

AVENGING
FATE

BY

JENNIFER DERRICK

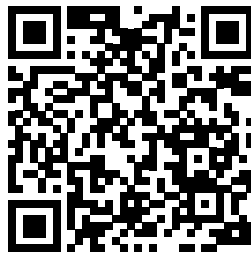
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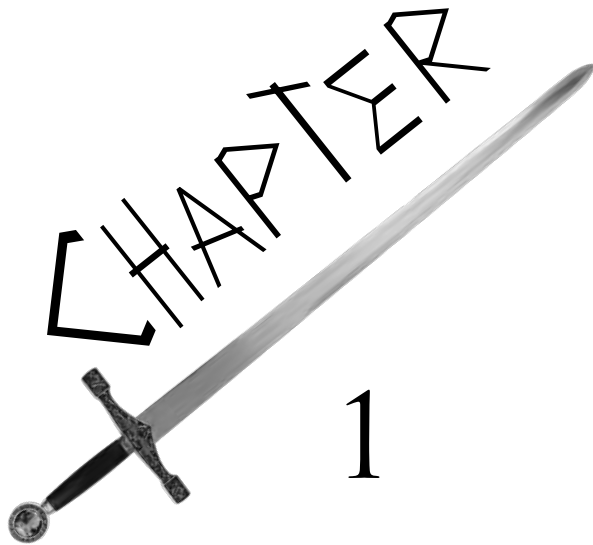
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CHAPTER 1

THE BULLET WHIZZES PAST MY LEFT EAR AND THUNKS INTO THE tree behind me. I duck as a shower of bark rains down on my head.

“Are you insane? You could have hit me,” I yell at Ares. He’s standing across the glade, grinning like an idiot and brandishing some kind of huge gun that I’m supposed to know the name of by now.

“Why aren’t you paying attention?” he counters. “Lack of attention in battle will get you seriously wounded, Little Atropos.”

“Don’t call me that,” I say, walking toward him while shaking bark out of my hair. “For the thousandth time, you don’t get to call me that. Not anymore.”

He shrugs his huge shoulders. “Habit,” he says with a boyish grin that makes me want to alternately hug him and slug him.

“Habits are made to be broken. So are fingers,” I say.

Ares gives me a look that says, “Go ahead and try, puny girl.”

“Seriously. Where were you?” he asks. “I called your name, and you didn’t even hear me. You were a million miles away. We’re supposed to be training, remember?” He waves his hand to indicate the weaponry scattered across the forest floor. Guns,

knives, swords, and even slingshots and maces glitter in the afternoon sun.

“I was just thinking.”

“About Alex, right?” Ares says.

“No, not about Alex. Well, not entirely,” I amend, and Ares rolls his eyes.

“He’s dead and gone. What’s there to think about?”

Where is he? Is he okay? Is he in the Underworld? If so, is he in one of the better parts? Does he even love me anymore now that he’s received free will? Those are just the top five on a lengthy list of things I’m thinking about. I don’t say any of this, though, because Ares won’t understand. Or care.

“Spoken like someone who’s never cared about anyone in their entire life,” I say instead.

“Not fair. I cared about you.”

“Not enough,” I reply.

“No, not enough,” he whispers.

I could point out that the sorry end of our relationship years ago was entirely his fault and that if he has any regrets, they belong only to him, but I don’t. There’s no point in being mean. Again.

“I was thinking about the mess we’re in. I’m supposed to destroy the Keres, or at least steal my shears back. We’ve used up two weeks of the eight that Zeus gave me, and we’re no closer to figuring out how to take them down than we were when we arrived here.”

“Here” is Ares’ home, which is a large cave hidden in a boulder field on Mount Washington in New Hampshire. The most notable aspect of my temporary home is the freakish weather. It’s June and there’s still snow on the ground in places. The wind howls practically twenty-four hours a day, keeping me awake at night and making my ears hurt during the day. I’ve even been lifted off my feet twice by wind gusts that had to be hurricane strength. The highs haven’t gotten out of the forties with a wind chill that registers as low as the teens at times. I’ve been freezing since we arrived, having only brought my bomber

jacket and not my full array of winter clothes. Stupid Ares didn't warn me to pack everything I owned for this road trip from hell.

Ares' cave is in the Huntington Ravine, just below something picturesquely known as the Alpine Garden, which, best I can tell, has no actual gardens. I don't really care. We had to hike seemingly all damn day to get here, and we've been hiking ever since.

Ares drags me out of bed before sunrise every morning to hike to some new spot so we can practice with various forms of weaponry. This seems pointless to me because, while I can practice with anything, the rules of combat set by Zeus for my little challenge state I cannot use anything of Ares' in an actual battle against the Keres. Ares insists I'll be able to steal some weapons of my own along the way and use those, so I'd better get used to how they work. I'm not exactly sure from where I'm expected to steal a mace or a grenade, but I let Ares harbor his delusions.

Worse, he seems to delight in beating me up in the name of "pointing out my shortcomings." Today, we hiked into a forest because Ares wanted to teach me how to climb trees and use them as cover. I really think he wanted to watch me fall out of trees because that's mostly what's happened so far. When I questioned what use this skill would be against beings that can fly, he'd simply shrugged and said it was important. It may be, but I can no longer see the point in any of our activities. I'm sore, exhausted, and more than a little angry at the time we've wasted.

"We'll figure it out," Ares says, breaking into my thoughts. "In the meantime, we need to get you into combat shape."

My frustration boils over. "Have you really given any thought to how we're going to defeat the Keres? Or are you just determined to unload everything you've got in your ridiculous arsenal on them, regardless if it solves anything? We can't kill them, remember? They're immortal, just like us. Bullets, grenades, and swords won't do any good. The best we can hope for is to injure or distract them enough so that we can

steal my shears, but, if you haven't noticed, they number in the thousands. The two of us are seriously outnumbered."

"But—" Ares begins, and I cut him off.

"Not done," I say, jabbing my finger at him. "We can't use Hades' hell horses, so we can't fly. That's a big problem. If we can't get up to where they are, the Keres will just stay out of range. And, I know, some of those fabulous guns you love so much can shoot over a mile," I cut off his argument before he can make it. "But we can't take them all down that way."

"War is a tricky thing, Atropos."

"We don't have enough people for a war, you idiot. It's you and me," I say, poking him in the chest.

There is no way the two of us can take down thousands of immortal beings at one time. Thanks to Zeus, we aren't allowed to involve anyone else in this quest. At least not gods, and they're the only ones who might be able to help. We're screwed, and I know it.

"You and I are aren't enough. No amount of running through forests, climbing over boulders, shooting at imaginary targets, and whacking each other with swords is going to change that. We might as well turn ourselves over to Zeus now and take our punishments," I say.

Flopping down onto my back on the grass, I stare at the sky. I'm exhausted, both mentally and physically. I wanted to believe we could win this battle, get my shears back, and avenge Alex's death, but the more I think about it, the more I realize that this isn't something we can win just because we want to. I was stupid to ever think we could.

Ares sits down cross-legged beside me. "There has to be a way," he says.

"There isn't. Zeus knew that when he set the rules of this game. He wouldn't have placed the bet if he believed there was any way he could lose. If we turn ourselves in now, at least he'll give Ker my old job of cutting lifelines. The humans' cycle of life and death can then go somewhat back to normal."

"You can't really want her to be in charge of death?" Ares

asks.

“Of course not. But right now, she and the rest of the Keres are killing indiscriminately. They’re like college students on spring break who’ve been let loose to drink themselves under every table in the world. All they see is the unlimited blood they can get by using my shears to kill as many humans as possible in as many inhumane and violent ways as possible. At least if we give up and let Ker take my job, they’ll settle down and reduce the violent deaths to a respectable number. It’ll still be way more than I would have allowed, but it’s better than what’s going on now.”

“I didn’t peg you as the sort who cared much about humans,” Ares says.

“I’m not. I don’t.”

Ares raises an eyebrow. “You don’t?”

“Well, obviously, I cared about Alex, although I now know even that wasn’t real,” I say, remembering how my sister, Lachesis, fated Alex for me. She did it to get revenge against me for killing her lover. The fact I killed Charlie because it was his time to die and that’s my job seemed to escape her. I loved Alex, but I have no way of knowing if he would have had feelings for me if Lachesis hadn’t intervened. It’s a question that haunts me every night.

“It’s not about caring for the humans,” I continue. “Even you have to see that what the Keres are inflicting on them right now is wrong. The world is their personal slaughterhouse. I can’t let that go on for another six weeks, especially if I know we can’t win in the end.”

“So, what, you’re just going to waltz up to Mount Olympus and tell Zeus you’re done? You’re going to let him put Ker in charge of death and condemn you to mortality and an eventual, painful death at Ker’s hands? And then be cursed to wander the Earth forever as a ghost, never finding peace in the Underworld with Alex? Worse, you’re going to let Zeus make *me* mortal and turn the God of War job over to Athena? Are you insane?”

I shrug. “If you’ve got other ideas, I’d love to hear them.

But doing what we're doing isn't working. If this is all we've got, then it's better to get out now. Besides, if you go to Zeus now, he might let you off the hook."

Ares snorts. "He might," I reiterate, sitting up and meeting his eyes. "If you tell him you made a colossal error in judgment, and you only tried to help me because you felt some misguided loyalty to me for what happened between us all those years ago, he might show you some leniency. You're his son, after all."

"You're his daughter, and you know he won't show you any leniency. Why would you expect it for me?"

"He likes you," I say. "Or at least, he respects you."

There's nothing for Ares to say to that because it's the sad truth. Zeus does care for and respect Ares. He has neither feeling for me.

"I still think we should at least use up the six weeks we have left," he says. "Who knows? Maybe we'll figure something out. Giving up now is just weak."

"Maybe." I shrug. "Or maybe it's the smartest thing we can do. Promise me you'll think about it. I really don't think it's too late for you to avoid the worst of the punishment."

"As long as you promise me you'll keep trying for a while longer. I don't want to give up. I'm not ready to be mortal, if it comes to that. Besides, I know we can crack this."

"It's getting late," is all I say as I stand up. While I appreciate his confidence, I have none and am too tired, angry, and sad to pretend otherwise.

We pack up all the weapons and hike back to Ares' cave. The sun is setting when we reach the boulder that hides the entrance. Unlike the cave I used on Mount Mitchell, which was hidden by a fake rock that was light enough for me to move, this one is hidden by a real, refrigerator-sized boulder that only someone with Ares' strength can move. There's no chance of a human stumbling on it and removing the rock. Not to mention that we're on one of the most remote parts of the mountain. The only people who come up here are rock climbers with a death wish.

Ares shoves the boulder aside. I toss our packs through the hole, and then crawl in. He follows me, then turns, and pulls the boulder back into place. Flicking on the flashlight that's kept at the entrance, I pick up our packs and move forward into the living space.

Ares moved to Mount Washington when Zeus allowed the gods to live among the humans. That was long after we broke up, so I'd never seen his home until he brought me here a couple of weeks ago. It's pretty much what you'd expect from a god of war who spends very little time at home, preferring to spend his time touring the battlefields of the world. Spartan is probably the kindest word for it.

There are only two rooms. The small main living area is where Ares sleeps. A few animal skins are all that pass for his bed. He has very few possessions. Those he does have are scattered around the room—boots, a few clothes, some weapons and, oddly, a copy of *War and Peace*.

The other “room” is his arsenal. It's a tunnel that stretches deep into the darkness of the cave. Racks containing every imaginable weapon line the walls. Guns and swords dominate, but there are knives, maces, flamethrowers, archery kits, throwing stars, nunchucks, slingshots, and more things that I'm not even sure what they are. There are also cabinets full of bomb-making materials—fuses, C4, detonators, and the like. If you can kill someone with it, it's in this room. If Homeland Security ever got wind of this... Well, never mind finishing that thought because Ares would destroy them before they could confiscate even one of his precious toys.

This is also where I sleep. I'm welcome in the main area with Ares, but I want my privacy and I don't want to give him the wrong idea. It's awkward enough having to work and bunk with my ex. There's no need to blur the boundaries any further. Ares was, however, kind enough to stop by Wal-Mart on our way here and buy me a sleeping bag and a lantern so I could use the arsenal as a bedroom. I haven't slept well in two weeks and it's no wonder, what with all the weaponry staring at me

night after night. I'm certainly no pacifist, but Ares' cache is a bit much.

After I drop my pack off in my room, I wander back into the main area where Ares is preparing what passes for dinner. We're subsisting on food that requires no cooking since there's no electricity and no way to light a fire without drawing attention to ourselves. I'm sure my diet of doughnuts, Vienna sausages, bread, and peanut butter isn't helping my mood.

It looks like we're having peanut butter sandwiches and potato chips. I'm pleased to see that Ares has also dragged out the giant bag of dried fruit I insisted he buy. We need something with nutrients in it. Of course, the warm beer Ares insists on drinking offsets any good it might do. I can't fix everything. Grabbing a bottle of water from the case I made him buy for me, I sit down across from him. He hands me a paper towel with my sandwich and chips on it.

He stares at me, and I know from experience he's gauging my mood. He's wondering if it's safe to speak or if I'm going to bite his head off again. He must decide it's safe because he asks, "If you don't think that training up here is helping, what do you want to do?"

I take a bite of my sandwich and think before answering. "I honestly don't know. I've been thinking about it for days, and I don't have any solid ideas. I have been wondering if there's anything in the computers back home that can help. Maybe some clue we can use? Some idea of where the Keres might be? I'm not saying violence isn't the answer," I add when his face falls at the idea of computers being any help whatsoever. "But we need something to be violent against. Right now, we don't have a target and no idea how to corner the Keres. Maybe there's something in the records that can help." It's comical to see how his face brightens again at the promise of violence.

"Is that allowed?"

"I don't see why not. Zeus only said that no other gods could help us. Computers aren't gods," I say.

"Thank goodness," Ares mutters around a mouthful of

peanut butter.

“My family can’t help us, but I don’t see why I can’t go home and look through the records. If we find something, then we can get violent. It’s a long shot,” I add. “We’re probably still better off quitting now.”

“If you think it’s worth a try, I’m game,” Ares says. “It’s better than quitting.”

“It’s all I’ve got.”

“Okay, then. We’ll leave tomorrow. Do you want to take the car or just poof down there?” he asks, referring to the way some gods can teleport between one place and another. Ares has that ability. I do not. Not that I’m bitter about that.

“Poofing’s quicker, but I’ll have more freedom with the car. If we have to separate, I’ll need transportation. It’s better to have two options.” I don’t mention there’s no way I’m leaving my midnight-blue 1959 Thunderbird up here without me. Ares is one of the few men I’ve met who doesn’t give a rat’s behind about cars. Guns, yes. Cars, no.

“With both of us driving, we can make it in a day,” I continue. “It won’t cost us much time.”

Ares gathers up the trash from our meal and stuffs it into the bag we’ll take with us when we leave. “Get some sleep, then. I’ll wake you at first light.”

I nod and head off to my sleep arsenal. Removing my boots, I stow them under one of the racks, but I leave my clothes on. I didn’t bring any nightclothes, and, even if I had, I’m not getting undressed in Ares’ presence. As I’m snuggling down into my sleeping bag, I see Ares watching me from the other room. He quickly glances away, but I recognize that look. It’s the same one I used to catch on his face when we were dating. It’s open, vulnerable, and caring. I only ever saw it briefly then. He’s quick to replace it with a mask of humor or indifference. But it’s there. Damn. That’s going to complicate things even more.



Nothing seems amiss when we depart Mount Washington. Trees whiz past my window as we head down the mountain and through the national forest. It's not until we hit the interstate that it becomes obvious things have gone very wrong in the two weeks we've been isolated on the mountain.

The first clue is how few people are on the road. This is I-93. It's heavily traveled day and night. But here it is mid-morning and we've passed maybe two cars. We've seen a lot of vehicles abandoned on the roadside, though. I puzzle over that until I notice that every single gas station we pass is closed. Ares gets off at a few exits so we can get a closer look. Some stations look like they closed in a hurry. Others had time to put "Sold Out" signs on their pumps. More disturbing, most of the attached convenience stores have been looted to the bare walls.

Was there some natural disaster I missed in the past two weeks? Some trade embargo on gasoline? A global pandemic? I reach over and flip on the radio to look for a news report, but I am greeted by static. I can't find a station anywhere on the dial.

"What's going on?" I ask Ares.

"I don't know, but if we can't find gas somewhere, we're never going to make it to Asheville. We'll have to poof."

I can't bear the thought of abandoning my Thunderbird on the side of the interstate so someone can loot it for parts. "Let's make that a last resort," I say. We agree to stop in Boston and see if we can learn more and find gas.

Things aren't any better in Boston. They're worse. Way worse. Bodies are rotting in the streets. The windows of almost every store and home are smashed, the contents spilling out onto the sidewalks. More cars are abandoned on the sides of the roads. There are almost no people out and about, which, in a major metropolitan area, is bizarre. The few people we do see seem to be either looking for something to loot or fighting over what little stuff is left. A fight over a box of muffins turns ugly, and one man knifes another in the stomach right in front of us. Ares speeds away before the murderer can come after us.

"The Keres did all this?" I ask Ares as we drive around

the city. Bodies are everywhere we go. “They killed this many people?”

“I doubt they killed them all,” he says. “More likely, the humans panicked when the killing started. They probably killed a good number of their own. You saw what happened back there. The world goes crazy and the humans start killing each other, rather than bonding together to fight whatever’s wrong.”

“That shouldn’t be, though,” I say. “I have to dictate that a person die in a riot or robbery. Humans can’t just kill each other without my permission. And I most definitely did not order this.”

Ares shrugs. “It’s your gig, so I’m sure I don’t know. But the Keres didn’t do all of this on their own.”

I don’t know what to make of the situation. Ares is likely right that even the Keres didn’t do this much damage. But what is going on that humans can just kill each other willy-nilly without my intervention? I don’t have a ready answer, and I can’t worry about it right now. It’s getting late, and we still haven’t found any gas.

“Let’s head out of the city. Maybe we can find a more remote gas station that hasn’t been looted,” I suggest.

Ares drives us out to the suburbs. No luck. We keep driving. We’re about an hour and a half outside of Boston, in the middle of nowhere, when Ares passes a farmhouse. It’s isolated and quiet. No people are out in the yard. He points toward the back of the property. “Outbuildings and farm equipment,” he says. “Might be gas there.”

I hate to resort to stealing, but it looks like it’s all we can do if we want to keep the car running. We find what appears to be a service road that winds around the back of the property and follow it back to the outbuildings. Ares parks behind one of the buildings so that we’re out of sight of the main house. We creep around to the front of the first building. It’s locked.

“No problem,” Ares says, expertly picking the lock and cracking the door so I can slide inside. He glances behind him to make sure no one is coming out of the main house before sliding in behind me and tugging the door shut.

The building is large and filled with all kinds of farm implements and seed bags. No gas, though. Ares grabs an axe and scythe off a wall of tools.

“What are you going to do with those?” I ask.

“You never know,” he says.

“You’ve got an arsenal big enough to equip a small army packed in the trunk of my car. Why would you need more?”

“You never know,” he repeats with a smile. “Besides, you can use these against the Keres since they aren’t mine. We’re building your weapons cache.”

I shake my head. This man and his weapons. I can’t see myself scything the Keres to death, so I keep looking for something I can use. The two buildings are connected by an enclosed breezeway, so while Ares continues searching the first building, I wander into the second. It’s much larger than the first and filled with tractors, a backhoe, and a bunch of stuff for which I can’t begin to guess the uses. But it all looks to be gas powered.

I’m excited until Ares comes up behind me and says, “Damn. It’s mostly diesel.”

“There’s got to be something here that runs on gas,” I say.

Ares pokes around in the recesses of the building and comes out with two five-gallon gas cans. “It’s not much, but it’s a start,” he says.

We search for a while longer, but we don’t find anything else that will help us.

“I wonder if the owners are here, or even alive?” I ask.

“Don’t know. Only one way to find out, though.”

We take our ill-gotten gasoline out to the Thunderbird and pour it into the gas tank. It’s not enough to fill her up, but it’s better than nothing. Ares tosses the two empty gas cans into the trunk, along with the axe and scythe.

We drive back to the main road, and then turn down the driveway to the farmhouse. No one comes out to meet us. We get out of the car, ascend the porch steps, and ring the doorbell. Ares fingers the gun he tucked into the waistband of his jeans.

I'm hoping this doesn't come down to a shootout. I don't want to add murder to my list of crimes. No one answers so we ring again.

When no one comes to the door, Ares tries the lock. It rattles in his hand but doesn't turn. "Either they left or, well—" He doesn't have to finish the sentence. I think about the bodies we've seen today. I really don't want to see more.

I scan the yard. "No car," I add hopefully. "Maybe they left."

Ares shrugs and gets to work on the lock. It takes him seconds to pick it. He cracks the door and calls out, "Hello?" No one answers so we cautiously slip inside and close the door behind us.

It's a cute little farmhouse, probably dating back to the 1800s or so, judging by the wide wood floorboards and some of the architectural touches. The furniture looks like it's all antique, as well. We wander through the living room to the kitchen at the back of the house. Ares makes a motion for me to stay while he heads upstairs. He's back in a minute.

"Nobody up there. Alive or dead," he adds.

I flip a light switch. Nothing happens. "No power," I say.

Ares opens the fridge. "Still cool, though. Power can't have been out more than a day or so." He pulls out two sodas, hands one to me, and then starts rummaging through the meat drawer and pulling out sandwich fixings.

"We can't," I say. "If these people come back, they're going to need their food."

"If they don't come back in the next couple of hours, the food's going to be spoiled," Ares says. "We might as well eat it."

I resign myself to adding sandwich theft to my list of crimes and start putting the items Ares flings at me from the fridge onto slices of bread. We eat in silence. I'm thinking about what we should do next.

"We can keep driving," I say. "Or we can spend the night here. It is getting late. We could head out in the morning."

"Or we keep moving. If we found this place, it's only a matter of time until others do."

“I think we’re better off here than anywhere else. At least until we can figure out what’s going on. We’ve got food and can conserve our gas. The hotels aren’t open, and I’m not sure we’re safe out on the highway after dark. If we keep driving, we’re going to have to stick to the back roads and we won’t make good time.”

Ares thinks this over. “All right. We’ll park the car in the equipment building and take turns watching it. We’ll have to defend it if anyone else comes along. If people are knifing each other over muffins, a gassed-up car’s gotta be worth killing for.”

Ares goes out to move the car, and I scout the rest of the house for anything we can use. I find a cooler in the basement, as well as a chest freezer that’s packed with food and two bags of ice. I shut the lid to keep the cold air inside. Tomorrow, we’ll load up the cooler with the ice and extra food before we leave.

Back in the kitchen, I inventory the nonperishables and start loading water, soda, soup, canned tuna, bread, and peanut butter into old shopping bags I find in the pantry. We should be able to survive for a few days on what I’ve bagged up. Not that starvation and dehydration will kill us, but even gods can be incapacitated without enough food and water. We can’t afford to be out of action right now. Plus, I don’t know what I’ll find when I get home. I don’t know if my family was able to prepare for this disaster. Anything extra I can bring them might be welcome.

Ares comes back and hands me a small gun he retrieved from the Thunderbird. “Just in case,” he says, and I tuck it into my waistband.

We check the rest of the house for anything we can use. We find the mother lode in one of the spare bedrooms: A ham radio, complete with a deep-cycle marine battery power source.

“Looks like somebody wanted to be prepared for the zombie apocalypse,” Ares says.

“Living way out here, I can see why.”

Neither of us knows how to work a ham radio. We just start twisting knobs and punching buttons until we hear a faint voice.

I fine-tune the signal, and we listen. At first, we can't understand what the male voice is talking about because we've joined in the middle of the broadcast. Something about a house fire, the well pump being offline, and requesting help for a certain address. Finally, the man takes a deep breath and starts over.

"This is W1KZM. Update on zombie event," he says.

"Seriously? They really think it's zombies?" Ares says, shooting a bewildered glance in my direction.

"Shush," I say. "Listen."

"Zombies have been spotted around the world, killing people at random. You're safer inside than out, although even that's no guarantee as the zombies have been seen entering hospitals and schools."

"Maximum killing, minimal effort," Ares whispers.

"Power is out in most cities, water supplies are dwindling, and food is becoming scarce," the man continues. "My contacts tell me that production of food and goods has all but stopped in most areas because workers are afraid to leave their homes to come to the factories. It's the same with power and water. No one is working the systems, so most are offline. Looting is the only viable path for survival unless you can shelter in place. Most cops, firefighters, and rescue teams have abandoned their posts. Citizens should be aware that they are on their own."

"Not good, not good," I chant.

"The Army and National Guard are fighting to keep order in some cities, but even they are being overwhelmed by zombies and frightened citizens. It appears to be the same worldwide, so don't expect any help from our allies, or supply shipments from abroad. I wish I had something positive to add, but I've got nothing. This is the apocalypse, people. This is not a drill. Repeat: Not a drill. Wait. This just in, I've got a report of a hardware store in the Uxbridge area that may have generators in their warehouse that have not been looted just yet... Trying to pin down details now."

I snap off the radio, and the voice fades away.

"Zombies." Ares laughs. "Just how gullible are the humans?"

“Well, what would you think? A bunch of ugly creatures that look mostly dead are killing people and drinking their blood. Humans these days are practically raised on zombies and vampires. What else could they believe? They don’t have a reference for the truth. Even if they did, I’m not sure it matters much. Zombies, Keres, the results are the same.”

“True,” Ares says.

“Well, at least we know the situation,” I say. “When we leave here, we’re going to have to stick to the back roads. Gas is going to be a problem, though.”

Ares puts a hand on my arm. “Hush,” he says. “Hear that?”

At first, I don’t hear anything. Then I catch the sound of an engine coming our way. I stand and move to the window overlooking the backyard, nudging the curtains aside so I can see out.

“There’s a car, no headlights,” I say to Ares. “Headed for the equipment buildings.”

“Damn,” he says. He’s out of his seat and down the stairs before I can react.

I pull the gun out of my waistband and creep down the stairs to the back door. In the twilight, I watch Ares moving from tree to tree, trying to stay hidden for as long as possible. The car parks in front of the larger building and two figures get out. They look male, judging by height and build, but I can’t distinguish more than that in the dark. I debate about following Ares, but decide I should guard the house in case anyone else shows up. He can handle two humans.

Judging by how quickly the humans pick the lock to the outbuilding, they aren’t strangers to the criminal life. Ares is hidden behind the last tree before reaching the building. He watches them go inside, and then looks back toward me. Raising his arm in salute, he dashes across the clearing to the door. He slips inside. All I can do is wait and watch.

I don’t hear or see anything for a few moments, but then I hear two quick pops. I don’t have to ask. I know. The God of War never misses. Whoever those two were, they’re gone. Great.

Now we're murderers.

I dash across the backyard and reach the door just as Ares comes out. "Did you—?" I start to ask, but he pulls the door shut before I can see inside.

"You don't need to look, Atropos. Help me search their car."

The car is an older SUV that looks better suited to a forest trail than the highway. Inside, we find clothes, more food, bottled water, and one full gas can. Better than nothing. Clearly, these two were on the move, just like us. And now, they're dead.

While I'm digging through the front console, Ares disappears into the building. When he returns, he's carrying some sort of plastic tube with a bulb in the middle, as well as the two empty gas cans from the Thunderbird. Opening one of the cans, he sets it on the ground underneath the SUV. He opens the SUV's gas tank, jams one end of the plastic tube inside, and then sticks the other end inside the gas can. He squeezes the bulb until gas begins to flow from the SUV into the gas can.

"A siphon. Brilliant," I say.

"Yeah, I remembered seeing it in the first shed, but didn't really think about its usefulness until now. They had a full tank," he says. "Don't know where they got it, but I'm not wasting it."

When the first gas can is full, he replaces it with the second. "I'm gonna go top off your baby and come back and get the rest," he says, grabbing the first can and heading toward the larger building.

Resuming my search, I find about two thousand dollars in cash tucked in the glove box. It doesn't sound like money is going to be much help in this new world, but I pocket it anyway, just in case. I also find four guns, which I'll add to my growing stash of stolen weapons that I'm allowed to use. I wonder if the men Ares killed were armed, or were they arrogant enough to go into that shed unarmed? Not that it matters; I'd just feel better knowing that Ares killed them in self-defense.

Ares comes back and finishes with the gas. He hauls the two full gas cans and the siphon back to the Thunderbird, then comes back for the gas can and other loot that we scavenged

from the SUV.

“Let me help you,” I say, grabbing the case of bottled water and heading for the door to the outbuilding.

Ares jogs to get in front of me and blocks the door. “You don’t want to see, Atropos,” he says, meaning the bodies.

“I’ve seen worse,” I say, remembering what Alex’s body looked like after the Keres were finished with him. A bullet through the head can’t look any worse than broken limbs, slashes, gashes, and bite wounds.

Ares shrugs and opens the door for me. I’m right. It’s not that bad. Sure, there’s a lot of blood on the floor, but Ares is a clean shot. There’s not much mess otherwise.

“Were they armed?” I ask the question that was bugging me earlier as I dump my load of goodies into the Thunderbird’s trunk.

“No. I searched their bodies after I killed them.”

“Then why kill them?” I ask. “Couldn’t you have just threatened them and made them leave?”

“And have them come back, maybe with reinforcements? No. Distasteful as it is to you, this is war, and, sometimes, in war, you have to do things to protect yourself. Now we’ve got more gas and supplies. It was the right thing,” he insists.

I know he’s right, but it doesn’t sit well with me. I’ve killed people for thousands of years, but not like this. Never this personally or against fate’s schedule.

“It’s going to get worse before it gets better,” he whispers as he reaches to hug me. I push him away.

“Don’t even,” I warn him.

He steps back. “Sorry. Wasn’t thinking.”

“Well, start,” I say. “You stay out here for a few more hours and watch the car. I’ll head inside, protect that stash, and hopefully catch a few winks on the couch. We’ll switch later.”

“Okay,” he says, giving me a mock salute.

I sigh. This is turning into the longest road trip ever.