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Dream Warrior

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Extract

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PIATKUS

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PROLOGUE

THEY WOULD BE COMING FOR HIM.

Cratus stood on top of the highest point of Olympus, staring out at the beautiful setting sun. Ribbons of warm color split the darkening sky, reminding him of a brilliant fire opal glistening and twinkling. Nowhere else was it more breathtaking than here, and he wanted to watch it set one last time before he submitted himself for his well-deserved punishment.

He wouldn't ask for clemency. There was no need. He knew better than anyone the wrath of Zeus. For centuries, he'd been the Olympian god's hammer, carrying out his justice.

Now that justice would come for him.

"Run and I will run with you."

He glanced down at the small form of his sister Nike. Where his wings were black, hers were a pure white. Her dark curly hair was wrapped with a white ribbon that matched her gown. The personification of victory, she'd been his accomplice throughout his entire life.

They, along with their brother and sister, had been

the sentinels of Zeus. Beloved guardians, they had been treasured by the father of the gods even above Zeus's own children. Until Cratus had committed an unforgivable sin—he'd spared a life he should have taken. It wasn't his place to question his master, only to do his bidding. He still couldn't understand why he'd done it. The gods knew compassion was an alien emotion to him.

Yet here he was . . .

Time to die.

Cratus sighed wearily. "I can't ask that of you, akribos. You still have Zeus's favor. Don't jeopardize that for me. Besides, no one can run from Olympian justice. You know that as well as I do. No matter where I hide, they will find me."

Nike took his hand and held it to her cheek. "I know why you did it and I respect you for it."

And that changed nothing.

What was done was done. Now there was nothing left except the punishment.

He glanced away from the sun to see her there by his side, her beautiful face still tucked into the palm of his numb hand. In all eternity, she was the only one he'd ever really trusted. His sister with the haunting pale blue eyes, whose courage and loyalty was without equal. For her, he would do anything.

But he would not sacrifice her for his stupidity.

"Stay here where it's safe."

She tightened her grip. "I would rather be with you, brother. To the end as always."

He stroked her cheek tenderly before he dropped his hand away and looked down to where the gods'

temples were nestled like jeweled eggs among the evergreen foliage. “Stay here, Nike . . . please.”

She nodded, but he saw the reluctance in her eyes. “For you only.”

Giving Nike his golden helm to keep as a memento of their battles together, Cratus kissed her brow before he headed down the mountain toward the hall of the gods. His embossed shield as heavy as his conscience, he leaned on his thick spear to keep him steady on his path.

As promised, Nike stayed behind, but he could feel her gaze on him as he walked. Her offer to run haunted him. But it wasn’t in his nature to run from or submit to anything. He was a warrior, and it was all he knew. All he lived for.

He would fight to the end.

More than that, he refused to give his enemies the satisfaction of dragging him before Zeus in chains. He’d lived his life standing on his own two feet, and so would he die.

Alone. Without flinching, begging or fear.

It was a fitting end, really. After all the lives he’d callously taken for Zeus, this would be his penance.

He paused before the doors that led to where the gods would be gathered. He’d walked here among them a hundred thousand times.

But today would be his last.

His head held high, he threw open the huge gold doors. As soon as he did, silence rang out in the hall as everyone held their collective breaths, waiting to see how Zeus would punish him.

Zeus froze in place before his throne, his eyes dark

and threatening. Cratus's gaze went to the right side of the dais, where his post had been for all these centuries.

It would be his post no more.

Taking a breath for courage, he dropped his shield just inside the door. The hollow, metallic sound echoed loudly in the silence and mimicked the emptiness inside Cratus's heart.

Still, no one moved.

Not even the gowns of the women rustled.

His gaze locked determinedly on Zeus's, he hefted his spear above his shoulder and threw it hard to bury it in the wall right above Zeus's head—a last act of defiance that made every god present gasp in shock.

Cratus pulled his sword over his head and tossed it to the feet of Ares. Next he removed his quiver and bow, which he handed to Artemis. With every step he took toward Zeus, he peeled a piece of his armor off and dropped it to the marble floor, where it clanked loudly. First vambraces, then his greaves, his cuirass and finally his armored belt.

By the time he reached Zeus, he wore nothing but his brown loincloth. He tucked his wings down and lowered his head in silent submission to the king of the gods.

Zeus's curse rang out before he pulled a lightning bolt out of his glowing quiver and used it to slash across Cratus's face.

Cratus tasted blood as his eye and cheek erupted with throbbing pain. Covering his face with his hand,

he felt the warm blood from his wound pouring between his fingers.

"How dare you come here after what you've done! No one defies me!"

The next blow knocked Cratus off his feet and sent him skittering across the floor. The cold marble peeled at his skin and bruised his muscles.

He came to rest at the feet of Apollo. Looking down in repugnance, the god sneered at him before he moved back, out of Zeus's line of fire.

Cratus wiped at the blood on his cheek, which dripped from his face to the floor, before he pushed himself up.

He didn't get far.

Zeus planted his foot on his spine and held him down on his stomach. "You have disobeyed me. I want you to grovel for my mercy."

Cratus shook his head in denial. "I beg for nothing."

Zeus kicked him over and drove a lightning bolt through his shoulder, pinning him to the floor. Cratus screamed out at the piercing agony that pulsed with every beat of his heart.

"You insolent dog. You dare defy me even now?"

"I will not—" His words broke off in a growl as Zeus planted another lightning bolt in his side and then in his other shoulder.

Curling his lip, Zeus stepped back. He swept an imperious glare around the gathered gods. "Is there one among you who will speak up in defense of this defiant maggot?"

With his one undamaged eye, Cratus looked to his brethren.

One by one, they turned away. Hera, Aphrodite, Apollo, Athena, Artemis, Ares, Hephaestus, Poseidon, Demeter, Helios, Hermes, Eros, Hypnos . . . et cetera. But the ones who really stung were his mother and his brother Zelos and sister Bia.

They stepped back and looked away, shame-faced.

So be it.

In his heart, he knew Nike would have spoken up for him. But she had done as he asked and stayed behind.

Zeus pierced him with another lightning bolt that would have probably hurt, too, had his body been capable of feeling any more pain. "It appears no one here cares for you."

Big surprise there. Cratus laughed, spitting up blood, as he remembered the day he'd forced Hephaestus to chain Prometheus to a rock for his eternal punishment. The god had been reluctant to carry out the orders and had called Cratus pitiless for his insistence that they obey Zeus's heartless command.

Cratus in turn had mocked Hephaestus's weak-kneed compassion. He'd told the god it was better to be the punisher than the victim.

Now it was his turn to suffer. No wonder no one would speak up for him.

He deserved no better.

Zeus pulled him up from the floor by his throat. His entire body numb from the pulsating lightning bolts that still pierced his flesh, Cratus could do nothing but stare at the father god.

"Will you pick up your arms and fight for me?"

Cratus shook his head. He would never again serve as a mindless dog obeying his master's every whim.

"Then you will suffer for all eternity and you will beg me every day for my mercy."

CHAPTER 1

New Orleans, 2009
6,000 years later . . .
Roughly
(Give or take a few centuries . . .)

DELPHINE PAUSED TO GET HER BEARINGS AS SHE looked around the old buildings with iron-work balconies or elaborate wood trim, many of which had boards over their windows. What a strange city . . . but then she wasn't used to being in the mortal realm except through human dreams. There the world of man looked entirely different.

This extremely loud and bright place baffled her. Not to mention the awful smell of something she thought might be manure of some kind . . .

She jumped as a loud, rude sound startled her while a car went speeding past.

Phobos grabbed her arm and yanked her to stand beside him on the uneven sidewalk. "Be careful. If a car hits you, it will hurt."

"Sorry. I wasn't paying attention."

He nodded before he glanced about the street where several cars were parked in front of a row of houses that were so close together, she wondered if they didn't share a common wall.

"The garage should be that one over there."

She looked to where he was pointing. Landry's Garage, Detail and Repair. "Are you sure he's there?"

Phobos gave her a droll stare. "His presence isn't what's in doubt, his *reception* of us is. We'll be lucky if he doesn't gut us both faster than Noir would." He wiped his hand over his brow to remove some of the perspiration. But it was quickly replaced by more.

She'd never been in a hotter place in her life. Poor Phobos, wearing all black clothes, wasn't exactly dressed for it, either. He looked as miserable in the heat as she felt. She'd always thought of him as one of the more attractive gods with his exceptionally dark hair and sharp features.

Tall and lithe, he moved fluidly and fast. Something that terrified his enemies and made him deadly in a fight. His job was to inspire dread, and at one time he and his twin brother, Deimos, had wreaked havoc on ancient battlefields. In more recent centuries, they'd become warriors for the Furies, punishing anyone who crossed the gods.

Until two days ago when everything had changed . . .

She shivered at the memory. Even though she should feel nothing, her stomach was still knotted over the horror she'd witnessed. They were still trying to piece their world back together after Noir's vicious attack.

"How did we get chosen for this again?" she asked him.

"We weren't there when Zeus banished him and therefore he shouldn't hate us as much as he hates the other gods." He snorted derisively. "Most importantly, we're part of the handful who is neither imprisoned nor dead."

That was comforting . . .

Not at all.

And it didn't mean Cratus would listen to them, never mind actually help them. "You think we stand a chance?"

"Like an icicle on the equator. But Cratus pulls his powers from the same primal Source that birthed Noir. Without him on our team, we're completely screwed."

She still wasn't sure about this. Zeus had sent them here to beg a favor from an ex-god who most likely would gut them as soon as they appeared. She'd never met Cratus, but his nasty reputation was legendary.

He had mercy on no one.

His brutality had only been matched by his single-minded determination. Even though Zeus had bound his god powers, the other gods continued to fear him. That alone said it all about his winning personality. Hephaestus himself had warned her that there was no reasoning with Cratus.

The man was angry and mean.

And that was before his punishment had driven him insane.

"Are you sure there's no other way?"

Phobos's features darkened. "Half your brethren are dead, and every time mine go out, they get their hides

kicked back to the Stone Age. Believe me, belly-crawling to this asshole is the last thing I want to do."

But it was a necessary evil.

"Zeus is the one who should be doing this," she groused as she wiped the sweat from her own brow.

Phobos snorted. "You want to tell *him* that?"

Hardly. The father god tolerated no one to question him. She narrowed her eyes. "This was your bright idea, Phobos. You lead the way."

"What are you? Scared?"

She gave him a nasty glare of her own. With her half-human blood, she did have more emotions than most of her Dream-Hunter brethren, but they were muted compared to mankind's. "If I were capable of hate, I would probably hate you."

He sucked his breath in sharply between his teeth. "You know, you get the best sex from a woman when she's angry and hating."

"Since I've never had sex with a woman, how would I know?" She shoved him gently on the shoulder to move him forward. "We're on a mission, Dolophonos. Remember if we fail, your twin dies."

"Believe me, I haven't forgotten." He crossed the street with purpose.

Delphine followed in spite of the bad feeling she couldn't shake. This wasn't going to turn out well. She knew it.

They entered the office of the garage to find a small girl who was doodling on a sheet of paper and a woman around the age of thirty sitting at a dinged, metal desk. The woman was pretty enough, with small

brown eyes and dark hair. Her smile was bright when she saw them. "Can I help you?"

Phobos stepped past Delphine to approach the desk. "We're looking for a guy named Cratus."

She frowned. "I don't know anyone by that name. Sorry. Maybe he's at the garage down the street."

Phobos scratched his head, obviously as baffled as Delphine was. "I know for a fact that he works here in this garage. Believe me, my sources are beyond reproach."

The little girl wiped her nose and pushed a pair of glasses back with her knuckle. "Did they lose their friend, Mommy?"

"Do your homework, Mollie." She turned her attention back to Phobos. "Look, I'm really sorry, but I've never heard the name Cratus before. I've worked here for five years and I assure you that none of our guys are named that. It's not exactly a name you'd forget—you know?" The phone started ringing. She put her hand on it. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"No." Phobos stepped over to the large window that looked out from the office into the garage area where men in gray and blue coveralls were working on various cars.

Delphine followed his lead and froze as she saw the man they sought.

Holy gods . . .

No one could miss *him*.

Little wonder he was the god of strength and the son of Warcraft . . . That power and formidableness bled from every pore of his body. Standing well over

six feet tall, he rippled with well-defined muscles. As she watched him, he wiped grease from his hands with a dark blue cloth. His gray coverall suit had been unzipped, and the sleeves wrapped around his lean waist, leaving his torso covered by a black tank top that only made those muscles more apparent. Black tribal tattoos decorated both of his arms from the wrists to his shoulders.

But it was his face that made her gasp. She'd never seen a man more beautifully made, except for the jagged scar that ran down the right side of his face, hairline to earlobe. His right eye was covered with a black patch and from the depth of the scar, she wondered if he'd lost the eye completely to whatever injury had caused it.

Yet it in no way detracted from his handsomeness. If anything, it added to it and made his face all the more rugged. His jet-black hair was sweaty and curled slightly around a face that was chiseled from steel and dusted with dark whiskers.

Fierce power emanated from every inch of him. Strong and lethal, it said he should be on a battlefield, sword in hand, killing and maiming his enemies, not stuck in a garage, working on cars.

He was everything she'd heard and more.

May the gods help them . . .

If he didn't kill the two of them, she'd be stunned.

Phobos glanced at Delphine over his shoulder. "He is definitely here."

The secretary frowned as she hung up the phone and saw Cratus through the window. "You're looking for Jericho?"

Phobos faced her. "You mean Cratus."

She pointed at the man Delphine had been ogling. "That's Jericho Davis. He's only been here a couple of weeks. Is he in trouble with the law or something? If you're here to serve process—"

"No. Nothing like that." Phobos gave her an almost charming smile. "We're old friends."

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "Well, if his name isn't Jericho Davis, we need to know. Landry is a stickler about his people toeing the line. We don't take in convicts or riffraff here. This is a respectable business, and we intend to keep it that way."

Phobos held his hands up. "Don't worry, I'm sure he's not a felon. I just need to talk to him for a minute."

The secretary snorted. "I thought you said you knew him."

"I do."

"Then how are you going to talk to a man who's mute?"

Phobos snapped his attention to Delphine, who was as shocked as he was by that disclosure.

Surely Zeus wouldn't have been that cruel . . .

What was she? Insane? Of course he would.

Sick at the thought, Delphine looked back to where "Jericho" had his head under the hood of another car. What exactly had been done to him? Zeus had taken his godhood, his life and most likely his voice and eye.

Getting his help was looking less and less likely by the second.

"You stay here," Phobos said as he put his hand on the knob of the door that led from the office to the garage.

No problem there. She'd rather confront a rabid lion than try to gain a favor from a man the gods had screwed over so badly. Why on earth or beyond would *this* man ever help them?

Hoping for the best, she walked to the window to watch Phobos. She closed her eyes and opened herself up to the ether so that she could hear their conversation.

The shop was loud with mechanical noises and a radio playing "Live Your Life" by T.I. Several of the men were chatting and joking while they worked. One was singing along, off-key, while he added air to the tires of a red Jeep.

Phobos paused beside the white Intrepid where Cratus stood.

Cratus glanced up, and his face froze an instant before he looked back down and continued working.

Phobos stepped closer. "We need to talk."

Cratus ignored him.

"Cratus—"

"I don't know what you're doing in here," an older man in a coverall matching Cratus's said as he stopped beside Phobos, "but you're wasting your time trying to talk to old Jericho there. Boy can't speak." The man shook his head. "Not that he needs to. The way he works on a car is magic." The man looked at the others and laughed. "Trying to talk to Jericho . . ." More laughter joined his before he walked off to work on the Jeep where the man was singing.

"Jericho," Phobos tried again. "Please give me one minute of your time."

If looks could kill, Phobos would be a distant mem-

ory. Jericho flipped the wrench in his hand before he walked over to another car.

Phobos glanced at Delphine, who shrugged in response. She had no idea how to persuade him.

Sighing, Phobos followed him. "C'mon, I—"

Jericho spun on him so fast that Delphine didn't even realized he'd moved until he had Phobos slung over the hood of a car and pinned in place by a tight hold on this throat. "Fuck off and die, you putrid bastard," he snarled in the ancient Greek language of the gods as he banged Phobos's head furiously against the hood.

Every mechanic who heard his deep growl paused to stare at him.

"Be damned," a tall, lean African-American man said. "He can speak after all. Anybody know what language that was?"

"Russian?"

"Nah, I think it's German."

"Dude," a younger guy said, pulling at Cratus's arm. "You're going to dent the hood and when you do, *that* will come out of your paycheck."

Grimacing, Cratus slung Phobos off the hood like a rag doll. Phobos rolled halfway through the bay before he caught himself.

His features looking shaken, Phobos pushed himself to his feet. When he spoke, he continued to use their language so that the humans wouldn't understand them. "We need your help, Cratus."

As he moved past Phobos, Cratus drove his shoulder into Phobos's, making Phobos grimace in pain and rub his arm. He went back to the Intrepid. "Cratus is dead."

"You're the only one—"

Cratus growled at him. "You're dead to me. *All* of you. Now get out."

Delphine projected her thoughts to Phobos. "Should I come in?"

"No. I don't think it'll help." Phobos turned to Cratus. "The fate of the entire world is in your hands. Don't you care?"

The feral look Cratus gave him said no. Well, that, and for him to go to Tartarus and rot.

Delphine sighed. What were they going to do now? They needed the god of strength. One who could pull power from the primal Source to combat the most evil of beings. Without Cratus, they didn't stand a chance of winning against Noir and his army of Skoti.

The older man walked over to Cratus. "So what country are you from, anyway?"

Cratus ignored him as he returned to his work in silence.

Phobos moved to stand by his side. "Zeus is willing to forgive you for what you did. He's offering you your godhood back. We need you desperately."

When Cratus still refused to respond, Phobos let out a frustrated breath. "Look, I understand why you're mad. But my brother's life is on the line here. If you don't help me, Noir *will* kill him."

Cratus didn't even twitch as he worked.

A muscle worked in Phobos's jaw. "Fine. When the world ends and everyone here is dead, remember you're the only one of us who could have stopped it."

Cratus continued ignoring him.

Phobos turned and headed back to her.

Delphine kept waiting for Cratus to reconsider and stop Phobos. But he really appeared to have meant what he'd said. He didn't care.

Even she, who had nothing save muted emotions, had more feelings than this man showed.

"We're so dead," Phobos said in a dire tone as he rejoined her. "Maybe we ought to join the other team before they pound us into hash."

Delphine cast a hopeless glance back at the man in the garage. "Maybe I should try."

He shook his head. "There's no reaching him. He's past help."

"I can try to contact him in his dreams tonight. He won't be able to run from me then."

He didn't tell her no, but his look reiterated the fact that he thought she was wasting her time. "You want backup?"

"I think I'll be more effective alone."

Phobos snorted. "Good luck. If you need me, I'll be on standby."

Delphine glanced back at Cratus. He was working, but she saw the agony in his one eye. It was so deep and biting that it made her ache for him. . . .

How strange to have those feelings. But they meant nothing. She had a mission to fulfill.

I'll be seeing you tonight. And she definitely didn't intend to fail.

JERICHO PAUSED AS HE SAW THE GREASE ON HIS HAND covering the tattoo he'd used to hide the words of

condemnation his own mother had burned into his skin at Zeus's command. Old memories tore through him anew as he thought about the way the Olympians had turned on him.

And all because he'd refused to murder an infant. Closing his eyes, he remembered that one defining moment so clearly. The small hut . . . the goddess's screams as she begged him for mercy.

"Kill me, not my baby, please! For the sake of Zeus, the baby's innocent. I'll do anything."

He'd tightened his grip on the child, fully intending to fulfill his duty. The baby's father had gone at his back. But the god of pain, Dolor, had caught him and cut him down before the goddess who'd tried so desperately to save her family.

That baby's only sin had been its birth.

And as he'd looked into that small, trusting face and the baby had smiled up at him, unaware of what was going on, he'd faltered.

"Kill it," Dolor had snarled.

Cratus had pulled his dagger out to slice its throat. Laughing, the baby had reached for him, its eyes twinkling with fire and joy as its tiny fingers wrapped around his large hand.

So he'd done the only thing he could. He'd used his powers to put the baby to sleep, then smuggled it out and given it over to peasants to raise.

One moment of compassion.

An eternity of shame, abuse and degradation.

Now they dared to ask him for a favor after all they'd done to him. They were out of their collective minds.

And he was through with them.

"Hey, man," Darice said, coming up to him. "Why didn't you ever tell us you could speak?"

Because talking to Darice might lead to friendship. And if he made that mistake, Darice would die right before him. Brutally and mercilessly.

Zeus had taken everything from him.

So he ignored Darice while he unbolted the alternator that needed to be replaced.

Darice made a sound of disgust. "Whatever. Guess you're too good to associate with the rest of us."

Let them think that. It was much easier than trying to explain a truth they would never accept. He was alone in this world. As always.

Darice wandered over to work on the Toyota that had come in earlier. He and Paul joked good-naturedly while they set about flushing the radiator and putting in new plugs.

Jericho had just pulled out the alternator when a shadow fell over him. Looking up, he found the shop owner, Jacob Landry. Short and pudgy, Landry had salt-and-pepper hair that was receding and a pair of greedy blue eyes.

"I heard there was some trouble here with you earlier."

Jericho shook his head no.

"Um-hmmm. Charlotte done told me that you can speak, too. Is that true?"

He nodded.

"Boy, why you want to lie to me? I done told you when I hired you that I don't play that bullshit. You

want to work here, you come to work on time, keep your personal life at home and give me no lip and no lies. Comprende?"

"Yes, sir," he said as he tried to keep the hostility out of his voice. He hated that he was reduced to belly-crawling to assholes like this just so that he could eat. "It won't happen again, Mr. Landry. I promise."

Landry poked him sharply in the shoulder. "It better not."

Jericho tightened his grip on the wrench in his hand, wanting to give Landry a taste of what he was capable of. There had been a time when he'd have gutted anyone who talked to him like that. Never mind someone who'd actually dared to touch him uninvited. Before his human life had begun, everyone who came into contact with him quivered in fear of his strength and sternness.

But Landry was a bully. He enjoyed his minuscule power over the people who worked for him. He only felt good about himself when they were groveling for their livelihood.

And as much as it sucked, Jericho needed this job. As the world became more modern, it was getting harder and harder to find people who could make fake IDs at a reasonable price and who were willing to let him live off the grid.

Other immortals were allowed to accumulate wealth, but that, too, was beyond him. Any time he tried to save even a dollar, Zeus cleaned him out. One catastrophe after another.

So had been his existence for so many centuries that he no longer even bothered to count them.

He was nothing and he would never have anything again. Not even dignity.

Sighing, he went back to work, hating himself and this life.

You could change that. . . .

It had to be bad for Zeus to send someone to ask for his help.

You could be a god again. . . .

The dream of that thought tormented him. It was tempting except for one thing. He'd have to look at the very beings who'd turned their backs on him and left him to this pathetic state. Every one of those bastards had ignored him.

Every one of them.

Or worse, they'd tortured him.

Every single night. For thousands of years, the Dolophoni—the children of the Furies—and the dream gods had come to him and killed him. And every morning, he was resurrected to live this miserable existence right where he'd left off the night before.

Over and over. Bloody and violent. No matter how hard he tried to fight them off, he held no powers against them. They gleefully held him down and beat him or carved him to maximize the pain of his sentence. Every organ in his body had been torn out of him so many times that the pain was seared into his DNA. He dreaded every night and the horror it would ultimately bring.

Just last night, two of them had cut his heart out . . .

Again.

At the end of the day, he would never forgive what had been done to him. So what if something was

threatening the world? If the world was to end, then at least he'd have some peace.

Maybe this time he'd actually stay dead.

DELPHINE RETURNED TO OLYMPUS SO SHE COULD spend the rest of the day researching her latest target. For hours, she watched him work in solitude. While the other men joked and laughed with each other, he kept to himself. Bitterly alone. Every now and again, she'd see him look up at the others and their camaraderie with a glint of longing so potent it made her ache.

They ignored him as if he were invisible.

At six-thirty, he washed up after the others were finished and leaving. He pulled his coveralls off, tucked them into a beat-up black cloth backpack that he slung over his shoulder and headed out on an older-styled motorcycle.

He stopped briefly to go into a small grocery store on a corner where he grabbed a loaf of bread, chicken salad spread, a paperback novel, and a six-pack of beer. Without speaking to a single person, he paid for it, tucked it into his backpack and went home to a tiny one-room efficiency apartment. The place was so run-down even the scuffed, chipped linoleum floor dipped in the middle. She wondered how the building kept from falling down around him.

It had to be the most depressing thing she'd ever seen.

There was no furniture whatsoever. Not a single piece, or even a TV or computer. Worn blankets were pinned to the windows for curtains, and his bed was only a threadbare sleeping blanket on the floor with a

single pillow that was so old and flat he might as well not have it. Next to that, he had one additional pair of shoes and a small stack of clothes and one old wool jacket.

That was it.

Her heart clenched as she watched him open a beer, then wash the coveralls in the sink before he hung them up to dry in the rundown bathroom. Brushing his hand through his dark hair, he went back to the kitchen—which had no stove and only a filthy old refrigerator—to make a single sandwich out of the bread that had been flattened in his backpack. He ate it in silence while sitting on the sleeping blanket, reading his book.

Every now and again, he'd look up expectantly at any sudden sound. Once he was sure it was nothing, he'd return to his reading.

Just after midnight, he sighed and stared up at his ceiling. "Where the hell are you, assholes? You scared or something?"

He waited as if he really expected an answer. Glaring furiously, he put the book on the floor and pulled his tank top off to show her a chest rife with horrendous scars. She would think them battle wounds, but they were so jagged and torn that they appeared to be where his vital organs had been viciously ripped out of his body.

"Fine," he said, his tone filled with disgust, "just don't leave too big a mess in my place. I'm sick of having to clean up blood first thing in the morning and don't fuck up my book. I'd like to finish it for once." He turned out the lights and went to sleep.

Alone and in total solitude.

Who had he been talking to?

He's gone insane from his punishment. . . . Hephaestus had warned her of his delicate mental state. Obviously the god was right.

Delphine sat in the darkness, waiting for Cratus to reach the dream state—which took forever, since he seemed to be fighting sleep. It was as if he was waiting for someone to attack him and he wanted to be alert when they did.

As she waited, all she wanted to do was comfort him and she didn't even understand why. She'd never felt a compulsion like this before.

Probably because she knew what it was like to feel isolated from the world—granted, not as much as he was, but she still remembered the desolate feelings of her former life. As a young woman, she'd lived among the humans and had thought herself one of them. Even then she'd known something wasn't quite right with her. She'd never felt emotions the way other humans did.

It hadn't been until her teen years that her powers had fully manifested. She'd been so afraid of rejection or hostility from her family and friends that she'd held it in and told no one about her vivid dreams and frightening powers.

Until the Dream-Hunter Arik had shown up in her dreams and explained to her who and what she really was. Explained that her mother had been seduced by a sleep god, which had resulted in her birth.

To this day, she owed her sanity to Arik. He alone had explained to her how the Oneroi—the gods of

sleep—had been created to help mankind with their dreams. Night after night, he'd visited and trained her until she had control of her powers. And once she was able to channel them, he'd taken her to the Vanishing Isle, where her kind lived, and had introduced her to the other gods.

There for centuries they'd been friends.

Even though Arik had eventually gone Skoti—turned into the evil dream gods who preyed on humans as they slept—she'd still been grateful to him for his guidance. So much so that she'd never pursued him in the dream realm to fight against him as she'd done other Skoti.

But Cratus had no one to protect him . . .

A fact that became brutally apparent an instant later when the air around him surged. Delphine started to go in, but an inner sense told her not to.

Something bad was about to happen.

She could feel the evilness of it. The fierce power went down her spine, painfully, and it froze her to the spot.

In the blink of an eye, one of the deadliest of all creatures materialized over his sleeping form. At first glance Azura appeared small and frail. But appearances were most deceiving. The very heart of evil, she was deadlier than any creature except for her brother and sister. Her skin was blue to mirror the icy coldness of her heart. Her hair, eyes, eyelashes and lips were snow-white. Dressed in a black leather halter top and pants, she knelt down by Cratus's side.

Delphine tried to transport in, but couldn't.

Azura looked back over her shoulder and smiled as if she knew Delphine could see her. "You will all perish," she said softly before she reached out to touch Cratus on the arm.

He came awake ready to battle.

Azura dodged his hands. "Calm yourself, Titan. I'm not here to harm you."

Cratus froze as he found himself in the presence of one of the original gods of the universe. The only problem was, she was concentrated evil. Granted, she wasn't quite as sinister as her brother, Noir, or sister, Braith, but she gave him a good run for his money.

"What are you doing here?"

She smiled. "You know what I'm here for, baby. I've come to make you an offer you won't want to refuse."

He sneered at her. "I'm not interested in fighting for the gods."

She patted him gently on his face. "Sweetie, you so greatly underestimate us." She dropped her hand to his arm.

Cratus hissed in pain as the words his mother had placed there burned like fire. The agony was so fierce that he couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. He wanted to shove her away, but even that was impossible.

She whispered in the first language of the universe and as she did so, he felt his will slipping. His sight dimming.

Then the pain was gone, and his heart was as empty as the sty he called home.

"Follow us, Cratus, and you will serve at the right hand of the masters. No one will ever be able to turn you again."

He wanted to tell her no, but the part of his heart that resisted was closed and sealed. Instead he saw all the centuries of his suffering. Felt all the degradations he'd been through, starting with Zeus pinning him to the floor with his lightning bolts.

As the son of Warcraft and Hate, he wanted revenge.

No, he burned for it.

"Come with me, Cratus, and we will make Zeus beg you for mercy."

"I live in a world where if something seems too good to be true, it always is."

She gave him a sweet, placating smile. "Not this time. You will have all the power you want. All the money you could ever imagine. No more crawling to a boss you loathe. No more being tortured on the human plane. No more having to fight with the gods who cursed you to this." She leaned forward to whisper in his ear. "Revenge . . ."

Revenge.

She nuzzled his cheek with hers. "Take my hand, Cratus, and I'll take you far away from this misery to a place where you will never again want for anything."

Don't do it. There was more to this than what she told him. There always was. He knew it deep inside and yet as he lay there, all he saw was the past. The unending cycle of misery that Zeus had given him.

If nothing else, at least Azura would kill him and put him out of this suffering.

He had nothing to live for. Nothing.

Dying was easy. He'd done that every night for thou-

sands of years. But to have one minute free of what his life had been . . .

He would take it.

His gaze burning into hers, he nodded. "I'm yours."

Laughing, Azura took his hand. "Then come, my precious warrior. Let us rain fire and destruction on the Olympians and humans. The final war has begun."