

## Chapter 1

“It seems wrong to be this happy,” Alex says as we walk hand in hand along the lakeshore at Tyson’s compound. He raises my hand to his lips and kisses the back of it. I squeeze his hand in return.

Smiling, I turn my face toward the late summer sun. It’s a perfect day, the sky a deep, clear blue. The breeze carries a tiny hint of the cooler air that will soon invade the North Carolina mountains. For now, though, the weather is a glorious reflection of my happiness. After the last few months, I’ll take happiness any way it comes, even if it’s only one perfect day stolen from the midst of chaos.

It’s unfortunate that this sliver of happiness is only on loan for a brief time. Alex and I, along with Themis and Clotho, arrived at Tyson’s compound a few days ago as fugitives from the humans and gods who want to kill or imprison us. Unflappable as usual, Tyson simply opened the door of the main lodge in the middle of the night and ushered us inside. We each chose vacant rooms and settled in with Tyson’s crew of supernaturals as if we’d lived here our entire lives.

We’d hoped to use our house in Asheville as a base of operations for the coming war. It was reasonably secure and protected from the other gods. We didn’t count on the humans attempting to torch the place in the middle of the night because they believe we are witches. Or terrorists. Or both.

My video detailing the crimes of the gods against humanity wasn’t as well received as we hoped. Very few humans believed me, even after I showed them the room of lifelines, told them Alex’s story, and explained how the Fates control every human life from birth to death. I told the humans the truth—the gods don’t care about humanity. To the gods, humans are nothing more than toys, something to be played with and then discarded when the urge passes.

I also explained my role in the attack on the city of Charlotte. My hope had been that the humans would understand that leveling the city and killing innocent people was the choice of last resort and the only way to stop the Keres’ killing spree. It didn’t help. They view me as a murderer. Which I kind of am, but at least I’m a murderer with good intentions.

The human mobs arrived at our house the night after the video aired. Some were religious zealots, upset I disavowed whatever religious fundament their worldview was based upon. Others were zealots

who didn't care which religion I espoused, only that I appeared to be some kind of witch performing crazy voodoo in my basement full of lifelines. If I ever again hear the passage from Exodus about, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live," I'll toss the speaker into the Underworld just for fun. Why is it that humans find it so easy to believe in witches, but not in things like Keres, Amazons, or Fates? Their stupidity is overwhelming.

Others in the mob were cops, there to arrest me for my role in the Charlotte attack. Clearly my defense that the deaths of a few were necessary to save millions didn't fly with the local constabulary. Or the feds, since some were FBI and Homeland Security. The cops weren't even interested in stopping the zealots who were trying to burn the house down. I think they secretly wanted to help them.

Things got out of control quickly that night, with Molotov cocktails flying through the windows and a battering ram slamming against the front door. Themis, my mother, managed to cast enough wards to keep the house from catching fire, but that just proved to the humans that we are dangerous and witchy. They redoubled their efforts to break in and capture us.

The sheer number of humans finally overpowered Mom's efforts, and they entered the main house. We rushed for the security of the basement, but we could hear people rampaging through the house and destroying everything. It would take the humans some time to breach the basement door, but we couldn't stay down there forever. Eventually, even the best defenses would fall in the face of such determined opposition.

We needed to abandon the house and move our workspace to keep the humans from destroying our equipment and the lifelines. Fortunately, our old workspaces still exist, hidden in mountains, caves, and deep basements. It's simply a matter of choosing one to move to and setting everything up again. While we prefer to choose a new place when we move, that takes time and we didn't have any that night. Thankfully, our abandoned workspaces serve as emergency bolt-holes.

Given the current attitude of the humans, we didn't want to risk even the tiniest possibility of discovery, so we needed something remote. We decided to move the workroom to one of our primitive cave locations deep inside Mount Meru in Tanzania. We may have blown the doors off our existence, but there was no need to leave the lifelines and our equipment at the mercy of angry humans. Mom hated to do it, but Clotho and I agreed there was no choice.

"Fate's on hold for now, anyway," I'd said. "Clotho and I don't have time to cut and spin lifelines in the middle of a war. We don't even know where Lachesis is, so no one's assigning destinies anymore. I've repaired what I can of the Keres' damage to fate. From here on out, the humans are on their own until the war is over.

"If we win, the humans will have free will and a workroom won't be necessary. If we lose, someone else will oversee fate, so let that poor soul deal with the pain of setting up a workspace in those

primitive conditions. Dump the workroom. It's not our problem anymore," I said.

Mom nodded and sat down at Clotho's computer. She pulled up the emergency move program designed by Demeter several years ago. The program is genius. We specify a location, either one we've used before or the coordinates of a new one, and then it combines computer programming and magic to move the room. It's more complex than the way Zeus moves our room, seeing as he's all-powerful and can just wave his hand, but for times like these when we can't use him, it's incredibly convenient.

Mom and I entered our passwords as required for security and clicked the *move* button. There was some shaking followed by a bang as our equipment and personal belongings disappeared, leaving us standing in a cavernous, empty basement. The move made me sad because there was a decent chance I'd never see any of my equipment again, including my shears and my beloved workroom door. At the same time, a large part of me was happy to see it, and the job that shackled me for my entire life, disappear.

For the first time, I am truly free from being the Death Fate. I don't have to ask permission for time off, and I'm not chained to my workroom and the lifelines. While the freedom is intoxicating, it also comes with crippling guilt. Centuries of responsibility have made it impossible to truly enjoy my freedom, especially with the knowledge that the humans must pay the price for it.

They will suffer from my neglect, just as they suffered during the Keres' reign of terror. Some will live long past their assigned date of death because I won't be there to cut their lifeline. If they're in pain, they will suffer indefinitely. Others will die well ahead of time, killed by other humans, accidents, or claimed by disease now that the immunity granted to some by fate is no more.

It feels wrong, but since the humans' immediate suffering is in service of the larger cause of freeing them from the gods, it's justifiable. Every day I work to bury the tiny voice in my head that says I'm justifying an awful lot of questionable actions these days. That voice sounds a lot like my good friend Persephone who counseled me when I was in the Underworld in the aftermath of the Charlotte attack. She means well, but she can't understand the decisions I've had to make or the anger I harbor for being forced to make them.

For now, things are quiet. Alex poofed us to Tyson's after we dumped the workroom. Since we arrived with nothing but the clothes on our backs, Tyson's crew scrounged up some clothes and basic toiletries. The saddest part was leaving my beloved 1959 Thunderbird behind. We couldn't go outside to rescue it because there were too many people milling on the lawn and street in front of our house. I hope the humans won't destroy it, but they will. Or someone will steal it. It's just a car, but I've suffered so many losses lately that the loss of a damn car feels more tragic than it probably is.

We're safe for now, and that's the important thing. Tyson and my mother cast powerful wards to keep the gods from poofing into Tyson's compound. The only one who might be able to enter is Hecate. She's an actual witch. We know she can get through Tyson's wards, as evidenced by the damage still

visible in the laundry room from her last attack. We don't know whether she's more powerful than Tyson and Themis combined, though. Since she only seems to want Elpis—formerly known as Alex's sister, Emily—who is safely stashed with a shape-shifting human/sea monster named Michael at the bottom of Tyson's lake, we hope not to find out.

As for the humans finding us here, most don't even know this old, decaying resort exists. The few who do think a colony of crazy, armed-to-the-teeth preppers reside in it, and they're afraid to investigate. Just as well. While my friends aren't armed in the conventional sense, any human army encroaching on this place would be in for a world of hurt. Tyson's crew consists of witches, shape-shifters, shamans, and sorcerers capable of inflicting major damage, just as they did in Charlotte. A few curious humans wouldn't present any trouble.

Thanks to all those protections, the last few days have been pure, violence-free bliss. It's the first extended time Alex and I have had together with both of us healthy. Today is another in a string of days where we've headed away from the main resort for some private time. Sure, the resort is full of bedrooms and cabins where we could hang out in private, but we prefer the outdoors. We've hiked, talked, read, kissed, and bonded in a way we couldn't when he was ill and I was a Fate with an all-consuming job. We've simply enjoyed the rarity of being together without some disaster getting in the way.

Returning to Alex's earlier thought about it being wrong to feel this happy, I say, "I'm not going to feel guilty for stealing a little bit of happiness for myself. I've spent three thousand years being unhappy. If a few days in the woods with my boyfriend is all I get, I'm going to take it."

"So greedy," Alex says, grabbing me around the waist and spinning me in a circle.

When he sets me down, he leans in and presses his lips to mine. Stretching on my tiptoes, I wind my arms around his neck. I pull him closer, twining my fingers in the soft hair at the base of his skull. The sounds of the forest surround us. For this moment, I can almost forget the outside world is coming for us.

"Yes, I'm greedy," I say against his mouth. "I'll never get enough of you."

He kisses me for a few minutes more before pulling back. Sighing, I rest my head against his chest where his heartbeat thumps strong and rhythmic in my ear, a reminder he's alive. That should be miracle enough. After all, it was just a few months ago that I killed him, held him as he died in my arms. Yet, he's alive now. At least temporarily, he's also an immortal god. It should be enough. But after centuries of loneliness, there's no amount of time that will ever be enough.

"I'm only sorry this has to end," I begin, but Alex places a finger over my lips.

"Don't talk about it," he says.

"You know we have to. We've procrastinated enough. While we could theoretically live here forever, we have to finish what we started."

He takes my hand and leads us deeper into the forest until we can no longer see the cabins at the

resort. We walk until we find a large, fallen tree blocking the path. Alex hoists me up on the log and then jumps up next to me. He retakes my hand and places it in his lap. We sit there silently, feet dangling in the air, listening to the birdsong. It won't be long before they head south, and the thought makes me sad. By the time they go, we won't be here, either.

To stave off the coming conversation and the sadness, I pull the tattered copy of *A Game of Thrones* from my waistband and open it to the last page we bookmarked. I was reading this book to Alex before he died, and I'd taken it from his house after his death. At the time, I thought it might be one of the few mementos I'd have of our time together, but we've been given a second chance to finish the story. I begin to read, my voice rising above the birdsong. Alex leans over and drapes his arm around my shoulders, pulling me closer.

After two chapters, I pause to take a drink from the water bottle we brought along. Alex sighs. Our joy is about to end.

"I'm sorry I pushed everything to a head," he whispers for the thousandth time.

"You didn't," I say, marking the page and placing the book beside me on the log.

"I did," he insists. "Killing Thanatos pushed you into this war."

"No. Zeus pushed me into this war. You killing Thanatos might have sped things along a bit, but this has been brewing for thousands of years," I say.

"Still, if I hadn't done it, you could have changed your mind. Zeus probably would have punished you for disobedience, but he'd have let you go back to your old life. I'm sorry," he says.

"Stop apologizing. It isn't your fault." After I say it, I start laughing.

Alex looks at me like I'm insane. "What is wrong with you?" he asks.

"Listen to us," I say. "Using our precious time together bickering over who's responsible for a war. As if it matters. What matters is what we do from here. We know the gods won't forget that we, yes, *we*..." I say when he opens his mouth to protest. "Killed one of their own. You may have delivered the final blow, but that's only because you could. I can't rip immortal souls out of bodies and make them mortal, but you can. If I could, believe me, I'd have killed Thanatos years ago. He was a menace."

"You're right. Still, if I hadn't done it, maybe we could have had more days like these past few."

"We wouldn't have. At best, I'd be back to cutting lifelines and you'd be transporting souls to the Underworld. We'd hardly see each other. At worst, Hades would have revoked your god status and dumped you in Elysium where I would never see you again. As it is, things have worked out as well as they could," I say.

"Except for the fact that we're being hunted by gods and most of humanity."

"Except for that," I say.

We fall silent. The birds keep chirping in the trees and a soft breeze rustles the leaves. I'm content

with this perfect moment, but aware that the minutes on our bliss are ticking. It's useless to try to hold on to it.

"Where do we go from here?" I finally ask him.

"Well, I really want to find my dad's soul and get him settled in the Underworld before things get completely out of hand. I don't want him wandering around up here when all hell breaks loose."

I nod. "Good thinking. Since Zeus and the other Olympians can torture a soul, your feelings for your dad will give Zeus powerful leverage over you. If he decides to use it, you could be forced to choose between sparing your dad endless pain and helping me. Best to get your dad under Hades' protection as soon as possible."

"Do you think Zeus would do that?" Alex asks.

"I don't put anything past Zeus, particularly when his power is threatened. Get your dad to the Underworld as fast as you can."

"You're coming with me, right?"

I raise his hand to my lips and kiss the back of it, mimicking his earlier gesture. "I want to, but I can't. I've got to find Gaia. We're proposing to leave her in charge of nature and humanity once the gods are gone. I need to make certain she's ready for the job. She expressed a desire to take her role back before, but I need to know if anything has changed.

"We also need to know if there's anything she can do to help us. She doesn't have physical powers, but she's incredibly intelligent and observant. She sees and knows everything that happens on this planet. If she has any wisdom to share, we need it," I say.

Alex nods. "Do you want me to poof you to her before I go hunt for my dad?" he asks.

I shake my head. "You can't. After her own children betrayed her and Zeus threw them into Tartarus, she retreated from any involvement in godly affairs and basically imprisoned herself.

"I sought her out for advice years ago when I was trying to come to terms with the unnatural way we Fates were manipulating human lives. It seemed so oppositional to her intentions. Anyway, it took me forever plus a few helpful tips from other gods to find her. In exchange for her counsel, I promised never to reveal her whereabouts. If you show up, she'll know I broke that promise and probably withhold her help in retribution."

"She doesn't sound like the sweet, old Mother Nature pictured in stories," Alex says. "Are you sure you'll be okay with her?"

"I'll be fine. She can be vindictive, but if you treat her with respect, she's helpful. It's only when you cross her that things get ugly."

"If you're sure," he says, doubt in his voice.

"I'm sure. Travel has recovered enough that I can reach her without too much trouble. At least it

won't be a repeat of my journey to find the Amazons," I say, remembering the creepy boat captains and truck drivers who offered me assistance on that journey.

"Yeah, but you'll be vulnerable to the humans and gods once you leave the compound. I can poof and get out of harm's way quickly if I have to. You can't.

"Away from here, Zeus and the other gods can find you. If the humans recognize you, at best they'll throw you in jail. At worst..." he says, echoing my earlier thoughts about my personal vulnerability.

"Right. Flaming pyres and stoning," I say. "The good news is they can't kill me. At least, the humans can't."

"Yeah, but they can hurt you. I don't want to see you hurt. And if Zeus captures you—" He doesn't have to elaborate on the creative punishments of which Zeus is capable. I've seen them all, from tying a man to a rock and letting a bird peck out his ever-regenerating liver to chaining a man to a burning wheel and making him roll through eternity.

I shrug. "It's a risk I have to take. We're going to have to go out in the open at some point, so I'd better get good at evasion now."

"It's not funny," Alex says.

"I didn't say it was. Nothing's funny about this war. But I'm the only one who can go to Gaia, and we need her help. It's just got to be done."

"Swear you'll be careful," Alex insists.

"I swear. I still have my sword. As someone once told me, I'm pretty badass about using it. I'll manage."

"You'd better. You have to come back to me. No matter how much time we have, it'll never be enough. I'm not ready to lose you," he says, echoing my earlier thought as if I'd spoken it aloud.

"When will you go?" I ask him.

He sighs. "I could keep putting it off and enjoy more time here with you, but I'd better go soon. Like you said, if Zeus realizes he can torture my dad—" He doesn't finish the sentence. Doesn't have to.

I lean in closer to him and tip my face up to his. "Then kiss me and let's get going. The sooner we accomplish our missions, the sooner we can come back here, together."

He kisses me, hard and passionate, and I give as good as I get. This isn't a gentle farewell or lazy kiss of two people who have all the time in the world. This is an attempt to imprint this moment on each other's memories and to savor what might be our last kiss.

When we pull apart, Alex gives me a wry smile and rests his forehead against mine.

"I won't say goodbye," he says.

"Me either."

He pulls away from me so we are no longer touching, to make sure he doesn't inadvertently poof me along with him.

"I love you," he says.

"I love you, too."

We stare at each other for a few moments, adding to our precious store of memories, and then he nods once and vanishes. Lyrics from a long-forgotten song drift through my mind. *Alone again, naturally.*

I sit a while, half hoping Alex will return but knowing he won't. Eventually, I slide off the log and begin the solo trek back to the lodge. At the edge of the lake opposite the main house, I pause and take a long look at the resort that's now my home.

In the fading sunlight, I can almost see the glorious resort it once was. It's easy to imagine the ladies in their *Mad Men*-era dresses and the men in their suits sitting on the balconies sipping drinks, chain smoking, and laughing the day away. Or couples dancing in the gazebo on the other side of the lake. It's tempting to emulate them. Just sit on a balcony and forget my responsibilities. Tempting, but impossible.

Suddenly, I'm bone tired. I sit down on a nearby rock and simply stare at the main lodge, watching the sunset change its stone face from white to pink, purple, and finally gray. I'm still sitting there, shivering in the cool evening air, when Lucas, who can shape-shift into a flying serpent, comes toward me.

"It's getting late. I figured someone better come out and make sure you guys are okay," he says. He looks around and registers the fact that "you guys" has been reduced to just me.

When I don't respond, he sits on the ground in front of my rock. He doesn't say anything for a moment, just sits there, watching my face. His presence is comforting, undemanding.

"Alex is gone," he finally says.

"Yep," I say, meeting Lucas' eyes for the first time. "Gone off to find his dad and get him to the Underworld before Zeus gets hold of him."

"It's time, then?" he asks.

I nod. "Yes. It's time."

He stands and holds out a hand. I take it and let him pull me up.

"I was just—" I begin, waving my hand at the lodge, unable to articulate my thoughts.

"I know," he says.

We take a last look at the lodge, which is now almost lost in the darkness, relishing a last moment of peace before chaos and brutality engulf us again. Lucas drapes a friendly arm over my shoulder, guiding me around the lake and toward the war that must now begin.