sucked on it until her tongue met his. His hands were all over her. But she wasn’t going to give herself over to him easily. He would have to work for her returned affection. His hands would worship her body, while his tongue explored all her secret temples.

Kalliope swallowed hard. The more she fantasized about Lugh, the more her lust burned through her. Sitting on the bed, her head spun. Her whole body lit up where Lugh had stroked her in the past. Phantom echoes of his caresses

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fired up her skin. Her nose was stuffy. She wanted to sneeze again. The need for Lugh overwhelmed her senses. If she didn't have him soon, she would ignite from the burn.

Kalliope curled up in a ball, not able to take the agony. She bit her lip. "Lugh, I need you." Her body's desires inundated her. She clutched the sheet to her chest and nearly found herself in tears from the craving coursing through her.

"And I need you too," he whispered against her ear.

She turned in the bed. There was the sun god. Hair the color of autumn and bright green eyes met her gaze. He was sculpted in all the right places, and her body fit against his. They were made for one another. She wrapped her arms around his neck and locked her lips locked to his. Her hands searched his body until they reached his butt, which she squeezed. It took a moment for the god to respond. When he did, it was with the intensity she was going after him with. She didn't have to say what she desired because he knew everything she thought. *Why am I acting so wantonly?*

All Kalliope could think of was getting him deep inside of her until his power lit her up from the inside out. One touch, at the base of her spine, blasted open her chakra points, filling her mind with the power of the universe. From the moment he entered her, she let out a primal, deep throated scream. The need she had for him was completed. Her

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whole body was a lightning rod for his touch. In one long wave, an orgasm ripped through her.

Lugh looked down at her while he rested on his elbow. After catching her breath, Kalliope looked back at him. “What?”

He smiled. “Nothing. It’s just...you’ve never been so aggressive.”

“Is that such a bad thing?”

“I didn’t say that. It’s just different. Is everything okay?”

Kalliope sat up. When she did, she felt better. *Weird*. “Yeah. I thought I was coming down with something, but I guess I’m better now.” She leaned in and kissed him again. “How are things with you?”

“They’re good, but even better when I’m with you. Kalli, you’ve bewitched me. None of the others I’ve been with compare to you. When I’m not with you, I want to be. I want you all to myself. I know that’s wrong, but I crave you. Do you feel the same way for me?”

“You know I do.”

Lugh kissed her, catching her tongue with the tip of his. His fingers traced designs over the expanse of her stomach, tickling her. Kalliope squirmed underneath him. Finally, he broke the kiss so she could catch her breath. “You’re such a tease!”

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“I know. Dagda sends his love. He says he wants you to sneak him in some coffee next time you have a chance. He says life is awfully boring without you there to cheer him up.”

Kalliope couldn't help but giggle. Dagda was Lugh's grandfather and another walking dreamboat. He was also addicted to caffeine. Whenever he got some, he went completely bonkers. He was the leader of all the Celtic Gods. Before Kalliope had met Lugh, she was a regular pagan who believed in more than one god. She was never specific as to what pantheon she summoned into her circles, be it Celtic, Greek, Egyptian, or whatever. She went with the flow of the ritual.

“I don't think that would be a good idea. I don't want to be blamed for him turning into a palm tree. I'm still the talk of the magickal realm from eating those three Oak Apples. All I *need* is to do something else and have other gods on my ass.”

“Speaking of apples. Are you hungry?” Lugh asked.

Kalliope nodded. She was ravenous. The more she thought about it, the more the witch realized she was starving for Lugh. She could go another twenty rounds and not feel satisfied by him. That was very, very strange. She shook it off and followed the god into the kitchen, deciding not to put on her robe. She was getting used to the naked thing with Lugh. However, it was still *very* distracting. Her eyes never strayed

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from either his perfectly rounded derriere or his magnificent anatomy.

Kalliope was in heaven with her lover. Her ex, Quince, was never comfortable with himself. All he wanted to do was please others—which was why he started boffing the tits with legs. It had broken Kalliope's heart to walk in on the two of them performing the nasty in her bed. Thank God she didn't have to worry about him anymore.

Lugh opened her fridge and pulled out a tray of chocolate covered strawberries she knew were not in their before. The fruits were bigger than her hand, and the tray was pure gold. The stem and the green leaves peeked out from under the mixtures of dark, white, and milk chocolate. She couldn't resist licking her lips.

“Where did they come from?”

The god grinned mischievously. “I happen to know the grocer.”

He put the tray down. Before she could protest, he hoisted her up, and flung her over his shoulder. With his other hand he grabbed the tray again. She started beating his back with her fists while he carried her into the bedroom.

“Oh help! Please, help me! Someone is trying to kidnap me,” she yelled weakly.

Lugh said nothing. He was about to drop her onto the bed. A tickle started in her nose. She tried to hold it. It

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was no use. She sneezed. In that moment, her whole apartment trembled like a mini-quake had hit it. The bed lifted off the ground a foot. The sudden movement of furniture and the levitating bed threw the god off balance. He stumbled. The strawberries scattered all over the carpet. Kalliope was pitched headfirst onto the covers slamming her forehead hard enough to see stars. These were not the good kind he normally made her see.

“Are you okay?” asked Lugh.

She rubbed her head, noticing the bed was still floating and her carpet was strewn with strawberries. However, the other furniture was not. A wave of pleasure overtook her. Instead of answering Lugh, she forced his lips to hers. He tried to pull away. The more she kissed him, the more her lust grew. Her condition was getting worse. Sweat broke out on her body. She yearned for Lugh to be deep inside of her again. Nothing else mattered. One hand let go of his chin and trailed down to his hard member. She began to stroke it. Lugh forgot about his question and kissed her back. The pain in Kalliope’s head faded to a dull ache. Her body craved to be touched. It hungered for an orgasm. Lugh slid inside of her slick depths. All she needed was a couple of strokes and she would be sated.

“Ahem.”

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Kalliope thought she heard something. She ignored it. She was so close. Lugh's tongue circled her nipples. His fingers fondled her flesh lightly from her rear up along her torso. The friction between them was building. Her muscles were tensing. The sudden heat that had risen was almost as intense as Lugh's power, but this was something else. It was wanton, primal. *Oh God, just one more stroke.*

“Can't you guys get a room? Ick!”

Lugh stopped kissing Kalliope. She was lost in her daze. After a moment realizing nothing was happening, she opened her eyes and sneezed. The bed crashed to the floor, causing their unexpected visitor to jump back. Lugh fell on top of her.

“We had a room until *you* interrupted us. What do you want?” Kalliope asked. Anger tore through her. This was not the best time for them to have an uninvited guest.

Lugh got off of her and handed her a sheet. Kalliope stared at her ex-roommate. He had dirt brown skin, matted dark green hair and a long, pencil thin nose with three warts on the end of it. The goblin's eyes were almond shaped and vibrant electric blue. He had sharp pointed teeth and long, thin fingers matching his nose. For years, she thought he was a poltergeist the way he rearranged her pots and pans until Lugh had allowed Kalliope to see him.

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“Tickleberry, what are you doing here?” She wrapped the sheet around her. She was shivering and feeling feverish. *I really gotta be coming down with something. The floating furniture and the gratuitous behavior must be a side effect. I’ve never had this happen before. I’ve gotten hot and bothered over men, but nothing like this. I keep thinking of Lugh being an entrée. Come to momma. Screw the goblin; I need me a man—No. This is worse than the need for chocolate. I’ll have to ask Morgaine about it the next time I see her. Maybe it’s a common symptom in magickal beings.*

None of the beings she knew ever got sick. Even her ex-goddess turned human roommate, Flidais, hadn’t gotten a cold. Dagda had banished Flidais because the goddess had originally given Kalliope the apples that made her magickal. In order for her to rejoin the gods, she needed to eat five Oak Apples. Lugh had now given the ex-goddess three of the five apples she needed. In her heart, Kalliope figured Dagda loved Flidais and wanted her back. However, pride and supreme law of the gods made him follow protocol.

The goblin hopped up on the bureau to scrutinize himself in the mirror. He licked his hand before smoothing it over his dark green hair. “Dagda wants to see you.”

“Go back and tell Dagda I’m busy.” Lugh turned to Kalliope and kissed the exposed skin of her shoulder.

She started to relax and drift away in Lugh’s embrace as if she were in a warm bubble bath. *Calgon, take me away!*

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“Excuse me.”

She opened her eyes while picturing horrible things being inflicted on the goblin. Instead of seeing him chopped into little pieces, he floated and started laughing hysterically. He rolled around on his back in mid-air while holding one of the lost strawberries.

“Kalli,” Lugh’s voice broke her concentration. The goblin tumbled to the ground. Several of the fruits cushioned his fall with a squish.

“What?” she grumbled.

“Magick doesn’t work that way. It can, but you have to have an evil heart. You, love, don’t have one to kill or hurt anyone. Even Ickleberry. I know how you feel, though. I was just getting started.”

She sighed. It was obvious Ickleberry was not going anywhere. “What do you want? I suggest you tell me before I get the heart to kill you.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time...”

“What did you say?” the witch asked.

“Nothing.” The goblin picked a few seeds from his teeth. “Look, I wouldn’t have come here at all, but Dagda thought it would be a good idea for you to see a familiar face. I’m doing him a favor. I was getting bored at my new pad since the tenants are gone. I’m getting hungry. Do you have any Chinese food in that magick fridge of yours? These ber-

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ries are too sour for my taste. Hey, Lugh, can you whip me up some Peking Duck?”

“Ickleberry. Enough. Focus. Please. I’ll take you to China so you can dumpster dive if you want. What does my grandfather want?” Lugh asked.

The goblin crossed his arms over his chest. “He wants the witch. Says it’s time for her to make good on her promise.”

Kalliope looked between the two of them. A feeling of dread washed over her. Before it set, she sneezed. This time the whole apartment shook. The bed jumped almost to the ceiling. “Oh boy!”

CHAPTER TWO

“Kalli, love. Are you okay?” The bed slammed to the floor.

She wiped her hand across her nose. The god handed her a tissue. “I think I’m getting sick.”

“I figured that. Why don’t you lie down, and I’ll get you some chicken soup.” Lugh started to tuck her in, but Kalliope was overtaken by another bout of lust. She pulled him down on top of her. He didn’t seem to mind when she kissed him deeply. His hands began to wander underneath the sheet.

“Humans are so annoying. Universe to Lugh! Dagda wants her now! I won’t have his wrath on me!”

The god gave the goblin a dirty look. “Obviously, she is not herself. I don’t think it’s a good idea for her to go.”

“Lugh, I have to,” Kalliope protested.

“No. You don’t.”

“Yes, I do. I’ll be fine. Promise.” She pushed him off her and stood up on wobbly feet. Dizziness overtook her.

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Whatever the illness was, it was hitting her fast. Her body burned with fever. She even found herself eying Ickleberry.

Ennn! But it has possibilities. No, that is disgusting! What am I thinking! Thinking about the goblin, in a sexual way was not appealing. Kalliope would do what she needed for Dagda and then come back and convalesce with Lugh many, many, *many* times!

“I’m taking a shower first. Who knows how long I’ll be gone.”

The goblin protested. The grin on Lugh’s face got bigger by the second. “Lugh, sweetie. I’m going this one alone. Can you be a dear and clean up the strawberries please?” Lugh’s expression reminded her of a crushed child who found out ice cream was gone forever. She turned to Ickleberry. “You. Deal with it!”

Kalliope hurried out of the bedroom and into the bathroom. There she found some out of date cold medicine, but it was better than nothing. Hopefully, it would fight her unusual symptoms. She turned the water on and jumped into the stream. Once she lathered her hair, she sneezed. The water separated around her and the shower curtain fell down. She sniffled, not caring that the water was going everywhere. If she didn’t go, Dagda would come get her. After seven months, he finally wanted her to make good on the deal she had struck.

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After getting the soap from her eyes, she wrapped her hair in a towel and looked at the mess in her bathroom. Water had pooled on the floor. Her shower curtain was half in the toilet. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. In her mind, she pictured the bathroom the way it was: clean, dry, and perfect. She held the image in her mind. Power built up inside of her. It felt like she would sneeze again. The energy shot down her right hand. Once the energy departed, she opened her eyes and was amazed.

It had worked. The floor was perfectly dry. The toilet seat was back down and shower rod free. Even the curtain hung back in place, but it was not the one she had started with. Replacing the nice, black, thick plastic one was a clear plastic curtain. Adorning the curtain were green dancing frogs with red umbrellas.

You've got to be kidding! Whoever is up there, you've got to be kidding! Kalliope had an aversion to frogs. She wasn't afraid of them. She just didn't like them. Even Kermit the Frog gave her the willies. The curtain was the exact one she had sacrificed when she had called 911 on Lugh the night he first appeared naked in her bed.

Magick was fickle. Now it was playing a practical joke on her. Kalliope closed her eyes again, envisioning her black curtain. The power built and left her. She heard the rustling of the shower hooks against the metal rod. When she opened

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her eyes, the shower curtain was still there, but the frogs were doing something different. Their umbrellas were over their opposite shoulders and their free hands were—

They can't be, she thought. She stepped closer and rubbed her eyes. *I'll be damned*. The frogs were flipping her off.

“Ribbit.”

She pulled the curtain back and peered in the tub. Inside was a green bullfrog the size of a small dog holding a red umbrella in its fingers. Kalliope shut her eyes, thinking she was hallucinating. When she opened them again, she was peering into the bulging eyes of the largest frog she had ever seen.

“Hey toots. How they hanging?” The frog leaped on to the edge of the tub and sized her up. She felt dirty from his once over.

“What’s the matta? Don’t ya like what ya see? Come here, babe, and give me some suga’ on these luscious lips o’mine.”

Kalliope turned and hightailed it out of the bathroom. The magickally conjured frog could wait. She could fix it, or ask Morgaine to help her fix it later. Right now she had to get to Dagda because the god was not going to wait for her. She just ho—

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“A-aa-achho!” All her living room furniture jumped about a foot. Maybe the cold medicine was kicking it. She hoped so.

“Bless ya!” she heard the echo from the bathroom.

She didn’t answer, but returned to her bedroom to find Lugh flipping absently through the television channels. Ickleberry rifled through her sock draw. As requested there was no evidence of the strawberries on her carpet.

“I don’t have any odd ones. Your brother is on his own.”

The goblin smiled at her innocently. He tucked something into his pants. She bet it was a pair of her blue socks. It had better not be her favorite pair. “You ready?”

She pulled on some jeans and was about to put on a t-shirt when she saw Ickleberry shaking his head out of the corner of her eye.

“What?”

“I think Ickleberry is trying to say what you’re wearing is not presentable to stand in the presence of a god.”

Her eyes narrowed. She tried to be mad at Lugh, but couldn’t. But she did muster a little annoyance. “I wear this with you and you don’t complain.”

Lugh smiled. “I never grumble about what you do and do not wear. Since this is official business, I think this would be more appealing.”

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Lugh snapped his fingers before she could protest. In a blink, Kalliope was attired in a deep green dress. The neckline plunged to the top of her breasts leaving her arms bare. The material fell in folds to her knees. Her feet were adorned with soft sandals with laces wrapping around her calves. On her right arm were the three snake bracelets Morgaine had given to her. Her hair was pulled away from her face and fell in ringlets around her shoulders. A fine silver chain with a crimson stone hung around her neck. When her fingers moved over the stone's smooth surface, it was warm and pulsed.

"Do you like it?" asked Lugh while he fingered the stone.

Kalliope smiled and entwined her fingers with his. "It's beautiful. What kind of stone is it?"

"It's not a stone. It's a piece of my heart." Lugh studied her reflection. Gone was the fun loving god she was used to. His eyes gazed intently into hers. Kalliope realized he was telling the truth. She turned in his embrace.

"You mean that?"

"Oh yes. You're always with me, Kalli. I want you to know that I'm always with you no matter where I am." He leaned in and kissed her.

"What do you mean?" she asked him when they broke the kiss.

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“I’m concerned about what Dagda wants from you. Sometimes his requests are nothing more than getting him some obscure coffee made in Antarctica. Or it could be worse. I want you to know I’ll always be there to protect you even if I can’t be. If you need to, place your hand over the stone and think of me. The power will be there.”

“All this lovey feely crap is about to make me barf. Are you ready?” Ickleberry asked.

Kalliope sniffled and rechecked herself in the mirror once more. “You made me look like a Greek goddess.”

“Greek, Roman, whatever. You’re always a goddess in my eyes. Besides, I was hoping, when you get back, we could go to Mount Olympus. I want you to meet Apollo. He’d love you. You remember all the fun we had the last time we were there. You were wonderful. If I remember, you took to it like a wild nymph.”

His hand caressed her breast through the thin material. Her nipple hardened. A small flush of lust moved through her. Her body pressed against his perfectly. Yup, the cold medicine was kicking in because she did not feel compelled to throw him down on the bed, and lather him with whip cream which she would clean up very slowly with her tongue. She kissed him quickly and reluctantly pulled away.

“Hey toots. You ain’t leavin’ without me are ya?”

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She turned to the doorway. The bullfrog had gotten rid of the umbrella and waited for her expectantly.

“What is that?” asked Lugh.

“I’ll tell you later.”

The frog hopped in her way. “What are ya waitin’ for? Let’s go.”

She shrugged, picked up the amphibian, and held him under her arm. She tried to repress a shiver.

“Oh, babe, a frog could get used ta this!”

Lugh peered down at the frog. “Don’t get any ideas! Understand!”

“Ribbit.”

Kalliope shivered from touching the bullfrog and followed the goblin into her closet.

CHAPTER THREE

Once she stepped over the threshold, a gust of warm air and the aroma of flowers greeted her. It was a smell she remembered from being imprisoned in the Oak Tree months ago. Once she got used to the light, she put the heavy frog down and looked around. The wall she stepped through was already re-carving another scene instead of her bedroom. The magickally self-playing harp plucked *Back in the Saddle Again* by Aerosmith. The harp had a sense of humor. She had hoped Dagda would forget about the deal she had struck with him. It was pointless because Flidais ended up a mortal anyway. Now whatever Dagda wanted her to do, she would. No questions asked. Well, maybe a few.

Kalliope looked up at the chandelier overhead. Vines had woven together with lily trumpets acting for the lights. Fairies, with their long, squirrel-tails, swung from the vines. The throne was made from wood. The head of a stag with a large rack of antlers adorned the top of it. The King Stag. That was what Dagda was. And with that thought, he ap-

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peared in the throne. His hair was dark brown with red and gold leaves woven into it. His beard was short and shot through with green moss. He was tan, sculpted, shirtless, and dressed in dark red leather pants. When she had first met him, he was turning cartwheels and bouncing off the walls because he was coming down off a caffeine high. Now he seemed more composed.

“It’s about time, Ickleberry. I sent you to get her hours ago.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t pull her away from Lugh. They seemed to be joined at the hip. But here she is.”

“I can see that. Thank you.” He dismissed the goblin. With a pop, Ickleberry disappeared back to wherever he was haunting now. Kalliope was glad the goblin wasn’t waking her up at six in the morning with the banging of rearranging her pots and pans.

“You rang.” She felt a sneeze coming on, but the instinct was suppressed. Thank God for that. She didn’t want anything levitating in front of Dagda. He stood silently, sizing her up. He ran a finger along her cheek. Before Kalliope had eaten the magick apples, she would have melted in a puddle at his touch. Now she hardly blinked.

“Sorry, Dagda. Not gonna work.”

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“Damn! A man can try, can’t he?” He grinned and then threw his arms around her, giving her a crushing, bear hug. She could barely breathe from the force of his grip.

The god backed off with an obvious pout. This was the god she knew. The one who was slightly child-like but definitely a hunk in his own right. Kalliope looked him in the eyes, not daring to examine anything below the waist that demanded her attention from the bulge in his pants. Her face flushed red when she let her eyes drift.

“Oh, Kalli, things have been so dull these past months without you here. And you brought me a present too. Goodie!” He clapped his hands together and picked up the frog. “I haven’t had frog legs in forever.”

The frog paled to a shade of pea green. Kalliope couldn’t help but laugh.

“What do you think?” Dagda asked.

“I’m not sure. I was never much a fan for frog legs. I hear they taste like chicken though.”

The god looked at her strangely and then it dawned on him. “No. Not to eat. What do you think about the new look?” He gestured to his lower half.

She glanced down. Instead of the red leather pants, he now stood on two frog legs. “Umm. Yeah, well it works. I guess. Now, what did you want with me? I was busy with Lugh.”

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He hopped over and handed her the frog. “I think this belongs to you. He has the feel of your magick. He’s your first familiar. That’s wonderful!”

“My familiar? I thought witches had cats, rats, owls, or something furry. Not frogs.”

“There ain’t nothin’ wrong with me, toots. I can’t help it if ya don’t appreciate frogs. Aren’t we handsome devils, Your Eminence?” the frog said.

“Oh, you flatter me. What’s your name?”

“Humphrey.”

“That is a noble name for a frog. You’ll do well as Kalli’s familiar. Did you know she’s the first witch her world and this one have seen in centuries? You should treat her with respect and if need be, sacrifice your life for her.”

“Hey, enough frog god bonding. I’m still here. I really want to back to Lugh. So, please tell me what kind of hare-brained scheme you have cooking for me.” Kalliope stamped her foot to get his attention.

“Gees. Fine. Women!” The god sat back in his throne, crossing his frog legs over one another. Kalliope tried not to flinch. “I summoned you for a mission. You must go to Mount Olympus and do whatever Zeus desires. I don’t want to bother doing it myself. Those Olympians can be such pests. They think they’re all important because they were written and sung about more. They have a complex because

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Hollywood has made more movies about them. What is up with that? Don't the directors know I'm a fine specimen? You know I've always fancied Gene Wilder playing me. What do you think?"

"Sure. I guess. So, you just want me to go and see what Zeus wants? Dagda, we never agreed on loaning me out. I'm not going." She turned and made it to the re-carving wall. When she touched it, the wall stayed solid. A thunderclap rolled overhead. It started misting. Kalliope turned to see Dagda had grown serious. His color was ashen and his skin had hardened with a faint sheen making it glossy. She had pressed the wrong button. Angering Dagda was not a smart move. She had seen firsthand what he could do. He had destroyed Cromm and banned Nas from his sight. Kalliope wondered where the shamed goddess was.

"You *will* do whatever I say. You are indebted to me. I will loan *you* out to whomever and do whatever I want with you. Just because you're Lugh's latest paramour don't think you can walk away from me and get out of the deal we made. You are very wrong. Kalliope, I enjoy your company. I don't want to see anything happen to you. My grandson loves you. That much is clear, but his heart can change in a split second. You're not the first human lover he's had over the years. Now you are part of my extended family. Even if you do part ways, you'll always be welcome here. You ate three apples

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from the Sacred Oak Tree. They have bound you to this place. If I say you will go to another realm and do what another god bids, then you will. You owe me. You promised to do whatever I commanded. I said you had spunk because you stood up to me. Don't make yourself into a fool by angering me. I might not be able to take away your powers. But I can do things to make your existence a living hell. Do you understand?"

Her rage built at every word. It was true what he said, but she was not going to be used as a wet rag and passed around to clean up someone else's mess. She took a few steps toward Dagda. Energy built around her. It radiated out of her like a heat wave. The moss carpet turned brown underneath her feet. "I will do what you ask only because I'm good on my word. I won't be pushed around. For too many years with my ex, I did whatever he wanted to make him happy. Now I do things for me. Is that understood?" She pointed her finger at the god. A stream of fire came out of it and hit him square in the chest.

Dagda looked down. Humphrey, the frog, hopped behind her to stay clear of the action. His slimy fingers wrapped around her leg. He was shaking. The fire stopped when her hand fell to her side. She took a deep breath to cool off. Dagda's eyes grew smoky. There was a scorch mark on his chest. He brushed the ash off. Underneath was perfectly

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tan flesh. He looked at her again. Kalliope held her breath, wondering if he would smite her. Dagda burst into laughter and came hopping toward her. He threw his arms around her in another bear hug and grabbed her shoulders roughly.

“See, Kalli. This is what I love about you. It’s been so dull without you here. Oh, my young, fiery witch. I see why Lugh cares for you so much. Now, tell Zeus I send my regards. Be a good witch and play nice with the Greek gods. You must have known you were going to Mount Olympus because you’ll fit right in. Just don’t fall for Zeus’s charms. Hera will be pissed. Night.”

Without another word, Dagda took one great leap in the air and disappeared. Kalliope glanced at the ceiling to see if he was hanging from the chandelier. She wouldn’t put it past him. However, he was nowhere to be found. She sighed then she glanced at her new familiar. “Well, Humphrey. I guess it’s you and me. Come on.”

She scooped him up. He snuggled against her and crooned. “Ohh ribbb—iittt, baby. Ya smell so good. Let’s go behind the throne and I’ll show ya the time of yar life. Once yar had frog, ya don’t go back.”

Kalliope ignored the comment and touched the wall. Lugh had taken her to Mount Olympus once, following her ordeal with Cromm. They had spent two magnificent weeks basking, with Lugh worshipping her. She pictured her time

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with him. Feelings of warmth filled her, and underneath her palm, the wall grew thinner. The slivers of tree bark tickled her when she moved through the wall.

CHAPTER FOUR

The air was thin when Kalliope emerged. The sky was neon blue with no clouds. It was so bright it nearly blinded her, reflecting off the highly polished pink marble floor. White marble columns were placed along the edge of the forum. The dais of Mount Olympus was larger than two football fields put together. Someone reclined in an oversized couch in the center of the dais. Three maidens waited on the portly occupant. She figured it was Zeus.

All around her were gods and goddesses. The gods were all dressed in togas of varying colors and the goddesses had on the same style dress she had. Kalliope wondered if Lugh already knew Dagda was going to order her to Mount Olympus. She was going to talk with her devoted sun god when she got back.

“Ohhh toots. I think I died and went ta heaven,” crooned the frog.

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“You’re on your own then.” She dropped the frog. He was the size and shape of a Thanksgiving turkey. Her arm tingled from holding him so long.

No one seemed to pay her any mind while she strolled casually toward Zeus. When she got closer, she couldn’t understand a word they were saying. *Great. Send me to a foreign astral plane and don’t tell me they speak no English.*

Evil thoughts of what she would do to Dagda when she got back strolled through her mind. Kalliope could easily see herself chasing him around the Oak Tree with a large cleaver to chop off his frog legs. She imagined the harp playing *Chopsticks*. Of course the god would get a kick out of it and not take her seriously. She banished the image from her mind. A jolt of fear ran through her. How was she going to communicate when they spoke Greek? She wracked her brain. Then it hit her. *Duh! I’m a witch. I can do whatever I want. Focus Kalliope.*

She closed her eyes gathering her power, envisioning herself being able to speak and understand everything the gods said. Warmth filled her. When she got to the center of the dais, she understood the language of the gods. Passed out on the couch was Zeus. He was nothing like she had pictured him. He was not the muscular god with a long, white beard with lightning bolts at his side. Instead, he was rather overweight, with olive colored skin and short black hair. He had

diamond studs in both ears and a ram's horn around his neck symbolizing his masculine power. His girth hung over the side of the sofa. Three very bored looking women waited on him hand and foot. One waved a large palm leaf over him. Another held a platter of grapes. The other was giving him a pedicure. Kalliope felt sympathy for the girl. There was no way she would get near those babies with a ten foot pole. The file the woman was using could chip a diamond, and it wasn't even denting his nails.

"Help me!" the woman mouthed. Kalliope looked at the other two girls. They seemed happier in their positions although not by much. The one with the large palm seemed oddly familiar, but she couldn't place her.

"Um, Zeus."

The god didn't budge. Instead, he uttered a loud, pig-like snore and mumbled something in his sleep. His hands lifted and he made squeezing gestures with them. Kalliope curled her nose at him. She looked at the other three women who did nothing. They seemed used to his behavior. Zilch was going to happen unless he woke up. Kalliope wanted him to, so she could get back to Lugh. Already, she felt naked without his body pressed to hers. When she thought about her lover god, she realized that her cold medicine was working. No sneezing. No sudden shots of lust overtook her. She was not going to melt to a pile of ooze at this man's feet. She

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moved closer to the couch, bending over the chubby god. He exhaled in her face. The aroma of his breath reminded her of dead fish. His cologne was a mixture of three day old tomato juice and skunk. How were any women were attracted to him? All the myths said he was a womanizer and chased after a bunch of tail.

The god reached up, seized her, and pulled her down on top of him. She let out a squeal. He kissed her, snaking his tongue in between her lips. *Help. I'm going to die from dead fish breath. Lugh, help! Dagda, I'm going to kill you.*

At the moment she thought about Lugh, she felt a jolt against her skin where her necklace had pressed into Zeus's flesh. The aroma of burnt meat wafted to her nose. Before she knew it, she was airborne and then landing hard on the marble floor. Instead of her head cracking open on the stone, it was cushioned by a pillow. Catching her breath and rubbing her bruised backside, she saw the frog raise his hand at her. Although Humphrey was annoying, he had helped protect her. She got up, dusted herself off, and stood before Zeus. All eyes were on her now.

“Calliope, you know better than to interrupt Zeus when Zeus is asleep. Naughty girl. Zeus is going to have to spank you for that. Come here and bend over, my wonderful muse. Let Zeus see your magnificent bottom. Inspire Zeus!” Zeus gave Kalliope a sly smile and winked. He thought she

was someone else. Kalliope had forgotten there was a muse with her same name.

“Err—I think you have me confused with someone else.”

“Nonsense. Zeus’s little fire love muffin.” He made a kissy face at her which looked more like a fish that had sucked on one too many lemons. Kalliope tried not to laugh at the image and bit her tongue. She didn’t need him angry with her.

“Seriously. I’m not your love muffin. Dagda sent me.”

His expression grew darker and more regal when he figured out she was there on business and not pleasure. A brilliant glow appeared around him making it seem like the sun was in her face, and she had to squint. “Zeus will hear why *you* have come and not the Greenman.”

Kalliope was getting tired of all the god drama. She was not impressed with the ‘Hey, I’m a big deity. All must bow down and worship me.’ It was getting old real fast. “Look, I’m not happy to be here either. I was in the middle of something and was interrupted by a goblin. Now, I’m here with some huge magickal frog who wants my body and you want to know why Dagda didn’t come himself. Well, Zeusy boy, I’ll tell you what. I have no freakin’ clue. Now dim the ten thousand watt bulb and tell me what you want.”

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A gasp erupted from the peanut gallery. Kalliope gathered no one talked to the head honcho that way and if they did, they were turned into something very nasty. One of the slave girls leaned in and whispered in the ear of the portly god. The serving woman with the palm turned her gaze to her and gave her a murderous look. Something about the look rang a familiar bell.

“Dagda sent Zeus a mortal witch! That is the last time Zeus will call upon the Greenman for help. That no goo—”

“Yeah, enough on the name calling already. What did you want me to do?” Kalliope crossed her hands over her chest. Lugh’s stone was still warm. It was comforting to know he protected her just by thinking about him. It had gotten her out of the grip of the hands of Zeus.

“My, my, such pizzazz and spunk for a mortal. Zeus likes that. Zeus can see why Dagda has been keeping you a secret from the other realms. Why don’t you come sit in Zeus’s lap? Zeus will show you the time of your mortal life.” He winked at her and patted his knee.

Kalliope couldn’t help but quiver at the invitation even though it weirded her out. “Thanks. But I’m good.”

“Are you afraid The Mighty Zeus will overwhelm you with his glorious power?” the servant girl with the palm asked her. Kalliope realized that she did know the servant girl after all. It was Lugh’s crazy ex, Nas. Dagda had banished her from

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his sight, but the goddess must have found another home among the Olympians. *Great. This is all I need. My archenemy is probably going to try and turn me into a cactus this time.*

“Hi, Nas. When did you get here? I thought you were exiled.”

The goddess crossed her arms over her ample bosom and glared at the witch. “Zeus took me in after he heard what a horrible ordeal I had with Dagda. He gave me sanctuary.”

“Yeah, by the looks of it, you’re his serving wench. That must really suck for you. Hope the benefits are worth it.”

“You little bitch. I’ll turn you into a—”

“Ladies, enough. Zeus doesn’t like bickering. Zeus is all about the love. Why don’t both of you come sit on Zeus’s lap and we’ll see how to work this out?”

“Your Eminence. This is the witch who stole my husband to be. Surely you can punish her for her indiscretions?” Nas asked the god.

“Nas, Lugh was never going to marry you. Get over it. He doesn’t want you back,” Kalliope muttered.

“We’ll see about that!”

“Zeus said enough!” The god stamped his foot. The marble cracked underneath him. A large thunderbolt appeared in his hand. He sighed and began to clean his nails with the tip of the bolt. “Zeus is getting bored. Nas, Zeus’s

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pookey muffin, Zeus cannot hurt the mortal witch because she is under Dagda's protection. Zeus is not allowed to break protocol. You know that. Now, mortal witch, Zeus is tiring of you so your mission is this. Find The Furies and put them back in the Underworld where they belong before they wreak havoc on your world."

That name sounded familiar. Something about it she should have remembered, but it was beyond her at the moment. "Who are 'The Furies?'" she asked.

There was laughter from the peanut gallery. "Does she not know her mythology?" Zeus asked.

"Humor me."

The god sighed. He looked at his nails and decided they were clean. He threw the thunderbolt over his shoulder not caring where it landed. There was a loud crash and a billow of smoke. "Mortal, The Furies were banished to the Underworld eons ago because they thought they could overthrow Zeus. Now, they have escaped and want to rule your realm."

"Why don't you go get them yourself? Why ask Dagda to do it?"

"The Greenman lost to Zeus in a poker match. Zeus is calling in Zeus's mark. This is the way Dagda can pay Zeus back."

Kalliope sighed. "Fine. Where do I find them?"

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The god laughed. All of Mount Olympus quaked. The echo of his laughter set off an avalanche on one of the nearby mountains. Snow cascaded down the slope in one large curtain. The god didn't seem to care. "If Zeus knew where to find them, then Zeus would tell you. That is none of Zeus's concern. Go to Del, she will tell you where to find The Furies."

Kalliope was about to lose her temper. Her nose was itching. Not a good sign. The cold medicine must be wearing off.

"Okay. Where is Del?"

Zeus turned in the sofa and lay back down again. He closed his eyes and motioned for the girls to begin pampering him once again.

"Hello! Where can I find Del?" she asked again.

Zeus waved a dismissal at her and then began snoring. Kalliope met Nas's gaze. The other goddess smiled triumphantly. "I guess you're on your own. Oh poor you. C-ya."

Kalliope stood there for a few more seconds. Zeus was not going to wake up and talk to her again. At least she had her mission. Find The Furies and save the world. *Great. How the heck am I going to do that? I can't go two minutes without wanting to jump the first male I see. Stupid men! Stupid poker! This is the last time saving the world is on my to-do list.*

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The witch turned around. None of the other gods paid her any mind. She sighed. First things first. She had to get her womanizing frog and go find Del, whoever that was. Searching the other gods, she found Humphrey surrounded by four identical giggling goddesses who had air for brains.

“So, Humph, you ready to get going?” Kalliope asked the frog.

The quadruplet goddesses pouted at her. “Don’t take him. Please. He’s so cute and loveable. We want to keep him.”

There was lipstick all over him. His bulging eyes were trained on the four goddesses’ opulent breasts. He sat on a stool with a cushion made of silk. He was in frog heaven. If she could, she would leave him, but instincts told her she was going to need the amphibian. She shivered just thinking about it.

“Sorry ladies. He’s gotta come with me. Maybe I’ll drop him by later. How does that sound?”

The four goddesses whimpered. Tears formed in their eyes.

They’re pathetic. They’re as bad as teenagers. I was never that bad! Kalliope thought.

“It’s all right, ladies. Humphy will be back to bring ya’ll some sweet froggy love later. Give yar frog daddy a kiss for the road.”

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The four leaned over and gave him each a kiss and then backed away to let Kalliope pick him up. He weighed more. “Did they feed you anything?”

“A few peeled grapes. Nothing too extravagant. Ohh baby,” he snuggled against Kalliope’s right breast. “Now that’s what I’m talkin’ about.”

She lifted up the frog to eye level. “Look, I don’t care how many women you go after, but stop doing that. It’s very disturbing and not to mention ick!”

“Ribbit. I’m sorry toots, but yar my maker. I’m only at home with ya. I promise to be nice even though ya smell so good. Give me some suga’.” Humphrey closed his eyes and puckered his frog lips. Kalliope could not deal with it any more. She threw the frog toward the door. He opened his eyes and had a startled expression on his face. While he soared through the air, he grew wings, started flapping, and landed perfectly on the ground. That stumped Kalliope. Who ever heard of a frog with wings? Not green leather ones, but white feathered angel wings. Then again, who heard of a womanizing amphibian? Magick was so much fun. Unexpected things just kept happening to her.

She shook her head and accepted her fate. *I’m stuck with the stupid frog.* Humphrey waited patiently for her. She knelt down and watched the frog’s eyes go wider than half-dollars.

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“Okay, Humph. Here’s the deal. You be decent to me. No more wise cracks about any of my body parts, wanting to kiss you, and stop calling me toots, babe, baby, or anything else. If you can do that, I’ll drop you off after I’m done saving the world and you can spend your life in the hands of those four over there. If not, I’ll turn you into frog legs. Deal?”

“Sounds good, toots. I mean, Kalliope.” Humphrey smiled at her, showing his gleaming pearly whites and batted his eyes.

She overlooked the slip. “Great. If you can fly, then let’s go. You’re heavy to tote around. If I didn’t know any better I’d say you weigh as much as a Thanksgiving turkey.” The frog battered his eyelashes giving her a dumb grin. “Ya lead and I’ll follow ya anywhere.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Kalliope exited Mount Olympus through an arched gold gate. When she left, she noticed a goddess sitting on a large stool reading a book. She had it pressed close to her face. Kalliope glimpsed the cover. *Poker for Idiot Beings* by The Almighty Cheesecake. She couldn't help but laugh at the thought of a book written by a cheesecake, let alone it being Almighty. It called to mind a conversation she had with Flidais. The ex-goddess had told her cheesecake was indeed a god. Humans had built shrines to it, and partook of its goodness. Kalliope had tried to explain those were restaurants called the *Cheesecake Factory*. However the goddess had made a good point which didn't just pertain to the existence of cheesecake as a deity. Thoughts gave form to things. If thought about enough, the things could come alive. Therefore with millions of PMS-cheesecake-craving women indulging in the rich dessert, it had taken shape in the astral realms and become a living, breathing thing that liked to play poker.

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Good enough that he had a book out. I'll have to tell Flidais when I get back. She'll have a cow. She headed down the curvy road with the flying frog beside her. She walked a ways, feeling the air growing heavier as she descended. For a while, she could barely see in front of her because of the fog. Finally, she was low enough that she saw she was headed into an emerald green valley that stretched for miles. Clumps of trees dotted the landscape here and here. There was large river that wound its way through the valley. The water was not blue or even muddy brown. It was ruby red, the color of blood. A vessel glided on the river. She wondered where the boat was going.

At last, she came to the opening of the valley. The mountain road kept going, but her instincts told her to veer off. She had learned over the past few months to listen to those silent urges because they knew what they were doing. They had saved her more than once when Cromm was after her. Once she stepped foot in ankle high grass, she sneezed. She waited for the flush of lust to overtake her and see if any pebbles had levitated. Nothing had. She sneezed again. Nothing happened.

“Yar sick.” The frog handed her a tissue.

She blew her nose. “Thanks. Where did you get these?”

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“I’m here to serve ya. If ya need somethin’ I make it appear.”

“So if I wanted an ice cream sundae you could make that appear?”

Humphrey smiled. There was a fly buzzing around them. The frog’s tongue shot out and grabbed it. “Mmmm. That’s some good fly. As I was sayin’. Only if yar in dire need. I’m an extension of yar magick.”

“And you know all of this, how?”

The frog shrugged. “No idea.”

“Great. You’re a big help, Humph. I’ll ask Morgaine next time I see her. I’m sure there’s some invisible book on the rules of having a familiar. Let’s keep going. Keep those tissues coming.”

They walked for what seemed liked hours until Kalliope came upon a man. From the looks of him, she assumed he was another god. He was tall, lean, and muscular. He had a tan, golden hair, and he wore a short white toga showing off well sculpted legs. Slung across his back was a quiver of arrows. The bow he held was long and curved. The string was taut. He was about to release an arrow. He let the string go. The arrow flew through the air and landed with a thunk in a distant tree. The god took another arrow from the quiver and set it to the string. He pulled the bow back and was about to release it again when—

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“Achoo!”

The god’s concentration was broken. The arrow curved off its mark and got lost in brush. He turned. When he did, Kalliope was left dumbfounded. He was perfect. He was handsome, gorgeous, and god she needed sex. Right now! She took a few steps toward the god. Her body was overcome with her lust fever. The god said nothing. He took her in his arms and kissed her deeply. God, he was hot. Her hands twisted around his neck while her tongue met his. Right as she was about to deepen the kiss, a searing pain sizzled against her chest, driving the fever away. Kalliope broke the kiss and backed away. When she did, she realized what she had done.

Oh no! Lugh! What am I going to tell him? What can I tell him? I’ll tell him I was sick and didn’t know what I was doing. Please don’t let him hate me for kissing another guy. I didn’t mean it. I swear, but oh God what a man! No. Bad, very bad! But his lips are perfect and those abs. What a work out I could give him!

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Kalliope didn’t meet his intense blue eyes. “Yes. Fine. Thanks. Sorry. I’m not myself.”

“What? Oh that? Don’t worry about it. Beautiful women always kiss me when they first meet me. You look familiar. Have we met?”

“I don’t think so. Who are you?”

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The god stuck out his hand. “I’m Apollo.” Once their hands touched, a spark went through her. The witch sneezed again. She waited for the fevered lust to sneak up on her, but it didn’t. She bit her lip just in case.

“I’m Kalli.”

“I knew I knew you from somewhere. You’re Lugh’s new squeeze. I’m so glad you got rid of that bit—” Apollo threw his arms around her and gave her a big bear hug that almost crushed her.

She returned the hug. The god went limp in her arms. She looked at his back and saw an arrow sticking out of his shoulder. It was embedded pretty deep. He was out cold. Her hands touched the wound. Apollo wasn’t bleeding. Kalliope unwrapped her arms and lay the god down on his stomach.

“I knew you were a whore!” Standing in front of her with the bow in her hand was Nas.

“What did you do?” Kalliope asked.

The color drained from Nas’s face. The bow fell from her hands. “What *did* I do?” The crazy goddess fell to her knees beside Apollo.

“Nas, you’re an idiot. I’m not cheating on Lugh with Apollo. He was giving me a hug.”

“Yeah and I bet you play tonsil hockey with every adoring sun god you meet!”

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“Whatever. Look I don’t have time for you. I have to ‘save the world’. Now I have to get him some help all because of you. Then I have to find Del wherever she is. Hey, Humph, can you not look at her tits and help me out here?” Kalliope bent over to pick up the god. Nas grabbed the chain around her neck.

“Where did you get this?” the goddess asked, her voice shaking.

“Lugh gave it to me. Do you mind?”

“But he would — couldn’t give that to you. It only means one thing.”

The goddess’s appearance changed. Her hair turned bone white. Black circles appeared under her eyes. Her dress darkened from white to black. Nas let out a wail that sent chills down Kalliope’s back and made her cover her ears. *This chick has seriously lost it.*

When the goddess looked up again, tears trailed down Nas’s cheeks. “What’s the matter?” A pang of sympathy went through Kalliope. Nas fingered the stone one more time. She wiped her eyes.

“Don’t you understand?”

“Understand what?”

“Lugh gave you a piece of his heart. When a god does that, it—it—means they truly love you. It’s really over. After all these years, Lugh doesn’t love me anymore.” Nas started

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to sob and cover her face. Where her tears fell, small, white, star shaped flowers sprang up. Humphrey gave Kalliope a tissue. She smiled at the frog who flapped away to give the women some time alone.

“Nas,” she handed the tissue to the goddess and put a hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry.” Kalliope didn’t realize how much the goddess had loved Lugh.

The goddess sniffled and accepted the tissue. “Why do you care how I feel? You hate me. I’m not blind. I can tell part of you is afraid of me even though you’re a big bad witch now.”

What Nas said was very true. Part of her did hate the goddess for leaving her locked in a vine prison and making her life a living hell for a few days. And Kalliope was still afraid of what Nas could do to her. Above all that, Kalliope understood how the woman felt. She had experienced it first hand with Quince. Her heart had been broken. She planned on marrying Quince. She even had her dress. He just kept postponing the date. That was almost four years ago.

“You’re right. I’m still afraid of you, but I don’t despise you. A strong dislike, maybe. But I don’t hate you. I still think you might try to turn me into a bush again, but that’s beside the point. Look, Nas, I know you love Lugh and he rejected you in front of the other gods. I know how you feel. I walked in on my ex while he was having sex with

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another woman. It broke my heart. I didn't think I could love anyone again. I went on dates because my friends set me up. I don't know the whole scoop about how far back you go, but I know you cared for Lugh."

The goddess sniffled again. Her gaze met Kalliope's. Power washed over her, but she didn't break the gaze. She thought if she did, Nas would figure she was lying to make her feel better. So, she rode the wave of power until she sneezed again. The goddess smiled sadly. There seemed to be an air of acceptance about her now. Maybe they were coming to a truce.

"Thank you. The other creatures you've encountered all said you were noble. They were right. I'm happy for Lugh and you. It sucks for me, but oh well—there are more gods out there. I've known a few who wanted to hook up."

"So, no more trying to turn me into a thorn bush or shooting me with arrows?" Kalli asked.

Nas shook her head. "Truce. I'll even help you out with getting the Furies. They're such bitches. It's kinda my fault you're in this position as it is."

If she had not imprisoned Kalliope, then she would never have eaten the three apples and stood up for Flidais. By standing up for Flidais, she had made a deal with Dagda not to make the goddess human. Now she was here. Not all of it was bad. Kalliope had fallen in love again. The sex was

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amazing, mind blowing, orgasmic. She grinned when she thought about Lugh. Always naked. He was hers. Her mind drifted to his rigid manhood. How soft it was. How much she wanted to wrap her mouth around it. The way he smelled of fresh pine. When he touched her, everywhere lit up. She needed him. She needed him now. Her eyes darted to the unconscious god on the ground. He was available. Maybe unconscious, but he wouldn't mind. His lips had felt great. She could tell he knew how to use them. It wouldn't be taking advantage if she turned him over and—

“Universe to, Kalliope. Did you hear what I said?”

Nas asked.

Her thoughts turned back to normal. Humphrey hovered with the arrows in his webbed feet. His eyes were glued to Nas's chest. Kalliope groaned. How she conjured him up, she had no idea. Slowly, he flapped behind the goddess and rose in the air, keeping his eyes glued to Nas's cleavage.

“Those are luscious. Ya got a great rack.” The familiar ogled the goddess.

“Thank you. Kalliope, you are sick.”

She shivered and feverish heat overtook her. *I can't believe I wanted to take advantage of Apollo, especially when he's out cold. Oh God, I have to get him to Morgaine, save the world, and then take more cold medicine.* “Yeah, I have a cold. Every time I

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sneezed at home, things started levitating. Then all I want to do is have sex with the first man I see.”

Nas couldn't help but giggle.

“Yeah, it's pretty bad. Poor Lugh. I think I wore him out. Oh sorry. I'm sure you didn't want to hear that.”

Nas was silent. “No. It's okay. I mean it hurts and all, but I can accept that now. I know you won't hurt him. If you do, well, I'll just turn you into a cactus.” Nas grinned.

Kalliope returned it with a weak smile. “So, do you know where I can find this Del chick Zeus was talking about? Hey, Humph, can you get the rest of the arrows and the bow, too?”

A thin line of drool hung from the corner of his mouth. The frog blinked out of his daze and then nodded, flying off.

“Kalliope, Delphi owns a bar. You have to go there because she's the Delphic Oracle. Don't you know Greek Mythology? Even I know that. What a witch you make!”

Kalliope bent over Apollo and grabbed his arms. “I can't help it if I'm not good with mythology. I get what I need for circles and that's it. Before I ever met you all, I was a crafty pagan who did spells when I needed to. I looked up information on whatever pantheon I was going to summon to watch over the circle. Fine. Del owns a bar and is the famed Delphic Oracle. Now help me with Apollo.”

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Nas picked up the god's feet, lifting him as if he were nothing. The two enemies, now uneasy friends or maybe just acquaintances, Kalliope hadn't made up her mind, said nothing to one another while they carried him to a tree. Kalliope sneezed again. The tree shook and its leaves fell.

"Where are you taking him?" Nas asked.

Kalliope didn't answer. Part of her was amazed Nas was helping her. Just a few minutes ago, she had tried to shoot her with an arrow. Another part of her was freaking out because Lugh's friend had been shot by his crazy ex. She had no idea what she was going to do with the god. She didn't know if the arrow had killed him. There was no blood. And she was not about to pull the arrow out. She didn't want to hurt him further. Then again, she didn't want to see what he would try to turn her into when he opened his eyes and realized he had been shot with one of his own arrows.

Morgaine is the only one that can help. She'll know what to do. I'm sure she'll be surprised that I killed Apollo.

With that thought in mind, Kalliope placed her hand on the tree and pictured Morgaine's apartment. There were tons of plants and her black cat that hated Kalliope. A small breakfast bar adorned with oranges whenever Kalliope went over there and walls plastered with rock posters. Power surged through her and into the tree. Trees made good doorways. That was how she had escaped Cromm when he

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was coming after her. She had her back against a tree and wanted to get away. She fell back into the tree landing at Stonehenge where she had first met Morgaine.

The tree bark softened underneath her palm. The brown bark shimmered. This was a true show of her power. Yeah, she could pull a penis shaped orange out of thin air and create a magickal frog that sprouted wings, but seeing the power acting the way it did always astounded her. She picked up the unconscious god again and started to bring him through the tree. She was halfway through when Nas halted.

“You coming?”

“I’m not welcome in Avalon.” Her voice seemed sad.

Kalliope sighed. “Why?”

“When Dagda banned me from the gods he also included Morgaine and anywhere she inhabits. I think he’s afraid I’d go after her. Morgaine and Lugh used to have a thing.”

“Figures. The man I get involved with had hundreds of girlfriends and two other wives before he decided to fall in love with me. Only I would get stuck with the baggage. Okay. I’ll get Apollo through, but can you go to Del and find out whatever you can about the Furies?”

“Nope. Can’t do that either. She only speaks to mortals.”

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“Can you at least find out anything on the Furies? How they escaped? If they have any weaknesses? Anything would be a great help.”

The goddess nodded. “I can do that. When I find out, can I come find you?”

“Sure. Why not? No matter what I’m doing, come and let me know.” Kalliope dragged the god through the tree the rest of the way. Right when his feet were through the bark, Humphrey flew in with the arrows and the bow.

“Will do.” Nas called while the tree sealed itself. When she arrived on the other side, she stood in Morgaine’s living room. Everything was silent. The only thing running was the trickling fountain buried underneath the plants. Kalliope waited for the cat to come out and attack her, but it didn’t. She looked around and assessed her situation. She was in a normal apartment in her world, with a turkey-sized flying frog that had white feathery wings, and a tan Adonis with an arrow sticking out of his back, and she was dressed to go to a Halloween party. The reality of the situation was rather comical. Before any of this happened she would have thought she was dreaming.

Morgaine must have been in Avalon. Kalliope looked at the unconscious god. She felt another hot flash coming upon her. She decided one minute with him on the floor was not going to kill him considering he might already be dead.

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Before the wanton lust overtook her, a sneeze got her instead. All the furniture and the plants rose in the air. When the plants lifted, she heard some rustling. A black blur flew by her and landed on Humphrey. It was Snowball.

“Get off me ya stinkin’ feline!” the frog yelled. He tried to flap and hop away from the pussy. It was useless. Kalliope looked up from sneezing. The furniture landed with a thud. Everything was askew. Several of the plants had tipped over, but the fountain was still in working order. She bent down to get the cat, but it jumped off Humphrey. Then it stared the familiar down.

“I haven’t had frog legs in an eternity. Come here, froggy,” the cat said. He flexed his claws. Kalli grabbed her familiar before Snowball could use the weapons.

“That was downright rude,” said Snowball in a British accent.

“I didn’t know you could talk,” said Kalliope.

“And I didn’t know you were smart enough to conjure your own familiar.” The cat jumped up on the breakfast bar and batted at an orange.

“Where’s Morgaine?”

“Why should I tell you?” The cat began licking his paws.

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She got down in the pussy's face. "Because if you don't, I'll turn you into a rabbit and put you in a cage with a bunch of leopards. How does that sound?"

"You don't have the guts!"

"I wouldn't count on that, pussy," the frog answered. "She conjured me, and I ain't nothin' to squawk about. I've seen her do some pretty crazy stuff. How do ya think cutesy boy over there got shot?"

The cat purred while he thought. "Oh, all right! She's in Avalon, but I wouldn't interrupt her. She left me to watch over the place."

"That wasn't so hard now, was it?" Kalliope didn't like the cat more and more. It was bad enough it had swiped at her the first time she met him. Looking down at Apollo, she grabbed his arms again and began moving him toward the bathroom door. She sneezed. The shower curtain blew down. The hamper hit the ceiling. She raided the medicine cabinet and discovered some more cold medicine. She blew her nose and then downed the pills. She would be glad when her cold was gone. Hopefully then she would be safe around furniture.

She slung the discarded bow and quiver over her and grabbed Apollo once more. Picturing Avalon with its apple trees and priestess gathered in a circle on the Tor, she pulled the god through the door. She tripped over a hump in the carpet and fell backward, bringing Apollo with her.

CHAPTER SIX

She landed on her back with Apollo's face buried in her chest. When she opened her eyes, Kalliope saw her roommate.

"Hi Kalliope." The ex-goddess smiled. Flidais seemed full of life. Her dark hair was streaked white and her complexion was glittery. That was something new.

"You ate another apple, didn't you?" she asked.

The ex-goddess smiled. "Yeah. Dagda delivered it himself. Why do you have Apollo on top of you? And why is one of Cupid's arrow's sticking out of his back. That boy has to be more careful where he shoots those things." Flidais picked up Apollo off her without any effort at all. Kalliope got up and took the bow and the arrows off her back. Somehow the bow had gotten wrapped around her neck and was strangling her. She dropped them by the hearth.

When she did, the sword above the mantle winked at her. A sudden light caught it and made it shine really bright. "Hello Excalibur. I haven't forgotten you."

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The sword glowed bright blue and then went dull again. Kalliope shook her head and then looked at Flidais. She had her foot pressed on Apollo's back and was trying to pull out the arrow. Even with her increased strength, the ex-goddess could not get it to budge. She stopped after a second and wiped her brow.

"I guess I'm not goddess enough yet to pull this thing out. How did he get shot and how did you end up with him?"

"So, he's not dead?"

Flidais laughed. "Heavens no. Just knocked out. He'll be fine once we can get this thing out of him. It's just like pulling a stake out of a vampire. Once you do, they pop up like daisies and are sucking neck again. Plain and simple."

"There are real vampires?"

"Of course. Did you not think there were? You know if you believe in something—"

"Yes. I know the drill. That's why there's the Almighty Cheesecake. Did you know he wrote a book on poker?"

"No. I'll have to find it. He's a whiz when it comes to the game. All the other gods hate that he wins all the time. He has to lose so they win."

"Have you seen Morgaine? I figured she can-can—aachoo!" Kalliope sneezed. Excalibur came off its hooks and landed blade first in the stones of the hearth.

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“Oh great!” Flidais said. “You sound sick.”

Kalliope nodded, hoping the medicine would kick in before she had another bout of wanting to have wild sex. She tried to pull the sword from the stone, but it was not budging. *Great. This is all I need. Morgaine’s going to kill me.*

“Leave it. Someone will come along and pull it out eventually. By the way, you don’t want to interrupt Morgaine right now.”

Kalliope pushed her hair out of her face. She took a moment and calmed her nerves. She really did want to interrupt the sorceress because she had to find away to get the arrow out of Apollo, the sword out of the stone, and get rid of her cold. “Don’t really have a choice.”

She walked past the hearth and pushed aside the curtains hanging in the door. When she did, she was transported to a tropical paradise. There was a path overgrown with large ferns, but it was passable. The aroma of flowers scented the air. Birds squawked overhead. It reminded her of being in a rain forest. A light mist drizzled down through the canopy, making everything appear to have a rainbow attached to it.

She heard voices not too far ahead of her.

“Morgaine?” she called.

Kalliope heard a moan. She pushed aside the fauna and walked up the path. There was a bed in the middle of a

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clearing with a brook babbling next to it. A cool breeze lifted sheer bed curtains. Kalliope saw her friend's back through the drapes. There was someone else in bed with her.

"I thought I told no one to disturb me!" Morgaine yelled.

Kalliope realized she had walked in on her friend who was extremely occupied and quickly hid behind a large palm so the sorceress would not feel uncomfortable.

"Sorry. But I really need to talk to you!" Kalliope called.

"Kalli?"

"Yeah."

"Now is not really a good time. I'm kinda —err— busy. Can't you come back later? We can work out whatever magickal problem you're having then."

Kalliope sighed. If only it were that easy. She could only image how the centuries old sorceress was going to react when she saw Apollo. *At least he's alive. I don't know what I'd do if I killed a god or had been the cause. I'm sure Zeus would say something. I don't feel like being the one to be filing his toenails for all eternity either.*

"Trust me it wasn't som-ome th-thing..." *Damn.* She sneezed again. When she did, there was a large thud. Morgaine and her companion landed on the ground.

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The sorceress sighed. “I’ll be right there. I can never get any time to myself.” Kalliope waited. Finally her friend emerged from the foliage wearing jeans and a black band T-shirt.

“Sorry.”

Morgaine said nothing, but motioned for her to follow. When she crossed over the threshold, back to Avalon, Apollo was no longer on the floor. He was on Morgaine’s bed. The sorceress turned around and glanced at Kalliope. “How did Apollo end up dead on my bed?”

“He’s not dead.” Flidais chimed in. “He’s only stunned from the arrow.”

“Great. Have you tried to pull it out?”

“I didn’t know if it would hurt him. Flidais tried, but it wasn’t budging,” Kalliope explained.

“Sometimes I wonder why you’re a witch and why this one is a goddess.”

“Ex-goddess on the way to becoming a goddess, thank you,” Flidais corrected.

Morgaine shook her head. “Whatever, I don’t care what kind of a goddess you are. Kalliope get on that side of him. Flidais hold him down.”

Both women did what they were told. Kalliope held down Apollo’s uninjured shoulder. His face was turned toward her and he seemed peaceful. The ex-goddess was sat

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on his feet. Morgaine straddled his back and gripped the shaft of the arrow with both hands. With one quick tug, she yanked the arrow out of the god's shoulder. There was no blood on the tip.

“Kalli, don't let him—”

Once the arrow left his body, Apollo opened his eyes and saw Kalliope. “Hello, gorgeous.” He popped up out of bed and swept her up into his arms into a deep kiss.

“—look at you.” Flidais was too late.

Kalliope melted in his arms. She felt completely at home. With the first touch of his lips, the fever burned in her body. She desired nothing more than to bed this beautiful hunk that had her in his arms. Any thought of Lugh vanished from her mind. Apollo's hands grabbed and squeezed her butt underneath her dress. That made her jump up into his arms. She wrapped her legs around his waist. He didn't seem to mind at all. He turned and was about to lay her on the bed. Kalliope didn't want him to stop, not caring that there was an audience. She was sweating. The fever in her brain had blocked any rational thought except sating the wanton lust consuming her. God he was a great kisser. His lips were full. His chest was ‘oh my God lick off chocolate syrup’ good. She kissed him harder and —

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Was suddenly dosed with frigid water. When that happened, her senses returned. She scooted away from the god who looked at her with big puppy dog eyes. He was not wet at all. *What have I done to Lugh? What's wrong with me?*

“Kalliope, are you okay?” Morgaine asked.

She shook her head and wiped the tears from her eyes. Guilt ate her alive. She sniffled and sneezed again. This time only the bed covers levitated. The furniture stayed put. The cold medicine was finally kicking in. “Something is seriously wrong.”

“Smooky, let me make it all better. I can cure anything you want,” Apollo said. He reminded her of a love sick teenage snuggled against her back with his head on her shoulder. Just the heat radiating from him dried her skin.

All three of the women looked at one another “Smooky?” Flidais started laughing.

“What’s wrong with him?” Kalliope asked.

“He got shot with one of Cupid’s arrows. When you pulled it out you were the first woman he saw. It’s love at first sight.”

“Flidais, you saw what I did to him. I practically raped him. I can’t be around a love struck god when I’m this way! What’s Lugh going to say when he finds out I fooled around behind his back with one of his friends? He won’t take too lightly to it. I know how I felt when I walked in on Quince.

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After all these years, I finally find a guy who I love and then I screw it up by cheating on him. What's he going to think of me?" Kalliope started to cry.

Apollo had a concerned expression and started to go to her aid, but Morgaine shot him a look and he backed away. Flidais sat on the bed next to her and put her arm around her. "Child, it will be all right. The effects of the arrow will wear off in a few hours. It's like Dagda drinking coffee except Apollo is going to have one hell of a hangover when he comes down. Lugh will understand. You're not feeling well. You'll be honest with him. He knows your heart."

She hoped her roommate was right. Morgaine gave her another hug. "Flidais is right. Don't worry about Lugh or Apollo. Tell us how he got shot in the first place."

Kalliope took a deep breath and started from the beginning. Both women paled, especially at the mention of the Furies. Neither said a word. Morgaine waved her hand. A book appeared in her lamp. It looked familiar. This was the same book Morgaine had gotten out when the sorceress had tried to show her astrology. Her friend had told Kalliope not to worry about the beings in the picture. Now she had to.

"Zeus should have gone after those monsters by himself. All he has to do is throw a couple of lightning bolts and they'd go back to the Underworld. He's just a lazy ass." Morgaine slammed the book shut. "You said Nas was going

to find some information out on them? Can you trust her after she tried to shoot you?”

Kalliope was silent for a while. She thought about it. Her instincts said Nas and she would finally be able to put things behind her now that she had seen Lugh had given her a piece of his heart. Her hand wrapped around the pendent. Her mind drifted to the Sun god. With the thought, she saw him in the forest with his dog, a magickal greyhound that lived in her apartment as well. He stopped, turned, and looked in her direction. The stone flared to life. Lugh moved his hand in mid air. She felt his fingers trace the line of her jaw, trail down her neck, and teasingly brush the top of her breasts. Her heart swelled with love and guilt at the phantom caress. What was she going to tell him? Of course it would be the truth, but could he live with her after that? Her mind turned back to the situation at hand. She had to save the world, but there had been a few detours. Now she was ready to get back on track.

“Yes. I can trust Nas. Morgaine, do you know any way I can get rid of this cold? Have you ever had symptoms like this?”

“Sorry, Kalli. I just get normal colds if I get them. It’s been a long time since I’ve had one.”

“I can make you better, love,” said Apollo. The women still ignored him.

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“I guess I’m on my own. What do I do with him? Do you guys know anything about the Furies?”

Flidais took the book from Morgaine’s lap and leafed through the pages quickly. When her eyes settled on the picture of them, she burst out laughing. “I’m sorry, but the Furies do *not* look like this. Well they have serpents for hair—”

“Like Medusa?” Kalliope asked.

“Yes. They’re related. Distant cousins, I think. I used to hang out with them back in my early creation years. I was wild. Those were the days. When they got pissed off, watch out. The Furies are sisters. Each one has different poisonous snakes for hair. There is Haley Anne, Haley Jo, and Haley Bobby. They look like prissy farm girls, but when they think someone has wronged them. I wouldn’t be in their path.”

“It reminds me of the movie *Heathers*,” Morgaine said.

“You know. They kinda are like the girls in that movie. Except they don’t try to kill one another. They just kill other people. I saw Haley Jo rip a guy’s penis off because he had slept with his wife’s sister. It was not pretty. That was when I saw how dangerous they were and decided to go my own way. We got into a huge fight about it. They were my best friends for years.”

“Great friends. No offense, but if they’re dangerous why would Zeus just let them go?” Kalliope asked.

“Oh, he wouldn’t just let them go. They were placed in the Underworld to work the UFC for eternity. The only thing that could have let them out was a certain celestial alignment that would act as a key. It only happens every five thousand years or so.”

Upon hearing that, Morgaine jumped up and rummaged through her trunk. She came back with a scroll and unrolled it out on the bed. Kalliope saw the stars and planets. Staring at it, she realized it was the same chart she had looked at months ago when Morgaine was trying to teach her astrology.

“Is that the same one that exploded?” Kalliope asked.

“Almost. I conjured it after you left. I figured it would be safer. Flidais, could this be the right kind of ‘key’ that would open the Underworld and let the Furies out from their perpetual grease filled service?”

The ex-goddess took the chart and studied it for a moment. Apollo looked over her shoulder. “That is very bad,” he said. He put his arms around Kalliope. His fingers brushed the top of her breasts absently. Kalliope tried to ignore the delightful shivers running through her. She had to concentrate very hard on what the other women were saying. Biting her lips and clenching her thighs together seemed to help a little. He rested his head on her shoulder. “I’ll protect you from those mean nasty Furies.”

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“There you have it. I’m surprised I didn’t realize five thousand years had passed. Then again, I was more human when this occurred and wasn’t really thinking about what would happen if the Furies decided to get out. I guess they decided to leave UFC hell.”

“UFC?” Kalliope shrugged off Apollo. The cold medicine had kicked into high gear so she was good for a while. Even though part of her still wanted to throw him down, straddle him, and have her way with the sun god, it was for the best she got better.

“You know. Underworld Fried Calamari? They’re popping up all over the Underworld. Last time I went there, there was one right by the entrance. Zeus sentenced the Furies to work in the one in the palace so Hades could keep an eye on them. Persephone loves calamari. Poor thing has gained so much weight. She should never have eaten those pomegranate seeds,” Flidais said absently while looking at the map.

Morgaine rolled her eyes at the statement. “Here.” Flidais pointed to a cluster of stars near the beginning of the chart. Morgaine showed it to Kalliope. She glanced at the two of them with a blank look on her face.

“And that means what?”

“Morgaine, I thought you were teaching the girl astrology. You told me she was getting better at it.”

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“I guess I neglected to tell you that she sucks and we stopped months ago. The same day the Furies got out. She’s hopeless.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“It’s true,” Morgaine retorted.

“Ladies, please finish with your argument so I can take my snooky away and make beautiful love to her.” Apollo started kissing Kalliope’s neck. Her eyes half closed at the caresses. She shook herself from the daze when the stone next to her heart flared to life.

“Excuse me. I’ll be right back,” Kalliope said.

Morgaine was shocked. “Are you really going to take him up on his offer?”

Kalliope said nothing but pictured a bucket of ice water tumbling on her friend’s head. The bucket appeared and the water doused the sorceress. Morgaine gave her an evil look. Kalliope stuck her tongue out at the woman dragged Apollo into the other room. Once they crossed the threshold, they appeared back in her apartment, in her bedroom. When Apollo saw the bed, a wide grin appeared on his face. He swept her up in his arms before she could protest and laid her gently on the covers which turned to silk. Her dress was now a black silk nightie. Apollo’s toga had disappeared. He was naked on top of her. His shaft was hard and ready for her against her thigh. He leaned over her and stared into her eyes.

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She studied his face and realized how much she wanted Lugh. No matter what her body told her to do when the fever flashes hit. She just wanted Lugh to take her away where there was no crazy serpent headed goddesses named Haley. The god above her leaned in and kissed her softly on the lips. He smelled like musk and fresh rain. If she was unattached, she certainly would have fallen for him, Cupid's arrow or no. Doing the right thing, she pushed him away. He looked down at her with sad, hurt, and confused eyes.

“Don't you want me?” he asked.

In my wildest dreams if I didn't already have one of you. Oh baby, we would be doing things that would make you blush. Then again I'm sure you've done even more than I can think of. “Apollo, of course I want you, sweetie. But there is someone else who I'm completely head over heels for. And if we do this. If I do, I'll break his heart. You're under a spell. You don't really love me. This will all wear off in a few hours.” *I hope.* “Besides, what would I tell Lugh? You guys have been friends since before there was a sun.”

Apollo pushed her down gently on the bed. With a wave of his hand he donned himself with his toga again. Long blonde eyelashes framed brilliant blue eyes that reminded her of a Caribbean Ocean. She was going to say something when he smiled and put a finger to her lips. “This might be a spell. However, I will not do what my lady does not wish for me to

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do. Kalli, I can feel the lust burning inside of you. It's a fever that consumes your very thought. I've seen it firsthand. If you do not want me, at least let me give you this."

He brought his hands close together until his palms were almost touching. In the center of them she saw a tiny light appear. He began to pull his hands apart. The light started to grow until it was the size of a golf ball. He removed one of his hands. The glowing ball, like a mini-sun, hovered over his palm. Little solar flares shot out of it. It warmed her. Apollo took her hand and placed the ball over it. Her skin was burning, but not painfully. It was heating up from the source of power she had in her hand. Apollo smiled and then wrapped her fingers around the gold orb. When he did, the light was extinguished. A zing of power ran up her arm and then settled over her heart.

"What was that?" she asked.

"A gift to use when you need it. The power can destroy a small town or heal a god. Now, snooky, since you do not wish my marathon love making and I'm still utterly in love with you, what do you want to do now?"

Apollo sat on the edge of the bed and waited for her like a devoted servant. She looked down at what she was wearing. "Can you change me back into what I had on, please?"

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He sighed. “You look so much better in this, but as you wish. You are Calliope’s twin. It’s amazing how much you two look alike. Of course, she’s a muse and you’re mortal. Her eyes are brown and yours are green. Her nose is chiseled perfection. Her hair spun from clouds. Her body is amazing. Her lips are luscious enough that when I see her, I want to kiss them and make love all night to her under the heavens.” The god got all dreamy eyed over the muse.

“You love her, don’t you?”

Apollo looked at her strangely. “No, I love you, but —”

“Kalliope, is that you?”

She heard Theresa’s voice coming from the hallway. She groaned and poked her head out of the door. Her friend’s belly seemed slightly bigger than it was before if that were possible. Kalliope swore her coven sister was having twins, but all the ultrasounds showed only one bun in the oven. Her friend had a suitcase in one hand and a piece of chocolate cake in the other.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

Theresa dropped her suitcase and the cake, and flung herself into her friend’s arms. She was crying uncontrollably and making no sense whatsoever. Kalliope pried her off and led Theresa to the couch. She thought of tissues and they appeared in her hand. She handed the box to her friend. The

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pregnant woman took them. Kalliope went to make some tea for the both of them. Apollo caught her eye and she just shrugged. The god looked a little lost at the crying woman. She wondered how much exposure he had to humans or with pregnant women.

Kalliope sat next to her friend and put her arm around her. The pile of tissues was already building. From the looks of it, this was not something induced by hormones either. This was something more serious. She had never seen her best friend behave this way.

“Honey. What happened?”

“Stan -he—he hhehe—” Her friend let out a wail and started sobbing again.

“Stan is hurt?”

Theresa shook her head no.

“He is dead?”

Again, another negative response.

“Another woman?”

Her friend broke out into sobs. It was kinda scary for Kalliope to see her coven sister this way. When she had found Quince boffing the tits with legs, she had turned on her heel and went straight back to Theresa’s shop. After three hours of her own crying and virtually making no sense, her friend had called in reinforcements who had brought emergency stashes of chocolate and liquor. After that she,

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Theresa, Adele, and Anna had all become best friends. She had hardly known her coven sister at that point. The only thing she had known was Theresa was going to be selling Kalliope's candles. Something terrible must have happened between Theresa and Stan for her to be carrying on this way, unless there was something wrong with the baby. She didn't sense that.

"Do you know who it was?" Kalliope asked. She handed the tea to her best friend.

Theresa took a breath and sniffled. "It wasn't a girl, Kal. It was another guy! They were—you know in my bed. What am I going to do?"

"You're sure you didn't walk in on him drunk again playing naked Twister with his buddies?"

Theresa wiped her puffy cheeks and shook her head. "No. I know what I saw. I told Stan I was going out shopping to get some more things for the baby. When I came home, there he was with—God I can't even think about it. How did you do it when you found Quince?"

Kalliope sipped her tea. It was not the flavor she had gotten. She checked the tag quickly and saw that it was orange instead of peppermint. Someone was playing a joke on her, probably Morgaine wondering where she was. She thought about the sorceress. When she did, she saw her trying to pull Excalibur from the hearth stones. The blade glowed

blue. Reflected in it were Kalliope and Theresa. She pictured a torrent of oranges falling around the sorceress. The sorceress looked up. One landed on her foot. Kalliope felt a surge of energy directed toward her. Without a second thought, she mentally threw up the barriers of the circle. The air thickened. A faint sheen shimmered in the small area surrounding her living room. Power pounded on the circle and was absorbed by it, making it even stronger. Mentally she saw Morgaine nod, knowing she had done it to test Kalliope's defenses. Ever since Cromm had come after her, Kalliope had fortified the circle in her living room. She left it open so anyone could walk in and out of it. No one could enter it until she invited them or if need be, it was a portal to the other realm. Kalliope now had the magick to make it go further, almost bringing it and whoever was in it, deeper into the other world. She was the only one of the coven who could do this. Her other three coven sisters had been acknowledged by the gods, but they had no power. They were now more sensitive to the world. They thought it was fun whenever they went to the woods and Kalliope was able to speak and see all the dryads, goblins, fairies, etc who still existed in their world.

“It tore my heart out to realize Quince was cheating on me. You know how it was. I closed myself off from love and didn't know if I could ever open up to anyone. It wasn't

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until I found Lugh that I knew I could truly love anyone again. He has shown me a whole new world. He's the best thing that has happened to me. But you don't want to hear all the gushy stuff now. You want to know how to kill Stan."

"Can you turn him into a frog for me? Then you can stick him in a pond and an alligator will eat him. I know how much you hate frogs."

"They're not that bad actually. What would the babies say when they asked where their father is?"

"Darling, Daddy looks great in the terrarium. Want to feed him some crickets? Why do you insist I'm having more than one? All the docs and pictures say I'm having solo uno. Only one. I wonder if your hormones are kicking in. You want to have a kid now too?" Theresa laughed a little. It was a good sign.

Kalliope handed her another tissue so she could wipe her puffy eyes. She punched her friend lightly in the arm enough to rock her a little. She released the energy barrier from the circle. The air returned to normal temperature. "You know I don't want kids right now. It would be a little hard having a child with a god. Besides, Lugh is off doing whatever right now and I'm supposed to be saving the world. You're more important."

"Saving the world? From what? Deadly cheesecake from beyond?"

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“None of the above. Long story. Really long story. Dagda called in his debt and now Apollo is helping me.” Kalliope gestured to the god who was poking at her teakettle with a fork. She thought he was trying to fence it with one arm up in the air. The fork tines were getting caught in the handle of the kettle.

Theresa peeked at the god through the opening separating the living room and kitchen. When she saw him, she started to fan herself. “Kalliope is he—I mean. That’s a real god? Is he really THE APOLLO? Sun god from Greek Mythology?”

Her friend started to fluff her hair and wipe her face. She got up and straightened her T-shirt that read: Yes, it’s really an alien. Kalliope only shook her head. This was the woman who she was used to. Kalliope knew finding Stan had crushed Theresa. They had been together forever, since high school. Kalliope nor Theresa ever suspected Stan was in the closet. Maybe he was drunk and it was a onetime thing. There was no excuse for what he had done. If there was any chance for him to fix it, Kalliope wondered if Theresa would even go back to him, but whatever her decision, she would stand by her friend.

“Yes. That is Apollo, Greek Myth come to life. You know Flidais is an ex-goddess and Morgaine is legendary.

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Why is it so hard to believe Apollo is in my kitchen fighting with my teapot?”

With the mention of his name, the god came in and gave Theresa a perfect smile. Before she knew it, Theresa had fainted.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“I guess you have power over women?” Kalliope asked.

The god caught her friend and carried her to the sofa. He propped her head up on a pillow and brushed away a stray tear. “It’s a godly thing. With Zeus it’s even stronger. Women go all doey eyed and start giggling.”

“Is that why he gets all those chicks?”

“Yes. Did you not feel the magnetism when you stood before him or me?”

“Nope. Sorry. I guess I’m immune.”

Apollo stared at her. His power flared against her aura. He glowed brightly and his skin glittered. Kalliope felt the pull towards him, but it was faint. She could tell he was using the full whammy on her because the light was intense. She doubted any other women would have seen the light; they would have felt it. Some might have perceived it as his aura, but it didn’t touch her.

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“Dim the light, please.” Her hand shielded her eyes from the illumination. “I appreciate you trying to try, but it’s not working.”

Apollo sat on the edge of the couch next to Theresa. He placed his hand on her stomach. Her friend opened her eyes, studying the god. Apollo had his eyes closed and started drumming his fingers on Theresa’s belly.

“What is he doing?” mouthed Theresa to Kalliope.

She shrugged.

After a moment, he stopped. He opened his eyes and turned to Theresa. “You have suffered many losses. Now that is being made up for. The hardship you are dealing with now will blow away. The doctors are wrong. You will not have one child, but two. Two girls. In years to come, there will be another pregnancy. And the doctors will be wrong again. You’ll have triplets.” The god beamed.

Theresa was a little dumbfounded. “Twins? Triplets. How am I going to handle that? Being by myself? Where am I going to get the money? I think I need a drink. Damn. I can’t do that! Kalliope, do you have any magickal mojo that will give me a buzz and not hurt the kids?”

Kalliope shook her head and bit her lip to keep from laughing. She could see her best friend trying to keep up with five kids. That would be something. At least she was right. Theresa was going to have twins. Doctors did not know

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everything. “Sorry. Nothing to make you drunk. We’ll do that after the twins are born. Now you have to think of some more names. Apollo, do you know where I can find a chick named Del? Nas said she’s an Oracle. You know her?”

“Yes. Why does my love muffin want to see her? Do you desire to know the future between us?”

“No, but thanks. Maybe later. Zeus said I had to get some information on the Furies. Can you take me there?”

A smile spread on his lips. He bowed. “It would be my pleasure. But first—” He slipped his hand behind her, pulling her into him. His free hand rested on top of her stomach. Kalliope was about to say something when he shook his head. He breathed onto her forehead. Her energy points flared to life from the power flooding her system. It ran down her back, fusing with her spine and running out over the spot where his hand was positioned on her stomach. The god’s face knotted in concentration. She tried to move out of his grip, but the power would not allow her to do so. The feeling was similar to what Lugh would do to her with one touch. His caresses sent her into instant orgasm. Apollo’s did not. His power was hot inside of her. A white heat. It blasted away any cobwebs or darkness lurking in her body. Kalliope’s eyes closed while she rode the power waves. She began to feel lighter almost as if she were part of the light the god infused her with. Then it stopped. Kalliope opened her

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eyes, realizing she was swaying ever so slightly. Apollo smiled and steadied her.

“What did you do to me?” she asked.

“You were sick. So I healed you.”

“Healed me?”

“Yeah. Kalliope didn’t you know one of Apollo’s attributes is he’s the god of healers. He also set up the Delphic Oracle.”

Then it hit her when the god had said that he could make her better. He really did make her better. She took in a deep breath. The tickle in her nose and throat was gone. She waited for a sneeze or a wave of lust to overtake her, but nothing happened.

“I didn’t realize that. Thank you, Apollo.”

“It was no chore at all, my love. Mortal physiology sometimes can get run down by crossing worlds and spending too much time with gods. If you stay around us too much, it will begin to change the very essence of who you are. It’s the same when a god heals you. The greater the transfer of energy the more it transforms you.”

Kalliope paled. She had been spending a lot of time with Lugh and moving in between the worlds. When they had sex it was hardly ever normal because he always used his power to make her toes curl and her head be filled with a glimpse of the universe. It was amazing and powerful. She

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missed it. Kalliope was with a wonderful god and she wanted nothing to do with Apollo. He had offered her his body. Now he was going to help her. However, what he said had her worried. She did spend a lot of time with Lugh in his world and around magick. Had it started to change her? She wasn't sure. Dagda had told her the same when she stuck up for Flidais. She hadn't noticed if it had or not, but who knows? Now was not the time for her to think about if she was being changed or influenced by the realm. She had to focus on getting to the Delphic Oracle.

Kalliope smiled and gave a quick hug to Apollo. Then she turned back to Theresa. "Are you okay? Not that you wanted to find your husband in bed with another guy, but—"

Her best friend started to tear up again. She bit her lip and wiped the wetness from her eyes and nodded. Theresa was the strong one emotionally and had lent her everything when she found out about Quince. She had lent her use of her house, her extended family and that was how they had become fast friends. She smiled and sat down next to her.

"I'll be fine. Sure I will. We can do it without Stan. That asshole! Low life, stinking, crappy—" She got choked up, but stopped herself from crying. She patted her belly. "I'll be fine."

"Theresa, I'm sorry, but I can't stay I—"

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There was a sudden pop and a puff of smoke. Sitting in Theresa's lap was Humphrey. Her friend let out a shriek and jumped, sending the frog leaping into Kalliope's arms. "What is that?"

"Hiya toots!" the frog said to Theresa.

Kalliope ran her hand over the amphibian's smooth skin. It was cool and not slimy. It didn't still her dislike of frogs, but it made it a little easier to deal with. She wasn't disgusted by being around him anymore. It was never her intention to conjure a womanizing frog.

"Humphrey, what did I tell you about being nice? Do you want to be a tadpole the rest of your life?"

"Sorry, Kalliope." The frog cleared his throat. He bowed to Theresa. "Forgive my manners. Hello, my lady." His New York accent disappeared. Kalliope was impressed. Her familiar flashed her a pearly white smile and winked.

"Oh you love to rub it in, don't you?"

"Ribbit."

"Kalliope," Theresa pointed to the frog, "what is that?"

"Theresa, believe it or not, this is my first familiar. His name is Humphrey."

Her coven sister smiled warily. "I thought you hated frogs. Aren't familiars supposed to be black cats or ravens or

something? I've never heard of any witch having a frog for a pet. At least not unless they turned someone into one."

Humphrey seemed disappointed at the comment. "I might not be a cat or some fancy bird with wings, but I get the job done. Isn't that right?" he turned to Kalliope.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I guess. I'm still not too sure on what a familiar does exactly."

"Familiars are loyal to the witch who created them. They will give their lives for their mistress. They're bound only to you. Will do whatever you say. It's only up to you to free them from their life of servitude. They are created when the witch's magick is powerful enough that they become an extension of power. No matter where you are, they can find you." She and Apollo looked over at the new voice in the room. Standing in the doorway of her bedroom was Lugh, except he was not naked. He was dressed in tight jeans that hugged his hips. If they were any lower, they would have been illegal. He wore a black T-shirt that showed off his abs.

Kalliope's heart pounded. She thought about how she had nearly slept with Apollo and what she had done with him. It might have only been a few stolen kisses and a couple of caresses, but guilt washed over her. Tears came to her eyes while she looked at the god. Shame filled her. Her hand slid over the stone he had given her. It was warm against her

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flesh. She lifted her gaze to his, but Lugh's expression was grim.

He knows! What am I going to do? I can't hide anything from him. He knows what I'm thinking. I don't know how often he reads my mind, but—I can't lose him. I love him too much. I have to tell him the truth. That's the only way.

“Excuse me guys.” Kalliope followed Lugh into the bedroom and shut the door behind her. She wondered what Theresa was going to do left with a magickal frog and a god. It was probably one of the strangest days her best friend was turning out to have, not counting on finding out her husband was gay.

“Kalliope, I need to speak with you.” Lugh leaned against her bedroom wall and didn't make an attempt to touch her and he was clothed. That was all a bad sign. A lump formed in her throat.

“Lugh, I can explain. I swear what happened between me and Apollo was a mistake. I was sick. I didn't know what I was doing. Not really. That was why I jumped you when you—”

“Kalli, what are you talking about?”

Tears started down her cheeks. She couldn't bring herself to look at him. She slipped the chain he gave her over her head and put it in his palm. “I don't deserve this. I'll

understand if you don't want to see me anymore." She headed to the door.

The god caught her arm and pulled her into him. His lips locked to hers. She was putty in his arms. His power surged through her. He controlled it this time because it only warmed her from the inside out until she felt light and airy. Inside that power was an overwhelming sense of love; it nearly broke her heart. It was almost as if he was sharing his soul with her, meshing their two beings together until she wasn't sure she was even alive any more. She was part of the very essence of the universe. It was even more intense than what he did to her when they made love. After a moment, his power withdrew from her, leaving her with only an echo of what had been. His lips lingered as he licked hers before releasing her. He pressed the necklace back into her palm.

"Kalli, love. I know you weren't yourself. I could tell. Besides, Apollo already told me what happened. He was under the influence of Cupid's arrows. You were sick. Did you know that was how Nas got me to fall in love with her in the first place centuries ago? You did nothing wrong. Please don't cry. It breaks my heart when you do."

Kalliope nodded, feeling an outpouring of love for him. Her heart swelled. *Thank you. Thank you. But if he knows about me, then why is he here? Something has to be wrong!*

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“What’s the matter?” She slipped the necklace back on. It was warm against her skin and made her feel more secure.

“It’s the Furies. They’ve decided to take over the mortal world. They’ve taken all owners of all the major restaurant chains hostage. They want to serve tofu and faux turkey disguised as the regular menu.”

Kalliope couldn’t help but chuckle. What was so bad about getting rid of all the fast food restaurants in the world? No more grease. No more deep fryers. “What would be so bad about getting rid of oversized hamburgers and fries that stain when you put them on a napkin?”

“Once mortals eat it, they’d be bound to do the Furies’ bidding. But I’m not talking about just pizza or any fast food chain either. They’ve kidnapped the heads of upscale restaurants all across the world. They’re holding them hostage. You have to help put them back in the Underworld before mortals become enslaved.”

“Why haven’t I heard anything about this? Why’s there nothing on the news?”

Lugh guided her to the bed. “Because the gods are keeping it under wraps. We’ve all come together, hence the clothes, and are keeping a lid on it. All Hail has agreed it’s the best way to handle things.”

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“If it’s the best way to handle things, then why don’t you and the other gods put them back in the Underworld where they belong cooking at UFC or whatever grease bucket they were working at?”

“If only it were that easy. You are now bound by universal law to get them back into the Underworld because you accepted Dagda’s task. No god can get involved because a mortal is in involved now. It’s a—”

“It’s a stupid law. That’s what it is.”

“I agree with you. I’d take them with my bare hands and send them back, but I can’t. Zeus washed his hands of them. The quest now falls to you. That was why I was at the council. All Hail is not pleased that there’s another witch in the human world. He hoped to wait for the second coming before he reintroduced magick, but there’s nothing he can do about it now.”

“So even he can’t rain down a flood or a plague of locusts to try and kill me? Is that another kind of universal law?”

Lugh nodded. “Now you’re getting it. Once a god, no matter who it is, gets involved with a mortal or gives the mortal something to do. It automatically becomes bound by universal law. No other god, no matter how high up, can interfere.”

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“So you can’t help me at all? What if I fail? What if they take over the world? I’m not exactly sure what I’m supposed to do.” Kalliope started to panic. Her heart was going a mile a minute, pounding in her chest and causing her to be light headed. Lugh grabbed her arm. She calmed down. Her arm came back into view again. When she glanced at her reflection, it grew more solid. Her near panic attack had almost driven her invisible. *Whoa. I gotta get a hold of myself.*

“You won’t fail. Apollo and I are here to help. I ran into Nas. She said you two had come to a truce. Is that true?”

Kalliope nodded. “Yeah, she was waiting on Zeus. When she saw me, she went nuts. She shot Apollo with an arrow and then saw the necklace you gave me. She realized then you and she were over. She was devastated. We came to an understanding. I felt bad for her. She really loved you. I’m not saying she’s not crazy, but I can relate.” To hear herself say that, Kalliope was pretty shocked. Of course she had not forgiven the goddess for putting her into a vine prison. But from the goddess’s point of view, she was the other woman cheating on the man she loved. Kalliope knew how she felt when she had walked in on Quince. She wanted to kill the tits with legs, but she never actually did it. Then she had wanted to turn the chick into something with pus, warts, and six hundred legs. Thank the gods she didn’t have her powers

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then. Hell would have been rained down on the church secretary, but that was the past.

Lugh leaned in and kissed her quickly. “I’m glad you’re getting along. You’ll not fail. I’ll be there to help you. You and Apollo should make your way to the Delphic Oracle. She can help you. First, I think you’d be better in this before you go.” The god snapped his fingers.

Kalliope was dressed in a long black dress that could have been a toga. Over that was a black leather corset with red stays. To top it off she had on red fuck me pumps that matched the laces. Her hair was jet black and braided down her back. Around her neck was a black leather collar set with Lugh’s gift in the center of it. Her lips coordinated the shoes. Her eyes were outlined in dark black. Looking at herself in the mirror, she assumed Lugh wanted to get into something kinky. The smile on this face said he desired her to be dressed like that for one of their dates. She didn’t understand why she was made up as a dominatrix to go see an Oracle. She did admit that she kinda enjoyed the look. The black hair fit her the best. Kalliope had never liked her red hair. “Why do I have to be this way to go see an Oracle? I thought I’d go and ask a question. Then poof. I’ll have an answer.”

Lugh shook his head. “It’s not that easy. Del lived in your world for a long time. Like Avalon, when magick retreated from this realm, so did the Oracle. Apollo wanted to

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keep her as an asset in case something happened in the future. So he granted her immortality. She's changed over the years. Del got involved with the centaurs and satyrs. They're rival gangs. She runs a bar that's neutral territory, but a lot of fights break out there."

"Fun. I'm going into a lion's den. Aren't satyrs things you play?"

Lugh laughed. "No those are sitars. They're played in India. And you're not going alone. Apollo's going with you. I'm not allowed."

"Why?"

"Zeus has forbidden anyone not under his rule to enter Olympus until the Furies are put back in the Underworld. Since you're technically doing something for him, you're under his rule. If you need me, I'll be there for you. I don't care what the ramifications will be. I won't let anything happen to you." Lugh took her in his arms and hugged her.

In the heels, her chin was even with his nose. She stooped to kiss him. How was she going to walk through grass in the six-inch spikes? All she needed to complete the outfit was a red bullwhip. A naughty smile spread on her lips. She imagined herself using the whip on Lugh. Having him blindfolded, spread eagle, and handcuffed in velvet restraints hanging from the ceiling. She would snap the whip, slicing the

air with it. The crack would make the god jump. The very end would touch his back and tickle him. She licked her lips at the image. *I could get used to that.*

Maybe, when you get back, we can experiment, Lugh answered her. The same look of mischief she felt over the whole dominatrix scene reflected on his face. Knowing he had read her mind, she turned crimson. Normally, she didn't mind if he read her mind. She kind of liked it because he knew exactly where to touch her and got her whatever she wanted—she was so spoiled—and that was fine. Neither of them had brought up the bondage stuff before.

“I have to save the world. All humans could be enslaved and eating tofu if I don't get my butt in gear.” Kalliope took a few wobbly steps toward the door.

“I love you, Kalli.”

She smiled at Lugh. “I love you too.”

She walked out the door and fell flat on her face.

CHAPTER EIGHT

When Kalliope got up, Theresa was reclined on the couch with Apollo rubbing her feet. The frog was perched on her stomach, feeding her strawberries from a bowl. She blew a piece of hair away from her face and watched the scene. A few minutes ago her best friend had fainted at the sight of the god and freaked out because of the size of the bullfrog. Not to mention the whole ordeal with her husband. She wondered why the others didn't notice her. When she tried to cross the threshold into the living room, she found an energy barrier. The circle had been activated.

That's odd since it should respond to me and no one else.

Kalliope put out her hand, feeling the barrier. Once her palm touched the circle, the energy collapsed in on itself. The occupants of the couch looked over at her.

"Hi, Kalli," Theresa said in a bubbly voice. Her friend seemed happy and calm which was a good thing. "What's with the outfit?" She ate another strawberry from Humphrey.

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Her familiar looked over and his jaw dropped. The frog fell to his knees on the floor and clasped his webbed feet together, wringing them in front of her. “I’ve been a bad bad froggy. Punish me. Please punish me!”

Kalliope reached down and scooped up the frog. “If you don’t hush, I’ll punish you and turn you into a tadpole.”

“Kalli, be nice to Humphy. He means well.” Theresa blushed when she looked at the frog. Was it her, or did the frog have some power over women?

“Dear, Kalliope, you look wonderful. A vision comes down from heaven.” Apollo came toward her. She put out her hand to stop him.

“Apollo, I know you’re under the spell of Cupid’s arrow. Thank you for healing me. It’s great. But I’m with Lugh and I just need—”

The god bowed and brought her outstretched hand to his lips. “Dear lady, the affects of the spell wore off when I found myself fighting your teapot. You were appetizing when I was under the spell of love, but now you’re delicious. If you were not with my best friend, then I’d sweep you off your feet and make you mine. That is the look that suits you best.”

Kalliope was confused. If the god was not under a spell when they first got to the apartment, then he why was coming onto her? “So, the thing in the bedroom with you and me where we—you know. That was all an act?”

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The god smiled. “Sorry. I wanted to be sure you actually had feelings for Lugh. If you slept with me, then you wouldn’t care about him at all. After hitting you with the lust arrow, only true love can break its spell. I wasn’t anticipating the side effects of you being able to levitate furniture with a sneeze. I guess you were allergic. I also wasn’t thinking I’d get attacked by Nas either and hit by one of Cupid’s arrows. But in the end, it proved my point.”

Kalliope was livid. If it were possible her hair would be on fire. She turned to Lugh who was in the doorway. “Was this your planning? To see if I was faithful to you? Was this all a test?” Hot tears of anger streamed down her cheeks. Her heart felt like it was broken all over again. Her mind flashed back to when she found her ex sleeping with his devout overdeveloped paramour.

“Kalli—” Lugh started.

“No. I don’t want to hear it.” She ripped off the collar. It landed at his feet. She clutched her familiar closer. “I don’t need either of you! Theresa, hun, I’ll be back. I have to save the world from three greasy goddesses without the help of these two jackasses!”

The witch walked towards the bathroom. Her mind was focused on the Delphic Oracle. From the description Lugh had given her, she had a pretty good idea where she

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would be going. Dark, loud, seedy and filled with drinking, leather clad creatures.

“Kalliope, wait!” Lugh called behind her. She put up her free hand and felt power move out of it. Her carpet writhed and split open. From the crevice came vines and braches that wove themselves into a thorny wall that echoed the state of her heart. She didn’t want to see what the gods did to get through it. She stepped over the threshold of her bathroom. When she opened her eyes, she was standing outside of a building. The time had changed in the other realm. It was night now.

“I think those wings of yours would be handy now. For a frog, you sure are heavy, Humph!” Kalliope set the frog down. After a second, the wings folded out of his back, and he was flying on white feathery angel wings. All he needed was a top hat and his look would be complete. Kalliope studied the building in front of her. It was beautifully carved out of marble with columns reaching to the sky in two even rows along the outside. Large torches were in between the columns, giving enough light to see by. It was balmy. She was starting to chafe in the leather outfit. She was not used to the corset and the metal boning was digging into her ribs. It was tied a little too tight. No matter how much it pushed up her boobs, she could barely breathe. Kalliope noticed several steps leading underground in the middle of the open air

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temple. She heard rather soothing flute music. Whatever she had expected was not at all what she thought.

“Come on, froggy.”

She made her way downstairs concentrating on not falling with her heels and also trying not to let what had just happened get to her. *I am a strong independent woman. I am a powerful witch. I run my own life and my own business. I don't need a man who is going to test my love. I am a strong and powerful woman who is going to kick some ass if anyone gets in my way.*

She kept repeating the mantra while she made her way down the spiral staircase descending further underground than she would have liked. While she ventured downward, recessed torches sparked to life when she got close to them. *Motion censored lighting! I need one of these when I get home.* The deeper she went, the quieter it got with only her echoing steps, the swishing of Humphrey's wings, and the crackle, snap, and pop of the torches springing to life. A sense of dread came over her. Was she in the right place? She had not seen a soul. It felt like she was descending into a secret labyrinth. *Maybe I'll be a feast for the Minotaur. I can see the headline now. Witch trespasses into maze stalked by half-man, half bull creature who decided to use her for a personal sex slave.*

Kalliope shook her head. She was losing hope. Her heart sank. The litany of all powerful witch woman faded fast. At the end of the stairs, she was met with cranking disco

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music. Instead of a torch lighting her way, a blue neon sign hung crooked over a wooden door set in the stone. Above it was a disco ball and a track full of different colored lights. Once she stepped off the last step, the mirrored ball began spinning. The lights bounced off the walls, hitting the ball and spreading rainbows all over the small chamber.

“Psychedelic.” Humphrey swayed while he hovered in the air.

Kalliope watched the lights a little bit more and looked at the sign. It said Del’s.

She swallowed and poked the half-tranced frog. He seemed to snap out of it when she opened the door and stepped into the bar.

Inside, she was greeted by a receptionist sitting behind a desk made from white marble. Her hair was perfect blonde set back in a French braid. Covering a perfect body was a hot pink toga. Everything inside was brilliant white. Kalliope had to blink to keep the glare off. Above the receptionist’s desk was a sign carved in marble that read Del’s Spa.

“Hi, welcome to Del’s! What can I do for you today?” Her voice was high pitched and squeaky. Kalliope winced. Either she was in the wrong place or someone didn’t want her to get to the Oracle. *If the Oracle knew the future then she*

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wouldn't want me to find her. Unless this is all a test and she's messing with me.

“I’m looking for Del.”

The receptionist looked down at her schedule. “I’m sorry, but Del doesn’t have any open appointments. Is there someone else who can help you?”

Kalliope rested on the stone counter and felt a vibration in the stone. It reminded her of the thump of a dance floor and the stone Lugh had given her. But she couldn’t think of that now. She had to think about what lay ahead. Goddesses taking over the world by making people eat drugged tofu disguised as burgers, or whatever crazy concoction they were feeding people, was on the agenda first. Kalliope closed her eyes and concentrated on the energy. It rippled. When the beat touched something else, it flowed through everything. It was a glamour disguising the place as a spa. It would have been nice if it really was a spa. She would have jumped at the chance to have a mud bath to relax the tension from her body. *That will have to wait.*

She was tired of the runaround. She plastered on a fake smile and summoned her power. Slamming her hands down on the large marble counter top, she let her power surge over it. The energy of the glamour pounded against her. It was powerful. She gritted her teeth.

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“Miss, what do you think you’re doing?” The plastic voice was tinged with a bit of concern and fear. The secretary’s appearance wavered from a perfect blonde into having bright blue hair, pointed ears, and wearing nothing more than a black bustier and a black leather mini-skirt.

“I don’t care if I don’t have an appointment. I need to speak to Del!” Her power flared through her. It moved down into the counter area and through the floor. Kalliope glared at the receptionist.

“Ah, Kalliope, ya sure this is such a good idea?” Humphrey asked. “Since ya don’t have an appointment maybe we should go.”

She glanced at the flying amphibian. He wore a leather spiked collar. More power blazed through her while she clenched the bar. As she pushed against the power, she caught glimpses of the patrons of the bar dressed in leather. Seventies disco played in the background. Down the bar she spied a woman with stark white hair. She was dressed in a neon blue leather outfit, and thigh high boots. The neon blue reflected off her hair. Her eyes were the same shade of blue her outfit was. In the spa scene, the woman was not there. It had to be Del. The Oracle’s fists were clenched. Her brow knotted from dueling with Kalliope. A final burst of power left Kalliope dizzy, she had to grab a hold of the bar and shut her eyes. When she did, she felt and heard a pop. When she

got a hold of herself and her breath, a completely different scene was before her.

Behind the bar, the white marble turned black. A large mirror appeared that was at least twenty feet long and very high. Fist sconces held blazing torches. Large disco balls sent rainbows dancing around the place, reflecting off the mirror. There were ten stools to her left each filled with creatures that appeared to be half men and half goats. Each wore leather vests with curly horns sticking out of the top of their heads. Some had mugs of beer in their furry hands and others were downing shots of ruby liquid. Along the mirror was an array of different alcohols and other concoctions Kalliope could only imagine.

When the first satyr looked over, he gave her a drunken smile and a once over. “Ssccome ‘ere swwwweettie,” he slurred.

She curled her nose at the drunken creature and took in the rest of the lot. In the back of the club, there was a centaur holding a mike and singing karaoke. Kalliope shivered at the off-key creature. There was another group of centaurs in another corner playing pool and smoking. The satyrs occupied the opposite corner. She planted her gaze on Del and felt a blast of cold power wash over her. Kalliope endured the cold, not breaking the Oracle’s gaze. After a moment, Del waved her back. Kalliope looked down at

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Humphrey who was being petted by the bartender. He looked at her and gave her a dumb smile. She shook her head and decided to leave him where he was since he was in froggy heaven. He blew kisses at her and went back to romancing the bartender.

Kalliope avoided the grabs, pinches, and stares she got from the patrons trying not to turn green at the barnyard smell from the creatures at the bar. She walked through the door at the end of the bar and down another winding staircase. More torches popped on. She ended up in a room lavishly furnished with settees and overstuffed pillows. On a canopied bed nestled in the middle was Del. She was propped up on pillows. Kalliope stood at the end of the bed and noticed the other corner was a mini dungeon with whips, restraints, shackles, and all kinds of toys.

“So you’re the new witch everyone’s been talking about?” Del’s accent was thick and made her sound French.

“Yup, that’s me. The talk of the town.”

Del purred and trailed her nails over the white sheets that matched her hair. “Why don’t you come sit next to me? It’s been a while since I’ve seen a mortal in these realms. One that was full blooded anyway.” A wicked smile curled on the Oracles’ face.

Kalliope was not sure she liked where this was going, but she had to play along because she needed the info on the

Furies. She sat on the edge of the bed and wondered if her familiar was living happily ever after with the satyrs and the barmaid above. Del crawled over the bed and ran her fingers through Kalliope's hair. Her lips were nibbling on Kalliope's ear. Del's hands had worked themselves under her the corset, cupping her breasts. She jumped and put a few feet between them.

“Okay, that was uncalled for. I came here for some help. Not to mess around. Besides, I strictly bat for the other team.”

Del got up, pouting. “You're no fun. I thought you'd enjoy playing since you were Lugh's new flame.” The Oracle snapped her fingers. The décor of the room changed. There was a harp in the background plucking *Master and Servant* by Depeche Mode. Del wore a blue kimono style dress with a white dragon embroidered on the front. Her hair was pulled up in a bun and accented with a blue lily. Her nails were now pointed and white. Everything about the room became smoky.

Great, what was Zeus thinking sending me here? I'm not going to wind up an exotic plaything. Maybe he's watching this whole scene and getting his rocks off. The Oracle's eyes glinted yellow behind the blue, becoming catlike for a split second. What kind of a creature was Del really? “Sorry to be such a party pooper, but

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I really need to save the world. Zeus said I should come to you.”

Del laughed which sounded like a long purr. “Kalligirl, you have to lighten up and have some fun. That’s what life is about. Yes, yes, you have to save the mortal realm. But do you know how many prophecies I gave to humans to avoid peril? What did they do? They ignored me! I got better reception and appreciation from the creatures upstairs than I got from the gods or from any humans in my day.”

Hurt flashed across Del’s face from being forgotten. She put a hand on the Oracle’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, but I won’t ignore your guidance. I’m not here to take over your place. I just need some advice.”

The Oracle smiled. “Gotcha! I haven’t had this much fun since Hercules came here asking about his twelve tasks.”

“You think this is a joke?”

Del chuckled. “Of course, it’s not a joke. But it was funny to see the look on your face upstairs. You’re quite powerful. It’s a shame really. I understand why Dagda doesn’t want to lend you out. It took quite a lot of convincing from Zeus to get the Greenman to let go of his prize possession.”

What is Del talking about? Dagda hadn’t mentioned anything about me being a prize possession. She makes it sound like I need to be put up on a shelf next to his award he won for being dickhead of the

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year. What is going on? “So why did Dagda let me go if I’m so valuable?”

Del walked around Kalliope and ran her fingernails over exposed skin of her throat where the collar had been. She regretted throwing the collar at Lugh. Now was a time she could have thought about him and used his protection to escape the cat’s den. This was going all wrong. Kalliope swallowed. Her eyes sought a way out.

“Oh, it’s true the Greenman owed Zeus a favor, but Zeus knew about Dagda’s secret coffee hoard. All Hail has banned any god from imbibing caffeine. Chocolate is okay once in a while, but Dagda is infatuated with coffee. Zeus found out about the stash with a little help.” Del purred in her ear and rubbed her face along Kalliope’s cheek. It felt velvety.

The only one who could have told Zeus about Dagda’s secret store was Nas. Only those close to Dagda would have known about it. Kalliope had no idea the Greenman had a hidden coffee supply, but she wouldn’t put it past him. Nas had tricked her all along. The goddess never wanted to help Kalliope in the first place. What for? What would Nas want more than anything? *To get me out of the way so she could go after Lugh again. I’m an idiot. I bet she even put Apollo up to hitting me with that lust arrow so I would cheat on Lugh with some*

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random god or who knows what. What a bitch! She was never going to help me and I fell for it. What did I do!

Her gaze swept the room. The incense smoke had gotten heavier, infusing the room with a peppermint smell. A shiver of fear ran through her. “So, Zeus got leverage on Dagda. Big deal. What does that have to do with getting me here and letting the Furies out? Does Zeus want to rule the world or something?”

Del chuckled. Her fingers slid down Kalliope’s arms. The Oracle raised goose bumps on her flesh. Del kissed her neck lightly like a vampire trying to find a vein. “Oh this had nothing to do with Zeus ruling the world. He could care less about anything else then getting pussy.”

“Then who wants to rule the world? You?”

Del’s sandpaper tongue licked a trail along her cheek. “I could care less about your world. I stopped being a part of it long ago. When mortals ceased believing in the Old Ways, I faded out. All of Delphi did. I chose to fade with it unlike Avalon which Morgaine so valiantly fought for. No, all of this is about ruling *this* world.”

Kalliope wracked her brain, thinking of a spell or something to get her out of the predicament she was in. Nothing came to mind. Del’s hand slithered up her thigh, leaving pink trails where her nails were. “So, why get me here? Why have me go after the Furies?”

“That’s such an easy question. And you’re so delicious that I’ll tell you. I haven’t had this much fun in a long time. Your fear tastes so sweet, Kalliope, just like cream. The Furies are only a distraction so you wouldn’t be focusing on the real problem. Nas had nothing to do with it. Zeus promised me the Greenman’s throne and threw you in as a bonus if everything went the way we planned.” Del grabbed Kalliope’s wrists tight enough that she couldn’t escape. A wide grin spread on the Oracle’s face, reminding Kalliope of the Cheshire Cat. She saw four pointed teeth in her mouth. “And so far everything has. But, why wouldn’t it? When you know the future, everything is so easy.”

Kalliope tried to get away, but the woman’s grip was iron clad. It was nothing for Del to drag her across the room to the dungeon. There, she flung Kalliope against a rack. She hit her head hard on the wood. Pain exploded in her temple and then darkness descended.

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CHAPTER NINE

When she opened her eyes, there was nothing but pain. It took her a moment before her eyes focused through the dancing frogs swirling around her head. When they did, she was surrounded by a group of on looking centaurs and satyrs. Next to her was another rack. On it was a barely conscious Nas. Dark purple bruises were brushed across her breasts and red lashes marks decorated her stomach. Clamps were attached to her nipples. She instantly felt bad for the goddess. Kalliope tried to summon her power, but nothing happened. Del realized she was awake. She tried moving, but she was bound spread-eagle and naked. Hot tears burned her eyes being exposed to all the strange creatures. Del's smile widened. She sauntered over, trailing a long, black whip behind her like a tail.

Lugh, where are you when I need you? Kalliope thought, knowing the god was not allowed to come and help her. *I was an idiot to walk out and throw away your love. If this is it, I'm so sorry.*

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“Well, well the witch is awake.” Del cracked the whip for emphasis. Kalliope jumped. The creatures around her jeered and whistled. “It’s no good trying to use your magick here. The restraints won’t let you. Hephaestus forged them for me. They were a present.”

“You let loose the Furies! You knew about the planetary alignment and told Zeus all about it!”

“Tsk. Tsk. Sure I knew about the alignment. I’m an Oracle. I *see* the future. Divine the fates even the Fates don’t know. It’s what I do. Like knowing the pitch of your cries when you feel the leather caress your flesh.” Del drew back the whip. A slice of pain cut Kalliope’s skin. She couldn’t help but scream. She did not look away from her captor. She wouldn’t give her the satisfaction.

“Why did you let them out? What’s the benefit of that?” She gasped.

“I already told you this. Distraction. Pure and simple. But you’re wrong on one thing. I didn’t let them out.” Del drew her whip back again and lashed Kalliope across her breasts this time. All Kalliope saw was red. Pain became her world. The laughs of the centaurs filled her ears. Skin separated and wetness trailed down her stomach. She tried with all her might to summon her powers again, but nothing. The bonds were magick proof. Hurt and shame moved

through her with all the otherworldly creatures scrutinizing her.

“Kalliope, we could’ve had so much fun. You should have stayed out of my way. I guess you’ll have to be my slave forever. The same with Nas over there. Poor, foolish, love sick goddess. She actually came to me for help. Like I would help such a stuck up bitch. She said you and she had reconciled. That was something I never saw coming. It’s hard to pull the fur over my eyes. I remember when her hate for you was so great she wanted to turn you into cactus. Now I’ll turn you into my servant. Soon you’ll be licking my boots and cleaning the floors with a toothpick.” Del pulled the whip back again. Kalliope winced at the anticipation of the flogging. Burning agony spread over her thighs.

Kalliope shrieked again. “Why are you doing this?”

Del stared into her eyes. Kalliope couldn’t help but return the gaze. She was falling. Her captor’s eyes swirled. Kalliope felt her will leaving her. Del licked the back of her hand and then ran it over her hair to smooth it back into place. “Because I can. You have to be broken.”

The Oracle gave her a twisted grin. She knelt down between Kalliope’s legs. Her tongue ran the length of her inner thigh to her nether lips, lapping at the trail of blood made from the whip. Catcalls erupted from the audience. Her head fall back against the back of the rack. All hope drained

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from her. Lugh was not going to be her god in shining leather this time. There was no one she could contact.

Del's tongue licked at her pleasure center. God it felt so good. She jumped when the Oracle nestled between her legs. She wanted the creatures to keep on going. After a few strokes, Kalliope's muscles clenched of their own accord even though she tried not to be stimulated from the strokes of Del's tongue. The echo of the lashes faded away to a slow sting. She opened her eyes through half slits to once again stare into the swirling gaze of the Oracle. Yes. She would do anything for her. Yes, she wanted to be hers. It was as if a silent voice in her head was controlling her, making her desire everything Del did. Something slid into her already slick depths. A moan escaped her lips. She was getting ready to come. A hushed silence descended over the crowd while they watched the show. Del licked the side of Kalliope's face and purred in her ear. She squeezed one of her nipples.

"You want this, don't you?" Del pushed the phallus deeper into Kalliope.

Kalliope bucked against it, ashamed the Oracle was able to elicit such a response from her. But it was true. Something inside of her wanted to be used because it was what the voice inside her head was telling her to do. Each time she gazed into Del's eyes, she fell farther away from herself. "Yes."

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“Good girl.” Del squeezed her nipple again. This time Del didn’t stop the pumping motion of the dildo buried inside her. Kalliope’s fists were clenched. She didn’t want Del to stop. She wanted it to go on forever and ever.

“Come on, Del. We want a turn at the witch!” One of the creatures shouted from the peanut gallery.

“Shut up. You’ll get your turn,” Del shouted. She locked her lips to Kalliope. She tossed the phallus aside and pushed her tongue in-between her lips.

I can see why Lugh loves you so. You’re such a good fuck, Kalliope. You’ll be a great plaything and concubine to keep me coming, Del whispered inside her thoughts. *I’d let you go, but these chains aren’t the only thing keeping you like this. Now tell me. Do you want to be whipped again? Will you cry out for me so I can have you again? Then you’ll let the others take turns, won’t you?*

Kalliope wanted to say no. But whatever hold Del had on her she couldn’t fight. “Yes.”

Del drew back the whip. She shut her eyes against the pain she expected. But it never came. She opened her eyes after a couple of seconds to see Apollo holding onto the whip. The tail wrapped around his arm to his elbow. Del hissed at him.

“Del, just because I don’t come to visit you all the time doesn’t mean you should be so inhospitable to your guests.” He pulled the whip out of her hands. She spit at him

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and made scratching gestures with her nails. He gazed at Kalliope and Nas.

“They’re mine, Apollo. They came willingly into my den. By law I should get them.”

The god walked over and unsnapped the manacles to release Nas who could barely stand. He did the same for Kalliope who then undid her feet. Once she was free, her strength returned to her. Del’s hold on her faded. She couldn’t believe she had let the Oracle violate her so. A part of her shivered because she had been so helpless. Another part of her mind had liked the sexual games the Oracle had played with her. Kalliope shook her head. Energy washed over her in a cold wave. Her magick was with her once again, and she did not feel so vulnerable now. Del would never have her way with her again.

“They’re not yours. Both came here seeking help. You are a former Delphic Oracle, Del. You know the consequences for breaking those laws. You swore to me to do my bidding. I always said those who came to you for help must be treated with the respect they deserve. Not manipulated into your sadistic games especially with these creatures looking on.” Apollo motioned for Kalliope to come into his arms. He kissed her forehead. Warmth flowed down through her third eye settling over the physical wounds the whip had inflicted and the mental ones. In a moment her

flesh was flawless. As for her experience with Del, Kalliope felt no remorse or shame for what had happened. Because of Apollo's healing powers she was apathetic towards it and did not feel violated. She was mad as hell that the Oracle had taken advantage of her. Kalliope closed her eyes envisioning herself in the green outfit Lugh had bestowed to her before her crazy journey. She was dressed in it minus the necklace. Apollo healed Nas next. When the other goddess revived, she smiled at Kalliope and then snapped her fingers, conjuring clothes for herself.

Apollo stared at Del. "I gave you the position as Oracle and you disobeyed me. I'm sure Hades can find something for you to do in the Underworld. Tell him I said hello."

Del fell to the ground to kiss the god's sandals. "Please don't exile me to the Underworld. I've done everything you've ever asked of me. Everything! Persephone is so vanilla. Please! I did what you asked with the—"

"You should have thought of that before." The god snapped his fingers. Del was swallowed in blue black flames leaving the stench of sulfur behind.

"You ladies ready to go?"

"Please," whispered Nas.

"Good because I'm getting sick of disco. The eighties had so much more style."

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Kalliope didn't say a thing, but relaxed in the god's arms. He led them up the stairs and out of the night club. She wished she was in Lugh's arms and had to bite back the tears forming in her eyes. But she couldn't think about her heartache. She had to focus on what she had learned about the Furies. Someone was behind letting them out. Her money was on Zeus since he had blackmailed Dagda to get Kalliope over to Mount Olympus. Now she had to get the Furies out of her realm before they started enslaving people. Then she could work on taking down the mastermind behind their escape. Then she would find Lugh and tell him how sorry she was. At least she owed him the benefit of the doubt. He had never put her in harm's way. He would have been there to help her, but he was not allowed. One thing she learned from the encounter was that she was not infallible.

A smile spread on her face when she thought about the chains she had been bound in. She had an idea.

"Well, you ladies are out of danger. I will take my leave of you." Apollo bowed.

"Hey, have you seen my familiar?" Kalliope asked. The last time she had seen him the bartender was making googly eyes at him. Where the frog got it from, she had no idea.

"No, he was not in the night club when I rescued you. I'm sure he'll show up."

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“But—”

“Kalliope, why don’t you let Apollo go? We can look for your frog after,” Nas interjected.

She saw a strange look in the goddess’s eyes and nodded. “I guess you’re right. Apollo, thanks for coming to our rescue. A damsel always needs a hero in dire times.”

The god bowed again and faded out of view. Kalliope turned to Nas. One would never know she had been tortured. The only thing different about the goddess was there were little worry lines around her eyes and the corners of her mouth betrayed her age. She wore a black dress and her hair was a dark shade of brown.

“Thanks.”

“What for?” Kalliope asked. They began walking away from the entrance of the night club into a vast open field where the grass seemed to be on steroids. In the distance, Kalliope saw several animals that could have been horses grazing by a stream that glistened in the sunlight. But she knew not to take anything for granted in the astral realm. The horses could have been centaurs, unicorns, pegasus, or something different she had never even seen before.

“You didn’t have to come and meet me. You could have forgotten all about me.”

In truth she *had* forgotten about Nas. It was only when she saw her strapped to the other rack did she

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remember the goddess was going to meet her. “Umm—so did you find anything out about the Furies we can use?” She felt a hand on her shoulder.

She looked over at Nas who was smiling at her. “Kalli, it’s okay that you forgot about me. I’ve been a real bitch to you and you didn’t deserve that.”

“That’s okay. It’s behind us now, right? So did you find anything?” Kalliope was staring at the herd of animals that was moving closer to them.

“No, it’s not okay. I have to confess something.”

“What?”

The goddess took in a deep breath and looked at the sky. It was very unusual for her to apologize. Nas had admitted she hated humans and that Kalliope was nothing more than scum to her. But that was back when she was being kept prisoner in the Oak Tree. Exile had changed the goddess. Hopefully for the better.

“The other night, when you were with Lugh skinny dipping. You thought something bit you and that was why you had gotten sick.”

Nas bit her lip and twirled a few strands of her hair. Kalliope noticed the animals were getting closer. “Yeah, so.”

“Well, you didn’t get an ordinary cold.”

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“I know that. Apollo said he shot me with a Lust Arrow to see if I’d sleep with him, or something, because he wanted to test my love for Lugh.”

“Actually, it wasn’t Apollo’s idea. It was mine. I asked him to shoot you with one of Cupid’s arrows. I wanted you to cheat on Lugh so I’d have another chance with him.”

A bolt of rage coursed through her. *She really is a bitch. Great. Just great. This is all I need to know to add to my already full and tipping over plate. Why not pile more crap on?*

“When I saw you in front of Zeus with the stone Lugh gave you, I was enraged. I couldn’t believe it. That was why I followed you and tried to shoot you. When you told me he gave it to you, I knew it was over between Lugh and I. It broke my heart. I want to help you. That was why I came here. Del foresaw my arrival and tricked me to get me downstairs. She knocked me out and tied me up. I came to some and overheard her talking with someone about the Furies. I’m so sorry for the trouble I caused you and for trying to turn you into a tree in the past. Can we be friends?”

Kalliope studied the goddess. Was she being sincere? Having a strange reaction to the Lust Arrow hadn’t been all that bad with the floating furniture. However, she was not particularly happy about almost sleeping with Apollo because Nas wanted to mess with her love life. The more she examined the goddess, the more she realized Nas was being

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honest. She really did want to be friends with her. *Great. All I need is another goddess in my life. I have a hard enough time juggling the roommate I already have. Why not have one more? I'm sleeping with her ex. This will just make my life even more interesting.*

“Nas, I can forgive you for everything you did, including trying to turn me into a plant. It will take me a while to forget. How about we start off slow? We get through getting the Furies back into the Underworld and then maybe we can have a late night slumber party and have ice cream. Okay?”

The goddess was silent while she contemplated the decision. “Sounds great. So, are you going to ask me what I overheard when I was captive?”

Kalliope saw that the group of horses was closer. They appeared to be unicorns headed in their general direction and were picking up speed. The leader's head was down. Its horn pointed directly at her. She grabbed a hold of Nas, pulled her along, and started running.

“I think we can wait. We have bigger problems.”

Nas looked behind her and saw why they had started running. The herd of eight was almost upon them. Kalliope and Nas ran until she tripped and fell in the grass. She grabbed for Nas who came with her. A couple of sets of hooves sailed over her and land gracefully a few feet in front of them. She got up and dusted herself off.

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She was surprised to see the unicorn had two horns not one. One was made of spiraled ivory. The other was short maybe a couple of inches long and coal black. Kalliope wondered if legends had also gotten the folklore wrong about creatures. But when she stood up, she noticed there was something on the lead stallion's back. It appeared to be her familiar.

"I believe this belongs to you." The bicorn gestured to the frog that was passed out on its back. She scooped up the frog and cradled him in her arms. Several lash marks scarred his back and stomach. One of his webbed feet had been cut off. He was beaten up and tortured. Her heart went out to the womanizing frog. He might have had a thing for breasts, but he didn't deserve to be mauled because she was an extension of him.

"Thank you. Where did you find him?"

"You're welcome. He was by the River Styx. Charon was about to take him when a woman appeared and took him in her arms. She asked that we bring him to you and deliver a message."

Kalliope looked at Nas, who shrugged, not sure why or who the strange woman would be, not to mention the message. "What's the message?"

"She said you're not the only one who is a sucker for cheesecake, and if you save the world you'll have an apple pie

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waiting for you.” The stallion seemed annoyed. He pawed the ground.

At the mention of apple pie, Kalliope knew Constance was the one who had saved Humphrey. Constance was her great aunt who had watched out for her after her parents had died. In life, she was obsessed with apples and constantly made apple pies. A lot of them she gave away, sold, fed Ickleberry the goblin with, who was watching over Kalliope even as a child, and forced Kalliope to eat. Even in death, her aunt randomly appeared in her kitchen and started baking pies. She had lost count of all the times she had woken up from *dreams* to find a half eaten pie sitting in the middle of her kitchen table. Constance also made them for Flidais because she was hooked on them too.

Now all she had to figure out was the reference to cheesecake. Why would Constance not come herself? Unless she slipped in and was not supposed to because Kalliope was barred from getting assistance from ghosts too? Maybe helping Humphrey wasn't against the rules because technically he was his own being.

“Thanks for the message.”

The bicorn bowed. “You're most welcome.” He neighed to the other bicorns and swung off in another direction. They sped off looking like a white sea among the grass.

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Kalliope stroked the back of the frog. She felt bad for the way she had spoken to him. Granted he had gotten on her nerves, but who wouldn't get annoyed with a womanizing frog? He had taken blows for her and had been true to his word that he would lay down his life for her. If Charon was about to take him, that meant he was near death. Kalliope may not have known much about Greek Gods, but she knew the ferryman to the Underworld. Charon was not unlike the Grim Reaper who demanded payment of a coin if he took a soul on the River Styx to the Underworld.

When she ran her hand over the amphibian's back, he slowly started coming around. After a few moments, he opened his beady eyes. "I'm in heaven. Ribbit!" Then he fell back unconscious. Kalliope chuckled and tucked him under her arm since he liked to be close to her chest. At least he was warm. The more she held him, the more she realized his injuries were getting better. Maybe her magick was healing him since he was part of her. Knowing he was going to be okay, Kalliope focused her attention back to Nas. "So, what did you find out when you were at Del's?"

"What?"

"You said you overheard Del talking to someone about the Furies? What did they say?"

"Right. Sorry, I was still stuck on the bicorns. I've never seen one up close."

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“You’re a goddess and you’ve never seen one of the animals up close? I thought they roamed free all over the realm.”

Nas shook her head. “No, they’re strictly a Greek animal. We have unicorns wandering in our forests. Anyway, I overheard Del saying to her guest the only weakness the Furies had was cheesecake. They go bonkers over it. When Zeus locked them up in the Underworld, he denied them access to it. It made them seriously bitter.”

“How? No wait—I don’t want to know—” Kalliope shook her head. She gazed at the rising sun. At the very edge of the orb was a chariot and golden horses with long, flowing manes. *It’s true the sun is drawn by a chariot. I wonder if Apollo is up there doing it. Maybe that was why he had to go.* “Okay, so they have a fetish for cheesecake. I can understand that. It also makes sense to what the bicorn said. It was Constance trying to tell me the same thing.” She thought a moment with the new info she had. “I have an idea that I think we can use. Do you know where I can find Hephaestus?”

“I do.” Nas blushed. “He and I hooked up a few times. He owes me a couple of favors. Why do you ask?”

“We need to get some of those chains Del had.”

“You’re going to use them on the Furies?”

Kalliope nodded. “We need three sets. I haven’t figured out how we are going to get them on them, but we

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can use cheesecake to do it. I just need to figure out that part. Look, can you find out if the Furies have captured anyone? And if so, where are they keeping them?"

Nas smiled. "How about you take care of doing recon on the Furies? I'll get the chains. Handling Hephaestus can get very delicate since he's so hot."

Kalliope chuckled. "Fine, you take care of that. I'm going to take Humph back to my apartment and check on Theresa. When I left her, she had just walked in on her cheating husband."

"Do you want me to turn him into a thorn bush for you? I've had very good practice with that." Nas grinned wickedly. Her hair was now copper with highlights of bronze, orange, and dark brown. Her dress was burnt yellow. Kalliope could only guess what Nas was going to do with the god, but she could imagine.

"You get the chains. I'll get Humph fixed up."

Nas waved her hand. In a burst of flame, she was swallowed whole to go with the outfit. Gods certainly had a flare for the dramatic.

CHAPTER TEN

Kalliope shivered when she returned to her apartment. The air was thinner from the astral plane and the air conditioner was blasting. She hugged the frog closer to her chest, hoping he appreciated it. When she examined him, his face was not so bruised. The whip lashes were nearly healed. Theresa had camped out on her bed and was fast asleep. Hopefully sleep would help and heal her heart a little. She waved the door shut and sat down on the couch. Her bones were heavy. She might have been knocked out for a little while, but staying in the astral realm for long periods of time was draining. Her lids were heavy. The couch was comfortable. Humphrey was still passed out. Kalliope figured he'd be fine until she woke up. It was better he slept and when he woke up she would talk to him.

She patted him on the head. In the back of her mind she saw herself curled up on the couch warm and happy. When she fell asleep, she felt the weight of a blanket settle on top of her. Kalliope drifted. Her body grew light, while her

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mind was still aware. Her eyes opened. She instantly recognized where she was.

She was in a glade surrounded by trees the size of small skyscrapers. They were bigger than Redwoods. Flowers of blue, purple, and yellow dotted the ground. Lush greenery and herbs were mixed in with the grass. The familiar scent of jasmine and lavender perfumed the air. The atmosphere hung heavy around her. In the center of the clearing was a large, clear pool. It was blue-green and she could see right to the bottom of it. An outcrop of rocks dotted one edge. One was a flat slab. This was the clearing she had met Nas and had her first glimpse of the astral realm. It was where she first realized she did indeed love Lugh. That was months ago before she had eaten any apples and still had a Death god after her. It seemed like a lifetime ago. Kalliope walked over to the pool and peered down into the bottom. Her siren friend was not there. Only fish the size of trucks and the odd turtle swam among the greenery. She ran her fingers over the motionless surface. Not even a ripple broke the glass like reflection. She sighed, feeling loss resonating in her soul. She had been an idiot to cast Lugh aside over something so stupid. He had done nothing to betray her trust. All he had done was love her and she had discarded him at the first sign of her own insecurities. What did that say about her?

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It says I'm a mistrusting bitch who can't see the truth under her nose. Kalliope wondered if her heart was twisted in some way that she couldn't trust men anymore. *Maybe it'd be better if I turned Quince into a toad. Then I don't have to deal with the thought of him anymore. It's not that he haunts me really, but what he did to me does. Maybe I can transform the tits with legs into something that will make all the other guys think she's a guy? Hmm...that would be something! I could do a glamour on her so all the world will think she's a guy. What would Quince do then?* The thought made Kalliope smile a little, but it did nothing to lighten her mood. Why had she come here? Something must have pulled her.

"I brought you here." She heard Lugh's voice in her thoughts. She looked up from the pool and scanned the clearing. The god was nowhere to be seen. His presence caressed her from behind. The warmth of his energy was smothering. It tugged at her heartstrings knowing he was so near, yet so far away. Finally, she stopped looking and stared back into the pool. In the reflection, he leaned against the outcropping of rocks.

The god was dressed in tight leather pants, no shirt, and a studded leather collar around his neck. It reminded her of the one Humphrey had on. When she looked back at the rocks, he wasn't there. "I guess this is as good as I'm going to get," she whispered. A lump formed in her throat.

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She studied the hard muscles of his chest and moved her gaze over his body, savoring every hunky detail she could in case this would be the last time she saw him. Even though she knew every inch of her lover's body by heart, her fingers yearned to touch the sculpted tan chest and squeeze the perfectly round derriere. His eyes held her transfixed, green as a budding oak leaf and fathomless. She could lose her soul in them. His appearance might not have hinted at his true age or wisdom, but his eyes did. And Kalliope loved him more than she ever did Quince.

“I'm glad to see you are well after you're encounter with the Delphic Oracle.”

“How did you know about that?” She watched his reflection for any emotional reaction, but his face remained impassive.

“I felt every lash where it bit your flesh and scarred your soul.”

She felt the gulf between them. It was so much more than his being on the other side of the pool or her body being asleep in another realm. Immobile, she felt her heart reach out to him, but he wasn't answering. “Apollo was good enough to heal me and Nas. You know she's actually trying to help with the whole saving the world thing.”

“That's a little shocking. Can you trust her?”

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Kalliope nodded. “I think so. I never thought I’d say that because she tried to turn me into a bush and went against Dagda with Cromm. But I think she’s changed. I’ve changed. Whoever thought I’d be saving the world? I’m just about to get the candle store off the ground. We’re opening in a month. And—” She couldn’t hold back the tears any longer.

Lugh said nothing and made no move to comfort her. Her heart sank even lower, but deep down she knew she deserved it. Kalliope stood up and took a few steps toward the outcropping. Gazing into the pool, she was only inches from him. Reaching out, she tried to touch him, but her hands passed through thin air.

“Lugh, I’m so sorry about everything. Nas told me she convinced Apollo to hit me with a Lust Arrow. I know you weren’t setting me up. I was...am a little insecure. The whole thing with Quince still troubles me more than I realized. Can’t you forgive me?”

“Kalliope, what’s done is done. There’s nothing to say about it. You showed me you do not love me. I gave you a piece of my heart and you threw it away. I brought you here to tell you I wasn’t going to be seeing you anymore.”

Shock resonated through her. She had not expected him to say that, but she understood why he would be mad. The last thing she wanted was for him to think she was anything like Nas. All crazed because she could not have him. If

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it was over, then she would have her heart broken again, and not stalk him. She couldn't believe how she had acted. Kalliope thought she was over her ex, but evidently she was not. In her heart, she did not know what to say. The truth was she had screwed up. Her soul loved him more than her flesh. His statement was her cue to go.

“Thank you for checking in on me. I appreciate that. I'll be going. Thank you for everything. I—” Kalliope backed away from the pool, but couldn't finish her thought. Her mind drifted back to her body, where everything was heavy.

“Tell Theresa I'm sorry about her husband.” She heard Lugh say. She nodded, staring at his reflection, memorizing every line of it because she would never see him again. Finally, she closed her eyes and awoke with a start. There were tears on her cheeks. It was over. There was nothing that she could do to make the god listen to her. From his own lips, he had said he didn't want to see her anymore. Kalliope curled herself into a ball and let her tears fall. She tried to be quiet and not wake up Theresa, who was worse off than she was. Her friend had a baby on the way and had just found out her husband had betrayed her. She was the one who came first. Then there was saving the world. Maybe that could wait too. Would it be so bad for all the fast food joints to be destroyed? She was not a huge burger-fast-food chain person, but she did enjoy Chinese food. What did it matter? She

punched the pillow and bit her lip. She had to at least try and save the world. Kalliope couldn't sweep the responsibility under the rug. She had made a promise to Dagda she would do whatever he wanted her to do. From the info she had gotten from Del, there was someone behind letting the Furies out. Someone wanted to take over the world and get Kalliope out of the way to take over Dagda's throne because they got that she was a powerful ally to the god.

Kalliope cracked a half-smile at the thought. How much good she could be in helping a god, she had no idea. Dagda was powerful. He had turned Cromm into vapor with a wave of his hand. But there were limitations on their powers. "Are you okay?"

Kalliope looked up to see her familiar staring intently at her. She shook her head. Humphrey hopped over looking completely better. She reached out a hand and stroked his back.

"Oh ribbbiittt!"

She cracked a smile. "You're cute."

"It's my job to make sure you're okay and be at your service." He bowed. He had grown on her. Her aversion to green hopping things was pretty much gone. Not to say that she still didn't dislike Kermit the Frog.

"Thanks, Humph." Kalliope wiped her eyes and tried to think about her plan on how she was going to take out the

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Furies. Hopefully, Nas would come through with the magickal restraints from Hephaestus. She could only imagine what the goddess was doing with him, in order to get them. She didn't want to know.

"What's the matter?" The frog hopped up and nestled on her lap next to her breasts. She was at the point that she didn't care that he was nuzzling them. At least someone appreciated her.

"It's about Lugh. I screwed up. Now he doesn't want anything to do with me. He said he didn't love me anymore. Which I don't blame him because I screamed in his face. And—" She got all choked up and started sobbing again. It felt like someone had sliced her heart out with an ice pick, taking one slow stab at a time with only small pieces coming loose. Her soul was bound to him.

"Did you mean what you said?" Humphrey asked.

"I love him more than I can admit. Why am I even talking to you? You're a guy and you're a frog! How can you understand anything about how I feel?"

"I understand because you made me. I'm part of you, Kalliope. Have you shown him how much you love him? Have you told him?"

"How can I show a god? Sex with him is out of this world, but I feel more than that for him. Sex doesn't matter. I love being around him. When the Lust Arrow hit me, I want-

ed to hump anything I could get my hands on. I almost did with Apollo. I wanted to kill myself with guilt because then I'd have been cheating on Lugh. But I didn't and now—" She hiccupped and wiped her tears, feeling the loss. "Well I guess it doesn't matter. Now I have to save the world. Who knows? My love life is nil and probably will be dead until the day I die."

"Lugh still loves you. I'm sure of it. Maybe saving the world will show him you're truly sorry. He'll come around."

Kalliope lifted the frog so she could gaze into his deep eyes. She didn't do anything for a moment and then brought the frog to her lips. She kissed him. He felt like putty in her hands. When she pulled away, the frog batted his eyelashes, dumbstruck by the kiss. "Thanks, Humphy. You're a good frog for trying to cheer me up! It means—"

An ear-splitting scream erupted from the bedroom. Kalliope jumped up, throwing the frog in mid air. It didn't seem to faze the amphibian because once airborne he sprouted his wings and hovered. She raced into the other room. She opened the door. "Theresa, you okay? Is it time? You need me to take you to the hospital? Are the twins coming?"

But when she got into the room, she saw Theresa petrified and backed up against the bed. Kalliope looked to see why she was so horrified. It was then she heard the hissing. It seemed her bedroom was filled with a thousand snakes. In

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the front of her closet were three women. They could have come from a cowgirl convention. They wore the same color cowboy boots, short jean skirt, and red and white plaid shirts tied under their breasts showing off flat tan stomachs each with bellybutton rings with snake charms dangling in them. It was their hair that told them apart. The one at the far left had black hissing snakes writhing in coils around her head. She had a sneer on her face and bluebell eyes. The middle one had red, white, and black striped snakes that were wound into braids and hissing at the two humans from the ends. The goddess on the right had long, white snakes hanging down her back to her butt. They wove around her waist, coiling around her arms and caressing them.

The last had her arms on her hips and stared at her. Kalliope was surprised the Furies had appeared in her bedroom. Then again she shouldn't be shocked considering they probably would have found out about her sooner or later. She was the one that was going to put them back in the Underworld.

“Hello witch!” the three of them said in unison.

“Kal, who the hell are they?” Theresa asked in a forced whisper.

Kalliope's eyes darted to her friend who backed up against the wall.

“Don’t ya’ll know who we are?” asked the black snaked cowgirl.

“Yeah, you’re in serious need of new hairstyles. Where did you get yours done? Hiss Salon? Down Under Grooming?”

“Kal, please don’t piss them off...whoever they are.”

“You’re friend is right, mortal. You shouldn’t make us mad. We know Zeus siced you on us to put us back in the Underworld. We’re not going back to UFC. We’re taking over your world! There’ll be no more fast food. Everyone will be under our control. Mortals will live on tofu. Everything will be made of soybeans and animals will be free!” shouted the goddess with the white snakes for hair.

Theresa looked at Kalliope. Then she burst out laughing. “Are you guys for real? Like humanity is going to give up eating McKing’s and Burrito Bell. Speaking of burritos I could really go for a taco right about now.”

“You don’t know who we are!” said the one with white hair.

“I would say you’re Medusa’s backwoods cousins. I heard she’s prettier than the three of you!” Kalliope taunted.

One of them was about to fling a snake at her, but the other goddess stopped her and smiled. The one with the braided snakes seemed to be the leader. “We are the Furies.

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We take out our wrath on all those wronged by the deeds of man. All will obey and fear us!”

A large thunderbolt shook the room, blinding Kalliope. She put her hands up to protect herself. When she blinked again, the Furies were holding Theresa hostage.

“Let her go!” She tried to step forward, but was stuck in the floor. The carpet had melted around her feet.

The black haired Fury smiled. She ran her hand over Theresa’s belly. Her friend tried to get away. “Why would we want to do that?”

“Come on, Haley Jo. We can stop off and get some veggie tacos for the new mommy. I know just the place,” said Haley Bobby. One of the red-banded snakes tickled her ear.

“But it’s so much fun to watch the human squirm! This one is having twins. We can use them.” Haley Jo whined. Her nest of black snakes uncoiled themselves.

“You can’t have my babies!” Theresa screamed. “Kalliope, help me! Please!” Her friend had tears running down her face. The Furies’ hair was wrapping around her neck lazily and the snakes tongues twitched on her chin. She watched helplessly as her friend shook in the hands of the goddess. Theresa was petrified of snakes.

Kalliope envisioned her feet were free. She stepped up. The carpet rippled around her. Her veins were boiling. Next to her she saw a large creature that resembled a weasel

on steroids lunging at the goddesses. The snakes hissed at it in fear and backed away. It was a dark green mongoose, the only animal that hunted snakes. It was Humphrey shape shifting into a three-foot mammal that freaked out the snakes.

The goddess shoved Theresa backward toward Kalliope who caught her best friend. “Haleys it’s time to go! Ya’ll haven’t heard the last of us! We’ll be back to get you and you’re little frog too!” The Furies snapped their fingers in a Z formation and disappeared in a puff of pink smoke.

Her coven sister wrapped her arms around Kalliope’s neck in a stifling grasp. She still shook from the encounter. Kalliope sat her down on the bed and watched the frog morph back into his normal self. He hopped past the two women and sat on the bed.

“Thank you!”

She hugged her friend closer. “It’s okay. They’re gone. Stay here. If you want, I’ll talk to Morgaine and you can go to Avalon. You might like it there. You’ll be around other priestesses. I don’t want you or the babies hurt. What do you say?”

“I’m really having twins. You were right as usual. What am I going to tell Stan?” Theresa patted and rubbed her belly. Kalliope saw the hurt about her husband flash across Theresa’s face.

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“Yes, it’s twins. You *finally* believe me. That would have been great months ago when I told you I was a witch.”

“Well, I couldn’t help that I didn’t believe you. You were gone for two weeks without telling anyone and then appeared and told me you’re a witch. How do you think I was supposed to take it?”

“You were supposed to believe me and not ask to turn you into the Easter Bunny. It’s a good thing you never did.” Kalliope smiled. “Now what do you want to do?”

“You’re right. I don’t think I’d look too great with a white, fluffy tail. Hmm? Kal-umm not that I don’t trust you, but Avalon I think. Is that okay?”

“Of course, honey. We’ll go tonight. That okay?”

Her friend nodded.

Kalliope smiled and snapped her fingers. In her mind, instantly she envisioned all her friend’s things packed. They were there neatly in bags and a few surprises too that she saw in the bag for the babies. It would be better for her friend to be in a place where the Furies couldn’t get to her. They would not use her for leverage. In Avalon, Morgaine could protect Theresa because she had a better handle on her power. For a moment, she wondered how it would feel to pull the sword from the stone. Excalibur was still stuck in the hearth back in Avalon. Morgaine hadn’t come to complain so everything

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with the sword must have been okay. If not, she was going to find out.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Theresa looked around Morgaine's apartment with interest. The band posters were shredded and all the furniture destroyed. Kalliope tried walking through every doorway in the house, but they were barred. She flopped down in the only upturned chair. Even Morgaine's annoying cat was nowhere to be seen. Humphrey flapped next to a doorway, poking his foot against the energy barrier. Each time he did, an arc of blue energy flashed between him and the doorway. Kalliope shook her head at the fascinated frog.

"What happened here?" Theresa asked. She had recovered from her encounter with the Haleys. Kalliope smirked, amazed how well her friend was taking it.

Just a few short months ago, her friend would have freaked at the whole situation. Kalliope remembered when all of her candles had exploded, decorating her entire apartment. Theresa had fled with the coven because she had never seen anything like it. But her friend had gotten used to the idea of her being a witch, her roommate being an ex-goddess, and

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her dating a god—well not anymore, but Kalliope hadn't told her that yet. She smiled about the candle incident.

It had taken Kalliope days to clean everything. Even now there were still rainbow flecks on her ceiling. No matter how much magick she tried to use on her apartment, it was not coming off. There was no way she was ever getting her security deposit back. What did that matter now? If she couldn't save the world, then who would care about her apartment? There was no way that she was going to give-up so easily and let the Furies get a hold of Theresa or any other of her friends or the people of the world. She would free all the presidents and owners of the fast food restaurants. Humanity was not going to be made to live on soybeans and to-fu curd.

“So what happens now?” Theresa asked.

Kalliope studied the trashed apartment and knew something had happened to make her friend close off the doorways to Avalon. *The Furies must have come here and done this to try and stop Morgaine. But why? Did they need her or something else?* Her gaze swept the room and spied the untouched bowl of oranges on the breakfast bar. That gave her an idea. She took an orange.

“Come on. Follow me. I know another way.”

Theresa grabbed her bags and took Kalliope's outstretched hand, not used to traveling through doorways and

appearing in other places. She didn't wait for Humphrey to move through the door first. Theresa squeezed her hand pretty hard. They walked through the bathroom door. Kalliope kept her mind clear, picturing exactly where she wanted to go. When she opened her eyes, she was outside.

Kalliope took in at her surroundings. The fence was still there and so were the standing stones. It was not nightfall. There were a few tourists gathered around the fence taking pictures. Theresa poked her. Others were pointing and snapping pictures.

“Is this really Stonehenge? You sure you wanted to bring us here?”

Kalliope noticed the tourists were past being stupefied and wondered how they got in there. The fence was erected to keep people away so they would not deteriorate the stones. She had heard they had finally started allowing pagans back into the sacred circle during high holidays so they could worship the old gods. Of course, Kalliope had been one of those regular witches a few short months ago. None except her friends, and the gods, knew she was magickally inclined. Flidias had said it would be her duty to bring magick back into her world. Besides having some strange fantastical creature knocking on her door or popping into her room at night, she had not seen anyone else with powers. Maybe this whole fiasco was going to change that. Or maybe All Hail would

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decree magick was still not ready for human hands again and wipe everyone's memories. She still had not heard about the kidnapped fast food presidents on the news so someone was keeping it concealed. She wondered how long that would be.

All Hail could not keep magick out of the hands of mortals forever. She didn't care that it was agreed upon during the Burning Times that magick was not safe in the hands of humanity anymore. It was their birthright to share in the wonders of the world.

"Kalliope, I don't think we should be in here." Theresa pointed to the park rangers heading toward the gate. They were talking into their radios obviously trying to get backup.

Great. All I need is to spend a night in jail with a flying frog and a pregnant woman. What would I tell the cops on how we just appeared? No really officer. I had no idea the frog had wings. What a strange coincidence.'

"Right. Sorry I was thinking." Kalliope took a few steps forward with her eye on the guards. She kept her mind focused on the archway in front of her. The energy of the circle gathered around her. She still held the orange and lobbed it through the doorway. She kept her fingers crossed mentally that it would not hit the fence on the other side. She sighed when it disappeared. In the blink of an eye, something orange landed at her feet.

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“What is that?” Theresa asked. She tried to see what it was over her stomach.

“Hey! You there! Come out of there at once!” The park rangers had the gate open. They had to hurry.

Kalliope scooped up the thing at her feet, quickly noting it was a penis shaped orange. Morgaine had gotten the message. The guards were coming into Stonehenge. She grabbed Theresa’s hand.

“Come on.” She dragged her friend behind her. Morgaine was waiting on the other side. The guards were on the other side of the arch. Kalliope smiled at them. Her foot crossed over the space. Theresa was right behind her. She was inches from the park ranger’s nose. The ranger tried to step out of the way so they could not run him over, but Kalliope and Theresa ran through the doorway and disappeared.

She stopped short, nearly losing her footing when her friend’s belly almost pushed her over. They had ended up in Avalon, but not where Kalliope figured. She wasn’t in Morgaine’s house. They were on the tor, where the other priestess did their circles. When she looked outside the circle, she was amazed at the sight. The priestesses were dressed in battle garb and all carried swords. Morgaine had hers raised. Kalliope noted it was not Excalibur. All the priestess had blue crescents tattooed on their foreheads. Leather armor and

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short skirts adorned the women. The sorceress seemed taller than normal.

She wore a short leather skirt, leather corset, and her hair was woven back in braids. It reminded her of an Amazon movie or that Warrior Princess television show.

“Whoa. Ease down. Morgaine, it’s me.” Kalliope called from the middle of the circle.

The energy of it surrounded them, keeping them locked in. The warrior priestesses stood on the edge, waiting to make their move.

“How do I know that?” Morgaine asked. She didn’t loosen her grip on the sword.

Something had definitely happened to make the sorceress go to arms. Kalliope didn’t realize the other women on Avalon knew how to fight. She assumed all they did was study magick. She learned something new every day. How come Morgaine wasn’t letting her onto the island? There was a reason she had closed off the doorway from her apartment.

“Morgaine, how else did I know about the oranges? You think the orange appeared out of nowhere?”

“The other one knew that to!” The sorceress gritted her teeth.

Kalliope’s brow furrowed. Someone must have impersonated her. *Oh god, what happened?* “Morgaine, where’s Flidais?” Kalliope asked. Her heart sped up. Theresa might have

been safe, but her other friends were not. It must have been one of the Furies.

Theresa threw down her bags and strolled over to the armed sorceress. Kalliope tried to grab her, but she didn't dare move in case something was wrong. She couldn't move out of the circle because it kept in magickal beings. Her best friend stood nose to nose with the sorceress. She reached up, touched her fingers to the top of the sword, and moved it out of the way. The tip sliced her flesh and a drop of blood trolled down the blade. The two of them stared one another down. She figured Theresa had finally come to her wits end and was not about to take any shit from anyone. *You go girl!*

“Morgaine, I like you. I have since the first time you came into my shop in disguise. I liked you when you blew up all of Kalliope's candles and scared the piss out of me. I even dealt with the fact you lived in an alternate dimension on a mythical island. I've invited you into my home, had you eat my food, and told you some of my most sacred recipes that outside our little group here, no one knows. Now, I'm seriously tired. I found out my husband is gay and fucking another man in my bed. I had snake haired goddesses try to steal my babies. I've had a really bad day. And if I don't pee sometime soon, I'm going to cook the head of the first person I see. I don't care how old, powerful, or what kind of creature they are. Got it?”

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She pushed past the sorceress and the other priestess marching toward the stone houses. The women said nothing, but watched her go and then turned their attention back to Kalliope and Humphrey. Morgaine looked at Theresa with a mixture of disbelief and shock.

“Don’t look at me. I’m not the one who’s pregnant.” She walked to the barrier of the circle and touched it with one finger. A large arch moved between her and the circle. She put her finger in her mouth to suck on the wound. “Look, Morgaine. I don’t know what happened here. I went to your apartment and found it looking like a biker gang trashed it. I tried all the doors to get here and nothing. So I went to Stonehenge and almost got hauled out by a couple of park rangers who are probably wondering how we disappeared into thin air under their noses, literary. I’ll probably make their local tabloids. The headline will probably read ‘Aliens appear in Stonehenge: The Exclusive Encounter’ or something. Let me in, please?”

The sorceress was unwavering. “Prove you’re really my friend, new witch of the realm, and lover of Lugh. Where is the stone he gave you?”

Kalliope’s heart sank at the thought of Lugh. Now was not the time for her to get all mushy and start crying again. Her friend was getting on her nerves now. “Last time I saw you. I walked in on you having sex in some sultry para-

dise and I knocked Excalibur into the stones of your hearth. You can't teach me anything about astrology because my brain doesn't understand it, and your cat has an uptight British accent. Do you want me to continue?"

The sorceress eased back and waved her hand. Kalliope let out a breath she did not know she was holding. All the other priestess relaxed too. Then the sorceress cracked a large smile and sheathed her sword.

"No, you're good. I believed you when Theresa walked out of the circle. She wouldn't be with you unless you were the real thing. I just wanted to see you blush."

"Great, just great! Scare me half to death. What's with the get up anyway? I didn't know the girls were Amazons in disguise. Are you hiding Xena anywhere?"

Kalliope walked out of the circle. The other priestesses went back to their duties. While she watched the women disperse, it seemed there were less than normal. She took in the surroundings. Little things were off about Avalon. One of the worn stones was scorched and another toppled. There was a burnt patch of grass ahead of them. Morgaine seemed tired and more aged. The sorceress had once told her, since she had come to Avalon, the aging process had reversed for her. Now that did not seem the case. The blue crescent on her forehead was new. When they got closer to the buildings, Kalliope saw several of the famed apple trees were

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split in half. Some were missing limbs. Others were gone completely. The cairn stones where King Arthur was buried had been disturbed. Something terrible had happened here.

When they stepped inside Morgaine's dwelling, they were transported to another place. Kalliope could tell by the change in air pressure. Her ears popped whenever she traveled between dimensions. The two women walked into a spacious living room with a couch that could have fit in her whole apartment. It was made of soft suede. Morgaine was back in a T-shirt and jeans and so was she. The sorceress waved her hand. A large, glass coffee table appeared. On it were two steaming mugs of coffee and a several ancient scrolls. Kalliope took the cup of coffee and watched a fire suddenly ignite in the fireplace to her left. When the flames shot out, a sword materialized in the marble hearth. It glowed blue and then went dull. Excalibur. It was still stuck in the stone.

"Flidais was taken."

"The Furies got to her? How?"

"It wasn't the Furies. Kalliope—" The sorceress took a sip of her coffee and stared at the dancing flames. She watched Morgaine's face while she wrestled with the idea of telling her something. Kalliope wished she had figured out how to read other people's minds. It would be a whole lot easier to get inside of Morgaine's head, if she would ever let

her. It didn't bother her anymore. Kalliope wished that she had figured out how to access part of her power. She was learning how to block her own thoughts, but it took a lot of concentration. Morgaine had told her once she got the hang of it, it would become second nature. She was not there yet. She needed to learn more control and with her scattered life, that was hard.

“Morgaine, what is it?”

“We were attacked. It wasn't me or the girls he wanted. It was Excalibur. The sword is a powerful weapon. In the wrong hands, it could sway the balance of the astral realm. The sword can slay kings and gods.”

The color bleached from her face. Morgaine had once told her the sword was a mystery unto itself. History knew it had played a big role with Arthur and setting Camelot into the tales of legends, but she did not know the true power of it.

“I was surprised to see him without you. He talked about old times and tried to get me into bed with him. I didn't because I knew how much you love him. Then he said he needed to borrow Excalibur. He was going to go after the Furies by himself. He said he didn't want you to get hur—”

Kalliope was confused. “Why are you saying he? Who he? Don't you mean that the Furies came here?”

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The sorceress shook her head. She saw tears in her friend's eyes and the pained expression on her face. "No. It would've been easier if it were the bitch gang. I'd have seen them coming. Honey, it was Lugh. I've never seen him like he was."

A bolt of shock went through Kalliope. Why would Lugh demand Excalibur? He had told her he could not help her with the Furies. From their latest encounter he wanted nothing more to do with her.

"Morgaine, don't feel bad about Lugh coming onto you. He and I are over. I threw away his love and—" She stopped her own tears. Humphrey snuggled into her. She patted the frog.

"What happened?" Morgaine asked.

"It's not important. Please continue."

Morgaine took a sip of her coffee. "He asked me about Excalibur because it wouldn't come to him as it did when he fought Cromm. The sword likes Lugh. I wasn't surprised when he said that he couldn't summon it. I told him it was on Avalon because you had knocked it off its perch and it was stuck in the hearth. There was no way I was pulling it from the stone. It has a mind of its own as to who it will work with. So, he wanted to come to Avalon. When we got there, he tried to touch Excalibur, but the sword freaked out. A purple flame engulfed it, so he couldn't even touch it. I

thought that was odd because of their history. Then he went ballistic. He ran outside and started going insane. He went after the girls. His power went supernova. I don't know. He destroyed some of the apple trees. When the girls got wind of it, I told them to suit up. The blade you saw me with is enchanted and can wound a god. It won't kill, but it can hurt them. The girls came after him and I lost some of them. I told them this was a safe place. Lugh went to Arthur's grave and accused me of hiding the real sword. I told him no. Once he dislodged a few stones, he just stopped. In a blaze he was gone. But it wasn't over. For a precaution, I cast an illusion of my place in the stone circle to trap anyone that was magickal or did not know the way out of the circle. I felt someone in my place. I popped back in there to see that it was trashed. I was in the bathroom and saw the Haleys. I assumed they were looking for the sword too. They saw me, but I got them out and drove them here. I had to close the doorways in my apartment. I came back here through Stonehenge. When I got back here, the girls said that you were waiting for me. At least you were safe. I came in here and you were asking me about the sword, which was weird because you've never really paid it any mind.

“I dropped the illusion trapping you in there. You just didn't feel right. When the illusion dropped, it was Lugh pretending to be you. Kalliope, I don't know what happened

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to him, but something did. It doesn't feel right. He went supernova again. Once I was outside the circle he couldn't get out. I hate to say it, but I think that the Furies got to him. They can control other gods if they get the chance. There is some small part of him that is mortal whether he lets himself believe that. His father was human, but when he came here Dagda proclaimed him his heir and he was elevated. I don't know all of it except he is not the man that you fell in love with. Flidais tried to reason with him, but he kidnapped her. He said that he would do an exchange. Her for Excalibur. He can't give the sword to the Halesys. They would destroy the world with it."

Kalliope hardly believed her ears. There was no way that Lugh would willingly go all evil and turn against everything that he believed in and hurt his friends. When he had appeared in her apartment for the first time, he had told her that anyone that hurt a woman deserved to have their innards eaten by ravens. And when Cromm laid hands on her he became her champion. That was what had driven him on, seeing her hurt. He would no more turn on his loved ones than she would turn evil. There was just no way. Something had him under a spell. It just wasn't right. She knew it. For now, she had to keep plodding forward and think about how she was going to save the world.

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“Morgaine, I don’t know what to tell you except that Lugh and I—well he made it perfectly clear that he did not love me anymore. I thought—well it doesn’t really matter what I thought, but maybe what he said to me and what happened with you is that he is bewitched. It’s the only explanation. Maybe the Furies got a hold of him. I can understand why you were leery to let me into Avalon, but I swear it’s me. Let’s try and make sense of all of this.

“The Haleys showed up at my house. That was the reason I brought Theresa here. They tried to take her and wanted her babies. I think it was a ruse. It had to be to get my attention away from you or something. I don’t know. I don’t get it. Nas said she overheard Del talking to another god. They wanted to take over the astral plane. She wants Dagda’s throne. The only reason I was called in to get the Haleys was because they’re blackmailing Dagda because he has some secret coffee cache or something. Del said that they wanted me out of the way. Why do they want Excalibur?”

“Because it can kill gods. Think about it, Kalliope. They don’t just want to take over Dagda’s throne. They want all realms.”

“They want to go after All Hail. What would that mean in the scheme of things? Has there ever been a god rebellion? Would humans stop being devout?”

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Morgaine shook her head. “I don’t know. All the stories, all the mythologies are true to a point. There have been overthrows in the past, but I don’t know what it would mean to the world today. Hardly anyone believes in the other gods anymore. I don’t know if it would become history or rework humanities’ memories. All I know is Lugh cannot get his hands on this sword. If he does go after All Hail then there will be chaos. You have to stop him, even if it—” the sorceress trailed off.

Kalliope stared at the sword and then back at her. A sense of dread descended on her. She already knew what her friend would say. But she had to hear it. “Even if it what?”

Her friend got up and paced around the room. She went to the hearth and put her hand on the hilt of the sword. She tried to pull, but it was not budging. “You have to kill him. One plunge of the sword will do the trick.” Morgaine looked at Kalliope. Her face twisted at the explanation of what she had to do.

She looked at the sword. The blade began to glow with a soft white light. Kalliope felt a tugging deep inside of her. She tried to ignore it, but the harder she ignored it, the more persistent it became. Kalliope got up from the couch and grasped the handle. The white was so intense it blinded her. A zap ran through her and a strong gust of energy blew

her hair back. She pulled on Excalibur. It moved from the marble. When she lifted the sword, it felt light as air.

“Me thinks you have pulled the sword from the stone.”

“Shut up.” Kalliope said, gazing at her reflection in the sword. She studied the blade. There were runes etched into the metal. “What do these mean?”

The other woman looked at the blade. “Those weren’t there before. Damn sword has a mind of its own. I swear. Not even when Arthur pulled it from the stone did it have writing on it. It says ‘She who pulls the sword from the stone can have the world at her feet, or change the course of the realm. Choose wisely.’”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s telling you when the time comes you have a big decision to make. You’re going to have to use Excalibur to kill Lugh. I know you don’t want to think that, but you to have to face the facts. He can’t get the sword. It doesn’t matter how much you care for him.”

“Morgaine, I know. Thanks for reminding me. Tell me this. If this sword can kill a god, then why didn’t Lugh use it to kill Cromm? Why use it now?”

“Lugh, didn’t want to kill Cromm then. He could if he had wanted to. Excalibur is a magickal mystery even I don’t know much about. Look at your reflection to see what

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I'm talking about." Morgaine waved her hand and a full-length glass appeared.

Kalliope gasped. The sword had transformed her. Her hair was no longer red, but black. She no longer had freckles smattered on her nose. Her skin was pale and translucent. Her eyes were almost black and ringed with gold. An upturned blue crescent moon tattoo adorned the center of her forehead now. She wasn't wearing jeans anymore either. She wore a dark red leather corset that fit snugly to her body, but she could breathe fine in it. Her snake bracelets Morgaine had given her were on her arms. She bore the silver pentacle Flidais has given her around her neck, but it was embedded into a leather collar. On her finger was a silver and gold braided ring. A red leather skirt allowed her to move if she needed and she had dark brown, leather boots. The sword's scabbard hung from her belt. It was decorated in runes the same as on the sword. Kalliope sheathed the sword, wondering if her appearance would go back to normal. It didn't. She went to sit down, but the sword poked her in the ribs. *This is so not going to work out.*

The sword disappeared when she thought about it and she was able to sit once again. *That's better. Is it still there?* A jolt told her the sword was only invisible.

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“This is just great. First, I’m a witch. Then I’m a witch trying to save the world. Now I’m a witch and the next queen of the realm or something. Great. Just freaking great!”

“Actually, I think Excalibur has made you into a Death Maiden.”

“And that would be?”

“You’re a witch and you don’t know what a—”

“Can it, and just tell me. I’m not in the mood.”

“A Death Maiden is—well they’re similar to banshees. They bring death to those they choose. They’re a cross between a valkyrie and a banshee. You’ll bring death to anyone you want with the sword. The crescent tattoo binds you to Avalon, and the sword. You’re still human of course, but you can go anywhere you want now. No way will be bared to you until your task is done.”

“And when that happens? All of this goes away?” Kalliope asked.

Morgaine bit her lip. “Honestly, I don’t know. The sword chose you because it knew you were a worthy champion. You *will* vanquish evil in the land and it may cost you your heart and soul, but it *will* right the world and, if I’m right, save All Hail from being assassinated.”

“Great. What happens if I lose Excalibur?” A strong jolt of energy zapped her. The invisible sword didn’t enjoy the thought of that. “I said if.”

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“If you lose it, then you have the power to call it back. But losing it would not be a good idea. Try it.” The sorceress grabbed the invisible sword and threw it on the couch. Kalliope was surprised that she knew where it was.

“You forget Excalibur has been with me for centuries. I know a few of its quirks. Trust me.”

The sword was only a few feet away. It wasn't moving. She put out her hand and nothing happened. She waved it a couple of times. “Abra ka dabra. Poof.” She waited a few more minutes and then cast her eyes to the woman next to her. Humphrey was just watching from the sidelines without comment. Kalliope hadn't noticed when he had popped in, but she should get used to it considering he was doing it off and on. Now he seemed to be dozing from the heat of the fire.

Morgaine threw up her hands. “Do I have to show you everything? Wait. Don't answer that. I can't believe you're a witch.” She held out her hand and motioned at a candle on the hearth. It floated through the air and was in her hand.

“That was way cool.”

“It will be cooler when you do it. You have the power, you know. I'm surprised you haven't figured it out by now. The basics of magick are think about it and it will

appear. Well, think about Excalibur being in your hand. Feel the energy move down your hand and grasp onto the sword.”

Kalliope didn't say anything. She sighed and drew in a breath to collect her thoughts. So much had happened in just a short time. She was still very frazzled. Her life had moved at a normal pace before she became a true witch. Then things got crazy. It had settled down for a few months while she was getting the candle shop in order. Now it was crazy again. How could she kill the man she loved, even if he was under a spell? She just couldn't. But if she had to save the world, wasn't it better to sacrifice the one she loved than to let three crazy, snaked haired goddesses take over. She sighed and focused on what Morgaine had told her. The energy gathered over her heart, moving through her. She concentrated. It moved down her arm. She could see and feel it wrapping around the hilt of the sword and bringing it to her. That was what she wanted. If the sorceress could do it, then so could she.

She took another breath and focused. The sword lifted off the couch and then dropped. Kalliope looked at Morgaine who was trying hard not to laugh. She gritted her teeth and focused all her will into it. Excalibur lifted off the couch again, floated through the air, and into her hand. She turned and stuck her tongue out at her friend. Finally, she put the sword back into its sheath and plopped down on the

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couch. The leather and the heat of the fire was making her sweat.

I wonder if Lugh would like me in this? She caught another glimpse of herself in the mirror. The thought was fleeting because her mind focused on the task at hand. She could not cry all the time because Lugh had told her he didn't love her anymore. She had to hold onto the trace of hope that he was under a spell. The glimmer was all she had left. If not, the impossible was the only thing left for her.

“It'll all work out, Kalliope. Just don't let Lugh get the sword.”

She smiled and lifted up her familiar who was fast asleep. “I think we should get back to Avalon. I want to check on Theresa.”

“She's ready to pop any day now?”

Kalliope nodded. She thought about Avalon. Holding the picture in her mind, she stepped through the glass.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Kalliope emerged from the mirror to a scene she never imagined possible. Expecting to find Theresa gabbing to the other priestess, instead she found her coven sister sitting on top of a hogtied and gagged Nas. The goddess didn't look worse for wear. She looked up at Kalliope and started mumbling through the gag. Her friend wore a triumphant smile.

“See what I caught snooping around. She had these chains so I thought she was coming after us. I snuck up behind her, whacked her on the head, and then tied her up. Now that you're back, I gotta pee. Help me up!”

The witch helped her up, and Theresa walked out of the room. Morgaine caught Kalliope's eye while she worked on freeing the goddess. When she tried to will the chains away, they wouldn't budge. Nas tried to stay still, but she kept mumbling something. Kalliope finally took off the gag.

“Magick won't work on these. These are the chains I got from Hephaestus. The key is between my breasts.”

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Kalliope sighed. “Great!”

Nas smiled wickedly. “It was the only place I could think of so I would remember it. Besides, it seemed like a good idea at the time. I was in a compromised position. The girls won’t bite. I promise.” Her wicked smile got bigger. She batted her eyelashes at Kalliope.

She glared at the sorceress.

Morgaine threw up her hands and backed away. “Oh no! Don’t even think about it. That is your baby.”

“Fine!” She closed her eyes and delved in between the goddess’s ample boobs. *Great. Just what I needed to top my day. I get to feel up another chick! She better not be getting off on this.* Kalliope stole a glance at Nas, who stared at her devilishly. *Oh yeah. She’s totally getting off on this.* She searched between Nas’s cleavage, but was not finding anything except mounds of rounded flesh.

“Hey Kal, what’s with the new look. When did you go all war—” Theresa walked in. Her face paled.

“It’s not what it looks like! The key for the ahh...for the shackles. She put it between her breasts.” Kalliope felt herself getting redder and redder while her fingers fumbled for the key which she thought she had. Theresa kept staring at the two of them.

“Why are you letting her go?”

“Theresa, Nas is not coming after you or Kalliope. Much to my surprise she is actually here to help us out,” Morgaine explained.

“Are you almost done yet?” Nas asked. “I’d love for us to take this somewhere more private, but you have to save the world, remember. Besides, you’re getting me all hot and bothered.”

Kalliope found the small, metal key and pulled her hand from between the goddess’s breasts. “Sorry, but I’m a god kinda girl. No offense. And I thought you just wanted to be friends?” She took the key and undid the chains holding together her arms and legs so the goddess could stretch out. Then she undid the ones at her wrists and ankles. The chains fell away. Kalliope put the key in a small pocket she noticed sewn inside the corset next to her chest. When she looked up, Nas was smiling.

“See, I told you putting it there comes in handy. And the whole friends thing, I was hoping we could do friends with benefits.” The goddess snapped her fingers. The room disappeared and they were somewhere that was just white.

“Where are we? What did you do?”

Nas didn’t say anything, but leaned in and cupped her face between her hands. Kalliope was overwhelmed with warmth that made her legs rubbery and her heart flutter a few beats. She forgot all about her question and why the other

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goddess had spirited her away from her friends. The only thing that mattered was the woman in front of her. The goddess's breath was sweet and her hair smelled of peppermint. The world fell away and she and the goddess were the only thing in the room. She didn't care anything about anyone else. The effect was what Dagda first had over her. She wanted nothing more than to be in his arms. Just like she wanted to fall into the goddess.

"You know you want me!" Nas whispered close to her ear. The goddess's fingers trailed along the flesh of her shoulder, along the curve of her breast over the corset.

Kalliope's thoughts swam. This wasn't right, but the pure desire building in her was beyond anything she had experienced, even with Lugh. It seemed Nas knew different buttons to push inside of her. She tried to gather her thoughts. Nas came closer and pressed her lips to hers. They were soft. Kalliope wanted to shed her clothes.

Give in to me. You'll enjoy it. I promise. There was something more sinister underneath her thoughts she was trying to get at. Kalliope couldn't quite put her finger on it. The goddess was loosening the stays on the corset. She tried to stir her thoughts away from being seduced by this beautiful goddess.

Nas's tongue traced her lips and met hers exploring her mouth with such tender sweetness that she wanted to cry

out in pleasure. The energy that flared through her body was intense that soon she was moaning and clutching the other woman's shoulders for support. Cool air caressed her. The corset top fell away, leaving her exposed to the world. She opened her eyes to half slits and didn't see Morgaine or Theresa anywhere. Nas must have spirited her away somewhere else, so she could have her way with her.

The goddess's hands found Kalliope's breasts. Her mouth trailed down in slow kisses along her neck and skin. Each kiss seemed like the woman was sampling a little bit of her. She was getting carried away. How could Nas have so much power over her? The fingers on her breasts were experienced while they rubbed over her nipples getting them harder and harder. All she could do was stay under the spell of the goddess. She had done something to her, and Kalliope enjoyed the sensations. Nas's tongue spiraled small circles along the expanse of her exposed chest until it came to rest on her hardened nipple. Once the wetness of Nas's lips enclosed Kalliope's flesh, she cried out. Her hands grabbed a handful of Nas's round derriere. Her thighs clenched together so tight she thought her knees would buckle. She definitely needed a new pair of panties. Part of her wanted to give in to the attention from the goddess, most of her did, but something else kept her semi alert.

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Let me have all of you. The goddess whispered again in her thoughts. Her teeth bit down lightly and made her quiver internally. Her stomach flip-flopped from the pleasure zinging through her. Her breath came in short pants now. She was ready to come. Underneath the whisper she heard something else. She had to concentrate.

Give yourself to me. You know you want too.

Kalliope heard that, but she also heard another whisper. The thought was repeated in her head, but this time she got the undercurrent to it. *Give the sword to me. You know you want to.*

Nas's hands were around her waist searching for the buckle of her skirt. Her mouth worked on the other nipple, paying that equal attention. But Kalliope focused on the other thought. No one could have the sword. She knew that. It had chosen her to be its champion. Nas's hands tried to unbuckle her skirt. The pleasure moving through her was almost enough that she was going to be brainwashed into doing exactly that. That could not happen. All of it had been a ruse. Wanting to help her and getting the chains. It was all for nothing. Deep down Nas still probably wanted to turn her into a prickly bush. With that thought in mind, Kalliope was able to get up the strength to step away from the goddess.

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When she did, Nas looked quite surprised. A cruel smile spread on her lips. “Don’t you want what I’m offering?”

Kalliope shook her head. She grabbed her top and strapped it back on. Panting slightly, she stared at the goddess. “How could you? I thought you wanted to help me put the Haleys back in the Underworld? Do you still want to turn me into a bush too?”

Nas stepped forward. A jolt of panic moved through her. On instinct, her hand sought the sword. Instead of being invisible, her hand closed on the hilt. A wave of energy moved through her, clearing away whatever spell Nas had put on her. The sword came out and the tip was millimeters from the goddess’s flesh. Nas’s appearance melted away and another woman stood before her.

The woman had long, flowing, white blond, curly hair past her waist. There were streaks of pink shot through it. Her skin was opalescent white. Her eyes of Caribbean Sea blue. Her dress faded from white to light pink. She was slender, yet curvy in all the right places and had breasts so perky they could get up and cheer. Her cheekbones were cut at a sharp angle with pouting full lips and a button nose.

“Who are you?”

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“My, my. I’m rightly surprised you didn’t fall for me. Everyone loves me! Don’t you want me?” she whispered in a low husky voice.

Her head got a little fuzzy. She thought she saw mini bluebirds and small cherubs dancing behind her eyes. But before she got a little woozy, a calmness descended over her that had not been there before. The sword was glowing white again. Excalibur was protecting her from the enchantment this goddess was trying to put her under.

“I said, who are you? No more games. They won’t work on me.”

“Very well. You almost fell under my spell, and no mortal has ever been able to resist me. How can they refuse the goddess of love?”

“Aphrodite?”

“Wow, the mortal is intelligent *and* hot. Come on. Why don’t you give me the sword and we’ll have a go at it. I know you want to romp in the hay with me.” The goddess twirled a piece of her hair around her finger. A lollipop appeared in her other hand. She put the sucker in her mouth and made a show of how well she could use her tongue. Kalliope could only imagine what the woman could do if she was speaking to Aphrodite. If she was the love goddess, then where was Nas?

“What did you do with Nas?”

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The goddess took a long lick of her candy and closed her eyes, savoring the sweetness of it. “Do you really think I was going to let that little whore sleep with my husband? Please. I might be blond, but I’m not dumb.”

“Where is she?”

“Why, she’s spending eternity in the Underworld. But that is what you get for messing with me and what’s mine. Now give me the sword like a good little mortal and I’ll let you live. You’d be my pretty little toy, but I’d let you live.” The goddess made a swipe for the sword, but Kalliope stepped back out of her reach. She was not afraid of the goddess. Obviously, the goddess knew about whoever desired to take over the world because she wanted the sword.

Aphrodite turned. There was a sword in her hand. She lunged at Kalliope, but the witch blocked the move and metal clanged on metal. Sparks flew when the two swords touched. Excalibur glowed purple. The other woman’s glowed gold, also showing its otherworldly heritage, probably made by her husband.

The goddess spun around and came at her from the side, but she blocked that blow too. Hands were being guided because she had no idea what she was doing. Without thinking, she attacked the goddess. Aphrodite moved out of the way quickly enough, but not before the sword caught the fabric of her dress. The goddess stopped and poked her

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fingers through the hole. “You bitch! This is my favorite dress.”

Kalliope smiled. “It’s not my fault you decided to wear such a tacky thing. Where ever you got it I would return it because you paid way too much.” She parried the goddess’s strike and marveled at how the swords rang out each time they hit one another. The love goddess’s sword nicked her cheek and the wound stung worse than a paper cut. Her fingers moved over the cut and came away with blood. She gritted her teeth. Catching Aphrodite off guard, Excalibur went through the goddess’s shoulder. The goddess stopped short. A look of shock came over her face. Her eyes went to the sword. Kalliope pulled it out from the wound. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head and she passed out.

The wound flowered crimson, and then healed over slightly so the goddess wasn’t bleeding anymore. Kalliope had not meant to kill her. She was just so mad at everything that happened that making her feel pain was in the back of her mind. She shook her head and understood that this was probably the first time that Aphrodite had felt true pain. Gods didn’t feel any pain from what she could tell. She understood why the sword was such a powerful weapon if it fell into the wrong hands especially if a god wanted to kill another god with it. Quickly, she sheathed it and it

disappeared from sight again. Looking down on the passed out goddess, she had an idea.

Thinking about Avalon she saw a doorway appear out of thin air. She slid her arms underneath the love goddess and then pulled her through it. When she reappeared, the other women were looking at her.

“Where did you go?” Theresa asked.

“No idea. Hand me those chains will you?” Kalliope asked. Morgaine raised her eyebrow at her and got a set of the manacles. She dropped the goddess. The doorway disappeared. She took the shackles and clamped them on Aphrodite’s wrists behind her.

“Where’s Nas? I thought you said that she was helping you out. So why are you tying her back up?” Theresa asked.

Kalliope sat down on the floor and tried to catch her breath from hauling the goddess through the doorway. Aphrodite might have looked thin, but she must have been hiding something. Kalliope figured she was the type to eat a couple of chocolate cakes and then down a Big Mack kinda girl because there was no way that the love goddess was as thin as she looked. Then again illusions were what many of the gods were about so who knows.

“That’s not Nas. That’s Aphrodite. How in the hell did you—?”

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Kalliope put up her hand and silenced the sorceress.

“Water first. Story later.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The girls waited. Kalliope told them what had happened to her when she disappeared. She also told them about her ordeal with Nas earlier. Morgaine reiterated her concerns about Lugh, and Kalliope took it all in. Morgaine and the other priestess took Aphrodite and placed her in a small circle of ancient stones that Kalliope had never seen before. It was old and powerful enough that it would hold the goddess. The sorceress explained the Fey had built it long before Avalon even existed when it was in the real world, ages ago. That was when gods and fairies walked hand in hand with mortals and the worlds were not separated.

Kalliope had left Theresa with the priestess and set out back to her apartment. She needed some space and time to think. She had a plan. It was just going to be something she was not sure she could do. She figured out how she could get the Haleys. That was easy. The hardest thing was figuring out who bespelled Lugh. In her heart of hearts she just couldn't believe that he wanted to take over the world. He

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was just too good. Maybe her love for him was making her blind to what Morgaine had said. Even Aphrodite was after the sword. If she kept it safe, then there would be no more problems. She just had to believe in herself to be able to do it.

First things first, she had to take a break. Kalliope arrived at her apartment very happy to be back. At the moment, all she wanted was to curl up on her couch under a blanket, with a cup of tea, some chocolate chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream, and watch, oddly enough, the Wizard of Oz. *You would think I would have had enough of strange dancing and singing creatures. But I guess not.*

She clicked on the television. The 11 o'clock news came on. She sat through most of it and decided that the kidnapping of all the fast food CEOs was still under wraps, at least for now. She still had a little time left. She got up and decided to make tea. When she opened her cabinet, the stench in the kitchen was horrendous. She pulled open the refrigerator and instead of seeing rows of all kinds of fresh food, all she saw was mold, bugs, and things starting to grow on the other products in the fridge. She put her hand up against her nose and slammed the door shut. Next she checked the cabinets to find that they were all empty save for a heavy layer of dust as if nothing had been in there for years. The freezer was the worst because it was filled with ice cream cartons that had melted and frozen on the shelves. She

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grabbed a bag from underneath the sink and started to throw the containers away. It was such a shame to waste such good ice cream.

As the cartons sloshed into the bag, her mind got to thinking about Lugh. There would be no way that he would all of a sudden make her things go bad in her refrigerator. True, she had not known the god for thousands of years like the rest of the supernatural beings and all the women folk that seemed to have slept with him. But she had a good idea of his heart. He just didn't seem to have a mean bone in his body. It didn't set right with Kalliope. He would tell her if he was going to stop restocking her shelves even if they had parted ways. Something else was going on. He had to be under some kind of a spell. He just had to be. There was no way that he would have treated Morgaine the way that he did either. He would not betray his friends. Kalliope picked up another carton of ice cream when she heard something on the news that caught her attention.

“...The owner of Burrito Bell has been reported missing. Mrs. Bell has no idea where he is. She reports they were fishing and the next moment there was a great white light that appeared in the sky and then poof, he was gone.” The camera panned to Mrs. Bell's face. “I swear he was abducted by aliens. My father was abducted. He was never right after he came back. Horus, where ever you are, come

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back to me. Anal probed or not, I don't care if they collected your sperm. I still want your baby!"

The newscaster forced a smile and started back into the camera, fighting the crazed wife off her microphone. "This is Deirdre Meriwether. Back to you Chuck."

Kalliope stared at the news anchor. She was running out of time. All Hail wasn't going to keep covering up the abduction for much longer. Either that or all the gods were starting to focus their attention elsewhere normally on saving their otherworldly butts. There was only a little time to get the Furies and put them back in the Underworld.

"A girl's gotta sleep you know. You want to help me out here and clean up this mess?"

All the light bulbs flickered and burnt in her apartment. She groaned. She did not have time for this. It certainly didn't take three or four witches to replace a light bulb either. She closed her eyes and focused on the lights returning to her apartment. It took a few moments, but then lights turned back on. Somehow there were no more bulbs and she still had to clean up the glass.

"Pie?"

Kalliope fell back against the counter. It was the ghost of her Aunt Constance. Her appearance had not changed. She still had silver hair and a few wrinkles. The pie that she had in her hands smelled of warm cinnamon and gooey apples. The

ghost walked over and set the pie on the counter before she took her niece in her arms. Kalliope had no more cares in her world. Who cared if the world was taken over by the Furies? Lugh didn't bother her anymore all because she was in this woman's arms, and she would make it better for her. Tears came to her eyes while she took in the scent of the spirit who was flesh in her apartment. She had not realized how much she had missed her aunt and how much she needed her in her life. She had tried to summon her in the past few months, but nothing had happened except a few candles had bit the dust because she had put too much energy into contacting the dead. Some other spirits got so upset that they came to her house instead of going wherever they were supposed to be. Finally, she had given up trying to contact Constance.

“Hush hush. All is not lost.” Constance pulled Kalliope away and led her to sit down at the dining room table. She pointed at the pie. A steaming slice appeared on a plate in front of her. It smelled wonderful, but with the knot in her stomach she was not sure she could eat it considering all the rotten food that she had seen in the refrigerator. “Aren't you going to eat anything?”

The oozing caramelized apples made her stomach lurch forward and growl. She could taste the sweetness of it, but she just wasn't hungry. Finally she looked up at her aunt. “Sorry. I can't. Not after everything. Is that why you're here?”

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“My, my, getting right to the point! That is something new about you. I guess being with Lugh has made you more forthcoming. I see you getting all comfortable with your naked self and that naked love muffin of yours.”

Kalliope couldn't help but turn red at her aunt's comments. “Auntie. You are horrible. Is that all you do up there? Think of embarrassing things to say to me when you come down to visit? Well, at least I'm not asleep this time. Why are you here? Please don't change the subject even if it is to cheer me up. I've got a dozen things on my mind like—”

“Saving the world from three nature-hugging snake haired goddesses all named Haley. Being chosen as Excalibur's newest champion, and figuring out why your lover has gone complete bonkers and off the radar. Yes, I know all about it. That is exactly why I'm here to give you a bit of otherworldly advice.”

“Great and what is that? Hurry up and get my butt in gear? Yeah I kinda figured that part out by myself with the news footage and the exploding light bulbs that I'll be vacuuming up from the carpet for the next few months.” She didn't look at her aunt and didn't care how she sounded. She was at the end of her rope. She started jabbing the apple pie with the fork to see the apples ooze out from the sides. It was not much help as a stress reliever.

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“Well, Miss smarty pants. For your information, yes the newscast was a warning. But it was for your eyes only. No one else in the world saw it. You have forty-eight hours to collect the Haleys, put them back in the Underworld, figure out who is out to get All Hail, and take over ruling as head honcho. If not, you are in serious trouble.”

Kalliope shrugged. What else could she do? She was doing everything she could and she was emotionally beaten down. “Let me guess, I’ll be burned at the stake for being a witch. That is so Burning Times. Hello, no one does that anymore.”

Her aunt put a hand on Kalliope’s. The pie was mush. She stopped and saw the concern on the ghost’s face. “Honey. I know you can save the world. I have faith in you. That was why I came so you would have a friendly face deliver the message instead of some thunder booming voice from the sky. We figured that would scare you too much. But you saving the world is not really what is bothering you, is it? What is the matter? Is it Lugh? Has your relationship finally come to an impasse? You know gods are fickle that way. They tell you they love you and then five minutes later they are on to another flower. Don’t fret over it.”

Kalliope shook her head. “That’s not it. I mean it is, but something’s wrong with him. I can feel it. The way he came to me in my dream and the way that he showed up at

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Morgaine's demanding Excalibur. It just doesn't make any sense. And then he impersonated me to try and get to Morgaine. He attacked her. There is nothing in him that would make him do that. I thought maybe he would be under a spell or something, but I don't think that way either. I mean he gave me part of his heart and I threw it away because I thought he was keeping tabs on me because of Apollo. But I don't know."

"He gave you a piece of his heart? Do you know how rare that is? It means that he really loves you. No matter what happens you will always be connected to him."

"Yeah, but I threw it away. What did I do? What must he think of me?" Kalliope couldn't help the tears that slid down her cheeks. The emptiness that she felt in her soul burned a hole so large she didn't know if she would ever be whole again.

"Darling. Listen to me. I know a thing or two about Lugh and gods in general. What if the man that appeared to you in your dreams was not Lugh? Maybe he was the one behind all of this? The same with getting Excalibur. Lugh is a powerful sun god. It would take a lot to get him bespelled. Not many gods have the power to do that. Whoever is after the sword, also wants All Hails' job. Think about it. They want you to stop believing in yourself. You escaped the Delphic Oracle. You didn't succumb to Zeus. All of these

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were plans to get you out of the way because you're a powerful commodity. Even the Haleys ruling this world was only a distraction I bet. Whoever is after All Hail has had a plan to get you down in the dumps so you would be so mad with grief that your powers would be useless when the time came. Even getting Excalibur was unexpected. It showed them that you were more powerful than they anticipated because the sword would not pick just anyone."

Kalliope stopped crying and listened to her aunt. What the ghost said made sense. Her powers were hinged on her emotions. If she no longer believed in what she could do then there would be no way that she could perform any magick. It made her understand it was not Lugh and that she had been right. It gave her hope that he really did love her still. If someone was using his appearance then something must have happened to him. She had to find him before it was too late.

"So, you think that Lugh is out there. Hurt maybe?"

Her aunt nodded. "It is a good possibility or being held prisoner. That was what I was going to tell you. You might have given his heart back to him, but you're a witch. You can call it back to you. With it you can find him no matter where he is. He loves you. That magick is the strongest in the universe. You should know that from the stories I've told you about your parents. They loved each

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other so much they stepped between the worlds and pulled a goddess to them. Doesn't that tell you something?"

Kalliope nodded. She hadn't thought about her parents in a while. "Do you see them? You know Mom and Dad? Do they know about me?"

"They know. And they are so proud of you. They never thought their daughter would be such a powerful witch."

"Will I ever see them like I see you?"

"I can't promise anything, honey. Maybe if you save world they'll be allowed to come down and see you. I know your mom would love that. But you can't think about that right now. You have to focus on what you are going to do. Do you have a plan?"

Kalliope nodded. "I do, but first I need some sleep and to clean this mess up."

Constance got up and pushed the sleeves up on her dress. "You go take a nap. I'll wake you up when I have to go. I'll get the mess. Don't worry about it."

Kalliope got up and nodded. She scooped up Humphrey who was still asleep on the couch and went back into her bedroom. She settled the frog down on the pillow next to her head and listened to his even breathing. Kalliope couldn't help but think of Lugh and all that she had put him through. What had happened to him? Where was he? Was he

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taken prisoner? Was he hurt? Scenarios of him being tied up, begging for help, and wounded played through her. No matter how much she tried to shake them, her eyes fluttered shut and she fell asleep.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

With Lugh on her mind, Kalliope drifted off to sleep. But she didn't sleep for long because almost immediately she felt herself falling. When she landed it wasn't on her carpet. It was on a hard stone floor. It was rather dark, but she saw firelight in the background. Flickering shadows. She saw a vast room before her with a ton of stone pillars. She was behind one of them in the back of the room. Every fourth column there was a large vat filled with flames. She heard crackling. On the pillars, she saw people bound to the stones, sitting on the ground. There was five to a post they were so big. Each appeared to be unconscious. She counted at least fifty pillars with people. That was a lot of fast food restaurants.

“Amazing, isn't it?”

Kalliope looked over and saw Humphrey flapping next to her. “How did you get here? Where is here anyway?”

The frog shrugged. “Beats me, babe. This is your astral projection.”

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“Astral what?”

“You know, out of body experience. It’s about time you figured it out”

“I know what astral projection is. How did I get here?” Kalliope whispered. Someone spoke at the far end of the room. She had to get closer.

“You were thinking about Lugh before you fell asleep, right?”

“Yeah. So?”

“Didn’t you hear anything Constance said? Or were you so enamored with destroying the pie you forgot?”

“How do you—”

“I’m part of you, Kalliope. You made me. So, I obviously know what you do. Women!”

“Oh.”

“Now what did Constance say to you about love?”

“That it’s the strongest magick in the world.”

The frog nodded. Then it hit her. “My love for Lugh pulled me here. Which means he’s here! I have to find him.”

The frog didn’t respond, but started to flap behind her while she crept along the shadows and ducked behind the granite pillars. She got to the first row of tied up hostages and tried to untie them, but her hands moved through the rope.

Damn it! Wherever I am I’m only a ghost. I have to be here in person to free all of them. But no one can see me here. I have to be careful.

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“You idiot!” Kalliope heard a man scream. She tried to get a little closer. She spied Nas tied to one of the pillars in the same chains she had been bound in at Del’s, the ones that kept her from doing magick. She was unconscious too. Across from her was Lugh. He looked beaten up and was also knocked out.

“I tried. Please, believe me.”

Kalliope got to the column beside Lugh and peered out. She saw a scared Apollo in front of the ugliest man she had ever seen. He was dressed in a torn and dirty toga with a grizzled beard and a large flap of skin covering his left eye. His nose was crooked, maybe broken one too many times. By the look of his forearms he would be envied by any wrestler on steroids.

“How can I believe you when you can’t even get a sword? You cannot even make the woman sleep with you. I even sent my wife after them. Now she’s a prisoner in the very chains that I forged. I need that sword if I am to rule. Why did you have to rescue the witch from Del? You could have left her and Nas there!”

“I had to make her believe that I wanted to help her,” Apollo pleaded.

“Just like you had the idea to shoot the witch with one of Cupid’s arrows? See where that got you! Get out of my sight before I decide to mar that perfect complexion of

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yours. If you're not careful you'll look like me. Where would that get you then, pretty boy! Go play with the Furies to get them off my back. I'm tired of hearing how bored they are kidnapping humans for their own little game."

Apollo bowed lowed and disappeared in a pillar of fire that made Kalliope wince at the heat. The god that was with him looked in her direction. She pressed herself against the pillar, praying that he did not see her. After a moment, he walked to the back of the room. She heard the sound of metal on metal. The room began to get really hot. At the end of the long hall, the god leaned over a forge and hammered something. Kalliope could not see what it was, but the flames that were behind him were from a fireplace that could have been right in the Devil's living room.

She watched the fire god for a few minutes and realized that he was not about to stop anytime soon. "Humph, stay here and be a lookout."

The frog nodded. She took another look to see if she was being watched. She wasn't. She crossed the wide space and went to Lugh. Her heart broke seeing the man that she loved badly beaten. The once perfect chest that her fingers had memorized had angry red burn marks on it. His bottom lip had dried blood on it from a cut that had split it. A hot tear burned her cheek. Anger seared her soul for the god that

had done this. Since he was tied up, he didn't have the ability to heal. *I will get you out of this.*

She brushed his chest lightly. Her hand fell on his chest as if she were corporeal. Kalliope kissed the side of his cheek and felt the heat burning him. "I'll get you out of this. I promise." It was then that Lugh stirred. She backed away. He lifted his head. His eyes focused, but it seemed he could not see her.

"Kalli?" His voice was harsh. He might have been a sun god, but it seemed the kind of fire that was in the place was not an attribute of his. Then again the magickal chains had rendered him powerless, so he was nothing more than human.

"Lugh, oh God. What has he done to you?"

"You should go. If he catches you, he will come. He wants Excalibur. You can't give it to him! Please, get out of here. Don't worry about me. Protect the sword. If he—"

Kalliope couldn't stand his suffering and threw her arms around his neck. "I know, love, I know. Shh. Save your strength. Lugh, I'm so sorry about—"

"No, Kalliope. No apologies. I wish I could see you. These chains prevent any magick—"

She didn't wait to hear more. She kissed his. His lips were cracked and dry under hers. Deep down she wanted them to be soft again. She wanted him to feel how much she

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loved him. How sorry she was for everything that she had said to him when she threw his heart back at him. Energy gathered above her heart. It worked its way up her throat and over her lips, touching his. The warmth that flowed out of her made him press against her more as if he was swallowing her power. When she finally pulled away, she was left lightheaded. She studied Lugh. All the bruises, burns, and the cut on the lip were gone. He was the perfection that he always was.

He looked up, still not able to see her, but Kalliope sensed that he knew where she was in front of him. His smile brightened her world. “Kalli, thank you.” She smiled and felt that she was growing heavy. It seemed that her body was pulling her back. She heard someone calling her name in the distance. She fought to stay where she was for just a few more precious seconds.

“I’ll be back. I swear. I’ll figure all of this out.”

“I know. Now, go before he finds you!”

She was about to say something and give into the voice that was calling her back, but someone grabbed her arm. Pain seared through her. Fingers wrapped around her upper arm melting into her flesh. She screamed and was amazed to see Hephaestus could see her and touch her. The agony of this touch burned through her even though she kept hearing her name being screamed in the background.

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Constance was trying to wake her up, but she was not able to get away from the fire god.

“Well, well what do we have here? The little witch has discovered where her lover is. I’m a little surprised you found him. I underestimated the bond between you. I will not do it again!” the forger said.

“But how can you see me?” she blurted out.

The god smiled which only seemed to make his appearance less appealing. “This is my domain. I can see whoever comes here either in spirit or flesh. If you were truly human, you’d be a ghost and my hand would pass right through you. I do get the occasional pagan or dreamer that loses their way. I think they assume that this is Hell. I give them quite a show. But you, you’re not so much human anymore as you once were. You’ve become a bit more than human. Not really a god, but maybe something similar to a fairy. Any Fey that come here never find their way back. If you have any kind of magick in you, I know about it. You see, I was kicked out of Olympus because of my looks. My own mother thought me too ugly so she condemned me to this place. I made provisions of my own. I made it so I would always know who was entering my domain. I knew once you appeared here. I’m not stupid. I just couldn’t pinpoint you until you used your powers and quite a show of them you did too. My chains make any magick impossible. How you got by

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them is interesting. I'm sure I'll learn all your secrets in time. You're almost more beautiful than my wife. Did you happen to see her?" The god asked with a cruel smile.

The fire of his grip has stopped. The pain still lingered and made her head a little blurry. In the back of her mind, she could hear Constance screaming for her to wake up. The god had not said anything about Humph. Hopefully he had not sensed her familiar. She swallowed and looked around the room. The frog hovered behind the pillar where Lugh was tied up.

Hang in there, Kalliope. I'll go get Constance. And in an instant, the frog was gone.

"I asked did you see my wife?" the god asked again. The fire was back on her arm and melting her flesh again. His grip brought her to her knees in front of him. She saw Lugh struggling to get out of his chains as her cries of pain filled the hall, touching every dark corner of it.

"Let her go!" Lugh screamed.

"And you'll do what to me? You can't get through those chains or you would have already done so."

Blackness threatened to overtake her. Before it could swallow her up, the god stopped. "Answer me witch! Where is Aphrodite? She should have been back by now!"

Kalliope licked her lips, which were now dry and parched. Her whole body felt all shriveled and withered. She

understood why the god compared it to Hell. She wondered if Humph was going to get to Constance in time. Something cool and soothing washed over her body. It gave her a little strength to counter the god with. The bolster was enough to fight him, rise from her knees, and face the god eye to eye. She felt something of her old self. The power that flooded her she was sure was borrowed from Constance. She had to get back to her body before Hephaestus did something that would harm her for all time.

“Your wife was a little unlucky. Thanks to your chains she’ll be my prisoner forever.” On instinct her other hand went to her side and closed on her sword hilt. She pulled Excalibur out of the sheath. A silver brightness filled the dark hall. It blinded the god enough that he used his other hand to shield his eyes, but he didn’t relinquish his grip on her. Momentum and instinct made Kalliope bring the blade down on the hand that kept her prisoner.

Once the blade severed his flesh from his bone, his hand fell to the floor and turned to a pile of ash. The god screamed. He held his wounded hand while trying to keep his eyes shielded from the glare of the sword. The god disappeared, retreating to heal. Kalliope took the chance and went to Lugh. She held the sword in both hands and brought it down on the chains binding him. She felt metal hitting metal and a spark came from the meeting of the two. The

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vibration of it went up her arm. Part of her was starting to fade from being pulled back to her body.

“Kalliope, it’s no use,” Lugh said to her.

She came around front and saw the sadness in his eyes. “I’ll be back. I promise.” She leaned in and gave him a quick kiss. Their mouths met in a split second. Sweet passion filled her being because she was reunited with him. In those fleeting milliseconds, she knew that he loved her no matter what had happened in the past. The rest of her was fading. The hall started to disappear around her.

“I love you,” Lugh whispered. Before she could answer him, she felt a sharp tug. Within a breath’s time, she felt her body. It was heavy and cold. Her heart beat slower than it should have been. She was barely breathing. When she settled back into her flesh, she sat upright and took in a deep breath. She opened her eyes and saw Constance’s worried look. The wrinkles on her aunt’s face had been deepened. It appeared that she had aged twenty years in the time span that she had been gone. Humphrey was perched on the dresser watching the whole scene. Her aunt’s hands wrapped around her neck and she drew her into a huge hug.

“Thank the gods you’re back. I was so worried.”

She didn’t have any time to think as all the feeling came back to her body. Her stomach turned over. She broke from her aunt’s embrace and raced to the bathroom where

she lost any pie that she had eaten. Her teeth wouldn't stop chattering. Constance came in and handed her a washcloth and then led her back to bed. Kalliope sat on the edge of it. Her aunt pulled back the material of her sleeve and revealed a meaty hand print that had been branded into her flesh.

“What happened to me? Why do I feel this way?”

“You used a lot of your power, dear. I suspect this was your first astral projection, right?”

She nodded. “I wasn't planning on it, but I had Lugh on my mind. After what you said I guess I just went to him.”

The ghost snapped her fingers and a bowl, bandages, and first aid gear appeared on the bed next to her. She used that to clean and dress the burn. “Didn't I tell you that love is a powerful bond? Your familiar said you healed Lugh even with the chains that prevent magick. You used great power and since you were not used to projection it drained you faster, and the wound... You'll have this for the rest of your days I'm afraid. Now tell me what happened to you?”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Hephaestus! I should have known. He’s always had a complex. More so than the other gods. He hated Hera for throwing him out of Olympus.” Morgaine was now pacing in her living room. Kalliope felt it was better to call her instead of having to tell her story twice to Constance and the sorceress. The ghost was serving all three of them another slice of pie. Kalliope thought she wasn’t hungry after her ordeal, but once she smelled the melting ice cream on the pie her stomach growled. She was ravenous. She only wished that her refrigerator was back in its self stocking order. Now she understood that because Lugh was bound, he could not use magick to keep her cabinets full.

“Yeah well, at least we know it wasn’t Lugh that told me he wanted nothing to do with me or that came to get Excalibur from you.”

“It’s a shame. I never thought Apollo would betray Lugh. They’ve been friends since they were tiny solar flares together. Now Aphrodite I can totally see. She’s always been

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queen bitch and wanted to rule the universe. Just because she's the goddess of love she thinks that everyone will bow down and kiss her feet. So, what are we going to do?"

Kalliope sat back in her chair and contemplated it. She had been in the hall for several hours. From her calculations she had about thirty-six hours left to get the job done and the Haleys back in the Underworld before All Hail was going to spill the beans to the human population. She had to hurry. She chewed on a slice of apple that was not cooked all the way and swallowed. An idea popped in her head.

"Morgaine, the Furies have a weakness for cheesecake, right?"

"Yeah, but you can't go out to the local bakery and get a cheesecake. They'll know something's up. They're not stupid. They might be hicks, but they weren't born yesterday. They would want something completely otherworld—" A smiled spread on the sorceress' lips when she picked up on Kalliope's train of thought. "You're brilliant."

"Thanks. I need you to find the Furies for me. Trick them into thinking you're sick of being exiled to Avalon and you want to join them to take over the world. Make up something."

"They're not going to fall for that."

"They will if I get the cheesecake and send it to you."

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“Why can’t you go to them?”

“They tried to get Theresa, remember?”

“They know that you’re friends with Morgaine though,” Constance chimed in.

“Yeah, but she can tell them it was all part of Apollo’s plan to get me on your side so you could betray me. Whatever. Play it up. Now, where is there some kind of otherworldly poker match?”

The sorceress rolled her eyes. “Go through the door and you’ll be there. But be careful. You could lose your butt.”

“Kalliope, you were never really good at cards. Maybe—”

She got up and Humphrey flapped behind her. “There is no time. I have to go. No matter what. I won’t let anything else happen to Lugh.” Her aunt nodded.

Morgaine smiled. “I’ll send you a sign when I’ve got them. It’s going to take more than me convincing them I’ve come over to the dark side to get them in chains. I hope the cheesecake works.”

“It will. I’ll get the chains from Avalon.” Kalliope she walked through the door.

On the other side, she was met with a bright glare. When she looked up, there were tons of lights all illuminating a large table in the middle of a white room. All the chairs were the folding metal kind that she would see at any flea

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market table. She would have assumed that at an otherworldly poker match they would at least have comfortable chairs. Around the table were a cast of characters that only could make her wonder. The one that she was looking for was nowhere to be found.

There were no other people, beings, or chairs so she started to walk to the table. Once she got about ten feet from it, a very large, well-built man appeared out of nowhere with his arms crossed over his chest. His arms were the size of small trees and he towered ten feet. He had a crew cut black hair, wore sunglasses, and a leather jacket which was over a black shirt that stretched over a muscular chest that even a washboard would envy. He even had an earpiece in his ear. He stuck out a hand that stopped her in her tracks.

“No mortals allowed.” His voice was a deep baritone.

Play ceased at the table. The other beings stopped and looked at Kalliope. She leaned around him, smiled, and waved. What she saw at the table was enough to stop her heart. There were four beings around the table with room for a lot more. One of the figures had the dark head of a large dog or a jackal. The more Kalliope looked at him, the more she realized that he looked familiar. The being must have sensed her eyes on him and turned its head to look more intently at her. It had gold and amber eyes. It smiled to reveal long, sharp teeth. She returned the gesture weakly. After a

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moment of silence and referral among the creatures, one of them got up. She felt a surge of heat move through her. She wondered if she was still having affects from the lust arrow because she would have jumped him in a heartbeat. He was tall, dark, built, clean-shaven, and dressed in tight leather pants. Long, black hair pulled back in a ponytail. Gold earring in his ear and a smile and walk so smooth it could turn her heart into melted chocolate. Sweat beaded on her brow. She absently wiped it away, hoping he wouldn't notice. Something about him was suave. He seemed to be a poster boy for anything she could dream of.

“What do you have here?” the man asked the bouncer. There was a lilt to his voice that made her want to fall under his spell.

“She is intruding on your game, sir. No mortals allowed,” the bouncer spoke again.

The man did a once over on Kalliope. Even though she thought she was immune to the lure of all the gods magick, something about him made her want to bite into him. If she did that then she knew she would enjoy a sensation as close to having an orgasm as she could without actually having one. She wanted to bury her face in his chest and see if he tasted of vanilla and cinnamon. Just the way he smelled.

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Get a grip on yourself, Kalliope. You're not on the market.

She chided herself for such horrible thoughts. But she couldn't help it.

Finally he said something to the bouncer who nodded, gave her a dirty look, and then poofed. Kalliope stared at the other god and the smile on his face.

“What brings you here, lovely lady?” His voice was smooth, creamy chocolate that made her want to eat him up. She could picture her tongue lapping whipped cream from his chest. Her tongue would start at his Adam's apple, then slowly lick between his pecs and down his stomach, lovingly to— She shook her head at her thoughts. There was nothing she could do because she was in love with Lugh. But oh boy!

“I...I—” Kalliope swallowed. Finally, she found her voice. “I'm here looking for someone. Maybe you can help?” She studied the other two characters at the table. One of them had the upper half of an elephant, with a hand of cards in front of it. Another was a creature that reminded Kalliope of a Chinese dragon. Smoke puffed out of his nostrils. His red eyes bored into hers. None of the creatures resembled a round plain cheesecake. She was royally screwed.

“Who are you looking for? Some kind of cheesecake perhaps? Another frog to go with your familiar?” the dark god asked. He snapped and a frog appeared in mid-air that

was the same size as Humphrey with big, luscious, cherry red lips and long eyelashes.

Humphrey's mouth dropped open. The other frog batted her eyelashes. The frog jerked her head and signaled for her to follow him. He looked at her, and she smiled and nodded at the frog for him to go. They both flapped off together.

“How did you know I needed cheesecake?” Kalliope asked.

The god leaned in and kissed her cheek. “I know a little bit about everything, Kalliope. I know that you prefer peanut butter cup cheesecake with Oreo cookies crushed on top of it instead of chocolate chip cookie dough cheesecake. There are hundreds of types of cheesecake in the world. Millions of men and women are brought together under one roof to celebrate the glorious art form of cheesecake. When it comes to that particular desert, I know everything there is to know.”

This couldn't be, could it? “I see you're playing poker. I was reading this book written by the Almighty Cheesecake. I hear he's a pretty good player. You know where I can find him? I think he can teach me some pointers.” Kalliope smiled sweetly and tried not to be put under the god's spell again. It was hard to fight his intoxicating power. He was right, that was her favorite cheesecake.

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“Kalliope, I’m not what you think I should be. No plastic nose like Mr. Potato Head or removable ears either. And the Almighty Cheesecake is just a nickname the other gods gave me because I have such an effect on women. My real name is David. To put those harpies back in the Underworld, I’ll give you whatever cheesecake you want. But you have to do something for me.”

“What is that?”

“You have savored cheesecake before while the fork slides over your lips because part of you worships the dessert of your choice. Let me taste those lovely lips of yours. One sweet kiss and you can have whatever kind of cheesecake that you want. I’ll make it special.”

Cheesecake was a delicacy for some and a sweet indulgence for others. She didn’t want to betray Lugh, but he would understand that she was doing it to save the universe. Her face burned. She nodded. “Okay.” She leaned, gave him a quick kiss on the lips, and then pulled away.

“David, are you coming back to play?” The jackal growled.

The other god turned to the players at the poker table. “Give me a minute, Jack. Gees. I can’t ignore a beautiful woman. Give me a minute and deal me out.”

The other players grumbled and went back to playing. David pulled her away from the table a little bit. He smiled

down at her. It was intoxication. She nearly lost herself in that smile. “You know I won’t hurt you. I would never dream of hurting Lugh. I know who he is, and all I want is one kiss. I promise it won’t hurt. Besides, it’s not all the time I get visited by beautiful women up here. I get many delicious thoughts of what the women would do if they were eating cheesecake. Now I just want one taste. I promise I won’t bite.” He leaned in. She was overwhelmed with the smell of vanilla. She licked her lips. She could almost taste him on her tongue. But to get what she needed she had to give in.

“All right.”

David leaned in and brushed her lips to his. They were soft like shaved chocolate with a hint of peppermint to them. She couldn’t resist his touch. A sense of peace came over her. Her arms wrapped around his neck. His arms entwined around her waist, forming her body to his. A moan built in her chest.

Oh, Kalliope, he whispered in her mind.

She was falling under his spell.

“You are a rare find in this world. You taste of cinnamon and lavender.” He pulled away, leaving her dumbfounded. When she came back to herself a wave of guilt washed over her. She had let herself enjoy the kiss from David. She was human and couldn’t help it. How could she clamp down on her emotions when it came to some gods that

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overwhelmed her senses? Lugh would understand, wouldn't he? She was not about to sleep with the cheesecake god.

“Don't feel guilty about the kiss. It's to save the world, right? If you weren't with Lugh, I would snatch you up myself.” He took her chin in his palm and brushed her lips with the tip of his thumb. “If this was another century, you could be another Helen and wars would be fought over you. If you ever need anything, dear lady, please let me know and I'll be right there.”

“Thank you,” Kalliope whispered.

The god bowed and held out his hand. A cheesecake appeared. It looked to be made of pure chocolate with red strawberries on top of it. He handed it to her. Absently, she licked her lips. If she could, she would have eaten the whole thing in front of him. Her eyes were getting bigger than her stomach. Something heavy dropped on her head and bounced to the floor. It broke Kalliope from her daze. When she looked down she saw that it was an orange, a penis shaped one at that. Morgaine still had a sense of humor even when the world was coming to an end.

She saw Morgaine in her mind's eye. Suddenly the cheesecake was gone from her hands and it had appeared before the sorceress.

“You see. All is not lost. Now, you should get those chains before the Haleys break out of the spell from the

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cheesecake. They are goddesses, so it will only last a few minutes.”

“Thank you.”

The god smiled again. “Not at all. Thank you. I’m sure I’ll see you again sometime, lovely witch. I’ll send your frog along later. Now, get to Avalon before anything happens.” He kissed her on the cheek. She began falling. When she opened her eyes, she was in Avalon.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

She glanced around the room and saw the manacles lying on the floor where Aphrodite had dropped them. She picked them up. It made her wonder where Flidais was. She had not seen her when she had gone to get Lugh. She tried to focus on where the other goddess was, but she was not getting a reading anywhere. Kalliope hoped that her friend was okay.

“There you are!” Kalliope turned quickly enough and saw Theresa standing in the doorway. Her face knotted in pain. She was holding her lower back.

“Are you okay?”

“Do I look okay, Kal?”

“You’re having the babies, aren’t you?”

The pregnant woman nodded and clutched the doorframe. Her face strained from a contraction. Kalliope felt a sudden stab go through her body. She almost doubled over along with her friend. She bit her lip and held her ground.

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She went over to help her friend sit down. Once she touched her, she got a flash of the pain that Theresa was experiencing.

“How far along are you?” Kalliope asked.

“I don’t know. A few minutes. Time is different here. Kal, I gotta get to a hospital.”

A shower of oranges came down around Kalliope. All of them were penis shaped.

“What was that about?” Theresa straightened up and the contraction passed.

In Kalliope’s mind, she saw Morgaine licking the fork. She only had a few minutes from when the Furies ate it before the effects wore off. She looked at her best friend and a pang of guilt went through her. There wasn’t enough time to get Theresa to a hospital and then get back to the Furies.

“Theresa,” Kalliope paused and summoned the priestess with her mind. “I’m so sorry, but I have to save the world. I don’t have time to get you to a hospital. Don’t you want the twins to be born in a world free of mindless zombies eating bean curd?”

Her best friend looked shocked. “You... I... no way! I can’t have the babies here. It’s primitive. They have no drugs.” Two priestesses came in and bowed to Kalliope. She gave her friend a quick hug.

“I’m sorry. It’s not backwoods. Just think of all the years of knowledge here. It’s wonderful. I bet they have

something better than drugs. The babies will have a touch of magick about them. Maybe when they're older they'll turn Stan into a frog for you." Kalliope grabbed the chains and thought about Morgaine. She dashed through the door and appeared in a room that was a cross between a coffee shop and a pub. There was no one else in the place.

She watched the Haleys and almost laughed. They moved their hands in front of their faces slowly, obviously amazed at something. The snakes in their hair were hissing.

"Hey look! It's the witchy witch Apollo wanted us to kidnap for him," announced Haley Jo.

"Can we kidnap you, witchy witch?" Haley Anne asked.

"What is in the cheesecake?" Kalliope asked Morgaine. The sorceress shrugged.

"David has a thing for cheesecake. It's his specialty. But if it's anything to do with brownies, I don't eat it."

Kalliope noticed the piece of cheesecake in front of Morgaine's place. There were fork marks in it and bits of cheesecake on the tines. The rest of the cheesecake had been devoured by the goddesses. There were only crumbs left on their plates. She shook her head at the high goddesses. "How was I supposed to know? I didn't think anything of what he was putting in it." She walked over and snapped a set of chains on two of the Haleys.

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“Oh Haley Anne, aren’t these pretty bracelets!” said Haley Jo. She brought her hands up to her face and admired the metal. Kalliope tried not to laugh. Even otherworldly pot had the same effects on supernatural beings. She then snapped the second set of chains on the third goddess and connected her to the other wrist of the second Haley.

“How did you get them to trust you?”

The sorceress smirked and snapped her fingers. Before her stood Apollo. Kalliope backed away for a second on instinct. Excalibur came alive against her skin. The blade burned, waiting to be used, but the form wavered and underneath it she saw Morgaine.

“Apollo, look what the witchy witch did to us! Isn’t she mean? Can you let us out? Please? We thought you said you were going to take us someplace fun!” cried the Haleys in unison.

The fake Apollo smiled and walked over to the bound goddesses. “Ladies.” Kalliope was impressed that the sorceress even had the god’s voice down to pat. The sorceress ran a finger down Haley Anne’s cheek. All three of the goddesses shivered and sighed. “You enjoyed the cheesecake that I brought you. David made it especially for you. Now why don’t you follow me? I’ll bring you to a place where everything you have ever wanted will be yours.”

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All three of them giggled. “What about the witchy witch? Don’t you want her out of the way?” Haley Jo asked.

“I have plans for her, all right.” Morgaine snapped her fingers. Chains appeared around her wrists. Kalliope was about to protest, but she saw the look that Morgaine gave her and shut right up. *Just go with it. It’s gonna take a lot of juice to get them to the Underworld from here. Those chains Hephaestus made will stop the magick wherever they touch. So I’m going to need your strength too.*

Kalliope nodded.

“Ladies, please after you. I’ll take the witch with us. Hephaestus wants to have his way with her. I know he has some fun things planned.”

The Furies walked through the door. Morgaine grabbed Kalliope’s hand. At the moment their skin connected, a jolt ran up her hand from their combined power. A heat wave emitted out from the sorceress and her. Where the chains touched there seemed to be a rip in the heat wave. They blocked the magick from doing its job. At that moment, Kalliope felt her own strength siphon through her and push into Morgaine. She was encompassed in a golden glow. The goddess moved through the doorway of the pub along with her. There was a bright light she closed her eyes at. When she opened them, she stood in front of a large cave opening. The goddesses were on the ground. Morgaine

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leaned on a post of a dock that was on the river. The water was calm, but very red.

Kalliope surveyed the surroundings. She had been to this place before. Well not the exact place, she had been further away at the top of the valley. She looked up and saw the mountains surrounding the valley. A ring of clouds surrounded the highest of them. She assumed it was Mount Olympus. At one end of the valley there was the beginning of a large forest that stretched back and up some of the other mountains. If only everything was perfect. She heard a loud ring which brought her out of her thoughts. When she looked up, Morgaine rang a bell. With the vibration of the bell, the water grew choppy. The ground trembled underfoot. The quake was enough to wake the Haleys. When Haley Jo opened her eyes, she immediately closed them again. Her hand went up to her temples.

She smiled and slipped the handcuffs off that Morgaine had put on her which were loose anyway. “Too much partying?”

The Furies opened their eyes. The snakes bared their fangs. Some snapped at her. It was then they realized they were chained. “Where’s Apollo? What did you do? Why can’t we use our magick?” All of the goddesses asked at the same time.

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“All in good time. Now, if I were you I’d get into the boat.” Morgaine gestured toward the dock.

“And what if we don’t?” Haley Bobby crossed her hands over her chest.

“Then my friend behind you will decide to have your hair for dinner.” The girls looked behind them and all cried when they heard a low growl. A very large mongoose growled at them. They all screamed and ran to the end of the dock. Kalliope smiled again to see the goddesses so terrified. It served them right for plotting to take over the world. A boat had just appeared. The red water lapped at its sides and sloshed over because it sat so low. The only passenger in the boat was a figure in a long, black, hooded robe that hung down over his face. In one hand he held a long pole. Kalliope patted the mongoose lightly and thought of the bullfrog, but he was still with the female frog David had created. She missed the green bug-eyed familiar. He had grown on her, but when she thought about conversing with other frogs, she still got the heebie-jeebies. Morgaine pushed the goddesses out of the way and climbed into the boat. She then tugged on the chains and watched the Haleys get in. Kalliope was last. The Ferrier extended his skeletal hand slowly, the bones creaking in his fingers. A cold chill passed through her. A sense of dread crawled up her spine. Kalliope might not have known lots about Greek Mythology, but instinctively she knew that

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the Ferrier was Charon, the Ferryman who brought souls across the River Styx into the Underworld. He wanted a coin for their passage. Kalliope closed her eyes and prayed her magick would not have a mind of its own. In an instant something heavy and cool landed in her palm. It was a silver coin that was old, worn, and about the size of a half dollar. She placed it in Charon's boney fingers. The Ferryman looked out from under his hood. Underneath it she got a glimpse of a skull and red eyes. She swallowed and looked down toward the water.

The boat lurched forward. They were traveling much faster than she figured they could. There was no engine. Magick always worked in strange ways. Look at what it had been doing with her life lately.

“Four hundred bicorn power. It's the fastest on the market.”

Kalliope looked up. Morgaine and the goddesses had said nothing. She glanced at Charon. His hood was thrown back, showing a shiny skull. His chin was pierced with a metal stud sticking out of it. The being grinned at her. Kalliope returned the gesture. He was not so bad.

“I was wondering why it moved so fast.”

“Has to be to get by Cerberus. Of all the dog's three heads, the first one loves to drool, the second thinks I'm

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something to gnaw on, and the third is the stupidest thing I've ever seen." His voice was hollow.

"Please don't take us back, Charon. Please. Didn't we have some good times together?" the Furies asked. Haley Jo rubbed up against the ferryman and ran her hand along his groin. Kalliope swore she saw his cheeks redden. He batted the hand away.

"Not on your flesh girls. You've messed up big time. I don't want any part of your meddling. I should throw you to Cerberus, one for each head, but we're not going by him. Hades wants you back to work pronto. Persephone wants her fried calamari. I thought I'd never hear the end of it, and lost souls don't make it the way she likes it."

He seemed like a nice guy, skeleton, whatever. But her mood dampened when they entered the mouth of the cave. It grew cold and dark. The water ran black from the lack of light, but Charon seemed to know where he was going while he steered the boat. They weren't without light for long because on the shores of the river, Kalliope spied ghostly forms hovering at the water's edge and staring at them.

Finally, the boat came to another dock. The Haleys got off first and then Morgaine. Charon wrapped a skeletal hand round Kalliope's wrist. "The one you're looking for is down here. I saw her."

Kalliope looked puzzled. "Who did you see?"

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“The goddess from the other realm. The dethroned queen. Just follow the pomegranate seeds.” He let her wrist go.

She leaned in and kissed the bone cheek when she realized that he was talking about Flidais. “Thank you. I owe you one.”

He shrugged. “The next time I need a beautiful escort I’ll look you up. Deal?”

“Deal.” Kalliope got out of the boat and headed toward the sorceress.

“He sure was talkative. I’ve never seen him so animated. Normally, he’s silent as a grave.”

Kalliope gave her a dirty look and hit her friend in the arm. The sorceress burst into laughter. “Very funny. He told me how to find Flidais.”

“Why don’t you go ahead? I’ll take care of the horrible three here.”

“I can’t leave you alone. It was my duty to get them back to the Underworld.”

“And you kept your part of the bargain. You got the Dixie chicks back to the Underworld. I’ll make sure they get to Hades. I have to pick up a few things while I’m down here anyway. I don’t make the trip very often. The dry heat chaps my skin and then there are the ghosts. They are sooo boring.

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Now shoo. Go find Flidais and free your love toy from Hephaestus. I have faith in you.”

Kalliope gave her friend a hug. “Thanks.” She turned to the Furies. “I would say that it’s been fun, what who am I kidding? Have a great eternity frying calamari, girls.”

She didn’t wait to hear what they said. She ran off and began searching the Underworld for pomegranates. Do you know how hard it is to find pomegranate seeds in the dark?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It was very hard to find pomegranate seeds on the dirt floor of the cave. The longer Kalliope looked, the more strained her eyes became. The light in the cave was enough for her to see where she was going and not bump into anything, but it was still hard going. Her course led her slowly downhill, deeper into the Underworld. All around her the setting looked the same. She finally felt a burning sensation on the side of her leg and forgot about Excalibur being there. The sword wanted attention. She drew it from its scabbard. The sword emanated a purple glow giving her enough light to see by. The cave was bleak and barren and getting hotter the further she descended. Her surroundings showed stalagmites and stalactites. The ceiling of the cave was hard to see. Silently, she thanked the sword for being so helpful. She noticed a reflection in the blade. Someone was following her. That was the true reason the sword wanted out. It was itching for a fight.

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When she acknowledged the intruder to her presence, she felt a shimmer around her. When she looked down at her clothes, she was back in battle gear. *You must have a thing for Xena. Trying to make me into a warrior witch?*

For a brief moment, she swore she felt a rush of joy and amusement run up her arm. Then it was over and her focus was super sharpened. She walked silently now with the steps of a trained warrior through the cave. *Whatever mojo you got had better stick with me after you go back above Morgaine's mantle. 'Cause I know I don't get to keep you.*

The sword didn't answer. She spied another reflection and heard something. She had turned around and Excalibur was at the throat of her would be attacker. "I would not move another muscle unless you want your head to come off!"

"Please don't hurt Zeus!" The being in front of her fell to his knees and wrung his hands. Kalliope stayed her blade and looked down at the man in front of her cowering for his life.

"Why were you following me?"

This was the same Zeus who had sent her to Del's in the first place. "Please spare Zeus. Zeus thought you were Calliope. But then Zeus saw you draw the famed sword and change."

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Kalliope groaned. Why did everyone think she was a muse? Was she dancing around in a circle with flowers singing about poetry? She certainly wasn't hanging out in smoke filled coffee shops dealing out information. At least the god noticed she had a sword. That was a plus for the self-absorbed ass he was. "Zeus, get up. I won't hurt you. Yet. Tell me why are you down here and not living the life of luxury on Olympus? Did Hera catch you cheating with one of the slave girls?"

The god got up. His robes were torn. His hair was disheveled and there were smudges of dirt on his face. He seemed gaunt and his portly frame had diminished. His toga hung around him. Even his expression was haunted. Something devastating had happened to the man. He should have been all high and mighty, but whatever had happened to him had certainly put in him his place. Kalliope suspected that had been a strong blow of reality for the guy. *Serves him right. I'm sure he's screwed over enough women to make them want to put him in his place.* Kalliope shook the thought from her head. She tried not to be judgmental, but she still had a hard spot in her heart for cheating men since Quince.

"The girls? Oh yes! Zeus forgot about them. It's been so long since Zeus has seen their luscious lips and their succulent breasts. With eyes..."

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“Yo! Zeusy boy. Back on track here. Why. Are. You. Here?”

The god got up and tried to be dignified. He wiped some of the dirt off his toga. His voice still quivered when he spoke. “Zeus was tricked.”

Kalliope groaned. The god was still a chauvinistic ass even if he was deceived. “When does Almighty Zeus get misled into leaving Mount Olympus unless you’re chasing some nymph tale? You rule the other gods with an iron fist and can rain down lightning bolts to smite the one who duped you. At least that is what I’ve heard. I guess mythology is all wrong. I’ve found that out lately.”

The god broke into tears. “The mortal witch is correct. Zeus is pathetic. Zeus is a fraud. Hera promised Zeus a night like Zeus hadn’t seen in a long time. But that hussy trapped Zeus and clamped this on Zeus.” He stuck out his sandaled foot. Around his left ankle Kalliope saw a gold band. “Hephaestus is the only one who has the key to take this off. Zeus hates the Underworld. All the ghosts have been playing horrible pranks on Zeus, so I’ve been hiding. Zeus thinks Hades has been taking advantage while Zeus is off the throne.”

Kalliope shook her head. The cuff made the god powerless and must have cut at his ego because he went from being all powerful and then cut down to nothing more than a

mere mortal all because of the woman that he loved. At least the stories said that he loved Hera. He couldn't stand her bickering so he would fool around. Basically his brain was in his penis, like all men. Gods were turning out to be the same as humans. Of course she didn't classify Lugh in that category. She'd had enough of this. She wanted all of this to be over. She had to find Flidais and get the hell out of the Underworld and free Lugh. She wanted her normal life back. She didn't care how many mythical creatures came knocking on her door for advice.

“Would you like to get your throne back and get out of here?”

He stood up straighter when she asked him that. “Zeus will kill all those that have kept Zeus from it. Zeus will even punish Zeus's beloved wife for her treachery against Zeus and siding with her good for nothing son.”

“Great. Well, if you help me out, I'll get that bracelet off you. Deal?”

“Zeus will do whatever the beautiful mortal witch wants. Lead the way gorgeous one.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Do you see any pomegranate seeds?” she asked the god. Excalibur was glowing brighter while she kept descending. They had been walking for what seemed like hours deeper into the Underworld. The ghosts had been aware of her presence. Every once and a while, they got up the courage to float close to her, but they never got too close. Kalliope figured it was because they sensed the power of Excalibur.

“Why would Zeus even think of eating those nasty fruits? Zeus only dines on the best wine and fare. Pomegranates are things of this foul place.”

“Will you just look!”

They walked a little while longer until Kalliope was fed up. Had Charon led her on a wild goose chase? Before she knew it, she was going to end up in the Chinese Underworld if she wasn't careful. Her feet were sore and so was her arm from carrying the sword. Without it she wouldn't

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have that much light. She wanted to save her strength for her magick in case she needed it to get Lugh.

“Gorgeous human, Kalliope. Is this what you are looking for?” Zeus announced.

She turned and saw that he held a seed the size of a penny in his hand. Her lips spread into a smile and without thinking she rushed into his arms and gave him a wet kiss on the cheek. The god was amazed and returned the gesture. His hand slid under her leather skirt and grabbed her butt hard. His tongue slipped into her mouth and met hers. Once she realized what he was doing, she pulled away and squirmed out of his grasp. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, trying to get the old fish taste out of her throat. She was about to say something to the god, but he smiled.

“You said nothing about not returning Zeus’s affections. Come here Zeus’s little snuggle bunny. Once you’ve had Zeus you never go back.” He leaned in closer for another stolen kiss, but Kalliope raised her sword and brought it between the two of them. The god backed off then.

“I am no one’s snuggle bunny. Well maybe one someone, but he’s being held prisoner at the moment so I really don’t have time for your clowning around.” Kalliope brought Excalibur down and struck the metal band around his ankle. When the cuff fell away, he drew himself up. The

power surge that she felt was incredible. A bright light flared around him that blinded her. It dimmed and Kalliope could look at him again. When she did, he was back to his glorious self. His robes were pristine white. His black hair slicked back with oil and his olive skin was immaculate down to his cuticles. He waited a moment and then bowed, something she figured that he would never catch himself doing around any other gods because he would be lowering himself to her standards.

“Zeus humbly thanks the gorgeous mortal witch for freeing Zeus and returning the Furies to their rightful place. Zeus regrets the misfortune that has been caused by this upset. That will never happen again. Zeus assures you. Zeus will make Hephaestus pay for what he has done to you. Name your reward and it will be done.”

“Leave Hephaestus to me. No one hurts those I love. I’ll get back to you on the rest of what you owe me. I’m not through yet. Not by a long shot. For now, can you zap me to Flidais, please? I’m getting tired of following bread crumbs.”

“As the ravenous witch commands.” Zeus snapped his fingers. Her stomach lurched forward and then back down again. Her feet settled on the ground and her vision cleared. Once it did, she saw Flidais slumped over with her back against a large stalagmite. When Kalliope looked around, she was in a room no bigger than her kitchen with the

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stalagmite that took up most of the room. Chains were wrapped around the goddess to keep her unconscious. Kalliope wondered if the magick from the chains had knocked her out because the goddess was still not a complete goddess yet. By her last count Flidais still had two more Oak Apples to eat before she could rejoin the other Celtic Gods. She tried shaking the goddess, but nothing happened.

Excalibur flared to life and vibrated in her hand. She glanced at the sword. The chains were pretty thick. “You think you can cut through those?” she asked the sword.

It ignited bright red. A flame surrounded the blade. The hilt grew slightly warm, but it was not enough to burn her. “Okay. I’ll take that for a yes.” *This thing has gotta have some kind of magickal artificial intelligence. There was no way it was only made just of metal.*

Without another thought, she brought the sword tip down to the chains. She half expected the blade to break into pieces or knick, or something, but the red glow hit the chains first. Where the sword touched the metal, the links in the chains grew bright orange. Once it was done, the glow was gone. Kalliope sheathed it. This time the sword didn’t go invisible, but stayed right by her side. Her next course of action was to go get Hephaestus and kick his ass.

She removed the chains from the goddess. Even when she touched them, she felt slightly weaker. The goddess

was breathing easy, but there was no change. Kalliope knelt down. Pebbles dug into her skin, but getting bruised and battered was par for the course when it came to saving the world. But now was not the time to think about herself. Her mind wandered to Theresa. She hoped her friend would forgive her for not getting her to a hospital. She hoped that the twins were okay. But she would have to understand that she was doing it for the greater good and had to save the world. Besides, the Furies were back in the Underworld. Now she just had to free the CEOs of the fast food restaurants and things could go back to normal. If there was such a thing.

Kalliope checked the goddess. On a whim, she leaned over and kissed her on the cheek hoping that maybe a kiss would wake her out of the slumber. There was no change. She closed her eyes and tried to quiet her mind. There was so much going on. Her thoughts were racing around her brain to see which would come out first. It wasn't helping. She needed calm. Finally, she relaxed enough that her mind was a blank canvas. Then she thought of Dagda, the cart wheeling, coffee addicted hotty, who had pawned her off to Zeus in the first place. She held the image in her head of the god. It changed. She saw him sitting on his throne playing chess with a very fat, but familiar looking beaver. Kalliope got a glimpse of the board. The beaver was winning.

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At that moment, the god sensed someone or thing was around him. Kalliope concentrated harder. Things went dark for a moment and then it was light again. She stood at the chess board.

“Hi, Kalli!” Dagda said. “Have you saved the world yet?”

Kalliope wanted to punch him. He knew perfectly well that she hadn’t saved the world yet. She waved her hand. All the pieces went flying from the chessboard. The beaver glanced in her direction and shook its fist at her.

“Sorry.” The oversized rodent got off its log and began picking up the pieces. He passed right though her. She was getting the hang of astral projection.

“No worries. Martin was letting me loose. If you haven’t saved the world, then why are you here? I have other important things to do.” Dagda stroked his beard which was greener and fuller than the last time she had seen him. He then moved his hand through her stomach. It felt like she was being tickled. She tried to push him away.

“Stop that!”

“But it’s fun. You have to finish saving the world so we can have some more fun together. It’s been so boring without you and Flidais around. Have you seen her by the way? She was supposed to meet me here eons ago.”

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“That’s why I’m here. She’s been captured. I can’t wake her up. I need your help.”

Dagda waved his hand over the chess table and it disappeared. The beaver threw up his paws scattering the chess pieces even more. They vanished along with him before they hit the floor. The god got up. There was panic in his expression. “What do you mean she was kidnapped? I would have known if she was taken prisoner. Has she been hurt? Where is she?” He grabbed her arm. This time his fingers didn’t pass through her flesh. They gripped her flesh hard near where Hephaestus had burned it. He noticed the hand shaped burn mark. His face softened. He released his hold on her and traced her cheek. “I never meant for you to be put in harm’s way. I apologize for what I have caused you. But how do you know that I can be of any help to Flidais?”

“Because love is the strongest magick in the world.” Her love for Lugh would never fade away nor his love for her. They were meant to be together. She didn’t understand why the revelation came to her. But peering into the face of a man who was desperate and so concerned to find the one that he loved made Kalliope see that Constance was right. Love was the strongest magick in the world, no matter what realm they were in. She didn’t need a spell to find Lugh or to call him. She had been in love with him the first moment she had laid eyes on him months ago when she first saw him

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naked, in the woods, in the pouring rain. He loved her no matter what. And she loved him. It wasn't the point that he had given her part of his heart. He had only done that to show her how he felt. Now every fiber of her being hoped that he would be okay when she got to him. Months ago, he had saved her from a crazy death god. Now it was her time to save him from a crazy fire god.

“How did you know to come to me?” Dagda asked.

“Because you love her with all your heart even though you don't want to admit it because it would make you look vulnerable to the other gods. To ones who might want to use her against you and take your throne. You keep them all at bay. Some would consider you weak because you are in love with a goddess that bore half-human children. Don't close your heart against her. If you want her back then give her the two apples she needs to be fully restored. She pines for you and you pine for her. Will you come please and wake her? I have my own love to save.” Kalliope touched the god's face and smiled. With a thought she wanted to be back in her body and she was.

Everything about her was cold. She opened her eyes and felt another presence next to her. When she looked up, it was Dagda. He knelt down next to Flidais and took her in his arms. Her head fell back against his shoulder. He stroked

Flidais's cheek gently. There wasn't a mark on her except she was unresponsive.

"What did they do to you?" Dagda asked. "You feel so human. Why did I ever exile you?" He looked at Kalliope and noticed how she was dressed for the first time. "You're a warrior princess now, hmm? I think it suits you, but I don't think you're Xena material."

"Let me guess. You've met her?" Kalliope asked.

The god gave her a knowing smile. "Do you really want to know?"

"No. Please wake her up."

"You care for her too?"

"Does that surprise you?"

Dagda smoothed some hair away from Flidais's peaceful face. "I thought you might have felt obligated to her for everything she had done for you and your parents. Did she tell you she chose to be human?"

It had never occurred to her. She assumed Dagda had put the punishment on Flidais to become mortal because she had given her the apples. "No, she didn't. Why would she want to give up her life and become human?"

"It wasn't because I punished her. I wanted someone to keep an eye on you to see if you could control the magical gift. I had to be sure. She chose to be your guardian. By staying with you and seeing how you lived she knew that you

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could handle it. Flidais told me you would do great things with your powers, Kalliope. And you have. Look at where you are today. Even as we speak a new generation is being born that has been blessed with the magick of this world. All because you made it happen.” Dagda kissed Flidais’s lips. The color came back to her cheeks. Her eyes fluttered open. Kalliope smiled at the display of raw emotion that she saw on the two lovers’ faces. It just showed they were closer to humanity than they gave themselves credit for.

“Well. I’m going to save the world now. Have fun you two.”

“Kalliope, wait.” Flidais called after her.

She turned back around to find the goddess on her feet. “Yes.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“No, you’re not.” Both women were surprised to see that Dagda was protesting.

“Yes, I am. She needs my help.”

“She is more capable than you realize.”

“Dagda,” Flidais said. “I know how you feel. But I have to help her.” She leaned in and kissed him tenderly. Kalliope averted her eyes. “I promise. I’ll be okay.”

The god sighed and looked at her. “If she gets hurt, I’m coming to look for you and even Excalibur won’t be able to protect you. Go on and save the world. I don’t know why

you haven't done it already." With a bow, the god disappeared.

Flidais chuckled and turned to Kalliope. "Well, let's go get that hunk of yours so I can get back to mine. Did you know Hephaestus wanted me to be his queen? God, he hasn't changed since the old days!"

"You knew Hephaestus in the old days?" Kalliope asked when she arrived at the entrance of the room.

"Oh yeah. We used to date before Dagda decided to take over my throne and all. Heph could never get over the fact I just didn't see anything in him. He was always going on about every other god hated him because his mother threw him off Mount Olympus and since that moment he was ugly. You know how sick of whining I get?"

"So, he kidnapped you so you would be his queen after he got Excalibur and killed All Hail? Sounds like a great guy."

Flidais shrugged. "I was young. I was rebellious. My father hated that I ran with the Olympians, especially Hephaestus. He was such a bad boy and those muscles. I never cared what he looked like, but he never believed me and thought I started seeing Dagda because of his looks. He thought I should have never given my throne away without a fight. I never thought he would do this. But living with Aphrodite could do that to a god after a few millennia." The

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goddess gave Kalliope a hug. “Let’s go get Lugh and set those poor people free.”

Kalliope nodded. She liked the sound of that.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Kalliope cleared her mind. It was easier than before because she just wanted to be in Lugh's arms and make the nightmare go away. She wanted his kisses trailing along her neck, his fingers rubbing the stress out of her muscles. She wanted all of him inside her with his power flaring over hers so she could see the ends of the universe in her mind. Once she thought of him, there was a tugging deep inside her. In her mind's eye, she saw the same hall where he was being kept. He must have sensed her presence because he looked up.

Kalliope.

She took a deep breath and followed the link that vibrated between them. Power moved over her. She gasped at the warmth and emotion that she got from him. His heart was open to her. All she had to do was look into it. She had been so worried about what he would think from those stolen and accidental kisses with Apollo, Zeus, and David. There was no resentment in him. Kalliope sensed he knew she did

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what she had to do in order to get back to him and to save the world. All he wanted was to get out of the chains so he could hold her.

When she opened her eyes, she was in back in Hephaestus's great hall. She only had a little time left before Hephaestus sensed her. Flidais was right next to her when she felt the comforting presences. The hall was still slightly dark and illuminated by the flaming torches. She drew Excalibur. The sword knew they needed discretion so it did not glow. Kalliope started toward the first pillar that held the CEOs. They were all bound by the same chains that were used to hold Kalliope and Flidais. At least they were only bound one time around. Why would they need to be bound any tighter when they were only human and had no magick? Kalliope hoped that she had enough time. All the mortal fast food presidents were slumped over unconscious.

“Are you ready to do this?” whispered Flidais.

She looked over and saw that the goddess was also dressed in battle gear. “Thank you.” The goddess nodded and she brought down Excalibur. This time she did not hesitate on striking, knowing the sword would not miss and would slice through the otherworldly forged metal. With the first swing, the sword sang. She was amazed at how much power it contained. It surged up her arm, sending shivers through her very soul. It strengthened her. The sword also wanted to

free the mortals. That was what the sword was supposed to be used for in the first place. It was a protector of mankind and defended people. It had been out of the mortal world for so long, that it had almost forgotten what it was made for. It had gotten lazy until she knocked it from above the mantle where it was a showpiece. It had longed for combat. Kalliope was right when she thought that it was made of some otherworld magickally artificial intelligence. It truly was otherworldly and made by the oldest gods that none of the new ones knew where it had come from and they were old. The sword had been forged in the fires of stars and given to humankind eons before Arthur had ever gotten to it. It was called upon by those that needed defending. It had wanted to protect her. Her mind fused with the blade on a deeper level than she knew. It was not telling her all of its secrets.

Kalliope moved to her third pillar slowly making her way to Lugh. She wanted to get to Lugh to free him and feel his warmth blending with hers. Her heart missed his touch. The sword came down on her sixth column. She was amazed that her arm was not getting tired. Maybe it was the adrenaline. Maybe her magick was keeping her going. Whatever it was, she was going to feel it in the morning. She kept her eyes on the large fire in the background. It was staying steady. With each chain she got, her time was growing short. Silently she prayed that Hephaestus would not sense

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her, but she knew it was inevitable. Behind her Flidais was freeing the chains from the humans. Kalliope didn't wait to see her wake them from their sleep and see her guide them to the back.

She was almost done. Only a dozen or so pillars left to go. Excalibur was cutting through the metal. Each time it came down separating the chains, the sword got happier. The song it sung got a little louder. To her ears it was the hum of hummingbird wings. To her mind, the sword's voice was filled with emotions that flashed colors in her thoughts. Each time she was happy about freeing more people and getting closer to Lugh, the more that the sword remembered battles, war, and how Arthur tried to unite a kingdom ages ago. Flashes of old battles moved through her mind. The sound of horses' thundering hooves and the smell of scorched earth where homes and woods were burnt. The sorrow that came along with death. She pushed all that aside and silently told the sword to worry about the task at hand and not the events of the past. She had to be thinking she would succeed. By her standards, the oath she had sworn was done and over with. Dagda could turn her into a platypus if he wanted to, but she was not doing any other favors for the gods no matter how much he threatened her. But she doubted that she would have to. Somehow she figured this was the last of her oath.

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Kalliope stood before Nas. All of the fast food owners and presidents were free. She looked down the hall and saw the throngs of middle-aged men with bad comb overs staring at each other in a daze. She saw Flidais near the end gathering them into the shadows so they could escape before Hephaestus returned. The goddess caught her eye and nodded. She brought Excalibur down on the triple chains that bound Nas. It took a couple of swings before the sword melted the links. When the chains fell away, Nas opened her eyes. They were glazed, but cleared and a smile broke out on her face.

“You rescued me.”

“Oh course, I did. Did you really think I was going to let you rot in a place like this? Besides the heat in here is murder for your hair and your skin. You really have to do something about that.”

Nas gave her a quick hug. She was so surprised she didn't know what to do, but after a moment she returned the gesture and then let her go. “What can I do to help?”

“Um...Can you help Flidais with the other prisoners? I need them to get back to their homes safely without any memory of what happened. Can you make something up to plant in their brain and those of their families?”

“That's all? I mean it's nothing, but yeah. Okay.” Nas walked off. Kalliope watched in astonishment while the

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goddess sweet talked the men who were ogling her chest more than anything else and got them to walk back to where the others were. She hoped that Nas would play nice with Flidais. Hopefully the two could bury the hatchet for a little while.

She went to Lugh. He stood patiently against the pillar, bound with chains. It appeared that Hephaestus hadn't decided to torture him anymore because he was back to. When he came closer a smile spread on his face that made her melt. "It took you long enough to get back here. I was starting to get worried."

Kalliope chuckled. He had a sense of humor even when they were facing danger. "Well I could have just left you, but I decided you were good for something so I had to come back and get you." She stretched up on tip toe and pressed her lips to his.

She only meant to give him a quick kiss, but her body molded to his just the way it was supposed to. His hard member pressed against her thigh, having a mind of its own. Her body heat rose from the kiss. He slipped in a little tongue that traced her lips. Her free hand caressed the side of his cheek. Something felt a little different about it. There was more skin than there should have been and it was rough. The heat in her body cooled, but the heat around her did not dissipate. It only grew hotter. The dry heat of a fire rose,

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almost consuming her and making it so hard to breathe that she had to pull away. Before she could escape, arms grabbed hers causing her to open her eyes.

When she did, she realized that she wasn't kissing Lugh. It was Hephaestus. Kalliope pulled away the best she could. The god chuckled to himself. She tried to free her arms, but his grip was viselike. This time he wasn't burning her, but his hands were grinding the bones of her wrists together. Pain shot up her arm. She tried to fight his hold.

"It's no use, little witch. I'm ten times stronger than you. Did you really think I didn't know your plan about coming back here and freeing the mortals the Furies brought here? I'm not stupid. It was so easy to trick you. The look on your face when you thought I was your beloved Lugh. Now that was priceless. Be a dear and give me Excalibur. I don't want to hurt you. Well, that's not true. I really do want to hurt you."

"Go to hell!" Kalliope cried.

The fire god smiled. In response he squeezed harder on her wrist. Hot, blinding pain raced up her arm. She screamed and dropped the sword. Hephaestus threw her away from him so that she landed on the floor cradling her broken wrist to her body. Hot tears moved down her cheek. Through blurred vision she watched Hephaestus bend down and lunge for the sword. He must not get it. In that second,

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she remembered what Morgaine had showed her. She pulled her power around her and stretched out her uninjured hand. She called it to her. Before Hephaestus could close his fingers on it, the sword skittered along the floor out of his reach, closer to her. The god looked up.

“Your silly tricks won’t work with me. I can do more things to you than break your wrist or leave my mark on your flesh. I can make it so your pretty face won’t be recognizable to the one that you love.”

Kalliope summoned the sword closer to her. The pain in her wrist throbbed. Using her magick was making the agony worse. Her magick was diverted so it couldn’t help her heal. Excalibur glowed violet. Even without the sword being in her hand, it was still connected to her mind. It was panicking. It did not want to be the instrument of death that Hephaestus wanted it to be. It understood that death was sometime unavoidable for peace, but what the god wanted was irrational. It wanted to be back in her hands again. She wanted that too, but her power was faltering. The pain was overwhelming her mind. Her magick wasn’t reaching the sword.

Hephaestus grinned. He took a few more strides and claimed the sword for his own. The blade went from purple, to red, to a black glow. The connection between the sword and Kalliope flared to life for a split second and then died.

Through the bond she saw the blackness that was Hephaestus's mind. He was mad.

“Tsk. Tsk. Poor little witch. The talk of the astral realm. Everyone had such high hopes for you. Even me. Beneath those taunting lashes of yours there is fire in your eyes. I hoped you would have gotten over Sun Boy. I could have waited for you, kept you around for a pet. Something to fuck when I was bored, but I see you're too much of a trouble maker. It's a shame really.”

Hephaestus raised Excalibur. Kalliope closed her eyes. *Lugh, I'm sorry. I thought I could save you. But I don't know where you are. I love you. Know that.* She waited for the killing blow. Instead, a current of love bathed her. Lugh was nearby. It was the only reason she could have felt him. Their bond had not led her astray. Hephaestus had only moved him somewhere else.

“Hephaestus, leave her alone.” Kalliope opened her eyes. The sword was inches from her throat. Flidais was a few feet away.

“My, my. The witch actually found you. I'm impressed.” The sword stayed where it was.

“Hephaestus. I said let her go,” Flidais demanded.

Kalliope noticed movement behind Hephaestus.

“What are you going to do to me, Flidais? What can you do? With this sword, I can rule the world. I've given you

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that chance. Come and sit by my side. Be my queen and we can rule the Universe and all the worlds in it. All beings will know us to be their gods. What do you say?”

Flidais took a step closer. The metal of the blade dug into her skin. The goddess stopped. “I say you don’t know what you’re saying. All Hail won’t let you take over his throne. Do you really think you can take out all of us, all his guardian angels, and then him?”

Kalliope saw more movement. It was Nas. She was close.

“I’m not worried about those feathered freaks! And I don’t have to kill everyone. Once they know I have Excalibur, they will bow at my feet or I’ll take their heads. Sooner or later the other gods will value their existences and move aside. I—” Hephaestus twisted away from Kalliope quickly bringing Excalibur away from her neck and down by his right side under his arm, jabbing at what was behind him.

Kalliope screamed. “No!”

The blade impaled the goddess in the stomach in once slice. Hephaestus drew it out of her flesh. The goddess’s robes were stained red. Nas crumpled to the floor and lay there struggling for breath while her life leaked onto the floor. “You dare try and trick me! Flidais, you should know better. I thought you might understand how I feel, but I see you’re just like the rest of them.” The fire god sighed.

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Kalliope sensed the goddess was trying to buy her some time. *Think Kalli. You got out of a vine prison. You had an ass leave you for tits with legs. You can do this!* Fear tried to rule her brain along with the pain in her wrist, but she found that was manageable. She had to get the sword away from Hephaestus and get Lugh out of his chains. But how? What would a fire god fear? Water. Why hadn't she thought of it before? *Because all you could think about was your hormones and having a long bout of great sex after this was all over.*

She closed her eyes and focused. She had to pull whatever power she had left in her to get what she needed to done. Her inner vision came alive. She could see everything in the hall and sense the presences of all those that were there. The fast food owners weren't all out of the place, and they were still too freaked and confused to know what was going on. They were all playing it safe and staying in the shadows. Kalliope let her thoughts brush over Flidais to Hephaestus. The heat blazing off him was amazing and radiated in her inner view like a mini sun. From the aura that he gave off, she saw something she had never seen before. It looked like a rope made of fire attached to his aura that led back to his forge. His forge was the source of his power. *No wonder he keeps it so hot in here. If he lets it drop down then so does his power.*

With all her strength she thought about water raining down over the fire. She wanted a torrential waterfall over the

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flames. Her body temperature dipped. Trying not to move, she ignored the conversation that was going on between Flidais and Hephaestus. Kalliope poured all of her strength into picturing the waterfall and barely felt the metal sting slice her flesh and wetness on her skin. She was the water dowsing the flames. She was the steam coming off the fire. It was almost orgasmic. Her breathing was shallow and came in pants. Her whole body tensed. Her nipples were hard and strained against her leather bodice. Everything in her ached for release. With one thought she let go.

In her mind, she saw the water pour onto the flames. Torrents of steam rose off the forge's flames and plunged the room into darkness. Her eyes opened when Hephaestus screamed.

She was aware of herself. Her head swam. Her wrist throbbed again, but Hephaestus was hurt. Excalibur was on the floor next to her foot where he had dropped it. Its blade was dull. She grabbed a hold of it. The connection between her and the sword was restored. The water over the flames was dissipating because she had stopped concentrating on it. She had to hurry. She got to her feet, took a breath, and felt the link between her and Lugh. Kalliope swallowed. She was parched. The room was full of steam and she could barely see where she was going. A few pillars away, she found Lugh.

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She brought Excalibur over her head with her unwounded left hand and came down on the chains. The sword did nothing, but bounced off them.

You've got to be kidding. Come on! She tried again, but still nothing. She cried out in frustration. The forge fire was starting to flare back to life. Hephaestus would soon be on her. She took a deep breath and had an idea. She lifted the sword and tried to slide it between the pillar and the chain. It took a moment, but the sword began to glow red again. The heavier chain links started to melt. The top link melted.

“I’m impressed.”

Kalliope spun around. There was Hephaestus. One side of his face and some of his body was badly burned. His flesh was raw and red. Some of it was already healing. She pulled the sword through the links and heard a snap. The rest of the chains fell to the floor.

“Give me the sword, witch! Or I promise whatever suffering I was going to inflict on you will be nothing when you have an eternity to suffer. You might be human, but there are ways to fix that. Now give me the sword!” Hephaestus demanded with an outstretched hand. Kalliope swung and brought the blade down on his hand. Hephaestus screamed. The blade severed his flesh. His hand dropped uselessly to the floor. He clutched his injured wrist to chest. It gave Kalliope enough time to pull the chains away from

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Lugh's flesh with her foot. There was no way she was going to give up her hold on Excalibur again. When the chains were away from Lugh, his eyes snapped open.

"What did I miss?" he asked. He was about to smile when he saw Kalliope holding her wrist and the wound on her neck. "What happened?"

"I'll get you, witch! No one hurts me and lives." Hephaestus charged at them. On instinct Kalliope pushed out of the way. She stumbled into the path of Hephaestus. He impaled himself onto Excalibur. The force of him knocked her down and the sword came out of his back buried to the hilt. Kalliope fell hard onto the floor and hit her head the stone. The breath was knocked out of her and she blacked out.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Hey.”

Kalliope blinked when she came to. Lugh cradled her.

“Hi.” She tried to sit up. Everything in her hurt. She remembered what had happened. She thought for a wonderful second it was a bad dream. A very bad dream Lugh was going to be the one to wake her up. When her gaze swept the room she realized everything she had experienced was true. Hephaestus’s body was a few feet away, but there was no sword. “Where’s Excalibur?” panic shot through her.

“Calm down. The sword is fine. It’s right by your side.”

Thank God. “Oh no, Nas.” Kalliope tried to get up, but Lugh had to help her. She was a little dizzy. The arm she grabbed was not smooth, but scratchy. He was wearing clothes. Why didn’t she notice that before?

Because I wasn’t wearing any. He chuckled in her mind. She walked over to the fallen goddess. Her once tan skin was now pale and growing gray. Her black hair was bone white

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and brittle. Her veins were blackened from poisoning. A thin trickle of blood escaped the corner of her mouth. Kalliope knelt next to her. Lugh smiled at his ex-lover and he knelt down beside her as well. He brushed a stray hair away from her face. Kalliope noticed the light in her eyes fading.

“You did it, Kalli.”

Tears pooled in her eyes. Kalliope took Nas’s hand and squeezed it. “Yeah, we did.”

Nas didn’t return the gesture, but shifted her gaze to Lugh. “Take care of her. She is one of a kind. Don’t let anything tear you two apart. You were meant for one another. Don’t—” A spasm of pain rippled through her. Her eyes closed against the pain.

“Shh. Nass. I will.” Lugh kissed her cheek. Kalliope saw the tears glistening in his eyes too. She wondered if he had ever lost anyone that he cared about before. Gods were eternal.

Nas shouldn’t have to die. Yeah, she had been a bitch to me in the past. But all that is forgotten. She truly wanted to be my friend. I can’t let her fade away into nothingness. Kalliope felt a surge of power in her that didn’t feel like her own. A sense of intense warmth burned in her chest. She sensed that it was not from her. She remembered that Apollo had given her a parting gift when he had been hit with one of Cupid’s arrows. She had forgotten all about it. He had given her a piece of his power.

It was stronger than her, and hopefully it would be enough. She closed her eyes and focused on that power. Suddenly, she felt like she was under the sun on a hot day in one hundred degree weather. Even that little power of the god was so intense she could barely hold onto it, let alone channel it. But she had to try. She let go of Nas's hand and placed it over the wound from Excalibur. The intensity built inside of her. She even tried to call upon her own power to help, but it was impossible. The magnitude of the energy she had to focus even tingling in her broken wrist trying to mend her own bones. She felt the sun shine down on her and then enfold her in its light. Everything she saw was bright white and yellow. With the sheer force of her will, she funneled the energy down her arm and into the goddess. Once the energy left her, she opened her eyes. Nas was surrounded by a golden glow. Then the glow faded, leaving only the glow where her wound was. When it was completely gone, Kalliope sat back on her heels feeling drained. Nas was healed.

“What did you do?” the goddess asked. No god could have done that!”

Both Flidais and Lugh looked at Kalliope, shocked. She stood up slowly using her wounded hand to support her weight. It was only when she did, that she realized that she had also healed herself.

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“I’m not sure really. When Apollo was under the spell of Cupid’s arrow, he gave me a piece of his power and told me to use it when I needed it. I guess I needed it. I couldn’t just let you die.”

Nas slammed into Kalliope and wrapped her arms around her in a tight hug. “Thank you.”

“It’s a miracle,” whispered Flidais.

Kalliope turned to the other goddess. “Aren’t you used to those being a goddess and all?”

Lugh took Kalliope in his arms. “Love. You don’t understand. Any wound from Excalibur is permanent. None of the gods have the power to heal themselves from a wound sustained by the sword. Even that cut I gave Cromm when I fought him would have healed human slow. Hephaestus would never have been able to grow his hand back. The sword is even older than us. What you did was amazing.”

“But it wasn’t my power that healed Nas.”

Lugh smiled. “It might not have been all of your power, but it was your intent. It was your compassion that healed her. Only that combined with the power Apollo gave you made it possible for Nas to be alive.”

“Kalliope, from now on I swear that whatever tries to harm you I’ll help defend you. No matter what,” Nas said solemnly. The goddess took off one of the silver rings on her thumb and slipped it on her finger.

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The ring had fine lettering engraved on it. When she tugged on it she found that it wasn't coming off. "Promise not to turn me into a bush or any other kind of fauna. Deal?"

All the gods laughed. "Deal."

"Great. Well now that Hephaestus is dead, the Furies are back in the Underworld, Flidais is free, and Zeus is head honcho again, I say we get the businessmen home without any memories of what happened. That will make everything right in the world, and All Hail won't rain down fire and brimstone on me."

Lugh pulled her close to him and nuzzled her neck, licking her ear before locking his lips to hers. Once their silky sweetness met hers, she melted. Everything she had been through was worth it—almost worth it—to have him back in her life at this wonderful moment. She wanted to stay in his arms forever. Their bodies were meant to be together. She felt him straining through his leather pants. Her nipples hardened at the thought of him. His tongue met hers. At that spark, Kalliope was wet and wanted nothing more than for him to take her home and slide into her moist depths.

"Get a room!" Flidais laughed.

Kalliope unlocked her lips from Lugh and stuck her tongue out at the goddess. "Didn't we originally have a room before all this began?"

Lugh laughed. "Yes, I think we did."

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“Nas, come on. Let’s get the mortals back to their realm and wipe their memory.”

The other goddess looked at Lugh and Kalliope for a long moment. She could tell that deep down Nas still loved the god, but she was not going to say anything about it. “I meant what I said. Take care of her.”

Lugh smiled and nodded. Nas turned and went after Flidais to herd the businessmen. Kalliope wondered exactly they were going to do to them. As they left, a big sigh escaped her lips. Finally, she was free of saving the world. All Hail would have to know she had done what she set out to do.

“So it’s just you and me now. Hopefully there won’t be any more interruptions. Oh, Kalli, I missed you so much. Excalibur certainly has a way of choosing appealing outfits.”

Kalliope blushed. “Don’t tell me you like the warrior princess thing...”

Lugh ran his hand over the leather bodice to the swell of her breasts. Even through the material she felt their energy spark against one another like an exploding rainstorm. Her whole body yearned for him. Where was a bed when you needed one?

I can solve that problem.

The energy gathered around them. Lugh was going to take them someplace else, but his momentum was stalled.

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The witch sensed something had thrown his power off. At the same time, a puff of air whizzed by her shoulder and cut her aura. When she looked up, she saw a golden arrow vibrating from landing in a nearby pillar. Lugh went into battle mode. His demeanor hardened. He spun her around so she would be protected. Kalliope heard another arrow whistle by her. This one grazed her arm.

“Apollo! Enough! Show yourself!” Lugh’s voice echoed in the hall.

Kalliope moved out from behind Lugh and drew Excalibur. The only thing that answered was Apollo’s laugh. It bounced off the pillars. The fires blazed. The other sun god stepped out from behind one of the pillars. She barely recognized him. His blonde hair was now black. His eyes held such hatred and amusement they could have been laser beams and burned through anything.

“Why Lugh, it is such a relief your plaything saved the world. What would we have done if she had not killed Hephaestus and rescued us all from his wrath?” He stood before them both with his bow and a quiver full of Cupid’s arrows slung on his back.

“Apollo, why are you doing this? Why did you align yourself with Hephaestus and cause all of this grief? Zeus will punish you once he catches you.”

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“Why am I doing this? That is a loaded question. Don’t you remember Calliope? She was *mine*. You stole her from me and then you threw her away! I went to console her, but she cast me aside. She was the only woman I loved.”

Kalliope looked between the two men. The once friends were now enemies. The hatred she felt coming off Apollo was amazing. What he had told her when he was under the spell of Cupid’s arrow was true. He had loved the muse.

“Apollo, that was ages ago. I was young. I didn’t know how much you cared for her. Now put down the bow. Tell Zeus you screwed up. I’m sure he’ll forgive you even after a hundred years.”

“Lugh, you’re such a fool. Zeus will strike me down for betraying him.”

“Then why do this now?” Kalliope asked.

The sun god smiled. “Because I want him to feel the same loss that I did.” Kalliope heard the hum of the bowstring vibrating from the arrow’s release. Before it stopped, a pain entered her chest. Excalibur clattered to the floor. The pain was so intense she didn’t even hear the cry slip from her lips.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Kalli.” She opened her eyes. Everything was bright, but she could make out shapes and forms. Two people were bending over her. She focused on the voice. It sounded familiar. When her eyes adjusted she realized that one form above her looked like her.

A fuzzy memory came to the front of her brain.
“Mom?”

“Yes, sweetie.” Her mother had the same red hair, but instead of dark eyes had green ones. Her mother helped her up and wrapped her arms around her into a hug. Kalliope wasn’t sure what to do and then, after a moment, returned the gesture. Her mother had always smelled of lilies and still did.

She let herself out of the hug and then studied her father. He was the way she remembered him too. Shorter than her mom with blond hair and blue eyes. Laugh lines had

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just started appearing around his eyes. His hair was a little shaggy. “Daddy?”

Her father nodded. “It’s us, Kalli-girl.”

Then it dawned on her what had happened. All of her resolve went out of her. Even though she was with her parents she realized what she had lost. She stepped away from her mother. Her heart sunk. She would never see Lugh again. She wouldn’t see Theresa and her twins. Adele and crazy Anna—she would never know how their trip was. But that was not the worst part. She would never feel Lugh’s arms around her again. Never be with him or hear his voice. Even though he was a god, he couldn’t come here to see her. Maybe if she turned into an angel. Was that possible?

“Mommie!” Tears fell.

“Honey. No. It’s not what you think.”

Kalliope looked up from her mom’s shoulder. She wiped her eyes and sniffled. “What do you mean? You’re dead so that only means one thing. I’m dead too.”

“It’s true. Yes, you’re dead, but it’s not your time,” her father consoled her.

“Then why?” Kalliope stopped crying. She noticed she was in a great white light floating and there was something behind her parents. A large garden. From that garden, she got a sense of peace and it would be nice to go there. “Is that Summerland?”

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“Yes. But it’s not your time to go there. You have to go back. You’re needed back on Earth. And there is much ahead of you.”

“Oh sweetie. It was wonderful to see you. Know we’re always watching out for you.” Her father gave her a hug.

“I don’t want to leave you now. I can’t.” Kalliope felt torn between leaving her parents and leaving Lugh behind. Part of her felt the tug of the garden and another part felt such loss for her old life that she didn’t know where she was supposed to go.

“Listen to your heart, sweetie. That is the only thing that can send you back. It’s your decision,” Her mom said. Kalliope was amazed to stare at herself in her mother’s face. She never realized how much she had looked like her. It had been so long since she had thought about her parents. But with her mother’s words she felt a tug and something calling her. Her hand went over her heart where the arrow had pierced her chest. The pain was overwhelming. She pushed past the agony. Lugh was calling her. Her heart surged forward. She looked at the garden behind her parents. If she wanted, she could follow them there and exist on another plane. But that wasn’t what she desired. She craved Lugh to hold her in his arms. She wanted to feel his lips against hers.

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He had put everything on the line for her and now it was time that she go back to him.

She took one last look at her parents and saw tears in her mother's eyes. Her father looked on her with a proud, but sorrow filled his expression. They wanted her to stay, but she also knew that wanted her to be happy. She smiled at her mom and saw her wave. Kalliope returned the gesture and then turned around and walked away from the garden.

She tried to breathe. All she could do was manage short pants. Her head swam from the effort. She tried to open her eyes and finally succeeded on the second attempt. When she did, she saw blond hair the color of spun wheat resting on her chest. Lugh's arms were around her, trying to keep her safe.

"You have to come back to me," she heard him whisper.

All you had to do was ask, she thought knowing he would hear her.

Lugh looked up. There were tears in his eyes. His hands were covered in blood. Her blood she assumed. It covered his chest from where he had been holding her to him. She wasn't in Hephaestus's hall anymore, but she was somewhere that smelled of roses. She was on a bed with vines and flowers hanging down from the rails.

"You came back."

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Kalliope smiled. It was so strange to see her lover so vulnerable. The expression on his face was purely human. Hurt and loss had been etched into his features, making him look older.

“Of course I came back. I love you too much not to.” She tried to sit up. She drew in a breath through her teeth to block out the pain, but even trying to concentrate on it was tiring. “Remind me never to get shot with an arrow again.”

Lugh laughed. “I’ll warn you next time. Here, Kalliope. Did you mean what you said about loving me?”

Kalliope tried to move again to touch his face, but it was too much of an effort. She knew the god could read her thoughts. All her love for him built in her soul. She tried not to sob over the magnitude of it. “You know it is.”

“Then you wish to be healed. I could only heal you enough to bring you back. To make sure it was what you wanted. You want to be with me?”

“Of course I want to be with you. I came back from the dead, didn’t I? Please heal me, Lugh.”

The god placed his hand over her chest. Warmth hovered over the wound. Kalliope wondered why the god was not using his power, but holding off. *What is the matter?*

If I do this, there could be consequences. His brow knitted in worry.

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What kind of consequences? Kalliope asked. She wondered if she would start to sprout leaves or bark.

I promise you won't turn into any kind of fauna. But with all that you've been through, and been around me and the other gods, along with staying so much in the astral realm and being hurt, my healing you would alter your body's chemistry. You wouldn't be exactly human anymore.

What do you mean? Kalliope tried to hold back the panic that was swirling through her mind, but there was no way she could suppress it. It had been mentioned to her before that spending time around the other gods in their realm would change her a little bit.

“I mean, love, that part of you will be human, but I don't know how much more powerful you'll become. I don't know if by healing your fatal wound if you will find it easy to stay in your realm. Almost like a frog. They can live in the water and out of it, but their home is in the water. You might find that you are more like me.”

Are you saying that I'll become a god too? Or a demi god?

Lugh shook his head. “I don't know. This is what you are and what you've done has never happened before. I can't say what will happen.”

Kalliope fought off the panic. Flidais had told her once that she was destined for greatness. Whatever that meant while she tried to juggle her crazy life. But if it meant

that she changed part of the very being that she was to be with the man that she loved, then so be it.

“Do it.”

He let go of the floodgates on his power and let them wash over Kalliope. In all of a second, the pain she felt increased in her chest. Healing wasn't supposed to hurt like this. *I'm sorry, love. I can't spare you the pain. This is my power. The raw essence of it must heal you and in doing so, change you. It will only last a minute. I promise.*

Kalliope didn't answer. Her insides were being split apart and remolded. She felt her skin fusing together where the arrow had been. In her mind she saw herself ignited with the same golden glow that she had seen around Nas when she had healed the goddess. Now it was over her heart fixing all the tears, but it was also doing more than just that. Lugh had been right in saying his power remade her in some way. Whatever imperfection she had was no longer there. Even the handprint Hephaestus had left on her was gone. But it went beyond that. Through her tie to her coven sisters, she felt the power also spill over into them. All of them stopped what they were doing. The power in them was nowhere as intense, but it did something to them. It made them more aware of things. It opened their chakras and connected them more with all the elements. It felt to Kalliope as if they had eaten a couple of the Oak Apples so they were now magickal, not to

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the extent that she was, but they could do things that others would dream about. Maybe Theresa would be able to turn Stan into a frog now.

In the instant Lugh's power ceased, Kalliope came back to herself. Her heart beat and she was breathing. The pain was all gone.

“Thank you.”

He smiled at her. “You are most welcome. Kalli—”

She didn't wait to hear his answer. She sat up and locked her lips to his. Caught by surprise he was thrown off balance and landed on his back on the bed. She straddled him and stared into his deep green eyes. Her hands traced his pecs, feeling the wonderful hardness of them under her fingertips. His leather pants creaked when he moved. Her warrior princess garb was getting on her nerves. She desperately wanted to be naked with him. On impulse she snapped her fingers and felt cold air. Lugh gave her a devilish grin because she had accomplished what she wanted on the first try. That was a new thing. She could certainly get used to whatever new power she had. Not that she'd gotten used to the other things she could do at first. The girls were definitely going to be wondering what had happened. She put them out of her mind. She scooted off Lugh and nestled her head between his legs. His member was hard and ready for her. She cupped his scrotum in one hand while holding him

steady with the other. Her tongue sought his silky shaft. She licked him up and down and around the head. Her tongue traced the engorged vein of his penis until she came to the tip where her mouth encircled his large shaft.

Lugh bucked a little going deeper into her mouth until he hit the back of her throat. He let out a moan of pure pleasure that sounded like he was eating cheesecake. Kalliope chanced a look at his face. His eyes were shut. His face hardened in concentration. He fought the urge to give in to her manipulations. His fists clenched the bed. She smiled inwardly. Her mouth worked up and down on his shaft, sucking on him slowly while circling her tongue around his hard member. She alternated between fast and slow. It was fun to tease and torture him. She had wanted to do this for so very long.

Do you know what you're doing to me?

Her tongue flicked over the sensitive head, tasting his saltiness. He was so close. Kalliope let her mouth enclose him once more, using the suction of her mouth and the movements of her tongue to show him that she was doing this to him deliberately.

You are truly wicked.

Paybacks a witch. She smiled. With one more long, slow lick she released his shaft and straddled him once again. He slid into her moist depths. It had been way too long since

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she'd had this. And to think that she had been dead and would never have experienced this again if she had chosen to stay with her parents. *What was I thinking?*

But she couldn't finish her thought Lugh caught her off guard and turned the tables on her. She found herself doing a somersault. Then she was the one on her back with him looking down at her. His devilish smile greeted her. The fire in his eyes told a different story.

Hey! You did that on purpose.

Oh yeah. Do you really think I was going to let you have all the fun?

His lips pressed to hers in a slow lingering kiss. His tongue explored her mouth and then tickled her lips. Lugh moved a little, impaling himself deep inside her. Kalliope's back arched. She groaned. One free hand cupped her breast while the other slid under her, clutching her derriere. His mouth went to work on her other breast. The nipples hardened instantly while he teased her with his fingers and his teeth. His tongue traced the rough ridges of her areola. His thumb and forefinger squeezed the other nipple until it throbbed. Her hips bucked underneath Lugh, meeting his own flesh. He suckled her breast lightly and then bit down, causing pain and pleasure to rewire her brain until Kalliope didn't know where she was anymore. She was just lost in the haze of what he was doing to her.

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He wasn't using his power. With one touch, he could ignite her energy points and bring her out of this world. He lifted his head from her right breast and stared into her eyes. Kalliope felt the connection between them. It was more than the physical connection, or one of power, they were tied at the soul. *Is it possible for a god to have a soul?*

But instead of answering her question, Lugh pulled himself out of her slowly and entered just as slow. She was so slick it felt like he was racing. The agony of it was beyond her. Her hips lifted more. Her muscles clenched. She didn't know how long she could last. She needed him and he was being gentle. But she didn't want that. She needed to know he was there, to feel all of him inside of her while she came. The need to call his name tugged on her lips. For now all she could manage was pants and low groans. He was doing this on purpose, prolonging the moment. Payback was certainly a bitch.

Right when she was about to come, he lifted her up and buried himself inside of her. He moved faster, pumping into her, clutching her derriere while he lifted her. Their gazes were locked. She wrapped her arms around his neck to make sure she was still on the same planet he was. Then with one final thrust. They both came together.

“Oh God, Lugh!” she screamed.

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“Kalliope,” he groaned. He kissed her lightly on the lips, still snugly inside of her. But he lowered her back down to the bed. She was starting to be aware of her surroundings again. When she settled onto the bed, he pulled out of her, slid into the spot beside her, and propped himself up on his elbow to look down at her.

“You are amazing.”

Kalliope blushed. “You’re not half bad yourself.”

Lugh chuckled, but then his expression grew serious. “Kalliope, I love you. You know that. And with all that has happened. I think that we need some time to adjust.”

She bolted up in bed. “We have magnificent sex and you want to break up with me. Great. Just my luck!”

“What? No!”

“Then what do you mean? You say that you love me, but now you want to leave me?”

“I don’t want to leave you, but by healing you things have become complicated. I need to find a way of sorting them out. I don’t want you to be harmed. I think you need to adjust to life back in your own world. Your friends are going to be wondering what happened to you. Your body needs time to figure out all the changes. And you have the candle shop opening soon. Please. It won’t be for a long time. I promise.”

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Kalliope listened to what Lugh had said. It made sense. She did have a lot of things on her plate back home. But she didn't want to give him up. At least not right away. Still, she had to get back to her real life. The shop was going to open soon and she had to be sure that All Hail was fine with the way things turned out. Besides she had promised Theresa she would bring something otherworldly for the twins. Now she just had to think of what.

She sighed. "I know you're right. And I understand and agree with you. Bu—"

Lugh's expression turned to concern. "But what?"

"Can't we have another go at it before you boot my butt back to Earth? I have no idea how long I'm going to be without you and penis shaped oranges can only hold me over for so long."

Lugh's expression melted into a wonderful smile that warmed Kalliope's heart. "I'll have to leave you a big supply of oranges then. But for now you'll just have to make do with the real thing."

EPILOGUE

“Chase, how many times do I have to tell you I want to pay you?” Kalliope glanced at the clock, knowing she had to go or she was going to be late for the Wiccaning for Sharren and Diana, Theresa’s twins and her goddaughters. It wasn’t her fault Chase wasn’t accepting any money for the shop. It was bad enough now that he was talking about selling her the place on a rent to own basis. That was all she needed.

“Look, Kalli—”

“No, Chase. We’ll talk about it later. I really gotta go. I’m going to be late.” She didn’t wait to hear his response. She hung up the phone. She scanned the shop. There were shelves of different scented candles, bath oils, and soaps. A small corner was dedicated to crystals, Tarot cards, incense and other new agey stuff. But it was all hers. She thought of what she had accomplished. Saving the world a couple of months ago had boosted her spirits and made her business soar. For some reason people were coming out of the

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woodwork to buy things. She was making candles almost every night so she wouldn't have a shortage. Flidais was back in the other realm with Dagda since he had given her the last two Oak Apples she needed to be a full goddess again. Of course, Dagda hadn't told anyone what they had said when he had awakened the goddess and he had threatened her by turning her into a platypus if she mentioned it to everyone. Kalliope knew that he would do no such thing.

She shook her head when she thought of the goddess because it only made her think of Lugh. That night after he had brought her back from the dead and they had wild unbelievable sex, he had deposited her back at her apartment and then disappeared. Now whenever she thought about it, penis shaped oranges appeared. Like she had said, they were not as good as the real thing. She laughed when one appeared on her counter by the phone. But she couldn't stay and think about them. She sensed Theresa's impatience through the bond that all four of them now shared.

By healing her, Lugh had really transformed her. The power had spilled over into the coven and linked her sisters to her. Now they were learning to deal with their new abilities like thinking of something and having it appearing. She was now their teacher. The first circle that had done together had burned a ring in her ceiling. Since then they had done their circles outside. Kalliope had been pleased when she was able

to bring them all to the grove she had first called Lugh in. They were handling it. She was dealing with the being different too. Everything was more intense. Sometimes she got overwhelmed when there were a lot of people in her shop and she had to escape to the other realm. She wanted to now, but Theresa was waiting for her.

Kalliope pictured what she wanted to wear. She thought about her priestess garb. So she was dressed in a white shift, the silver pentacle at her throat, and the snake bracelets on her upper right arm. Her hair was still black from having Excalibur. It seemed to prefer it that way. She had tried giving the sword back to Morgaine, but when she left it above the mantle it appeared back on her bed. So, she gave up. Right now the sword was at her apartment.

“Oh ribbitt—” Humphrey said. She glanced at her familiar. He was decked out in a tux.

“You ready to go, Humphrey?”

“Anything for you, baby.” The frog unfurled his white, feathery wings and flew over to her. She thought about going to the grove. When she passed through the door of her shop, she emerged in the oak grove. Her coven sisters were there. Theresa held Diana and Adele had Sharren. Morgaine stood before them as priestess. The babies cooed at the fairies fluttering around.

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Kalliope put her hands out to take Sharren. Adele handed over the baby. Out of the shadows appeared Flidais and a bicorn behind her. It was the one that has saved Humphrey. The bicorn bowed to all of them.

“You made it!” Theresa exclaimed. “What are these bothersome creatures?” she asked while she swatted them away. The fairies tried to braid Theresa’s hair. She held in a laugh because she knew how annoying the fairies were.

“They’re fairies. You said you wanted something otherworldly for the twins. So, I bring the fairies and well just about everything here is otherworldly including you now and them. Hell, why be normal these days?” Kalliope laughed.

Sharren cooed and tried to grab one of the fairies’ tails. Flidais stepped forward and scooped up the baby. “Hi, Kalli. You look good. And so do you!” Flidais said when the baby grabbed her hair.

“Theresa, I think she’s going to be a handful. Already two months old and she wonders about everything.”

Theresa was about to say something when she closed her mouth. Kalliope had explained to them what had happened to her when she was dead, but they still couldn’t believe it.

“Is everyone ready?” Morgaine asked. All the women nodded.

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“Good. Theresa and Kalli, please bring the twins forward.”

Both women did what they were told and held the twins before the sorceress. “I call to the great goddesses Isis, Maat, and Bast. Bear witness to these two remarkable children. Grant them your protection and wisdom while they grow. Help them to learn the ways of the earth and to honor and cherish all those that live upon her.” The sorceress drew small pentacles on their foreheads. Kalliope saw the power she put into them glow blue for a second and then die. Diana hiccupped and reached out for the fairies.

Without warning a bolt of lightning struck next to Kalliope. All the women jumped. She held the baby closer to her. When the brightness disappeared, there stood Zeus in all his glory with an entourage. She hoped that he wasn't about to tell her that Aphrodite, Apollo, and Del and broken out of the Underworld. The Greek god had made them all work under the Furies in the UFC. Kalliope smiled every time she thought of Aphrodite in a hairnet. The Furies were happier now they were management. In their free time they had opened up a cheesecake shop with some help from David, aka The Almighty Cheesecake. They had sworn never to break out of the Underworld again since they were happy.

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“Zeus, what are you doing here? This is a private party,” Morgaine stated. She gestured for Sharren from Kalliope who handed her over.

“Mortal sorceress, Zeus is not here for the likes of you.”

A blur moved past Adele and Anna. When it stopped, it was Dagda. He slowed down and did a few more cartwheels until he landed on his feet next to Flidais. He gave her a big dumb smile and kissed her on the cheek, so she blushed.

“What is going on here?” Kalliope demanded.

But before anyone answered, out of the shadows of the grove appeared, a dark sexy man in black leather pants holding a cheesecake. It was David.

“Umm. Kalliope. What’s all this?” Adele asked. She had huddled close to her cousin. Anna was silent while she waited for an answer.

She looked at her friends. “Beats me.” She turned to the other gods. “What are you all doing here?”

The gods said nothing. The shadows parted and another figure appeared. It was Lugh and he wasn’t naked. He wore a sleeveless, dark green tunic over dark brown leather pants and boots to match resembling a true being of the forest. Golden bracelets adorned his upper arms along

with blue dragon tattoos. He looked very solemn and more handsome than she had ever seen.

“That’s Lugh?” Theresa asked.

Kalliope nodded absently.

“Wow. I see why you’ve been selfish.”

“What are you doing here?” Kalliope whispered when he came to stand before her. He looked serious and regal. His demeanor showed that he was a true prince and a god rolled into one. His green eyes met hers. She felt a caress from his mind that was so intense it almost knocked her over. She had to curl her toes and bite her lip to keep from moaning in front of the other guests because it was so sexual. God, she wanted him right there if only there weren’t so many people around.

“Kalliope, do you remember when I said healing you would have consequences?”

Her heart went into her throat. He was here to take her hostage or pull her into his world because the gods had decided she had changed too much.

“Yes,” she replied softly. She waited for him to lead her away from the grove and into the astral plane. But he did something she wasn’t expecting that brought a gasp from all the women in the circle. He lowered himself down to one knee before her and took her left hand.

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“Kalliope, as it is the human custom, will you become my wife?” Lugh slid a ring onto her finger. She studied the stone set into it, a red diamond, a piece of his heart. The one she had thrown back at him months ago.

Kalliope looked at the women in the grove. Only the male gods seemed to know about it. Morgaine, Flidais, and her coven sisters looked at her expectantly. Tears welled in her in eyes. What could she say? This was the man that she loved.

But Marriage!

Oh my!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Crymsyn Hart is a bestselling author of Erotic Romance. Her worlds are filled with luscious vampires, gorgeous gods, quirky witches, and everything else that goes bump in the night. Hell, there is even a delicious cheesecake god floating around, but if I were you I wouldn't eat his brownie cheesecake.

Crymsyn worked as a psychic for many years in Boston while attending Emerson College. She graduated with a BFA in Writing, Literature, & Publishing. When she gets bored, she sneaks away to local cemeteries and coffee shops to find peace and quiet. Granted, graveyards might be a great place for the dead, but she still has to listen to their chattering. It can get annoying when all you want to do is write, but she can tell you quite a ghost story.

Crymsyn shares her life with a small zoo, two playful puppies and her hubby Mark. If you come after dark, you're more than likely to find her snuggled up with a gory horror movie, or a bloody vampire movie. Crymsyn has a collection of Living Dead Dolls and five bookshelves overflowing with books. Of course there's always room for more.

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