

Slowly

A FREYA NOVEL

MATTHEW LAURENCE

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MAKE YOUR MARK
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Bookish burglars, stay your hands,
resign yourselves to safer plans.
Take not from gods the spotlight,
lest you become the next they smile.

*For those who believed in me, and you,
who believed in Freya*



BURNING BRIGHT

FREYA

The lava hasn't even cooled yet.

Fat drops of rain hiss on the glowing pit of molten slag that used to be the home of my enemies. I inhale deeply, savoring the smell of steam mixed with a hint of sulfur, then let out a contented sigh. Long ropes of bright yellow caution tape flutter in the wind, while rows of police barricades present a more permanent deterrence to the hordes of onlookers at Florida's first volcanic crater. I'm just another face in the crowd, one more tourist huddled under an umbrella, gawking at the scene. The only difference is that this is all my doing, the remnants of my first battle with a conspiracy arrogant enough to exploit the gods themselves.

Did I mention I was a goddess? I'm not sure if you knew that already.

My name is Sara Vanadi, but that wasn't always the case. I used to be Freya, goddess of love, beauty, battle, and a host of other glorious things. I abandoned that title when my worshippers abandoned

me. I tried to retire, to hide and live in peace. Then a man visited me and changed everything. His name was Garen, and he tore my life apart. I fled him and the people he worked for, a company named Finemdi. They wished to contain the gods, to shackle us all, and I'm certain you know how I felt about *that*. So I sought to destroy them in turn, and, well, I'm still at it. I've been joined in this quest by a new high priest—a mortal named Nathan—and new divine allies.

“Look! There's where I flew the convertible in!” an exuberant voice yells from beside me. I turn to its source, a young Hawaiian girl in a flowery dress, and give a look that pleads for silence. “Sorry,” Hi'iaka squeaks, her voice a whisper on the air. A windswept spirit of nature, she doesn't exactly define *restraint*. I glance around, anxious, but luckily the other tourists either didn't hear or have decided to ignore us. So far so good. Finemdi might have written off this place as a total loss, but that doesn't mean they aren't watching its remains.

Nathan shifts nervously beside me, and I can tell he's thinking the same thing. The two of us nearly died in that pit a month ago; it was only thanks to Hi'iaka and her sisters we didn't. About as literal a *deus ex machina* as you can get, come to think. I can tell Nathan's not very keen on getting captured and starting the whole thing over again, but I had to come.

I got a letter, you see.

It was addressed to me—to *Freya*, actually—and its contents were short and to the point: *Meet me where my father died. Saturday, 2:00 p.m. I'll find you there.* I knew exactly who'd written it, and despite the danger, I couldn't help myself; I had to know what she wanted. So here I am, standing in the rain under a cheerful polka-dot umbrella, waiting for her to make an appearance.

“Now there's a thing of beauty,” Pele, goddess of fire and most

famous of the three sisters, says with a nod at the sizzling lake of rock. “Fine work for such a tectonically dull land, eh?”

Nāmaka, the third sister, pulls an exaggerated smile. “Did you create a *volcano*, Pele?” she says, voice dripping with sarcasm. “Why, I’m surprised you’ve never mentioned it. Especially not *every day for the last four weeks*.”

Pele pauses to look at her sister, then smirks. “Well, where do I begin? First, I sunk my mind beneath the Caribbean plate, searching for the sweet music of magma. . . .”

“Ugh,” Nāmaka says, giving her hair an irritated flick that shakes droplets at her sibling. A water spirit, she’s the only one of us without an umbrella. Pele glares in response and sticks out her tongue before turning back to the crater to admire her handiwork.

I hope my contact shows up soon. Even with a few choice illusions (courtesy of yours truly) concealing their elemental natures, the sisters aren’t exactly the most inconspicuous creatures. At least Sekhmet, my fourth divine companion, understands the occasional need for self-control—and *she’s* the Egyptian goddess of righteous wrath. Her leonine features are also hidden under a disguise, an enchantment she was granted long ago, and she’s been quiet since we arrived.

That said, I can tell she shares my discomfort; her illusory cheeks are contracting oddly, trembling as she twitches hidden whiskers. This place just doesn’t feel safe, even behind the anonymity of the crowd. I feel like I’ve returned to the scene of the crime, an amateur thief displaying a rather classic lapse in judgment. Maybe this was a bad idea. I’m considering a retreat when Nathan stumbles against me with a grunt of surprise.

“What the—” he starts to say. Then his words are stifled by a gasp as he realizes there’s a teenage girl standing next to him who definitely wasn’t there a split second before. She’s no enemy of ours,

though, and I relax the moment I identify her. Unassuming and awkward, she's precisely who I'd hoped to see.

"Hello, Samantha," I say with genuine warmth.

This scientific prodigy is the only employee of Finemdi's I can trust. Her father was Gideon Drass, an all-around vile individual and, up until I murdered him in a waterfall of lava last month, Finemdi's CEO. Samantha has had a rather tragic past, what with her dad sacrificing her mom to a god of darkness and being a colossal ass. There was an upside to all that misfortune, though: It made her only too happy to help us destroy her employer and father. Of course, as tends to happen in these stories, things got complicated. During my recent adventure, I discovered her mother had actually become a vessel to *contain* that god of darkness . . . and I may have inadvertently released it to wreak havoc upon the world.

I'd prefer to keep that little tidbit a secret as far as Samantha's concerned. You understand.

"Hi, everyone!" she says cheerfully, turning to take in my new pantheon and adjusting her glasses.

They all mumble their greetings in hushed tones, looking around to see if anyone noticed a lady appearing out of thin air. Samantha picks up on it and shakes her head. "Got it covered. There's an illusion of random tourists here right now."

"Nice!" Hi'iaka exclaims. "Just how many tricks *do* you have up your sleeve?"

"In charge of divine admissions, remember?" Samantha says, pointing at herself. "You wouldn't believe how many artifacts I managed to sneak out before Impulse Station went up in flames."

"We made off with a pretty good haul ourselves," I say, thinking of the truckload of mystic widgets the Hawaiian sisters managed to steal.

She chuckles at that. “Wasn’t like anyone else was going to use it.” She holds out a hand to Nathan. “Oh, and we haven’t been properly introduced.”

My friend shakes it and smiles. “Nathan Kence,” he says. “High priest and Web designer.”

“Samantha Drass,” she replies with a laugh. “Scientist of the divine.”

A tiny frown creases my forehead at her cheer. The Samantha I knew was a wallflower, sweet but interpersonally inept. She might have had a calculating streak, but you could never mistake it for social confidence. This girl is bubbly and forthright, so unless that reserve was just another emotional wall she’d built, I’d say there’s been a seismic shift in her personality in just a handful of weeks. Then again, she’s always been a little hard to read. Maybe her tyrant of a father was keeping her down? I toss the idea back and forth, then mentally shrug away my doubts—I’ve always been a trusting goddess, and right now I’m just happy to see that Samantha is alive and well.

Sekhmet, on the other hand, is about as far as you can get from “trusting,” but since she was locked up at Finemdi until I showed, she never really got to know Samantha. All she says is, “It is good to see you again. I am pleased you chose the path of virtuous strength. The craven submission you displayed when I first awoke in Impulse Station was most disagreeable.”

Samantha’s good cheer fades a little as she recalls the memory. “Er, yes, thank you. I believe you promised to, um—”

“Flay you alive in the burning winds of the Sahara,” Sekhmet says with a too-wide smile.

“Ah. Yes, that was it,” Samantha says.

“Fortunate indeed you chose another path, *yes?*”

Samantha pauses for a moment, seeming unable to find the right

words. Finally, she just nods at the Egyptian goddess before turning to me. “Well, I’m sure you’re wondering why I wanted to see you.”

I give her arm a friendly tap. “I’m just glad you’re alive, really.”

“And kicking,” she says. Again, so confident. “So listen, before I get to the real reason I asked to meet you, I wanted to talk about Finemdi.”

“Oh?” This should be good.

“They’re transferring me. Meridian One, in New York—it’s their headquarters. Makes Impulse Station look like a strip mall. More security, more researchers, more everything. It’s where the board meets and where they keep their most-trusted gods. When you think you’re ready—or want to catch up—look for me there. I’m not about to start planting bombs, but I’m willing to do what I can for you as long as I can keep working on my, um, project.” She gives my friends an apprehensive glance as she finishes.

I know what she means, and why she’s reluctant to say more. Samantha’s been trying to resurrect her mother as a god for the past few years, using Finemdi’s stable of shackled believers to worship the woman into existence. It hasn’t been going well.

“I hope you find success up there,” I say, and mean it. What she’s doing may be an abomination, but then, what’s been done to her is worse. Besides, after dealing with Finemdi’s industrial approach to magic, my bar for divine outrage has been set pretty high. “Do you know what they’re going to have you do?”

She shrugs. “After they debrief me about this place”—she jerks her head at the lava pool—“they’ll probably just put me back on artifact identification and divine intake. Anyway, the main reason I brought you here is . . . hang on . . .” She reaches into the satchel at her side and begins rummaging around. “This!” she exclaims as she retrieves a thick manila envelope. She holds it out to me. “Here you go.”

“What’s in it?” I ask, moving to open it.

“Wait until you’re home,” she says, holding up a hand. “You’re going to want a quiet place to think about what’s in there. Besides my contact info, I’ve included something you’ll find very interesting—a bit of research I’ve been doing on the side. Finemdi doesn’t have a clue, but I knew you’d want to see it.”

“Um, okay. Thanks, Samantha,” I say, stuffing the envelope into my bag. It’s not a great fit—I went with “cute” today, not spacious.

“Oh!” Samantha says, snapping her fingers. “Something else I need to do: Make sure you understand just how dangerous Finemdi can be.”

Nathan chuckles at that. “Yeah, they seemed all sunshine and snuggles before.”

Samantha pushes her glasses up on her nose and gives him a pitying look. “How much do you *really* know about them? You have no frame of reference for the level of power they can bring to bear. They get enraged when somebody so much as pokes their hive with a stick, and you’ve taken a baseball bat to it.”

I have to laugh. “I’m liking that image.”

“So Finemdi’s all crazied-up,” Nathan says. “What does that actually *mean*?”

“It means they’re more suspicious of their gods than ever before, they’re investigating every lead they can find, and they’re dead set on hunting down whoever’s responsible. Actually, it’s just about . . .” She checks her watch. “Yes, in another minute, they’re going to be here.”

That gets my attention. “*What?!*” I hiss, eyes darting around.

“Shh, keep your voice down!” Samantha snaps. “Look, you need to see what a real Finemdi operation is like—not some lone specialist going after a girl in a mental hospital. They barely considered you a god, Sara. You need to understand who you’re dealing with, because

I need you out there and fighting, not captured or killed because you underestimated these people.”

“Why do you—”

“Just listen—when they get here, everyone is going to drop, including me. *All* of you need to pretend to fall asleep with the rest of them, but land so you can still see what’s going on.”

She looks up, frowning, then nods. “Okay, they’re a little early. Get ready, and whatever you do, don’t—”

Her eyes roll up in her head and she crumples to the pavement along with Nathan and every other tourist around us. I spin around, bewildered, before practically throwing myself onto the asphalt. My still-conscious friends follow suit, each pantomiming their own personal fainting spell.

There’s a massive bass rumble in the air, a shuddering that jars reality and thrums in my bones. The gray skies ripple and flex, waves and eddies distorting the air like the surface of a storm-tossed sea. An enormous . . . *flipper* descends from the sky, a mottled green arc of wizened leather that has to be at least a hundred feet long. I’m so focused on it I almost miss that there are four of them in all, spaced in an ellipse above the pit. Then the clouds part further, revealing the plated underside of a colossal beast. An enormous pitted head lowers from above, jutting in front of the shell, and as it opens its beak to yawn, I realize it’s a turtle—a gigantic, floating *turtle*.

I stifle the urge to laugh, but just barely. Keep it together, Sara. This is serious. Sure, your mortal enemies fly around on a *freaking turtle*, but—*no*, I need to stop thinking about this. The more I consider it, the closer I get to hysterics.

The creature continues its descent from the roiling heavens. I can just make out a woman perched atop its head, still as a statue. She’s jet-black, as if carved from flawless obsidian. A bunker-like

structure rises from above the turtle's back and I can see guards patrolling its perimeter, on the lookout for any threats. Then there's movement on the side closest to the lava pool, and as I watch, a thickset, well-built man with a great bushy beard walks to the edge of the shell. He's clad in nothing but a heavy blacksmith's apron and limps as he moves; one of his legs is twisted and lame.

With that last clue, I'm able to put a name to him: Hephaestus, Greek god of the forge.

He halts for a moment, leaning over to peer into the pool, then throws himself in with a graceless swan dive. His body smashes through the thin crust on the surface of the molten lake, vanishing in a spray of liquid rock.

"What's he doing?" Hi'iaka's voice whispers to me. A spirit of the wind, she's controlling the air to carry her voice to our ears alone.

Ordinarily, it would be a brilliant idea. Ordinarily, the little spark of divinity she's using to do it would be about as noticeable as a mouse's sneeze for anyone with the sense to look for such things. But there's a flying turtle above us with a Finemdi-run outpost lashed to its back. Ordinary has gone out the window, booked a ticket to the moon, and left our world behind.

With a deep, mournful whine, the turtle shifts to stare down at us, its body spinning in the air. It begins drifting closer, zeroing in on the errant whiff of magic it somehow senses. The Finemdi guards on its back are yelling, calling to their companions and rushing to get a better look at what their ride has found. The flippers lift up, moving out to the side so the turtle can drift lower without touching the pool of lava below. It's getting even closer now, enough for me to make out hundreds of years of wear and tear, a reptilian face of impossible character and age. Its eyes are great black ovals, their

darkness made all the more striking by irises that shine like the stars of a distant galaxy.

Those captivating eyes can't be more than fifty feet away now, and getting closer by the second. The ebon woman perched atop the turtle's head is peering around as well, trying to find the source of her pet's interest. She's hauntingly beautiful, her midnight features refined yet brushed with a touch of warmth. Any moment now, I fear they'll spot us—that the turtle will somehow realize what we truly are, and all my beautiful dreams of vengeance will come crashing down.

Then the smoldering lake beneath the creature churns, the darker rock on the surface heaving and cracking. An enormous geyser of lava erupts from deep within the pool, spouting up to splash against the turtle's belly. Its roar of pain is titanic—a bellow that drowns out every other sound and makes me shudder in sympathy. With stunning speed, the beast rears back and launches itself away from the pool, soaring up hundreds of feet in an eyeblink. The guards on its back cry out in surprise and panic as they lose their footing. Several of them topple from their perches and fall, screaming, before they crash into the lava below with thick, satisfying *plops*.

“Now!” Pele shrieks, picking herself off the ground and running. “C'mon, move!”

I lie there dumbly for a moment as my friends scramble from the pavement, trying to understand what could have possibly made the lava do that. Then I snap out of it, berating myself with the realization that Pele's the reason there's even a lake to begin with. *Idiot!* I spring to my feet, grab Nathan's arm, and haul him over my shoulder. I look for Samantha, but she's nowhere to be found. Assuming she's been saved by one of her many contingencies, I hightail it after my friends. As I run, Nathan's body jiggling on my shoulder with

every footfall, the part of my brain that's not concerned with side-stepping a field of torpid tourists amuses itself with the fact that I've been getting a lot of experience carrying my poor priest's unconscious body lately.

I spare a glance behind us as we reach the parking lot; the turtle is still spiraling high into the skies, flecks of lava dripping from its stomach, enraged howls escaping from its maw.

"An excellent distraction!" Sekhmet yells at Pele as she jogs alongside us.

"Yeah, brilliant!" Hi'iaka adds.

Pele grins at that and puts on an extra burst of speed, aiming for our Honda at the back of the lot. Nāmaka just shakes her head, though whether she's frustrated at our nearly getting caught or Pele getting something new to brag about, I'm not sure. We all reach the car at roughly the same time (I suspect Sekhmet was holding herself back for us). I fumble in my bag for the keys, spending a few heart-stopping seconds fishing around in the mess of makeup, receipts, trinkets, and mini Toblerone bars for the little tangle of metal before I wrench it out with a cry and click the button to unlock the doors. I practically toss Nathan into the backseat, and we all pile into the car. I slam the door closed, turn the key in the ignition, and peel out of the lot as quickly as I dare. Driving is still new to me, but I refuse to err on the side of safety.

A few minutes later, as we merge onto more populated roads, I feel some of the tension in the car begin to fade. There's no sign of the turtle, or any other form of pursuit. "Hey, girls?" Hi'iaka says, chuckling nervously. "I think I can guess what Ms. Drass was about to say before she fell asleep."

I laugh a little too much at that—we all do, really—but I can't help myself. I didn't get up today expecting to narrowly escape the

attentions of a Finemdi assault squad . . . to say nothing of the *turtle*. That thought just makes me laugh even harder, and it's to the sound of our relieved mirth that Nathan finally awakes with a groan.

"What the hell just happened?" he moans from the car's floor. "And why are you all laughing?"

"Sky turtle," I manage to squeak out before a new wave of amusement consumes us. When it finally dies down enough for us to concentrate, we fill Nathan in on what he missed.

"Wish I could've seen *that*," he murmurs, sounding a little jealous.

"Yeah, wasn't something I've encountered before," I say. "Sekhmet? Any ideas?" My friend has been rather quiet the entire ride.

She nods, seeming unsettled. "I believe that was the personal conveyance of the ebon goddess we saw. She is Yamī—a Hindu deity. The Tibetans revere her as ruler of all the female spirits in Naraka, their purgatory."

She pauses, displaying a rare moment of apprehension. It occurs to me that she doesn't want to voice her next thought. When she does at last, I can see why. "It bodes ill for us that Finemdi controls such gods. How many can they truly call their own? How many are left beyond their walls?"

The remaining humor flees the car in the face of those sobering questions. We ride in silence for an awkward minute. Finally, Hi'iaka breaks it, trying to focus us on something a little less depressing. "So what's in the package?" she asks.

"Oh yeah," I mutter, patting my overstuffed bag. "Must've been important. Let's check it out when we get inside the apartment."

I pull into our usual space, and we hurry out of the car, dashing across the parking lot as if any time spent in the open will call Finemdi down onto our heads. Then, safe in our cramped little condo,

I haul out the envelope and tear it open. Two things spill out: a note card with Samantha's e-mail address, and the political section of the *Washington Post* newspaper, dated from over two weeks ago.

I begin leafing through it. "Why would she . . . ?"

My confusion ends the moment I spot a particular article. The image above it has been circled in red. It's captioned with the innocuous phrase *Gen. Theo Ariston seeks a new life in the private sector* and shows a stern man standing in front of a government building, looking official. Beside it, Samantha's neat handwriting reads, *Who do you think he just joined?*

I gasp, and the paper falls from my hands. He may be wearing a military dress uniform, but I would recognize that chiseled face anywhere.

Sekhmet touches my shoulder and leans in to examine the image, eyes narrowing. "Can it be?" she whispers.

I nod, an odd mix of excitement and anger coursing through me.

"Who is he, Sara?" Nathan asks, picking up the paper and frowning at the picture.

I glance at my friend, a wicked smile tugging my features. At last. *At last.* "A dead man," I say, laughing at the absurdity of it all.

I take a moment to gather my thoughts, and then I begin the story of how I lost everything.



ONCE UPON A TIME

FREYA

The world was mine, once. Maybe twice. It's hard to remember. Here I am, a god, a shining, egotistical force of nature, yet fallen so far from what I once was that I don't even want to use the *name* my followers gave me. Haven't you wondered how that happened? How I came to accept my fate, to pull away from the world and hunker down in the shadows like a wounded animal?

Well, I was wounded, of course.

Long ago, I tried to play kingmaker, to use my immortality to meddle in the affairs of man. My pantheon had begun its decline, but our power was far from gone. I thought I could do what no human could, that with my magic, agelessness, and experience, I could create an empire to stand the test of time. My hand would always be there, guiding an endless procession of rulers.

In my arrogance, I actually believed I was the only god to try this.

Let me paint you a picture: I sit behind a dozen thrones, hidden

ruler of Scandinavia and England, beloved queen, courtesan, and seer. Then a horde of ignorant barbarians arrives from lands beyond, from across the southern sea, and challenges my kingdom. Our armies meet at a spot of my choosing, on high ground that gives us the advantage. I ride out beside my king, shield our forces with an impenetrable spell, and wait for our foes to come and die.

They oblige me. They fall in droves, unable to assault the hill, their arrows and spears turned aside by my wondrous magic. Then, as the rabble retreats, a single man walks forth, clad in odd segmented plates of armor, glittering bands of steel covering his bright red tunic. A skirt of studded leather straps bounces around his legs, and he clutches a short, thick sword in one white-knuckled hand. He brushes our arrows from his skin as if they were irritating flies, his stride unbroken by the hail of weaponry that rains upon him. As he nears my wards, I catch the jagged pulse of divinity writhing beneath the crested helm that shadows his eyes. Then he plunges his sword into my barrier, gives it a twist, and shatters it like glass.

I walk forward to meet him, long sword in hand and spells of battle on my lips. We lay waste to each other and the land around us, our fight tearing open the earth and turning men to mist. I besiege him with living lightning, bathe his forces in hurricanes of fire, and resurrect my fallen almost as fast as he can kill them. Golems of blood and steel rise at my command, glacial winds of razor ice howl across the battlefield, and our weapons clash with the speed and strength of thunderclaps. Impossible devastation flows from me, a torrent of magic and violence that scars the skies and nips at the foundations of reality.

And it's not enough.

I am a god of war, but far too late I realize he is one as well, and this conflict has only fueled him. *He* is battle personified, a creature

undiluted by concepts such as love and fertility, and in this arena, he is my better. In the end, a brutal slash of his blade removes one of my arms, a spinning thrust pierces my heart, and a final sweep takes off my head.

My view of the landscape tumbles and bounces crazily before I come to rest on a thick patch of grass halfway down the hill. At first it's peaceful, a welcome rest from the haze of battle and the pressures of command. Then rough fingers plunge into my hair and I'm wrenched from the grasses, raised into the air until I am brought face-to-face with my attacker. I sway before him, a crisp fall wind rustling my golden locks.

His eyes are burning pits, his features noble yet enraged; a berserker carved from marble. "Your little island is mine," he grates in the Norman tongue. "And you will make a fine trophy."

"I am no man's prize," I say with all the disdain a decapitated head can manage. It's not much.

He laughs at that, a booming, humorless bellow that carries over the sound of my people being crushed by his army's counterattack. "Pathetic girl, I am the Destroyer of Men, the Stormer of Walls, the Lord of War." He sneers and brings me closer. "The *world* is my prize."

The terrible thing is, he's right.

My neck is capped in molten gold and enchanted with ruinous magic, preventing me from re-forming through the beliefs of my followers. For a hundred years, I rest on his mantel as he conquers the known world in the name of countless mortal rulers, always seeking new wars, new bloodshed. In the end, I'm traded away with a host of other trinkets. I don't know if he simply forgot about me, or this is just another form of disrespect. Whatever the reason, I've escaped in the hands of unscrupulous traders, and through no guile of my own.

I should be outraged at the idea, but decades of imprisonment and humiliation have blunted my sense of self-importance. I can feel my worshippers dwindling, my strength fading. Christianity is spreading, its missionaries slithering through my homelands, and I have no one to blame but myself. I dared to meddle in the affairs of other realms, reached too far for power, and this is where it has led me—if I had remained with my pantheon, if I had been there to answer the prayers of my people, I might still have their belief. At the very least, I certainly wouldn't be a disembodied head on a pile of treasure, being sold for a handful of coins.

Besides self-loathing, I actually feel a stirring of excitement. The end seems in sight. My hope is that my new owners consider my head worthless, that the gold on my neck is all they really want. If they pry it off and melt it down, they'll free me in the process. Yet all too soon, it becomes clear the enchantments are too strong for these mortals to sever. Though my surroundings have changed, I remain a prisoner. The years crawl by as I'm passed from owner to owner, nothing more than a bizarre curio traveling Europe in the collections of nobles and scoundrels alike. The days blur into a crushing mix of boredom and disgrace while my power evaporates like blood into the seas. The only constant, the only thing I can hold on to, is my hatred for the god who did this. I swear a thousand times, to all the fates that touch this world, that his suffering will be cruel beyond reason and last days beyond counting.

Finally, another *decade* after I was first sold, I wind up in Egypt, a gift to a powerful lord. Servants bring me to his home with other expensive gifts and leave me in a receiving room overseen by a bookkeeper with a checklist. Rolled carpets, jade statues, bolts of cloth, chests of spices, and lockboxes of jewelry are piled here, awaiting categorization. I sit on a velvet pillow within a curled brass

enclosure, waiting my turn with the bookkeeper. As I wonder if I'll be jammed in storage somewhere or placed high on a shelf to gather dust, a door leading farther into the manor swings open and a beautiful woman enters.

She has a dark, olive-skinned complexion, almond-shaped eyes, and icy, regal features. She is dressed in jewel-studded robes and a golden snake-headed circlet nestles in her thick black hair. She is haunting grandeur wrapped around brutality, breathtaking in her majesty and ferocity. This is a predator, a hunter, a warrior queen. The bookkeeper bows his head in greeting, which seems silly, like a rabbit waving at a wolf. "Greetings, Lady Rashida," he says with great respect in Coptic.

"Is this everything?" the woman asks, gaze darting over every trinket and bauble.

"Indeed," he replies. "All the gifts for our master."

"*Your* master," she snaps. "*My* compatriot."

"Of course, of course," he says, grimacing. "I did not intend offense, dear lady."

She gives him a baleful stare, locking him in place for an awful second. Then she shakes her head in disgust. "Get out. Finish your tallies later."

He nods and backs away, all but dashing from the room. The woman sighs as he leaves, then begins examining each of the items. She doesn't spend much time with anything, doesn't seem to care about the wealth in front of her, sparing but a moment for each piece before moving on to the next. She runs a hand over the bolts of cloth, taps the ornate statues, fiddles with the jewelry and spices, every movement cold and precise.

At least, until she turns to me.

The moment her eyes lock on to my brass cage, her composure

changes completely. She hunches over, features freezing, arms drifting down to her sides, looking like she's ready to pounce. She stays like that for a minute, studying me. Then she stalks forward, picks up my cage, and rips it open in one smooth motion. Brass pieces clatter against the floor as she holds my pillow up to eye level and snarls.

"You come to my lands wrapped in darkness. The scent of ruin hangs heavy about you," she says softly. "What are you, wretched thing? Tell me now, for you will never have the chance again."

She's a god. I can finally feel it, now that she's so close; I can sense her divinity through the haze of spells inside my head. My mouth drops open in surprise, but nothing emerges—I haven't spoken in over a century.

I'm not even sure I can.

"A spy? An assassin?" she asks, intense. "Who holds your reins, and why have they sent you?"

Her question strikes a nerve deep inside me. My *reins*? I may have spent more than a hundred years as a beheaded toy, but never for a second was I the servant of another. The warrior maiden in me, the Valkyrie, rises for the first time in ages, incensed at the notion, and with her return, I find my voice. "I am no one's *pet*," I spit, the words hoarse and hollow. "I am shackled, yes, but not by choice—*never by choice*."

Her eyes grow wide, and I feel her judgment like the glare of the sun. "A fighter, I see. But if it is not choice that brings you here, then what?"

"Defeat," I say, looking away as the grief floods me. "I defied my nature, and for a hundred years, I have suffered for it."

The woman gives me a voracious smile that seems to bare too many teeth. "Do you desire freedom, then?"

Of course I do. But something tells me this woman is looking for a different reply. She wants to hear what the Valkyrie's answer would be, and I am all too happy to give it. "I want *revenge*," I hiss.

The woman's smile changes, shifts from hostile to joyous. "A goddess sits before me," she whispers. "Broken by her past and hidden by vile spells, but a goddess all the same. I shall release you, little fighter. I shall hear your story, become a part of it, and one day, rejoice in its bloody end."

She holds me by the hair with her left hand, letting the pillow drop away, and brings up her right. Wicked claws sprout from her fingertips, and she digs them into the golden seal on my neck. With a roar, she tears it from me. The enchantments collapse in a calamitous burst of sparks, and I feel relief for the first time in a century. At last, the pain in my mind is silenced. She sets me down and I begin to change, to reassume the form chosen by my dwindling pool of believers. Veins writhe and flex, spilling out of my neck like crimson roots. Bones click, skin stretches, and blood thunders as my body rebuilds itself. Weak as I am, I know it will take hours, but in the end, I will be whole again.

My eyes close, and we stay quiet for a time as I enjoy the simple peace of freedom. Then my curiosity grows, forcing me to break the silence. "Who are you?" I ask the woman as I re-form.

"I am the protector, the One Before Whom Evil Trembles," she says, bending down beside me. "I am Sekhmet, and you are welcome in my lands."

"Thank you," I whisper, and I see in her eyes she understands the depths of my gratitude.

"And you, little fighter?"

I sigh. "Freya, though I feel unworthy of the name."

She shrugs. “Then choose another, and *fight* for the honor of returning to the old one.”

That brings a smile to my lips. “Perhaps I shall.”

“*Who?*” she asks, leaning in, and I can tell she isn’t wondering what my new name will be. “Who did this? Who must die? The promise of death sings in my soul, and I would know the name of your foe, a title for this hymn of destruction.”

A hundred years of hate fill me as I recall the man. My powers wither, my pantheon fades in lands far removed, and all I have left is my revenge. He must die. How else can I have any right to call myself a god? My eyes narrow, and I clench a half-formed fist as I spit his name.

“*Ares.*”

“I looked, believe me,” I say to my friends. “For centuries, I sought him, and for centuries, I was denied. Sekhmet became a good friend of mine, and our adventures could fill libraries.” I glance at her, smiling.

“But never again did I catch the barest whisper of Ares. My strength dwindled and, alongside it, the call for vengeance. I pulled away, withdrew from the divine, and, as I traveled the New World, became convinced my quest was pointless. In the end, I committed myself to a mental hospital in Florida, intent on spending the rest of my existence there.”

“And that’s where I came in,” Nathan adds, a touch of wonder in his voice.

“Precisely, my priest,” I say in a soft voice, feeling a little awed by my own sprawling history.

“And now he’s working with Finemdi?” Nāmaka says. “That’s what Samantha’s little note means, yes?”

“Must be,” I say. “She reviews most of the new gods they get—I’m guessing he joined up voluntarily, but she probably still had to give him a once-over.”

“Fine, wonderful, but think about your shared history—that’s *nine hundred years* gone,” Nāmaka says. “How would Samantha even know *any* of it? And *why* would she send you after Ares? None of this makes any sense.”

These are excellent, excellent questions. Questions I’d almost certainly be asking if our roles were reversed. But my head is filled with the glorious drumbeat of battle, drowning out pesky things like logic and self-control. So I brush away Nāmaka’s completely reasonable—and incredibly important—queries with the first thing that pops into my head.

“She probably came across an account of what happened as part of, like, research she was doing for Ares’s intake evaluation. I’m sure it showed up in a history book somewhere.”

Yeah, that sounds plausible. *Surrrrrre*.

“She’s my friend—she would have known how much I want him dead, how much I would appreciate the chance to take revenge.” Makes perfect sense.

“If you say so,” Nāmaka says, doubtful.

“So where does that leave us? I mean, we kind of have a lot on our plate already, don’t we?” Nathan asks.

“There’s only one place it can possibly lead, my priest,” I reply, a solemn tone creeping into my voice. I get up and walk to our computer. I jiggle the mouse so it comes out of sleep mode, head to the Web browser, and type *General Theo Ariston* into the search engine. The first hit is a *Wikipedia* entry for the man. I click it, bringing up his page, and feel a dark smile spread across my face as his picture appears on the right-hand side. Cold and dour, yet with a hint of

bloodlust visible even now, it can be no one else. This is my nemesis. The reason my power has vanished, my faith has fled, and now . . . well, now I can feel him becoming something else entirely. My will is bending itself around the idea, all my effort focusing itself on this one glorious thought. The urges of love are a distant cry now. If I were human, I might mourn the plague of hatred that bubbles within me.

But I'm not.

“We are going to find him and destroy him.”

3

EMBERS OF WAR

NATHAN

Here we go.

With mounting worry, Nathan watches as his goddess loses herself to the siren song of payback.

“It’s going to be incredible,” she’s saying, eyes glazed with fear-some joy. “I’m going to eat his heart. Like, literally rip it out of his stupid uniform, show it to him, and then *eat the damn thing*.”

Nathan looks to the others in the room, hoping to find a bit of support. The Valkyrie in his goddess is clearly taking charge, while love and beauty, laughter and life—the things he adores her for—are being kicked to the curb. Sekhmet, of course, sports a mile-wide grin, those dazzlingly exotic features of hers bathed in delight at Freya’s dreams of violence. At least the Hawaiian sisters seem to share Nathan’s appalled outlook.

“Gross,” Hi‘iaka says, scrunching up her broad nose. “So, what, we’re just gonna traipse off to kill this Theo guy because he’s actually some jerk-ass Greek god I’ve never even heard of?”

Nathan breathes a sigh of relief, thankful for some common sense. The girl is clearly trying to steer the conversation toward less-brutal topics. A goddess of nature like her siblings, she's a step removed from the passions of humanity, and that seems to include centuries-old vendettas.

"Really?" Nāmaka says, incredulous. "He's all over your beloved gadgets. Didn't you fight him in a video game? And what about that silly show with the warrior princess?"

"Oh yeaaaaah . . ." Hi'iaka murmurs.

"Comics, too," Nathan says, figuring now was as good a time as any to jump in. "But Hi'iaka's on the right track—are we really going to drop everything and go tearing *through* Finemdi just to get to this guy?"

Freya turns a cold smile on her auburn-haired high priest.

"Yes," she says in the voice of a goddess, all steel and arrogance.

A crash of thunder wouldn't be out of place, Nathan thinks.

"I've waited over *nine hundred years* for this," she continues. "How many of your lifetimes is that? If you think my vendetta against Finemdi matters in the face of his sins, then you cannot fathom the depths of my hatred."

Nathan's lips twist into a grimace. Since he met Freya at the Inward Care Center several months ago, he's learned a great deal about the true nature of the world, not to mention a handful of spells—*freaking spells*—but the sinking feeling in his gut tells him he still doesn't quite understand how gods work. After all, hadn't Ares obliterated her when she was near the height of her power? And now she wants to try her luck again, from the bottom of the celestial barrel?

He feels sick.

"Can we . . . not?" he says, trying to package his extreme dislike

into something more palatable than gagging in front of five goddesses. “I mean, really—think about this. You’ve waited so long. What’s the hurry?”

“It’s not like I have him booked for next weekend,” Freya says, frowning. “I know I need power—and probably a plan. I may be obsessive, but I’m not an idiot.”

“I know that, but is this what you really want to sink yourself into? Revenge? Hatred? You’re a god of love, not—”

“I’m more than that,” she replies, soft and dangerous. “More than love, and more than capable of—”

“Then be more than *this*, Sara,” Nathan says, wishing he could keep the pleading tone out of his voice. “It makes *no sense* for you to focus everything on settling this score right now, especially when you’ve got *the rest* of Finemdi to deal with, too. Remember them?”

“You don’t—” Freya starts to snap, but then she stops herself, closes her eyes, and inhales sharply. “Nathan,” she begins in a calmer voice. “This is part of who I am.”

“That doesn’t make it any less of a terrible idea,” he counters. “I mean, Nāmaka’s totally right: If Samantha knew enough to send you this article, she’d *have* to know you’d want to drop everything to go after Ares. Why would she do that? What does she get out of it?”

Freya blinks at that, and Nathan entertains a moment of hope that paranoia might win out over a thousand years of deep-rooted divinity. Then Freya shakes her head, saying, “Nothing. She’s trying to do a favor for a friend—that’s all.”

Nathan stifles a groan. “Even if that’s the case, you know these stories,” he points out. “How often do they *ever* end well?”

“Nathan,” Freya says, a blend of frustration and finality in her voice. “This tale is already being written. I’m on the path. Now,

I'd really like to walk it with you, but one way or another, I *will* walk it."

Nathan turns to share a worried look with the Hawaiian sisters, but they seem content to stay out of the argument. *Nature spirits*, he thinks, letting out a small sigh. The sisters were born to neutrality in much the same way Freya was wired for vengeance. It's a part of what they are, and behind those flashing forget-me-not eyes and pale, flawless Norse features, Nathan has the sneaking suspicion Freya knows this is just as bad an idea as he does.

And then it hits him. He stiffens, suddenly realizing why all his arguments, all the reason and logic in the world don't matter: This isn't about them. It's all wrapped up with centuries of dogma, a tower of belief rising from the past that leaves little room for Freya to defy the expectations of her followers.

Gods aren't born, after all, Nathan remembers—they're *made*. Every last one, from his goddess and her allies to the prisoners and collaborators behind Finemdi's walls has a *purpose*. Belief doesn't just empower gods; it *defines* them, and though Freya's long absence from the spotlight has granted her a bit of leeway in obeying the calls of her portfolio, it clearly isn't enough to overcome this.

She has to hunt Ares as surely as every human heart has to beat.

And so, even though every part of Nathan wants to object, to charm, beg, and plead his god away from her decision, he instead bows to it and says, "Okay, Sara. I'm with you. Wherever you go, or whatever you're after, I'm with you."

It doesn't feel great, but slamming his head against that unyielding bedrock of faith is worse.

His words bring a genuine smile to her lips, which almost—*almost*—makes the choice feel right. "Thank you," she says. Then an odd look flashes across her face, an out-of-character blend of regret

and self-doubt, and though it's gone in an eyeblink, it's enough for Nathan to realize he's seen it on her once before: The night he agreed to help her take down Finemdi.

She thinks she might be influencing me again.

It makes sense. She'd been worried his agreement then was a result of her influence, of the pressure all gods exude on the people and places around them. Following Freya (or any god, for that matter) meant risking a little of one's personality, of surrendering a part of yourself to their power. That kind of thing apparently went double for him: As Freya's high priest, their connection meant he got more than magic. According to her, he has a much higher chance of experiencing those changes.

Not that he's noticed anything yet.

Then a soft, cold little part of him asks, "Would you?"

The thought gives him pause, because it's painfully, terrifyingly true. After all, Freya herself had told him it might happen, had seemed worried *sick* about the possibility. How subtle was it? Could his choice of religion have influenced him already?

How much of any of this is my own free will? And if it's not me . . . how will I ever know?

"And don't worry," Freya adds, pulling him out of his head with a touch on the shoulder. "We're going to be smart about this. I won't drag my friends into a battle I know I can't win."

He gives a tired laugh. "I know. It just seems . . . fast, that's all."

"She's waited long enough, I think," Sekhmet says, flashing him an enormous smile. "As have I."

Nathan blushes at the attention. He's still unsure if he finds Sekhmet cute or petrifying, but when a beautiful lady beams at you, it's hard not to feel *something*. He settles for returning a grin.

Freya nods at her words, then seems to fidget for a moment before

returning her attention to “General Theo’s” *Wikipedia* article. She looks embarrassed, though by what, Nathan can’t quite tell. She’s just won the argument, after all—shouldn’t that make her happy? Are there other reasons she’s leapt on this opportunity beyond a bitter past? He knows she’s been having trouble with her goal of destroying Finemdi . . . perhaps Ares is a way of ignoring those difficulties.

A few weeks ago, when he agreed to help her and the other goddesses wipe the company from the face of the earth, what they’d all failed to realize at the time was just how *large* global conspiracies could be. Even worse, they had no idea who Finemdi’s true leader—some mysterious “chairman”—actually was, so it wasn’t like there was a figurehead all lined up to assassinate.

Would’ve been nice, Nathan thinks, not liking the hint of irritation he can feel trickling out of his god.

He doesn’t like it, but he *does* understand, at least a little. For a creature like Freya, defined in part by passion, confrontation, and war, being unable to act on *any* of those things must have been frustrating beyond imagination. With Finemdi, not only did she not know where to begin, but she didn’t have the power to do something about it even if she *did*.

His god had been resigned to gathering belief, waiting until she was strong enough to divine the future and cheat her way into a plan, but now . . . now Ares represents the perfect outlet for her rage: a simple, tangible foe upon which to focus all her attention. He’s even working *with* their enemies! How perfect is that?

But it means Freya can’t see—or convince herself—that Finemdi *as a whole* is the greater threat, and focusing on a single employee of theirs isn’t exactly the best use of time.

Just goes to show how well gods listen to voices of reason, Nathan thinks. *Especially their own.*

Pele leans in to read the webpage over Freya's shoulder. "Handsome fellow," she says after a moment. "Little cold for my liking, though."

"Figures," Hi'iaka says with a snort.

Pele sighs. "Like *you* want to date him."

"He has a father?" Freya says, still reading the article. She clicks a link titled "David Ariston," and Nathan leans closer to see what comes up. The picture on the following page is much older, but clearly of the exact same person.

"Decorated World War Two officer and descendant of famed Civil War leader Alfred Ariston," he reads.

Freya clicks the new name. The picture is faded and grainy this time, but still unmistakably Ares in a period uniform. Nāmaka shakes her head. "He's masquerading as an entire family? How do mortals miss this? Doesn't anyone suspect?"

"Of course not," Freya says. "Why would they? Why would any of them go looking for magic when they know the world would laugh at them for it? Isn't 'family resemblance' all the excuse they need?"

Hi'iaka nudges Nathan. "You people need to work on your imaginations."

"I'll make sure to bring it up in our next newsletter," Nathan says with a half smile.

"You have a—Ooh, sarcasm. Hilarious," Hi'iaka says, hair snapping in a sudden, irritated gust. Nathan snorts a little at that. He enjoys messing with the nature spirits, and Hi'iaka's naiveté makes her a fun target.

"He's been a part of every American conflict since they started keeping records," Freya says, still skimming the articles.

"Must love fighting," Pele remarks.

“Well, he is the Lord of War,” Freya says in a mocking tone. Then her eyes widen. “Oh, son of a—” She pushes away from the computer and spins to face her friends. “I know *exactly* what the bastard’s doing. You know how we’ve been working for Disney the past few weeks, right? Lapping up belief?”

The other goddesses nod, looks of gratitude popping onto their faces as they do. Not long before their recent showdown with Finemdi, Freya started a job at the local theme parks as a Disney princess—a choice that amused Nathan to no end. There, she’d discovered some of her youngest visitors believed so earnestly in her as a fictional character that she was charged ever so slightly by the strength of that conviction. She’d said it was like gaining a fraction of a worshipper every time, all without them even knowing her true name. When Sekhmet and the Hawaiian sisters joined up, she’d let them in on her little secret and helped them get similar jobs.

At Finemdi, Freya and Nathan had learned that gods need concentrated worship to form, but after that, just about any form of belief directed at them was fair game—particularly if it was catalyzed by something related to their specialty. Dionysus was a good example of how powerful a god could get that way, and Nathan frowns at the memory. A jackass god of merriment and madness they’d met at the parks, he drew his strength from revelry and entertainment. They weren’t sure where he’d gone in the aftermath of Impulse Station, but considering how much strength he’d drawn through his position at Disney, it was a safe bet he made it out just fine.

“We all have our areas of expertise,” Freya continues. “Ares . . . well, he’s figured out the perfect way to empower himself from his.” Sekhmet’s mouth drops open. “You mean to imply—”

“War is his answer to humanity’s cynicism,” Freya says, nodding

grimly. “They may not believe in him anymore, but he knows the call of battle will never fade.” She looks at Nathan as she finishes, prompting him to put two and two together.

It doesn’t take long. “Wh-wait, you mean *he’s* the reason we’re still blasting craters out of the Middle East?” Nathan says, shocked by the implications.

Freya gives him an approving smile, and Nathan feels a surge of pride for making the leap. “I think he’s the reason for more than that. *Look* at this,” she says, gesturing at the monitor. “I’m sure it goes back centuries. All these stalemates and endless wars, prolonged conflicts and global tensions. He’s been wallowing in warfare like a pig in mud, using his military connections to keep the planet in peril.”

“Then why join Finemdi? What more can they offer him?” Nathan asks, feeling dismayed by the idea of a god with that kind of obsession anywhere *near* the conspiracy. The lives Ares had destroyed over the centuries, all to fuel the fires of conflict . . . it staggers him to imagine the scope of the suffering that could be placed at that monster’s feet, and for the first time since Freya laid out her hateful plans, he feels they might actually be a good idea.

Sekhmet lets out a humorless laugh. “A challenge,” she says.

The room turns to her, curious.

“Look at what has become of war,” she says. “Commanders no longer lead the charge—they sit in meetings and observe the results of orders from half a world away through spy satellites and drones. That is not what a creature like Ares craves. He will miss *battle*, the chance to test himself in combat. Finemdi can provide all this and more, can promise he will face *gods* firsthand, not men and their toys from behind a desk.”

Nathan notices Freya nodding at that, but as much as he hates

being the voice of dissent with this group, something doesn't feel right about that line of thinking. "So he'd give up on the military for *that*?" he says. "I mean, he's got access to *nukes*—why wouldn't he just stay with the government and try to kick-start World War Three?"

"I am aware of your ghastly atomic weapons," Sekhmet says, shaking her head. "Enough to know that Ares does not desire a nuclear exchange. He needs humanity alive and fighting, not slaughtered in a radioactive flash."

Pele makes a little gasp of understanding, drawing the connection at last. "So he can feed on them. But a *world* of conflict? For centuries?" She turns back to Freya. "How strong is he, Sara? We were born in all our glory through the worship of thousands. Now you're telling us Ares has managed to draw on the strength of *billions*?"

"Merciful Ra," Sekhmet breathes, brow crinkling as she does the divine math. "Of what feats could such an abomination be capable?"

"Sky's the limit," Hi'iaka says. "And *this* is our monster of the week? Come on, Sara. Be the better god and let it go. We've already got a global conspiracy to kill. Gotta go big picture on this one."

Nathan can't help shaking his head at the notion. Hi'iaka's right, of course, and deep down, he's sure Freya knows it . . . but that battle has already been lost. He understands the fury that seizes her soul at the thought of Ares. She won't be able to take the high road, no matter how much all those years of hiding have eased off the call of divinity. The principles of her faith don't just influence her; they *define* her.

She's trapped, he thinks.

A half second later, Freya simply shrugs and says, "No, my friend. I can't."

“You sure?” Hi‘iaka pushes, and Nathan wants to snort at the impossibility of arguing. That ship sailed the moment Ares put a sword through Freya’s neck. “We’ve got a good thing going here.”

“Am I sure?” his goddess repeats with cold disdain. “I will set this world alight if I can catch him in the flames.”

And that’s that, Nathan thinks to himself, unable to keep a little stirring of glee out of his head. Maybe it *is* the influence of their link, but this new endeavor carries an undeniable thrill, the brutal simplicity of the plan calling to him in much the same way it must for Freya herself.

Find Ares. Kill Ares.

How very . . . neat.

Hi‘iaka shares an unhappy look with her siblings, then turns to Nathan and Sekhmet. He just shrugs and moves to stand beside his goddess. Sekhmet, meanwhile, practically glows with anticipation, claws unsheathed and whiskers twitching as if there’s a chance of finding Ares outside the front door.

An awkward moment of silence passes as everyone judges just how committed the rest of the room is to the endeavor. Then Pele speaks up, regret filling her voice. “I fear this is a path you must walk without us, my friends. We will support you if we can, but our place is here. We must restore ourselves in these parks and, in time, face the larger threat of Finemdi as a whole. Know that we do not consider this an ending—merely a different trail. The moment you wish to rejoin our cause, you will be welcomed with open arms.”

Nāmaka and Hi‘iaka nod, and Nathan knows Pele speaks for both of them. He’s a little disappointed but bears the trio no ill will. They don’t have as strong of a commitment to Freya as he does.

No turning back.

“I look forward to that day,” Freya says. “But there’s no reason to

make this feel so final. I don't even have a plan, so I'm not going anywhere just yet."

Pele smiles, clearly relieved this hasn't caused a rift between them. "Good!" she chirps. She stands there and fidgets a moment longer, glowing eyes flickering with uncertainty before she moves away. "Well. I'll, um, let you three get to your plotting, then. Come on, girls."

Hi'iaka turns back before she exits the room to say, "Oh, and we're having breaded pork cutlets with cabbage and rice for dinner!"

Nāmaka sticks her head in to add, "And I'm making mai tais!"

Then the three are gone, leaving Nathan, Sekhmet, and Freya to their dreams of revenge. Nathan shakes his head. "I'll never get used to that."

Freya snorts. "What, their mood shifts?"

"It's like living with hyperactive kids."

"They are nature spirits," Sekhmet says with a shrug. "Children of the earth, yes, but children nonetheless."

"I'm a little surprised at your reaction, too," Nathan says, turning to her. "Thought you'd consider that a 'betrayal,' of sorts."

Sekhmet smirks, and a husky laugh pours from her throat. "My specialty, yes? Well, priest, there must be *trust* before there can be betrayal. They are friends, to be sure, but only a fool would rely on such . . . *whimsical* creatures in matters of life and death."

Nathan remains silent a moment before he says, "Sekhmet, you nearly killed the pizza delivery guy last week because he was late."

"*He promised it would be thirty minutes or less!*" she snarls, whipping her head around to glare daggers at him.

"Okay, okay, just, uh, commenting, is all. Only a comment," he says, putting up his hands. *Smooth, Nathan.*

“Hmph,” she replies, staring him down for another second before turning back to Freya. “What next?” she asks.

Freya blinks. “Now isn’t *that* the question of the century?” she says, shifting to look at Nathan.

“Yeah, you’re going to need to give me some time on that one,” Nathan says, wishing he had a better answer. *Any* answer, really.

“If Ares truly *has* become the beast we fear, my vengeance won’t come easily,” Freya says, idly tapping the keyboard beside her. “I need strength, and a lot more of it than even a decade at these parks will provide. I need people to believe *in* me, not *at* me. I need worshippers again.”

“But how?” Sekhmet asks, sounding a little distraught. Nathan has a feeling she’s spent a long time considering that very problem. “How do you reveal yourself to the disbelievers of this modern world and not die in an onslaught of cynicism? There’s no room for new religions now, no appreciation for magic and wonder. The only fantasies humankind will accept in this day and age are of their own creation: books, movies, and games built to *entertain*, not answer prayers.”

“Well, magic isn’t gone, if you think of it that way,” Nathan says, drawing their attention. “Sure, yeah, the rules have changed, but people *will* believe. I mean, I’m still waiting for my Hogwarts letter. It’s just . . . we don’t buy new gods anymore. We never lost our faith; these days, it just goes elsewhere.”

“Why is that?” Freya asks, a blend of frustration and curiosity in her voice. “Why can you so easily accept a fictional character from behind the safety of the page or silver screen but can’t bring yourselves to embrace the *real* wonders that walk among you?”

“Hey, *I* did.”

“Yeah, but you needed me standing in front of you to do it,” she

says, frowning. “And okay, you’ll allow fictional characters and settings and such into your hearts, so fine, maybe there’s belief there, *maybe* even worship of a sort, but it’s *celebrity* worship, not—”

She stops midsentence, mouth agape as a thought strikes her. “Oh,” she murmurs, a smile curving the edges of her lips.

“What?” Sekhmet asks. “What is it?”

“I think I know how to gain the strength I need to destroy Ares.” She laughs. “I know how to get worshippers. *True* worshippers, Sekhmet, not mental patients or distant cultists.”

The goddess’s eyes grow wide, and Nathan can practically *feel* the desire radiate from her. “*How?*” she whispers.

Freya turns to the computer and pulls up a map of the United States. Then, she traces a line from Florida to California, to a dot labeled LOS ANGELES.

“I’m going to be a star.”

4

CHASING THE SUN

FREYA

Our farewell party has gotten a little out of control. Actually, it got out of control a few hours ago. Now it's approaching "really fun natural disaster."

Finding an isolated place in central Florida isn't much harder than driving thirty minutes away from civilization, so we weren't too concerned about random onlookers walking into our midst . . . but I'm starting to worry this will show up on satellite. What began as a mash-up of Hawaiian luau, Egyptian banquet, and Viking feast has devolved into a drinks-fueled, magic-boosted, music-blasted riot. I may be a minor player, but the other goddesses with me have more than enough mystic might to compensate. Have you ever seen three drunken nature spirits and a berserker cat goddess compete to see who can do a better job of firing up a party?

Besides the five of us, we've also brought a few dozen of our friends from Disney to this isolated patch of forest. I've made a lot of great connections in my time there, and there's no way I'm aban-

doing them without a little good-bye celebration. We *were* a little concerned about letting them see us wield our supernatural skills, however, so I agreed to use a touch of my gift to befuddle their memories. Most people seem to think this is a test for a new Disney attraction, anyway, but just to be on the safe side, we also had everyone leave their cell phones in their cars. After Sekhmet ferreted out the handful of social media addicts who tried to hold on to their gadgets, food and drinks began to flow, and my friends cut loose.

Waitresses of sculpted water mingle with the revelers, wielding platters of barbecued meats and fizzing drinks. Each moves with Nāmaka's liquid grace, and the concoctions they bear are tweaked and tuned to intoxicating perfection. Pele dances before a grand fire pit, surrounded by a throng of ecstatic revelers caught up in her addiction to music and movement. Balls of light twinkle and throb high above us, ten thousand flaming fireflies pulsing in time with the beat and lending the event a unique, arcane rave atmosphere. The songs themselves shake the trees with their power, amplified, channeled, and enhanced by Hi'iaka's mastery of wind and air.

Sekhmet has already torn through a lake of cocktails and is in the process of entertaining a crowd of awestruck cast members by dueling an escalating series of elemental golems. Forged by the Hawaiian sisters from water, wind, and fire, the beasts steam and slosh in an enormous fighting arena prepared by the Egyptian goddess herself, pummeling wood and earth with thunderous blows in their single-minded attempts to flatten her.

Hi'iaka protects the onlookers with an invisible screen of air currents, but they still jump whenever a particularly large chunk of rock or tree slams against the barrier. Nathan, at least, is far from the chaos, DJing the event and trying to ignore the rising madness around him. Every time I spot him looking up from the rented

controllers and turntables, I can tell by his look of increasingly bewildered awe that things are rocketing out of hand.

With all four goddesses trying to one-up one another and our mortal friends getting increasingly hammered, I really hope nobody gets hurt. Or at least, I *would*, if I were present enough to string that many thoughts together. I may not be able to throw down with my empowered allies, but I've been saving up some lovely illusions for this event, and dancing through a field of living fireworks, towering giantesses, and kaleidoscopic cats while pounding mojitos isn't the sort of thing that inspires sobriety. Oh, well. Sekhmet has the gift of healing, so come what may, we'll probably make it through the night without any fatalities.

"Love the fire moths!" I shout to Pele as my pack of dancers crashes into hers.

"The go-go giants were a nice touch!" she replies, grinning as she bounces a nearby reveler with one lovely hip.

"I really am going to miss you, you know," I say, moving to dance with her. "All of you."

"Oh, sweet little Viking, you'll return to us!" she says with a laugh. "Tonight, we celebrate a choice, a quest, and our friendship—and when you return, we'll do it all again!"

"Any excuse for a party?" I ask, hair bouncing as the air thrums. Inferno eyes blaze with glee. "*Life* is all the excuse you need!" she yells. "Make sure you remember that while you're out there on your big adventure!"

"How could I forget?" I say, throwing back my head and letting the music wash over me.

Ironically, that's fairly close to the last thing I can recall with any real certainty. The rest of the night is a very loud, very awesome blur. I'm pretty sure I remember tossing Sekhmet a can of beer and

cheering as she shotgunned it while ripping the head off another battle golem. There might have been a drinking contest with Nāmaka at one point (always a bad idea), and I seem to recall a few rounds of ear-blasting karaoke with Hi’iaka. I might’ve grabbed Nathan’s butt, too. Actually, I think I grabbed a *lot* of butts.

By the time the sun rises on the remains of the most shamelessly wonderful evening I’ve had in centuries, we’re all dead to the world. The day that follows is a long and quiet one, and while I bounce back almost as quickly as my fellow goddesses, Nathan sleeps through the entire thing. A shame, because our flight leaves the following morning.

I’m actually a little worried about it. Not because I have a problem with flying, mind you; it’s just that I’ve never tried to sneak mystic artifacts through airport security before.

After stumbling home from the party, we finished our packing and started divvying up our haul from Finemdi. It’s a frustrating pile of wonders: glowing talismans, enchanted tools, inscrutable tomes . . . all of it pilfered from their armory, all of it valuable beyond measure, and all of it completely unidentified. Despite the fact that none of us know what the things actually *do*, we aren’t about to leave a stockpile of potential “Get Out of Jail Free” cards lying around, so we pour them onto the dining room table and go in a circle, each of us taking a piece until it’s all divided.

Sekhmet crams her share into her luggage, and I do the same for mine, mixing in a pile of spell components I’ve been building with the help of Amazon.com and some of the local markets. Since I’m too weak to dish out major magic without keeling over, I’ve gotten in the habit of attaching a host of useful spells to keywords (I use breeds of pigs so they won’t go boom in casual conversation) and casting them over the course of hours. It’s a bit of a hassle, requires

tons of weird and wonderful ingredients, and most of them are fairly utilitarian—summoning, tracking, illusions, and so on—but considering how much they helped me back at Impulse Station, I’m wary of letting even the least of them fade. I’ve even got a casting schedule set up in my phone; my very modern Mimir.

Once every mystical party favor and reagent is packed away, we do our best to get one last night of solid slumber, then prepare to say good-bye. Despite centuries of practice at it, leaving friends behind never seems to suck any less. Sure, Sekhmet gets to be all stoic about it, but I’m a mess. In spite of everything, part of me really wishes we could stay. Amid sniffles and hugs in our kitchen the following morning, Pele repeats her command to find celebration whenever I can, Nāmaka cries and asks if we can take a swim in the Pacific for her, and Hi‘iaka gives me, Sekhmet, and Nathan big hugs, tweaks my nose, and tells us we’ll be back before we know it.

I hope she’s right.

A few last jokes and heartfelt sentiments, and then, far sooner than I would have liked, we’re dragging our many suitcases to the curb, packing ourselves into a taxi, and taking a quiet, nervous drive to Orlando International. Even at this early hour, the airport’s a buzzing hive of tourists, families, and business travelers.

I try to restrain my sniffles as we make our way toward security. I miss those girls already. Sure, they might have been flaky and naive, but they were also joyful, talkative creatures who just want to have fun with life. Now I’m standing in a line of bedraggled tourists, getting eyeballed by apathetic TSA agents, and hoping I don’t set off any red flags. The last thing I need is to be detained and have somebody run a background check on me. Or worse, Sekhmet. Do you think there’s a chance in hell of them strip-searching her? There’ll be blood on the walls in a heartbeat.

Nathan sighs and shuffles forward a step. He looks exhausted. I think the combination of an early-morning flight and our earth-shaking festivities have taken a toll on my poor priest. Maybe it's because it's been ages since someone's thrown a party in my honor, but thinking back on the whole event is getting me choked up all over again. I grimace as a new pang of loss stabs me. Why am I hurting myself like this? Now I miss those delightful spirits even more.

"Please remove any laptops from your carry-ons and place them in a separate bin," one of the agents says. Nathan complies sleepily, retrieving his computer from its satchel bag.

Glad to have something else to think about, I hoist my rolling pink suitcase onto the baggage conveyer, square my shoulders, and move toward the metal detector. Nathan walks through without a problem, and the TSA agent beyond beckons me forward. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch as my possessions disappear into the uncertain darkness of the baggage scanner.

Nothing beeps as I walk through the detector, and I allow myself a sigh of relief. I move to the left and wait anxiously for my suitcase to emerge. The belt stops, jerks back for a heart-stopping moment, and then mercifully pushes its boxy prisoners into the light. I pull my things down the line and begin stowing everything away, when an agent speaks up.

"Ma'am, we're going to have to ask you to step aside."

My blood freezes. It's not *what* he says that terrifies me—it's the person he's addressing it *to*.

There's a horrible, horrible pause that goes on for far too long, and as my head pivots to take in the scene, I hear her reply at last: "Excuse me, but may I inquire as to *why*?" Sekhmet says it slowly, enunciating each word as if she's speaking to a child.

This is not going to end well.

“We’d like to ask you a few questions about your carry-on, ma’am,” the man replies, unaware of the monumental danger. “Right this way.”

He holds up a hand. Sekhmet’s eyes dart to it as if she’s considering how easy it would be to rip it off and feed it to him. Then she inclines her head in the slightest of nods and follows him to a secondary security area partially fenced in by glass screens. The man has her carry-on with him, a dark tan rolling bag I picked out for her after an exasperating trip to the mall. (It took us *four hours* to find something halfway decent—I love the girl, but it’s staggering how indecisive she can be when it comes to fashion.) The agent places the bag on a small table between them and unzips it. Sekhmet bristles at what she must consider an appalling invasion of her privacy, but thankfully that’s all she does.

I move to get a better look. Frowning, Nathan follows me. The agent, wearing a dark blue uniform that probably offers little to no protection against brutally sharp claws, reaches in, fishes around for a moment, and then closes his fingers around something. He nods to himself and moves to withdraw the object. A bit of metal shines in his hand as he pulls back—and keeps pulling. It takes a moment before I realize it’s an enormous *knife*, with a blade that seems to go on forever.

My heart stops. Part of me wants to scream obscenities at the woman.

“Ma’am, you can’t take this on the plane,” he says in a weary tone, turning the weapon over in his hands. It’s obviously ancient and priceless beyond measure, its hilt decorated with polished bands of lapis lazuli and the business end of it hidden by a sheath of beaten

gold. Hundreds of tiny Egyptian characters have been carved into the precious metal, the life's work of an absurdly skilled craftsman.

"What? Don't be silly," she says in a haughty tone. "How else am I to know it's secure?"

"Passengers aren't allowed to bring weapons on the plane, ma'am," he replies.

"Well, that's fine, then," she says with a sharp nod. "I have no intention of using it as such at this time."

The TSA agent sighs, obviously used to dealing with obstinate passengers. *I'm* seething. I think I remember her getting a package from overseas a week ago—*this* has to be what was in it. Really, Sekhmet? *REALLY?*

"Ma'am, it's still a knife," the agent says. "Now you can either take the item back and check it in your luggage, give it to a friend to take home, leave it in your car, or mail it."

"I will do no such thing," she says, rearing back. "Do you have the barest notion of how long I have searched for this? It is one of the few relics to survive the fall of my faith and I will *never*—"

"*Hi*," I say, butting in to stand beside her. I glance down at his name tag. "Gary, is it? This is a friend of mine. She's new to this whole 'air travel' thing, and I'm very sorry about all this."

"That's fine, ma'am, but we still can't let her board with the knife."

"Impertinent mongrel—!" Sekhmet begins, but I elbow her in the side to cut her off and lean in, focusing my will upon the man.

I didn't want to have to do this. I don't know who's paying attention or if this might alert some Finemdi sleeper agent, but I *do* know there are cameras watching . . . and that I don't have much of a choice.

I'm a goddess of love, first and foremost, and even at my weakest, the one thing I'll always be able to do is tweak how others feel about me. Now, after my successes at Disney, it's child's play to flood the man's brain with adoration. In just a second, his look of glazed irritation vanishes, his cheeks flush, and I can feel a heady soup of affection bubble in his brain.

"So you two are friends?" Gary asks in a completely different tone.

"Yes," I say, scooting around Sekhmet to stand directly in front of him. "Would it be too much trouble to bend the rules for us? Just this once? It's such a teensy little thing, isn't it?"

"Huh?" he murmurs. Then he notices the knife in his hand. "Oh, this? Ha, it's like, from a gift shop or something, right? Sure, this couldn't hurt anyone."

I hold up a hand for it and he lowers the weapon onto my waiting palm. As soon as he lets go, I jam it back into Sekhmet's bag and zip the thing closed.

"Was there anything else I could help you with?" Gary asks.

"Nope!" I chirp, giving Sekhmet a meaningful look as I hold out the suitcase for her. "You've been a huge help. Such a sweetheart."

"Aww." Gary scratches the back of his head, looking embarrassed. "It's nothing."

"So we're good to go? We do have a flight to catch. . . ."

"Oh, right, yeah, of course. Better get moving. Sorry about all this." He leans in, lowering his voice and jerking his head at the agents monitoring the baggage scanners. "They can get real uptight. Don't mind 'em."

"Already forgotten," I say, flashing him a smile.

"Say, you, ah, wanna get drinks sometime?" he asks as we gather our things and begin moving away.

“Sure thing, Gary!” I reply with a wave. “Next time!”

He grins and returns the gesture. I give Sekhmet—who still looks highly annoyed—a friendly shove, and then we’re off, heading for the elevated shuttle that will take us to our terminal. She manages to restrain herself until we’re standing by the sliding doors that will open when our tram arrives. She turns to me with a glare and says, “That was beneath us.”

“Beneath—Sekhmet, you tried to bring a giant freaking *knife* on the plane!”

“And what of it? If I wished to cause harm, I would certainly not use such a precious bauble.”

I roll my eyes. “Well, they don’t know you can sprout *razor-sharp claws*, now do they?”

“Even so, how dare they suspect me of lawless behavior—I am beyond reproach, my fury saved only for the deserving.”

“We are not in *ancient Egypt* anymore, Sekhmet!” I snap, feeling myself getting angrier by the second.

“Oh, look, here’s the tram,” Nathan says, trying to ignore us.

“We talked about this,” I say as we begin moving onto the shuttle. “We need. To lie. Low.” I plop onto the little shelf at the front of the car, keeping my bag between my knees. Sekhmet moves to stand beside me, frowning.

“Yes,” she says after a moment, some of the rage behind her eyes subsiding. “Yes, we—we have greater threats whose punishment I will not jeopardize.” She sighs and shakes her head. “I apologize. I do not wish to be a burden. Even after all these years, it is difficult to accept how much our world has changed.”

I nod, looking out the window at the approaching terminal. There’s not much else to say to that, so I decide to bring the conversation back to the little oddity in her suitcase. Somehow, I doubt

she'll mind changing the topic. "So what's the deal with the knife, anyway?" I ask her.

"The—? Ah, yes," she says, actually looking a little sheepish. "An old artifact of mine. A gift, actually, from Ninurta." She gives me an appraising look. "Do you know of him?"

I frown. "Vaguely. Assyrian?"

"Close. Sumerian. God of war and agriculture. He bequeathed it to me after I, ah, bested him."

I glance at Sekhmet as our shuttle glides to a stop and the doors open. She seems a little too self-satisfied for that "bequeathing" to have come from anything other than Ninurta's bloody remains. Such a delightful woman. "How'd you get it back?" I ask. "I assume Finemdi didn't let you keep it."

She shakes her head as we head out into the terminal and begin looking for our gate. "No, I lost it long before my capture."

"Then where'd you find it?"

She sighs. "eBay."

Nathan snorts, barely managing to turn an obvious laugh into a coughing fit. Sekhmet glares at him. "It was very difficult!" she snaps. "Some wretched individual tried to steal it from me at the last moment; the price raised in a matter of seconds!"

My priest looks like he might be in danger of pulling a muscle trying to keep quiet. Finally, he manages to choke down his mirth and says in a strained voice, "I'm sorry. It's just that the idea of a god having to deal with auction sniping is, well, absurd." He pauses a moment, then adds, "Wonderfully absurd."

Sekhmet huffs and turns her attention back to navigating the crowds of travelers. As we're padding down a long carpeted hallway, our rolling suitcases making a satisfying hum, I lean in and whisper to her, "Plan on telling me what the knife *actually* does? I know

you're not *that* sentimental. You wouldn't seek it out if you didn't think it would be useful."

She turns to peer at me with a curious expression. "You touched it, did you not?"

"Yeah, for all of five seconds," I say.

Sekhmet's features contort into a ghastly smile. Despite the illusion of a Nile princess, I get the sense I'm facing a mouthful of long, curving teeth. "There is an intelligence within it, a ghost of prophecy and power. The weapon is meant for the hands of a warrior who will wage this world's last battle. I couldn't care less about the magic it provides—I only wish to ensure I play a role in such a conflict."

"Oh," I say. I suppose I should have guessed. As a goddess of warfare, destruction, and judgment, she must have found the words *final war* utterly irresistible. I keep forgetting I'm dealing with an intractable relic here. I really need to do something about this.

"Listen, Sekhmet, I have a favor to ask of you," I say as we near our gate.

"Name it, little fighter," she replies in an instant.

"When we get to LA, I want you to relax."

"Relax? I'm not sure I—"

"Let your guard down. Get a pedicure. Go to the beach. See a movie. Be a civilian." Part of that shouldn't be too hard; I know she's utterly addicted to action movies. You should see the way her eyes light up when they're on. I swear she's watched some of her favorites a hundred times.

Even still, she responds with a frown that remaps her forehead in wrinkles. "You're joking, of course."

"I am *not*," I say with a shake of my head. "I know you—you're going to want to sink your fangs into a villain the second we land."

This isn't that kind of adventure. We need to deal with producers and socialites, not barbarian hordes. I'm going to need your help, and if you want to be able to provide it, you're going to need to dial back the bloodlust."

"If it helps, I can show you around the city," Nathan says, sounding oddly hopeful. "All the hot spots. It'll be fun."

"But—but Ares . . ." she sputters, ignoring him.

"*Will be dealt with.* We're going to LA to stock up on belief, remember?"

She wavers a moment, then persists. You don't know stubborn until you've talked to a god. "Yes, but I can still—"

"You *can't*, Sekhmet." I think my tone is getting really close to pleading at this point. "No fighting. No *threatening*. I need you to be a tourist."

She thinks it over a moment. "I can't even—?"

"*Need*, Sekhmet."

She blows out her breath in a sigh, then looks away. As she does, we reach our gate at last. Our flight's not ready to board yet, so we find a few seats together and settle in to wait for its arrival. Sekhmet sits down and immediately begins drumming her elegant fingers on her bag. I can see the gears turning.

"Centuries ago, I swore to help you achieve vengeance," she says at last. "That promise is now one of my oldest unfulfilled oaths, so if indulging in such . . . *frivolity* is how it must be resolved, then I will learn." She looks me in the eyes as she finishes speaking, and I see the stoic resolve there, like she's just agreed to march through the gates of hell for me. Geez, Sekhmet, it's just a pedicure.

"Thank you, my friend," I say, holding her gaze. Despite how silly it all feels, I'm sincerely grateful—I know how hard it is for a god to change his or her ways, even if it's only for a little while.

She nods at that, then sits back in her chair to watch the airplanes outside taxi beneath the hot sun. A few minutes pass in silence until a flight attendant's voice echoes overhead, crackling out of a loudspeaker to let us know they're about to begin boarding. It's only a few moments more before we're walking down the ramp toward our plane; we're flying first-class, after all. I made sure to buy the tickets in person, and—surprise, surprise—the agent liked me enough to give us all an upgrade.

We stow our carry-ons in the overhead bins and settle into our large, luxurious seats. Nathan and I are sitting together, and Sekhmet's just across the aisle. I flip the window shade up and look over the tarmac, letting the Florida sun play on my face one last time. A sense of nostalgia fills me as I realize I'm leaving here for the first time in decades. My true home will always be in the far north, in the verdant bloom of spring and breathtaking cold of winter, but this place is not without its charms.

"Ooh, the screens flip out of the armrests!" Nathan says, showing his focus is on more immediate luxuries. "And can you believe this leg room?"

"Trivialities," Sekhmet mutters, yet I can't help but notice the little smile that curves her lips as she settles into her own chair. She may not *need* the amenities of first class, but she's still a god at heart, and we have a thing for special treatment.

"First time riding up front?" I ask Nathan.

He nods. "Never took many flights to begin with. We were all about the road trips."

"Oh? How were those?"

"When my dad was alive? Great." He pauses. "There . . . weren't many after."

"The soldier?" Sekhmet asks, perking up from across the aisle.

“My dad? Um, yeah . . . ?” Nathan says, seeming a little taken aback by her attention.

“You do not speak of him often.”

“Kinda try not to,” he says, shrugging. “I mean, I can’t tell you how much I miss him, but I don’t want to be that guy who’s always moping after his dead dad, y’know?”

She watches him a moment, then nods. “I often forget you are of warrior blood,” she says, giving him an approving smile. “The occasional reminder is not . . . undesirable.”

Nathan’s face goes through an interesting mix of confusion and appreciation at that, while Sekhmet simply leans back into her chair, still smiling. For my part, I focus on the food and drinks menu we get as first-class passengers, mentally ticking off the things I want to try.

The rest of the passengers finish loading, each seeming to fix us with a jealous stare as they pass on their way to coach. Then there are a few clicks and bumps and the plane taxis away from the terminal, heading for the runway. Nathan taps my arm after a few minutes. “So besides not drawing attention to ourselves, how else how can we help you when we get there?” he asks.

I lean around him to look at Sekhmet. She’s still pressed back in her chair, eyes shut: the picture of tranquility. You might think an ancient creature of the desert would hate flying, but gods don’t scare easily—it’s hard to worry about a crash when you know you’ll just regenerate. The whine of the engines increases to a dull roar as the plane readies itself for takeoff, and I turn back to Nathan. “Uh, well, I’ll definitely need someone to help me coordinate everything, which I bet you can do. As for Sekhmet—”

“She’ll still be with us, right?” he says as the plane shoots for-

ward, on its way to the skies. He seems surprisingly concerned about her. “Maybe a bodyguard?” he adds.

“She’d be great at that,” I say over the sound of the aircraft rumbling. “Actually, it might not be a bad idea to call that her cover. When she’s not ‘enduring’ her vacation, though, what I’ll really need her to do is sift truth from lies. I’ve read enough about the entertainment industry to expect plenty of the latter in the days to come.” The rumbles fade, and there’s a gentle lurch as the plane takes off.

Nathan nods, looking relieved. Then a slight frown makes an appearance. “Wait, just ‘coordination’? Like, schedules? That’s it?”

“Um, that’s not . . . enough?” I say, feeling slow.

“You haven’t thought about what I’ll be doing at all, have you?” he says, toeing the line between amusement and frustration.

“It’s cute, right?” I say, then slip into a Valley girl parody. “Forgetful girls are, like, so totally cute.”

“Totes adorbs,” he drawls, trying to mimic the accent. Then he sighs. “I really *do* want to help, Sara,” he adds in a normal register. “Palling around with gods is basically the best thing ever, but even so, it’s hard not feeling a little . . . unnecessary.”

I wince at that, and rub his arm. “Nathan, you—*all* of you—are everything. We. Serve. You. Some of us might do that in some really jerky ways, but we’re all made by mortals, *for* mortals. I am nothing without you. Never forget that.”

That fun, easygoing smile of his makes a reappearance. “Okay, that *is* nice to hear, but c’mon—I want to do more than stand around and look pretty.”

“And here I thought you’d found your calling,” I say, giving him a shoulder bump. “Okay, you’re right. High priests should always be

more than window dressing. And I know exactly what's going to set you apart. Remember those spells I've been teaching you?"

He snorts. "You can only burn your eyebrows off so many times before that kind of thing sinks in."

"Well, it's time to crank it into overdrive. You're my chosen representative here in the world. When you cast those little flame spheres and cantrips, you're tapping into whatever empowers me, right?"

"Pixie dust, rainbows, and M•A•C lipstick, right."

I poke him. "Well, train enough at it, and you'll be able to do a *lot* more. I'm a goddess of magic, and that means my followers are supposed to be able to conjure some pretty impressive stuff. Every spell still goes through me, but until I get a line on some solid belief, your potential is actually higher than mine right now."

"What, seriously?"

I nod. "The power of my clerics was never precisely tied to my own—just validated by it. Belief made me, *and* it can supercharge you. Starting to get the picture?"

"Yeah," he breathes, then laughs. "And starting to wonder what the holdup on the phenomenal cosmic power was."

I give him a bashful smile. "Eh, things got busy. Then aimless. Then busy again." I shrug. "Gods are not the best friends, in case you were wondering. But I'm committed to this: We're going to use every shred of downtime we have to make you a high priest worthy of the name."

"Now *that* is a plan," he says, nodding eagerly. "Only problem I can see with it is how hard it's going to make falling asleep on this flight—I was keyed-up about this adventure before, but now . . . ?"

"Perils of priesthood," I say with a grin.

He laughs at that, and we fall into easy chatter as the ground

sneaks away beneath us, an intricate model reaching for the horizon. Not even five minutes pass before I have to stifle a bit of laughter as our conversation trails off and his eyelids begin inching down. Thrilled he may be, but an all-night god party is not something one recovers from in a single day. He'll probably be out for most of the flight.

I unfold my complimentary blanket and tuck it over him, then turn away from my friend and stare out the window, gleefully watching the clouds beyond and the land beneath. It's glorious, a miracle of technology made possible in the last century alone. To someone who's lived over a thousand years, this kind of change is simply astonishing—and just a bit saddening. People seem all too ready to take such wonders for granted, after all. I glance around the first-class cabin, looking at the other travelers absorbed in their newspapers and notebooks, ignoring the fact that what they're doing right this moment would have been impossible at nearly any other point in human history.

I'll find a way to impress them, to leave a mark on the collective consciousness of mankind they won't be able to shrug off so easily. Just wait, people. Just wait.

I watch through the window a bit longer, then recline in my chair and pull a fashion magazine out of my bag. It's a long flight to LA—might as well read up on the latest styles. Part of me itches with glee at all the shopping I'll need to do. There's a brand-new scene out there, and I'll have to look my best if I want to fit in.

This is so exciting! Celebrity status and Hollywood stardom are waiting for me. The call of fame has been a part of my soul since before the concept even existed, and now I'll be chasing the dream that's already ensnared thousands of would-be starlets. I might just have the edge on all of them, though, because while I'm probably

not the finest singer or actress, I *am* the most beautiful goddess in the world. And if that's not enough, I can always force people to love me, so hey, I've probably got this in the bag.

I allow a self-satisfied smirk to make an appearance on my lips, feeling like the answers to my many problems are just a few hours away. With all this smug certainty, it's a wonder alarm bells aren't going off in my head. I've certainly been around long enough to know better. Gods may have the market cornered on cockiness, after all, but that doesn't mean we're immune to good old hubris-induced disasters.

And there really *is* something I'm missing here, incidentally. It's the reason I got so upset with Sekhmet earlier, and the reason I was so uneasy about using my gift to get us through security: the fear that someone was watching.

As it turns out, someone was.