



WARRICK
NASH

Lockheart

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EPILOGUE

PROLOGUE

The Judgment of Warrick Nash

Rain fell not in drops, but in solid, wind-driven sheets that sluiced over the storm-lashed cityscape. Lightning fractured a sky the color of a fresh bruise, its thunderous report cracking the very air. Hundreds of feet above the metropolis, two figures hovered, their forms silhouetted against the epic gale. The victor of their battle had already been decided.

The Great Warrick Nash, Descendant of Ares himself, held the throat of Lycaon in a grip as inescapable as fate. The power difference between them was a chasm. Lycaon, whose lycanthropic strength was celebrated, might as well have been a small child in the warrior's grasp. He clawed uselessly against Warrick's unyielding forearm, legs kicking at empty air as his lungs burned.

Warrick watched him struggle, feeling nothing but a cold, satisfying resolve. This was the consequence. They had taken everything from him. After centuries of shielding their cities and slaying their monsters, they had repaid him with whispers, then accusations, then condemnation. They called him a murderer for the necessary price of victory, pointing their fingers while cowering behind the very power they now decry.

"Audacity," Warrick's voice was a low growl, the sound of mountains grinding together. He squeezed, feeling the satisfying crunch of cartilage under his thumb. "You have betrayed your kind, Lycaon! You wear their leash, lap up their praise, and follow their commands like the dog you are! Did you, a yipping runt, truly think you could bring Warrick Nash to heel?! You are nothing!"

His anger was a physical presence, a red haze that narrowed the world to the straining pulse in the throat beneath his thumb. He was no longer in control. He was merely a vessel for the hate that had festered within him since the betrayal, since they had framed him. There was no coming back from this. Lycaon would be the first of many.

"Please! Don't kill him! Don't take my husband from me!"

A woman's cry from below, ripped away by the wind. Warrick ignored it. The plea was fuel.

"This world flourished because I allowed it," Warrick's words were almost a whisper now, a chilling intimacy in the heart of the storm as he leaned closer to his foe. "My mercy is all that has ever held me back. Now you will be the instrument of my release."

The mortals you have allied with will know my fury as you know it. I will extinguish their authority and their rule.” Lycaon’s struggles weakened, the light in his eyes beginning to dim. “Die knowing you were the fuse that ends this pitiful world, Dog.”

Just as Warrick prepared to snuff out the last flicker of life from his fellow Descendant, the woman below spoke a final, broken farewell.

“Forgive me.”

It was not for her husband. It was for Warrick.

She raised her hand, a soft, impossible glow blooming in her palm. It was not a weapon. It was a key. In an instant, a silent, tearing light consumed him.

The feeling was one of utter violation. The fierce storm vanished, ripped away from his senses. The shriek of the wind was replaced by the gentle chirping of unseen birds. The smell of ozone and rain became the thick, sweet scent of pollen and damp soil. He no longer hovered above a broken city but stood on soft, loamy soil. His hand, which a moment ago held the last breath of a dying man, was empty. It tingled with a phantom pressure, a memory of murder that had no conclusion. He flexed his fingers, staring at them as if they belonged to a stranger.

The rage inside him did not just fade; it was ripped out, leaving a hollow, freezing void. And into that void, his senses, raw and overloaded, poured in this new, terrifying reality. The gentleness of it all was a physical assault. The quiet. The warmth. The sheer, vibrant life of the forest felt like a cage of suffocating peace.

All his strength, all his divine might, could not protect him from this. He knew what this was. Not from experience, because nobody ever came back from this, but from legend. A judgment reserved for the unforgivable.

Apeirgy.

The horror slammed into him, a wave of ice that was colder and more absolute than the rage had been hot. He looked at the alien beauty surrounding him, and for the first time in centuries, felt true, paralyzing fear. He was a man utterly undone. His voice was a choked, broken whisper.

“What have you done?”

CHAPTER ONE

On the Shores of Damnation

The shift from maddening fury to horrifying shock was a violent whiplash that staggered the centuries-old warrior. For several long moments, his mind was a silent, empty battlefield. Judgement was supposed to be a death sentence. Was this their Hell? A verdant prison of suffocating peace, where he, the Descendant of the God of War, would wander without conflict for eternity? He could imagine no greater torture.

He shook his head, the motion sharp, physically dispelling the thought. Assumptions were useless. He steeled himself, his training a familiar anchor in the chaotic sea of his emotions. He needed perspective. He needed the sky.

Warrick centered himself, drawing a deep breath. He called upon the familiar, intrinsic power that let him defy gravity, the energy that was as much a part of him as his own blood. He focused his will, tensed the muscles in his back and legs, and anticipated the effortless surge of liftoff—

Nothing.

His eyes widened. He tried again, a flicker of confusion warring with his absolute certainty. His feet remained planted in the soft loam. No energy answered his command. There was only the weight of his own body, suddenly feeling dense, alien, and crushingly mortal.

They had taken it. His power, his identity. The indomitability that was as much who he was as his own heartbeat. Gone.

A sudden, agonizing cold rushed into the space where the fire of Ares had once burned. The divine hum that had vibrated in his bones for centuries vanished, leaving behind a hollow, aching silence that was more terrifying than any battle cry. For the first time in his life, Warrick felt the true, suffocating weight of the atmosphere pressing against his chest.

Gravity, once a mere suggestion he chose to ignore, became a cruel master. It yanked at his limbs with a sudden, malicious force, demanding he recognize his own newfound fragility. He was no longer a master of the storm. He was a falling object, a piece of meat at the mercy of the wind.

The power that defined him, the very essence of his lineage, was gone. Ripped from him by the sentence he never deserved, a final act of treachery by the world that had cast him out. He clenched his fists, knuckles white, his jaw tight enough to crack teeth. The vibrant green of the forest seemed to mock him, its sheer aliveness a stark contrast to the hollow void where his divine strength had resided.

The thought of an eternity spent like this, impotent and grounded, threatened to drown him in despair. But the warrior within, the strategist forged in a hundred battles, clawed its way to the surface. Panic was a luxury. Humiliation could wait. Survival was now paramount.

He forced a deep, methodical breath. His eyes narrowed, scanning his surroundings with a new, desperate intensity. He noted the sun's position. He identified landmarks. A cluster of tall ferns, an ancient, gnarled tree scarred by lightning, a slight rise in the terrain to the west. He would find water. He would find shelter. He would understand this prison.

He picked a direction, towards the scarred tree, and began to walk. Each step felt heavy, clumsy, terrifyingly human. It was movement. It was action. It was all he had left. The quiet forest pressed in, a silent, watchful enemy.

He walked with grim purpose, the crunch of leaves under his boots a rhythmic intrusion on the incessant birdsong. Each step was a small victory against the crushing reality of his exile. He analyzed the patterns of moss on the trees, the subtle shifts in elevation, anything to orient himself in the endless green.

Then, a high-pitched scream ripped through the air, choked with terror.

Warrick froze mid-stride. His head snapped towards the sound, every sense instantly sharp. That was not an animal. That was the sound of sentient fear. His heart, heavy with dread moments before, gave a sudden, fierce leap. *Others*. He was not alone in this verdant hell.

A hot surge of purpose burned away his despair. Information. Allies. Enemies. It did not matter. Contact was everything.

His walk became a ground-eating stride, pushing through ferns and low-hanging vines that whipped at his face. Another shriek echoed, closer now, emanating from a dark cleft in a rocky outcrop ahead—a cave mouth, draped in shadows and smelling of damp stone and something else, something musky and feral.

Just as he neared the entrance, a small shape burst from the darkness and collided hard against his massive frame. The impact, like a child running into a stone wall, sent the figure tumbling backward to land with a soft thump on the forest floor.

Warrick looked down. Before him sat a trembling creature of pale green skin that seemed to glow faintly in the dappled light. She was clad in simple, stitched leather, with small pouches and glass vials of swirling liquids tied securely to her belt. A pair of round spectacles, knocked askew by the collision, framed wide, terrified eyes that stared up at him.

"Please!" she gasped, her voice thin and reedy. "Please help me!"

Help her? Something in that cave wanted her dead. A low rumble vibrated through the soles of his boots, growing into heavy, thudding footsteps. Something large was coming.

He instinctively shifted, placing himself before the fallen girl as three shapes emerged from the gloom. They were massive, easily eight feet tall, their thick bodies covered in coarse, dark fur that smelled of hot blood and damp earth. Muscles like coiled ship ropes rippled beneath their hides, and their bovine heads featured sharp horns and burning red eyes. In their powerful hands, they gripped colossal, crudely forged axes.

Minotaurs.

Legends spoke of a singular, ancient beast. Asterion, if he recalled the lore correctly. But three of them? This realm was already defying his understanding. He would have questions for the girl trembling behind him. If he survived.

One of the Minotaurs flared its nostrils, let out a deafening, guttural roar, and stomped a heavy hoof, gouging the earth. It lowered its head, preparing to charge.

Warrick didn't flinch. Power or no power, he would not be cowed. He was Warrick Nash, Descendant of Ares. If this verdant prison was to be his grave, he would water its roots with blood. He stepped fully over the girl, planted his feet, and tore a primal roar from his own throat. It was a challenge hurled back at the beast.

Let them come.

Before the charge connected, something shattered against his back between his shoulder blades. A cool liquid soaked through his tunic, and a jolt of surprise shot through him. He spun, his glare locking onto the small green girl, now scrambling to her feet. *Her?* Did she throw one of her liquid potions at him? Was this all a trap?

He braced himself, waiting for the potion's effect; weakness, paralysis, some burning agony.

Instead, a jolt of liquid fire surged through his veins. It was like an old furnace roaring back to life; fatigue vanished, replaced by a thrum of familiar, divine energy. It was a faint echo of his peak, but infinitely more than the emptiness he'd felt moments before. She wasn't attacking him. She was *arming* him.

Hope, fierce and unexpected, flared just as the lead Minotaur charged, its axe whistling in a deadly arc.

Time seemed to slow. Centuries of combat experience took over. Empowered by the girl's concoction, he pivoted, letting the axe blade shear empty air inches from his face. As the beast stumbled, Warrick exploded into motion. His fist, imbued with rediscovered strength, slammed into the side of the Minotaur's knee. Bone *cracked* audibly. The creature bellowed as its leg buckled. Before it could recover, Warrick drove his other fist deep into its torso. The sound of bones shattering echoed through its chest. The Minotaur let out a strangled, gurgling cry and crashed heavily onto its back, motionless.

One down.

The remaining two Minotaurs, enraged, roared in unison and charged, their hooves pounding the forest floor like war drums. Before they could close the distance, another glass vial sailed through the air, thrown with surprising accuracy by the small green girl behind him. It shattered against the face of the Minotaur on the right, erupting in a cloud of lung-searing, acrid green vapor. The beast gave a strangled bellow, stumbling blindly as it clawed at its own face.

One incapacitated. That left the other.

This one swung low, a vicious sweep aimed at Warrick's legs. He stepped back, but not quite fast enough. The crude iron blade grazed his forearm, slicing through tunic and skin. A sharp, stinging heat erupted along the gash. Blood, startlingly red, welled and began to pour down his arm, slick against his skin.

Pain. Real, visceral pain. It was a sensation so foreign it shocked him almost as much as the wound itself. He couldn't remember the last time he'd bled.

That shock was instantly consumed by fury. The indignity of it, the vulnerability, enraged him. As the Minotaur recovered for another swing, Warrick channeled that rage. He slammed his hands together, transforming his fists into a single, brutal hammer. With a yell fueled by pain and fury, he brought the makeshift weapon surging upward.

The impact was devastating. His double fist caught the beast squarely under the jaw. Bone didn't just splinter; it exploded with a sickening crack that echoed through the sudden quiet. The Minotaur's massive form collapsed like a felled tree, dead before it hit the ground.

Silence descended, broken only by the harsh rasping of the third Minotaur. It writhed on the forest floor, thick green foam bubbling from its mouth and nostrils, its powerful limbs flailing weakly against the poison searing its lungs. After a few violent convulsions, it grew still.

Dead. All three.

Warrick stood amidst the carnage, his chest heaving. The exertion was unfamiliar, the drain on his endurance absolute. His wounded arm throbbed, a constant, irritating reminder of his new mortality. The air was thick with the coppery tang of blood—his and theirs—mingled with the sharp chemical scent of the Oread's potions.

Only when satisfied the danger was over did he turn towards the girl.

She stood frozen, her small hands trembling, her wide eyes staring with a vacant, shell-shocked gaze at the dead monsters. The adrenaline had clearly fled, leaving raw shock in its wake. He acknowledged with a cold warrior's pragmatism that her intervention had been crucial. One vial that gave him strength for the first kill, the poisonous gas potion to prevent a two-on-one fight—she had saved his life.

He stalked closer, ignoring the tremor in her frame and the blood still dripping from his arm. His voice was rough, demanding.

“What in the hells were you doing in there?!”

Warrick's harsh question boomed in the quiet clearing. The small green creature flinched violently, scrambling backward to land on her rump in the dirt. Her wide eyes, magnified by her spectacles, stared up at him, brimming with a terror he recognized. It was the paralyzing fear of the weak he had both protected and scorned. She was lost in shock, useless for now.

He snorted dismissively. There wasn't time for this. The brief, violent encounter had shattered any illusion of a peaceful prison. It was dangerous, and he was vulnerable. Shelter was the priority.

Pragmatism took over. He strode to the nearest corpse, ignoring the trembling girl, and began methodically searching the crude packs. His efforts yielded a surprisingly intact waterskin, a rough-spun bedroll, and a pouch containing strips of dried meat that

smelled vaguely of smoke and salt. He gathered what was useful, slinging the supplies over his shoulder.

The girl hadn't moved. With a grunt of impatience, Warrick bent down and scooped her up. She let out a startled squeak as he unceremoniously plopped her onto his broad shoulder. Her small legs dangled against his chest, and her hands shot out, one wrapping hesitantly around the back of his head for balance.

"W-what are you doing?" Her voice was a fearful whisper.

"Focus on composing yourself," Warrick commanded, his voice low and rough. "We need to move before more come." He scanned the trees, recalling a hollowed-out boulder formation he'd noted earlier. It wasn't a fortress, but it offered a solid wall to his back. A safe place to rest.

Sensing the futility of arguing, she fell silent, clinging on as he strode purposefully into the trees, leaving the carnage behind. He found the spot easily. A large, weathered boulder split open, creating a shallow, cave-like depression screened by ferns.

He unfurled the looted bedroll onto the dry ground. "Sit," he ordered, placing her gently onto the rough fabric. He then dropped the pouch of food into her lap. "Eat."

Leaving her there, he moved to the entrance of the hollow, settling heavily onto a smaller rock to watch their surroundings. The borrowed power from the potion had faded completely, and the adrenaline crashed with it. A bone-deep exhaustion he hadn't felt in centuries settled over him. His body felt heavy and unresponsive. It was truly his again in the most unwelcome way. Powerless.

He glanced at his arm. Blood still seeped from the gash, dripping onto the rock beside him. The pain was a dull, persistent throb. He knew battle tactics, strategy, the physics of destruction, but tending to his own flesh? In his old life, such wounds were either rendered irrelevant by his near-invulnerability or handled by others. Now, he didn't even know where to begin.

A hesitant movement caught his eye. The green creature had picked up the waterskin and was tearing strips from the edge of the bedroll with nimble fingers. She rose cautiously and approached him, moving slowly, deliberately, like someone trying not to startle a wolf.

Warrick didn't move. His mind was adrift in the bitter sea of his exile, replaying the storm, the betrayal, *her* face. Beneath the layers of rage, a profound, aching sadness churned.

She reached him, hesitated, then gently took his injured arm. He remained still. With surprising dexterity, she cleaned the wound with water from the skin and began wrapping the fabric strips around the gash, creating a neat, functional bandage. Her touch was light, careful. It was the first non-violent contact he'd had in this world.

As she tied the final knot, she looked up, her gaze less terrified now, more assessing, as if sensing the turmoil behind his stony expression. "Vexi," she said softly, her voice clearer.

Warrick slowly turned his head, his brow furrowed in question.

"That's my name," she clarified, gesturing to herself. "Vexi Dew."

He considered her for a long moment, a strange, small creature who had armed him, then tended to his wound. He gave a curt nod. "Warrick," he responded, his voice flat.

An uneasy silence settled between them, the sounds of the alien forest filtering into their small shelter. Vexi, relieved to be alive but shaken. Warrick, grappling with the raw wound of betrayal, the shock of his own vulnerability, and the crushing weight of his new reality. Two disparate survivors, thrown together by violence.

CHAPTER TWO

The Verdant Deep

A dull ache permeated Warrick's body as consciousness returned. He didn't stir immediately, finding little strength or motivation to rise from the rough bedroll. Through slitted eyes, he stared up at the oppressive curve of the hollowed rock above, its cold, grey surface a bleak canvas for his thoughts.

He replayed the confrontation, the storm, the blinding flash of the Apeirgy. Had he gone too far? Let the fury consume him entirely? Was this exile, this humiliating reduction, a penance truly earned? The flicker of self-doubt, unfamiliar and uncomfortable, sparked within him.

No. The thought hardened almost instantly, extinguishing the flicker. *They* did this. The grasping, judgmental humans who clawed their way to dominance, forgetting the very Gods whose descendants protected them. They dared to challenge *him*, to impose their petty laws on a power they couldn't comprehend. They took and took, and when he fought back against the villains *they* allowed to fester, they condemned *him* for the consequences. It was their fault. *Theirs!*

Anger, hot and familiar, began to well inside him. His heart hammered against his ribs, a frantic rhythm against the morning stillness. His hand, resting by his side, clenched into a tight fist, knuckles white. The injustice burned—

"Sit."

The voice, low and gruff, startlingly close, cut through his burgeoning rage. It was thick with mock seriousness, a clear imitation. Warrick's head turned sharply. He pushed himself up on his elbows, his weary muscles protesting, swinging his legs over the side of the bedroll. Just as he settled into a sitting position, a small leather pouch landed squarely in his lap with a soft thud. Dried, reddish strips of jerky spilled slightly from the open top.

"Eat," the voice commanded again, the same forced gruffness barely concealing an underlying amusement.

It was Vexi. She stood beside the bedroll, small hands planted firmly on her hips, her head tilted slightly. A wide, undeniable smile stretched across her pale green face, crinkling the corners of her eyes behind the round spectacles.

Warrick stared, momentarily baffled. Was she mocking him?

Then, a soft giggle escaped her, quickly blossoming into gentle, unrestrained laughter. It wasn't malicious, but light, almost relieved, echoing slightly in the rock hollow. She *was* teasing him, throwing his own terse commands from the previous day right back at him.

He felt a strange tug at the corner of his mouth, an almost imperceptible smirk threatening to break his stony expression. He hadn't expected this. Humor? From the trembling creature he'd rescued? He prided himself on understanding the base predictability of most sentient beings. Their fear, greed, ambition. But genuine, teasing humor directed at *him*, now? It caught him completely off guard.

"You've regained your composure then," Warrick stated dryly, deliberately smoothing the fleeting smirk from his face. He picked a piece of the tough, dried jerky from the pouch Vexi had dropped onto his lap.

As he chewed mechanically, his mind drifted, momentarily pulling away from the small nymph and the strange hollow they shared. Haunting memories flickered in his mind. The storm, the shouts, *her* face. He pushed them down. They were unavoidable, he knew, persistent specters from a life now severed. But dwelling on them hindered survival. His past held no consequence here, in this new, raw existence. Though memories had an insidious way of clinging, capturing moments, refusing to let go.

"I've never seen someone like you before. Where did you come from?" Vexi's question pulled Warrick back to the reality he now shared with this strange creature. Her genuine curiosity confirmed it. He was an anomaly in this land.

"I have frustratingly few answers," he admitted, the words pouring from him as his attention remained fixed on the jerky he was chewing. "I was banished from my world through a power we call Apeirgy. No one has ever returned. I had no idea I would end up here." The meat was surprisingly well-cured, smoky and tough. The revelation that the Minotaurs were perhaps civilized enough to be adept at preserving food was a detail he filed away.

"Apeirgy? Huh." Vexi looked perplexed, adjusting her spectacles. "We call this world Apeiron. I wonder if there's a connection."

Warrick paused mid-chew. He was no scholar; he was a warrior, through and through. But centuries of experience had sharpened his instincts. A cruel joke, then. Naming the prison after the sentence. It was a brand, a permanent reminder of their judgment. The thought soured the taste in his mouth.

"And you?" he countered, his curiosity purely tactical. He needed to understand this new environment to survive in it. "What manner of creature are you?"

"Creature? You're the creature! I'm normal here!" Vexi huffed, crossing her arms in playful offense. "I'm an Oread, but most just call us Cave Nymphs. We have a dwelling to the south, Flowstone Falls."

Warrick began building a mental map. Minotaurs to the north, Oreads to the south. "What else is out there?" he probed, wanting to avoid any more surprises like hulking beasts with colossal axes.

"Well, this whole region is the Verdant Deep," she explained, tracing a map in the air with a nimble finger. "You've got the Dryads to the west in Sylvanrest. Then, farther west, are the Everwind Glades. No one goes there. The Harpies are way up north in the Halcyon Spires, and there's nothing but impassable mountains to the south."

Dryads and Harpies. He had some idea of what they might be from his own world's lore, but this place twisted expectations. The Oreads of legend were not stout, four-foot-tall alchemists. Who knew what the others would look like?

"I just don't understand it." Vexi's voice pulled him from his thoughts. Her playful demeanor vanished, replaced by a genuine sorrow. "The Minotaur aren't usually hostile. I trade my potions for their metals and hides. I even brought that Draught of Vigor as a gift for them allowing me to harvest glow-moss in their caves. We had peace." Her voice cracked slightly. "The one I hit with the chokeweed potion? His name was Borin. We drank mead together. We were friendly."

So, they weren't just mindless beasts. They were a people. Warrick considered her words as he began packing the meager supplies, rolling up the bedding. Societies, trade networks, diplomacy. This was a complex world, not the empty prison he'd first imagined. One thing was assured. He needed allies.

"Does your village have a leader? Someone we need to inform about this hostility?" Warrick shouldered the bedroll and started walking.

"We? As in you and I? No, no, we don't really let outsiders into our home."

Warrick glanced left, the direction she'd indicated was south. "I saved your life. They'll make an exception." He marched onward, his long strides forcing Vexi to practically jog to keep up.

"You're too big! You probably won't even fit inside!"

He brushed off her comment, his mind on the mission. An alliance was the priority. But there was something else he desired, more than food, more than shelter.

"You're some sort of chemist then? Brewing potions like a witch?"

"A witch?!" Vexi stomped her foot, her voice full of indignation. "Listen, I'm a scientist! An alchemist! I work with precise measurements and reagents, not bat wings and frog legs!"

"So you know what a witch is?" The question was casual, but his mind sharpened.

"Of course I know what a witch is. Pointy hat, big nose, likes to eat children. Elder Myrrine tells us stories all the time. *The Three Little Pigs, Red Riding Hood, Goldilocks.*"

Fairytales from his world? Here? Someone else had been here. Someone who had taught them his language, shared his culture's stories. His blood ran cold, then hot. Apeirgy was for the worst of the worst. Yet someone had been here long enough to befriend a village of Oreads and become a storyteller. Was it possible the Kritaí, those with the power of Apeirgy, had been wrongfully judging his kind for centuries? The rage he was trying so desperately to control began to fester again, a familiar, coiling heat in his gut. He focused on his small, green companion, forcing the thought away.

"This Draught of Vigor you mentioned," he said, his voice carefully neutral. "Is that what you struck me with? Do you have more?" He despised the need in his voice, but the craving for that echo of his lost power was a physical ache. Without it, he was just a shell, no better than the feeble mortals he'd shared a world with his entire life up to this point.

"That was my only one," she admitted. "I rarely need them myself. But I have others! Chokeweed Vapor, Philter of Starlight, Webweave Ichor, Lover's Balm—" She stopped, a faint blush coloring her cheeks before she gave a theatrical shudder. "Actually, I don't make Lover's Balm anymore. I spilled some on myself once. I've never been in heat like that before in my life!"

Warrick paused, the corner of his mouth threatening to twitch into a smirk before his stoic discipline crushed it. He filed the information away. She was a skilled, if somewhat reckless, alchemist. Her casual confession, however, truly caught him off guard. He supposed it was the scientist in her, more interested in the clinical results of a failed experiment than any social stigma attached to it. He had dealt with queens and diplomats who weighed every syllable, yet this creature spoke of a potion-induced frenzy with the frankness of a field report. He found himself wondering if all Oreads were so brutally, refreshingly uninhibited, or if that particular trait was unique to Vexi Dew.

They continued south, the dense forest canopy creating a world of shifting green and gold light. Their earlier conversation had left a comfortable quiet between them, and Warrick found his mind turning over the map Vexi had laid out for him.

“So Oreads in the south, Dryads to the west,” he mused aloud, more to himself than to her. “What about the border you mentioned? The Everwind Glades.”

“Oh, nobody lives there,” Vexi said, as if stating the obvious. “Nobody *can*! The winds just get stronger and stronger the farther in you go. Fierce! Eventually they’ll pick you right up and toss you back out.” She seemed to find the concept more of a fascinating physical anomaly than a terrifying barrier.

She didn’t give him time to ponder the physics of it, launching into a story. “I had this cousin, see? Bramblefoot. Wildly curious, that one! He got obsessed with the Glades, spent nearly ten years trying to get further in than anyone else. Built all sorts of strange contraptions like weighted boots, hooked ropes, angled shields.” Her eyes lit up with the memory, her hands gesturing animatedly. “And he did it! Got further than anyone! We were all watching from the edge one day as he pressed on deep into the harsh winds, and then all of a sudden— *whoosh*!” She threw her hands up, mimicking a great gust of wind. “The Glades just spat him out! Sent him flying, way up high, soaring like a startled Harpy right over our heads! Honestly,” she giggled, “I couldn’t stop laughing!”

Warrick found a low chuckle rumbling in his chest, a sound he couldn’t quite suppress. He pictured the small figure being ejected violently from an impassable wall of wind. “Did he die?” he asked, a genuine curiosity in his voice.

“Nope!” Vexi chirped, delighted by this part. “That was the clever bit! He’d built this backpack rig with a huge, specially folded blanket packed inside. Pulled a cord, and *poof*! It billowed out above him. Floated right down, gentle as a seed pod, and landed in a berry bush.” She beamed. “I was actually surprised it worked!” Her steps seemed lighter as she recounted the tale, her voice warm with memory.

Warrick processed the description. “A parachute, you mean,” he said, the term familiar from his own world’s inventors and daredevils.

Vexi frowned, tilting her head. “Para-what now?” The word was clearly meaningless to her.

Warrick filed the term away with a flicker of melancholy. It was another piece of his old world rendered useless here. The invention, perhaps, ultimately an inevitability in the pursuit of engineering. Their conversation lapsed into a comfortable silence, broken only by the crunch of leaves under his boots and the snap of twigs. He remained vigilant, his eyes scanning their surroundings, while Vexi, now completely at ease, occasionally

pointed out a cluster of edible-looking fungi or a rock formation that looked like a sleeping animal. The initial tension between them had dissolved, replaced by the easy rhythm of two companions on a shared journey.

CHAPTER THREE

Flowstone Falls

They continued south, their conversation weaving through different subjects as Warrick prodded for more information. After what felt close to two hours, the distant murmur of water grew into a steady roar.

"We're close," Vexi announced, pointing a finger in the direction of the sound. "Flowstone Falls is this way."

She took the lead, pushing through a final screen of dense ferns that opened into a misty clearing. A powerful waterfall crashed down a sheer rock face, its spray cooling the air as it slammed into the churning river below.

"Through there," Vexi said, gesturing directly at the curtain of water. Sure enough, she slipped behind it, revealing a hidden, narrow ledge. "You have to jump to get across."

Warrick eyed the slick, wet rocks and the churning water just a few feet below. "That seems rather unsafe. What happens if you slip?"

"Uhh, I don't know. You die, I suppose?" she said with a shrug, as if the thought had never seriously occurred to her. She then took a light, nimble leap across the gap, landing with the casual grace of a creature born to such treacherous terrain.

Not one to be deterred, Warrick took a running start and propelled his powerful frame across the gap. He landed hard but steady, the impact a jarring reminder of the mortal weight he now carried. As far as security measures went, he had to admit, it was effective. No Minotaur could make that leap.

They followed the ledge behind the deafening roar of the waterfall into a dark passage carved into the mountain. Vexi was not joking when she said he might not fit. It was a tight squeeze, and he had to turn sideways, the cool, damp stone scraping against his chest and back as he pushed himself through.

Finally, the narrow tunnel opened into a vast cavern, and Warrick stepped out of the passage and into a secret, living geode.

The change was immediate and absolute. The warm, humid air of the forest gave way to a cool, moist atmosphere that smelled of wet stone, rich earth, and the faint, sweet scent of blooming cavern fungi. The roar of the waterfall faded to a constant, soothing

murmur that filled the immense space which must have been the lifeblood and heartbeat of the community.

The cavern was breathtaking. A vast, natural dome hollowed out of the mountain's heart, its ceiling arched hundreds of feet overhead, lost in shadow. A wide, clear river flowed from a majestic waterfall at the far end, running placidly through the cavern floor before disappearing into another dark tunnel.

But it was the city itself that held Warrick captive. Carved into the natural alcoves and ledges of the cavern walls was a vertical metropolis stretching a hundred feet into the air. Dwellings with rounded doorways were connected by a web of rickety-looking wooden scaffolding, swaying rope bridges, and simple, hand-cranked pulley lifts. It was a marvel of quirky, precarious-looking, yet functional engineering.

The entire place was illuminated not by fire, but by enormous, sharp blue crystals embedded in the walls, pulsing with a soft, magical light that cast a serene, azure glow over everything. This was supplemented by cultivated gardens of phosphorescent fungi, their gentle, multi-colored light creating an atmosphere of perpetual twilight.

The city hummed with a quiet, industrious energy. Oreads moved with purpose along the ledges with engineers checking the tension on a pulley rope, alchemists grinding crystals with a mortar and pestle, children chasing glowing insects near a precipitous drop-off. It was a city of crafters and explorers, a testament to their fierce independence and boundless ingenuity. Warrick, a man from a world of soaring skyscrapers and advanced technology, found himself utterly, grudgingly impressed.

The staggering beauty of this underground metropolis was temporarily masked by the hushed whispers and shy gazes now fixed on the massive intruder. All throughout the vertical city, activity ceased. Oreads tending to glowing mushroom gardens, engineers checking the tension on pulley lifts, even children playing tag along the ledges, they all froze to stare cautiously at the towering, strangely garbed figure in their midst. Their wide eyes, reflecting the cavern's azure light, held a mixture of fear and profound curiosity.

"It's alright!" Vexi's voice, sharp and familiar, echoed through the cavern. She planted her small hands on her hips. "He saved me from a Minotaur attack! He's a friend!"

Her words caused a fresh wave of murmurs to sweep through the crowd, the tone shifting from alarm to intrigue. Several Oreads cautiously approached her, asking rapid questions in low voices, their gazes still flicking warily towards Warrick. He stood impassive, letting Vexi handle them, his own attention still captivated by the sheer, impossible scale of her home.

After a few minutes, Vexi extricated herself from the concerned group. "This way, there's a place you can rest," she said, gently tugging on his arm and gesturing toward a quieter side passage. "It's not much, but it's dry and safe. You can wait there while I go find Elder Myrrine."

He followed her into a smaller alcove, where a comfortable-looking pile of dried mosses served as a public seating area. Warrick sat, the cool stone at his back a welcome relief. Vexi turned to leave, then hesitated, turning back to face him.

"Oh," she started, looking down for a moment before meeting his gaze. "Thanks. For saving me, and for walking me home." A sincere, unguarded smile graced her face, and her eyes, magnified by her spectacles, seemed to glow with gratitude.

Warrick was caught off guard by the simple, heartfelt sincerity. He wasn't used to it. Praise in his world was a transaction, a tool. This was different. He gave a short, guttural grunt in acknowledgment, nodding his head as if to brush off the act as no great feat.

Vexi's smile lingered for a moment longer before she turned and hurried off, her small form soon disappearing into one of the many tunnels of the Oread city.

Warrick sat patiently on the mossy ledge. When you have been alive for centuries, moments tend to lose their urgency. In his youth, he would have grown restless, his warrior's blood demanding action. Now, he could sit for days with only his thoughts for company. He didn't have to wait long, however, before a small group of Cave Nymphs began to gather, their hushed, sibilant whispers echoing in the cavern's vastness.

They were clearly intrigued. Vexi had said they didn't welcome outsiders, and their cliff-face entrance was a testament to that seclusion. Not only was he a giant compared to them, but he was also of a race they had likely never seen. His presence here was an intrusion, a disruption to their quiet, subterranean world.

Yet, curiosity was warring with caution in their wide, luminous eyes. He saw them nudging each other forward, their gazes darting from his burly arms to his strange, tattered clothing. It was the eternal dilemma of creatures drawn to the unknown. *Fire might be beautiful*, Warrick mused, *but it can also burn*.

He decided to break the stalemate. "I don't bite."

His voice boomed through the cavern, far louder than he'd intended. The stone walls amplified the deep rumble into an explosion of sound that sent the entire group scrambling back several feet. The whispering ceased. They froze, evaluating his declaration.

After a moment of tense silence, one Oread, a male whose skin held more of a yellowish tint than Vexi's vibrant green, took a tentative step forward. He was slight of build, barely taller than Vexi, but he held his shoulders square with a manufactured boldness.

"Fenlow, careful!" one of the females hissed from behind him.

Fenlow faltered for only a second, his glance back toward the female confirming Warrick's diagnosis. *Courage born of a desire to impress*. A timeless, foolish motivator Warrick knew all too well. He felt an unexpected flicker of sympathy for the young Oread's posturing.

Fenlow cleared his throat, his voice cracking slightly. "You fought off a Minotaur? Like Vexi said? Is it true?" He stood closer now, but remained poised on his back heel, ready to bolt.

Warrick rose slowly, his sheer size an intimidating mountain of muscle that cast a long shadow over the small Oread. He saw the instinct to flee flash in Fenlow's eyes, saw him swallow hard against the fear, but the boy stood his ground, unwilling to look weak.

Warrick moved toward him slowly, as one might approach a startled fawn. He knelt, bringing his face level with Fenlow's, and locked eyes with him.

"I would be happy to tell you about it," he said, his voice a low rumble. He paused, a roguish glint appearing in his eyes. "If you buy me a drink."

Fenlow's eyes widened, then lit up with profound relief and understanding. The tension fled from his shoulders, replaced by a wide, eager grin. In that moment, across the vast gulf of species, worlds, and experience, a universal truth was shared: the promise of good company and strong drink.

After relaying the Minotaurs' unprovoked hostility to a concerned Elder Myrrine, Vexi made her way back to the public alcove where she'd left Warrick. She found it empty. A flicker of unease went through her. Where could he have—

A dull roar from a side passage caught her attention. It was the common area, the large cavern where Oreads gathered to relax and drink fermented mushroom brew, but the usual gentle hum of conversation was replaced by a rambunctious, chaotic noise she'd never heard before.

A sinking feeling hit her. *Warrick*.

Hurrying towards the sound, she pushed through the woven vine curtain that served as the tavern's door and was hit by a wall of heat and sound. The air was thick with the earthy, sweet scent of brew and the press of warm bodies. The scene stopped her short.

Instead of the usual mingling couples and quiet groups, nearly every Oread in the settlement seemed to be packed into the space, their attention fixed on the center of the room.

There, standing atop a sturdy barrel with a large earthenware mug in hand, was Warrick. He was flushed and animated, radiating an energy utterly alien to the stoic warrior she knew.

“—and that’s when the enormous Kraken revealed itself!” Warrick boomed, his voice amplified by the cavern’s acoustics. “A hideous beast, tentacles wrapping the ship like pythons around a helpless fawn! A hundred times the size of any Minotaur, and three times as ugly!” He gestured wildly, sloshing his drink and nearly overbalancing. “It thought to swallow us whole! But I showed that abyssal horror the meaning of true power!”

The surrounding Oreads were utterly spellbound. They gasped and leaned in, their eyes wide in the cavern's azure glow, captivated by the performance.

“With nothing but my bare hands,” Warrick roared, flexing an impressive bicep, “I scaled its slimy hide! I found its eye, big as a boulder, and *tore it out!*” He mimed a great tearing motion, his face a mask of theatrical fury. “It howled a sound that shook the very sea! The crew feasted on Kraken meat for months, and its slimy brethren never troubled that shipping lane ever again!”

The cavern erupted in a deafening cheer. Oreads raised their mugs, shouting his name. Fenlow was at the front, his face alight with adoration as he offered to refill Warrick’s mug. Warrick threw his head back and laughed, a wide, genuine grin splitting his face as he soaked in the praise he had clearly been starved for.

"Warrick?" Vexi's question was a perplexed whisper, swallowed by the roar of the crowd. She began to push her way through the throng, a small boat in a churning sea of Oread bodies, their shoulders and elbows jostling her from all sides.

"Hey! What are you doing?" she yelled up at him, waving her arms frantically. Still, he didn't notice her, lost in his performance. Finally, she grabbed the hem of his tunic and yanked fiercely.

He swayed, looking down from his barrel perch with a wide, unfocused grin. "Vexi! My steadfast companion! You must join me in this glorious drink!" he bellowed, his voice thick with mushroom brew. "Fenlow! Mead for the maiden!" Fenlow, who had been staring up at Warrick with wide-eyed adoration, nodded eagerly and dashed off to fetch a mug.

"Who even are you right now?" Vexi muttered, bewildered by this boisterous performer. Before she could protest further, Warrick reached down and, with effortless strength, hoisted her into the air. The world lurched, and suddenly she was perched on his broad shoulder for the second time since they'd met, looking down at the sea of upturned, curious faces.

"I was not the only one to fell a Minotaur this day!" Warrick announced, his voice booming across the tavern. He pointed a thick finger at Vexi. "The clever and cunning Vexi Dew took down a brute all by herself! The beast was no match for her brilliant tactics!" He punctuated the declaration by chugging his entire mug of ale, while the crowd turned their awe-struck gazes on her.

"No, it wasn't like that!" she protested, her face flushing with embarrassment. "He exaggerates!"

But her objections were lost, drowned out by a fresh wave of thunderous cheers for their newfound, and very small, hero.

Time melted away in the feverish jubilation of the tavern. Vexi, who had several mugs of the potent brew herself, handled the alcohol with a surprising tolerance, dancing spiritedly with the other Oreads. Warrick, for his part, held court on his barrel, regaling his captivated audience with exaggerated tales of his past. It was a familiar pastime. He'd once spent entire days in taverns across his world, but no humans had ever matched the wild, infectious energy of these Cave Nymphs.

Eventually, though, the wind in his sails began to die down. The alcohol couldn't completely mask the profound exhaustion of his new mortal limits. Noticing him swaying on his perch, Vexi broke from her dance and began tugging on his arm.

"Alright, big guy, I think it's time for bed."

"Indeed," he confirmed, allowing her to pull him from the barrel. He turned to the crowd. "It is time I depart for the night, my friends!" A collective groan of disappointment rose from the Oreads. "Fear not! I shall return to regale you with more stories another time!" Cheers erupted as he gave a final, grand wave.

"Yeesh!" Vexi said as they navigated the still-rowdy crowd. "Haven't seen everyone that riled up in two moons!"

She guided the swaying giant up a rickety-looking spiral staircase carved into the cavern wall to her dwelling on the second level. As he ducked through the doorway, his gaze wandered around the small chamber. It was clearly Vexi's. A workstation cluttered with mortars, pestles, and glinting vials stood in one corner, smelling faintly of dried herbs

and strange minerals. On a small shelf, several identical pairs of round spectacles sat neatly lined up.

A wide, foolish grin spread across Warrick's face. "Ah ha!" he proclaimed, pointing a wavering finger at the moss bed against the far wall. "You have led me to your bed chamber!" He puffed out his chest. "I see now! You wish to engage in amorous accord! Who could resist?"

Before she could react, he dropped clumsily to one knee, wrapped a large hand around her waist, and pulled her stumbling towards him. "Fear not, little nymph! I shall show you intimacy that would make the Gods themselves blush!" He leaned in, lips pursed dramatically.

"Ew, gross! No!" Vexi yelped, planting both hands on his face and pushing. "I didn't bring you here for *that*!" While she couldn't physically move him, he registered the rejection and paused, blinking owlishly at her.

He released her and unsteadily pushed himself back to his feet. "You wound me, Vexi Dew," he declared with a look of tragic hauteur. "You have opted out of an epic night full of many climaxes!" He took a couple of staggering steps towards the moss bed.

"I'm pretty sure you would crush me," Vexi retorted, shaking her head in exasperated amusement. "And the only climax would be my life ending."

Warrick reached the bed and, with purposeful abandon, simply fell backward onto it. *THUD!* The impact shook the small chamber, rattling vials on her workstation and sending dust motes dancing in the crystal light. He lay sprawled on his back, stunned.

"I'll have you know," he mumbled, his eyes fluttering closed, "I'm actually a gentle lover."

"You're all bluster and booze, probably just desperate for affection." She scoffed, though without any real heat as she set her own spectacles on a nearby table.

A moment of silence passed. His breathing began to even out as sleep claimed him. Then, his voice came again, unexpectedly soft, almost slurred but clear.

"I would never court a woman out of desperation." His eyes remained closed. "You're a capable and magnificent little woman, Vexi. A night with you would be a treasured honor."

Vexi froze. She stared at his slack, sleeping face, the words echoing in the quiet room. No one had ever said something so genuinely flattering to her.

Heat rushed to her cheeks. With nowhere else to rest, she cautiously approached the bed and curled up on the far edge, her back to the slumbering giant. A small smile crept onto her face as she replayed his words. Blushing, she slowly turned over, propping her head on her hand to gaze at his face in the dim, fungal glow. His expression in sleep had smoothed out, returning to the hard, stony mask he wore when sober.

Warrick Nash was intense, infuriating, terrifying, and now, utterly confusing. The idea of him as a potential mate was ludicrous. He was a different species, a force of nature, possibly insane.

But watching the unguarded lines of his sleeping face, feeling the warmth of his surprising words, a tiny, treacherous seed of contemplation began to sprout in the quiet cavern of her heart.

CHAPTER FOUR

Oaths and Stone

The sun, Warrick vaguely registered, was likely painting the outside world with its morning light. Within the cool dimness of Vexi's cavern dwelling, however, no such natural alarm spurred its inhabitants awake. It was a small mercy, he'd later concede, for a warrior about to experience the mundane yet thoroughly debilitating misery of his first true hangover in this weakened body.

Though the cave shielded him from the harsh rays that would have undoubtedly amplified his suffering, not all within it were as considerate. Something light, yet just heavy enough to be profoundly irritating, landed squarely on his belly, jolting him from the uneasy depths of sleep. His eyelids felt like lead shutters, refusing to obey his will. No amount of mental command or strained energy could fully raise them. He managed only a narrow, painful squint, trying to focus on the offending object disturbing his much-needed rest.

He saw her perched on his chest, her small hands pressed against him to hold herself upright, her face, framed by those round spectacles, far too close to his own. She poked his cheek gently with a small finger. "Hellooo?" she chirped, her voice bright and far too loud. "Is the mighty conqueror in there? Or just a grumpy boy who drank too much moss brew last night?"

Her playful tone, combined with the epithet "grumpy boy," was, under the crushing weight of his pounding headache and roiling stomach, a bothersome, high-pitched annoyance.

He had withstood sieges, shrugged off wounds that would have felled lesser men, but this mundane misery was an entirely new and humiliating form of torture. With a groan that was more exasperation than threat, Warrick made an effortless, sweeping motion with his free arm, brushing Vexi off him like a bothersome insect. "Don't you dare— Ooph!" Her small frame tumbled sideways, rolling harmlessly across the moss bed. She sat up, adjusting her spectacles, a gleeful smirk spreading across her face despite her attempt to look affronted. "Ugh! Fine then," she declared, her voice bright with suppressed laughter. "I'll make you something for that colossal headache." She scrambled off the bed and padded over to her alchemy station, calling back over her shoulder with mock severity, "You big grouch!" The amusement dancing in her eyes was unmistakable.

He heard the rhythmic scrape of a mortar and pestle as she began to grind herbs, the sharp, clean scent of crushed mint and something vaguely medicinal cutting through the stale air of the room.

Vexi soon returned from her alchemy station, a steaming mug in her hands. The concoction, a special brew passed down for generations among her people, was specifically designed to cure the miseries of overindulgence. Once it had cooled slightly, she strode back to where Warrick lay, and with the same playful impishness as before, plopped herself down lightly on his prone form. Her presence this time, however, wasn't enough to fully rouse him from his pained stupor, his arm still clamped over his head for comfort.

"Sit up," Vexi commanded, her voice firm but with an underlying gentleness. Warrick merely grunted, shrugging off the command. Though the headache throbbed with malevolent intensity, he found a perverse comfort in his current, motionless state. "This will make you feel better, I promise," Vexi coaxed. "Just have a few sips, you stubborn ass."

With considerable hesitation and a groan that seemed to emanate from his very bones, Warrick slowly forced his upper body upright enough to drink. Vexi gingerly tipped the mug to his lips, and he gulped down several mouthfuls of the warm liquid. "Gods, that might be the most bitter thing I've ever had curse my tongue," he rasped. "Haven't you ever heard of—"

Then, suddenly, and quite surprisingly, his head felt light, almost buoyant. The pounding receded to a dull ache, his stomach settled, and a wave of clarity, followed by a gentle return of energy, washed through his body.

"Sugar," he concluded, finishing his interrupted thought as he looked at Vexi. He blinked. It became apparent that Vexi was very close to his face. Extremely close. Her light smile was soft, her bespectacled eyes looking up at him with a coy, knowing gleam.

A soft, elderly voice from the entrance cut through the moment. "Ehem."

Vexi shot up as if scalded, spilling the rest of the precious brew all over the moss bedding. She scrambled to her feet, nearly tripping over her own haste as her face flushed a deeper shade of green.

"Not the brew!" Warrick lamented inwardly, already missing the relief it had provided.

"It's not what it looks like!" Vexi proclaimed, her voice high with an obvious guilt that suggested it was, perhaps, exactly what it looked like.

Warrick's attention turned to the figure in the doorway. She was an ancient Oread, her face a roadmap of wrinkles, her back bent into a terrible hunch. She leaned heavily on a simple wooden staff topped with a polished amber orb, and each step into the room was a slow, strained effort. Yet, her eyes, sharp and intelligent, held a mischievous glint that spoke of a life filled with adventure before time had claimed her vitality. A knowing smirk played on her lips as she looked at the flustered Vexi.

"Remind me later, child," she said, her voice thin as dry leaves but laced with undeniable amusement, "to teach you the art of subtlety and allure."

"Mr. Warrick, was it?" She slowly made her way toward the bed where he was still sitting. "Vexi has told me of your tussle with the Minotaurs. I am Myrrine, the elder here in Flowstone Falls." She paused to study him, her gaze sharp and assessing. He peered down at her in kind. A flicker of recognition sparked in her ancient eyes. "My stars. A Descendant."

Warrick's fatigue vanished. "You know of us?" he asked, his voice sharp with sudden urgency.

"Oh, yes. I see your kind rarely. Very rarely." She turned, attempting to sit on the edge of the high moss bed. After a moment of fruitless struggle, she reached out a brittle, trembling hand. Warrick immediately took it, his own massive hand gently enveloping hers as he helped lift her frail form onto the bedding.

She took a deep, rattling breath, the short journey clearly taxing. "I have only spoken with a few myself," she continued, "but we hear the tales. Strange beings appearing in the forests. Often times hostile."

"I can put your mind at ease, Elder," Warrick said, his voice softer than he intended. "My intention is not to cause trouble." He felt a familiar pang of sorrow for the elderly. He had watched generations of mortal friends wither, their strength and fervor stolen by the relentless march of time. He could imagine no worse fate until now, in this realm, where he himself had been sapped of his own vitality. Her frailty was a bitter mirror to his own newfound vulnerability.

"There was another," she murmured, her eyes distant as she grasped at a faded memory. "When I was very young. He was kind, like you seem to be. I knew him only briefly." She struggled, her brow furrowed, but the finer details were lost to her. She let out a heavy sigh and looked back at Warrick. "What brings you here, Descendant?"

Warrick sat in contemplation, the question demanding a humility he rarely practiced. He took a breath, the words tasting like ash in his mouth. "I was robbed of my might when I arrived. I come seeking allies while I navigate this new world."

Myrrine's ancient eyes held a deep empathy, and she wisely chose not to linger on his painful confession. "This Minotaur attack, Descendant. This broken peace," she said, her voice laced with the weariness of a leader facing a crisis. "It is a terrible confusion. We had such amicable relations with Chieftain Kazgar." She lamented for a moment, her gaze distant. "Though perhaps it was inevitable."

Her wrinkled hand tightened on her staff. "We have grown apart over the years, the races of the Verdant Deep. The Dryads in their forests, the Minotaurs in their caves, and we Oreads in our stone cavern. It wasn't one event that separated us. It seems we all just slipped away from each other, into the comfort of our own traditions and cultures." A profound sadness entered her voice, the quiet regret of a leader who has watched the world shrink. "I fear we have become a fractured alliance, drifting ever further apart."

She looked at Warrick then, a clear, desperate plea in her eyes. "Mr. Warrick, we can spare supplies, and I am sure Vexi would be delighted to guide you. But I must ask you, as a request, please travel to the home of the Dryads. To Sylvanrest. Appraise them of this new hostility so they may be cautious. Knowledge is imperative at this juncture."

Warrick listened, processing her words not just as a plea, but as a strategic assessment. He had already planned to visit the Dryads, another potential piece on the board. In times of war, allies were often the deciding factor. Myrrine saw a fractured peace. He saw disparate factions that needed to be united against a common enemy. His quest for his power and their need for security were now intertwined.

"I will see it done, Elder," he said, his voice a low, steady rumble. It was the tone of a soldier accepting a mission, a promise made between two ancient beings who understood the weight of the stakes.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Winds of Unrest

After securing the pilfered supplies from the fallen Minotaurs and acquiring a pack of dried fruits and other goods from the Oreads, Warrick and Vexi made their way out of the cavern. A small crowd of Nymphs saw them off, eager for one last glimpse of the giant and his epic tales. Fenlow stood front and center, waving with an excitement that was almost comical.

As the sound of the waterfall faded behind them, Vexi trotted to keep up with Warrick's long strides. "For a stick in the mud," she quipped, "I didn't expect you to be so socially adept."

A low rumble, almost a chuckle, escaped Warrick's chest. "A warrior understands that the fight is only half the battle, Vexi. The other half is remembering what you are fighting for." He spoke with the easy authority of a man stating a fundamental truth. "Good drink, good company, and camaraderie are the sharpest weapons in any arsenal. It keeps the soul steady when the body wants to break."

Vexi considered this, her own experience with conflict being thankfully limited. "So that's your life then? Punching and drinking?" she poked, testing his composure. She was growing fond of their banter, of the way he seemed completely unbothered by her jabs.

"Peace was always the goal," he corrected, his voice softening slightly. "The battle was just the path to get there. Most of my years were quiet. Building, not breaking. Sharing a drink with the men whose cities I helped raise. Conflict is a serious, costly endeavor."

His tone sobered her own. "Did you kill a lot of people?" she asked, her playfulness giving way to a more serious curiosity. A knot of worry tightened in her stomach. Who was this man, really?

Warrick stopped walking, forcing her to halt as well. He turned to face her, his expression unreadable. "Fewer than you imagine," he said, his voice low. "In my world, there was no man, beast, or God who could truly stand against me. When you possess that kind of power, killing becomes a choice, not a necessity. I would describe it simply as a failure." He looked past her, at a memory only he could see. "But I spared many who later met a fate like my own. Banishment. I count their losses as my own."

He met her gaze again, his eyes holding the weight of centuries. "I do not enjoy taking a life, Vexi. To end a life is to end a story that has not yet been written. I have seen men I spared go on to raise families, to create wonders. Redemption is nearly always possible. That is a truth worth fighting for."

The sheer gravity of his words was overwhelming. Vexi felt uncomfortable, out of her depth in the face of such ancient, heavy truths. She decided to pivot, breaking the tension with a burst of her usual energy.

"And you were stronger before? Like, how strong? Could you punch the moon into a billion pieces?" She shadowboxed with the air, throwing a series of tiny, fierce jabs at an imaginary celestial body.

The hard lines of Warrick's face softened, and a genuine, smug grin touched his lips. "Remind me the next time we share a drink," he rumbled, turning to resume their journey, "to tell you about the time I tore the top off a mountain."

"Here I thought the Minotaurs were strong," Vexi said, her voice thoughtful as they walked, breaking the comfortable silence.

"They are," Warrick confirmed, his warrior's eye replaying the brief, brutal conflict. "They carried their weapons with experience. There was no hesitation in their swings. I was surprised to find warriors of that caliber in a land that seems so peaceful."

Vexi's expression clouded over, her gaze turning inward to a memory. "Borin used to speak of a darkness deep in their labyrinth. He didn't like to talk about it, but it sounded like a constant battle they were fighting." She frowned, struggling to recall the details. "I once heard him muttering to himself after a trade. He used strange words I couldn't understand. Something that sounded like 'Fleshless,' and 'Rotted Ones'." She gave a small, confused shrug. "Are they fighting ghosts and spoiled fruit? I honestly don't know."

The words, so innocently misinterpreted by Vexi, landed on Warrick like shards of ice. He stopped walking. The terms conjured images in his head. He had an understanding about what they were speaking of that she did not. The air in the vibrant forest suddenly felt colder. The shadows between the ancient trees seemed to deepen, to coil.

Vexi's words painted a picture not of ghosts or spoiled fruit, but of something far more gruesome.

Undead.

The realization settled in his gut, a cold, heavy dread. The problems of this realm were potentially far darker than he had imagined. Could it be that they were fighting something dark and twisted deep within their cave?

Before Warrick had time to contemplate the dark nature of the forest's depths, Vexi stopped him. "Look," she pointed. There, pressed into a patch of damp earth, was a single, perfect footprint.

Vexi peered at it. "I've never seen a track like that before."

But Warrick had. His breath caught. The intricate tread, the shape of the heel. It was undeniably from his world. Elder Myrrine had spoken of others, but seeing this tangible proof sent a jolt through him. Another Descendant. Here. Was it a potential ally, someone who understood his loss of power? Or was it another enemy, a rival cast into the same prison?

Before he could process it further, a cry ripped through the trees ahead. It was a raw, agonized wail that was abruptly cut short.

"Stay behind me," Warrick commanded, his voice a low growl. He strode forward, his focus instantly sharpening. An ally in need, or a foe to be vanquished. Either way, he was walking into a fight. Vexi trailed behind, her hand hovering near the vials on her belt.

A soft whimper drew them toward a great oak. He held up a hand, signaling Vexi to wait, and cautiously rounded the massive trunk.

There, crumpled at its base, was a feminine creature. She was tall and willowy. Her pale, gold-green skin was smudged with dirt and a darker substance that was unmistakably blood. Her dark, ivy-green hair, a complex weave of braids and flowers, was partially undone, trailing in the damp earth.

One leg was twisted at an unnatural angle, blood gushing out of a deep gash in her thigh. The wound was crippling, obviously agonizing. The meat of her muscles were clearly visible, the cut going all the way to the bone. This was a mortal wound, a death sentence.

When her emerald green eyes, wide and expressive, landed on Warrick, they filled with absolute terror.

A faint whimper escaped her throat. To her terrified mind, this towering, strangely-clad figure was surely an associate of her attacker, here to finish the job. She knew her life was forfeit, that she had no way to stop him, no way to run. Hope was a luxury she no

longer had. She turned her face away from him, her body curling inward, unwilling to witness the final horror he surely had in store for her.

In one last, tragically desperate effort, she began dragging her limp body across the forest floor. Tears streamed down her face, carving clean paths through the grime on her cheeks as she enacted a hopeless final attempt to get away. Her movements were a heart-wrenching display of palpable desperation, the sound of her weak body scraping through the leaves a pathetic whisper in the quiet woods.

But just as she felt the last of her strength give out, a familiar voice burst through the trees.

"Lyra!?"

Vexi's cry was sharp with alarm and recognition. She sprinted the few remaining feet and practically threw herself onto the forest floor beside her friend. "It's me, it's Vexi! Everything's okay, I promise. You're safe now." She glanced back at Warrick. "This is Lyrallylly Whisperleaf, one of the Dryads."

Lyra's head turned slowly, her tear-filled eyes struggling to focus. "Vexi?" she whispered, the name a fragile breath of disbelief. A wave of astonished relief washed over her face, and the dam of her composure shattered completely. Her silent, hopeless tears transformed into deep, wracking sobs of overwhelming thankfulness. She threw her arms around Vexi, hugging her tightly, burying her face in her shoulder.

"He tried to kill me," she choked out. "I didn't do anything, Vexi, but he stabbed me. Why would he do that?" Golden tears streamed down her cheeks, catching the dappled forest light.

Warrick stood as a silent sentinel, his mind cold and clear. The raw shock on the Dryad's face told him this was a creature of peace, a native of a sanctuary now violated. His gaze fell to his own boots, then to the track they'd found. The footprint belonged to a Descendant. And banishment was a sentence reserved for criminals and convicts. Violent predators who would stab a peaceful creature for sport or spoils. This wasn't an ally. This was a threat.

"Heal yourself, Lyra. Use your magic," Vexi pleaded, but the Dryad's attention was fractured, her horrified gaze still locked on Warrick. "He's a friend," Vexi insisted, trying to pull her back from the edge of shock. "He won't hurt you."

"He took my staff," Lyra whispered, her voice cracking with a pain deeper than her physical wound. "Why would he take my staff? Why would anyone do this?" The raw

confusion in her tone, the inability to comprehend such senseless cruelty, was a gut punch to Warrick.

Vexi, realizing Lyra was in no state to help herself, tore the pack from Warrick's shoulders and began frantically digging through it. "They use their staves as conduits," she explained to Warrick, her voice tight with desperation. "She can't use her nature magic without it." Her words hung in the air, a grim death sentence. Without that magic, there was no hope.

Vexi worked quickly, wrapping a strip of linen tightly around the gash to staunch the bleeding, but the cloth was immediately soaked a dark crimson. It was a futile gesture against such a grievous injury. "We have to get her to Sylvanrest, Warrick. Now!"

Warrick knelt, offering his arms to the injured Dryad. She recoiled with a yelp of pure fear.

"I am not the one who harmed you," he said, his voice a low, steady rumble, trying to project a calm he did not feel. "I will carry you home, if you allow it." He extended his hand again, his palm open. Lyra's terrified green eyes followed the movement. She hesitated, trembling, clinging to the single word he had offered. *Home*.

Slowly, her slender, shaking fingers reached out and touched his.

As their hands connected, he gently pulled her towards him. "Wrap your arms and legs around me. We are going to move fast." She obeyed, her long arms encircling his neck and her legs wrapping around his waist, a sharp hiss of pain escaping her as the movement jarred her wounded thigh.

He stood, lifting her with ease. He felt a faint whisper against his ear. "Thank you."

A cold resolve settled in Warrick's heart. This creature, so full of gentle life, represented the very peace he had once fought to protect. This assault was an affront to his core principles. He made a silent, deadly vow. He would find the Descendant who did this, and there would be no mercy.

"Vexi," he said, looking down at the small Oread. "Can you keep up?"

She was already uncorking a small vial containing a shimmering, silver liquid. "Yep," she said, downing it in one quick, practiced motion. A surge of energy seemed to visibly jolt through her small frame.

Trusting in her confidence, Warrick launched himself forward, charging into the dense woods toward Sylvanrest. His strides were long and powerful, leaping over fallen logs and shouldering branches out of his path. The forest became a blur of green and brown.

Lyra shut her eyes and clung on with all her might, the wind whipping through her hair as they raced against death itself.

CHAPTER SIX

Mother of the Moons

The journey to Sylvanrest was a brutal sprint. Warrick's legs burned as if on fire, an agony that was both a torment and a grim reminder of all he had lost. This searing exhaustion was a byproduct of his stolen power, his stolen self. But he would not be deterred. He was not just running to save a life. He was testing the absolute limits of this fragile new form.

He pushed onward, the forest a green blur around them. He felt Lyra's arms begin to loosen their grip around his neck, her legs starting to unravel from his waist. She was losing consciousness, her breathing a faint, shallow whisper against his skin.

"Faster, Vexi!" he growled, adjusting his grip to hold the limp Dryad more securely. If they didn't reach her home soon, he feared he might succumb to his own exhaustion.

Just as his own vision began to swim, a voice called out, seeming to come from every direction at once. It was a calm, resonant, and undeniably firm command. "Go no farther."

Warrick skidded to a halt, his head snapping in all directions, searching for the source of the voice that seemed to pierce his very mind. "I have one of yours!" he bellowed into the seemingly empty woods. "She is injured and requires aid!"

In front of him, the air began to shimmer. Motes of light and shadow coalesced, weaving together until a figure took shape, as if the forest itself had given her form. She was as tall as Warrick, with long, dark hair interwoven with living purple leaves. A corset of brown bark cinched her waist, and a flowing skirt of living vines draped her long legs. Her face held a timeless wisdom that Lyra's lacked, yet her beauty was just as profound.

"Lyalilly?" she breathed, her serene expression breaking as her gaze fell upon the limp form in Warrick's arms.

Vexi stumbled to a halt beside them, panting. The tall Dryad's attention shifted back to Warrick, her voice a low command. "Set her down. Quickly."

Warrick complied, gently laying Lyra on a patch of soft moss. The Dryad knelt, pressing the head of her ornate staff against Lyra's chest. A pulsing, emerald light enveloped Lyra's body, but she remained pale and still, perhaps already gone.

“Tell us what happened.” The new voice was male, and sharp as flint. Warrick turned, his eyes widening as he realized they were no longer alone. Several male Dryads, their forms like hardened bark and their hands gripping sharpened wooden spears, had detached themselves from the shadows of the ancient trees. He was surrounded. “The truth,” the lead Dryad growled, “or you will perish where you stand.”

Warrick’s pride, raw and instinctive, surged past his exhaustion. “I do not answer to threats,” he snarled, puffing out his chest and standing to his full, imposing height. Instantly, the Dryads leveled their spears, their sharpened tips aimed directly at his heart.

“Stop!” Vexi cried, throwing herself between Warrick and the guards. “We found her like this! Someone stole her staff and left her for dead! We brought her here as fast as we could, that’s the truth!”

Her desperate words seemed to fall on deaf ears. The Dryads held their ground, their expressions grim, their spear points glinting in the dappled forest light.

“Hold.”

The voice came from the woman kneeling over Lyra. It was soft, yet it carried an undeniable authority. The spears pointed at Warrick immediately eased back a foot. She rose, her gaze fixing on him. “You would posture so defiantly, Descendant?” she asked, her tone one of genuine confusion, not accusation.

“I was met with hostility,” he retorted, though some of his fire had cooled. “Is this how you greet all guests?”

The tall Dryad tilted her head, her eyes studying him as if trying to decipher an ancient, dangerous text. She did not answer. He was an outsider, a giant of a man clad in strange garments, a being of power and violence in a haven of peace. And, a thought struck him, he must have looked just like the man who had nearly murdered one of their own. Of course they were hostile. They were right to be.

The woman seemed to sense the futility of words. In a gesture he did not expect, she extended a long, slender hand toward him, palm open. It was an invitation, an offering of profound trust.

Drawn by a curiosity that outweighed his pride, Warrick mirrored the gesture. As his calloused fingers neared hers, she did not take his hand, but instead glided her own over his, her cool skin brushing his knuckles before her fingers wrapped gently but firmly around his wrist. Instinctively, he did the same, his hand encircling her delicate arm.

The connection was instant and absolute. It was not a thought, but a sensation like cool light flooding his senses, a current of pure empathy flowing between them. He felt a gentle probing at the edges of his consciousness, an invitation to share. He resisted, slamming a door of iron and rage in his mind.

She did not force it. Instead, she opened herself to him.

He was suddenly drowning in her world. He felt the sunlight on his skin as if it were his own, tasted the morning dew, and felt the deep, slow, collective heartbeat of the grove. He felt their harmony, their connection to the living world. They were not *in* the forest, they *were* the forest. He felt their joy in simple existence, and the profound absence of ambition, greed, or a desire for power. It was a peace so complete it was utterly alien to him. He then felt their fear. The startling intrusion of Harpies, the confusion caused by the Oreads' strange contraptions, and finally, a raw, terrifying memory of a far younger, more impressionable Dryad standing before the silhouette of a man dressed like him, snarling, demanding, violent.

He felt her fear of that man, and in that moment, understood he had to show her he was different. He lowered the wall in his mind. Just a little.

He pushed the feelings of a memory to her. It was Vexi, small and terrified on the forest floor. He let her feel his grim resolve as he stepped between her and the Minotaurs. He showed her Lyra, bleeding and broken, and let her feel the protective urgency that drove his desperate run to Sylvanrest. And then, he shared the most precious thing he had left. A little girl with his eyes, laughing as he tossed her into the air. He let her feel the overwhelming, uncomplicated affection. An echo in his mind broke away from him. *"I love you, Daddy!"*

But as he shared the light, she stumbled into the darkness he had tried to hide. She found a jagged, violent memory shard. His hands wrapped around Lycaon's throat. The snarl on his face. The sound of his own voice, distorted by hate. *"Die knowing you were the fuse that ends the world, Dog!"*

She gasped, ripping her hand away as if burned, stumbling back. Their empathic connection shattered.

Warrick didn't flinch from her horrified stare. He made no excuse. He simply looked down, a fleeting shadow of guilt in his eyes.

She caught her breath, her own eyes wide with a new, fearful understanding. "You are a complicated man," she stated, her voice a mix of caution and deep intrigue.

"I lived in a complicated world," he replied, his tone flat. He was a beast from a land of beasts. A deer could not be expected to understand a kodiak. His only concern now was what she would do, having seen the monster that lived inside him.

"What is your name, Stranger?" the Dryad asked, her voice a calm invitation for dialogue. Her reaction was not what he'd expected. After witnessing the monster lurking within him, he had anticipated fear, or an order to leave. She was difficult to read.

"Warrick Nash, a Descendant of the God of War," he stated proudly, meeting her gaze. "I am here to alert you to the Minotaurs' new hostility and to request a truce between the Dryads, the Oreads, and myself."

"I am Althea of the Three Moons." Her eyes, deep and ancient, held his. "You are a Descendant of the God of War, yet you ask for peace?" The question was a gentle probe, searching for the truth beneath his words. The safety of her people was clearly her priority.

"Like you said," he shrugged, a flicker of his old arrogance returning, "I'm a complicated man."

"Truly," she murmured, a hint of skepticism in her tone. "Walk with me then, Warrick Nash." She gestured with a long, slender arm. "You too, Vexi. Do not worry for Lyrally. Her kin will watch over her now."

"Will she be alright?" Vexi asked, her face etched with concern.

"The wound is closed, but the ordeal took a heavy toll. She needs rest." With that, Althea turned and began to walk, her expectation that they would follow as clear as a command.

"The Minotaurs, under Chieftain Kazgar, have been peaceful neighbors for a very long time," Althea said as they walked. "However, on my last diplomatic visit, I sensed a change." She turned her head to look directly at Warrick. "There was a woman with him. Another of your kind, with skin and garments like yours."

Warrick's mind began to race. The footprint in the forest from the attacker who nearly killed Lyra was certainly a male of his kind. Now Althea spoke of a woman with the Minotaurs. Counting himself, that made three. Three Descendants in this small corner of Apeiron. Banishment was supposed to be a rare sentence. What was happening back home?

"It has been many decades since we have seen another like you," Althea continued, her slow pace designed for conversation.

"In my world," Warrick said, thinking aloud, "Descendants are banished when they've committed crimes so egregious they can no longer be allowed to stay within society."

"Is that why you are here, Warrick Nash?" Althea asked, her voice gentle but her question pointed. "For a crime of such horror?"

Her question struck a nerve, but before his anger could rise, the pieces began to click together in his mind with horrifying clarity. It wasn't about crime. It was about control. How many villains did they convince him to fight who were actually just Descendants refusing to kneel? Was their goal a purge? The human elites, unable to control the legacy of the Gods, had schemed to remove them entirely. And he, in his arrogance, had believed himself untouchable, above their petty politics. He thought no one could ever force him to stand trial. He never imagined they would find a way to bypass it entirely. His hubris had been his downfall.

Althea watched him, her perceptive gaze sensing the internal storm. "You carry a great injustice," she observed softly.

Warrick looked at her, the raw, bitter truth of his realization hardening his features. He wouldn't give her the whole story, not yet. But he would give her a piece of the truth.

"The ones who pass judgment are not always the ones who are just," he said, his voice a low growl.

His jaw clenched, fists balling at his sides. The tension radiated from him in palpable waves.

"He gets like this," Vexi announced to Althea, her tone remarkably casual. "I think anger is his natural state. Get some mead in him and he perks right up."

"Is that so?" Althea murmured. She stepped directly into Warrick's path, stopping him. "That anger must be a terrible burden to carry." Her hand rose, and with a slow, fearless grace, she placed it flat against the center of his chest.

He felt it again. The cool, gentle probing at the walls of his mind. But this was different from their first empathic connection. This wasn't a request to share but instead it was an offer. A gift. Curiosity won out over his pride, and he allowed her in.

A soothing coolness spread from the point of contact, a sensation like stepping into a silent, frigid forest pool. The roaring inferno of rage inside him did not just quiet. It was quenched, receding from a violent blaze to a low, distant ember. The tension bled from his body. His fists unclenched, his jaw relaxed. The screaming banshees of his pain,

sorrow, and hate were silenced, reduced to muffled whispers in the farthest corners of his mind.

He took a deep, shuddering breath, a sense of profound peace washing over him. There was a respite blossoming inside him devouring his inner torment. It was a reprieve he desperately needed.

As the calm settled over him, he noticed Althea's own breathing had become ragged. Sweat beaded on her brow, and the serene color of her skin had paled. She held her hand to his chest for only a moment longer before pulling it away, stumbling back a step and leaning heavily on her staff.

"You require too much," she gasped, her chest heaving as she fought to catch her breath. "It is like trying to put out an inferno with a single drop of water."

It was enough. The brief respite Althea had given him was a profound revelation. It was a reminder that the flames *could* be quenched, that he might not be a slave to his own rage forever. The possibility of peace, however fleeting, was enough to give him hope.

Warrick placed a large, gentle hand on Althea's shoulder, supporting her as she recovered. "Thank you," he said, his voice a low, rough sound, heavy with a sincerity he rarely expressed. He saw her for what she was then. Not just a guardian, but in every sense of the word, the mother of this grove, her instinct to nurture and protect extending even to a broken warrior like him.

He straightened up, his focus shifting, a new and clear path forward materializing in his mind. "The woman you saw with the Minotaur leader warrants investigation. I must go and speak with her." War, despite his nature, was a last resort. A fragile peace would buy him time to understand this world, and perhaps, find a way to reclaim what he had lost.

"Speak with her?" Vexi squawked, her voice sharp with disbelief. "What if they just attack us on sight? We'll be murdered instantly!"

"We have time to prepare a plan," Warrick reassured her, the unshakable confidence of his old self carrying over, even in this mortal form.

Vexi planted her small fists on her hips, her expression a perfect mix of playful defiance and genuine concern. "Prepare? I'm prepared to use you as a decoy while I run away. That's the plan I'm prepared for!"

"I will discuss this matter further with my people," Althea said. She was standing at her full height again, her profound exhaustion seemingly held at bay by sheer will. "Our

priorities align, Warrick Nash. Sylvanrest will support your journey to investigate these troubling developments."

She looked between him and Vexi. "You must both be weary. We do not often have guests, but I am sure we can find accommodations for you."

As she spoke, Warrick felt the full weight of his own body settle upon him. The brief respite she had gifted him earlier had faded, replaced by the brute reality of aching muscles and a pounding heart. His diminished body screamed for rest.

"I'd like to stay with Lyra, if that's possible," Vexi spoke up, her voice quick and full of concern for her friend. It wasn't lost on Warrick that Vexi seemed to forge bonds easily. She was more adventurous and open than her reclusive kin, and certainly more than the sheltered Dryads. Had he not appeared, she might have become the very diplomat this land needed.

"Of course, little one." A warm, genuine smile touched Althea's lips, her gratitude for Lyra's rescue shining in her eyes. "She is this way."

Althea then guided Warrick to the edge of the grove, where a single, colossal oak tree stood, its branches creating a canopy wider than any three of its neighbors. A living doorway, a section of gnarled bark, seemed to shimmer and recede as they approached, revealing a chamber within.

"Rest here," Althea said. "You will be safe."

She left him at the entrance, and he stepped inside. The air was cool and smelled of oak wood, damp earth, and fresh sap. The room was surprisingly spacious, furnished with a simple table and chair that seemed grown from the wood itself. Against the far wall was a bed with a deep mattress of fragrant mosses and soft, dried leaves, covered with a blanket woven from something as light and fine as spider's silk.

Sleep came for him the moment his body stretched out. In his world, he had slept to quiet his mind. Here, in Apeiron, he slept because his body, now fragile and mortal, desperately demanded it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Nymph's Ire, A Dryad's Grace

The morning came instantly. One moment, Warrick was surrendering to a bottomless exhaustion. The next, a warm, invasive glow poured through the entrance of his dwelling, assaulting his senses. He struggled to command his eyes to open, but they remained defiantly shut against the call of the new day.

Still, a mission awaited him. Flinging his legs over the side of the bed, he sat up, the aches of his mortal body a dull but constant chorus. He massaged his eyes with a thumb and forefinger, urging them to obey, and finally, they opened to the world.

He pushed aside the living curtain of the doorway and the sight that greeted him stopped him cold. There, sprawled in a patch of sunlit grass, was a Dryad. A wide, peaceful smile graced her lips as she rested on the cool, damp ground.

But it was her beauty that truly arrested him. Her hair wasn't merely blond; it was a river of liquid gold fanned out against the emerald grass. A simple white dress, more suggestion than substance, seemed to cling to her form by sheer will alone. It plunged in a daring V from her collarbones to her navel, barely containing the high, full swell of her breasts, while a slit cut high on her thigh showcased the generous curve of her hips. Her skin, flawless and smooth with the faintest hint of spring green, seemed to drink in the sunlight, possessing an allure all its own. His warrior's eye, trained over centuries to assess, swept over her hourglass form and found no flaw. Only a breathtaking perfection that seemed to defy the natural world. This, Warrick thought with a sense of dawning wonder, was the single most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

"Ehem." He cleared his throat, alerting her to his presence.

Her eyes fluttered open. When they landed on his towering form, they widened with a gasp. She recoiled instantly, scrambling back several feet as her serenity shattered into fear.

"There is no need to be alarmed," he said, holding his hands up in a placating gesture. "I am a guest, here with permission from Althea of the Three Moons."

The assurance did little to soothe her. She held herself still, her legs drawn up to her chest. "What are you?" Her voice was musical, soft as a violin's gentle pluck.

Warrick knelt to lessen his intimidating stature. "A lumbering fool, most days." He made an attempt at levity, the words not landing as humorously as he'd hoped. For him, they never did. "You can call me Warrick."

She remained silent, her unease a palpable thing between them.

"Perhaps you could show me where Lyrally is resting?" he tried again. "I wish to check on her." He was about to give up and find his own way when she finally found her voice.

"Y-yes," she stammered. "I can take you to her."

Warrick stood and extended his hands to her, an invitational offer of his strength to help her up. She stared at them, confused by the gesture, before her own hands tentatively met his. He hoisted her to her feet with little effort, and a soft yelp of surprise escaped her. "May I ask your name?" His voice was purposefully less booming.

"Helaina," she said, her head tilted down, and her bright blue, almost glowing eyes peered up at him from beneath long lashes.

"Thank you for your help, Helaina." He persisted in his attempt to reassure her. These were a people of deep innocence, unaccustomed to strangers, and she clearly had no idea what to make of him. "Please, lead the way."

She turned, retrieving a slender staff from the grass. As she led him through the grove, she kept stealing glances back at him. The first was fearful. The second, cautious. But on the third, he caught the faint, upward tug of her lips. It was a shy, blushing smile that vanished the moment she turned her face forward.

He found himself utterly captivated. He was not a man given to idle leering, but she was a masterpiece. The tapered waist, the wide hips, the silken dress outlining every curve. A profound, primal desire stirred within him, direct and potent. He could not help himself.

It wasn't long before Helaina stopped before a colossal, ancient-looking tree, its branches forming a canopy high above. A curtain of woven leaves and living vines hung over a dark opening in its trunk. "This is Lyra's home," she said, her earlier fear now entirely replaced by a shy, coy smile. She hugged her staff to her chest as if for comfort, her gaze flickering between Warrick and the ground.

"I appreciate your assistance," Warrick said with a curt nod. "Perhaps I'll see you around."

"Maybe," she whispered, and with one last intrigued glance, she turned and walked away, disappearing silently back into the grove.

Before he could decide how to announce himself, the bottom of the vine curtain was peeled back and Vexi's head poked out. "Hey," she whispered, her spectacles glinting. "Come in." Her bright smile signaled good news.

Warrick ducked through the entrance. The air inside was cool and smelled of fresh sap, damp earth, and something sweet, like blooming flowers. There, sitting up on a cot woven from living branches, was Lyrally, sipping from an oddly shaped wooden mug. She looked vibrant and whole, her skin glowing with healthy color. A wave of profound relief washed over him. He had seen too many rescues fail, too many lives slip away. To see her recover so completely from such a mortal wound was an astounding feat. The healing gifts of the Dryads were truly a formidable power.

"I am glad to see you're well," he said, the sincerity in his voice surprising even himself. This was a victory to be savored.

Lyra set down her mug, her brilliant emerald eyes shining with a deep, unmistakable gratitude. "I owe you my life, Warrick."

"Nothing is owed. I was happy to help," Warrick said, and was surprised to find he meant it. While his primary motive had been strategic, this victory was more than just an opportunity to open diplomatic channels. He felt a genuine satisfaction seeing the young Dryad safe and well.

Before more could be said, the vine curtain was pushed aside. A male Dryad filled the doorway, his presence immediately commanding the small space. He had a deceptively youthful face framed by long, brown hair, but he moved with the deliberate economy of an experienced warrior. He carried his broad shoulders with confidence and held a sturdy, spear-like staff. Warrick recognized him. He was the lead guard from the standoff.

"Warrick Nash," he said, his voice a higher pitch than Warrick expected from such a formidable figure. "I am Guardian Kaelen Stonebark of Sylvanrest." He awkwardly extended a hand, the gesture stiff and clearly learned.

Warrick met the gesture, his own hand engulfing Kaelen's in a firm, warrior's grip. Kaelen's gaze flickered to where Lyra sat, and for a fraction of a second, the hard lines of his face softened, his eyes glistening with unspoken relief. No words were needed. Warrick understood completely. This stern Guardian cared for Lyra deeply, and her rescue was a debt Kaelen now acknowledged.

Kaelen drew his hand back, his guarded expression returning. "Althea told me of the Minotaur attack," he stated, his tone flat. "I had volunteered to lead the diplomatic mission myself. And yet, it seems you have taken it upon yourself to go."

"Both your people and the Oreads say the Minotaurs were peaceful," Warrick reasoned, his tone that of a general assessing a battlefield. "Now there is a Descendant of my own kind possibly among them. The facts don't add up. Speculation will get us killed. I intend to confront them directly." He looked Kaelen in the eye. "Your people need their Guardian here. Allow me to go in your stead."

"You do not speak for Sylvanrest, Stranger," Kaelen countered, his stance rigid. "If the Minotaurs are hostile, that is valuable information. But if they allow discourse, *your* words are not *ours*."

Warrick almost smiled. Kaelen was cautious, using him as a probe to test the enemy's disposition. He was a sacrifice on the altar of inspection. It was a role Warrick knew well. He had never truly been a part of any group. Not one of the humans who came to fear him, nor a true leader among the Descendants. He was an outsider. A lone wolf. This was his strength.

"I have no intention of negotiating a treaty on your behalf," Warrick stated, accepting the terms. "I will be a scout. I'll gather information and report what I learn. If their Chieftain, Kazgar, is willing to talk of peace, that will be a conversation for him to have with you directly."

Kaelen held his gaze for a long moment, a silent battle of wills passing between them. Despite the gratitude he felt for Lyra's rescue, a deep distrust still smoldered in his eyes. He was being persuaded into this, likely by Althea, and it chafed at him. Finally, he gave a stiff, reluctant nod.

"We will prepare supplies for your journey. Meet us at the edge of the grove when you are ready." Kaelen turned to leave, but his eyes glanced one last time at Lyra, who was now chatting softly with Vexi. Warrick saw something then. It was not just relief in the Guardian's eyes, but a flicker of profound failure. He was her protector, and he hadn't been there when she needed him most.

He watched Kaelen retreat, a flicker of something akin to sympathy stirring within him. Warrick was forged in failure and loss. He knew how to carry its weight. But Kaelen was the guardian of a peaceful world, a world where trauma of this magnitude was a shattering anomaly. The damage to the Dryad's soul, he suspected, would be a wound that lingered.

He turned to the two who remained. "Are you ready to go, Vexi?"

The little Oread smacked her own thighs with a grimace. "My legs are sore from yesterday. Stamina potions are great in the moment, but they demand their payment later." She stretched, a pained look on her face. "But I'll manage."

"What if you get hurt out there?" Lyra chimed in, stepping forward, her voice laced with a gentle worry.

"Vexi is a competent mender with her bandages," Warrick replied, the thought of his own past invulnerability a distant, bitter memory.

"But I can heal," Lyra insisted, her chin lifting with determination. "I should go with you. It's the least I could do, and my people are in peril as well. We should be involved."

Warrick felt a familiar, strategic part of his mind overriding his reluctance. He hated the idea of putting her in danger again, but her logic was undeniable. A dedicated healer was an invaluable asset, tipping the scales of any engagement. He was turning from a lone wolf into the leader of a pack.

"Althea gave me the impression your people rarely venture far from Sylvanrest," he observed, his gaze assessing her. "What were you doing so far out in the forest yesterday?"

"Lyra's a bit of a rebel!" Vexi interjected with a grin. "It's unusual for a Dryad, but it's why we're friends. She's always exploring."

Lyra's cheeks colored slightly. "Althea says my roots run deeper than most," she explained, her voice soft but sure. "To me, the entire world feels like my home. All the plains, mountains, and rivers feel like a part of me." A joyous light filled her eyes, only to dim just as quickly. "Although, I didn't know there were people out there who would hurt someone just to hurt them."

Her innocence, so recently shattered, was a tangible loss. Warrick weighed his words carefully.

"I would not ask you to face that danger again, Lyra. But if you insist, your aid would be welcome." He left the choice entirely to her.

Her resolve returned, her expression hardening with courage. "I want to help."

The decision was made. The party of two was now three. Together, they headed for the edge of Sylvanrest to prepare for their journey.

Althea of the Three Moons and Guardian Kaelen Stonebark were waiting for them at the edge of Sylvanrest, a satchel of supplies hanging from a low branch. The mere sight of Althea brought back the memory of the harmony she'd shared with him, a calm he now associated with her presence. In this time of turmoil, she was an anchor.

Kaelen was the first to speak, his voice as rough as the bark of the oak he stood beside. He gestured to the pack. "Waterskins are full. Dried fruit and nuts from our stores. Extra bindings. It should be enough."

Althea stepped forward, her serene gaze settling briefly on Warrick before falling to Lyra just behind him. "Lyrally? Are you here to see them off?" she asked, a hint of concern in her tone masking her uneasy guess.

"Warrick and Vexi may need my aid," Lyra stated, her chin held high, though she braced herself against her staff for the expected response. "I have volunteered to go with them."

"No!" Kaelen interjected immediately, his voice sharp with alarm. "You mustn't! It is too dangerous!"

"Kaelen," Althea said gently, reaching a hand toward his shoulder. "She must choose her own path." He brushed her hand away before it could touch him.

"You owe him nothing, Lyra. Please, do not do this," Kaelen pleaded, his voice cracking with a desperate, paternal love. He drew Lyra aside, just out of Warrick's earshot, their conversation a tense, quiet murmur.

Warrick turned to Althea. "It was not my intention to cause a rift. Her healing would be useful, but I understand his position completely."

Althea gave a sad, knowing smile. "I would be lying if I said I didn't half expect this. Lyra is a wandering soul. She is not content to remain in the grove like the rest of us." Her gaze followed the path where Kaelen had taken Lyra, a fond but worried expression on her face. The silence stretched for a moment before she turned her full attention back to Warrick.

"The task you now undertake for us is a great one," she said, her tone shifting to one of formal gravity. "And we are grateful. Yet I am afraid Sylvanrest has little to offer as a reward for such a service."

A roguish, ill-advised thought struck Warrick's mind. "I wouldn't turn down a night with Helaina," he said offhandedly. The words were out before he could stop them, a reckless impulse he couldn't seem to control. The jest tasted like a mistake the moment it left his lips, but the memory of Helaina's beauty still held a strange, lingering pull in the back of his mind.

"Eep!" A startled squeal rang out from behind a nearby fern. Warrick turned to see Helaina's beautiful face, pale with embarrassment, her sky-blue eyes wide. She clutched

her staff for a moment before darting away deeper into the grove, vanishing like a startled fawn.

"I thought you wanted *me*, you stupid oaf!" Vexi stomped her foot, her usual playful teasing replaced by a genuine, fiery anger. "What, am I not enough for you?!"

Warrick couldn't help but smirk down at her. "I do recall you rebuffing my affections the other night, Vexi. Jealousy does not become you."

"I'm not jealous! Have whoever you want, you filthy manslut!" She crossed her arms, fuming.

"I'm sensing a bit of hostility," he observed, cocking an eyebrow.

Vexi tore a Chokeweed potion from her belt and pulled the cork off with her teeth. "I'll show you hostility, Warrick!"

"If you desire me so intensely, Vexi Dew," Warrick rumbled, "I would be happy to accommodate you right here and now."

"There is not enough moss brew in all the Verdant Deep to make that happen!" she shrieked. "Why are you so preposterously daft!?"

It was then that Althea's serene voice cut through the chaos with quiet gravity. "When we touched, Warrick, I sensed that physical desire is an intense force within you. I imagine it is so for all your kind." Her tone was not judgmental, but one of keen observation. "We Dryads are more measured, but we are not without our own passions."

She paused, her gaze becoming pointed. "Helaina, however, is still inexperienced. Though she is many decades old, she is deeply innocent and fragile." Althea wasn't shaming him for his crude comment, but she was asking him to consider a truth he had overlooked.

And he did. Warrick had been entranced by her physical form but had given no thought to her mind. He saw it now with a sobering clarity. The Dryads matured slowly, in a world free from the hardships that forced adulthood. Helaina, for all her breathtaking beauty, was emotionally still a child. He cursed himself for being so thoughtlessly lustful. The realization made him recoil internally. "I will adjust my approach to her in the future," he said, his voice a low, sincere promise.

"Your feelings were not entirely your fault," Althea replied cryptically, and left it at that.

Lyra returned then, Kaelen trailing close behind her. "I've decided to stay," she said, her voice full of a regret she tried to hide. It was clear Kaelen's plea had won.

Warrick looked from Lyra's pained expression to Kaelen's fiercely protective one. He gave a slow, solemn nod. "I understand." The warrior in him lamented the loss of a powerful healer, but the man in him was glad she would be safe.

Vexi, her anger at Warrick momentarily forgotten, rushed to Lyra and gave her a quick, fierce hug. "Be safe," she whispered, her voice tight with disappointment.

"You too," Lyra whispered back, holding on for a moment longer than necessary.

Warrick shouldered his pack, gave a final, unreadable nod to Althea and Kaelen, and turned without another word. Vexi, after giving Lyra's hand one last squeeze, turned and followed him, a tangible distance between them.

The two of them disappeared down the path, leaving a heavy silence in the grove. Kaelen let out a long, slow breath of relief and placed a comforting hand on Lyra's shoulder. But she didn't relax. Her gaze remained fixed on the spot where her friends had vanished, and the look of sad regret in her eyes slowly hardened into one of quiet, steely resolve.

CHAPTER EIGHT

What Fury Wrought

As Warrick and Vexi traveled east, the heavy silence that had settled between them was finally broken.

"What if they're sick?" Vexi blurted out. "The Minotaur, I mean. Maybe it's a magical curse, or they ate some bad mushrooms? Something that made them rabid?"

Warrick's response was immediate and clinical. "Then diplomacy is impossible. We would collapse the entrance and seal the den. Keep the plague from spreading."

Vexi stopped, horrified. "You'd kill them all? Just like that? What if there's a cure?"

"Would you risk your people for that possibility?" he countered, his logic a hard, unyielding wall. "The Dryads, too?" Her face fell.

Warrick could feel the discomfort in the air. She was disturbed by his answer, even if she didn't entirely disagree with it. "We don't need to speculate," he said, his tone softening slightly. "We'll know what happened soon enough."

Just as he finished, a voice called out, clear and determined. "Wait! Wait for me!"

They turned to see Lyrallylly Whisperleaf moving through the forest with a supernatural grace. She didn't push through the brush as Warrick did. She glided between the ancient trees, the ferns seeming to part for her as she sprinted noiselessly toward them. She came to a stop, her emerald eyes bright with resolve.

"I'm coming with you," she said with conviction.

"I can't say I'm surprised," Warrick shook his head, "but Kaelen is not going to be happy about this."

"He'll forgive me," Lyra said, though she seemed to be convincing herself. "Eventually." A pang of guilt flashed in her eyes as her gaze fell to the ground.

"I won't rob you of your free will," Warrick said, turning back to the path. "If you aim to join us, you are welcome."

"Is he the forgiving type?" Vexi asked Lyra with a cocked eyebrow. "I'm pretty sure he's never forgiven me for introducing you to 'Shroom Brew.'"

"Eck!" Lyra shuddered at the memory, her expression deeply serious. "It went down my throat like fire and made me feel sick. You poisoned me!"

Vexi let out a giddy chuckle. "A single sip and you were already ralphing! How is that even possible?" She looked at Lyra with a clinical curiosity. "Perhaps we need to dilute it. Or start with only a few drops on your tongue."

"No!" Lyra shook her head violently. "Never again! I will happily enjoy my berry juice, and that is all!"

Warrick hadn't even noticed the faint smile that had curved his own lips. Listening to their easy banter was a welcome distraction, a moment of light in the grimness of their quest.

The joyous atmosphere was shattered when Lyra stopped cold in her tracks, her head snapping to the side. The color drained from her face. "Something isn't right," she whispered, clutching her staff. "The forest feels disturbed."

Warrick took her warning with absolute seriousness. His own amusement vanished, replaced by a warrior's sharp vigilance. He pivoted, his eyes scanning the deep shadows between the trees, listening. The air grew still. The birdsong ceased.

A dry, unnatural rustle scraped from a thick bush to their right. Warrick shifted his stance, his body coiled, ready for an attack. The entire forest seemed to be holding its breath.

"That," Lyra breathed, her voice trembling, "wasn't an animal."

"Something is stalking us," Warrick growled, his voice a low rumble. He subtly shifted, placing himself between the two girls and the unseen threat. "Or someone." The feeling was unfamiliar, deeply unsettling. He was a predator, a hunter. To be the prey, to be tracked by an enemy he could not see, was a coward's tactic, and it infuriated him.

Then, a sly, disembodied whisper slithered through the trees, seeming to come from every shadow at once. "Look how the mighty have fallen. Down in the dirt with the rest of us. Lucky me, lucky me."

Warrick recognized the voice instantly. "Corvus Auto," he noted with heavy disdain, his own voice tearing through the forest in a thundering boom. "Given the opportunity to start over, and you choose to skulk in the shadows, harming innocents? Now you have the gall to come after me?"

A dry, crackling laugh echoed around them. "You'd have found me already if you still had your powers. Without them, you're an easy target. You're nothing without your

strength. Nobody need fear you now." The voice was menacing, the manic, fluctuating tone of a mind shattered. "You're a traitor, Warrick. A tool used by the humans to enslave us to their will! You'll die for your crimes against your own blood!"

"You were a petty thief, Corvus!" Warrick roared, his rage spiking. "You talk of our birthright, of authority? You were a rat building a nest from stolen scraps and calling it a throne! A gnat buzzing with delusions of a crown!"

Vexi and Lyra huddled together, their eyes wide with fear, trapped in the center of an argument with a ghost. They couldn't fight what they couldn't see.

"They were the pests!" Corvus's voice shrieked back. "And you sided with them! You, with all your power, stood by and watched them dismantle our legacy, our history! You helped them take it from us!"

"You should have left me and mine alone, Corvus," Warrick yelled, his voice echoing through the trees. "Regardless of anything else, you should never have come after my family!"

"She became their greatest weapon!" the disembodied voice shrieked back, filled with a crazed anger. "She had to be stopped! You should have stopped her!"

Hearing Corvus speak of her, something in Warrick snapped. He would not allow this broken creature to taint her memory. With a roar of pure fury, he ripped a jagged rock from the earth and hurled it into the trees in the direction of the voice. The stone shattered against an ancient oak.

It was the opening Corvus had been waiting for.

From the opposite direction, he moved like a phantom. A blur of silent, deft swiftness weaving between the trees. He was on Warrick before the larger man could even turn. Warrick saw only a brief glint of a makeshift dagger before it was plunged deep into his abdomen.

"Bleed, betrayer," Corvus whispered, his hot, triumphant breath in Warrick's ear. "Bleed and die."

The shock left Warrick dazed, his eyes wide with surprise and agony. The stone dagger was ripped from his belly, and blood erupted from the wound. His hands flew to staunch the flow as he collapsed to his knees, defeated.

"Three years in a cage because of you!" Corvus kicked him hard in the shoulder, sending him sprawling. Blood began to pool in the dirt around him. "Do you have any idea what that does to a mind, Warrick!?"

Vexi tore a potion from her belt, but before she could throw it, a pebble shot from Corvus's hand and shattered the vial in a shower of glass and liquid. He was impossibly fast, a flash of his old, deadly precision. Green gas hissed into the air, and Vexi leaped back, coughing violently.

Lyra stood still amidst the chaos, her expression serene, her eyes closed. Unseen by the gloating thief, a single vine slithered through the soil beneath her staff.

"This is all I ever dreamed of," Corvus danced around Warrick's fallen form. "You, dying, knowing it was me. You put me in a box, and now I've put you in the ground."

Warrick felt something cool and living wrap around his ankle. A soothing warmth spread up his body, a clean, tingling energy that washed away the fire of his wound. He could feel his bleeding stop, his flesh knitting together. He was healing.

Corvus noticed the shift. "No!" he screamed, his gaze snapping to the seemingly innocuous Dryad. "You—"

He lunged at her, dagger in hand, but she simply vanished, melting back into the forest from which she came. His head swiveled, searching for her. That brief window was all Warrick needed.

With a roar like a wild animal, he charged, shouldering Corvus and driving him to the ground with the force of a battering ram. Corvus landed with a grunt, scrambling back to his feet and holding the stone knife out in a trembling, defensive posture. Warrick stood over him, his full, imposing height radiating a murderous fury.

"Cowardly fool!" Warrick roared, his voice thick with a rage that was both ancient and immediate. "I sided with the humans because they were the lesser evil! The Gods were immortal monsters, satisfying their whims at the expense of anyone and everyone! Rapists! Murderers!" The fire inside him was an inferno now, his vision collapsing into a blood-red haze. He pointed a trembling, accusatory finger toward Vexi and Lyra. "These are peaceful creatures! And you stab one for nothing?! You escaped the sadism and hate of our world only to bring it here!"

"You turned me into this!" Corvus shrieked, thrusting his dagger forward in a final, desperate lunge. "It's your fault! You let them break me!"

But without surprise on his side, his attack was clumsy. Warrick batted the blade aside, reeled back his hand, and landed a single, heavy blow against Corvus's cheek. The man hit the ground hard, dazed, and spat a mouthful of blood and several teeth onto the forest floor.

Warrick stood over him, his body trembling. He wanted to hit him again. The beast inside him roared for it, demanding to be let loose. But he resisted, a war raging in his own mind. *Control yourself. You are better than this.*

Corvus crawled to a nearby tree, resting against it, his jaw broken. It was over. But he had one last piece of poison. "They let me see the news, you know," he slurred, spitting more blood and letting out a sad, pathetic chuckle. "They showed that little girl you killed. Her lifeless body cradled in the arms of her weeping mother. You're the real monster here, Warrick."

All Warrick's control shattered at the words. He roared, a sound not of a man but of a crazed beast, and launched himself at Corvus, hauling him up and tossing him across the clearing. Corvus landed in a heap, unable to recover.

"You're here with me, Warrick," he coughed, a final, victorious whisper. "They banished you, too. You're a villain, just like me."

Villain. That was the word. The lie they had branded him with, the lie that had followed him to this new world. He wouldn't bear it. He wouldn't let Corvus wag his venomous tongue any longer.

He lifted his leg high and brought his bootheel down with all his enraged might onto Corvus's head. Blood and bone and brain matter exploded, painting the trees with gore. His headless body drained out onto the loamy earth, turning it a dark crimson.

Warrick's breaths were heavy, his chest heaving. His body shook with unbridled anger. His eyes remained fixed on the ruin at his feet until, finally, the roaring in his ears subsided enough for him to hear the silence. He lifted his head.

He saw Vexi, horrified, her hands clamped over her mouth, petrified by a brutality she had never imagined.

Seeing her trembling with fear sobered his rage instantly. His vision cleared. "Vexi, I didn't—"

His words faltered. Lyra had stepped in front of Vexi, her staff held up in a defensive, trembling stance. She was shielding her friend. From him.

He had enacted the very violence he condemned. He had betrayed the goodness of the people he was trying to protect. Corvus was right. He was a traitor. A monster. They would never forgive him for this.

His arms went limp. He knew they would only see a ravenous beast now. He turned his body away from them, and walked away.

CHAPTER NINE

What Truth Wrought

The image of Lyra's defensive stance was a fresh, searing brand on his mind. The horror in Vexi's eyes was a ghost that walked beside him. Despair was a leaden cloak on his shoulders, heavy with regret and a profound, sickening self-loathing. He had failed. He had come to this world and found a flicker of something pure, something worth protecting, and in a single moment of unrestrained fury, he had proven himself to be the very monster they should be protected from. The man he was wanted to stop, to fall to his knees and surrender to the crushing weight of his failure.

But the warrior he had been for centuries refused to allow it.

Discipline, forged in a thousand battles, screamed back at the despair. A soldier does not stop in the middle of a battlefield because his heart aches. A general does not abandon the campaign because of a single, devastating loss. He had lost their trust, yes. A battle, decisively. But the war was not over. Victory is never out of reach so long as you draw breath. To be alive is to have a chance to turn the tide.

His mind latched onto the cold, hard logic of the mission as a drowning man latches onto driftwood. It was a familiar refuge from the chaotic, treacherous sea of his emotions. His objective was to reach the den of the Minotaur. He would find the woman Althea had spoken of, the other Descendant. He needed to know who she was and what she wanted.

He would finish the mission. He would re-evaluate after. He would survive today so that he could find a way to fix the damage of yesterday. Life was a thing of fluctuation. Even in this hopeless moment, he knew the memory of this failure was a wound and it would heal over time.

And so, he marched on. Alone.

An hour of trudging through the forest, the despair from his recent failure a quiet, haunting feeling, brought him to the Minotaur den. Two of the brutes stood guard outside, their massive forms still and silent as stone idols. Stealth was not a tool in Warrick's arsenal. He strode directly into the clearing. The guards tensed, their crude axes shifting into ready positions.

"I have come to speak with Chieftain Kazgar," Warrick announced, his voice firm and even. He stood tall, planting his hands behind his back in the disarming posture of a

soldier at ease, a gesture that felt profoundly unnatural to him. He could only hope their culture respected the sanctity of a diplomat.

He was not prepared for what happened next.

A familiar, melodic laugh erupted from the shadows of the cave. "Ah ha ha. What an unexpected guest!" He recognized the voice even before she stepped around one of the beastmen, revealing herself.

Warrick's head snapped up. This was the woman Althea had seen. Her short blond hair seemed to almost glow against the gloom of the cave, framing a face of sharp, aristocratic beauty. She was clad in simple, dark gown that did little to hide a regal confidence. The attire hugged her form closely, revealing a busty, sleek figure. Her piercing green eyes held an intelligent, amused contempt. Her movements were fluid and confident, the walk of an experienced woman who knew how to weaponize allure.

"Phaedra," Warrick said, the name a weary sigh. He didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed. It could have been someone far worse. "I didn't realize they allowed snakes in their den."

She glided closer, her eyes glittering with amusement. "The Warrick I remember would have torn his way inside by now. Are you the legacy of the God of War, or the God of 'Pa-pa-please Let Me In'?" she mocked. He shook his head, unamused. She stopped, uncomfortably close. "Of all the exiles in all the hells, you were the last I imagined seeing in this place." Her words confirmed it. Even among the revolutionaries, he was seen as a tool for the humans, an outsider to his own kind.

"What are you doing here, Phaedra?" he growled. "Poisoning the well? Leading these creatures into one of your bizarre schemes?" She had been part of the sovereignty movement, like Corvus, but her methods were different. Tolerable, usually. *A criminal*, his mind supplied out of old habit, before a new thought corrected it. *Or just another victim they made me believe was one.*

"You don't have your powers either, do you?" she said, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Gods, a powerless Warrick Nash might be the most useless thing in this realm." She circled him, a predator assessing weakened prey. "Better than nothing, I suppose." She turned and walked toward the entrance. The Minotaur guards, who had not moved a muscle, relaxed their stance at her passing.

"I asked you a question," Warrick's tone grew rougher.

She paused at the mouth of the cave and looked back over her shoulder, a sly, beckoning smile on her lips. "You want to know what I'm up to, Warrick?" She wiggled a single finger at him. "Come on in, and I'll show you."

CHAPTER TEN

Styx and Stones

He marched forward into the cave entrance, the eyes of the Minotaur guards glaring with an intensity that promised violence if he made one wrong move. The moment he passed the threshold, a wave of overwhelming scent struck his nostrils. It was the primal, musky odor of unwashed fur, old blood, hot metal from a distant forge, and a deep, earthy dampness. The cavern was lit by flickering fire sconces that cast long, dancing shadows across rough-hewn walls. Crude weapon racks lined the passage, holding axes the size of tombstones, and the skulls of strange, horned beasts were mounted like grim trophies. The air was filled with the distant clang of a hammer on an anvil and the low, guttural grunts of other Minotaurs in side passages.

"My mind is riddled with questions," Phaedra's voice cut through the gloom, pulling him from his assessment. She circled him, her eyes sharp and analytical. "But what strikes me hardest are those drooping shoulders. Your power loss leaving you feeling a little heavy?"

She was perceptive, he'd give her that. She could sense his despair. "I ran into Corvus Auto on the way here." He deflected.

He watched her face, and saw the genuine flicker of shock.

"I crushed his skull beneath my boot," he added, his voice flat and cold, an intentional brutality meant to throw her off the scent of his own anguish. Strangely, she seemed less surprised by the murder, as if she knew any confrontation between the two of them could only end one way.

"When I was arrested, I was put in a cell next to his," she reflected, her gaze becoming distant, unfocused. "I could hear him at night. Cackling. Mumbling gibberish to himself." A haunted look crossed her face as she touched the memory of his madness. She composed herself quickly, shaking off the melancholy. She had lost as much as he had, and she was clearly feeling the sting of it despite her veil of calm impishness.

She turned and continued down the corridor. "I've been here for two months. You're the first of us I've seen."

He remembered her banishment. It was a media spectacle. They'd called her a terrorist, a traitor to the fragile peace. He realized now it had all likely been lies. "Seems a lot of us have been on the chopping block lately," she observed grimly.

Her words were measured, a subtle jab at his past neutrality. He knew what she was doing. She was painting him as the one in the wrong.

He said nothing, his mind a swirl of conflicting feelings as they wound through the corridors. Had her movement been successful, would her reign have been any less horrid than the humans?

He felt a brief flicker of caution. This could be a trap. But the thought vanished as quickly as it came. Phaedra was cunning, but she didn't destroy potential resources. He understood her games.

"I thought you were going to explain yourself," he insisted, his voice growing rough.

"Through here," she said, pulling open a heavy, iron-banded wooden door. It creaked open, revealing a chamber that was markedly richer than the rest of the den. Furs were spread across the floor, and a massive Minotaur stood at the far end, his back to them.

"I have found another of my kind, Chieftain," Phaedra called out. "And he wishes to speak with you."

This had to be Kazgar. The leader stood impassive, as if he hadn't heard her.

"I have come to discuss the battle that took place outside your den," Warrick's voice boomed, deep and gruff. "And to offer a truce."

At the sound of his powerful voice, the Chieftain finally, slowly, turned. This was the moment of truth.

The giant Chieftain was a mountain of fur and muscle, his presence seeming to suck the very air from the room. He approached Warrick slowly, each heavy hoof fall was a dull thud that resonated in the stone floor. A polished metal ring hung from his nose, and his ancient eyes, enormous and sharp, scanned Warrick from head to toe.

"You wish to show him the river?" Kazgar's voice was a deep, slow rumble, like stones grinding together, yet surprisingly gentle. He spoke with a measured, ancient cadence, hanging on each syllable.

Phaedra shrugged. "Two heads are better than one."

Warrick stood in confused silence. He had killed three of this Chieftain's warriors. He had expected rage, a demand for retribution. Instead, Kazgar seemed to regard him with a calm, unnerving indifference.

"Walk with me," the Chieftain rumbled, turning and exiting the room.

Warrick shot a questioning look at Phaedra, his arm half-raised. "Patience," she whispered, nudging him forward. "Trust me. This part is interesting."

Warrick followed as Kazgar led them deeper into the mountain. "We are compelled, Descendant," the Chieftain said, his words echoing in the rough-hewn corridor. "The Labyrinth calls to us. We build. We dig. We expand. Here, in our home, the Underdeep, the work is never finished."

They came upon an archway, and the nature of the cave changed abruptly. Beyond the threshold were carefully laid brick walls, ornate sconces, a floor of polished tile, and a ceiling of smooth stone. The white of the marble floor tile was pearl white, glistening with immaculate spotlessness. The entire corridor was unbelievably pristine, not a speck of dirt or spot of grime to be seen. It was a marvel of impossible, obsessive construction. This, Warrick accurately guessed, must be the entrance to the Labyrinth.

"This is our sacred work," Kazgar stated, his voice resonating with absolute finality. "Ours and ours alone. Nobody must ever trespass."

The implication was not lost on Warrick. A curious Oread, foraging for glowing moss, stumbling into a place considered more sacred than life itself. The puzzle pieces clicked into place.

"This is why your warriors went after Vexi," Warrick's realization spilled out of him.

"It is not a choice, Descendant," Kazgar rumbled, his ancient eyes filled with a profound weariness. "We must construct. We must build." He paused, drifting his sad gaze to Warrick. "We are compelled."

For a brief moment, Warrick looked into Kazgar's eyes and saw not a beast, but a king burdened by an ancient sorrow, a profound exhaustion that seemed to emanate from his very soul. He sympathized.

The Chieftain turned from the ornate corridor and led them down another rough-hewn hallway. Warrick took one last look at the impossible architecture of the Labyrinth's entrance, admiring its artistry while lamenting the obsessive compulsion that must have driven its creation. And this was only the entrance.

What was Phaedra's role in this? What was the river they spoke of? His mind churned with questions.

It wasn't long before they stood before a grand, black-wood double-doorway, heavily barred by two enormous iron beams. At a silent signal from Kazgar, two Minotaur guards began the laborious process of unbarring the entrance. The beams groaned in

their brackets, the muscles of the guards straining with the immense weight. Whatever was beyond this door, they were desperate to keep it contained.

With a final, deep groan, the doors swung open, revealing only an impenetrable, silent darkness. The air that washed over them was stale and cold, thick with the foul stench of decay. Warrick stepped forward, peering into the void. He saw nothing. But then he heard a wet, shambling groan, the sound of something dragging itself across the stone floor.

A shape shot out of the darkness, a grotesque mockery of a man with flesh hanging from bone and a mangled jaw. It threw itself at Warrick, but before it could reach him, a colossal axe swung down from a Minotaur guard, pulverizing the abomination in a spray of gore and rotted tissue.

"Undead," Warrick breathed, the word a shocked realization. This is what Vexi had meant. The Rotted Ones. The Fleshless .

"They never stop," Phaedra said, stepping up behind him and raising a torch, its light pushing back the oppressive gloom. "They claw at the doors until they break through. The guards have to open it once a day to drive them back, or they'll tear the wood apart."

Warrick stared at the disgusting pile of decay and coagulated blood at his feet. This was something out of a nightmare, a horror his world had never known.

Kazgar brushed past him, hefting a colossal warmaul that may have weighed more than both Descendants combined. He was not angry or fearful. He was a king marching into a daily, hopeless war. The two guards fell into step on either side of him. Without a word, Warrick and Phaedra followed, their torchlight casting long, wavering shadows as they descended into the darkness.

The Minotaur vanguard formed an impenetrable, moving wall of fur and steel, their axes cleaving through the undead with brutal efficiency. Warrick and Phaedra followed in their wake as they pushed deeper into the darkness. Some of the dead still wore rotting flesh over their bones, while others were little more than skeletons clad in the tattered rags of a forgotten age.

Eventually, they reached a crumbled wall, a ragged breach in impossibly ancient, cyclopean stone. A faint, crimson glow emanated from the chasm. This was it. The revelation.

Warrick followed Phaedra through the jagged hole, stepping out onto a crumbling precipice. He stopped, his jaw falling open. The sheer, glorious horror of the sight before him stole the breath from his lungs.

He stood at the edge of a cavern of impossible scale, a vast, circular dome that could have contained ten of his world's grandest arenas. The distant, curved ceiling was lost in impenetrable shadow. Below, illuminated by a faint, ambient crimson light, sprawled the colossal, decaying remnants of an ancient, city-sized necropolis. Crumbling Greek-styled temples and basilicas, their once-proud columns now broken and leaning like skeletal fingers, were connected by wide, brick-paved roads, all cracked and overgrown with pale, ghostly flora.

And through the heart of it all, bisecting the ruined city, snaked the source of the crimson light. A wide, slow-moving river, its waters the color of freshly spilled blood. From its sluggish depths arose a constant, collective groan, a symphony of a million tormented souls. Skeletal hands, draped with tatters of flesh, reached up from its surface, grasping at the stale air. All along its banks, the Rotted Ones and the Fleshless were constantly pulling themselves free, shambling aimlessly into the ruined city.

"Styx?" he breathed, the word a whisper in the face of such impossible grandeur.

"It must be this realm's version of it, yes," Phaedra confirmed, her voice a reverent hush. She pointed a trembling finger toward the far end of the river. "There."

A colossal statue of some forgotten, many-armed deity had toppled forward, its immense bulk smashing across the river and creating a crude, massive dam. Pinned beneath the tons of shattered marble, Warrick could just make out the splintered, crushed remains of an enormous, ancient barge that could only be The Ferryman's ship.

"Only the Gods could have built this, Warrick," Phaedra whispered, her eyes shining with a feverish, ecstatic light. "They were here in this land!"

"You can't know that for sure," he countered, his own awe tempered by a deep, rising dread.

"I can. I do," she insisted, turning to him, her eyes welling with joyful tears. "There are documents, Warrick! Scrolls and tablets. I have begun to decipher them. They left long ago, but they were here!"

Before he could respond, a guttural roar sent a shockwave through the air. It was a warning from Chieftain Kazgar signaling the retreat. The Minotaur vanguard was struggling, being pushed back by a fresh surge of the dead. It was time to go.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Phaedra's Gambit

Warrick sat on the edge of a massive, petrified stump outside The Underdeep, the ancient wood cool against his skin. The sun bled across the horizon in hues of orange and violet, casting long shadows from the monolithic trees around them. He and Phaedra were silent for a long moment, the sheer spectacle of the day still settling in their minds. He could count on one hand the number of times he had been genuinely awestruck over the centuries. Seeing the mythical crimson river carving its way through a decaying, subterranean Greek necropolis was now among them.

It wasn't just the impossible scenery that overwhelmed him. It was the weight of its implications. Architecture of this scale, of this divine artistry, could only have been the work of the Gods.

"What were they doing here?" The thoughts vomited out of him, raw and unfiltered. "Where are they now?"

"The Gods?" Phaedra, who had been studying his profile, turned her gaze to the darkening sky. She'd had the same earth-shattering questions herself. "The answers have to be here somewhere, Warrick." There was a fervent, unshakeable conviction in her voice.

"And the undead," Warrick mused, the pieces clicking into place with dreadful clarity. "They're trapped. Unable to pass on."

"The blockage in the river is like a dam for the souls. They can't leave this realm and move onto the next because of it. While it seems so obvious to us, the Minotaurs were blind to it." She gracefully rose from her seat and, with practiced ease, wedged herself between Warrick's legs, placing her warm hands on the hard muscle of his chest. She leaned in, her scent a mix of night-blooming flowers and something wilder, enveloping him. "It's here, Warrick. It's all here. Creatures of myth, wonders of the old world. Our legacy, our ancestry."

Warrick looked up at her, his brow furrowing. Her eyes burned with an intensity that went beyond mere excitement.

"Don't you see?" she whispered, her voice a hypnotic thrum. "We're home."

It dawned on him then. For Phaedra, this was the ultimate prize. Not just the necropolis, but everything. This entire dimension was an untamed paradise, littered with the forgotten relics of their progenitors. Where Warrick saw a strange and dangerous land, she saw a throne waiting for a queen. She saw the second coming of Olympia.

"Join me, Warrick. Help me," she purred, her fingers tracing the lines of his clavicle. "We'll rebuild it all, together. We'll forge a world that is truly ours." She leaned in, her lips brushing against his ear. "I'll bring you whatever you desire. A kingdom to rule." He cared little for a crown. "Endless women to warm your bed." A tempting offer, but one he could manage himself. "I can even give you your power back."

His head snapped up, his heart slamming against his ribs. The world narrowed to her and that single, impossible promise. That was the one thing he desperately, achingly wanted.

"How?" His response was immediate, a single word loaded with centuries of frustrated pride.

"I have already convinced the Minotaur Chieftain to remove the blockage. It is a monumental task that will take every one of them, but they begin tomorrow." Seeing the skepticism on his face, she pressed on. "Once the dead can finally pass into the afterlife, their endless assault on the Minotaurs will cease. As a reward, the Chieftain has granted me unrestricted access to the necropolis. I will be free to search every tomb, every temple, every crumbling vault for the secrets of the Gods."

"You're *assuming* you'll find something that can restore our powers," he said, the hope in his chest deflating. It was a fool's errand, a shot in the dark. But she was right about one thing. He couldn't afford *not* to take that shot. She knew it, too. She knew exactly which strings to pull.

Warrick let out a deep, weary sigh, turning his head away from her seductive gaze. "Okay," he submitted, the word tasting of capitulation. "What do you need from me?"

"The Harpies," she answered instantly, her hands beginning to massage his chest. "I need a contingency plan. You'll go to them, do your little diplomacy song and dance, and convince them to tell us if they know of any other ruins in this land."

"A survey of the territory, in case the city is a dead end." It wasn't a question. It was a clear-eyed understanding of her strategy. The risk was no greater than approaching Kazgar's fortress as he'd already done. "Alright. I'll do it."

The agreement seemed to ignite a fire in Phaedra. She'd gotten what she wanted, and the victory was a potent aphrodisiac. She pressed herself more fiercely against him, her

lips finding the skin of his neck. He knew it wasn't him that she desired. It was what he could do for her that set her ablaze. Before he had a chance to react, a small, hesitant voice broke the moment.

"Warrick?"

His head swiveled. Vexi was standing near a gnarled tree, her form silhouetted against the last rays of sunlight. In one swift, reflexive motion, Warrick stood, dislodging Phaedra, who landed on the ground with a surprised *thud*.

"Vexi," Warrick said, a strange mix of guilt and surprise warring within him. "What are you doing here?"

Phaedra, scrambling to her feet in a huff, brushed the dirt from her clothes, her face a mask of pure indignation.

"I was hoping you would have come this way," Vexi said, her voice strained. She was wringing her hands, her posture radiating discomfort. "You scared us when you killed that man. That's not how things are done here, Warrick."

He took a moment, the accusation hanging in the cool evening air. He could have explained the blinding rage, the specific taunt that had broken his control. He could have argued that Corvus's words were a poison that had to be silenced. But he didn't.

"My anger got the better of me," he confessed quietly.

"As it so often does," Phaedra interjected, her tone light and casual.

"What if you got angry at me one day?" Vexi asked, the question hanging heavy between them.

"Ha!" Phaedra laughed, a sharp, musical sound. "His rage is the stuff of legends, true, but it takes a remarkable amount of effort to truly unleash it. I've only seen it a handful of times." She glided behind Vexi, kneeling to rest her chin on the smaller woman's shoulder. "And never against a beautiful young woman. He saves that fire for special occasions."

"Who *are* you?" Vexi demanded, shrugging Phaedra off and turning to face her, hands on her hips.

"Phaedra Valeris, Descendant of Peitho," she answered with a theatrical dip of her head. "And an acquaintance of Warrick's. We've decided to work together on a little project." She shot a wink at Warrick. "You saw his brand of justice with Corvus. Is that what this is about?" She pointed the question at Vexi.

"It's personal, actually," Vexi clipped out, her disdain for Phaedra immediate and obvious.

"Fine, fine. I'll leave you to your little heart-to-heart." Phaedra had secured Warrick's cooperation and had no sincere interest in his relationship with this forest creature. With a dismissive wave, she strode back towards the yawning maw of the Underdeep.

Warrick turned his full attention back to Vexi. "I should have handled the situation with Corvus better. I apologize."

"He lied about the child," Vexi stated, her eyes searching his.

Warrick's breath caught. "How did you know?"

"I didn't," she admitted. "Not for sure. His words felt rehearsed. Cruel for the sake of being cruel. I only knew for certain when," she reached into a pocket and pulled out a folded piece of parchment, "I read this." She handed it to him.

He reached down, his fingers brushing against hers as he plucked it from her small hand. He unfolded it. The script was elegant, familiar. And at the bottom of the letter, a name that shattered his composure.

Cassandra.

He physically stumbled back, a choked gasp escaping his lips. His eyes, wide with shock, shot to Vexi. "Where did you get this?"

"Off his corpse. It was hidden in his boot."

Warrick stared at her, imagining the small nymph searching the mangled body he'd left behind, driven by her unyielding quest for the truth. He sank back down onto the stump, the world narrowing to the letter in his trembling hands.

"Warrick,

I'll never forgive myself for what I've done. I keep replaying the event in my head over and over again, and I wish so badly things had turned out differently. That I'd have done things differently.

I know the incident with the young girl was not your fault. We know there are always risks involved in our conflicts. Sometimes there are casualties when we clash in this world of mortals. You had to watch that poor child perish after trying so desperately

to protect her. You didn't deserve the condemnation they straddled you with, the blame they heaped upon your shoulders.

We have a system of courts and law for a reason. If you would have just allowed yourself to be taken into custody, the system would have found you innocent. I know it would have! The people would have stood behind you, too. I'm sure of it.

Though, the Council seemed delighted that I banished you. They offered me anything I desired. Which concerns me. Perhaps your judgement was always their plan. I fear that possibility so much.

All I wanted was to write this letter, hoping it finds a way to you. That's all I asked them for. I've hidden it on a Descendant that is to be sentenced today.

But this letter is not for you. I'm sure it will never find you. It is for me. For closure.

I don't know where I've sent you, or if you survived the exile. But I hope you did. I wish for you to find a new home, a new place where you can set down roots and live a better life. You weren't happy here. Not for a very long time now. I deeply want for you to find happiness again, wherever you are.

I love you, and I'll miss you forever.

Goodbye, Dad."

The fragile parchment trembled in Warrick's grip, a crinkling whisper in the heavy silence. A single tear escaped the corner of his eye, a foreign and unwelcome visitor. It carved a solitary, glistening track down his weathered cheek, tracing a path through the dust and grime of the day before clinging to the grim downturn of his mouth. It was, perhaps, the first tear he had shed in a century, and it was for her. His daughter. A woman he would never see again, whose last words to him were an apology he could never accept in person.

He did not wipe it away. To do so would be to acknowledge its presence, to admit to a vulnerability he had spent ages burying under stone and steel. With movements that were uncharacteristically delicate for a warrior's hands, he folded the letter along its original creases. This was the last piece of her he would ever have. It was now his most treasured possession.

"The girl that died," Vexi's voice cut softly through the stillness. "The letter says it wasn't your fault?"

Warrick looked up, his gaze distant. He saw Vexi properly then, saw the conflict in her own eyes. She did not truly know him. How could she? She was trying to reconcile the man who wept silently over a letter with the beast who had torn Corvus apart. Was he a good man scarred by tragedy, or a monster with a fleeting moment of conscience?

She deserved an answer. She had sought him out, offering not judgment, but a chance to explain. Even after seeing the worst of his rage, she was still here.

He drew a slow, steadying breath, the memory rising like bile. "It was in a city, back in my world. There was an explosion at the base of a tall building followed by a screaming, chaos, and dust so thick you could taste it." He stared into the past, remembering the event with controlled composure. "The whole structure began to groan, to give way. That is when I saw her. A little girl with blond pigtails, frozen in the street, right in the path of its collapse."

He paused, the image searing and sharp.

"I rushed over and wrapped myself around her, trying to make my body a shield. I felt an incredible force slam onto my back. It came down on top of us with a roar of grinding stone and snapping steel." He could still feel the phantom weight, the shuddering impact that drove the air from his lungs. "But my body held, as it always did. When the shaking stopped, I pushed the debris away, pulled us both from the rubble." His voice faltered for a second. "A piece of rebar had punched through a gap in my arms and impaled her."

He fell silent for a moment, then continued in a hoarse whisper.

"I held her and watched the light go out of her eyes."

They both sat in a profound silence. Vexi was picturing the horrific scene, her heart aching for the man beside her. And Warrick was desperately trying to maintain his composure, which was already threatening to shatter. He was used to death. It was the constant companion of mortals. But that one in particular, that little girl with the pigtails and the wide, trusting eyes, she had reminded him so much of Cassy at that age. It was a failure that felt less like a casualty of war and more like a personal damnation.

The fragile parchment, now folded and safely tucked away, felt like a lead weight in Warrick's tunic. He had said more than he intended, cracked open a door to his past that he normally kept bolted shut. The feeling of vulnerability that followed was one he disdained. He could feel Vexi's curious, pitying gaze on him and knew she had more questions. He had shared enough. It was time to rebuild his walls.

"You went into the Labyrinth, did you not?" He changed the subject abruptly, his tone shifting from somber to analytical. He knew the question would be jarring enough to alter the course of their conversation. "That is why the Minotaurs were so angry with you."

"What? No! I would never," Vexi started, her denial immediate and instinctive. But then she stopped, her brow knitting as her thoughts drifted back to that day. "I dropped the cork on one of my bottles and it rolled away from me. I dashed to grab it and," Her eyes went wide, the memory and the realization striking her at the same moment. She had been so focused on the small, bouncing piece of wood that she had paid no attention to where her feet were carrying her. "And that is when they started roaring at me," she finished, the sentence spoken with the dawning horror of her own mistake.

"You were distracted," Warrick stated, not as an accusation, but as a simple observation. "You did not realize where you were walking."

"Even if I did, I had no idea it would make them that irate! How could I have known?" Vexi's defensiveness flared, desperate for the whole bloody affair not to be entirely her fault. It was an understandable reaction, Warrick thought, because she was not wrong. Stumbling into a forbidden room should not warrant a death sentence.

"They are obsessively, unnaturally captivated by that place," Warrick said, thinking back to Kazgar's haunted eyes as he spoke. *'We are compelled.'* The words echoed back through his mind. "It is not a choice for them. I think any outsider entering is an offense to their very nature." He looked at Vexi, sharing his theory. "It is almost as if a curse binds them to it, forcing them to build, to maintain, and to protect it with a violence they cannot control."

A new understanding settled between them. The Minotaur were not malicious, just magically bound.

"Where is Lyrallylly?" Warrick asked, realizing the small Dryad was nowhere to be seen.

Vexi's expression softened with concern. "Oh. She went back home. You," Vexi paused, choosing her words with care, "you terrified her, Warrick. I mean, you terrified me too, but Dryads are more fragile than we Oreads are. Seeing that much rage and brutality was too much for her."

A flicker of regret crossed Warrick's face. He would have to return to Sylvanrest to report his findings, and he would have to face her then. He suspected forgiveness, if it came at all, would not come easily.

"I cannot sleep in the Minotaur den," he grunted, the thought of the smell making his nose wrinkle. He gestured at the forest. "I still have bedrolls in my pack. Let us return to our original campsite."

A playful glint returned to Vexi's eyes. "Are you going to carry me there against my will again?" she teased.

In response, Warrick simply bent down, scooped her up in one fluid motion, and settled her onto his broad shoulder, her legs dangling against his chest.

"Ahaha!" A giddy, delighted laugh burst from her as she kicked her feet like a child. "Onward, Giant!" she commanded, pointing a finger dramatically towards their destination.

This was the part of him she adored, the gentle giant who was calm and playful. It was the vital reminder that though he was capable of terrifying violence, he was also deeply kind. She leaned her head against his, feeling the rumble in his chest as he walked. But the question lingered, a shadow in the back of her mind. Who was the real Warrick Nash? The tender storyteller who captivated her entire community, or the raging beast who slaughtered his enemies without a moment's hesitation? Or was he, terrifyingly, both?

CHAPTER TWELVE

A Warrior's Heart

After a surprisingly restful night under the overarching stone shelter, they rose with the forest. A light, misty drizzle had washed the world clean, and as the sun climbed above the canopy, every leaf and blade of grass sparkled as if adorned with diamonds. The air was cool and smelled of damp earth, wet bark, and blooming night flowers closing their petals. The beauty of the Verdant Deep was never more apparent, a serene and gentle stage for the conversation to come.

They walked in a comfortable silence for nearly a mile, the only sounds the soft squelch of their boots on the muddy trail and the chirping of unseen birds. Vexi kept glancing at the towering man beside her. She saw not the beast from the Minotaur den, nor the weeping father from last night, but a quiet giant lost in thought. She wanted to understand how all those pieces fit together. Finally, she broke the silence, her voice soft so as not to startle him.

"What was she like?"

Warrick did not need to ask who she meant. "Cassy?" he said, the name a fond, sad whisper on his lips. "She was loving, kind, and painfully hopeful. So optimistic that it sometimes felt like a force of nature in itself. She saw light where there was only darkness. To her, everything broken had the potential to be fixed, every wrong could be righted. It was," he paused, a rare, faint smile touching his lips as he reflected, "inspiring."

"And you loved her?" Vexi recalled the note, the reverent way his calloused hands had held it, as if it were the most fragile thing in the world.

"Before her, my life was balanced," he searched for a different word. Balanced felt passive when in fact he felt somewhat bored with life at the time. "Mundane. It was a long, straight road with neither thrilling peaks nor unpleasant valleys." He remembered centuries of being a lone wanderer. Sharing ale with locals in loud taverns, engaging in trifling conflicts over cards or insults, and often returning alone to an empty home at the end of the night. "When she came into my life, she introduced a beautiful chaos. The quiet was replaced with laughter. The order was replaced with her toys and books scattered everywhere. It was a radical change, but a charming and wonderful one. She gave me something to cherish."

"Family," Vexi supplied, trying to put a single word to the feeling he described.

"More than that," he corrected gently. "I had children before her, and lovers. Cassy was indescribably special." He was not a poet. He did not have the words to convey the sun-like warmth she had brought into his cold, solitary world. "Unfortunately," his tone shifted, the light in his eyes dimming, "she also had the Apeirgy." His broad shoulders drooped slightly at the recollection.

"And that is the power that banished you here?" Her questions continued, each one a careful step into his past.

"It is not a divine power, not like mine. Its origin, its nature, no one knows where it came from or how one inherits it. But it is the single most impressive power in existence. Terrifyingly so." He paused, his next words a gloomed whisper. "It humbled even me." He lamented, the old bitterness creeping into his voice. He wished again, as Cassandra did in her letter, that things had gone differently. That she had never felt the need to use the Apeirgy she wielded to strip him of his power and cast him away forever.

Vexi saw the change in him immediately. The warmth of his memories was gone, replaced by the stark chill of his pain. It was as if she were prying open a freshly sutured wound, tearing out the stitches one by one with each question. A part of her desperately wanted to know more, to understand the full story, but another, gentler part recoiled at the thought of causing him any more suffering.

They continued on, the forest floor a soft carpet of moss and fallen leaves under their feet. The path wound through a dense patch of ancient, weeping trees whose branches hung low like mournful veils. As they emerged from the shaded grove into a small, sun-dappled clearing, a familiar location revealed itself. Warrick stopped short. It was the place of Corvus's last breath.

But the bloody, brutalized heap he had left behind was gone. In its place sat a mound of woven vines and living roots, tangled together in an intricate, organic lattice. Small, white flowers, no bigger than a thumbnail, were already beginning to sprout from the damp earth caught within the weaving. It was not a grave born of digging and sorrow, but one of growth and reclamation. It took only a moment for Warrick to understand the strange gathering of the forest's wilderness into this one, singular marker.

"Yeah," Vexi's low, sorrow-filled voice chimed in from behind him. "Lyra didn't feel right leaving him like that. She," Vexi took a sharp breath, her gaze momentarily unfocused as she forced back the horrific memory of brain and sinew exploding through the air, "she wrapped him up. A Dryad tradition, I imagine. To return a body to the earth as quickly as possible. I've never seen it done before."

Warrick declined to add anything. No questions, no comments. He simply stared at the last resting place of the man driven mad, the man he had stomped the life out of in a

blind fury. There was no remorse in his heart for the act, only a cold acknowledgment of its necessity. He held his gaze on the living grave for three steady heartbeats, then turned and continued on the path. Moving forward. Always moving forward.

Vexi watched him go, then glanced back at the mound. She shook her head slightly, a small, frustrated gesture, as if trying to shake off the grim irony of the moment. Despite her best efforts not to pry open his fresh wounds, it seemed the world itself was insistent on reminding him of all the pain he carried. A dark cloud of the past, it seemed, was determined to follow them on their journey.

The walk back to the Dryad's grove was nearly complete. They were just outside the whispering borders of Sylvanrest when the very air in front of them seemed to shimmer and coalesce. Althea of the Three Moons materialized before them, stepping out from behind a curtain of weeping willow as if she were detaching herself from the forest's own spirit to greet them.

"You have returned," she spoke, her voice like the rustling of ancient leaves. There was a hint of surprise in her tone, as if a part of her had wondered if the grim warrior would simply walk away and never come back.

"The Minotaurs are not a threat," Warrick reported immediately, his voice a low rumble. "There was a misunderstanding. It is resolved." He offered the good news first, a clear sign that his duty was at the forefront of his mind.

Althea was quiet for a long moment, her ancient, moss-green eyes seeming to dig deep into his soul, searching for the truths he did not speak. Finally, she gave a slight, accepting nod. "Lyra told us what happened. She spoke of your confrontation with the man who tried to take her life."

"Then I am sure she told you of his demise as well," Warrick stated, his gaze unwavering. He did not try to deflect or dodge the subject. If Althea wished to confront him, he would stand and face it. He knew the man had to be stopped, but he also knew it should not have happened like that. Not in front of them.

"She will carry the scar of that memory for the rest of her life, Warrick," Althea said, her words not accusatory, but heavy with a profound sadness. She hung his actions in the air between them, forcing him to see their full weight.

Warrick's jaw tightened. He placed both hands on his hips and looked down at the earth, his broad shoulders slumping. He did not need to say anything. His dejected posture said it all. He was not proud of what he had done, but neither could he go back and change it.

But Althea was not looking to chastise him. She only wanted to understand the heart of the man she had allowed into her sanctuary. Did he revel in such violence? From his expression, it was obvious he did not. Her gaze softened from judgment to concern. "Lyra told me of your shock, after. That must have been a difficult moment, seeing two you sought to protect looking at you with horror." The genuine care in her voice was unmistakable.

Warrick looked up, and in a moment of profound trust, held out his hand, palm up. Althea was an empath. He was normally guarded, not from shame, but from a protector's pragmatism. If his allies saw the depths of his rage or his despair, they might lose their faith in the shield he offered.

Emotions, however, were Althea's native language. He trusted she would understand their complexity without judgment. He wanted her to know that even at his worst, he was not a threat to her or her people.

Althea looked closely at his offered hand, her brow raising in surprise at the raw vulnerability of the gesture. She took a breath, her gaze flicking from his calloused palm to his earnest eyes, before reaching out. Her soft, slender fingers grazed over his skin.

And then she felt it.

First, the blazing forge of his righteous anger, a white-hot inferno ignited by Corvus's poisonous words. An intolerable offense that had to be silenced. Then, in an instant, the fire was quenched. She felt the shock of him seeing Vexi and Lyra's terrified faces, and the roaring inferno was replaced by the cold, sharp ice of regret and shame. She felt his hand reaching for the frightened Dryad, an unspoken plea for forgiveness, and the sting of being met with her defensive stance.

And beneath it all, vast and deep and cold, was the ocean of his despair.

She felt the crushing weight of his banishment, the phantom ache of his stolen power, the disorientation of this strange new world. She understood. He was a man broken by injustice, drowning in a sea of his own grief, yet somehow, with a warrior's heart, he was still pushing forward, still fighting to keep his head above the waves.

Althea gently released his hand, the warmth of the connection fading, though the echo of his turmoil remained. She had an inclination of what had occurred before he showed her, but feeling it directly confirmed her suspicions and gave her a much deeper understanding of the man himself. He was a warrior not just against external threats, but against the raging sea within himself. Recovery for him would not be as simple as healing a fresh wound. This was an ancient sorrow, a foundational crack in his soul. She

knew he had a long, difficult road ahead, and from the grim resolve in his eyes, it seemed he was already aware of this.

She let the silence settle for a moment before changing the subject, her voice gentle. "And the other Descendant? The one I sensed among the Minotaurs?"

"Her name is Phaedora," Warrick answered, his emotional walls sliding back into place. "We were not aligned in our goals back in our world. But here, we have decided to work together to discover more about this land."

"Oh yeah? Are you boinking her too?" Vexi suddenly snapped, crossing her arms tightly over her chest. The memory of Phaedora draped over Warrick on the stump was clearly a fresh irritant.

"Phaedora is a master of manipulation," Warrick stated, his tone matter-of-fact. "She has no issue using seduction to get her way." He did not condemn her methods, but there was a weariness in his voice that suggested he would not be swayed by a game he had seen played a thousand times before.

"So that is why you are helping her? She is going to wet your whistle whenever you want?" Vexi huffed, kicking at a loose root on the ground. She could not stand the idea of him bedding that woman, or any other for that matter.

"She offered me something I could not refuse," he said, meeting Vexi's angry glare without flinching. "The slight chance at regaining my strength." He was not ashamed to admit it was his greatest desire, nor that Phaedora had played her cards perfectly to secure his help.

"But you know she is a master manipulator!" Vexi's voice rose, her frustration boiling over. "Why would you let her control you like that?"

"She is not tricking me, Vexi. Our goals simply align for the moment." He had already replayed their entire encounter in his head. Phaedora had dangled kingdoms and pleasure, but she had saved the real bait for last. She knew the return of his strength was the one thing he coveted above all else. It was a calculated offer he was knowingly accepting. "She made me an offer I cannot refuse, even if I know the hand that offers it is not to be trusted."

"You might be strong, but you are as dumb as a brick," Vexi muttered, turning away from him, too infuriated to look at his face.

Warrick did not argue the point. He watched the rigid set of her shoulders and understood this was not truly about his alliance with Phaedra, or his quest for power. Vexi was not angry *with* him, she was jealous *of* her.

He turned his attention back to Althea. "I will be heading toward the Harpy roost in the high crags tomorrow morning."

"We," Vexi corrected sharply, without turning around.

A faint, almost imperceptible smile touched Warrick's lips. It was good to know she was not dissuaded from the journey, despite her current mood.

"Their vantage point could provide invaluable knowledge of the surrounding lands," Warrick explained, but Althea seemed to take in his intent with a bit of concern. He did not seem to be allowing himself a moment's rest. She had imagined he would be more eager to settle in first, to find a place to call home and begin his life here. Instead, he seemed driven, ever busy, moving from one quest to the next as if stillness itself were his greatest enemy.

"You will want to rest for the journey," Althea said, raising her long, branch-like arm and sweeping it in the direction of the guest den Warrick had used before.

"I would appreciate that," Warrick replied with a nod. "But first, I wonder if I might speak with Lyra?" He did not wish to delay the inevitable conversation. Leaving a wound to fester only invited infection.

"I will take you to her." Althea's willingness was a quiet testament to her leadership. She respected the independence of her people, where Kaelen was often far more restrictive, or protective to be more precise.

It was a short walk through the living heart of Sylvanrest. Other Dryads paused in their work, their leafy hair rustling as they turned to watch the trio pass, their curiosity piqued by the grim set of Warrick's jaw. Althea led them to a dwelling woven from the living boughs of a great willow tree. After she announced their arrival, they stepped inside.

The air within was warm and smelled of crushed herbs and damp soil. Lyra sat on her cot of woven moss, and she seemed to physically recoil at the sight of Warrick. Beside her, Guardian Kaelen stood like an angry, petrified statue, his knuckles white where he gripped his sturdy spear. He had carefully positioned himself between her and the entrance.

"I do not think it appropriate for him to be here," Kaelen's tone was as hard and unyielding as ancient oak.

"He deserves a chance to explain his actions, Kaelen," Althea replied, her voice a stern, balancing force against his overprotective instincts.

Warrick's gaze went to Lyra. Her legs were purposefully turned away from him, and her wide eyes held the look of a frightened forest creature cornered by a predator. "I should have handled the situation with Corvus differently, Lyra," he said, his voice a low rumble of sincerity. "It was not my intent to expose you to such a sight." It was the apology of an ancient warrior finally realizing his brutal world had collided with a place of gentle harmony. He knew battle, and in his youth, had often reveled in the thrill of it. But he had never enjoyed the cost.

"Can I," Lyra's voice was softer than usual, a muffled whisper, "can I speak to Warrick in private?"

"We have no secrets among our people, Lyrally! And I will not leave you alone with this savage!" Kaelen brought the butt of his staff down hard on the floor, the thud echoing through the living wood of the tree.

"Kaelen." Althea needed only to say his name. It was not a shout, but it carried an authority that silenced him instantly. Though they postured as equals, it was clear that Althea of the Three Moons was the deep root of power in Sylvanrest, and Kaelen would not challenge her.

He let out a great, frustrated huff and turned back to Lyra. "I will be right outside if you need me." Warrick saw the obvious paternal love in the gesture and respected it. He wondered how he would react in the same position if it were Cassy. Then again, he had always expected strength from her. He would give his life for her without hesitation, but he also knew that it was imperative she learn to be strong on her own.

Kaelen and Althea stepped outside, leaving Warrick, Vexi, and Lyra in the now quiet room. Lyra spent several long moments staring at the floor, clutching her arm as if feeling a phantom pain, a deep guilt coloring her expression.

"That man," she began, her voice shaky. "He hurt me. For no reason at all. He took my staff, which had no value to him." Her eyes welled with tears. "I was horrified at what you did to him." She finally looked up, meeting Warrick's gaze. "But I'm glad he's gone."

She paused, her lips trembling with the weight of her confession. It seemed as though she was going to say more, a whole torrent of words dammed up behind her teeth, but

she choked on them, a small, frustrated sob catching in her throat before they could escape.

Warrick would remain perfectly still for a long moment, letting her choked confession hang in the air, giving it the respect and gravity it deserved. He would not rush to fill the silence. When he finally spoke, his voice would be a low, quiet rumble, softer than she had ever heard it.

Warrick knelt, the old leather of his armor groaning as he lowered himself in front of Lyra. The deliberate act made him smaller, less of an imposing mountain of a man and more of a supplicant. He wanted her to see his sincerity, not his strength. "You are not glad of his demise, you are glad for the safety his departure has given you and your people. That feeling is not a love of death. It is a love of life that can now continue without fear of harm." He understood the difference between the joy of hurting others, and the relief of a threat passing.

Lyra seemed to consider his words, her small hand wiping an escaped tear from her cheek. This was all new to her. Though she ventured farther than the other Dryads, she had rarely encountered anything that tainted her view of the forest as a docile, harmless land to frolic in and explore. Now, a deep shadow had been cast upon her world.

"When you saved me," she began, her voice gaining a little strength, "I thought that is who you were. A protector. A guardian, like Kaelen." Lyra glanced over at Vexi, perhaps wondering what the Oread saw in this giant of contradictions. "But after what I saw you do to that man, you were someone else entirely. I felt as if I was so wrong about you. That you were not a guardian at all, but something twisted. A nightmare wearing the face of a dream."

The harsh image she conjured of him, a wolf in sheep's clothing, landed painfully on his soul. "I do not fit in here in your forest, Lyra. I know that." He paused, collecting his thoughts. For all his age and wisdom, he found he had little more to say. He had never been around a people like hers, a people whose wounds were to the spirit rather than the flesh.

"He's harmless, Lyra. Watch!" Vexi suddenly exclaimed, breaking the heavy silence with an attempt at levity. She launched into an exaggerated fighting stance, reeled her fist back, and threw her best haymaker at Warrick's shoulder. The impact made a soft *thump*, and felt more like a gentle breeze than a punch. "Come on, you brute! Fight me!" She peppered his arm with a flurry of equally ineffective blows.

Warrick simply reached his hand back without looking, gently nudging Vexi with a wide palm. Her momentum thrown completely off, she tumbled to the floor with a surprised 'Oomph!'.

Lying on her back, she pointed up at him. "See? He's a total pushover!" She exclaimed, despite being the one who was pushed over.

"What she is trying to say," Warrick clarified, a hint of weary fondness in his tone, "is that my violence is not for you or your people. I only resort to it when I am pushed across a line that is not easily reached."

"I need some time to think about all this," Lyra said, her mind still a whirlwind of the intense emotions inside her.

Vexi scrambled to her feet and began tugging at Warrick's arm. "Come on. Let's give her some space."

He nodded, rising to his full, imposing height once more. He backed towards the dwelling's entrance, pausing in the doorway to glance back at Lyra one last time. Her face was turned towards the wall, lost in contemplation. He left knowing that while a bridge had been offered, she had not yet decided if she was ready to cross it.

The air outside Lyra's dwelling was thick with unspoken tension. Kaelen was waiting, his posture as rigid as an ironwood tree, and he immediately stepped into Warrick's path as he exited.

"You come into our home, accept our hospitality, and then you twist one of ours to lie to us and scar her mind for life?" Kaelen's voice was a low, dangerous growl, like the grinding of stone on stone. "You have tainted her soul with your darkness, robbed her of her innocent glee. She will be fearful of the world beyond this grove forever now, because of you!" He poured a river of righteous, paternal anger out before Warrick.

"Your sacred bubble will not last forever," Warrick snapped back, a different kind of anger igniting within him. It was not the blind rage from before, but a sharp, pointed fury born from painful experience. The Dryad's words echoed a debate he'd had with himself a hundred times over when raising his own daughter. "You are not allowing your people to grow. You build no defenses against tragedy because you pretend it does not exist." The words came out sharper than he intended. "Perhaps if you had armed her with more than just innocence, she would not have been found bleeding and helpless in the forest!"

"You watch your tongue, stranger," Kaelen warned, his hand tightening on his spear, his bark-like skin seeming to bristle. He was agitated, yet Warrick noted with a bitter pang of envy that his control was still leagues beyond what Warrick himself was ever capable of. It was a rare feeling, but the ability to hold such fire within and not be consumed by it was a strength he coveted.

"Enough," Althea interjected. Her single word did not cut the tension like a knife. It simply smothered it, a profound silence falling over the clearing as if the forest itself was holding its breath. "Warrick, walk with me."

It was not a request. There was a pull in her words, an ancient, undeniable presence that commanded respect in a way that was deeper than mere authority. It was like being caught in a gentle but irresistible current.

"I am going to stay here with Lyra," Vexi announced, her expression soft with concern. "She could use a friend right now." She gave Warrick's arm a quick, reassuring squeeze before turning back toward the willow-bough home.

Warrick gave a curt nod, then turned his back on Kaelen's simmering anger to follow Althea as she moved gracefully into the deeper parts of the grove.

They walked deeper into the woods, the familiar sounds of Sylvanrest fading behind them until they were cocooned in the quiet sanctity of the forest. Sunlight filtered through the dense canopy in shifting patterns on the mossy ground.

"When I let you into my mind, you saw another Descendant," Althea began, her voice losing its melodic strength, becoming fragile. "One from my own memory." Her posture shifted, her shoulders hunching slightly as if against a cold wind. Her tone felt saddened, and for the first time since he had met her, frightened. "He was as a rabid animal, lost in a tangled web of apathy and derangement. When he saw me, there was only a consuming lust in his eyes."

The memory was clearly a painful one for her, but she pushed onward, her gaze fixed on the path ahead.

"He tore the clothes from my body, his hands like claws. I did not understand then what he might do next, but I know now. I know he meant to have his way with me, and then to discard me like a broken toy." She turned towards Warrick, though her eyes remained downcast, staring at her own feet. "Kaelen saved me that day. He drove his spear through the man's heart, ending his life right in front of me. I can still feel the hot splatter of blood on my face." Two soft fingers grazed her cheek, touching the crimson red gore in her memory with a lightly shaking hand.

A long silence hung between them, filled only by the whisper of the wind. Warrick rolled the confession around in his head. The Gods of his world were rumored to be just like that, taking what and who they wanted with a complete disregard for the minds and souls they left shattered behind them.

But the irony was not lost on him. Kaelen, who had just minutes ago accused him of being a savage, had once acted in virtually the same way. Though it was unfair to directly compare the two events. Kaelen was saving his kin from a horrible fate. Warrick was a mindless ragebeast unable to control the violent storm that had taken him over.

The deep, unshakable bond between Althea and Kaelen finally made perfect sense. Though she must have been distraught by the brutal act, she surely came to realize he had saved her from a horror she would never have recovered from. It was violence in the name of protection, a language Warrick understood perfectly.

"When I saw you for the first time, carrying our wounded Lyra, I was right back in that moment," Althea confessed, her voice barely a whisper. "I was so afraid of you. I wanted to turn and run and never stop." Warrick remained silent, knowing this was a story she needed to tell without interruption. "But I knew I could not. I am the guardian of this grove. I had to face you, to keep my people safe."

She finally looked up, her ancient green eyes meeting the massive warrior's gaze. "Once you let me in, I saw that you were not like that man. I saw the warrior, yes, but I also saw the father. I saw the heart beneath the armor." A measure of her strength returned to her voice. "That is why I did not deter Lyra from journeying with you, why I did not stop you from seeking Helaina. I began to think that their only hope of truly growing, of learning to be strong, might just come from an outsider like you. A warrior with a good heart."

The words struck him with a surprising force. He had been called many things in his long life. Monster, general, brute, hero. But never that.

She seemed to be agreeing with him now, her words confirming the argument he had just had with Kaelen. "This grove cannot remain a secret forever, Warrick. I know the outside world will one day bleed its evils into our home." A deep-seated fear, one she had likely held for a long time, was finally being brought into the light. "My people are not ready. But perhaps, with your help, they will be."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Songstress of Sylvanrest

Althea of the Three Moons and Warrick found a fallen, moss-covered log nearby and sat, spending the rest of the afternoon in the quiet solitude of the deep woods. They exchanged memories, hopes, and regrets, their voices a low murmur against the backdrop of the forest's gentle hum.

Warrick spoke of the man he used to be, a fiery young warrior with a thirst for glory, always eager for the next fight. "There was a time," he admitted, his gaze distant, "when I believed strength was the only virtue that mattered." He told her of Cassandra's arrival, and how her boundless compassion and stubborn optimism had chipped away at his hardened exterior, transforming him into a more thoughtful man capable of great warmth and sincere kindness.

In turn, Althea spoke more of the future, her perspective that of a concerned lioness peering out from her den at the greater world. She spoke of the broken alliances between the races of the Verdant Deep, the premonition of a lost harmony that troubled her dreams, and her quiet hope that a solution might yet be found.

Eventually, the sun began its slow descent, painting the sky in strokes of gold and rose that filtered through the leaves. The day grew into evening, and the air cooled. A greater bond had formed between them in those hours, a foundation of mutual respect and understanding. For the first time since his banishment, Warrick felt a flicker of something he had thought long dead. It was a glimpse of a potential new life, here on Apeiron. A life that might hold peace as well as purpose.

"Your company was most pleasant today, Warrick," Althea said, her voice soft in the growing twilight. She was never more stunning than in that moment. A faint, genuine smile painted her lips, and the last rays of sunlight on her back cast a haloed silhouette around her form. A soft, golden sparkle seemed to surround her, like pollen or luminous spores dancing in the evening air.

"We will have to spend more days like this, Althea," Warrick responded, his own voice holding a warmth that surprised even him. She was easy to speak with, easy to open up to. Her presence was a welcoming gift he had quickly grown fond of.

Their gaze held for a long, quiet moment, an entire conversation passing between them without a single word. Then, as if by some unspoken agreement, they turned from each other and headed in separate directions. Warrick's easy steps were slow and deliberate

as he walked, his mind not just reminiscing, but savoring the shared conversation with the sincerely interesting Dryad. A fragile sense of hope had begun to take root in the barren ground of his heart.

A flicker of movement in his periphery, a lighter shade against the deep green, caught his eye. Warrick paused mid-stride, his head slowly oscillating as he scanned the area. A pair of sky-blue eyes peered at him from behind the thick trunk of a tree, a fall of silken blonde hair easily identifying the skulking figure.

"Helaina?" he called out, his voice a low rumble, not loud enough to carry far but certainly enough for someone hiding nearby. "Is that you out there?"

There was a moment of silence, a soft rustling of leaves as she shifted further behind the tree, and then her hesitant voice whispered from the shadows. "No."

It was, quite obviously, Helaina. A smirk almost broke through Warrick's stoic expression, amused by her impossible innocence. "A pity," he said, feigning disappointment as he began turning in a deliberately wrong direction. "I seem to have taken a wrong turn in this beautiful, but somewhat confusing, grove. I was hoping a kind local might guide me to my quarters." He was not lost in the slightest, but the excuse felt plausible enough.

She emerged shyly from behind the massive, silver-barked oak. Her ability to blend in with the forest seemed far less developed than the other Dryads he had met.

"I can help you," she murmured, clutching her staff to her chest like a shield. She wore a dress of woven leaves today, though it was far more daring than Lyra's simple tunics. Two strategic cutouts exposed the pale skin of her chest and a sliver of her defined midsection. A thin, iridescent fabric hung just below her navel, sparkling faintly in the growing moonlight and doing very little to conceal the curve of her wide hips. His eyes were drawn to the faint glisten of the material, and he had to consciously fight the warrior's instinct to survey every detail, reminding himself that this was a creature of profound innocence.

Her allure reminded him of his crass comment the other day, for which he had yet to apologize. "I did not mean to be inappropriate," he said, his voice sincere. "My comment about a reward, I hope it did not upset you." It was uncharacteristic of him, a verbal misstep that didn't feel like himself.

"Kaelen said I have to be careful," she replied, her eyes wide. "He says I have an effect on others that is very dangerous." Her implication was that her beauty was far more than a simple trick of genetics.

"An effect?" Warrick questioned, his curiosity piqued.

"All the women of Sylvanrest have a gift," she explained. "Like Althea's empathic link to others, or Lyra's ability to combine her powers." This was a revelation. He had felt Althea's gift, but Lyra's was a mystery. He thought for a moment. Althea had to lay hands on Lyra to heal her, but Lyra had stitched his wound from a distance. The vine that had wrapped around him she must have used as a conduit, combining an entangling vine with healing magic.

"And what can you do, Helaina?" he asked, his gaze intent. She was undeniably sheltered, yet she spoke of a dangerous power. What was dangerous to these gentle people would likely be a mere curiosity to a warrior forged in centuries of battle.

A faint blush touched her cheeks. "Well," she admitted, her voice barely a whisper as she looked up at him coyly from beneath long lashes, "I can show you, if you really want."

Warrick gave a casual nod, shrugging his massive shoulders. After all he had seen and survived, he felt no fear. "Show me."

"If you're sure," she said, her voice still quiet, but with a new, trembling undertone of excitement. She positioned herself directly in front of him. Her nervousness seemed to melt away, replaced by a strange, focused intensity. She began to hum, a low, gentle melody that resonated not just in the air, but deep within the marrow of his bones. Her sky-blue eyes locked onto his.

A strange, creeping warmth began to build inside him as the hum deepened, blossoming into a wordless, harmonic hymn so captivating that the sounds of the forest faded to nothing. He saw only her eyes now. They gleamed like jewels in the twilight, shimmering with an impossible, brilliant light that seemed to pull him in. Soon, all he saw, all he knew, were those eyes.

Then, the feeling consumed him entirely. It was pure, unfiltered, overwhelming *lust*. His mind, his will, his very being was suddenly stripped bare of all thought, all reason, save one. *Her*. He had to feel her lips on his, place his hands on the impossible softness of her skin, feel her slender legs wrapped around his waist like a silken python. He *had* to have her. Right here. Right now. He took a step towards her, his breath catching in his throat, his entire world narrowed to that single, all-consuming need.

"Helaina!"

A sharp, clear voice sliced through the intoxicating haze, shattering the spell like a stone through glass. Warrick staggered back, shaking his head violently as a searing pain erupted behind his eyes. He gasped, the cold air a shock to his lungs. He had been

overcome, completely lost in a desire so powerful it had felt more real and urgent than breathing.

"You know better than to use your songs so freely!" Kaelen furiously reprimanded her. He had appeared from the shadows, an expression of stern disapproval on his face. "Do you have any idea what might have happened if I had not stopped you?" Yet, beneath the anger in his voice was a profound, paternal sadness. He was not just angry, he was disappointed. More than that, he feared greatly for what may have happened next had he not been there.

"I'm sorry!" Helaina's voice cracked, the words punctuated by a sob as tears streamed down her face. She hugged herself tightly, clearly embarrassed and deeply ashamed of what she had done. "I just wanted him to like me. I didn't mean to pull so hard!"

Warrick was still shaking his head, trying to clear the intoxicating fog from his mind. He had never been susceptible to this sort of influence, and the feeling of his will being so completely hijacked was a new and deeply unsettling experience.

"Go home, Helaina," Kaelen commanded, his voice stern but laced with a profound disappointment. "Reflect on this moment. Now you know why I so adamantly oppose you using your songs." He pointed a hard, unwavering finger in the direction of the Sylvanrest grove.

"But I," she started, her words stumbling. She looked back at Warrick with wide, regretful eyes, let out a soft groan of anxiety, then turned and ran. Her light form quickly faded into the trees and was gone, leaving Warrick alone with the furious Guardian.

"What happened?" Warrick asked, his head still spinning. It was a sensation of intense displacement, as if his mind was a separate entity struggling to reconnect with his body.

"If you had touched her, I would have killed you where you stand," Kaelen stated, his voice a low, dangerous growl. It did not matter to him that this was not Warrick's fault, or that Helaina had initiated the near traumatizing event. Kaelen thought only of her safety, and no amount of reason would deter him from his stance.

Warrick's mind began to clear, the pieces clicking into place. The memory of his body acting on its own, caught in a lustful tailspin, returned with horrifying clarity. "She would have better control over her abilities if you had not forbidden her from practicing with them," Warrick said, his voice unnervingly calm and cold. "A blade is dangerous in the hands of an infant, but it is a valuable tool for a chef. This is on you, Kaelen."

This cold logic only fueled Kaelen's rage. Warrick could see the storm residing in the Dryad's heart, but the Guardian held it in check. "You will stay away from her." It was a simple command, firm and absolute.

Their eyes locked in a battle of wills, the hard seriousness in their expressions feeling like two opposing forces meeting in the quiet woods. Warrick was not unsympathetic to Kaelen's position, but he was angry at the ignorance that fueled it. Still, he knew that a man like Kaelen would never have been at peace after what nearly happened. Though it was Helaina's mistake, the scar would have weighed on their entire society for decades.

With that thought, Warrick broke his gaze. He gave a slow, deliberate nod of acknowledgment, not of agreement, and sauntered off towards his temporary residence. Despite how he felt about Kaelen's foolish methods, he knew one thing for certain. It was damned lucky the Dryad was there at that moment. And for that, Warrick was truly glad.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Unfurling Bloom

The moment his large form collapsed on the bed inside his guest dwelling, Warrick was asleep. The mental toll of Helaina's song must have sapped him of the little stamina he had left at the end of the day. Though he slept deeply, his rest was not his own. His dreams were a chaotic tapestry woven with the threads of her lingering influence, every thought a phantom echo of her, his sleeping mind conjuring her in hazy, erotic settings that left him feeling both exhausted and restless.

Sunlight streamed in and struck his closed eyelids, an illuminated knock at the door of his unconscious brain. He took a deep breath, a great yawn arriving with his consciousness, and turned his head towards the open entrance of his current abode.

Two sky blue eyes looked back at him before quickly retreating from the doorway.

"Helaina?" He could hear the soft rustle of leaves as she shifted outside. "Do not linger at the entrance. Just come in." Warrick called out, his voice thick with sleep as he began to shake the grogginess from his body.

"Are you mad at me?" Her voice came from the doorway, brittle and high, like a child's after being scolded.

Warrick swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat upright. "Certainly not." He stretched a thick arm across his chest, feeling a stiffness in his muscles he was still not used to, a constant reminder of his lost power.

Helaina peeked back in, then slowly moved her body more and more into the room. "I wanted to apologize about last night," she said, her shame on full display as she refused to look up at him. "I should not have done that."

"You were given a rifle and not taught how to use it," he said, mentally chastising Kaelen once again.

"A what?" Helaina looked up, the word completely foreign to her. Warrick imagined a bow or a staff might have been a better comparison for this world.

"Sit with me for a moment," Warrick commanded gently, motioning to the bed beside him. Helaina made her way to the spot and sat, keeping her body turned away from him. "You cannot be expected to wield your power responsibly if you do not know how to use

it. You need to practice in a safe environment. Once you understand your own strength, then you can learn to be careful with it."

"But Guardian Kaelen says," she began.

Warrick interrupted her. "Kaelen would put you in an inescapable bubble and keep you locked away for eternity if he could. He is irrationally protective." He let her reflect on his words for a moment. "I had power like yours once. In my youth, I was reckless with it. I hurt people by accident because I did not understand the force I was commanding. But once I learned control, I helped a great many people."

"You did?" She glanced over at him briefly, a flicker of hope in her eyes, then looked back at the floor. "Could I help people too?"

"We would need to discover the extent of your abilities," he continued, his voice now a bit more strained, "but potentially, yes. Your songs could help people."

Helaina sat for a long moment, contemplating in silence. Warrick allowed her the opportunity to think on his advice, while simultaneously wondering if she did indeed have more to offer with her voice than just sparking an uncontrollable desire in others.

"I should go," she said finally, standing up. Her head hung low and her movements were slow, as if wading through deep thought. He knew this would not be a simple revelation for her. She needed time. She disappeared through his doorway, and Warrick was left alone.

Warrick pushed himself to his feet, his large frame filling the small, earthen den. He stretched, rolling his shoulders as a series of painful-sounding cracks echoed from his spine. He was tearing his way through the perpetual, bone-deep exhaustion that seemed to plague him ever since his powers had been stripped. The lingering, phantom influence of Helaina's song had not helped, leaving his mind feeling bruised and his body on a frustratingly high alert.

The desire to collapse back onto the cot and sleep for another few hours was a heavy, physical pull. But his determination was stronger.

The mission. The Harpy Roost. Phaedra's manipulative bargain. It was, for now, the only thread he had to pull, the slimmest chance of regaining what he had lost. That goal was a cold, sharp stone in his gut, more potent than any exhaustion.

He grabbed his pack, his mind already shifting from the unsettling encounter with Helaina to the practical needs of the journey ahead. It was time to find Vexi.

"Oh, I was just coming to get you." Vexi nearly collided with him as he stepped out of the den's entrance, his mind still on the journey ahead. Her arms were already crossed, her weight cocked onto one hip. "I saw Helaina *shamble* away just a moment ago. You didn't, uh," she trailed off, her meaning hanging thick and heavy in the morning air.

"Helaina has a power she does not understand," Warrick replied, his voice flat and final, leaving no room for her jealous prodding. "She came seeking advice. Nothing more, nothing less."

He saw the tension release from Vexi's shoulders in a small, sharp sigh of relief. "Good," she clipped out. "Well, Althea is waiting to see us off. Come on." Vexi turned, kicking off in the direction of the central clearing.

Lyra stood idly next to Althea as they approached, bathed in the soft, dappled light of the Sylvanrest morning. Warrick's eyes widened slightly. He was genuinely surprised. After her reaction to the execution of Corvus, he had been sure she would want nothing more to do with him. Yet here she was, her small pack on her back, her jaw set with a quiet determination. He felt a sudden, sharp spike of respect for her. She was not as fragile as she appeared. She was a Dryad of quiet, resilient courage, perhaps only now realizing it.

"Once again, Warrick Nash, we are sending you off on an adventure," Althea greeted them, a warm, knowing smirk on her lips. "Perhaps we will make you our official diplomat soon enough."

Warrick rolled his eyes and shook his head, a low chuckle rumbling in his chest. "The hospitality here being what it is, that is a tempting offer," he humored her. His expression grew more serious. "My agenda, however, is ultimately not diplomacy. I seek my own goal." They held each other's gaze for a long moment, the deep, honest conversation from the previous day reflecting in their eyes. A new understanding had been forged between them.

"I want to join you."

The voice was meek, barely a whisper, breaking the quiet of the clearing. It was Helaina, clutching her staff as if it were a lifeline. She had stepped out from behind a nearby tree, and now looked up at Warrick with a mixture of profound eagerness and raw, nervous fear.

This was an opportunity. Warrick looked from Lyra's newfound resolve to Helaina's desperate hope. Danger was almost assured, but experience was a harsh and effective teacher. His mind drifted back to that image of Lyra, pale and bleeding, mortally wounded on the forest floor. If she'd had this experience then, would she have been able

to fight back? Or at least, not freeze? He could teach them both how to break the shackles of shock and fear. That lesson, he knew, might one day save their lives.

Warrick turned back to Althea. "This should not be as dangerous as the last venture. We are only seeking to speak with the Harpies." He respectfully placed the decision at her feet. "However, I will respect your choice either way. Shall Helaina join us?"

A flash of true panic crossed Althea's ancient eyes. He could see the immediate, visceral instinct to refuse, to pull her kin back into the safety of the grove. But she calmed herself with a visible, shuddering breath, her gaze softening as she looked at the two young Dryads. "Please," she said, her voice heavy with the weight of her trust. "Keep them both safe, Warrick." She could see the same truth he did. They needed this. But her maternal heart was already fearing the cost of the lesson.

Lyra and Helaina offered their quiet goodbyes to Althea before the small group of four set off north towards the Halcyon Spires. Althea followed their forms as they grew more and more distant, her gaze unwavering until they disappeared entirely into the dense green of the forest. She stood tall, a pillar of feigned composure, but her expression betrayed her. The slight, high arch of her brows and the tightness in her lips were a clear map of her concern.

They walked for only a few minutes, the path already soft with moss underfoot, before Lyra broke the silence. "Are you sure you want to join us, Helaina? It is not too late to turn back." To Lyra, this was an entirely unpredictable move.

"Warrick said I need to learn how to control my abilities. I cannot do that at home." There was a nervous tremor in Helaina's voice, and her eyes seemed to dart from tree to tree, as if expecting a threat. This was, perhaps, the farthest she had ever been from Sylvanrest.

"But *why* would you want to use them?" Lyra pressed, stopping for a moment. "They seem like nothing but trouble, driving men into a lustful madness."

"Oh!" Vexi chimed in from just ahead, her voice bright with recognition. "Sounds like my Lover's Balm concoction! I *really* should have diluted that last batch. Whoo, that stuff was potent!" Her shamelessness gave Warrick an idea.

He stopped, and the others paused with him. "Actually, Vexi," he said, his tone thoughtful. "You might be the perfect test subject. You have experience with this kind of thing. Perhaps you would be willing to help Helaina get a better handle on her songs?"

"In the name of science? Absolutely!" Vexi seemed genuinely excited by the prospect.

"Oh, I don't know," Helaina protested, taking a heavy step back, her hands gripping her staff. "I shouldn't use it on people. It is far too dangerous."

"You said you wanted to learn," Warrick stated calmly, his voice leaving no room for argument. "The only way to do that is to use the power. We are right here. We will stop it if it goes too far."

Helaina looked at Vexi, who was bouncing slightly on her heels, a grand, eager smile on her face. For her, the pursuit of knowledge seemed to trump all else. Warrick recalled the story of the Oread explorer. Risk was secondary to them. Helaina's gaze then flicked to Lyra, who gave a modest, noncommittal shrug. "Okay," Helaina whispered, her voice trembling. "I'll try."

Helaina knelt to Vexi's level. Hesitantly, she began to hum. It was a gentle, harmonic vibration that seemed to grab Vexi's full attention instantly. Warrick watched, an analytical observer, noting this was the same way she had begun with him. The hum grew, blossoming into a wordless, melodic song. Vexi's eager smile faded, going slack. Her vision tunneled, locking onto Helaina.

As the song grew louder, Vexi began to move as if possessed. Her arms reached out, stiff and robotic. Her legs shuffled forward, moving without her command. Before Helaina could react, she was within Vexi's grasp. Vexi pulled Helaina's head close, locking their lips. Helaina's hum faltered for a second, then continued, as Vexi began to kiss her passionately, her hands moving vigorously up and down Helaina's body. Vexi pushed forward, knocking Helaina onto her back, and immediately crawled between her legs, her lips never breaking the kiss.

Warrick found himself entirely entranced. Helaina never stopped her song, even as she was pinned to the ground with a lustful Oread on top of her. In fact, she seemed to be enjoying it. The scene was so jaw-droppingly raw and erotic that Warrick felt no immediate urge to intervene. He was a witness to the full, untamed power, and a part of him was curious to see what would happen next.

Lyra, on the other hand, was horrified. "Stop! Vexi, stop!" She rushed forward and grabbed Vexi by the shoulders, pulling her off the stunned Helaina. Lyra placed herself between the two as a physical barrier. "Snap out of it!" she shouted, shaking Vexi, whose eyes were still glazed and unfocused.

Helaina sat on the mossy ground, breathing heavily, her face flushed a deep crimson. She gingerly touched her lips, still feeling the sensation of Vexi's passionate assault. She looked like a young maiden discovering the intoxicating rush of a first kiss, and it was obvious to everyone that she had not wanted it to stop.

Warrick approached her with an outstretched hand, offering a way back to her feet. "Debrief. What did you learn?"

Helaina looked up at him, her hands still trembling slightly as she accepted his grip. "I could feel the influence *pour* out of me this time," she said, her voice full of awe as he easily pulled her to her feet. "It's like a muscle I just realized I had. I think," she paused, touching her chest as if feeling a new, internal limb, "I think I can control it better. I just used all of it at once."

"What a *rush*," Vexi said, shaking her head as if to clear water from her ears. The glazed, unfocused look was gone, replaced by her usual sharp curiosity. "My gods, that was more potent than any balm. The desire was *singular*. It erased every other thought." She tapped her chin, the scientist in her taking over. "Okay, so that is obviously the call of lust. What else have you got? Can you do courage? Serenity?"

Helaina's new confidence wavered. "Well, I do have other songs. I only sing them to myself, down by the river. I can feel a different *color* to them, but I don't know how they might affect others. I'm afraid to find out."

"Then find out," Warrick insisted, his voice firm but not unkind. "Now. While you have a safe audience."

"Warrick, maybe this is not a good idea," Lyra interjected, her arms crossed tightly, still horrified by the lewd act she had just witnessed.

"It's fine!" Vexi said, siding with Warrick. "It seems like the effects wear off the second she stops. This is a controlled experiment! Come on, Helaina, try another!"

Helaina looked from Vexi's eager face to Lyra's worried one, and finally to Warrick. He simply nodded, his expression one of calm expectation. This was why she had come. She took a deep, steadying breath. "Okay. This one always makes me feel brave."

She positioned herself in the center of their small group. Her entire stance changed. Where before she was coy and her song a slow, hypnotic melody, she now stood straighter, her chin high. The song that burst from her was not a hum, but a bright, staccato chant. It was a rapid-fire vocalise with a driving, percussive rhythm that thrummed with energy. It was not seductive, but instead *galvanizing*. A profound, almost visible wave of power pulsed out, striking all three of them like a current of electricity arcing towards them.

The beat was utterly infectious. "Ha! Sensational!" Vexi proclaimed, pumping a small fist and bouncing on her heels. "I feel like I could take on the world!"

Warrick felt it too, but for him, it was a profound, spiritual shock. It was more than inspiration. It was the complete and total absence of doubt. The despair, the anger, the hopelessness that had been his constant companions. All were simply gone, incinerated by this bright, clean fire. He no longer *thought* he might find his power, he was absolutely *certain* of it. It was an inevitability.

"I feel it too!" Lyra chimed in, her voice full of a new, bright strength. "The fear and sorrow has all left my mind. I have no worry anymore!" Her head instinctively began to bounce to the beat, her whole body overtaken by the song's confident joy.

The song built to a crescendo, and then, as Helaina's voice cracked with the effort, it stopped.

The silence that fell was immediate, heavy, and cold. And just as suddenly as it had come, the feeling of absolute certainty vanished. For Warrick, the crash was devastating. The despair and hopelessness did not just creep back in. They *rushed* in to fill the vacuum, colder and heavier than before. The uncertainty of his quest, the anger at his old world, and the deep, aching sorrow from Cassandra's letter, still folded in his pocket. It all came flooding back, made a thousand times worse by the brief, beautiful reprieve.

"Woosh! And there go all the fuzzy feelings. Bleh," Vexi said, shaking her shoulders. She seemed less affected, as if her natural state was already one of curious optimism.

Helaina, however, was gasping. She leaned heavily on her staff, her breathing ragged, her face pale with exertion. "I did not realize," she panted, "it would take so much effort to captivate three people."

"So it has a cost," Warrick noted, his mind filing away the tactical data even as his heart ached. He stepped toward her. "You did well, Helaina. You faced your fear, and you learned. I am proud of you." He gave her a short, respectful nod.

Her eyes lit up at the words, a brilliant, shy smile erasing her exhaustion. She had sung for others, she had learned, and her new teacher was proud of her.

Their journey continued forward, the miles falling away beneath their boots, yet a silent battle raged within Warrick. The withdrawal from Helaina's song was brutal. It was not just the return of his burden. It was the sudden, crushing weight of a mountain dropping back onto shoulders that had briefly forgotten the strain. The sorrow of Cassandra's letter, the frustration of his impotence, the anger at his banishment. It all clawed at him with renewed vigor.

But he was a warrior first. No amount of mental exhaustion could stop the machinery of his discipline. He was old enough to know that nothing was truly over until the final

breath rattled in the chest. There was always something to live for, something to fight for, even if it was just the spiteful refusal to yield. He put one foot in front of the other, his perseverance an indomitable presence.

"Helaina," he grunted, turning his head slightly towards her. He noticed the lingering, proud smile still plastered on her face. "When you sing, do you give it your all?"

"Yes! Every time! I promise!" She beamed, eager to impress him further, seeking the praise for her abilities that she had been denied her entire life.

"Don't," he said simply.

Her face contorted into confusion, her smile faltering.

"That is why you exhausted yourself," he explained, his voice steady despite his internal turmoil. "If I put my full might into a punch, I would blow a hole through the planet." He paused, the words turning to ash in his mouth as the reality of his current state caught up to him. He looked away, his jaw tightening. "Once upon a time, at least."

"I don't want to blow a hole through anything," she stated, a hint of genuine fear in her eyes.

"What I mean is that sometimes it is best to hold back," Warrick corrected, pushing past the moment of weakness. "If inspiring three people was that taxing, try a more subtle approach next time. Less energy. Less exhaustion." He decided not to mention that a gentler song might also result in a less devastating emotional crash for her listeners when it ended.

"I think," she began, the gears in her mind visibly grinding as she processed the lesson. "I think I can do that. Subtlety." She tested the word, rolling it around on her tongue. "Subtlety." She repeated it a second time, her steps suddenly taking on a purposeful, rhythmic cadence. "Subtlety."

"And don't—" he began to add another instruction, but movement in the periphery of his vision cut him short.

He stopped, his hand instinctively coming up to shield his eyes from the sun as he looked skyward. Three dark shapes were circling overhead, banking in a tight formation that was far too organized for mere carrion birds. As they dropped lower, spiraling down toward the canopy, the vague, humanoid outlines became undeniable. The sunlight glinted off sharp talons and wide, feathered wings.

"Harpies," Warrick warned, his voice dropping to a combat timber. "We have company."

"We are intruding into their land," Vexi warned, stumbling back, her eyes wide. "They are poised to attack." She recognized the sharp, predatory angles of their flight pattern.

Warrick tried to shout up to them, "We are not here to," but one was already a razor sharp shadow diving towards Lyra. The harpy kewed angrily, its claws outstretched. "Look out!" Vexi screamed, but Lyra froze, having no recourse. Just before the harpy could connect, a glass vial arced through the air. Vexi's precision was magnificent. The glass shattered against the harpy's face in a puff of mist. Instantly, the harpy went limp, its wings ceasing their beat, and it crashed into the ground in a heavy tangle of broken feathers and limbs.

The kewing in the air immediately escalated, becoming a deafening, furious shriek. The two remaining harpies were emboldened by their downed sister. "Helaina, the one on the left!" Warrick roared, his voice an inspiring command that cut through the chaos. Helaina, without hesitation, began to sing.

The harpy on the right, aiming for the obvious leader, arrogantly swooped down towards Warrick. With blinding speed and in a sudden, violent blur, he snatched her out of the air. He slammed her to the ground and pinned her, ignoring the frantic struggle and sharp, metallic kewing beneath his hand. "Vines, Lyra! Now!"

He heard the ambient, gentle song continuing from Helaina in the background. Thick, ropy vines erupted from the mossy ground, wrapping tightly around the harpy's limbs and wings, immobilizing it completely. "It is done!" Lyra shouted, a triumphant note in her voice.

Warrick looked up. The third harpy stumbled around on the ground in a daze, its head bowed as Helaina sang gently, the subtle, steady melody working its magic. "That is enough, Helaina. Good work." Her song dwindled out, ceasing completely.

The affected harpy began shaking her head, trying to clear the dizzy haze. Warrick hauled her up by one leg. "Fetch your master. We wish to speak with her."

Seeming to come to her senses, she glared at Warrick. "Never! Leave! Leave our lands!" She raised a clawed hand to scratch at him, but her movements were still sluggish from the enchanted song. Warrick easily knocked the swipe away.

"We have news of a grave threat. Go tell her!" He lifted her high and threw her with controlled force into the air. Her wings, acting by instinct, began flapping hard against the air, carrying her off in the direction of the huge spire jutting out of the mountain in front of them.

Lyra was already kneeling beside the crumbled Harpy, her small hands resting on the creature's broken limbs. A soft, vibrant green light emanated from her bark-like skin as her magics began to mend the wounds. The impact of crashing into the ground had left the harpy gravely injured. "Will she be alright?" Warrick inquired, worried that they had just destroyed any potential for diplomacy.

"Yes, I can heal this," Lyra confirmed, her confidence pure and without hesitation.

"I had to stop her. I had to," Vexi repeated, agitated, disturbed by the decisiveness of her action. Her breathing was still heavy, the reality of nearly killing the creature with a single perfect throw setting in.

"You did well," Warrick assured Vexi, placing a firm hand on her shoulder. He then turned to Helaina and Lyra, his gaze sweeping over the whole group. "You all did well. I am impressed." His praise was sincere.

"That was scary," Helaina admitted, still trembling faintly. "I did not like that at all."

Warrick positioned himself in front of her, meeting her gaze. "Courage is not the absence of fear," he assured her, his voice low and steady, born of centuries of experience. "It is the strength to fight in spite of it." Helaina visibly seemed to perk up from the words, finding in them the validation she needed.

The second harpy, entangled tightly in Lyra's vines, was beginning to exhaust herself in her struggle. Her frantic movements slowed, and she finally submitted to the capture, her chest heaving. Warrick could see the raw horror in her eyes. She was defeated, and the panic in her mind was palpable. Her cries turned into a begging, pathetic cooing that tugged sharply on the empathy of the party.

"Release her," Warrick commanded, seeing no reason to keep her detained. The act of imprisoning her alone was beginning to demoralize his inexperienced companions.

The vines quickly receded back into the ground with a soft rustling sound, and the harpy instantly leapt to her feet. She took several quick, backward steps away from the team. She held a suspicious gaze, as if expecting to be struck from behind if she showed her back. She gave one last spiteful, weak *kaw* in their direction, confirming her defiance, before turning and running toward the great spire. She was too exhausted to launch herself into the air.

"And now we wait." Warrick crossed his arms, still peering down the path into the distance at the fleeing Harpy.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Where Memories Roost

Time passed in the renewed quiet of the forest as the two Dryads and the Oread composed themselves, shaking off the residual adrenaline and shock of the attack. Vexi was the first to bounce back to her normal self. "I can't believe how fast you were," she said, her hands flying up to mimic his action. "You just yanked that Harpy right out of the air! Woosh!"

"Yes, that was impressive," Lyra agreed, her gaze still focused on the ground where the struggle had taken place. "I thought for sure you were going to be shredded by her talons." She paused, looking up at him with a sorrowful stare, "I'm glad you did not hurt her." She recalled Corvus, his headless corpse, and burying him in the mound of vines. The horror of that experience still clearly haunted her.

"They were just trying to protect their home." Warrick stretched out on the ground, prioritizing rest and energy conservation in preparation for the inevitable arrival of the Harpy leader. He had simply stated the fact that he did not seek mindless conflict. But this simple statement meant something profound to Lyra. It meant that despite his moments of brutal weakness, there was perhaps a decent man beneath the barbarism. Perhaps.

Lyra sat next to him, picking at a piece of moss. "I have never seen command like that before. Not even from Guardian Kaelen." Warrick was unsure if this was intended as praise or just a simple observation. "How do you stay so composed in a situation like that?"

"I have been in countless conflicts, trained hundreds of others for combat, and battle is in my blood," he explained simply.

"So fighting is not just an unfortunate happenstance in your life," Lyra prodded further, seeking to better understand the warrior's psyche. "It is part of you. An extension of you."

"In my youth, I sought it out," he admitted. "Now I am content with a thick mead and a hearty meal. But conflict will never be entirely avoidable. There will always be a need for warriors." He spoke of it as a sort of divine calling. He was born for this. Inscribed by the universe, as if by some sort of cosmic will.

"We lived for decades in peace," Lyra observed, her eyes wide as she connected the dots. "You showed up and that harmony was shattered. Do you think it follows you? A dark shadow of inevitable fighting? You cannot help but draw it towards you?"

The question struck him with an unexpected force. He had never considered it before. The thought was absurd, yet it lingered. Vexi had an amicable relationship with the Minotaur before his arrival. Lyra had never encountered Descendants before him. The undead were relatively contained. The Verdant Deep was, seemingly, objectively better off before him.

Yet Althea had an encounter that nearly destroyed her before he ever came to Apeiron. "No," he stated, the conviction returning to his voice. "You may have been secluded here within the safety of your homeland for a time, but your long period of peace would not have lasted forever. With, or without my arrival."

"If that is true," Lyra continued, resuming her probing of the moss on the ground, "then I am glad you are here." Their eyes locked onto each other. She seemed to force a smile, not entirely convinced that he was not the anchor that drew in chaos, but unwilling to dismiss the possibility either.

"Look!" Vexi shouted from behind, pointing up at the sky.

Warrick's head whipped up. Three figures in the distance were growing larger with alarming speed. He stood, anticipating their arrival. The harsh sun obscured their approach, making their features difficult to distinguish until they were nearly upon them.

In a moment's time, they were in clear view. Two landed gracefully, glaring at the trespassers with undisguised hostility. Then, a much larger, intimidating one hit the ground in front of them with a loud *thwump*, kicking up a whirlwind of dirt and debris in the wake of her massive wingspan.

The two escorts were larger than the ones Warrick had tussled with moments ago, standing at least six feet tall. But the one in front was nearly nine feet tall, with much more vibrant, metallic feathers, a sleeker frame, and an oddly human-like face. She wore the sharp, knowing features of an older woman, with fine wrinkles around her cheeks and eyes, and long, fire-orange hair that caught the sunlight. This was surely their Matriarch.

As she looked upon Warrick, her eyes widened and she gasped lightly before instantly composing herself. She looked back and forth, her keen gaze scanning the assembled party. Lyra and Helaina, Dryads from Sylvanrest. Vexi, a Cave Oread from Flowstone Falls. And then, the stranger, rugged and foreign.

"We should pick their bones clean!" one of the escorts squawked gleefully.

"Perhaps we could play with them first, Alecto. I want the little one!" the other chirped, both viewing this event as entertainment more than an actual threat or diplomatic meeting. Looking up at the huge figure in front, Warrick thought it might indeed be futile to fight. She very well may be able to tear them apart with minimal effort.

The Matriarch looked over at her still recovering kin with concern, before turning her attention back to the group. "She is unconscious, but fine." Warrick assured.

"Silence! You will speak when spoken to!" Alecto screeched. The Matriarch lifted a wing and swept it in a sharp signal of cease to her kin, immediately silencing her. She approached the group slowly, circling around them with a keen eye that scanned not just their forms, but their intentions.

"I am Warrick Nash. We are here to inquire about the surrounding land, and warn you and your people of an awoken threat." His words seemed to fall on deaf ears. She continued to circle, her gaze settling on one of their satchels. She nudged it with an enormous claw, spilling out the contents. Berries rolled across the ground. Her eyes seemed to follow them with an eagerness, and she was momentarily captivated by the food, before turning away from it.

Then, standing erect and right in front of Warrick at her full imposing height, she spoke. "A Descendant." She proclaimed before leaning down dramatically, cocking her head to the side to an inhuman degree, and eyeing him inquisitively. "And of which God? Hmm?" The dramatic inflection at the end of her sentence lingered.

"Ares." He stood tall, proud.

"The God of War? Yet you come in peace?" She knew their history. Clearly she had some education on them which begged many questions. Warrick remained silent. He had told her their intentions. He would not repeat himself.

"Galeia, is my name." She once again stood tall, now wielding an almost imperceptible, knowing smile. "What, pray tell, is this threat you speak of? Hmm?" Her dramatic inflection peeked through her words again.

"The Minotaurs have awoken the dead." Warrick informed, banking on his upfront intel loosening her tongue enough to give him information on the surrounding areas.

"Yes, many years ago, in fact." Galeia moved back in front of her two sentinels, perching down comfortably on a nearby fallen tree. "They are requesting aid?"

"No, they seem to be managing," Warrick conceded. It was unfortunate that she was aware of the incident, removing his leverage.

"You have come seeking questions. This is your true purpose." She wrapped her massive wings around herself, a fearless position of comfortable resting. "What is it you wish to know?"

"You are avian creatures. You must know the area well," Warrick stated, taking several deliberate steps closer to the Matriarch. "I seek answers about this world, and those answers may lie within ancient ruins or cities." The closer he got to Galeia, the more he noticed the lingering glint of a genuine smile upon her cheeks.

"Apeiron is a big place, Descendant. Many ruins, many creatures," she answered, her voice sounding dry as parchment. "Yet if it is answers you seek, they are," She lifted a great wing, the feathers catching the light, and outstretched a long, cruel talon to her right. "There." Warrick followed her direction, peering through the dense trees and shrubbery that obscured the path.

"And what, exactly, is there?" he inquired, still peering through the brush.

The Matriarch stepped down off her perch, dipped her head down to Warrick's eye level, and cocked her neck, once again, to an inhuman degree. "Would you like to see?" Her smile widened, revealing pointed teeth.

Warrick sensed the shift in the air. Something felt deeply wrong. She could rip him apart with ease, so he doubted this was a simple trap. Yet Galeia was undeniably captivated by him. "Yes, I would." He decided the probability of learning something, however small, was worth the risk.

"Walk with me." Galeia turned towards the destination, keeping one sharp, amber eye on Warrick as she proceeded forward. Her two escorts followed close behind. Vexi periodically turned her head around to make sure the sentinels were not getting too close. They did, after all, seem to have an eagerness to play with her before devouring her.

"You are right, Kestra. She does look delicious! Gahah!" Alecto cackled from behind.

"When do we get to eat them, Matriarch? I am starving!" Kestra grabbed at the air with her clawed fingers, mimicking the act of catching prey.

"Silence, sister. Do not ruin this moment for me." Galeia's calm, but firm, orders instantly silenced the two sentinels.

"Moment?" Warrick asked, his voice low as he grew increasingly worried about their intentions.

"Mhmm. Haven't seen a Descendant in a very long time. Special occasion, this is." She walked close to Warrick, uncomfortably so.

"Special occasion? Because Descendants taste good?" Helaina chimed in, a hint of genuine fear in her voice.

"Do not let my sisters intimidate you. They are ornery and mischievous, but loyal." She eyed Alecto and Kestra, who shrugged and smirked at one another, confirming the mischief.

"And you? You are different? You certainly look different," Warrick prodded, seeking to understand her intent.

"Am different. Yes. Mhmm." She bobbed her head in quick agreement.

"You have known Descendants before?" he continued his line of questioning.

"Yes. We are going to one's home as we speak." Her casual words stopped Warrick cold.

"You are taking us to a Descendant? Another like me?" The entire party halted, stopping dead in their tracks.

"Was, yes. Like you. Yes." She confirmed, her demeanor a strange mix of human speech and quirky bird-like movements. "Elian, was his name."

"Was?" Lyra caught the key word, her gaze sharpening with interest.

"He passed away many years ago. Yes." Galeia's slight smile seemed to fade, and her amber eyes began to glint with a sudden sadness.

"But he was your friend?" Lyra continued, eager to find out more about the Descendants.

"Friend? Hmm. Yes, I suppose." She bobbed her head as she urged them to walk again. "Was my father."

Vexi sprinted forward in front of Galeia, planting herself in the Matriarch's path. Walking backwards, she began her flurry of inquisition. "Father? How? What? How would that work? You are two different species!" The mechanics of the relationship clearly baffled her Oread mind.

"Harpies are female. All of us. Require males of different species to reproduce." Galeia educated the group on Harpy mating rituals, her tone clinical.

"So this is all to acquire my seed then?" Warrick chimed in, half-joking, half-testing the waters of the threat.

A roar of cackling came from behind. "He is big and strong, Sister. Perhaps we enjoy him before we pull him apart," Kestra said, her bird-tongue licking her beak.

"Yes, I very much like that idea. Unless you prefer to have him first, Matriarch?" Alecto submitted to the will of Galeia, their loyalty absolute.

"That was not my intention." Galeia glared back at the two, who promptly ceased their giggling and quieted themselves.

"This moment is special because Warrick reminds you of him," Helaina said shyly, clutching her staff for comfort. She understood the feeling. Warrick was a paternal influence in her own life.

Galeia kept silent, her absence of words a stronger confirmation than anything she could have said.

"He had journals? Knowledge written down? Is that why you are taking us to his home?" Vexi's inquiring mind seemed to completely overcome her fear of the two hungry Harpies.

"He did. Many journals. Mhmm, mhmm." Galeia bobbed her head.

The forest seemed to come to an end and a large, dry, open field sprawled out in front of them. Large, obtrusive rocks jutted out from the ground and sand covered the floor. It was a strange divide that seemed almost unnatural. There was the lush forest of the Verdant Deep on one side and, instantly, a desert of rocks and sand on the other. Not far from the tree line stood an elaborate shack erected right on that threshold. It was a log cabin, with furniture sitting outside and a withered garden out back.

A few steps more, and they were upon it. But it was not the cabin that captivated the party at first. It was the shallow grave out front, marked with an ornate tombstone that read simply: *Eliau*. The name was deeply, almost reverently, carved into the stone's surface. The letters were rough, clearly etched by something powerful, like a talon.

"You were close," Vexi said, the words more of a proclamation than a question.

"Raised me. Taught me. Loved me very much," Galeia's voice grew softer, somber. "Just before the end, he told me of his customs. To dig a hole, to bury the deceased. It was his last request."

"How did he die?" Helaina asked. She was accustomed to the long lifespans of Dryads that extended for centuries. The idea of growing old and perishing was something she had never witnessed in her lifetime.

"Inside," Galeia pointed toward the front door. "In his bed. He was tired. He had been tired for a long time." Her eyes visibly welled, showcasing the difficulty of the memory. "I held his hand tightly when his eyes closed for the last time. It was the worst day of my very long life."

The Matriarch perched on a purposefully placed log nearby, its wood marked with wear and scratches that told the story of countless visits. She was a grieving queen returning to the humble grave of her beloved father.

"Used to visit more often," Galeia whispered. "I would curl up in his bed, trying to recall his scent, or his voice when he told me stories." A single tear rolled down her cheek. "But I grew too big for the doorway. I cannot fit inside now."

Lyra struggled to remain composed, her cheeks flushing a deep red as she physically turned away from the raw reality of the grave. Helaina, however, possessed no such walls. She did not hold back, allowing the sadness to overtake her. Tears flowed freely down her face as she stared down at the tombstone, mourning a man she had never met simply because he was loved.

Vexi was the heartiest of the trio. There was empathy in her expression, but it was tempered by a calm pragmatism. "I didn't know my father well," she said, kicking a small pebble near the grave. "He was always too busy to find time for me, or at least that was his excuse. Then he wandered off one day and I never saw him again." She regaled them with her own tale, an attempt to bond, or perhaps just to shift the focus from death to life.

"Guardian Kaelen is almost too protective at times," Lyra added, her voice soft as she wiped her eyes. "But I don't know if I could live without him. I'm not sure what home would be without his shadow over me."

"Remember that time," Helaina sniffled, wiping away a river of tears, "Nyro tried to kiss me? I have never heard Guardian Kaelen that furious before!" The two giggled at the memory, the sound of their laughter a bright, fragile bell in the heavy air.

Warrick had stories himself. The best times of his past were the ones he shared with Cassy. But his mind was drifting, pulled away from the warmth of the present conversation by a cold, creeping realization. He stepped away from the group, his boots heavy on the wooden planks of the porch. He found a sturdy, handcrafted chair out in front of the log cabin and sat himself down. The wood groaned under his weight.

It wasn't long before Galeia noticed his departure. She strode over to him, her movements jerky but silent, an obvious, ever-present eagerness to be near him pulling her like a magnet. "Is something wrong? Hmm?" She tilted her head, her amber eye fixing on him with intense curiosity.

"Elian," he began, pausing to shake his head as he stared out at the strange desert landscape. "He died of old age. We don't die of old age. Not as Descendants." He sighed heavily, the sound scraping against his throat. "Which means he never found a way back to his powers."

The dots connected to reveal a terrible reality. The answer he sought, the key to his restoration, would not be found here.

"No," Galeia confirmed softly, "he did not."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Beneath a Harpy's Wing

There was a silence between them for a long moment. The two Dryads and the Oread were still swapping stories off to the side, their voices a distant murmur. Farther out, Alecto and Kestra were play-fighting, poking at each other and laughing. It all seemed colorless in the moment. Muted. Warrick's disappointment was all-consuming, a heavy grey blanket that threatened to smother his resolve.

But he didn't dwell long. He couldn't. It was a setback, not a dead end. He took notice of Galeia, who was still eyeing him with that unsettling fascination. "I am not like Elian," he said firmly, trying to ensure she understood that he was not a replacement for her father.

"No. You are stoic. Hardened." She agreed. "He was a kind and gentle man. Much softer than you. But," she reached back to scratch one of her massive wings, plucking a loose twig that had managed its way between two feathers, "you come from the same world. You are the closest thing to him that I will ever know."

It was a harsh, almost cruel fate for this majestic Matriarch. Centuries had passed between her last interaction with her father, and now Warrick, a brutish rage-beast who could not be more different, was the sole connection she had left to him.

Warrick was not unsympathetic. He had a daughter of his own he would never see again. He realized with a pang that he would want Cassy to find someone, anyone, who could fill the void he left behind. They were strangely mirrored. Galeia was a daughter seeking the phantom of her father, and he was a father missing the memory of his daughter.

"I didn't know Elian," Warrick said, his voice gentler now. "I knew many Descendants throughout my lifetime, but his name I do not recall."

"Of Hermes, he was." Galeia lowered her massive head to be closer to Warrick's, her body settling into a comfortable crouch beside his chair. "Was a seeker of knowledge his entire life. In his world, and in this one."

"And his abilities? Did he ever speak of them?" Warrick asked.

"He did, mhm. Missed them terribly. Like you." She nodded, a quick, rhythmic motion. "Could peer through time. See the past, and the future. Until he arrived here, of course."

She looked up at the sky, then shook her head frantically, her feathers ruffling. The reason immediately hit Warrick on the top of his head. It was a single, fat raindrop striking him square on the scalp.

"He could see the future?" Warrick wiped the water away, ignoring the sudden chill. "An ability like that is unbelievably potent. Why in the hells was he sent here?" Another raindrop slapped him in the face, harder this time.

Galeia shuffled next to him, extending a massive, rust-colored wing over his head like a canopy, protecting him from the sudden sprinkling of rain as she would a chick. The warmth radiating from her was surprising.

"Knew too much," she whispered, the sound muffled by the rising wind. "Sounded crazy to others."

It was then that Warrick realized the true tragedy of Elian. He was a man cursed with foresight in the Victorian era that demanded absolute submission to the stagnant theories of the day. He had not been banished for madness. He had been ejected for the unforgivable crime of challenging the arrogance of learned men who refused to admit they could be wrong. Seeing the future meant seeing technology, medicine. He must have known their crude ideas were incorrect, and was banished for pointing it out.

The rain was coming down in sheets now, drenching the arid landscape in a sudden, violent blanket of water. Vexi, Lyra, and Helaina rushed over to the Matriarch, huddling close to each other as Galeia outstretched her other massive wing over them like a protective canopy.

"The air feels different outside of the forest," Lyra murmured, shivering slightly as she stared up at the grey sky in surprise. "I did not even sense the rain coming."

"Won't last long. Always rains around this time," Galeia informed them, her voice a low rumble amidst the patter of drops against her feathers. She was a true native of this side of Apeiron, attuned to its harsher rhythms.

Warrick stood up, the top of his head nearly brushing the damp feathers of the Matriarch's wing. "Perhaps now would be a good time to investigate Elian's research. It may not have the answers I seek, but potentially could point us in the right direction. If it is alright with you, Galeia." Warrick knew he was asking to enter a shrine, not just a log cabin.

She nodded gracefully, her amber eyes soft. "Would be a shame for his work to go unappreciated. Mhmm." It wasn't just that she wished to preserve his home. She knew,

deep down, that a man like Elian would want his life's work to contribute to the world, even after he was gone.

Warrick stepped up to the low, sturdy doorway of Elian's log home, pausing for a moment to look back. The Harpy Matriarch, still perched nearby, her vibrant plumage now slick and dark with rain, gave a slow, silent nod. It was an invitation to proceed. Warrick ducked his head and went first, his companions filing in one at a time behind him, their eyes wide with curiosity and a touch of solemn respect.

The sound of the storm was instantly muffled, replaced by a heavy, reverent silence. Dust, thick and undisturbed for what must have been decades, coated every surface like grey snow, yet the home itself was meticulously organized.

They started in what was clearly the kitchen. A large, open hearth dominated one wall, its stones still blackened by the soot of ancient fires. The air here smelled faintly of cold ash and dried herbs. Simple, hand-carved stone bowls and well-used iron tools hung from hooks driven into the log walls. A carefully laid wood plank floor, worn smooth by the passage of feet, creaked softly under Warrick's boots. Clay jugs were tucked away neatly under a rough but sturdy cobblestone counter. This, Warrick thought, had been the heart of the house. It was a place of diligent, honest work, built with care and without the aid of magic or modern convenience.

The bedroom beyond was spacious but equally ascetic. A single wooden chair, its seat woven with dried reeds that had long since become brittle, sat in one corner. The bed was a low wooden frame covered with a thick mattress woven of fine fabric. The pillow was sunken in the middle, surely filled with the softest downy feathers. They were likely gifts, Warrick realized with a pang, from a daughter to her father.

A weathered desk sat at the far end of the room, near a small, grime-covered window that looked out onto the rain-swept desert. Upon it rested a candlestick with the melted stub of an old candle, a small, corked vial of ink that had long since dried to dust, and a scattering of parchment. It lay there exactly as he had left it, as if Elian had been interrupted mid-thought and fully intended to return to finish his sentence.

And then, they stepped through a narrow archway into the final room.

Warrick's breath caught in his throat. It was a library, larger than the other rooms combined. Shelves built from floor to ceiling lined every wall, sagging slightly under the groaning weight of countless scrolls, bound stone tablets, and crudely stitched books. It was a lifetime of obsession, all penned or collected by Elian himself. Each spine was carefully labeled with symbols that looked only vaguely familiar.

Paintings hung on the few spare sections of the wall, preserved remarkably well in the dry desert air. They were masterful, vibrant depictions of colorful characters. Many were human-like Descendants and strikingly rendered Harpies interacting in various scenes of daily life.

But Warrick's eyes were drawn to one small piece tucked away in a low corner, framed with simple twigs. It was much more crudely drawn, the lines charcoal and shaky, childlike but bursting with affection. It depicted a small, round Harpy chick with exaggerated wings holding hands with a stick-figure human.

Warrick stared at it, the silence of the room heavy around him. It was Galeia's own youthful drawing, a drawing of love hanging proudly amidst a scholar's life work.

Vexi gingerly slid one of the leather-bound tomes out from the shelf, the spine cracking softly in the quiet room. She laid it carefully onto the central table, disturbing a thin layer of dust. Warrick, his massive frame casting a shadow over her, hovered close, his curiosity warring with his anxiety.

As she peeled open the stiff cover and turned to a random page, the script was immediately familiar, yet frustratingly distant.

"Greek," Warrick sighed heavily, the sound scraping against his throat. "Of course it is in Ancient Greek." He slammed his hands onto his hips, turning away from the table to hide his grimace.

"You don't know this language?" Vexi asked, scanning a few more pages. She frowned at the dense rows of angular letters and the few rough, indecipherable sketches. "You can't read this?"

"My knowledge of the written tongue is limited." Warrick admitted. He was not the scholarly type. He was a blunt instrument, a terrifying force of raw power designed for the battlefield, not the library. It was suddenly, painfully apparent to him that he relied on his strength as his defining feature far too much. "We will need Phaedra if we want to comb through all this effectively."

Vexi carefully closed the book and slid it back into its slot, treating the brittle collection with the reverence of a holy relic. "A successful first step in our journey. A great success." She smiled wide, looking up at Warrick, who clearly did not share her optimism. "What? You didn't expect to absorb all this information right away, did you?"

Her words were slicing, cutting right through his ego. He felt rather foolish in the moment, a giant standing in a room of fragile wisdom he couldn't access.

"You are right. I am fortunate to have you here to ground me, Vexi." Though his tone was polite, there was a firm disappointment underneath. "We will report back to Sylvanrest, then proceed back to the Underdeep to recruit Phaedra." He laid out the future in black and white, a simple path forward, though his words were heavy with the weight of dissatisfaction.

Helaina and Lyra continued to meander around the cabin, their footsteps soft. They pointed out small, intimate details. A carved wooden statue of a bird with a dark, rusty stain where Elian may have sliced his hand working the wood. A crumpled, charred parchment in the cold hearth, the remnant of a frustrated idea thrown into the fire.

Warrick, needing air, sulked toward the door. He walked outside, mentally kicking himself for his lack of foresight. To be fair to himself, he imagined the Harpies would have the answers he sought. The home of a long deceased Descendant was an unexpected surprise.

The rain had stopped, leaving the desert air crisp and cool. He noticed the two Harpy sentinels, Aleto and Kestra, perched under the eaves, pruning their wet feathers.

Warrick yanked his pack from his shoulders and slid his hand deep inside, grabbing a generous handful of their supplies. He proceeded toward the two escorts, his heavy boots crunching on the wet gravel. They noticed him immediately, their heads snapping around with predatory speed. They arched down, eyes squinting to focus on him, beaks clicking.

"Here," Warrick said flatly. He picked a single berry from his hand. Aleto followed the movement, her head cocked, a single amber eye widening. He tossed it.

She snatched the fruit out of the air with a lightning-fast *snap* of her beak, throwing her head back and swallowing hard.

"Mm! Berries! Delicious!" Aleto proclaimed, her feathers fluffing up.

Kestra, seeing her sister fed, began prodding at Warrick's closed fist with her sharp beak, a dangerous game. Warrick lifted his hand and opened it, revealing a fistful of the purple fruit.

He held it out steady. If she wanted them, she would have to take them from his hand directly. It was a test of dominance. Kestra eyed him seductively, slowly leaning her head down while keeping his gaze locked with hers. She drew one of the berries into her mouth with a long, grey tongue, kicked her head back, and swallowed in one gulp.

"Now that you have been fed, stop threatening to devour my companions," Warrick stated firmly, his frustration with the library finding a target.

"Is it strange that his demands are exciting me, Sister?" Kestra purred, still locking eyes with Warrick, a strange mix of hunger and arousal in her gaze.

"For another bite, I might be persuaded," Alecto chirped, eagerly following the movement of his hand. She reached for his wrist with a clawed hand, trying to pull it toward her.

"Bawk!" She squawked in defiance as Warrick held his arm out, rigid as stone. He then poured the rest of the food into her open, clawed palm before turning and walking away.

He could hear them behind him, gorging themselves on the offering, merrily devouring the fruit without taking the time to savor a single bite. It seemed easy enough to satisfy them. They were simple creatures of appetite. Feed the belly, and you tamed the beast. At least for a little while.

"Found their weakness, did you? Hmm?" Galeia's voice rumbled from the porch shadows. She was watching her sisters scramble for the last of the spilled berries with a look of amused tolerance. "I would expect no less from a warrior such as yourself. You understand strategy."

"Are they always so offensively obnoxious?" Warrick grumbled, wiping the berry juice from his palm onto his trousers as he stepped onto the wooden slats. He was still venting, the adrenaline of the day curdling into irritation.

"Together? Rather abrasive, yes. They feed off each other's energy," she explained, her gaze lingering on the younger harpies. "Apart, they are more wholesome than you may believe." Warrick decided to take her word for it, though he found it hard to imagine either as wholesome in any context.

"One will replace me someday," she added softly. The sunlight caught the grey at the roots of her fire-orange feathers, highlighting the age that wasn't always immediately obvious in her imposing stature. Speaking of a replacement meant she felt the clock ticking. For a creature of her power, the end might be years or decades away, but she knew the sunset was on the horizon.

"Did you find anything, Descendant?" she asked as he settled back down into the sturdy chair beside her, the wood groaning under his weight.

"Elian kept an impressive collection of information. A lifetime's worth," Warrick admitted, leaning back and closing his eyes for a moment. "But it is written in the old

tongue. I will need assistance to go through it all." He sighed, the frustration ebbing away into a dull ache. "There is someone residing in the Underdeep who can help."

He felt a mild catharsis in the admission. The path was clear, even if it required an annoying detour. "We will depart tomorrow morning and return in a few days' time."

Galeia turned her head, her amber eye catching the light. "I would like that," she said, and the sincerity in her voice was unmistakable.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Seeds of Alliance

Out of respect for Galeia, the four travelers slept in their bedrolls on the hard wooden floor of the log cabin, leaving Elian's empty bed undisturbed. Morning came slowly, filtering through the grime-streaked windows, and with it arrived the familiar, unwelcome weariness of aching muscles and stiff joints. The surprise of morning pain was beginning to fade, replaced by a begrudging acceptance. This was his reality now. Warrick was getting used to wearing a mortal body in this new world.

As he knelt to roll up the bedrolls and tie them to his pack, his mind drifted. He wasn't thinking of the powerful Descendant who had banished him, but of the little girl Cassy used to be. He remembered the weight of her small hand in his, the way she would lean against his leg for support and paternal love. There was a time when he had looked forward to seeing her grow, to holding her children. The grandchildren he might have spoiled. Now, even if she did start a family of her own, he would be nothing more than a ghost story to them. A memory that faded a little more each year.

The thought, heavy as a stone in his chest, drew him back into Elian's library. He moved silently to the corner and plucked the crudely drawn picture from the wall. He traced the charcoal lines of the young chick and her loving father with a calloused thumb. It was a tragedy that spanned worlds. Galeia, like Cassy, would never see her father again.

He tucked the frame under his arm and proceeded outside, swinging his pack onto his shoulder. The desert morning was cool and crisp. He met up with his three traveling companions near the porch. Vexi was wiping the morning drear from her eyes, while Lyra and Helaina stretched, looking like flowers turning toward the sun.

Galeia was there, too, standing tall next to her two sentinels. They must have flown back earlier that morning, or perhaps Galeia had kept vigil through the night. Alecto and Kestra eyed Warrick's hands immediately, their heads bobbing as they checked for food, less inclined to be their usual abrasive selves and more interested in breakfast.

"Are you three ready to depart?" Warrick asked. The three offered silent nods of confirmation.

He then turned to the Matriarch. He stepped close, ignoring the clicking beaks of the sentinels, and held out the frame.

"I found this inside." Warrick handed the drawing to Galeia.

She took it in her massive talons with surprising delicacy. She turned it over and gasped, a sharp intake of air that sounded entirely human. She recognized the drawing instantly. It was a relic from a time when she could fit through the door, when her father was her whole world.

"I wasn't sure if you wanted to keep it," Warrick said gently. "I can put it back inside if you prefer?"

"I will keep it." She pulled the frame close to her chest, her feathers rustling as she embraced the memory. Her amber eyes welled with gratitude. "Thank you, Warrick."

"Would you like to escort us to the edge of your territory?" Warrick plucked a few dark berries from his pack and flicked them casually in the direction of Aleto. She snatched them out of the air with a snap of her beak, swallowing them whole without chewing. "There are a few more things I would like to discuss before I depart." He threw a handful more in Kestra's direction, who similarly pecked at the air, catching every berry with lightning speed and a greedy trill.

Galeia tucked the framed drawing carefully under one wing, clutching it against her chest, and began walking. Warrick fell into step beside her, the crunch of sand under his boots mingling with the scrape of her talons. "What do you wish to discuss?"

"The four races of the Verdant Deep seem fractured," Warrick began, keeping his voice low. "Althea is of the opinion that it was a natural drifting apart. An inevitable cultural divide in a time of prolonged peace."

Galeia offered a slow, agreeing nod. "Distance grows when necessity fades. Mhmm."

"My concern is that peace never lasts forever," Warrick said, his eyes scanning the horizon where the green of the forest met the grey of the desert. "A reformed alliance could be imperative to the survival of all your peoples. If a threat comes, like the one festering in the Necropolis, isolation will be your grave."

"The Oreads are easy enough to get along with," Lyra interjected from behind, clutching her pack straps. "An alliance with the Harpies, though, will be difficult if they keep stealing food out of our hands." She did not protest the allegiance so much as she expressed the exhausting reality of the Harpies' menacing tendencies. "It is hard to shake hands with someone who is trying to snatch your lunch."

"We do not forage. Not built for it," Galeia said bluntly, extending a hand to display her massive, razor-sharp talons. They were weapons of war and hunting, not tools for delicately plucking fruit or tilling soil. "In our nature to take. To snatch. We see, we want, we take."

She seemed to know that the actions of her people were viewed as immoral by the others, but she offered no apology. It wasn't a justification so much as a biological explanation. They were predators and scavengers. Asking them to farm was like asking a shark to walk.

"I am sure the Dryads, Oreads, and Minotaurs would be willing to trade," Warrick proposed, drawing on the historical economics of his native world. "Perhaps we could set up a barter system? You have things they need, and they have the food you desire."

"Trade?" Galeia cocked her head, the concept seeming foreign. "What do we have that ground-walkers want? Hmm?"

"Information," Warrick said immediately. "You see everything from the sky. You know when the rains come, where the herds move, if intruders approach. That is valuable. And feathers," he added, looking at the vibrant plumage she had preened earlier. "Vexi, are Harpy feathers useful in alchemy?"

"Incredibly!" Vexi piped up, hopping over a rock. "Our engineers have been interested in mimicking the Harpy's ability to fly. Their feathers could provide insight, or even material for crafting our own gliding contraptions." She was jubilantly animated at the thought, her hands moving as if shaping the air into wings. "Oh! And shed claws have fascinating properties we'd love to experiment with!"

"You desire what we discard? Hmm?" Galeia pondered the thought, her head tilting as she processed the alien logic. Bartering didn't seem like something she had ever considered. It was such an obvious concept to Warrick, but entirely unheard of to them. To a Harpy, you kept what you needed and dropped what you didn't. The idea that the dropped refuse had value was a revelation.

Warrick knew he wasn't an economist, nor a politician. Far from it. He was a general who knew logistics and morale, but the finer details of setting up markets, trade routes, and eventually even currency were beyond him. But Phaedra was a creature of systems and influence. She might have ideas and insights that could turn this simple concept into a functioning, collaborative society.

"We should set up a meeting between the leaders of the races," Warrick proposed, looking Galeia in the eye. "Trading may be the incentive to bring you all back together. A reason to sit down together, talk, and perhaps unite."

"Stupid idea! If we want something, we take it," Alecto spat, inserting her opinion with a snap of her beak.

"We do not wish to socialize with weak, grounded pests!" Kestra added to her sister's protest, puffing up her feathers. "We have all we need. The Minotaurs disrupt the earth, disturb the dead. Oreads make vile potions that spill everywhere! Nasty stuff. Nasty! Let the other races be a distraction for our enemies. No threat can reach us in our roost anyway."

Her points were not entirely unreasonable. The Harpies indeed held the ultimate tactical advantage of the high ground, and they seemed to be surviving well enough in isolation.

"Did you forget how we ended up here, Sister?" Galeia paused mid-stride, turning her massive head to challenge the convictions of her sentinel.

"There is no sea here! We are not in danger like before!" Kestra defended her opinion fiercely, though her eyes darted away.

"Sea?" Helaina perked up, stepping closer. "Like the ocean? I have never seen it myself, but Althea spoke of a great body of water that stretched out as far as the eyes could look." Lyra nodded along, recalling the same ancient stories of a vast, endless blue.

"We used to dwell near it. Until something lurched out. Attacked us. Drove us from our home." Galeia's pace slowed as she recalled the painful memory.

There was a silence for a moment, the weight of the Matriarch's painful memory hanging in the air, before Warrick spoke up. "If threats exist out there, they may descend upon you again. There is no telling if they will be capable of aerial travel, or worse. I have seen weapons level entire cities. I have seen fire burn down areas larger than the Verdant Deep in an instant."

"Lies! Nothing could do that!" Alecto snapped as if offended, her anger boiling over at the very notion of power that eclipsed her own. "You are just trying to trick us!"

"I hope you never have to experience something so devastating, Alecto," Warrick said calmly. "But if you do, wouldn't you want every advantage? Allies you can call on to help? Even if it never happens, what is the harm in befriending your neighbors just in case?"

Alecto turned her head away defiantly, wrapping herself inside her wings like a petulant child refusing to listen.

"It is too bad you feel that way," Lyra began, a smirk playing on her lips as a devious plan emerged. "We have a stockpile of fruit that we keep hidden away. More than plenty to share."

Kestra stopped. She ran up to Lyra, getting uncharacteristically close, her predator's eyes widening. "Hidden? Where?" Her beak was nearly resting on Lyra's shoulder, eager for the tasty delights she teased.

"We may appear lazy, but the forest gives us all we ask for. We do not need to take from others, or even forage. We simply make a request to nature." Helaina played along with Lyra's game perfectly. "For friends, we could give them an endless supply of the sweetest, juiciest, most delicious fruits they could ever want."

"Awk!" A squeak of shock leapt out of Kestra. Her eyes lit up. "Perhaps we could hear them out, Sister. No harm, yes?" She nuzzled up to Alecto, entirely entranced by the thought of gorging herself on heaps of succulent fruits without having to hunt for them.

"Perhaps." Alecto unfolded her wings slightly, obviously taken by the thought. Her defiance melted instantly in the face of an easy meal.

"Our ideals may conflict, but trade between our peoples is enticing. We will travel to Sylvanrest at midday to meet with Althea." Galeia straightened, her regal bearing returning. She was different from her peers, lacking their chaotic impulses, yet she remained an exceptional leader who prioritized the needs of her roost above all else.

"As the forest becomes thicker moving forward, we will part ways here and meet you at Sylvanrest," Warrick concluded, adjusting the straps of his pack.

"Farewell for now, Descendant." Galeia nestled down onto her haunches to watch their departure, her massive wings tucked tight against her sides. She knew she would have difficulty weaving through the brush as the forest became dense again. The sky was her road, not the earth.

As the party of four stepped across the threshold of the tree line, disappearing into the thick, dappled shadows of the woods, the last thing Warrick heard was the low, excited murmuring of Alecto and Kestra. They were not discussing strategy or war, but debating the possibilities of just what kind of sweet treats the Dryads might offer them.

The potential of a great alliance had begun with the simple promise of delectable fruits.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A Life in the Balance

Hours passed as the group moved purposefully through the Verdant Deep, the transition from scrubland back to dense forest marking their progress.

"Market?" Vexi had been prodding Warrick for miles regarding his proposed economic system. "Currency?" She continued rolling the words around in her mouth like strange pebbles. Helaina and Lyra were mostly silent during the flurry of questions. They were less interested in the dry complexities of economics and more focused on the path home.

"Coins, most commonly," Warrick explained, his patience wearing slightly thin. "Instead of bartering a goat for a sword, you trade the goat for coins. The coins have a specific, agreed-upon value. You then use the coins to buy the sword."

"Fascinating. A sort of go-between item," Vexi mused, tapping her chin. "A universal token of value."

"And if you had a lot of coin, you would store most of it at a bank." Warrick's rudimentary teachings were beginning to show themselves for what they were, which was extremely simple. He knew how to spend gold, not how to structure a fiscal policy.

Vexi stopped, looking up at him with a deadpan expression. "You don't know much about all this, do you?"

"Look, I am the brawn," Warrick grunted. "If you wish to speak to brains, then talk to—"

He was cut off by a violent rustling of leaves directly in front of them. Instinct took over and he shoved Vexi behind his massive frame while peering into the shadows, his muscles coiling for a fight.

A figure materialized from the brush, stumbling slightly. It was Guardian Kaelen. His usual stoic composure was shattered, replaced by a look of wide-eyed, breathless shock.

"Lyra! Come quickly!" He waved her onward, his voice cracking. "We need your help." He turned toward Warrick, a terrified panic in his eyes that chilled the warrior to the bone. "It is Phaedra. She is gravely injured."

Warrick dropped his sack and broke into a full sprint toward Sylvanrest.

Lyra and Kaelen weaved through the woods as if gliding, their bodies moving in harmony with the forest, dodging brush and limb. Warrick possessed no such grace. He powered through the undergrowth like a siege engine, snapping branches and trampling bushes, leaving a trail of destruction in his wake. Vexi brought up the rear, her short legs pumping furiously. She plucked a potion from her belt, yanked the cork with her teeth, and downed the contents in one swig, a burst of alchemical speed allowing her to keep pace.

They arrived at the edge of the village and were led immediately to a small healing hut. A crimson trail of slick, wet blood led through the doorway.

Warrick hurried in just behind Lyra, but the sight that greeted him stopped him cold. It was a charnel house.

Kazgar, the massive Minotaur Chieftain, sat slumped in the corner. He looked like a mountain that had crumbled. His limbs were bent at sickening angles, his fur matted with dirt and blood, and deep gouges marred his iron-hard skin. Dark blood oozed from his mouth, pooling on the floor between his legs. He was unconscious, his breathing ragged and wet.

But in the center of the room, on a blood-soaked bedroll, lay Phaestra.

It was a nightmare made flesh. Her stomach had been laid open, a horrific, jagged wound that exposed the glistening red of her insides. Her intestines had spilled out, coiled like snakes on the wooden floor. Her skin was the color of moonlight, drained of all life, and her clothes were shredded tatters.

"Lyrally, I cannot heal her on my own." Althea stepped into view, her hands stained red. Warrick hadn't even noticed her, so distracted was he by the gore. "Assist me. Quickly, before her spirit flees."

"I can't. I can't heal this." Lyra froze, her hands shaking. She had treated cuts and even minded broken bones, but this was butchery.

"Try," Althea commanded, her voice cutting through the panic.

Lyra rushed over, gasping for air, and grasped her staff until her knuckles turned white. She pressed the wood against Phaestra's shoulder, squeezing her eyes shut. A warm, wavering glow began to emanate from the staff.

Phaestra's head lolled to the side. Her eyes, usually so sharp and calculating, were wide with a primal terror. They found Warrick.

"Warrick?" she whispered, the sound a wet gurgle.

Warrick knelt beside her in the blood, placing a heavy hand on her shoulder. "I am here."

"We couldn't have known," she wheezed, her fingers scrabbling weakly at his arm.

"What happened?" Warrick demanded, his mind racing. What force on this earth could break a Minotaur Chieftain and gut a Descendant?

"I don't want to die, Warrick. Please." Tears welled in her eyes, cutting tracks through the grime on her pale face. "Help me."

But there was nothing he could do. He was a dealer of death, not a savior from it.

Vexi hurried to the other side of the bedroll, yanking the cork off a vial. She lifted Phaedra's head.

"What are you doing?" Warrick reached over, trying to stop her, fearing a mistake.

"It's a sleeping draught! She doesn't need to be awake for this!" Vexi snapped, pouring the liquid down Phaedra's throat. Phaedra coughed once, then her eyes rolled back, her body going limp as the alchemy took hold.

"I can't do it. It's too severe. I can't!" Lyra began sobbing, the glow of her staff flickering out. The task was impossible.

Althea sat next to her, placing a gentle, grounding hand on Lyra's spine. "You are the only one who can."

Lyra's head lifted as she felt Althea's immense, ancient power pour into her.

Then, a soft sound cut through the panic. Helaina stepped up behind Lyra, placing a hand on the young healer's shoulder. She began to hum. It was not the song of lust, nor the shout of courage. It was a low, steady, rhythmic thrum. Subtle, controlled, and deeply focused. It was a song of weaving, of mending.

Lyra took a sharp breath. Supported by Althea's strength and focused by Helaina's song, her eyes snapped open. They glowed with a blinding green light. She grasped her staff with renewed purpose.

The magic that filled the room was suffocatingly thick. On the floor, the impossible happened. The spilled coils of Phaedra's insides began to writhe, crawling back into the cavity of her abdomen as if guided by invisible hands. The blood that pooled on the wood defied gravity, receding back into her veins. The tattered flesh of her stomach pulled itself together, knitting bone and sinew with an audible wet snap.

Lyra's breathing was heavy, sweat pouring down her face, the act taxing her body and mind to their absolute limit.

With a final flash of light, the wound sealed, leaving only a furious, angry red scar. Lyra collapsed, falling backward into Althea's waiting arms.

"She did it? Is Phaedra going to be alright?" Warrick asked, his voice tight. A daunting amount of his future lay on that bedroll. Without Phaedra, the translations, the magic, the plan all fell apart.

"We have done what we could." Althea whispered, picking up Lyra's limp body and carrying her out of the hut to rest.

Warrick turned to the corner. "What about the Chieftain?"

"We cannot heal him," Kaelen said, hanging his head dejectedly. "Their bodies resist our magic. It is like trying to heal stone."

"What in the hells happened?" Warrick's anger began to mount, filling the space the fear had left behind. "Phaedra is hanging by a thread and the Minotaur Chief is a crumpled mess in the corner." He stood, his shadow falling over Kaelen. "Who did this?!"

"We do not know." Kaelen stood his ground, meeting Warrick's furious gaze. "Chieftain Kazgar approached our village carrying Phaedra in his arms. She was barely alive, and he was struggling to stay on his feet. He crossed the boundary line gasping for help. He has not woken since setting her down here and collapsing into that corner."

A sudden cacophony of rustling leaves and terrified gasps from outside interrupted Warrick's interrogation, drawing his attention away from the grim scene in the hut. The Dryads in Sylvanrest were abuzz, cowering behind trees and huts as they peered up at the canopy.

Tilting his head back, Warrick gazed up at what held the locals in such thrall. Three dark shapes circled the area, blotting out the sun as they descended with harsh, rhythmic *caws*. It was Galeia and her sentinels.

Leaves, twigs, and dirt whirled through the clearing in a violent vortex as they landed. The heavy *thud* of their talons hitting the earth shook the ground, scattering the remaining Dryads like frightened deer.

"What is the meaning of this?" Kaelen strode forward, planting himself between the village and the intruders. He was impressively fearless, a lone wooden soldier staring down three apex predators.

"I asked them here," Warrick said, holding up a halting hand to the Guardian. He turned immediately to the Matriarch. "Galeia, there is a situation. Chieftain Kazgar and another have been gravely wounded. We're not sure what happened, but it was brutal."

"Attacked?" Galeia chirped in surprise, her feathers ruffling. Then, a calm, cold realization fell over her avian features. "Possible their containment has failed. The dead are relentless." Her amber eyes darted around, calculating, before snapping to her two guards. "Alecto, Kestra. Scout the Underdeep. Quickly. Do not engage. Just see."

Without a word of protest, the two sentinels crouched and launched themselves into the air, the downdraft of their wings flattening the grass as they sped toward the Minotaur dwelling.

"We would have preferred to meet at a neutral location, Warrick," Kaelen hissed, turning on the Descendant. "You do not invite guests of this nature into our home without our permission." His teeth ground together, the sound like bark rubbing against bark.

Warrick's jaw tightened. Kaelen wasn't wrong. This was a massive breach of protocol and safety to invite Harpies directly into the heart of the grove. It was his own impatience, his desire for progress back to his powers that drove the decision. But he refused to apologize. He ignored the Guardian, refusing to give him the satisfaction of submission while lives were on the line.

"Matriarch." The soft voice cut through the tension. Althea approached from the direction of Lyra's home where she must have taken the exhausted Dryad to rest. She looked up at the gargantuan Harpy now inhabiting her home, not with fear, but with recognition. "It is wonderful to see you again," Althea said, smiling warmly. "Welcome to our grove. It has been a long time."

"Mhmm. Long indeed. Too long," Galeia replied, her posture softening. She dipped her head low, bringing her face level with the Dryad leader. "Much to discuss, it would seem."

Galeia bobbed her head as Althea reached out, placing a guiding hand on the Matriarch's wing. She led the massive creature toward a larger clearing where she wouldn't crush the undergrowth, speaking to her not as a monster, but as an old friend separated by an ocean of time.

"I must tend to Lyrally since Althea has been pulled away," Kaelen said, his voice tight. He shot a final, aggressive glare at Warrick before turning on his heel and marching toward Lyra's home. It seemed they were destined to endlessly clash, oil and water in humanoid form.

Warrick watched him go, then scanned the grove as the Dryads began to emerge from hiding, their movements still skittish. He looked at the perimeter with a general's eye and shook his head. There were no walls, no barriers, nothing but open air and trees. Anything could enter their home from any direction. It was a tactical nightmare, an indefensible position completely open to slaughter. If something out there was strong enough to break Kazgar, who was a literal tower of muscle and iron-hard skin, then these people were helpless.

He hated the feeling of being exposed, but he could do nothing until Alecto and Kestra reported back their findings. He headed back into the dim quiet of the healing hut to check on Phaedra. She was still unconscious, her breathing shallow but steady, covered now by a large, soft woven sheet of leaves.

"She looked cold," Vexi said softly. She was curled up against the wall, her arms wrapped tight around her knees, pressing them into her chest. She looked very small.

Warrick sat next to her, the floor hard beneath him. He hated being incapable of searching out the threat himself, forced to wait idly by while others scouted.

"Something has been bothering me, Warrick," Vexi said, resting her chin on her knee, her eyes fixed on the sleeping Phaedra. "I have never seen a Descendant before. Now there are three of you here, all at the same time. You, Phaedra, and Corvus."

Warrick nodded lightly, staring at his hands. "It was rare for a Descendant to be banished. For a long time, extraordinarily so. Then," he paused, the memory dark and heavy, "it seemed, suddenly, every week there was a sentencing."

He thought back to the glowing screens in his old home, the news anchors with their serious faces reporting the containment of yet another dangerous individual. One after another, banishment after banishment. And he had ignorantly ignored it.

"Why?" Vexi asked. She was prone to investigate. She craved answers the way the Harpies craved berries.

"Because it was no longer our world, Vexi. It was theirs. And we threatened that authority," Warrick said, his voice rough with regret. He connected the dots that he then had selfishly refused to see. As long as they weren't coming after him and Cassy, he hadn't cared. He had justified it. He had told himself the others deserved it, just as the television told him. And he had foolishly, blindly believed them right up until they came for him.

"Eventually they came after you too," Vexi whispered. It wasn't a question. It was the final, sorrowful piece of a puzzle she had finally solved.

"I nearly lost myself that day," Warrick said, his voice tightening until it was a low, dangerous rasp. The shadows of the hut seemed to deepen as his anger flared. "I felt the cold embrace of madness start to take hold when my whole world turned on me. I wanted to crush everything. Everyone. I wanted to see it all turn to ash."

His tone soured with a deep, ancient hatred. It was an anger that threatened to re-emerge just by speaking of it, a fire that had never truly been extinguished, only banked.

Vexi turned her head toward him, offering a small, gentle smile that seemed far too bright for such a grim room. "In a way, Apeiron saved you then."

Warrick looked at her, watching the way the dim light caught the earnestness in her eyes. She said the world had saved him, but he knew the truth. It wasn't the soil of this land or the breath of its Gods that had pulled him back from the brink of total, violent insanity.

It was her. This little Oread that reminded him of humor and companionship. Who guided him through a world he thought was a prison, only to find out it was a home to a great many wonderful creatures of myth. It was the adventure she led him on that gave him new-found purpose and renewed hope.

A sharp rustling in the brush shattered the moment. Warrick was on his feet instantly, his instincts screaming of a threat before his eyes even found the source. He stepped out of the hut to find the two Harpy sentinels landing in a cloud of dust and shed feathers.

"Report. What did you find?" Warrick commanded. His voice had the cold, hard edge of a general on the eve of a slaughter.

"We do not answer to you, flightless pest," Alecto snapped. She half turned away from him, clicking her beak in a sharp display of petulant defiance.

"An unrelenting tide of the dead is crawling in every direction," Kestra revealed, her voice heavy with a concern that overrode her sister's stubbornness. "They are spilling out of the Underdeep like a stain. We have half a day at most before they descend upon this grove."

"Half a day?" Kaelen seemed to appear from the shadows beside Warrick. His tone was a jagged mix of terror and disbelief. His head drooped as the weight of the news settled on him, his spirit visibly crumbling.

"Flee or fight. Those are the only two choices the world provides," Warrick said. He laid the truth out plainly, refusing to sugarcoat the coming storm.

"This is our home. It is all we have," Kaelen whispered. He looked pale and haunted. This was a side of the Guardian that Warrick had never witnessed. His entire existence, his every memory, was about to be erased by a force that could not be reasoned with.

"Then we have work to do. The dead are slow and brittle. Their only advantage is their numbers," Warrick stated, stepping into the center of the village. He knew war. He knew how to break a charge and hold a line. He could give them a chance at a future. "Gather every Dryad capable of magic. We need a perimeter of reinforced bramble to tangle their legs and bleed their momentum. We must turn the very forest into a cage."

"They are endless! No wall or army can stand forever. You are skittering insects standing before a landslide!" Alecto shrieked at him, her voice a piercing needle that mocked his authority as if his strategy were merely the frantic scribbles of a fool.

She was right. No matter how many of the walking dead they cut down, the tide would simply rise over the corpses of the fallen if they were truly endless. Warrick realized he did not need a battle plan. He needed a solution to a catastrophe. He needed a cork to stop the flow of a ruptured world. But how?

Warrick turned and ran back toward the healing hut, bursting through the doorway with audible purpose. "Phaedra!" He looked down at her still, pale form. She needed rest, he was certain of that, but time was a luxury they no longer possessed.

He strode toward her with intent, set on waking her by any means necessary. Just as he reached the bedroll, a massive shadow eclipsed the light. A figure rose from the corner, unfolding like a mountain of battered muscle until he towered over the Descendant.

It was Chieftain Kazgar. Even broken and bruised, he dwarfed Warrick as he rose to his full, staggering height. His body was a map of trauma, but the wounds were closing, the deep purple swelling around his eye beginning to recede. It seemed he was capable of incredibly fast healing.

"She must rest." Kazgar's words were slow and firm, carrying a weight of profound sadness beneath the gravel of his voice.

"I need answers, Chieftain. What happened to her, and to you? Why are the dead marching toward us? I thought your people had them under control." Warrick's voice started with a frantic inquiry but quickly transitioned into the heat of anger. Such a failure on the part of the Minotaur clan could destroy this entire world. If they had never

dug too deep, none of this would be happening. Warrick could have remained focused on his own path back to power.

"We released something under the great stone blocking the river. Something powerful. Something unstoppable," Kazgar replied. Each word plodded out of him like the slow, inexorable crawl of lava down a volcano.

"What was it?" Vexi chimed in from the corner. She stood up, taking a small, curious step toward the giant with a mix of wonder and dread in her stride.

"Undead. Like the others. But stronger than all of them combined," Kazgar began, his eyes unfocused as he searched for words to describe the horror. "It felled twenty of my brethren before I even understood the nature of the threat." He sat back down, the floorboards groaning under his weight as the weariness of his injuries resurfaced. "Even my own might failed against it. It was like fighting the wind or the tide."

"A creature? An undead? Stronger than you?" Warrick pushed harder, his voice rising in a furious inquisition. "What man or creature could be strong enough to fell your entire clan in their own home?"

Then, a cold hand clamped onto his arm from below.

It was Phaedra. Her grasp was weak, a trembling tug that pulled his attention down to the bedroll. She stared up at him, her eyes wide with a primal terror, tears welling and spilling down her pale cheeks. She spoke a single word, the answer he demanded but could not bring himself to believe.

"Ares."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Drums of War

"No, you are mistaken," Warrick said, his voice ringing with absolute disbelief. The implication was a blade to his chest. Phaedra was suggesting that Ares, the God of War and the very ancestor Warrick claimed with such fierce pride, was not only defeated but humiliated and disfigured into a rotten, animated corpse. "It must have been another Descendant. A powerful mage, or some ancient guardian. It could not have been him."

"I saw him, Warrick. I saw his fury. I felt a strength that made the earth tremble. It was him. I am sure of it." Her eyes drifted away, lost in the red-stained corridors of her memory. "He must have been trapped beneath that boulder in the river for ages. When the Minotaurs moved it, they set a catastrophe free. I watched him," she paused, her entire frame trembling. "I watched him tear the Minotaur warriors apart as if they were made of dry parchment. I tried to run. I tried."

The sobbing that followed was a raw, jagged sound. She clutched her stomach, her fingers digging into her skin as if she could still feel the terrifying sensation of her organs being liberated from her body.

Warrick stood resolute. He anchored himself in the confidence that the creature she saw could not have been the legendary God of War. She was confused by the trauma or simply wrong. It was impossible.

But a dark, cold seed of doubt began to take root. What if she was right? What if the idol he had aspired to for centuries was now nothing but a hollow husk of a God, a shambling and grotesque undead horror? How could the apex of might and strength allow himself to be broken and defeated in such a wretched manner?

Warrick pushed the thought aside. He had to. The doubt was a poison that threatened to consume his resolve. He turned his focus back to Phaedra, who was now inconsolable. She had spent her life in battles of intellect, subterfuge, and silver-tongued debate. She was a scholar and a manipulator, not a soldier. The sheer, mindless brutality of a physical slaughter had shattered her composure.

He placed a gentle hand on her shoulder, letting her feel the grounding weight of his presence in the center of her trauma. There were no words he could offer to bridge the gap of the horror she had witnessed. Only time would alleviate the haunting memories, and time was a resource they were rapidly exhausting.

"Vexi, take Phaedra to the river," Warrick said. He imagined the cold, clear water would be more than just refreshing. It would be a symbolic cleansing of the gore that still clung to her mind. "I will fetch new clothes for her."

Vexi nodded, her expression solemn, and Phaedra wiped the salt and grime from her cheeks. Warrick helped the Descendant to her feet, supporting her weight until she found her balance. As she turned to leave with Vexi, she looked back at him. She did not speak, but the distress in her eyes had softened into a quiet comfort at the sight of him. It was a gentle nod, a thank you that remained unspoken but deeply felt.

Moving outside, Warrick watched as Kaelen worked with frantic energy, recruiting every available Dryad to conjure the bramble walls. He briefly considered instructing the Guardian to lead the non-combatants north, away from the grove, until the battle was over. But he dismissed the thought as soon as it formed. There was no safety to be found. An endlessly expanding wave of the dead would eventually engulf the entirety of Apeiron. Their best chance was to enlist the magic of every single soul in Sylvanrest, regardless of age or ability.

"Kestra and Alecto have explained the situation to us," Galeia said, approaching him from behind. Althea walked at her side, looking small but resolute next to the towering Matriarch. "We have decided to stay and assist."

"We should leave! Halcyon is protected from the monsters. We have to get you to safety!" Alecto protested, her wings twitching with nervous energy as she tried to convince her leader to retreat back to their home.

"If the threat is truly as dire as you yourself have suggested, Alecto, then the undead will eventually infest every corner of the Verdant Deep. Eventually, they will find the Spires," Galeia said, her voice like grinding stone. She saw what the younger Harpies could not. "Their presence alone would strangle the forest, leaving it a lifeless void. We would only be choosing to starve to death in the safety of our home."

It was obvious the two sentinels did not like the idea of going hungry, but it was difficult to say if they disliked it more than the prospect of helping the Dryads. Either way, they would not question their Matriarch. They simply crossed their arms and sat in the dirt, a silent and obvious protest.

"Warrick, do you have any idea how to stop this?" A thin thread of desperation hung in Althea's words. The races of the Verdant Deep knew nothing of the old Gods or the ancient, broken machinery of the world. Unfortunately, neither did Warrick.

"Phaedra is our only hope, but her mind is shattered from the attack," he said, placing his hands on his hips and staring at the ground in thought. "I have sent her to the river to clean up. I will go speak with her once she is calm."

The two leaders nodded. "Then we will work on buying you the time you need," Althea said. She turned toward the line of Dryads who were currently summoning a wall of thorns into existence.

Warrick headed for Lyrally's house to prepare his two companions for the coming storm and retrieve the fresh clothes for Phaedra. As he entered the home, he found Helaina and Lyra huddled together on the bed, looking like two lost children.

"You're awake," Warrick noted, seeing Lyra sitting up.

"I have never exhausted myself to that degree before," Lyra whispered, pulling her knees to her chest. Her eyes were rimmed with red. "Those were mortal wounds, Warrick. She should be dead. I should not have been able to do what I did."

"I am going to need both of you at your best," he said, his voice firm but not unkind. "The undead are marching this way. They are half a day out. We need every bit of help we can get to face this."

"Undead?" Helaina breathed the word in shock, her face turning a shade paler.

Warrick knelt before her, placing a grounding hand on her knee to still her shaking. "You will stay in the center of Sylvanrest. Remember what I told you. Subtlety, Helaina. Inspire the village to fight. Remind them what they are defending. That is all you have to do."

She nodded, the nervous trembling of her body subsiding slightly under his touch.

Warrick turned his attention to Lyra. "Phaedra is awake, but she needs clothes."

"Okay," Lyra said, standing on shaky legs to retrieve a clean garment. "What should I do?"

"I need you to tend to the wounded the best you can," he instructed as she handed him the fabric. "Stay close to the center. Do not overextend yourself unless it is absolutely necessary."

She nodded nervously, clutching her hands together. Warrick headed for the door, then paused to look back at the two of them.

"Rest and prepare," he said. His voice was a calm, steady rumble that seemed to push back the fear in the room. It was the confidence of a man who had seen a thousand horizons and expected to see a thousand more. It was a lie, perhaps, but it was the inspiring assurance they needed to hear.

The roar of the falls drowned out the rest of the world as Warrick approached the riverbank. The air was thick with a cool, clinging mist that turned the sunlight into a hazy, golden veil. Through the spray, he saw the silhouette of Phaedra standing directly beneath the crashing weight of the water. She was a pale, slender figure against the dark stone, her body a quiet map of exhaustion as she let the river wash away the literal and metaphorical stains of the Necropolis.

Vexi moved toward him, her footsteps silent on the damp moss. She looked small against the backdrop of the churning water.

"She seems better. I mean, compared to how she was," Vexi said, her voice barely rising above the thunder of the falls. She looked up at Warrick, her brow furrowed with a heavy, uncharacteristic weight. "Warrick, I don't know what I can do in this fight. I have a handful of potions. A few tricks. But against an army? Against whatever hurt Phaedra?" She trailed off, shaking her head in a rare moment of utter defeat.

Warrick knelt so they were eye to eye, his massive frame shielding her from the spray.

"When the time comes, empower me. I will face the creature myself," he said. The warrior inside him was no longer just a memory. He was the iron and the edge. His expression was a fortress of absolute certainty. It was the bravery of a man who looked at the impossible and saw only a task to be completed.

"You are not immortal anymore, Warrick," Vexi reminded him softly. She regretted the words the moment they left her lips, fearing she was stripping away the very confidence he needed to survive. She wasn't just afraid for the grove. She was terrified of losing the man who had become her world in a matter of days.

"I have grown rather fond of you, Vexi Dew. I would like to continue getting to know you, and all the people I have met here," Warrick said. His voice was a low, steady rumble that cut through her fear. "I am going to put every ounce of effort into breathing life into a future for all of us."

They were simple words, but to Vexi, they were a tether to reality. Her doubt didn't disappear, but it found a place to rest. If Warrick believed there was a future to be built, then she would help him lay the foundations.

She threw herself into his arms, wrapping hers as far around his broad waist as they could go. Vexi had lived a lifetime of quiet isolation before he arrived. In one week, he had saved her from death, dragged her into the sunlight of adventure, and given her a reason to be brave. This embrace was not just a goodbye or a thank you. It was a desperate holding on to something precious.

Warrick squeezed her back in kind. He valued her energy and her relentless curiosity more than he could easily put into words. She was a refreshing blast of life in a world that often felt stagnant. He felt the same protective instinct for her that he once felt for Cassy.

They reluctantly released one another. Without another word, Vexi wiped her eyes, turned her back to the falls, and headed toward Sylvanrest to prepare. She didn't want him to see the cracks in her composure.

Warrick stepped into Phaedra's view at the edge of the churning river. She gasped and immediately covered herself with her arms, turning her body away with a sharp splash of water. Warrick pivoted on his heel, presenting his back to her, and held the fresh bundle of clothes out to his side.

Phaedra waded through the shallow water toward him. He felt the brief, cool brush of her skin against his arm as she snatched the garments from his grasp and retreated to the bank to dress.

"Are you feeling better?" Warrick asked. He knew the clock was ticking, but he refused to rush her. A broken mind was as useless in a war as a broken sword.

"I tried to persuade Ares with my powers," Phaedra said, her voice trembling. He could hear the rustle of fabric as she pulled the dress over her damp skin. "I had grown so used to them that I didn't even think about it. My abilities always kept me safe. They kept me out of harm's way. Without them," she trailed off, the sound of her voice swallowed for a moment by the roar of the falls. "I don't know how to protect myself."

Warrick stood silent, staring at the misty forest. He had been entirely focused on his own loss. His strength, his flight, his divine power. The despair of his own fall had consumed him so completely that he had not considered her perspective. He had seen her as a silver-tongued witch in his world, but here she was a survivor who had just lost her only weapon.

She walked around to face him. She was clad in a dark green dress that fit her like a second skin. It featured a daring slit down the chest and a singular, tight pant leg that covered her right side while leaving her slender left leg entirely exposed. It was a

garment that looked more suited for a high-society gala than a forest floor, yet she wore it with a desperate kind of grace.

"When I arrived here, the Minotaurs gave me shelter. They gave me a home and protection. I owed them everything, Warrick. And I had to watch them be torn apart while I stood by, helpless."

A spark of genuine curiosity stirred within him. He wanted to hear her story. For the first time, he realized she wasn't just a conniving player in a game. She was a refugee.

"I didn't use my powers very often back home," she continued, her gaze fixed on the rushing water. "But they were a safety net. A way out of trouble. I could convince anyone of anything. Without my powers of persuasion, I don't know how to survive."

He had never seen her this vulnerable. Behind the mask of the clever manipulator was a person who was terrified of her own mortality.

"I'm scared, Warrick. I don't want to be mortal. I don't want to die." She hugged herself tightly, staring at the mossy ground as if looking him in the eye would make her fear too real to handle.

"We can figure everything else out later. For now, we need to stop the undead," Warrick said. He stepped forward and used a gentle hand under her chin to guide her gaze up to meet his. "How do we do it?"

"I don't know," she whispered, her eyes darting between his with a frantic, hunted look.

"Think," he pushed, his voice a low command. He was unrelenting. She was the only one who had studied the ancient Gods and the heavy, rusted machinery of the world. She held the key.

"The river," she said, the words so soft they were nearly lost to the spray. "The Crimson River is what guides the souls to the underworld. The dead began to grow more rapidly in number after we jostled loose the massive stone. Before, some of the waters were getting through. After releasing Ares, the stone statue fell into place like a dam backing up the river entirely. It's overflowing into the living world."

The logic clicked into place. The boulder was the clog in the metaphysical plumbing of Apeiron.

She took two steps back, shaking her head. "But we can't get there. We can't break it apart. There is nothing we can do." Hopelessness engulfed her again. The Underdeep was crawling with the dead, and the source was guarded by a fallen God.

Warrick, however, was not so quick to resign. He was a man who had built his life on breaking things that were meant to stay whole.

"I have an idea," his booming voice cut through the thunder of the falls.

The epiphany was cut short by a sudden, jagged sound from the direction of Sylvanrest. High-pitched screaming and commanding shouts echoed from the village. Something was very wrong. Warrick had assumed they had hours. He had assumed wrong.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Battle for Sylvanrest

Warrick and Phaedra sprinted toward the village with a desperate, lung-burning intensity. The transition was jarring. The clean, cool scent of the river was replaced by the cloying, sweet stench of rot. Soon, the rhythmic groaning of a thousand dead throats reached their ears. The fight had begun without them.

They burst into the clearing. A hundred yards beyond the first huts, the dead were becoming a tangled, writhing mass in the bramble walls. Teams of male Dryads armed with long spears circled the perimeter, their thrusts precise and lethal. They were stabbing Rotted Ones through the eyes and shattering the fragile joints of the Fleshless. Against a standard horde, they were doing surprisingly well.

"Kestra!" He reached the sentinel, whose eyes were darting with predatory speed across the wall. Her posture was coiled, a spring ready to snap at anything that breached the thorns. "Can you carry a passenger?"

Kestra's head snapped toward him, her amber eyes widening. "Carry? I am a hunter! I do not carry!" She squawked, her feathers ruffling in an immediate, sharp offense.

"I need you to take Phaedra to the Underdeep. Now!" Warrick's voice left no room for debate.

"We do not take orders from lowly, grounded creatures like you!" Alecto pecked toward him, her beak snapping inches from his face.

"Do it," Galeia ordered. The Matriarch stepped forward, her voice a calm anchor in the chaos. She was placing her trust in the Descendant.

Kestra hissed, shaking her plumage in a rare display of near-defiance. She lowered her center of gravity before exploding into the air like a feathered rocket. She circled once, a dark blur against the canopy.

Phaedra reached up with a single, trembling arm. In a blur of motion, Kestra plummeted and plucked the woman from the ground. She held Phaedra's wrist with a crushing grip as she soared higher. It became clear in that moment that these were not the simple scavengers Warrick had first encountered. Alecto and Kestra were the elite, the killers of the sky.

Just as Kestra began to cross the bounds of Sylvanrest into the mist of the forest, something intercepted her. A figure materializing from the shadows of the high canopy lunged forward. In an instant, it had Kestra by the throat.

It was a disgustingly disfigured creature, its flesh hanging in grey tatters from yellowed bones. It wore recognizable armor. An ancient Greek chestplate, bronze shin guards, and arm guards. The metal was caked in centuries of grime, half-disintegrated and held together by sheer malice. This was the fallen God. This was Ares.

Kestra choked in his grasp, her talons clawing desperately at the impossibly strong arm that held her suspended. Phaedra dangled in the air, her fingers locked around Kestra's leg in a white-knuckled grip. A fall from this height meant a certain, bone-shattering death.

"Warrick!" Phaedra screamed, her voice thin with terror. "Help!"

But Warrick was grounded. He stood as a helpless watcher, his stolen power a distant memory as he stared up at the sky.

Then a boom echoed across the clearing as Galeia launched herself. She met the attacker with the full, terrifying weight of a Matriarch. "Go!" she shrieked at Kestra, her talons raking the God to force him to release her kin. "Now!"

Kestra did not hesitate. She banked hard and continued her journey into the dark of the forest.

The onlookers below watched in frozen terror as Galeia and the undead powerhouse traded blows in the air. Galeia was a whirlwind of feathers and fury, her beak tearing strips of rotten flesh from the God's frame. For a moment, it looked as though she held the upper advantage.

Then the creature caught her wing. With a brutal, casual jerk, he snapped the primary bone. An audible crack rang out like a dry log breaking. Galeia let out a harrowing shriek of agony before she plummeted, crashing into the dirt with a sickening thud.

"No!" Warrick's roar was a missile of pure rage aimed at the tyrant above. "Vexi, now!"

The Nymph was already moving. She tossed a vial in a perfect, shimmering arc. Warrick caught it, shattered the glass against his chest, and felt the alchemical fire surge through his veins. He knelt low, his muscles coiling until they threatened to tear, and then he launched.

He became a projectile. He threw his arms back, cocking his fists as he reached the apex of his jump. As he nearly collided with the undead monster, he let loose a blow that

carried centuries of pent-up resentment. Both fists smashed into the beast with a shockwave that sent a visible ripple through the mist. The God was driven straight down, cratering into the earth with the force of a falling star.

Warrick hit the ground seconds later. The impact was so intense it nearly snapped his shins, but he rolled and came up standing. To his side, Galeia writhed in the dirt, her wing bent at a grotesque angle. Lyra was already there, her hands glowing as she began the taxing work of mending a creature of such power. Althea rushed to her side to bolster the spell.

The monster crawled out of the smoking crater, brushing dust from his tattered bronze plate.

"I refused to believe it. It could not be," Warrick yelled across the gap. "But it is you. I see it in the armor. I see it in your stance."

Warrick marched forward, his eyes locked on the confused God who stared back through hollow, empty sockets.

"Monster! Freak!" Warrick's rage boiled over into madness. "How could you let yourself become this? You were indomitable! You were the strongest of the Gods!" He spat the words through gritted teeth. "And now you are a grotesque abomination. You could not even find the strength to die like a warrior. You are a disgrace to the name Ares!"

The broken God looked down at his own hands. They were bony appendages with grey skin barely clinging to the tendons. Entire fingers were missing. A flicker of shock appeared in his dead eyes, as if he were only now noticing his own decay. A single word growled through his throat.

"Ha... des..."

There was a world of disdain in that name. Betrayal. Hatred.

It didn't matter. Nothing mattered to Warrick except putting this rabid dog down. He had prided himself on his lineage for his entire life. To see his idol reduced to a shambling wreck was a betrayal worse than his exile. His mind was on the absolute verge of collapse.

He charged like an enraged animal, slamming into Ares like a meteor. Ares was a fraction of his former glory, but he was still a God. He met Warrick's charge with immovable strength, absorbing the blow before slamming both fists down onto Warrick's spine.

The blow forced Warrick to his knees. Ares took a single, confident step back to peer down at him.

Warrick looked up and saw his own reflection in the God's posture. Ares stood at his full, imposing height, puffing out his chest in a mimicry of Warrick's own habitual arrogance. It was a mirror held up to Warrick's future. This was the end of a potential path for he himself.

The thought ignited a final, desperate fury. Ignoring the excruciating pain in his back, Warrick launched himself upward. He unleashed a flurry of blows, each one landing with explosive force, driving the God backward step by step.

Yet no matter how hard he struck, the undead thing would not fall. It felt no pain. It had no blood to lose. Eventually, Ares found his opening. A heavy blow to the stomach doubled Warrick over. A brutal uppercut to the chest knocked the remaining air from his lungs. The final strike slammed into the side of Warrick's face, sending him spinning into the dirt.

Before Ares could relish his victory over the fallen Descendant, something crashed into him from the sky, cratering him back into the dirt.

"I am going to rip you apart!" Alecto shrieked. She tore into the God with a murderous, unhinged rage. She scratched and clawed through his ancient breastplate, her talons shrieking against the bronze as she pecked at his hollow eyes and wrenched her feet into his thighs. Her Matriarch lay crippled on the field, and the sight had turned the sentinel into a whirlwind of violence.

The undead Ares swiped and swung his massive arms, trying to dislodge the harpy. He rolled and writhed against her assault, but he could not find his balance through the flurry of her strikes. She was a blur of feathers and fury, pulling ribs from his chest and flinging them into the brush as if they were mere kindling.

Finally, Ares caught one of her swipes with a grip like a titan. That was all he needed. In one harsh motion, he slammed her to the ground and flipped himself on top of her. She fought with everything she had, continuing to claw and tear at his face, but Ares never relented. He was an impossible march of determination. With a sickening, wet tug, he ripped Alecto's arm and wing clean from her body.

She let out a harrowing scream of agony as blood erupted from the wound. The assault ceased instantly in the aftermath of the amputation. Ares grabbed one of her legs and hurled her into the distance where she crashed into the undergrowth, her cries of pain echoing through the grove.

Warrick was already back on his feet. He could feel cracked ribs grinding in his chest, and he spit a single bloody tooth into the dirt. He still had life in his body and he would not be defeated by anything other than death itself. He charged again.

Blow after blow, he plummeted his fists into Ares, smashing whatever bone he could reach. The God was driven back by the sheer, desperate force of the assault until he found another opening. He pushed one of Warrick's fists aside and countered with a swift, punishing blow to the liver. The hit stumbled Warrick backward, dropping him to his knees as white-hot pain blossomed in his gut.

Then, a roar that shook the very earth beneath their feet erupted from the healing hut. Kazgar was charging like a bull, a ten-foot-tall mass of pure muscle. He gored the surprised Ares, lifting the God high into the air as horns protruded through the ancient backplate. Ares held the horn that had penetrated his stomach, groaning in a sound of defiant disbelief.

Warrick lay broken on the ground. His breathing was fast and raspy. Each intake of air sent sharp needles through his entire frame. He wrapped his arms around himself, unable to bear the intense agony of his shattered ribs and ruptured organs. His vision was a messy blur, and he could only feel the rumbling of the earth as Kazgar and Ares battled. He tried to claw his way back up, but he stumbled, his strength spent.

A faint song pierced through the haze of pain. He could hear Helaina, her voice was clearing his mind and emboldening his senses. A vine crawled up his leg, and he felt Lyra's healing magic flooding his system. His bones began to mend and the fire in his liver eased. Vexi pulled his head up, and he looked into her wide, terrified eyes.

"Drink," she commanded, pouring a cool liquid down his throat.

He climbed back to his feet, standing as tall as he could. His legs were still shaking, but he had a second wind fueled by the love and magic of his companions. He took a moment to breathe, inhaling the rejuvenation.

In front of him, Kazgar was smashing Ares into the dirt. Each blow shook the grove. He was an absolute beast of raw, impossible strength. Just as it seemed the Minotaur had the upper hand, Ares' arm shot up and clamped onto Kazgar's throat before violently ripping it out.

Kazgar held the gaping hole in his neck with both hands, choking on the blood that drenched the earth below. He stumbled a few steps before collapsing in a heap of his own crimson fluids.

Ares was unstoppable.

Warrick knew that brute force had failed. He stood tall, grimacing at the loss of another friend. This time, he would not rush headlong into the slaughter. This time, he would take Ares as a calculating brawler. He put his fists up and proceeded back into the fray.

He jabbed, connecting with Ares' face, before weaving away from a retaliation. He leapt up, driving a knee into Ares' jaw and shattering the bone, before landing and stepping back to avoid a lunging hand. He fought smart. He fought calm.

Another hit cracked Ares' orbital bone, another dodge avoided a lethal blow to Warrick's own head. He was mixing defense with offense in a way he had never been forced to do before. Each strike was a victory, and each dodge left another opening.

Yet he could not put the God down. No matter how many bones he broke or how much damage he caused, Ares remained standing. Eventually, Warrick faltered. A punch landed against his temple, dazing him, before a heavy foot to his chest sent him flying backward into the dirt.

He rolled over, coughing up blood. This was a battle he could not win through attrition. No matter how hard he fought, the God of War was truly a symbol of indomitability, even as an undead monster.

But Warrick would not die huddled on the ground. He would die on his feet. He used what strength he had left to stand one last time. He glared at Ares, blood dripping from his mouth. "Finish it then."

Ares stood tall despite the massive damage to his body. He stared down at Warrick even as they stood at nearly the same height. There was almost a flicker of respect in his hollow eyes, a nod of appreciation that his kin was not a coward. Ares marched forward for the killing blow.

As he reached Warrick, something exploded out of his chest. The shock jostled him, sending his head backward as his hand reached up to the wooden shaft. It was a spear through his back. He snapped it off, but another pierced through, locking him into place. And then, another.

Kaelen and several Dryads had managed to sneak through the shadows behind the God. The trio of spears in his chest wrenched him to the ground. He reached up again to snap the shafts, his movements slowing.

This was the only opportunity Warrick would get. He strode behind the pinned God, leaning his head down close to the creature's ear. "I will release you from this indignation."

With those words, Warrick grabbed the God's head and ripped it from his body. The spine dangled from the freshly decapitated neck as the light of undead life finally left his hollow eyes.

Warrick tossed the severed head of Ares into the dirt with a final, wet thud. The headless body of Ares crumpled like a suit of empty armor, the ancient malice finally snuffed out. Warrick stood there for a heartbeat, his chest heaving as he surveyed the wreckage of a victory that felt like a total massacre.

Off to his left, Galeia lay crumpled in a heap of mangled feathers and broken pride. The great Matriarch of the Halcyon Spires was stripped of her majesty, her breathing shallow and labored. Althea knelt beside her, hands glowing with a soft, desperate light as she tried to bridge the jagged break in Galeia's massive wing. The primary bone was splintered, a white sliver of calcium poking through the grey plumage, and every time the Matriarch moaned, the sound sent a shiver of guilt through the clearing.

Near the crater, Alecto was a vision of hollow trauma. She sat in a pool of her own blood, staring up at the canopy with eyes that saw nothing. Lyra was working frantically on her, her face streaked with tears as she used every ounce of her magic to staunch the bleeding from the ragged, pulsing stump where a wing and arm had once been. The ferocious hunter had been reduced to a shivering, silent thing, her murderous rage replaced by a shock so deep it looked like death.

But it was the sight of Kazgar that truly broke the spirit of the grove. The Minotaur Chieftain, a ten foot tall pillar of unyielding strength, lay perfectly still in a lake of his own crimson life. His massive hands were still curled as if trying to plug the gaping, horrific hole in his throat. He had been a wall of protection and safety, and now he was just a mountain of cooling flesh, his eyes fixed on some distant horizon he would never reach. The earth beneath him was saturated, the dirt drinking deeply of the blood that had once powered the strongest heart in the Underdeep.

Beyond the clearing, the war had not stopped. The undead still clawed at the thorn walls, their mindless groans creating a constant, sickening drone. Bodies were beginning to pile high enough to form ramps for those behind them. Kaelen remained at the perimeter, his movements mechanical and weary as he continued the defense, refusing to let the victory in the center distract him from the survival of his people.

Warrick felt the last of Vexi's alchemical fire flicker and die. There was no energy left within him, no rage, and no strength. He had spent every ounce of his soul on the decapitation of his own legacy. His legs, which had carried him through centuries of conquest, could no longer hold his weight.

He fell backward into the soft, blood-soaked grass. The sky above was a blur of spinning green and grey. His vision faded at the edges, pulled into a heavy, suffocating shadow, until he was finally engulfed in a total and silent darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Battle for Apeiron

Kestra soared through the sky with Phaedra in tow, slicing through the air at a dizzying speed. Below them lay an endless expanse of rot. It was a carpet of shamblers that groaned and shuffled toward the horizon in every direction. From this height, Phaedra could see every shape of the tragedy. There were the broad, bulky shoulders of Minotaurs, the slender silhouettes of Dryads, and the small forms of Nymphs, all turned into grotesque corpses meandering in a purposeless tide.

The entrance to the Underdeep soon loomed ahead. What would have been a walk of half a day was covered in a fraction of that time by the incredible power of Kestra's wings. The dead were pouring out of the cavern mouth like a dark liquid, accompanied by a rank, rancid green mist that clung to the stone.

Kestra pulled Phaedra tight against her chest as they entered the Underdeep, lifting her high to avoid the reaching forest of arms below. Phaedra dangled just inches above snapping teeth and bony fingers. Her eyes were wide with a mix of horror and disbelief as she watched the unreal scale of the army.

"Which way?" Kestra shouted. Her voice echoed off the stone as she struggled to navigate the twisting corridors of the Minotaur home.

"There!" Phaedra pointed, her arm shaking as she guided the Harpy through the gloom.

For a brief moment, Kestra glanced sideways. She saw the glimmer of a hallway that gleamed with ivory brilliance and incredible craftsmanship. The Labyrinth, once the most intricate and wondrous work in all of Apeiron, was now a sewer of shifting corpses and toxic fog. It was an infectious disease that had contaminated the very heart of the world's beauty.

They passed through the great wooden doors and into the dark corridor leading toward the Necropolis, but a final obstacle stood in their path. The only entrance was a narrow passage entirely choked by an endless line of the dead. There was no room to fly above the horde.

Kestra did not slow down. She accelerated.

"What are you doing?" Phaedra screamed. She gripped Kestra's chest with a terrified hold.

The Harpy elite tucked her wings and spun her body in midair, letting her incredible momentum carry her forward like a battering ram. Her back slammed into the weakened stone wall just above the passage. There was a deafening crack as she burst through the masonry, emerging on the other side amidst a rain of exploded stone and fine white dust.

Kestra reoriented herself into a flight pose, hovering in the open air of the cavern. She was instantly awestruck. The Necropolis was a staggering sight. An underground city of unbelievable scale and design. She gained altitude, peering down at the metropolis from above. The Crimson River divided the city in two, slicing through the architecture like a jagged, glowing vein.

From the river, the undead were crawling onto every bank and bridge. They were so densely packed that not a single tile of the floor was visible. They were a sea of gooey flesh that bumped and jostled, with some corpses even being pushed back into the water because there was simply no place left to stand.

"Kestra! Over there!" Phaedra pointed toward the far edge of the city where the river met the cavern wall. A massive statue chunk of stone was wedged into the channel, plugging the flow. "Take me there! To the fallen statue in the river!"

Kestra did not hesitate. She dived toward the blockage, dropping Phaedra onto the flat top of the stone before perching beside her. The Harpy stood with her mouth open, her predatory eyes darting across the horizon. She had never seen such majesty, nor had she seen it so thoroughly corrupted by the grotesque.

Phaedra scrambled across the uneven surface of the monumentally large rock, her breath coming in ragged gasps. "I don't know what to do. I can't move this!" Her panic was palpable, vibrating in the cold air. She knew this had to be the answer. It was right under her feet, a massive physical weight holding back the tide of souls, but she didn't have the strength to move it. No fewer than twenty minotaur would be required to budge it even an inch.

Below them, the dead began to take notice. They reached their bony arms upward, their groans growing louder and more rhythmic. Their desire for the beating hearts they no longer possessed was a temptation they were drawn to like moths to a flame. They clawed at the sides of the statue, their nails scraping against the rock as they tried to find purchase.

Eventually, the pressure of the horde became so great that they began climbing over one another, forming a writhing ladder of rot to reach the duo. Kestra eyed them with a predator's focus, her talons twitching. "Aren't you supposed to be the clever one?" She

taunted Phaedra, reaching down to pluck an entire hand off a shambler as it breached the edge of the stone.

"I don't know! I don't know!" Phaedra shrieked, her mind a chaotic blur. She was unable to concentrate on anything but the rising tide of grey skin. "Can you not pick this up? Move it?" Her hands began to tremble as she reached for any impossible solution.

Kestra's frustration mounted. She had taken the time to bring this pathetic woman all the way into the heart of the Necropolis only for her to break under the pressure. She could be back at Sylvanrest protecting her Matriarch, but instead, she was perched on a rock surrounded by filth.

She took a deep breath, forcing herself to stay calm. The woman beside her was supposed to be the architect of their salvation. "Perhaps we do not need to move it," Kestra said. It was a random impulse of an idea, a spark thrown into the dark to see if it would catch.

"Well, if we don't move it then the river can't flow!" Phaedra shouted, her panic shifting into a sharp frustration. "If we don't move it, then we'd have to shatter it!"

Suddenly, her eyes lit up. She went still for a moment, the frantic energy replaced by deep, calculated concentration. "Shatter it," she whispered. She said the words again with more certainty as Kestra snapped the neck of another undead that reached for Phaedra's ankle.

Phaedra began moving across the stone frantically, running her palms along the smooth, weathered top. Kestra eyed her with curious disapproval, wondering if the Descendant had finally lost her mind entirely.

"Here! Right here!" Phaedra drew her finger across a deep, jagged crack in the stone. The dead were piling up quickly now, allowing the creatures to climb higher. "A wedge! I need a wedge! Something, anything!" Phaedra looked toward the dark reaches of the city, searching for a tool through the fog. She could see nothing through the mass of bodies.

Kestra did not wait. She ascended into the air before diving headfirst into the sea of shamblers. For a brief moment, she was submerged, entirely surrounded by the horde. They clawed at her wings and body, grabbing at her plumage. In an instant, she flung herself back into the air, whirling with such force that she shed any clinging undead with ease before flying back to Phaedra.

"Will this work?" She dropped a heavy iron chisel into Phaedra's lap. Somehow, with her hawk eyes, she had spotted the tool through the endless, shifting mass of the dead.

"Yes! Perfect. This is it!" Phaedra drove the chisel into the crack in the stone as hard as her mortal strength allowed. She hammered at the blunt end with a smaller stone, driving it in deep. "Grab the biggest thing you can handle and take it as high as you can!" Her orders were an irritating command, and Kestra's instinct was to snap back in defiance, but she managed to brush it aside and follow the plan.

Once again, Kestra dived into the horde. She emerged moments later, the struggle painted clearly on her face as she fought the air to carry a massive, heavy iron anvil. Each flap of her wings took incredible effort as she pulled the weight higher and higher.

"Here! Drop it here, on the chisel!" Phaedra pointed wildly.

Just as she reached the maximum height her straining muscles could manage, Kestra let go of the anvil. It whistled through the air and smashed into the chisel with a sound like a thunderclap. The force was so immense that the iron drove straight into the heart of the statue. The stone shattered, breaking apart into a dozen jagged pieces and sending Phaedra flying off the edge into the horde below.

Phaedra landed on top of three grotesque shamblers, their soft, rotten bodies breaking her fall. She looked up in terror as faces of pure nightmare looked down at her with wanting, dead eyes. They reached for her, aiming to tear the warm flesh from her bones.

But before their fingers could touch her, the remnants of the statue were swept away by the sudden, violent tide of the flowing Crimson River. The water roared into the channel, descending into the chasm and pulling the thick green mist with it. As the river resumed its course, the undead began to dematerialize. They turned back into shimmering, ghostly souls before being yanked into the current en masse. The invasion was being sucked back into the underworld.

Phaedra sat motionless on the stone floor, her head tilted back as she watched the spectacle unfolding above her. The oppressive, rancid atmosphere was being purged. A blue, swirling shimmer of light, composed of thousands of ghostly and beautiful souls, was being vacuumed back into the river. The guttural groaning of the undead had vanished, replaced by a high-pitched, angelic stream of voices that harmonized in a haunting chorus. Faster and faster the light spiraled toward the channel, pulling more and more spirits as the crimson waters drained into the depths. Minutes passed in that surreal glow until finally, the Necropolis fell into a profound stillness.

The nightmare was over. The countless ranks of the Fleshless and the Rotted Ones had been replaced by a calm, echoing emptiness. The only sound remaining was the gentle, rhythmic flow of the Crimson River pouring down into the chasm of the underworld.

Phaedra smiled, basking in the warmth of a victory she had thought impossible. "It's over," she whispered to herself. She allowed her body to go limp, laying completely flat against the cold tiles. "We did it. I can't believe it, but we actually did it." She shut her eyes and let out a soft, jagged laugh of pure relief.

Kestra landed just beside Phaedra, her legs and wings trembling with the sheer effort of the day. Unlike the Descendant, she did not allow herself a moment of relaxation. She stood with her head cocked and her eyes darting across the shadows, still expecting a potential threat to lunge from the darkness. The crushing intensity of the Necropolis and the alien nature of the blood-red river kept her predator instincts on high alert.

Phaedra sat up slowly, the adrenaline finally receding to leave a hollow ache in its wake. She felt the heavy weight of her mortal fatigue, a sensation that was still frustratingly new to her.

"Ugh," she muttered, attempting to shake off the stiffness in her joints. "I need a very large glass of wine."

"We must get back," Kestra snapped.

The Harpy's concern for her Matriarch was deeply ingrained, overriding any curiosity she had about the ancient city. There was a sharp edge of worry in her tone, and her words acted like a bucket of cold water, pulling Phaedra back to reality. While they had been busy with the blockage, the others had been left to face a fallen God.

Phaedra stood up, brushing the white stone dust and grime from her dark green dress. She looked up at Kestra and offered a tired, resolute nod.

"Ready when you are," she said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

A Price Paid

Their flight back was a vastly different experience from the frantic journey into the dark. The world below was once again a vibrant forest of lush green trees and dark brown earth, all basking in the honey-colored glow of the setting sun. The air smelled of damp leaves and fresh spring dew. The Verdant Deep was at peace, a still and lush sanctuary where worry and woe seemed absent in all directions.

The flight back to Sylvanrest was swift and harmonious, yet beneath the beauty of the world below, a cold concern resided in the minds of both Phaedra and Kestra. They were returning to a world saved, but they did not know what they would find in the wreckage of the grove.

Upon reaching the village, the carnage of the battle became immediately apparent. Blood had soaked into the thirsty ground everywhere, turning the soil into a dark, iron-scented mire. The wall of bramble around the city was a tattered mess of broken vines and snapped thorns.

On the edge of Sylvanrest lay the lifeless body of the great Minotaur Chieftain, Kazgar.

"Oh, no," Phaedra gasped. The sight of the savior who had given her a home and a glimmer of hope lying deceased in a pile of his own blood was a devastating sight. Kestra dropped her off next to him, and Phaedra approached the mountain of fur and muscle with a trembling hand pressed to her lips. "No, no."

She knelt beside him, hot tears running down her cheeks. This was the cost, and she hated it. All that Kazgar had done for her, and she had not been fast enough to save him. Guilt took root deep inside her chest, cold and immovable.

"He saved us all. He will be remembered as a hero," Kaelen said as he approached her. The Guardian sat beside her, his own spirit visibly weary. He had questions about her journey to the Underdeep, but those could wait. For now, there was only the silence of the dead.

Phaedra wiped a tear from her cheek with a shaking hand. "No amount of statues or fond stories of his heroism will make this okay. This," she choked on her words, struggling to find her voice through the knot in her throat. "This is not fair."

"Alecto! Please, wake up!"

A terrified, raw shriek rang out several yards away. Phaedra's head snapped toward the sound. Kestra was kneeling over the still, mangled body of her sister. Her cries were a desperate plea, a howling in the evening air at the cruelty of the aftermath.

"This cannot be real. It cannot be!" Kestra wailed. She crawled over to the body and pressed her head into the chest of her beloved kin, searching for a heartbeat that was no longer there. "Don't take her from me. Please, don't take her."

"I tried," Lyra whispered from the shadows. She was holding herself tightly, her hands still stained with the blood she could not stop. "I tried so hard, but I couldn't save her. I'm so sorry."

The price of victory was paid in full by the living victors who had saved the entirety of Apeiron. It was a cruel reward for their heroism, a debt settled in the currency of loss.

Kestra finally composed herself enough to lift the remains of her sister into her arms. She held her close, feeling the last lingering warmth of Alecto's skin before it faded forever. She turned toward Lyra, her amber eyes welling with unrelenting tears.

"I will never be whole again," Kestra said softly. She lifted off into the air, banking toward the Halcyon Spires to put her sister to rest in the high peaks they called home.

Phaedra sat with Kazgar for several moments longer, wishing for the impossible and hoping for a miracle that would not come.

"I will help you bury him, if you would like," Kaelen offered.

Phaedra gave a small, somber nod. The Guardian recruited several of his fellow Dryads, and together they carried the lifeless body of the great Chieftain to a quiet place just outside the village. Phaedra spent the next hour piling heavy river stones over the gentle giant who had given her a home in her time of greatest vulnerability, ensuring the earth would hold him fast.

Sylvanrest had grown eerily calm in Phaedra's absence. The aggressive wall of thorns was receding back into the earth, the wood and vine seemingly exhausted by the day's violence. The citizens who had gathered to clean and mend the grove were gone, and the arrival of the night had brought a moonlit shade to the world. The silver light felt cold against the blood-stained soil.

She noticed Kaelen standing idly outside the village center, looking wearily into the dark of the forest at nothing in particular. There was the unmistakable scar of trauma about him, a lingering shock at the events that had nearly erased his home.

"Thank you," Phaedra said softly as she approached. She stood next to the Guardian of the forest, her own grief a heavy stone in her chest. "For helping me bury my friend."

Kaelen nodded, holding his spear upright as an anchor for his composure. "Your Descendant kin is just behind us," he said without turning his head. His voice was monotone, a desperate attempt to stay stalwart in the face of the overwhelming aftermath. "He is in the healing hut."

Phaedra turned and headed toward the small structure, feeling a cautious curiosity about what she might find amongst the hollow victory. Inside, she immediately noticed Warrick. He was spread out on the bed where she had been lying only a day before, looking strangely human in his stillness. Vexi was curled up on his chest, her small form rising and falling in sync with his steady breaths.

Phaedra's eyes were drawn to Althea, who was seated in the corner. "He will be alright," the Dryad assured her.

Phaedra took a seat at her side, her body and mind a tangled mess of exhaustion. "What happened here?"

She found herself almost afraid to ask. The only version of Warrick she had ever known was the undefeated champion of her own world. As far as she knew, he had never tasted defeat or anything even close to it. Seeing the village in shambles had shattered her view of him.

"The one you call Ares was unstoppable," Althea whispered, her eyes lost in the memory of the fight. "Each blow seemed to fuel his fury further. But Warrick was relentless. Every time he fell, he got back up. I could not believe what I was seeing." She paused for a moment, a flicker of a smile touching her lips. "Eventually, Warrick prevailed in what seemed like an impossible feat of sheer perseverance."

"He faced a God while powerless and came out victorious?" Phaedra was stunned. Her own lack of abilities after the banishment had been devastating, leaving her feeling brittle and useless. She had thought she might never find the strength to stand on her own again. Yet here, in front of her, was a man who had gone through a far more profound loss and still found the strength to challenge a literal ancient deity.

"We all gave everything we had to the fight," Althea corrected gently. "But victory would have been entirely out of reach without him."

Phaedra let her head fall back against the wooden wall of the hut. Her eyes shut as she imagined the unthinkable task of facing such a threat with nothing but willpower.

Warrick truly was a warrior. Power or no power, he would stubbornly stand stalwart in the face of, seemingly, any and all threats.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Mending Grove

Warrick's eyes opened slowly as consciousness hit him in subtle, rhythmic waves. The exhaustion he had experienced was so profound that waking up felt like emerging from a long coma. It took several minutes before he found the strength to push himself upright and scan his surroundings.

The healing hut was silent and mostly empty, save for Phaedra. She was slumbering off to the side, buried beneath a leafy brown quilt. She looked peaceful, curled into herself with a rolled-up piece of fabric serving as a pillow. It was a rare moment of vulnerability for the woman who usually carried herself with such calculated poise.

Warrick swung his legs over the side of the bed and willed himself to stand, shaking off the groggy haze that clung to his mind. As he stepped out of the hut, he noticed Althea and Galeia nearby. They both took notice of him immediately.

"Wonderful to see you awake, Descendant," Galeia spoke first. She was perched on a fallen log, her frame still imposing. Her wing appeared fully healed, a miracle provided by the Dryads that defied the brutal snap Warrick had heard during the fight.

"How long was I asleep?" Warrick asked, rubbing the grit of weariness from his face.

"Nearly a day and a half," Althea replied. She stood next to the Matriarch, the bright light of the midday sun reflecting in her wide, observant eyes.

Warrick looked around the grove, taking in the atmosphere. To his surprise, everything seemed to have returned to normal. The blood that had saturated the ground was gone, and the aggressive bramble walls had vanished back into the earth. It was as if the slaughter had never happened.

But the memory of the carnage was too vivid to be a dream. "Where are your sentinels? Kestra and Alecto?" He looked up at Galeia, whose face visibly drooped at the mention of the names. She did not speak. She simply pointed toward a distant ridge. Warrick's eyes followed the gesture to a single Harpy perched alone against the sky, and the reality of the price they had paid finally hit him.

He knew the fate of Kazgar. The image of the Chieftain's throat being torn open was a fresh wound in his mind. But Alecto had still been breathing when his world went dark. The finality of the casualties was a harsh, cold weight. Without hesitation, Warrick

walked purposefully toward Kestra. He owed Galeia and her sentinels a debt that could never truly be settled.

He could feel Kestra sense his approach, but she continued to stare up at the drifting midday clouds. "Strange, isn't it?" she said without looking at him. "I remember the sky being so much more colorful."

The world had taken something vital from her, and the vibrant colors of the world had been dulled because of it. Their chemistry had always been one of shared arrogance and strength, and Warrick was not entirely sure how she would handle a future without her sister.

"It doesn't feel like it now, but you will find beauty in the world again one day, Kestra," Warrick said. He let his shoulder brush up against hers, a silent reminder that she was not alone in this new, quieter world. She leaned into him gently, accepting his solemn kindness as they both watched the colorless sky.

After several moments of shared silence with Kestra, Warrick allowed himself to head back over to Althea and Galeia. "I am sorry for your loss, Galeia. Alecto was a true warrior and a hero," Warrick said. He was sincere in his praise. War had been his life and fighting was his singular purpose for centuries. Yet, as he looked at the hollowed out village, the cost never felt quite justified in the end.

"Alecto was my most promising choice to take over my role as Matriarch," Galeia said, her voice heavy with the weight of the tragedy. "Now I am unsure Kestra will have the strength." Galeia was clearly moving into her later years and remained unsure how much longer she would be capable of leading her roost. This was a catastrophic loss for her in every respect, both as a leader and a mother of her people.

"She will," Warrick assured her. He had seen much weaker men than Kestra succeed under the pressure of grief. Kestra was a pillar of might. Her recovery might be slow, but he knew from experience that a broken bone often heals stronger.

"Lyra? Helaina? Are they around?" Warrick asked. He needed to fully assess the damage caused by the battle beyond the physical ruins. He felt a drive to visit those most unprepared for such a catastrophe and ensure they were mentally alright.

"They are with Kaelen at Lyrally's home," Althea assured him, noticing the protective edge in his voice.

"I should visit them," Warrick said, picking up his feet with the intent of heading in their direction.

"Warrick," Althea stopped him. "Galeia and I are departing for Flowstone Falls to discuss an alliance with Elder Myrrine and her people."

The alliance between the races had mostly been an afterthought for the leaders until the dead began to march. Now, the importance of the union was undeniable. They were finally seeing that isolation was just another word for vulnerability.

Warrick offered a firm nod. "Imperative as ever. I will look forward to hearing how it went."

He briefly considered offering to go with them, but he realized this was their world. They were more than capable of handling a diplomatic endeavor, especially with a woman as kind and experienced as Elder Myrrine. He turned away and continued his march toward Lyra's home, his mind already shifting to the healers and the quiet ones who had survived the storm.

Just as Warrick approached Lyra's home, Kaelen stepped out from the doorway. They nearly collided, both men stopping short in the narrow space.

"Warrick," Kaelen acknowledged him. He looked nearly surprised to see the Descendant awake and moving so soon after the battering he had taken.

"How are you holding up, Kaelen?" Warrick asked. He had not been on good terms with the Guardian since their initial meeting, but it was impossible to ignore the truth. Kaelen's intervention against the undead God had been the pivot on which their lives turned. Warrick would not be standing outside this door, and he would not get to enjoy a future on Apeiron, if not for Kaelen's help.

"Conflicted," Kaelen said. The word was vague, mirroring a deep and messy internal confusion. "My men were unable to fight. They were utterly petrified by the scale of the battle. Our failure to subdue the horde was assured." He spoke as if the victory had never happened, his voice flat with disappointment. "That is," he continued, "until Helaina's song reached their ears."

The dots connected in Warrick's mind. Kaelen wished to thank Warrick for guiding Helaina toward her abilities, yet he also wished to castigate him for it. Warrick heard the pain in the Guardian's voice, a cocktail of reluctance and hesitation. It seemed to cause Kaelen actual physical pain to confront the idea that the outsider had been right. Warrick did the decent thing and moved past the friction.

"Thank you, Kaelen. Your assistance was paramount in the battle," Warrick said firmly.

"I was surprised to see you resign at the end. I nearly thought you would never cease your assault against him. To hear you admit defeat was," Kaelen trailed off, searching for the right word.

"Pathetic?" Warrick offered. He was not proud of that admission. It was not how he had envisioned his final stand against Ares. He had never fought so hard in his life. In his own world, his powers were an overwhelming force against any foe. Fighting someone genuinely stronger than himself had been a humbling, bone-breaking lesson.

"I was going to say inspiring," Kaelen said.

Warrick's head snapped back slightly in shock. "Inspiring?"

"Admittedly, I do not believe I would have accepted my fate with such grace," Kaelen said. He showed a level of respect for Warrick that the warrior had never expected to see. The feeling was mutual. They were both warriors, just of a different breed, with different purposes and different visions.

"I came to visit Helaina and Lyra," Warrick said, moving past the sentimental back and forth. He was not one to linger on such things.

"I found them resting and did not wish to disturb them," Kaelen informed him. His words felt less like a territorial warning and more like genuine concern.

"I will come back later then," Warrick replied.

The two men hung in the moment for a few seconds longer, locking eyes in a quiet, solemn nod. It was a newfound respect born in the blood of hard won victory.

Warrick drifted back toward the healing hut just in time to watch Althea begin her journey toward Flowstone Falls. She paused at the edge of the tree line, offering him a sharp, respectful nod before disappearing into the emerald depths of the forest.

He found a soft patch of grass nearby and sat down. He did as the Dryads were often known to do, relaxing into the midday breeze and basking in the warm rays of the sun. He let his head fall back and closed his eyes, absorbing the tranquility. For a moment, the iron scent of war was replaced by the perfume of blooming wildflowers.

"Mind if I join you, Handsome?"

Phaedra appeared from behind him, plopping down onto the grass and pulling his arm around her shoulders as she leaned into his side. She tilted her head back, letting the warmth of the sun kiss her face and smooth the lines of worry from her brow.

"I guess you managed to clear the river," Warrick stated. It was an obvious observation, yet it carried a weight of genuine respect. "I knew you would."

He spoke with a quiet confidence. He had not known Phaedra personally back in their own world, but he knew of her. He knew enough to be certain that she was not a woman who failed once she set her mind to a task. Despite how often she annoyed him, he knew she was capable of moving mountains.

"I am still reeling from Kazgar's demise," she whispered. Her voice was thin, losing some of its usual sharp edge. "I mean, Alecto's too, I suppose."

She tried to sound more sympathetic toward Kestra's loss, but the tragedy of losing the giant who had given her a home was still consuming her thoughts.

"You should have seen him, Phaedra. Charging out of that hut and beating the living pulp out of that undead freak. It was epic," Warrick said. He knew that physical might may not be as impressive to her as it was to him, especially since she valued Kazgar for his kindness. But it was the warrior's tribute he had to give. Phaedra didn't reply. She simply leaned further into him, soaking in the heat.

A rustling in the brush announced a new arrival. Vexi appeared, clutching a massive bundle of random herbs, moss, and various mushrooms.

"Oh," she said, stopping short as she noticed the two of them. "You're both awake!"

"What are you doing with all that?" Warrick asked, motioning toward her arms, which were overflowing with forest fungus and greenery.

"I have suddenly been feeling naked without a fresh supply of my alchemical potions. Especially after the other day," she said, nodding toward the crater where the God had fallen. "I don't have everything I need here to make a full stock, but I can make something."

Vexi dropped the materials onto the grass and crawled directly into Warrick's lap. "Well, if you guys are going to relax for a while, then I am too." She pressed her body into his chest, letting her head rest against his chest.

"Are you holding up alright, Vexi?" Warrick asked softly.

"Nope," she said. She did not elaborate, and she didn't need to. "But I'll be alright." She adjusted herself, finding comfort in the steady thrum of his heartbeat.

"I hope we have an open invitation to this little gathering," Lyra said, sneaking up from behind and causing Vexi to jump slightly. Helaina was with her, clutching her staff as she always did, though a gentle smile played on her lips.

Helaina huddled against Warrick's free side, leaning her body into him. He responded by wrapping a comforting arm around her. Lyra took a seat a little off to the side, less inclined toward physical affection but clearly wanting to be near the group.

"I thought you ladies were resting," Warrick teased.

"We heard you speaking to Kaelen and did not want to interrupt," Helaina chimed in, pulling his arm closer.

"I'm proud of you," Warrick said. He looked at Helaina, then at Lyra, his head swiveling to acknowledge each of them. "All of you."

They each offered a gentle, tired smile at the praise. It was all that needed to be said.

This was not the position Warrick had expected to be in when he first arrived in this realm. He had assumed this strange, alien land would be his demise. In a way, perhaps it was. This was his resurrection. He had ascended into a sort of paradise he never knew he wanted. A new world was waiting for him to explore, and he was surrounded by four incredible women who had come to adore him.

It had not been since Cassy was a child that he felt so alive. His bond with his daughter was something he cherished above everything else in his life, and though he had lost that as she grew older, he had found it again here. He looked out toward the horizon, holding onto the women around him. For the first time in a long time, he was not angry. He did not feel despair.

He felt hope. He felt happy.

EPILOGUE

Warrick sat on the porch of the log cabin in a chair that was quickly becoming one of his favorite lounging spots. The forest behind him remained visible in his peripheral vision, a sea of emerald, while the Halcyon Spires were a towering sight just before him. Not far away, he watched with a faint smile as Vexi sprinted toward Kestra.

"Prepare your tastebuds, Big K, because you are going to love this!" Vexi held out a hand as she ran, clutching a vial filled with a swirling purple liquid.

"Trying to poison me again, Dewfus? I will not be tricked twice!" Kestra threw her head back and looked away, crossing her arms in a display of stalwart refusal.

"I said I was sorry! I didn't realize the last one had turned. This is fresh! I swear it!" Vexi bit down on the cork and yanked it off with a satisfying pop. "Here, smell!" She held up the vial and wafted the fumes toward the Harpy, who was immediately disarmed by the scent.

Kestra cocked her head and peered down at the vial with one piercing, predatory eye. The aroma had captivated her, and she was now entirely at the mercy of her appetite. She snatched the vial out of Vexi's hand with a blur of motion. "Alright, fine, I'll try it!"

Kestra threw her head back and dumped the entire contents of the vial down her gullet in one fell swoop. "Mm! Okay, yes, that is brilliant. I like this one." She began prodding at the small Nymph with her wing. "Where is the rest of it?" Her beak nudged at the various pouches on Vexi's belt.

"That's all I brought! It's really difficult to make, you know. You were supposed to savor it," Vexi grumbled, unamused. She had toiled away for hours concocting the perfect mixture of crushed fruits and roasted nuts to create that specific flavor.

"Then we are done here," Kestra said, folding her arms together and turning her back to the Nymph.

"Aw, come on! It's worth five minutes, isn't it? Please?" Vexi begged like a petulant child, her voice echoing with a desperate plea.

"Ugh. Fine. But not a minute longer," Kestra muttered, kneeling low to the ground.

"Yes!" Vexi jumped onto Kestra's back. Without a moment of hesitation, the Harpy lurched into the air. "Ah ha ha! Yes! Higher!" Warrick watched as they circled the sky, diving low over the trees before soaring back up toward the clouds.

"Nonsense! Utter nonsense!"

Warrick could hear Phaedra inside Elian's house, spitting curses at the ancient tomes. It seemed that Elian had possessed a habit of writing down every stray thought and mundane observation, regardless of its actual value.

She had been at it for days, spending hour after hour pilfering through the works of the old scholar and reading countless journals and notebooks. Yet, any valuable information regarding the ancient Gods or the mechanics of Apeiron seemed to be eluding her.

"Boo!" Lyra poked Warrick in the side with enough force to make him jump. He nearly toppled from his chair as she seemed to poof into existence out of thin air.

"Ha! Got you!" Lyrallylly shouted, taking a seat beside him with a mischievous grin.

"I was unafraid," Warrick lied, attempting to smooth over his startled reaction. "I merely wanted to give you the satisfaction you were seeking. That is why I jumped."

"I do not like that at all. You should not scare people, Lyra," Helaina protested with a sour pout. She sat in a nearby chair, clutching her staff. She looked up at Kestra circling the sky with a look of pure dread. "Whoa. I could never do that. Way too scary!"

"Has Phaedra made any progress today?" Lyra asked. Her eyes followed the Harpy and the giggling Nymph on her back.

"Eureka!" A sudden, triumphant cheer erupted from inside the house.

"It would appear so," Warrick responded just before Phaedra burst through the front door.

"Here it is!" Phaedra announced, holding a weathered tome aloft like a trophy. "It is all here, Warrick. I have found it!"

"Alright, let us hear it," Warrick said. He tried his best to hide the eagerness vibrating in his voice.

Phaedra poised herself in front of him before cracking the book open. "Listen to this. 'I met Charon, who agreed to take me to the Underworld through this universe's version of the River Styx.' Blah, blah, blah. Noise and nonsense. But then! 'He mentioned his daughter, Stygian'."

She slammed the book closed with a thud. "Daughter? What? Charon did not have a daughter. He must have had her here in Apeiron. Is that not unbelievable?"

Warrick was stunned, but not with amazement. "Why would I care about the family tree of a ferryman?" His brow drifted downward in a look of profound displeasure.

"Okay, okay, that's not even the most interesting part." Phaedra cracked the book open again. "I met Hades in the Underworld, and he was not at all what I expected. His mind was warped and twisted, and he rambled on like a madman."

Phaedra paused to look at him. "Hades is here. Or was. And he is broken. Something is deeply wrong with him."

"Stop teasing me with these fragments," Warrick commanded. "Ares mentioned Hades before he died. What does this mean? Did Hades destroy the other Gods?"

"I was unable to decipher most of his mad ramblings. He went on about seeing something on another plane, another dimension. Whatever it was, it seemed to break him." Phaedra looked back up at Warrick. "As far as I can tell from what Elian has written here, Hades met someone, or something, on his journey here."

"Met someone who drove a God mad?" Warrick rubbed his face with his hands. "What could possibly do that to the Lord of the Dead?"

"Something greater than the Gods. Something beyond even them," Phaedra said, setting the book aside.

"What? Who?" Warrick prodded, his voice low and intense.

Phaedra pushed her way through his legs and knelt before him. She brought her face inches from his, her eyes burning with a terrifying realization.

"The Artist."