

DOES THE PYTHON KILL THE LION?

PRINCE OF PYTHON

The illustration depicts a woman with long, flowing green hair, wearing a light green, ethereal dress, looking down at a man. The man is wearing brown leather armor and looking up at her. They are surrounded by large, gnarled tree trunks and dense green foliage. The overall style is painterly and atmospheric.

THE TRAGEDIES OF TREES SERIES

E. D. ALPAUGH

D PRINCE OF PYTHON⁴

*This book is dedicated to all the trees and butterflies.
May there never be a reason for you to hide.*

Copyright © 2021 by E.D. Alpaugh

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or people, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Edited by Yasmin Gruss
Cover Design by Elizabeth Frappier-Lussier
Formatting by Rebekah Heffington

www.edalpaugh.ca

CONTENTS

Prologue | Oread | The Forgotten Forest

i. Metamorphosis Of Amphissus

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

ii. The Laurel Tree

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

III. [The Lotus Tree](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Epilogue | Orilla | The Hills Of Kerberos](#)

[Glossary](#)

[About the Author](#)



CEN. 501

PROLOGUE | OREAD | THE FORGOTTEN
FOREST

In the Forgotten Forest, the Python King cursed a nymph.

It was almost the sixth day of the fifth month, the birth date of Artemis. Not far from lake Gygaie, crowned in fragrant myrtle, two sister nymphs relished in the shade of a lotus tree as they made flower garlands for the celebrations. Ida, the one with the rainbow hair, was loved by Pelion, a mortal from Orilla in the north, and the nymph couldn't help but daydream of their reunion as she bound the purple blossoms to her wreath.

It might have been a perfect day with the broad, warm rays of sun that made the world around them glow, but, unbeknownst to the sisters, not far from the verdant boughs, a hungry snake awaited.

King Pythian had recently crowned himself the mortal King of Oread following his miraculous victory over the dragon-serpent known as the Python, which he had taken as a namesake. Exulted by his new title, the Python King was out exploring the lands that now belonged to him—planting his flags wherever he could—until he spotted Ida and instantly fell in love. The other sister could have been a lotus tree for all he cared.

But nature felt the shift in the atmosphere, in King Pythian's heart. In warning, blood began to spill from a branch where Ida had plucked a blossom.

Ida's sister wasted no time, always the fearless one, and grabbed her to escape before it was too late.

The sisters had been foolish that day. Not only were they emptied of any magic they could have used to shift themselves back home—

a small spell that would have instantly taken them from one place to another—but they hadn't brought any defences in a false sense of safety.

They ran to the protection of the Forgotten Forest, fleeing faster than a light breeze from his longing arms. After chasing the nymphs for miles, the king had lost most of the soldiers that followed him through the rough terrains, but he somehow managed to hold true, unnaturally fuelled by his baseless desires.

As they entered the forest, the king almost had the nymph—her soft elbow was just a hair's width away—but in that exact moment, her sister made the ultimate sacrifice. Unwilling to lose her only family, her dearest friend, to a possessed, love-stricken mortal, she pushed Ida out of the way and threw herself at the Python King, forcing them both to the ground. He called out for his love, and she replied with desperate cries for her sister, begging him to release her as a laurel tree swept her up and enclosed her in its branches.

The king was mortified. Not only was he humiliated at his failure, but he had indeed lost his only true love. As if struck by a golden arrow of Eros, the Python King seemed to lose all control of his mind and heart as he let out a mighty roar.

Green orbs of magic erupted from his chest—dark magic from Lampades, otherwise known as the “Land of the Lower World.”

And so, as it were, in the Forgotten Forest, a nymph was cursed.

The curse was simple, yet it wasn't: until her sister returned to him, she would not take another lover or know true pleasures.

Although it was too late, she could feel the Earth trying to help her as moss began to tickle her fingertips from where she lay. Slowly but surely, magical roots crept over her hands, arms, and shoulders as they brought her down into the soil. The Python King had no weapons on him, but he tried to rip through the branches, desperate to choke her while she was swept away. His efforts were to no avail.

For the months that followed, every laurel tree was inspected for signs of Ida, but she was never found. It was perhaps thanks to Her love and protection—the love of Gaia, the Earth—that Ida had been able to get away while her sister was free to live as she pleased.

Or at least, as free as a cursed nymph could be.

PART I

METAMORPHOSIS OF AMPHISSUS

Not distant far, a wat'ry Lotos grows,
The spring was new, and all the verdant boughs
Adorn'd with blossoms promis'd fruits that vie
In glowing colours with the Tyrian dye:
Of these she cropp'd to please her infant son,
And I myself the same rash act had done:
But lo! I saw, (as near her side I stood)
The violated blossoms drop with blood;
Upon the tree I cast a frightful look;
The trembling tree with sudden horror shook.

**THE FABLE OF DRYOPE, OVID'S METAMORPHOSES BOOK 9, [v.
324-393]**

POEM BY ALEXANDER POPE



CHAPTER ONE



AMPHISSUS

STRAWBERRY PERFUME. If I had to recall that night before everything went wrong, that's what struck me the most. The sweet, unsettling smell of synthetic strawberries.

I remembered thinking how surprised I was that we'd made it through the night without getting into any fights at the bar, which was rare for our group when drinking was involved. In fact, we almost made it out the door with our bill fully paid until Gnome felt inclined to make a nasty joke at a local fisherman and his wife.

Like a domino effect, one punch from the fisherman was all it took before every patron in the bar engaged in fights of their own. After quickly finishing my drink, I carefully escorted my date out as miscellaneous objects were being tossed at our heads and even saved a random woman from a misplaced punch along the way.

The random woman was Dorylas, the bartender who'd taken my virginity when I was seventeen. She was wearing that strawberry perfume, and let's just say Dory was *very* grateful I'd saved her face. As the glass shattered everywhere, I enjoyed one of those rare moments where I realized I had two women pulled into me.

Twenty minutes later, we were all in my bed chambers fucking like horny teenagers. It was the best send-off a guy could have asked for—one that I didn't take for granted.

I tried to sneak both women out as quietly as possible, but unsurprisingly, given my drunken state, I ended up shutting the door with a little more gusto than I'd meant to.

Hylonome—or 'Gnome' as he was known due to his bald head, goatee, and short stature—startled me with a loud giggle from the corner of the dark kitchen.

"Was that not one but *two* birds I saw fly out of your room, Misfit?"

After getting his ass kicked by the fisherman *and* his wife, I was surprised Gnome was even standing.

"Gnome, I truly don't even know how you're alive. I'm not sure whether to applaud you or express great concern."

He smiled savagely. "All I did was ask him if that smell on his fingers was from his wife or the trout! Just a harmless tease. Besides, Thrasher took care of 'em."

Pholus, or 'Thrasher,' was the leader of our little group. It was a nickname he'd received during the war for his affinity to finish opponents with a knee to their neck, which caused them to thrash around like desperate animals. I'd only witnessed him do it once or twice myself, but I could understand how it would stun someone into giving him a new name.

"How much longer until these drunken Cheirons wake the hell up?" Gnome groaned as he shamelessly chugged a stale beer someone had left out. "I'd like to get going before the drink wears off and this hangover kicks in."

The men called themselves 'the Cheirons' long before I'd joined. It was a reference to the centaurs that symbolized Orilla before the Python family took over the land. I was born just as the war was ending, so the Python flag was all I'd known.

Thrasher, Gnome, Eurytion ('Riot'), Cyllarus ('Killer'), and Myko had all decided to form a 'club' when the vet checks stopped coming in, and I mean literally *stopped*. There was a time when we were desperate for cash, and as a result, our jobs ended being on the... morally grey side, to say the least.

I always thought of us as vigilantes since our crimes never involved anyone who didn't have money to spare. And on the rare occasion that we did accept outside jobs, they were primarily for locals who needed dirty work done on a dime.

Until the day Thrasher accepted a job from the king.

Officially, we were being sent to the city in the Forgotten Mountain to deliver a message to King Pythian, the new King of Oread and heir to the Python kingdom.

Unofficially, we were in search of a prisoner of war from Orilla. A woman.

"Tell me, Misfit!" Gnome called out as I left the kitchen to get some extra sleep. "How does one stick his cock in all those holes when he's had half a keg?"

I wordlessly cursed myself for bringing those women back to my room, knowing I would never hear the end of it.

CHAPTER TWO



THE NYMPH

O, Sisters of the Earth,
let your soil fill me,
and let your roots lift me.
Feel my love for Her, Earth.

THE EARTH GROANED BENEATH ME, pleased by my loving mantra.

From Her highest peaks, we
are chosen to protect.
Show me what I must see
if I am deemed worthy.

A small branch gently stroked my jaw before spearing its way through the opening in my ear, taking complete control of my mind and body.

I was thrown into a small dark room lit by two weak candles. A man was on a creaky bed with two females, and they were... *preoccupied*. One was perched in his lap, slurping away, while the other had her hands braced on the headboard as he devoured her from beneath.

I could almost taste the sex with how small the room was. I tried to navigate the small, dark space, but it was hard to look at anything besides the impressive performance happening before me. Unfortunately, all I could make of the man through the dim lighting was the deep tan of his skin and loose strands of dark, curly hair.

Gentle hands made of branches braced my shoulders, guiding me towards a chest of drawers that was too far for the candlelight to reach. Those branches then extended past my fingertips so they could open the top drawer and uncover a small box. They placed the box in my hand, and the little sticks quickly pried it open, revealing a small silver object.

As I moved towards the light, I noticed it was a ring. A thick, silver iron ring engraved with the symbol of a python wrapped around a lightning bolt.

At the exact moment I looked back up to the bed, the man lifted the woman off his face and flipped her over.

“Lick her clit,” he said, his voice low and rough.

His voice stood out to me among the loud cries and claps of sweaty skin. It was the voice of a king.

He even fucked like a king.

The python on the ring symbolized King Pythian’s family line, and my brain went into overdrive trying to connect the dots.

From what I understood, Pythian remained unmarried and had been uninterested in anyone even before he swore himself to Ida. So, while the odds of him having any offspring weren’t impossible since he was a bachelor king, the chances of those children obtaining a royal ring would have been next to none.

And as for King Typhon of Orilla? All his potential wives either wound up dead or ‘mysteriously missing.’

“*He is no child of Pythian and no legitimate child of Typhon,*” a beautiful, feminine voice whispered into my ear.

Now, I was even more confused. What would a bastard be doing with a royal ring?

Both women sounded like they were close as the man set a faster pace for all three of them. Their cries started to synchronize, and it was all about to reach a grand finale before I was roughly yanked away and dropped into a body of water.

The man from the bedroom was now running towards me, wearing armour made of wood from the Forgotten Forest. Before I could even begin to wonder how he could’ve gotten such a thing, I realized I was standing under a rainbow.

Under Ida’s rainbow.

The branches then threw me back into my front yard, where I landed with a heavy thud. I was sore everywhere and entirely out of breath, so much so that I didn’t bother getting up straight away.

For three days, I’d known something was awry. Blades of grass no longer blew in the wind despite the breezes, and the flowers hid

from the sunlight. The only way I knew how to get answers in a short period was by performing a vision ritual with the Earth Herself.

So, if the Earth was kind enough to warn me of this man's plans, then I knew what my next steps had to be.

I may not have been able to kill Pythian when he tried to kidnap Ida, but I knew I had a chance with this mortal man.

Regardless of my plans, I still dreamed about him that night. Dreamed I was with him and those women as we were all about to reach that grand finale I missed.

It was quite the finale, the ultimate crescendo, and I almost felt guilty I was about to rob the world of such a specimen.

CHAPTER THREE



AMPHISSUS

"HAVE YOU EVER SEEN A NYMPH BEFORE?" Riot asked the group.

"Twice!" Gnome called out from his spot at the back. He sauntered along as the rest of us tried to keep a steady pace, grinning like an idiot. "Remember when they came to negotiate the peace terms? I saw dozens of them!"

"Liar," Killer growled as he tossed an apple core at Gnome's face. "You never saw them. You just saw the carriage they came in. *I* was the one who saw them at the border when we had to dig those trenches."

Gnome caught the apple and threw it back at Killer. "Fuck off! You were there with me!"

Riot cursed under his breath. "Forget I asked."

My mother used to describe the nymphs to me in great detail and admiration. I'd seen paintings since then—beautiful, haunting images that depicted the colourful nymphs in natural settings.

"I hear they used to live in Orilla. Shame that they left," Riot murmured through a yawn, still feeling the effects of his hangover. "I bet you they would have turned that shithole around in no time."

Killer rolled his neck. "Hell no. We keep them out for a reason. It's a damn miracle they left. Once nymphs or any other fake deities are involved, it's all *their* personal cash-grab. It happened before; it'll happen again. That's why we went to war, dammit."

"No." Gnome did a little dance from the back. It was his 'I'm-a-piece-of-shit' dance, the one he'd break out before he was about to say something irksome. "We went to war because Pythian was about to fuck us harder than I fuck your sister, Cyllarus!"

Killer spun on his heels. His arm was cocked back, ready to knock Gnome's face in, but he thankfully dropped it at the last second. Gnome deserved a punch or two, don't get me wrong, we just couldn't afford any unnecessary injuries.

Bythos—our most recent initiate—ignored the debauchery. "I wonder if we'll get to see any water nymphs. My father claimed he fell in love with a nymph of the sea."

"Not likely." Riot shook his head. "They haven't left Naiad lands in centuries. I think your father might have been drinking the seawater, Bythos, sorry to tell you."

Bythos adjusted his kerchief, the one he'd bought from a women's clothing store. Despite Bythos having the darkest complexion in the group, he seemed to be the most paranoid about the sun.

"Can we rest? My knees are workin' up a fright!" Gnome sat on a large rock before anyone could answer.

"We've barely even begun!" Killer shouted as he took in the long, empty road ahead of us. "We're not slowing down because you're out of shape! Tough luck."

"No, he's right," Thrasher said. "Let's take a quick piss-break and meet back in five."

I knew hiking with their Cheirons would be challenging given all their untreated wounds from the war, but we'd barely even made it five miles that day. At this rate, the woman we were looking for was more likely to find *us* than we were her.

"Hey, Misfit," Myko whispered as we relieved ourselves by some bushes, away from everyone else. "Did you see Thrasher the day he got the contract?"

"Sort of. I was with Daphnis that night."

A wiser man would have married Daphnis years ago, but I wasn't a wise man. She was honest, hardworking, loved horses, and kept to herself. I was just a piece of shit who couldn't commit.

Myko shrugged. "Could have been the booze. He just seemed off to me."

It was hard to deny that the whole 'mission' did come as a bit of a surprise. We'd kept a low profile for several years, almost to the point where things were starting to get boring.

"Off? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Put your peckers away! It's time to move!" Thrasher called out.

Myko's crow's-feet tightened at the corners of his dark eyes, but he smiled at me as if the conversation had never happened. "Nothing, forget I said anything."



Two days later, we were still in Orilla, only a few miles from the forest borders of Oread.

"What about the witch that lives in a house made of skulls?" Gnome held his hands out in front of him as he skipped forward, pretending to fly a broom. "I heard she sits around, waiting for attractive, unsuspecting male travellers like us to walk by so she can cook us for dinner."

Gnome was referring to the old witch, Baya. My mother used to tell me bedtime stories about Baya, claiming she was the oldest witch in Oread.

I flinched inwardly. After years of practice, I had succeeded in the art of mentally sidetracking myself whenever she was brought up. I could still recall the stories she'd told me using her gift of sight, but aside from that, a lot of the memories with her were a blur.

I scoffed at Gnome. "Oh, please. Even a starving witch would pass on the opportunity to eat you."

"Say what you will, but I reckon I've got more meat on me than you, Misfit." He slapped his belly for emphasis. "I'd last a witch all winter."

Once I started living with Thrasher, the men changed my name from Amphissus to 'Misfit.'

I'd earned the nickname as a kid after Riot dared me to steal some sweets from a local shop. Not surprisingly, I was caught red-handed, and the shop lady called me a 'misfit child' before smacking me upside the head.

By all accounts, it was a big day. I learned to never steal (from that shop) again and was tokened with an official Cheiron nickname.



I had taken up watch for most of the night after we'd settled into a private spot by some shrubs, and a restless Thrasher noticed my yawns were growing more frequent.

"You had a long night, Misfit. Let this old man take watch for a while."

Between his towering height and the massive scar that covered half his face, you'd think Thrasher was the scariest, meanest man in all Orilla.

As it turned out, he was the kindest person I'd ever met. A gentle, pure soul.

I wasn't about to pass up the opportunity for sleep, so I quickly rearranged my jacket as a make-shift pillow and made do with my sorry excuse for a bed in front of the fire.

But as I fell asleep, the world around me seemed different.

I noticed the cracking of embers was louder than before, and if I wasn't mistaken, the smoke from the fire shone green in the starlight.

At some point, I dozed off while thinking about that smoke. I awoke the moment the cracking from the fire stopped, or at least I think I was awake. I was standing on the edge of a modestly high waterfall, only a few feet from the crystal waters below, and looked up to find a woman standing before me.

The most beautiful woman I'd ever seen.

I couldn't see all of her since she was half-covered by a flock of rainbow-coloured butterflies, but they took off towards the skies as soon as I arrived.

Once they disappeared, I noticed her eyes were every shade of the rainbow. She seemed to be a rainbow herself in some way despite her green skin. It was in her hair, her eyes, her lips—almost like it was her very essence.

"Who are you?" I didn't recognize my voice.

She cried, keeping her eyes fixed on mine. I panicked, reaching out to help her despite not knowing what was wrong. I was about to ask her why was crying before a deep, dark chuckle startled me from behind.

I whirled, shocked to find a dark green cloud slithering towards us like a snake.

The woman gasped, pulling my attention back to her. Even in my dreams, I was still clumsy as hell and nearly fell on her from the whiplash.

"It's not what you think," she said between sobs, although her face was neutral.

She revealed a small dagger from behind her back and took my hands in hers. After a brief pause of me freaking out and begging her to stop, she shoved the dagger right into her heart, using both our hands.

Before the dream was over, the shadow wrapped around my neck. Choking me.

"It's nice to finally meet you, Prince of Men."

CHAPTER FOUR



AMPHISSUS

PRINCE OF MEN.

Even though it was a relief to cross the border and commence our hike up the Forgotten Mountain, I wasn't in the mood to celebrate.

Prince of Men.

I was so distracted that at one point that Killer had to catch me before I tripped over an embarrassingly large rock—one I definitely should have seen coming.

"You feeling okay there, Misfit?" He wiggled his eyebrows. "Hope you drank enough protective tea after those harlots. Never know what sort of wicked business the women in Orilla have between their legs."

I rolled my eyes because, obviously, I'd taken the tea, which meant I wasn't in danger of getting a fever from the sheets. In my twenty-five years, I'd seen the strongest of men, fiercest in combat, fall sick and die with no glory to speak of because they couldn't contain their cocks. Not like I was much better, but at least I was careful.

I wasn't in the mood to explain that I was troubled by my dreams, which would have traded my annoying nighttime activity jabs for a whole set of new ones, so I kept moving forward and ignored them all.

"Hoy, ahead!" someone yelled.

We all came to a halt and pulled out our weapons, slowly spanning out in a circle to cover all angles.

After a few moments of silence, there was a shuffle from some shrubs in the distance. Thrasher immediately went into his 'lieutenant mode' and stepped forward.

"We have official business in these mountains from the king. Show yourself."

A pair of long, skinny legs crawled out from the shrubbery. An old man, who looked human enough, limped his way into our line of view.

He whispered to us with his head down, his face covered by greasy strands of grey hairs. "Gentlemen, a man has many weary travels."

I cut Thrasher off before he could respond. "It appears we are on a long journey ourselves and do not wish to bother you." As he began to sway like a drunk, I noticed his feet were bare. "What happened to your shoes, if you don't mind me asking?"

I had a hunch, but I just needed one more piece of information before I could confirm my suspicions.

"Walked. Found. Lost."

Fuck.

It could have just been some harmless tree creature, but we were dealing with something much different indeed.

The Leshy.

I tried to remember everything my mother had told me about the creature she'd seen called the 'Leshy.' It was a protector of the Forgotten Forest, made to destroy anything that threatened the land. She'd described it as a tall tree monster, and I was positive the old, weak man persona was just a ruse to disarm us.

But we weren't anywhere *near* the Forgotten Forest. Why would the Leshy bother us on the mountain roads?

I also remembered her telling me that the Leshy seemed fair and would make deals with people to keep them out of the forest.

"That's all it should take for him to allow the passage, to make a bargain in honour of him or the land."

But what the fuck was I supposed to bargain with?

"Would you like to borrow my shoes if your travels are so weary?" I asked, thinking on my feet.

I dropped my weapon and slowly knelt to untie the laces on my sandals. The Leshy seemed surprised.

Killer swung his sword around like a baton. "This is boring. Just kill him and be done with it."

The Leshy cocked its head to the side. "How about you give me one shoe, so I do not leave you to suffer?"

A compromise. We were safe.

Or at least I thought we were until Bythos rushed past me and went straight for the Leshy.

Thrasher and I tried to stop him, but he'd already taken his weapon out. It was an impressive attack, one almost worthy of a painting.

Not even a fraction of a second later, the Leshy put its wrinkly hand *through* Bythos's neck before tossing him to the side like a dirty towel.

Thrasher choked out a sob. "Goddammit, Bythos..."

Although I couldn't see it since I was looking at Bythos, I could hear the Leshy smile as it spoke to me. "Give me your shoe and your word that you'll all stay out of the Forgotten Forest, and I'll let you all pass."

Thrasher tried to hold me back, but I held out a shoe in an offering, despite what it had just done. It snatched the sandal without even looking at me.

"Thank you for your assistance. You can expect me to return the favour when needed, so long as you do not enter the Forgotten Forest."



We buried Bythos in a sad excuse for a grave comprised of sticks and leaves we found on the mountainside, pushing forward despite our grief and trepidation. We only had two days left to find the woman, and it would have been a great disservice to Bythos's memory if we abandoned the job when we were so close to the finish line.

If we couldn't find the prisoner, King Typhon had instructed us to deliver a hand-written message to King Pythian indirectly through a messenger.

The prisoner was nothing more than a name since we didn't even have a written description of her.

Ida Melisseus.

King Typhon ordered us to say the name to anyone who correctly responded to the question: "Does the python kill the lion?"

The correct answer: "The lion got lucky."

"Who has the address?" Gnome asked. "My back is *killing* me. I need to lie down."

"Oh, really, your back hurts?" Killer said as we approached the gated entrance, rolling his eyes. "Thanks for reminding me. I didn't really get it the first few hundred times you brought it up, but I think it's really starting to settle in."

Myko gasped once the stone gates opened, revealing the sun-lit city. I wish I could have shared his enthusiasm.

"Gods, it's just as perfect as I thought it would be."

I tried to pinpoint our location on the small map as all the men fawned over the mountain. It was scribbled on a shitty piece of parchment paper, so illegible it felt like Gnome had drawn it, and I kept messing up and having to start over.

Prince of Men.

I noticed the tall stone buildings before anything else. They saturated the landscape with slate-grey and beige tones, a neutral backdrop for the colourful elements. Some of the loftier buildings disappeared into the thick clouds, leading me to wonder how anyone could build a high-rise on a mountaintop.

And the city was *packed* for a random weekday. Or was it the weekend already? Fuck if I knew. It was a simple point A to point B trip, and we'd calculated it would take a week to hike from our village to the mountain, but only if we were fast. The situation with Bythos ended up weirdly helping our momentum, and I had a feeling we'd arrived on target.

The city folk were precisely how I pictured them to be. Colourful, eccentric, and expensive. Some humans walked among the forest creatures, although I use the term 'human' lightly—they clearly wanted to appear as *inhuman* as possible through layers of bright makeup and flashy clothes.

They looked more like clowns to me, but to each their own, as Myko would say. It was just hard to stomach the thought that their outfits probably cost more than the average cottage on the north side of Orilla.

The inn we were assigned to was a small, black townhouse decorated in fake silver ivy, and I realized I'd never seen so many books in one place as I admired the expansive library that spread

throughout the lobby. The 'library' we had back home was just an old woman's basement with dirty books.

The receptionist regarded us passively. "You have an entire hall to yourselves, as per the request of your king. There won't be enough space for seven of you, so you'll have to partner up."

I couldn't tell if she noticed there weren't seven of us anymore, including myself, or if she was just an asshole. I was too tired to even care. All I wanted was to drink the thoughts of Bythos's wife, children, and grave out of my head.

Getting a new pair of shoes had also become a priority. I only had room in my bag for one extra set, so I'd decided on my heavy rubber boots, which were great for rain but rotten for hiking.

Rotating my remaining shoe between both feet had saved me throughout most of the hike up the mountain, but the overall damage was unavoidable. Painful, unrelenting cuts and blisters now mercilessly burned on both feet despite my efforts.

And although I wasn't as close with Bythos as I was with the other Cheirons, I still couldn't shake his sudden death or the image of the pathetic gravesite we'd created for him.

Thrasher delegated the next round of tasks with a firm, sombre tone to his gravelly voice. "I'll do the first rounds of questions with you, Misfit. Riot, you and Myko head east so we can cover our grounds. You two," he motioned to Killer and Gnome, "go shut the fuck up somewhere and leave people alone."

They snickered to themselves, likely making plans to wreak havoc on the nearest bar and drink their own troubles away. When paired together, Gnome and Killer referred to themselves as 'Killer Gnomes'—one of the many reasons Thrasher didn't let them out on their own.

The streetlights illuminated the lively city as we made our way through the heart of downtown and questioned anyone we could find.

The whole process ended up being awkward as hell since we were the ones who had to start all the conversations with the question.

"Does the python kill the lion?"

"I'm sorry?"

We approached every nymph and human willing to talk for what felt like hours, only to be shunned away before the conversation even started. As the daylight disappeared, I tried not to dwell on the strangeness of our task. Or how we hadn't been asked to approach a specific individual.

It was almost midnight before I realized we hadn't adequately washed back at the inn. Personally, I'd only bothered to splash some cold water on my face and change into a semi-clean tunic.

"You know, maybe people will want to talk to us once we don't reek of our sweat, piss, and blood," I said, ready to call it a night. Thrasher looked inclined to disagree at first, but one whiff between the two of us was enough to make him wince.

"Let's save this for tomorrow," I insisted, giving him a light pat on the back. "Wash up and drink up tonight, Thrasher. You earned it."

He nodded with a small smile, understanding as always. "It's not easy watching men die, Misfit. Take your time with it."

I raked a hand through my hair, trying to avoid making eye contact with him. If I let myself go there, it was all bound to come out tenfold, and I was too tired for dramatics.

"Are *you* going to be okay?" I asked.

The shadows in his eyes confirmed he wasn't, but they were old shadows. They knew how to handle these kinds of tragedies. "Bythos made his decision when he went after something he didn't understand. I won't tell his wife and kid that; none of us will. If they ask, he made a noble sacrifice, which he did, even if it was careless. But you did well, Misfit. You sized up your opponent and improvised. I'm proud of you."

I reminded myself that I still had Thrasher. I still had Thrasher, Gnome, Killer, Riot, and Myko.

Despite my brooding, we met up with Gnome and Killer at the bar they'd found on the outskirts of the city.

Gnome got in a brawl with two humans, his method of dealing with grief. As he was being escorted out, I noticed Riot had a human lady of the night on his lap, giggling all over him as he showered her with kisses. At a certain point, I was tired of sulking among the violent and cheerful Cheirons and gave them all a quick goodbye before stumbling back to the inn alone.

I safely made it to the hallway outside our room—still floating on the cloud of whatever drink I'd had as I attempted to get the key in the lock. I managed to fumble them on the third attempt and had to be *extremely* careful as I knelt to pick them up.

"Here, let me help you."

A sharp voice came out of nowhere, accompanied by a pair of tiny feet in black heels. Looking up, I found a stunning human woman with long black hair, wearing a short, dark-green velvet dress, smiling down at me.

I didn't understand why I was immediately reminded of that woman from the waterfall dream.

"Ah fuck, not you."

CHAPTER FIVE



THE NYMPH

“Not *you*? Does that mean we’ve met before?” I asked.

He blushed, and I took note of that since I couldn’t remember when I’d last seen a man blush.

“I...didn’t mean to say that out loud, sorry,” he mumbled.

“So, we haven’t met before?” Despite my heels, he still hovered over me by about half a foot, and I had to tilt my chin up to maintain eye contact.

After a few heartbeats, he licked his lips while staring at mine. “Nope,” he said, popping the ‘P.’ “Definitely would’ve remembered that.”

I leaned into the door, which he still hadn’t managed to unlock. “Well, why don’t you introduce yourself to me then?”

While I usually didn’t concern myself with the aesthetics of mortals, it was impossible to disregard his beauty. High-mettled grace shone in every aspect of his face. His neck, chest, shoulders, hands, and other visible parts of him were reminiscent of a sculpture’s most-praised masterpiece. He looked to be in his mid-twenties, although his broad build suggested he’d been in quite a few brawls for his age.

“I’m Amphissus, and I’m really fucking drunk, so even if you tell me who you are, I’m probably not going to remember it.” He went to unlock the door but still struggled.

Amphissus.

“Having trouble getting it in the hole, Amphissus?”

I panicked as soon as he unlocked the door, worried that my flirting skills had vanished after I’d neglected them for so long.

He winked before opening the door all the way, motioning for me to come inside. “I can assure you I never have trouble getting it in the hole.”

I intentionally brushed my shoulder up against his hard, warm chest as I went to sit on the settee by the window.

It wasn’t the most comfortable seat, but I still made a show to look relaxed as I threw my arms over the back and crossed my legs.

Amphissus kept casting wary looks over his shoulder as he prepared drinks for us, rightly put off by the stranger who'd practically invited herself in.

I was honestly still waiting for him to kick me out, but I had a feeling he needed some company. I could be that company for him. A shoulder to cry on, a drinking pal, or someone to kiss the worries away—I could be whatever he wanted me to be.

He just needed to be dead by the end of the night.

After tossing back a few shots, he walked—I mean *wobbled*—over to me with a drink in each hand. “Sorry, I forgot to ask what your preferred drink was, so I just made you one of mine.”

“And what sort of drink would that be?”

“I call it pouring-brandy-in-a-glass-until-I’m-happy.” He smiled proudly as he handed me a glass, and I smiled back, amused by how much liquid he'd filled it with.

I held my glass up to his. “Well, cheers to being happy.”

His smile didn't reach his eyes as our glasses clinked together. After the cheers, I took a small sip of my drink while he tossed his back in one go.

“You seem to be quite the weary wanderer,” I observed, no longer able to avoid his sad demeanour.

He snorted before turning back to pour another drink. “Oh yes, quite weary indeed.”

His sadness confirmed a few things for me.

Firstly, the Leshy wasn't lying when he told me he'd killed one of the humans and left the rest alive. It was an ambush that was meant to kill Amphissus, but he passed the Leshy's test, and as per the laws of the land, the Leshy was unable to kill him as I'd hoped.

There was no denying it was a cowardly move. I'd lost all my nerve the morning after I woke from that tantalizing dream, the one where I was with him and the other women. In my cowardice, I summoned the Leshy and struck a deal, promising a rare golden apple seed in exchange for it killing Amphissus and his men.

The seeds were a gift from my father many centuries ago while he was still alive. The Leshy may have been a force of nature Herself, but it was as greedy as a human. As soon as I offered the

seeds and confirmed their authenticity, the Leshy didn't think twice before accepting my bargain.

I finally decided I had no other choice but to kill Amphissus myself, no matter how distracting he was. If you wanted a job done right, I guess you had to do it yourself.

Secondly, this boy had become a man because of that loss. It was the type of sadness I only saw in humans—so tormented by the fragility of their feeble lives. It shouldn't have bothered me as much as it did, but I found myself wanting to...lighten the darkness there.

"Why don't you come here and tell me all about it, Weary Wanderer."

The room was silent as he walked over and sat on the couch, never once taking his eyes off mine. "Your eyes are distracting," he said.

Since I was disguised in my human form, I'd tried to dull the green in my eyes. Perhaps my aversions to humans made my work sloppy.

I gave him a wicked smirk. "That's not the only thing distracting about me."

He had the oddest mixture of blue and yellow in his eyes. One would think the colours would come together to be as green as mine, but that wasn't the case. The yellow lived among the blue, coexisting in a harmonious, hypnotizing composition. I was taking my time admiring his face until he threw his head back and laughed at my flirting attempt, showing off the Adam's apple in his throat.

His neck was so...defined. Distracting. "Tell me, Wanderer, what brings you to Oread?"

And then he had that look again—as if saying the name of the land from which I was created brought him tremendous grief, and his laugh left the room as fast as it had appeared. Without thinking, I reached out to stroke the arm that was closest to me. It was as intimate as it was comforting, even though it was only meant to comfort.

He furrowed his brows as he took in my fingertips.

"I'm sorry, do you not like being touched?"

He shook his head, still focused on my hand. "No, don't stop. That was...unexpected."

Two women in his sheets and a simple caress on his arm was surprising to him?

“Oh? Is this arm reserved for someone special?”

“Other than myself, no.”

I was about to laugh before he started leaning in as if he wanted to kiss me. *Mother Artemis*, when had I last been kissed?

It didn't go against the rules of the curse. I could share a kiss, enjoy a taste. That was a part of the torture—it was only a taste. He used the hand that wasn't holding his drink to tilt my head up more.

“I'm sorry, what did you say your name was?” he asked.

“Does it matter if you're just going to kiss me?”

“I just want to know what name I'll be saying later when I touch myself thinking about this bottom lip right here.” He lightly flicked my lip with his thumb, emphasizing his point.

“Laia,” I lied.

“Laia,” he stretched out each syllable. *Lie-ah*.

It took every ounce of willpower I had not to bite down on his thumb as he flicked my lip again.

“You think I can get a taste, Laia?” Our lips just barely brushed together.

“Yes,” I breathed. I meant it, too.

“Then tell me your real fucking name.”

CHAPTER SIX



AMPHISSUS

IT DIDN'T MATTER how many drinks I'd had that night. I immediately sobered up once I sat down and looked into her eyes.

My mother warned me of the nymphs who disguised themselves as humans—how they would trick people into thinking they were safe before killing them.

Laia, like a liar. It was kind of funny in some sick way.

Telling her my real name was a complete accident, and I decided to blame it on the liquor, even though I knew a small part of me just wanted someone to know my real name. I also blamed the alcohol on the way my cock twitched ever-so-slightly when she'd said it—the first time I'd ever heard a woman say my name that way. Like she was seducing me with it.

All signs of lust left her once the words escaped my lips, which were still almost touching hers. Despite the hilarious expression on her shocked face, I was suddenly distracted by the material of her dress and the way velvet reflected in the light; how the skin-tight material contracted and expanded with every nervous breath. I ended up ogling her tits a little longer than I should have, so, to distract myself, I said the only thing I could think of at that moment.

"Does the python kill the lion?"

She surprised me by laughing—a real laugh, unlike anything I'd heard before. It came right from her gut and somehow managed to sound both manic and sexy as it left her sinfully red lips.

"The storm wipes out the entire animal kingdom, *Prince*."

The glass I was holding slipped through my fingers.

She stood from the settee, clearly no longer interested in whatever games we were playing. "What, no more flirty remarks from this worldwide wanderer?"

"What did you just say?"

Instead of responding, she ran a pale hand across the table in the middle of the room, all while keeping her gaze carefully hidden.

"Was I not clear? Or are you too drunk to understand?"

"Don't try me, nymph. I know what you are."

"I'd love to try you. Believe me." That dress tested my focus, ending just at the spot where the back of her thighs met her tight ass. "But I'm actually just here to kill you."

The news landed like a missile in the middle of the room, and I almost laughed.

"Get in line, bitch."

My hand twitched to cover my mouth, but I held it at my sides. I'd never called a woman a bitch before, and I wasn't sure if I even meant it. I certainly didn't mean to say it out loud. It sort of...slipped out.

A small part of me wanted to apologize. It was never right to call a woman a bitch, or any other name; I knew that. Even if that woman was there to murder you.

I waited for a reaction from her, but she seemed unfazed by my slur.

I rolled my eyes at myself. "How were you going to do it? Did you poison my drink? Are you going to cast some sort of nymph spell on me?" My eyes shot to the peak of her breasts above her dress. "Or were you going to take me down and beat me to death? Maybe choke me out?" All my blood rushed south to my cock at the last thought.

Was I really that fucked up in the head? Or was I just really drunk?

"I have my ways. It would be painless, I promise. And no, there's no poison in your drink. Not yet, anyway." She scoffed and walked over to the bar. "I'll be honest, I'm impressed you figured out the Leshy. I believe only a handful of humans have managed to do so, and even they couldn't live to tell the tale."

My mouth fell open.

"You sent the Leshy for us?" I already knew the answer based on the nonchalant way she looked over her shoulder and smiled. As if she wasn't having enough fun toying with me already, she slowly started picking away at a bowl of berries, making a point to hold my gaze as she licked the red juices off the tips of her fingers.

"Yes, I did. The lands warned me about you, Prince. Each blade of grass whispered to each other as soon as you stepped across that

border." She went for a cherry next and fingered the two balls of fruit before she placed them in her mouth, one at a time.

She sent the Leshy. It was a planned attack.

"One of my men was slain at the hands of the Leshy. A good man."

Her steely expression didn't waver. "I'm sure he was a great man, but the Leshy lives by a strict code. It seems your friend did not abide by that code."

"Be careful who you mock in my presence."

She cocked a hip out to the side, unbothered by my threats. "You know, if you mortals respected the rules, you'd realize the laws are quite simple. Maybe I should kill you, send a message to the rest of these *men*." I hadn't realized she was still debating whether or not she should kill me, but the fact that she was torn was oddly flattering. "But you understood. Your trick with the shoe confined it to the laws. Good job."

I was speechless. At that moment, dwelling on the Leshy wasn't necessary, although it wasn't forgotten. I needed answers, and something told me if she kept the upper hand over the conversation, it would be over before I had a chance to learn anything meaningful.

"What does this 'prince' thing mean? How do you know about it? Why do I see it in my dreams? Are you invading my dreams too, nymph?" Her eyes narrowed at the way I said 'nymph,' like it was worse than 'bitch,' and I mentally pocketed that information for later.

"No, I'm not entering any of your dreams. Have you been dreaming of me, Prince?"

My heart raced, which could have been due to the drink. "I don't know what I'm seeing, but I keep hearing the same thing in my head, over and over. *Prince of Men*. It's driving me insane. So quit fucking with me and tell me what it means or get out and stop wasting my time."

Her eyes softened despite my outburst. "Tell me what you saw in these dreams, Wanderer. Maybe I can clear some things up for you."

"No, I don't want any more lies. Forget I said anything and just leave."

"Amphissus." The sound of my name coming from her steely voice made me pause. "I'm not manipulating your dreams. There's a

spell for it, but it is not something I choose to practice. My powers prefer other methods of expression."

And damn me to all the hells, but I believed her. Why should I trust this nymph who was responsible for Bythos's death? It must have been the magic of Oread or the booze making me legitimately crazy at that point.

Still, I had an overwhelming urge to talk about the dream, to see if anyone could make sense of it. I decided the only way I would be able to do that without losing control would be to drink more, so I turned away from her to replace the glass I'd dropped as I laid it all out.

"I only had one dream, and it was before we even crossed the border. I was in the Forgotten Forest, I think, the one by the waterfall. A woman was there with a big dark cloud of...well, I have no idea what that was. It spoke to me, called me the *Prince of Men*. That's where I first heard it."

Tired of refilling my glass, I unscrewed the cap to the brandy and chugged straight from the bottle. "The woman stabbed herself using my hand on the dagger with her. That's another thing I don't get; why use me to stab her?"

"Describe the girl from the waterfall," she insisted.

"She had rainbow hair, eyes, tears, and blood. Same height as you, without those heels." I had to remind myself not to look at her creamy legs. "That's about all I can remember."

As I turned back around, those green eyes of hers burned into mine. Slowly, she stalked towards me, all while rolling a plump raspberry between her middle finger and thumb.

"I'm going to ask you this again, and I'd really like for you to be honest with me. If you are, I'll tell you everything, but I need to know the truth. What brings you to Oread?"

Instead of answering her, I just wanted to fuck her. Wanted her to roll me around between her fingers like that raspberry and devour me if she pleased. So instead of being smart, I grabbed a fistful of her hair and pulled her in for a kiss.

Until Thrasher stumbled into the room.

"What the hell are you doing, Misfit?"

My hand that had been full of the nymph's dark hair moments ago was now met with thin air, and she was nowhere to be seen.

Fuck, fuck!

I was so close, so close to finally learning the truth. If I had just forced her to talk and used my brain instead of my prick, she probably would have told me anything I wanted.

Thrasher looked genuinely concerned. "Am I absolutely pissed, or were you about to kiss a ghost? Should I find another room?"

I tried to laugh it off despite how mad I was. As I made my bed, I also made a drunken wish that I'd wake up and realize it was all a dream—and I'd be back in my room with those two women wrapped around me.

Maybe Bythos would still be alive.

I could still smell the nymph, feel her on my fingertips, so I smacked both my hands against the wooden headboard to shake the feeling off, nearly breaking it in the process.

Thrasher chuckled to himself. "Ay, I think I'm in for a long night."

I wouldn't have been able to sleep had I not consumed an entire bottle of brandy, but the drunkenness only made me more confused. If I had been sober, dealing with the nymph would have been a lot easier, so I made a vow to myself that night to ease off the bottle.

And I'd be lying if I said a shameful swell of anxiety didn't bubble up at the thought of being sober for too long.

CHAPTER SEVEN



AMPHISSUS

I USUALLY DIDN'T DREAM when I was drunk, but I had no such luck in the mountains of Oread.

I felt like I was being dragged through the mud, and maybe I was. After struggling to claw through the dirt, something grabbed my hands and lifted me until I was finally able to take in air.

"Breathe, Wanderer."

"You?" I gasped through unsteady breaths as I realized it was the woman from the hotel. Except it wasn't.

Her once milky skin now had a silvery-green shimmer to it, and the hair I'd been obsessing over was a blend of green and brown—like soil and vegetation.

Earthly. That was the only way to describe her.

"But I thought—but you said you didn't—" I stammered as I recalled her promising she hadn't entered my dreams.

"That wasn't me before, I assure you. Otherwise, it would have been like this. But as soon as you brought the idea up, I couldn't resist the urge."

"What's happening?"

"Well," she said as she brushed off excess dirt from her massive ears that arched out like overgrown branches. "There's a temple that grants us access to dreams through its springs. It's the spell I was telling you about, except it's not really a spell. It's more of a prayer to prove your worth before you drink from the water and hope for the best."

The heaviness still weighed on me, right in the centre of my chest, pinning me down like a Cheiron wrestling me to the ground.

"So, let me explain. You're here to find my sister, Ida, but it's a lost cause. No one will ever find her, so I need you to stop looking." Her eyes softened as she moved a hand down to cup my cheek. "I won't apologize for protecting Ida. It's all I've known. It was a straightforward plan; I was going to poison your drink. But all you had to do was smile at me, Wanderer, and that plan fell faster than a

maiden on the edge of a waterfall. I know it's not your fault, though— I know it's just the people who ruined our lives."

Ruined *our* lives?

"The Earth showed me where you buried your friend, Bythos, and I gave him my condolences. If he chooses to torture me for the mirth of his afterlife, then so is his right. Just know that I am sorry for sending the Leshy, Amphissus, and know that you are a true Prince of Men. These self-proclaimed kings and queens would never stand a chance against the Leshy, no matter how much magic they possess."

Her grip tightened on me as a heavy, sinking feeling started to creep its way up through my stomach.

"I think our time is up for now. Look into the bowl of berries; your answers will all be there. And before you go," she leaned in to whisper in my ear as I was being dragged down, "I want you to know that if I could, I would squish you like a berry and lap you up. Just the way you want it."

I was yanked out from her warm grip and pulled down through layers of soil before waking up in my bed at the inn.

My scream was so fierce it startled Thrasher, and he landed on the floor with his dagger out in front of him.

"Gods," he mumbled to himself, half-asleep. "Long night indeed."

CHAPTER EIGHT



THE NYMPH

I SHOULDN'T HAVE CHASED his dreams, but time wasn't on our side anymore.

It was worth it, though, to be able to apologize for the death of his friend. After I confessed to conspiring with the Leshy, Amphissus looked at me like most men and kings look at me, and all I wanted was to sink back into the Earth and hide in shame.

So, I knew that I would call upon the Earth to show me his friend as soon as I got back home.

Show me his passage
if I am worthy.

I only saw a glimpse of his friend, Bythos, through the spring—a brief flash of the Earth taking him into Her arms before carrying him down to the Lower World. It was an honour to view such a passing, and I made sure he heard my apologies on his way down there. Not that it would have made much of a difference.

I dozed off to thoughts of holding Amphissus in my arms as we lay together in the soil. Even just the memory of his smell—rich but sweet, like honey and leather—caused waves of pleasure to course through me despite my feelings of guilt.

I pictured him as he was in the vision—his hard, sweaty body working those females until they cried out—when one of my whispering butterflies fluttered by my ear in a warning.

"The queen is here."

Not the kind of royalty I so intensely despised, but my very own queen of the land.

I immediately jumped out of bed to change into something that wasn't my short nightgown, although I'd be lying if I said a naughty part of me wasn't thrilled at the idea of appearing before my queen in a scandalous outfit.

We had four queens of the nymphs: one for the suns, one for the moon and stars, one for the waters, and my queen of the lands.

While nymphs like Ida and me were made in the image of the mountains, trees, waterfalls, and rainbows, Queen Heria was crafted by the hands of the Gods Themselves. Each added Their own unique attribute, whether it was beauty, prophecy, or strength. She was born from the clouds when the Earth was still being made, but you wouldn't know she was timeless if you met her.

Once I was outside, I admired Queen Heria from afar—how the stars and moonlight outlined her perfect form and long wooden horns.

She didn't face me, but her voice was warm. "The Earth tells me you've been busy."

Between her wide hips and the curvature of her waist and thighs, I had an overwhelming urge to touch her. To bury my head in those thighs and tell her of my troubles. I knew it was cheeky and perhaps even blasphemous to think such things, but I couldn't help myself.

Mother Artemis, I was spending too much time thinking of Amphissus. He may have started something I could never finish, literally. "All with good reason, I assure you, my queen."

"You may use my Earth name, or would you prefer to stick to titles, Guardian of the Forgotten Forest?"

I considered. "Honestly, you can call me whatever you want." She laughed, and the trees rustled with delight at the sound without help from the slightest breeze.

I marvelled at the overgrown ivy in her hair, how it nearly cascaded all the way down to her feet. The leaves on the ivy looked so soft, so supple, it was hard not to reach out and caress them. She turned to face me, and I almost went to my knees for her.

"Sounds to me like someone is being held captive by their curse more than they're ready to admit," she said with a small smile.

"It had its days." I swallowed the lump in my throat. Really, only the past three days had been a burden. "To what do I owe the pleasure, my que—Heria."

While I was more than happy to stand outside in the dark with her all night, the guilt from the Leshy ambush still weighed heavy on my mind.

"I need your word you'll stop pursuing King Pythian."

I had to refrain from gasping in disbelief.

"King Pythian continues to terrorize my sister. To threaten these *lands*. Typhon's bastard and his men were sent to find her just the other day. Surely you can understand the measures I'm taking."

"It was a fool's suicide mission, and you know that. King Typhon did not intend for the Cheirons to survive the mountain or the city."

I'd figured as much, but hearing her say it made me want to rip all these mortal kings to shreds.

Heria tilted her head to the side. "I can see you thinking about him now. Tell me, why have you not killed him yet, if he too poses a threat against your sister? Have you not sworn to protect the Forgotten Forest, which you saw him charging through in your vision?"

I bowed my head, unable to hide my shame in front of her. She glided over and held my chin, willing me to meet her glowing gaze.

"It was so much simpler in my head," I whispered in a shaky voice. Defeated. "I would kill him, and maybe the king would get the message and stop coming after Ida. But he'll never stop. Amphissus and I are just his pawns." I did, in fact, get on my knees for her at that point. "Please tell me what to do if you deem I am worthy."

Her voice was gentle as she stroked my hair. "The fates of men are decided, but you possess such powers given by Her that you can leverage those fates. Do not pursue the king as you have been, and She will take care of the rest."

I smiled up at Heria, proud to call her my queen.

"You are too good to me, Heria. I don't deserve you."

She paused, pursing her beautiful, dark lips. "Your curse can be broken, and you know this. The spell is as simple as the man who gave it to you. Why let it torture you any further?"

I hugged her thighs tighter in answer. "It's not possible. I know the spell he used; it's dark magic from Lampades."

"There is a way—there will always be a way. She is fair, and She is kind."

I looked up, confused.

A light breeze caressed her leaves. "Men may use the magic as they please, but they have not mastered it yet."

I knew she'd have to leave soon, but there was one last question on my mind that only she would know the answer to.

"Amphissus spoke of a dream invasion that I did not commit. The dream included Ida by her waterfall. Who would do that?"

My queen blessed me with the softest kiss to my forehead, and the action reminded me of the love I had for her, the love I had for my sister, for the Earth. After a few heartbeats, her lips went right to my ear, sending a shiver down my spine.

"You already know the answer to that."

CHAPTER NINE



AMPHISSUS

"SOMETHING about this meeting doesn't feel right." Thrasher was leaning against a massive boulder as he assessed the dark, empty field in front of us.

Myko sharpened his weapons quietly beside him, his umber skin unusually pale. "I agree."

It was hard to disagree with them, but we had only been waiting for fifteen minutes, and I wasn't about to stand the messenger up. "Ten minutes, and we leave," I promised.

Dusk approached a little too fast for my liking. We were miles from any civilians in the city, tucked away in a set of oak trees that shielded us from anyone's view.

Killer's blue eyes nearly bulged out of his head as he quickly approached me. "Ah, to the hells with this. Misfit, come with me so we can get some of those fancy berries in a nearby bush. I'm starving and want to tell you all about this nymph I had on my cock last night."

I fingered the ring in my pocket, focusing on the cold iron instead of Killer's request.

The messenger was named Osilian, who we were informed would appear in a black jacket bearing the python and femur symbol—a sign that he was a member of the King's Regiment.

For some reason, when I thought of the python, I held onto the ring even tighter. It was my mother's, and she'd made me promise I would *always* keep it on me no matter what—a promise I'd clearly broken when I didn't even bother to check and see if it was inside the box before packing it for the trip.

I knew what the nymph was suggesting by leaving the ring in that bowl of berries.

Prince of Men, the inference that the ring was unique aside from being my mother's...

Was I the bastard son of a king?

A cold voice broke my train of thought. "Does the python kill the lion?"

A man in the promised attire appeared out of thin air near the boulder where most of the Cheirons stood. Riot immediately had his weapon out along with all the other Cheirons except for me.

My voice was rough, uneven. "The lion got lucky."

Osilian wore the famous python mask, which covered the entire upper half of his face in black leather scales designed to look like snakeskin. I considered what the riddle really meant, and then I remembered how the nymph responded when I asked her the question at the inn.

The storm wipes out the entire animal kingdom.

Osilian took a small step towards me. "You have a message for me?" For some reason, I couldn't lift my arm to hand him the note.

Who was the python, and who was the lion?

Thrasher noticed my hesitation. "Misfit, give him the note."

I mindlessly walked towards Osilian despite that strange voice in my head that grew louder with each step.

The python? Pythian, that was obvious. And the lion was King Typhon? But Pythian and his Lampades army destroyed Orilla in the war. How could the lion be considered lucky after such an epic slaughter?

Myko anxiously walked over when I stopped again. "What's wrong?"

"Who is the lion?" I asked Osilian.

The lower half of Osilian's face, the only part of him I could see, didn't budge at my question. That terrified me more than anything he could have said.

I took out my weapon and backed up, my hands steady despite the sweat starting to moisten my palms, and I looked right into the face of the man I knew had been sent to kill us all.

I also knew he wasn't alone.

"You were right, guys. Something's wrong here," I said between uneven breaths.

Roughly fifteen men appeared out of nowhere, the same way Osilian had. They were like ghostly replicas of him, all dressed in python masks and dark leather armour.

Osilian noticed my hesitation. "Give me your ring."

I froze, unsure of what to do next.

Thrasher ran in front of me, blocking Osilian's view. "He doesn't have it on him. He left it back home."

"Give me your ring, boy. I won't ask again."

"Hasn't he given you Oread freaks enough? First his shoes, now this? Fuck off!" Gnome shouted, ready to take on a small group of soldiers.

"What do you need the ring for?" Myko asked as he positioned himself beside Thrasher, further obstructing my view.

"I wasn't speaking to you; I was talking to the Prince of Men," Osilian hissed.

Everyone paused and looked at me with fear—fear that told me they knew exactly what he was talking about.

I spoke up before any of them tried to explain. "I know what he's talking about. I know I'm the Prince of Men."

And there it was, the big reveal. Thank the Gods for hot, meddling, mischievous tree nymphs.

Whatever tether was holding us all in place snapped. Thrasher was the first to move, and he held true as he went right for Osilian, flanked by Myko and Gnome. Osilian humoured Thrasher by meeting his sword a few times before using some sort of magic to twist him around.

Thrasher kept his eyes locked on mine as Osilian held a dagger to his bearded neck. "I'm so sorry, my boy."

I shook my head, not because I refused his apology, but because I refused for him to accept that sort of fate.

Tiny droplets of blood fell from his thick neck as Osilian applied pressure to the dagger. "They almost sold you out, you know. That's how the king found out you were still alive. Someone told him there was a price for his own bastard son."

His *own* bastard son? So King Typhon was my father?

I knew it was bait, but I realized I had a choice to let the information ruin my thirteen years of love, brotherhood, and sacrifice. An option to hold it against them forever.

A part of me wanted to hate them, to curse them out for lying to me, but I saw the apologies in every single one of their faces—the ones they couldn't say out loud.

So, I forgave them because we were the Cheirons, and I would always forgive them.

I noticed Killer stalk towards me out of the corner of my eye. "Enough of this! Misfit, take my hand!"

Ignoring him, I angled my sword right at that mask, my own way of showing everyone that I knew who my real enemy was.

"You'll die last," I said to Osilian.

I was done with twisted words and meaningless titles like 'Prince.' I knew who my family was, and I knew King Typhon had sent us here to die.

Osilian seemed pleased with my decision. "I hope you enjoy watching your men die." He angled the blade, ready to slice through Thrasher's throat. The bubble burst momentarily, and everyone jerked forward before a female voice sounded from the top of the boulder.

"Love the mask, Osilian, although I do wish it covered your entire face."

She didn't just snap the tether; she blew it up into ash and smoke.

CHAPTER TEN



THE NYMPH

“ESPECIALLY THAT MOUTH OF YOURS. You just really love listening to yourself talk, don’t you?” I said casually.

Osilian was nothing more than a useless wraith made of dark Lampades magic. “I could say the same for you,” he sneered.

“Who the hell is that?” a short, bald man with a goatee asked. I put a hand up to my breast, smiling at them with feigned innocence.

“Who am I? I’m the noble nymph who’s going to give Osilian here one last chance. Drop the dagger and have your wraiths stand down, or you all can die.” The wraiths might have been spellbound, but they weren’t immortal or impossible to kill.

I jumped off the boulder and walked over to Amphissus, making sure to give everyone a sweet smile as I passed them. I got a little kick out of everyone gawking at me; it was hard to deny.

Osilian hissed through clenched teeth. “Or else what?”

Once we were finally face-to-face, I gave Amphissus one of my most genuine smiles, and he was staring right back at me. The pure look of shock and disbelief on his face was almost enough to make me laugh.

“Hello, Wanderer. Long time no see.”

“I’m tired of this,” Osilian growled. But he was too late; it had already started. In fact, it had started before I jumped off the boulder. Osilian was just too foolish to notice.

My roots crawled up from the Earth and snatched him from behind at the exact moment he angled the blade at the man’s neck, forcing the dagger out of his hand before they whipped him to the ground.

That’s when butterflies fluttered in my belly—literally. I hadn’t used them in quite some time, and when I daydreamed of ways to kill the king’s wraiths, my butterflies begged me to utilize them, desperate to see some action.

And I could never refuse my butterflies.

Shadows buzzed around the guards, a sign that they were summoning their own powers. Before they had the chance, I blew

them a kiss and made sure they heard the exhale of my breath. My butterflies flew out of my mouth like it was a cave they had been trapped in for eternity. First tens, then hundreds, and then possibly thousands, and they were all different shades of green, yellow, blue, purple, orange and red.

All the colours of the rainbow.

For Ida, for my sister. She loved my butterflies, was always jealous I'd been given such an incredible gift, and I'd been hesitant to use them since they reminded me of her.

Another one of Amphissus's men cried out. "Holy shit, what in all the hells!"

The man Osilian had been holding ran away from the onslaught, which was wise of him. My butterflies were fair, but I wouldn't want to get in their way during an attack.

My butterflies forced the wraiths into a huddle, and once they were finally in position, screaming for their lives, they swarmed in and tore them apart as their feather-light wings became sharp blades.

Does the python kill the lion?

Trick question: my butterflies got there first.

"I think my roots left a surprise for you," I whispered to Amphissus as I motioned my head towards Osilian, who was still alive in the confines of my roots.

Amphissus observed him looking pathetic while trying to rip out the thick branches that had him ensnared in every possible way. It was sort of...arousing, seeing him size down his enemy with murderous intent.

He slowly approached the wraith leader, his footsteps light like a dancer. I never noticed how graceful he was, but then again, I had only ever seen him sloppy drunk or in a pile of dirt. He turned his head towards the carnage my butterflies left behind, and his shift in attention made Osilian look over, too.

"Take off his mask," Amphissus demanded, causing my sex to clench most delightfully.

Lick her clit.

My branches exposed Osilian's long, pale face. He growled in frustration, which felt more directed at his predicament than the loss

of all of his men.

Amphissus's voice was playful and icy as he repeated Osilian's words back to him.

"I hope you enjoyed watching your men die. I know I did. You can live, though."

My eyebrows shot so far up that they almost touched my hairline.

"Misfit! It's not worth it! He'll go right back to Pythian!" a tall man with fire-red hair and freckles cried out.

"That's the point, Riot," Amphissus explained. "I want him to go back and tell Pythian he can go fuck himself."

CHAPTER ELEVEN



AMPHISSUS

I WASN'T sure how much longer the Cherions were going to stare at the nymph like she was the first female they'd ever seen.

She used magic to 'shift' us all from the city to a quiet rural area—to her home—and invited us to stay for the night. Her cottage was the most petite house I'd ever seen, hidden in the shadows by trees and moss, almost impossible to spot from a distance.

Everyone was shaken up from the whole experience, which meant that we were also *starving*. She kindly offered us some leftovers, and we ate with more relish than the food warranted. We weren't total savages, though—we were at the table and used utensils, like civilized folks.

The nymph grinned at Myko, who was awkwardly shuffling in his chair as we all gathered at the dining room table. "Don't worry, my butterflies are a part of the house. They don't bite...unless you're naughty."

He shifted even more at the attention, always so shy, and immediately looked away to hide his blush.

Gnome scratched his goatee, carefully assessing her. "How'd you keep all of the butterflies in your stomach like that?"

"Oh, I assure you, it's not pretty. My mouth's not the only hole I used to get them all in." Gnome just blanched at her and went back to his food, stunned into silence for once.

Killer snickered. "What's a matter, Gnome? Nymph got your tongue?"

"What's your name?" I asked, tired of not knowing. She carefully kept her gaze fixed on the glass of red wine she was drinking—wine she'd pointedly explained was enchanted and too strong for humans.

The Cheirons all turned to me in confusion.

"Don't you two know each other?" Thrasher asked.

"Misfit," Riot growled, always the hopeless romantic. "Tell me you haven't taken this nymph to your bed without knowing her name!"

Oh, if only he knew how many women I'd enjoyed despite not knowing their names.

The nymph scoffed rather loudly before finishing the remaining contents in her glass, which surprised me. Was the idea of sleeping with me laughable? That was new. I clearly remembered her begging me to kiss her at the inn despite how much I'd had to drink.

"She never ended up telling me, and when she did, she was just being a great big *Laia*."

She pursed her lips, which were another beautiful shade of green slightly darker than her skin, and shook her head.

I groaned, entirely at a loss. "I don't get it. Why not? Is your name like a spell? Does saying it out loud release killer butterflies out of all those holes you mentioned?"

"I wouldn't worry about it. You can call me whatever you want."

Gnome slammed his fists down on the table excitedly. "Oh, yes, that's what I like to hear! Esmerelda! I knew a scary woman named Esmerelda—scary like you!"

Riot hurled a loaf of bread at his face. "Keep your gobber shut, Gnome. There's a reason we're being kept from the wine like children."

She simply chuckled at their buffoonery. "You know, you men have had quite the week. I'd say you've earned a sip of the forest wine."

Gnome jolted from his seat as if something bit him in the ass when she made her way over to the little bar tucked beside the living room.

She took out an ornate decanter before pouring us all a glass, barely filling them halfway. The tall, thin flutes had natural vines trailing up the handles, and I marvelled at how delicate they felt in my hand.

She raised her glass to toast, staring into my eyes as she addressed the group. "To happiness."

"To happiness," we all replied, raising our glasses.

Gnome threw his fists up. "To butterflies who eat people! Blimey, I'm going to have nightmares about that for the rest of my life."

The wine was sweet and tangy on the way down, almost like medicine. Once it settled in my stomach, it was clear that whatever it lacked in flavour, it made up for with its potency.

"Oh, fuck. That's the good stuff." I couldn't even tell who'd said it; it might've been me for all I knew.

"You see," she began, just as I started itching for another glass. "The problem is, Wanderer, if I told you my name, I'd enjoy hearing you say it too much."

CHAPTER TWELVE



THE NYMPH

HE SMILED AT ME, and it was the type of smile I only ever saw on males who fucked like he did.

Or at least, how I assumed he fucked, since I'd only ever been a voyeur in his sexual encounters.

"And why would that be a problem?" Amphissus asked as if he'd forgotten everyone else in the room.

The wine kept me confident and focused as I walked back to the bar. "It's kind of a long story, but let's just say that one day, our friend, King Pythian, bestowed a lovely curse upon me in the Forgotten Forest." They all stared at me as if I had three heads and ten tits, including Amphissus.

I took another sip of wine before continuing. "Well, the rest is sort of history. It's no secret in these lands, and it's proven quite handy to me at times."

"Enough words, spit it out," Amphissus grumbled, gesturing towards me as if I would urge me on.

Lick her clit.

I tried to keep my voice casual. "I got in his way of something he wanted, and he cursed me for it. Took away all my 'womanly parts.' At least the ones that matter the most to me."

And there it was—the truth.

It required a lot more guts than I'd anticipated, and I'd intentionally kept his men around as a buffer so I wouldn't do anything I'd regret.

Killer, the one with the thick golden hair, tossed his head back in laughter. "Come again?"

"Oi, you've got *nothing* down there?" Gnome asked, looking horrified. "How do you take a piss? Does it all just come out of one hole? What kind of magic is that?"

Myko, the shy one who was fun to tease, looked like he was about to shrink from the awkwardness and left us all for the safety of the empty dining table. They all followed except for Gnome at first,

who had to be dragged away by the neck to stop him from teasing me—away from the violently chaste nymph with no name.

"Well, that..." Amphissus scratched the back of his neck. "Must really suck."

I laughed into my wine. "Nope, no sucking, either. If I went to suck anything, I'd go as still as one of those oak trees out there until the moment passed. Oh, that's another fun part! If I really start to enjoy myself, I freeze up. It's a great catch; people *love* it when you ask them if they've ever made love to a marble statue before. I doubt even Pygmalion would be tempted."

A few of the men gawked at the comment. I grinned at no one in particular, amused at my dirty little joke. I hadn't had company over other than my queen, and it was kind of refreshing to be the centre of attention for once.

"Can we go talk somewhere else?" Amphissus insisted. I sighed in agreement, knowing it would have been futile to argue. Not that I wanted to.

He addressed his men firmly before I led him out the back door. "You all remember the deal? Don't go sniffing around the wine cabinet, shut the fuck up, and don't fuck anything up."

They all grunted in agreement aside from Gnome, who excitedly tapped his feet on the wooden floors with a giant grin.



We wordlessly enjoyed the calming, cool night breeze wafting from the water, not in any sort of rush.

"How long do you think it'll take them to realize the bar is sealed by magic and they can't get the wine?" I mused as we reached the rocky edge of the tiny stream.

He chuckled, keeping his gaze averted towards the water. "If you think that's going to stop Gnome, you've got another thing coming."

I started doing a little dance then, just because I felt like it. Because the wine made me feel like it was a good idea.

It wasn't anything fancy, just some movements on my tippy toes, the kind of dancing I'd do with the nymphs when we'd gather to

honour Artemis and the Earth.

"Have you ever tried to take a lover?" The sweet rumble of his voice was music to my dance.

"At first, yes, but that was a few years ago."

His eyes tightened. "What does it mean? You can't...do anything? Not even over-the-clothes stuff?"

I let out one of the giddiest giggles I'd ever heard escape my lips. The birds and other wildlife surrounding my house noticed, too.

"You're funny. Have I ever told you that? I thought human men were only good for laughing *at*, but you actually make me laugh, Wanderer."

He sucked in a sharp breath. "I like the way you call me Wanderer."

"Dance with me."

I didn't give him a chance to refute before I reached up and took both of his large hands in mine, swaying them in the space between us as if we were fluffing out fresh bed sheets. "See? Not that bad."

He allowed me to continue my silly dancing, his smile never once leaving his face. Every so often, I'd twirl us around like ballerinas or make him dip me like a proper lady at a fancy ball, which made him chuckle.

After a few moments of lightness and laughter, he grabbed my wrists, halting my movements all at once.

"Tell me your name, please."

I think that was the first time I'd ever heard him say 'please,' and I wouldn't make him repeat it.

"Adrastea."

He looked at me as if I were a stranger, even though I'd just technically introduced myself.

"Adrastea," he tested each syllable on his tongue. *A-dras-tee-uh*.

And given my body's reaction, I instantly knew I was right to hide it for as long as I did.

"What does your curse say about kissing, Adrastea?"

"The curse allows kissing. It allows touching. So many things, but no pleasure. If I start floating up, up, up..." I lifted our hands over my head as I spoke before dropping them. "I'd come right back down

and freeze up like I told you. And the entrance down there is locked, so to speak."

Chaste, just like my Artemis. It should have been a blessing in some way that I was forced to live as she did...and yet, there I was, dancing under the stars with the most beautiful man in both Orilla and Oread.

"Adrastea." The way he said my name was an apology for my curse—and a plea.

I reached up to frame his face—his sharp nose, scar, and slightly rough facial hair. I was about to tell him that he didn't need to apologize, that I was deserving of such things before he kissed me deeply, so hard and soft all at the same time.

I opened for him, letting him taste all the wonders of the forest that lived within me. He immediately stiffened under my touch.

"What's the matter, Wanderer?" My tongue brushed his as I spoke.

He tasted so sweet, so human. Humans were so wildly obsessed with sugar and often tried to steal ours as they did everything else, but not even the sugars of Oread were as sweet as Amphissus.

He crashed his lips back down to mine, now eager to explore the new territory he'd just discovered.

We remained that way for quite some time—my arms entwined around his neck and his at my waist. At one point, I loosened my grip, desperate to touch any exposed skin I could as he slowly trailed one of his hands up my spine and gripped a fistful of my hair, right at the scalp...just as he had in the inn before we were interrupted.

I'd enjoyed many lovers before my curse, but no one had ever been so eager to fill me, to taste me. And even better, I had never been so keen to return the favour.

He broke the kiss momentarily to catch his breath, working his way down my jaw and neck. I was about to protest at the lack of contact before his tongue did the most astonishing thing at the hollow point beneath my ear.

I arched into him even more, my breasts now desperate for some sort of friction, and he lightly bit down on the spot he'd licked.

Tired of his wicked teasing and skillful tongue, I gripped his hair the same way he had mine before resuming our kiss. It was messy—

the most delicious clash of teeth, tongue, and tangled breaths. I loved every second of it.

He stroked down my arms and then around my ribs, just underneath my breasts. I urged him on, and both his hands were there in an instant.

That's when it happened.

Down, down, down.

I sighed into his mouth as my blood chilled, and whatever dampness had started between my legs disappeared in a heartbeat.

Amphissus sensed my resignation and lifted his touch from my breasts to the base of my neck, his large hands nearly cupping my entire head as we broke our kiss. I rested my forehead against—mourning the loss of his touch that was there only a few moments before.

"You taste so sweet," I whispered.

"You taste like nothing I ever imagined."

"I've never felt this way before," I admitted—because he was more intoxicating than the wine.

He shook his head, and for a moment, I was convinced he was about to tell me to leave him alone and keep my feelings to myself.

"I have no clue about anything right now. Life has never made less sense or been this damned complicated before." I nodded in agreement with whatever he was telling me before he lifted his forehead from mine. "But I know that I want you, Adrastea."

My heart burst at his words, having been so sure he was about to tell me otherwise only moments before. I couldn't help my smile as tiny tears escaped my traitorous eyes.

My queen was right; the curses of human kings were wrought with stupidity, as flawed as the men themselves.

And for the first time in so long, I found myself full of wanting.

I wanted to touch him, to show him how much I admired him with my body and soul. I wanted *him* to help *me* break my curse. I didn't know if it meant breaking it forever or just once, but I knew I wanted him to do it.

"Amphissus..."

Thrasher cried out before I could finish. "Misfit!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



AMPHISSUS

A DEAD BABY python with a note attached had been thrown through one of Adrastea's windows, which, she explained, was only possible since the python was an accepted part of the land.

I felt horrible that her house had been vandalized because we were there. She sobered up immediately when we got back inside the house and only mumbled a few words to us before disappearing into thin air, leaving her butterflies busy with activity.

Which just left me, the Cheirons, and the dead baby python on the centre of her dining room table. A table we had all enjoyed not so long ago.

The message was elusive, just like everything else in Oread.

The python escapes the storm.

Castle of Oread - 06.01.06

Thrasher was the first to break the silence. "Look, Amphissus..."

The use of my real name immediately caused everyone to straighten in their seats, and I took a deep breath to brace myself for the truth.

Killer shot him a warning glare. "Pholus."

But Thrasher had made his decision and ignored Killer as he continued. "I need you to know that when you came to us, we were lost Cheirons—all ravaged by the war and too fucked up in the head to find work and have families. I was paid to watch you, just for a while. That was the deal. Then I saw that ring of yours one night when you were asleep, and I knew what you were, why I was being paid to keep you—"

Myko interrupted him with an abrupt cough. "He didn't tell us on his own. We were out and noticed he was off, so we got him pissed before he admitted anything. Selling you out was our idea, not his."

Gnome nodded. "Ay, it was our idea. We were all doing desperate things those days, awful shit for food, drink, and ugh... fucking food."

“And the scar was my idea,” Riot said with a frown. “There was a boy who’d just died, a butcher’s kid, and he was about your age. He had that scar, and we bribed the butcher not to tell anyone he’d died so we could pass you off as him for a while. I promise you there’s not a day that goes by where I don’t look at your face and regret making that call.”

Even as they admitted they’d lied, I couldn’t help but admire their honesty at that moment.

“About the deal...I think I was spellbound, Amphissus. I wasn’t outright hypnotized or made to drink some sort of potion, but a member from the king’s council caught me off guard at the pub one night. I ended up signing the contract before I even knew was happening. I tried to play it off, but I knew there’d be something waiting for us in the mountains. That’s what Osilian meant. When I was given the contract, I knew that it was a death warrant for you as soon as I signed it. We all came along to make sure you were safe, I swear it.”

Myko spoke before I had a chance to respond. “You remember the name the priest gave to Thrasher, your name from before?”

As I took in the expression on Thrasher’s face, I thought back to that time. To the priest holding my arm and knocking on the stranger’s door—on Thrasher’s door. It almost made me sick to my stomach, but I remembered what he’d said.

“Pythamphus.”

My mother had always called me Amphissus, and I’d maybe heard her say ‘Pythamphus’ once or twice to strangers. I wasn’t even aware it was my full name until the priest told Thrasher.

Gnome looked at us as if we were all speaking in different languages. “Gods, this is making my head spin. No more depressing talk! Misfit, go seduce the nymph to bring us more wine!”

“Adrastea,” I said, and my heart sang as I corrected him, gladdened at the discovery. “Her name is Adrastea.”

I longed for her closeness again, to take in more of her breath that reminded me of damp moss and the air after a rainstorm.

At first, it was a shock since I hadn’t realized she was...built differently in that sort of way. I wasn’t sure what else I expected, especially since everything about her was so uniquely Adrastea.

Even her tongue had such a strange texture to it, like a glossy leaf. That sick, depraved part of my mind wondered what it would feel like all over my cock—had to know what other parts of her looked, tasted, and felt like.

That curse of hers was a nightmare, and it moved Pythian farther up my shit-list. I hadn't been aware I was making a list, but Typhon and Pythian were pretty much just sitting at the top, right on their thrones.

Myko held out his hand. "Let me see your ring."

No one had ever touched it before, aside from Adrastea, who *stole* it—which I still needed to ask her about when we weren't so distracted. Regardless, I pushed through the internal resistance as I handed it to him.

Killer groaned. "It's just a trades ring or some anointment shit. It's not important besides belonging to Typhon's court." I noticed he didn't call him 'King Typhon.'

Myko searched for something in my eyes. "Tell us more about your mother's gift."

"What's that got to do with it?" Thrasher asked.

Myko shrugged, continuing his close inspection of the ring as his tattooed fingers traced the finer details. "Always seemed strange to me that a wool-spinner had the gift of sight."

Prince of Men.

"Strange indeed." That came from Adrastea, who I hadn't realized returned from whatever she was doing outside. She was covered in dirt, but it didn't look strange on her or out of place; it was fitting.

"What sort of sight did she have?" she asked.

"She saw things that were far away and knew what was happening in other parts of the world. That's how she taught me how to look for things like the Leshy." I winked at Adrastea. "And mischievous tree nymphs disguised as humans."

Gnome shot up from the table. "Christ, all this talking is driving me mad! Ny—I mean Adrastea—bring us more wine!"

"Adrastea," Riot said, rolling his eyes. "Do you have some sort of sleep magic you can give him instead?"

As she stepped under the hanging light in the kitchen, I noticed how tired she was. It was hard to make out with all the dirt on her

face as her eyes almost disguised themselves as grass, but I could see the weariness in her expression, the exhaustion there.

“Actually, there’s an herb that grows in these very forests, no enchantments whatsoever, and it brings about an incredibly sedative feeling when brewed in some tea.” She gestured towards the cabinet in her kitchen. “I’ll get a pot going for whoever wants to try some.”

She left us to wash up and surprised me by returning only a few moments later, all clean and wearing looser clothes—another magic of her house, I assumed.

“Damn, this nymph sure does come in handy when you need it. Tell me, what other sorts of tricks have you got in there?” Killer teased as he ogled her from head to toe.

I punched his shoulder, which almost caused him to fall off his chair. Adrastea seemed amused by our antics despite the crass behaviour.

One by one, she poured everyone a mug and offered us all the parsley and mint-smelling tea. Everyone seemed eager to try it besides Thrasher, who politely waved his off.

“No tea for me, miss. I’ve had quite the day, and that wine was enough for the night.” Thrasher rubbed his throat—reminding all of us how close he’d come to death only hours ago. How close we’d all come.

She placed a hand on his shoulder. “There are a few mattresses ready in the room upstairs, first door to the right. Just ask one of the whispering butterflies if you need anything. They’ll understand. Sleep well tonight, Thrasher.”

My heart threatened to leave my throat as I watched her comfort him—the closest thing to a father I’d ever had. He returned her smile before wishing us all a good night as he took off for bed.

I hadn’t thought much about my sleeping arrangements for the night, but if I had to choose between sharing a room with a snoring Cheiron or her, the choice was pretty obvious.

The tea worked its magic, which was apparently no magic at all, and Gnome and Killer were out like a light after only a few sips. She smirked as she watched them clumsily pass out before they were wafted by magic into the rooms upstairs, which gave me a sneaking suspicion that she’d slipped them a little more than the rest of us.

“Talk to me, Myko.” Riot joined him back at the table with a hot mug in his hands. “I’m not sure if this steam is coming from the tea or your ears.”

Myko was sitting across from me at the dining room table while Adrastea busied herself with tidying. The look on his face suggested he was doing enough thinking over things, enough for the both of us, so I let myself be distracted by Adrastea as they deliberated.

Myko shifted in his seat to face Adrastea, playing with the ends of his salt and pepper beard. “Would you happen to know where kings meet in Oread?”

A beat passed. “The castle of Oread, the one that’s just by that waterfall. That’s how this whole mess started, actually.”

“What do you mean, ‘this whole mess’?” I asked.

She didn’t respond right away, but then I remembered how the word ‘please’ seemed to push her over the edge when I begged her to tell me her name.

“Please, Adrastea.”

It worked, thankfully. “My sister Ida and I lived in this house together, just the two of us for the longest time. Pythian was here not long before the war was over and instantly fell in love with her. Ida has a certain...ethereal quality about her, so I guess I can’t blame him.”

“That ethereal quality runs in the family.” Riot winked.

She gave him a pleased smile in return and walked over to sit in the chair next to mine. I had to resist the urge to pull her in a little closer. “It was truly bizarre. He just saw her and fell instantly. I think he sees her as his mate”—she wiggled her fingers in the shape of air quotes—“or whatever you mortals call it. Anyway, he chased us into the Forgotten Forest and cursed me since he couldn’t have her. He would have killed me, but most humans assume related tree nymphs are connected to each other. I don’t think any human knows how to really kill us.”

I couldn’t help but admire all the fierce loyalty she had for her sister and her look of love that made those emeralds light up the whole room as she spoke of her. It made me think of her sending the Leshy for us, and I finally felt that I understood what her motivations had been. After what they’d both endured at the hands of men, she

obviously would have done whatever she could to make sure that wouldn't happen again.

Her sudden revelation also confused matters even further. I'd known King Typhon lied to us about her sister, Ida, but now I truly understood how deep that lie went.

Did King Typhon sincerely want us to find Ida to get some sort of leverage over Pythian? Did he want us to return her so he could...kill her? Start another war?

"Gods," Riot growled, likely sharing my thoughts.

Adrastea looked at us with wide eyes. "What's wrong?"

Myko's posture was firm, resolute. "I know where I've seen this type of ring. This is a ring for blood oaths, for secret royal deals. I only know that because our second lieutenant broke an oath before the Siege of Kerberos. Someone got to the ring before I could really look at it, but it was like this. Same shape and symbol." The edge in his stare made my breath hitch. "I think this ring was given to your mom by Pythian."

King Pythian knew my mother?

Adrastea hummed in response. "Prince of Men."

Myko shifted in his seat, picking up on the gravity of the moment. "I think your mom is related to Pythian, and I think she named you Pythamphus to confirm it. I never really thought much of it since people name their kids after his family all the time. 'Pyth' is reserved for those higher up in line for the throne; Pytharon, Pythella, Pythian..."

I paused, baffled that I'd never realized it sooner myself.

Riot's eyes shot to mine. "You're the Prince of Men because you're the closest there is to a pure royal bloodline."

If I wasn't mistaken, I heard a slight crack of thunder outside.

The horror in Adrastea's face as she turned to look out the window told me I wasn't mistaken and that Myko's words had set off some sort of seismic shift.

Prince of Men. Bastard to King Typhon, and somehow related to King Pythian.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



AMPHISSUS

“ADRASTEIA, you called me a Prince at the inn before I told you about my dream. How did you know?” Sitting together at the table after we’d made our discovery somehow brought the memory back. I could have sworn she blushed at the question as a deep shade of green suddenly covered her exposed neck and cheeks.

“I didn’t know about the ‘Prince of Men’ or any of this. I promise, Amphissus.” I believed her, but still.

“Was it some sort of magic? Does everyone in Oread know I’m a...Prince?”

“I told you nature warned us about your visit. As far as I know, I’m the only one She showed anything to.” Adrasteia’s blush deepened with every word, and I’d never seen her so unsure of herself. It turned me on for some fucked up reason.

“What did it show you?” I urged her on.

“She took me to your room and gave me your ring.” She nervously chewed her lower lip. “Went into that chest of drawers and took it out Herself. I was just strung along like a puppet the entire time.”

Well, that wasn’t so terrible. When she asked about the disturbance, the “Earth” gave her my ring, so why was she blushing like a schoolgirl?

Riot laughed at her uncomfortable expression. “His chambers really are quite filthy, aren’t they?”

She looked down into her tea to hide her expression. “Yes, quite filthy.”

And then I understood that she must have seen something filthy enough to make her blush. Once it clicked into place, I couldn’t resist the urge to smirk, especially when she was so vulnerable. “How filthy was it?”

Myko cleared his throat, feeling the shift in the air, and practically ran out of the dining room before quickly thanking her for the tea, motioning for Riot to follow him to bed. She avoided me like I wasn’t even there and kept staring into her tea as if she could hide in it. I

wondered if she could do that—if she was able to shrink herself and hide in the mug. With her, you never really knew.

Once we were alone, I made no attempt to hold back and started rubbing her thigh. “Well? Aren’t you going to tell me how filthy it was?”

Her eyes went so wide I thought they might pop out. “It was putrid. Old food, dust everywhere, clothes all over the floor.” I trailed my tongue up the side of her neck as she spoke, curious if her blush made her skin taste any different.

The heat from her skin did, in fact, make her musky forest smell a lot headier, and my cock throbbed in response. “And what were those clothes doing on the floor?” My hand continued its lazy strokes up her thigh, but I was careful not to get too close to that spot since her curse was a constant, annoying presence in the background like a drunken Gnome. I breathed in and out of her ear the way I knew women always liked it, the way I knew I liked it, which caused her to shiver and spill her tea all over her lap.

I laughed, amused at this blushing, bold female who never failed to surprise me. “That’s for making me drop my glass at the inn,” I reminded her.

Myko rushed to the top of the stairs. “Everything okay down there?” I sent him away as she practically ran to grab some towels. She seemed distracted by her nerves, so I went ahead and cleaned up the mess on the floor for her.

After a few minutes of shyness on her part, I finished wiping up the last of the tea and smirked while she dried herself off. “Hey, look, I made you all wet. Maybe we’re on our way to breaking this curse after all.”

“You always make me wet, Wanderer.” She rolled her eyes but kept her head down. “Don’t worry about that.”

Fucking Gods, the things she said sometimes.

But I still had to know something; otherwise, I’d never get any sleep. “What did you see in my room, Adrastea?”

She finally looked at me from under her thick lashes as she continued biting her lower lip, teasing me with it.

“I saw you having what looked to be a fun night with some friends.”

I should have figured she wouldn't make this easy. "Yeah? What sort of fun was I having?"

"There was a woman in your lap. She was sucking on you, and it sounded like she was giving you her best. Lots of big slurps and gulps."

I instantly knew what she was talking about, and the memory set my body on fire, even more so knowing that she was somehow there, watching me, watching us. All of us.

"And was that all that was happening?" While I suspected I was right, I still needed to hear her say it.

"No, in fact, now that you mention it, it looked like there was some fun up at the headboard, too." I could tell she was holding back a smile. "It sounded like it was delicious."

All at once, her demure, blushing demeanour disappeared as the woman who walked into the inn suddenly appeared. The complete 180 of it caused me to lose my swagger almost entirely, and she took advantage of my surprise by tracing my lips with her pointer finger, her eyes following her finger's movements.

"And then you had her on her hands and knees begging for more while you took her like she was your prize—like your dirty little trophy." She tilted her head to angle her lips right in front of mine. "You were even kind enough to make sure the treat in your lap didn't get left out and ordered the other one to *lick her clit*. I think about that part a lot, actually. I didn't get to stay for the good part, but I'm sure it was quite the finale. You'd never disappoint, Wanderer."

No, I wouldn't.

I kissed her, and it was like we'd moved through time from her backyard to that very spot, the way she and the wraiths seemed to be able to move through air and time. I backed her up into the nearest wall, which allowed us to be much closer than before. I knew it also meant we wouldn't be able to enjoy it for very long, but it was impossible to stop with the way my hard cock was pressing into her stomach, given the height difference.

Her hands tangled in my hair, gripping it tighter than she had before, most likely taking a couple fistfuls of strands with her along the way. It reminded me of those aspects of her curse that she was so undeserving of.

I unwillingly broke the kiss because it didn't feel right to go that far. Even if she opened for me and begged me, the knowledge that it couldn't satisfy her didn't make it worth it.

"Why'd you stop?" She ran her fingers through my hair softly as if she were apologizing for pulling on it. I gave her a chaste kiss, just to let her know she had nothing to apologize for. I was the one who just backed her up against a wall, after all.

And then the entire house shook, or maybe I just imagined it, when she reached down between us and grabbed my cock through my pants with those sweet hands of hers.

My eyes narrowed in a warning. With the way she spoke so openly about sex, I didn't think I needed to warn her about anything, but I found myself doing so regardless.

"Adrastea."

She cocked her head to the side. "Well, that doesn't feel so comfortable. How long have you been this hard for me, Amphissus?" Hearing her say my name made me twitch again, and I knew she felt it.

"Since you asked me if I needed help in that hallway."

Her emerald eyes burned into mine so fiercely it sent a shiver down my spine. "You know, I have a crazy idea if you're up for it. Why don't you take care of this, but since I can't partake, how about I enjoy it from a distance like I did in your bedroom?"

I beamed at her. "Now, there's an idea."

She kept her smile in check, calculated, and turned her head to the left before her eyes glazed over. As if in an answer, a small swarm of those butterflies appeared. I flinched out of her grip, startled to see something that had killed a group of wraiths not so long ago. She held me firm, whispering to them so low I couldn't hear despite how close we were, and they quietly flew away, making a point to go through her hair before they left.

"Just letting them know to ward off any unwanted attention from upstairs."

I was about to respond before she started walking us towards her room, facing me the whole time. The butterflies opened and closed the door for her, thankfully leaving us alone for some privacy. I didn't get to take in how unique her bedroom was as she let me go and

slowly walked back towards the foot of her bed. I saw a bit of that shyness creep through again, but it didn't rival the power she held in her stare, in her whole body. "Will you take off your clothes for me, Amphissus?"

"Only if you take yours off."

If I wasn't touching her, I didn't see why that would be an issue. She quickly pulled down her leggings that were already stained from the spilled tea instead of responding, and they were gone in a blink of an eye with how eager she was, leaving only a pair of white cotton panties visible. Her oversized wool sweater followed shortly after, and thankfully, her breasts weren't covered at all, leaving her upper body exposed as she stood before me.

She was undoubtedly made from the Gods, and they had some good taste.

"You're the most perfect thing I've ever seen." Her breasts were poised, so round and soft, slightly more than a handful. I could still feel them in my hands as if I were touching them outside—could feel how hard her nipples were, which I now realized were a similar shade to her eyes. Like little crown jewels.

"I could say the same thing about you." She smiled sweetly and started slowly rubbing those nipples. Her eyes then pointedly went down to the bulge in my pants—a reminder.

Right, that's why we were here.

Even though I wanted to tease her and take my time with every piece of clothing, I had no patience whatsoever and nearly tripped twice while trying to get my pants off. As soon as I was fully naked, I looked up and saw pure hunger gleaming in those green eyes.

For what felt like forever, we just let our eyes roam over each other's bodies in the way we wished our hands and lips could. It was a comfortable silence until her eyes dropped down to my feet.

"I'm so, so sorry about the Leshy." She seemed devastated as she took in my battered feet. I could tell it was pulling her out of the moment, so to stop her, I took hold of my cock and stroked the tip.

"Not now, Adrastea."

Her gaze lifted from my feet back to my eyes, and all that sadness disappeared before it ever arrived. I started working myself, moving down the shaft more and more with each stroke. She sat

perched on the edge of the bed, never once looking away from my eyes.

And while that was hot, so hot it had me sweating, it wasn't the main attraction.

"You can look at it, you know, it won't bite." I tried not to smile, but I think the one side of my mouth might have betrayed me.

"I wish you could bite," she said with a moan. I pictured myself doing just that. "More," she instructed.

I bit back a groan and fisted my cock harder, making a point to slowly squeeze the tip on the way up, letting her see the precum there.

"I imagine you taste so fucking good, Wanderer."

I'd never heard her swear like that. It only made me pump myself harder and faster.

And then she tested me, pushed me almost entirely over the edge when she trailed a hand to that spot between her thighs before slipping her panties to the side to reveal her sex. Just a peek.

Something tied between a growl and a sob escaped my throat. "Can you take those off?"

She eagerly removed the other hand from her breast before reaching down to pull her undergarments off, tossing them to the side, and wasted no time exposing herself and spread her legs out as she leaned back on her elbows to give me a complete view.

Her wetness had her cunt almost glowing, just like the rest of the iridescent shine she had about her. I moaned without even meaning to.

"Come for me, Wanderer. I don't think I can last much longer."

I noticed her breathing had increased, and I had the feeling she sensed the curse might bring the moment to a close soon. I could feel my own release building, tensing all my muscles, but I refused to give in until I allowed it.

"That depends. Are you going to let me come on those pretty tits?"

She went completely still, and I worried the curse might have frozen her. I almost released myself before she began massaging her breasts together.

That was all I needed.

It only took a few steps before I came all over her, decorating her magnificent skin. She massaged her breasts some more, and I might have selfishly tapped my tip on them at some point. Just to let her know that they were mine for the night.

She just watched my cock in fascination and looked up at me with a pleased smile once it was done.

That's when I decided that if that was all I got for the rest of my mortal life, then I was the luckiest Prince of Men—or whatever the hell I was—in the world.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



THE NYMPH

THE SALT from Amphissus's sweat and the sweetness that was purely him were the last thing I smelled before I fell asleep and the first thing I smelled once I woke the following day.

I'd used a fair amount of my powers the past few days. Alone, they would have been an easy recovery, but combined, they were proving to be challenging to bounce back from. I couldn't keep avoiding the strain on my body, so I reluctantly pushed Amphissus off before getting out of bed.

"*Outside, please,*" a butterfly whispered as I stretched my stiff limbs.

All the afterglow of that evening with Amphissus was gone in an instant as my adrenaline kicked in.

My butterflies led me to the stream, right at the base of a poplar tree, and showed me an awkward pile of dirt—a blatant attempt to conceal something. Underneath the comically obvious effort to hide evidence was a tiny dagger that had little bits of dried, bright-orange blood on it.

The blood of a python from Oread.

My heart thundered in my chest, and I put it all together before my butterflies needed to elaborate. "Which one?"

"*Cyllarus. 'Killer,' they call him.*"

I was too distracted to notice Amphissus running towards me. He was still buttoning his pants, which caused him to stumble a few times before he finally reached me.

"Go back inside, Amphissus."

"What's wrong?" He frantically looked around for any signs of danger through his panicked, sleepy daze. "The butterflies look spooked. Talk to me."

I couldn't move, couldn't process it properly with him being there. I didn't even think about hiding the weapon I was still holding out in front of me. His whole body froze once he noticed it.

"What's that supposed to be?"

“It’s the blood of a python, one from Oread. My butterflies just informed me that Cyllarus used this dagger to kill the baby python.”

His tan face paled. “What did you say?”

“My butterflies don’t lie.” I shook my head, not believing it myself. “I know my protection barrier. Whatever happened to the python was done by someone who was already welcomed in my home.”

He took it all in, and those full lips of his that were usually so rosy went as white as eggshells with the realization. I hated bringing him the news and desperately wished we were still holding each other back in my bedroom.

“I’m sorry.” I knew it wouldn’t mean anything, but I still had to say it. He remained silent for a few moments, never once taking his eyes off the dagger as his jaw clenched and unclenched in deliberation. He took in one last deep breath before looking back up into my eyes.

“Wake him up and bring him to the dining room. Wake them all up.”

Lick her clit.

It was evident that Amphissus had no intention of being king, but I felt that kingdoms would willingly go to their knees for him. I saw the fire starting in his eyes and heard it vibrate through his core as we made our way back into the house. Even nature seemed to notice him, and She normally had closed eyes when faced with the affairs of mortal men.

Having heard our conversation, my butterflies were already hard at work, causing each of the men to groan and cry in fear as they forced them awake.

One by one, they filtered into the dining room, all half-dressed and reeking of morning breath, their eyes barely open to the world. A few of them even tried to go back to sleep on the couch in my living room.

That was until they saw Amphissus and me standing in the empty archway and laid their eyes on the dagger firm in Amphissus’s grip.

Thrasher’s scar became more pronounced as his face twisted in confusion. “What’s that there, lad?”

“I’m not too sure. Why don’t you tell us, Cyllarus?”

Cyllarus was sitting in a chair with his head in his hands, still half-asleep, but his eyebrows instantly furrowed as he heard his name. I

think I smelled a hint of shit once he noticed the weapon.

He looked up at Amphissus innocently. "What's wrong, Misfit?"

The room was silent as everyone waited for either of them to break the tension, and I felt inclined to speak up when neither would draw.

"My butterflies found this dagger this morning, covered in python blood, a python from Oread." Cyllarus didn't even look at me; he just held Amphissus's stare as if he were silently communicating with him.

"You don't fucking believe that, do you?"

"My protection barriers are strong. Only someone invited into my home would have been able to throw a python through my window. I had my doubts last night, but I know now for certain."

Thrasher paled, horrified at the accusation. "That's not possible, Adrastea. Killer was inside with us when the python was thrown through the window. He was with us all night."

As if on cue, one of my butterflies wafted over to me.

"They gave it to him in the city, the pretty birds. A gift from the king."

Cyllarus refused to look away from Amphissus. "You know me, listen to me! I have no idea what she's talking about!"

I felt Amphissus's questioning gaze shift to me after the butterflies flew away. "Did someone slip you an enchanted bird when you were in the city, the kind that remains dormant until you awaken it with a single task, like flying a baby python through a window?" I stalked towards him. "Was it Pythian who told you that if I invited you in, that bird would also be allowed in, and it could deliver the message to Amphissus while you all relaxed inside *my* home?"

I couldn't help the edge in my voice, at the anger over what they'd done to Amphissus and my house.

Finally, Cyllarus stood up. "No, it's not true. Those butterflies are wrong!"

I don't know why I kept going, but I couldn't stop myself. "Are you working for Pythian? Is that why you chose the baby python?"

Cyllarus looked at me with his cold blue eyes for the first time that morning. "Shut the fuck up, nymph, you lying whore!" His outburst

surprised me before I could respond, but Amphissus was already there.

One moment, he was standing next to me in the empty archway, and the next, he had Cyllarus by the throat as he forced him back down in the chair. Gnome instantly ran over to pull Amphissus off, but Myko grabbed hold of him from behind before he reached him.

Amphissus's voice was hauntingly low. "I'm done with lies, so fucking done. I can forgive wanting to sell me to the highest bidder, I can forgive conspiring against me, but I won't have you lie in my face and callAdrastea a whore."

I realized I couldn't remember the last time someone had stood up for me besides Ida. It was almost enough to make me tear up despite the situation we'd found ourselves in.

"I did it to protect you." Cyllarus's eyes were bulging as Amphissus cut off his air supply. The room shifted as Amphissus let go of Cyllarus's neck and ran a shaky hand through his dishevelled curls.

Riot groaned. "You're working for Pythian?"

Cyllarus's nostrils flared as he ignored Riot's question. "King Pythian wants me to keep you alive, Misfit."

"Why does he want me alive?"

"I don't know what he wants, but he wants you to live through this. I promised him I would do anything I could to ensure that."

"Tell us then," I said. "How much did Pythian pay you in exchange for keeping Amphissus alive?"

Thrasher's fists tightened at his sides. "We haven't been hard on money for a long time now. Why would you work for Pythian?"

"I have my reasons." Guilt shone on Cyllarus's deep blue face.

"How could you do this?" Gnome sobbed, and something told me it wasn't often he let his guard down in front of everyone.

"How could I do what?" Cyllarus only seemed inclined to acknowledge Gnome. "Keep something from him? Like I'm the only one here who's done that? We all have our secrets."

"What about the attack in the city?" I pulled everyone's attention back to me. "How was that supposed to happen? Did the king give you another little magic tool to get you and Amphissus out of there?"

Was it a shifting spell a human can evoke with the volcanic ash, or was it one of those pretty little crystals Pythian fancies so much?"

A group of butterflies flew over what I assumed was Cyllarus's bag and dropped it at his feet. The front flap immediately flew open, exposing a small cloud of volcanic ash.

Looking at the bag, I realized that my butterflies had recently been so responsive in the past few months, so busy with activity. I was so lucky to have them, so blessed that the Earth had gifted me with my butterflies.

I gave Cyllarus a little *tsk, tsk*. "That would have only worked for you and Amphissus, and I hope you know that. I'm assuming you do."

My heart broke at the expressions on their faces, but at least the truth was out there.

At least they knew who they were with—a snake.

Cyllarus jumped out of his chair to strike me, but Amphissus didn't let him gain an inch on me.

He grabbed Cyllarus by the collar and threw him to the ground, nearly breaking one of my little side tables in the process. Cyllarus had about fifty pounds on him, but Amphissus was quick and seemed to know how to leverage his body weight so he could keep the upper hand. That lasted for a minute or two, and not a single Cheiron went to defend Cyllarus, not even a tearful Gnome.

Oh, how the Cheirons had fallen.

"I did it to protect you!" Cyllarus was frantic as Amphissus lifted his knee up to apply pressure to his neck and growled his words right into his face.

"How *dare* you set them up like that, your own brothers! Did you actually think I would have turned my back on them?" A tiny vein popped out of Cyllarus's forehead. "Or was it just for the paycheck? Drop me off to Pythian, like everyone drops me off. Like I'm nothing." My heart swelled with his words, and I wished I could go to him and tell him what a fool he was for thinking such things, let alone saying them out loud.

And then Cyllarus backhanded Amphissus across the face.

It caught him off guard, and they wrestled on my floor even more aggressively than before, breaking about half the items in my dining

room in the process. I tried to utilize my magic, but the little voice in my head told me I was too late. I'd missed the opportunity to recharge at my tree that morning, to allow my powers to return to normal, and wouldn't get another chance until dawn.

Myko and Thrasher decided it was enough and went over to hoist Cyllarus up by his arms, securing him in place as they lifted his bloodied body off the floor. They faced him to Amphissus, who looked like he wanted to spit blood out but stopped as if he remembered they were my floors. Like there wasn't already blood everywhere.

Amphissus couldn't hold back the emotion in his voice. "This isn't what the Cheirons were made for, Cyllarus. Greed comes with the territory, but we take care of our own first."

Cyllarus wept, and I couldn't tell if it was real or not. If it wasn't real, he was a tremendous actor. I'd give him that much.

"You're right, you're right. We lie together; we die together. You can send me back to Orilla; I'll leave at once, and you never have to see me again."

Thrasher and Myko looked at Amphissus in a silent question at the mention of Orilla. He nodded, confirming they could release him, and they all but threw him back on the floor as he tumbled pathetically. He surprised everyone a few heartbeats later when he crawled towards Amphissus's feet on all fours.

"I only did it because I believe in a true Prince of Men. The money was there, but once I learned you're Pythian's nephew, I knew you were more important than all of us. I'll leave you all now, but know you are my true prince and my brother."

Amphissus looked torn between killing Cyllarus or letting him go, the only thing that could have possibly distracted him from the news that he was related to Pythian by blood. The fact that he even considered letting him go after everything spoke volumes.

Thrasher stepped towards Amphissus. "Let him leave if he wishes."

"No," Gnome said between his tears. I saw something in him at that moment—a genuine love for his friend, one that went beyond brotherhood. I wondered if the other Cheirons had ever seen it, too.

Amphissus's voice was hoarse. "I don't care where you go. Just get out of Adrastea's house and stay away from us."

Cyllarus nodded profusely, thanking Amphissus as he stood and extended a hand as if he were asking for help to stand. Amphissus took his hand at the same time one of my butterflies appeared from behind Cyllarus's shoulders. I tried to shift as Cyllarus lifted his arm with the dagger in hand but ended up lamely running towards them once I remembered I didn't have a drop of magic left.

"Amphissus!"

All too fast, he pulled Amphissus in to stab him with the dagger he'd killed the baby python with, which I hadn't even realized he'd taken from Amphissus during their struggle.

Thankfully, Myko had a knife of his own through Cyllarus's throat before he could even lift the little weapon.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



“BOY, don’t you know you’re supposed to pass the ball with the side of your foot, not your tippy-toes?” Cyllarus shouted at me as he stumbled out of the house and into the backyard where I was playing.

I kept my head down as I tried to kick the ball like he’d said.

“I knew that.”

“Right.” I could tell he’d had a few drinks already by the way he started swaying. I’d been secretly trying drinks of my own the past week to avoid getting sick in front of the men with little success. I told myself I’d keep trying, though, because I liked how it made me feel regardless of the sickness—how it made me feel nothing.

Gnome practically fell off the porch as he came up behind Cyllarus. “That little shit could kick a ball like a sissy girl, and he’d still get all the tail! I’ve seen the way those old shop women look at him, nasty things. Why won’t they give me a spin? I’ve been here longer than he has; he’s barely a cub!”

Cyllarus sauntered over with a chuckle, motioning for me to pass the ball to him.

“You know, there’s this book I read during the war that mentioned one way to win is to focus on your opponent’s strengths. A neat way to look at it.”

He kicked the ball so hard it went flying off my face, sending hurt all over. Gnome doubled over in howling laughter from the porch as I tried to fight back my tears, suddenly wishing my mother were there with her ointments that smelled strong and soothed my sores.

“You should’ve been paying attention to your opponent’s strengths, Misfit.”



I couldn’t stop staring at Cyllarus’s dead body on Adrastea’s dining room floor.

Myko hummed to himself as he cleaned his weapon, not a song of victory or joy, but a wish for safe passage. Because there laid a Cheiron, and we'd given him our word that we would honour his dead body.

Riot was the only one who was able to maintain his composure. "I'm sorry for this, Adrastea. Please let us help you clean this mess we made."

I wanted to agree with him, but I couldn't. I was glued to the chair, unable to move or think about anything else.

"No, you all take your time to process. I'll clean most of it later with some spells, so your efforts would be wasted." Her voice was soft, almost enough to soothe me at that moment.

Prince of Men. What was the point of a Prince of Men when those men wanted to betray you and kill you?

"Can't you just use magic now?" Riot asked the question I'd been thinking to myself.

"I'm a little low on magic supply, unfortunately. The butterflies and the roots might look pretty, but they do require a bit of power. I haven't had as much time to...get my energy back as I'd like." A sharp pang of guilt hit me, nearly masking all the other emotions since I knew she was tired because of us.

Riot looked like he was about to respond with a similar sentiment of guilt before she interrupted him. "Would you like to give him a proper burial, Cheirons?"

Gnome sobbed harder from where he sat on the couch. Out of all of us, Gnome was taking Cyllarus's death the hardest outwardly.

Thrasher shook his head. "That would be too kind of you. We would never ask you to do that."

She hummed to herself, and it was one of the softest things I'd ever heard. It pulled me from my trance long enough to look up and meet her tired eyes.

"It's no trouble to me. Such rituals are cherished, and I would be honoured to assist you all with the passage of your friend. Help me bring him outside, Cheirons. I have a spot for him."

With her guidance, we all helped carry Cyllarus to the backyard. A few of us brought shovels as she led us to the spot where she'd discovered the dagger, right under the massive tree by the stream. I

wondered if it was intentional, burying him there, and knowing her, it probably was.

Thrasher hadn't stopped glancing guiltily towards her the entire time we carried him outside. "Are you sure you want to do this, Adrastea? He's done nothing to earn this kind of respect from you."

"This is my home as much as it is the Earth's home." She shrugged casually as if it was nothing. "And he poses no threat to me this way. He belongs to the Earth now. I'm just doing my part by handing him over." She cocked her head. "Let's just say he'll be in good company."

"Gods," I heard Riot mumble under his breath, his voice laced with fear and admiration at the inference of there being other bodies buried in her yard.

Gnome let out a snuffle. "Is it different then? Is the Earth gonna punish him because of what he did?"

I heard a resolve in Gnome's voice and knew that if he didn't think this was right for Cyllarus, then he'd most likely steal him away and hide forever. She walked over to Gnome and rubbed his back.

"That's between Cyllarus and the Earth, Hylonome, but the Earth is always fair, and She is so loving. I can't really describe it; it's just something you'd have to feel. And while he may have to face his choices, She would never hurt him."

Thrasher stuck his shovel in the ground. "So, how's it done?"

She backed away from Gnome to give us space. "As it's normally done. Bury him, and I'll speak to the Earth as you do so. Sing him songs and remember the good times as you lay him to rest."

Her voice was that of a goddess, and it was as if she summoned not just our bodies into action but our hearts and minds as well. We all took time to think about Cyllarus and what had happened while digging his grave. Thrasher took the role of choosing the hymns, and we'd join in every so often if we felt connected to the lyrics.

I tried to make sense of the situation as I went through the motions of helping the others dig.

Why did Cyllarus work with Pythian? Why did he try to kill me? As his swollen, bloodied face became slowly shrouded in the dirt, I remembered his expression as he ran at me with the dagger.

It felt like a suicide attempt, just like this entire damn mission. Whether or not Cyllarus knew it would be at the hands of another Cheiron or me, it seemed like he was hell-bent on dying and did the only thing he could think to provoke it. He'd barely pointed the blade at me—I remembered how loose his wrist was.

Adrastea was on her hands and knees a few feet from us, her face down to the ground while she spoke under her breath. I couldn't tell if she was singing, praying, or doing some sort of magic spell. Whatever it was, it felt private, so I kept my gaze averted despite how distracting she was in that position. Towards the end of our hymn, the ground caved in as if it were bringing him down even further. I noticed she started panting as he disappeared entirely, so I finally ran over to her, not caring about the privacy of her ritual.

"I'm fine, Wanderer. No magic necessary, just a little bit of pain." She was still trying to catch her breath when I took hold of her face and moved her hair out of the way to see if she was hurt, but then she *winked* at me.

Was this woman insane?

Remembering we had an audience, I helped her up and tried to clean her off, but it was like the pieces of Earth stuck to her refused to leave her body. Not that I could blame them.

Thrasher gave her a genuine smile. "Thank you for that, Adrastea. We can never repay you, but we are in your debts—for this reason and so many others."

She sagged into me, utterly spent.

"There's nothing to repay. You have all treated me with fairness and protected Amphissus with your lives. That's all that matters to me."

My heart sang as she spoke, at the way she said my name as if I truly mattered to her.

"So, what now, Amphissus?" Myko asked.

I thought back to the scribbled numbers on the parchment paper. "The note had a date and time on it, right? 06.01.06. I've lost track of the days, but that's coming up, isn't it?"

Riot nodded. "The first hour of the sixth day of the sixth month. Two days from now."

I held Adrastea even tighter to me than before. Because even though I just wanted to run away with my mischievous nymph and say fuck the rest of the world, I knew that wasn't an option for us.

So, I gave the Cheirons a light smile. "Go back to Orilla, Cheirons. You've done enough."

Everything quieted, even the wildlife in the background, and I felt Adrastea go stiff in my arms.

Thrasher looked as if I'd just given him the greatest insult. "What?"

Myko cracked a knuckle, his own way of communicating his annoyance. "That's not happening."

I appreciated them not wanting to go, but I had no choice.

"The mess caused by kings is not your burden. I don't know why I was dropped at your door, Thrasher, but none of you asked for this. I won't have another Cheiron die for me."

Riot shook his head furiously. "That's not the way, lad. We made promises to you, not a prince. We'll follow you to the end no matter what side you fight for or rule over."

I winced at the way he emphasized 'rule over,' especially since I'd learned how cruel the kings were. And I saw it in their eyes—that they weren't going to let me walk away without them.

But I also saw Bythos charge for the Leshy. I saw Osilian hold the dagger to Thrasher's throat. I saw Cyllarus's eyes widen when I told him to stop lying.

"I have to do this alone, men. None of you are safe in Oread. I can't protect you all from whatever's about to come."

Because it was a sure death, and if I had to force Adrastea to find some sort of magic to drag them back to Orilla, I would.

Thrasher was unnervingly still. "What about us protecting you?"

Thrasher. Pholus. The one who'd opened the door to me even though he could have shut it in my face.

I smiled at him—at my father. "You already have, you all have. Let me return the favour. Go back home and tell everyone about the Prince of Men. Tell them the kings are all liars fighting their own petty wars. Tell them about Bythos's sacrifice to the Leshy and all the unbelievable things we saw in the great city in the mountains, even if we only went to one bar." I took in a lungful of Adrastea's hair before

continuing. "Tell them about the beautiful nymph who saved the Cheirons from the wraiths with her rainbow butterflies. Tell them her name is Adrastea."

I felt her heart race against my chest, a steady harmony to my own erratic rhythm.

Myko was the first to get down on one knee, and I saw all the love he had for me as he looked right into my eyes.

Myko killed Cyllarus for me, and I would've done the same for him if he were in my position, without thinking twice.

"The people of Orilla will know the truth. I swear it."

Thrasher was the next to get down on one knee, followed by Riot and Gnome, although Gnome looked more defeated than anything else.

A small tear slipped down Thrasher's scarred face. "It's an honour to be a Cheiron with you, Amphissus."

"The honour is mine, Cheirons. Don't worry about me. The baby python survived, and it hasn't forgotten its enemy's strengths."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



THE NYMPH

WATCHING Amphissus's men go to their knees and swear their love and loyalty to him was one of the most emotional things I had ever experienced.

He held me the entire time, so tight he nearly choked me, but I didn't protest.

They all had remnants of tears in their eyes as they packed to leave, and I felt like it was a private moment. In my awkwardness, I mumbled something about going to find them a safe passage to Orilla and left before any of them had a chance to give me a meaningful goodbye.

Having no magic made matters a little more complicated until I remembered something I'd been trying to forget—one last trick up my sleeve.

I walked to the cypress tree that wasn't far from the waterfall. It was a clear day, almost to the point of being ominous, and I glared at the cloudless skies. Perfect weather always made me suspicious.

All different kinds of birds chirped away as I carefully sliced my palm with on a sharp branch and placed it on the cypress's trunk to call upon the Leshy:

The men came and walked,
and then they were lost,
but nature found them.
Come to me
If I am deemed worthy.

"Walked. Lost. Found."

The branches twisted up in a groan before releasing him in his natural form.

"You owe the Prince of Men a debt for taking his shoe; you know it is true." I had to be forward with the Leshy. It was nothing if not volatile and an outright liar sometimes.

To think I'd ever sent it to kill Amphissus made me want to ask the Leshy to devour me whole right there.

The Leshy's voice sounded like it came from the core of the Earth. "And you speak for the Prince of Men?"

I sighed, relieved I hadn't brought Amphissus with me. This would have been hard to explain without revealing too much of myself.

"You feel my blood and hear its call. You know I speak for the Prince of Men."

A confession. One I wasn't ready to admit to myself yet.

I think Leshy smiled, but it was hard to tell. Its eyes were puncture marks in the bark, empty and hollow, making it impossible to read any sort of emotion. I wasn't entirely sure if it was even capable of such things. Did greed count as an emotion?

"What debt do I owe this Prince of Men?"

"Take the Cheirons to safe passage back to Orilla. You know the ones. Use whatever magic you can. Ensure they get there safely and leave them once it's over." I had to make sure I didn't leave any loopholes.

"Is that all?"

I tasted the guilt on my tongue that came up whenever Amphissus or one of his men spoke of the Leshy.

"Tell them I sent you in the mountains. Tell them I am undeserving of them." I doubted it would do any of that, but I still had to ask anyway.

There was a brief pause, and I panicked it would ask for more apple seeds. I hadn't brought any with me since I'd decided to savour at least *one* in honour of my late father. Maybe I could offer it a lock of my hair? A Naiad once said it had accepted hers. 143 strands, to be exact.

After what felt like millennia of silence, the branches from its tree reached out to pull the Leshy back in.

"It is done, so long as the Prince of Men keeps his word and does not enter the Forgotten Forest."

With that, the Leshy disappeared, and I knew the Cheirons were safe in Orilla. At least for the time being.

The blood that was now coming out of my hand only added dangerous depths to my weariness. Nature had to assist me on the

walk back, keeping me up upright with tiny roots when I tripped over my own feet.

"You're a fool," I said aloud, speaking to myself.

It was a habit I'd fallen into since Ida disappeared. She was my only friend, a loyal companion and a remarkable chef. Funny in a cutthroat sort of way and also brutally honest. My butterflies were great company, but it just wasn't the same.

To say I was lost without her was an understatement.

A butterfly landed on my nose as my foot caught on some rocks. "*The only man you deserve is a fucking Python.*"

That was the last thing Pythian had said that day Ida went missing. Why would the butterflies bring that up?

"*The only man you deserve is a fucking Python.*"

I felt the words as they repeated them. Felt the curse consume me and close me up, constraining me in ways I'd never imagined.

While he was saying it.

"It's part of the curse? What does that mean?"

A few of them landed on my left shoulder. "*A Python.*"

Python.

"The Python...family?"

I waited for them to respond, but they never did.



When I returned home, the Cheirons were gone. Their absences seemed to mute all the room's sound and colour, and I noticed Amphissus cleaning in the dining room through my window.

"You know, when I dropped the mug with the tea in it, I still had enough magic left in me to clear the mess. But I enjoyed watching you clean it up too much to tell you. Does that make me horrible?"

He jumped from where he was picking up broken shards of glass from the floor, startled by my sudden appearance. The house was a hopeless collection of ruined upholstery, smashed wood, and human blood. A disaster I'd deal with...later.

A small smile perked at his lips. "What a mischievous little forest nymph." He studied me as he stood. "How'd you get the Cheirons to

Orilla? I thought you were out of magic?"

"The Leshy still had a debt to pay to you. It promised to leave them there. They won't be in any danger besides whatever trouble they get themselves into." I sighed, bowing my head in shame as I continued. "I asked the Leshy to tell your men I was responsible for Bythos since I assumed you hadn't. Which was very nice of you, by the way."

I could tell he wanted to argue, but his eyes tightened as he assessed me more.

"You look tired, Adrastea."

"I am. I neglected my energy call this morning. It's probably best if I get some sleep." I really didn't want to, not with him standing right there.

His features softened as he nodded in agreement. "Do you need some of that tea? I can make you a pot if you show me how."

I couldn't help but marvel at my kind, considerate, sexy prince as I shook my head.

"Just lie with me for a bit, Wanderer. That's better than any tea I could brew."

We went to my room, where he tucked right into his chest against his heart, the same way I had the night before. The steady rhythm of our breathing lulled me to sleep, and I hardly lasted five minutes once he pulled the covers on top of us.

By the time I awoke, I felt as if I hadn't slept for years. Amphissus was sitting on a chair across the room, flipping through the pages of one of my books.

"Where'd you wander off to?" I couldn't recognize my voice through the grogginess.

He closed the book, leaving it on a side table before he practically ran back over to sit beside me. I also realized I was wearing one of his shirts, a soft black one. It seemed like an odd choice since we were in *my* room, but it was also kind of attractive in a weird way. Like he was showing me I was his.

Wait—was I *his*? How could I be? I didn't even belong to myself, thanks to the curse.

"The only man you deserve is fucking Python."

"I couldn't sleep, so I asked the butterflies if I could help out. Those things are wild, by the way, like how do they talk to you? Are they whispering inside my mind? Anyway, they showed me where all the cleaning stuff was, so I got most of that taken care of. And don't give me any 'but I'll fix it later with magic' bullshit, either." He brushed my hair away to see if I looked any better and frowned at whatever he saw there. "Your skin's changed. It's less...shiny. I don't like it."

"It's because I haven't recharged in the morning sun by my tree, don't worry. I'll be shiny in no time."

"I know. The butterflies explained the energy calls when I asked why you were so tired. They're also mad at you for ignoring those, by the way." He flicked my nose as he said the last part.

His playfulness made me think about Amphissus as a little boy and his mom giving him all kinds of books to read so he could prepare his mind before the Cheirons prepared his body. I wondered if he knew how special that was, to be able to possess both qualities so effortlessly.

I was about to tell him that before he abruptly left for the kitchen, and I saw my butterflies fly out in a flurry of activity after him.

"Amphissus?" I didn't want him to be too far away, which I knew was just as pathetic as it sounded.

I heard him chuckle to himself before he returned with a tray full of tea, fruits, and other confections I knew the butterflies had helped him with.

That was when my control slipped away. I don't know why, but I started crying just a little bit. It was silent, just a slight mist in my eyes, and I wasn't even sure if he noticed.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd had this, couldn't remember if I'd ever had this. Ida would bring me breakfast if we ever had a celebration, as I would do for her. The act was simple, but it made me feel all kinds of things regardless.

After he laid everything out, he sprawled out on the bed like he was posing for a painting before casually plopping a blueberry into his mouth. It was the same way I'd eaten the berries at the inn when all I could think about was how much I'd wished they were him.

"So, this tea has a mushroom ground up in it that has a reenergizing property," Amphissus said, his lips twitching as he

noticed me staring at his mouth. "It's not going to solve the energy issue, but it's a temporary fix. I left plenty for tomorrow just in case. You probably already know all of that, but I like hearing how smart I sound when I say it. The same way you sound when you fuck someone's world up with something you know. I love how you do that, by the way, even when I've been on the receiving end of it."

I blushed and reached for the tea so I could muster up the strength to deal with a flirty Amphissus.

"You're one of the smartest men I've ever met," I muttered, in case he had any doubts there. "But I've met a lot of foolish men, so the bar isn't very high, I'm afraid."

He ate his next berry with an arched eyebrow, seducing me the same way I had tried to seduce him. I wondered if I was as good at it as he was, although I sincerely doubted it. Amphissus had such natural ease about him, where I always felt so calculated, cold.

He smirked as my butterflies flew in, carrying some sort of crystal dish.

"Would a foolish man ask your butterflies what your favourite snack is and go outside to get them for you himself?"

They dropped a small bowl of sugar-coated mulberries in my hand, and I almost laughed as I watched them fly away.

That was the reason the butterflies had been so busy in the kitchen—they didn't want Amphissus touching the sugar. It was more coveted than the wine.

The moan that came out of me once I started eating was shameful. "Yes, you are a fool. A great fool. Humans aren't allowed to have these sugars. Now you must sit there and watch me relish the most delicious treat in all of Oread and not enjoy it yourself."

He took my hand and sucked the juice off my pointer finger, making a point to stare at me the whole time. My cheeks burned.

"I think I can manage. I've had some practice."

I could only nod, thanks to the berries lodged in my throat, watching him as he swirled his tongue down the entire length of my finger. He seemed satisfied by my response, or lack thereof, and leaned in a bit more, propping himself up on one elbow.

We ate in comfortable silence for the next twenty minutes or so. I half-expected Amphissus to at least ask for a berry, but he didn't. He

just looked around my room like it was a museum. I guess in some ways, it kind of was.

I was reminded of Gnome and how he wouldn't have been able to resist devouring the entire bowl. The thought brought a smile to my face as I finally understood how easy it must have been for Amphissus to fall in love with Cheirons.

And the fact that I didn't understand what I was feeling for him didn't matter so much as the fact that I was finally starting to *feel* something.

A Python.

What if I liked Pythons? There was no such thing as a sinister snake, just those who chose to be wicked.

And Amphissus *was* a Python. It was in his blood as Dryope's son.

"You're perfect, Amphissus. I get it now. I think I can break this curse."

He stopped his casual, flirty façade and stilled mid-chew with a blueberry in his mouth. His eyes were so wide I could see the whites around them while his cheeks puffed out, stuffed with berries.

I panicked. Would I be able to tell him that he was the way to breaking the curse without it sounding like I had tricked him this entire time?

"Adrastea..." he said as if he understood but not wholly. I couldn't lose that chance to give myself over to what I truly wanted, so I gently took his hand and placed it on my heart, right atop my breast.

"I know it sounds crazy. It's hard to explain. I just—" I started chewing my nails without meaning to. Mother Artemis, I was so weak.

"Be with me, Amphissus, please. If you still want me the same way you wanted me the other day, be with me and help me show them that they are all fools. Show them that their petty curses mean nothing, just like the rest of their twisted words." My blood rang in my ears from the combination of the tea and sugars. "Be with me because I want you so much. *You*. I don't know what'll happen. It could be terrible, or it could be wonderful. Are you willing to take that chance with me?"

He shook his head, which had me frowning faster than I cared to admit.

"Adrastea...I don't understand."

I lifted his hand I'd placed on my heart up to my cheek. "I get to decide who breaks this curse. I didn't choose to receive it, but I can choose who helps me break it. Do you trust me?"

Because therein the truth lied the truth.

If it wasn't him, it had to be someone else from Pythian's family or until Ida was returned to him, and I'd never let either of those happen.

His eyes scanned mine, looking for signs of trepidation or fear. He wouldn't find any.

"I trust you, Adrastea."

I was so excited I nearly squealed like a piglet. "We can do it wherever you're comfortable. There might be more space for it outside."

"Outside?" He flinched. "If we're going to...is there no one else that lives nearby?"

I winked. "No, there's not. We can be as loud as we want."

Afraid to let another moment pass and risk him completely changing his mind, I eagerly grabbed his hand and led him outside. My butterflies quickly caught onto our intentions and went out to make sure our coast was clear without me even asking them to.

I led him out to the same point we had danced just the night before, except now we had more light. As if painted by the Gods themselves for our benefit, Amphissus and I were adorned with beautiful rays of purple and pink, which reflected nature all around us.

There was a little patch of grass by the stream, right by a rosebush. Despite the change in seasons, the roses seemed to persist and were still just as lovely as when summer began. We sat comfortably, facing each other, and merely petted whatever body part was closest, wading through the nerves. My hair was braided in a few sections, and he spent most of that time inspecting it with furrowed brows, although I'm sure he wasn't thinking about the mechanics of my plait.

We were both getting sidetracked. "Humans and nymphs receive curses all the time. One turned into a weasel whenever she was about to have sex. Imagine how fun *that* would have been."

I was stalling—it was time to tell him. I *had* to tell him.

He placed a finger on my neck, below my jaw. "Your pulse is running off like a rabbit. When your heart races, does your tree shake in the forest, too?"

"No," I rasped. "It doesn't. I just get to look like a fool while it calmly rests with the other trees."

His finger trailed up to my mouth, lining my lips, nose, and cheek. "What about when you come? Does that make your tree shake?"

"Stop distracting me, Amphissus. We need to—"

"We need to what?" He kissed the soft spot below my ear, nibbling at the lobe. "Break a curse? I'm all here for it. I've just been waiting like a good boy for you to tell me what to do."

What *did* I need him to do? "One, I need you to stop distracting me." He sighed into my neck and pulled away with a groan that went straight to my sex. "And two, I need to...explain something about the curse."

He merely raised an eyebrow, not looking the slightest bit concerned. "Okay, let's hear it."

Why was it suddenly so hard to be honest with him? I had been upfront until that point, or at least more upfront than I was with others.

Those yellow-blue eyes were so patient and understanding as he took my hand and waited for me to elaborate.

Damn him. I was entirely unworthy of him.

"I choose you," I mumbled. "The curse needs me to be with someone...like you."

He went still. "Someone like *me*?"

I panicked and brought his hand to my chest, willing him to feel my heartbeat.

"Yes, someone like you. But that doesn't matter. Even if it wasn't you, I'd still choose you."

He blinked. "What does that mean?"

"It means...someone in your family."

A few more agonizing seconds passed, but they felt like hours. I held my breath and prayed the entire time.

His jaw tightened. "Oh."

I almost cried. "Amphissus, it's not what you think."

"What am I supposed to think?" He sprung from the ground, running a hand through his hair as he stared me down with wide, confused eyes.

I crossed my arms over my chest, cringing inwardly. If I could just say those three words out loud, tell him how I really felt, we wouldn't have to deal with this nonsense.

"You know, you really had me going there for a second." He started backing up towards the house, almost laughing along the way. "And I was even starting to... never mind. If you wanted my dick that badly, you could have just asked for it. I would've fucked you at the inn, and we would have saved everyone a lot of time."

My eyes misted over, and I tried swallowing it back. It didn't work. "Amphissus, please."

"Spare me the bullshit, Adrastea. It's like I said to Cyllarus—I'm fucking done with lies. You knew this the whole time and didn't tell me, didn't you? That's what this was all about?"

"No, I promise, I only figured it out *yesterday!* Please believe me." I even sounded like Cyllarus as I pleaded with Amphissus.

He rolled his eyes and spun on his heels, shaking his head as he walked back to the house with clenched fists at his sides.

"You're a fucking snake, just like the rest of them."

Once the door was closed and he was back inside, I went to my knees and let myself cry.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



AMPHISSUS

IT WAS ALWAYS TOO good to be true.

Whatever that *thing* was about her, it was always too *damn* good to be true. She claimed she didn't poison my drink to kill me at the inn, but maybe she'd spiked it with some kind of love spell instead.

I camped out—or *hid*, depending on how you looked at it—in the room the Cheirons had slept in for the night, staring at my bags as I worked up the courage to leave.

My head was spinning with the bullshit. The meeting at the castle, Cyllarus's death, King Typhon, and her *lies*.

The door clicked downstairs as she returned, and I noticed she'd been gone for a while. I felt a sharp pang of guilt in my middle when I realized she was upset, a gnawing urge to make sure she was okay.

I pushed those feelings aside. To hell with her and her curse, she could find some other sorry asshole in my family willing to put up with that sort of manipulation.

All the fake kisses, words, and gentle touches. Had any of it been sincere?

The mattress hit the back of my head hard enough to bruise as I laid back, causing me to wince. I didn't understand how any of the Cheirons could have possibly slept here, but then I remembered the sedating tea she'd made.

Was that just another kind gesture to lower my defences?

I expected her to come up and try to sort things out, or maybe even leave a note before we both went to bed, but she never did.

The urge to go get some wine, or whatever the hell she had in this house, was more potent than it had been in years, so much so that it made my toes curl. I was positive I was too stressed to sleep, but the anxiety of it all started weighing heavy on my eyelids as I finally gave in to sleep.

Or at least, I think it was the stress. Whatever it was, it had me dreaming within minutes as I kept telling myself that none of it was real, that I had just imagined it all.

My dream was swift but vivid.

I saw the woman on the cliff again, but she was different from my first dream. Her skin was the same shade as Adrastea's, with the same silver-green—

"Ida."

She held out the same dagger she'd stabbed herself with during that first dream—a dagger I now recognized as the one Cyllarus used to kill the baby python. She placed it in my hands as she had before, and because I was dreaming, I was entirely powerless to stop her.

Her voice was barely a whisper. "The storm must come first."

I blinked and stood in front of a fireplace in a small, dark room while my foreign body braced for an attack.

"Does the lion kill the python?" A voice asked from behind me.

Instead of answering, I grabbed a steel poker that had been left in the fire and whirled as three men stormed me.

My strong form, much larger than my natural body, easily prodded out one man's eyeballs out before I threw the poker at the man behind him, which allowed me to free up my hands and punch the last one. The skin on my hand was black, a few shades darker than Myko's. It was quick and easy, and once it was over, a man in the doorway took out his weapon, followed by those who stood behind him. He was panicked.

Good, I thought to myself—except it wasn't myself. He should be afraid.

"Where is she?" I asked, my voice lower than it had ever been before.

Bright teeth shone from the figure in the dark, empty doorway I was now facing. I think it was a smile.

"She's no concern of yours anymore. I wonder—will the lion get lucky against the python?" The same voice who asked the question from before answered.

And that was it; with those words, I picked up that poker and ran at the man almost as fast as he ran at me.

I woke before he reached me and tried to blink the sleep away before noticing almost a hundred butterflies in the small room, all flying around in a panic. Bile rose in my throat, threatening to escape as I jumped from the mattress.

"We've been trying to wake you. They have her. Only moments ago—they're now bringing her to the castle of Oread, the Python King's men," one of them whispered. "He broke the laws of the land."

I didn't have time to think; I just scrambled for my clothes while the butterflies left the room, giving me some privacy and space to see. My clothes were ragged, dirty, and completely busted up. Before I could put them on, a few butterflies flew back with brand new fighting gear.

It looked like the standard fighting attire I'd seen in Orilla, except it was a lot...nicer. Instead of the heavy, gaudy silver metal armour, it was made of wood in the breastplate, helmet, bracers and greaves, and shoulder pads.

"It is made by the forest to protect from the forest."

The butterflies filled me in while they helped me dress: Adrastea had gone out for her energy source at the tree this morning, and somehow, she'd been stolen away and taken to the castle despite being within her protective barrier. The butterflies didn't tell me how she'd been taken precisely, but it was all I needed to know; Adrastea was missing, and it was because of me being here.

Despite my raging heart and the churning of my blood, I stilled my mind the same way I remembered Myko would when he'd remember things from the war he didn't want to think about.

I had no plan, no Cheirons, and no Adrastea with tricks up her sleeves. I felt her loss then, the way her sure, cunning, calming presence had already become a part of me, and how I desperately needed her in moments like this.

"Go to the castle. We will go with you, Prince of Men."

My plan may have just been a bunch of rainbow butterflies, my sword, and armour made of enchanted forest materials, but I had a feeling it could be enough. It *had* to be enough.

I deserved to meet my fate with Pythian in the castle. Adrastea deserved no such thing.

"Go through the Forgotten Forest. Be quick."

My heartbeat was erratic as my palms began to sweat. The Forgotten Forest was heavily protected with so many wonders to it, I knew I wouldn't just be facing one at a time. It also didn't help that my feet were still swollen as hell.

"Your sword, Prince of Men."

I ran through the forest in almost total darkness, not wasting any time as I heard my mother's voice in my head.

"Land goblins, carnivorous beasts, but they seem slow. They grow out of the ground in an instant but move like they're made of molasses."

They were the first on me, their arms made of thick branches that tried to pull me to the ground. I managed to avoid the first few but tripped while trying to outrun another, crowded by so many sticks I didn't have time to think; my only option was to slash my sword out aimlessly until I was back on my feet and running.

My *feet*, which were burning like nothing I'd ever felt before.

One of the butterflies noticed I'd slowed down as I exited the forest.

"Don't stop, Prince of Men. The storm is coming."

CHAPTER NINETEEN



AMPHISSUS

THE OUTSIDE of the castle was ominously decrepit, with overgrown moss and other hardy evergreens lining the tall, dark, stone walls, making it impossible to see anything besides the broken portcullis at the entrance. I'd never seen anything like it; even the castle in Orilla couldn't compare.

I kept my sword in front of me while a few butterflies remained by my side, guiding me through the pitch-black corridors as they led straight to a small wooden door tucked away in a dark hallway.

They flew away after helping me unlock the entrance that opened to the top of a green-lit staircase as if they knew they couldn't help me beyond that point. I braced myself with a shaky breath, not allowing second thoughts or nerves before beginning my cautionary descent down the dark, narrow staircase.

The faint green light was bright enough to expose the enormous, rotting wooden staircase with a broken railing. I tried to be quick, but the structural integrity of the wood, or lack thereof, had me sweating so profusely it dripped down my nose as I carefully watched my steps.

The stairs led to a tomb within the castle, or maybe it was some sort of graveyard. The first thing I noticed was the smell—like decaying meat and mould.

Although I couldn't see any water, a green light bounced off the dark, wet, stone walls as if reflecting off the volatile waves.

Pythian rose from the shadowed throne at the opposite end of the pit to greet me, wearing a silken, onyx himation with gold detailing that trailed behind him like a tail. He was crowned in a golden wreath of laurel leaves, and although I wasn't a 'crown expert,' I knew it was an unusual choice for an heir to the Python throne.

"It's great to finally meet you, nephew!"

"Whatever this is about, let Adrastea go."

"You look so much like Dryope. It's unbelievable."

"Let her go, Pythian." I intentionally didn't refer to him as 'king.' His smile faltered, but his posture remained open. Friendly.

"I see her spirit in you, and I know how happy she would have been to see the two of us finally meeting. It's a shame it's under these circumstances."

I shook my head, willing the images of her out of my mind. "I don't give a fuck if I'm related to you by blood. Please let her go." I'd beg if he wanted me to.

Pythian rubbed a hand over his exposed chest, offended. "Don't give a fuck? Nephew, I swore to protect you in front of Dryope in this castle. Have I not upheld my end of that bargain and kept you safe throughout the years? Are you not standing here, alive, because of my love for her and you?"

I shook my head to the echo of my mother's strained cough in the cold streets.

"She asked me to stay away so she could protect you. If I went to help, there would have been a target on both your backs. She begged me not to. Seek reason, Pythamphus. Being Typhon's illegitimate son would have left you both in grave danger."

"My name is *Amphissus*! And I'm the one you have a problem with, so just let Adrastea go and face me like a man."

I saw his guards shift out of the corner of my eyes, ready to strike.

Pythian paused his advance. "I do it all to protect you."

I just had to keep him talking—all I had to do was buy us time so we could get out of this. "That's a lie, and you know it."

"Our entire family mourned your mother, and we continue to mourn her death, Amphissus. If you ever went to the palace in Lampades, you would see a portrait of her mounted in the main hall. A beautiful painting from when she was a little girl."

I genuinely wanted to see that painting more than anything. Pythian seemed encouraged by my hesitation and resumed his slow stalk towards me. "You should come to see where your mother grew up. Now that you are older and stronger, the people will rise with you. With *us*." He looked over his shoulder to Adrastea's lifeless form, but I didn't follow his gaze. "You can bring the nymph, too. We'll keep her safe."

"No."

"The war never ended, Amphissus. You see that now, don't you? Nature has cursed most of the land, leaving humans to scramble after my great victory over the Drakon. The land is scared and knows it will lose against me. We can balance that. We can lay the unrest to rest."

"The only unrest is what you cause, Pythian."

The shift in his expression told me I'd hit my mark, but he was determined enough to reach a bony and oddly soft hand out to take mine. I wondered how such delicate hands could have slain a Drakon.

"The land does not recognize the needs of the people, so I must! I speak for them, and so can you. Come with me to the kingdom of Pythons and help me build a world where nature and man coexist in *respect*. Do it for Dryope, so your portrait may hang beside hers."

I saw those portraits of us together—me at twenty-five and her as a young girl with dark curly hair, just like mine. As I took in her rosy cheeks and sad blue eyes, I realized the painting was looking right at me.

And she was shaking her head.

"I'm not going anywhere with you, and neither is Adrastea."

His nostrils flared. "Are you sure about that?"

I nodded and braced for whatever was to come, hoping and praying those goddamned butterflies were around to help us.

He let go of my hand as he took a casual step backward. "You just don't see it yet. You've only had a taste of the Godly wonders from Oread, but I can assure you there's so much more out there. Adrastea will love it in the kingdom. We'll treat her like a queen." I was about to respond before he lifted a hand towards a group of guards hidden in the far corner, signalling them to bring Adrastea over.

My entire body vibrated as they roughly pulled her up from the ground. Although I was still trying not to look, I could see her head slumped forward and noticed her limp legs dragging on the floor as they hauled her over to us. My entire body jerked towards her, but the rational part of my brain kept me in place.

Pythian stood beside Adrastea. "Give me your ring, Amphissus. Give me your ring and come with me to Lampades, and I'll let her

live. You don't have to bring her if you don't think that's best. I'd prefer it, actually." He gently stroked her hair as he smiled at me, waiting for a response.

Her skin was dull and ashen, hardly any remaining glimmer or shine, but her chest moved in shallow inhaleds and exhaleds. Alive.

"Please," I said. "This is about me. Just kill me. I'll kill myself if you can't. Adrastea's innocent in this."

Pythian turned his head toward the wraiths, projecting his voice so everyone could hear. "These creatures of the land...they think their laws are so clever, always mocking men for not knowing their ways. We see through their laws, Typhon and I. They can't outsmart the python."

Pythian's men hissed as he said the last part, like a choir of venomous snakes. His proclamation afforded me some time to run at him and aim my sword inches from his face before a group of his guards were on me. Everyone froze as Pythian and I stared at each other, trying to catch our breaths.

"Nobody's dying except you if you kill her," I said. "I'll go with you if you let her go, but I'm not giving you my mother's ring."

"That's not negotiable, I'm afraid. You need to take it off for me and set it on the ground."

Why was everyone so obsessed with this damn ring? Were they even able to touch it? But Adrastea had *stolen* it.

I blinked between her and Pythian, who was blocking most of her body. Was she hurt? Did they beat her to force her out of her backyard? There's no way she would have gone quietly.

A guard came up from behind and held me by the torso, so close that I could feel the chill of his breath. "I could kick him around until it falls off, my liege."

"Just let yourself imagine it: us, entering the Lampade parade as the city celebrates our arrival."

"Enough! I said I'd join you, but not if you don't let her go."

"There's no other alternative, Amphissus" Pythian clicked his tongue and looked down at the ring. "This can only go one way if you won't hand over the ring."

Another guard took my sword, and I braced myself for a beating that never came.

"My patience is endless, but I cannot tolerate disrespect. Please consider what I'm saying since I'll only ask once more. Give me. Your. Ring."

My left hand, the one with the ring on it, started to shake as I lamely held it out in front of me, reaching for help that wasn't coming.

Do it, I told myself. Do it to save her even though you couldn't save your mother.

The castle vibrated with exploding thunder.

My mind went back to that portrait he'd mentioned, the one where mother looked so sad. Had her childhood been an unhappy one? In my memory, she was always smiling, dancing, and giggling. Or was that just what she wanted me to see?

The portrait did the same thing as it had before—it looked right at me and shook its head, and I knew what it meant.

I felt like I was going to literally split in half with the conflict. Was I supposed to follow the unconfirmed will of my dead mother and gamble the life of this nymph I barely knew?

This nymph I loved.

There was another round of thunder, this one louder than before.

I bowed my head, consumed by my shame.

"No," I said, my voice thin, scratchy. There had to be something here that could save us—some way to get through fifty guards and a mad king. I jerked forward, but the guard's strong arms held me in place.

And to think of the days I'd spent not wearing that ring throughout the years. All the nights at the bar, random trips in the summer, and even the beginning of this trip. Why hadn't someone from Pythian's royal guard showed up then? Put me out of my misery before it had to come to this?

He was six feet from me—six feet, and I couldn't move a damn muscle.

I was so pathetic. I deserved to die. This whole plan was doomed from the start, and I couldn't even do the one thing that would save her.

Pythian growled and extended his hand out to the side as if he were holding something. As he stalked towards me, a green orb

arose from his palm, no larger than a cantaloupe, illuminating the space.

"Do it," Pythian said slowly.

She opened her eyes, except they didn't look like her eyes—they were black and beady, and her dark veins lined her ashen skin like a maze, glowing as brightly as Pythian's orb.

"Adrastea." My entire body convulsed as I vomited.

I closed my eyes and saw Ida as she'd appeared in the nightmare before this real-life nightmare, and it all started to dawn on me. Those dreams, how Ida always had me stab her...I tried to retreat, but the guard held me in place—right in front of Adrastea and Pythian, who was holding her with his free hand.

"I remember this nymph once said she'd rather kill herself than return her sister to me. Let's put that to the test, shall we?"

I struggled against the guard as he chuckled in my ear. All of them chuckled, amused at my desperation.

"Finally," a wraith whispered from behind me, but not the one holding me.

"This is it, Amphissus, one last chance to end this entirely and make things right. Don't worry about the ring; it'll be kept safe where no one will find it. I swear it on your mother's life."

I had a nagging feeling that 'on your mother's life' meant nothing to him.

I tried to hand the ring over, but I couldn't. I felt like a puppet being controlled by a marionette—like I was possessed and had no way out of it.

My insides twisted as I shook my head, giving him my final answer.

Pythian threw his head back with a sigh. "Well, you certainly inherited our stubbornness. And for the one whom you claim to love? I would have handed over everything for Ida. Everything"

A chill slithered down my spine as the guard released Adrastea. She was able to stand on her own, but those black eyes were spellbound, distant.

"Adrastea!" I knew there was no way she'd respond, but I still had to try.

I continued to struggle against the guard through the silence—the prolonged silence that felt like an eternity. She kept walking towards me, dragging her feet along the way, and I lost control of both knees.

"Please don't do this, Pythian. I'll be a Prince of Men, I'll be a Python, I'll be whatever you want me to be. Please, please..."

The green light from his magical orb undulated like a heartbeat. "Kings don't beg, Pythamphus. That's your first lesson. I'll show you how an heir makes a deal."

Adrastea was only a few feet in front of me. "I love you."

I was so angry at myself for not saying it earlier and hoped she could hear my love, forgiveness, and sadness over the curse she was bound to. The guard released me, and I ran over to help her, hoping to maybe shake her out of it, but I knew it was useless. I knew I'd failed her.

I heard her voice call me 'Wanderer.'

I saw her offering to help us bury Cyllarus.

I saw those butterflies leave her lips after she blew a kiss.

"I love you. I'm so sorry for everything." She was close enough that just the slightest incline of her arm would have stabbed me in the gut. I prayed she would.

She held my hand in one of hers, her ordinarily soft skin now cold and rough as she lifted the dagger towards me.

"Be with me and help me show them that they are all fools, and their petty curses mean nothing. Just like the rest of their twisted words."

I tried to be clever like her and think of a way out of this—tried to find some sort of loophole that could save us like she would have.

Before I could plead with Pythian again, she closed my fingers over the handle and plunged the dagger into her heart, using both our hands.

CHAPTER TWENTY



AMPHISSUS

MY CRIES DROWNED out the sound of the thunder and lightning outside.

“I hate to repeat myself, but this *was* avoidable. It’s a shame. The Lampades lands are magnificent. I was willing to give you a chance, Pythamphus.”

I looked down at her face, and despite her bruises, she was still as lovely as ever. Still had those thick lashes and full lips that were always smiling. I kissed those lips, which no longer had her essence, and made sure her eyes were closed before I gently placed her down.

“That is very touching. You and I are more alike than you think.”

Tears ran down my face faster than the leaks of rain through the cracks in the tomb, and I really took my time to look at him.

He was the same height as me with curly, light brown hair; although, he was much lankier, especially in his oversized himation. Other than that, I saw no resemblance, saw nothing of importance, and wiped away a tear that was taking too long to make its way down before picking my sword back up. Because if I was going down, I would *not* go down without a fight. I had the Cheirons to thank for that mentality.

And I stood in front of her body because I’d be damned if any of them disrespected her corpse if I could help it.

“You and I are nothing alike.”

“I know the love you feel. It is the good part about me, the only reason I do everything I do. This nymph took her from me, and now you know what that loss feels like.”

I saw tears in his eyes, a strange look at the love he thought he had for Ida.

“*The storm has to come first.*”

The guards used their magic, ready to detain me, but just like in the city, those beautiful, glorious rainbow butterflies stormed into the tomb faster than I could process.

I couldn't understand why they hadn't arrived earlier to save Adrastea, but it was hard to think about anything once they went to work on the guards.

It was the perfect sense of déjà vu—watching the wraiths backtrack in confusion as the butterflies swarmed in on them, except it was nothing compared to the look of shock on Pythian's face, which I wished I could have memorialized in a statue.

He waved at the butterflies, trying to get their attention. "This castle is protected! There are no magical forces but my own welcome here!"

The butterflies devoured the guards, sending their masks flying. A few of them tried to run, shift, fight, do whatever they could, but the butterflies were all over them.

And they were *pissed*.

Through the cries of terror, a woman suddenly appeared in the middle of the tomb. At least I think it was a 'she'—whatever it was, it was exceptionally tall, with ivy for hair that reached its feet and long wooden horns poised on the top of its head.

It looked like...royalty, the kind Pythian was pretending to be.

The creature held Pythian firmly in place through some type of magic. "Hello, King Pythian." The female's voice filled the tomb despite how quiet she was.

Pythian writhed, desperate to regain control as he began to tremble.

"Do you know who I am? I assume you do." Her tone was even, almost bored. "My Earth-given name is Heria, but you will address me as your queen, so long as you can address me. I've been informed that you've broken the laws of the land by detaining my Guardian. You resurrected the mortal the Earth already claimed—you commanded him to rise from his grave so he would detain her."

His eyes bulged, causing my stomach to do a flip as I pictured Cyllarus crawling from his grave.

"Would you like to know how I learned this, King Pythian?" It was almost amusing, watching her taunt him while he couldn't respond or move, almost like his brain couldn't keep up with what was happening. "A little butterfly told me."

As if in answer to a summons, the butterflies flew over to where the woman stood. They orbited around her a few times before closing in on themselves. As quickly as they multiplied, the butterflies disappeared, inverted into themselves...

Into the shape of a woman.

And when the butterflies left that outline, I could only see her back, but I knew who it was.

A woman with silver-green skin, rainbow hair...

"Ida." Pythian's lips formed the words, but he was silent.

"How do you answer your crimes against the land, King Pythian?" Heria asked.

His gaze was fixed on Ida, his body unnaturally still. Despite his frozen form, I had a feeling the queen had let him out of whatever sort of magical restraints were on him from before.

"My Ida."

I couldn't see Ida's face, but I could feel her staring Pythian down. Felt that murderous rage she had unleashed on almost all the wraiths in Oread.

Heria's tone was firm. "You are addressing me, King Pythian. How do you answer for your crimes against the land?"

The authority in Heria's voice finally pulled his attention to her. "Innocent."

"Is that so? So, you claim you did not use dark magic to break into Adrastea's barriers and resurrect the dead Cheiron? That is what you are saying?"

"Innocent."

I saw Heria's horns move as she shook her head, taking a moment to consider before she slowly walked towards Pythian.

"When you set fires in Oread and send men out to plant your flags in the mountains, you do so in ways that allow the land to balance itself. When you cut down the trees and harness Her powers that do not belong to you, it is still acceptable under the laws since the trees will grow back. But it is a clear violation when you go into the Earth and take the souls She has claimed. As simple as they come. I know you are not aware of such things, but if you cared to learn our ways, you would know it is so."

“Innocent! Your laws mean *nothing!* I defeated the Drakon and claimed Oread, and the magic is my own, from *my* family.”

“If this is your final answer, you will soon learn that the laws are everything. But She is fair, and so am I. So, I will only ask this once more, Pythian: How do you plead?”

“Innocent!”

Heria nodded once, just the slightest shift of those glorious horns, and that was that.

“I hope you can appreciate how fair She’s been with you, Pythian, out of Her love for you. I hope you remember that when She takes you on your next journey. Your sentencing is complete.”

Pythian stumbled back towards the throne. “Ida! Come with me to Lampades!”

Heria turned to Ida, allowing me to see more of her face. It was hard not to let out an audible gasp and the sight of her—her skin was mostly made of bark, and her eyes glowed so brilliantly they illuminated the entire tomb, replacing the green light.

“Do you wish to be lifted from the curse you asked Her to bestow upon you, Ida Melisseus, Guardian of the Forgotten Waterfall?”

“Yes, please. If I am deemed worthy, please lift me from the curse which She so kindly gifted me.”

Queen Heria gently stroked Ida’s face, lovingly, looking at her in the way my mother used to look at me. The way kings and queens *should* look at those they rule over.

“Ida, please!” Pythian cried out. “I can keep you safe. Please listen to me. I did this for you. Everything is for you! I love you!”

“Prince of Men,” Heria addressed me with her moonlight eyes. “Will you bring me that dagger on the ground? Do not fear. She is watching over her body. No one can hurt her anymore.”

No one can hurt her anymore.

I didn’t know if I could get up and leave her, but I felt the admiration I knew Adrastea would have had for this queen, with their matched fierceness and love for their land.

The dagger was still warm with her blood as I picked it up off the floor and walked it over to Heria. It was hard to take in her stare, with all the glow and power in it, but I didn’t want to look anywhere else. It felt like it would have been disrespectful to do so.

Heria strode towards me, away from Ida, who was still facing a panting, powerless Pythian. “Adrastea chose well, Prince of Men. I look forward to our next meeting. Remember the lands from which the pythons and lions are made.”

Heria swiftly took the dagger from my shaking hand and walked back over to place it in Ida’s hands. “You will always be deemed worthy in my eyes, Ida Melisseus. Take what is yours.”

Those were the last words Queen Heria spoke before she disappeared from the middle of the tomb, leaving Ida and me alone with Pythian.

He started moving towards her, emboldened by Heria’s departure. I quickly went to grab my sword near Adrastea and tried to stay as close to Ida’s back as I could, but I also had a feeling I’d be taking a moment away from her if I tried to step in and save her. And something told me she’d been waiting a very, very long time for this moment.

“Ida, you can stay here in the forest. You can stay wherever you want. If we bring man and nature together, we can fix it all. Have it all, my love, my mate.”

“I am not your *anything*. There are no such mates in this land; it’s just your human mind tricking you, unable to handle the magic you keep using.”

Pythian frantically shook his head as he held his arms out to her. “You are. I knew it when I first saw you. I’ve always known. I love you.”

“His name was Pelion, and he was ten times the man you are, ever will be, ever could be.”

“Ida, please come with me, please.”

“Her name is Adrastea.” She walked towards him, lifting the dagger. “And nature hid her from you these past few years because She knew she could outsmart you.”

A crash of thunder was Pythian’s sign to get on his knees, tears streaming down his face.

“You have been sentenced, Pythian. You have gone against the law of the land, and you have been found guilty.”

“Please, Ida.”

“Beg, Pythian.”

“Please.”

“Again.”

“Please.”

She held the dagger higher. “Do you know what this dagger was used for?”

“Please.”

“It killed the python.”

And with that, Ida sliced his throat while his mouth was agape, still trying to say ‘please.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



AMPHISSUS

IDA and I brought Adrastea's body to the waterfall.

It was the most tragic contradiction: the balmy river adorned with a rainbow connected to the roaring edge of the waterfall, and her corpse half-submerged in the water as Ida gently cleaned her wounds.

Ida understood that I wanted to be a part of it, so she had me hold Adrastea while she worked.

Adrastea was battered from the attack, but I could still see her in my head as I turned away and called her a snake.

As I held her, Ida started humming, and it worked to soothe me—reminded me of Adrastea's voice.

"What happened to her tree?"

Her humming stopped, but she continued cleaning her sister with an enchanted cloth that closed her wounds as she washed them. "Help me lift her into the water, Amphissus."

I tightened my grip on Adrastea and was instantly reminded of being twelve as a priest forced me to leave my mother before I was ready.

Ida grabbed her legs, pulling them towards the edge of the water, and the only thing that kept Adrastea from going under was my hold on her.

"I'll always be your Wanderer." I kissed her hair one last time before the stream gently whisked her away.

The water guided her body as she lay facing up, floating away until I couldn't see her shape anymore. I felt Ida's hand go to mine as she sang again.

In what felt like no time, she reached the point where the rainbow connected to the water before disappearing into the mist.

"She showed her a beautiful passage, Amphissus. Adrastea is safe. Let's go home. It's your home now, too."

Before I was ready to leave,—as if I would have been prepared to do so—Ida shifted us to the house. We arrived in the dining room,

which was still a mess from the death of Cyllarus, but the broken plates and blood weren't the first thing I noticed.

Because all remaining Cheirons were sitting at the table.

"What—?" I didn't have the energy, the words.

Myko smiled, although his smile didn't even come close to meeting his eyes. "You broke your deal with the Leshy and went into the Forgotten Forest, so we ended up back in here."

"That Leshy's a right creepy fuck! And I thought those butterflies were scary." Gnome shivered.

I went to my knees and sobbed for the first time in a long time.

PART II

THE LAUREL TREE

But when she backward would have fled, she found
Her stiff'ning feet were rooted in the ground:
In vain to free her fasten'd feet she strove,
And as she struggles, only moves above;
She feels th' encroaching bark around her grow
By quick degrees, and cover all below:
Surpris'd at this, her trembling hand she heaves
To rend her hair, the shooting leaves are seen
To rise, and shade her with a sudden green.
The child Amphissus, to her bosom prest,
Perceiv'd a colder and a harder breast,
And found the springs, that ne'er till then deny'd
Their milky moisture, on a sudden dry'd.

**THE FABLE OF DRYOPE, OVID'S METAMORPHOSES BOOK 9, [v.
324-393]**

POEM BY ALEXANDER POPE



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



...as the earth moved round, she bare one neither like the gods nor mortal men, fell, cruel Typhaon, to be a plague to men.

HOMERIC HYMN 3 TO PYTHIAN APOLLO 300 FF

THE BASTARD SURVIVED the castle of Oread.

It didn't come as a shock. The ambush was Pythian's idea, so clearly, it was bound to fail.

While I ruminated over the mental images of Pythian dying, my newest advisor, Nessus, listed all the reasons we were fucked.

I, on the other hand, was busy celebrating.

"Pythian was our only way in; we need to act now," Nessus said from his end of the table—the very end. "If any of these other territories start sniffing up Oread, we lose that magic faster than we were getting it. We also lost the Lampade Marines he promised us. All the infantry we've obtained over the last decade has just vanished."

Nessus was brash. He'd been my father's privy counsellor for years, back when kings killed first and thought later.

I was consistent; I always got around to the killing part. I was just better at it than my father was.

It was also my father's idea to pay Nessus's impotent son to spy on the bastard, another spectacular waste of Orilla's coin.

All the lords and "essential" council members had gathered at the castle of Orilla. Typically I wouldn't say I liked it when my home was

so overcrowded, but it was tolerable on this one occasion. The death of Pythian was something to be celebrated.

I nodded. "Yes, Nessus, we do need to act now."

My wine had been sitting for too long—a rather expensive blend I'd opened for the event. I held my glass up and gave it a swirl, indicating I needed a refill. My cupbearer was there in an instant, a failed squire to some knight who'd died in the war. He shook like a leaf, and it took everything not to glare as he ran off.

I hated weakness in my court, especially when we had visitors.

"I say forget Oread," Lord Aristaios of the Satyr Tribe said. "Take the kingdom of Naiads and then go after Lampades. Naiads have weak numbers, and we can supplement the loss of Marines with their forces."

It wasn't a terrible suggestion, but they were all forgetting the point.

Losing Pythian was a blow to our resources; there was no denying that. He was our only connection to the Python family in Lampades and a valuable one at that. After his father, King Pytharon, threatened my head and war once his daughter showed up pregnant, Pythian was the one who settled the score. He'd always been desperate to win my approval ever since I usurped my father—was constantly jealous over how I'd managed to do so while keeping the trust of the Orillan people.

Pythian wasn't capable of inspiring allegiance, especially not after he'd sent armies of men out to search for a goddamn nymph.

"Pythian left us with invaluable magic," I said as I stared at the clock, impatient for my wine. "Some self-proclaimed witches and wizards say they can take the natural magic of Oread and the dark magic of Lampades to make something...more impressive."

It was the only reason I'd kept Pythian around all these years. He used to brag about the magic that he claimed could make him immortal, but not undead.

And that was the point they were all forgetting—immortality beyond just the history books.

It also wasn't lost on me that the bastard was immortal in some respect. I remembered Pythian explaining it to me years ago as we covered up another failed attempt at killing a pregnant Dryope.

"The ring stays on if he wears it. You won't be able to take it off, and you'll die if you try. He has to do it himself or lose it, but it keeps him alive if either of us tries to kill him, even indirectly."

Ten minutes had passed since the cupbearer left to get my wine. He stumbled in not long after, nearly dropping the glass in the process.

With a simple flick of my wrist, the boy was dead within seconds. It wasn't messy, just a gasp before he fell at the door.

I motioned towards the knights guarding the door. "Add him to the group."

All of the lords and advisors were silent, shocked. Not even the loud-mouthed Nessus said anything.

While the timing for Pythian's death wasn't ideal, it was also perfect. He'd bargained the rare magic so that I'd agree to his plan to convince the bastard to join him in Lampades.

And like I'd said, it was Pythian's idea, so I knew it wouldn't work. I already missed him—he was just so *easy*.

I now had magic none of these lords could even dream of possessing, of being able to master. As I studied their faces, I saw that they were finally starting to understand.

That after all this time, they finally knew who the real Python King was.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



*No love could compare
to Pheobus's affections for Daphne the fair.
A lover's mountain, a hunter's heart,
was shot by cupid from the 'ery start.*

I SANG my mother's favourite song to her lifeless form.

*The face was all that now remain'd of thee,
no more a woman, nor yet quite a tree.*

The birds indicated that it was some time in the early morning. Nobody was out on the streets; they hadn't been for days. The cold winter kept people in their homes, safe from its volatility.

Except for us—we were trapped, even though we were outside.

One morning, as if she were under a spell, mother came into my room and led me to an abandoned church not far from downtown. It had been fall at the time, just at the point where the leaves displayed their beautiful shades before succumbing to the cold. At first, I thought we were moving to the church despite not having brought anything, but instead, she sat us on the curb and held me in her lap.

And we sat and sat...

*A springing tree for Daphne they find
and print warm kisses on the panting rind.*

I knew I could leave, and I'd tried many times, even while she was still alive. In the beginning, I'd occasionally get up and run around while she stayed in place.

"Come on!" I'd yell as I pulled on her hand. "Let's go back home! I want those sugar cookies we were making!"

Even though people were around during my tantrums, they never seemed to notice us—never seemed to care if I was screaming or

starving. It was like we weren't even there.

"Keep your ring on, Amphissus," she'd said before going quiet.

She was always quiet when I'd pry, almost to the point of looking like she wanted to cry, so I stopped asking after a couple of weeks.

Now, she was dead, and I imagined those sugar cookies had set our home on fire since she'd left them in the oven.

I pointed to the sky. "Mom, look! The sun's setting. You can see some stars ahead; that means the winter's almost over. We'll be home soon."

Despite not knowing if any of it was true, it still felt nice to believe in that future—in the prospect that this would all be over once spring arrived.

I heard footsteps crunch in the snow as they approached us, the first I'd heard in two months.

For some reason, I didn't call out for help. They were daunting footsteps. They didn't sound like they were coming to help us at all.

"Get up," a male voice demanded.

The man growled when I didn't move and yanked me up by the collar. His dramatic frock told me he must have been a priest, the prestigious kind reserved for the royal church.

I screamed as loud as I could with what little voice I had left. I kicked, punched, bit, did whatever I was capable of given my weaknesses.

It made no difference. Even if I was a fully-fed, healthy boy, there was no way I could have escaped that fate.

The priest dragged me from my mother without even letting me say goodbye. I tried to tell her I'd come back for her, that I was sorry for leaving her.

It was useless, and the last thing I remembered before the priest shut me up with a smack over the head was how alone she looked in the snow.



The Cheirons joined me at Adrastea's table, just as they had only two nights before, and listened thoughtfully as they let me air my

grievances.

And at that point, I had a lot of grievances—too many to count. Still, Thrasher, Myko, Riot, and Gnome didn't interrupt or get impatient as I absolutely broke apart in front of them.

I also told them about Ida, who was in the living room just a few feet from us, and how she'd asked the Earth to turn her into the butterflies so she could hide from Pythian and keep Adrastea safe. Gnome was shocked at the realization.

"What the hell! Those were you? You are one scary bird; all you nymphs are nightmares!"

Riot winked at Ida. "And fantasies."

Thrasher beamed at her, a slight blush creeping over his bearded, scarred face as he took in her rainbow eyes. "You saved me from having my throat sliced. I owe you my life, little butterfly."

Thrasher cringed as he called Ida a little butterfly before bowing his head slightly. "I used to call my niece little butterfly before I lost that side of my family to the war. Sorry if I offended you, miss. It slipped out."

Ida's voice was soft. "No offence taken at all; that is very sweet, and I do like the sound of it. But I think I will call you Pholus instead of Thrasher, is that okay?"

Gnome shook his head at Thrasher, matching his awkwardness with a wicked smirk. "It's only because you're the prettiest nymph in all of Oread. He's not used to beauties like you, not like I am. He's just an old fart who's afraid of you."

"You should be afraid of her," I heard myself say without meaning to speak. "Ida killed Pythian. Brought him to his knees and had him begging before she sliced his throat."

Myko gasped, and I'd almost forgotten he was there. "Hells..."

Ida blushed at the attention, which gave her cheeks the softest blend of all her colours. "I would have done no such thing without my queen. She was the one who gave me the power." She closed her eyes as a few tears escaped. "My queen is so wonderful, and she is so fair... I had to show her proof of Cyllarus's resurrection before she could enter the castle by the laws of the land, but I wasn't fast enough..." Her voice was barely a whisper. "I tried to get there on

time before Pythian triggered her new curse. I felt the storm, and I multiplied more than I ever had...but it wasn't enough."

"You weren't fast enough because you protected me," I reminded her. "You protected me the entire way there. The *entire* way. Adr—" I had to calm myself before saying her name. "Adrastea would be proud of you. She wouldn't want you to feel like you failed her, not when you did so much for her. For all of us."

Gnome interrupted our moment, and there was a slight edge to his tone. "What happened to Cyllarus? Is he alive? Is he some sort of dead man walking now?"

"He remains contained within the Forgotten Forest, in the place where the souls who are disrupted in the Earth go. He will never leave, but he is safe there, Hylonome. He did not choose to be resurrected, so the forest will protect him."

Gnome let out a sigh of relief. "What happens to those who choose to be resurrected?"

Ida's eyes simmered. "You don't want to know."

Thrasher put a heavy hand on my shoulder, drawing the attention back to me. "We told the people of Orilla about Python King's deceit, Amphisus. We wasted no time. I'm glad we didn't since we wound up here, but we told everyone we could and sent out a few letters to neighbouring towns. The word should have reached by now if the messengers survived the trip."

"Everyone also knows Pythian is dead," Myko said as he stroked his graying beard.

I shook my head, confused.

"What? Do you think there will be an uprising? But he's dead; people should be happy. Typhon doesn't attack his own people like Pythian does."

Riot cleared his throat. "Not directly, he doesn't. People have suspected that King Typhon opened the door to Pythian's influence to gain his magic for quite some time now. They know he could have stopped the war and didn't. He didn't even care who won so long as he had the magic in the end."

The Cheirons' postures straightened at the mention of the war.

Myko gave me a small smile before reaching over the dining room table to put his tattooed hands on mine. "They will rise with the

Prince of Men who took down the Python King. Even if you say it was Ida who slain him, they will know you were there, and that will push them forward. The Prince of Men stands for all men and women, not those other assholes."

Myko nodded. "It will give them the courage to fight back."

I kept my head down. "I don't want to fight anymore. I can't."

"No one expects you to protect anything, lad." Thrasher's fists were tense on the table, ready to fight my battles for me.

Riot rounded the table and knelt in front of me. "Let us protect you like we promised we would. The people will fight for you."

Myko stood from his chair. "The people of Orilla know about Adrastea, and her death is not in vain. They will know she died at the hands of Pythian, and that will show them the kind of snakes they are."

"Even if you don't want to be a prince, you will stay a Cheiron." Thrasher squeezed my hand tighter. "The Cheirons fight for the bastards, not the pythons or lions or whatever they want to call themselves."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



AMPHISSUS

THRASHER AND MYKO carried me like a babe to Adrastea's bedroom and even helped me undress out of the enchanted, bloody armour Ida had given me.

Covered with Adrastea's blood.

Being manhandled should have been more humiliating, and in any other circumstance, it would have been. I found myself too exhausted to care.

Once I was in bed after Thrasher had tucked me in, I realized it still smelled like her. It didn't have the same warmth, but the softness in the mattress from her sleeping in it all those years still lingered.

I dreamt we lay together on a patch of grass in front of the waterfall, shaded by the purple blossoms of a lotus tree. We were close to the river, and the thundering crash below was all I could hear besides her steady breathing as she nuzzled into my neck.

"This is how it should have been," she said between moans.

Despite all my heavy confusion, I found myself giving over to her kisses as my eyes drifted shut. I felt her little hand massage me through my pants when a lion roared in the distance, startling me. It was a long, angry roar, and my eyes shot open in time to see butterflies storming out of the castle, flying towards the roar.

Before I had a chance to ask her about the lion, the loud noise of a branch being ripped off startled me. Thick, red blood dripped down from where the branch had disconnected, and only a few moments later, that blood rained down from the skies in a torrential downpour.

I tried to scream, but all I could hear was Adrastea whispering in my ear.

"Get ready for the storm, Wanderer."

* * *

The empty space in the bed mocked me as I reached out for her.

Once my hands were met with thin air, I felt an overwhelming weight in the pit of my stomach. It was one I hadn't felt in a while, but at that moment, I only wanted one thing...

I just wanted a fucking *drink*.

Ida had mentioned the house was 'mine,' which I hoped implied I had access to the bar sealed by magic. I supposed there was only one way to find out.

There were a pair of slippers someone had left out for me, although I already knew it was Ida—ones that made me feel like I was walking through the softest moss on top of fresh soil. It took a few moments to adjust, but after a few steps, I started to enjoy the feeling as the cold dirt soothed the painful sores that remained on the soles of my feet.

Given the darkness, I assumed it had to have been the earliest hours in the day. I was careful not to wake anyone as I snuck over to the bar and stuck a nervous hand out, very slowly, to see if it would be met with magical resistance.

It wasn't.

Relieved, I wasted no time in pouring myself a large glass of that enchanted red wine to the rim. After nearly inhaling the drink in a few sips, I stumbled back a few steps, feeling as if I'd just done back-to-back shots of the best, most expensive whiskey in Orilla.

I was dizzy, lightheaded, and *distracted*. Distraction was good.

"You'll make yourself sick." Ida's voice startled me.

I jolted backward, knocking everything off the bar in the process. I tried to fix it, but once I realized I was only making everything worse, I turned back around to face Ida with an innocent smile. "Don't worry, I promise you my stomach is well-trained. I could out-drink Thrasher by the time I was eighteen." I smiled proudly at the memory of finishing my eleventh ale as he fell off his barstool.

Ida rolled her eyes. "It's enchanted wine. I'm sure your tolerance is terrific for such human drinks. However, this is forest wine, and your body isn't made to handle too much of it at once. Just wait before you have more." I held the drink away from her, childishly, as she went to take it from my hand. I wasn't typically such a petty drunk, but that wine was something else...

"No, it's fine, trust me. You haven't seen 'the Misfit' out on the town. I'd win shit tons of money surprising fat old brutes with my tolerance."

Ida wasn't even a little impressed. "Thrasher, Misfit, Riot... What does Thrasher refer to?"

I chuckled dryly, ignoring her warning as I went to pour another glass. "He likes to finish his opponents with a knee to their neck, which causes them to thrash around. He likes the nickname. It was his request we start calling him Thrasher instead of Pholus."

Ida sighed with a big frown. I tried not to compare, tried to not even let myself *remotely* go there, but it was hard not to when she was standing right in front of me.

Ida was so much more reserved than Adrastea, softer-spoken and demure in nature. I thought of Adrastea when I met her at the inn, when she showed up as a human, and how she ate up all my fumbling attempts to flirt.

I tossed the glass back and let that tremendous warm feeling wash over me.

"Amphissus."

I beamed as those happy clouds drifted in my head. "See? Toughest liver in all of Orilla."

I vomited right after I said 'Orilla'—all over my lovely new slippers.

I wouldn't have put it past Ida to laugh. "Lie down on the couch and take off your slippers. There's a glass of water on the table, Amphissus. Drink it."

I think the magic in the house might have helped me to the couch because I had no idea how I ended up lying on it with my long limbs sprawled out at awkward angles.

"I dreamed about her." My slurred words only made me sound more miserable than I already was. "Is that all it is now? Just dreaming about her?"

Ida returned a few moments later with a brown mug full of steaming tea for me and set it down on the table in front of us. She picked both my feet up, gently placing them in her lap since my long legs didn't leave much space for us both on the couch, and took a moment to consider before she began massaging my most swollen foot. It was an intimate moment, but not a romantic one.

"The dreams are pleasant. They're not the same, and I know they don't compare, but keep dreaming of her as long as you can."

I groaned as that happy cloud in my head darkened over. "What does that mean? Is she still alive? Is it her tree or something? Stop fucking with me, Ida."

She looked disappointed at my volatility. "You can all call yourselves 'Thrasher' and 'Misfit' and drink until you win all the bets in the Orilla, but you'll still feel the same in the morning. It doesn't change who you are."

I sat up on my elbows despite the spinning room, feeling weirdly defensive, before we were interrupted by Gnome, who was suddenly at the bottom of the stairs, surrounded by a swarm of butterflies.

Ida shot up from the couch. "Hylonome? What's wrong?"

The wine threatened to come back up when he didn't respond at first.

"Gnome?" I said, standing up a little too fast for my current state.

Gnome's drowsy voice was barely audible. "The lion was lucky. He is the King of his Pride, and he always protects his lioness."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



IDA

"THE LION WAS LUCKY. He is the King of his Pride, and he always protects his lioness."

My rainbow glowed from within so brightly it filled the entire house. It might have filled all of Oread, for all I knew.

"He is the King of his Pride, and he always protects his lioness."

The last thing I saw before I shifted to the temple by my waterfall was Amphissus's drunken face gawking at the rainbow light radiating from my body.

I ended up underneath a cypress tree that was only a few feet from the water. Although it was dark, the rainbow lit the space for me as I carefully searched for any traces of someone who could have invaded Gnome's dreams with the spring by the temple.

"Hello?"

I tried to channel all the bravery I knew Adrastea would have had at that moment. Having been a butterfly for so long, it was a strange adjustment to suddenly be on my own two feet—a lot harder than I would have anticipated.

"Is it odd that I'm turned on by you holding that dagger?"

I whirled on my heels to meet the voice as the dagger I'd brought with me immediately fell from my hands.

"Pelion."

He smiled and started walking towards me.

"And knowing you used it to kill Pythian kind of only adds to it, I'm not going to lie."

His golden-brown eyes glowed as he took me in, contrasting beautifully with his dark skin that was so luminescent at all times of the day. He was uniquely handsome for a mortal man—I had never seen anyone with a smile as big and perfect as his before.

He flashed me one of those smiles, displaying all his pearly-white teeth. "If I ask you to use it on me later, would you? Or would that make you blush rainbows until you melted into a waterfall?"

"How is this possible? How did you survive?"

He shrugged despite my whirlwind of emotion. "The same way I've always survived—fighting."

I tried to think back to that day I learned Pelion was dead. I'd flown out to Orilla to see if it was true, and although I hadn't seen his dead body, I did see his men and women—his Pride, as he called them—mourn his loss.

He was so much closer now, and his familiar scent was distracting, like cinnamon and sugar...

The overwhelming, raw emotion caused my rainbow to glow wildly, and it almost looked like we were in the light of day despite it being the dead of the night.

I could see all of him. His wide jaw, his perfect, full lips, and kinked hair that sat so firmly on the top of his head.

Pelion stroked my face, his calloused fingertips gently outlining my lips. "The lion got lucky, remember? It's the riddle. I survived. Pythian just played his magic like he always did to make everyone think I was dead, make them think he defeated me when it was *my* sword on *his* neck."

I sucked in a sharp breath at the image of Pelion's massive, commanding form standing over Pythian about to strike him down before Pythian used his dark magic to cloak Pelion in a death spell. One that would have kept him alive but made him invisible.

And now that Pythian was dead, the spell was lifted, and there he was. He looked just as perfect as I remembered. Not even a single inch of him was out of place.

"I'm so sorry he did that to you. Because of me." All because of me.

He shook his head. "Don't apologize. It's not your fault. None of it was your fault."

I tried to believe him, and I did, but it was hard not to feel guilty, impossible not to mourn all the time he'd lost with his friends and family because of Pythian's sick obsession over me.

"I hate him. I hate him. I don't like that word, but I *hate* him. I hate all of them. He's taken everything." I sobbed into his chest.

He held me upright and let me cry as he patiently stroked my hair. The birds seemed to cry with me, acknowledging the loss we'd

both suffered. The sweet chirps didn't take the pain away, but they did lighten my heart.

"He hasn't taken everything," Pelion whispered. "We're both still here. That's all that matters. I never stopped fighting, even when I couldn't fight, and I'm not about to stop." A small tear escaped the corner of his eye, and it was the first time I'd seen him cry in all my years of knowing him. "I wanted it to be over so many times. It wasn't just the invisibility—I didn't eat, sleep, or do *anything* because I was never hungry or tired. It was hell. I almost ended it before nature stopped me. It took me to you when you were the butterflies, and although it didn't say it outright, I knew what it meant. I knew they were you."

My Pelion was the lion.

And my lion was smiling down at me, showing me all his teeth, ready to attack. "We're free from him now; you won. I'm disappointed, Ida. I thought you'd be prouder of your victory."

I pressed into him. "I'll never disappoint you again."

"You never could."

I gave myself over to our kiss, to his victory and his sacrifice. His body was so much bigger than mine; every part of him was so hard.

He was always my wall. My strength. He was always there, just like I was, while we waited for the right time, waited for the storm to pass.

Waited for the rainbow.

He picked me up in his arms, and I wrapped my legs around him as he consumed me. I thought he'd maybe lay us down, but he backed us into the tree while I was still wrapped around him, already trying to undress him despite the awkward angle. He chuckled at my eagerness, and the way his voice vibrated in my mouth sent the sweetest, sharpest pleasure through me.

He also couldn't contain his eagerness, equally burdened by his own spell, and removed his pants before working on mine.

"I'd do it again, Ida. I'd do it all again. Anything for this."

"So would I."

There was still so much to say and decide, but I couldn't bring myself to care at that moment. After thinking I'd never get to

experience this with him again, I was desperate to redeem all those sad thoughts and lonely nights as fast as possible.

His one hand moved to pull my leggings down over my bottom, giving us just enough space. He was so large, so shapely in ways I wasn't accustomed to, and I momentarily reconsidered the position of him holding me up against the tree.

That fear disappeared as he kissed down my ear and jaw, tickling me with a slow exhale of his warm breath as he barely pushed in. I touched his cheek and looked deep into his eyes when I felt his hesitation, just to make sure he was really there one last time before he took me completely.

Pelion's breath went ragged, and he started moving in me slowly, giving us both time to adjust. It was a bit uncomfortable at first with the position leaving me so open, but those golden-brown eyes of his held me through it. And after only a few controlled pumps, he was so close, almost entirely there, but it felt like it was taking so *long*.

I bared my teeth at him as I held his face in my hands, the same way he always did to me. "I'm your lioness, and no one will get in our way ever again. I won't let them."

Pelion groaned, unable to keep himself under control as he started thrusting me into the tree, hard. "Who does that rainbow glow for, Ida?"

Him. It always glowed for him. That's how I knew.

"You." I worked myself on him more, desperate to keep up with his strong movements. He suddenly withdrew before lowering us both to the ground and flipped me onto my stomach, allowing me a full view of my rainbow right by my waterfall.

He trailed feather-light kisses down my spine, leaving a solid bite on my backside before giving it a light slap. I was wild at that point with the dull pain left from his teeth and the sound of my waterfall.

Pelion knew—he knew I liked it like this, that I wanted to see my waterfall and rainbow while he took me.

"I missed this view," he said, and I knew he wasn't talking about the waterfall as he massaged my backside. I braced my hands into the Earth and grabbed onto Her soils, letting Her feel all that pleasure I was experiencing at that moment.

I moaned, but it sounded more like a whine. "Pelion, please."

I tried to back into him, into anything. He punished me by lightly playing with me, barely a touch.

And then, Pelion let me have it. He braced a hand on each hip and gave me that fullness of him that was so exquisite. His thrusts were brutal, and every time he hit that spot, the waterfall would flow faster, harder.

I couldn't get enough of him at the angle, so I arched up and pushed back into him, crying out his name as I looked right into my rainbow and let him fill me. He grabbed my hair and pulled me up until I was flush against his chest before reaching a large hand down between us to massage my clit.

"I love you, Ida. I'd do it all again."

Between him working me and the quick thrusts, I came with a cry that matched the intensity of my waterfall. He bit down on my neck and held me by the throat as he came, his arm braced firmly over my chest.

I didn't know how long we were like that—panting together as he held an arm out to keep his body weight off me.

"I love you," I said as he twitched inside me despite what we'd just done.

"The lion was lucky, Ida. The luckiest."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



AMPHISSUS

IDA's brilliant rainbow light woke all the Cheirons up.

I could tell she was at her waterfall and even debated going after her to make sure she was okay before I quickly realized that I had no way of helping anyone after all the enchanted wine.

That *damned* forest wine.

"These nymphs are crazy," Gnome mumbled. "How does anyone get any sleep around here with all this magic? I was just dreaming about those bu—"

Before he could finish, Ida's rainbow lit up the Forgotten Forest. We rushed outside, and I heard Myko groan as he rubbed his eyes, adjusting to the colourful glow.

"Should we go after her?" he asked.

"No, we'd have to go around the forest." Especially since I had no plans to go through the Forgotten Forest ever again. Completely at a loss for any reasonable solutions, we all just stood around, uselessly debating with ourselves until Ida emerged with a man at her side.

"Butterfly!" Thrasher ran at the stranger.

"Stand down, Cheirons." Ida smiled, pleased with our concern. "This is my Pelion, and he lives here as well."

I noticed she was holding hands with the ridiculously tall man, Pelion, who gave us an easy smile as he took us in—all poised and ready to jump him. "Hello, Cheirons, it's a pleasure to meet you. Ida didn't downplay your loyalty. I'm impressed."

Ida continued, smiling up at him. "Pelion was born in Orilla, like you, Cheirons, and his parents were born there as well. But his people, the Nemean people, were taken from their homelands during one of the first great wars led by men. The lion is a symbol of that land, and his group of men and women are his Pride."

My eyes widened. "You're the lion." It didn't come across as the great realization I'd hoped for. Pelion nodded.

"Yes, Prince of Men, that's the riddle."

Those dreams—Ida stabbing herself, being in front of the fireplace in that unfamiliar body...

Pelion's body.

"I almost had him," Pelion continued, his golden-brown eyes simmering with the memory. "But he panicked and placed that spell on me at the last minute."

I saw Ida squeeze his hand, and my breath caught at their casual affection towards each other.

It was as if Pelion could sense my trepidation. "Do you not enjoy being the Prince of Men? Is it not an honour to represent the people of Orilla and those beyond?"

Even though I wasn't feeling as drunk as before, I was still too drunk to have *that* conversation. "I'm not the prince of anything. I'm just a bastard who can't do shit for anyone."

Pelion shook his head. "You ran into a castle of fifty men and a king with nothing but your sword and some butterflies. I wouldn't call that 'not doing shit for anyone.'"

I kept shaking my head. "It was because of me she was in that castle. You seem noble enough; why don't you be a Prince of Men? Orillans would stand behind someone like you."

And it was after I'd called her a *snake*. Gods, was there a word stronger than hate? I hated myself for everything to the point where it was my default emotion, the one I woke up and fell asleep to.

Ida's voice was firmer than I'd ever heard. "You do not get to decide to be a Prince of Men, and Pelion didn't decide to be the lion. That is what is chosen. It might seem cruel, but you would have never met Adrastea if you weren't the Prince of Men. Is that what you want?"

I was about to tell Ida that I just wanted Adrastea back before we were all startled by the sound of an Orillan warhorn in the distance.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



AMPHISSUS

MASSIVE, terrifying balls of fire soared through the sky as they rained down on Oread.

It was Typhon. He was coming to claim Oread now that Pythian was dead.

Ida left us to make sure she wasn't needed to defend her waterfall but returned only seconds later, rushing us inside the house to their safety pit.

Gnome was curled up in a corner humming to himself with both hands covering his ears as he battled the memories brought on by the noises. Because as much as you could be a badass Cheiron, you were still just as powerless as anyone once the bombs arrived.

"I don't get it," I said, shaking my head as I listened, angered by every loud blow that made the pit rattle. "Why doesn't the land fight back? These bombs are just going to rain down until he gets retaliation; why can't the land protect itself?"

Ida was tucked into Pelion, who had his eyes closed as he meditated through the destruction, clearly planning something to the melody of their betrayal.

"The land will protect itself when it is truly threatened. Everything that's dying out there will grow back, even though it is devastating." Ida sighed. "The land will rise when its Queen declares war. But this is a surprise attack, and nature didn't warn. I just hope it doesn't reach the city in the Forgotten Mountain. I love the city. I'd hate for it to be destroyed before I can go back and see it one last time."

Another bomb went off that shook the pit more than the others, and Gnome hummed to himself a little louder.

"This is disgraceful." Myko cracked his knuckles. "Typhon has sealed his fate. There's no chance Orilla will stand with him after this."

Riot interrupted him. "Some will, you know it's true. You know most of these bombs are from those who want the magic as much as he does. I've seen his arsenals. There's no way he could have pulled off this scale of an attack on his own."

A thought occurred to me as he spoke. "What's about Adrastea's tree, Ida? What about your tree?"

She winced. "You remember the book I gave you? The trees are protected by the Forgotten Forest; that is why it is so heavily guarded."

"But you're still here...and you guys are connected...by the roots? Even if your trees are different?"

"And we will always be connected by the roots," Ida seethed through clenched teeth. "But Adrastea has fallen. I'm sorry, Amphissus. I don't know how else to explain it."

Pelion's baritone voice filled the pit before I could process what she'd said. "Listen to those bombs, Amphissus. They're dropping right by Adrastea's house, in the forest from which she was made, where Ida was made."

As Pelion placed another kiss on her forehead, I felt the effects he intended with his words. Felt my blood start to burn as if he had poured gasoline all over it.

"You say you're no Prince of Men, but how can you not protect those who are blameless in this? If you can't find it in yourself to rise and fight for them, will you at least fight for Adrastea? Because I can assure you, the man leading this attack is every bit as responsible for her death as Pythian is."

Ida lifted her head off Pelion's chest. "If Adrastea were here with us, we would all be trembling in fear of *her* in this pit, not those bombs outside. She would be cursing Typhon's name right now and coming up with beautiful, brilliant ways to murder him."

I could see and hear her doing exactly that. It made me sit up slightly. Pelion's lips barely twitched up in a smile. "They'll expect retaliation like you said, or else they'll keep coming. I can have my Pride here, and you can rally your Cheirons. What do you say?"

I was trying to come up with the right words when a big crash of thunder caused me to jump for the first time that night despite all the firebombs. What was truly horrifying was how distinguishable the sound was over the destruction; its roar was more profound, wilder, and angrier.

Ida gasped in disbelief.

"The storm is back."

* * *

It didn't take long for Pelion to find his Pride.

The next day, when it seemed like the attack on Oread had ceased for the day, Pelion and Ida shifted to Orilla to bring his Pride back to the house. His eager expression as he was about to be reunited with his men and women solidified the change taking place in me as well.

I still felt the chaotic energy I'd had since Adrastea died, but the fire that lit up Pelion's eyes, as bright as those bombs, lit up the barren depths of my heart in response.

Pelion set the stage, not giving Typhon a chance to throw another baby python through an undeserving window and told him to meet us at the castle of Oread the following day.

We gave ourselves a day to rest, to settle, and in what felt like no time at all, we awoke to the sound of light rain and thunder the morning of.

The Cheirons seemed roused by Pelion's energy as well, especially after Ida had gifted them all with the armour made from the forest, the same kind she had given me.

The wooden helmets were simple in design, much like the ones I'd seen the Cheirons keep from the war with the distinctive almond-shaped eyeholes, prominent nose guard, and large cheekpieces.

"Thank you, little butterfly." Thrasher smiled at Ida as she helped him secure his breastplate. "You didn't have to do this. What is it about these forests that makes all its creatures so sweet?"

"You'd have to meet Her." Ida finished adjusting his straps with a wink.

The wink reminded me of Adrastea in the best way, and I tried to tell myself I didn't care that the armour reminded me of her blood. That I didn't care if only days later, I was going right back into that castle.

But at the same time, I knew going back so soon would set off some sort of involuntary reaction. I could tell Myko sensed it as well as he pulled me aside for some privacy.

"Keep this ring on you." He took my left hand and stroked his thumb over the iron. "Try to remember it's there. Remember, it's your mother's way of protecting you, and her blood is in that ring. As it is

in you." I simply nodded at his kind gesture, utterly at a loss for words.

A boisterous laugh came from outside, startling Myko and me. It was louder and more cheerful than anything I'd heard for days, almost to the point of making me nervous as we all went outside to meet the Pride. It wasn't that I was shy; I was embarrassed. People only saw me as a Prince of Men. It didn't matter if I was Amphissus, Misfit, or a piece of shit—they all saw what they wanted to see, and being under their expectant eyes made me incredibly anxious, more so than I'd ever been before.

"Cheirons," Pelion announced as we met them outside. "This is my family, the Pride. They're from Orilla, like yourselves, so we'll have much to catch up on once this hellish meeting is over."

There were twelve of them, almost too much to take in at once. They were all as large and intimidating as Pelion, both the men and women. The tallest out of them, a man, even seemed to be dressed in female fighting gear. If I looked closely enough, I could have sworn he was wearing makeup.

It was the first time I'd ever seen anything like that, and I had to remind myself not to look despite the gnawing curiosity. Gnome, thankfully, didn't make a rude comment when he saw the group. I wasn't sure why I expected him to; it just seemed like something he would do.

"You didn't mention the Prince of Men was such a treat, Pelion," a woman practically purred.

She was unlike any human woman I'd seen before with her curly, wild onyx hair that sat atop her head like a crown. She was curvy in the way I liked—the way that would have made me drool if we were out at a bar. There was nothing weak about her. Even the soft parts of her exposed, dark skin seemed to radiate strength. I felt the stir in my pants, the momentary awakening as I looked at those delicate parts for a heartbeat too long. It barely lasted half a heartbeat before I heard Adrastea's laugh in my head.

"Chariclo, no lusting after the prince," Pelion said with a teasing glint in his eyes.

Before I had time to blush, Ida stepped outside to join us, and Pelion growled as he noticed her armour.

"I really wish you would wear that in other places besides impending combat because you are magnificent."

At that moment, I fully understood Myko's urge to never be around public displays of affection if he didn't have to be. Thrasher beamed at Ida as he noticed the wooden hilt of a sword peeking out of the scabbard attached to her belt.

"Look at you, little butterfly! Are you trained with swords?"

"Yes, Pholus. But I'm afraid it's only for necessary circumstances."

Ida suddenly turned and noticed a wide-reaching, dense, dark cloud forming over the castle, beckoning us. I gripped the ring in my pocket and repeated Myko's words in my head, along with the breathing practices he'd reminded me of.

Her blood is in that ring, as it is in you.

We all stood in a circle, ready for Ida to shift us to the castle before Pelion left us with one final warning.

"Stay with the Pride."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



AMPHISSUS

THE BROKEN PORTCULLIS was raised when we arrived, indicating that Typhon and whoever he'd brought with him were already there. The butterflies guided us to the door that led to the dodgy staircase, which only allowed a few people to ascend at a time, and we were greeted by the disorienting green light.

Typhon stood in front of the throne, flanked by twenty or so guards and a pack of dormant hounds. From what I could see in the distance, he wore a silver diadem decorated as a snake that crept out from the back of his head and furled around his straight, black hair. He held a long, impressive silver sceptre with ebony ribbons tied to the top—ribbons that were a traditional symbol of victory in Orilla.

“Back from the dead?” he asked as we approached.

I tried to take in his features. From what I could see through the darkness, he was built more like me than Pythian, and our face shape was unmistakably the same—the sharp, indented chin and high cheekbones, the colour of our hair. It was easy to see the similarities even in the darkness.

Pelion scoffed as he stepped towards Typhon. “The fact that you ever believed anything that came out of Pythian’s mouth shows what a great fool you are.”

“That’s a shame.” I could almost hear Typhon roll his eyes. “I was quite thrilled to hear about that attack. How many men did you lose again?”

That earned a terrifying snarl from Pelion, and the sentiment was echoed throughout the entire Pride.

Ida placed a calming hand on Pelion’s arm. “What are your intentions with these attacks on Oread? Do you wish to steal the magic just like your predictable predecessor?” she pried.

“I beg your pardon?” Typhon cocked his head to the side. “Are you some kind of royalty in these lands? I don’t believe I answer to you, nymph.”

Another snarl ripped out of Pelion. “You do not speak to her.”

A few members of the Pride had their weapons out as Pelion spoke, so I followed suit. Taking out my weapon shifted Typhon's attention to me, and I remained completely still while he wordlessly assessed me from head to toe, judging me like a critic in an art gallery. After a few seconds, he shrugged, unimpressed with what he saw, before turning his attention back to Pelion.

"You called this meeting, so what do you make of it? A peace offering? I don't answer to pack leaders, either. If there's a ruler in these lands, I will gladly discuss my terms with them. Until then, I believe my time is being wasted."

"Yet you accepted this meeting, Typhon." Pelion's confidence was unwavering as he advanced on Typhon and his men. "So clearly, you have something to say. Why don't you get it off your chest?"

"You have no clue why I accepted this meeting, Nemean." The hounds barked as he spoke, filling the vast, hallow space with their hostile growls.

"Alright, well, I'll tell you why I'm here." Pelion strode towards him at a leisurely pace, his hand carefully placed over the hilt of his sword that was still secured in its scabbard. "Half of Orilla is ready to revolt against you. If you don't cease fire, I will order those individuals to assist me in usurping your kingdom."

Typhon chuckled. "Is that so?"

"You're not my king, Typhon. I'm the King of my Pride, and when I go into battle, I follow the Prince of Men."

"That's a shame, Pelion." Typhon sounded amused despite his serious expression. "You and your family have lived in Orilla for a long time. I know it goes without saying that it's a death sentence if you and your pack ever step foot near the border again."

"It's unnecessary bloodshed," Pelion said. "Typhon. Stand down and avoid any sort of battle before it's too late."

Typhon shrugged. "I don't think I will. Like I said, I don't answer to lowborn pack leaders. I do like hiring them for my staff, though. You should come work for me in the castle, Pelion. I think servitude would suit you."

Pelion fingered the y-shaped harness strapped across his chest. "Then it's settled. If you don't lay down your arms, the Prince of Men and I will meet you and your army in the hills of Kerberos."

Thrasher stepped forward. “You’ll do well to remember those of us who fought for you in the war, Typhon.”

Typhon’s eyebrows shot up as he turned to Thrasher. “Cheirons! I see you successfully completed my little mission. Is that not Ida Lei Oread right there? The nymph with the rainbow cunt Pythian drooled over?”

Pelion started shaking, but I could hear reason shouting at him in his mind. “Do *not* address Ida, Typhon. I’ll say that one last time.”

Typhon took a half-step to the side, almost like a choreographed dance. “You know, you all keep talking about this Prince of Men, but I don’t think I’ve heard a damned thing from his mouth this entire time. Or maybe I’m just not inspiring enough for him. Maybe he needs more motivation.” He let out a whistle that reminded me of a bird call and was answered by a small group dragging a man out from the shadows.

Except it wasn’t one of his men; it was Cyllarus, the dead Cheiron.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



AMPHISSUS

GNOME'S VOICE was a strangled cry. "No!"

Cyllarus still had the same clothes he'd worn the day he died with the same amount of blood, except it was now covered in dirt and other foul-looking and smelling substances. Ida fervently whispered to the butterflies as soon as she saw him, and they wasted no time before flying out, leaving us without any special defences. Riot regurgitated everywhere, holding up his wooden shield so no one would see him, but just listening to him was enough to almost make me hurdle over and vomit as well.

Typhon chuckled at our reactions. "You know, this man here is a real Cheiron, a true loyalist. He was supposed to be the one who raised your Prince of Men, not that retarded lieutenant. Another one of Dryope's tricks, no doubt."

The way he sneered my mother's name finally broke my silence. "Pholus is a better man than you are."

Typhon's head snapped towards me, displaying all his white teeth in the green light as he snarled. "Is he now? How nice of him to sell you out."

"We were all broken Cheirons, no thanks to your wars." Myko stepped in front of me, sensing something was about to happen.

"You're still broken Cheirons." Typhon chuckled again. "Weren't there seven of you besides this one here?"

All at once, everyone on each side was poised and ready for an attack. Typhon seemed impervious to the commotion as he leisurely paced around Cyllarus and the guards holding him.

Pelion's voice was slightly louder than before. "So, you're saying that you refuse to stand down?"

Typhon held his hands out in front of him as if to say, '*What do you think?*'

"Fine, then you have decided the fate of Orilla." Pelion sucked in a sharp breath. "I hope one day the Orillan people will learn of your lack of honour."

I couldn't stop looking at Cyllarus and his lifeless eyes, which were staring at nothing and no one in particular. Typhon laughed at Pelion, loud enough that the sound echoed throughout the vast tomb, instantly making me feel cold all over despite the warmth of the enchanted armour.

"I'll enjoy watching you try to usurp me, Nemean. And watching you 'follow' the bastard into battle. I hope this Prince of Men puts up a good fight." Typhon's smile was now directed at me. "I remember his mom didn't."

I ran at Typhon like a madman with my sword pointed at his face and shield held tight to my side, ready to swing at anyone who came close.

Typhon whispered in Cyllarus's ear, but I could hear him as if he were whispering to me. "Kill the rest of the Cheirons. Avenge your death." He crept back into the shadows of the throne as he watched the madness ensue.

Cyllarus went straight to Gnome since he was the closest. I halted my charge, torn when I saw the look on Gnome's face and the way he lowered his shield as if he wasn't willing to defend himself against Cyllarus. I stopped dead in my tracks, my feet abruptly skidding to a halt, and ran back to help him.

"Hylonome!" I cried out, along with the other Cheirons.

"Love ya till the end."

That was all I heard from Hylonome before Cyllarus took him to the ground and tore him apart.

The emotion in Hylonome's voice surprised me, the heaviness there. Still, I didn't have time to think about it as Thrasher and Riot both started on Cyllarus, and they were able to contain him for only a few moments before Cyllarus got a hold of Riot. Others got in the way of my view after that, but I heard Thrasher's roar as he tried to save Riot. I knew what that meant.

Myko came up from behind and wrapped his arm around my chest protectively before I had the chance to run over and help Thrasher. His voice was strong and somehow rang through the pandemonium, which Typhon was still enjoying from the throne.

"End this!"

Typhon was almost entirely cloaked in the shadows, but I saw the outline of his smile, which hadn't left his face since the fighting started. "Why would I do that? This is why I accepted the meeting."

Thrasher screamed, and I looked over to see that he was losing a struggle with a guard on the ground, too distracted to notice Cyllarus approaching Myko and me from behind. I barely had a moment to turn around and twist Myko away from him before Cyllarus shoved one of Gnome's knives in his throat—the same thing Myko had done to him.

I saw the blood gushing out of Myko's thick, long beard as he faced me. Saw his eyes widen as he realized it was over and took one last, long look at me.

I saw Adrastea stab herself using both of our hands.

Myko went down, and he was heavy enough that I could barely hold him up, but I kept my arms around him as we went down together. Five of Pelion's men and women tried to restrain Cyllarus, but he struggled like a hellcat.

Although we were on the ground, I held Myko as tight as possible and took my final look at the man who used to terrify me with how quiet he was. I used to think Amykos hated me, that his quietness meant he wasn't impressed, but he was always an observer. Perhaps an artist or a writer in another life—if given a chance.

"Myko."

He choked on his blood, gasping for air as it bubbled up. I felt his hand go to my pants pocket, to my mother's ring. I couldn't see him through my tears, so I nodded in understanding.

"It's been an honour being a Cheiron with you. I love you, Amykos." He blinked a tear away since he couldn't respond, and I saw him take one last strangled breath before his warm hazel eyes dulled forever.

I closed his eyelids for him, just as I had for Adrastea, and despite all the emotion coursing through me, I felt oddly numb. Light, even. Like there were too many feelings, and they had nowhere to go, so they misted into thin air and dissipated into some sort of...madness.

Pelion came up beside me with Ida tucked in firmly to his side, his shield covering her instead of himself. There was still fighting

around us, but I felt detached from it as I faced Typhon sitting on the throne.

A liar. A rapist. A murderer.

My father.

"What did you say to Osilian?" Typhon mused. "That you enjoyed watching his men die? A little birdie came back and told me that part. It's been fun watching your men die, Prince of *Men*."

Adrastea's response to the python riddle came back to me—the strange answer I hadn't heard since.

"The storm wipes out the entire animal kingdom, Prince."

"The storm will come to you." The words were possessed as they left my lips.

CHAPTER THIRTY



AMPHISSUS

THERE WAS a deep rumble from outside the castle. Not a clash of thunder, but a warning.

The butterflies returned to the tomb and flew around in a frenzy, breaking up any fighting that was still taking place, and before I knew it, Queen Heria was standing in the middle of the room, facing Typhon.

“Hello, King Typhon.”

Typhon immediately recognized Heria’s authority and stood from the throne. “Stop.”

The flurry of commotion ceased. Typhon stepped out from the shadows and cautiously approached Heria, although he didn’t regard her with nearly as much respect as she commanded. “Are you the ruler of this land?”

“I am the ruler of all lands, King Typhon. And I am quite tired of meetings with Kings in this castle, which was once a place of sacred worship.”

Typhon, to his credit, looked Heria straight into her eyes.

“My Earth name is Heria, but you will address me as Queen so long as you can address me. My Guardian of the Waterfall has informed me you apprehended that which belongs to Her. Bring me the resurrected Cheiron.”

Typhon nodded at a few guards, an order to surrender Cyllarus. It took a while since no one wanted to handle a dead Cyllarus or approach Queen Heria, but eventually, a few guards managed to push him forward. He was docile as she contained him through magic, a daunting disparity to the Cheirons’ blood dripping off his ratted, filthy clothes.

“We will be taking him back, as She has already claimed him. Did you apprehend him yourself, King Typhon, or did the resurrected Cheiron present himself to you? Speak wisely, for She is listening.”

Typhon’s jaw danced from side to side as he considered the implications of his next words. “I did apprehend him. I used magic given to me from Pythian to bring him here.”

“Thank you for your honesty, King Typhon. She is fair, and She is kind.”

“What of my attacks?” Typhon stepped down from the small dais. “Are you here to negotiate terms?”

“I do not answer to men.”

Typhon kept his voice even. “I will continue to bomb these forests until all the trees burn to the ground, and we have funnelled every last piece of magic into Orilla. What say you?”

“You do not know of the laws of the lands. Otherwise, you would know what I say, King Typhon. And I’ll remind you to address me as ‘Queen,’ so long as you can address me.”

“What if I resurrected every dead Cheiron, Orillan, and whoever else I wished to attack your lands? What say you?”

Heria hummed in response. “And you possess such powers? I’ll remind you to address me as ‘Queen,’ so long as you can address me. That is my last reminder for you, King Typhon.”

“I do, a little leftover gift from Pythian. One of his many gifts. I possess such powers, and I will unleash them on all of Oread if you do not surrender it over to me.”

Heria used her power to strike Typhon with some invisible force, causing him to topple over with a groan as if someone had kicked his most sensitive part. “That was my final warning, King Typhon. You are to address me as ‘Queen,’ so long as you can address me. And if you cannot properly address me as I address you, then you will not address me unless I allow it.”

Typhon opened his mouth to respond, already failing to listen to her.

Heria examined everyone—how some were bleeding while others panted as their adrenaline subsided into fear. “I see you have no magic here, in yourself or your guards, so you must be containing it all in Orilla. If that is so, and if you confirm with me that you intend to use that dark magic against Oread, then the laws of the land demand protection. It is an act of war. So, I will allow you this last chance to address me, and I’d advise you to address me wisely. She is fair, and so am I. Do you stand by this threat, or will you relinquish the magic and return it to the Forgotten Forest in which it belongs?”

Another lash of thunder sounded as Typhon tried to straighten despite whatever pain he was in. "I stand by it."

"So, you are declaring war against the land, Typhon?" It was the first time she hadn't addressed him as 'King.'

We all heard the soft patter of rain begin as the entire tomb chilled.

"I am."

"Then it is done."

Murderous thunder kept roaring, almost rattling the castle with its rage. I mirrored that rage—letting my own storm boil over.

The storm of my mother dying.

The storm of being related to Python Kings.

The storm of the felled Cheirons.

The storm of Adrastea dying.

Once it was settled, the last thing I remembered was Typhon looking at me with almost as much hate as I had for him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



AMPHISSUS

QUEEN HERIA SHIFTED us all back to Ida andAdrastea's home, including all our dead.

I was surprised that someone so powerful cared so much about the death of men and women in castles, but Heria cared and seemed genuinely saddened at the losses herself. When she offered to help with the passing of our dead, Ida practically wept on her knees as she accepted. "You would honour us by doing so if you deem that we are worthy."

Pelion had lost four members of his Pride, and even though I didn't know them, I felt their loss.

Heria's offer seemed to lighten that despair, and Ida's show of emotion told everyone it was most likely rare that such an offer was being made. So, we followed the same burial process as before, singing hymns and remembering our dead.

Hylonome's incessant teasing.

Amykos's strong, silent presence.

Eurytion's thoughtful, romantic nature.

My fault. They were all my fault. The only person who should have died in that castle was *me*, not everyone else.

Heria finished a prayer as we tossed the last bit of dirt over the graves. "She is kind, and She is fair. She feels the love you all have for your men and women. Remember them as you push forward."

Thrasher bowed his head to give his final words, letting out a heavy sigh and a light whimper.

Ida walked over and took his hand before addressing her Queen. "What now, Heria? War has not been declared in these lands in so long."

"Guard your waterfall, Ida Melisseus. It is your sworn duty to Her, and She will guide you so long as you guard Her. Oread will need all of its guards." Heria winked at Ida before turning to everyone else. "Oread is honoured to have the Nemean lions and Orillan Cheirons fight for the land, so long as they remember that land from which they came."

Pelion's Pride closed in around him as if they were suddenly drawn to Heria's call. "Typhon is gathering his forces and magic as we speak, and he plans to attack a week from this date. You will meet him on the hills of Kerberos as you swore, Pelion, King of the Pride. Do not fear; there will be no more bombings or surprise attacks."

Everyone gave some sort of confirmation, aside from me.

"Prince of Men, I think you left something in the water." Heria looked at me with those staggering moonlight eyes before she vanished. "I look forward to the storm."

Ida was panting as she whipped her head around, which only incited an irrational reaction from me as my erratic breathing matched hers. Thrasher stepped between us, looking back and forth nervously. "What's the matter?"

Pelion stepped forward. "The stream..."

"I think you left something in the water."

There was a splash—a splash of what looked to be someone crawling out of the water...

A green arm...

"Adrastea!"

I wasn't thinking; I just ran towards the stream. I think I might have flown, too, like one of the fancy flying sky stallions from Orilla. I tripped over a wet rock as I reached out to grab those arms even though her head was still submerged.

Her head...

I was met with some resistance at first, so I wrapped my arms around her exposed shoulders and braced my feet down on some rocks, pulling with everything I had until she was all the way out.

And then she was in my arms—wet, glowing, and naked, and I panicked that I might have been in one of those messed-up dreams.

She was here. How was she here?

I didn't care. Not one bit.

Ida was suddenly there with us as I looked Adrastea over for any signs of injury and covered her with my jacket.

"Adrastea?" Ida cried as she held her sister, her rainbow tears heavy as they painted Adrastea's already-soaked face. She was

asleep, or at least I hoped she was sleeping, but after a few moments, I saw the steady inhale and exhale of her chest.

She opened her eyes, and they were just as beautiful and emerald as I remembered. Not one piece of that had changed. She blinked a few times before her eyes landed on Ida.

“You were the butterflies?”

Ida laughed through her choked sobs, and I laughed, too.

She was still my Adrastea. She was alive, and she was still my Adrastea...

“I was. I tricked you. I’m the clever sister now.”

Adrastea shook her head, causing droplets of water to fall from her perfect face. “You are so paying for that!”

Ida leaned down to kiss her on the forehead and held it there. “Can’t wait, sister.” She gave her a couple more kisses on the tip of her nose before walking away, giving us space.

And when Adrastea looked at me, I gave myself over to it all. To everything. She reached up and brushed some hair out of my eyes with her wet hand.

“You look like quite the weary Wanderer.”

“I’m so sorry—” My words were choked.

She placed a finger against my lips, silencing me. “I heard you through the curse. I saw you guard my body, and I saw you let me into the waterfall. Never apologize to me for that. Ever.” I cried as she spoke, as I relived all those horrible memories and kissed her to stop the intrusive thoughts.

And thank all the Gods because everything about her was the same. Her soft lips, her rainforest breath, and that soft tongue that felt like a glossy leaf...

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



AMPHISSUS

“HOW UNLUCKY AM I to miss you cutting Pythian’s throat!” Adrastea groaned. “Tell me, how much blood came out?”

We were all out in the backyard by the stream since the house was now too small for everyone as we enjoyed the sound of steady nature. A moment’s peace, which we all deserved.

Ida smiled from where she was lying with Pelion on the ground, her arms wrapped around his chest as he leaned back to sunbathe. I briefly wondered if Pythian’s spell had also taken away his ability to feel the sun on his skin or the wind. Pythian seemed to enjoy giving out curses that made everyone as miserable as he was, so it wouldn’t have surprised me.

“Lots of it.” Ida chuckled. “So much. He took many attempts to say please as he cried.”

Adrastea’s head rested on my shoulder as she snickered, and I basked in the feeling of her being folded in my lap as she faced Ida. “Incredible! And you used the dagger—so poetic!”

Pelion bellowed. I shook my head, remembering how Ida had scorned me and the Cheirons for having nicknames like Thrasher and Misfit, and yet there they were in their mysterious home with all their little trophies.

The complete turnaround of being in that moment with everyone as we relaxed after what had happened was a bit of a head spin, almost like a bad hangover, but I tried to enjoy it. I thought at times I was dreaming, so I’d go to pinch myself every so often. Adrastea noticed and pinched me in response, hard, but it felt kind of nice. After my pain became so dull in the castle, the pressure of her nails was like a strike of lightning within me—awakening me.

“Look at what they did,” Adrastea observed the carnage left by the bombs in the areas that weren’t protected. “Look at that village by Baya’s...it’s destroyed. How does Typhon have such weapons?”

Thrasher sighed heavily from his spot against a tree. “More greedy men, I’m sorry.” I could tell he was taking time to reflect on everything. We’d already had a few moments together to mourn, but

I wanted to give him the space to process, as I also needed space to sort out my feelings.

Adrastea shook her head. “Don’t apologize for the foolish pythons, Thrasher. And don’t compare yourself to them, either.”

Chariclo, who impressed me to no end with how she fought in the castle, left the conversation she was having to join ours and sat with her legs crossed beside Ida and Pelion. “Those bombs are all from Lampades, where Pythian’s family is from.”

Thrasher cringed. “I hear those Lampades bombs in my sleep every damn night.”

Ida, always so attuned to Thrasher’s emotions, stood up to join him under the tree.

Pelion sat up on his elbows and regarded Chariclo. “We will meet with loyalists from Orilla as well, Kiko. You will see faces you recognize and feel the betrayal. Do not let it distract you. As Queen Heria said, we fight for the lands now.”

Chariclo, or Kiko, rolled her neck before looking between Ida and Adrastea. “How will the land be protected? How will it fight alongside us?”

The sisters were silent. Not in the sense that they were hiding anything, but as if they genuinely didn’t know. Ida was the one to answer.

“We are Her foot soldiers, and we will go where She orders once the stage is set.”

“That queen is something else,” a glazed look swept over Kiko’s bright brown eyes. “I’ll gladly follow her into battle any day.”

Adrastea giggled. “Make no mistake, Heria does not fight wars. If She steps on the battlefield, she *is* the battlefield, and there is no fight. She’ll rally magical defences to stop anyone from entering Oread and send help to fight with you in Orilla.”

“Does that mean I’ll get some of that fancy armour you all have?” Kiko grinned. “I’d like to put the symbol of my people on one—the symbol of the lion fighting.”

Adrastea cocked an eyebrow. “What about a lioness?”

Kiko tossed her head back in a laugh. “Oh, I like you.”

Adrastea stood up from my lap and stretched out as she took in her home, comparing its size to the number of people that were

suddenly there before turning to Ida. “I think our house is a little small, sister. Looks like we have some work to do.”

Ida beamed one of her many smiles I’d seen since Adrastea returned and nodded enthusiastically as she also stood to dust herself off.

“Are you going to use magic to make the house bigger? Do you need any help?” I asked, observing the small home which barely fit five Cheirons.

“Always so thoughtful, but no. I’m not going to do anything.” She took my hand before winking at Ida. “I’m going to have a nice *wander* around while Ida here takes care of the housing problem.”

Ida scowled. “Oh, you’ll pay for this. It is on.”

Kiko purred as if she could sense the shift in Adrastea’s tone. “Adrastea, if you and the prince ever need a lioness to pet, you come and find me.”

I blushed, another uncharacteristic reaction, but Adrastea made up for it by laughing that guttural laugh of hers before shifting us to the waterfall.

“Oh, I *like* you, too. But keep your paws off my prince.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



AMPHISSUS

ADRASTEIA SHIFTED us to the waterfall, and I felt like I was reliving the first dream I'd had after she'd died.

We remained silent for the longest time, almost as if there was too much to say, so instead, I let the steady water calm my dreary mind. Despite the light clouds that flittered northward, the day was perfect—worthy of a painting. *The Rebirth of Adrasteia*, I would have called it.

One of her fingertips lightly trailed the underparts of my eyes, which I'm sure were bleak from lack of sleep. "You look so sad, Wanderer. I've never seen your face this way. You know how I lost my shine when I didn't reenergize? You've lost your shine."

"It came back." I kissed her forehead so she wouldn't see the tightness in my eyes.

"No, it's still missing. Do you want to talk about it? You don't have to." She paused. "You never have to. Whenever you're ready."

"What's there to talk about?" I wasn't even sure where to begin, so I stroked her soft hair to calm my thoughts. "You died, I died, and you came back. That's a pretty good story."

"Yes, I came back, but did *you* come back?" she implored, stroking my hair the same way I was hers as she rested an elbow in the grass. "I know there was a lot left...unsaid between us, and I can see the shadows in your eyes. They're yours to keep if you wish, but it's just...what if those sorrows cloud your judgement a week from now? Make it hard to see?"

She was right; I knew she was right. I knew I would be useless on that battlefield like I was with so many things if I didn't begin to process the madness.

"You want to know what I'm thinking? I think Typhon is a fucking murderer." I started without thinking, as I always did with her. "He's vermin, and I *hate* that he's my father. I hate that Pythian is my uncle. Typhon killed my men, my family, and he raped my mom. I'm just so angry all the time." My breathing grew erratic, but she remained still.

“He only wanted to meet us in that castle to kill the rest of the Cheirons so I would fall apart before meeting him in battle, but his sick efforts are wasted because I already *have* fallen apart.”

“I hope this Prince of Men puts up a good fight. I remember his mom didn’t.”

In my frenzy, I stood up from under her and started pacing around—the watery lotus blossoms mocking my fury with their delicate beauty. Those delicate clouds turned dense and dark, shadowing us as my words pooled out of me.

“And I get everything now, I *get* it. I get how I survived two months during a brutal winter on the streets of Orilla while my mother just died. I know it had to do with that ring. It has a spell that won’t let Typhon or Pythian kill me, and I just *know* it kept me alive because one of them had something to do with it—that one of them put us there. That’s why my mother made me wear it the whole time. It kept me alive even though I hadn’t eaten in days, I was fucking freezing, and she had been dead for *weeks!*” My voice caught at the image of her lying in the snow. Stiff as a tree and cold as ice. “I don’t know what to do with that feeling. When I’m around him, I’m just a pathetic kid in Orilla who can’t help his mom even though I want to be everyone’s Prince of Men. I do, so bad.”

I realized I was yelling, and I cursed myself for raising my voice at her. I wasn’t trying to yell at her. I was just...yelling.

She sat motionlessly, but once my breathing settled, she slowly rose. It reminded me of hunting with Riot, how he’d cautiously approach the animals with a lethal calm before always landing his mark.

“You’re right, Amphissus. You’re right about all of it, about them. You’re right to feel it.” Blood sang in my ears, and I could have sworn I heard thunder in the distance as she said the word ‘python.’

“I’m going to tell you something, and you don’t have to believe me.” She walked towards me slowly, carefully. “I promise I’m not saying this in the wake of battle to lift your spirits. We don’t lie to each other, right?” I nodded as she placed a hand on my chest. “What did Cyllarus say to you? ‘We lie together, we die together?’ Is that a Cheiron thing? What about this: we don’t lie, and we die

together because I'd only like to go back there if you're there with me. It can be our thing now, how's that?"

I tried to smile, to show her how happy her words made me, but I was too far gone. She wasn't deterred by my silence.

"Listen to me carefully: Dryope is a goddess, and they love her down there. She was kissed and loved by everyone, and they were all happy to be near her. Souls who were hurt like hers in this world were there." I went to my knees as lightning struck behind me, and Adrastea followed, holding my face in her hands as she leaned in close. "I went to her, and she knew who I was. She kissed me like she kissed them. She saw how sad I was to leave my Wanderer."

"My mother..."

"Yes, your mother. Her love for you fills her love for those souls, and she knows you are a Prince of Men amongst pythons. When Typhon declared war against the land, Dryope reached her hand out to Heria, and Heria was kind enough to reach back. They both brought me here. Your mother brought me back here, Amphissus." She caressed my tear-stained cheeks. "You feel the loss of your dead here but believe me when I say your mother is with you, and your Cheirons are always with you, just like I was always there to make sure you didn't wander off too far. And when you go into battle, you listen to that storm. It is Dryope. Typhon sealed his fate when he declared war. Do you understand me?"

"Yes."

"You are a Prince of Men, Amphissus."

"Yes."

Her green face glowed brilliantly as lightning illuminated the skies. "And when you go into battle, you bring the storm of Dryope—a storm that's been raging since you were born. Are you going to give him that storm?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to fight with the felled Cheirons, who will be joining Pholus on that battlefield?"

"Fuck yes."

"And when we've won this war, and it's just my Wanderer and me,"—she leaned in to whisper the last part in my ear— "will you stay with me forever until we go to that place?"

I answered her with a kiss so forceful it crashed in the storm.

She took advantage of her position and lowered me to the ground, and I let her. No more curses. No more lies. No more pythons. Just me and my Adrastea.

She straddled me as we feverishly kissed, and I further explored her mouth to make sure it was the same as I remembered it.

It was. Which meant every other part of her had to be the same, too.

We were eager to get our clothes off, and out of nowhere, she gave a strong tug on my thin cotton shirt, completely ripping it in half. I momentarily broke our kiss to look down at the torn material and her sinful smile. “You have no idea how upset I was when I realized we didn’t get to do this.”

I froze. “Wait—what about the curse?”

She took both my hands in hers, smiling at me with soft eyes. It started raining, barely a mist. “Yes, the curse is still there. It’s a part of my soul and will be with me until it is broken.”

Enough. She had suffered enough—we both had.

“Well, that simply won’t do anymore, will it?”

I was absolutely memorized by her as the rain gently came down on us. She lifted her ass so I could help get her pants all the way down at the same time she worked on mine. Within a few seconds, the thick clouds overhead crashed once more, and it was just us in the rain.

The cool water steadied me, allowing me to focus on her entirely. I admired all the wonders of her upper body once she finally had her shirt off and took my time exploring her tits as she gripped my length, angling me at her entrance. My hips twitched up in desperation, but she kept a firm hand on my chest and sat up, straddling me. I could feel her wetness coming through her despite the rain with how close we were—the wetness I assumed tasted better than all the sugar berries in Oread.

We remained still, right at the edge, and I had to hold her in place by her hips so I could contain myself.

“You are the Prince of Men. Say it.”

I’d say anything she wanted me to. “I’m the Prince of Men.”

“Do you trust me, Wanderer?” She reached down to pull my hands from her waist and placed them above my head, pinning my wrists together so I wouldn’t move them. “Is this okay?”

My fingers twitched from the loss of contact, especially after I hadn’t touched her for what felt like so long, but I nodded frantically.

“You tell me if it isn’t, my prince. Just tell me to stop it, and I will.”

As soon as the words left her lips, she lowered herself on me, and it rained so hard I couldn’t see shit anymore.

There was a bit of resistance at first, but the tightness was overwhelming. It wasn’t painful, it was just...so fucking tight, and I couldn’t stifle my loud groan that followed.

“Gods,” I mumbled, shaking. “This was worth it, Adrastea. So worth it.”

She huffed a laugh and lowered herself even further. I could feel the...barrier break as she gasped.

She noticed my hesitation. “No, it’s fine. It’s perfect. Please don’t stop.”

“I don’t want you to hurt you. I—”

“It’s a good kind of pain. The kind of pain I’ve been waiting for, Amphissus. I like the pain. Did I ever tell you that?”

I remained frozen, but my dick twitched inside her.

She started to glow, and even though it should have scared me, I was stunned—entirely in awe of her beauty. I wondered if the glow was a sign that the curse was gone. A bright, sparkling contrast to the dark magic that haunted her for so many years.

Perfect wasn’t the right word. Gnome and Riot were right—the nymphs were things of nightmares and fantasies.

She moved on me more once she noticed my stillness, right as those magical branches popped out of the ground, securing themselves around my wrists.

“Say it, Amphissus.”

“I’m the Prince of Men.”

“You are. Repeat it.” Unable to take it anymore, I thrust up into her as hard as I could, given my limitations. I could tell she had to fight to keep her composure through my desperate pumps.

“I’m the Prince of Men.”

Her fingernails ran down my chest so hard it drew blood, but the rain immediately washed it away. “You’re *my* Prince of Men.”

She ground on me harder, giving the most delicious little swirls of her hips. Her pussy was soft like a glossy leaf, and she moved all over me in the most unimaginable ways. My eyes rolled into the back of my head with the need to touch her.

I increased my pace, starting to feel that build, and she met me thrust for thrust. The sounds of guttural moans, as deep as her laugh, combined with the slapping of wet skin, had me spinning so much further to that place than I’d ever been before. I looked up just in time to see her throw her head back as she fucked me; wet strands of wild hair flying everywhere.

She must have sensed my need to touch her because only a few seconds later, the roots loosened their hold, and I reached out to work her nipples as I felt her start to tighten around me.

She lowered herself to kiss me, wrapping a tiny hand around my throat. “I’m yours. In this world in all the worlds. I’ll always choose you.”

I knew I wouldn’t last much longer, so I reached one of my hands down between us and applied pressure to her clit with my thumb before she started screaming, choking me almost entirely.

It was amazing—she always took my breath away.

I felt my own climax build once her grip became impossibly tighter and held her in place by her hips as I spilled inside of her. She collapsed, and as soon as I regained control over my breathing, I held her as tight as I could.

“Sorry about that.” She giggled from the crook of my neck, gently caressing the spot she had been holding. “I had a dream about doing that. I might have gotten a little carried away.”

I laughed, breathless. As if that could ever bother me. “Your dreams sound a lot better than mine.”

Although my words sounded depressing, I didn’t have that heavy feeling anymore. I felt light, happy. Like I’d had all the wine in Oread and gotten away with it without throwing up everywhere.

She gave me a chaste kiss, laughing against my lips before she rolled off me. “You want to know what else I dreamed about?” She wiggled her eyebrows and got that naughty look in her eyes I’d only

ever seen from her. I gave her a lopsided smile I knew made her breath hitch as I folded my hands behind my head.

“What else did you dream about, Adrastea?”

She beamed at my teasing tone, and I even surprised myself with it. She practically bounced off the ground and turned around to brace down on all fours, lifting her ass up to expose herself to me as she looked back over her shoulder.

“You know, when I first saw you, I thought you fucked like a king. Can you fuck me like a king, Amphissus? Like you did those two girls?”

The rain had stopped, and although I was still soaking wet, slightly cold, and dirty from being on the ground, it was like she poured gasoline all over me and lit my numb soul on fire.

“What girls? I don’t recall.” I got up and walked over to her as I stroked myself to get hard again. With her wicked grin and ass in the air, it wasn’t that hard to do. No pun intended.

I massaged her plump, soft ass cheeks in both my hands. I’d never had a hold of her like that before and couldn’t resist the urge to give one a little slap just to see if it would bounce back. It did.

I knocked her legs further apart with my thighs, admiring her wetness gleaming through, ready for me, and took a fistful of her wet hair before I pushed into her as mercilessly as she wanted me to.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



IDA

I LOOK FORWARD to the storm. Queen Heria's vague comment to Amphissus replayed in my mind, the same mantra I'd heard since I'd transformed into the butterflies.

The Python is gone. Only the storm can survive.

Expanding the house took longer than it should have, thanks to all my distractions. The wood from the trees morphed itself into new walls, floors and rooftops, with tiny windows for extra privacy. After a couple of hours, I stepped back to evaluate my work and realized I'd somehow built the west end of the house on a forty-degree angle, making our house look like it was imploding from within. I guess in some ways, it technically was.

Adrastea and Amphissus were gone for the entirety of those two hours. By the time I finished the expansion, his clouds had already reached the house, and I wondered if Adrastea had brought that up with him yet—if she'd bothered to explain the "apotheosis of Amphissus," as I called it.

"It looks great," Adrastea said from behind me all of a sudden.

I cried out at the sound of her voice, which startled everyone around us. My anxiety had been all over the place; loud noises seemed louder than before, lights were brighter, and everyone looked larger. And I wasn't the only one having difficulties adjusting.

Pelion seemed to always be in fight or flight mode, which was understandable. The night before, I'd woken up with my hands pinned over my head as he screamed for help, for someone to see him. He woke only moments later, horrified at his actions. I held him tight that night and assured him everything was fine.

But I couldn't lie to myself. It terrified me a little.

"No, it doesn't," I said with a sigh.

She looped an arm through mine as we admired my terrible handiwork. "You're right. It doesn't. I'll fix it later, don't worry. You were never one for arts and crafts."

It almost felt strange to have a moment to ourselves. In a lot of ways, I hadn't had a moment to *myself* since I'd returned to my body.

It was hypocritical to judgeAdrastea for throwing herself into the whims of passion with Amphissus when I was doing the same with Pelion.

She led us away from the group. We were unhurried as we walked towards the stream, often throwing wary glances over our shoulders to ensure everyone enjoyed themselves. It was so strange to have visitors—I don't thinkAdrastea or I had hosted since the Bronze Age.

"How did things go in Orilla?"Adrastea asked.

I blinked, surprised by her choice of topic. "It took a bit of convincing for some members to believe it was Pelion since they thought it was another one of Pythian's tricks. Other than that, it was fine. A lot of the men and women he spoke to outside of the Pride seemed eager to help."

I was impressed by the number of people who were willing to stand against their Crown. King Typhon's court was relatively popular from what I understood—the humans adored their fierce leader who wasn't afraid to stand up against the 'Pythons.'

"Good,"Adrastea whispered, "it's about time they woke up."

I shrugged, not in the mood to disagree. Pelion's Pride had fought for years, and they fought in ways that mattered. They'd tried to make an official House of the Nemean Tribe so they could earn a seat in the Royal Council for years and were always met with a resounding 'no,' but they still tried. Every year.

As far as I was concerned, the Nemean people had been awake for quite some time.

"Thank you, by the way," she said with a smile. "For helping me with the curse. I guess I was never really the clever sister in the first, was I?"

I smiled back. "You're welcome. And no, you weren't, but you can still tell people you are if it makes you feel better."

She unlinked our arms and gave my shoulder a light swat before a bee flew by in the space between us—a *loud* bee.

"*She wishes to meet at the Northern entrance of the Forgotten Forest,*" it whispered in our ears through the buzzing.

Adrastea crossed her arms like a child. "Do we *have* to? I'm in such a good mood."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes as I took her hand. "Don't be a baby. Just keep your mouth shut and remember what mother used to say."

"I'm not saying that."

"Cruel speech falls on deaf ears, but kindness doesn't need words."

"Please shut up."

I realized we hadn't told anyone we were leaving before I shifted us to the lake. And honestly, that was most likely the best call—this meeting would have been too difficult to explain with everything else going on.

"Hello, cousins," Amalthea greeted us.

She had her arms crossed in a similar way to Adrastea. They were painfully alike—hot-tempered, stubborn, and constantly desperate to prove everyone wrong.

I greeted her with a smile. "Hello, Amalthea. It's so nice to see you after so long. You look lovely."

She smiled at the compliment but didn't respond, shrugging as if to say, *'of course I look lovely—when have I ever not?'* I waited for Adrastea to greet her, but she merely inclined her head with her nostrils flared.

Amalthea flipped her long, straight golden hair over her shoulder with a smirk. We had hundreds of cousins, but I always found her to be the most beautiful. She was a Meliae nymph, born in the image of an ash tree, and her skin was a unique shade of gold and green, one I'd never seen any other creature besides her. It was almost as rich as her amber eyes.

Our uncle's wife, her mother, was a famous she-goat, a warrior, which meant Amalthea's pale wooden horns were always present, and she often referred to herself as the 'Queen Bee' since she'd been gifted bees as Adrastea was her butterflies.

I wasn't artistic, as Adrastea had pointed out, but if I had the talent, the first thing I'd draw would be a portrait of Adrastea's face whenever Amalthea called herself "Queen Bee."

Amalthea didn't seem rattled by Adrastea's attitude. "I must say, it's an honour to speak to two of Gaia's favourites. You ladies sure know how to stir up some trouble. And I hear Queen Heria visited

you not once, but twice?" She raised her eyebrows and smiled, but the lines around her eyes were tight. Unimpressed.

"Maybe if you had offered to help when I asked, we wouldn't have to stir anything," Adrastea hissed.

"You have to be kidding me! Why can't you accept the help I was able to give? You asked me to look for Ida, so I did! I couldn't do it *with* you with that Python King there, waiting for Ida to return."

"She understands," I interrupted with a pinch to Adrastea's hand. "She's tired, you know, having just come back from the dead and all."

Amalthea's amber eyes tightened. "Yes, I imagine that would be exhausting. How lucky of you both to have your prayers heard by Her."

"Oh please," Adrastea grumbled. "Spare us your pity party. We don't get to decide those things, and it is blasphemy to question Her motives."

Amalthea started picking at her nails, which had been painted a glittering gold colour to match her eyes and snorted. "It's nice to see you haven't changed."

I cringed, embarrassed by my sister's childish actions. "Okay, okay, that's enough. We're all a little tired. Amalthea, tell us what this is for."

Amalthea raised her blonde eyebrows. "Can't I just be happy to see my cousins and congratulate them on their success?"

Adrastea let go of my hand so she could tighten her fists at her sides as she stepped closer to Amalthea. "No, you can't."

"Well, I am, but you're right. That's not why I'm here now." She faced me then, making a point to avoid Adrastea. "I hear we'll be following a 'Prince of Men' into battle. Is he trustworthy?"

Adrastea ran at her with the type of growl I'd only ever heard from Pelion. "Get out of here. Go back to the Oceanides or wherever you like to dwell, but *get out* of Oread. You've overstayed your welcome long enough."

I grabbed Adrastea by the back of her dress even though I knew she'd scold me for wrinkling it later. Between the two of us, Adrastea was the stylish sibling. She loved to craft her own dresses with chiffon and nature, whereas I typically stuck to garments made of cotton for the sake of comfort.

"He is trustworthy," I said between attempts to grab Adrastea—failed attempts. "If you find Pelion to be a good man, Amphissus is a kindred spirit. They both act with honour."

Amalthea, impervious to Adrastea, played with the ends of her hair as she considered. I understood why she'd be hesitant—why *all* nymphs would be reluctant to go into war with men, but something else seemed to be weighing on her mind.

"I've seen his kindness. He defended Adrastea's corpse. He has a lot to learn, but I can see that he is also willing to learn. Have faith in that."

"Who are *you* to question anyone's honour?" Adrastea practically screamed. "Where were you the day those men destroyed Athena's temple? Where were you when we received word that Pythian was about to attack the Python? I often notice you missing, probably too busy staring at your reflection with the water nymphs. I'll be surprised to find you in this battle at all. How *dare* you come to my home and speak about my man in front of me."

Adrastea's roots had crept up as she spoke, stretching out like arrows ready to strike. They were larger than I remembered—faster in their ability to rise from the Earth. I almost stumbled back in shock.

Amalthea's one eyebrow shot up, her only sign that she was remotely impressed. "I know you think 'Queen Bee' is a joke, but I can assure you it's not. You'd understand why if you ever bothered to visit."

Adrastea cackled. "Is that why you refused to help me find Ida? Because I don't *visit you enough*? Get over yourself."

"I *did* look for her; you weren't there. Stop patronizing me."

"Enough!" I was starting to get a headache. No matter how many years had passed, they would always act like children together, and that wasn't going to change any time soon. "Amalthea, can you accept my claim?" I asked, trying to deter them both. "Can you fight for the land in confidence that the man leading this battle has its best interest at heart?"

Amalthea shrugged. "I'll fight for what I think is right. You'll remember that Orilla was once Meliae territory before they followed a man into battle. Now we get to 'dwell in the Oceanides,' or whatever it is we like to do."

Adrastea pointed at Amalthea so her roots would seize her, but Amalthea managed to dodge the incoming sticks. "If you want to cry about a war you lost more than two centuries ago, then be my guest. You knew he was a dangerous fool before any fighting began."

There was a moment of silence after that. I was almost ready to shift myself back home and let them settle the score themselves until Amalthea clapped her hands together. A giant beehive grew from between her palms as she slowly expanded her arms out, grinning at Adrastea like a cat.

Hundreds of bees started on my sister. We hadn't brought the butterflies, a mistake we were famous for making at that point, so Adrastea was left to defend with her roots. It helped a little, but the roots were no match for the small, fast bees.

I summoned a rainbow ribbon, long and loose like a whip. I hadn't used it in a while, so my execution wasn't perfect, but I still managed to lasso the two neanderthal nymphs into an awkward restraint that forced them to look at each other.

"I said *enough*," I said through a growl, although it wasn't as intimidating as theirs. "Adrastea, apologize to Amalthea for speaking ill of the Meliae. You know that's an unfair thing to say."

Adrastea and Amalthea shared an intense stare. "I'm sorry, Amalthea," Adrastea drawled with her chin raised. "Sorry that you're such a coward."

A few roots pulled me down and held me there. I couldn't contain my shock any longer—Adrastea's powers were definitely more potent than before. I could also summon nature, all nymphs born of trees could, but this was different. Adrastea's magic was quick and quiet. Lethal.

And at that moment, I knew whatever had happened in the Lower World made her more than a Dryad.

"I feel sorry for your Prince of Men," Amalthea spat. She'd completely ruined her white silk dress in the dirt and dried autumn leaves—rare silk. It was almost like she'd picked it to establish her wealth before us, so we didn't think any less of her despite her struggles. "What does Adrastea mean? *An inescapable woman*? He's in for a real treat. I look forward to seeing you on the battlefield, cousins. You can count on me being there."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



AMPHISSUS

THE WEEK that followed would go down as one of the best weeks of my life, and it had come right after one of the worst weeks of my life. So even if it all ended on that battlefield, it was worth it. I supposed not everyone was afforded that kind of transformation—to experience such pains and pleasures simultaneously.

We spent those days getting to know the people in Pelion's Pride, and they were all as hilarious and loyal as my Cheirons. Pelion and I would occasionally find moments to go over fighting techniques, and I liked when he'd give me tips without any sort of swagger about it or when he'd even ask me about some of my moves. It was the most natural I'd ever felt with anyone besidesAdrastea and Pholus, and I found myself forgetting about things that generally bothered me when we'd get lost in our movements.

I wasn't sure whatAdrastea did to me by that waterfall, maybe one of her many mysterious nymph tricks, but she had put me back together.

I had known who the enemy was, but she reminded me that the hero was more important.

That hero was Dryope, my mother.

We all settled in the expanded living room on the night before the battle and enjoyed a sombre conversation.

"You know, little butterfly," Thrasher spoke up, turning to Ida, who was sitting on the couch with Pelion. "You remind me so much of my niece Pholea. Not that you look like her—she was a young lass, but you have the same presence. That's why I like the nickname. Amphissus told me what you said, but some names are too hard to hear."

Pholea. Pholus. I'd never heard Thrasher mention his family before, and it almost made me cry.

Thrasher let out some tears of his own. "You know, that's why I keep fighting, keep this old body going. For Pholea and my sister Nephela. For those Lampades bombs that were dropped on them. That was quite the hurt; it took me right into the drink, muffled my

brain for a few years. And then I met my boy Amphissus, and I saw her smile there, too.”

My boy, Amphissus.

“Thank you for being my father, Pholus.”

I went over and touched my forehead to his, savouring the moment I knew I’d reflect on in the years to come.

I wasn’t sure about him, but I felt the felled Cheirons there as we enjoyed our little moment.

Adrastea interrupted us. “Did you say a *priest*?”

Everyone stopped whatever they were doing and looked at her.

“Yes, a priest took me to Thrasher when I was twelve. I thought you knew that?”

Adrastea sucked on her teeth, pondering as her eyes narrowed. “Who was this priest? Describe him to me.”

So much of that time was dark, it was all just memories of my mother’s cough, so I permanently blocked it out. Adrastea saw me caving inwards on my own thoughts.

“It’s okay, Amphissus. No one can hurt her now.”

I breathed slowly, steadying myself. “He was...tall? Old? Gray hair? Dressed like a priest? I don’t know...”

She got up from where she was sitting and walked towards me. “Do you know his name?”

I tried to think back to when the priest found me on the street next to my dead mother and dragged me away from her, leaving her there...before he took me straight to Thrasher’s.

“Callias?” I said.

Ida hissed. “Pythons.”

Adrastea nodded in agreement. “Sneaky pythons indeed. Always slithering around. Thrasher, where did you live in Orilla?”

Suddenly, Ida stood from the couch in a panic. “Adrastea, no!” I looked at Pelion to see if he understood, but he looked just as confused as I was.

I suddenly felt the urge to run over and grab her so she wouldn’t disappear. “Adrastea?”

“What?” She looked between Ida and me. “I won’t do anything; I’m just going to take a peek.”

Ida crossed her arms. “No. Absolutely not. You heard the call; we will fight tomorrow. You are *not* going into the heart of enemy territory the night before a battle for a hunch.”

Pelion nodded. “Ida’s right,”

“What? No!” I ran at her as an irrational, frantic fear shot through me, awakening all my anxieties. “Absolutely not, hell no! I just got you back. Are you serious?”

She rested a cool hand on my cheek, but it did little to abide my panic. “Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.” She suddenly changed into her human form, the one I’d met her in. Although this time, she wore shabbier clothes—the kind you’d expect to see from someone in the slums of Orilla.

“Adrastea, explain.” I implored.

“I can’t tell you if I’m right, but if I’m wrong, I’ll explain this all after the battle tomorrow, and you can spank me for it.”

Was she *flirting* with me right now? I took both her wrists in my hands, still shaking my head. “If you’re putting yourself in danger, I don’t want you to go. Please?”

She brushed her lips against mine, barely a kiss. “I’ll be fine, don’t worry. The first sign of trouble, and I’ll be out as quick as a lion. Do you trust me?” I trusted her more than anything or anyone else, and I knew that wasn’t the problem.

My issue wasn’t that I didn’t trust her. It was the fear of the pain I was finally being relieved from. When she looked at me, I saw she understood. So, I had to remind myself she was still my bold and brilliant Adrastea who took out those wraiths with Ida as her butterflies.

“I’ll always trust you.”

Ida let out a frustrated huff. “You really love to milk that human form. I wish you’d never taken it in the first place.” She gave Ida a mischievous smirk before jutting her one hip out, placing a hand on it as if she were posing for everyone.

“You’re just jealous.”

“I’m not. You tricked that nice king from Aurae into giving it to you; you are the wicked forest nymph everyone warns of.”

Adrastea put a hand on her chest but couldn’t stop the grin that teased the corner of her lips. “Me? A wicked forest nymph? That king

was begging for it.”

Ida chuckled, but for some reason, the thought of her tricking a king into giving her powers made me as horny as it did angry.

“Dull your eyes,” I said.

Her demeanour broke. “They aren’t right?”

I wondered what she did to that king to take his powers. “No, they’re not right. They’re perfect. Dull them.”

She blushed, but the green in her eyes diluted to a more human contrast.

I cocked my head to the side and daydreamed about her and that king of Auras. “Make your hair dark and curly like mine.”

Someone awkwardly cleared their throat, but I didn’t care. I couldn’t stop focusing on that deep, forest green blush of hers as she fulfilled my every command.

“How long?”

“Only an hour at most, I promise.” Her voice was light, and I could tell she was aroused by my sudden edge.

I looked at the clock—marking the time. I tucked a strand of that strange new hair of hers behind one of her human ears before I leaned in closer. “If you’re not back in an hour, I’ll spank you just like you asked, and you’ll show your Prince of Men exactly how you got that king’s magic.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



AMPHISSUS

SHE RETURNED WITHIN THE HOUR, safe and empty-handed.

I honestly didn't care, especially after I'd chewed off all my nails while incessantly staring at the clock for that hour. Pelion and Ida interrogated her for hours, but she only revealed what had happened to them in whispers—away from the rest of us.

I made love to her slowly and steadily that night, not in any rush. Because even though we maybe should have been in a hurry, and even though I promised to spank her, I couldn't. As soon as she was in my arms, I melted into her and just wanted to savour how warm and safe she was under me.

In the quiet, early hours of the morning, she'd pulled out my mother's ring from her bedside table, which had been fashioned on a chain necklace. I couldn't thank her with words, and it didn't seem to matter after she put it on me.

We both fell asleep holding it together.

The sisters had their own calls to battle in Oread, defending against surprise attacks Heria said Typhon was planning, which meant they wouldn't join us in Orilla. I was relieved because I didn't know how I'd be able to focus on Typhon if she were there, but regardless of that, I still worried about her even though she wasn't there.

We all waited in the living room for the sisters since they were the first to leave, and my jaw nearly dropped when I saw them for the first time.Adrastea was head-to-toe in wooden armour, wearing her own symbol of a tree with butterflies around it.

They both had their own wooden horns out. They weren't nearly as big as Heria's, but they were sharp and proud and had the oddest influence over my cock, which was suddenly twitching at attention—right before a battle of all times.

Once we'd all said our goodbyes, the sisters gathered in the middle of the living room, hand-in-hand.

"You ladies fly back home, you hear?" I could tell Thrasher was trying not to get too upset, and Adrastea regarded him with misty

eyes.

“Come back to us too, Pholus. Keep my prince safe.”

Although he did a much better job, Pelion took a small step towards Ida as he fought back the same emotion I was feeling. “The lion always protects his lioness.”

“Always.” Ida’s rainbow eyes burned before they vanished, taking all the life in the house with them.

Pelion placed a strong, gentle hand on my shoulder. “It’s time, Prince of Men. The Pride will follow you to the end.”

I considered his words for a moment. “Pride, Cheirons, we’re all the same. Thank you for fighting by my side and believing in me, Pelion. It’s an honour to fight with you.” Thrasher came up beside me and put an equally steady hand on my other shoulder.

“We’ll be right here the entire time.”

I smiled at them, at my family, both new and old. “Let’s give that fucker the storm.”

PART III

THE LOTUS TREE

“If to the wretched any faith be giv’n,
I swear by all th’ unpitying pow’rs of heav’n,
No wilful crime this heavy vengeance bred;
In mutual innocence our lives we led:
If this be false, let these new greens decay,
Let sounding axes lop my limbs away,
And crackling flames on all my honours prey.
But from my branching arms this infant bear,
Let some kind nurse supply a mother’s care:
And to his mother let him oft be led,
Sport in her shades, and in her shades be fed;
Teach him, when first his infant voice shall frame
Imperfect words, and lisp his mother’s name,
To hail this tree; and say with weeping eyes,
Within this plant my hapless parent lies:
And when in youth he seeks the shady woods,
Oh, let him fly the crystal lakes and floods,
Nor touch the fatal flow’rs; but, warn’d by me,
Believe a Goddess shrin’d in ev’ry tree.”

**THE FABLE OF DRYOPE, OVID’S METAMORPHOSES BOOK 9, [v.
324-393]**

POEM BY ALEXANDER POPE



CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



AMPHISSUS

WE USED magic to shift our forces into the sandy dunes of Kerberos, where Typhon's armies were waiting, but the storm never came.

I decided that instead of worrying about things I couldn't control, like the weather, I should focus on the feeling of my mother's cold ring against my chest.

In only a few days, Pelion was able to rally around two hundred men and women from all corners of Orilla and neighbouring cities. It was almost embarrassing that I was calling myself 'the storm' or a 'Prince of Men' when he was the King of his Pride and had clearly earned the love and trust of everyone. Pelion was one of those people who inspired without words. By simply doing, being, and persevering, everyone who met him immediately knew he'd be the one to follow into battle. Not a broken bastard like me.

And while it might not have been your average war numbers, especially since we knew we were up against three times that with Typhon's forces, I still felt confident we could hold our own. Queen Heria gave us creatures from the forest to assist in the fight and was keeping them hidden in the shadows, waiting for the real battle to begin, but I had seen them in the Forgotten Forest before we'd arrived.

There were goblins like the ones I faced and a few massive tree giants that were the most terrifying creatures I had ever seen. While they were impressive, they weren't impossible to kill—they moved 'as slow as molasses,' as my mother would have said.

But despite all of that, Pelion's support was unwavering. A part of me began to wish we'd survive it all to have more time together as brothers, or at least something close to it.

Our wooden horses were also from Queen Heria, with manes made of ivy that resembled hers, and although they weren't the most comfortable ride for obvious reasons, I was grateful we could spare some of the actual horses. Ida had informed me that the enchanted ones could be 'replanted.' Apparently, Oread had been planting

'seeds of horses' for thousands of years in the Forgotten Forest, even though I'd never seen one before.

Pelion and Thrasher rode on either side of me with a new flag strapped to their horses at the full mast—a flag Pelion designed that week leading into battle, one of his many hidden talents.

It was a centaur and a lion, back-to-back, fighting together. The centaur was nocking an arrow on his bow, and the lion was on its hind legs, poised to attack, baring all its teeth in a mighty roar.

The Cheirons and the Pride.

Typhon's army still held up the symbol of the python with the two femur bones crossed at the bottom, and I'd never realized how angry it looked before. I remembered even feeling a sense of pride when I would see it raised on the morning of a new year.

Pelion's horse came up beside mine. "We meet with him now. It's the final word—we give each other a chance to surrender before the fight. Remember that the words of pythons are nothing but slithers."

Thrasher and Pelion followed me as I slowly strode towards Typhon, but they ensured I stayed in front since I was technically 'leading' everyone. The weather was oddly calm; there was no wild wind or thunder to stir up a reaction from me, just a light Orillan breeze.

We kept a safe distance in the middle of the field, about ten yards, but I felt Typhon's gaze solely on me as if we were the only people there.

The word of pythons is nothing but slithers.

I swallowed the nervous lump in my throat and made sure my voice was loud enough to be heard by all. "This is the last chance, Typhon. Lay down your arms and forfeit the magic as Queen Heria ordered, and we'll surrender our forces."

Typhon didn't smile, didn't sneer. Didn't do anything, really.

"You are from Orilla, bastard. You address me as 'King.'" Thrasher growled at his words, but Typhon ignored it, and so did I.

"So that's a no?"

"I won't be getting on my knees for a nymph whore who doesn't even fight her own battles if that's what you're asking."

"Fine," I clutched the straps attaching me to the enchanted horse even tighter. "If that's your choice, then so be it."

"I made your mom get on her knees, though."

I stopped breathing, but I tried, tried, tried to feel that necklace on my chest.

"Cheap words, Typhon," Pelion growled. "You keep her out of your mouth. It won't win you this war."

"I can still taste her cunt, boy. I wonder if you'll beg like she did."

I felt the bile rise in my throat, and before I knew it, Thrasher's horse was moving towards Typhon. "Words of a python! Go back, and let's settle this honourably!"

Typhon gave Thrasher a simple smile, his voice laced with amusement. "You know I'm always honourable, Cheiron."

Right as he said 'Cheiron,' two arrows flew straight for us, landing in Thrasher's chest and face before his horse had a chance to turn away.

As I looked over to where the arrows had been shot, I saw a man in a black leather mask smiling behind his bow. Osilian.

Thrasher fell off almost instantly, still awkwardly attached to his saddle as his horse ran off to hopefully put his body elsewhere.

Pholus.

Thrasher, my father.

The last Cheiron. Dead, just like that. I prayed it was quick.

As he fell from his horse, I was reminded that I never got to tell him how much I loved my scar. How I wore it as a badge of honour, but even more so since he was the one who'd given it to me.

That familiar, dark void that had taken over when Myko died crept back over me as the warhorn sounded, and I felt the hooves of running horses vibrate in the Earth.

I had a choice at that moment—the option to go watch from the hills as planned and only step in if needed. I had a choice to walk away because I was considered *royalty*.

I waited for the storm, but it never came. It just exploded within me.

"You know what makes a prince?" Typhon called out as his horse veered to the right. "A king."

Tagged by a small group, he then sidelined the oncoming charge and headed eastward as the fighting broke out all around us.

I couldn't afford another thought as the two sides collided, so I took off after him as fast as the horse would allow. Pelion was close behind the entire time, but I could barely hear him over the cries of battle and the clashing of swords.

Typhon rounded a corner near a massive boulder, much like the one in the city, and we were met with fifty or so men who had on the infamous python mask—the one made to look like the soldiers had snake eyes.

My horse came to a sudden halt, along with Pelion and the men and women that followed us.

I saw my Cheirons. Not Cyllarus, since Queen Heria had taken him, but Amykos, Hylonome, and Eurytion.

Myko, Gnome, and Riot...

"Amphissus!" Pelion yelled as I took off my helmet to catch my breath. "They are not the Cheirons. If they attack you, you strike them down!"

"These queens, their fucking laws." Typhon shook his head. "This bitch wants to start a war over death magic we've been using for years. Maybe the 'lands' aren't as wise as they think they are."

I couldn't look away from the Cheirons. The shock of it rendered me as lifeless as they were. Pelion tried to keep me in check, but it was useless.

"Amphisuss—they are *not* your men!"

"Your armies are about to get a real surprise. Good job leading them into it, Pelion, very noble of you." Typhon chuckled as he removed his jacket, revealing a leather vest with a silver python embroidered in the middle. "How long do you think it'll take for a hundred or so mentally deficient Orillans to realize they're fighting dead people? I hope I make it back for that. I just wanted to watch the Cheirons kill the Prince of Men."

"Listen to me, *they are not your men!*" Pelion and his Pride started closing in on me.

Typhon did the same bird whistle he'd done at the castle, and his men brought over a dead Thrasher. My head started unintentionally bobbing back and forth as I took in the arrows still sticking out of his chest and face.

I would *not* kill my Cheirons, not even their dead bodies...

Pelion was practically screaming once he noticed how still I was. "For fuck's sake, they are *not* your men! Stay with me, Amphisus!"

"Kill him, Cheirons. He's passed his due date."

The thunder roared, refusing to be ignored as the dead Cheirons started on me.

I was taken back to the first night I ever saw them all in a room together, only a couple of days after Thrasher had taken me in. My foggy brain cleared when becoming a Cheiron became my purpose, my sole reason for moving forward.

"Take out your sword!" A few of Typhon's men started on Pelion.

Gnome approached me first, but my horse kicked its front legs up, punting him away, which caused me to fall off in the process.

Riot approached me with his hands out, braced to strangle me. At that exact moment, I saw him hold my arms up in front of my face to show me how to box defensively.

"Eurytion..." I tried to kick him away, but his heavy foot came down on my chest and held me in place before Kiko sideswiped him.

I was only able to take in a single gasp of air before Thrasher was on me with his thick knee pressing down on my neck as he tried to restrain my hands.

Look at you, boy. You can't weigh more than a wet rag. Come, I've got some bread I stole from the market...

Here's how you hold the sword. Try not to choke it like your pecker...

I knew I had to take my moment before he had his entire body weight on me.

You always shake hands before a fight, so it's fair. Always respect your opponents, Misfit...

I couldn't tell him I loved him with his knee on me. Or that he was the best father anyone could dream of.

So, I said the words in my head and remembered him smiling at me as a stranger orphan boy before shoving my sword through his face.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



AMPHISSUS

I STOOD up from the ground, covered in Pholus's cold blood.

"My, my! How about 'Prince of Cockroaches' for a new title?" Typhon grinned from his spot in front of the boulder as he put on a pair of black leather gloves that left his fingers exposed, stretching them in anticipation. "I like that. 'Prince of Cockroaches,' since you won't die. King and Prince of Cockroaches."

Someone ran at me, but I had them down before they even got close.

After they were dead, I flipped the wooden hilt of my sword in my hand and admired the bloodied blade—the same move Riot used to do when he'd get a feel for a new weapon.

Kiko ambushed a swarm of Typhon's men with more members of the Pride, affording me some leverage as I faced a more minor group.

The rain finally reached us, awakening me. Lightning struck, illuminating the hills of Kerberos, and I saw it all.

I saw Pelion fighting.

I saw those men and women in the field fighting.

I saw Adrastea and Ida guarding Oread against Typhon's surprise attacks.

"Oread is free land. It decides who gets to rule over it, not you." My words weren't my own, but apparently, it was the right thing to say because my eardrums were almost blasted by the thunder that followed.

Typhon and I were close enough to engage, and my voice got louder so he could hear me through the storm. I lifted my sword to the sky, pointing the blade right at those violent strikes of lightning and dark, vengeful clouds.

"You feel that? Dryope is the fucking storm!"

Typhon, blinded with rage, ran out to finally face his bastard son with his ornately decorated sword, the blade darker and thicker than anyone else's. I dodged his first slash, and we met each other with slightly uncoordinated force—just pure, raw emotion. Regardless of

how fast we fought, Typhon was graceful on his feet, constantly averting my swings as he weaved around me.

A few of his men ran to his aid, but bolts of beautiful lightning struck them down from where they stood. Typhon watched it happen, surprised, which left me with an opening to kick him in the stomach and restrain his arms before he had time to lift his sword.

We were all fists and kicks at that point. I almost dislocated his arm, forcing him to lose his weapon, but he punched me with a free hand before I could follow through. We feverishly grappled, each trying to get a hold of the other's neck, and at one point, my hand was bloody enough to slip out of his grasp and grab the knife in my belt.

The first blow landed in his chest with a disturbingly satisfying crunch. Typhon's eyes widened, but they didn't seem to glaze over right away as I pulled the weapon out of him, panting like a rabid animal.

And I couldn't help myself—I stabbed him again. And again. His blood was cold, but my own was coursing through my veins so fast it warmed everything I touched, everything I was near.

"Amphissus!"

Adrastea's voice pulled me from my trance. I stopped stabbing Typhon long enough to see her running towards me, taking down soldiers along the way.

"Amphissus, get away from him! Now!"

A distant rumble of thunder sounded as if agreeing with her, but I was still too stunned to respond. Rain began to pour down, washing Typhon's cold blood off my face.

Cold blood.

And then he reached out and grabbed me, right after I'd stabbed him to death...

His face, neck, and chest had been shredded apart, and even though nothing was left recognizable as soft masses of bloodied tissue and organs hung out, he stood tall and proud before me. I think he might have even smiled.

Adrastea's butterflies were there, along with all other types of wildlife. Bees, birds, even the smallest flies flew in and seized control over everything as the guards fought alongside our forces.

Typhon grabbed me by the throat, throwing me down. I tried to look up, but the sight of his bashed-in face almost made me gag before he landed another blow. As my head was knocked to the side, I noticed my ring lying on the ground beside me.

The butterflies and a few other creatures swarmed Typhon. He struck me again, and that time, my jaw went slack. His hands—despite the butterflies slicing them to shreds—wrapped around my throat and tightened. Everything went black.

Adrastea kept calling out for me, but those butterflies and Typhon's disfigured face were the last things I saw before I completely blacked out.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



AMPHISSUS

MY MOTHER and I were in the middle of a snowy field, and I was sitting in her lap facing the snowfall as we leaned against a lotus tree. Despite the winter season, the tree was covered in ripe blossoms as if it were springtime. The flakes weren't cold or harsh like I remembered—they were soft, quiet, and thick as they tenderly floated from the bright white skies.

She stroked my hair, and I realized I was a little boy again, except I wasn't all bones from being starved.

"You'll always be my little prince," she whispered.

I'd forgotten she used to call me that. It was probably why I hated hearing it so much, just like Thrasher with his name. "My strong, brave little prince."

"You'll always be a Cheiron." I looked up to see all six Cheirons standing in front of us, all smiling down at me. Not the strange, dead creatures I had last encountered.

"You did beautifully, Amphissus," Pholus said.

Hylonome laughed in agreement as he held hands with Cyllarus, who looked utterly peaceful and content for once.

This was the place. This was important.

Mother held me tighter. "You brought the storm."

I couldn't see her since she was holding me, so I smiled into her heart.

Suddenly, I heard Adrastea's laughter from far away, and I looked up to see the two of us walking in the snowy distance, leaning into each other as we casually strode along. I felt the need to go to her, to us, but I didn't want to leave just yet, so I tightened my hold on my mother, just like I had that day the priest took me away.

"I'll always be right here," she said softly.

"Wanderer!" Adrastea called out, panicked.

"Your Adrastea needs you."

Adrastea needs me.

"We'll always be here," the Cheirons all said at the same time.

"Right here." My mother took my hand with the ring on it and placed it right over my heart. I smiled and looked back up to the Cheirons, letting myself believe in this world where I was twelve, and they were all happy and safe.

"I love you," I told them, knowing it would be my last and only chance to say it to them all.

"The storm isn't over yet," mother whispered before she kissed my head.

EPILOGUE | ORILLA | THE HILLS OF KERBEROS

In the hills of Kerberos, the King of Orilla killed his bastard son.

Amphissus did not have his mother's ring on him when he died, so he was not protected by its spell—the spell that Dryope had secretly woven into the ring without her brother, Pythian, knowing.

Pelion's forces were falling, and the King of his Pride had no choice but to surrender as he witnessed the death of Amphissus. They were outnumbered, outsmarted, and no number of magical forces from Oread could have saved them at that point.

As Pelion went to bend the knee to Typhon, lightning struck in the centre of the battlefield, stunning everyone—even those who were still fighting—into sudden silence.

A lotus tree that had not been there before now stood in the middle of the field. Its ripe blossoms crackled with flames leftover from the bolt, illuminating the bark as it came to life before everyone's eyes. Even King Typhon froze, anticipating a standoff with the Queen he'd met in the castle only a week prior.

The tree twisted, its boughs reaching up to the sky, and a woman slowly emerged from within its trunk. Adrastea, the nymph loved by Amphissus, gasped in recognition.

It was Dryope, the Goddess, and the Earth had returned her to the physical plane. Had granted her the privilege of protecting her son one final time.

King Typhon surrendered, but was it already too late?
Or did Dryope kill the python?



GLOSSARY

Amphissus: am•fiss•us
Amykos: a•mee•kos
Bythos: b•ewth•os
Chariclo: har•ee•klaw
Cheirons: hee•rawns
Cyllarus: kill•arr•us
Dryope: drai•op•eh
Eurytion: eh•vree•tee•awn
Heria: hai•ree•ah
Hylonome: hi•lo•nom•eh
Oread: aw•ree•ad
Orilla: aw•rill•aw
Osilian: aw•sill•ee•en
Pelion: peh•lee•un
Pholea: fah•lee•uh
Pholus: fah•liss
Pythamphus: pith•am•fiss
Pythian: pai•thee•un
Typhon: tai•faan

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PRINCE OF PYTHONs is the debut adult fantasy series from Canadian author E.D Alpaugh.

After earning a degree in marketing, E.D. explored several fields that involved advertising before rediscovering her passion for writing. These days, when she's not working her wonderful part-time job at a legal recreational store in Ontario, you'll find E.D. scribbling insane book ideas on an overpriced notepad from Indigo somewhere in Victoria Park.

www.edalpaugh.ca

@edalpaugh (all social media platforms)

FOLLOW FOR UPDATES ON THE SEQUEL TO PRINCE OF PYTHON

QUEEN OF TREES