

JUNE 19, 9548 BC

“You missed, moron. My son still lives, and one day, we are going to bathe in your blood.”

Dressed in Greek cavalry armor to hide his identity, Archon, the king of the Atlantean gods, froze in the middle of the dark hallway as he heard the taunting voice of his angry wife in his head. A sick feeling of dread clenched his stomach tight. “What say you?”

“Well,” Apollymi projected mentally to him, drawing the word out. “Lord High King God Intelligent, ye who knows all, I am still imprisoned in Kalosis and that baby you hold in your arms is quite dead. What does that tell you?”

That he’d slaughtered the wrong infant.

Damn it! He’d been certain this was the right child . . .

Wincing in utter agony over what he’d done, Archon heard the screams of the Atlantean queen from where he’d left her in her bedroom as she cursed them all for the death of her newborn son. It was an unforgivable act, but Apollymi had given him no choice. She had refused to hand over her son and had hidden the infant here in the mortal world so that Apostolos would live in spite of Archon’s order that the boy be killed.

If her infant son grew to manhood, *all* of them would die. The Atlantean pantheon and their people. But Apollymi didn’t care. So long as Apostolos lived, the rest of them could burn.

Heartbroken over the innocent life he’d mistakenly taken, Archon handed the baby’s body to a guard on his right so that it could be returned to its grieving mother.

“Where is your son, Apollymi?” he demanded in his head.

She laughed at his anger. “Where you will *never* find him. Go on, slaughter every pregnant queen and her brat in the mortal realm. I *dare* you!”

Archon glanced at the three gods with him, who were also disguised as he was—in cavalry armor. The Atlantean queen believed them to be vengeful Greeks sent to assassinate her child. Since they were the gods she and her people worshiped, they couldn't afford for her to hate them. Not when the worship of the Atlantean people fed their powers.

And if they searched through the mortal realm where other gods ruled to find Apollymi's son, they would have to do so very carefully. Especially if the mission was to slaughter princes. The humans would call out their own gods, who would then demand retribution for their followers, and it would be a divine bloodbath between feuding pantheons.

Been there. Done that.

And it hadn't been the least bit enjoyable.

No doubt that was what Apollymi craved as much, if not more, than the return of her child. Born of the darkest powers in the universe, the first goddess of destruction lived only for such warfare. It was the very air she breathed.

Disgusted and furious over his mistake, Archon flashed himself from the human world to the main temple hall on Katateros, where the Atlantean gods ruled their people. The three gods who'd gone with him to Atlantis followed.

The moment the four of them were corporeal in their ornate temple, the other Atlantean gods stared at them expectantly.

"Well?" Misos, their god of war, asked. "Did you get him?"

Archon shook his golden head and narrowed his gaze on Basi. Beautiful and seductive, the drunken goddess of excess was the one who had taken Apollymi's son and hidden him out of their reach. Unfortunately, the sot had no recollection of where she'd put the baby, other than in the stomach of an already pregnant human . . . maybe. Maybe not.

Big help that, bitch. Thank you.

That was why Apollymi had chosen the drunkard and forced her to do this deplorable deed. When it came to giving up any kind of useful information, Basi was worthless.

Archon shed the hated Greek armor and skin in favor of his true form—that of a perfect blond male in his mid-twenties—and donned his dark blue Atlantean formesta robes. “Can you remember anything else?”

Fear darkened Basi’s beautiful brow. “No, Archon. I just remember Polly telling me to hide it in a queen . . . Yes. It was a queen. I think I was in Greece, but I can’t remember. Maybe Sumer . . . Akkadia or Egypt? I think the queen had dark hair . . . but it might have been blond or red . . . Maybe.”

It took everything he had not to kill her for her stupidity.

His brother, Misos, sighed heavily. With black hair and a full beard, Misos was as different in appearance from Archon as he was in his divine warring powers. “So what do we do now?”

Archon growled at the only option they had. “We go out and we hunt that bastard down. Whatever it takes.”

Chara, the plump redheaded goddess of joy and happiness, scowled at him. “If we venture into the domains of other pantheons to search, we’ll have to hide our powers from their gods. How are we to find Apostolos without them?”

It wouldn’t be as easy, but . . . “I know my wife. There will be something about him different from other mortals. You won’t mistake Apostolos when you *see* him, and I doubt our powers will help anyway since she has him shielded so carefully. In the meantime, those of us who remain in Katateros while the others search can call out to him and drive him insane. That, too, should help us find him. He’ll be the mortal prince who hears the voices of the Atlantean gods even when he doesn’t worship us.”

Bet’anya Agriosa stood up from where she’d been sitting next to her mother, Symfora. With flowing black hair and perfect caramel skin, she stood out from the other Atlantean gods. “For the record, I want to state my displeasure over all this. I may be the goddess of wrath and misery, but I find it distasteful and wrong to hunt down an innocent child and kill him because of the accidental prophecy of three little girls.”

Archon glared at her. “My daughters may be young, but they

hold the power of two pantheons in them. You better than anyone know how powerful that makes them.” While his daughters were born of him and the Greek goddess Themis, Bet’anya was Atlantean and her father the Egyptian god, Set—one of the most powerful beings in existence.

Some even claimed Set held more power than Apollymi, and *that* was something Archon never wanted to test.

Bet’anya arched a brow. “So? You don’t fear *me*.”

That wasn’t true, but Archon wasn’t dumb enough to let her know that. Bet’anya held a lot of dark power herself and he wasn’t about to cross her. No one with a brain would. The last time a god had taken her on, the world had almost ended over it. “You don’t draw the same powers Apollymi does. And we don’t know what powers her son holds.”

Misos nodded in agreement. “As the son of Apollymi and Archon, he could easily be the mightiest of any pantheon.”

Archon inclined his head to his brother. “We have twenty-one years to find this boy and kill him. We *cannot* fail. The sooner he’s destroyed, the better for us all.”

Bet’anya clenched her teeth as they began to divide the world between them. Apollymi had always been one of her allies. And Bet hadn’t been here when the other Atlantean gods had united their powers to trap her in Misos’s hell realm, Kalosis. Personally, she couldn’t blame Apollymi for her anger. Had they ganged up on her and locked her away while calling for the life of her child . . .

She, too, would show them exactly how dark her powers ran.

But like it or not, Bet’anya was part of this pantheon and would be honor bound to hunt for the child.

She’d just do so leisurely.

Her great-grandfather, Misos, approached her. “What are you thinking, child?”

“That it’s a sad day when a mere baby can threaten a pantheon so powerful.”

“While I concur, I would remind you that pantheons have fallen for a lot less.” He kissed her brow.

“Fine, Tattas.” She used the Atlantean term for grandfather. “I’ll take southern Greece and Egypt where I can use my powers to find him . . . if he’s there.”

She looked back at the leader of this cursed quest and spoke to him. “I have one question, Archon . . . you slaughtered an Atlantean citizen and prince by mistake. How is it that here at home, where you have full power, you couldn’t tell the baby was mortal?”

“The queen’s son stank of a god’s powers. Not to mention, her husband died well before its conception and to our knowledge, she’s had no other lovers. That smacked of Basi’s interference.” He growled low in his throat. “Obviously, I was wrong. I should have known Apollymi wouldn’t make it that easy on us.”

Bet’anya arched a brow at that. There was only one god from outside their pantheon it could possibly be. “It was Apollo’s son?”

“Most likely.”

She cringed inwardly. While she wasn’t afraid of the Greek gods, she didn’t want to be in another bloody war with them. Every time she went up against their rampant stupidity, she felt like it sucked a portion of her own intelligence out of her. “And you think the Greek god will be all right with your actions?”

Archon wasn’t concerned in the least. “Why would he care? He has bastards aplenty he ignores. Besides, he doesn’t dare rattle our cage since Atlantis is the only place his Apollites can live and thrive. No other pantheon will tolerate them among their people.”

And the warring Apollites had been a constant source of grief in Atlantis, but Archon didn’t see it that way. To him, they were another set of beings to honor the Atlantean gods and feed their powers.

To her, they were creatures who were as likely to turn on them as they were to continue to worship them. Anything Greek made her skin crawl. She hated them above all races.

Out of the corner of her eye, Bet’anya saw Epithymia slinking

out a side door. Tall, beautiful and golden, she was the goddess of all desires.

Curious about what had her so skittish, Bet'anya followed after her. "Epi?"

Outside the hall, she froze instantly. "Yes, Bet? What I can do for you?"

"What have you not confessed?"

Epithymia stiffened. "That which I *will* not confess."

Unwilling to play this game, Bet'anya gestured toward the hall they'd just left. "Then perhaps I should tell Archon about this?"

"Don't you dare!" Epithymia grabbed her arm and hauled her to a corner so that they couldn't be overheard by anyone. "I have to do something I don't want to do."

"Kill a baby?"

Epithymia scoffed. "I wish. *That* would be easy." This from a goddess of light powers? If Epithymia was so quick to kill, it explained so much about Bet'anya's proclivity for violence.

"Apollymi has enlisted me in her scheme and I have to do it. If I don't . . . I can't even tell you what she holds over me because I can't afford for anyone to learn it. That bitch!"

Bet'anya frowned. "What has she asked you to do?"

"Birth her child."

Bet'anya sucked her breath in sharply at that implication. "He's not born yet?"

She shook her head. "And if you tell a soul, I swear I'll join Apollymi against you."

Rage clouded her vision as Bet'anya glared at her. "Do not threaten me. God or not, I will feed on your entrails. But in this, you don't have to fear. I have no desire to kill a defenseless baby."

Epithymia released her. "Good. Because I have a plan. Apollymi wants me to oversee his birth to make sure nothing goes wrong with it, and I intend to deliver him myself."

Bet'anya's stomach clenched at what the goddess was telling her. "You intend to touch a babe who will be born without god powers?"

She nodded.

That was so cold . . .

“The humans will tear him apart in their desire to possess him. And they will hate him for it.”

Epithymia winked at her. “I’m just following my orders from Apollymi. To the letter.”

“Why not tell Archon—”

“She’ll rip out my heart and devour it if I do. I wouldn’t cross that bitch for anything. I cannot even hint at where that child is or anything else about his birth. She wrung an oath from me.”

And Atlantean gods could never breach their oaths. As such, they tried their best to never make any.

“It would be kinder to kill him on delivery than to leave him with your touch and no protection.”

Epithymia held up her hands. “Apollymi won’t let me. So I’m doing this her way. And if you breathe a word . . .”

“My oath, I will *never* tell the ones hunting him where he is or what it is you do.” No sooner had those words left her lips than she realized what she’d said. It was just such a slip that had cursed poor Apostolos.

Epithymia glared at her.

“I didn’t mean . . .” There was no need in explaining. “Fine. I can still kill him if I find him.”

Epithymia relaxed. “Good luck, Agriosa.” She left to go to her own temple down the hill.

Bet’anya sighed at Epi’s parting shot that referred to the fact that she was also a goddess of the hunt. She absolutely hated the thought of harming a child.

Any child.

And yet . . .

What she’d said was true. Death would be the kindest act. Otherwise, that child would live a life of absolute agony. No one should be condemned to such a horrific fate.

“I’m sorry, Apostolos.”

As in all battles, when a soldier’s wound was mortal, no matter

his age, and there was no doubt he would die from it, the kindest thing was to end his suffering with a single fatal blow.

She would commit this mercy killing and pray that one day Apollymi could understand and forgive her. It was for the good of all.

Especially the boy.

Her only hope was that she found the child first. The other gods would not be so merciful to him.

JUNE 23, 9548 BC

King Xerxes stared down at the infant boy who peacefully slept in his arms. How could his joy have turned so bitter so fast? For a moment, he'd believed himself to be the most blessed of all kings. That the gods had granted him two sons to rule his vast empire.

Now . . .

Did he even have one?

There was no doubt that the firstborn, Acheron, was born of the gods. That his wife-queen had whored herself to them and birthed it.

But Styxx . . .

The king studied every inch of the perfect, sleeping child nestled against his body. "Are you mine?" He was desperate to know the truth.

The infant appeared to be a mere human babe. Unlike Acheron, whose eyes swirled a living silver color, Styxx's were vivid blue and perfect. But then the gods were ever treacherous.

Ever deceitful.

Could it be that Acheron was his son and this one was not? Or that neither child belonged to him?

He looked to the elder wise woman who'd proclaimed Acheron

a god's son just after his birth. Deceitful and wizened, she wore heavy white robes that were richly embroidered in gold. Her gray hair was wrapped around an ornate gold crown. "Who is the father of this child?"

The woman paused in her cleaning. "Majesty, why do you ask me something you already know?"

Because he didn't know. Not for certain. And he hated the taste of fear that scalded his throat and left it bitter. Fear that made his heart pound in trepidation. "Answer me, woman!"

"Truth or lie, will you believe whatever answer I give?"

Damn her for her sagacity. How could the gods have done this to him? He'd sacrificed and prayed to them his whole life. Devoutly and without blasphemy. Why would they taint his heir in this manner?

Or worse, take his heir from him?

He tightened his grip, which caused the baby to wake and cry out. A part of him wanted to slam the child into the ground and watch it die. To stomp it into oblivion.

But what if this one *was* his son? His own flesh and blood . . .

The wise woman had said it was.

However, she merely relayed what the gods told her, and what if *they* lied?

Angry and betrayed, he went to the woman and shoved the infant into her arms. Let someone else solace it for now. He couldn't bear the sight of either child.

Without another word, he stormed from the room.

The moment she was alone with the babe, the old crone transformed into a beautiful young woman with long black hair. Dressed in bloodred, she placed a kiss to the boy's head and he instantly calmed down.

"Poor, poor Styxx," the goddess Athena whispered as she rocked him in her arms to soothe him. "Like your brother's, yours will be an unpleasant future. I'm sorry I couldn't do more for either of you. But the human world needs its heroes. And one day, they will all need *you*."